

THE GIRL AND THE HERO

Tap, tap, tap…

Quiet steps echoed across the castle.

The demon lord had already fled, leaving his bastion behind him. I was the rear guard. A sacrificial lamb. He used me like a tool right up to the end, showing me not a sliver of emotion along the way. The only kindness he ever showed me, I think, was when he called me by name.

Did I hate him for that? I honestly wasn’t sure. Was it the will of Ifrit, the high-level flame elemental, that made me serve him, or was it mine?

I still don’t know. And I didn’t mind being a sacrifice very much. Nothing seemed to matter anymore.

It appeared that this castle was some kind of experimental facility. Abandoning it, however, didn’t seem to be any great loss in the demon lord’s eyes. What confused me was his goal in leaving me here. I could have just withdrawn instead of engaging anyone who came, but he ordered me to stay.

Maybe he had some plan in mind, but his thoughts remained a mystery to me.

The one who arrived was a so-called hero.

She had long dark-silver hair tied behind her head, and her light equipment was colored a uniform shade of black. Her beauty rivaled the demon lord’s. The only difference was that she was a woman. A young one.

The moment I laid eyes upon her, I knew it. I had no chance of winning. But I wanted to fight her to the end—not as a person, but as a magic-born with powers of flame. It’s the least I can do, I thought, to make up for the sin of living all this time.

My sword of concentrated flame was easily caught by the hero’s own. My weapon burned with intense heat, capable of ripping through anything, and her simple curved blade stopped it. It made me doubt my eyes. No doubt it was the power of the wielder more than her sword itself.

Thanks to the training I took under the demon lord’s trusted black knight, I had gained some mastery of swordsmanship. It was nothing Ifrit ever learned. I remembered how the knight praised me, told me it was all my own talent at work.

As a magic-born, I was physically strong enough to be in the upper ranks of Leon’s guard. Plus, I had mastered sword skills under the black knight’s guidance. It was far more than Ifrit’s power that made me such a close confidant of the demon lord.

And yet—nothing I did affected the hero. The strikes and slashes I had worked so endlessly to perfect were all effortlessly parried away. Gently turned aside before our blades could even clash in earnest.

Even when Ifrit’s searing flames enveloped my entire body, the hero remained calm, shedding not a single drop of sweat. Just as I’d first thought, she was on a completely different plane of existence.

Then I felt Ifrit falling asleep in my body, a side effect of consuming too many magicules. It was impossible to keep fighting. I lost, incapable of landing a single blow. I collapsed to the floor, confident that I had returned the favor to the demon lord. I sort of wished I could live a while longer, but I doubted a hero would ever show mercy to a magic-born like me.

“Are you done?” I heard her say. “Why are you here?” It was a bit surprising. I was expecting death to come the next second. My head turned up to her. The hero was a hunter of evil, and I was her foe, a magic-born. If she cut me down right now, I would have nothing to complain about.

What whim of hers prompted these questions? Timidly, I opened my mouth. Then I told her about how I was summoned to this world, how I had lived up to now… What I had done.

It was selfish of me. I was a magic-born now. I had no right, no expectation, to be believed at all. But it was true—having someone take an interest in me and listen to my story made me happy. It left incontrovertible evidence that I had been alive all this time. I could throw out my chest and proclaim to the world that I had lived, even if it was just in someone’s memory. That’s what I wanted to do.

I doubted the hero would ever believe a magic-born’s tale. But that was fine. If I just created a nook in her memory to occupy, that would work. And yet:

“It’s all right now. You’ve been through so much.”

She believed me.

Her words brought tears to my eyes. The next thing I knew, I was clinging to her, crying. For the first time since I came to this world, relief embraced me as I expressed my true feelings to someone.

I wound up coming under the hero’s care.

Her face darkened at the sight of my burn scars. I was used to them; the way they spread across half my body was proof that I was alive.

The hero tried to use healing magic to do something about them. It didn’t appear to work. Merging with Ifrit had stabilized my body to its current state, scars and all. She thought for a moment and then took a pretty mask out from a bag.

“You know,” she said, “this mask helps boost your resistance to magic. You might be able to use it to keep Ifrit at bay inside you.” She gave it a loving caress, then handed it to me.

The instant I put the Mask of Magic Resistance on, it immobilized Ifrit inside me and hid the burn scars across my body. And that wasn’t all. With the will of Ifrit no longer dominating mine, all the oppressed emotions I felt over the years immediately welled out of me. The pangs of loneliness, the fear of becoming a magic-born. The deep shame of killing the first friend I ever made. The intense hatred I held for this unfair world. Putting on that mask helped me regain the emotions I had thought I had forsaken with my childhood.

The hero held me tight until I was able to calm down. I remember how scared I was after that for a while—so scared that I couldn’t even talk to anyone except the hero. But she never complained. She treated me warmly. And little by little, she loosened the ropes around my heart, teaching me how to converse with others once more.

I accompanied the hero wherever she went, hiding myself in a full-body robe. I was always following her, scared she’d leave me behind. That was about when I was introduced to the Society of Adventurers. I was, as other people at the time put it, a silent girl, one who always covered her face in a mask. One who never ventured out past the hero’s shadow. A useless piece of baggage.

One day, something happened to me at the society, which I had visited alongside the hero several times. A man, concerned after seeing how I joined her on all of her monster-slaying work, spoke up. “Is that child in the mask a girl?” he asked. “Don’t you think she should stay here this time? This’ll be a dangerous one.”

All I could do was shiver at the idea. At the time, the hero was the only person on the planet I could muster the courage to trust. The hero meant everything to me, and I couldn’t bear the thought of being separated from her. I was sure the grown-ups would kill me if they found out I was a magic-born. I had that much common sense, at least.

The hero gave me a thin smile. “It’ll be all right,” she said in a reassuring tone. “Everyone here’s really nice, all right? You’re a strong girl, too. It’ll be fine.”

I think that’s what made me do it. I wanted to live up to the hero’s expectations, and I knew this couldn’t go on forever. Something about the way she spoke always seemed brimming with confidence, too. It made me believe whatever she said was true.

It was with a strange sense of calm, then, that I separated from her on that day.

In the waiting room next to the society’s front desk, I began studying.

That was around when I learned that I was in the kingdom of Blumund. There were several other nations nearby, I found out, around the Forest of Jura. And that wasn’t all. When they weren’t handling society issues, the workers there taught me arithmetic, as well as several different writing systems.

I listened intently to the passing adventurers as they spoke about the neighboring nations. My knowledge of these other states and the balance of power between them was faint at first, but I still gained a working understanding. To someone like me, who had hardly seen the inside of a school, the society became my place of learning.

I studied magic, as well. The society played home to sorcerers, shamans, magicians, and enchanters, as well as many others who were versed in magic ways. I was lucky enough to build friendships with them, and they, in turn, taught me about the mysteries of the world.

There was much about what they said that seemed unfathomable me. But what I needed most of all was to learn how to deal with elemental spirits. Ifrit, a high-level elemental, was merged with me. Apparently, this allowed me to harness his abilities without the formality of forging a pact with him. But remember—I still had my Mask of Magic Resistance on.

Carefully, I attempted to find an inroad to Ifrit. Soon I discovered ways to manipulate his skills without exacting a burden upon my own body.

Somewhere along the line, I came to be known as the “Conqueror of Flames.” I was an elementalist, gifted in the arts of fire and explosive magic, and I had grown to the point that no one worried about me joining the hero on adventures. In fact, she had fully accepted me now—not as a traveling companion, but as a full-fledged partner.

It made me so happy. I had worked hard for so long to help her out, to have the woman who’d saved my life recognize me for who I was. All the effort had paid off. Life was good.

Several years later, though, the hero went off on a journey. Without me.

I didn’t know why. The hero must have had her motivations, much like I had mine. I intended to set off myself someday, so I had no right to complain about it.

Did she want to slay the demon lord I served? No, the truth was…

She had saved me, then left me. I needed to find out why, perhaps, and I wanted her to accept me once more. I wanted to show that I was alive, that I was human. It was exactly that kind of selfish hope that proved I had no right to stop her in her tracks.

I was already grown up, not some child naive in the ways of the world. The droplets slipping down from behind the mask must have been my imagination. I made myself believe it was true as I watched her leave.

Because I know I’ll see you again…

The thought made me want to grow stronger than ever before.

I continued traveling after she left me, across many countries. I wanted to help people in their times of need, as she did.

Whether it was Ifrit’s influence on me or not, my body had stopped growing at the age of sixteen or seventeen. One of the demon lord’s curses, I thought, but it nonetheless served me well on the road.

A large number of adventurers were in the business of handling other people’s dirty work—searching for rare plants in the forest, slaying monsters and harvesting them for useful materials, and so on. It was a line of work that stereotypically involved huge, lumbering frames and equally bulging muscles. Sheer strength bred respect and trust from others, since it meant one could hold one’s own in a job that flirted with the line between life and death.

The Society of Adventurers attracted the kind of people who lived free lives and were never tied down by any one nation. If they were injured fighting a monster, they could expect no assistance from one government or another. Nations already had their armies of knights to protect them. They didn’t need the aid of some dirty adventurer.

Sometimes a local lord would ask for their help rooting a monster out from their lands or villages, but there was no formal system in place for encouraging cooperation between nations and adventurers. It meant that nations could expand only into the range their armies could physically defend—small pockets of civilization in an otherwise wild land.

There would be times when towns fell under attack from powerful monsters. Three-headed snakes, winged lions, and such. Whenever these so-called calamities appeared near a settlement, they would cause as much consternation as a full-scale war.

Of course, one might expect governments to cooperate and create support systems that extended beyond national borders. And such agreements did exist, but such support always came after things were stable. In the meantime, it was seen as a country’s own responsibility to defeat the monster in question.

This was why those with full rights as city-dwellers were granted special treatment, while the others had to make do with life in neighborhoods built in the hazardous areas around the walls. Such people eventually acclimated to a life of being pillaged and exploited. The stronger among them saw an adventurer’s career as a way to protect themselves.

The wealth gap quickly grew between rich and poor. It was a dog-eat-dog world, one where the weak had no recourse. I wanted to protect them. Just like the hero, who’d offered me the salvation I’d so deeply hoped for. If I abandoned them, I would be no different from my demon lord.

So I worked as hard as I could to be an ally to the weak. And somewhere along the line, people started relying on me. Calling me a hero.

A dragon attacked the town, with enough force to equal an entire army. A calamity-level foe, absolutely. Blumund immediately declared a state of emergency and placed the nation on high alert. I was one of the many people they enlisted.

A calamity-class monster was usually discovered once every several years, but this one was different. No halfhearted strike would ever faze a dragon, and the nation’s knight corps was too offensively weak to provide any support at all. I myself provided all the offense I could for the effort, but my sword could do little against such a foe, and I was hardly much of a threat.

If something wasn’t done, it would ultimately lead to thousands of deaths. So I decided to call upon Ifrit, sleeping within my body this whole time.

The dragon’s stone-melting breath enveloped my body—but because I’d merged with Ifrit, it felt like nothing more than a passing breeze. By the time it realized I was impervious to its breath—that I was a force to be feared—it was already too late. Waves of white-hot flame whipped out of my hands, binding the dragon before it could flee. In another few moments, it was burned alive.

I, on the other hand, was left in a coma for a week afterward. The effort had sapped my magical force. I was aging now, and I couldn’t focus my spirit as well as I could in earlier years. As my spirit flagged, so did my magic. Ifrit, and my relationship with him, gave me more than enough magical energy to work with, but the vitality I needed to harness it was dying on me. I had failed to notice it draining, thanks to my body’s lack of aging. I’d had Ifrit held down that whole time—no wonder I’d been using up so much of it.

All’s well that ends well—the dragon was defeated, after all—but if I had taken one step further, I might have released an enraged Ifrit, a concept far more terrifying than any dragon. I recalled the past, my face tensed and pale. If I wasn’t careful, I could very well incinerate the people I swore to protect.

It might be time, I thought, to call it a day. If I let myself grow any weaker, Ifrit could go berserk on me. Retirement was something I had to consider, sooner or later.

I talked the matter over with Heinz, one of the managers who ran things around the Society of Adventurers. “If that’s what it is,” he said, “I’d advise you to travel to the kingdom of Englesia. They’re looking for teachers in basic battle techniques over there. There’s lots of ex-adventurers out there, but if you can teach your skills to people, you’ll never be hurting for a job.”

He handed me a reference letter I could use.

“Thank you,” I replied. “You’ve done so much for me.”

“Ah, forget about it,” he protested. “We’re the ones who should be thanking you, Shizu! You’ve been a rock for all of us.” He blushed. “Well, have a nice trip, I suppose. If you get some free time, come back and visit.”

They all saw me off before I left for good. It made me feel as if I belonged to this place. As if I had for years. I couldn’t believe how happy it made me.

So it was that, toward the end of my career, I made the switch from adventurer to instructor.

