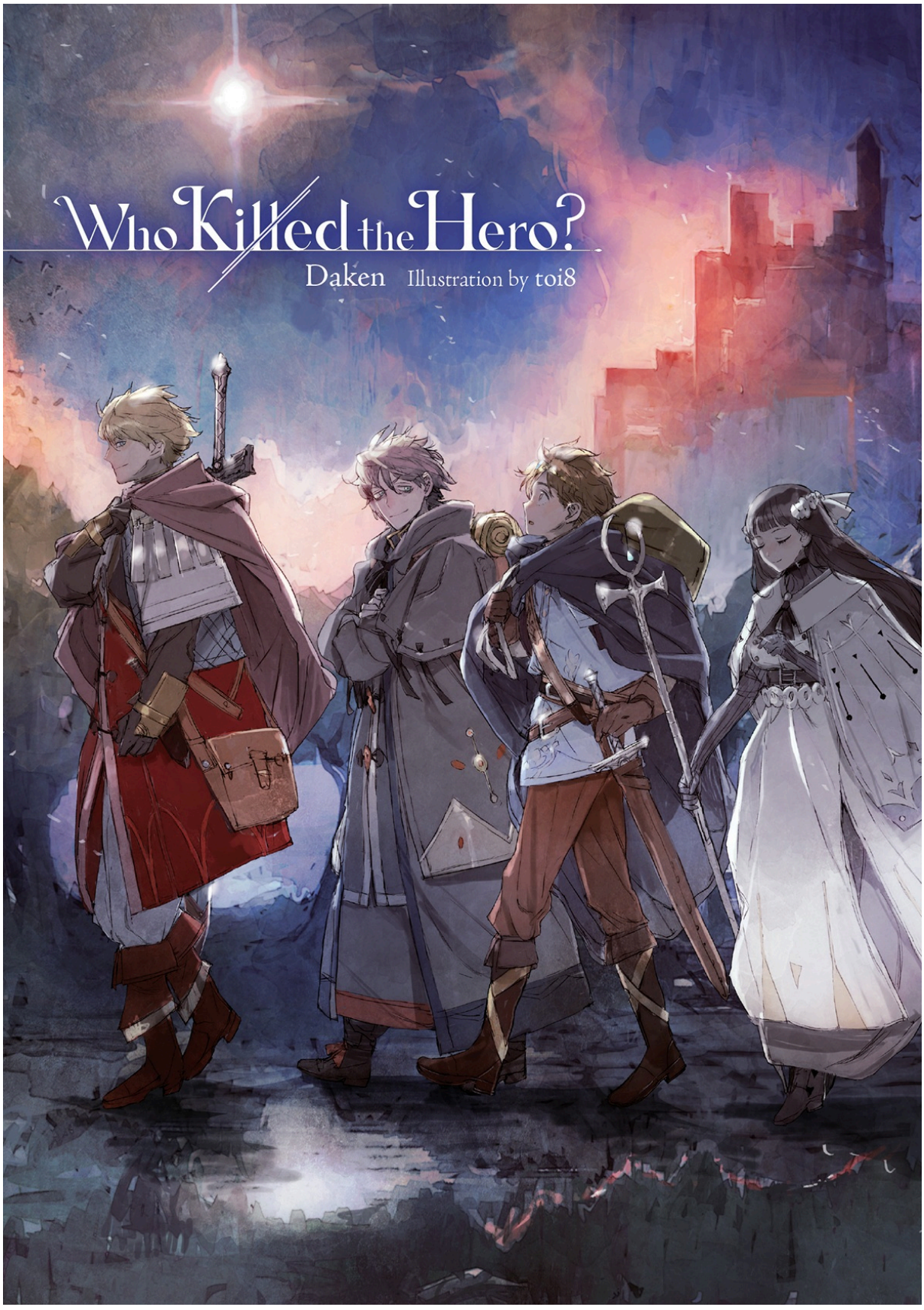
Who Killed the Hero?

Daken

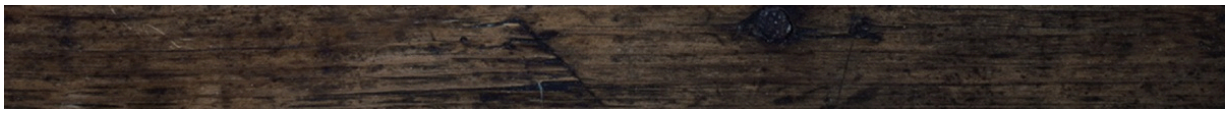
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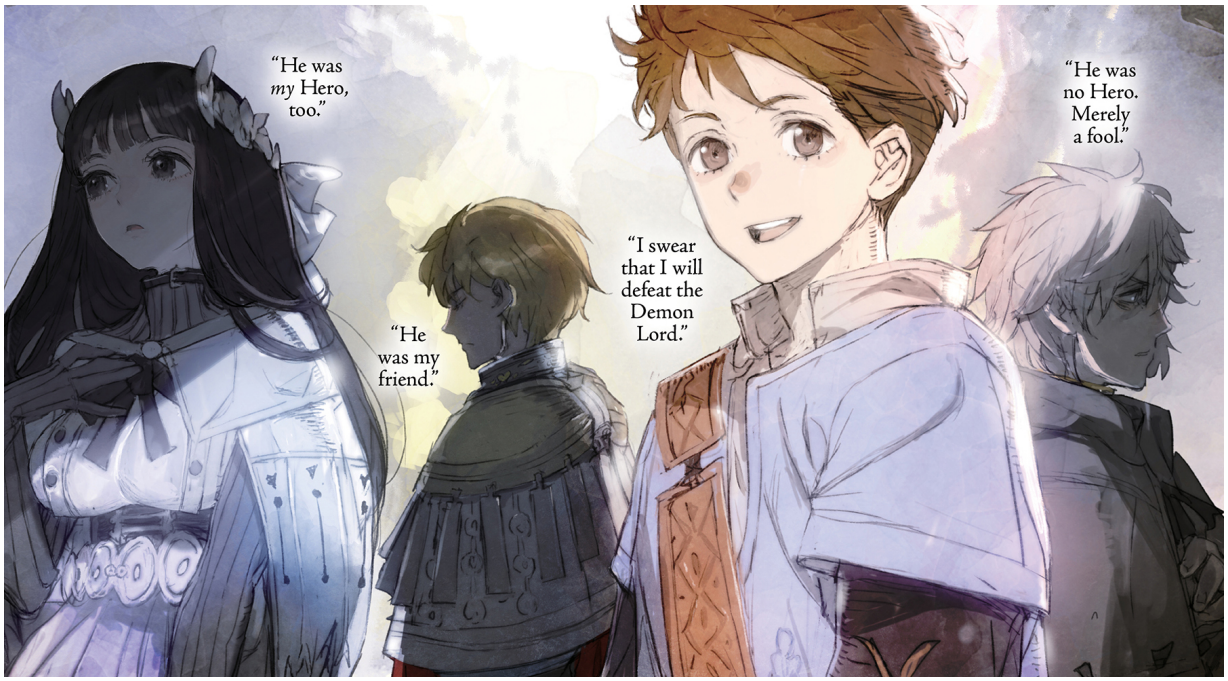

Who Killed the Hero?
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Praise be to the late Hero. Let his
great deeds be inscribed in literature.
—Alexia




Leon Müller
Eldest son of a count and first in line of the Hero candidates. Known as Leon the Sword Saint.
Ares Schmidt
The prophesied Hero.
Maria Lauren
A priest who serves as the healer in the Hero's party. Known as the Holy Maiden.
Solon Barclay
A magician hailed for his prodigious talents since childhood. Known as the Great Sage.


"He was my Hero, too."
"He was my friend."
"I swear that I will defeat the Demon Lord."
"He was no Hero. Merely a fool."



Who Killed the Hero?

Daken

Illustration by toi8

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CONTENTS

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Prologue
On the Streets
Leon’s Story
Fragment 1
Fragment 2
Maria’s Story
Fragment 1
Fragment 2
Solon’s Story
Fragment 1
Fragment 2
Ares’s Story
Fragment 1
Fragment 2
Fragment 3
Fragment 4
Alexia’s Story

Fragment 1
Fragment 2
The Prophet’s Story
Fragment
The Hero’s Story
Epilogue
At a Certain Confectionery Store
Afterword
Yen Newsletter

Prologue

Our country is a matrilineal monarchy. It is said that the royal family comes from religious roots; the priestesses who serve our deity preserve their bloodline by taking the most influential men of their time as husbands. For the most part, these men come from highborn families such as domestic nobility or foreign royalty.

There is just one exception: the Hero.

The *Hero* refers to the individual who defeats the Demon Lord, the monstrous being who appears periodically throughout history to threaten the human realm. In our country, the Hero is guaranteed to become monarch as their reward for the deed. By welcoming the Hero into the royal family, the kingdom preserves its legitimacy and flaunts its status as the nation that saved the world. So it has been for eons.

Fifteen years ago, another Demon Lord emerged—the ruler of the mighty race known as the demons, who scorned the god of humans and sought to eradicate His followers. After much conflict, half the world fell under the Demon Lord's thumb, and our country faced a similar bitter fate.

It was then that the Hero appeared.

Nobody knows beforehand who will become Heroes, but many were guided by someone known as the Prophet. This enigmatic individual appears seemingly out of nowhere, recites their prophecy, and disappears just as mysteriously.

The Prophet predicted four years prior that the Hero would come from a small village within the kingdom's borders. This prophesied young man entered Falm Academy—an institute for training prospective Heroes, where he was top of his class. He formed a party with his fellow Hero candidates—Leon the Sword Saint, Maria

the Holy Maiden, and Solon the Sage—and on His Majesty's invitation, he came to the royal palace.

My name is Alexia, princess of our nation. I was the Hero's promised reward.

My father was somewhat disappointed by the Hero, from what I could tell. His complaints included "the fellow is lowborn," "his looks are unremarkable," and "I wish Leon was the Hero instead."

My mother, the queen, was not present. She was at the temple, having taken over the role of priestess after my grandmother's passing. In our country, the queen chooses the king as her partner, and after raising their children to adulthood, she serves as a priestess for the rest of her life.

Leon the Sword Saint was the eldest son of an influential count. A gifted and reputable individual, he and I would surely have been wed had the Demon Lord not appeared. He seemed to conduct himself under that assumption when we met on previous occasions, but after the battle at the Great Forest of Lozorof, he said, "I am not the Hero," and voluntarily withdrew his pursuit of my hand. Many regarded this as a shame, my father included.

Personally, it was of no concern to me. I understood that Leon was an upstanding individual, but given that I ultimately had no say over who I married, the Hero's identity mattered little to me. I had always been praised and encouraged from a tender age to study books, swordsmanship, horse riding, and other worthy skills, but I was never allowed to decide my own future.

To be a princess of this nation is a curse—for, you see, our family has never produced a prince. If only a single boy was born, I could live a freer life.

Heedless of my thoughts at that moment, the Hero—Ares—strode into the throne room. My father praised him for his deeds at the Great Forest of Lozorof, presented his reward, and formally recognized him as the Hero.

This was the birth of Ares the Hero. The king introduced me as Ares's prize.

"This is my daughter, Alexia. When you defeat the Demon Lord, she will take you as her husband, and you will become this nation's

next king."

Hushed murmurs rippled across the room. Tradition though it was, some of the nobility disliked the idea of a lowborn king. Yet how else could one reward such a risky endeavor? Nobody would sneak into the Demon Lord's territory otherwise. *Hero* is a pretty-sounding way of referring to an assassin. And the Hero has to be amply motivated to improve his chance of success.

It would have been remiss of me to let the world fall to ruin. I had to encourage this Hero to the best of my ability, and I knew how I must act in order to achieve that end.

I walked over to the Hero as he knelt, and I said:

"O Hero, please defeat the Demon Lord and save this world. I will be awaiting your return."

I was just a young girl of twelve years; still, I was pretty, and I thought I knew how to appease others. I truly did want to save the world, but I was lying about awaiting his return.

The Hero was a perfectly average-looking young man. He had brown eyes that matched the color of his slightly curly hair. His body did appear to be fairly toned, though it was unremarkable in terms of height and build.

An expression of unease came over his face, and he said in a low voice that only I could hear:

"Your Highness, I make this promise to you: I swear that I will defeat the Demon Lord."

He smiled gently.

"But I will not return. So please marry someone you love."

Four years after uttering those words, the Hero defeated the Demon Lord. And he never did return.

Four more years passed after that. With peace finally restored, our kingdom began compiling literature to extol the late Hero and praise his great deeds.

On the Streets

"You want to know what I think of the Hero? Well, I'm grateful to him for defeating the Demon Lord. It's thanks to him that we're alive today."

"He could do it all—swordplay, attack magic, and healing magic. A great man indeed. It's a shame he passed away."

"His absence is certainly felt. I heard he was brilliant even at school. I'm sure we'll need people like him in the future."

"I suppose it was a wound or curse from the Demon Lord that killed him, yes? He was up against the most formidable foe you can imagine. They must have taken each other out."

"Well, he had to be great to take down the Demon Lord. But y'know, they say he came from some backwoods town. Kind of freaky to imagine him becoming king if he returned. Not that I know anything about the nation or politics or whatever."

"How'd he die on the way back? You wouldn't think a monster would stand a chance against the guy who killed the Demon Lord. It's a bit of a mystery."

"I always thought that Sword Saint fella was fishy. I mean, he's some big shot count. Maybe he offed the Hero so that *he'd* be next in line for the throne. Don't they say that if it wasn't for the Hero, the princess would've married the Sword Saint? Whoops, you oughtta keep that between us. You never know what they'll do to you for saying that."

"I heard the Sage and the Holy Maiden were childhood friends. Didn't the Sage have a crush on the Holy Maiden, but she was into the Hero? Maybe the Sage snapped and killed the Hero over that?"

"Yeah, I reckon they were at odds over the Holy Maiden. She's an

incredible beauty, after all. What if the Sage and the Sword Saint got jealous over how she liked the Hero, so they teamed up and made him kaput? When you think of it that way, I can't help but feel sorry for the Holy Maiden. She's still single to this day."

"It's because of his commoner background, don't you think? I doubt the nobility thought too kindly of him. If he returned home and became the king, they'd have to take orders from a commoner, and I bet they didn't like the sound of that. I think they got someone to kill him."

Leon's Story

"He was my friend."

When asked about his relationship with Ares the Hero, Leon's response was simple.

His taut, muscled body is evident through his clothes. Despite his clean-cut features—trim blond hair and a short, neat beard—there is an intensity in his gaze that makes it clear that he is no ordinary person.

Friend. His relationship with Ares could not have been so simple. They had known each other since their student days, and as party members, they had braved death together on many an occasion.

Leon Müller, also known as the Sword Saint, had once been first in line among the Hero candidates.

"I don't mean it in a special way. I just didn't have anyone I could call a friend until I met him. You see, I was born into the upper class. When you're a member of the nobility, relationships are all about who's above and below you. You categorize the people you meet into whether you show deference to them or whether they show deference to you. Pretty scummy, isn't it? That's upper-class society for you," he said with a devilish smile.

The present Leon, at least, displays no hint of bourgeois affectation. In fact, he has a reputation for being a fair and upright individual who treats everyone the same regardless of social standing. I could not feel the difference in our stations through the casual tone in which he conversed with me.

Now, can you tell me what things were like when you met Ares?

"I was a nobleman. Well, I still am now, but I lived and breathed it back then. Not to mention that I was a Hero candidate. I was

pretty conceited about my sword skills—I was convinced that nobody else but me could be the Hero. Everyone else saw me in the same light. That's why…"

There was a shadow in Leon's eyes.

"…I hated him. Only the nobility can attend Falm Academy, but here was this commoner barging in. Plus, he looked like such a plain and ordinary guy. I hated the sight of him."

Falm Academy is still reputable these days for training prospective Heroes, but it is no longer exclusive to the nobility. In fact, its doors are open to anyone with merit.

"These days, yes. Not at the time. It had lost its original purpose, and it was basically a place for noble families to send their boys for clout. In theory, anyone can enroll with enough money, but hardly anyone was crazy enough to dish out that kind of cash. There's plenty of other ways to get stronger, like going to a private school, apprenticing under a famous swordsman, building experience as an adventurer—you name it."

Then why did Ares attend Falm Academy?

"Simple. Because he wanted to become the Hero. Sure, there are many ways to become a strong warrior, but if you want to be acknowledged as the Hero, you *have* to go to Falm Academy. Although, when you think about it, no way is that an actual requirement. But it's what I believed at the time, and he thought the same."

What was your first meeting like?

"I'd love to say I don't remember, but it still haunts my dreams. I sneered at him and said, 'You're not qualified to be the Hero.'"

How did he respond?

"'Even so, I have to become the Hero.' I didn't expect to hear that from a commoner, and it made me furious. I was about to cut him down right there on the spot, but you can imagine the teachers put a stop to that. 'No spilling blood on school grounds,' they said. Even the teachers thought he didn't belong there, but they obviously didn't want me to outright murder him."

What was Ares like as a student?

"Mediocre. Apparently, he had a short stint as an adventurer

before he enrolled, and he had some pretty good fighting skills. But he was self-taught with the sword, so he had to relearn the basics. We sparred many times right up until graduation, and I never lost a single bout."

Did Ares believe that he would excel at the academy?

"That whole thing about him getting exceptional grades was made up after the fact. His acquaintances at the academy completely changed their tune about him once he defeated the Demon Lord. Suddenly, they were saying stuff like 'Even as a student, he shone like a Hero.' Truth is, he didn't shine at all. He was certainly unusual, though."

How so?

"He'd keep fighting in mock battles until he either won or passed out. A small scrape or two wouldn't make him give in. Even when he was up against a teacher, he made it into a life-and-death thing. When he didn't understand a lesson, he would keep asking the staff or his fellow students questions until he got it. He'd keep practicing his form until the early hours of the morning."

That makes him sound like he was merely a passionate student. It's a rather unremarkable thing to say about him, if anything.

"It went way beyond 'passionate.' The concept of *rest* didn't exist for him. He didn't have a moment of spare time. He used it all for 'the sake of becoming the Hero,' quote unquote. He didn't sleep. He just kept doing what he was doing until he literally passed out. Some people tried to mess with him since he was a commoner and all, but they quickly stopped bothering. Everyone could see that his zealousness was abnormal."

All that hard work, and his grades were still average?

"No, he did improve quite a bit. I mean, when you go to those lengths, you're bound to get *some* results. But no amount of effort makes up for a lack of natural talent. That's the cold, hard truth. At the end of the day, he never surpassed me in the sword, and he never became the best in the other fields, either. Of course, his grades weren't *bad.* But anyone would get his results if they put *that* much into it… Granted, not that there's anyone else out there with

his work ethic."

Indeed, Ares was not the valedictorian. I believe that title went to you, Leon.

"That's because of my father's backing as a count. If a member of royalty happened to be in the same cohort, they would have been the valedictorian instead. Although to be fair, my grades were pretty decent."

Leon grinned. His smile was cocky yet endearing.

By the way, you called Ares your friend, but when exactly did you strike up that friendship?

"It was during our field exam at the end of our third and final year. We capped off our studies by going on a monster-fighting expedition to the Great Forest of Lozorof."

Even nowadays, the Great Forest of Lozorof is known as a monster hot spot. The field exam is still a long-standing tradition.

"'Hot spot' makes it sound like the whole place is crawling with danger, but the strength of the monsters varies quite a lot depending on where you are. It's a fairly big region, and the kingdom has made plenty of headway in it. The students go to an area with relatively weak monsters, plus the teachers are veteran adventurers, and there are knights to keep them safe. There's hardly any danger…most of the time. But on that day, a demon targeted our group."

That's a famous story. It's even part of the literature. The demon who attacked your group was defeated by the people who would later form the Hero's party.

"It wasn't as glamorous as it sounds. Almost all the teachers and knights who were guiding us were killed. Some of the students died as well, of course. When you really get down to it, the kingdom's oversight is to blame. They shifted the narrative by waxing poetic about the surviving students."

Now that you mention it, the many casualties were attributed to the demon's strength, which highlighted the bravery of the students who managed to take it down.

"Later, I learned that the demon was not particularly strong

among his kind. He was just a crafty one. He was going for a low-risk, high-reward play by targeting potential Heroes while they were still students. The fight would have gone better if the teachers and knights weren't stuck trying to protect us."

Even if he was a weak demon, they're still the strongest monster race. How were the students able to defeat it?

"Simple. In terms of raw ability, we outclassed him from the start. We might have been students, but Maria, Solon, and I were leagues above the demon. We just didn't have much actual combat experience. Beating weak monsters was one thing, but we didn't know how to coordinate against foes stronger than us. I was beaten soundly when I tried going at it alone. Solon panicked when his best spells didn't work. Maria was dazed when she couldn't heal the dead."

Maria the Holy Maiden and Solon the Sage were renowned members of the Hero's party, though they were not yet able to tap into their strength at the time. What about Ares?

"Well… As soon as he saw the demon, he shouted at everyone to run. 'Don't stay still, just scatter.' I thought he was a coward for telling people to flee without engaging. But the students who listened to him survived, and the ones who tried to fight the demon died."

What did Ares himself do?

"He fended off the demon when the scoundrel tried to pursue the people who were fleeing. Ares never tackled his foe head-on. Instead, he looked for openings and kept the demon in check. Even acting alone, he tried to save as many people as he could. When the demon knocked me off my feet, he got in between us. If not for him, I'd be a dead man."

Did Ares tell you to run?

"No, actually. He said, 'Get up! Fight!' Darn presumptuous of him, don't you think? Imagine someone telling you to fight right after you got your backside handed to you. I thought I didn't have a chance."

But you did fight.

"It was my first time ever getting beaten up so soundly. My pride

was in tatters, but the commoner was still willing to fight even by himself. No way was I going to run, not when I was a nobleman—and a count's son, no less.

"Besides, he said it himself: 'Weren't you gonna be a Hero?' I squeezed out what little courage I had and stood up.

"Looking back, I think that was the first time I ever showed courage. I'd never faced a single lick of hardship until that moment. It's why I folded at the first threat I faced and assumed I was going to die."

How did you fight an enemy you couldn't beat?

"The same way he did. I didn't face it head-on. I kept my distance and struck the demon where he had his guard down. I'd always thumbed my nose at that way of fighting. To me, it was a weakling's tactics, unbecoming of a knight. But that's what makes it effective against opponents that are stronger than you. I should have been using that style from the start when I was up against a monster that's stronger than a human.

"I don't know how many times he and I made cheap shots at that demon. He told Solon to use spells to slow down the demon, and Maria started focusing on just healing us. That's how we won."

Was that your first time fighting together as a party?

"It sounds simple when you put it that way. I never thought we would win at the time. I didn't even know whether our attacks were working. We were just able to fight because *he* did it without a single bit of hesitation. He was getting knocked down, too—who knows how many times? But it didn't matter; he'd always get right back up.

"It was only later that I realized that he'd been picturing this kind of scenario all those times we had those mock battles in class. That's the reason why he never conceded defeat in those fights and just kept going at it until he won. Somehow or other, he'd been absorbing all kinds of things from those lessons… When it came to figuring out how to fight a strong opponent, the difference between him and us became very clear in that field exam."

Did you start thinking of him as a friend because he saved your life?

"Maybe, maybe not."

Leon cast his eyes toward the empty sky.

"That's when it hit me: 'Oh, this guy was the Hero all along.' I'm not being a sore loser when I say this, but I was the one who did more damage to the demon once we got back on our feet. In terms of raw ability, I was stronger than him. But that's not what being a Hero is about. A Hero needs to be strong, yes, but that's not the only thing that matters. Status has absolutely nothing to do with it, of course. A Hero calls the entire system of classism into question.

"I was not the Hero. That incident was the first time I acknowledged a person for who they were, hierarchy be damned."

Why did the Hero die?

"Because it was Ares's fate. That's all."

Fragment 1

Soon after I started at the academy, someone said this to me in the classroom:

"You're not qualified to be the Hero."

He was a blond, well-built young man. His blue eyes made a strong impression, as did his clean-cut features.

"Even so, I have to become the Hero."

When I said that, the guy got angry and put a hand on the sword at his hip. The teachers rushed to intervene, so the situation didn't get out of control, but he saw me as an enemy ever since.

I knew right away that he was Leon Müller. He was the class celebrity, and even some of the teachers tried to curry favor with him because he was the son of a count. Moreover, he had real skill with the sword. For all his privilege in terms of family pedigree, physique, and natural talent, he was no slouch when it came to hard work. He trained diligently outside class, and he showed no sign of complacency about his talents. Needless to say, he was the front-runner of the Hero candidates.

I assumed he would become the Hero. In fact, I hoped for it.

If only Leon could become the Hero, then it wouldn't have to be me was my selfish thought. Yet I couldn't just give up on myself and wait until he became the Hero for real. I couldn't foist the role of Hero on him.

And so I pushed myself into training even harder than he did. Whatever amount he trained outside class, I doubled it.

Fortunately, I had time on my side. Leon's popularity meant he had to spend some of his spare time with other people, but I had no one. I could spend every waking moment on training.

Many of our combat instructors were former knights who'd retired

from old age or injury, which meant that their skills were first-rate. Although they didn't instruct me directly because they favored my noble-blooded classmates, the things they mentioned in class came in very handy for me. Whenever there was something I didn't understand, the few staff members who liked me were kind enough to answer my questions. I took their teachings to heart and swung my sword diligently in inconspicuous places like the back of the academy building. It was even better if there was a mirror or some glass around so I could check my form.

If there was one thing I took away from the lessons, it was that my sword technique lacked polish in so many ways. I became painfully aware of all the unnecessary movements I made because of my lack of formal training. Meanwhile, Leon's swordplay was impeccable. His form was beautiful and concise, as if he was in full control at any given moment. I used him as the model for my own training.

Whenever we had mock battles in class, I tried to take him on as much as I could. He beat me to a pulp every time. "When are you going to hurry up and drop out already?" he would sneer.

But for some strange reason, he would scowl in disapproval whenever the other students made fun of me.

One time, I was careless and left my sword behind in class. A classmate stole it and tried to pass it off as his.

"This sword is wasted on a peasant like you. I'll show you a proper wielder," he said, which prompted our other classmates to laugh scornfully and agree with him.

"That sword's important to me. Could you give it back?" I asked.

The sword was the one thing I could never cede. That was my line in the sand. I closed in on my classmate, not about to take no for an answer.

"Wh-what impudence! Don't you know your place?!"

The boy seemed slightly intimidated by my intensity, but he had numbers on his side. His friends soon encircled me.

"Hey." At that point, Leon intervened. "They told you this in class.

What is a sword to a warrior?" he asked, pressing the classmate who'd stolen my sword.

"Huh? Uh… A sword is a warrior's life…," the boy said falteringly.

"Oh? So your life is a stolen object, then?"

This startled the boy. "What? No. I was just playing around…"

"So you're a warrior who plays around with lives?"

He fell silent and handed the sword back to me.

Leon turned to leave after that, but I ran up to him to express my gratitude.

"Thanks, you were a big help."

"Weren't you listening to me?" Leon was scathing in return. "I said that a sword is a warrior's life! Shame on you for letting someone take it from you! As foolish as it is to steal someone's sword, leaving it behind by mistake is even worse!"

He was totally right. From then on, the sword always remained on my person so it would never leave my side again.

※ ※ ※

At the end of the summer of our third year, I was practicing my swings behind the school building as usual when Leon called out to me.

It was rare for him to speak to me, and for once, he didn't have an entourage with him.

"Looks like you're getting the hang of swinging a sword," he said.

He didn't do flattery or sarcasm, so he had to be complimenting me. I stopped swinging and turned to face him.

"I've been basing my form on yours," I told him.

"Huh. You're worse than me, but you have the best form otherwise. Well, part of that is because everyone else skimps on their training."

That was nice to hear. Because I was lacking in the fundamentals, I'd been the worst in my class when I first started at the academy. And now Leon was saying that I was the next best after him.

But it was also true that nobody besides me and Leon took the

lessons seriously. I got the impression that they were afraid of getting *too* good, because then they would have to go to the Demon Lord's territory. This probably peeved Leon.

"Thanks," I said. "Looks like all that effort paid off."

"You think so? I don't think the results match your effort. If that's how good you've gotten from swinging your sword thousands of times a day, I wouldn't say you're a natural."

Leon was right. If this was where I was at after over two years of nonstop training, then I was nothing special at all.

"I'm fine with that," I said. "I have to improve my sword skills, even if it doesn't amount to much. Because I have to become the Hero."

"Why are you so bent on becoming the Hero?" Leon wore a serious expression.

"Because the Prophet appeared in my village and said a Hero would emerge from there. If I don't step up, no one else will."

"Do you really, seriously think you're the Hero?"

"Who knows? I admit I'm not that suited for it. If I'm being honest, I'd say you're the better fit, Leon."

"Huh?" He looked totally and utterly exasperated. "Then why are you saying you're going to be the Hero? You could have just left it to me. Then you wouldn't have to put yourself through so much training."

"No, I'd feel bad."

"What are you talking about?"

"A Hero isn't something to aspire to. Everyone foists their hopes on you, and you have to risk your life in the name of defeating the Demon Lord. And if you fail, the world is over. The reward isn't worth the risk."

"……"

Leon was silent. Then after a slight bit of hesitation, he spoke again.

"My father told me yesterday to drop out as a Hero candidate."

"Why?"

I was sure that Leon's father had been expecting his son to become the Hero.

"The warfront is in a bad state. It's not looking feasible for anyone on our side to infiltrate the Demon Lord's territory. The prognosis is that it's impossible for even a Hero to defeat the Demon Lord."

This made sense. If our kingdom was in rough shape, then it wouldn't be able to provide support to the Hero when he entered the Demon Lord's territory. And without support, the Hero would be rushing to his death.

"He's worried about you," I said.

"I know!" shouted Leon. "But I've been groomed to be the Hero for as long as I can remember! It was my dream to become the Hero and save the world! I shouldn't be having second thoughts at this stage! But still…"

A count's orders were absolute. And as a father, he was worried for his son. There were no grounds for Leon to object.

"Don't worry. I'll be the Hero instead." I started swinging my sword again. "I swear I'll defeat the Demon Lord. So you'll be fine."

"You will? Even though you're weaker than me?" Leon scowled. "Where do you get that confidence from? You're average! Powerless! You can't beat the Demon Lord!"

He was lashing out at me bitterly.

"I'll keep at it until I win," I said. "If I fail the first time, I'll try again. If I fail a second time, I'll go for a third. That's all there is to it."

I knew that things wouldn't be as easy as I made it sound. I wasn't *that* much of an optimist.

"What are you saying? If you fail once, that's the end for you. There is no second attempt."

"But still, I have to try. The important thing is to stay calm and not give up. If I give in to despair, *that's* where it ends. I'll stick to my goal and see it through to the end. That's why I'm learning attack and healing magic, too."

"……"

Leon was silent for a while as he stared hard at my face.

Then he said, "Hmph. Big talk. You're a commoner—what can *you* do? No, *I'll* be the one to defeat the Demon Lord. I can't push the

whole thing onto your shoulders and wait snugly at home. My pride doesn't allow me to entrust the fate of the world to a peasant. I don't care what anyone says; I'm going to the Demon Lord's territory. Just you watch."

With that, Leon turned around to leave, but then he looked back over his shoulder at me as if he had thought better of it.

"Promise me one thing. If I become the Hero, you'll join my party."

I didn't expect him to say that.

"And what if I become the Hero?" I asked.

"That's one big if. But let's see…"

Leon flashed me a cocky smile.

"If you become the Hero, I'll join *your* party."

Fragment 2

For as long as I could remember, my shoulders bore the weight of expectations. That is what it means to be the heir of a count's title.

House Müller is one of the kingdom's long-standing pillars of martial prowess, and thus, my strength is taken as a given. One of my earliest memories was of me practicing my swings with a tiny blunt sword. I wasn't opposed to it—I enjoyed it, in fact. I could feel myself improving the more I did it. My uncle, who instructed me in the blade, showered me with praise, and so did my mother and father. The sword became the measure of my self-worth.

But although my house is renowned for its military successes, being good with the sword is far from the only thing that mattered. My uncle was the best swordsman in the family, but he was unable to inherit the house because he was the second-born son. At the end of the day, nobles are creatures of lineage.

The times caught up to them, though, when the Demon Lord appeared.

Through their overwhelming power and strength of numbers, the monsters under the Demon Lord's command began conquering the human nations. I was six at the time. There was a huge clash with the Demon Lord's army in the south, and our country ended up deploying its army, too. But despite His Majesty's decree, my father refused to take to the field himself, and instead, my uncle led the charge. This was to prevent potential danger to the current head of the house—so the reasoning went.

You couldn't fault my uncle's bravery. He came to the Kingdom of Malika's aid and fought off the Demon Lord's army. Sadly, though, he was too late to prevent Malika's fall. Maybe the country could have been saved if my father had acted promptly and gone to the

battlefield. It was truly a great pity.

On the other hand, I came to respect my uncle, who differed from his fellow nobles by fighting on the front lines himself. Since he had no son of his own, he doted on me as if I were his biological child.

He had one daughter, who was a year younger than me, and we learned swordplay together as if we were siblings. She really took after my uncle with her muscles; if she'd been a boy, she might have surpassed me as a swordsman. I had our rivalry to thank for sharpening my skills.

As time passed, a heavy gloom came over the country. Although we'd repelled one attack, the Demon Lord's influence was steadily growing. People thought it was only a matter of time before his sinister hand reached our nation.

That was precisely why my strength was needed. *I'll save my country with the power of my sword*, I thought as I became absorbed in my studies. One day, my uncle told me that I had surpassed him. I was still in my teens when people started calling me the Sword Saint.

But before I knew it, I'd drifted away from the people around me. Nobody was serious about saving the kingdom. Everyone was hoping to stick it out without actually fighting. The higher a person's social status, the more inclined they were to think that way.

I couldn't stand this idiocy. The nobility were supposed to lead the fray and fight for the kingdom and its people.

My idea was to become the Hero, save the world, ascend to the throne, and reform the system of nobility. I didn't doubt for a second that I would become the Hero. I was convinced, in fact, that I was the only one who could do it.

But at the same time, a part of me always hoped that there was someone else out there with my ideals—someone who would put their life on the line for the sake of the people.

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I joined Falm Academy when I turned fifteen. An institute for training Heroes, it permitted entry only to elite nobles. A faint anticipation bubbled in me at the thought that I would meet fellow Hero aspirants here.

Instead, I found Ares—a commoner who refused to know his place.

The commoners were supposed to be protected by the nobility. Otherwise, the nobility would lose their reason for being. Although the Hero could technically be someone of any station, we nobles would be nothing but leeches to the country if the Hero did not come from our ranks.

"You're not qualified to be the Hero."

Those words were out of my mouth before I knew it.

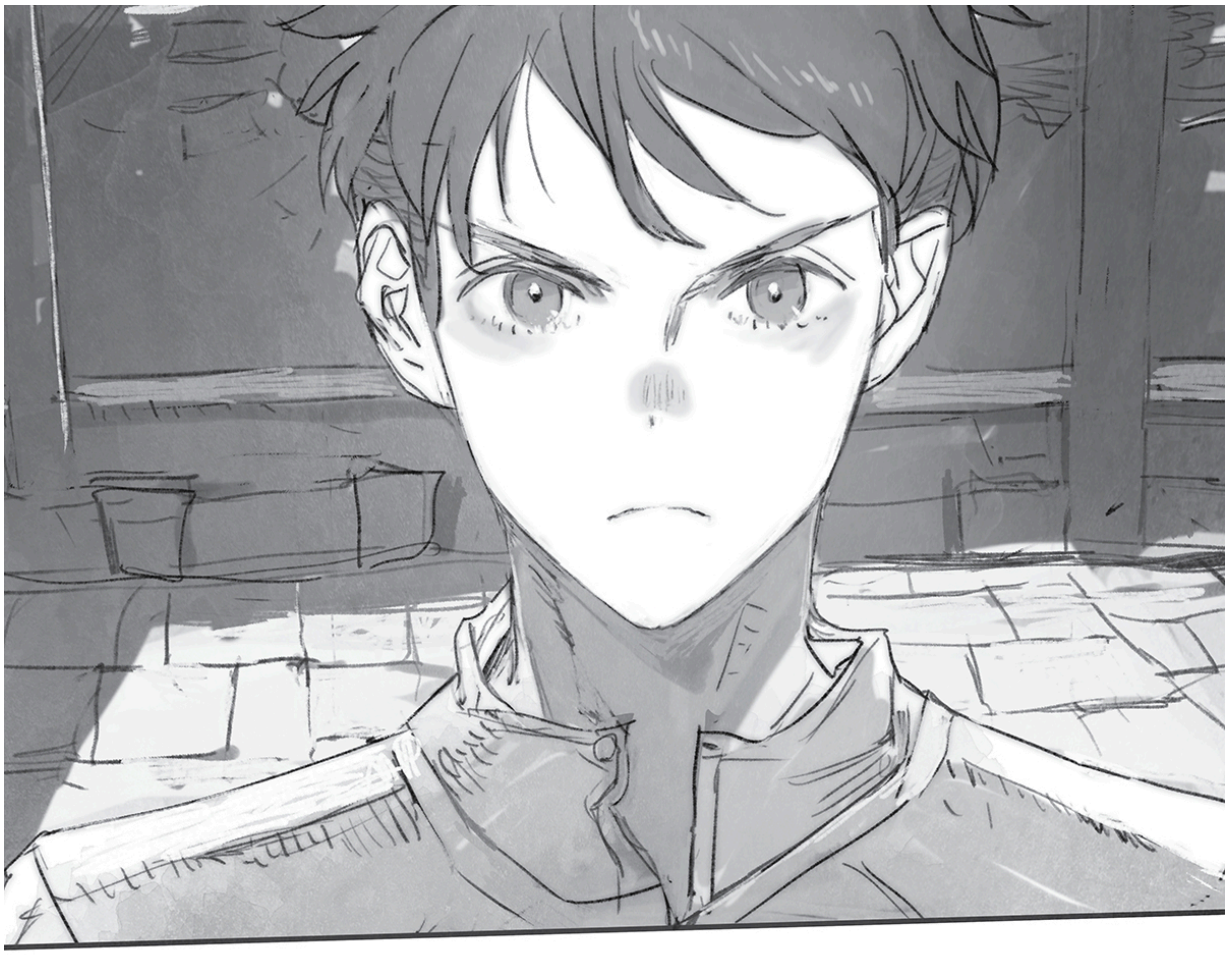
Qualifications? Who needed them? Anyone could become the Hero. But I just couldn't stand the thought of the nobility becoming shams of themselves.

"Even so, I have to become the Hero," Ares replied, looking me straight in the eyes.

Resolve brimmed in his gaze. He was so unlike the other noble boys who joined the academy along with us, laughing without a care in the world.

My hand flew to my sword. Everyone around me instantly stopped me, as if they were united by the same breath.

Why did they stop me? I wondered why they felt no sense of urgency. If a commoner saved the upper classes, it would invalidate their purpose entirely. Didn't they know that?







I could tell that this boy genuinely aspired to become the Hero. I'd never seen anyone else like him. I'd asked so many promising-looking people before whether they were trying to become the Hero, and they always gave the same answer.

"Isn't it guaranteed to be you, Leon?" they'd say, batting their lashes at me.

Why would they suck up to me? The Hero was not guaranteed to be any particular person. Anyone with the determination to save the world could have aspired to it. But what if the nobility and knighthood *didn't* have their eyes on that goal? They were supposed to fight to protect the citizens, dammit.

I was going to be the Hero, of course. I was going to save the world. I was going to become king and bring happiness to the people. But I couldn't walk that path alone. I needed to hone myself by competing against many people with the same goal. Were they telling me to do it by myself? To walk the wilderness alone? Why did they have no drive, no ambition? How was I supposed to reckon with the fact that the only person who showed up in the wilderness was a commoner of all people?

I could hear them sneering at the commoner when he spoke of becoming a Hero. *Don't laugh*, I thought. What right did they have to scorn him when they were unwilling to do it themselves?

Falm Academy was supposed to be a training facility for Heroes. Anyone who enrolled here was meant to be an aspiring Hero. Yet they kept their eyes off the goal and even had the audacity to laugh at someone who *did* want to be a Hero.

Ares did not so much as flinch when I laid a hand on my sword. He was the real deal. But I couldn't just come out and admit that.

Because I was a noble and he was a commoner.

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Class began, and when the teacher announced that we would be doing mock sword battles, Ares challenged me to a bout.

My classmates tried to stop him, saying, "The nerve of a

commoner to challenge *Leon* to a fight," but I accepted the invitation.

My reasoning was simple. If not for Ares, I wouldn't have had anyone else to spar with. I couldn't say whether the others were being deferential, or if it was because they were reluctant to match up against someone out of their league, but regardless, nobody threw the gauntlet at me. Fighting a teacher was my only other option.

And so the battle began. Ares held his sword directly in front of himself, the tip slanting up toward my eyes. His grip was too strong, and the sloppiness was evident in his form. The class burst out laughing when they saw it.

I suspected that he had never received formal training. He was similar to an adventurer or mercenary with practical experience. I could tell that his skills were nothing to write home about at this point.

I used a single-handed grip, not bothering with any kind of stance. By relaxing my body, I could keep my movements nice and light, promptly responding to my opponent's moves.

With a "Hyaah!" Ares took a step forward, swinging his sword.

He used big movements for his lead-in, and there was plenty of distance between us. I didn't even need to use my sword to block him. With the slightest possible movement, I dodged his attack by a razor-thin margin, then tapped Ares's head lightly with my sword.

"That's one hit. Can you go on?" I said to him.

"Of course!"

Ares jumped back and immediately readjusted his stance. This time, he came at me in earnest. When he entered my range, I made as if to slice upward from a low position. This was a feint. Ares fell for it, taking up an exaggerated defensive stance. Seeing my opening, I put my second hand on my sword and struck Ares's shoulder from above instead.

Thwack. A dull sensation traveled through my arm. We were using blunt, wooden swords, but I imagined it had to sting for my

opponent.

"Urk!"

With a cry of anguish, Ares fell to his knees.

"Ooooh!"

The crowd gushed in admiration. My technique had been simple, but the onlookers knew it took a lot of training and skill to move seamlessly.

"Can you still go on?" I asked Ares, who was grimacing as he pressed his left hand against his right shoulder.

There was hardly a pause before he replied, "I can."

That was fine by me. It would make good practice for the people in the priest class.

Having learned from the previous two rounds, Ares tried very hard to keep his movements to a minimum. Once more, he entered my range, but this time, it was Ares who took the initiative. His motions were sluggish because of the damage he had already taken —I didn't even have to do anything.

So when Ares tried to swing his sword, I struck him in the chest, where he was wide-open. With a grunt as if all the air had escaped his lungs, Ares fell to the ground.

It was over. I might have broken his arm, but that wasn't too big of a problem when there were a bunch of people around wanting to test out their healing magic.

"Hurry up and drop out already," I said to him.

Ares looked back at me. His eyes showed no sign of disheartenment.

Ares challenged me to mock battles after that, too.

To be perfectly frank, he was the weakest in our class, what with his self-taught form and tendency to move more than he needed to. But I did sense a certain intensity from him that I didn't get from the other students. Maybe it was because he had real combat experience.

I never knew what move he was going to pull. In a sword fight, he would throw kicks or even toss away his weapon and attempt to

grab me. The students criticized him for pulling tricks. “Vulgar cur,” they would call him, but he didn’t seem to mind. He had the determination to do whatever it took to win.

But guts alone didn’t win fights. The difference in our sword abilities was too vast for him to surpass.

Whenever he came at me, I beat him to a pulp.

“Hurry up and drop out already,” I always said when he was no longer able to move.

The people around me seemed to think that I was seriously trying to drive Ares out of the academy. They were right about me being serious. Ares was my rival in becoming the Hero, so of course I would want to kick him down. But those other assholes weren’t even worth that treatment. I would never take someone seriously as a rival if they weren’t bothering to try. Meanwhile, Ares got back on his feet no matter how many times you knocked him down.

It was as if he was declaring to me that *this* was what it meant to strive to be a Hero.

Before I knew it, my eyes had started following Ares. Yet he never looked my way. He spent every minute honing his skills; if he had a spare moment, he would use it to pore over his textbooks, and any large chunks of time were funneled into practicing his swings. He literally had no time for anyone else.

When classes ended for the day, he would swing his sword behind the academy building. Each and every stroke was careful and precise, as if he was attempting to absorb everything we were taught in class into his skin.

I watched him go at it practically every day. Maybe I was trying to make certain that there was at least one other person walking through the same wilderness as me.

“What’s that commoner so desperate for?” the nobles around me said.

How was that even a question? We were fighting the Demon Lord. If he was prepared to take on the threat, of *course* he’d be desperate.

But even so, Ares's work ethic was unusual. It never occurred to him to rest. He ran as if something was chasing him down.

There was no doubt in my mind that he had experienced something that spurred him to become the Hero. I had no idea what it was, and I wasn't about to ask him.

Maybe that was the thing I lacked.

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Some time after that, I started hearing rumors about Ares. Apparently, he had fallen for Maria Lauren from the priest class and confessed his love to her on multiple occasions.

That can't be right.

I laughed it off. Sure, Maria was beautiful. Her skills as a priest were outstanding enough that she deserved to be called the Holy Maiden. I'd talked to her in the past because I was interested in her as a potential member for my own party, but she only ever spoke in flowery platitudes. I never got a handle on what she was really thinking.

She struck me as someone who was never sincere when she praised God. She could feel God's presence, and because of that, she didn't believe in Him at all. I couldn't imagine Ares becoming infatuated with a girl like her.

A few months later, I heard Ares was learning magic from Solon Barclay.

"What an idiot. Does he really think a Hero can use magic?" my classmates said disparagingly.

They had a point—magic was a talent. You were either born with the ability or not. At the same time, there were folklore tales of Heroes who wielded magic. Maybe Ares took those stories seriously and was trying to learn magic. Which also suggested that the reason he'd approached Maria was so he could learn healing magic.

What a waste of his time. Ares was totally fooling himself.

The next thing I knew, I was taking the magic tomes in my house up to my room and reading them in secret. I couldn't understand a word of them because they were written in the ancient script. But I chipped away at them with the help of a dictionary.

I was definitely no slouch when it came to academics. It was important for me to read widely and accumulate knowledge so I could run our fief one day. Magic tomes were a completely different beast, though. For one thing, they were unintelligible. Even if you could decipher the letters, the grammar was so different from our modern language that the sentences were nigh impossible to parse. I counted my lucky stars that I'd never enrolled in the mage class.

In the end, I quit trying to read the magic tomes after a month. It was too grueling a task. After all that careful work of translating the letters and comprehending the text, I would finally chant a spell and get no reaction whatsoever. Nothing in my environment changed. I found it impossible to continue.

How is Ares sticking with this?

It wasn't the action of a sane man. You had to be off your rocker to learn magic without having the aptitude.

It's got to be impossible for him, too.

Ares was generally clumsy. No way could someone like him learn magic from scratch, I told myself.

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Some time after we started our third year at the academy, I heard rumors that Ares had learned how to use attack and healing magic.

"His spells aren't anything special," everyone sneered, but there was awe in their faces as well.

In truth, his spells *weren't* that powerful. But he had managed to achieve something beyond my capabilities. It must have taken an unimaginable amount of effort.

The same thing went for the sword. Ares was clearly surpassing everyone besides me in the warrior class at around this point. Although his level of improvement frankly didn't match his effort, he

was still powerful in his own right.

Even after three years, Ares kept challenging me to mock battles.

He stood before me, both hands on the hilt of his sword. The tip slanted up toward my face. There was nothing excessive about his stance, and his grip was moderately relaxed.

This particular stance was basic, but it was generally the most reliable in a one-on-one duel. Since he wasn't showing any openings, I adjusted my upper body and held my sword with one hand, pointing it at Ares. By this point, I didn't have the luxury to adopt an improper stance against him.

We held our stances as we searched each other for opportunities to strike. The air was tense; all of a sudden, Ares lowered his body and thrust his sword toward me. His movements were seamless and minimal, leaving nothing for me to exploit. It could have been a feint or a proper attack.

I jumped to the side and made a swipe at his flank, only for him to instantly revert to his original stance and block my attack. Of course, I wasn't done there—I kept pelting him with slashes. I incorporated feints in my barrage, but Ares parried everything with perfect precision and efficiency.

What a world of difference. Ares had improved the most out of everyone in the warrior class. Maybe that was only obvious considering where he'd started, but it did give meaning to him joining the academy.

Compared with him, what did I gain from being here? I did my daily practice, but that was it. If I was aiming higher, shouldn't I have gone off the beaten track instead of taking the easy route at school? I could have fought on the front lines with my uncle, for instance. There was so much I could have learned from heading to war. And if I couldn't go to the front lines, slaying monsters within the kingdom was always an option for me. That would have sharpened my skills and let me contribute to the country at the same time.

Despite my moniker as the Sword Saint, I'd taken the

conventional route of attending Falm Academy. For all my pride about how I was the only one thinking about our country, maybe I wasn't actually thinking about anything but myself.

For some reason, as I watched Ares desperately block my strikes, regret bogged my mind.

I can't lose to him, at the very least. That's the one thing I won't allow.

I read Ares's next move. He was saving his strength to perform a counter after blocking my next blow. I made a show of backing off a step. Seizing the opportunity, he zipped right up to me and delivered an overhand slice. But that was just what I'd anticipated. I swerved to the side and struck Ares's torso at the same moment his attack missed.

I felt the weight of the blow. Two years ago, this would have been enough to knock him off his feet. But this time, Ares remained standing. His stance hadn't even faltered. Although he was grimacing in pain, he still had it in him to fight.

I went on to crush him after that, but Ares never conceded defeat. I knocked him down at multiple points, but he always got back to his feet. By now, nobody laughed or called him an idiot.

A Hero was somebody who made the impossible possible. Maybe I was simply sticking to what I was capable of, and nothing more.

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At the end of summer, I received a notice of my uncle's death. He had died fighting a demon at the border.

He was a strong and stouthearted person. I'd always been convinced that no mere monster would ever do him in.

My cousin was stoic even in the face of her father's death. "It is the warrior's way to perish on the battlefield. It is what he wanted," she said.

So then why did my father, the head of the house, decide to prioritize his own life instead of fighting? Why was I, the Sword Saint, absent from the field?

Gazing at my cousin, I was keenly aware of my powerlessness.

The death of a frontline commander was as clear a sign as any that the war was worsening.

"You need to drop out as a Hero candidate," my father told me.

His reasoning was that it was dangerous—a count could not afford to lose his heir to the monsters. A very characteristic reason indeed. But what did that mean for the country?

What would happen to the world? Weren't nobles supposed to protect others? What did my uncle die for?

I went to see Ares. It was our first time having an actual conversation.

"Don't worry. I'll be the Hero instead."

He listened to my worries and came to this clean and crisp answer. He hadn't changed one bit from when we first entered the academy.

But his response made me realize something: I'd come to Ares because subconsciously, I'd wanted to foist the role of Hero on him. My resolve was so feeble that my father telling me to stop was enough to make me waver.

I was pathetic.

I'd always known that Ares would make a better Hero than me, but I'd insisted on going through the motions anyway. I kept walking through that wilderness all by myself.

Now I understood. He was what a person *should* be. It wasn't about whether one could or couldn't accomplish the task; it was about what you *had* to do.

I wondered if I should abide by that philosophy, too. Maybe I should continue to fight and struggle, even if I lost in the end.

Even if I couldn't become the Hero, I would pour all my effort into saving the world.

A Hero needs friends, after all.

Maria's Story

"He was *my* Hero, too."

When asked about her relationship with the Hero, she gave her response with a warm smile.

Maria Lauren was the healer in the Hero's party. Now a bishop, she manages the church's affairs. From a young age, she was gifted with miraculous healing powers, which she used to treat anyone regardless of their social status. For this, she was known as Maria the Holy Maiden.

"We first got to know each other in our academy days," she explained. "He spoke to me one day out of the blue, asking if I could teach him healing magic. You know, at first, I thought he was trying to flirt with me. That's usually what men are after."

Maria gave me a cheeky smile. She has long and silky black hair, porcelain-white skin, and inscrutable, enigmatic eyes. In the literature, she was described as a beauty, and even now, her looks are very much intact. If anything, age has only enhanced her allure.

"But when we got to talking, I found out that he was serious. He was under the impression that a Hero could wield a sword, use magic, *and* cast healing spells."

In the past, there were Heroes who could do all those things, and the same should be true to this day. Was he really that strange for thinking that way?

"He was. Well, to be precise, both attack magic and healing magic require innate talent. At the time, people thought it was impossible to wield both styles of magic while also succeeding as a warrior."

But the Hero makes the impossible possible, is that right?

"When you put it that way, yes. But in over two hundred years,

there had been nobody of that description. Apparently, the academy was first established to train warriors in both attack and healing magic, but it was so inefficient that they put a stop to it right away.

"The two types of magic aren't very compatible, you see. Mages view the world's natural energy as mana, which they use for their own purposes. We priests interpret that same energy as God's blessing, and we act on His behalf. We have a fundamentally different way of seeing things, which makes it difficult to juggle the two."

The idea that attack magic and healing magic are inherently different is still hotly debated to this day. Although it is technically possible for people to wield both, it is an impediment in the sense that no one can rise above a rudimentary level in either discipline.

"Not to mention that training as a warrior is nothing like training as a priest. Classes in the academy were separated based on occupation. The idea was that it was more efficient to specialize."

But you didn't agree, and that's why you taught Ares healing magic?

"I was interested, you see, about whether a person without talent could receive God's grace."

Maria smiled benevolently, and yet what she was saying was borderline blasphemous. What did it mean for a priest to have *talent*?

"It's a matter of whether you can sense God. Piety has nothing to do with it."

She crisply denied the relationship between faith and healing magic.

"Although sensing God can deepen one's faith, it is not faith that allows a person to sense God. I have seen many people who are more devout than I am. But they weren't necessarily able to sense God's presence. That's what I mean when I say 'talent.'"

It is generally understood that priests needed to receive God's grace, which was a talent in a certain sense, but it was highly unusual to see someone—a bishop, no less—outright deny the connection between faith and God's grace.

"It's not a taboo, although I suppose there are many who would

find it hard to admit. Now, let's get back on topic, shall we? The Hero had neither talent nor faith. In fact, he asked, 'If God exists, why are there monsters?' A blunt question, indeed. But you do come across people who think that way, especially when they've actually fought monsters themselves."

The relation between God and the monsters have many points of debate, but the priests avoid a clear answer. The consensus is that it is "God's will."

"So I was curious to see whether he could learn to use healing magic. I taught him as an experiment."

Is it easy to teach healing magic?

"Not at all, especially to someone with no talent. *Feeling God's presence* is much easier said than done when you've never sensed it in your life. It is like teaching language to a dog."

But it must have gone well, given that the stories say that the Hero wielded divine powers.

"It depends on what you mean by 'gone well.' With the help of my instruction, he gradually started to feel God's presence over time. It took him more than two years to learn his first healing spell."

If he learned it in the end, doesn't that count as a success?

"It takes an aspiring priest a month at most to learn their first spell. Or to be more precise, it comes to you naturally as long as you have the aptitude. In his case, he made no progress whatsoever in two years. I couldn't understand why he kept at it for so long."

Do you think he was able to become the Hero *because* he applied himself to learning healing magic without getting results?

"Who knows? I was interested in watching him at first. Right, so a divine miracle won't happen for someone without talent, I thought. But he kept at it for two years without any payoff. Any normal person would give up within three months. You might be able to push yourself if you had something to prop you up, like devout faith or a natural aptitude, but he had neither of those things."

You didn't understand why Ares would practice healing magic?

"There are folktales that say the Heroes of old could use healing magic, but I don't know whether that's actually true. For decades until very recently, party roles were very clearly defined. If the warriors performed well on the front lines, they didn't need healing magic. That was the conventional wisdom, you could say. It's why everyone in the academy thought he was strange for practicing healing magic, not just me."

Now that you mention it, I suppose a warrior leading the charge wouldn't need to use healing magic. I'm sure it would come in handy, but if the party works well together, then there wouldn't be much burden on them to use it.

"Indeed. But I should mention that I only told him about God's presence. I didn't stand there and watch him practice the whole time. Although I warned him about his lack of aptitude on many occasions, I couldn't stop him."

He proved you wrong, yes?

"He showed that someone without talent or faith can learn healing magic. But all he acquired were the most basic spells, so it wasn't a huge achievement in that sense."

The beginner spells can only heal or soothe small injuries and bruises.

"When the pain or injury is that minor, it will go away over time, so I didn't think those spells were worth the effort. Even a priest wouldn't bother healing such small wounds in battle. You'd be at it all day otherwise. But he understood the importance of healing those types of wounds."

How so?

"Although they might not be life-threatening, they'll slow you down if you leave them untreated. Or rather, I should say, any injury will impede your movements, however small or large it is. If you want to use your full strength at all times, then you have to heal every single wound. I healed his major wounds, while he took care of the light injuries by himself. He was able to fight so tenaciously because he had the beginner spells up his sleeve."

In the literature, Ares is glorified for never letting any obstacle or hardship wear him down. Were the beginner

healing spells his secret trick?

"You could say that. To be more precise, he understood that every little thing adds up. Whenever he was up against a formidable monster, he would wear away at it with smaller wounds until his foe went down. Slow and steady wins the race, as they say. It sounds simple when you put it like that, but it was *very* time-consuming.

"Once, we fought an enemy for three whole days and nights. When we were done, we all slept right there on the spot like the dead. We would have been wiped out if we got attacked at that moment."

Maria smiled fondly in recollection.

But if you did everything that way, wouldn't that have extended the journey significantly?

The Hero's journey did not take *that* long.

"Yes, things would have moved at a crawl if we left everything to him, but between Leon, Solon, and me, we were able to get through most problems quickly. We were always telling him, 'If we left this to you, the Demon Lord would die of old age.'

"None of us were the friendliest of people, so it might have come off as condescending. But he would always laugh, scratch his head, and say, 'Thanks, you were a big help.' It made *us* feel like the bigger fools in a way."

You speak so fondly of those days. You loved Ares, didn't you?

"I've been asked that question many times, and I've always given the same answer: I didn't love him. That's the truth."

There was no dishonesty in her expression.

The rumors say you've stayed single because you've never been able to forget him.

"Well, that's a bit of a prying question. I simply missed the window for marriage. Perhaps I'd have found a partner long ago if I had a bit more courage. They might call me the Holy Maiden, but in truth, I'm quite a coward."

Why did the Hero die?

"It was a tragic thing indeed, but I suppose that was God's will. I can only say that it was Ares's role."

Fragment 1

At the academy, the classes are divided by occupation: warrior, priest, and mage. You can only specialize in one field. This is the wrong call, in my opinion. I would have thought that a school that "produced Heroes" would teach some amount of attack and healing magic in the warrior class. But the lessons are completely segregated because apparently, it's inefficient to learn close-quarters combat and magic at the same time. Plus, there's this idea that magic requires traits inherited at birth.

But I'm not about to give up. A Hero has to be able to use both attack and healing magic. *I* have to learn those things, at any rate.

"Could you teach me healing magic?" I asked Maria Lauren, a celebrity from the priest class.

She was pretty, with her long and neat black hair and her gossamer-white skin. She was the most beautiful person I'd ever met. But that wasn't the reason I chose to speak to her, of course. She was the only one in the priest class who didn't seem overwhelmed by the lessons, so I thought she might have the time to teach me. Also, a lot of people called her the Holy Maiden, and she had a reputation for being a charitable person.

"I thought a warrior didn't need to know healing magic," she responded with a twinkly-eyed smile.

"I want to be the Hero. So I need to learn magic, too," I said.

Maria's eyes widened. Everyone around us started buzzing in surprise as well.

"Oh, really?" Maria seemed to think for a moment. "I have heard that past Heroes possessed such qualities. But are you aware that juggling disciplines is not recommended these days due to how inefficient it is?"

"I know. The teachers said the same thing and wouldn't teach me healing magic."

"Ah, so you came to me after they turned you down."

"Yep. You're the best in the priest class, and I heard you're as kind as a saint, so I thought you might teach me."

"Hey. As nice as that is to say about Lady Maria, aren't you being awfully presumptuous?" a girl from the priest class cut in. With her slightly rotund figure and stern-looking features, she looked more suited for the warrior class.

"Oh, I don't mind," Maria replied mildly to the girl. "Now, let's see. I'm far from a saint, but still, guiding people is part of what it means to serve God. I'd be happy to teach you about God when I have time."

Hearing that, the crowd started lavishing Maria with praise:

"She's so kind!"

"No wonder she's the Holy Maiden!"

"She's even willing to teach a commoner about God!"

I was deeply grateful to Maria, too, and I made a point of thanking her.

It was only later that I learned that "far from a saint" was the most accurate part of that conversation.

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Some time after that, Maria approached me one day as I was practicing my sword swings behind the school building.

"Sir Ares, may I have a moment of your time?"

"Oh, hi, Maria. Are you here to teach me healing magic?"

"No. Teaching spells to someone who cannot sense God is a pointless endeavor. It is like teaching arithmetic to a monkey. Do you understand what I mean?"

"…Uh, sort of." I was a bit taken aback from being straight up compared to a monkey, but I got the gist of what she was saying. "So how are you going to make me sense God?"

"Could you buy me some delicious bread?" Maria smiled brightly.

"Huh? Bread? What does that have to do with Go—?"

"You mustn't think. You must *feel*. Now hurry along with that bread, please."

I had my doubts, but since I was the one asking her for a favor and all, I ran off at full speed to the cafeteria and bought the nicest-looking bread I could find. However, when I brought it to the back of the school building…

"What is this, may I ask?"

Maria was gazing icily at my offering as if it were a dead bug.

"What? It's bread," I told her.

"Is it now?" Maria let out a large, exaggerated sigh. "You didn't understand me. I asked for delicious bread. Did you not consult with God about where to find it?"

"Huh? How would God know?"

Was God a real bread connoisseur or something?

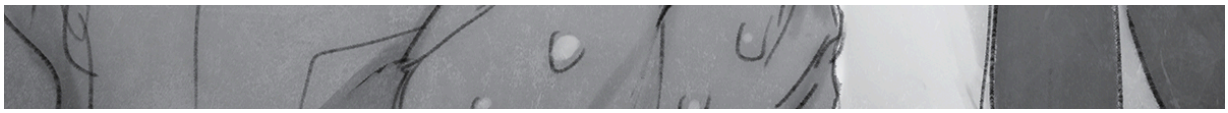
"God is all-knowing. Nothing escapes His awareness, be it delicious bread or sweets. You were meant to sense God's presence in order to buy the bread. You think He would be satisfied with some slapdash purchase from the nearest store? That sounds an awful lot like blasphemy, don't you think?"

Apparently, the search for delicious bread was the first step to knowing God… Wait, really?

"But oh well. I shall accept this bread for today. I am a charitable person, and I'm feeling peckish."

"Wait, what?"





Maybe I was spitballing here, but did she just use me as a gofer because she was hungry?

"Be more prudent next time, please," Maria said, before swiping the bread off me and scampering away.

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She called for me again on a cold winter day, this time to a dried-up riverbed.

"In my infinite charity, I have devised a trial for you," she announced.

At this point, I was getting a bad feeling. "Er, um, you know you can just tell me a normal method, right?"

"What are you saying? How would a normal method work on you? Are you not blind to God's presence despite receiving a priest's initiation from a young age?" Maria gave me a look of exaggerated exasperation. "I put in all this effort to think of a trial for a poor lost lamb. You can't possibly be saying you don't *want* to do it, yes?"

"Well, I wouldn't go *that* far, but…"

"Wonderful. Now, shall we begin?"

All of a sudden, Maria picked up a rock from the riverbed and offered it a prayer. The rock gleamed faintly with the light of a divine blessing.

"Take this rock, please."

I took the gleaming rock. "Okay, now what?"

"Throw it over the river as far as you can. The farther, the better."

I did as she said, but since the river was quite large, the rock ended up plopping right in the middle of it.

"Now, go and pick it up, please."

"Huh?!"

The audacity of this girl!

"The rock has received a divine blessing. It should be a simple matter to find it if you can sense God's presence."

"Wait a sec. You're not telling me to search that whole river, are you?"

You could tell that the river was deep just by looking at it. The current was fast, too. I'd probably get swept away if I went about this wrong. No sane person would try searching the bottom of the river.

"My goodness… What are you saying?" Maria heaved a big sigh. "You can't sense God's presence in your everyday life, can you? Then your only option is to take extreme lengths to drum it into your body. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

"Well, yes, but…"

"I'm glad to hear it." Maria flashed me a bright smile. "Please do your best."

It took me three grueling hours of wading through those icy waters before I found the rock.

I couldn't tell if the rock was shining since it'd been lodged at the very bottom somewhere. So at first, I dug up any old rock from the riverbed, but…

"Do you have scales over your eyes?" she said coldly, before chucking the rock right back into the river.

She was merciless.

The same thing happened over and over again until I somehow found the rock. When I hauled myself out of the river, feeling like I was on my deathbed, Maria gave me a luscious, devilish grin.

"Were you able to sense God?"

"Well, if you mean it in the sense that I felt called to do God's bidding," I said wryly, "then yeah, very much so."

"Wonderful. You just need one more push." She smiled, refusing to perceive my sarcasm.

I wasn't liking my chances of surviving this "one last push"…

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Maria went on giving me crazy trials every week, but I didn't learn a single healing spell. By the time I was in my second year at the academy, what I *did* know was the location of all the best bakeries

and confectionery stores in the capital.

When I pointed this out to Maria, she said, "Women will be delighted at your knowledge of good confectionery stores. I trust it will come in handy."

Er, I really doubt my future involves getting chummy with girls. The witch in front of me doesn't count.

Although I didn't fully believe that her tasks would have any effect, I had no one else to rely on to teach me healing magic. I trusted her, but it wasn't like I had a better option.

Then one day, I sensed a vague change in the air. If I had to be specific, I would say I got weirdly good at finding good bread and sweets.

Maybe I'm hearing the voice of God? I thought, so I tried chanting a prayer I'd learned ages ago, and one of the tiny scrapes on my arm healed up.

"I did it! Maria was telling the truth!"

To be honest, I'd half given up, so my success felt extra impactful.

What a marvel—Maria was an actual saint! Why didn't I believe in her more? Maybe I would have learned the magic sooner if I'd taken her tasks seriously!

My heart was filled with gratitude and remorse. Hurrying back to the priest class, I made sure to tell Maria: "Thanks a bunch! I can use healing magic now!"

For a moment, Maria just stared at me.

"…Seriously?"

I would never forget the stunned look on Maria's face, not for the rest of my life.

Fragment 2

I suppose it happened when I was about three years old. I was taken to church, where I asked my mother:

"Mother, why is everyone praying?"

"It's so that they can ask God for a favor. They're all praying to be happy."

"But, Mother, God doesn't…"

…care about humans.

For as long as I can remember, I've been able to sense God's presence.

Just His presence.

My parents and their peers, all devout believers, said this was a miracle. That I had to be a Holy Maiden.

But it was no miracle to me—because God had no interest in us humans. Father, Mother, and the vast majority of believers offered up their earnest prayers, only for God to look the other way. It was a tragic yet comic sight, as if humanity had a one-sided infatuation with God.

I did not want to be so pathetic. And so I thought of God's power purely as something to use. His miracle—healing magic—was mine to wield. Not a single part of me believed. It was pointless, after all.

At first, I was under the impression that the priests thought the same way I did, that there wasn't much purpose in unheard prayers. But I was mistaken. The priests clung to God's power through their prayers. They were no different from mages chanting an incantation, the way they served as mere catalysts to the miracles. They did

appear able to sense God's presence dimly, but it was like a haze to them. They could not perceive it accurately. Ironically enough, they took that as a sign of God's greatness.

Being an astute child, I didn't say anything to undermine anyone's faith. In fact, I conformed with everyone else, even if it was only on the surface. People called me a "Holy Maiden" or "God's chosen" by pure virtue of my ability to sense God's presence and channel His miracles, and so from a young age, I got used to playing the part.

I never thought of this as a burden. But I will say that since I wasn't really the Holy Maiden, I felt a growing wall between myself and others the more I put on the act.

The one exception to this was a boy my age: Solon.

He was so clever that people praised him for his "God-given talent" from a young age, but that only made him doubt God even more.

"If God was on the side of humans, then the monsters, which are the enemies of humans, wouldn't exist. As long as the monsters are around, God is no ally. Alternatively, it means God didn't actually create this world," he would say flatly.

Such precocious statements were probably why, for all their talk about him being a prodigy, people kept their distance from him. I was the only one who knew he was correct, so I felt a sort of camaraderie with him. We even got to talking a little.

But I kept him at arm's length as well. People would think I was as weird as he was if we got too familiar.

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Looks are another thing I've been praised for since I was young, which factored into people calling me the Holy Maiden. This had everything to do with my parents, however, and nothing to do with God.

As I grew older, I could tell from how people reacted to me that I was becoming prettier. Many admirers courted me, but I had no

desire to be with people who only saw me as the Holy Maiden. Occasionally, a highborn noble would try to pressure me into marriage, which would have been difficult to turn down under normal circumstances because I came from a family of minor nobility. But since I was the so-called Holy Maiden, I was able to get out of it by leaning on the church's authority and declaring that I would join its ranks in the future. Besides, it was what my parents wanted, too.

Such were my circumstances when I enrolled in Falm Academy at the age of fifteen. By all appearances, it was completely pointless. Nobody in this country was better than me at using healing magic, which obviously included the teachers. But I still had to go through the formalities, so I resigned myself to being a student while paying lip service to the staff.

I noticed that Solon, who was in a similar predicament, was openly disgruntled about being in the mage class and didn't get along with his peers. He was an antisocial sort…or no, maybe he was a pure soul in the truest sense of the word.

My life as a student was uneventful. The teachers left me alone for the most part, and my peers respected me more than the teachers. Although the classes were boring, that was the story of my life in general, so I didn't think much of it one way or the other.

Then, one day, Ares came into my life.

Out of nowhere, he barged into the priest class and said to me, "Could you teach me healing magic?"

I was surprised, just like anyone else would be. For one thing, he was of common descent. Although I came from minor nobility, I still wasn't the kind of person he could casually strike up a conversation with. Besides, it was unheard of for a warrior to ask about learning healing spells of all things.

Maybe he came to me with this random request because he wanted to flirt with me?

I talked with him a little, bracing myself for the worst, but it

turned out that he actually did seem to aspire to become the Hero. And his vision of the ideal Hero was a warrior who could use attack and healing magic.

I couldn't fathom what he was thinking. Was he really trying to model himself after fairy-tale characters?

From what I could see, he felt no kinship with God. He had absolutely zero prospects. I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said it was impossible for him…

…and yet his eyes were serious. He was different from everyone else, who simply followed the crowd, slaves to conformity.

Well, this is interesting!

The first seeds of emotion sprouted within me.

Although I didn't quite understand what was going on, I accepted his request.

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From that day forth, my life at the academy was awash with color.

How can I teach someone healing magic when they lack the talent?

I grappled seriously with this question. When I asked Ares about his experience with healing magic, he said that a priest in his hometown had introduced him to it, but he'd never been able to sense a thing.

This was dire. Normal methods would definitely fail to work—emphasis on *normal*. Given how apathetic God was toward humans, He wouldn't suddenly care about a person after a bit of prayer. Ares needed to do something to amuse me—er, God and win His favor.

I was racking my brain on this problem when my stomach began to rumble. That was when it hit me—bread! Yes, I could ask Ares to buy me some bread. He could search for God's presence *and* bread at the same time. What a fine trial that would make—I was sure I would get some scrumptious bread out of this. I wasted no time looking for Ares and passing on this request.

It was a total disappointment. For his first trial, Ares bought me average bread from the academy cafeteria. Was he not taking his search for God seriously?

I did give the bread a try, and it was, indeed, average.

This would not do. He needed a tougher trial. Yes, this was all for Ares's own good.

But I had to wonder about this feeling that was swelling within me. Perhaps it was love. I could not stop the pounding in my heart. I decided to have him search the river for a rock for his next trial.

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Many trials later, Ares began bringing me progressively tastier bread and sweets.

I thought of trials for him almost every day. Watching him desperately attempt his weekly tasks brought me great joy.

For the first time in my life, I was grateful to God.

Thank you, Lord, for granting me such a wonderful person.

I could not say for certain whether a simpleminded person like Ares would be able to sense God. I didn't know of any previous cases of God suddenly giving His blessing to a person out of nowhere. I explained to Ares that this was a fool's errand, and that it was determined at birth whether a person could sense God. Just some slight nudging would have sufficed to teach him healing magic if only he'd possessed the latent talent. But Ares did not possess even the dimmest of prospects. If he was to achieve his goal, it would be nothing short of a miracle.

He understood that, and he refused to give up. I had no idea what made him strive to such lengths, but he completed every one of my demands—er, trials—with an unflagging spirit.

Looking back, I'd shown him my true self right from the beginning of those trials. But he accepted me for who I was and continued applying himself to my tasks. Somewhere along the way, I ended up rooting for him to sense God. At the same time, a part of me feared that our sweet time together would come to an end.

He looked absolutely comical, taking those challenges so seriously. And it made me feel the beauty of humanity.

Then one day, Ares came to see me.

"Thanks a bunch! I can use healing magic now!"

He was beaming. There was evidently no falsehood in his words.

"…Seriously?"

I was so shocked that my vocabulary slipped to the level of an uneducated pauper.

For the very first time in my life, I witnessed a miracle. Not from the hand of God but from tireless human effort.

I had never believed in what the "Heroes" represented. They had always seemed like nothing but a pipe dream.

But at that moment, a Hero stood before my eyes.

Solon's Story

"He was no Hero. Merely a fool."

The man known as the Great Sage spoke in a derisive tone. His thin body is cloaked in a purple mage robe, and there is a sternness to his face that gives off the impression of a high-strung personality. He also has a rough and curt way of speaking, which all but signals "Don't talk to me if you don't have anything important to say."

Such is Solon Barclay. Hailed as a prodigy from a young age, he boasted magical prowess that exceeded his teachers at Falm Academy from the very beginning of his studies there. He is also credited for creating numerous spells and magical inventions in recent years, contributing greatly to our modern society.

"Think about it: What *is* a Hero? A strong guy? Someone who can wield powerful magic?"

How about a vanquisher of the Demon Lord?

"So defeating the Demon Lord makes you a Hero? You can beat the Demon Lord *because* you're a Hero? Ridiculous. That's like asking what came first—the chicken or the egg. That guy didn't have any strength or magical power. He had none of the qualities a Hero would need, but somehow, he was carrying the fate of the world on his shoulders. Insane. He didn't do what a Hero should do, and everyone who left it to him to handle the Demon Lord was an idiot."

But he *did* defeat the Demon Lord.

"That's a matter of hindsight. He was just lucky… Actually, no. Anyone could have done it if they put in the same amount of work. People just overlooked that and pushed the whole achievement on him. *We* should have put in more work, too—Leon, Maria, and me. Anybody else was out of the question. All those fools who sat on their hands are alive now without a care in the world. They're

beyond help."

Leon said that Ares's work ethic was unusual.

"'Unusual'? It got results, didn't it? You think swinging a sword a thousand times a day will make you strong enough to defeat the Demon Lord? You think chanting a hundred spells would do it? Absolutely not. Defeating the Demon Lord requires a completely different level of effort from becoming a knight captain or a court mage. The conventional amount would barely put a dent in the Demon Lord. Of course you need to go above and beyond."

Like how you taught Ares magic.

"Because he wouldn't stop pestering me about it. He'd follow me around and ask me over and over. Apparently, the instructors in the mage course refused to teach him. Which made sense. You didn't teach magic to warriors, both then and now. It's inefficient and a waste of time. Hence why he came to me for a favor: 'I want you to teach me magic. You know more about it than the teachers do.'"

So you taught him.

"I gave him a simple introduction. Just something to waste time. But I did discover a few new things through teaching the magic arts. It wasn't a bad experience, I suppose. I can credit him for how I have an apprentice now. If not for him, I would have thumbed my nose at others until the end of time. I certainly wouldn't have gone around teaching anyone."

Did Ares have a talent for magic?

"Nope. In fact, he had the least amount of promise out of everyone I've ever met. You've talked with Leon and Maria, right? I bet they said the same thing—that he had no talent. He didn't have any skill with the sword, magic, or summoning divine miracles. He was mediocre to the core."

But they say that Ares the Hero wielded magic.

"He wielded…some amount. It would have been quicker for him to strike flint than for him to use a fire spell. That's how basic we're talking. And he only got that far after training himself to death. I thought his spells would be completely useless."

Were they useful?

"Yeah, pitiful though they were. And it wasn't just once or twice.

He was good at using magic—or I suppose he knew *when* to use it. For example, he didn't just fling a fire spell at an enemy. He would use oil to amplify the flames. When he was crossing swords with an opponent, he would throw a wind spell into their eyes. Depending on how you wielded it, a level-one spell could become a ten or a zero.

"At my first battle at the Great Forest of Lozorof, I blasted the demon with my most powerful spells, but when they didn't work, my mind went blank. Not my finest hour. It was then that he said to me, 'You can use weak spells—just buy me some time. Focus on what you can do.'

"Under normal circumstances, I would never have let him order me around like that. But I was in a daze at the time, so I just did what I was told like a puppet. It worked."

Did that make you want to join Ares's party?

"I thought I was above parties back then. I was conceited enough to think I could defeat the Demon Lord all by myself. At best, I considered joining up with Leon and Maria. I suppose they were thinking the same thing. They pretended to be high-minded, but deep down, they were just as prideful and arrogant as I was.

"It was only after I had my ego beaten out of me at the Great Forest of Lozorof that I considered joining *his* party. If not for him, we would have joined some other guy and gotten wiped out fast. Although we excelled as individuals, we wouldn't have worked as a team without him."

Were you able to bring out your full power because of Ares?

"Who knows? But I can tell you this: We could have defeated the Demon Lord if someone else stood in for Leon, Maria, or me, but we couldn't have done it without *him*."

Would you say that's what it means to be the Hero?

"Don't be stupid. I already told you he was just a fool. He wasn't anything that fancy. He could have just lived his life quietly like an ordinary person. Sure, the rest of us had talent. We were scumbags who rested on our laurels. But *he* had nothing. He was a ridiculous fool who ended up being called the Hero while having nothing. It's

easy to get people to call you the 'Hero.' But what do they know about *him*? They assume he beat the demon because he's the so-called Hero, but do they know the blood, sweat, and tears he poured into that? The world is full of people with more talent than him, myself included. And because *we* did nothing, he had no choice but to step up and become the Hero."

As the Sage, you fought the Demon Lord. Are you really saying you did nothing?

"It's only natural that I would fight the Demon Lord. I'm a genius, after all. Leon and Maria also fought out of that same sense of obligation. It was our duty. Our destiny, you could say. But he wasn't like us. He didn't have it in him. He fought the Demon Lord by twisting fate itself. Even if it's what he wanted, I don't want anyone calling him the Hero."

Why did the Hero die?

"Don't ask me. Is that all for your questions? Then pack up already. This interview is over."

What was the cause of Ares's death?

"Was that what you really wanted to ask?"

Solon's sour expression cleared up, and he let out an amused laugh.

"It was a demon who killed Ares, just as we reported. There's no mistake about that. But we didn't witness the moment of his death."

How was an underling able to kill him when he defeated the Demon Lord?

"Well, that's just how it happened."

Why weren't you at the scene?

"Bad luck. That's all."

Some would think that you and the rest of the party had the opportunity to kill Ares.

"Interesting. I can see how people could think that way. But that's impossible. We would never have been able to kill Ares. Even if we wanted to."

Because Ares was strong?

"No, because it was literally impossible."

There's one last thing I'd like to ask. What was Ares to

you?

"He was a friend. Just a friend. The only one I ever had. But I lost him in that battle. He was an average and modest guy in every way… Ah, but there was just one thing he fussed over."

What do you mean by that?

"When we were setting out on our journey to vanquish the Demon Lord, the king had an artist paint our portraits. The Hero gave a lot of detailed instructions for his: 'Make my nose a little longer,' 'make my eyes a little bigger,' and so forth. The artist was already going out of their way to beautify him without any of us needing to say a thing, so we just laughed at his fussiness. At the time, we simply wrote it off as him having a complex about his average looks. Not very Hero-like of him, we thought."

Solon's lips curled into a slight smile.

"If you want to know about Ares, you should visit his hometown, Daris Village. If you're trying to write down everything about the Hero, then you'd be remiss not to go there, wouldn't you say?"

Fragment 1

Now that I was used to my sword training and my weekly trials from Maria, I decided to work toward my next goal: learning attack magic.

Figuring that I might as well ask the mage-class teachers to teach me, I put in a request, only to get immediately shot down. Which I kind of expected, to be honest. I already had my sights set on a student who seemed likely to teach me magic.

Solon Barclay, child prodigy and future Great Sage. He's a problem student who barely ever shows up to class, probably because his magic powers already surpass the teachers'.

I had one reason to choose him: He looks like he has a lot of free time since all he does is just walk around the place.

I don't see him much, so when I happened to spot him one day, I immediately called out to him.

"Solon Barclay, could you teach me magic?"

"No," he said without even looking at me. He promptly tried to leave.

Between his skinny frame and the constant scowl on his face, his entire body seemed to shout, "Don't come near me."

"Wait, could you hear me out for a bit?" I circled around him, blocking his path.

"I don't need to. You're Ares. The weird guy who's seriously trying to become the Hero. You ape Leon's sword style, and Maria toys around with you once a week. And now you're trying to make me teach you magic? Don't be ridiculous. Why do I, a genius, have to waste my time on someone like you? Do whatever you want with *your* life, but don't get in *my* way."

His scowling face grew even pricklier throughout this entire spiel.

"Wow, you sure know a lot about me. I'm glad I can skip the explaining. So could you teach me magic? Please?"

"Weren't you listening to me? Didn't I tell your sorry peasant behind not to interfere with a genius like myself?"

"But you've got loads of free time, right?"

"Me? Free time?"

"You always seem like you have nothing to do when you're at the academy. Doesn't seem like you've got friends, either."

"*You* don't have any friends yourself! Are you looking to die?"

When I saw Solon concentrating magic into his right hand, I hurriedly cleared a path for him. His lack of friends seemed to be a sore spot.

"Don't talk to me ever again," Solon spat as he strode off.

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I spotted Solon another time a week later.

"Hey, Solon," I called out. "Have you thought about what we talked about?"

"Do you have no powers of recollection? Did Maria's pranks unscrew your brain? Also, how dare you speak to me so casually. Do you have a death wish?"

From then on, he and I engaged in this sort of banter whenever I saw him. Solon was always insulting me with phrases like "you piece of trash," but Maria's trials must have strengthened my mental fortitude, because that level of insult left me completely unfazed.

After a month of this, he finally stopped walking off.

"Okay, I get it, trash can," he said to me. "Your words have some logic to them. I admit I don't have much to do at school. I'm only here because of stupid obligations."

When I asked him for the details, he told me he'd been forced to enter the academy for appearance's sake.

"I'm a low-ranking noble. My father is a skilled mage like myself, but he didn't have enough clout to overrule a high-ranking noble like the chairman, who wanted me to attend so the academy could brag

about raising a genius. That's why my father was pressured into making me enroll. I killed time in the library for the first month, but now I have nothing to do. Mind you, though, I do have the right to choose something other than teaching you."

As Solon spoke, he pulled a pile of books out of his pocket. There physically wasn't enough space in there to store so much stuff. Was that some kind of magic?

"These books are given out to the students in the mage class. Technically, you should be able to use beginner magic if you can read and understand these, but in practice, you need talent. I won't tell you to cast spells—just go and memorize everything in these books. It should take you about a week."

"A week?! To finish this mountain of books…?"

This covered an entire year's worth of classes. Solon was asking the impossible.

"Can't do it? I'd say becoming a Hero is the more ridiculous task. Besides, you're the one who said you want to learn magic despite not having the talent for it. If this is enough to make you think twice, you'll never learn it."

"Oof."

He had a point. Solon's argument was completely logical.

And anyway, compared with Maria's trials, this one actually made sense.

"Okay, fine. One week. I'll memorize it all. Then you'll teach me magic."

"I don't make false promises."

And with that, Solon walked away.

I went back to my room and dived straight into reading. It was a little hard to understand, but surprisingly enough, it wasn't completely undecipherable, partly since the contents overlapped with a magic tome I'd read ages ago.

From that day forth, I put a halt to my sword training, avoided Maria's trials, and cut down my sleep time, all to focus on reading. Day and night, and even during classes and meals—I used every

minute of my time on those books.

One week later, when I saw Solon, I ran up to him without hesitation.

"I memorized everything!" I declared.

"Oh, you did?" Meanwhile, Solon was the picture of nonchalance. "Then let's go."

Solon started walking toward the campus.

"Where?" I said. "Aren't you going to quiz me on what I've learned?"

"I don't ask for the impossible. And I know you're no liar. So I don't need to check you."

That left me momentarily dumbfounded, but I soon ran after Solon.

His destination was an empty classroom.

"Okay, try chanting a fire spell," he said.

I did what I was told, reciting a spell from the books. But nothing happened.

"Hmph. You chanted it correctly. But I sensed no mana in your spell. Have you pictured a fire?"

"Yeah, just like the book told me to."

"What kind of fire?"

"A hearth."

"That's too weak. Imagine raging flames."

Solon gave me similarly detailed instructions over the course of our lesson, expanding on what was in the books. Although I didn't quite muster any results, Solon took the whole thing very seriously.

"Interesting. How very interesting," he mused. "You might be able to analyze the fundamentals of magic in even greater detail."

"But it doesn't look like I'm casting spells anytime soon."

"That's what's so interesting. I can use magic without thinking about it, but if you put thought into your magic, then theoretically, it's possible to bolster your efficiency. In other words, if you can just learn how to cast magic, you might be able to improve your spells on a fundamental level."

I only half understood what Solon was saying, but at least he was really getting into his teaching gig.

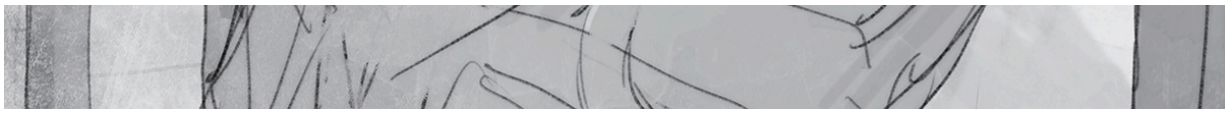
Our lessons only happened once a week, when Solon came to school. But I enjoyed our hangouts; we chatted about all kinds of things. I'd always thought of him as kind of a smart-ass who was prickly around other people, but he was actually a caring guy once you got to know him.

"People always flattered me by calling me a genius or a prodigy, but nobles are all about using people for their own ends. Growing up with that kind of treatment, I couldn't trust anyone around me. I always kept my own company," Solon said with a self-deprecating smile. "Maria's the same. Truth is, she's just able to sense God. She's no Holy Maiden, but people kept pushing their expectations on her, and now she's a wacko. She might seem fine on the outside, but she's quite gloomy on the inside. Still, there's no one else who can sense God like she can. She's nothing like those old farts who became bishops because of their status. If Maria can't teach you, no one can. I guess, in that sense, she really is a Holy Maiden."

Solon seemed to have mixed feelings about Maria.

"So what are her trials like?" he asked me.





"Last time, she hit me over and over with a whip. 'If you truly pray to God, you should stop feeling the pain,' she said."

Solon winced. "Oh. Oh, I see. But you know, healing wounds is the first step toward God's miracles. Maybe she was whipping you to get your body to heal itself and to make you sense God."

"These days, she's been hitting me while venting about some venerable bishop who touched her butt or something. I can just hear her yelling, 'Screw that old man!'"

"……"

"Oh, and while she's hitting me, her smile gets wider and wider. Gives me the creeps. Is it really doing me any good?"

I needed to do whatever it took to learn healing magic, but I had my doubts about Maria's teaching style.

"…Did you achieve anything?" Solon asked finally.

"The pain did stop halfway through. Maria called it a 'divine miracle,' but I think I just got numb to the pain."

"I'm surprised you don't have scars on your body…" Solon's eyes swept over me.

"She cleaned up the lash marks. 'What we do in our trials is our little secret, so I must conceal the evidence,' was what she said."

Maria demonstrated her competence in the most unpleasant form imaginable.

"Okay, let's start training your magic! Can't waste a genius's time!" Solon announced.

He averted his gaze, and so our lesson began.

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And that's how I spent my days at the academy. I used it all on training. Everyone else, teachers and students included, looked at me as if I was weird and derided me for "putting in so much work for nothing," but I couldn't give up on becoming the Hero.

Around the beginning of my third year, I started being able to use magic. I could produce a bit of fire right around my fingertip.

“Well, look at you!” Solon was as delighted as if it were his own achievement. “This is incredible! Nobody should be able to use magic unless they have a latent ability for it! Your hard work overcame that! Now this is something you can brag about! This is groundbreaking stuff, enough to rewrite the conventional theories of magic!”

He was so happy that I forgot to be happy for myself.

It took some time for it to sink in, but when the joy struck me, so did the tears.

“Thank you, Solon.” My cheeks were damp. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

I’d dreamed about being able to use magic. And now I’d finally done it.

No more regrets this time.

Fragment 2

I was about a year old when I learned how to read—not picture books but the tricky tomes in my father's personal library. I didn't understand them, of course. I was just copying my father, who always had his nose in a book. Although my father had a valuable collection, he was the kind of person who took joy in reading to a baby.

I think I enjoyed being with my father more than the act of reading in and of itself. It was thanks to him that I eventually learned what was in the books. This is probably why I was able to read magic texts by the time I was three.

My father stopped me from learning magic immediately—that would have been too dangerous for a young child. But when I turned five, he let me use magic, and I cast a fire spell to burn my teddy bear into cinders. My mother was beside herself in anger. She was generally a tolerant woman, but she was the one with the most common sense in our house.

The fact that I wielded magic at such a young age instantly attracted attention, and I was told to show off my magic all over the place. I was like a doll being paraded around, but at the time, I felt proud of myself.

Yet for all the people who said, "Wow, it's so amazing that a child can use magic," I had others who said, "Oh dear, it's so dangerous for a child to use magic." It was obvious that I was being treated differently than other children my age. The parents who thought I was great put their kids in my proximity, expecting that I would make a name for myself in the future. The ones who thought I was dangerous avoided having their children around me out of fear of

what I could do.

Even as a child, I could tell there was something warped about the whole situation, and it affected my relationships with other children. A rift steadily grew between us, and before I knew it, I spent all my days reading books by myself.

I liked books, and it was fun learning new spells. But I wasn't so philosophical that I could take it in stride when other people let me down. Maria was the only person I could have a proper conversation with, but unlike me, she was fairly good at navigating relationships because she had given up on others. Ironic how that was.

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By the time I turned fifteen, I still wasn't good at handling the people around me. It was all the more reason to focus on my studies and practice magic. I ended up becoming quite skilled as a mage; my father was delighted when I surpassed him, and I could count the number of people who could teach me further on one hand. For obvious reasons, I didn't need to go to school, and I thought I'd be just fine researching magic by myself.

But that never ended up happening. The chairman of Falm Academy, a high-ranking noble, pressured my lower-ranking father into sending me to the academy, all so that he could brag about how "Solon Barclay studied there." My father tried to put up a fight, but I decided to accept the invitation. I didn't want to cause trouble for my old man.

Life at the academy was about what I expected. I was way ahead of the classes, and I finished reading all the books in the library in a month. The other students kept a wide berth of me. Although I basically had nothing to do, I had to attend the academy for as long as I was enrolled.

We ended up settling on a compromise: I would physically attend just once a week. This meant that I was more isolated from my peers than ever, but even from going one day a week, I could get a

feel for what things were like inside the academy.

There was one person who caught my eye: Ares Schmidt. He was a guy of common birth who was earnest about becoming a Hero. Although the academy existed to train prospective Heroes, that was merely lip service. Hardly anyone was actually serious about this aspiration. The one exception to this was Leon Müller, Sword Saint and son of Count Müller, but it was less like he was actively aiming for the goal and more like everyone else assumed he'd be the one. Then again, I had no idea how Leon himself felt.

So when Ares brazenly declared that he was striving to be the Hero and took up Leon as his rival in swordplay, he caught my attention. He was probably getting Maria to teach him healing magic as well. Although, it was debatable how seriously *she* was taking it.

What a fool, I thought.

It was dumb for a commoner to attend an academy swarming with nobles, and it was pretty embarrassing of him to cling to ideals that were out of fashion in this day and age. For him to waltz in here without any self-awareness, he had to be the biggest of fools.

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Around half a year later, the fool in question stood in my way.

"Solon Barclay, could you teach me magic?"

I turned him down flat—because it was pointless. Magical aptitude was almost entirely determined at birth. This guy didn't have a sliver of talent. There was zero point in me engaging with him.

Plus, he ticked me off by saying I didn't have friends. I felt downright ready to murder him—so much so that I almost unleashed my magic right there on the school grounds.

What the hell did *he* know about me? Like he was one to talk, barging into people's personal space without a thought in the world.

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One week later when I went back to school, Ares talked to me again. His tune hadn't changed—he still wanted me to teach him magic. I drove him off, hurling all the insults I could think of.

Yet Ares insisted on speaking to me whenever I came to the academy. He was a persistent wretch. It was the first time in my life anyone had ever stuck with me so stubbornly. Most people would get fed up with my bad attitude and keep their distance.

After about a month of this, I took five academy-issued textbooks with me to school. I knew everything in them, so they weren't valuable to me. When I arrived, Ares came over to me like he always did. And just like usual, he hung around me no matter how much I tried to swat him away. He was so cheerful about it, too, like a dog wagging its tail.

At this point, I couldn't be bothered putting up a fight anymore. There was nothing calculating in this guy's mentality. He really was trying to learn magic out of the simpleminded desire to become the Hero. This was probably a bit rich coming from me, but this guy had a clumsy approach to life.

That's why I gave him the five books. I promised him I would teach him magic if he learned everything in them in one week. It was an entire year's worth of classes—quite a tall order for an amateur mage. Practically impossible.

Yet somehow, I knew that if anyone could do it, it was Ares. If he failed, then it would simply mean that my faint sense of anticipation was off the mark.

After handing over the books, I thought about how I would teach magic to a talentless student. It was probably pointless to speculate, and yet it was surprisingly fun to imagine. Looking back, that might have been the first time I thought of doing something for someone other than my family.

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Ares ran up to me a week later, when I was back at school.

"I memorized everything!"

I knew just from looking at his face that he was telling the truth.

Huh. So he managed it.

Surprisingly, I wasn't shocked. Objectively speaking, I'd given him quite a difficult task, but I must have been expecting more from him than I'd realized. I couldn't explain this feeling in a logical way. It was like a hope, a wish for something ideal.

The fact that Ares had lived up to this wish made me…happy, I suppose.

I wasted no time getting us into an empty classroom that I'd picked out beforehand. When I got Ares to try using magic, predictably nothing happened.

Not everyone could be a mage just because they could chant a spell. It all came down to what methods you took and the individual differences between people. There were a lot of things you had to check: whether you chanted the incantation correctly, whether there were any discrepancies between the spell and what you pictured in your mind, what part of the caster the mana was reacting to, and so on. Those factors were always bundled into a single word: talent. Some people could do it, while others couldn't—and that was the end of it.

I'd always thought the same way. Then again, if you could solve that fundamental issue, then maybe the art of magic would take a huge leap forward.

On the days I went to the academy, I met up with Ares to teach him spells. When I stayed at home, I buried myself in research about the fundamentals of magic.

One day, my father said to me, "You seem to be having fun going to school lately."

I was about to contradict him as a matter of course, but for some reason, the words got stuck in my throat.

Instead, I said, "Eh, it's not bad."

"Glad to hear it. There are some things you can only learn at school. Good to see you're having a nice experience."

He seemed happy. He'd been apologetic about sending me to Falm Academy—he must have been worried about whether I would get along with the people there.

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Ares kept practicing magic for over a year and a half to absolutely no result. Eventually, we entered our third year at the academy.

All the while, I kept analyzing the foundations of magic and improved my efficiency at casting spells. From what I observed through my studies, anyone could use magic, but everyone was born with a different compatibility for it. People without the aptitude had to extend that part of themselves, but I didn't know how exactly one should go about training them. What I was doing with Ares was my first attempt at testing out the theory. It was possible that he'd never learn magic throughout his entire life.

I said as much to Ares, but he just answered with a smile, "I'll take a chance on it, even if it's slim."

This guy sure liked fruitless endeavors. I hated doing things that seemed pointless. At least, that was how I felt in the past.

It was easy to sneer at something as "pointless," but that was born out of the fear that your efforts would amount to nothing. It occurred to me that the right thing to do was to keep pressing forward, battling that fear.

Then one day, Ares produced a faint light at his fingertip. It was so weak that it felt as if it would go out if you blew at it.

For the first time in my life, I saw the beauty in such a flimsy flame.

To me, it looked like a person's beacon of hope.

Ares's Story

The village is neither small nor large for its kind. It's one of many mountain settlements, a ten days' horse ride away from the capital, and its residents live pastoral existences tilling the fields.

Daris Village is famous for producing a Hero.

"You want to ask about Ares? Be my guest! I was his friend!"

I questioned someone who would have been around Ares's age had he still been with us.

"Ares could do anything when he was little. He was strong, fast on his feet, and really good at school. He was good-looking, too. All the girls around our age had a crush on him."

The man seemed accustomed to either talking about Ares or being asked about him, because his answer flowed smoothly off his tongue.

"Anyway, he was amazing. When he got a sword, it took him no time at all to outdo the adults. Our local priest taught him healing magic. And that's not all, you know? He even managed to learn spellcasting from reading the crusty old books in the village chief's house. Let me just say, never mind me, not even the chief could decipher what was in those books. They're written in some special language, see? He studied up on how to read it. Now that's the Hero for you!"

Could the Hero already wield the sword, magic, and divine miracles when he was living in this village?

"Of course. I'm sure you know that already, right? Ares is famous for it. The reason he's the Hero is 'cause he was special."

Why did someone who was already so special go out of his way to attend Falm Academy?

"'Why'…? Wasn't it so he could get recognized as the Hero? Or maybe he was scouting for party members, I guess? I don't really know. I wonder if it's 'cause the fortune teller told him to go to the capital."

"Fortune teller"? You mean the Prophet?

"Yeah, that person. One day, they showed up in the village and said, 'The Hero who shall save the world will come from this village.' Everyone knew right away that it had to be Ares. He always did seem special."

The Prophet was known to give a proclamation when the world was in peril. They'd been active for over a thousand years, so it was debatable whether they were even human. It led credence to the idea that it was not the same person every time.

Did Ares meet the Prophet directly?

"Don't ask me. The fellow disappeared quick. How do I put it? You could tell just by looking at this person that they were different from the rest of us. There was this dignified aura around 'em. Full of mystery, you'd say."

So Ares journeyed to the capital after hearing the prophecy?

"Yep. That's how it went. Made me think, *Wow, that Ares sure is something*."

What do you mean by "something"?

"Well, nowadays, everything is all peaceful-like, but back then, the monsters were rampaging anywhere and everywhere. The road to the capital was dangerous. Trade was pretty spotty 'cause of that. My old man said it was hard on the village."

A fourteen-year-old boy traveled that dangerous road alone?

"Sure did. But hey, I figure having an adult tag along would have slowed him down. He made it all by himself. That's what I mean when I say he was something."

I parted ways with that bumbling villager and headed to Ares's childhood home. Ares was the son of the current village chief. At the

time he set out on his journey, his grandfather was in charge.

"Thank you for coming all this way. I hear you want to ask questions about my son, Ares."

Ares's mother—Shella, wife of the village chief—greeted me warmly, perhaps because we had exchanged letters beforehand arranging to meet. She appeared to be around fifty, but she had an air of elegance around her that made me imagine that she'd been quite the beauty when she was younger.

What was Ares like as a child?

"He was a well-behaved boy. Bright and clever, never much trouble to deal with. He even volunteered around the house. He really was…a good boy."

Shella spoke slowly in fond recollection.

In your eyes, was he capable of doing everything?

"It wasn't so much that he could do everything and more that he was a resourceful child. But I don't think he was *quite* as gifted as others say. Yes, he was fairly good with a sword and knew a little magic and healing, but he wasn't a master at any of them. He might have stood out in a small village, but if he went somewhere with more people, I suppose they would think of him as a somewhat talented individual with a few unusual tricks up his sleeve."

Were you born elsewhere, may I ask?

"Yes, I'm surprised you noticed. I was born and raised in the capital, not here in this village. My husband and I met at school when he came to the capital for his studies. I moved to the village after we got married. Both my husband and I were excellent students and athletes, as a matter of fact, so we didn't think our son was unusually talented. We've never really said this aloud, though."

With a smile, Shella described that particular anecdote as a bit of a brag.

But Ares was chosen as the Hero.

"It was a mystery. As proud as I am of my son, he wasn't *that* special. The villagers were convinced that the prophecy was about Ares, but my husband and I weren't so sure."

You didn’t believe the prophecy?

“Well… It was less about whether the prophecy was real and more about Ares. Besides, what kind of parent wants their child to fight the Demon Lord? I never wanted him to be in such danger. Perhaps it wasn’t that I disbelieved the prophecy so much as I didn’t *want* to believe it. I would have liked someone else to be the Hero.”

But you still sent him out to be the Hero?

“My father-in-law, who was the village chief at the time, was all for it. So were the villagers. They were enthusiastic about the idea of a Hero coming from their town. Back then, there was a grimness in the air because of the Demon Lord, and this village was no exception to that. Of course they’d be delighted about a Hero’s appearance. I couldn’t bring myself to go against the flow. The least we could do was send him to Falm Academy so that he could build his strength and find companions for his journey.”

Was it your idea to enroll him?

“Both me and my husband wanted it. We knew that Falm Academy was a place for training Heroes. But since we also knew that only the nobility went there, we told him he didn’t need to force himself. As long as he got stronger and found some friends, then anywhere would do. Since he was an open-minded boy, we thought he would work things out on his own, but he went to Falm Academy anyway.”

What did Ares think of being chosen as the Hero?

“He was a clever child, so when he saw what the mood was like in the village, he went along with what everyone wanted. But I think he felt uncertain of himself deep down. He knew his shortcomings better than anyone. Sometimes, I would wake up in the night and see him swinging his sword intently. He was so anxious that he couldn’t sleep.”

And yet he defeated the Demon Lord.

“And then he died. I know I should be happy because the world was saved, but neither I nor my husband found it in us to rejoice. Why did our son have to die? I find myself wondering that even now. If all it took to defeat the Demon Lord was a bright and clever person, then so many others could have done it. So why him…?”

Shella wiped the tears trailing down her cheek.

I turned my gaze away from her and looked around the room, where the presence of a sword caught my eye. Although it was clean, it was heavily worn.

What is that?

"His sword. Only his sword came back to us. It was passed down through this family for generations. I don't know if he used it throughout his journey, but it was with him at the very end. It must have been a faithful companion. Getting that sword back was the only silver lining. It's something to remember him by."

Did the Hero's companions bring that sword to you?

"I've never met the members of Ares's party. It was Zack who brought the sword to us."

Who is Zack?

"His cousin who's the same age as him. He's my sister-in-law's child; both she and her husband were adventurers. They lost their lives in Malika. Zack's father was from that country, so they both went to its aid when the Demon Lord invaded. Before they set off, they left Zack in our care."

How was Zack able to bring back the sword?

"Because he went with Ares to the capital. When Ares died, he said he got hold of the sword. So he brought it back to the village."

I'm confused. Another villager said that Ares journeyed alone.

"Well, he had bags to carry, for one thing. We couldn't just send him off by himself. Besides, the two of them grew up together, and they got along very well. I think that having Zack by his side helped ease some of Ares's anxieties.

"The villagers don't mention Zack because they love to exaggerate Ares's achievements…or maybe they've just forgotten. He didn't stand out very much in a crowd."

Where is Zack at the moment?

"When he delivered the sword, he said, 'I'm leaving on a journey.' I haven't seen him since. I encouraged him to stay in the village, but he was very insistent on leaving. 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for letting Ares die,' he told me. Even though he'd done nothing to apologize

for…”

Did Zack travel with Ares?

“Only to the capital. He was a normal boy, so he didn’t go on the journey to fight the Demon Lord. He always did his best at everything, though I have to say he was the clumsy type. But he was a very good boy, you know? I think Ares gained a lot from being with him. Ares would start things, and Zack would go along with him until he finished. Did you know it’s very hard to learn things all by yourself? Ares was able to keep going because he had Zack doing it alongside him.”

What do you think of the portrait of the Hero circulating the kingdom?

“It looks very much like Ares. We even bought a large copy for ourselves to hang up.”

Indeed, there was a large portrait of the Hero’s splendid visage displayed prominently in the house.

Did Ares and Zack look alike?

“They were cousins, so yes. But Ares had slightly bigger eyes and a longer nose. Just tiny things, really, but they made quite a different impression on others. Ares was often complimented on his looks, while people said Zack was unremarkable. It’s strange how the little things can make all the difference.”

Fragment 1

"Thanks for coming with me, Zack," Ares said to me quietly once we had walked quite a bit of distance from the village.

"Sure, but are you really okay with this? Wouldn't a proper adult have been better?" I asked, voicing what I had been thinking on the inside. It was kind of reckless to send two fourteen-year-old boys to the capital by themselves.

When the time arrived for Ares to leave the village, everyone had come up with the idea of sending an escort from the village along with him. A few young, unmarried men volunteered, but Ares ended up picking me.

Strangely enough, however, nobody objected to his decision.

"If some adult I don't know very well comes along, it just makes it harder for me to do things," said Ares. "Besides, I get the impression that they're not about to put themselves in danger even though they're perfectly willing to sing my praises and make *me* fight the monsters."

I was surprised to hear him criticize the villagers. He usually kept that to himself.

He had a point, though. There were definitely some people who seemed glad about not being chosen to accompany Ares. It was because they knew the journey would be dangerous. Ares rarely spoke badly of others, but I guessed that he was privately disgruntled with the villagers' attitudes.

"The monsters are strong, so I can't blame them," I said. "It's how my parents died, after all."

My parents had both been adventurers whose bread and butter was fighting monsters, but they'd lost their lives in a big battle against the Demon Lord's army.

"Except if I become the Hero, I'll have to fight those monsters. I'll even have to vanquish the Demon Lord," Ares told me. "What *is* a Hero anyway? I never asked to be one. But if I don't do it, the world as we know it will end. Crazy, right?" An uncomfortable smile came over his face. "One time, I woke up at night and saw my mom crying. Deep down, she doesn't want me to be the Hero."

I could tell. His parents had pretty much raised me. When the Prophet gave that proclamation, Ares's parents expressed their doubts about whether it was trustworthy. It was all too evident what they really thought.

But Ares's grandfather was the village chief, and when he started singing Ares's praises, pretty much everyone else in the village followed suit.

"You'll be fine, Ares! I know you can do it!" I said. "You can use a sword, you can use magic, and you can even call on divine miracles! You've beaten *loads* of monsters. I bet nobody else is like that, even in the capital!"

The cheer in my voice was slightly forced.

"You think? Daris Village doesn't have any professional warriors or mages. Everyone's an amateur. What if I'm just a big fish in a small pond?"

"Ares…"

I was astonished at his words. We'd been together for so long, and yet I had no idea he felt that way.

"Ah, sorry," he said. "I just blurted out everything I was thinking now that we're out of the village. Even though I decided I'd do this Hero thing, it seems like I'm pretty weak at the knees."

From then on, Ares never spoke about his reservations. But that conversation stuck with me ever since.

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The journey proceeded smoothly. At the villages we stopped by along the way, Ares very maturely negotiated for water and food with our meager supply of money. Whenever we encountered

monsters, we avoided fighting them as best we could. We only resorted to it when escape wasn't an option. Even on those occasions, Ares always made sure I was safe—ever the coolheaded and reliable fighter. He always knew the right time and place to use magic, and he would finish off the enemies with his sword.

Watching him at work, he was nothing short of a Hero.

We walked through a dense forest. Although the weather was clear, the trees on both sides of the road were overgrown, blocking the sky. A vague sense of unease blanketed the surroundings.

Although this road had once been a popular route to and from the capital, monsters had become rampant in the area since the Demon Lord's appearance. Nobody passed through here now. Even after half a day of walking, we didn't cross paths with anyone. The monsters, meanwhile, strutted about as if they owned the place. We'd already encountered a bunch of enemies, all of which Ares cut down.

"Nice," I said. "Looks like you can handle them all by yourself, huh?"

Although I carried a sword for self-defense, I'd never found any opportunity to use it except to practice with Ares along the road.

"Ugh, Zack, you're just as guilty of exaggerating as everyone else. It's hard to stick with *anything* when you're alone. I can only keep at it because you're with me. It was the same when I learned the sword, magic, and healing arts. Everybody's gung ho about it at first, but when they don't get the results they want, people drift off one by one. It's always just you and me by the end."

"True, but I never learned magic or divine miracles," I replied with a chuckle.

"That was a shame, but you still stuck with me to the end. That's amazing in itself. It's tough to keep at something you're not good at. It worked out for me since I picked things up quickly enough, but if I was even a little worse at it, I don't know if I would have stuck with it. I might have quit halfway just like everyone else."

"I can't imagine you being bad at anything. But still, I would've

kinda liked to learn *something* after all that."

Those were my genuine feelings. I'd done everything I could to catch up to my cousin in at least one thing, but nothing panned out.

"There's things I suck at, too…," Ares began, only to abruptly stop in his tracks.

Sensing that something was up, I stopped as well to peer at our surroundings.

It was too quiet. I couldn't even hear the animals in the forest.

"Oh, you noticed? I suppose there's a reason why they call you the Hero," came a voice.

Somebody shuffled out from behind the large tree in front of us. A human… No, he only *looked* human. He had purple, muscly skin, ears that were twice as long as a human's, and—last but not least—bloodred eyes.

"Run! It's a demon!" Ares roared.

He didn't need to tell me twice—I sprinted in the opposite direction.

Demons. Retainers of the Demon Lord, they had bodies that resembled that of humans, but their physical strength and magical power was on a completely different level.

The reason I ran away immediately was not just because I was afraid of the demon. A big part of it was because I didn't want to drag Ares down.

Not a second later, I heard the sound of steel clashing. Ares and the demon had started battling. I flung myself into the undergrowth, and after making sure I was a safe distance away, I watched the battle from behind a tree.

The demon was using both his hands to wield the hugest sword I'd ever seen. The force behind his swings was like a gale.

"Hmph. I heard there was a new Hero heralded by the Prophet, but you're still just a puny kid. You won't amount to anything if I kill you now," the demon scoffed.

Ares was on the back foot against the demon's confident strikes. Never mind an injury, Ares would probably die if he got hit by one of those attacks. Still, he dodged the blows calmly, and what he couldn't dodge, he blocked with his sword.

Time passed bit by bit as Ares continued to endure.

At first, the demon smiled haughtily because Ares wasn't launching any of his own attacks, but after a while, he appeared to grow bored.

"You seem to be able to take a hit, if nothing else. But how will you fare against magic?"

Flustered about not landing a direct blow, the demon stopped attacking with his sword. Instead, he thrust his left hand forward, attempting to activate magic.

Ares did not miss his chance.

"Hah!"

Unleashing all the power he'd been saving, Ares shot forward like an arrow and cut the demon's outstretched hand with lightning speed.

The demon's fingers flew into the air—how many of them, I wasn't sure.

"Aaaaaargh! You brat!"

The injured demon immediately picked up his broadsword again and attempted a counterattack, but his swordplay was noticeably clumsier than before.

Without his fingers, he can't grip his sword properly!

I wondered if that was Ares's plan. If it was, then it worked like a charm!

The tables turned after that, with Ares launching into the offense and the demon playing defense. Ares never went for any big attacks, instead aiming to wear away his opponent by striking where his guard was down.

"Ngh! Curse you!"

With so many tiny wounds all over his body, even a bystander could tell that the demon's energy was steadily beginning to drain.

Victory was right before Ares's eyes, but even then, he continued to fight carefully and steadily. Then, after succumbing to one of Ares's keen strikes, the demon finally dropped his sword.

It fell to the ground with a harsh *thump*.

Not missing his chance, Ares swung his sword at the demon's head. But the demon blocked it with his now-empty left hand. Although the blade cut into his skin, it did not completely rend it in two. In fact, the demon's arm was so muscly that it looked as if it were eating up the sword.

"I can't pull it out?!" Ares cried out for the first time since the battle started.

"I'll let you have my left hand."

With a smirk, the demon raised his right hand and swiped at Ares with his enormous claws. Ares let go of his sword and tried to get out of the way, but the claws cut slightly into his stomach.

As the demon continued its attack, Ares chanted a spell.

"O wind!"

He shot it at the demon's eyes.

"Tch!"

The demon dodged the spell, but Ares managed to back off and build some distance between them in the meantime.

The demon pulled out the sword in his left arm and discarded it in the forest behind him. The arm hung limply down his side. Not even a demon could use it freely after all that, it seemed.

Ares was muttering something, probably another incantation. But he only knew basic spells, not anything that would work against a demon.

This is bad!

The thought spurred me to run out of the forest and toward Ares, my own sword in hand.

The demon made his next move. With his foe now clearly in range, Ares unleashed a fire spell. The flame covered the demon's head, only for him to charge through, unperturbed.

Ares tried to dodge, but his movements were sluggish. Was that earlier stomach wound slowing him down?

"Ares, take this!"

I tossed my sword toward Ares.

The demon raised the claws on his right hand.

Ares skillfully caught the sword as it spun through the air, then sprang at the demon and lodged the blade straight into his foe's

stomach.

"You did it!" I cheered.

But then…

"You can kill me…but I'm taking you with me…"

Even with the sword lodged deeply in his body, the demon had his mouth wide-open. His enormous fangs were buried in Ares's neck.

Blood spurted furiously from the wound.

"Ares!!"

My scream reverberated through the forest.

Fragment 2

Zack came to my house when I was six. His mother was my dad's little sister, which made him my cousin. Since we were the same age and roughly the same height, he made for a good playmate.

There was a good reason for him to stay with us—his parents were adventurers. His father was a warrior. Unlike the villagers from around here, my uncle's face was gallant and manly, and his physique was incredibly toned without a speck of excess fat. I'd asked him to swing his sword for me on numerous occasions, and I was always wowed by how cleanly he moved. It made me think he was the strongest warrior in the entire world.

Zack's mother was a mage. I heard she was so clever, she'd taught herself magic. She'd left her books and magic tomes in our house once, and they were all worn from being read a million times. She once showed me her magic, and the spell she fired off into the sky was utterly beautiful.

On the other hand, Zack was so ordinary that it made you wonder if he was really their son. He was honestly kind of clumsy. But he was weird in how he stuck with anything he wasn't good at until he could do it, whether it was for play or something else.

When I asked him why he did that, he said, "It's our family motto to keep at things until you can do them."

Except it got tedious when he did that for our games, so I would stop him while things were still fun.

Zack's parents stayed at our place for a week, and then they went off to fight the Demon Lord's army. From asking around, I heard that the Kingdom of Malika got invaded and a big battle was happening there. If the good guys won, things would be peaceful for a while.

"A while? Not forever?" I asked my mom.

"As long as the Demon Lord is around, we won't have lasting peace. It'll be very difficult. But even a short while of peace is worth fighting for, you know?"

She had a sad look in her eyes.

"Okay, then I'll defeat the Demon Lord!" I said, thinking that would cheer her up.

"Oh, really…?"

An ambivalent expression crossed her face.

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"Ares, take care of Zack, would you?" Zack's parents said to me before they set out.

"Of course! Leave it to me!'

I was being asked a favor by two people I respected. Obviously, I was going to say yes.

After that, Zack's parents hugged him tenderly for a long time.

Watching them, I got this vague feeling that I'd never see them again.

The next day, I got my friends in the village together and started practicing swordplay with wooden sticks.

"We're gonna beat the Demon Lord!"

I was serious about it, and my friends were on board. Zack included, of course.

We were only waving wooden sticks around, but it felt like we were full-fledged adventurers. I wanted to be a warrior just like Zack's father. I was going to show off to everyone the same sword skills he'd shown me. But then…

"I'm bored, Ares. Let's do something else," one of my friends said about a month after we started training.

The others agreed. "Yeah, Ares is too strong. It's not fun anymore."

Over time, it seemed, the skill difference between us had grown too much for them to stay entertained. Sure, I did feel that there

was a noticeable gap. I had improved the most—but maybe that was because the others weren't even practicing. They just saw it as an extension of play. Zack was the only one who took it seriously.

"Okay… Fine…," I said.

I stopped practicing with everyone except Zack.

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We lived in the village chief's house, and my mother and father were both educated, so Zack and I were taught how to read and write as well. I picked it up immediately and devoured the books in the house. Zack learned how to read quite a while after that.

In those books, there were stories about the Heroes. According to them, the Heroes couldn't just use swords; they could wield attack magic as well as a mage could and healing magic as well as a priest.

"Okay, I'm gonna learn magic!"

To me, it was all simple. The Hero defeated the Demon Lord, so of course I had to learn magic.

The magic tomes that Zack's mother had used for her own studies were lying around, but they were too difficult for me to learn from, so I went to the village church.

"You'd like me to teach you healing magic?" the priest asked me.

This village's priest was still young, and he had a gentle, frail air about him.

"Yep! I wanna be the Hero!"

"The Hero? Oh, I see. The Hero." The priest gave it a bit of thought, then said, "Go get your father's permission first, okay? Then I can show you the basics. You see, in this day and age, you're only supposed to teach healing magic to aspiring priests."

His smile was tender and kind.

I wasted no time getting home and telling Dad about it.

"Healing magic? I thought that only the chosen people can use it…but, well, if the priest is willing to show you the ropes, then go

ahead and give it a try."

My dad didn't seem to think I was cut out for it. Still, I got his permission, so Zack and I went back to the church and received the priest's training.

That said, he only taught me the basic prayer and the attitude you were meant to take when praying.

"First, you must sense God's presence. If you become conscious of Him, then your prayers will naturally gain power."

According to the priest, those who became priests could sense God's presence. To put it another way, people became priests *because* they sensed God. Since I'd never felt anything of the sort in my life, I settled for reciting prayers over and over. Zack did the same.

As we were hard at work, a friend came over.

"What are you doing?" he asked me.

"Practicing healing spells."

"Healing spells? Are you gonna be a priest, Ares?"

"I'm gonna be the Hero. Not a priest."

"Is praying gonna make you able to do healing spells?"

"If I do it while sensing God, yeah."

"Oh, cool. Teach me, too."

"Why?"

"Farmwork is a huge pain. It'd be cool to be a priest or someone who can sit around praying all day."

While I didn't think much of this friend's motive, I did tell him how to pray. After that, a bunch of my other friends came over, and we all got to praying. They had the same idea that being a priest was "respectable and easy."

We kept at it for a few days, but eventually, some of my friends dropped out. I wasn't surprised; all we were doing was reciting the words of some easy prayers. It wasn't very fun, and nothing happened, either. Only Zack and I were left at the end.

To be honest, I wanted to quit as well, but Zack kept at it so seriously. It made me wonder if he was trying to learn healing magic

so he could go to his parents. When I thought of it that way, I couldn't bring myself to stop.

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Months later, word of the battle in Malika reached our village. Our country's forces, led by General Müller, fought hard and succeeded in driving off the Demon Lord's army, but they were too slow to arrive. The Kingdom of Malika had already fallen. Not a single one of the mercenaries who had volunteered on the front lines survived.

On the night we heard what had happened, Mom and Dad said to Zack and me, "Zack is one of us from now on."

Zack nodded silently.

Later that night, I heard him crying quietly in bed. As I listened to his faint sobbing in the next room, I offered a prayer to his parents.

Up until that point, I hadn't understood the meaning of the prayer's words one bit. I'd just been reciting them without really feeling them.

The first time I prayed for someone else's sake, a dim light grew in my clasped hands.

Having succeeded in creating my first divine miracle, however slight it was, I went to the church the next morning and showed the priest my accomplishment.

"Amazing. To be perfectly honest, I thought you wouldn't be able to do it. That is indeed a divine miracle." The priest praised me as he patted me on the head. "However…I'm sorry to say this, but it doesn't feel all that strong. Even if you do learn how to use healing magic, I suspect you'll only be able to master the basic spells. Are you still willing to continue?"

I nodded without hesitation.

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After a few more months of instruction from the priest, I was able to use simple healing magic. Zack took the lessons along with me, but unfortunately, he was never able to manifest a divine miracle.

The fact that I could use healing magic spread like wildfire across the village. Well, to be more precise, my grandfather, who was the village chief at the time, bragged about it to everyone he met. According to Dad, my grandfather had been just as boastful when Zack's mother learned magic.

Thanks to my reputation, the villagers came to me whenever they had small injuries. It was opportunistic of them, sure, but I was grateful to practice my healing magic. Just as the priest warned me, though, I hit my ceiling quickly. I could only use the most rudimentary of spells; no higher miracles manifested for me.

Honestly, I got the impression that this was going to be completely useless, so I decided to learn attack magic instead. Another reason for this was because I thought that Zack was getting nowhere with healing magic. I figured he'd be better off with attack magic, seeing as his mother had been a mage.

When I told him as much, he replied, "Okay, if you say so. I'll come with."

There was some reluctance in his voice, which made me think he was still a little attached to healing magic, but together, we got into studying attack magic. We started off by learning to read the ancient script, which was necessary for understanding the magic tomes. The books that Zack's mother had used were still around, so the both of us put our all into our studies.

It was the talk of town that we were studying attack magic. Hearing the rumors, my friends once again asked if they could learn it along with me. Apparently, they thought, *People who can use magic get a lot of respect*. But since they couldn't even read or write, they had to start with learning basic literacy before they could get into the ancient language. Then, and only then, could they read the magic tomes.

Daunted by this long road, my friends quickly folded.

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My magic studies continued for a long time. This was partly because it was so difficult, but I also had my sword training and chores to do around the house. Since I was squeezing in my studies between other tasks, I didn't have much to show for my efforts straight away.

I successfully cast my first spell when I was twelve. It'd taken over five years. If Zack hadn't been there studying alongside me, I would never have made it that far. Sadly, though, Zack was never able to use magic himself.

It was around this time that the Demon Lord's army started another invasion, and the monsters became more numerous and aggressive. Even the villages formed their own defense groups, and the people took up arms. Zack and I were no exceptions, but since I'd been training with the sword the whole time, I was a lot better at it than the adults. I was even able to take down the monsters that occasionally appeared near the village.

Thanks to this and my abilities with attack and healing magic, people treated me like some kind of genius. My grandfather went around telling people that I was "Hero material."

But I didn't agree. I knew Zack's parents. My sword skills couldn't match up to Zack's father, nor would my spells put a dent on those of Zack's mother. My healing magic wasn't as good as the priest's, either. Basically, I was mediocre at everything. I had no idea how I was meant to beat the Demon Lord with my second-rate abilities.

And then the worst possible thing happened: A Prophet appeared in town.

"A Hero will emerge from this village and defeat the Demon Lord," they declared before a crowd of villagers.

Everyone turned to me.

Stop it! Don't look at me with those eyes! I wanted to shout. There was no way I could defeat the Demon Lord. I was trembling, and my knees threatened to give out beneath me.

When I turned my gaze to Zack for help, he was staring straight

at the Prophet.

Zack was the only one who didn't expect someone else to do it all for him. It seemed to me as if he was trying to bring out his own Hero potential. Come to think of it, he never once gave up on learning swordplay or magic, even if he wasn't as good at those things as I was.

Seeing him, I felt a sense of calm return to me.

In the end, I was propped up as the Hero, and I silently accepted the call. I talked things through with my parents and decided that my first stop would be the capital, where I would enroll in Falm Academy. Fortunately, my parents were levelheaded about everything, and they knew I couldn't beat the Demon Lord straight away. In fact, they seemed to doubt I was the Hero at all, but they couldn't just say so while all the villagers were in a fervor. My grandfather was even ready to hold a banquet.

From that day on, I stopped doing chores and poured everything into my sword and magic training. I took the initiative to slay monsters. I was like a desperate madman, struggling to the death.

I couldn't help but worry about the future, but fortunately, Zack was always with me. Even if he never excelled at anything, he was always doing his best right there at my side. Seeing him cheered me on.

I had no idea whether *I* could become the Hero, but I got the feeling that it didn't just take sword skills or magic to be the one.

Somehow, Zack felt like the perfect fit.

Fragment 3

Ares somehow managed to stay alive.

Since the demon had been on his last breath, the neck wound he'd inflicted was not as dire as I'd feared. The bleeding stopped with healing magic.

But just because the wound closed didn't mean it was completely cured. Ares looked awful—everywhere around the left side of his neck was stained bright red. To make matters worse, the healing used up the last of his magic. Between his depleted state and the pain of his injuries, he wasn't even able to stand by himself.

Although the cut on his stomach was shallow, it showed no sign of recovery. I wrapped some cloth around it as a stopgap measure, but the blood stained right through it. A basic healing spell would have fixed it up easily, but Ares couldn't use it in his current state.

If this goes on, Ares'll be in trouble.

Both the neck and stomach wounds were potentially life-threatening. Casting away everything but the bare minimum of our baggage, I started walking with Ares leaning against my shoulder. I found his sword in the bushes and carried it for him. Ares had insisted he take the sword with him, if nothing else.

"Sorry," Ares said to me, his face pallid.

"Don't worry about it. I'm saving the Hero who's gonna save the world. Aren't I awesome?" I joked in an attempt to take his mind off things, but every step I took still felt unbearably heavy. I was walking at less than half my normal pace.

I had no idea when we would reach civilization.

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Ares's condition got worse over time. Maybe the stomach wound got infected, because he broke out into a fever and eventually stopped being able to walk.

I threw away nearly all our stuff and carried him on my back. Supporting someone the same height as me was grueling. It sapped my energy almost instantly. I'd carry him for a bit, stop to rest, and then start again, only to need another rest immediately. At this rate, we'd spend a whole month here and never make it out of the forest, let alone reach a town.

As I was resting, I turned to Ares and chanted the healing spells that the village priest taught us. It never worked once. No divine miracles for me.

Please! I'll never ask for anything else in my life! Just heal Ares's wounds!

I prayed desperately, yet no amount of wishing seemed to reach God. The thought of Ares dying from such a minor wound made me regret not putting more effort into learning healing magic. My eyes stung with the knowledge of my own powerlessness.

Ares wasn't even able to open his eyes at this point, so he wasn't able to see me cry.

I walked with Ares on my back. But I wasn't getting anywhere. His state had gotten worse overnight, and I wasn't in great shape, either. I was tired and hungry, but the worst thing was that we were out of water. We had nothing to drink and nothing to clean Ares's wound with.

I didn't dare go deeper into the forest. There didn't seem to be any rivers or watering holes nearby, and the woods were too forbidding. I knew all too well how important water was, but I'd used almost all our supply on cleaning Ares's wounds the day before, and now we had nothing left.

"O water!"

I chanted the spell that Ares and I practiced a long time ago, but nothing ever happened. It didn't work at all.

Ares could have made water easily. Why couldn't it have been *me*

who'd gotten injured instead? Why couldn't I cast a simple, measly spell?

"It's faster getting it out of a well," our friends had said when they saw Ares cast his first water spell.

They were right. But you weren't always guaranteed to be near a well or river. You definitely weren't going to have that luxury when you were in the middle of a journey, fighting off monsters. That knowledge struck home, deep to my core.

Night came, and I couldn't see a thing. Sounds of life bellowed around me; I couldn't tell whether they belonged to animals or monsters. I was scared. I wanted a fire.

"O fire!"

I chanted the words of a fire spell I knew, but predictably, nothing happened.

A strange smell was starting to emanate from Ares's body. His wound must've begun festering. Fear spiked through me, and I unpeeled the cloth covering him, but I couldn't muster the courage to see for certain what it looked like underneath. If only I was able to use fire magic, I could have closed his stomach wound by burning it.

I hadn't packed any flint when we set out. I'd assumed we wouldn't need it because Ares could cast a fire spell. But now that it had come to this, my heart sank with the realization of how important it was to have fire. Not even the starlight penetrated this gloomy forest. Trapped within what felt like an abyss, I sensed a primal fear rippling through me.

And it was cold. Ares was burning up with a fever, but that was only around his head and wound. His fingertips were so cold that I couldn't feel any life in them. Hugging him close to me didn't do a thing to warm him up.

I desperately wanted to use magic. Even just a tiny fire would do.

If I could have just one more chance, I swear I'll do anything to learn magic, I vowed in my heart as I lay there in the darkness, trembling with fear.

The sun rose. I hadn't slept a wink; Ares moaned the entire night. All the blood had drained from his face, and now he looked like a corpse. My own exhaustion hadn't cleared up one bit, and I no longer had the energy to carry Ares on my back.

"What am I supposed to do? What do…? What do I do?"

My voice broke the silence. Despair loosened my lips.

"Kill me…"

That was Ares's answer, spoken as a groan.

"I'm done for. At this rate, I'll drag you down with me. And I've been in pain this whole time. I'm scared of my body rotting while I'm alive. Please…use my sword. Finish me off."

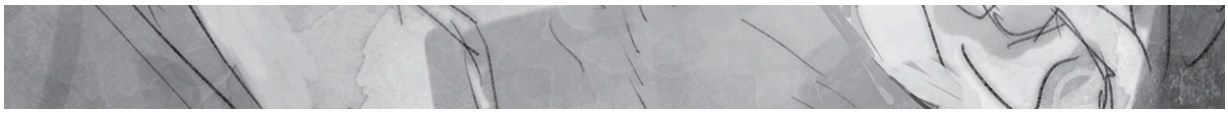
Ares's voice was barely above a whisper. Every word took its toll on him.

"I can't do that! You're my brother! My best friend! Weren't we supposed to be together—always?! I'd never hurt you!"

He and I were raised like brothers. I couldn't *imagine* killing him.

"That's why I'm asking you. You understand what I'm feeling. Zack, you have to leave me behind and go on. If you don't finish me off here, the bugs and animals will eat me alive. That's why I'm asking you… Kill me. And go on by yourself."





Ares's eyes were shut. He was clenching his face in an effort to withstand the pain.

"What am I supposed to do when I get to the capital? *You're* the Hero, aren't you? If you die, the world's gonna end!" I cried.

He didn't respond for a moment.

"In the end," he said slowly, "I wasn't the Hero. The Prophet only said the Hero would come from our village. They didn't say it was me. And you know what? When I heard what they said, something told me it wasn't about me. They were talking about you, Zack."

"How could it be me?! I can't even use magic! If only I could, I would have healed you! I'm not even that good with a sword…"

I was bawling now, unable to rein myself in.

"I…don't know why I thought that. I just…did." Ares's face was contorted in agony. "Argh, it's like I'm on fire. It hurts so much. Please, Zack, I'm begging you. Put me out of my misery."

I could tell just by looking at him that his suffering was immense. Deep down, I knew what had to be done.

My face was damp with tears as I drew the sword. I placed the tip against Ares's chest as he lay crumpled on the ground.

Ares's eyes were shut tight as he forced a smile on his face. He was trying to smile even though his last moments were full of pain.

He was doing it for me.

My hand trembled. A moment passed—just a tiny sliver of time—and Ares's face contorted in pain again. That was when I ran the sword through his chest.

At first, his hard flesh resisted me. I could feel the tremor against my hand. And then the sword sank smoothly into Ares's torso.

His mouth moved faintly. His last breath barely amounted to a sound.

"Mom," I thought I heard him say.

Fragment 4

Eight years passed after that fateful day.

The forest hadn't changed. Not the massive, oppressive trees that covered the sky, nor the vaguely unsettling atmosphere. It was as if time stood still.

The Demon Lord was no more, and yet monsters continued to swarm the place. There was no human traffic, and the road through the forest had been laid to waste.

Relying on my dim memory, I looked for where I'd put Ares's body to rest, but to no avail. I'd lacked the strength or stamina to dig a hole and bury him at the time, so I'd just covered him with a cloak. Even if I found the right spot, nothing would remain of him now.

"What are you doing, Ares? You're not supposed to be loitering around here. We have to get back to the capital and tell everyone the Demon Lord's been vanquished. Plenty of his followers still remain, too. We need your strength," Leon called out to me, having noticed I'd strayed from the path.

He was in a hurry to get back home. He'd just achieved a great deed as the next in line to his house. He probably wanted to make a proud declaration at the royal palace—it was only natural. Maria and Solon would earn a lot of clout from this as well.

"Leon, Maria, Solon. Let's part ways here. Tell everyone that Ares the Hero died."

Their eyes peeled wide at my words.

"What nonsense are you spouting, Ares? We finally beat the Demon Lord. We're going back together! You're going to marry the princess and become the king, right? You'll be the king, and I'll be your support!" Leon cut himself off there. After a bit of thought, he

resumed: “Wait, don’t tell me you’re nervous about taking the throne? Sure, some nobles might oppose a commonborn king, even if you are the Hero. But don’t worry about that—I’ll back you up! My house will lend you its full support. We won’t let anyone bad-mouth you.”

When we first met, Leon had been ruthless with his insults, always disparaging my commoner background and huffing about how he would be the Hero and the future king. He’d come a long way since then, but he hadn’t changed at his core. Leon never wanted anything for himself; he was a virtuous knight and nobleman who truly cared for his country.

“He’s right, Ares. Becoming king is part of the Hero’s trial. Are you really going to give up before you try? That doesn’t sound like you.” Maria flashed me her benevolent smile. “I have the church under my thumb, so let’s rule the world together.”

Except what she was saying was not benevolent at all.

“Why, Ares?” asked Solon, trying his best to stay cool. “Give us a reason.”

“Sorry, guys, I’m not Ares. I wasn’t actually the Hero.”

I finally said what I’d kept bottled up for so long.

Leon looked bewildered. “What are you saying? If you’re not Ares, who are you?”

“Zack. That’s my real name. Sorry…for lying to you all.” I lowered my head.

Solon still had questions. “‘Zack’? Why’d you fake your name?”

“Because Ares was the name of the real Hero.”

Then I recounted my past, about how the Prophet had appeared in my hometown, how I went on a journey with Ares, how we were attacked by a demon on the road, how Ares got injured, how I stabbed him to finish him off. Then I spoke of how I’d gone to the capital alone and enrolled in the academy…

“He beat a demon at age fourteen?! Who knew there was a guy like that…?” Leon was impressed at Ares’s bravery.

Yeah, Ares was amazing. He’d managed that feat at just fourteen years old. If only he’d lived, we would have defeated the Demon Lord that much sooner.

"I get what Ares meant to you, but why'd you pretend you were him?" Solon was leaning against a nearby tree. Maybe he thought this would be a long story.

"Because I killed the Hero. I had to carry on his legacy. That was my responsibility."

I'd come this far so I could atone for his murder.

"Ares died because of the demon. I don't think it was your fault," said Maria.

"No, he died because of me. My hand still remembers what it felt like to pierce him with his sword. Besides, I didn't defeat the Demon Lord as Zack. I did it as Ares. I wouldn't have been able to do it if I'd stayed as Zack."

"Even though Ares is long dead?" Solon had his arms crossed and was tapping his fingers. He seemed irritated.

"Ares's mother…Shella… She raised me. She was a nice person. I couldn't bring myself to tell her that Ares died without ever becoming the Hero. She never really wanted him to be the Hero to begin with."

"So your plan is to give all the credit to Ares and then go off somewhere?" Anger laced Solon's tone.

"It should have been Ares's accomplishment, not mine."

"Are you a complete buffoon?!" Solon finally snapped. He always did have a short fuse and a foul mouth. "*You're* the Hero! Ares died on his journey! That's a fact! And you *know* what the Prophet said. Just because they said the Hero would come from your village doesn't mean they singled out Ares. *You* were always meant to be the Hero!"

As one would expect from a guy called the Sage, Solon's argument was on point. I understood the logic of his words.

"I'm just an average guy who couldn't even use a sword or magic. I didn't have it in me to be the Hero. To me, the Hero will always be Ares."

Yeah, I wasn't cut out for this role. All I'd been doing this whole time was chasing Ares's shadow.

"That's right! You *are* average!" Solon spat. "You were the most talentless guy at the academy! And it was *you* who defeated the

Demon Lord! We know better than anyone how much you poured into your training, how much you sacrificed! You worked day and night without free time or sleep, and you never stopped even when you didn't get the results you wanted. Maybe you *didn't* have a Hero's qualifications. But you're still the one who saved the world! I refuse to see anyone but you as the Hero!"

Solon covered his face with his hood as he spoke. His tone was harsh, but his words were kind.

"Thanks, Solon. Hearing you say that is enough for me."

All that time, I thought I'd been getting nowhere, but it paid off in the end. And my three friends were there to acknowledge my efforts. I couldn't have asked for more.

"Are you really going to leave us, Ares…no, Zack?" Maria asked.

She didn't plaster on her usual Holy Maiden facade. She showed me her true face, one with genuine and heartfelt concern.

"Please don't go, Zack. I'll stop you, you know. Refusing a request from me is a blasphemy against God."

"Thanks, Maria."

Maria's true face—the one she hardly ever showed anyone—was, without a doubt, the most beautiful thing in the world.

"But don't say that," I told her. "You'll weaken my resolve. I have to go. If we continue any farther together, someone will see me. Then they'll know I'm alive. That's the one thing I want to avoid. To be honest, I meant to leave a little earlier, but I wanted to keep traveling with you guys for just a little longer."

It'd been a harsh and difficult journey, but the days I'd spent with my friends were fond memories of mine.

"Where do you plan to go?" asked Leon.

"First, I'll return to the village. I'll tell them Ares defeated the Demon Lord and give his sword back to his parents. After that, I'll leave this country and go on a journey."

My idea was to cap things off by visiting Shella before departing this land. If I lingered, my secret could get exposed.

"His Majesty isn't that old yet," said Leon. "There's no rush to find his successor. You're welcome to come back any time. I'll accept you with open arms."

"Thanks, Leon. I think you'd make a great king."

"But of course." Leon cracked a smile. "No one's better for the job than me. Although, I'm not such a laggard that I need to piggyback off *your* achievement."

He really was an upstanding guy. It was a pity that he didn't want to be king.

"Okay, I'm off now." I turned my back on my companions.

"Wait." Solon chose that moment to call out to me. "Who are we to you? I mean… Who am I to you? Um…"

He sounded a little hesitant.

"You're my best friend, of course," I told him.

We'd been together through thick and thin ever since the academy. There was no better way to describe us.

Solon hesitated again.

"I…see. You're as impudent as ever, calling a genius like me your best friend. But I suppose we are friends, yes." He smiled slightly.

"Good for you, Solon. You've finally made your first friend," Maria teased.

Solon shot her a reproachful look, and then he said to me:

"No matter where you go, I'll find you and bring you back with me. Because we're friends."

Alexia's Story

"So you're here."

The door to the room opened with no resistance, revealing Solon sitting there expectantly, dressed in his typical purple Sage robes. He seemed to have anticipated my visit.

"Why are you trying to reveal that Ares wasn't the Hero?" I asked, my tone accusatory.

"The truth was always going to come out eventually."

"I checked the interview transcripts. Whenever you mentioned Ares by name, you were talking about Ares, but whenever you said 'he' or 'him,' it was about Zack."

Solon smiled thinly in lieu of a response.

"When exactly did Zack become Ares? As far as I can tell from my investigation, Zack had been referring to himself as Ares since he arrived at the capital…"

"He said Ares died on the road to the capital when they got attacked by a demon. If you believe his story, that is."

Solon answered that way to test me. He was hinting at the possibility that Zack had murdered Ares.

"I believe him. But why wait until now to speak of this?" I asked.

"I told you, didn't I? He had no talent. That includes lying—he was terrible at deception. It's a miracle that his secret never came out after all those years. You never thought he was dead, did you… *Princess Alexia*?"

I fell silent at his words.

"You had all those marriage talks after we came back. Leon was first in line. But both of you refused. You said something about how you were sworn to the Hero and it was too soon after his passing."

Leon was not the only name in consideration. Solon was also a

candidate, but he refused as well. I turned down all the marriage offers that came my way, and for some reason, Leon and Solon supported that. Only Maria suggested I marry "for the stability of the kingdom."

Maria aside, I had the Hero's former party members to thank for the fact that I was still unmarried to this day.

"But you can only put it off for so long," Solon said. "His Majesty won't let you off the hook forever. That's why you started compiling the Hero's deeds. You're looking for him."

He was right. I was the one who proposed that our kingdom inscribe the Hero's tale into our literature. It was so I could begin my own investigation.

I believed he was still alive. What I hadn't anticipated was that he was *not* Ares.

"You're not the only one sticking their nose into his business," Solon went on. "Leon's been using his family's influence to find information on where that guy went, and Maria's been using the church's information network, too. And me, well, I've put together some search spells."

"But you haven't found him?"

"He went off to another country, after all. It's not easy to track him down."

There was a slight softness in Solon's cranky expression.

"What do you plan to do when you find him?" I asked.

"Take him back home. He's my friend. A life without friends is no fun at all." He put up his hands, attempting a quip.

"…Zack doesn't want people to know that he was the Hero," I said. "But you still plan to bring him back to this country?"

That was the part I was worried about. I wanted to expose Zack's lie.

"Who is he lying for? If you went to Daris Village, you'd know." Solon looked at me expectantly.

"He's doing it for Shella. He wants her to believe that Ares was the Hero, at the very least."

"Exactly. He's doing his duty for her because she raised him, and she's Ares's mother. He even got his portrait drawn to look exactly

like Ares."

When I first saw his portrait, I thought it looked a little more attractive than he actually was, but there'd been a reason it was drawn that way.

"So what do you propose?" I said. "Zack won't return so that he can uphold the lie. His willpower is so strong that he defeated the Demon Lord. We can't just tell Shella the truth. I don't want Zack's resolve to go to waste."

"Yeah." There was no argument from Solon. "But what if Shella knew the lie from the start?"

"What? She couldn't possibly know."

"She knows. I guarantee it," Solon declared.

"How can you say that?"

"If you see her again, she'll tell you."

Just what did this man, known by others as the Great Sage, see?

"So I have to go to Daris Village again?" It took ten days by horse—not a simple journey.

"What's the problem? I'll take you right there. They don't call me the Great Sage for nothing."

"Don't tell me… A teleportation spell? I heard you were researching such magic, but…"

"I've completed the incantation. Although, only I can use it."

He spoke matter-of-factly, but it was really not as simple as he made it sound. Teleportation was legendary magic that was said to exist long ago.

"What's wrong, Princess? Are you scared of traveling by magic?" Solon said tauntingly.

Naturally, I felt some trepidation about entrusting myself to a spell I'd never seen before. But…

"Very well," I told him. "Let us be off."

There was no turning back now. Solon stood up at my answer and ushered me into a separate room.

Deep in the basement of his mansion, there was a large magic circle on the floor.

"For now, it's only possible to teleport to and from this room."

Solon said this as if it was a flaw, but that already sounded

beyond incredible. It was epoch-making, in fact.

Solon and I stepped into the center of the magic circle, and then he started chanting the incantation. The circle began to shine with a pale light, which swiftly expanded across my entire vision. Our surroundings changed an instant later.

Young trees strained at the sky around us. We'd been in the capital just moments ago, but now my senses detected the strong scent of vegetation.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"The woods near Daris Village. I picked somewhere we wouldn't be seen. We're not that far from Shella's house, though. Let's go," said Solon, before breaking into a brisk stride.

Given his scholarly appearance, one wouldn't think he was suited for walking outdoors, but then I remembered that he was a member of the Hero's party. A road like this would pose him no trouble at all. In fact, his pace was quite swift. I hurried on after him.

The village chief's house, where Shella lived, really wasn't that far, just as Solon said. Some of the villagers we crossed paths with on the way regarded us with wariness, but Solon ignored their gazes completely.

When we arrived at our destination, I knocked on the door at Solon's urging.

"Yes… Oh my?"

It was Shella who answered.

"Back again, I see… I expected you would come." She put on a slightly nervous smile and ushered us inside.

It was around the same hour of the day that I'd last visited. Her husband, the village chief, was usually out at this time.

"Um… Who is this, may I ask…?" said Shella.

"Solon Barclay. The Great Sage, according to some," Solon told her before I could explain.

"The Great Sage… I'm flattered that an esteemed individual like yourself came all the way to visit. I'm Shella Schmidt. Pleased to meet you." Shella offered Solon a polite bow, and then she knelt

toward me with the same reverence. “And you are Princess Alexia, I assume? Please excuse my rudeness at your last visit.”

She had seen through my deception. Both now and during our last meeting, I’d worn simple clothing, presenting as a civil official on an investigation. Given that I’d borne none of my royal accoutrements, I’d been confident that I would not be perceived as nobility.

“There is an air of elegance in your conduct that is not so easy to mask,” Shella said. “Although I did not realize who you were at first glance, your mannerisms and the way you speak did leave me wondering.”

With a mother figure like Shella, no wonder Ares and Zack were such remarkable individuals. She had a discerning eye, and she’d applied that wisdom to the way she brought up her children.

“You’re just the kind of person I thought you were.” Solon lowered his tone slightly. It was a far cry from the way he usually spoke, which was direct and to the point. “I’m sure you’ve guessed why we’re here.”

“Yes, it’s about Zack, isn’t it?” Shella replied, closing her eyes. “I knew it. I knew that someday, I would have to tell somebody. No, I should have told him at the time, when he came to me…”

“You knew from the start?!” I couldn’t help but exclaim.

I never imagined that she had caught on so quickly. I’d only realized myself after investigating for quite a while.

“I raised that boy, you know? I can tell when a child of mine lies. Zack always was an honest boy. A terrible liar.” Shella smiled wistfully. “When Zack came home, there was a moment when I thought he was Ares. But as soon as he looked at me with his kind and sad eyes, I knew it was Zack. He said to me, ‘Ares defeated the Demon Lord. But then he was killed by a demon.’ And then he gave me the sword.”

Shella pointed to the blade hanging on the wall.

“That boy was in tears when he told me, ‘I’m sorry that I’m the only one who came back. I’m so sorry.’ I asked him, ‘Did Ares defeat the Demon Lord?’ I think my voice was trembling. He nodded silently. Then I asked him where he’d been the whole time, and he

answered, ‘I was working in the capital.’ Funny, right?”

Tears streamed from Shella’s eyes.

“I mean, he’d grown up into such an unbelievably fine man. I’d never seen a body as toned as his, and his face had become so manly. It was only his eyes that hadn’t changed since before he went on the journey. He did not look at all as if he had spent his time working on a farm or in a shop. He wouldn’t have looked that way even if he were a soldier.

“I asked what he was planning to do after this, and he said, ‘I’m leaving on a journey.’ I didn’t want him to go, so I grabbed his hand. It was so rough, like touching tree bark. Even his palms were full of calluses—I’m sure he must have swung a sword tens of thousands of times. When I looked closer at him, the parts of his skin that weren’t covered by his clothes were scarred all over. I couldn’t believe how many scars there were…

“And that’s how I knew. I knew that this boy defeated the Demon Lord. That he did it for me and Ares. And I couldn’t bring myself to say anything after that. I just couldn’t expose a lie he told out of pure kindness.”

My vision blurred as I listened to Shella’s story. Solon covered his face with his hood.

“I didn’t want either Ares or Zack to be the Hero. I just wanted them to grow up and live happy, normal lives,” Shella told us. “I know it’s no longer possible for Ares, but I at least want it for Zack. And I need to hear about Ares’s last moments from Zack’s own lips. That’s my duty as a mother. So please, Princess Alexia, find that boy. Find Zack. That’s all I ask.”

Fragment 1

After the battle at the Great Forest of Lozorof, I formed a party with Leon, Maria, and Solon and was formally recognized as the Hero.

The first time I came to the palace, it had this weird, strained atmosphere. Everyone was wondering why the Hero had to be *this* dope instead of Leon or somebody else. I didn't really mind, though, since I basically agreed with them.

The king didn't look like he expected much of me specifically, but he did have high hopes for our party overall since it was made up of other talented people. Meanwhile, the battle against the Demon Lord's army had taken a turn for the worse, so I guess he had no choice but to pin his hopes on us.

That was the context in which he introduced me to Princess Alexia.

"This is my daughter, Alexia. When you defeat the Demon Lord, she will take you as her husband, and you will become this nation's next king."

The first time I laid eyes on her, I thought, *She's pretty.*

She had long, flowing, gold hair and beautiful blue eyes. They were like gems, brimming with wisdom. Although she was still just a young girl of twelve, there was a dignified air around her that made her pretty in a different way from Maria.

"O Hero, please defeat the Demon Lord and save this world. I will be awaiting your return," she said to me, summoning a smile.

She's really straining herself.

She was just twelve years old. No matter what tradition said, there was no way she wanted to marry a random guy who was six years older than her. She was suppressing her true feelings to play the part of the "princess."

“Your Highness, I make this promise to you: I swear that I will defeat the Demon Lord,” I said quietly enough so that only she could hear. “But I will not return. So please marry someone you love.”

I wasn’t the real Hero anyway, so I couldn’t possibly marry a princess, let alone become king. Talk about going beyond your means.

Besides, I wanted this cute girl to decide her future with her own two hands. I wanted to give her that choice.

Upon hearing my words, Princess Alexia blinked her wide blue eyes at me in evident surprise. It seemed genuine—I was glad for the opportunity to witness it.

If I told myself I was fighting so that girls like her could have a future, then even a fake Hero like me could press forward.

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For the next few days, we received a lot of warm hospitality. They held a welcoming party for us at the palace and drew portraits of everyone in the party, to name a few things. They even provided us with some good and practical equipment to use instead of what we brought, but the sword was the one thing I didn’t switch over. I just had it cleaned and oiled instead. My plan was to fight with this sword until the very end.

While I was staying at the palace, I spent a lot of time in particular honing my swordfighting with Leon. Although I’d gotten a lot better over time, my skills still couldn’t put a dent in his. Only by using attack and healing magic could I scrape by and level the playing field.

“You fight as sloppily as ever,” Leon commented. There was no ill will in his appraisal. Even he was aware that you didn’t need scruples in a fight against monsters.

The problem was that consuming both my physical stamina and my magical energy at the same time put a huge strain on my body. When we finished our sparring, I practically collapsed right there in the training hall.

“I’ll go on ahead,” Leon told me.

He, meanwhile, still had plenty of energy to spare. Although we were evenly matched in a fight, he always used the minimal amount of movement, preserving his stamina.

Leon left, and while I was resting and waiting for my energy to come back, somebody approached me.

It was Princess Alexia.

“I was watching you.” Unlike our first meeting, she spoke bluntly. Rudely, even. “You’re not as good with the sword as Leon. I’ve been studying swordplay, so I can tell. Your fighting style is so unrefined… How do I put it? It’s awful to watch.”

The princess was a candid one. I couldn’t help but smile sheepishly.

“Hmm… What a pickle. I don’t know the right way to speak to royalty,” I said. Etiquette wasn’t my forte. When it came to interacting with important people like the nobility, I let Leon and Maria do all the talking, so I didn’t know a thing.

“You can speak normally. I’m not expecting much from the Hero anyway.”

She didn’t seem to place a lot of stock in formalities. That was a relief for me. I liked her already.

“I’m not that strong,” I told her. “So I just swing my sword sloppily to win, even if it’s not nice to watch.”

“You’re not strong even though you’re the Hero? How are you going to beat the Demon Lord?” she asked, not out of condescension but simple, plain curiosity.

“How? Well, uh, I guess I’ll use a bunch of tricks?”

“Like what?”

“Let’s see… For example, if the Demon Lord’s castle looks flammable, I’d set it on fire.”

“You’d set a castle on fire?!” Princess Alexia pressed a hand to her mouth, disbelief written across her face.

“I’d use oil and take the strength and direction of the wind into consideration. That would make it easy.”

"That's not very heroic. It sounds *unfair*. I always thought the Hero sounded kind of like an assassin, but I didn't think you actually did that kind of thing…"

Alexia seemed a little perturbed.

"It's because I'm weak even though they call me the Hero. I have to do whatever it takes to defeat the Demon Lord. I mean, we're all in trouble if we can't beat him. So I'd use poison if it works or even negotiate with monsters if that would help. I'd do whatever I have to, and it doesn't matter to me what people say."

I wasn't very heroic, which made sense because I wasn't actually the Hero. It was why I felt no qualms about playing dirty.

"You're not very Hero-like on the outside *or* inside. So why do you bother? I mean, when you said you won't return, that means you don't want to be king, right? What exactly do you want, then?"

She looked at me as if I were some kind of weird creature.

"What I want is to defeat the Demon Lord. I'm not thinking of anything beyond that. I don't mind giving up my life for that goal… Actually, that might be for the best."

If I defeated the Demon Lord and then made out that it cost me my life, then no one would doubt that Ares was the Hero. Maybe that was the future I wanted.

"No, it's not." Alexia brandished a finger at me, her face flushed in anger. "What are you thinking, Ares Schmidt? I've never heard of the Hero and the Demon Lord taking each other out. Who wants an adventure story with a gloomy Hero like that?! Listen, okay? Your job is to defeat the Demon Lord and come back to the palace."

I couldn't help but smile at how very much like a twelve-year-old she sounded.

"But if I come back, I'd have to marry you, right? Wouldn't that be a problem for you?"

Even as I said that, it occurred to me that it would be nice to see her all grown-up if I did return.

"Oh yeah… That *would* be a problem… But don't worry! I'll work something out! So let's make a promise! Make sure you defeat the Demon Lord and come back alive! You mustn't refuse an order from a princess!"

She gave me a very regal-sounding command even with her face slightly scrunched up in worry. It was really adorable.

"Fine, you win. I promise I'll defeat the Demon Lord and survive."

I deliberately said "survive" instead of "come back alive."

"So make sure you marry someone you love, okay, Princess Alexia? I'm going off to fight so that everybody can be happy. I wouldn't want you to end up in a marriage you didn't want even after the Demon Lord goes away."

She hesitated for a moment, and then she said, "Okay. You hold up your end of the promise, and I'll hold up mine."

She turned her face away from me, obscuring her expression, as she made her promise.

Fragment 2

The Hero I met in the throne room was a very different person from what I'd imagined. I thought he would be a valiant knight or, if not that, then at least a strong man like a thuggish adventurer. But he turned out to be neither.

Why's he *the Hero?* I was wondering, when he said to me:

"Your Highness, I make this promise to you: I swear that I will defeat the Demon Lord. But I will not return. So please marry someone you love."

I had no idea what he was saying. If he wasn't planning to return after defeating the Demon Lord, that meant he didn't expect a reward. What was he fighting for, then?

That was the moment when Ares Schmidt sparked my interest as a person.

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When I heard that Ares was sparring in the training hall, I watched him in secret.

He and Leon were fighting. Since I practiced the sword, too, I could follow their moves to a degree, and I could tell that Leon was way stronger. His swordplay was powerful, swift, and polished—the kind of traits you'd associate with a Sword Saint. Anyone learning the blade would aspire to be like him.

On the other hand, despite not having Leon's skills, Ares fought pretty evenly against him. Part of that was because he incorporated magic in his fighting, but he honestly wasn't that bad with a sword.

But I just didn't sense any talent from him. He was about as good as anyone would be if they went through some proper training.

Despite that, Ares refused to back down no matter how many hits Leon landed on him. Although he wasn't flashy, he was stout like a thick tree trunk. I could see this was the result of many hours of training.

Maybe it was because he didn't know when to give up, but I found myself cheering him on even as I wondered why he hadn't quit already.

Eventually, the spar ended in a draw. Leon was still raring to go, while Ares sank to the ground in exhaustion.

Once I was sure that Leon was gone, I called out to Ares.

"I was watching you," I said.

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From talking with Ares, I learned that he really was content with beating the Demon Lord and leaving it at that. He had no interest in becoming king or marrying me. In fact, he didn't seem to care about his own life at all.

Is he going to be okay?

Even though he promised to return alive, I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

I checked in on him often for the rest of his stay in the palace. Whenever I saw him, he was always training somewhere, whether it was sparring with Leon, using healing magic with Maria, or practicing attack magic with Solon. He practiced so much it made me worry if he ever rested at all.

But when the palace residents saw him at it, they started gossiping about how his swordplay and magic were nothing special. None of them took him seriously.

I wondered why. I'd never seen anyone work as hard as he did. I studied books, swordplay, and horse riding, but I didn't try nearly as much as he did. If anything, I was kind of complacent because people said I was talented, and I felt like I was good enough

already.

But Ares went full tilt at everything. I could tell just by watching him. He did nothing to hide it. It was amazing how he was going off to fight the Demon Lord even though he wasn't anything special.

If he was doing this even though he wasn't special, then why weren't the rest of us going in his place? "Then you all should fight the Demon Lord yourselves!" I wanted to tell those naysayers.

But I couldn't say that—because I couldn't fight the Demon Lord, either.

Even with the Sword Saint, the Holy Maiden, and the Sage along with me, I'd be too scared to go to the Demon Lord's land with just the four of us. I wanted someone else to do that, not me.

We were all weak and cowardly. We couldn't do anything ourselves, and yet we selfishly expected others to pick up the slack for us. We'd be disappointed if those people didn't live up to our hopes, and we'd make comments nobody asked for.

So I made up my mind that if nobody else was going to be Ares's cheerleader, I would take on the role. I offered a prayer for him to return alive, safe and sound.

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The day came for Ares and his party to embark on their journey.

They slipped out of the castle early in the morning; the demons might have noticed them if we sent them off with a big fanfare. Apparently, Ares wanted a quiet departure, partly because a demon had attacked people at the Great Forest of Lozorof.

"Guess Heroes can be cowards, too," somebody said.

What was wrong with being a coward? If a valorous person became the Hero, the Demon Lord would have picked them off a long time ago. And besides, we were the real cowards for leaving the job to others and not lifting a finger ourselves.

I got on my horse.

"I'm going on a quick trip," I told my attendants, then galloped off without waiting for a reply.

I caught up to Ares's party just as their carriage was leaving the capital.

The driver stopped the carriage in shock when he saw me. Ares and the others stepped out to see what was going on.

"Princess Alexia…"

Ares looked stunned. Leon and Solon watched on in interest. Only Maria seemed annoyed. Well, that was a fair reaction to someone interrupting their travels.

"Don't die! You don't have to defeat the Demon Lord!" I blurted out.

It was not the kind of thing you were meant to say to the Hero.

"Thanks, Princess Alexia." Ares, meanwhile, looked cheerful. "Seems I've made you worry. I'm surprised that there's someone out there who would feel that way about me."

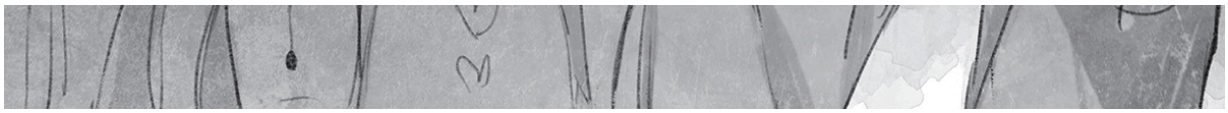
He then went back to the carriage. Leon and the others followed him.

The group eventually got going again, and Ares waved until I could no longer see him. I waved back until the carriage had disappeared into the distance.

When I got back to the palace, there was a sound scolding waiting for me.

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After Ares and his party set off, we heard reports on their movements for a while. Apparently, they were making smooth progress toward the Demon Lord's territory, and their deeds were renowned across other lands. But as their journey progressed, information dwindled, and there came a time when we heard nothing at all. We didn't even know whether they were okay.

I thought we should send people to gather information and lend their support, but everyone said, "He's the Hero guided by the Prophet. He'll be fine."

Their logic was awfully self-centered. Were they going to blame the Prophet if Ares's party failed? Wasn't there something we were supposed to do? They were fighting so hard for us, and what did we do to deserve it?

It was during this time that I turned fifteen and entered Falm Academy. I joined the warrior class while juggling mage and priest lessons.

People had a lot to say about that:

"Are you trying to copy the Hero?"

"You're a bit of an oddball princess."

"Are you quite mad, Your Highness?"

But as far as I was concerned, I was doing my part.

I did what Ares did so that I could replace him if he was ever defeated on his journey. I didn't want to be a coward who expected others to do things for them. I was a member of this country's royal family. We were the ones who were meant to take on the mantle of Hero.

But it was harder than I imagined, studying the sword and magic at the same time. Apparently, I had no talent for magic, and I saw no success with either healing or attack spells. I heard people say that it'd taken Ares over a year to cast a single spell.

It was hell. Continuing down a path without knowing whether I'd ever be able to accomplish anything was more soul-crushing than I could ever have anticipated.

In the summer of my second year at the academy, news that

Ares's party had vanquished the Demon Lord spread across the world like wildfire. Everyone started singing their praises.

"I always believed in him."

"I knew he could do it."

"Hooray for the Hero!"

I'm sure they did believe. But they didn't care about Ares and his party; they only cared about themselves.

I was happy, of course. So happy that I cried. Because Ares's hard work had finally paid off.

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But then came the news that Ares died on the journey home. Apparently, a demon had been lying in wait for him, and they took each other out in the ensuing battle.

This time, there was a slight sense of relief throughout the kingdom, even as the people grieved. This trend was more pronounced among the upper classes. Some people even blatantly said to me, "Good for you, Your Highness."

What was *good* about that? Shameless fools.

But I knew. I knew that Ares never had any intention of returning from the very start. There was no doubt in my mind that he had abided his promise to survive. When I saw Leon and the other party members on their return, my suspicions were all but confirmed. They were not as sad as they should have been. When they had stayed at the palace, they definitely looked like friends to me. If Ares really had died, they would never have been so calm about it.

Who were they trying to fool? Did they think I was an easy mark?

I was Alexia, princess of this land. I was pretty darn special in my own right.

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After graduating from the academy and spending two years working in the kingdom's administration, I proposed we compile literature to

exalt the late Hero and inscribe his great deeds. My father was reluctant, but I made a push for it, arguing that this was the obvious action to take now that things were settling down in the kingdom. Naturally, I was in charge of the project.

I swore to myself that I would find him.

So I could uphold *my* end of the promise.

The Prophet's Story

"We've resolved things with Shella, but we still don't know where Zack is, do we?" I said after we returned to Solon's mansion via the teleportation circle.

Solon and I were in his room, facing each other. "There's probably only one person in this country who knows where he is," Solon replied, sipping on a cup of tea that his apprentice had made for him.

"Who is it? I've interviewed nearly everyone who interacted with the Hero, but I don't think anyone got close to him besides you and the other party members."

Solon paused, then said, "The Prophet. The Prophet probably knows where Zack was headed."

I was let down by his answer. The Prophet was a mysterious person of unknown origin. They were an anomalous being, which made them even harder to find than Zack in a sense.

"And where do you suggest looking for this Prophet?" I asked.

"I have a pretty good idea about their identity," Solon told me as he took another sip.

"'Identity'? What do you mean, 'identity'?"

"I only found this out after we defeated the Demon Lord, but…" Solon put his cup down on the table. "The Prophet is probably the Demon Lord of the human side," he began in a haughty tone.

"'The Demon Lord of the human side'? What are you talking about?" I was completely mystified by what he was saying.

"The Demon Lord rules over the monsters as their king. He's something like a retainer to the dark god. Well, when I say 'dark god,' I'm just talking about the human perspective. As far as the

demons are concerned, *our* god is the dark god."

"Our god is the dark god? Solon, you do know who you're talking to, right?"

The royalty of our kingdom had deep religious ties. Even the Great Sage would be branded a heretic if he so much as misspoke. Not that I had any intention of doing that, of course.

"Don't worry. I'm only saying that who's 'good' and who's 'evil' changes depending on your allegiance. We might have gone on a long journey to defeat the Demon Lord, but the monsters have their own beliefs and ethics. The battle between humans and monsters boils down to a proxy war between our respective gods. That lesson was drummed into us many times throughout our journey."

"……" I was at a loss for words.

It was hard to readily agree with what Solon was saying, but I couldn't deny his experiences when I hadn't stepped a single foot outside the kingdom, while he'd fought for years beyond the kingdom's borders.

"That's when I, in my great wisdom, realized something," he added. "If the monsters have a Demon Lord, then the humans must have something like a Demon Lord, too."

"And you're saying that's the Prophet?"

"Yep. The Hero would seem like the most likely suspect since he fights the Demon Lord directly, but we're well aware *he* doesn't fit the bill. So that raises questions about the Prophet, given that they select the Heroes."

"I sort of get what you're trying to say, but the Demon Lord was so fearsome, while the Hero…Zack…didn't possess any such power. The Prophet doesn't do anything besides foretell the Hero's coming. I feel it's kind of unbalanced against our favor."

The monsters were strong, while humans were weak. God ought to give humans more power if the idea was to level the playing field.

"Our god simply has a different kind of authority," Solon argued. "Say what you will about us weak humans, but we're the ones in charge of most of the world. The Demon Lord temporarily upsets the status quo, but it doesn't last."

Now that he mentioned it, he was right. The Demon Lord had

never gained control over the entire world. Not even once, despite being so terribly powerful.

"The Prophets themselves don't have much power, but that's also what makes their role so important," Solon added. "That said, even I haven't figured out what exactly they do."

"So you're saying this Prophet is close to God? Then that would be…Maria? People call her the Holy Maiden, and she can sense God very keenly."

Despite being called the Holy Maiden, there was something a bit dark about Maria. If someone told me that she was the Prophet, I could believe it.

"No, she isn't the Prophet. She's just good at using healing magic. She might be more powerful than other priests, but that doesn't make her close to God. Personally, I'd say she feels more affinity with the dark god."

That was a harsh appraisal for someone Solon had apparently known since childhood.

"Besides," he went on, "the Prophet has been active for a thousand years. It's not a role that a person can do alone over that span of time. One more thing—it's not acknowledged much, but this country has two deities: the major god that Maria and most of the world worships, and the native god. The populace is under the impression that both gods are one and the same, but they're actually separate. It's as if the major god is deliberately conflated with the native god in order to conceal the latter's existence. And remember how this country has a family that has always served the native god?"

Solon's eyes were glued on me after he said that.

"What? Are you talking about…me? The royal family is the Prophet?"

I never imagined that the royal family would come into question here.

"That is what I'm saying, yes. The royal family has its roots in the priestesses who serve the native god, and the way they've produced only girls is unnatural. What's more, the role of priestess always goes to each queen down the line, so there's always *someone*

praying in the temple. Which would mean that the Prophet of this generation is most likely our current queen."

"That can't be! My mother is a lovely person. She couldn't be a shady character like the Prophet!"

I summoned my memories of my mother. The way I saw her as a child, she was a beautiful, kind, and wonderful lady.

"And how many years has it been since you last saw her?" Solon asked, ignoring my argument.

"It's been…ten years." I struggled to respond. "She took on the role of priestess when my grandmother passed away. You're heavily restricted from seeing other people when you become the priestess. You know that, right?'

"I do. But I don't know what the priestess does at the temple. They say she offers prayers to God, but what exactly does that entail? What are they doing when they pray?"

I was stumped for an answer. Although I knew that I would be the next priestess after my mother, I hadn't heard about what I would be doing specifically.

"I figured you wouldn't know." Solon could apparently tell my ignorance from my expression. "The temple is on sacred ground. Outsiders are strictly prohibited from entering, and even the royal family can't get in easily. I'm guessing there's a tight lid on information. The fact that no one's told you, the future priestess, about what you'll be doing beforehand is telling. What are they going to such lengths to hide? Why does the Prophet only appear in this country, and why do the Heroes only originate from here? When you think about it from that angle, the royal family—no, the queen's family—sounds like the Prophet."

"No…way…"

I couldn't refute him easily. I possessed nothing that could invalidate his argument. And the fact that he was the Great Sage meant I couldn't write off what he was saying as a mad conspiracy theory.

"Let me give it to you straight. I hinted that Zack was the Hero to you because you're the princess. I thought you would be able to enter the temple and expose Zack's whereabouts."

He'd been trying to use me from the start, it seemed. But given that I'd been using him in my search for Zack, it went both ways.

"…Why do you think the Prophet would know where Zack is?" I asked Solon.

"There has to be some kind of connection between the Prophet and the Hero. That something explains how the Prophet is able to foretell the Hero's emergence. In practice, every Hero throughout history has married the princess and become king. This case is the only exception."

I didn't know what I was supposed to offer in rebuttal. "What are you telling me to do?"

"Meet with the queen at the temple. I'm not asking for anything more."

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The temple was in the underground level of the palace. Apparently, it was more correct to say that the palace was built atop the temple—as if to protect it or, perhaps, to conceal its existence.

As I descended the steps, my torchlight flickered across the white marble floor and walls. It all seemed so cold and inhospitable, as if the entire area were rejecting human entry.

Just when I feared that I was traversing a bottomless hole, I finally caught sight of the temple doors. Standing there in front of the entrance, clad in pure-white garb, were two attendants. With their veiled faces, they looked like indistinct ghosts. Frankly, it was unsettling.

They were women, since only women were permitted entry into the temple, though they wore swords at their belts. Although the attendants were not part of the royal family, they belonged to another clan that had served the temple for generations. They swore absolute loyalty to the priestess's clan, undergoing stringent training until their skills outclassed the knights'.

"Please inform Mother…the priestess…that Alexia is here," I said to the temple attendants.

They hadn't so much as quivered when I arrived, but on my command, they parted to my left and right. The door began to open slowly, as if on its own accord.

"Her Holiness is expecting you. Please come inside."

I had no idea which one of them said that. They might have spoken in perfect unison.

Contrary to my expectations, the women did not try to stop me. They must have known beforehand that I would come.

There was another long hallway, followed by another door. On the opposite side was an enormous room, built across what was once a cavern. Light enveloped me; it was hard to imagine that this place was underground.

A large statue of a goddess filled my vision directly in front of me. It was so exquisitely made that it looked as if it were alive. Meanwhile, a woman in white stood before the statue's altar. She was utterly still, almost as if *she* were the statue instead.

"Mother…" My voice croaked.

Even though she looked the same as she did in my memories, her expression was devoid of all the love and vitality that had once abounded there. In its place, I could sense a vast, deep emptiness.

"Alexia," she said, "I understand your reason for coming here, and that you were led here by Solon." Her eyes were cold as she looked at me, and I sensed no warmth in her words.

"You know Solon?"

How had she found out from this secluded place that I'd been in contact with Solon?

"I know him well. That boy can be a bit too clever for his own good. It made him difficult to handle at times."

"'That boy'? Mother, were you close with Solon?"

Solon was famous for being a child prodigy, but I was fairly sure that he wasn't deeply involved with the royal family.

My mother answered my question with a question: "What did Solon say to you that made you come here?"

"…He said that you're the Prophet."

"That is true."

She confirmed it. She did it so easily, without so much as a flicker

in her expression.

"Huh?"

"I am the Prophet, and our clan exists to serve this land's god. We are closest to the divine. That includes you as well."

My head spun; I felt like I'd been knocked off my feet. Although I'd braced myself for this, it was still a shock to hear.

"Why?" I finally mustered in response.

"It is the duty of our clan, our inescapable fate. Perhaps you could call it a god's curse." My mother's eyes slid to the goddess icon behind her. "Did Solon mention how the Prophet guides the Hero?"

"He said he didn't know the method…"

"I suppose he wouldn't know. He didn't know it back then, either… Very well. I shall impart the secret to you, my successor."

A callous smile came over my mother's face. It was as if she was sneering even at herself.

"I am incapable of death," she told me.

"What?" I did not immediately grasp what she was saying.

"Upon my demise, the world will end, and time will reset to a point at which it is possible to avert my cause of death."

"What does that mean…?"

"You asked if I was close with Solon. Solon was once one of the Heroes I guided. He was the greatest mind of his day and the biggest threat to the Demon Lord other than Zack. He figured out the Prophet's identity back then, just like he has now. But he has no recollection of this. No—it didn't happen at all in this timeline."

As she spoke, my mother closed her eyes in recollection. Was it just me, or was there something melancholy about her expression?

"It wasn't only Solon. I guided Leon and Maria as Heroes, but they were defeated on the journey to battle the Demon Lord. Although they were certainly gifted individuals, they had a tendency to rely too much on themselves instead of other people. That was where they came up short as Heroes. There were many other Hero candidates, but none of them were successful.

"I…the Prophet…cannot discern the identity of the Hero. Time simply repeats for me eternally until I find someone who can defeat the Demon Lord."

I could not speak. I comprehended her words, and yet my mind rejected their meaning. Because it would mean that my mother must have repeated her life…how many times over?

"It takes more than ten years to guide a Hero to the conclusion of their journey. I have repeated this sequence over a hundred times."

"Then it must have been over a thousand years…"

That was longer than I could even fathom. How were human beings meant to spend that kind of time?

"Yes. It was Zack who I found at the end of my thousand-year journey. But it was Ares who I tried to lead at first. When I heard that there was a gifted boy in a distant village, I sought him out with a faint hope. I thought his talents were promising, but sadly, he perished before he could reach the capital. I considered ending my own life to restart the loop, but then I found myself taking an interest in Zack."

"…Ending your own life?" I couldn't just let that go.

"When you have lived over a hundred times, your death carries little weight. My first death was at the hands of monsters. The palace fell to the Demon Lord's army—everyone inside was killed. I would choose death without hesitation to avoid repeating that tragedy."

I wondered how many times she must have taken her life over the course of a thousand years. That was just too…

"Do you think it pitiable, Alexia? But it is finished now. That boy, who had no talent or expectations on his shoulders, brought my long journey to an end. His resolve to defeat the Demon Lord was stronger than that of any person I'd seen, and he possessed the unshakable willpower to endure even the harshest of trials. His character is worthy of the Hero's name."

The Hero was the person the Prophet found after many lifetimes of searching. They were not the product of fate or miracles; it was simply the name given to someone who eventually defeated the Demon Lord. The realization left me dazed for a moment, but then a thought nagged at me. It was about a potential other timeline.

"Mother… What if, um, Ares had lived? Wouldn't Zack…no, Zack and Ares have been able to combine forces to defeat the Demon

Lord? I met with Ares's mother, Shella, in Daris Village. She was deeply saddened by Ares's death. She raised Zack, too, you know. I feel so awful for her…"

From what I'd heard, Ares had been a talented individual. Wasn't there an option for Ares to live and defeat the Demon Lord alongside Zack?

"Zack's strength came from his tragic resolve, spurred by his feelings toward Ares and his mother," my mother said. "Without it, he would not have been able to vanquish the Demon Lord. While Zack did accomplish this great deed, it was through threading a fine needle, the accumulation of very slim possibilities. There is no guarantee that it can be repeated. And, Alexia…would you really tell your mother to die in order to test that possibility?"

Indeed, that was a logical conclusion. Perhaps she was right in saying that my very suggestion was cruel to her.

"I have witnessed an uncountable number of tragedies and calamities. From that perspective, Shella's grief is but a common misfortune."

"But, Mother, weren't you the one who chose Ares? Neither Ares nor Zack wanted to be the Hero. Shella didn't want it, either."

"I will concede to that. Although it was not my hand that struck the blow, it was my choice that led to that course of events. Indeed."

Then my mother said:

"I killed the Hero."

Even as she acknowledged her part in it all, she showed no hint of emotion. She wasn't supposed to be like this, not the mother I knew.

"However, Alexia, I never asked to be the Prophet, either. Do you know what I thought when I was repeating time over and over?"

"Did you wish that you were never born into the royal family?" It was something I'd felt on occasion.

"It was *Why did it have to be this generation?* Why did the Demon Lord's invasion have to occur in my lifetime? I resented this

fact many times over. I cursed it. If only it happened in my mother's time or my daughter's time. Why did I have to be the only one to shoulder this agony? The Demon Lord won't be born again in another hundred years. You will live your entire life without ever experiencing what I did. Let me be frank: I burn with jealousy when I think of you. You were born into the priestess's bloodline, and you will almost never have to use its power."

"Ah…"

Even as I thought that she was being unreasonable, I couldn't claim that I didn't understand her feelings. Those thousand years must have been miserable if they'd transformed my wonderful, kind mother into this cold visage. Her pain was harsh enough to tempt a person into pushing it all onto someone else.





“Do you understand now? The sight of your face discomforts me,” my mother said to me. “I understand why you are here. You wish to find Zack, yes? He is in his father’s hometown, a village called Retin in the former Kingdom of Malika. Go there if you wish to see him.”

The Kingdom of Malika was close to the Demon Lord’s territory. It’d been first in line for destruction when the Demon Lord invaded, and it was where Zack’s parents lost their lives.

“Our conversation is over. You are forbidden from entering the temple for the remaining duration of my life. Leave this place at once.”

And with that, my mother closed her eyes, as if to say that there was nothing further to discuss.

Did she really despise me *that* much? Sadness washed over me. I couldn’t help but hang my head. I turned to the door, but then I looked back at my mother one more time. There was something I couldn’t let go.

“Mother!”

She showed no reaction to my shout.

“Thank you so much for everything! The world was saved because of you! I don’t mind if you hate me—I’ll always be proud of you! I’m glad I could be the daughter of such a strong mother!”

At some point while I was unaware, tears had fallen down my face.

Through my blurred vision, I thought I saw my mother’s expression twitch slightly—or was that just my wishful thinking?

“I love you, Mother! I’ll love you for the rest of my life! Could you remember that, at least?”

I bowed deeply in her direction, and then I wrenched away my head and left.

Fragment

The palace was burning. I'd seen this sight many times before. It meant this attempt was another failure.

I saw it through a vision in the underground temple.

So many people died. Next time, I'd save them. I'd made that vow more times than I could count, and yet it crumbled so easily. Now the futility of it all drummed through me, drowning out every other emotion.

Why am I so powerless? I'd asked myself on so many occasions.

If only I was strong, I could have defeated the Demon Lord by myself instead of leaving the task to others. But I knew all too well that my female body was a handicap and that training at my age would never get the results I wanted. I actually did try to wield a sword once, but it was too heavy for me to even perform a proper swing. My physique had always been on the frailer side.

But I knew that this was an excuse.

If I was as industrious as my daughter, Alexia, who partook in swordplay and horsemanship, perhaps things would have been different. This thought fueled my self-loathing.

Sadly, I had no affinity for magic, either. And because I was affiliated with a different god, I was unable to call upon the major god's blessing and use healing magic.

Why did the goddess curse her retainer with such weakness? I gazed up at her icon with baleful eyes.

The dirge of war boomed beyond the door. The Demon Lord was on his way. The hour of destruction was nigh.

I gulped down the poison I'd prepared for myself and bid farewell to this failed world.

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When I opened my eyes, a young Alexia was beside me. I hugged her tiny body tight.

"I'm already eight! Don't be embarrassing," Alexia insisted, but her small hands embraced me gently in return.

My love for this child was what sustained me whenever my world reset. Without it, I would have given up on this world long ago.

All I could do was latch on to another person like a parasite. The Prophet could only project a phantom of themselves to the person of their choosing and watch how their journey played out. I could make this false version of myself speak words, but I could not actually fight.

I could share the knowledge I had accumulated, of course: information about the future, monsters' weaknesses, which roads were relatively safe to traverse, what items were absolute necessities, and so forth. I was not completely useless, but it was nothing compared to what the Hero's party did when they put their lives on the line.

Also, needless to say, designating a Hero did not mean that the person would take on the role. Some refused the call, quite rightly. "I don't want to do it. It's too much of a burden," they would say. I could not blame them for having the most natural reaction. The Heroes I guided would all die from violent and unnatural causes. They gained no special power from accepting the mantle.

By using the name of the "Prophet," I would bestow the honor of "Hero," forcing people to take on the duty of "defeating the Demon Lord." Nothing more, nothing less.

This abominable power first manifested when the Demon Lord's army stormed the palace, and the Demon Lord himself broke the barrier around the temple. He slaughtered Alexia in front of my eyes and killed me next. The shock of my daughter's death hit me harder than my own impending demise.

When I next opened my eyes, it was ten years prior. I hugged

young Alexia beside me and bawled. She cocked her head in confusion, ignorant to what had transpired, but she gently hugged me back with her tiny arms nonetheless.

I swore in my heart that I would never let this girl die again.

I understood what had happened to me. When I inherited the role of priestess from my mother, I received the power and records of the previous priestesses.

World Revision.

It was a powerful ability to adjust and change the world, bestowed by our god upon the priestess so her clan would live on for eternity. It was also a means to thwart the Demon Lord.

The priestess could not die of anything aside from age; any other cause would activate the power, and time would revert to a point at which the impetus could be averted. One could say it granted someone knowledge that only the heavens could know.

I used this power not just to contend with the Demon Lord, but in many other situations. Even in peacetime, there were threats such as internal backstabbing and assassination attempts from the king's retainers.

None of those obstacles required multiple uses of World Revision, however. It was only the battle against the Demon Lord that made me experience time over and over again.

When I first used World Revision, I formed a united army to combat the Demon Lord. Instead of relying on a lone individual, I thought the power of nations posed a better chance of eliminating the threat.

I convinced my husband and our neighboring countries to form alliances so they could prepare for the invasion at an early stage. Because of my knowledge of the Demon Lord's route and attack patterns, we were able to set up a robust defense. This allowed the united army to fight efficiently and successfully fend off the Demon Lord's forces.

Yet no matter how many times our side repelled theirs, they would immediately spring back. By consolidating the monsters under

one umbrella, the Demon Lord could continually replenish his forces and press on the assault without end, wearing down our united army until, at last, the country on the front line fell. The army's structure crumbled in an instant, and my second death fell upon me.

On the second World Revision, I thought of using the united army to launch an attack. I was painfully aware that playing defense would get us nowhere and that we needed to strike at the enemy's base.

But politics proved to be a barrier. Organizing an expedition into the Demon Lord's distant territory required vast sums of money. Even if we were to secure victory, there would be practically no territorial or financial gain. And because the threat of the Demon Lord's army was not yet imminent, the expedition plan was caught in a deadlock, allowing the invasion to happen in the meantime.

When I saw the Demon Lord's army invade my kingdom, I swallowed poison.

I ended up going down the traditional method of searching for a Hero from the third World Revision onward. If the nations couldn't be moved, then there was no other choice but to send in a small elite squad to defeat the Demon Lord. Fortunately, there were plenty of promising young individuals, particularly Leon the Sword Saint, Maria the Holy Maiden, and Solon the Sage.

With his reputable family name and striking talent, Leon was the first Hero candidate in line. But when I actually sent him into the Demon Lord's territory, his upper-class upbringing made him ill-suited for traveling as an adventurer, and he couldn't respond well when the demons struck him where his guard was down—like a betrayal from someone he was trying to protect, for instance.

In the end, he perished a mere three months after beginning his journey.

My next candidate was Maria. Although I was a bit hesitant to make a priest into the Hero, she had a nasty personality (suitable for my purposes) and a good grasp on people. Her journey proceeded as smoothly as I hoped. She used her companions well, not only fending off the demons' attacks but even outwitting them.

Alas, her party had no camaraderie, and the fissures in their

teamwork gradually came to surface. When they faced off against a powerful demon, they broke down entirely. Maria lasted a year before she perished.

Solon was third on my list. Although he had personality issues that put his success rate lower than Leon's and Maria's in my estimation, he was extraordinarily gifted in his magical power and intelligence. Putting all the information I had accumulated from my experiences to good use, he snuck deep into the Demon Lord's territory and even managed a showdown with the Demon Lord himself. Unfortunately, the Demon Lord's strength crushed his, and Solon died in despair.

I tried using the same people to better effect on subsequent attempts, and I also tried guiding different people altogether. On some occasions, I put Leon, Maria, and Solon in the same party, but they never saw eye to eye, and the results were less than ideal.

After so many attempts of trial and error, my spirit wore down. I stopped thinking much about people's deaths, and I became blasé about even my own demise.

I'm just going to redo it all anyway, I thought.

After all my headhunting in the capital ended in failure, I looked outward to the rural areas for talent. My newest candidate was a boy named Ares.

In my previous World Revision, I'd heard rumors about a young man in a remote village who was talented at both swordsmanship and magic. The residents had apparently survived against the Demon Lord's army thanks to his efforts. This was a promising sign.

I sent my phantom toward Daris Village. I could manipulate this phantom like a puppet, flitting between the people it came into contact with before eventually reaching the person I deemed the Hero.

Annoyingly enough, however, there was nobody headed toward Daris Village because the highway that directly connected to it was infested with monsters. But I had decided to gamble on Ares this time, and so I released the Prophet's phantom.

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In the end, it took almost a year to reach Daris Village. My phantom chose quite a circuitous route, eventually arriving in the form of a traveling merchant.

I estimated that Ares was in his midteens at this point. He had brown eyes, which matched his chestnut hair, and he had quite a toned physique for a boy his age. Between that and his bright and alert visage, there was clearly something different about him compared with the other villagers.

I got to work observing him. Even as he helped around the house, he spent his mornings and evenings diligently studying the blade. On rainy days, he read magic tomes, and he paid regular visits to the church, where the priest taught him divine miracles. He also got along well with others.

He was the ideal person, one could say.

Although he was not as skilled with the sword as Leon, of course, and his magic skills could not compare with Maria's or Solon's, he possessed an intelligent and flexible spirit. I believed that this, more than anything else, was the necessary ingredient for vanquishing the Demon Lord.

I decided to make Ares the Hero.

Although designating someone a Hero had no direct effect, it did change how the person perceived themselves and was perceived by others. With greater expectations on their shoulders and financial support on their side, the individual would strive for greater heights.

I manifested my phantom at a village gathering and gave it a physical form. "A Hero will emerge from this village and defeat the Demon Lord," I declared.

The villagers were overjoyed, saying that they always knew that Ares was the Hero. They all looked in his direction. But he…turned pale.

Oh, he really is a clever boy.

Pain stabbed my heart. Ares understood the fundamental nature of being the Hero, that it was a harsh and difficult mantle to bear.

Meanwhile, his cousin, Zack, who was standing right next to him, peered directly at me. As if to declare that *he* was the Hero. To be perfectly frank, Zack was not a particularly remarkable child. He did everything with Ares, from being his sparring partner to studying magic alongside him, and he was inferior to Ares in all those things.

He was not the kind of boy one could imagine becoming the Hero. But his eyes left a strong impression on me.

Ares looked at Zack as well. The sight of his cousin seemed to restore his calm, and he quietly accepted the villagers' jubilations.

When he returned home, he consulted with his parents and decided to head to the capital. This was exactly what I'd hoped for. There, he could devote himself to his training, hone his skills, and assemble his party members. It was all necessary for defeating the Demon Lord.

But later, when I watched Ares swinging his sword at night instead of sleeping, he made for a rather pitiable sight. As a fellow mother, I understood painfully well why Ares's mother, Shella, cried for her son. Even though her pain was entirely my own doing.

After making his preparations, Ares set off on his journey with Zack.

And…he perished en route to the capital. Not even I had anticipated that a demon would be lying in wait for him on the road.

It was a frightfully quick death.

"Another failed loop," I said to myself.

I decided to end my life quickly. Although Ares had perished all too soon, nobody his age could have fought toe-to-toe with a demon. As long as he avoided that tragedy, he still had promise.

But then for some reason, Zack caught my eye. The boy who traveled with Ares and had no talent of his own.

I sent my phantom after Zack and watched his journey play out.

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Zack took on Ares's name and enrolled in Falm Academy, where he

applied his efforts to becoming the Hero. Watching him struggle onward despite getting nowhere, I saw my own futile efforts in him.

He kept swinging his sword silently, despite his clear inferiority to Leon. He awakened to divine miracles even after being subjected to Maria's ludicrous trials. He learned magic from Solon after many hours of training. Although he was far from the top at any of those skills, Zack racked up tiny miracles one after another.

And before I knew it, he was the Hero. I'd done nothing to guide him.

He was lowlier, weaker, and more pitiful than any other Hero. But he earned the title through his own strength.

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Zack formed a party with Leon, Maria, and Solon and set off on a quest to defeat the Demon Lord.

He got the party to synergize. Instead of using them as tools, he drew out their respective strengths. For my part, I fed what I knew to him at every opportunity, and he used this knowledge to overcome the vast number of trials and tribulations that came his way.

Could Zack defeat the Demon Lord? I wondered.

My anticipation grew. But ambivalence stirred within me at the same time.

I thought about Ares. The reason Zack was fighting was because of Ares, because he was offering himself as Ares's replacement. I knew that better than anyone. But if he went on to defeat the Demon Lord, then this world would proceed along a timeline in which Ares was dead.

I decided to speak with Zack about my worries. I approached him just when he was about to arrive at the Demon Lord's castle.

"Would you return to a world where Ares was alive if you could?" I asked.

Zack's eyes widened. "Return? Not bring him back to life?"

"I cannot revive the dead. I can only reset time to before his death."

"What about people's memories?"

"They don't carry over. Only I will remember. But I can guide you so he doesn't die next time."

Zack peered at me in silence for a while before he said, "What about the Demon Lord? We only have a little to go before we arrive at his doorstep. Will we be able to come this far again?"

I hesitated.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. The fact that he'd gotten this far was like a miracle to me. I wasn't confident that it could be repeated.

"Then don't bother."

"What?"

"It's a pain to do it all over again, right? I don't think I could repeat my life if someone told me to. I don't want to go through so much trouble again," he told me with a smile.

"But if you keep going, Ares will—"

"What happened to Ares was sad. Of course I'd want him to come back, but I don't think it's right to invalidate everything that's happened till now. I'm not just talking about myself; everyone's pain would all go to waste. So I'm fine with sticking on this path."

"…Are you sure?"

"Yeah, this is my choice. I'm going to let Ares die.

"*I killed Ares.*

"So you don't have to make such a sad face."

What *face* was he talking about? The form he was seeing was merely a projection—it was impossible to even tell its age or gender. He could not possibly have known what expression I was making. I was just an onlooker from afar who couldn't do anything.

"You don't know a thing about me," I said to Zack.

"I just sort of picked up on it, you know? There's something about you that reminds me of Shella. I found myself thinking that

you're a nice, motherly sort of person."

Shella… Ares's mother. She did not rejoice when her son became the Hero. That only made sense. I would never want my daughter to become the Hero, either. No parent would want to send their child on such a perilous journey. And yet I'd forced another woman's child into the role, and he'd paid the price for it with his life.

"I…am not nice," I said.

"You think so? I reckon you are. The Prophet's goal is to beat the Demon Lord, right? But we're just one step away from potentially getting what you want, and here you are proposing to redo things. If that's not *nice,* I don't know what is."

"……"

"But if I die without defeating the Demon Lord and have to redo things, I wish you could nudge me into learning magic before setting out on that journey. I'm a terrible learner, so I reckon it would be hard on you, but that's my request. That way, I'd be a proper friend to Ares, and I wouldn't let him die. We could go journeying together."

Zack kept his tone light as he spoke of his regret and his true wish. At that point, the conversation wrapped, and he left.

After that, at the end of a grueling and punishing battle, Zack and his friends defeated the Demon Lord, and my thousand-year journey came to a close.

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Freed from the long cycle, I trembled with joy. At long last, I could reach the end of my life and die as a person.

But my glee lasted for only one night. When I arose from my slumber, my happiness disappeared.

"The dead will never return."

It wasn't just Ares. Many people died as a direct result of my choices. When I first used World Revision, I had tried so hard to save as many people as I could, and yet somewhere along the line, I'd become numb to everything. *It's all pointless when this timeline*

is going to waste anyway, I'd thought.

But this time, the Demon Lord was actually defeated. I could have saved more people if I'd tried.

I blamed myself eternally after that. All I wished was for the natural span of my life to quickly reach its end.

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For years, I pined for death, until one day, Alexia appeared before me.

After a long argument with the temple attendants, she half forced her way inside the hallowed ground. It would appear that my daughter came to me under Solon's suggestion to inquire about Zack's whereabouts.

True, my phantom was still attached to Zack. However…

Oh, my foolish daughter.

…to think that she would intrude upon this sacred ground out of simple curiosity, utterly ignorant of my pain or Zack's feelings. The blackness in my heart reared its ugly head. When I told Alexia everything, I urged her to take the poison I used to kill myself.

"If you are a member of the priestess's clan, show me your resolve. If you can overcome your fear of death, I will tell you Zack's location."

I simply wished to cow her. I thought my sheltered daughter would leave when I said that.

But Alexia responded:

"Yes, Mother."

And she gulped down the poison.

Right before my eyes, she perished with a gentle smile, without even showing a hint of her excruciating agony.

Witnessing her death, I wondered what the point of it all was. Why had I ever used World Revision? Hadn't I died over and over again because I wanted to save my daughter?

She'd come to me with her own resolve. And I had used it as an outlet for my depression.

Brandishing a short sword, I stabbed myself in the throat and collapsed atop Alexia's body. My final World Revision activated.

When I regained consciousness, time did not reset to before the Demon Lord's defeat. I felt a faint sense of both relief and guilt.

It was one day prior to Alexia's visit.

I ordered the temple attendants to allow her to pass through and awaited my daughter's arrival for a second time.

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When I heard the door close, I opened my eyes and made sure that Alexia was gone.

Silence returned to the sacred ground.

"Thank you, Alexia, my beloved daughter."

My journey had been a long and lonely one, for no matter what I did, everyone would forget it all the moment I reset. Not a single effort bore fruit, and because of my guidance and choices, many were led to their deaths.

To me, it was a cursed duty, one that I never expected a word of gratitude for.

"But I always did want someone to thank me…"

Alexia's words sank deep into my heart.

At that point, my limbs gave out, and I slumped over the altar. Tears flowed in an incomprehensible blend of joy and sadness.

I will never see my child again.

It was the only atonement I allowed for myself.

The Hero's Story

After two years of traveling, I arrived at the location of the fallen Kingdom of Malika. I made my father's hometown, the village of Retin, my tentative destination.

Since Malika had been closest to the Demon Lord's territory, the land was still ravaged two years after the Demon Lord's defeat. There were hardly any humans around.

Even if I go, there might be nothing there.

My late father had always said he wanted me to meet my grandfather in Retin. That thought was what brought me this far, but there was also the possibility that there might not even be a village at all.

I had no mother or father anymore. If my grandfather wasn't around, either, where exactly was I supposed to go?

I'd stayed alive so I could defeat the Demon Lord in Ares's place. Now that I had seen this goal through, I honestly had no idea what to do. For a time, I played at being an adventurer as I traveled the world, helping reconstruct towns and villages and slaying monsters when asked. Being thanked did make me feel a little gratified, I suppose.

All my life, I'd been too late for the things that mattered. I'd wanted to go help my parents, but I'd been a powerless kid at the time. I studied swordplay and magic with Ares, but none of it stuck. I never got good at the sword even though my father was so great, and I couldn't use magic at all despite being my mother's son—a mage's son.

So I couldn't help Ares when he became the Hero. I watched him

die.

After I joined Falm Academy under Ares's name, I somehow managed to hone my sword skills and learn magic, but even then, I wasn't anything special. I knew that better than anyone.

I worked so, so hard to become the Hero, but the only reason I was able to defeat the Demon Lord was because I had Leon, Maria, and Solon with me. It wasn't my power that did it.

If I'd asked the Prophet for it, we could have had a world where Ares was alive. But that was exactly the one thing I couldn't ask for. It was the one rule I couldn't break. Although my life wasn't so great in a lot of ways and I couldn't save a single person I wanted to save, I still strove to do my very best. I didn't want to invalidate all those things I did—it would turn my whole life into a lie.

Except…in the end, I had nothing. I went back to being Zack, said good-bye to my three friends, and took off on a lonely, hollow journey.

Part of me wanted to see Princess Alexia. She'd gone out of her way to tell me, *"Don't die! You don't have to defeat the Demon Lord!"* It warmed my heart to hear that. I never expected someone to worry about what happened to me not because I was the Hero but as another human being. She hadn't looked at me as Ares the Hero but as *me*.

Yet I couldn't bring myself to go back to the capital. If I did, everything would be for naught.

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According to a map I got from Malikan refugees in another country, I was getting close to the location of Retin—if it still existed.

In the distance, my eyes spotted white smoke in the sky. Someone was there. My feet felt a little lighter.

Eventually, I arrived at something that resembled a village. The buildings were dilapidated, but there were people around.

As I made my way toward the settlement, a lone old man came

to approach me. His clothing wasn't in great shape—a sure indication of how rough life was around here.

"I'm the chief of Retin. Are you by any chance related to Vince?" he asked. Vince was the name of my grandfather.

"I'm his grandson, Zack. My father is Luke."

"Luke… Now that brings back memories. Is he doing well?"

"He died fighting the Demon Lord's army."

"I see…" The old man closed his eyes and hung his head slightly, silently mourning the dead. "Many in this village perished as well. Vince included."

So my grandfather did pass away, just as I'd thought. Although I hadn't expected a reunion, it still came as a small shock.

"You look a lot like Vince. That's how I knew you were related. Come with me. I'll show you his grave," the old man said as he broke into a stride. I followed him.

Along the way, we met quite a few villagers. When the old man explained that I was Vince's grandson, they all wanted to shake my hand.

"Your grandfather saved my life," they told me.

The chief led me to a ruined house on the outskirts of the village. Being close to the mountains, the property was on a slightly elevated piece of land, giving it an unbroken view of Retin. There was a small gravestone next to the house.

"Vince lived here. Luke was born here, too. This gravestone was the first thing I made after I returned to this village. His body isn't here, but it was the least I could do."

The old man put his hands together in front of his chest. I did the same.

"What was my grandfather like?"

My father had said he was "the person I respect most in the world." From how the villagers acted, I could guess that he'd been an upstanding man.

"A dunce." The old man laughed. It was a surprising answer. "Vince and I grew up together. He was always worse at picking

things up than I was whenever we played. He'd been that way since we were kids."

That sounded a lot like me and Ares.

"But, you know, I lost to Vince in the end. I settled for being good enough, while he kept applying himself until he could finally do it properly. It was all because of his natural clumsiness. In that sense, I never won against him."

The old man recounted the story fondly. It felt like he was praising me somehow.

"I heard that my grandfather was a hunter, and that he also did some adventuring work here and there," I said. My father had told me bits and pieces about him when I was young.

"He was born into a family of hunters, and so he became a hunter. He was terrible at it when he started out. His father yelled at him all the time."

"But he kept at it diligently, right?"

"*Diligent* doesn't begin to describe it. He'd hole himself up in the mountains and wouldn't come back down until he'd caught his game. It wouldn't just be for one or two days, either. He'd stay for *ages*, long enough that his father would get worried and bring him back home. The fact that he took that long doesn't say much about his hunting skills, but I'd say he was the best in the world when it came to sheer persistence."

That brought a little smile to my face. My grandfather sounded kind of like me.

"He got the hang of it eventually and settled down with a wife. Although she passed away too soon, she was a beautiful person who could do anything. Luke took after her. But Luke was very attached to Vince."

I hadn't heard much about my grandmother. Since she passed away when my father was young, he barely remembered her, it seemed.

"Anyway, since I belonged to the village chief's family, I was in charge of minding the fields and the village. But one day, monsters showed up. That was a problem for a tiny village like ours since we didn't have the money to hire adventurers. So I asked Vince if he

could hunt the monsters."

What an insane request. Animals and monsters were on completely different ends of the spectrum in terms of threats. If hunters were capable of defeating monsters, nobody would need adventurers.

My surprise must have shown on my face, because the old man rushed to continue his story.

"I knew it was an unreasonable thing to ask. I wasn't trying to force him into anything. But Vince accepted the challenge. I paid him for his trouble, of course, although it was short change compared with an adventurer's rate."

My grandfather sounded perhaps a bit too nice for his own good.

"This was Vince we're talking about, so of course, he wasn't good at it at first. But everyone knew that he'd pull through eventually. Whatever you could say about him, we all liked him and depended on him."

"So he learned to hunt the monsters?"

"Yeah. It took him about a year, but he improved his weapons and traps and took his time to finish off those monsters carefully. Thanks to him, we're alive and well to this day. But when word got around to the other villages, they asked him to take care of their monster problems, too. He accepted their requests with nary a grimace. He kept at it, picking off those monsters one by one, and somewhere along the line, people started calling him 'the Hero of the frontier.'"

"The Hero…you say?" It was the first I'd heard of this.

"Well, that was just how grateful we were. The real Hero defeated the Demon Lord and saved the world, but if Vince didn't slay those monsters at our doorsteps, we wouldn't have lived to see the next day. Luke admired his father so much that he became an adventurer. Apparently, Vince wanted to pass on his hunting skills, but Luke was more inspired by the things Vince did that made him the Hero in everyone's eyes."

"Ah, I see."

My father had said that he became an adventurer because he wanted to help people. That must have been my grandfather's

influence.

"Luke left the village to become an adventurer, but he always planned to come back one day and take up the monster culling in Vince's stead. But then the Demon Lord appeared and launched an invasion on this country."

I was six years old when the Demon Lord attacked Malika.

"Vince was the first to catch on. One day, he said, 'The monsters have been acting funny.' There were more of them around, and their movements seemed aggravated. Vince warned me to abandon this village and run somewhere far away."

I didn't like where this was going. "What happened?"

The answer was what I expected.

"I believed him, but the villagers didn't. Or rather, not everyone could escape. The nearby villages were in the same boat, and not everyone was willing to throw away their current lives to go to some distant place. They hoped that Vincent's gloomy prediction was wrong and didn't do anything."

I figured that would be the case. People were shortsighted like that. Instead of thinking things through rationally, they'd cling to what they wished would happen. But maybe that was only natural.

"He was right, in the end. One day, Vince told us that a huge swarm of monsters was headed for the village. They didn't believe it until they saw the monsters with their own eyes. By then, of course, it was too late."

"What happened after that?"

"Vince and I had our escape plans ready: what to bring, what roads to use, how we would get away, and so on. Thanks to our preparations, we managed to get the villagers out. I led the group, and he was at the rear. His job was to slow down the monsters with the traps he'd set beforehand."

"And then my grandfather…"

"Yes, he died during the escape. He fought the monsters till his last breath so that as many people as possible could get out. Plenty of villagers died as well. But still, many lives were saved because of him."

Mom and Dad died fighting for people, too. Was that another

thing they got from my grandfather?

"Vince's escape route took us to the neighboring country. Although the Kingdom of Malika fell, the villagers of Retin survived because of him. And now we're back here, rebuilding the village in his honor."

The old man's eyes turned misty.

"To tell you the truth, a few days before the monsters attacked, I said to Vince, 'We should escape together.' His family and mine. The way I saw it, there was no point fighting for the villagers who didn't bother listening to him. But he refused to get on board. He said, 'I'm staying here.' Even now, I don't know what was going through his head. I didn't want him to die. I didn't want to lose him. But…that's how it panned out."

The old man touched the gravestone tenderly.

"He was a Hero. We were the ones who killed the Hero. Because a Hero is someone who fights for weak people like us. But I wonder, you know, if we were worth the gamble he played. If only we'd been a little stronger, a little smarter, he wouldn't have had to die. He wouldn't have had to sacrifice himself. He could have run. Why did he have to stay behind…?"

The old man grieved for his best friend. Having lost Ares, I empathized painfully well.

But…

"I think I understand a little how my grandfather must have felt."

"What do you mean?"

I looked down at the view of Retin sprawled out before me. It was by no means a large village, and the scars from the battle had not yet faded. But the residents were hard at work, trying to get the place back on its feet.

Retin wasn't the only place like this. You could find similar sights across the entire world. It was the picture of an ordinary day, and yet there was something so very precious about it.

"He had something he wanted to protect in spite of it all," I said.

The things my grandfather strove to protect still existed in a tangible form.

Likewise, I'd thought I had nothing, but plenty of things still

remained for me. I felt like I could finally feel proud of myself for what I'd done.

That night, I stayed in the old man's house.

The day after, I helped rebuild the village my grandfather died to protect.

Epilogue

It took a little while for us to get to Retin. Solon could only use his teleportation spell to travel to places he had already been, so he took us near where the Kingdom of Malika had once been, and from there, we struck a course for Retin.

"Magic can't do everything. I can't pinpoint a location I've never been to." For whatever reason, Solon sounded proud of himself as he said that.

But that did imply he had been to Daris Village at some point.

When I asked him about it, he hesitated at first. "I went to the area so I could meet Ares's parents. But I never ended up seeing them," he answered a little sullenly, his face red.

Aha. This fellow looked arrogant, but he was actually kind and bashful. Since he couldn't bring himself to question Shella, he'd asked me to do it instead.

We borrowed some horses at the town we teleported to and headed for Retin. I was a practiced rider, but Solon was surprisingly adept, too.

"It's not my forte, but I had my chance to learn on our journey. Zack taught me. It was one of the many things I learned from him."

Solon beamed with pride.

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Signs of the Demon Lord's invasion still lingered in the former Kingdom of Malika. The area was a total wasteland.

"The closer you get to the Demon Lord's territory, the more you find places like this."

Solon didn't seem particularly emotional. I supposed he was

desensitized to this sort of sight from his journey.

But it was a huge shock to me, as I'd never left the kingdom in my life. It drove home just how little I understood of the world. My mother must have witnessed this devastation many times over.

When we arrived at Retin Village at last, I saw that it was close to the sea. The buildings and fields were still in disarray, but it was in quite good shape compared with the other places we passed through on the way. Several plumes of smoke trailed across the sky —a sure sign of human habitation.

When I asked the villagers in the fields about Zack, they immediately told me where he was.

Apparently, he'd come to the village two years ago and had been helping with the reconstruction ever since. The villagers appreciated his presence because he put a lot of vigor into his work, and he even slew monsters from time to time.

I went where I was directed and found him piling bricks on a roof. I recognized him at once from his slightly curly hair and matching chestnut-brown eyes. Although his appearance had changed to match his age, he was still the same at his core. The villager clothes suited him so well that he didn't look out of place in the slightest, but that, too, was characteristic of him.

Zack noticed our approach right away. With such good instincts on his side, I wasn't surprised that he was the Hero.

"Whoa! Is that you, Solon?!"

Zack was stunned. Well, it would have been a letdown if he *wasn't* surprised. We had gone through quite some trouble to get here.

Solon strode right over to Zack and seized him in a hug.

"I was looking for you."

That single sentence contained an incredible weight.

"I know," was all Zack said in return as he hugged Solon back.

After a short while, Zack turned his eyes to me.

"Are you Princess Alexia, by any chance? What brings you here?"

I was happy to see that he remembered me.

Solon backed away a few steps, making room for me to approach.

"I know about your lie. Shella does, too," I said.

Zack's expression jolted in surprise. "What a pickle…" He frowned in thought. "I see… I see. But why would the princess come all the way here to tell me that?"

"To fulfill my promise."

"What promise?"

"To marry the person I love."

"Huh?"

Solon was snickering. Zack looked so confused.

"Person you love? You mean…uh…me?"

He was so very slow on the uptake. I nodded silently.

"Uh…"

His face turned red, and he scratched his head sheepishly.

And then after a slight pause to think, he said:

"I know this place in the capital that serves great sweets. If you're up for it, do you wanna come with me?"





At a Certain Confectionery Store

Things had been in a slight tizzy at the capital lately.

The Hero had returned, seemingly back from the dead. Apparently, the story was that the princess had discovered that the Hero was actually still alive while she'd been compiling a record of his deeds, so she went out to find him.

The records were extensively made public, revealing the Hero's roots. They said that he wasn't the Hero at the beginning, that he took the place of his best friend, who was the original Hero. After overcoming many trials and tribulations, he finally struck down the Demon Lord.

The whole thing was published as a book, which became all the rage in the city. They said you couldn't read it without crying. The rich folks bought the book, while the literate yet penniless folks shared their copies. As for the people with neither money nor literacy, they went to public readings of the book and heard the tale aloud.

Because of all that, the Hero's popularity soared. There were a bunch of people even coming out of the woodwork to say they wanted a guy like him to be king. None of us knew whether the Hero would marry the princess and take the throne, but I was among those who wanted it to happen.

After the book took off, there was a massive parade to celebrate the Hero's triumphant return. It was a huge deal. The Sword Saint, the Holy Maiden, and the Sage all showed up, and even people from other countries came to see what was going on. I watched it as well, but I was too far away from the action to see the Hero's face clearly. According to the rumors, he was chiseled and handsome. I sure would have liked to see him up close.

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My father was a skilled confectioner. The store he ran downtown in the capital was a small one, but it was always busy. Given the location, most of his customers were commoners, but nobles occasionally sent their servants to make purchases. I was proud of how, despite being aimed at commonfolk tastes, Dad's sweets had fans among the nobility.

I'd been helping with the store ever since I was little, and over time, I learned how to make confectioneries of my own. These days, my father had even been putting one of my creations on the shelves.

Making sweets was surprisingly laborious work. You had to transport heavy ingredients, knead the dough, and then mix that with the ingredients for ages. You could burn yourself, and the whole process made your hands rough and calloused. This was why it was considered a man's job, but I wanted to be like Dad, so I worked really, really hard to make sweets every morning before the shop opened.

Slowly but steadily, I was improving, except my creations didn't sell well because they didn't match up to my father's in terms of presentation or taste.

So whenever I looked at the customers, I was always silently praying: *Won't you buy my sweets?*

Around the time my sweets were added to the wares, we got a new regular at the store. Dad said he was a former Falm Academy student who used to come by over ten years ago but stopped showing up after he graduated.

The moment he spotted the young man, Dad sprang out of the kitchen and squeezed him in a hug. "It's been ages!" Dad said. This was unusual for him; he was a professional and didn't really show much emotion. But the sight of this person was enough to make him light up in joy.

The young man returned the sentiment, saying, "Yeah, it's been a while," with a bright smile.

He looked like he was in his mid-twenties, and he had slightly curly chestnut hair and brown eyes. Going by looks, he was your average male commoner.

Dad talked with the guy for a good while, before pushing samples of the store's entire selection onto him. "Take this! Give 'em all a try!" he urged.

Looking a little flustered, the young man attempted to pay, but Dad refused his money. This came as another surprise to me—Dad never gave his sweets away to customers for free.

In the end, the young man said, "I'll be back again," as he carried a mountain of sweets out the door.

Dad told me he was greatly indebted to this person.

When I was really young, Dad left a large confectionery store to go independent. He opened a shop aimed at commoners, but nobody came at first. Sweets were luxury items, not really something that commoners ate very often to begin with, so when they *did* have them, they wanted them to be as delicious as possible. The expectations were high, and they were very difficult to meet. Dad experimented with all kinds of sweets, but nothing seemed to catch on.

It was during this low point that the young man appeared, back when he was still a student. He was a strange customer, constantly squinting at the wares while muttering God's name. He always bought just one thing at a time. Being a student, he didn't have money for more, and he made his choice after a lot of agonizing.

Apparently, the sweets were for his girlfriend, not him. The young man insisted, *"She's not my girlfriend,"* but Dad was convinced she was. Otherwise, he wouldn't be trying so hard.

It seemed that this girlfriend was quite a colorful character; she was awful to the young man whenever she didn't like his presents. She'd hang him from the school roof and use him as a target for her spells, or she'd kick him down a cliff and then kick him again when he was climbing back up. The stories were insane.

"How did it go last time?" Dad would ask the young man.

"'No good,' she said."

Apparently, he and my dad conversed a lot at the time. The young man said he went to other stores as well, but Dad learned how to make sweets that appealed to the girlfriend's tastes because he felt so bad for the guy. And since this person never ate anything for himself, Dad would give him samples.

Why did he hang out with a girl who made him buy her sweets and punished him soundly whenever she didn't like them? She sounded like an ugly, rotten person.

Meanwhile, the confectionery store's reputation climbed steadily as Dad adapted his sweets to the girl's liking. The outward presentation improved, and among the vast array of sweets he made, there were some that became a hit with the other customers. Before long, Dad got into the habit of showing the young man his samples and getting him to pick out the best one. The next day, Dad would put the selection on the most prominent display.

Thanks to this strategy, his new sweets flew off the shelves practically every week, and the store became very popular.

"Our store wouldn't be where it is today if it wasn't for that guy and his terrible girlfriend," Dad said.

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About a week after I saw him at the store, the guy came back—this time with a girl.

She looked like a working woman, what with the glasses on her face and how her pretty blond hair was tied back in a low ponytail. Judging by her appearance, she seemed to be a civil official at the palace or the receptionist at a large merchant house. She was quite pretty on closer inspection.

"No way, is that the girl from back then?" Dad whispered to the young man.

"Oh, no," he replied with a laugh.

"Good. I'm glad you broke up with that piece of work." Dad was weeping in relief.

The young man put on a stiff smile.

Something strange happened soon afterward, though. Another new female customer came in right after the young man left.

It was hard to see her face because she had a scarf pulled over it, but when I approached her as a store employee, I could tell she was amazingly beautiful. She had porcelain-white skin and dark, mysterious eyes, and the black hair that was visible from under her scarf looked silky smooth.

"There was a customer here a short while ago, yes? The young man with the brown hair. I'd like some of the sweets that he bought. He's good at picking them, you know," she said.

Faced with her graceful smile, I did exactly as I was told, wrapping up the sweets without suspecting a thing.

"Thank you," she said.

After paying and receiving her purchase, the woman made herself scarce, as if she was somewhat self-conscious about the people around her.

I watched her vacantly as she left.

What a beautiful lady. I was sure that she had a beautiful personality to go with her face. Maybe she hid her face because it was too beautiful.

A little while after that, we got another new customer. He was a blond man with a sturdy physique and a neat appearance, all of which screamed *knight* in bold letters. He was handsome, too, with his firm jawline. He also had a small beard, but that added to the appeal.

"So, hmm… This is *his* favorite store. Za— No, Are— No, the plain-looking guy with slightly curly brown hair. You know who I'm talking about?"

That was all the information I needed. Although he was an average person, he left a strong impression in many different ways, so I knew instantly who this customer was referring to.

"Yes. The man who has been frequenting this store recently?" I

asked.

"Yeah, him. Give me what he bought. Whatever's left of it."

"Um… That's quite a large quantity. Are you sure?" It was far too much for a single person's stomach.

"It's no problem. I'm gifting it to my fiancée. I've kept her waiting a long time. I need to give her the good stuff," said the blond man, breaking into a smile. It looked so handsome on him.

"Ah, so you have a fiancée." I felt a tad disappointed.

"Don't expect a glamorous love story. She's my cousin. We know each other inside out, and she's the daughter of a man I respected. Honestly, I'm wasted on her."

He gave a slightly bashful laugh. It was heartwarming to see.

To think that this upstanding gentleman had such an adorable side, too. I was liking him more by the second.

Well, after Mr. Blondie left, a new customer showed up right around closing time. This one wore the purple-hooded robe of a mage. It was rare for mages to stop by confectionery stores. Was it a first for us? When I thought of mages, I pictured them drinking some weird, goopy, green soup instead of sweet things.

This particular mage had a high-strung, irritable look on his face. I had to be careful around people like him. They tended to nitpick.

I summoned the nerve to speak with him.

"Hey, did a plain-looking guy come by today to buy sweets? A guy with slightly curly brown hair. You know him?" he asked curtly.

What? This guy, too?

That made him the third person to ask about that guy. He looked so ordinary. What did *he* have to do with a pretty lady, a knight, and a mage? Maybe he was famous for picking out the best sweets.

"He did come by, yes…"

"Okay. Give me the same sweets he got." There was no friendliness in the mage's tone.

"I'm sorry. Another customer bought them all…," I answered *very* apologetically. I suspected that the mage was about to get angry.

"Tch, damn that Leon. This is what I hate about nobles…" The

mage frowned, but instead of getting mad at me, he just grumbled under his breath.

"Um, we have other sweets at our store…," I offered. Since my job was to shill our wares, I followed the script even to an annoying-looking customer like him.

"Hmph." The mage gave a slightly disgruntled snort. "I wanted the same thing he ate. But it would be senseless to leave without buying anything. Fine, then. I'll take a few of what you have left."

What the heck? He was definitely a paying customer, but it was hard to be happy about a fellow who couldn't keep his comments to himself.

The mage picked out some sweets very half-heartedly indeed. My creation was included in his slapped-together selection.

Oh dear. What if he doesn't like the thing I made and blows the shop to smithereens with his magic?

In my head, I pictured the mage roaring in laughter as he cast his flames on the shop. It seemed all too plausible.

"Um, that sweet there is…"

To protect the store from destruction, I tried to stop him from buying my creation.

"What? You have a problem with me buying this? Why would you put something on a shelf if you don't think it's worth selling?" said the mage, looking genuinely irritated.

No shop employee in the world would dare try to make the customer reconsider his purchase after hearing *that*. Left with no other choice, I told him the price of all his sweets.

With a bored expression, the mage pulled the money out of his pocket. I took it reluctantly.

"Thank you very much. Please come again soon." I recited the usual line while hoping he never showed his face again.

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Another week went by, and the famed (?) sweets connoisseur visited again. He came with the bespectacled lady, just like last time.

Dad sprang out of the kitchen and started chatting with the man about sweets. The fellow wasn't very good at explaining things in words, but I found it endearing how hard he tried to get across what he liked about them.

Then the lady said to me, "I enjoyed your sweets very much. My mother said they were delightful."

"I'm glad to hear that. It sounds like you and your mother get along."

"Is that how it sounds? Actually, there was a long period where we never saw each other. We did meet once a little while ago, but then she shut herself in her room, and it was hard to reconnect. That's when he and I forced open her door."

The woman gazed fondly at the man. He went on chatting with Dad, completely oblivious.

"Was that…a lot of, uh, trouble?" I asked.

Her family situation sounded kind of complicated. It made me hesitant to inquire further.

"Yes, it sure was. But then when he gave her some sweets to eat, she silently chewed them and blurted out, 'This tastes nice.' That helped break the ice between us. So I'm planning to buy more today as a gift for her."

The lady looked very happy about what she said. I had to hand it to the sweets connoisseur. Who would have thought confections could bring people happiness?

Once again, the beautiful lady came by straight after the man left. Predictably, she bought the same thing he did. Later on, Mr. Blondie came in and swooped up all the remainders.

Last was the mage. He showed up at closing time again.

"Is it sold out again?"

The mage was disappointed. He looked as disgruntled as ever.

Come earlier if you feel that strongly about it, I thought. The mage must have seen into my mind because he shot me a glare.

"Oh well. I'll take some of whatever's left again."

This fellow really didn't need to verbalize every thought in his

head. But hey, he didn't complain about the last batch he bought, and he didn't spontaneously chant a curse, so maybe he actually liked it?

"I'll have that, that, and that. Oh, and some of this, too."

The mage picked the sweets offhandedly, and one of my creations ended up in the pile again. Was it too much to hope that he liked it?

I definitely couldn't ask him for his thoughts, though, because I got the impression that he'd bite my head off.

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The same pattern repeated every week, many times over.

The sweets connoisseur said that the pretty lady, the blond guy, and the mage were his close friends. When I asked him why they didn't all come together, he said that everyone was busy with their lives, so it was hard to coordinate.

But was that really the case? Maybe I could buy that about Mr. Blondie and the mage, but the pretty lady always came in straight after him—as if she was following him around.

I was about to mention this when I felt a cold tingle run down my spine. I felt as if I was being *watched*. Nervously, I peered out the store's window, and standing right there was the pretty lady. Smiling.

I'm gonna have nightmares from this.

I held my tongue. I wasn't going to overstep my bounds with the customers. For my own sake, just as much as theirs.

The last customer of the day was the mage.

As usual, he asked about the sold-out goods and picked out some leftovers, which happened to include the sweets I made. His choices were random, but he always consistently picked one of my creations.

Maybe he liked my sweets after all?

"You always buy that item. Do you like the taste of it?" I mustered the courage to ask.

"It's awful."

I shouldn't have asked. I knew it; this mage guy sucked.

"You're the one making these, right?" he said with a smile.

What a jerk. He knew that I made those sweets, and he still said it sucked.

"Well, yes…"

"The sweets you make are the only ones that look different from the others. I can tell the love you put into them by sight."

He had a keen eye—not surprising for a mage.

"Why are you always buying them if you think they taste bad?" I asked peevishly.

"Hmph. The other sweets have a polished flavor. But there's value in unfinished work. I can tell your improvement from the taste. I enjoy the process, I suppose you could say. I learned the value of such things from my friend."

By "friend," was he talking about the sweets connoisseur?

The mage looked at me. "Of course, that improvement comes from your hard work. That's why I buy your sweets every week. If you didn't put in the effort, I wouldn't buy it. Aim high and don't worry about failure. I'll be there to buy your stuff."

With that, the mage paid for his purchase and left.

He was *so* unfair. That spell he cast was completely uncalled for.

I could tell my face was burning red.

Afterword

When I first started posting novels on the Shousetsuka ni Narou website, I was forty-four years old, well past the typical age range of contributors. My first submission, *How I Became King by Eating Monsters*, barely got any traction, and I concluded the series feeling disappointed.

Then in the year I turned forty-five, I wrote my second piece: *Who Killed the Hero?* This one got high praise from a lot of people and even landed me a book deal. (*How I Became King by Eating Monsters* also got a book offer from GC Novels around this time.)

Since I was posting on a site called Shousetsuka ni Narou ("Let's Become a Novelist"), I obviously wanted to be a novelist. But I didn't want to be just any old novelist—I wanted to be a great one. Many people these days post their wish lists on the internet, writers included, but my list has just one thing:

The Japan Booksellers' Award.

You know what I'm talking about, right?

When my editor first read my afterword, they probably thought the same thing most of you reading this are thinking right now: *Is this author an idiot?*

I'm an old fart who started writing novels at the ripe old age of forty-four—and in the light novel genre to boot. Winning an award like that is practically impossible.

But the story I wrote is about that sort of impossibility. It's about taking something on when other people say, "You can't do that," or "You can't be that." Perseverance in the face of ridicule. Expecting things of yourself, however humble those aspirations are. That sort of thing.

Of course, I don't believe my chances are zero. I have faith that I've crafted a story that can be enjoyed by people of any demographic. I think it's something that booksellers can recommend

to pretty much anybody, not just to avid book lovers but even to people who don't normally read much. Thinking of it that way, is a literary prize really so far out of reach?

Besides, if I don't talk up my book, then I feel like it will just be written off as part of the light novel "genre." If I don't shout about it from the rooftops, it won't be so much as considered.

Even if this book doesn't gain any traction, as long as I continue to write, I can always strive to be an amazing novelist worthy of a literary prize.

I'm an old guy who lucked his way into becoming a novelist at forty-five, throwing a tantrum about wanting the Japan Booksellers' Award. But what I can say is that even if I fail miserably at this goal, I don't regret trying.

After all, I'm living life just like the Hero.


An image of Ares that I didn't set to draw for the main story.
I want to see him shine in a different timeline!!
2023
taiG



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