

The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows



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1

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The healer lunged forward,
enhancing his leg strength to dodge out of the way.
as the golem's arms came crashing down with a resounding rumble.
Immediately after, magic converged onto his right hand,
and he let out a loud cry as he cast Scalpel,
the spell he'd once used to treat Zophia and Loewe.

“RAAAAAAH!”

The small blade grew and morphed,
taking on the shape of a glowing white sword.

Zenos

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Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Prologue: The Brilliant Healer Is Kicked from the Party](#)
4. [Chapter 1: The Brilliant Healer's New Shadow Practice](#)
5. [Side Story I: Meanwhile, Aston's Party... \(Part I\)](#)
6. [Chapter 2: The Big Shots of the Slums](#)
7. [Side Story II: Meanwhile, Aston's Party... \(II\)](#)
8. [Side Story III: Afternoon Girl Talk](#)
9. [Chapter 3: Lady Iron Rose](#)
10. [Side Story IV: Meanwhile, Aston's Party... \(III\)](#)
11. [Chapter 4: Reunion](#)
12. [Chapter 5: The Reason](#)
13. [Epilogue: Somewhere to Belong](#)
14. [Epilogue: Omen](#)
15. [Extra Chapter: Carmilla's Long Nights](#)
16. [Afterword](#)
17. [Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)
18. [About J-Novel Club](#)
19. [Copyright](#)

Prologue: The Brilliant Healer Is Kicked from the Party

"Zenos, you haven't been pulling your weight much lately, eh? I'll be honest, man. We don't need you anymore."

Aston—the party's leader—had pulled Zenos aside for a conversation at the inn where they'd been staying, and suddenly blurted that out.

Behind their leader stood the rest of the group: Yuma, an archer; Gael, a support mage; and Andres, an offensive mage. They all regarded Zenos coldly too.

Theirs was a rising adventuring party that had felled countless large beasts. With the increase in renown came more rewards from the guild and more sponsorships from nobility, giving them an abundance of funds. Indeed, Aston's room was lined with valuable antique furniture, and the entire floor was covered in beautiful plush carpets.

These spoils were not shared with Zenos, however. He was the one person in the group who had been born and raised in the slums, after all.

The vast Kingdom of Herzeth, located at the heart of the continent, was divided into a strict hierarchy. At the very top was the royal family, followed by nobility, then common citizens. The poor fell at the very bottom of the social ladder. Discrimination was deeply ingrained in society, and so, despite them all being fellow party members, Zenos was always provided with a room more modest than everyone else's. In fact, it was a blessing whenever he was given a room at all, since he was often relegated to camping outdoors.

Despite this mistreatment, Zenos continued to polish his skills for Aston's sake in return for Aston taking him in.

"That's not true, Aston. I do things. I'm sure I'm at least somewhat useful to everyone," Zenos protested.

Aston scoffed. "You don't even have a healer's license."

In this country, only those of citizen status or higher were allowed official adventurer's licenses—the poor did not have that right. And of course, since he hadn't been able to receive formal training, Zenos had largely taught himself how to use healing magic.

"We don't need your dodgy self-taught spells anymore. With how strong we've gotten, no one can hurt us anyway."

"But that's because—"

Whenever one of his comrades was about to be injured, Zenos would immediately cast a healing spell. Not only that, he'd been using protective spells to prevent them from being injured in the first place, and buffing spells to enhance the party's combat abilities as well.

Zenos tried to explain this, but Aston only shrugged.

"Bullshit. You don't have a license, so maybe you don't know this, but to cast healing spells you need chanting and magic circles and whatnot. You're no saintess, and there's no way you can just instantly activate your magic the second we're wounded and heal us back to full health. If we're not getting hurt, it's thanks to Gael's protective spells and our own power. You're no help at all."

Behind Aston, Gael, the party's support mage, smiled triumphantly. Zenos had nothing else to say to that.

He was in Aston's debt. Zenos was only here because, when passing through the slums, Aston and the others had said that they didn't have a healer yet and asked him to join. Furthermore, since he hadn't had any formal education in the healing arts, he figured there was a chance he was in the wrong after all.

"Get a grip, Zenos," Aston said, letting out an exaggerated sigh. "We need to look good to the nobility and royalty now. We can't have some slum rat in our party. It'll make us look bad."

"But you said I was part of the team," Zenos protested.

The other party members all snickered scornfully.

"What are you, an idiot?" Aston asked, holding his sides with laughter. "You seriously haven't noticed? We just wanted cheap labor. A kid from the slums

like you wouldn't complain about going without food or camping out alone. And if push came to shove, we could just use you as a scapegoat, guilt-free."

Zenos fell silent. He felt as though he could hear his memories crumble, falling around him like debris.

Having spent most of his life as an orphan in the slums, he was elated to have joined a party. To have found a place where he belonged. That was why, even when subjected to poor treatment, he grinned and bore it, hoping to be of use to everyone else.

But he had never belonged to begin with, had he?

"Anyway, we're through with you," Aston said, flicking his thumb. Something sparkly went flying and bounced on the floor, rolling to a stop at Zenos's feet.

"What's this?" Zenos asked, frowning as he picked the small object up.

"*You* wouldn't know, but that's a gold coin. A poor bastard like you can go his whole life without ever coming across one, so be grateful."

"Aston..."

"Now listen here," the party leader continued coolly, narrowing his eyes. "Don't you dare tell anyone a slum rat like you was ever in our party. Got it?"

Silent, Zenos clasped the gold coin tightly in his hand. It was the one thing he'd gotten for his years of work as an adventurer, and it felt terribly chilly to his touch. It wasn't a reward for his services—it was hush money.

"Very well," he said finally. "If that's how it is, then I'll leave the group."

Thus, the healer Zenos was driven out of his party. His former comrades, who had only ever seen him as a kid from the slums, had no idea whatsoever who it was who had led them to their current position.

And neither they nor Zenos knew just how much of a twist of fate their divergence of paths would turn out to be.

Chapter 1: The Brilliant Healer's New Shadow

Practice

“Now what...?”

Having been kicked from his party, Zenos trudged along the dilapidated city streets.

The chilly evening air made him instinctively pull the collar of his cloak tighter. It was jet-black, one that blended in with the dark of night, and he'd worn it since before joining the party.

“Should I stay an adventurer?” he wondered aloud.

Even if he were to join another party now, without an official healer’s license, he’d still not be able to apply for membership at the Adventurers’ Guild.

And, in the wake of the betrayal of those he had believed to be his allies, the mere idea of trying to fit in somewhere else was exhausting. On the other hand, adventuring was all he’d done since leaving the slums, and he knew no other life. Though he had no regrets about his former party given how cruelly they’d cast him aside, his future was entirely hazy.

For now, though, he needed to get some food in his belly. He was looking for a place to eat when he overheard an argument further down the street.

“You idiot! Why did you shoot our merchandise?! How are we supposed to make money now?!” a man’s voice bellowed.

“I-I’m sorry!” an apologetic voice replied. “She... She was going to get away, so I...”

Curious, Zenos stepped into the narrow alley. Creeping close as he navigated around the scattered trash and dead rats, he spotted a small shadow lying on the bare black soil, with two shady-looking men standing nearby.

The fallen figure was dressed in soiled rags and seemed to be at death’s door. Judging from what he could see of her face, she seemed to be a young girl.

The edges of her ears were slightly pointed—an elf, perhaps. Elves were uncommon and lived in the north, but some would occasionally drift to the royal capital.

A silver arrow was deeply embedded in the young girl's back.

The angry man clicked his tongue. "She's a goner. Elves are valuable, you know! We finally get our hands on one, and you go and do *this*?"

"I-I'm sorry!" the apologetic man repeated.

"Hey!" Zenos called out. "You put an arrow in a child's back?!"

The two men turned to glare at him.

"You stay out of this," the angry man retorted, scoffing. "This girl's our slave. Our property."

Zenos quietly gazed down at the girl's pallid face, then held out the single gold coin Aston had offered him for his silence. "I'll buy her off your hands, then. Will this suffice?"

"Huh? Are you stupid?" the second man asked, incredulous. "She's already—"

"You shut your mouth," the first man cut in. "I don't see the problem. He wants her, he can have her. If she's just gonna die anyway, we might as well take what we can get."

The man snatched the gold coin from Zenos's hand, and the two thugs ran off.

Kneeling beside the girl's prone form, the healer placed a hand on her back.

"Hey. You okay?" he asked.

The girl only groaned in response, her lips opening and closing, her gaze vacant, her glossy golden hair caked with dirt.

"Am I...going...to die?" she croaked.

"You'll be fine," Zenos replied. "This isn't too bad. You'll survive, don't worry."

"There's...no way..."

"Look, your wound's gone. You can speak normally now."

"Huh?"

The girl's large eyes blinked open, and she slowly pushed herself up.

"What?" she mumbled, staring in amazement at the arrow lying beside her.
"It doesn't hurt. The bleeding's stopped. How?"

"I'm a healer. I pulled out the arrow and knit your wounds shut using magic."

In disbelief, the girl reached behind herself to feel her back. "The wound's...gone! I was so sure I was going to die!"

Zenos laughed at her reaction. "It was hardly a scratch. It's no big deal, really."

"Hardly a scratch?" she echoed in shock. "W-Wow..."

The young girl gripped Zenos's hands between her own small ones.

"Th-Thank you," she stammered. "Thank you, mister."

Perhaps out of relief, her eyes filled with tears. The healer felt a warm glow light up deep within his heart.

It had been a long time since anyone had last thanked him for his healing.

Aston and the others hadn't believed that Zenos had learned to instantly cast healing spells, no matter how much arduous training he went through. Since he'd taken care of even the slightest of their wounds in combat, they'd never noticed. In retrospect, he'd never even had the chance to explain it, since both his lodgings and his place at the table had always been separate from theirs.

Looking back, they'd treated him extremely poorly, considering the amount of hard work he'd put into everything.

"It's fine," Zenos said. "Say, were those men just now slavers?"

"Y-Yeah," the young girl stammered. "I was captured yesterday, and...when I saw an opening, I tried to run, but they found me..."

"What's your name?"

"Lily," she answered, her gaze low. Hesitantly, she continued, "Um, about the money—"

"You mean the gold coin I paid them?" he interrupted her. "Don't worry about it. That was dirty money anyway."

A bribe wasn't something to be cherished and held on to. It was much better used to help others.

"Um, who are you, mister?" Lily asked.

"My name's Zenos," he replied.

"Are you a famous healer?"

"No way. I'm self-taught. I don't even have a license."

Given his origins, he'd never formally registered as a member of his party with the Adventurers' Guild, and therefore he hadn't been allowed to accompany them in any sort of official capacity. In other words, there were no public records anywhere of a healer by the name of Zenos.

"Either way," he continued, "I'm sorry you got captured by slavers. Where's your home? I'll make sure you get there safely."

"I don't have one," Lily said, shaking her head.

That meant she was an orphan living on the streets. It reminded him of his past self. Elves were quite rare, so whatever circumstances had led to an elven child being homeless had to be serious. Still, he had no intention of prying.

"You don't, huh?" he asked with the mirthless smile of a man who had nowhere to go either. "That's not good."

Lily's stomach growled, and a blush spread across her cheeks.

Standing up, Zenos smiled at her. "For now, maybe we should get something to eat, Lily."

After that, Zenos took Lily to a restaurant on the outskirts of town.

"This is so good!" she exclaimed in delight as she tasted the tender rabbit stew.

The young girl dug into her steaming bowl, munching away like a small puppy. A bit of onion was stuck to her cheek.

Lily tilted her head at Zenos. "Aren't you hungry?"

"No, I'm full," he replied. "Just water's fine."

That was a lie. Truthfully, he didn't have enough coin to buy them both a meal. When he'd traveled with his former party, Aston had hardly given him any share of the profits, and he'd used his "severance pay" to buy Lily's freedom. His meager traveling stipend was barely enough for a single bowl of soup.

He'd figure something out later.

He had more pressing concerns to worry about, such as where to leave this child. He couldn't leave her at the town's church without a reference, and as a poor man, he didn't meet the qualifications for that. An orphanage in the slums might've taken her in, but those were hot spots for human trafficking. The mere thought of how an elven child might be treated at one of those places made his stomach churn.

"Hey Zenos," Lily interjected, interrupting his worries. "Where do you work as a healer?"

"Well," he said, scratching his head, "I actually just got kicked from my party, so I don't have anywhere to go."

Spoon in hand, Lily grinned brightly at him. "So you're just like me, then!"

"I guess so, yeah." Zenos watched her carefree smile for a while, then slowly began to speak once more. "I've been thinking..."

"About what?"

"I want to open a clinic."

Without a license, he couldn't do it by the books and register it as an official business. It'd have to be done on the down-low, making him a shadow healer of sorts.

"When I healed you back there, you thanked me," he said. "That made me kinda happy."

Originally, he'd taught himself healing magic both out of a desire to help the oppressed people of the slums and because of an encounter with a certain healer. Gratitude was a feeling he'd long forgotten after Aston's party had used

him without uttering so much as a single word of thanks.

It was Lily who had made it resurface.

At his words, the young girl looked straight at Zenos and said, “I wanna help too!”

“You what?” he asked.

“I’ll help at the clinic! Being a shadow healer sounds cool! And you’re cool too.”

“Well... But... I mean...” he stammered.

Starting a healing practice without a license was, put simply, illegal. Zenos himself might’ve had nothing to lose, but he couldn’t stomach the thought of dragging an innocent child down with him.

Lily seemed to have no intention of backing down, though. “You bought me,” she said. “That makes you my master, so I’m coming with you!”

“I bought you to help you, not own you,” he protested.

“Oh, I see,” the young girl said quietly. “That’s awful. You bought me just to dump me somewhere...”

“Don’t put it that way. That’s not what I meant.”

Her less-than-palatable phrasing aside, it *was* true that he couldn’t simply leave a rare elven child on her own. In the end, under the condition that it would be strictly until he found her a safe place to stay, Zenos decided to take her under his wing.

Lily’s eyes lit up at the news.

“Really?! Yay! I’ll do a real good job serving you, master!”

“Can you, like, *actually* mind your phrasing, please?”

A moment later, the door to the restaurant opened with a loud noise, and a man stumbled in.

“Excuse me!” he shouted, his voice trembling as he grimaced in pain. “Please, I need water!”

On closer inspection, his left arm was red and swollen from the shoulder all the way down to his fingertips. Some parts of it seemed charred, burned to a crisp. No other customers were present, just the owner, who rushed in from the back just to stand there too stunned to move.

"What happened to your arm?" Zenos asked as he rose from his seat.

"Well, it's kinda..." the man trailed off. "Please, water..."

Scales dotted the man's cheeks, and a green, reptilian tail swished behind him. He was a lizardman, one of the so-called "demi-human" races.

Instead of giving him water, Zenos held out his hand over the man's arm.

"A bullet wound and extensive burns," he said. "A magical gun, huh?"

"Yeah. I was careless and got shot. I know this arm's as good as useless now, but if I could at least do something about the pain..." the man mumbled. "I need water—"

"This isn't a big deal," Zenos cut in. "I wouldn't call this just a scratch, but it should still heal quickly."

"What?" the man asked, incredulous. "The hell are you talking about?"

Severe or not, the wound had reached the deeper tissues. To ensure it healed fully, it was safer to use an incantation along with the spell.

"Cure," Zenos chanted.

A faint white light enveloped the man's arm, and when it faded, the burn marks had completely vanished. Utterly astonished, the man was rendered speechless for a moment.

When he found his voice again, he said, "What did you just do? Who the hell—"

"Zenos is a super great shadow healer!" Lily cut in, huffing proudly.

"I don't actually have a practice yet, though," Zenos clarified.

"Oh! Right," the young elven girl said.

"Zenos, the shadow healer," the lizardman repeated. "Holy hell. I had no clue an amazing healer like you existed. You saved me, dude."

The man reached into his pocket, whipped out a number of silver and copper coins, then pressed them into Zenos's palm. "I'll remember you." With those parting words, he hastily left the shop.

He'd come suddenly and gone like the wind, leaving the bewildered healer silently holding on to the dirt-streaked coins.

"Why so quiet, Zenos?" Lily asked.

"Oh, I mean..." the healer replied. "Cooks get paid to make food for people. So...healers should get paid for healing people."

"I think that's pretty normal."

"Yeah, guess so."

Zenos had forgotten even such an obvious thing. With some of the coins the man had given him, he paid the bill, then offered the young elven girl an encouraging smile.

"All right. Now we need to find a suitable location," he said.

After his party had expelled him, Zenos had lost everything. But now, he had a new companion, had the objective to open a clinic, and had made some money as well.

He was determined to start his life anew.

From now on, he would live as he pleased, without worrying about what others might think. He would do what he could and get paid what he needed. And if he could make someone happy in the process, well...

That wasn't such a bad way to live, was it?

As they walked out of the restaurant, the night breeze seemed to push firmly against Zenos's back, as if encouraging him to move forward.

"Zenos, are you really opening a clinic here?" Lily asked, warily looking around.

"That's the plan," Zenos replied.

The pair was walking through the streets that night after leaving the diner.

Though it wasn't that late yet, there were no voices around them—the only sound that reached their ears was the distant barking of a dog.

Dilapidated houses seemingly on the verge of collapse lined either side of the packed-dirt road.

"It's so deserted," the young girl remarked.

"Yeah. It's a ghost town," the healer explained.

At the heart of the capital of the Kingdom of Herzeth lay the palace, where the royal family lived. Around it was a special district where the aristocrats dwelled, which in turn was surrounded by the town where the ordinary citizens lived. Even further out from that was a continuous stretch of slums.

The deserted area where they currently found themselves was situated somewhere between the town and even the slums, and had been wiped out by a plague long ago.

"Why would you choose a place like this?" Lily asked.

"I wouldn't be able to run an unlicensed business out in the open in the middle of town, you know," Zenos replied.

"Right! You're smart, Zenos."

"And there's also the simple matter of rent."

He'd hardly received any money from Aston and had spent his "severance" on freeing Lily. While Zenos still had some of the unexpected coin he'd received from the lizardman, he was poor by birth and therefore couldn't secure a proper real estate contract. This particular area, however, had numerous properties ripe for the taking.

The two went from building to building, inspecting each one until they found one that was still relatively intact.

"Now, shall we take a look inside?" Zenos asked.

"Okay..." Lily said apprehensively, gripping the healer's sleeve.

"What's wrong? Are you scared?"

"I mean, a ghost might come out..."

Ghosts weren't simply folklore. There lingered remnants of a demon king, long since defeated, still affecting the world today, birthing creatures such as ghosts, zombies and ghouls.

"I know that monsters tend to spawn in places like this, where lots of people have died," Lily said. "If we run into a wraith, we're done for..."

"A wraith?" Zenos echoed.

"One of the highest forms of undead. They look human, but they can steal your life force with just a touch and turn you into their ghostly minion."

"Huh."

The door opened with a creak, and Zenos stepped inside, a frightened Lily in tow. Unsurprisingly, they were greeted by pitch darkness. The musty smell of mold assaulted their nostrils.

"Glow!" Lily chanted, holding out her hands. A soft light appeared, illuminating their surroundings.

"You can use magic, Lily?" Zenos asked.

"Only simple spells."

That even a child could use magic was a testament to the vast magical power and talent of the elven race.

Illuminated by the faint light was a scene like a fading memory, frozen in time. Blackening, exposed beams. Decaying floorboards. Most of the steps on a staircase to the side were damaged.

Lily's thin brows furrowed. "Wow, this place is..."

"Not bad," Zenos said. "Not bad at all."

"It's not?"

"Yeah. I mean, it has a roof!" the healer said, grinning.

The young elf looked up at him with a concerned expression. "Okay, yes, it has a roof, but...is that enough?"

"See, when I was in my old party, I had to camp outside by myself. Having something to fend off the elements at all is a blessing. And these support beams

look sturdy. With a little work, the place's perfectly livable."

"You're so optimistic!"

"I've reached rock bottom. Can only go up from here."

"Ahhhhh!!!" Lily screamed suddenly.

In the back of the dimly illuminated room stood a black-haired woman.



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She was dressed in unfamiliar attire, with jet-black robes and a cloth belt tied around her waist with a rope looped around the middle over the top of it. Her features were beautiful, but her eyes were veiled in profound darkness. An ominous aura emanated from her slightly translucent form, enveloping the surrounding area in a freezing chill.

"I smell your life force..." the woman murmured. "Give it... Give it to me..."

"Zenos!" Lily yelled. "It's a wraith! There's a wraith here!"

"Yeah," Zenos said, disappointed. "Guess the place's taken after all. I mean, this *is* the most comfortable building."

"Um, how are you so casual about this?"

The creature's lips curled upwards, and she rose into the air, ready to attack.

"Cure," Zenos chanted.

"Gahhhh!!!" the wraith shrieked.

"Huh?" In the time it took Lily to blink, the wraith's arms had vanished.

Holding out his right hand, Zenos coolly said, "I see. So this is what a wraith is, huh? In that case, I've defeated a hundred or so of them before."

He knew that undead creatures were vulnerable to healing magic. Long ago, Aston, in a foul mood, had left Zenos behind in the deepest part of an underground labyrinth out of spite. There, he'd encountered a large number of them.

Lily's jaw dropped, and she stared at him in disbelief. "I heard that you're done for if you run into even just one wraith. You said you've killed a *hundred*?"

"Look, I'm sorry, but this is the best building," Zenos told the wraith. "I promise we won't get in the way, so do you mind if we borrow a room for a while?"

"What are you talking about?" the wraith demanded. "Hurry and give me your life—"

"Cure."

"Gahhhh!!!"

"Oh. Sorry," Zenos said. "You came at me. It was a reflex. I meant you no harm."

"Ughhh..." The wraith's face twisted in anger as she groaned.

Both of her arms had regenerated, and she raised them overhead. Her whole body swelled, releasing a stagnant black aura into the air.

"How dare you!" she hissed. "This is the first time a human has incurred the wrath of Carmilla, the Lich Queen! Come to me, my underlings! Show this foolish human the meaning of true torment!"

Through the cracks of the decrepit walls rose a horde of pale blue apparitions—likely the ghosts hiding in the ruined city—writhing as they gathered around her.

"Eep!" Lily squeaked. "Zenos!"

"Man, and here I was hoping to borrow a room the easy way," Zenos said with a shrug as he held out both hands. "*High Cure!*"

Rings of light began to orbit Zenos, then shot outward in every direction. Faint cries of agony rang out as the ghosts summoned by the wraith vanished in seconds. The high-ranking undead, who had introduced herself as Carmilla, screamed in astonishment.

"Wh-What?!" she demanded. "What *are* you?!"

"A plain ol' shadow healer," Zenos said nonchalantly, joining his hands in a pleading gesture. "Look, I am very sorry. I just need a room to use as a clinic and a bedroom."

At his words, the wraith shrank with a *whoosh*, floating up through the ceiling and disappearing into the second floor.

"D-Do what you will with the first floor!" she said. "But the second floor is mine!"

"Of course. Thank you," Zenos told her, before turning to the young elven girl. "All's well that ends well, right, Lily?"

"I'm not sure if I should be happy or sad..." the girl remarked.

And thus, Zenos successfully secured a property (resident wraith included).

Side Story I: Meanwhile, Aston's Party... (Part I)

"Hey Aston, have you heard?"

In a luxurious inn near the royal capital's special district, a buzz of excitement coursed through Aston's party like levin.

"Yeah. We got a direct request from Lord Fennel," Aston said. "I'm itching to get started."

His party had been commissioned to slay a magical beast by one of the seven major noble families of the royal capital. Normally, such a request would've gone through the Adventurers' Guild first, which would in turn post it publicly as a quest to be attempted by capable adventurers. Those who succeeded reaped the rewards.

Occasionally, however, a favored party could be directly approached by a sponsor with a commission. Lord Fennel had heard of Aston's party and wanted them specifically for the job.

"Soon as we kicked that Zenos guy out, this happened. Suddenly Lady Luck's all smiles at us."

"Yeah, having that slum rat with us really dragged our fortune down."

"For sure."

They all burst out laughing.

A magical beast known as an emberfox was their mark, and the request involved bringing back its pelt. Each strand of the creature's fur was red-hot, a premium material for winter clothing and alchemy.

Apparently, it was to be made into a scarf—a birthday gift for Lord Fennel's daughter.

The hunt was ranked B+ in difficulty. Taking it down would be a difficult feat for an unskilled party, but Aston's group had successfully felled multiple A-rank beasts before. Though they'd never encountered an emberfox before, the

adventurers were confident that this would be an easy task.

“With my elite swordsmanship, Yuma’s unparalleled archery, Andres’s outstanding offensive magic, and Gael’s impenetrable protective spells, what could possibly go wrong?” Aston mused.

“Pity we don’t have anyone to watch our stuff anymore,” Gael quipped, eliciting laughter from everyone once more.

With the success of this mission, they’d be able to establish ties with one of the most prominent noble families in the country. It wasn’t too far-fetched to think that down the line they’d earn noble titles themselves.

“Cheers to our bright future!” Aston exclaimed, raising his glass.

They could hardly wait for the day of the hunt.

Chapter 2: The Big Shots of the Slums

“Sure is slow, huh, Zenos?” Lily said, resting her chin on her hand.

She sat at the reception counter, bathed in the gentle afternoon sunlight. Several days had passed since they’d opened for business, but given their location in the ruined part of town, *no one* had walked past their door, let alone a single customer.

“That’s good, though, isn’t it?” Zenos replied, looking around the tidy room with a satisfied look on his face. “We got a lot of cleaning done.”

The dust had caked every surface so thickly that it’d looked like millennia of unearthed stone. By scraping all the layers off and fixing the damaged floors and walls, the place felt like a proper home.

A bed made from scrap wood now sat in pride of place, along with an examination table, shelves lined with bottles of medicine, and books on healing. Since they didn’t have a license and, as such, couldn’t get an official supplier, everything had been obtained through the black market.

Still, the place looked like a proper clinic now, at least to some extent. This new environment was profoundly moving to Zenos—even if the place *was* technically borrowed from a wraith.

Sitting quietly in a chair, an uneasy Lily mumbled, “Um, yeah, but...maybe I should go outside to advertise?”

The young elven girl wore a white apron and a white cap adorned with a cross. Lily had heard most clinics had something called a “nurse” and, wanting to emulate that, she’d bought a length of white cloth and made the outfit herself. Not that she’d had the chance to show it off to anyone just yet, what with the lack of customers and all.

“Hmm,” Zenos mused. “Doing so carelessly could alert the Royal Institute of Healing.”

In this nation, the Royal Institute of Healing had immense influence and

oversaw all regional clinics. The last thing Zenos wanted was to become a target before even having the chance to start working.

"But we're never gonna get customers at this rate," Lily lamented.

"Don't worry," Zenos assured her. "Someone's bound to come soon."

"Really?" the young elf asked, lifting her head.

No sooner did she say that, the entrance door slowly opened.

A man poked his head in. "Is this the clinic of Zenos? The shadow healer?"

Lily rushed toward him in a hurry. "Wow! Someone really did come!" she exclaimed. "Welcome to—huh? I've seen you before."

It was the same lizardman who had showed up at the restaurant the other day with severe burns.

From the back of the room, Zenos spoke to the man. "There you are."

"You knew I was coming?" the lizardman asked.

"Those burns you suffered were from a magical gun," Zenos pointed out. "Not the kind of injury an ordinary person would incur. And people of the less-than-respectable variety have all manner of circumstances preventing them from visiting an ordinary clinic."

This was something Zenos was well aware of, having grown up in the slums. There were those who couldn't afford a doctor visit. Others could afford the fee, but not being out in the open. And *that* was where shadow healers shined.

"I've been looking for you for a while," the man, who introduced himself as Zonde, said. "Can you take a look at my sister today?"

As he finished speaking, a beautiful young woman appeared behind him. She had black hair tied at the back that fell to her hips, and a powerful gaze. Like Zonde, she had lizardman blood—her brow and cheeks were partially covered in scales.

"My brother tells me you're an exceptional healer, doc," she said, her deep green eyes staring intently at Zenos. "Mind examining me?"

"I don't know about 'exceptional,'" the healer replied, "but sure, I'll have a

look."

"I got shot in the arm," the woman explained. "It's been getting worse."

She took a seat and unceremoniously removed her coat, holding out her right arm. A bluish-purple reticulated pattern extended from the shoulder to the fingertips.

Zenos glanced at the injury. "A magical gun with a poison effect," he said. "The bullet's still inside your arm and is causing the flesh around it to necrotize."

"You can tell just by looking?" the lizardwoman asked.

"I was nearly used as a test subject once." By Aston, specifically. At the time, Aston had claimed it was for the sake of researching new weapons. Thinking back, he'd definitely just wanted to mess with Zenos.

"Some people are just awful," the woman mused.

"Yeah," Zenos agreed. "They'll get their comeuppance sooner or later."

"So, can you cure it?"

"If you've been shot recently, I can remove the bullet, and it'll heal on its own."

"It's already been three days."

"In that case, that arm's as good as dead," Zenos explained. "It should be amputated before the poison spreads elsewhere."

"I see," the woman replied with a resigned sigh. "Oh well. How much will it cost?"

"A million wen."

"What?" Zonde, who sat at his sister's side, yelled out. "A *million wen* just to cut off her arm?! What the hell are you thinking?!"

"Hey. Cut it out, Zonde," the lizardwoman spoke up, holding out a hand to stop her brother. "But you *are* really fleecing me here, doc." She crossed her long legs. "Would you have said the same thing if you knew I'm Galewind Zophia?"

Galewind Zophia: leader of a group of lizardman thieves and one of the most influential figures in the slums. A hero to the poor, stealing from corrupt merchants and giving a portion back to the community.

Being from the slums himself, Zenos had of course heard the name.

"So you're Galewind Zophia," he said. "Wasn't expecting such an illustrious patient to just walk in here."

"A million wen just to cut off an arm is highway robbery," Zophia pointed out. "Gimme one good reason why I should accept, or else—"

"So," Zenos began, nonchalant in the face of her sharp tone, "who said anything about 'just cutting off an arm'? What would the point of that be? You're getting a new one too. Limb regeneration is quite exhausting, and I'm done working for free. Whether the patient is some big shot from the slums or the king himself, I want payment commensurate with my efforts."

"Eh?" Zophia's jaw dropped. "Wh-What did you say? Are you *making* me a new arm? I've never heard of a healer who can do that."

"Huh? Other healers can't do it?" Zenos asked. "You're kidding."

Since the healer hadn't been formally educated, he sometimes lacked common sense. And because, during his time with them, Aston's party had rarely ever gotten seriously injured thanks to his protective spells, he'd seldom had the chance to use his healing skills.

"Now, let's begin the treatment," Zenos said.

He laid Zophia, still with a look of disbelief on her face, down on the bed.

"Scalpel," he chanted, his right palm facing upwards. A white light converged onto his hand, shifting into the shape of a small knife.

"Wh-What's that?" Zophia asked.

"Hmm? Oh. A magical bladed instrument," Zenos explained. "It's sanitary, and I can conveniently make it manifest at will."

"I've never heard of a healer using something like that."

"You haven't?" he asked, his left hand hovering over Zophia's shoulder. "So

what do they use to cut with?"

He cast a healing-over-time spell locally to alleviate the pain, then used his magical scalpel to sever the necrotic arm, making sure to retain and reshape as much healthy tissue as possible to make the regrowth process easier.

Zonde swallowed loudly at the scene.

"This is where the real work starts," Zenos remarked.

To stem the bleeding, he used a protective spell. Then he repeatedly cast healing spells on the wound, accelerating the regeneration process exponentially.

First the bones reformed, then the nerves, blood vessels, and muscles, until at last, the skin reformed anew.

Every step of the process, he adjusted his magical output accordingly, meticulously reconstructing her limb as if crafting an anatomical model. Magical energy surged, creating rings of light that danced in the air.



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Zophia's arm sprouted anew perfectly.

"All done," Zenos said, sighing heavily as he took a seat in a chair Lily had brought over. "Man, that was tiring."

It could've been done more quickly if a rougher job had been sufficient, but an entire new limb required a lot of energy.

"Holy crap," Zophia remarked, rising from the bed and looking at her pristine arm with wide eyes. "I've never seen a healer like you."

Her brother Zonde, too, looked astonished. "This is *nuts*—" The words caught in his throat as he looked to the ceiling. "H-Hey!" he shouted, pointing a trembling finger upward. "What the hell is that?!"

From the ceiling boards, the upside-down face of a beautiful woman poked out.

"Oh, that?" Zenos asked. "That's the wraith that lives with us."

"Wraith?!" Zonde exclaimed in shock. "You live with a wraith?!"

"And here I was hoping you would fail and she would die." Carmilla, the wraith, clicked her tongue before disappearing into the second floor. "How I wish for the sweet nectar of life..."

"What's with that ominous crap she's saying?!" the lizardman demanded.

"Don't mind her," Zenos told him. "She's not so bad."

"Looks pretty damn bad to me!"

Watching her brother's exchange with the healer, Zophia let out a bright laugh. "Ah ha ha! Damn, doc, you're really something! And funny too! I like you. I'll send my dudes your way from now on. They'll pay you and everything!"

With that, she left, clearly in high spirits.

And so, the name of the unknown healer Zenos began to quietly spread beneath the surface, bit by bit.

"Zenos, I made some tea."

Later that night, when the clinic had already closed, Lily placed a steaming cup on the dining table.

"Thanks, Lily," Zenos replied. "How thoughtful."

Lily giggled. "I could do with some praise!"

"Okay, okay," the healer said, petting her fluffy blonde hair. Lily's pointed ears twitched happily in response. "Oh, also, why are there three cups?"

"One for you, one for me, and one for Carmilla," the elven girl explained.

"Wait, *she's* going to drink too?"

"Evidently," the wraith, suddenly sitting across from them, replied.

"She's actually doing it," Zenos remarked flatly.

Though Carmilla was translucent, she was somehow able to interact with objects. With pale fingers, she lifted the cup with ease and sipped the tea.

Completely used to the powerful undead, Lily cautioned her to mind the hot liquid.

"Ah, yes, of course. I shall be mindful," Carmilla noted, then gently blew on her cup. What kind of wimpy wraith got burned by tea?

"Anyway," Lily said, "We've been so busy lately, haven't we?"

"Sure have," Zenos agreed.

Thanks to the referrals from bandit chief Galewind Zophia, her lizardman underlings had been coming nonstop to Zenos's clinic. And they paid well, which was a blessing.

Carmilla scoffed. "And not a single death. How dull," she grumbled before finishing her tea and disappearing upstairs.

"Hey, Zenos," Lily said. "Why are lizardpeople always injured?"

"They're probably fighting other factions," the healer remarked.

The slums, where Zophia's band was based, was a melting pot of different races. There were humans, yes, but also a number of demi-humans as well. Though they all shared the same social status being poor, territorial disputes

between races were constant.

Among them all, three large factions of demi-humans stood out. There were the lizardmen, led by Zophia. Then there were the orcs, known for their stout physiques.

“And the third would be the were—”

Before Zenos could finish his sentence, the front door flew open with a loud bang.

“Someone’s here!” Lily exclaimed in a panic as she turned toward the entrance.

Wolf-faced men wielding axes began to pour into the clinic through the wide-open door.

Seeing them, Zenos shrugged. “Sounds like the last faction just decided to show up.”

Werewolves. The third of the major demi-human factions in the slums, alongside the lizardmen and the orcs.

“In here, boss!” one of them said.

“Good job.”

From behind the werewolves, a woman appeared. Her face was relatively well-put together, as if human blood ran thick through her veins, but the sharp claws lining her fingertips, the gray fur draped over her shoulders, and the wolf ears protruding from her hair gave away her werewolf lineage. Each time her large tail swished with a loud *whoosh*, the faces of her werewolf subordinates tensed.

“Who knew we’d find a clinic in a place like this?” the woman said. “Are you Zenos the shadow healer?”

“That’s right,” Zenos replied. “And you are?”

“I’m Lynga, leader of the slums’ werewolves.”

Lynga the Tyrant. Zenos had heard the name before. She was a female werewolf, said to rule over illegal back-alley gambling in the city. Word had it

that she counted nobles among her clientele, and she even had connections to the government.

"Oh boy. One big shot after another," the healer muttered. "Look, we're closed for the day, but I'll see you if it's a major emergency."

"The emergency's right here. It's *you*," Lynga said bluntly, her tone cold, and pointed a sharp claw at Zenos. "No matter how hard we kick Zophia's goons' asses, they keep making full recoveries somehow. Weird, I thought."

She went on to explain that, after getting a subordinate to tail a lizardman to the ruined part of town, they discovered this clinic.

"You seem to be a pretty solid healer," she remarked.

"Not really," Zenos said. "I don't even have a license. I'm just a plain ol' shadow healer."

"So I think I'm gonna put you six feet under."

"Are you listening to me?"

"Then there'll be no one to heal Zophia's henchmen, and I can take her down!"

"No, really, are you even listening?"

Before Zenos could ask whether her animal ears were just for show, Lynga swung her hand axe at the healer's neck with enough force it could've sent sparks flying.

Her wide gray eyes stared at him in disbelief. "How's your head still attached?"

"You really don't listen to people, do you?" Zenos asked. "Lily, get in the back. Now."

"O-Okay!" Lily stammered, doing as she was told.

The healer had preemptively shielded himself with a protective spell. Aston and the others had used Zenos as their personal punching bag and as a sacrificial decoy to escape brutal magical beasts. He'd had no choice but to learn that kind of spell.

"What the hell?!" Lynga said. "My axe did nothing!"

Truthfully, Zenos had cobbled together his own protective spells, but considering he'd once accidentally wandered into a dragon's lair and walked out unscathed, he figured they were probably decent.

Lynga and her subordinates, now visibly sweating, hacked away at the healer, over and over, the sound of vicious snarling echoing in the small room.

"Are you done yet?" Zenos asked, beginning to feel bad for them.

"N-No, we're not!" Lynga exclaimed in annoyance. "Fine! Tear the damn place down!"

"Yes, boss!" Following her command, the werewolves began to tear at the furniture and walls with their hand axes.

"Oh, uh, you really shouldn't do that," Zenos cautioned.

Lynga's underlings laughed. "If we can't kill you, we'll just trash your clinic! Don't underestimate the power of werewolves!"

Protective magic only worked on living beings, of course. That, however, wasn't the problem.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Zenos said flatly. "I'm just a guest here, see."

"Huh?"

Lynga and her men soon noticed the surrounding air growing freezing cold and a long-haired woman standing against the back wall.

"Eek!" the werewolves yelped in unison.

Carmilla's eyes, as if melting into pools of the blackest night, sank and hollowed in an instant as her form swelled.

"Wraith!" someone cried out. "It's a wraith!"

The werewolves all rushed to flee, jostling against each other in their panic, struggling to get through the door all at once. Apparently, they were terrified of wraiths. Indeed, Lily had recently mentioned that encountering one was a death sentence.



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Carmilla slowly rose, spreading her arms. A sinister aura washed over the air like a tsunami.

"How dare you do this to my lair," she hissed ominously. "I shall make you pay—"

"Hold up, Carmilla," Zenos said, stopping the wraith in her tracks. "I know you're mad. I am too. I'd just finished cleaning up the place, and now they've made a mess of it."

"What would the matter be, then?" the wraith asked. "Let me feast on their life force."

"The second floor is yours. If they go up there, by all means, do as you please. But the first floor is a clinic. This place is where lives are saved, not taken."

Carmilla glowered silently at the healer. Despite the overwhelming tingling sensation on his skin, Zenos stared right back. The wraith hovered in the air quietly for a moment, then finally lamented, "Hmph. Very well. Ah, the things I must do."

"Appreciate the outrage, though," the healer said.

"That was for my own sake, not yours," she scoffed, slowly disappearing into the second floor. "Besides, this place *is* cozier than before."

"Did that wraith just...listen to him?" Lynga, whose knees had given out, murmured in astonishment, before suddenly bending over and smacking her forehead against the floorboards. "S-Sir Zenos! I'm so sorry! I didn't know you were the master of a wraith!"

"I'm not her master or anything," Zenos replied.

"We werewolves are nocturnal creatures by nature! It's in our instinct to fear our superior kin, like wraiths and vampires! We've been unspeakably rude to you, Sir Zenos, despite your command over a wraith!"

"Look, I'm trying to tell you I don't command anyone—"

"You lot, on your knees too!" Lynga told her subordinates. "Show him how sorry we are!"

"Yes, boss!"

"Oh, right," Zenos mumbled. "You don't listen to people. Forgot about that."

Surrounded by groveling werewolves, Zenos let out a deep sigh.

Early in the afternoon on the fifth day after the sudden visit from Lynga and her werewolves, a man with a face like a cross between a pig and a wild boar showed up at the clinic.

"Are you Zenos, the shadow healer?" the man asked. "Mistress Loewe, leader of the orc tribe, calls for you."

The healer, who sat at his desk, slowly lifted his right hand to his forehead.
"Yep. I figured this would happen."

"What? What's happening?" Lily asked.

"Well, since the lizardmen and the werewolves came, orcs were bound to follow."

It hadn't even been a month yet since he'd started his practice, and he was now involved with all three of the major demi-human factions ruling over the slums.

Loewe, the orc tribe's leader, had attained her status thanks to the fortune she'd made from manastone mining. Zenos didn't want any involvement with famous people attracting unwanted attention, but this kept happening.

"So tell me," the healer began, "does your leader have any, say, missing screws or..."

"Do not mock her!" the orc messenger snapped, turning red with anger.
"Mistress Loewe is wise, noble, and dignified to a fault!"

"Oh. Good to know, then."

The reason for the question was that Zophia, the leader of the lizardmen, would come by every day with luxurious gifts, while Lynga of the werewolves, as a means of apology for damaging the building, had offered to construct a grand palace right next to it (which, of course, Zenos had refused). His was an

underground business, and standing out like that was a terrible idea, he'd insisted repeatedly, his pleas falling on deaf ears every time.

Hearing that Loewe of the orcs was reasonable was something of a relief to the healer.

"Incidentally," Zenos said, "why hasn't she come herself?"

"Don't be absurd," the orc retorted. "Lizardmen and werewolves come and go freely here. Why would we bring Mistress Loewe to a place crawling with our rivals?"

"I have nothing to do with your conflict, though," Zenos said with a sigh before his expression turned serious. "Is she gravely ill?"

"She can't move."

"You should've led with that."

If the patient couldn't move on her own, he'd have to make a house call. Leaving the clinic in Lily and Carmilla's care, Zenos decided to follow the orc. He led Zenos to a particular corner of the slums.

"Back here," the orc said.

Rocky mountains towered over the area, and a great number of caverns had been carved out of the bedrock. The place was a mining site for manastones which doubled as the orcs' base of operations. No one was foolish enough to carelessly approach orc territory, so Zenos had never been to this area, even when he had still lived in the slums.

"Mistress Loewe," the orc began, "I've brought you the shadow healer Zenos."

"Welcome," said a woman sitting on a throne, her voice strong and confident. "I'm Loewe."

She looked younger than he'd expected. Loewe was tall for a woman, with tanned skin, chestnut hair, and striking irises reminiscent of a blaze. The sharp fangs in her mouth were unmistakably orcish.

So this was Loewe the Mighty. Her intimidating aura was, indeed, fitting for someone so important. She was surrounded by countless henchmen, all of

whom were eyeing Zenos, sizing him up.

"So, you're Loewe," Zenos said. "Where did you hear about me?"

"What do you mean, 'where'?" Loewe asked. "You're a celebrity in the underbelly of the slums."

"Huh? I am?"

"The lizardmen and the werewolves were all going on like, 'There's this superawesome healer we can't tell anyone about! Would be pretty bad if anyone found out!'" she explained. "So! I got curious and looked into it."

"Those bastards," Zenos muttered. What a terrible job they'd done at not attracting attention! He'd *told* them he had to keep a low profile! His knees buckled in disappointment.

Loewe glanced down at him. "I hear you'll treat anyone who pays accordingly."

"I'm done working for free, yes."

"Well, you see, I can't move right now, and that's a bummer. Do you know why?"

"*Diagnosis,*" Zenos chanted.

A linear white light passed through Loewe, from her head to her shoulders.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"You don't seem wounded, so I'm checking internally," he explained.

"Never heard of a healer doing that."

"Huh? What, do other healers offer treatment without checking people's insides?"

External wounds one simply had to look at, but internal injuries were a different story.

Zenos continued to examine an astonished Loewe. "There's a hard lump in your stomach," he said. "I can sense the magic within it. Is this a manastone?"

"Remarkable," Loewe noted. "You're right. There's a massively powerful

Explosion Stone in my belly.”

Manastones were a form of crystallized raw magic, which could produce effects similar to spells. Of all the offensive manastones, Explosion Stones were the most powerful. Having something like that in one’s stomach was, to say the least, disquieting.

“Don’t tell me...” Zenos murmured. “Did someone trick you into swallowing it?”

“Nope!” she replied. “I mistook it for a rice ball and gobbled it up!”

“Are you stupid?”

“Looking at me, you’d never guess how much I eat!”

“Do I look like I care?”

This was the wise, noble, and dignified-to-a-fault leader he’d been told about? Galewind Zophia. Lynga the Tyrant. Loewe the Mighty.

During his time in the slums, even their shadows had seemed untouchable. Having met them, however, they were just a bunch of oddballs. He’d wasted his time taking them seriously.

“Ridiculous,” Zenos snapped. “Just leave it be and it’ll come out the other end eventually.”

“No can do,” Loewe said. “I bit into it and chipped part of the outer layer when I ate it. It’ll detonate soon, and any small movement will cause it to explode.”

The healer straightened up a bit, narrowing his eyes. “I see. So that’s why you can’t move.”

Loewe nodded, a serious look upon her features as she continued, “Sadly, my men won’t leave my side. They’ll be caught in the explosion at this rate, but they won’t listen to me, and I can’t drive them away.”

“Boss!” the henchmen said, not budging from their position near Loewe. It seemed like despite her idiocy in eating an Explosion Stone, they still held her in high esteem. “We’ll be here when you die! We’ll go with you!”

"So what do you want me to do?" Zenos asked.

Whatever Zenos had expected Loewe to say, her answer wasn't that. "We want to donate our assets to you. When this blows up, we're probably toast. It'll be the end of the slum orcs. Thieves would probably waste no time raiding what's left of our stuff, so we'd rather hand it all to someone who can put it to good use."

"We've only just met. Why trust me with your fortune?"

"There's no one we trust outside of our own kind. You're a neutral party, and though you charge a pretty penny, you treat kids for free, right? We love kiddos," Loewe said, then flicked a golden key at Zenos with her finger. "Our treasury's in the cave behind the rocky mountains. Use that key."

"We'll follow you to the next world, Mistress!" her overly emotional subordinates declared.

Zenos held the treasury key between his fingers absentmindedly. "That manastone. Did you *just* eat it?"

"Yep. Soon as I did, I sent someone over to fetch you."

"Based on my Diagnosis, it's still in your stomach," he remarked. Zenos turned his right palm upward and chanted, "*Scalpel!*"

Magical energy converged onto his hand, forming a glowing white blade.

"Stay still. Careful not to bite your tongue." With that, he quickly approached her, stabbing the tip of the instrument into her abdomen.

"Mistress Loeweee!!!" a subordinate cried.

"You!" another demanded. "What are you doing?!"

Her men lunged at Zenos, but stopped when they saw his raised hand. In it was a flickering red manastone.

Loewe blinked, holding her abdomen. "Wh-What did you just do?" the leader of the orcs asked incredulously, rubbing her belly.

"Nothing really," Zenos said. "I cut open your stomach and took out the stone, then I knit the wound shut."

"Y-You can do that?"

"Without a license, this is all I can do."

Realization dawned on Loewe's face as she exclaimed, "B-But if you disturb the stone, it'll blow up!"

"Right, yeah," Zenos said, clasping the manastone tight between both hands. The next moment, a massive explosion echoed from within his palms, shaking the rocky mountain and making small debris rain from above.

"H-He's fine..."

"I put a protective spell on my palms," Zenos explained. "Still, it stung a bit, so I healed them too. Anyway, all done. Sorry to interrupt your little moment, but I'd rather not be called over for something like this. Here's your vault key back."

"What a guy," Loewe murmured in amazement as she looked closely at the key Zenos had tossed back to her. "You could've just stayed quiet and taken our stuff."

"I told you, I only want what's fair for my labor. This wasn't worth all of your assets."

"Hah! Ha ha ha ha!" Loewe laughed heartily, clapping her hands together. "I like you, Shadow Healer Zenos! We orcs are in your debt! If you ever find yourself in a bind, we'll come right on running!"

"Please don't, actually."

"Ha ha ha! Don't be so modest! If you want, we can all come guard your clinic all day long!"

"No, seriously. Don't!"

Why did this keep happening? He'd said time and again he didn't want to stand out, and more and more problem people just kept joining in!

"Man, what a relief," Loewe said. "Now I'm starving! Hey, Zenos! Wanna eat rice balls with us?!"

"Please stop eating rice balls," the healer replied. "I'm not saving you next time."

And thus, completely contrary to his wishes, Zenos's esteem only grew among big shot after big shot in the city's underbelly.

"Hrmph."

Morning had dawned on the clinic. Lily frowned as she sat quietly at the reception counter, her blonde hair swaying gently in the breeze.

"Why the long face, Lily?" Zenos asked.

"I was just thinking about how Zophia, Lynga, and Loewe come over all the time now," she muttered.

It didn't take much thinking to realize the young elf was right. The three women, all of them the biggest big shots in the slums as leaders of their own factions, had indeed been coming to the clinic often as of late.

Zophia came on Mondays.

Lynga on Wednesdays.

Loewe on Fridays.

Given their respective factions' conflict, they had an unspoken agreement to visit on different days so that they didn't run into one another.

"Come to think of it," Zenos said, "they're not even injured, so I wonder what they're coming here for?"

All three of them looked flashy and were hard to miss. It was, frankly, a major headache.



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"You don't know why they keep coming, Zenos?" Lily asked.

"They must have a lot of free time," the healer mused.

"No way. They're all important people, so they must have a lot of stuff to do."

"Then I have even less of a clue."

Were they pranking him, he wondered?

Lily mumbled to herself. "Maybe it's—"

"*Love*, I would wager. Hee hee hee."

"And when did *you* get here?" Zenos asked Carmilla, who out of nowhere was sitting on the clinic's bed.

The wraith crossed her pale legs, a smile playing at the corner of her crimson lips. "Those lasses are all swooning over you, Zenos."

"What? Don't be ridiculous," the healer snapped. "Why would they be? I'm just a plain ol' shadow healer. I don't even have a license!"

Carmilla chuckled. "My eyes cannot be deceived! I have secretly been watching them from the ceiling, and they have the gazes of maidens in love. I have not been alive for three centuries for nothing."

Well, no, actually, you're dead, Zenos thought. *Also, what's with the snooping?*

"I'm a little worried," Lily said.

"What about?" Zenos asked.

"I-I mean, they're all beautiful."

"Sure, they're nice to look at, but frankly they're all kind of problematic."

Carmilla, still sitting on the bed, stifled a laugh. "Hee hee. At this rate, soon the day will come when these demi-humans wage all-out war for Zenos's affections."

"Uh. No?" Zenos retorted. "That's ridiculous."

The wraith fluttered into the air. "Kindly do your best to regale me with your efforts as well, Lily. I do so crave entertainment."

"B-But I'm just a kid," Lily stammered. "I'm not as charming as they are..."

Carmilla chuckled. "A lady's love is a beautiful thing."

"Th-Thank you, Carmilla," the young elf said.

The wraith disappeared into the second floor, leaving the faint echoes of her snickers in her wake.

Why was she here? Zenos wondered. And all-out war, over me? It's so ridiculous it's not even funny.

"Hey, doc. I'm thinking of going to war with them."

"What?"

Monday morning, Zophia, leader of the lizardmen, stopped by for her usual visit and dropped that bomb.

"I never liked Lynga and Loewe, anyway," she explained. "I think it's about time to show them who the *real* leader of the demi-humans is. Sure, they're strong, but they can't hold a candle to lizardmen when it comes to agility."

"Wait, about that—"

"And that's why, doc," Zophia cut in before Zenos could finish his sentence, her gaze shifting up to meet his, "I was hoping you'd lend your support to my people. If you can heal us mid-fight, we'll be invincible."

"Sorry, no can do," the healer replied decisively. "Playing favorites would affect business."

"I see," Zophia said, sounding disappointed. "Well, that's unfortunate, but it makes sense. At least promise not to side with the werewolves or the orcs, yeah?"

With that, she left a large amount of fruit behind as a gift and walked out.

"..."

"Why are you staring at me, Lily?" Zenos asked.

"A war really is breaking out over you," the young elf remarked.

"No, it's probably just a coincidence," he replied. "Also, Carmilla, stop snickering up there! I can see you!"

Carmilla's face slowly disappeared into the ceiling. "Hee hee hee."

Yes, it was a little surprising, but Zophia had probably said that on a whim. There couldn't possibly be a war.

Deciding to put that out of his mind, Zenos went back to his treatments.

"Sir Zenos. I wanna settle the score with those two."

"Huh?"

Wednesday morning, Lynga, leader of the werewolves, stopped by for her usual visit and dropped this bomb.

"Zophia and Loewe have been too full of themselves lately," Lynga explained. "I think it's time I took 'em down a couple pegs. I mean, sure, they're tough and all, but when it comes to raw power, us werewolves always come out on top."

"Wait a minute—"

"And that's why, Sir Zenos," Lynga cut in before the healer could finish his sentence, sniffing the air as she leaned closer, "I want you to side with my dudes. With your healing skills, our victory is in the bag."

"Sorry, no can do," the healer replied incisively. "Playing favorites would affect business."

"I see," Lynga said, sounding disappointed. "Well, that's unfortunate, but it makes sense. I hope you won't side with the lizardmen or the orcs, at least."

With that, she left a large amount of freshly caught fish behind as a gift and walked out.

"..."

"I'm telling you, it's all coincidental, Lily," Zenos said. "Also, Carmilla, seeing your head stick out from the ceiling like that gives me the creeps. Mind not peeping?"

The silent elf and the upside-down wraith simply looked on as Zenos

scratched his head. What were Zophia and Lynga thinking?

Perhaps they both just happened to say impulsive, heat-of-the-moment things. Surely they would calm down, given time.

“Zenos, I’ve been thinking about destroying those two’s asses—”

“Now wait a second!”

Friday morning, Loewe, leader of the orcs, stopped by for her usual visit and dropped this bomb.

Zenos tried to protest. “Look, listen—”

“Sure, Zophia and Lynga are powerful,” Loewe said, “but us orcs have unmatched stamina. And that’s why, Zeno—”

“Nope! I’m not siding with anyone!”

“It’s like you knew what I was thinking! That’s very like you, Zenos.”

“Of course I knew what you were thinking! You guys are all the same!”

Peas in a pod, those three.

After informing Zenos of the date and location of their upcoming battle, Loewe left a large amount of meat behind as a gift and walked out.

As the healer stood there in utter disbelief, Carmilla sneaked up behind him with a chuckle and whispered, “A war between the three major factions... Your popularity will bring much death...”

“Can you, like, *not* say insanely awful stuff?” Zenos protested.

“Hrrrrmph!”

“Why are you sulking, Lily?”

Damn it. Why is this happening? Zenos lamented to himself, leaning his elbows on the table and burying his face in his hands.

A war between three women over one shadow healer was about to begin.

The stage was set for the final showdown on Sunday just before noon, in a ruined arena on the outskirts of the slums.

It was said that this place had been used for public entertainment in bygone days, where the poor were forced to engage in fights to the death. As the neighboring Malavaar Empire gained strength and demi-human men were conscripted to patrol the borders, however, the custom had gone out of fashion. Now overgrown with moss and ivy, the coliseum usually stood in silent testament to its history.

This day, however, the arena buzzed with excitement that surpassed even its historical peak, with the three major demi-human factions that dominated the slums standing opposite one another.

One such faction was the lizardmen, with their sturdy scales gleaming in the sunlight.

Then there were the werewolves, with their ruffled fur and ferocious growls.

Lastly, the orcs, flexing their brawny bodies.

They all glared daggers at one another, the air thick with their animosity.

“Thanks for coming all the way here just to kick the bucket,” said Galewind Zophia, leader of the lizardmen, her hair fluttering in the wind. “It’s about damn time I showed all of you who the real master of the slums is.”

“If that was a joke, I’m not laughing,” howled Lynga the Tyrant, who stood at the vanguard of the werewolf clan. “I’ve been taking it easy on you lot. You know that, right?”

“Idiots.” Loewe the Mighty, standing before her army of orcs, confidently crossed her arms and loudly proclaimed, “Get ready to meet your maker.”

The atmosphere was charged with palpable tension, like a bomb ready to explode.

And then the bell signaling midday tolled.

In an instant, all three armies charged forward—

“Hold up a sec!” a man’s voice cut through the air, stopping the three groups from clashing.

In the spectator area of the arena, silhouetted against the backlight, stood a black-haired man in a dark cloak alongside a petite elven girl.

“Doc!”

“Sir Zenos!”

“Zenos?!”

The three leaders lifted their heads, exclaiming in unison. They didn’t fully halt their march, however.

“Have you come to stop us?” Zophia asked. “Look, doc, I respect you, but we can’t stop now.”

“That’s right!” Lynga agreed. “I care for you dearly, Sir Zenos, but this is the one thing I won’t budge on.”

“Yeah,” Loewe chimed in. “I’d do anything you ask of me, just not this.”

Zenos cast a sideways glance at an anxious Lily before turning to the three women and firmly saying, “I know. I’m not here to stop anyone.”

“Huh?”

“I was raised in the slums, you know. I get that you can’t just back down.”

Lizardmen, werewolves, and orcs had been clashing over control of the slums for a long time. Their history was fraught with endless conflict and years of accumulated resentment.

Many blows, kicks, bullets and kills had been exchanged. The complexity of the tangled feelings between the three races couldn’t be put into words. While this particular conflict may have seemed superficial, triggered by a feud over Zenos, deep down there was a long-standing history of mutual grudges between the tribes. There had always been a tense atmosphere among them, ready to ignite at a moment’s notice.

“As an outsider who doesn’t belong to any of the three races, it’s not my place to intervene,” Zenos explained. “I’m but a plain ol’ shadow healer, after all.”

Troubled, Lily attempted to protest. “But Zenos—”

"I'm here to tell you to have at it! Knock yourselves out!"

"Whaaat?!"

Opposite of the speechless Lily, the three leaders locked eyes, glowering at one another with murder in their eyes.

"Looks like we got the go-ahead from the doc," Zophia said. "Let's settle this once and for all. Last one standing gets to have him. How's that sound?"

"You're on," Lynga replied. "I've got this in the bag."

"His chastity's all mine," Loewe declared.

"Uh, Zenos, are they serious?" Lily asked.

"I've made no such promise—"

The healer's frantic attempt at an explanation was cut short by a resounding war cry coming from the center of the arena as the three forces collided.

Flesh met flesh in a raw cacophony as massive bodies went flying everywhere. Crisscrossing screams, roars, and cries of agony echoed through the air, blood splattering in every direction. Years of mutual resentment erupted into an immensely powerful storm that violently swept over the coliseum.

It was unstoppable. Inexorable.

Lily instinctively shielded her eyes from the gruesome spectacle, sorrow swirling in her heart.

But there was no end to it.

The fight dragged on and on. Several hours had passed, and still it showed no sign of concluding. The three parties remained evenly matched, and time continued to march on, the fight continuing with neither victor nor vanquished.

Once sitting high in the sky, the sun tilted westward, casting a burning red hue across the heavens.

As the fighters' bodies grew leaden with a dull fatigue, the melee began to slow.

"Wh-What the hell?! I can't kill a single one!"

"Dammit! I smack 'em and smack 'em and they're still standing!"

"I should've cut down, like, thirty of them by now! What's happening?!"

"Why aren't their damn numbers going down?!"

"It's more like—"

"Are our wounds just...healing on their own?"

That was the moment when all eyes in the arena turned to the spectator seats, where one man stood tall and imposing.

"I told you. I'm not here to stop you from fighting. You can do whatever you want. It's none of my business," Zenos explained with his arms crossed.

"However, all of you are my patients, which means if you get hurt, I'm just gonna heal you. *I am* a shadow healer, remember?"

All words faded. All sounds stopped. The heated atmosphere cooled. The arena stood silent, as if time itself had stilled.

"Huh. Okay. I was so caught up in the fight that I only just noticed how dumb I've been. So you've been doing your job this whole time, doc?" Galewind Zophia said as she plopped down onto the ground, her shoulders shaking with laughter.

"Wow. I've never heard of anyone who could heal this many people for such a long time," Lynga the Tyrant murmured in amazement, dropping to her knees.

"I know you said you wouldn't side with anyone in particular, but I didn't think that meant you'd actually side with *everyone*," said Loewe the Mighty, breathing heavily. "But that means there's no end to this."

"That's right," Zenos said, overlooking the arena. "There's no end to this. You hit a guy, he gets back at you. Another guy kicks you, you get back at him. It never ends. You wanna keep going, be my guests. I'll see it through to the end. For a fee, of course."

"..."

"..."

"..."

One long silence later, the three leaders burst into joint laughter.

"Ha! Ha ha ha! You're right, doc!" Zophia said. "There's no end to this, so what the hell are we doing?!"

"Everything seems so pointless now," Lynga added. "All we're doing is tiring ourselves out."

Loewe laughed heartily. "After all that bashing and smashing, I think I'm good!"

They'd punched with all their might, and been heartily kicked in turn. Roared from the depths of their chests, screamed to their hearts' contents. All the pent-up anger, resentment, and hatred that had once blazed brightly in their souls had burned out completely. The malice that once enveloped the arena had vanished, as if in a puff of smoke.

The three women let out shallow sighs, gazing up at the sunset.

"Well, I guess that's that," Zophia said. "We're done for today. Doc's orders."

"The werewolves have no objections," Lynga declared.

"Ancient orcish wisdom says that there's strength in forgiveness," Loewe remarked.

Without a hint of hesitation, their three fists raised in the air, converging at the center. Their underlings, now spent, began to commend each other's combat prowess. The three women exchanged glances, their lips curling into smiles.

"Now we only have one thing to fight over," Zophia pointed out.

"I'm a step ahead of you all, mind you," Lynga noted.

"Now *that* fight I'm not losing," Loewe asserted.

"The hell are they talking about?" Zenos asked.

"Hmph. Look at you, Mr. Popular," Lily muttered, puffing her cheeks. "But, um, why go this far for them, Zenos?"

"Oh," the healer replied. "Back when I lived in the slums, I met a healer who told me this: 'A third-rate healer just mends wounds. A second-rate healer heals

people. A first-rate healer makes the world a better place.””

“Sounds like they were an amazing person,” Lily remarked.

“A bit of an oddball, really, but amazing nevertheless. That’s why I figured I could help change the slums for the better, in my own third-rate-healer way.””

“Zenos, you’re so cool!”

“Well, that’s my excuse, anyway.”

“Your excuse?”

“I mean, they’re regulars at the clinic. I can’t afford to lose their business over something like this.””

“You’re lying,” Lily murmured quietly.

After all, if the three races became friendly, there would be no more minor skirmishes, meaning fewer injuries and less income. Surely Zenos was aware of that.

The young elf gripped Zenos’s sleeve tightly. “Hey, Zenos?”

“Yeah?”

“I like you a lot.”

“Hm? Oh, I like you too, Lily.”

Lily grumbled. “That’s not the kind of ‘like’ I meant.”

“What kind did you mean, then?”

“N-Never mind!”

“Either way,” Zenos said, turning on his heel. “Let’s collect our pay and go, Lily.””

“We’re getting paid?”

“Of course. Healing this many people nonstop for this long is very taxing. I’ll take what I’m owed.””

As sunset bathed over the two of them, etching their shadows deeply into the ground, Lily chuckled, still holding on to Zenos’s sleeve.

"Carmilla's gonna be sad that nobody died," she pointed out.

"Probably," Zenos replied. "Serves her right."

"Or maybe she'll be happy," Lily said with a giggle.

And thus, a humble shadow healer put an end to the long-standing conflict in the slums. His own fate, too, would be profoundly altered by this turn of events.

Side Story II: Meanwhile, Aston's Party... (II)

A lone, intricately designed carriage sped across the green plains, pulled by horses with golden manes swaying in the wind. It was a truly magnificent sight.

"Best feeling in the world," said Aston as he sat inside the carriage, lazily stretching his legs and sipping wine.

Support mage Gael gazed out the window at the azure mountains sprawling in the far distance, saying, "It doesn't even feel like we're on a quest."

"This is how we deserve to be treated."

They were working on a job personally requested by Lord Fennel, a member of one of the kingdom's seven most influential aristocratic families, after all.

Not only had they been provided with ample funding for equipment, they'd also been supplied with this luxurious carriage for the journey to and from the cavern at the snowy fields to the north, where their target—an emberfox—could be found. Though the trip from the capital took over ten days, arrangements had been made for their stay at high-end lodgings in every town along the way. The journey was all but dazzling, and the group was enjoying every second of it.

"It's like we're nobles now," said Yuma, their archer.

"Well," Aston replied, raising his glass, "that's what we'll be when we retire."

Having defeated multiple A-ranked marks, Aston's party was currently Gold Class. Due to their ability to defeat powerful enemies unscathed, their party had earned the moniker "The Golden Phoenix."

"If we keep this up, we may even make it to Black Class."

Adventurers who reached Black Class—the highest class possible—were regarded as national heroes and could become nobles after retirement. In fact, a considerable number of Black Class adventurers did indeed do so, including the head of the Royal Institute of Healing. While multiple referrals were

necessary to attain nobility, that would be a nonissue if they could build rapport with someone as influential as Lord Fennel.

"We've really made our way up in the world."

"Used to be that we had to walk all the way to a dungeon."

"I mean, we did have a pack mule, so it wasn't all that bad."

Everyone burst into laughter at the quip.

"But you know, Aston, you really are something. I could hardly believe my ears when you said you'd brought some kid from the slums into the party. He didn't mind eating leftovers, he was fine with sleeping outdoors, and he doubled as a cook, a porter, and a sacrificial pawn in a pinch. It was like you'd gotten us a free slave."

"Hah!" Aston snickered, gazing down at his deep-crimson wine with a satisfied smile. "Zenos was a good little tool. I'm sure being with us was like a dream come true to someone like him."

He wondered what Zenos was up to. Aston had given the healer hush money to ensure he didn't blab about having been with the party, but that may not even have been necessary. Zenos was poor trash, after all, unable to get a proper job, unworthy of anyone's time. He was probably dying by the roadside at this point, grateful for having had the best moments of his life with Aston's group.

The carriage came to an abrupt stop.

"Hey!" Aston barked at the coachman. "What the hell? You got wine on my armor!"

"Begging your pardon, sir," the driver replied. "Some magical beasts are in the way. Could you take care of them?"

"Oh, for—" Aston groaned. "I was busy enjoying my damn drink." Grudgingly, he and his team stepped out of the carriage.

Just ahead, on the road, a pack of five large, horned rabbitlike magical beasts growled at them.

"Oh. It's just horned rabbits," Aston said. "A bunch of D-rank trash has no

business blocking our path. Whatever. Let's get this over with."

Aston drew his sword, Yuma readied his bow, Andres gripped his staff, and Gael clutched his talisman.

The battle began.

A horned rabbit charged at Aston, who swiftly parried the attack. A sharp metallic sound cut through the air as the impact, greater than anticipated, rippled through the swordsman's body.

"Ugh!" As he attempted to strike back, Aston realized the enemy was quicker than he thought. "You little—"

All in all, it took them almost half an hour to defeat all five horned rabbits.

Aston felt sluggish. Perhaps he'd drank too much?

"Damn pests wasting our time," he mumbled, cursing under his breath as he made his way back to the carriage.

Yuma's voice came from behind him. "Hey, Aston! Your arm's hurt!"

"My arm's what now?"

Sure enough, a trickle of blood ran down his arm around the elbow.

Aston clicked his tongue, his thoughts slipping out loud. "I got careless."

Thinking back, he couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten injured in combat. Deep within, he felt something stir that made his skin crawl. A tiny, budding unease, like a thorn pricking at the back of his mind.

Aston didn't yet understand what it was.

Side Story III: Afternoon Girl Talk

"So, like, what the hell *is* up with the doc, anyway?"

It was a lively early afternoon when Zophia posed the question to Lily at the clinic's dining table.

"Hmm," Lily mused. "I don't know either. He grew up in the slums, then happened upon an amazing healer, decided to become one, got invited by an adventurer to join his group, then got kicked out. That's all I know."

"They kicked Sir Zenos out?" Lynga asked, baffled. "What a bunch of morons."

"Wow. Unbelievable," Loewe chimed in, equally astounded. "I didn't know people could be *that* stupid."

Zophia nodded in agreement with the other two. "His healing magic is off-the-charts nuts. Wonder where he learned it?"

"Apparently he taught himself when he lived in the slums," Lily explained. "But I don't know the specifics."

"Sir Zenos can use protective magic too. My hand axe didn't even put a scratch on him!" Lynga said, tilting her head in puzzlement. "How did he even *do* that, anyway?"

"He said he learned it because his party often used him as a meat shield," Lily replied.

"What do you mean, 'learned it'?" Zophia asked. "It can't be that simple, right? Can he use other types of magic too?"

"I've never seen him do it," Lily answered, "but he said he's dabbled in enhancement spells too."

"Healing, protection, enhancement..." Lynga mused. "That's too much for my brain. I feel like my head's gonna explode."

"He told me his specialty is healing magic, but protection and enhancement spells work by improving the body's functions, so the fundamentals are the

same."

"All that goes over my head," Loewe said, bringing a palm to her forehead and shrugging. "I just know it's impressive."

"But Zenos doesn't have a license and didn't get any formal education as a healer, so he's convinced he's nothing special," Lily pointed out.

"Well, if there's anyone out there who can match the doc's skills, it's probably that legendary 'saintess' people talk about," the lizardwoman said.

All the women sighed in unison.

"I wonder what's in store for the doc," Zophia mused.

"Apparently he doesn't want to stand out," Lynga commented.

"But people just won't leave him alone," Loewe added.

"Hee hee hee. How about we stop beating around the bush and address the *real* reason you've all gathered today?" asked the wraith in the back as she put her teacup down, a mischievous smile playing upon her lips. "We *are* all women here. What we *really* want to talk about is love. Now, which of you fine ladies will capture his oblivious little heart?"

Carmilla's question lit a fire in all their hearts, and they stood in unison.

"Me! Who else?" Zophia stated.

"I will, obviously," Lynga declared.

"I'm winning this," Loewe asserted.

"I-I will," Lily stammered.

The four of them all looked at one another, then shifted their gazes to Carmilla.

"What about you, Carmilla?" the lizardwoman asked.

"I was wondering that too," Lynga chimed in.

"How do you feel about Zenos, o wraith?" Loewe questioned.

"A-Actually, I'm curious too," Lily added.

"...Me?" The wraith blinked in surprise.

After a moment of silence, Carmilla laughed loudly.

"Pfft! Ha ha ha ha! Oh, please," the wraith mocked. "Cease your nonsense at once. I, Carmilla, Lich Queen, harboring affection for a mere *human* like him? Unlike you lot, I am a *victim* of this man. He invaded my home, nearly exorcised me, helped himself to my space, *and* disrupted my peace and quiet! I am but waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. Hee hee hee... Wait, why are you all grinning like that?"

"I mean...I don't buy it," Zophia said.

"Yeah," Lynga agreed. "There was this conspicuous pause before you replied."

"And when you did, you spoke way too fast," Loewe pointed out.

Lily grumbled. "Carmilla is a formidable rival..."

Confronted with the group's skeptical gazes, Carmilla stood up and tried to defend herself. "I-I am a wraith! Do not mock me, mortals!" she demanded. "True, he might be a *slight* bit interesting, but I am three hundred years old! He is but a drop in the sea of my eternity! A child and nothing more!"

"Age doesn't matter when it comes to love," Zophia said, giving the wraith a side glance.

"Well, I'm a monster," Carmilla pointed out.

"I don't care about racial differences, personally," Lynga said, clenching her fist.

"I'm dead," the wraith added.

"Dead or not, feelings are feelings," Loewe countered, tilting her head sideways.

"You really think it doesn't matter?" Carmilla asked.

"Come on, Carmilla," Lily said gruffly. "Being stubborn doesn't suit you."

"Wait, who said that? Lily, why are you suddenly acting out of character?" the wraith questioned.

"I was doing my best Zenos impression," the young elf replied.

"You couldn't possibly be more dissimilar to him," Carmilla pointed out.

"Aw..." Lily lamented.

At that moment, the front door opened with a click.

"Lily, Carmilla, I'm done with today's house calls—oh. You're all here again," Zenos said as he walked in. "Do you mind? You're in the way. I can't treat anyone like this."

The three demi-human women exchanged glances, then slowly sat back down.

"I mean, I think we're fine," Zophia said.

"Yeah," Lynga agreed. "It's not like there's anyone here in need of treatment anyway."

"We're not at each other's throats anymore thanks to Zenos," Loewe pointed out. "There are way fewer injured now."

Zenos groaned. "I just *had* to stick my nose where it didn't belong, didn't I?"

"I like it when everyone's here," Lily said.

"*Some* of us prefer silence to a gaggle of women," Carmilla muttered.

"Why the hell are an elf, a lizardwoman, a werewolf, an orc, and a wraith all chattering away like best friends at my clinic?"

Yet another lively day carried on at the clinic as the aroma of tea filled the air.

Chapter 3: Lady Iron Rose

The Kingdom of Herzeth, also known as the Sun Kingdom, reigned absolute at the heart of the continent. Its capital city was divided into four distinct areas. At the center sat the palace, from which the royal family ruled. Surrounding it, in descending order of status, were the special district, home of the aristocracy; the town district, where the common citizens resided; and the slums, housing society's rejects, which sat at the farthest reaches of the city.

Within the nobility's special district, there was a ward crowded with national institutions, such as the Senate and the Royal Institute of Healing. Tucked away there stood a building combining ruggedness and magnificence. Two people sat within, facing one another.

"You called, Commander?"

"I've been waiting for you, Vice Commander Krishna," said a stern-looking man with closely cropped hair sitting behind a desk in the inner office.

Standing before him was a fairly young woman. Her blonde hair was long and lustrous, and her eyes shone a luminous blue. She was clad in platinum armor and carried a pair of magical guns holstered at either side of her waist. Though her features were beautiful, her face was set in a stoic expression, as if having been molded from iron.

"Why the sudden summons, if I might ask?" she said.

"I've caught wind of a rather curious rumor, you see," the commander replied.

"A rumor?"



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The man nodded slowly, stroking his goatee. “It seems the situation in the slums has been rather odd as of late.”

“‘Odd’? What might you mean?” Krishna asked.

“It seems the fighting among the demi-humans has come to a near complete halt.”

“Surely you jest,” the vice commander said with a slight furrow of her brow. “That place has been a territorial battlefield between the lizardmen, werewolves, and orcs for years. The idea that their conflict has come to a halt is preposterous.”

“I find it hard to believe, myself,” the commander agreed, placing both elbows on his desk and lacing his fingers in front of his face. “However, on the off chance that the rumors are true, we cannot turn a blind eye. As you’re aware, our kingdom has a history of prosperity structured around its strict caste system.”

“Indeed, I am well aware.”

“The common citizens direct their resentment at the poor, and the poor in turn resent rival races, thus maintaining this delicate balance. If, however, the prominent figures of the slums were to unite...”

“It could pose a danger to the common folk, the nobility, and consequently the ruling system as a whole, I imagine.”

“Correct. As stewards of the capital, we, the Royal Guard, cannot let this lie.”

Though the Royal Guard had originally been established for the royal family’s personal protection, the scope of its authority had expanded over time. Now, it was responsible for the protection of the entire capital city.

The entrance of their headquarters was engraved with an emblem in the image of the sun surrounded by a sword and shield. The sun represented the king, and thus, maintaining the safety and stability of the capital city, where the king resided, was the primary mission of the Royal Guard.

“Be that as it may, Commander, I remain skeptical,” Krishna said, her stoic expression unchanged. “The three races hold deep-seated resentment toward

one another. I find it unthinkable that they would set their differences aside so easily.”

“Word has it that a certain individual acted as a mediator between them,” the commander explained.

“A certain individual? That seems even more implausible. Galewind Zophia, Lynga the Tyrant, and Loewe the Mighty are all notorious figures in the underworld. I cannot imagine any one person capable of uniting those three.”

“I am of the same opinion. Our intel regarding the mediator is shaky at best. However...” There was a dull gleam in the man’s eyes. “Let’s assume, for argument’s sake, that this information is true. If indeed such an influential character does exist, we cannot simply ignore it. As the Royal Guard, it is our duty to keep an eye on this individual.”

“Is that why you called me here?”

“This could be a matter of national security, and as such, I cannot leave it to the lower ranks. You’re our vice commander, and so I would entrust the task directly to you.”

Still wearing the exact same expression she had when she walked into the room, Krishna lifted her arm in a salute. “Leave it to me, sir,” she said. “If such an individual does exist, I *will* apprehend them.”

The man’s lips curled into a small smile, and in a low voice he said, “I have high hopes for you, Lady Iron Rose.”

At the clinic in the ruined part of town, Zenos sneezed loudly.

“Do you have a cold, Sir Zenos?” Lynga asked. “I’ll warm you up with my fur!”

“That’s my job,” Loewe said. “My muscles are surprisingly warm, y’know. And I have a huge rack.”

“I-I...don’t have fur. Or muscles. Or a rack,” Lily mumbled. “I’ll, um, I’ll make some tea!”

“What are you, mother hens?” Zenos muttered as he sat in a chair in the treatment room, not averting his gaze. “I just sneezed. I’m working here. Be

quiet, please.”

Before Zenos sat Zophia of the lizardman tribe, alongside her younger brother, Zonde, both of whom had lacerations crisscrossing their way up their arms. As the healer hovered his hand over their wounds, a faint white glow enveloped the injuries, and within an instant, they were completely healed.

“Your healing skills never cease to amaze, doc,” Zophia commented. “Kinda makes me want to get hurt on purpose.”

“I don’t treat ill-behaved patients,” Zenos snapped.

“Heh. You always say you’ll treat people as long as they pay you, and then you’re so serious about this stuff.”

Lily returned with the freshly brewed tea and began to pour some for everyone. “Come to think of it, Zophia, it’s been a while since you last came here for healing,” the young elf said.

“Aw, come on, Lily,” the lizardwoman replied. “It’s like you’re saying I only ever come here to shoot the breeze.”

“You do, though,” Zenos pointed out.

Zophia flashed a charming grin and gently rubbed her newly healed arm. “Just to be clear, I didn’t get hurt fighting a *certain* two women who *do* only ever come here to shoot the breeze,” she noted, clearly referring to Lynga and Loewe. “I got hurt on the job.”

“Oh, right,” Zenos said. “You’re a thief, right?”

Granted, her group targeted corrupt merchants and privileged individuals who got involved in illegal businesses. They stole from such people and distributed the spoils among the people of the slums, making Zophia something of a righteous thief.

“The Royal Guard has their eye on us,” she explained. “We had a run-in with them during a heist yesterday, and I got a little careless.”

“By the way, didn’t you and your brother have matching injuries before?” Zenos asked, recalling that Zonde had been burned on his arm by a magical gun, and Zophia had been shot with a poisonous bullet. He’d healed both injuries,

but they were unique enough in this city to be memorable. “Were those from fighting the Royal Guard too?”

“That’s right,” Zophia replied. “We went after a target in the special district, and *that woman* shot us.”

“Same here,” Zonde added. “*That woman* suddenly blasted me with a flaming bullet.”

“Uh, who are we talking about, exactly?”

Both siblings looked exasperated. “This menace of a woman in the Royal Guard,” Zophia explained. “She always has this blank look on her face, and her attacks are nasty as hell.”

“I still have nightmares about that woman chasing after me. Keeps me up at night,” Zonde said. “I think she’s their vice commander or something. They call her ‘Lady Iron Rose’ or whatever.”

“‘Lady Iron Rose,’ huh...” Zenos mused.

At the mention of the moniker, Carmilla, who had been sitting on the bed, smirked and chuckled eerily. “Ah, but if such a woman set her eyes on you, why, that would be a major problem, would it not, Zenos? Another troublesome lady for your personal collection, as if you did not already have enough of those.”

“Huh?” Lily mumbled. “Wait, but I’m the only sensible one, right, Carmilla?”

Zenos gave the anxious young elf a side glance, scratching his head. “What does that have to do with me? I can’t imagine the vice commander of the illustrious Royal Guard would concern herself with a plain ol’ shadow healer like me.”

“A wraith’s intuition never fails,” Carmilla said.

“No point worrying about it,” Zenos grumbled. “Want to eat lunch, Lily?”

“Yeah!” the young elf replied. “What do you wanna eat, Zenos?”

“A veggie dish for me,” Zophia remarked.

“Fish, please!” Lynga added.

“You’re all nuts,” Loewe interjected. “Meat’s the only option.”

"Literally nobody asked," Zenos retorted. "What, are you all going to eat lunch here?"

Asked to at least agree on the menu, the three demi-human women grudgingly consented to drawing lots. Fish won the luck of the draw, and while Lynga rejoiced, Zophia and Loewe loudly protested, and Carmilla, staring at all of them, began to float toward the ceiling.

"Well, then, I shall be resting upstairs," the wraith announced as she left. "But truly, Zenos, vast as the royal capital is, I very much believe only *you* could keep company with all three of these major players of the slums."

"It feels more like I'm keeping a bunch of high-maintenance beasts as pets," Zenos said. "I really don't need any more trouble in my life."

"Thus did Zenos inadvertently jinx it..."

"Don't just drop ominous predictions and disappear, damn it!"

As Zenos's angry voice echoed throughout the clinic, the footsteps of the Royal Guard drew ever nearer.

"Am I truly in the right place?"

Though the commander had informed her that the conflict between the demi-humans had ceased, Vice Commander Krishna could hardly believe her eyes as she set foot into the slums.

A lizardman and a werewolf were laughing together, their arms draped around each other's shoulders as they walked. Elsewhere, a werewolf and an orc were jovially playing a tabletop game. An orc and a lizardman shared drinks still further down the road, their cheeks flushed red.

It was as though the pervasive tension and gloomy, oppressive atmosphere that had once permeated these streets had lifted completely.

"It cannot be," she muttered, swallowing hard. Were the rumors of this "Mediator" settling the dispute between the three races actually true? Before her arrival, she'd thought such a thing to be preposterous, but the scene before her eyes now stood as definitive evidence to the contrary. "You, there," she

called out, approaching a lizardman leisurely smoking a hookah at the side of the road. “Do you have a moment?”

“What’s up, lassie?”

“Lassie?” she echoed. Krishna was in disguise, draped in rags, and so it appeared that the lizardman did not identify her as a member of the Royal Guard. “Well, it matters not. You see, I have not been to the slums in a long time, and I was thinking the atmosphere here seems quite different.”

“Yeah?”

“Your kind seems to be quite friendly with the werewolves and the orcs.”

“Aw, they ain’t so bad once ya get to know ‘em!”

“I seem to recall your relationship being contentious.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“What happened?”

“Well, that was—” The lizardman fell silent, not finishing his sentence. Abruptly, he put away his hookah and turned away from Krishna, ready to take his leave. “Sorry, lady. I dunno who you are, but I ain’t talkin’. Would be bad if word got out, and all.”

“It ‘would be bad if word got out?’” she echoed.

“See ya!”

“Wait,” Krishna commanded, blocking his path as she reached into her ragged cloak for the magical gun holstered at her waist. Drawing her pistol, she pointed it at the lizardman’s stomach. “Start talking.”

“Wh-Who the hell are you?!”

“Answer my question. Who is the Mediator?” she asked as her finger tensed on the trigger.

“I ain’t tellin’.”

“What did you say?”

“We owe ‘em too much,” the lizardman explained. “Shoot me if you like, but I

ain't snitchin'!"

"Sounds like the Mediator is held in high regard," Krishna mused. "So who in blazes is it?"

"B-Boss!" the lizardman shouted suddenly.

Across the road, in her peripheral vision, Krishna spotted a pair of lizardman siblings jaunting down the street: Galewind Zophia and her younger brother, Zonde.

A heartbeat later, Krishna sprinted down a narrow side alley. The siblings had walked past by chance, but confronting them on their home turf was ill-advised. More than that—she'd only caught a brief glimpse, but Krishna had noticed both siblings' arms seemed to be perfectly normal. Unexpected, given that she had grievously wounded them days ago when they'd infiltrated the special district. And those wounds, she remembered, should have been beyond healing.

"What in the world is going on?"

Truthfully, there was much she didn't understand. Not only had the seemingly endless conflict in the slums come to an end, the demi-humans' wounds had somehow healed. And if that wasn't enough, she had other pressing matters to attend to as well.

Now... What should my next move be?

While pondering this and running through the alleyways, Krishna got lost.

"I've got the chills..."

Zenos sat at his clinic, now closed for the day, trembling slightly as he waited for Lily to finish brewing tea in the back. The three demi-human women had left for the day and things had finally settled down, but still an inexplicable shiver ran down his spine. And then, slowly, the front door opened.

There stood a woman, draped in rags. In stark contrast with her dirty outfit, her beautiful blonde hair and blue eyes exuded a certain amount of class. Her expression, on the other hand, was cold and hard as steel.

As Zenos wondered whether she might be a patient, the woman spoke. “Excuse me. I am a bit lost, you see. I was just in the slums and then suddenly found myself here, in this ruined town.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Zenos remarked.

“Indeed. My poor sense of direction is my one weakness.”

“I see.”

“I happened to pass by this building and saw signs that there were people inside, so I decided to stop by. Could you please tell me the way to downtown?”

“Right. That’s—”

Before the healer could finish his explanation, Lily walked in from the back, teacup in hand. “Oh, Zenos, do we have a guest?”

“No,” he replied. “It sounds like she got lost—”

The woman’s blue eyes widened and she suddenly pointed a gun at Zenos while he was still midsentence, her piercing gaze fixed on him.

“I must thank providence for this,” she said. “To think I would find my mark for another mission here of all places...”

Two loud bangs echoed through the clinic as she launched two powerful smoke bombs at Zenos in quick succession.

“E-Eeeek!” Lily shrieked, dropping the tea. “Zenos! Zenos!”

“I am on a major assignment at the moment,” the woman said, “but I am also pursuing a child abduction case on the side.”

“W-Wait! Zenos isn’t—”

“This young girl is an elf, and you’re a human, meaning you cannot be her father. I have found you at last, kidnapper. Very shrewd of you to set up a hideout in this deserted, ruined area.”

“Y-You’re wrong!” Lily protested. “Zenos took me in!”

“Taking on a child without going through the proper channels is human trafficking and very much illegal,” the woman countered. “If he has anything to say in his defense, I will hear it elsewhere.”

"That's not what I mean! Zenos saved me!" Lily insisted loudly.

"What?" Krishna gazed blankly at her gun as the young elf spoke. "I see. Perhaps I jumped the gun a bit."

"You jumped it a lot!"

"My apologies, elf child. I am quite thorough at my job, but my impulsiveness is my one weakness. This is a nonlethal bullet, meant for capture, but this man will not be waking up anytime soon—"

"I thought you said your poor sense of direction was your one weakness," Zenos pointed out. "That makes two weaknesses, no?"

"What the...?!"

As the smoke cleared, Zenos came into clear view, completely unharmed.

With surprise faintly etched upon her features, the woman before him offered him a light bow. "My apologies for jumping to conclusions. It gladdens me to see you unscathed, but how...?"

"I used protection magic," Zenos said.

"Surely you jest. No simple defensive spell could've shielded you from my magical gun."

"No, I'm pretty sure it was a very ordinary spell."

"What?!"

Uh, did I say something wrong? Zenos wondered. He was self-taught, so he didn't have much confidence in himself.

"Are you serious?" Krishna asked, narrowing her eyes as she stepped closer. She stared intently at the healer, their faces a breath away. "Though it *is* true you have nary a scratch. How is this possible? Today has been nothing but one unbelievable event after another..."

"From my end, you just shot me two seconds after we met, which I would categorize as a pretty unbelievable event indeed," Zenos said.

"You must be an archmage of great renown," Krishna mused. "You have devoted yourself to the protective arts since childhood, mastered them, and

now live as a recluse in this ruined town. Correct?"

"None of that is correct."

"And your alias is 'He Who Tried Very Hard at Protective Magic.'"

"You're an absolute disaster at aliases!"

"Being an absolute disaster at aliases is my one weakness."

"That's three, now."

"Regardless, there is no other sensible explanation. You may fool the eyes of others, but the eyes of Krishna, Vice Commander of the Royal Guard, are not so easily deceived."

Zenos and Lily exchanged glances.

"Vice Commander of the Royal Guard?"

"Correct," Krishna confirmed. "Due to my steely determination to carry out my duty, I am also known by the moniker 'Lady Iron Rose.'"

"Huh?"

"Oh! I just had the most splendid idea. Mr. Zenos, right? Would you be willing to aid me in my investigation? It would be immensely helpful to secure the cooperation of an expert such as yourself. You will be compensated, of course," the knight suggested cheerily.

Zenos was under the impression he heard the faint sounds of Carmilla's muffled laughter coming from the second floor.

"I came to the slums on a certain classified mission," Krishna explained, taking a seat at the dining table in the back like it was a perfectly natural thing to do.

Knowing it could cause him problems if he forcefully turned her away and risked unnecessary scrutiny, Zenos reluctantly decided to hear her out. To avoid having any of the demi-humans walk in, he had Lily raise a yellow flag on the clinic's roof—a sign to his existing customers that something unusual was going on and to stay away.

"If your mission is classified, should you really be telling a stranger about it?"

Zenos asked.

"It involves locating and apprehending a certain individual," Krishna explained.

"Aaand you just went and told me." Was she bad at listening too?

Expressionless, Krishna continued. "I had to. My target is not easy to find, it seems. I would not be able to secure your cooperation without sharing some information with you."

"I never agreed to cooperate," Zenos pointed out.

"It is the duty of the citizenry to assist the Royal Guard. Besides, you are a retired recluse, no? You must have the time."

"Well, I guess..." Zenos couldn't admit that he was a shadow healer, so he simply nodded vaguely in response.

"It seems the individual I am searching for is quite significant."

"Huh..."

"They have thus far eluded capture by the Royal Guard, however. This makes it likely that they are squirreled away somewhere inconspicuous, much like yourself. As they say, it takes one to know one, and so I thought perhaps you might know something."

"Who exactly are you looking for, anyway?"

Krishna pulled her face closer to Zenos's and said cautiously, in a hushed whisper, "*The Mediator*. The one who put an end to the conflict between the demi-humans in the slums."

"Pfft!" Zenos sputtered, spitting out the tea he'd just sipped.

"Is something the matter?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing..." he mumbled, wiping the table before burying his head in his hands quietly.

From the ceiling, Carmilla peeked out, her expression filled with mischief as she desperately tried to stifle a laugh.

Damn her!

Krishna's fingers balled into a tight fist. "I had thought the notion of their conflict being settled foolish, but indeed, the slums have drastically changed. As a guardian of order, I cannot turn a blind eye to an individual with such tremendous influence."

"I-Is that so?" Zenos stammered. "Maybe we should calm down—"

"Even under threat, the demi-humans have remained tight-lipped about it," Krishna continued. "It is as though they are under some manner of spell. This individual must be an instrument of evil."

"An instrument of evil," the healer echoed. It stung to be referred to like that. He was just a plain ol' shadow healer, not an evil mastermind!

"Either way, for the safety of the royal family, I must search every last nook and cranny for the Mediator," she concluded.

"Maybe there's no need to search so hard for this person," Zenos suggested.

"Huh?"

"Huh?" Zenos took a moment to clear his throat. "Well, I mean... Perhaps this person doesn't want the spotlight and would rather lay low? Wouldn't it be best to leave them be?"

"Do you know who the Mediator is?!"

"Of course not!" Zenos replied quickly. "It's just a hunch! Ha ha...ha...ha..."

Before Zenos was Krishna, her steely demeanor not faltering in face of his hollow laughter. Behind him were a pale-faced Lily, panicking, and a puffy-cheeked Carmilla, trying her hardest not to burst into laughter.

Truly a unique kind of hell.

"I cannot simply leave them be," Krishna said in a grave tone. "This individual has enough influence that they could lead the people of the slums. Someday, they could rise as the leader at the helm of a revolt and threaten the kingdom."

Suddenly, Lily, who had been watching from the sidelines, interjected. "I don't think this 'mediator' is that ambitious."

"What do you mean?"

"I think...they might go on and on about money, but in reality, they just don't like seeing anyone get hurt."

"Lily," Zenos mumbled. Whether this was to admonish or praise the girl was uncertain, but the young elf wasn't far from the truth.

The memory of a day long ago, when he was still a child. The heavy rain pelting his skin. His palms caked in mud. The feeling of his life slipping away. It all resurfaced in the back of Zenos's mind.

After a brief silence, Krishna turned her blue gaze upon Lily. "Elven child, do you know the Mediator?!"

"N-N-Nope! I don't know anyone! A-Anyone at all!" Lily stammered, averting her gaze and whistling off-tune.

She was a very bad liar, yes.

Krishna eyed the young elf suspiciously, then let out a small sigh. "Ah, well. This individual is quite influential in the underworld. Doubtless even his shadow is elusive."

Phew. She fell for it. Lily was a child, after all. Perhaps the knight was taking her words as the ramblings of one so young and nothing more. Even if in reality the man himself, shadow and all, stood right before Krishna.

Oh no. Carmilla's about to lose it, Zenos thought, quickly standing up before the wraith could start laughing. "A-Anyway, like we said, we don't know anything, so let's wrap up the conversation. I'll tell you the way to town, so you should get going."

"You certainly are in a hurry to be rid of me," Krishna mused.

"Surely you have important things to take care of. You can't afford to waste time with the likes of me."

"Well, that may be so, but..." The knight trailed off and stood, albeit somewhat reluctantly. "I apologize for disturbing you," she said, turning on her heel.

Zenos let out an exasperated sigh. That was exhausting, but at least she finally looked like she was going to leave.

Krishna, however, suddenly stopped at the entrance. “Say, why is there a bed at a place like this?” she asked, her already low timbre sounding even lower.

The area by the entrance served as an examination room and therefore had a bed for patients to lie in. Since the clinic operated illegally, its decor wasn’t particularly reminiscent of a hospital, but it would still be a bit out of place to have a bedroom there.

Had the knight caught on that this was an underground business?

Zenos tensed up, quickly coming up with an excuse. “Oh, that’s...an extra bed I had and was gonna throw it away, so I left it there for now.”

“What?” Krishna said, slowly turning around. Zenos braced for the worst, but instead, she said, “In that case, might I perhaps use this bed?”

“Say what?”

“I was looking for a place to use as a base of operations when I lost my way,” she explained. “My objective is in the slums, quite far from my home. My mission is confidential, so staying somewhere in the city would be far too conspicuous. This place, however, is not only close to the slums, but also unassuming. It is perfect for my investigations.”

“You may not.”

“Why?”

“You need to ask?”

“This is a spare bed, no? It should pose no problem to you, then. I shall pay for the lodgings, of course,” she said, looming over Zenos. “Or would it be an issue for me to stay here? I thought you were a retiree?”

Oh, no, not “an” issue. All the issues, Zenos thought. He couldn’t actually tell her this, however. Krishna had the backing of the Royal Guard, protectors of the capital city—he couldn’t risk insisting on the refusal and getting on her bad side.

He’d have to lament things having gone horribly wrong some other time. For now, his only option was to allow her to stay, if only for tonight. In the meantime, he’d come up with a plan.

With no other choice, Zenos nodded, and Krishna extended him a hand, her

blue gaze fixed on his. “Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Zenos,” she said. “I swear on my honor I will find this great evil, the Mediator, and bring him to justice by my own hand. Until then, I will be counting on you.”

Suddenly, Zenos had been promoted from a mere instrument of evil to a great evil.

“Thus another burdensome woman darkens the doorstep of Zenos’s clinic...” said the spectral narrator from the second floor, the words echoing hollowly in Zenos’s stupefied eardrums.

The curtains of night descended upon the ruined streets as the subtle buzz of insects filled the air. On the dining table lay a single lamp, its light reflecting off of Krishna’s golden hair.

“Tis especially quiet at night, is it not, Mr. Zenos?” Krishna said.

“This *is* a ghost town,” Zenos remarked.

“It is a great deal more comfortable than I thought.”

“Just make sure you go home when your mission’s over.”

Well, he’d said that, but her orders were to arrest Zenos himself, or the “Mediator,” as she called him. And her mission being over meant that his business as a shadow healer would be over too. He couldn’t just let that happen.

Krishna took a long, slow look at the darkness outside the window. “This area was ravaged by a plague, was it not? Do the undead not roam about?”

“Maybe. Maybe a wraith is roaming somewhere.”

“A wraith?”

“They’re scary, right? You should go home, don’t you think?”

“You certainly are persistent in trying to get me to leave,” Krishna noted. “Worry not. Wraiths are apex undead creatures. One does not encounter them quite so easily.”

Yet Zenos saw one every day. She was peeking out from the ceiling just

behind them as they spoke, in fact. The healer had considered chasing the knight out with Carmilla's help, but it would've been a problem if the Royal Guard came knocking later to exterminate the wraith.

Right now, the most practical measure would be to move while Krishna was away on her investigation, but he'd grown quite fond of this dilapidated building, so he wasn't a fan of the idea.

"Your tea," a somewhat sulky-looking Lily said, placing a cup of tea on the table beside Krishna.

"Thank you," the knight replied, taking the cup in her hands and gently bringing it to her lips. "Ah! Oof! Hot!"

"Huh?"

"Oh, pardon me," she said. "Hot liquids are my one weakness."

"You sure have a lot of weaknesses for someone with only 'one' weakness," Zenos pointed out.

"What do you mean? I only have the one."

"Do you, now?"

Krishna continued to blow on the cup and carefully sip on her tea, to the sound of "Oof!" and "Phew!" every so often.

"Hmph."

"What's the matter, Lily?" Zenos asked.

"I wanna sit on your lap, Zenos," the young elf replied huffily, climbing onto the healer's lap. She snuggled closer to him, then cast a glance at Krishna. "Hey, Zenos, do the thing."

"The thing?" he echoed.

"The thing!" Lily repeated, lightly waving her head from side to side. Catching on, Zenos moved a hand to pet her blonde hair, making her ears twitch. The young elf crossed her arms, raising her chin proudly. "Hah!"

What was that about? the healer wondered. Lily seemed even clingier than usual.

"This is jealousy, young man," came a low whisper into his ear.

"Yikes!" Zenos yelped reflexively at the sudden sound. "That scared the hell out of me!"

"Is something the matter, Mr. Zenos?" Krishna asked.

"Uh, nothing," the healer mumbled. Was that Carmilla?

The wraith chuckled. "'Twas indeed. I am invisible, whispering in your ear."

He wished she wasn't. This wraith was going to give him a heart attack one of these days.

Carmilla explained that, in this state, she couldn't touch objects and had limited vision, so she didn't do it very often.

Zenos whispered back to her, "Why would Lily be jealous?"

"Why, she's trying to assert dominance over this woman who just sauntered in, making a statement that she is closer to you than the knight," the wraith said. "She may be friendly toward the demi-human women, but she will never accept a woman who not only fired a magical gun at you, but also had the audacity to help herself to your bed. Oh, how fascinating that this boorish woman has a cute side to her, like a sensitivity to hot beverages! Surely young Lily's heart is in turmoil as we speak. Now whatever shall you do? Whatever *can* you do? The curtains rise on the battle for a lady's pride—"

"Shut up, already!" Zenos had been wondering this for a while, but how could the highest-ranking of undead be this salacious?

The sound of Carmilla's eerie chuckle slowly grew further and further away from his ears. Still, he couldn't deny the wraith had a point. Lily *was* unusually clingy today.

"Zenos! Your tea's still hot. I'll blow on it for you!" the young girl said. "Zenos! Your hair's a mess. I'll fix it for you!" she also said. "Zenos! I got you an apple. I'll peel it for you!"

What was this, some weird sense of rivalry? Lily was fussing over him an unusual lot. Krishna, meanwhile, was completely unresponsive, seeming lost in thought.

Lily grumbled. “If...this is what it’s come to, then...I’ll...I’ll use the secret technique Carmilla taught me!” Seemingly having lost her patience, the young girl turned bright red as she gripped Zenos’s cheeks with both hands. She swallowed hard, then said, “Zenos! I-I-I won’t, I won’t let you sleep tonight!”

“Zzz...”

She fell asleep.

“Elven children sleep so soundly,” Krishna remarked.

“Yeah,” Zenos agreed.

A few seconds after her bold assertion that she wouldn’t let Zenos sleep, Lily was snoring peacefully on his lap. She was still a child, after all, and as such went to bed early. Also, what the hell was that damned wraith teaching this innocent girl?

“I’ll give her a piece of my mind later,” Zenos mumbled.

“Did you say something, Mr. Zenos?” Krishna asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

The healer carried Lily to her bedroom. Moments later, he returned to the living room, finding the knight still seemingly deep in thought.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked.

“That elven child,” Krishna said. “She mentioned she was captured by slavers, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“Do you know who these slavers were?”

“No idea.” He’d only been in contact with them briefly, and they’d quickly left. He’d had to focus on Lily’s treatment at the time, so he hadn’t bothered following them.

“I see. It would seem there exists a thriving black market for child trafficking,” Krishna explained. Before she’d been assigned to her current mission, she’d been investigating that particular case, she said.

"So that was why you shot me out of nowhere."

"I truly am sorry. I have been following their trail, but they always manage to elude me. When I thought I had finally found the culprit, I pulled the trigger reflexively, not wanting to let them get away."

A human had stealthily taken an elven child to live with him in a ruined town, away from view. Any onlooker would've found the situation suspicious.

"Impulsiveness is my one weakness, you see," Krishna said.

"You sure don't have a lot of weaknesses or anything," Zenos retorted.

"What are you talking about? I only have one."

"Right, right. Whatever."

"I have resolved a great many cases. Lady Iron Rose must be a perfect knight. A hero to the people. Only one weakness may be tolerated at any given time." For a brief moment, a glimpse of another emotion graced Krishna's expressionless features.

Zenos said nothing.

Krishna, whose gaze had been fixed on the table in front of her, slowly lifted her head. "Incidentally, Mr. Zenos, I have a question for you."

"What is it?"

"You are a master of the protective arts, correct?"

"Incorrect, actually."

"Do not be modest. My shot may not have been lethal, but the fact you were fully unharmed is a testament to your godlike mastery of the arts."

"Well, it's not... It's... Oh, fine. Think about it that way, if it's easier."

"I would like the insight of a master of magics such as yourself. If, say, someone were to master the healing arts to the extent that you have mastered the protective arts..." Krishna trailed off for a moment, swallowing hard before continuing, "Could they, for example, fully regrow an arm?"

"Huh?"

"I realize it sounds preposterous."

"Oh, no, it's not that. It's just that such a thing is—" *Within reach of anyone, even a third-rate healer like me*, is what Zenos had wanted to say. It wasn't as though mastery of the art was necessary to perform limb regrowth. Still, he stopped himself from finishing his thought; it was unwise to speak carelessly to someone whose intentions he didn't know.

Krishna let out a weak sigh. "My apologies. Surely only the saintess and a select few healers of the highest caliber could achieve such a feat."

"What's your point, then?"

"You see, while patrolling the special district where the aristocracy resides, I encountered Galewind Zophia, leader of a band of thieves. I inflicted a grievous wound on her arm at the time, yet when I saw her in the slums, it had fully healed."

Zenos had a bad feeling about this.

"I have been pondering what the Mediator might be like. What kind of person would Zophia and her ilk defer to? And then it occurred to me that, if someone capable of healing such a severe injury exists, perhaps their words would carry that much weight."

The healer said nothing in response. Though Krishna, Vice Commander of the Royal Guard, seemed like a rash and foolhardy woman, she was surprisingly sharp. It was evident her title wasn't just for show.

"Still," she continued, "such a thing should not be possible. Perhaps I simply misjudged the gravity of her arm injury."

Shrugging, Krishna once again brought her tea to her lips, to the sound of "Oof!" and "Phew!" Was it still that hot? How sensitive to heat could she be?

"Either way, I'll start my investigation tomorrow," the knight continued after a while. "I shall locate the progenitor of all evil, the Mediator, and arrest him myself."

"Progenitor..." Zenos echoed. He'd started as an instrument of evil, and his title just kept getting worse and worse. "Oh, by the way. Why the grudge

against the poor?"

Krishna was silent for a while in response before finally saying softly, "It is not a fun tale. 'Twas the poor who took my mother's life."

Zenos had no response to that.

"My mother was the very picture of kindness. She felt for the people of the slums and their ever-empty bellies, and so she brought them home-cooked meals on a daily basis. Until one day, she was returned to us as a corpse. They said the culprit had been after her wedding ring when they brought her home."

The lamp's flame flickered, casting shadows on Krishna's features.

"My mother saved many in the slums from starvation," the knight continued. "However, not a single one of them tried to save her. And so I made a vow—I would become a flawless hero, and bring the evildoers of the slums to justice, so that there would be no more victims like my mother. My ruthlessness brought me many accolades, and so I rose to become the youngest-ever vice commander of the Royal Guard."

Krishna's expression remained neutral as she continued her story.

"The iron will with which I carry out my duty earned me the moniker 'Iron Rose.' Some ridicule me for it, calling me rigid and inflexible. But I am aware there is another meaning to the alias."

It was the fact her face itself was like an iron mask, Krishna explained.

"Since that day, I have not been able to smile."

"Well then, I shall be back by nightfall," Krishna said. "My thanks for your cooperation, Mr. Zenos."

With that, the knight left to conduct her investigation the next morning. Though he was finally free of her, Zenos still couldn't relax. Was it what she'd told him the night before?

Carmilla, sitting on the edge of the bed with her legs crossed, spoke up. "Do not allow it to dampen your mood overmuch, Zenos. You cannot do anything about it one way or the other."

So she'd heard Krishna's story too, huh? "Yeah, I know."

"Hers is not a particularly unique tale," the wraith continued. "Live for three centuries as I have, and you will inevitably encounter all manner of human interaction."

You're not alive, though, Zenos thought to himself.

"Did you come here just to tell me that?" he asked. "Thanks, Carmilla."

"Huh?! I-I simply cannot stand this gloomy atmosphere!" the wraith stammered before turning away and disappeared into the second floor. What kind of ghost didn't like doom and gloom?

Lily tilted her head, as if she'd just remembered something. "Oh, right! Zenos, what about the flag?"

"Right. Let's take it down for now," he replied.

Since Krishna's arrival, they'd kept a yellow flag as a signal to the demi-humans that they should stay away from the clinic. Someone might've been waiting this whole time for treatment, he thought. Sure enough, as soon as the flag came down, a certain Zophia showed up. She'd injured her fingertips at work, apparently, and needed healing.

"Take better care of yourself," Zenos admonished her. "I can't cure death."

"Sorry, doc," she replied. "I'll try not to worry you. I was more concerned about that flag having stayed up for so long, actually. Was starting to worry something might've happened to you."

"Well, all sorts of things did happen, but I'm fine for now."

"That's good to hear, at least," she said, breathing a sigh of relief before recalling something and lifting her head. "Right! I have some prime info for you."

"What is it?"

"One of my men told me that the knight we talked about earlier, Iron Rose? Yeah, she's been sniffing around asking about a 'mediator.'"

"Huh."

"What's with the nonchalance? That woman's a menace, y'know."

"Uh-huh..."

"C'mon, doc, you've gotta take these threats more seriously. If people find out about this place, you'll be in a world of trouble."

Kinda late for that, he wanted to say, but the front door slowly opened before he had the chance to.

And there stood the golden-haired, blue-eyed female knight. "Excuse me, Mr. Zenos. It seems I have gotten lost," she said. "Could you perhaps tell me the way to the slums? My poor sense of direction is my one weakness, and—huh?"

"Huh?"

Krishna and Zophia locked eyes with one another.

"Galewind Zophia!" Krishna exclaimed. "Why are you at a place like this?!"

"Iron Rose!" the lizardwoman exclaimed back. "Why are you here?!"

"I can explain!" Zenos interjected. "It's not what it looks like!!!"

The sound of Carmilla's voice drifted down softly from the second floor. "You *do* realize you sound like a cheating husband caught red-handed, yes?"

"Explain. Why are you here?" asked Krishna, vice commander of the royal guards, her gun raised.

"That's my line," retorted Zophia, leader of a group of thieves, as she took a low, defensive stance.

"Just hold on, the both of you!" pleaded Zenos, caught in the two's cross fire. "There's an explanation for this!"

"Thus the situation grew even more dire as the unfaithful man desperately attempted to explain himself."

"And you, on the second floor! Knock it off with the weird commentary!!!"

"Um, Krishna?" Lily, who stood behind Zenos, spoke up, trying to think on her feet despite her panic. "This lady, she, um, she got lost."

"She lost her way and wound up *here?*" said the knight in a low voice, her gun

still pointed at Zophia. “What horrible sense of direction she has.”

Pot, meet kettle, Zenos thought.

Zophia caught on and slowly relaxed her posture. “That’s right. Is something wrong? I got lost and came here to ask this guy for directions.”

Krishna took a wary step forward. “Be mindful of that one, Mr. Zenos,” she warned. “That woman is a notorious scoundrel.”

“Funny you say that when *you’re* the one suddenly pointing a gun at *me*,” Zophia countered. “If you wanna throw down, I’d be happy to, but are you sure you wanna do it in here?”

Krishna scanned the room in silence for a moment before quietly speaking up. “I am in Mr. Zenos’s debt. I have no intention of causing trouble here.”

“Then let’s save our fight for later. Now why don’t you put that damn thing down? It’s dangerous, you know.”

“I might as well,” the knight replied, not yet lowering her gun, casting a cold and oppressive aura upon the room. “But first, I have a question for you, Galewind Zophia. *How* is that arm in perfect condition?”

Zophia was taken aback by the question. The tension in the room immediately intensified tenfold.

Expressionless, Krishna slowly closed in on Zophia. “Unbelievable. It has fully healed,” she remarked. “So my eyes did not play tricks on me. And surely ‘twas the Mediator, master of the healing arts, who mended that wound.”

Finally, she’d reached the crux of the matter.

For a moment, Zophia tensed, but quickly recomposed herself. “And what if it was?”

“What do you mean?”

“They heal injured people, and folks appreciate ‘em for it! I don’t see the issue here!”

“What is concerning is the amount of influence this individual has,” Krishna explained. “He could become a leader to the unsavory characters of the slums,

and in so doing, threaten the lives of upstanding citizens. As keepers of order, we cannot sit idly by.”

Staring straight into the barrel of the knight’s gun, Zophia shrugged. “The poor, threatening the peace? It’s always the poor’s fault with you people, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Sure, maybe I’m a crook and in no position to speak,” the lizardwoman said. “But there are bad eggs everywhere.”

“And what are you implying?”

“Word on the street is that the Royal Guard’s investigating child trafficking. Did you know the guy behind it is a noble?”

“What?!”

At the unexpected revelation, Zenos and Lily exchanged glances.

Krishna, too, seemed genuinely surprised. “Nonsense,” she said, her brows creasing slightly. “Only the slums would be festering grounds for such trafficking.”

“He operates everywhere. Makes it harder to track him down. Even I only just recently caught wind of it,” Zophia explained. “And sorry to say, my intel on shady stuff beats yours any day.”

“You expect me to believe this slander? What proof do you have?”

“He’s careful enough to scrub all evidence that could lead to him. You’ll have to catch him in the act. And since your people have been poking their noses into this, he’s moved some of the kids to a special room in his manor. That’s the safest place of all, see.”

Gun still in hand, Krishna took another step closer. “I do not believe you.”

“Of course you don’t. You people never listen to the likes of us.”

The knight scoffed. “Let us hear it, then. Who is this mastermind?”

“It’s Callendore.”

“Lord Callendore? That is even more preposterous,” Krishna said. “The man is

an ardent supporter of education for orphaned children.”

“You’ve gotta scratch past the surface if you don’t wanna be fooled,” Zophia replied, boldly taking a step forward of her own, briefly locking eyes with Zenos before continuing. “But this ‘mediator’ you’re looking for is different. They don’t judge us by our status, what we look like, or what we’ve done. They see a life in need of saving and just do it, and that’s why we all admire them so much. And as much as I hate to admit, if *you* got hurt, they’d save you too. Sure, they expect payment, but unlike you, they don’t label all poor as evil. *Your* justice is just a sham.”

“What did you just say?!” Krishna exclaimed as her finger reflexively shifted to the trigger of her gun.

Before she could fire, however, Zenos stepped in front of Zophia.

“Mr. Zenos! Stand back!” the knight demanded.

“Sorry, no can do,” the healer replied. “Zophia is my patient.”

“Patient?”

Zenos sighed deeply. “Enough already. Don’t make this place into a battlefield. And Zophia, thanks for your concern,” he said, using one hand to hold the lizardwoman back.

“Doc!” Zophia protested, to no avail.

The healer slowly turned to face the knight. “Look, I’m sorry I kept quiet. *I’m* the ‘mediator’ you’re looking for, Krishna.”

Krishna blinked several times at Zenos’s confession, staring in silence for a long moment. “*You’re* the Mediator, Mr. Zenos?” she finally managed.

“That’s right.”

Zenos had wanted to stay on the down-low, and he’d have to come up with a plan now that he’d come clean, but he couldn’t keep still watching people argue over this “mediator” thing anymore.

“Sorry,” he continued. “I didn’t mean to make such a fuss—”

“That is impossible, Mr. Zenos,” Krishna interrupted him. “The Mediator is a

master of the healing arts. You specialize in the protective arts. There is no way you could have mastered both of them at the same time.”

“I haven’t mastered anything, first of all. Second of all, healing and protection spells both enhance the body’s natural functions, so the basics are the same.”

“Never has such a theory come up in my magic lessons,” Krishna said, a hint of sadness in her otherwise expressionless features. “But one thing is now clear as day: you stand with the demi-humans and the Mediator. A shame; I had thought you a respectable individual. I shall find myself another base of operations.”

“Krishna—” Zenos tried to call out as the knight turned to leave, but she didn’t stop, reaching for the doorknob instead.

“Our people need a perfect hero,” she asserted. “And I am no sham.”

After Krishna had left, Zophia joined her hands together in apology. “I’m so sorry, doc! I went and did something dumb...”

“It’s not your fault,” Zenos assured her. “I should be the one apologizing for worrying you.”

“Heh,” said Carmilla, sitting on the edge of the bed all of a sudden. “The second wife has won this round. Having been together longer truly does make a difference, I see.”

Second wife? What the hell?

“Wh-Which number am I, Carmilla?” Lily asked.

“You really don’t have to take her seriously, Lily,” Zenos said.

“You do have to admit tensions *were* rather high moments ago,” Carmilla pointed out.

“And you curiously always stay out of these tense situations,” Zenos grumbled.

“Now what would the fun be in intervening?”

“What do you *mean*, ‘fun’?”

"Besides, the dead should stay out of matters of the living and their beliefs."

"I guess..."

Carmilla spread out her arms and stretched. "Now what will you do, Zenos?"

"Good question," he mumbled.

Zenos had come clean about being the "mediator" to try and defuse the situation, but Krishna hadn't believed him—though in a way, that had at least averted the impending danger. Would she continue her search, he wondered?

After staring quietly at the closed door for a while, Lily hummed pensively.

"What's the matter?" Zenos asked.

"Did Krishna wanna go to the slums, you think?" she replied.

"I mean, probably," the healer mused. "She seems to think the 'mediator' is hiding somewhere out there."

"But she went in the completely opposite direction."

"Is she *that* directionally challenged?" Zenos wondered. He brought his hands to his head, lost in thought. Was that really it? "Wait a minute..."

"Something wrong, doc?" Zophia asked, peering into the healer's face.

"I don't think it's the slums she's headed for."

In the city's aristocratic district, at the end of a street neatly paved with white limestone, stood an elegant estate. Standing in the parlor, bathed in the gentle light of the setting sun, was a stout, middle-aged gentleman.

"I was quite surprised, I'll admit," he said. "I was not expecting the vice commander of the Royal Guard to suddenly pay me a visit."

"Apologies for the inconvenience, Lord Callendore," Krishna said. She sat opposite him, sipping on a cup of tea. "Oof! Hot!"

"Is something the matter?"

"Ah, pardon me. My sensitivity to hot liquids is my one weakness."

The nobleman laughed heartily at this. "So even Lady Iron Rose has a

weakness!" he exclaimed. "This fine tea is imported from the East. I hope it suits your tastes."

"It is indeed quite delectable."

The tea had a rich aroma and an elegant, refined flavor—yet Krishna found herself nostalgically thinking back on the simple tea she'd been served in the ruined town. Gazing out the window, she saw splendid coniferous trees spanning the estate's backyard. Even the simple well beside the flowerbeds seemed much more grandiose than the buildings in that dilapidated area.

"Now then, what can I do for you?" Callendore asked.

"You see..."

Krishna couldn't exactly tell him that she was here due to rumors of his involvement in child trafficking.

What am I doing? she asked herself derisively. It had been the words of a demi-human that had led her to this place (though she'd gotten lost along the way). But that was beside the point.

A hub for trafficking at an aristocrat's home? That was *preposterous*. She couldn't have reported such dubious information to headquarters. Rather, she'd come here simply to confirm that it was nothing but baseless hearsay.

With that in mind, she put the porcelain cup down. "Have you heard of bandits occasionally infiltrating the special district?" she asked instead.

"Yes," Callendore replied. "I've heard of a gang of lizardman thieves."

"You have heard correctly. We plan on strengthening security further."

"That would be appreciated."

"Of course. It is, however, impossible for us to scour every inch of the land. Thus, we hope that the nobility, too, will heighten their awareness of crime prevention practices."

"Hmm. A valid point."

"To that end, I would like to request a tour of your home, so that I may verify the security measures currently in place and identify potential high-risk areas,"

Krishna said, observing Callendore intently.

Galewind Zophia had mentioned that, due to the matter being closely investigated, some of the children had been moved to a special room within the man's estate. Ordinary people could not simply enter a noble's home, and manors tended to have more rooms than one knew what to do with. That would've, in a way, made it a very safe place to keep something hidden.

The middle-aged nobleman's cheerful expression never faltered, however. "What a splendid idea! I do wish you'd told me in advance so I could prepare..."

"I wished to see how it looks on an ordinary day, so I took the liberty of coming by unannounced," Krishna explained.

Callendore laughed heartily again. "I see, I see. Very well, then. I'm free until dinnertime, so I'll be your guide."

"It would be an honor, my lord."

Krishna followed after the man, looking around the estate. She closely observed every room, the kitchen, bathrooms, and even the underground pantry, but found no signs indicating that children were incarcerated anywhere.

Perhaps the rumors were, indeed, baseless.

Likely, there had been no need to check in the first place. Though she was angry and disgusted with herself for having lent an ear to pointless gossip, she was also awash in a sense of relief.

"Well, Lady Krishna? What do you think?" Callendore asked.

"The estate is more diligently guarded than I had anticipated," she mused. "A thief would have a difficult time indeed attempting to breach your security."

Another hearty laugh. "How reassuring to get a stamp of approval from the vice commander of the Royal Guard!"

"Although, well, I suppose if I had to name one thing, the way the guards are distrib—"

Krishna caught herself before she finished her sentence.

"Hmm?" Callendore asked. "Is something the matter?"

"Oh, no, not at all," the knight replied. "Pardon me, but might I perhaps use the restroom before I leave?"

Yet another laugh. "Yes, of course. By all means."

As Krishna excused herself and exited into the hallway, her heartbeat sped up a touch. Though his estate was vast, Callendore was a middling noble at best. Having such tight security was...intriguing.

While that certainly could have been attributed to being a naturally cautious man, there was the odd distribution of guards to consider as well. They'd toured the outer walls of the manor, and Krishna recalled there were notably more guards toward the back than the front.

She opened a window in the hallway and, from there, descended into the backyard below.

Could it be...?

Before her stood a simple hut. Krishna checked her surroundings and, under the cover of the nearby trees' shade, swiftly moved toward it and the well housed within. The holsters at her hips felt empty without her guns, left behind when she'd entered the estate, and she felt strangely vulnerable. She just had to confirm that she was wrong before leaving.

Krishna pushed open the door to the aged hut, then peered into the well. Since the inside was too dark to see, she picked up a pebble and tossed it in. It hit the bottom with a dry *thunk*. No water. A small railing ran along the well's inner walls. It wasn't uncommon to have such a thing in case someone accidentally fell in, but still...

She swallowed hard. In one swift movement, she glided down the railing, finding herself in a small space at the bottom. There were no traces of well water, and piled-up, dried leaves rustled beneath her feet.

Once her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she spotted a robust, padlocked iron door deeper inside.

"This cannot be," she whispered. Krishna stood there a moment, feeling slightly faint, unsure of what to do.

There was no time to deliberate. Technically, Callendore should've been present for an inspection; if he refused, however, it would be nigh impossible to return without solid evidence, even as a member of the Royal Guard. Her current pretext would not work a second time.

This was her only chance.

Granted, it was quite possible this was simply a hidden vault. Opening it without the proper authorization could easily get her in trouble.

"Still," she murmured, slowly stepping closer to the doors. If there really were children imprisoned here, if they really were waiting for a hero to come save them...

Holding her breath, Krishna removed a buckle from her belt, inserting the pointed end into the lock. As a member of the Royal Guard, she'd undergone crime prevention drills and was familiar with how locks were structured, meaning she could pick them to a certain degree. It took her some time, but she was able to pry it open. She gripped the handle and slowly pushed the heavy doors open.

"Oh..." she murmured.

Behind the doors was an iron-barred cell, in which dozens of blindfolded children were imprisoned, their limbs bound by iron shackles.

A trembling girl in front spoke up. "Who's there? Are you someone scary?"

"Worry not," Krishna said reassuringly. "I am told I can look scary due to my stony face, but I am not here to harm you."

The two leaned closer to one another, and the girl's terrified expression painfully gripped the knight's heart as anger toward Callendore and herself swirled deep within her.

But now, Krishna was an eyewitness—and that would be enough to mobilize headquarters.

"You must all be frightened," she said. "Please, wait just a little longer. I will return with help soon."

"Wh-Who are you?" the girl asked.

"Me? I am a hero of justi—"

Bang.

A searing sensation shot up Krishna's side, and she collapsed against the iron bars. Biting back the intense pain, she looked behind her, and there stood Callendore, holding the knight's own magical guns.

"Royal Guard-issue magical guns sure are something else, aren't they?" he remarked. "These bullets are supposed to be for capture, but they sure pack a punch at maximum firepower. I could definitely use these to keep the brats in line." The man's once-placid expression had vanished, replaced with a sadistic smirk. "You were taking your sweet time, so I had a nagging feeling. I came over to check, and what do you know! You found this place! For shame, girl. You really shouldn't be wandering around unattended."

"D-Damn...it all..." Krishna cursed under her breath. She tried to lunge at the nobleman, but he fired again, sending a painful shock up her left arm. "Gah!"

Having realized something was happening, the blindfolded children began to sob.

"D-Do you think you can get away with this?" Krishna hissed.

"Oh, but I do," Callendore replied. "All I have to do is kill you, and everything will go right back to normal. It'll be like no one was ever here. Isn't that right?"

Krishna coughed, fresh blood dripping down her lips. The first bullet had pierced her flank, and the second had severed her arm at the elbow. Her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the floor.

Serves me right, she thought. Krishna had despised the poor, doubted them, oppressed them. But this time, they had spoken true, and in the end, she wasn't able to save a single child. Her justice was, indeed, a sham.

A suitable end for a sham of a hero.

"You're a measly *knight*," Callendore spat, approaching her with cold, emotionless eyes, the guns still in his hands. "You think you can mess with a noble like me?!"

Krishna's body was cold, unable to register even the pain anymore.

"You people should just shut your mouths and keep the rabble in their place, hmm?" He raised the muzzle of the gun, pointing it at her.

Wanting to at least spare the children from being hit by a stray bullet, Krishna gritted her teeth and crawled away from the iron bars.

The nobleman let out a mocking laugh. "*This* is the famed Lady Iron Rose? Pathetic!"

Forgive me.

She coughed.

"Look at you, getting your panties in a twist over a handful of abducted slum brats!" Callendore asked.

Forgive me, everyone.

Blood surged from her lungs.

"I am a noble!" the man exclaimed. "Laws do not apply to me! I get to do as I please! Understand?!"

Forgive me, mother.

A dull pain settled in her chest, and her breaths grew shallow.

"True justice lies in class! You'll pay for your insolence with your life!"

I could not become a true hero.

Her vision grew hazy with tears.

"Hmm?"

Just as she prepared to meet her end, the nobleman's finger stilled against the trigger. The sounds of a commotion could be heard coming from outside.

Suddenly, a guard's cries rang out. "Thieves! Thieves have broken in!"

"What?!" the nobleman exclaimed, raising his head as angry shouts roared in the distance.

Multiple voices coming from what sounded like a scuffle echoed in the confined space. A moment later, someone descended into the well.

"Huh. You're still alive," languidly said a woman with long black hair tied in a

ponytail and sharp, upturned eyes. “Maybe I should’ve come a little later.”

“Galewind...Zophia...?” Krishna murmured, coughing up blood. “Wh-Why...?”

From behind the lizardwoman, another figure appeared.

“Do you *have* to be so reckless? You never disappoint. And I mean that in the worst way possible,” grumbled the figure as he emerged from the shadows, slowly coming into view. “Don’t mind me. Just doing a house call. It’s gonna cost you a *killing*, so you’d better be ready.”

He stood draped in a pitch-black cloak, with harsh words and an exasperated expression, and still...

The man looked like a true hero.

“Wh-Who the hell are you people?!” Callendore demanded in a panic as he pointed the guns at the two strangers who’d suddenly appeared at the bottom of the well.

“Don’t mind me,” Zenos said as he slowly moved closer. “I’m just a plain ol’ shadow healer.”

“What? What did you just say?”

“And I’m just his guide,” Zophia added.

“Do not mock me with this nonsense!” Callendore snapped. “Hey! Someone! I need someone here, now!”

Despite the nobleman’s desperate cries, there were no signs of reinforcements. The sounds of angry men shouting could still be heard coming from above.

“My guys are up there wreaking havoc,” Zophia explained. “No one’s coming to save you right now.”

“Y-You’re a lizardwoman, aren’t you?” Callendore said triumphantly, placing a finger on the trigger. “I see. So you’re that bandit leader people have been talking about!” The nobleman snorted. “Don’t you threaten me, fool! No one’s going to blame me for killing a thief from the slums! Now get on your knees! I’ll

execute you one by one!"



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"Man, I know we sneaked in and all, but I really hate types like him," Zophia remarked.

"Are all nobles like this?" Zenos asked.

"Some of them, I guess." Zophia shrugged as the healer stepped in front of her.

"Mr. Zenos," Krishna gasped between ragged, labored breaths. "B-Be careful... The...the guns, they are...extremely potent without the limiter... Even a master of protective magic like you would be—"

Bang.

Callendore fired the gun in his hand before the knight could finish her desperate warning, the muzzle bursting into flames as a blazing bullet cut through the air and hit Zenos directly.

"Ha! Ha ha ha ha! Idiot!" the nobleman exclaimed. "That's what you get for daring to trespass on the lands of a holy noble, thief!"

"Huh. What do you know," Zenos said. "That did hurt a little."

"What?!"

As the smoke cleared, the figure of the healer rubbing his stomach came into view.

"H-How?! What happened?!" Callendore shouted in bewilderment, firing again and again in rapid succession. Gunshots echoed throughout the cramped space as it filled with white smoke.

Emerging from the thick fumes, Zenos closed the distance between himself and the nobleman.

"Bit trigger-happy, aren't you?" he said. "Mind holding it back a touch? No?"

"What manner of monster are you?!" Callendore asked, stumbling backwards until he touched the iron bars. The cold sensation made him yelp, startling him into dropping the magic guns.

Zenos casually moved to pick one of them up, pointing it at the man.

"What?!" the nobleman exclaimed. "H-How dare filth like you point that thing

at a noble like me?!"

"If you're gonna go around shooting at people, you better be prepared to get shot at," Zenos remarked. "Good thing to keep in mind."

As the healer moved his finger to the trigger, Callendore swiftly raised his hands in surrender and dropped to his knees. "W-W-W-Wait! I-I-I get it! I-I have money! You're thieves, right? Name your price! How much do you want?!"

"I'm no thief. But if you're eager to part with your riches, she'll take however much you want to give," Zenos said, pointing his thumb at Zophia, who stood behind him with her arms crossed.

"I mean, if you're offering," the lizardwoman said. "But you know, I *am* just a guide right now, so it's secondary to what you gotta do, doc."

At those words, Callendore, still on his knees, slunk over to Zenos and pleaded softly, "W-Well, what is it you want, then? I'll do anything, so just lower the guns, all right?"

"Let's see," the healer pondered. "Honestly, I just met you, and you've done me no wrong. Other than, you know, the fact that you just rained bullets on me."

"I-I-I... I-I'm sorry," the nobleman stammered. "I really am. I apologize, so please just let me go."

"Nah."

"Wh-Why?!" Callendore asked, visibly shocked. He glanced over to a Krishna, who barely clung to life. "Oh. I see. I should apologize to that woman too! I-I'm sorry. I just lost my cool a little. It was a heat-of-the-moment thing, all right? You forgive me, don't you?" He hastily bowed to the knight, his pleading gaze fixed on Zenos. "H-How's that?"

"Nope."

"Wh-Why?! I apologized!"

"The fact you think that cuts it is astounding," the healer mused. "But to be fair, I'm no friend of Krishna's. I don't owe her anything. She owes *me*, actually."

"Then... Then what's the issue here?!"

"You're missing the most important apology of all," Zenos said, pointing a gun straight at Callendore's forehead.

"Wh-Wh-Who should I be apologizing to?"

"You really don't know?"

"Of course not!" the nobleman snapped. "Oh! I see! I see how it is. You want to intimidate me into paying you more!"

"Well, okay, then. Since you *really* have no idea, you'll just have to face the consequences of your actions."

"W-Wait! Don't—"

Zenos's gaze briefly shifted away from the panicking Callendore and toward the trembling children behind the iron bars.

"This is for what you've done to my potential customers!"

Bang.

A magical bullet shot forward with a bright flash, hitting the nobleman squarely in the forehead and sending his corpulent body flying.

"Gahhhh!"

He crashed into the iron bars upside down, eyes bulging with shock. Foam bubbled from his wide-open mouth as urine began to leak from his crotch, soaking his face.

"Did you...kill...him?" Krishna rasped weakly as she lay on the floor.

"Nah," Zenos replied, tossing the guns to her. "I had the limiter on. But he's gonna be out of commission for a good while. It's not like it's my place to sentence him or anything. Right?"

"But... I..." She tried to speak, her every breath weaker than the last. "It is...too late for me... P-Please, report...this incident...to headquarters..."

"Pass. Sounds like a pain," the healer replied. "That's *your* job."

"But..." Krishna trailed off, too weak to continue.

Zenos kneeled beside her, inspecting her injuries. "Left arm, flank. Some

internal damage too.”

“Y-Yes...”

“You’re giving up over *this*?” he asked dismissively. “That doesn’t befit you, Lady Iron Rose.”

“Huh...?”

Zenos held his hands over Krishna’s wounds. “Look, it’ll take some effort to patch you up fully, so don’t come crying to me when you get the bill later.”

“What...are you...?”

A white light flowed from the healer’s palms as they hovered over the knight’s injuries, tracing spirals in the air as it enveloped her. Krishna’s exhaustion and sense of impending death began to fade, replaced by a comforting sensation not unlike that of an embrace.

“Vascular damage, bone fractures, crushed soft tissue, necrosis,” Zenos said. “I’m stopping the bleeding, relieving the pain, repairing the damage, and revitalizing the affected areas.”

“Mr. Zenos...” she murmured. “Who...are you...?”

“Quiet. You’re distracting me.”

Illuminated by the white light, Zenos’s serious countenance looked as though it were draped in radiance.

“A...savior. A hero...” Krishna mumbled, the words spilling from her lips.

Zenos gave her a wry smile in response. “I’m nothing quite so grand. Just a back-alley shadow healer.”

The overflowing light shimmered in a rainbow of color, then burst.

“Unbelievable...”

At the bottom of the well, Krishna sat awestruck as her treatment was completed. The missing chunk of her flank and her severed left arm were completely healed.

She flexed her fingers a few times, then repeated in astonishment, “Unbelievable...” Her blue eyes turned to the tired man sitting next to her. “To have such miraculous healing skills... Mr. Zenos, you are the Mediator?”

“I mean, I told you that already,” he pointed out. “Maybe you should try listening to people for a change.”

“It is... It is simply difficult to process. You have mastered not only protective magic, but the healing arts too? Such a thing is unheard of in the realm of magical studies.”

“I keep telling you I’m no master of anything. Healing, protection, enhancements, they’re all tied to enhancing body functions, so the fundamentals are the same.”

“I simply cannot comprehend it. And you say you can use enhancement spells too?”

Zophia, leaning against the wall beside them with her arms crossed, said, “Does that matter? Whether you wanna believe it or not, it happened right before your eyes, so it’s true, no? Maybe this’ll soften that hard skull of yours, Iron Rose.”

“P-Perhaps so, but...” Krishna trailed off for a moment, then bowed her head to Zophia. “My apologies. I was mistaken about this matter. You had the right of it all along.”

“What’s with the sudden humility?” the lizardwoman asked. “Are you feeling sick? Did you hit your noggin’?”

“I did not, but my arm and side were blown off, then restored. It stands to reason I would have changed to a degree,” said the vice commander of the Royal Guard with a hint of melancholy. “I had thought *myself* a flawless hero, but I was mistaken. Now I know that it is people such as Mr. Zenos who are perfect heroes.”

“Uh,” Zenos interjected as he sat on the ground, scratching his head. “What part of me says ‘perfect hero’ to you? As a kid, I scavenged for scraps to just barely get by. I never received any formal education, my party treated me like trash, and I don’t even have a license...”

"M-My apologies. It seems I have touched a nerve," Krishna said, perplexed.

Zenos breathed a small sigh. "There's no such thing as a 'perfect hero.' Healers like me exist because people fighting for something inevitably get hurt. That's all."

"Mr. Zenos..."

"I'm just parroting someone else's words," the healer said, slowly turning to look behind him. "But you know, no matter how badly beat up you got, to *them*, you're undoubtedly a hero."

"Them'...?"

Behind the iron bars, the blindfolded children were fidgeting restlessly. The sudden silence was broken when the little girl in front reluctantly spoke up.

"U-Um, what happened? To the hero of justice?"

Krishna's blue eyes widened, her lip quivering with emotion. "B-But in the end, I could not... I did not..."

Zenos gently tapped the knight's shoulder. "You were the first to spring to action, despite working on shaky info and the fact you were going up against the powerful nobility. Just the thought children might be waiting for help was enough to make you step into the darkness. We just followed after you. If there's a hero in this situation, it's you."

"I... I..." Shakily, Krishna stood, stepping closer to the iron bars. "W-Worry not, everyone. I am unharmed. I will return with help soon, so please, wait just a little longer."

The children erupted into cheers. "Thank you, hero!" one said.

Krishna shut her eyes tightly, pressing a hand to her chest. "Is this how my mother felt?"

"Huh?"

"I have always thought of my mother as nothing but a victim. But... But her eyes, they sparkled each time she went to the slums to deliver food to children..."

"I see. Just as you're now a hero to these kids, she must've been a hero to someone too."

Krishna let out a small groan. All this time, she'd tried to be a perfect hero. And yet...

Yes. This had to be it.

"My mother was...clumsy, scatterbrained, short-tempered, forgetful. She was full of flaws, but still... Still, she was—" Krishna paused, the hand on her chest curling into a fist. "She was, without a doubt, my hero." A single tear rolled down the corner of her blue eyes, followed by many others, soaking into the dried fallen leaves covering the ground.

Zophia, still leaning against the wall, listened closely to the sounds coming from outside the well, then gave a light shrug. "Hey doc, the Royal Guard's probably gonna notice something's up pretty soon."

"Right. Time for us rascals to scram," Zenos said. He followed after the lizardwoman, looking back over his shoulder at Krishna. "Now then, the rest is up to you. We're counting on you, hero. I'll collect my fee later."

"W-Wait a moment, please," the knight called after him, hastily wiping at her tears. "Might I ask you just one question? Why did you help me?"

Krishna had been quite rude to him, after all. Zenos was under no obligation to take such high risks for her sake, she explained. The healer and the thief stopped in their tracks, exchanging glances.

"See, I told him to leave it be," Zophia said. "But he insisted, told me he'd pay a hazard fee if I got him into Callendore's estate. And I may not like you, but I can't refuse a request from the doc."

"You did, Mr. Zenos? Why...?" Krishna asked, looking at the healer.

"Your lodging fee," he replied.

"Huh?"

"You told me you'd pay for the lodgings when I let you borrow a bed, remember? I was on pins and needles, couldn't treat anyone that whole time... It was a huge hassle. I want proper compensation for my services, yes? And if

you do something dumb and get yourself killed, I can't get it, now can I? So make sure you pay me back in full, along with the treatment bill."

Krishna stood there, her blue eyes blinking in befuddlement. All this risk just to collect a lodging fee? He'd braved breaking into a heavily guarded nobleman's residence in the special district for *this*? It made no sense. None at all.

She couldn't tell whether he was actually being serious, but that was just the kind of man he was, wasn't it?

"Pfft... Ha ha..." Krishna sputtered involuntarily, then broke into full belly laughter.

Zenos and Zophia stared at her in a bit of shock.

"Wh-What is it?" she stammered.

"I mean," Zenos said, "you're laughing."

Krishna brought a hand to her mouth and stood there in amazement. She hadn't smiled or laughed once since her mother's passing. At first, it'd been due to her overwhelming anger and sadness. After she'd joined the Royal Guard, it'd been because she'd believed there was no place for laughter until she'd eradicated all evil.

There had come a point where she'd forgotten how to smile at all.

"I see," Krishna said, still bewildered, as she brought a hand to her cheek. "I was...laughing."

"Well, your smile's still pretty stiff," Zenos teased.

"Yeah, kinda just makes you look creepier," Zophia added.

"W-Well, it is only logical," Krishna protested huffily. "I have not smiled in quite some time. Being bad at smiling is my one—no..." The knight caught herself, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye before smiling softly. "One of my many weaknesses."



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Seven days had passed since Krishna's first arrival at the clinic.

"Took you long enough," Zenos grumbled. "Thought you were never gonna pay up."

"My apologies. I have a terrible sense of direction and it took me quite a while to find my way here," Krishna explained without a hint of shame.

"I mean, even for someone that directionally challenged, that's a bit much, no?"

"Well, it is to be expected. I am a woman of many flaws, after all."

"Do you *have* to always find the most infuriating way of brushing things off?"

Krishna offered him a serene smile, less stiff than the one from the week before. "I jest. The aftermath of that incident has kept my hands full, and it was difficult to find the time. Truly, I apologize. To compensate, I shall pay a little extra."

"So, did things turn out okay in the end?"

"We have but taken the first step."

Callendore had confessed to the child abductions, but remained mum on the trafficking routes, and it would still take some time to get to the bottom of it all. Still, the fact some light had been shed on the dark side of the nobility had been gathering significant attention at the heart of the city.

"There will be many more to follow," Krishna concluded.

"You're nothing if not stubborn, so I'm not worried," Zenos remarked. "Also, I seem to remember shooting the hell out of that nobleman..."

"Oh, worry not," Krishna said with a wry smile. "He seems to be quite confused about the whole incident. The man had thought me at death's door, after all. Yet here I am, alive and well." The knight bowed her head deeply to Zenos. "All thanks to you, Mr. Zenos. I am in your debt."

"Honestly, I kinda just showed up last second, so it's not a big deal."

"I could recommend you for an award from the Commander of the Royal

Guard for your contribution, if you wish.”

“Change my name to Sore Thumb too while you’re at it, why don’t you?”

“I thought you might refuse,” she said with a chuckle.

“Um, Krishna?” Lily, standing behind the two, reluctantly interrupted. “So, um, about Zenos...”

“Ah, you mean the matter of the mediator?” Krishna asked, her tone growing quieter. “An agitator, rallying the three main tribes of the slums to bring harm to the good people of this city.” Her blue eyes locked with Zenos’s. “I located no such individual, as per my report to headquarters.”

“I-Is that okay?” Lily stammered.

“Worry not, elf child. I sought a dangerous individual who posed a threat to the citizenry. Regrettably, the mediator I found was a man entirely too concerned with trivialities such as collecting lodging fees.”

“Why do I feel like you’re throwing shade at me?” Zenos asked.

“Well, if I have grown a tad cheeky, it is thanks to your influence,” Krishna said with a small smile. “But just to confirm, Mr. Zenos, are you certain about this? Your contribution to the resolution of this incident was remarkable. Do you not want any record of it?”

“It’s fine,” he insisted. “What if my name’s cursed and writing it down gives you nightmares, y’know?”

“Very well, then. ’Tis a curse I would bear willingly, but if you do not wish for any official records, then there shall be none. My memory, however, shall forever bear witness to the hero tucked away in this corner of the ruined city.”

“It’s not that big of a deal. I just healed some wounds.”

“You did, indeed, mend my injuries,” Krishna agreed, placing a hand on her chest and glancing down for a moment before looking back up with determination in her eyes. “Say, Mr. Zenos?”

“Yeah?”

“I know now that the mediator I was chasing after is no threat, but as Vice

Commander of the Royal Guards, I still cannot simply ignore an individual with as much influence as you.”

“You can, actually. In fact, you absolutely, positively *should*.”

“I cannot. And so, would it perhaps be agreeable if, on occasion...”

“Hmm?”

“I-If, on occasion, I came here to monitor you?” Krishna mumbled, seemingly blushing for some reason.

“No.”

“What?” Krishna said in a slightly higher-than-usual pitch, disappointed. “I-I see... It bothers you... Yes, of course... A woman ought to smile, no...? Of course you would not wish for a woman whose smile is rigid as a mask...”

“The hell are you mumbling about like you’re about to burst into tears? I said I don’t want you to monitor me. If you have a reason, feel free to stop by.”

“R-Really?!”

“Now that’s a mood shift if I’ve ever seen one. Just be sure not to disturb me while I’m working. I have enough annoying patients as is.”

“Of course!”

“Are you sure the Vice Commander of the Royal Guard should be frequenting an illegal business, though?”

“Heh. Fortunately, regulating clinics is the jurisdiction of the Royal Institute of Healing, so I need not report anything.”

“You sure look smug all of a sudden.”

With that, Krishna left with a strange spring in her step. Had she always been this expressive?

“What the hell was that last part about?” Zenos wondered aloud.

Lily grumbled. “Another beautiful rival. Hrmph.”

“And why are you pouting again?”

A voice drifted down from the second floor, clearly trying to suppress

laughter. "Heh heh... I knew it. Another burdensome woman on your plate."

Thus, the quiet clinic on the outskirts of the city acquired yet another frequent visitor and carried on doing business.

Side Story 4: Meanwhile, Aston's Party... (III)

"Finally, we're here," Aston groused. "This is some bullshit. Why's this place so damn far?"

Amid the snow-covered trees, Aston gazed at the expansive cave ahead, cursing under his breath. Emberfoxes, which they'd been tasked with hunting, were said to live in this cavern, deep within the northern forest.

Their carriage had been unable to go any further in, and so they'd had to navigate the thick, snowy forest on foot.

"Bastards making *me* waste my energy on garbage like this."

Aston's party members, following behind him, also began to complain.

"Yeah. Can't even nurse the hangover I got from all that wine," grumbled their support mage, Gael.

"Let's just hurry and get this done so we can hit the nearest town and get wasted again," said Yuma, their archer.

"Yeah," agreed their offensive mage, Andres. "You saw how that girl's eyes lit up at the tavern when we told 'er we were the Golden Phoenix."

Their party's renown for taking down multiple A-rank beasts was such that it'd reached even this remote area.

"Back off, Andres," the archer snapped. "I've got my eye on that one."

"First come, first served, Yuma," the offensive mage replied.

"Yeah, yeah. You two stop bickering over some tavern wench," Aston said. "It's a matter of time before we can get whoever we want, anyway. Even fancy noblewomen."

The group collectively smirked at their leader's words.

As they ventured deeper into the cave, a rising heat began to cut through the chilly atmosphere. Emberfoxes were rare magical beasts that lived far to the

north, and during this season, they were known to stay in their caves and care for their young. Their fur glowed a bright red and got quite hot, and the creatures were at their most aggressive. Local adventurers would stay away from them this time of the year.

Still, they were only ranked B+. For the Golden Phoenix, with multiple A-ranked hunts under their belt, the beasts would be easy pickings.

"Heh," Aston chuckled as they reached the depths of the cave and a pair of emberfoxes came into view. "There they are."

Behind the two adults were several kits, mewling softly. The parents took a low, aggressive stance, growling ferociously as they noticed Aston and his party.

"Psh. They sure are on their guard."

"Well, can you blame 'em? Elite hunters are here for their hides. So, which one are we going for?"

"Young ones have softer fur that sells for more."

"Hah! We may as well get the whole lot," Aston said, drawing the sword at his hip. "Lord Fennel's gonna be pleased as punch."

At that moment, the emberfoxes' fur shone even brighter, wrapping them in crimson flames.

"You better show us a good time," the leader said to the creatures. "Gael, get the protective spells ready!"

"You got it!" Gael replied, quickly drawing a magic circle on the ground and brandishing his talisman. As he chanted, a green light enveloped the party.

"Grr..."

With a roar, the beasts charged forward. Aston tried to slash at one of them, but it swiftly evaded the attack, diving back in from the swordsman's flank.

"Tch! They're speedy little shits, huh?" he grumbled. "But a puny strike like that won't—holy hell, that's hot!"

A searing pain shot through Aston's left arm. He gazed down at his blistering skin, red and swollen.

"What? What the hell is this?!"

"Aaaargh!" Yuma screamed as the other emberfox bit into his shoulder. "Shit! It hurts! Dammit!"

Aston clicked his tongue. "What's he *doing*?!" He was too busy trying to deal with the flurry of fireball attacks from the first emberfox to be of any assistance, anyway. "Hey Andres! Blast these things with your magic, now!"

"I-I'm working on it!" stammered the offensive mage who stood in the rear, his panic rising as he clutched his staff.

His destructive magic was powerful, but readying the magical circle and chanting took time. Normally, Aston would keep attackers at bay while Yuma rained down arrows on them to buy time for Andres's incantation to finish.

"The hell's taking you so damn long?!" Aston shouted as he managed to parry a fireball with his sword—a fine weapon Zenos had fetched from an underground maze Aston had thrown him into when annoyed about something or another.

It'd been the tomb of a great noble, where myriad treasures lay buried...and many ghosts, ghouls, hellhounds and other such dangers lurked. Bringing back even just one piece of loot from there would've earned them a substantial reward from the guild, but they'd all assumed Zenos would've come running back in no time, crying his eyes out. To their shock, he'd returned with not one but seven items, and unharmed at that. They'd assumed he'd gotten lucky.

Most of the haul had been pawned off for gold, or given as gifts to women. This sword, however, had been particularly sharp, and so Aston had kept it for himself. Yet even armed with it he couldn't prevent the fireballs' searing heat from scorching his skin.

"Where's the damn spell, Andres?!" he barked. "Are you asleep or what?!"

"*I said* I'm working on it!" the mage protested. "Maybe *you* should do your damn job and hold out a bit longer!"

"Tch! You useless bastard!" Aston snapped. He'd have to kick Andres from the group soon. The pain in his left arm grew stronger, and he could barely move it at this point.

There was only one explanation for it.

"Damn it, Gael! You *are* casting those protective spells, right?!" he shouted.

"I-I am!" the support mage stammered. "I-I'm just kind of out of it right now."

"Drank too much or what? The hell's wrong with you—"

Yuma's screams echoed through the cavern again.

"Fucking hell!" *Everyone* was useless! They just kept doing worse and worse!

Aston managed to fend off the emberfox that had bitten Yuma. The two beasts, cloaked in flames, growled in warning.

Andres, still brandishing his staff, timidly asked, "Wh-What do we do, Aston?"

"How's that attack spell coming along?!" Aston demanded.

"If we want to bring back their fur, I need to dial back the firepower," the mage explained. "It takes time to adjust."

"Ugh. Shit, whatever. Let's just fall back for now!" the leader commanded.

Aston gritted his teeth as he dragged a weakened Yuma back to the entrance of the cave. Fortunately, the emberfoxes were focused on their young, and so they did not give chase.

"The hell's wrong with you people?" Aston snapped. "Why's this B+ trash giving you all such a hard time?"

"As if you were doing any better," Andres pointed out. "You moved like a damn snail."

"Say that again."

As the leader and the offensive mage were about to come to blows, Gael murmured, "I'm just saying, but..." He trailed off for a moment, swallowing hard. "What if Zenos was telling the truth...?"

Their former healer had claimed he'd instantly mended their wounds as soon as they got injured. Not only that, he'd used protective and enhancement spells to ensure they'd hardly ever incur any wounds in the first place.

"No way in hell," Aston spat. "What are you, drunk?"

"R-Right," Gael stammered, nodding repeatedly as if to convince himself.

"That wouldn't be possible. Sorry."

Aston, grimacing from the pain in his arm, came to a realization and muttered, "Though maybe we should bring a healer on board. Not some useless nobody like Zenos, but an actually skilled one."

There was still time until their deadline, after all. They'd gotten a decent down payment, so they could hire someone on short notice if needed.

Glory was within reach. They couldn't afford to falter now.

"All right. We'll head back to the nearest town and talk it over with the guild," Aston said. "And you, Gael—no more drinking, you hear?"

"Uh, yeah."

The sounds of impending doom crept ever closer to the party.

Ten days had passed.

"That sure took a long-ass time," Aston grumbled as he stood once more at the entrance of the forest cave, clicking his tongue in frustration.

They'd tried to hire an interim healer at the nearest town, but due to the sudden nature of their request, they hadn't been able to find anyone, and the deadline set by Lord Fennel had drawn closer and closer. In the end, they'd had to push the guild hard, until finally a healer who happened to be visiting a nearby village had been referred to them.

"We're counting on you to make yourself useful," Aston said.

"Please don't expect too much," said Umin, the female healer now in their employ. She wore round glasses, and her blue hair, lightly sprinkled with snow, fell to around shoulder length. "I usually work as a healer in the capital, so I've never really put my adventurer's license to use. And I'm not sure why a prestigious party like the Golden Phoenix, known for defeating even A-ranked monsters unscathed, would need the support of a middling healer like me."

"Look, a lot's happened, all right?" Aston groused.

"H-Hey, healer lady," Gael called out. "Is Yuma gonna be okay?"

"You're talking about the archer, right?" Umin asked, her gaze downcast.
"He'll live, but I doubt he'll be adventuring again."

"Uhm, Aston?" Andres spoke up. "What are we gonna do?"

"We take down our marks, grab the spoils, and go," Aston replied. "What, are you getting cold feet, Andres?"

"N-No, I just..."

Lord Fennel had wanted emberfox fur to craft a scarf for his daughter's birthday. Given how long it'd take them to travel back, they had no choice but to get those hides today. Their initial plan, though, had been to dispatch the creature quickly, then enjoy a lavish celebration in a town somewhere on the way back to the capital.

Aston's irritation had reached its peak. "Whatever. Yuma wasn't good enough for the illustrious Golden Phoenix, anyway. Even if we're down an archer, Gael can handle defense, I'll chip away at it, and Andres can finish it off with magic. No issues there."

"Well, I mean, yes, but..." Andres mumbled.

"And try not to take the whole damn year with your magic this time."

"I know, all right? I've prepped in advance."

"And you, Gael. I sure hope you haven't been drinking."

"N-No," the support mage assured him, nodding repeatedly as he clutched his talisman. "I'm sober."

Cautiously, the party advanced deeper into the cave. Before they could reach the emberfoxes' lair, however, the pair of beasts approached, growling fiercely at the group. They'd likely recognized the returning hunters' scents.

The creatures wasted no time in striking first.

"Shit!" Aston hissed, just barely managing to parry the oncoming flurry of fireballs. Fortunately, the sword Zenos had found at the underground labyrinth could deflect even flames; that'd been one of the few times that useless piece

of trash had contributed anything of worth at all. “Gael! Stop dragging your damn feet!”

“Right! I’ve got this!” the support mage replied, drawing a magic circle and brandishing his talisman, enveloping the party in a green light.

With that, they could breathe a little easier. Now all they had to do was wear down their opponent bit by bit.

But things weren’t going as planned.

“Gaaah!” Andres cried out, writhing in pain on the ground after taking a direct hit from a fireball.

“Moron! What the shit are you doing?! Get the hell up!” Aston barked, glaring at the offensive mage from the corner of his eye. Protection magic or no, Andres had been too careless.

Aston tried to slash at the emberfoxes, but his attacks were easily dodged. His sword couldn’t touch the creatures at all. “Fuck! Why can’t I hit ‘em?!”

Just one hit. Even one hit from this sword would’ve inflicted significant damage. But despite the fact he was completely sober, his movements remained sluggish.

“Um, excuse me!” the healer Umin shouted from the rear as Aston breathed heavily, readying his sword. He looked back to see her kneeling next to the fallen Andres. “Are you going to continue?!” she asked. “This man’s in deep trouble if he doesn’t receive prompt treatment!”

“What was that?” Aston asked.

The part of Andres’s chest that had taken a direct hit from the fireball was red and swollen, and parts of it looked charred. He lay motionless on the cold ground, his breaths shallow.

Swinging his blade, Aston put some distance between himself and the emberfoxes. Given how slow his attacks currently were, taking down the beasts by himself would be too challenging. He needed Andres’s offensive spells, no matter what. Insisting on fighting like this would’ve just worn them out.

“Shit,” he hissed, gritting his teeth as he stepped back.

Back at the entrance to the cave, Aston gripped Gael by the collar.

"Hey! What the *hell* are you doing?! Are you fucking shitting me?! I don't wanna hear any bullshit about how you're feeling sick today!"

"N-No, I mean, I don't know either..." the support mage stammered.

"His protective spell was definitely active," Umin remarked as she used healing magic on Andres. "If it hadn't been, this man would've died on the spot."

"Yeah, but he still ate shit, so what's the point?" the leader spat. "Aren't you a healer? Patch him up already!"

"Don't act like it's so simple. I have to adjust the spell's potency to the severity of his injury. I've provided emergency first aid, but we need to take him to a treatment facility equipped with a recovery magic circle immediately."

"What? We don't have time for that crap. Heal him up, right here, right now."

"Do you even understand what you're asking me to do? Even a high-ranking healer wouldn't be able to heal him fully on the spot like this. Only a select few healers of the highest caliber or the saintess might."

Aston stood there silently as a singular name flashed in the back of his mind. The name of a man he'd once expelled from the group. There was no denying the truth anymore.

The party had only ever suffered injuries in battle *after they'd kicked that man out.*

He'd supported them with protective and enhancement spells, and healed them as soon as they took any damage. Zenos had made that abundantly clear. They'd been the ones who'd chosen not to believe him.

"You've gotta be kidding me..." Aston muttered as he felt a momentary cold shiver running down his spine. "Hey. Umin, right? You think someone without a license can use top-tier healing spells?"

"Um, it's unlikely. Why? Do you know someone like that?"

"N-No," the leader stammered, shaking his head. What was he saying? There was no way slum filth like Zenos would've been able to do that. Aston was

overthinking things. That guy had never been more than their party's personal slave.

One thing was certain, however: they would no longer be able to complete this quest on time.

"Fuuuck!"

Aston's angry scream echoed hollowly across the snowy plains.

"I was a fool to expect anything of you. Do not dare show your faces before me again," said the message from Lord Fennel that Aston and his group, all badly battered, received upon their return to their base at the capital.

Aston felt as though he could hear the ground crumbling beneath his feet. "W-Wait," he pleaded with the messenger who'd brought the letter. "Let me speak to Lord Fennel directly. I can explain—"

The messenger shook his head. "The young mistress's birthday has passed. What's there to explain at this point?"

"I-I understand, but—"

"Sir Aston. Lord Fennel isn't simply angry due to your failure to complete the request. The schedule should've allowed for at least a little bit of leeway. You could've contacted him sooner if completion wasn't possible. If you'd done at least *that* much, Lord Fennel would've been spared the shame of wishing the young mistress a happy birthday empty-handed."

"Th-That's..." Aston clenched his fist and remained rooted to the spot. He'd had an opportunity to cozy up to an important aristocrat. Admitting that he'd been unable to complete the mission hadn't been an option. Still, he swallowed the words forming in his throat. "You're...wrong."

"Wrong about what?"

"We were doing great. Just needed a bit more time and that emberfox would've been in the bag."

"And what are you implying?"

"W-We had a traitor in our party," Aston said with a serious expression, earning a puzzled look from the messenger.

Yeah, he thought. Just blame it all on him.

"Everything was going just fine. We were about to deal the finishing blow when that bastard Zenos interfered all of a sudden."

"Zenos?" the messenger asked, tilting his head. "How odd. I've never heard of anyone by that name being part of the Golden Phoenix."

Damn! That's right...

Aston had made sure that there were no public records of Zenos's participation in his group.

"So who exactly is this Zenos?" the messenger asked.

"Oh, I misspoke," Aston corrected himself. "I meant Yuma. Yuma, our archer, betrayed us."

"Hey! Aston!" said Gael, who'd been watching the exchange from behind Aston, before gripping the leader's shoulder. "What are you saying?!"

"Shut up!" Aston snapped. "He was useless! That's just the facts!"

The messenger gently intervened before the two came to blows. "I am sorry for your troubles, but your party's issues should be resolved internally. They're none of Lord Fennel's concern."

"Y-Yes, but..." Aston moved his hand away from Gael, turned to the messenger, and bowed his head deeply. "Please, just give us one more chance!"

Why the hell do I have to bow not just to a nobleman, but to a stupid messenger too? he groused internally, though he dared not admit it aloud and instead kept his head down.

He'd done so well until now. From childhood, Aston had navigated the world using others as stepping stones. He was on the brink of reaching the top; there was no way he could fail now!

"I've heard two of your party members are gravely injured and hospitalized," the messenger said. "What manner of opportunity do you expect us to grant a

party that has not only failed to complete a request, but is also down to half its members?"

"That won't be a problem," Aston assured him, his head low and his tone insistent. "We'll be replenishing our ranks with elite members soon. Please, just one more chance! We won't fail you next time!"

The messenger took a step back. "I will convey your words to Lord Fennel, at least."

"You have my deepest thanks!" Aston said in an unusually cheery tone before seeing the messenger off.

Once he was gone, Gael once again confronted his group's leader. "Hey! What the hell's your problem? Why'd you say that? You know how bad our situation is!"

They could've asked the guild for new members, yes. Attracting talented people, however, required a significant amount of money. And thanks to their previous mismanagement of their assets, compounded by Lord Fennel's funding having been cut off, they were quickly running out of funds.

"Wait. I get it," Gael said. "You're gonna recruit based on the Golden Phoenix's reputation, aren't you?"

"That won't work right now," Aston replied. "I hate to say it, but word of our failure to kill the damn things has spread like wildfire through the guild. Gonna be hard to use our name as leverage for a while."

Gael panicked. "So what you're saying is, we're screwed."

"Chill, Gael. We're missing someone, remember? A certain slave."

The mage knitted his brows. "You mean Zenos? But he's—"

"And? How much you wanna bet he's dying to come crawling back to us? Dude's gonna cry tears of joy the second I say something."

Aston didn't think of Zenos as the party's savior, nor did he want to. Still, he couldn't deny that things had been going swimmingly when the healer was around. Now that everything had gone to hell in a handbasket, they had to go back to basics: they'd use Zenos to their hearts' content and salvage their

tarnished reputation.

The Phoenix would rise from the ashes.

A deep, rumbling chuckle escaped Aston's throat. "Oh, well. Be grateful, Zenos. I'm coming to fetch you myself, after all."

Chapter 4: Reunion

Adventuring, by nature, took a great deal of time and effort.

In order to complete guild missions, one needed proper equipment, as well as plenty of supplies and items. Adventurers had to traverse fields and mountains to reach their destination, and were often exhausted by the time they got there. The risk of another party having already completed the mission always weighed on their minds, and not everyone could afford the luxury of hiring carriages or porters.

And that had been why Aston had thought of bringing a poor man into the party. In Herzeth, the ruling class reigned absolute, and the destitute lived in the margins of society. The downtrodden were seen as less than human and could be endlessly exploited for free labor.

Having someone like that in a party would harm its reputation, of course, hence why most wouldn't dare to go to such lengths. Aston had figured that if he could ensure their existence remained a secret, have them camp outside alone, eat apart from the others, then get rid of them once they'd made a name for themselves, everything would've been fine.

With that in mind, he'd been strolling through the slums when a lone boy sitting on the side of the road had caught his eye. His frail frame had been draped in a large black cloak, which had made him look like he blended in with the shadows.

Aston had immediately understood the kid was homeless.

"Hey," he'd called out. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," the boy had replied with vacant eyes.

"Well, if you don't have anything to do, why not come adventure with me? You don't have a home, do you?"

After a moment's pause, the young man had lifted his head, seeming a little surprised. "I heard poor people can't be adventurers."

"Normally, yeah. But to me, class doesn't matter as long as you have the talent and motivation. Are you good at anything?"

The boy had thought about this. "I know a bit of healing magic," he'd said after a moment.

Aston had managed to suppress a snort. A slum rat knew healing magic? Please. Although it wasn't like he'd expected the kid to be much of a fighter in the first place. He'd just wanted a slave. So he'd humor the kid, just this once.

He'd nodded. "Perfect. Our party happens to be in need of a healer."

I gave Zenos somewhere to belong, Aston thought to himself. He ought to be grateful forever.

"Hey, Aston," Gael called out, shaking the swordsman from his reverie. "What's on your mind?"

"Huh?" Aston mumbled. "Oh, nothing." He cast an annoyed glance at the unpaved, rough ground. The two had come to the slums to get Zenos to rejoin their group. "Dammit, I didn't ever wanna come back to this filthy-ass place."

As he walked beside the grouchy Aston, Gael looked around, perplexed. "Doesn't the air around here feel different, though?"

The swordsman pondered this for a moment. Indeed, the oppressive air that had once hung over the place had pretty much lifted, replaced by the sounds of lively chatter. What had happened here?

Puzzled, Gael continued, "But, uh, Aston? What if Zenos is dead in a ditch somewhere?"

"Well, that's the thing..." While Aston had originally hoped for exactly that, since he hadn't wanted the knowledge that a kid from the slums had been with the Golden Phoenix to spread, things had taken a turn. Now, if Zenos was already a goner, his plan to restore his party to good graces would be dead on arrival, and there would be no rebirth from that. But he remembered something. "He might still be alive. I gave him a gold coin the day I kicked him out."

"Right, yeah," Gael mused. "He might've managed to survive off of it."

"I'm so generous," Aston added sarcastically. "Brings a tear to my eye."

He'd considered keeping Zenos's trap shut by relieving the healer of his heartbeat, but the guy had always been weirdly resilient. If he'd managed to escape, he might've opened his mouth just as their party's reputation soared, so Aston had figured paying him hush money and kicking him out was best. And, as it turned out, he'd been right.

So he'd not only gotten Zenos out of this rotten place, he'd even given the bastard an entire gold coin. Surely the healer's gratitude was such that he'd come running back if asked, tail wagging and all.

After a solid bit of laughter, Gael looked around them. "Y'know, the slums are huge. How do we find him? I doubt anyone would know of him, even if we asked."

"True, but I have an idea," Aston said with a smug grin.

"An idea?"

"You've heard about the territorial conflict between the three major demi-human tribes in the slums, yeah?"

"I have. Lizardmen, werewolves, and orcs, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. So, we just gotta ask the leaders of those factions about him. That lot has info from all over the slums, so if there's a new arrival, they'll hear about it right away, probably. That'll be way faster than searching for him ourselves."

"Ooh, good thinking, Aston."

"Yeah, I know." He'd always been good at using others to suit his needs, after all. *And that includes you, Gael.*

The two approached a lizardman walking down the street.

"Hey," said Aston. "Can you take us to your leader? I need a job done."

"Who the hell are you and where did you come from?" the lizardman asked.

"I'm nobody suspicious, just the leader of a Gold Class adventuring party."

The lizardman stared silently at Aston's adventurer license for a moment before saying, "Follow me," and walking off. They passed several streets before

reaching a roofed plaza. “Hey, boss. This human says he has a job that needs doing.”

“A job?” languidly said a woman with striking green eyes, lounging on a couch in the back with her legs crossed. “I’ve got an appointment with the doc soon, so I’m kinda busy here...”

She looked dignified, and it was clear she had a lot of influence as one of the three major leaders. And besides, she was attractive.

Maybe when I’m a noble, I’ll add her to my harem, Aston mused. I wonder what it’s like to have a demi-human woman. Can’t wait to find out.

With a serious expression, Aston took a step closer to her. “You the boss around here?” he asked. “I’m the leader of the Gold Class adventuring party known as the Golden Phoenix. Name’s Aston.”

“Well, that was a whole lot of words,” the woman mused. “You don’t have to take all day just to introduce yourself, you know. Cut to the chase. What do you want?”

“I’m looking for someone.”

“And that is?”

“A man named Zenos,” Aston explained. “He should’ve arrived in the slums about two months ago. He’s a human, with black hair and—”

Before he could finish his sentence, the woman burst into laughter, doubling over. “Ah ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“What the...?” Aston mumbled, raising his eyebrows.

The woman rubbed the corners of her eyes before continuing, “I see, I see. So you’re the infamous party of dumbasses that kicked the doc out. I *did* think you looked pretty damn stupid at first glance.”

“Wh-What did you just say!?” Aston instinctively reached for his sword, making all of the surrounding lizardmen stand up at once.

Their leader signaled for them to stand down, waving her hand dismissively. “Get lost. The man you’re looking for doesn’t have time for the likes of you.”

"What...?" Aston looked on in shock, his hand still on his sword's hilt. "Y-You know Zenos? How the hell—"

"Doesn't matter. Out, now. I'm not wasting any more time with you idiots."

"What?! Do you even know who I am, you—"

Again Aston couldn't finish his sentence. The lizardwoman stood up in a smooth, slow motion, and said, "You're the one who doesn't seem to know who I am."

Goose bumps spread across the swordsman's skin in an instant, and an oppressive, cold feeling of dread, very different from what he got when facing ferocious magical beasts, settled in the very pit of his stomach. It hit him suddenly what it meant to be a leader in the slums, where survival of the fittest was the law.

Aston clicked his tongue. "I've wasted my time," he groused, wanting to at least get one last jab in before retreating.

On his way out, he heard the woman's final words coming from behind him. "Oh, by the way... Mess with the doc and you'll regret it. Mark my words."

Aston and Gael kept their mouths shut as they left the lizardmen's camp.

As soon as they returned to the main street, Gael spoke up. "Hey, what the hell was that, Aston?"

"Do I look like I know?" the swordsman grumbled, still feeling a lingering chill in his gut. "Dammit, what's happening here?"

A major player in the slums knew of Zenos, which was strange enough. But she also seemed to harbor some sort of respect, or perhaps even admiration for him—

Nah, no way. That couldn't be right.

"Wh-What now?" Gael asked, bewildered.

Aston forced himself to speak calmly. "Don't sweat it. There are still two of the three major factions left. Let's go to the werewolves' turf next."

"Huh. So you're the stupid party that kicked Sir Zenos? Personally, I think you guys are better off dying in a ditch somewhere and coming back as sewer gnats," said Lynga, leader of the werewolves, when Aston and Gael visited her tribe's hideout. Her features were well-put together, her ash-colored beast ears were twitching, and her words were frosty and dripping with venom.

"Y-You know Zenos too?!" Aston asked.

"Yup. And I know he has no time to waste on sewer gnats," she said. "Now get out, if you know what's good for you."

"Wh-What was that?!"

"You wanna throw hands?" she challenged, staring down at them coolly.

Between her gaze and the intimidating aura of the surrounding werewolves, Aston and Gael had no choice but to turn on their heels.

A sharp remark came from behind them as they left. "Mess with Sir Zenos and you mess with us werewolves," she warned. "Get that through your thick, stupid skull."

Without another word, Aston and Gael left.

"Wh-What the hell is happeniiing?!" the swordsman whined.

"The hell should I know...?" the mage mumbled.

Back on the main street, the two held their heads in confusion. Nothing made sense anymore. Two of the three major demi-human leaders held Zenos in high regard. It was as though they were trapped in a nightmare.

"Anyway," Aston said, straining to keep his breaths even. "We've gotta find Zenos if we wanna get anywhere. Let's try the last tribe—the orcs."

"Ooh. So you're the morons that kicked Zenos out," said the female orc chieftain with chestnut-colored hair and fiery red eyes, sitting in the cave within the rocky mountain where the orc tribe resided. "Why look for him now? Kinda late for that, no?"

Aston and Gael remained silent, having no strength left to retort. Surrounded

by a great number of orcs, the two decided to stay quiet and turn back.

From behind them a familiar warning echoed. “Hey. Mess with Zenos and you’ll answer to us. Got it?”

Back on the main street, the two stood in silence for a moment.

“Aston...” the mage began.

“Not a word, Gael,” the swordsman interjected, teeth gnashing on his fingernails. Based on the reactions they’d gotten, they could surmise that Zenos had somehow gained the admiration of the heads of all three major powers in the slums. Logically, though, that made no sense. “I see...”

“See what?”

“Must be a different guy,” Aston mused. “Maybe there’s some really powerful dude named Zenos out there. That’d explain it.”

“Oh, that would do it!” Gael exclaimed. “Wait, but they all talked about him being kicked from a party.”

“Even then, we can only assume this other guy’s situation is coincidentally similar. The Zenos those demi-human women spoke of must be powerful. The one *we’re* looking for is our party’s slave.”

“I mean, I guess that’d make sense, but...”

Aston refused to consider another possibility—that *their* Zenos had been powerful all along. To him, that was unthinkable; he could never admit someone he’d looked down on and taken under his wing was now a renowned figure in the city’s underbelly. Zenos was subservient, always grateful just to belong, and tirelessly handled menial tasks for no compensation. That was Aston’s view of him.

“Either way,” the swordsman said, “let’s go find him.” Surely once they did, Zenos would come running back to the Golden Phoenix, wagging his tail. After all, Aston was offering somewhere for Zenos to belong again after he’d lost his place in their party.

But they were still missing one crucial component: the healer’s whereabouts. Were they going to have to search every nook and cranny of the slums? Just

imagining the monumental effort it'd take made Aston dizzy.

A wide-eyed Gael snapped the swordsman out of his reverie when he pointed further down the path and said, “H-Hey, Aston! Look!”

“Huh?” said the swordsman, slowly turning around.

Behind him, a man draped in a jet-black cloak was about to cross the street.

Aston’s breath caught in his throat.

“Zenos,” he whispered.

There he was at last.

Aston and Gael exchanged glances, then started running.

Zenos, meanwhile, seemed unaware of their presence. Following close behind him was a dainty young girl, presumably an elf.

“This way, Lily,” Zenos said.

“Right!” the young girl replied. “I don’t remember the way too well...”

“The slums *are* kind of a maze, huh?” the healer mused.

“You sure know your way around, though. Is it because you used to live here?”

“Well, I lived further ahead, but I did come by this area too. Weren’t you also living on the streets a while back?”

“I-I was, but...”

“Hey!” Aston, growing impatient with the healer’s lack of notice, called out. “Zenos!”

The healer stopped in his tracks. His eyes narrowed in slight surprise. “Well, I’ll be. Aston, and...Gael?”

Standing firm, Aston raised his voice. “That’s right. And you’ve been surviving, I see. Tenacious as a cockroach.”

“What brings you here?” Zenos asked.

The swordsman burst into laughter. “Why, indeed! C’mon, I don’t need to spell it out for you, do I?”

“Guess not,” Zenos replied as he began to cross the street. “Anyway, I’m busy, so...”

“Hey! Wait!” Aston called out in a panic. “Wait, I said! It’s you, all right?! You!”

“What?”

“We came looking for you! I came all the way here to see *you*, personally, and you have the gall to try and leave!”

“You were looking for *me*?” Zenos asked, genuinely surprised. “Why?”

Annoyed, Aston crossed his arms. “You should be grateful. We’re bringing you back into the Golden Phoenix.”

The healer stared blankly at his former party leader. “No, thanks,” he deadpanned.

“Hah! I knew it. It’s not every day you get such a great offer. Bet you’re so happy you could cry, and—wait, whaaaaaaat?!” Aston’s confidence quickly turned to disbelief, and he took an aggressive step closer. “Am I hearing things? Because I thought I heard you refuse.”

“I did refuse.”

“Why? Why would you?!”

“Why *wouldn’t* I? You treated me like crap and didn’t pay me fairly. What’s in it for me? Nothing, that’s what. Who in their right mind would accept?”

“That’s not the point!” Aston protested. “*I’m* the one inviting you!”



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Annoyed, Zenos scratched his head. “Well, if you insist, I might consider joining you on a quest, but you’d better pay me properly.”

“What?”

“I don’t work for free anymore. Each treatment will run you fifty thousand wen. Serious injuries are a million a pop. Triple the price if I use protective and enhancement magic. Take it or leave it.”

“Wha... What did you just say?!” Aston gritted his teeth. Their party no longer had that kind of money. “You cocky bastard. You don’t even belong here, do you?”

Sure, there was a renowned man of the same name in the slums who commanded the demi-humans’ respect, but surely that couldn’t be the man who stood before Aston now. There was no way *this* guy was an elite-level healer, able to mend injuries instantly *and* use his own system of protective and enhancement magic, the swordsman assured himself.

And as he did, several demi-humans walked by.

“Oh, Dr. Zenos! Hello!” one said.

“Hey. How’s your leg?” Zenos asked.

“Perfect, thanks to you! Your magic took care of it in no time.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, you know. And working late is fine and all, but try to take care of yourself.”

“Yo, Zenos,” said another. “Thanks for patchin’ me up the other day. I’m bringin’ some good meat next time as thanks.”

“That’s nice of you,” the healer replied. “The stuff you brought last time tasted great.”

Aston and Gael exchanged glances. “What the...”

Passing demi-humans greeted Zenos one after the other. Indeed, a man named Zenos was beloved by the tribes of the slums. But surely not the one before them— “Uh, Aston?” Gael said. “I think our Zenos is *the* Zenos.”

The swordsman said nothing, unable to respond when confronted with a

truth he'd feared and hadn't wanted to admit: that the Golden Phoenix's legendary ability to fight without so much as a scratch had been all thanks to Zenos.

"Hey, Aston!" Gael blurted out in a panic. "You're the one who said we should kick him! Now what?!"

"Shut it!" Aston snapped. "You guys were all too happy to agree!"

The two started arguing.

"They're really loud for how old they are," Lily mused.

"Who are you calling old?!" Aston snapped.

"You're right," Zenos said. "Let's get going, Lily."

"Hey!" Aston called out between ragged breaths, glaring at the healer. "Don't you dare walk away from me!"

"What? Was there something else?" Zenos asked, casting an unimpressed glance over his shoulder at the swordsman.

"Are you really not coming back?"

"That's what I said. I like it here."

"Yeah, but *I'm* asking you to come back!" Aston protested. "I took you under my wing! Gave you a place to belong! *I've*—"

"Sorry, Aston. Too little, too late."

With that, Zenos turned his back to the swordsman and began to walk away with the dainty elf girl beside him, surrounded by the adoring demi-humans chatting him up at every turn.

Left standing alone, Aston stared at the healer's receding back, clenching his trembling fists. "Don't ignore me," he muttered quietly, his gaze downcast. "You think you're so great because this trash admires you? I'm gonna be a *noble* someday, you bastard. And you dare, you..."

Slowly, Aston pulled his blade from its sheath, then took off running after the black-cloaked man.

"Get the fuck back here, Zeno—"

Bang.

A powerful blow to his side sent Aston tumbling to the ground. He managed to lift his head as he held his stomach in pain. Before him stood a beautiful, blue-eyed blonde, gazing coolly down at him, a pair of magical guns in her hands.

"You have the *audacity* to attempt to attack a man right in front of me?" she asked. "As a member of the Royal Guard, I cannot allow such a thing."

"Th-The...Royal Guard?" Aston stammered. That was the force responsible for maintaining order in the city, he knew.

Zenos stopped walking and turned around. "Huh. Why are you here, Krishna?"

"I came to see you," she replied. "I cut my fingers, you see."

"You could've literally just spat on that and it'd have healed," Zenos deadpanned.

"W-Well, I *am* paying for your services, so I fail to see the problem here."

"Fine, fine. But I was doing a house call, you know. I don't actually live around here."

Krishna chuckled. "I was lost."

"Shocking and flabbergasting."

"However, thanks to that, I happened upon you. You should be thankful for my poor sense of direction."

"You have no shame whatsoever."

Aston recognized the name. Krishna. Word had it she was an incredibly skilled woman, one who'd solved countless cases, and was the youngest person ever to be appointed vice commander of the Royal Guard. Yet here she was, all buddy-buddy with Zenos.

The man had the admiration of the big shots of the slums *and* was tight with a high-ranking official of the Royal Guard.

"Who...the hell...are you, Zenos...?" Aston croaked, struggling to his feet. It

was evident from his grimace that he was in a lot of pain from the wound on his side.

Krishna stepped closer to the swordsman. “Now then, I will be handing you over to the nearest station for attempted assault. And out in the open too.”

Aston immediately pointed at Gael, who stood behind him. “It wasn’t my fault! I didn’t wanna do it! That man made me!”

“What? Aston, what are you even—”

As soon as Krishna’s gaze shifted to the surprised mage, Aston sprinted away, ducking into a narrow alley nearby to avoid getting shot in the back.

Don’t you ignore me, Zenos...

A dark, indescribable feeling swirled in the pit of his stomach.

It’d been a few days since Zenos’s chance meeting with Aston. Life in the ruined town hadn’t changed, and today was yet another ordinary day.

“Hmm, this jam’s pretty good, isn’t it?” Zophia said, licking the amber-colored confection off her fingertips.

Lynga chuckled, puffing out her chest proudly. “Of course it is. I made it with boiled apples.”

“Don’t talk like you made it all on your own,” Loewe, who sat beside the werewolf leader, interjected. “I helped. A *lot*.”

“Nope,” Lynga said. “All you did was lug that heavy pot around. I made it pretty much by myself.”

“With *my* apples,” Loewe pointed out. “Also, who was it that mistook salt for sugar, again?”

“Hey! You promised not to tell!”

Zophia listened in on the other two while intently observing the jam-filled jar. “The head of the werewolves and the chief of the orcs, capable of scaring anyone into submission, making jam together. Seriously, what happened to you two? Did too many drugs and lost your minds, or...?”

"Um, rude," Lynga replied. "I don't do drugs."

"Orcs are strictly forbidden from using that stuff," Loewe remarked.

"So what the hell's happening, then?" Zophia asked.

Lynga and Loewe exchanged glances.

"It bothers me that you took all the glory during that incident with the noble," Lynga said.

"Yeah," Loewe agreed. "Lynga and I were of no use to Zenos."

"Huh. So you two conspired to try and win him over with a little bit of domestic charm, is that it?" Zophia slowly stood up, breaking into full laughter. "Ha ha ha! A commendable effort! But do you think you can one-up me with mere jam? Because the doc *personally* came to me to escort him to that manor, you know."

"Ugh!"

"Damn, I don't have a response to that..."

"In the battle for the doc's affections, I'm one step ahead! Ha ha ha!"

"I-I'm the one who..." Lily stammered, trailing off.

Carmilla chuckled. "Hee hee... How unsightly the women's battlefield is. 'Tis sweeter than the jam..."

"You guys know I can hear you, right?" Zenos said, exasperated, as he stood from his chair. Since things had slowed down, he moved to the dining table in the back of the clinic. "Don't talk about people right in front of them. Also, why do you keep coming over here to eat like that's supposed to be a thing?"

The demi-humans all looked at him apologetically.

"We discussed this between us," Zophia explained. "We've been trying to visit less often to not inconvenience you, doc."

"Yeah. Honestly, we wanted to come every day," Lynga added. "But we've decided to hold back and do it twice a week."

"Yup," Loewe agreed. "We do have to take care of our guys every now and then, after all."

Zenos took a seat at the front of the table. “Well, as long as you don’t get in the way while I’m working,” he said. “Hey, Lily, is there still any tea left? Can I have some?”

“Sure!” the elf replied cheerfully.

The healer took a sip of the tea, and grabbed a piece of bread slathered with jam. “Huh. That’s pretty good, actually.”

“Doc! Don’t tell them that!” Zophia said. “It’ll go to their heads!”

“Y-Yesss!” Lynga exclaimed, her wolf ears twitching. “I’m so happy!”

“We win this round,” Loewe said, covering her eyes. “I’m getting a little emotional...” Wait, was she crying?

Carmilla chuckled again. “A struggle with no victor.”

Zophia seemed to remember something. “Oh, right! I forgot to mention. Just the other day, those people who were stupid enough to kick out the doc came to see me.”

“You mean Aston?” Zenos asked. He hadn’t thought he’d ever see the man again, so it’d caught him quite by surprise.

“They came to me too,” Lynga said. “They did look like total idiots.”

“That trash party sauntered right into my place too,” Loewe added.

Well, that was harsh.

Zophia’s expression turned solemn. “So, that Aston guy? Got a bad vibe from him. I had my men try to track him down, but we’ve had no luck at all.”

“Same here,” Lynga said. “Even with the werewolves’ sense of smell, no luck.”

“Not a whiff of him to be found in the orcs’ network either,” Loewe remarked.

“Maybe he just went back to the city?” Lily mused.

The demi-humans exchanged glances.

“I hope so,” Zophia said.

“It’d be pretty bad if he was plotting something,” Lynga pondered.

“Yeah. Even we demi-humans stay away from the deepest parts of the

slums,” Loewe pointed out.

“What do you mean?” Lily echoed, tilting her head.

Carmilla spoke up from the back. “They mean the Black Guild.”

“Black Guild?” the young elf asked.

“Put simply, an illegal guild,” Zophia explained.

Typically, one went to a guild to ask for help with things they couldn’t handle on their own. The Adventurers’ Guild was the biggest of them all, but there were also guilds for blacksmiths, builders, other craftsmen, and the like. Lawful guilds operated with approval from the government, had fixed rules and fees for commissions, and membership required passing a certification exam.

“But the Black Guild doesn’t follow those rules,” the lizardwoman said. “It’s basically a whole bunch of shady people.”

“Yeah. I don’t like them,” Lynga added. “There’s no line they wouldn’t cross for money.”

“Mm-hmm,” Loewe agreed. “You definitely don’t wanna associate with them.”

All three of the demi-human leaders held the Black Guild in contempt, it seemed.

“So they’d do anything at all?” Lily asked.

“Drug smuggling, assassination, enacting vengeance,” Zophia replied. “Word has it they had a hand in that child trafficking incident with the nobleman too.”

Lily trembled at the idea, looking over at Zenos. “Wh-What if that loud geezer went to the Black Guild for something bad...?”

“Loud geezer? You mean Aston?” The healer thought about this for a moment as he took a bite of his bread. “I’m not sure. I mean, I used to live in the slums, so I knew about the Black Guild and all that, but I hear their prices are steep.”

“Hmm,” Carmilla pondered, crossing her arms. “The fact that he came all the way to the slums to find Zenos tells me the man is likely destitute. I doubt he

has the funds.”

Lily breathed a sigh of relief. “Really? Oh, that makes me feel better.”

Zophia, however, stared at the table with a glum look on her face.

“Zophia?” the young elf called out.

“Oh, it’s just...” the lizardwoman began. “Yeah, the Black Guild revolves around money, sure, but there have been whispers lately of someone who’ll take jobs for no pay, depending on the situation.” She scrunched her brows as if trying to recall something, then finally said, “I think they go by ‘The Conductor.’”

In the nethermost reaches within the slums lay an ancient aqueduct, sprawling across the underground like a spider’s web. And in a dimly lit corner of it, two individuals stood opposite one another.

“Welcome. A client, perhaps?” said one of them, a figure clad in a slate gray cloak that obscured their face. “You did well to find this place.”

The other, however, whispered so quietly that their words dissipated into the darkness. All that echoed in the underground space was the cloaked figure’s incongruously cheery tone.

“Ah. So you were referred to me because you couldn’t afford to pay? I do get clients like you on occasion.”

The client whispered on.

“Yes, of course,” the cloaked figure assured them. “I’m not doing this strictly for money.”

Another whisper.

“Hmm? Me? Please, call me the Conductor.” The client must have agreed, because the Conductor continued. “Now then, how may I help you?” The Conductor listened as the client explained their quarry, their words still lost to all but her and the stone. “I see... In other words, you want revenge. And your grudge extends to the perpetrator’s social circle as well. And may I ask why that is?”

"Yes, it's necessary. Others in the Black Guild may care little so long as they're paid, but the reason matters to me."

"If you're unwilling to share, then you may consider this deal null and void—"

The client cut them off with a hiss.

"Oh? Have you changed your mind?" The Conductor paused to listen. "Huh... What a twisted, selfish reason that is. This isn't revenge. It's merely lashing out. You have no friends, I see." This appeared to rub the client the wrong way; the Conductor waved it off. "Hmm? When did I say I wouldn't accept? Quite the opposite. It's exactly the kind of reason that tickles my fancy. Very well, then. I'll lend you a hand."

The figure calling themselves the Conductor took a pitch-black manastone from their slate gray cloak's breast pocket. Its blackness was such that it seemed to absorb even the surrounding darkness.

"It just so happens I've been studying this recently," the figure said. "This is the perfect opportunity to use it. Yes, of course, you have nothing to worry about," the Conductor reassured the apprehensive client. "Your request will be fulfilled, make no mistake. Incidentally, I don't believe I caught your name."

Their lips, obscured deep beneath the hood of their cloak, curled into a grin.

"I see. Aston, then."

Chapter 5: The Reason

Night fell upon the ruined town. The clinic was enveloped in a tranquility so deep that the lively hustle and bustle of the day seemed like a distant memory.

“Can’t sleep, Zenos?”

The healer had been lost in thought at the dinner table when he looked up to see the young elf girl standing behind him, hugging her pillow.

“Still awake, Lily?”

“I slept a little,” the girl replied. “But I woke up and saw the light was still on out here.”

“My bad. I’ll go to bed soon.”

“Want some tea? Or would that just keep you awake?”

“Hmm, sure. I’ll take some.”

As Zenos sipped the tea Lily had prepared for him, a warm sensation spread from the pit of his stomach. The leaves she’d carefully selected filled his nostrils with a rustic, soothing aroma.

“How is it?” she asked.

“Tasty as always,” he replied, setting down his cup. “Thanks.”

Lily circled around behind him and brought her small hand to his head, giving it a gentle pat.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“You pat my head when I can’t sleep,” she explained. “I’m returning the favor.”

Zenos smiled softly. “It’s helping. I’ll sleep well thanks to you.”

Satisfied, Lily let out a little snort and leaned against the healer, quickly falling

back asleep. Zenos smiled a little awkwardly and shrugged before picking the sleeping girl up and carrying her back to bed.

Not wanting to let the remaining tea go to waste, he returned to the dining table, only to find a certain wraith sitting there with her legs crossed.

"Unable to sleep, Zenos?" she asked.

"And why are you down here, Carmilla?" he retorted.

"I saw three cups laid out and thought I would partake."

"Lily's a thoughtful girl, isn't she?" he mused, taking a seat once more.

The wraith picked up her teacup. "Are thoughts of your former party keeping you awake?"

"What, are you worried about me?"

"Of course not! I simply have little to do at night, and thought I might keep you company for a time."

"You're actually pretty nice, aren't you, Carmilla?"

"Do not mock a wraith, human!" The wraith began to rise from her seat. "Otherwise our conversation ends here!"

"Right, sorry. I can't finish all this tea on my own, so by all means, stay."

"If you insist, I suppose I shall," she said, sitting back down.

Zenos poured himself more tea from the pot. "I hadn't actually been thinking about those guys until recently. The clinic's kept me busy and, honestly, I'd pretty much forgotten all about Aston." He'd been quite surprised to see him again. But... "Now, thinking back on all the ways he mistreated me, I regret not having decked him in the face at least once."

Carmilla chuckled. "That is rather honest of you." She sipped her tea, her shoulders shaking lightly. "Human lives are fleeting. Ephemeral. You would do well to settle your debts while you can."

"You're right," he mused with a nod, looking down at his own hands. Certain debts he could no longer repay. "Meeting Aston after all this time has me thinking about the past." He slowly raised his head again. "About things that

happened before I even joined his party.”

“Your time in the slums, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

Carmilla’s hand stopped halfway as she brought the teacup to her lips. “I seem to recall you mentioning you learned the healing arts while living in the slums. How, exactly, did you accomplish this?”

“How do I explain...?” Zenos crossed his arms, looking up at the ceiling. “I grew up in an orphanage in the slums. Looking back, it was a pretty awful place.” It was a daily occurrence for people to drop dead in the streets, and the orphanage’s head patron instructed its children to loot the corpses. “I hated doing that, see, so I’d often just bury them and return empty-handed. I often got beat for it.”

“Unattended corpses can transmit disease, no? Seems to me you handled it appropriately.”

“It’s not like I was thinking that far. I just felt bad for them, you know? They died, and then they’d get their stuff stolen too? I buried them so nobody could loot them.” Looking at the fallen bodies had made Zenos feel like he was looking at his own future. Despite his efforts, however, sometimes they’d get dug up anyway. “So one day, my child brain innocently went, ‘What if I could just bring them back to life?’”

Carmilla’s eyes widened with shock, and she spilled some of her tea. “Th-That is anathema! Forbidden magic!”

“It sure is. But I didn’t know that back then, so I was pretty desperate about trying to bring them back.”

He’d place a hand over the bodies and imagine resurrecting them. Nothing would happen, of course. Still, he’d observe the bodies closely—the way the skin was structured, how the muscles attached, the pathways of blood vessels and nerves, how the organs were arranged.

Naturally, he’d had no knowledge of anatomy at the time, so he hadn’t known what roles different body parts played. So he just pondered, imagined, observed meticulously, until he could recreate the body’s structure clearly in his

mind.

For a moment, Carmilla thought she heard herself gulp. The slums were home to a melting pot of races that lived and died there. Which meant Zenos had encountered the corpses of multiple different varieties of people, and memorized all their body structures. How many healers in the world could claim to have experienced such a thing, really?

"Outrageous," she remarked.

"Did you say something?" Zenos asked.

"Nothing."

Zenos tilted his head lightly to the side, then continued, "So, at first nothing happened, right? But I kept at it, day after day, for several years. And eventually, a white light began to envelop the bodies." Thanks to that, he'd felt like he'd begun to make progress, and that success might be near. "Then one day, while I was trying to resurrect a corpse, someone smacked the back of my head really hard."

He'd turned around to see a scruffy-bearded man fiercely glaring down at him, wearing a cloak so black it looked like it merged with the darkness. And the man had told him, "Don't ever use that power on the dead. That's for the living only."

"So that was the healer you said you met in the slums," the wraith mused.

"Yeah. I've only seen him use healing magic once, though." And he'd never learned the man's real name. "Still, he taught me a lot. The slums were all I knew, a tiny fraction of the world at large. He looked shady, but he was pretty incredible."

Zenos had asked for a name, but all he'd gotten was a smile and a nonchalant, "You can call me 'master.'"

"My master had a lot of catchphrases. One of his favorites was, 'A third-rate healer just mends wounds. A second-rate healer heals people. A first-rate healer makes the world a better place.'" Zenos put down his cup and picked up the teapot, which only held enough for one last pouring. "Sometimes I think back on him and wonder if I've at least made it to third-rate." Because he'd

never see the man again, he murmured to himself. For a moment, he felt as if he caught a glimpse of his master's face on the rippling surface of the tea. "Sorry. Boring story, I know."

"It passed the time."

"Well, that's good, then," Zenos said with a small smile.

Carmilla lifted her cup with both hands, seeming to recall something. "While this is not quite the same as resurrection magic, during my time among the living, there existed magic to create artificial life-forms known as golems."

"Wasn't that three hundred years ago? Back when the Demon King was still around?"

The southern continent across the great sea was once the Demon King's territory. Demons and humans now coexisted in peace, but about four hundred years ago, demons had invaded human territory, ushering in what became known as the Great Human-Demon War. By the time the fierce conflict was over and the Demon King was dead, nearly a hundred years had passed.

"Though now lost to time, 'twas a type of dark magic used by demonkin," Carmilla explained. "Golems were crafted by using a special variety of manastone as their core, with bodies made of materials such as carbon and sulfur built around it."

"Huh."

"They felt neither pain nor fear, only silently carrying out their orders. Truly a nuisance to deal with."

"By the way, Carmilla, what was it *you* were doing three hundred years ago?"

"That is ancient history. I have long since forgotten."

"You're always probing into people's business, but you never talk about yourself," Zenos mused.

It was about time for him to head to bed, he thought—and then, riding on the wind, came distant sounds. Destruction. Screams. Whatever was happening, it couldn't spell anything good at all.

An unsettling tingle pricked at Zenos's skin. "What the hell...?"

"It seems to be coming from deeper in the slums," Carmilla noted.

The wraith fluttered upwards, phasing straight through the ceiling, likely to go up to the roof and check. She returned hardly a moment later, her face set in a state of pure shock the healer had never seen before.

"Preposterous," she said. "I speak of golems one moment, and the next there is one rampaging through the slums!"

By the time Zenos arrived, the slums were in a state of complete and utter chaos. Numerous buildings had collapsed, with flames licking up the eaves of buildings here and there. The screams and shrieks of people running in confusion echoed through the night air.

And there it stood, behind the thick column of smoke, its towering form blocking the moonlight.

"So that's a golem..."

The construct swung its arms and legs of mud and stone, slowly making its advance, its lumbering steps kicking up dust and debris, leaving crushed homes in its wake. Its hollow black eyes were like caverns, its deep groan reverberating in one's eardrums.

"How perplexing."

"Augh! Don't startle me like that!" Zenos protested, turning around to find Carmilla floating there with her arms crossed. "I didn't think you were coming too."

"I was curious, of course. Why would an ancient relic be running amok in this day and age?"

"Where's Lily?"

"Still asleep. For the best, too, as she would doubtless have nightmares about this creature should she see it."

"Doc!"

The three demi-human leaders came running up to him from across the

street.

"Good to see you safe," Zenos told them as they arrived at his side and caught their breaths.

"Same here," Zophia said. "We were thinking of going to get you, doc. The three of us are safe somehow, but..."

"Many of my men are in no shape to move," Lynga remarked.

"About half of us orcs are badly injured," Loewe added. "What the hell *is* that thing?"

Zenos explained that it appeared to be something called a "golem"—an ancient artificial life-form. "Just what in blazes happened here?"

"We don't have a clue either," the lizardwoman replied.

"It's the middle of the night. I was snoozing like a baby," Lynga said. "Then there was this loud noise, and *boom*, there was this thing."

"My men told me it came from somewhere deep within the slums," Loewe pointed out.

"Deep within the slums, huh..." Zenos mused, bringing a hand to his brow. Did this have something to do with the Black Guild? And if so...

No, the healer thought, shaking his head. I don't have time for contemplation. Not with this many injured.

"Zophia, Lynga, Loewe," he said. "I need you guys to work together and get the injured all in one place!"

Someone had to be pulling this giant construct's strings, but he didn't have enough information to make a proper guess. One thing, however, was certain.

Zenos looked up at the golem. "Keep in mind this is gonna cost a pretty penny."

In the heart of the slums raged a golem—an ancient, man-made weapon of destruction.

Watching it from atop a small hill in the distance was a figure clad head-to-toe

in gray robes. “Destructive as expected,” the figure who called themselves the Conductor mused as they peered through a special magical device meant for long-distance observation, “but not quite as agile as I’d hoped. How unfortunate. I suppose further improvements are in order.” The screams drifting on the wind, they thought, had a pleasant ring to their ears. “Still, it looks like it’ll be a job well done.”

The job in question, as commissioned by a man named Aston, was to bring down the hammer on a former party member named Zenos and his entourage. His reason was that, despite his former leader having graciously taken him from the slums and given him a place to belong, Zenos had treated Aston poorly. The swordsman, who had lost much, begrudged the healer, who had in turn gained much.

Selfish though that reasoning may be, and despite the fact that it was nothing but a petty outburst, such a twisted wish was quite compelling in its own right. That was why the Conductor had asked for no payment. It was curiosity that made them tick. How would people feel in a given situation? What would they do?

“In that sense, Aston,” the figure muttered as they watched the situation unfold from afar, “your request is incredibly fascinating.”

Given that it was the middle of the night, neither the Royal Guard nor the Royal Institute of Healing would be coming to the rescue anytime soon. And taking into account the fact this was happening in the slums, it was possible no one would be coming at all.

Which was to say they couldn’t expect any timely external intervention and, with Zenos being a healer and multiple people injured, he’d inevitably show himself.

“What will he do when his admirers drop like flies one after the other, I wonder?”

Would he kneel in despair, tormented by feelings of helplessness and loss? Or would he put on a brave front and attempt to fight back?

This was but the first act of the stage the Conductor had set.

The figure's lips curled into a grin as they continued to peer through their magical device. "What now, Zenos? I *do* love people who surpass my expectations..."

"Over here!" Zophia said. "Keep 'em coming!"

"Us werewolves have the best noses!" Lynga remarked. "Follow the scent of blood to track down more of the injured!"

"You guys gonna let the lizardmen and the werewolves show you up?!" Loewe exclaimed. "You can carry five people at once! Show 'em what we orcs are made of!"

As the leaders gave their commands, those among the demi-humans who had escaped the carnage brought more and more injured to the vacant lot. Some had broken bones, others were covered in blood, still others screamed in pain, and a few were down to their last breaths. It was truly a hellscape.

After confirming the golem's location, Zenos turned his attention back to the injured. "Carmilla! Stay back!" he warned before chanting, "*High Cure!*"

A white light swirled around the healer for a moment before raining down on the injured, making the agony gradually lift from their faces. This was merely first aid, however. To ensure full recoveries, he needed to individually assess the condition of each victim; that was why he'd wanted them all gathered in one place.

With both palms extended forward, he began to heal them one by one. "Once you're healed, evacuate immediately!" Thankfully, the golem's movements were slow enough that anyone sprinting away at full speed should be able to escape.

Though the line of people in need of treatment seemed to go on forever, eventually all were healed by Zenos's hand.

"Ugh, come on," the healer grumbled.

"Why are you grousing, Zenos?" Carmilla asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asked the wraith without turning to her. "Put

yourself in my shoes for a second. I had to come all the way out here in the middle of the night, heal hundreds of people who probably can't pay me, and I'm worried sick about Lily back home, to boot. Screw whoever's behind this. They can't just get away with it!"

The wraith crossed her arms as she observed Zenos's back. The motives of the individual controlling the golem may have been unclear, but it was likely that causing a great number of casualties among the residents of the slums was one of their objectives, at least.

"Did you truly fail to notice, with all your bellyaching, that you have in fact already thwarted their plans?"

"Well, I'll be..." the Conductor murmured from atop the hill in admiration as they observed, through the magical telescope, the black-haired man wearing a dark-as-night coat. "That's a high-class healer if I've ever seen one. Perhaps beyond that, even."

Based on what the client had told him, the man standing in front of the injured, gradually healing them one by one, had to be Zenos. Though the Conductor had been aware that he was a skilled healer, they hadn't thought he'd be *this* good.

"Well done, Zenos," they mused. "I *do* love people who surpass my expectations."

The Conductor had watched with great interest to see which it would be. And it seemed like Zenos had genuinely chosen to lend his assistance to each and every injured, all with a perfectly serene expression, as if it were the obvious choice.

To think such talent had existed in the slums all along...

"Very well," they said. "You have succeeded at the first act. Now to see how the second act will unfold..."

Simply healing the injured wasn't enough, after all. Unless something was done about the golem itself, the problem would persist.

The Conductor watched with bated breath as the construct continued to wreak havoc in the slums. “What next, Zenos? I look forward to seeing what you can do.”

“Doc, we’re not finding any more injured,” said Zophia.

“My men aren’t reporting anything either,” added Lynga.

“Same with us orcs, Zenos,” concluded Loewe.

“That’s good. Thanks, everyone,” Zenos said, plopping down in a clearing somewhere in the slums. “Ugh, I’m beat.”

Those who’d been healed had evacuated away from the golem, so only Zophia, Lynga, Loewe, a number of their subordinates, Zenos, and Carmilla remained at the scene.

“Looks like we have no casualties thanks to you, doc,” the lizardwoman noted.

“That’s great and all, but we still have one very large problem,” the healer replied tiredly.

The golem continued to rampage, destroying houses indiscriminately in between low, rumbling groans. Its massive form slowly advanced through the thick smoke, drawing closer to the group.

“Carmilla,” Zenos said, “what the hell *is* that?”

“I told you earlier,” the wraith replied. “That is an artificial life-form with a special manastone at its core.”

“If we leave it alone, do you suppose it will get bored and go home?”

“Of course not. Golems do not stop until they complete the mission assigned to them.”

Perhaps it’d been given orders to completely destroy the slums.

“Ugh, come on!” the healer groused with a sigh. “Why can’t it just tire out?!”

Puzzled, Carmilla continued. “But there is one thing I do not comprehend. The high-purity manastones used as golem cores should only be found on the southern continent, where the Demon King once resided. Not only that, they

should have been largely depleted during the Great Human-Demon War three centuries ago. The dark magic system used during that war has been lost for a long while. And the ingredients necessary to craft a golem are not readily available. So who, exactly, would be capable of such a feat?"

If the wraith was to be believed, creating a perfect golem shouldn't have been possible in this day and age, not with the resources available.

"And yet it stands right in front of us," the healer said.

"Maybe so, but..."

Zenos sighed deeply as he slowly rose to his feet. "Oh well. Pain in the ass, really, but I guess I'll wrap up my break and go."

"Go? Go where?"

"Go deal with that monster, obviously."

The wraith's eyes widened with shock.

Zophia spoke up. "We'll go too, doc."

"Are you sure?" Zenos asked, rubbing his own shoulders. "I may not be able to offer much in terms of hazard pay."

The three demi-human women exchanged glances, then nodded firmly.

"Of course we're going," Zophia said. "We're not gonna sit by while that thing destroys our turf."

"This is our town," Lynga added. "No one gets to trample it."

"Agreed," Loewe chimed in. "We'll show that thing what for."

"All right," Zenos said. "I won't turn down the help. I *am* more of a rear-support type." He turned to the wraith floating behind him. "Carmilla, how do we defeat a golem?"

"Locate and destroy the manastone at its core," she replied. "Otherwise, it will continually rebuild itself."

"Destroy the manastone. I see." Zenos rolled his shoulders. This was his first opportunity for combat since being expelled from the Golden Phoenix. He cracked his neck, then deadpanned, "Guess we can't sell the manastone if we

destroy it..."

Once laid low, the blackened phoenix—born from a discarded feather torn from a gleaming bird—now spread its wings, ready to soar into the dark night.

A massive creature of rock and clay stood on one side. On the other, the three major demi-human forces and a single healer, clad in clothing black as night.

"All right, guys. Let's give it all we've got."

Zophia, Lynga, Loewe, and their followers charged forward at Zenos's command, though they still seemed somewhat daunted by the enemy's oppressive aura.

"It's fine," he assured them. "I know it's scary, but don't be afraid. Leave the support to me."

Enhance Agility.

From the back, Zenos gestured at the demi-humans and a faint blue light enveloped them, causing a sudden increase in their speed.

"What's this?" Zophia asked, taking out her coiling whip. "My body feels so light."

"Sir Zenos must've done something," Lynga remarked, readying her axe.

"I'm not complaining. We can fight better this way," Loewe pointed out as she lunged forward with her massive spear.

Enhance Strength. Strike Boost.

With a resounding crash, parts of the golem's leg crumbled under the combined force of the three women's enhanced blows.

"Been a while since I last used enhancement magic, but it's looking all right," Zenos mused with his arms still outstretched. "Nice. Keep it up, people!"

Perhaps recognizing the group as a threat, the golem suddenly let out a deafening, aggressive roar, swinging its arms around. A loud boom rippled through the air, followed by a powerful gust of wind. Its fingertips grazed Lynga, sending her body flying through the ruins of a nearby home.

"Lynga!" Loewe called out. "You still alive?!"

"Yeah," the werewolf leader replied. Composed, she emerged from the destroyed home, brushing the mud off her skin. "That startled me, but I'm okay thanks to Sir Zenos."

Zenos had preemptively cast a protective spell on her. During his days with the party, he'd supported his comrades in such a manner, from the rear. The difference was that, back then, he'd done so silently. Whenever he'd chant a support spell during battle, Aston would become aggravated.

Thinking back on it, Aston had to have known he was a tyrant. Perhaps he'd felt uneasy about Zenos using an unknown spell from behind him out of fear of retaliation. And no matter how many times the healer tried to explain, his words had fallen on deaf ears. Eventually, he'd trained himself to not need chants or magic circles, or show any other signs of using spells. It got to the point that even his party members no longer realized they'd been under the effects of his magic. As a result, they'd come to believe he'd been doing nothing at all.

"I'm starting to remember how to do the whole fighting thing," Zenos remarked.

There were two main points to be cautious of. One, the further away a caster was from its target, the less effective a spell became, so it was necessary to stay relatively close by. Two, despite healing, protection, and enhancement magic all sharing the same fundamentals, they activated differently, and therefore they couldn't be cast simultaneously.

So essentially, the first order of business was to cast a protective shield, then use enhancements when attacking, and heal immediately after sustaining injury. Switching between the different spells on the go as needed was crucial.

Thanks to Zenos's support, the demi-humans were gradually pushing the golem back while remaining completely unharmed.

"All right, I get the gist of it," he said.

Just as Carmilla had said, no matter how many times they chipped away at the golem's limbs, the rocks and mud would reattach to the damaged areas and

the creature would regenerate.

Now he knew, however, that there was a delay between the start of regeneration and its full completion. That was the key.

“Everyone!” he shouted. “Break both of its legs at the same time!”

Following Zenos’s command, the demi-humans all charged at once.

In order to defeat a golem, one had to destroy the manastone located somewhere in its body. The healer could locate it by using Diagnosis, but the spell’s accuracy was reduced if the target moved too much. So first, they had to break both its legs, and then he could cast Diagnosis during the brief moment it couldn’t move while rebuilding itself. Once he knew where the manastone was located, all they’d have to do was concentrate their attacks there.

Bathed in a faint light, the three demi-humans exchanged glances.

“Never thought the day would come where I’d fight side by side with you two,” Zophia said.

“It’s all thanks to Sir Zenos,” Lynga replied.

“This is the safest I’ve ever felt having someone watch my back,” Loewe remarked.

“Goodness me, but you’re full of surprises, aren’t you, Zenos?” said the Conductor from atop their hill overlooking the battlefield, once more exhaling in admiration. Would he stall, hoping for reinforcements from the city? Would he flee this place and call for help?

As the figure waited to see which the healer’s choice would be, the young man once again had surpassed their expectations. With only a handful of allies, he’d opted to directly confront the golem.

“Impressive,” they mused. “A group formed on the fly, showing this much power?”



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Yes, they'd been informed that Zenos could use both protection and enhancement spells, but this defied imagination.

Demi-humans of different species banding together, fighting against an ancient creature as though they were all part of a seasoned party. Three major clans that once stood opposite each other, now united under the support of a single healer.

"Being able to master different systems of magic at that level is practically cheating," they mused. "I suppose you have succeeded at the second act, as well."

Despite their words, however, the Conductor seemed to be having a great deal of fun, their mutterings tinged with excitement.

"Now we have finally reached the climax. The final choice awaits you."

The golem let out a resounding roar as both of its legs crumbled to pieces under the collective attack from the demi-humans. Its upper body, having lost its support, began to stumble.

"Oh, crap!" Zophia yelled out, pointing where the golem was about to fall. "Doc! There's a kid back there!"

"What?" Zenos replied. Had someone failed to evacuate in time? Perhaps they'd been hiding behind a ruined house, frozen in fear. Either way, the piled-up debris obstructed his view, and Zenos couldn't see from his position. "Damn it!"

It wasn't possible for him to cast a protective spell on a target outside of his field of vision, and so he immediately took off running, hoping against all hope to make it in time.

But then something unbelievable happened. The golem twisted its upper body suddenly, placing both of its hands on the ground, halting its movement completely, as if trying not to crush the child.

Seizing the opportunity, the child ran away, crying. One of Zophia's men quickly scooped them up and carried them to safety.

"Impossible," Carmilla muttered in astonishment from behind Zenos. "Golems should only be capable of executing simple commands. What this one just did is inconceivable. Even the fact it grew aggressive at the start of combat against you is odd. Golems are supposed to be consistent in their actions."

Zenos listened quietly to her before speaking. "Carmilla, you mentioned before that it's not possible to get the high-purity manastone needed for an artificial life-form's core, right?"

"I did, indeed."

"If, say, one were to instill life into an imperfect manastone, how would they go about it?"

"Instill life?" she echoed with furrowed brows before gasping sharply. "You cannot be implying...!"

His gaze still fixed forward, Zenos slowly lowered his hand. "I've finished casting Diagnosis on the golem. The manastone is located in its chest, to the left."

Not only had the spell revealed the location of the manastone, but also a contour in the general location of it that was familiar to the healer.

"So it's you, Aston..." he whispered, gazing intently at the golem as it regenerated.

"Ah, it seems he's noticed," said the Conductor, peering intently through his magical telescope, with a hint of excitement in his voice.

The high-purity manastones that could serve as a golem's core weren't easy to come by in this day and age.

"So how, indeed, would one instill life into an imperfect manastone? I thought about this myself," they muttered.

And the answer the Conductor had found was to use a living human, fusing them with a manastone, creating a new core that way. One problem remained, however: humans, with their complex emotions, were difficult to control. Thus they'd needed someone simple, with easily understandable negative feelings.

Then a man named Aston had appeared. Told he wouldn't need to pay as long as he cooperated a little, he'd readily agreed.

All the Conductor had needed to do was embed a manastone into his body, under the pretext that it was necessary for his revenge plot, then assemble the golem using him as a core.

"Now then, Zenos," they said, "how will you draw this battle to a close, I wonder?"

Their client's body had already been assimilated, nearly fully merged with the manastone by now. Destroying the stone meant destroying its host. There was no other choice at this point. Killing the golem was the only way to end the battle.

"Can you, someone who's healed and saved so many, really bring yourself to kill your former party member? The man who took you in? A thrilling scenario, don't you think?"

The Conductor was very interested in how Zenos would execute his only option. How would the curtains close on this tragedy?

All they cared about was sating their own curiosity. "What a grand spectacle I'm being treated to. And all it cost was one life of little value," they muttered, chuckling to themselves.

"Sorry, guys," Zenos said to the demi-humans as he stood before the regenerating golem. "I need you to give me room for a sec."

"But, doc!" Zophia protested.

"I can keep going!" Lynga exclaimed.

"You should leave the vanguard to us," Loewe pointed out. "With you providing support, there's no way we won't win this."

"I mean, yeah, probably," the healer agreed.

One of his mentor's most repeated lines was that a healer should never be on the front lines, lest they focus too much on fighting and forget about supporting their allies. Not only that, if they got injured, the effectiveness of their magic

would decrease, potentially leading to the whole party being wiped out.

So yes, his mentor had been entirely correct. However...

"Sorry," Zenos said. "Given the circumstances, I'm the only one who can settle things with him."

"Doc..."

At the healer's serious tone, the demi-humans exchanged glances and slowly retreated.

"Dawn is almost upon us," Carmilla, floating behind Zenos, said. "I mislike the sun, so I shall take my leave."

"All right," Zenos replied. "I'll be back soon too."

"I am not particularly concerned. There will be tea waiting for your return."

"You say that like *you're* the one doing me a favor. Lily's the one who's gonna brew the tea, no?"

Carmilla chuckled, abruptly turned around, and left. The residents of the slums had already evacuated the premises, and the area had fallen eerily silent.

"Aston. It's just you and me now," Zenos said, his voice echoing amid the ruined streets and debris. "It was here in the slums that you first approached me. This is where it all began for us."

"Well, if you don't have anything to do, why not come adventure with me? You don't have a home, do you?"

It'd happened right after Zenos and his mentor had parted, as he sat dejectedly on the side of the road. He'd wanted to go somewhere else, far away, unknown. Yet he'd known that these gloomy, run-down streets were the only place that would willingly accept the poor.

That is, until Aston had reached out.

It would've been no exaggeration to say that Aston, at the time, had looked like a savior. Sadly, he'd turned out to be a self-serving tyrant.

Slowly, Zenos trod forward on the gravel, closing the distance between them. "It's not like you to save a kid."

Aston was presumably a common citizen, so above the poor, but still near the bottom of the food chain.

"Well, you see, the reason he's so obsessed with money and power," Zenos had once overheard Gael, who'd known Aston the longest, say to another member, *"is that he lost his little sister when she was an infant because they couldn't afford medicine. Not that he'll admit it, though."*

Maybe, in his haze, that child had reminded him of his deceased sister. And if so, that meant some part of his humanity still remained somewhere in there.

Its regeneration complete, the golem stood with a booming roar. Raising both of its arms sky-high, it turned to face Zenos, taking on a combat stance.

"Still have some fire in you, huh?" the healer deadpanned as he continued to advance toward the massive creature. "Can't stand to see a stray dog you picked up and then threw away happier than you now, can you, Aston?"

Zenos had once wondered how Aston had been able to tell at a glance that he'd had nowhere to belong.

"I get it now, you know." He looked up at the golem's hollow, cavernous eyes. "You don't have a place to belong either."

Aston had been surrounded by party members who'd supported him, attained a decent status and a fair bit of fame. Yet he'd always looked down on others, only thinking of how to use them, and so he'd never had true companions he could actually trust. He'd never had a place to call his own, where he could find peace.

"Oh, well. None of my business now," Zenos muttered.

The healer lunged forward, enhancing his leg strength to dodge out of the way as the golem's arms came crashing down with a resounding rumble. Immediately after, magic converged onto his right hand, and he let out a loud cry as he cast Scalpel, the spell he'd once used to treat Zophia and Loewe. The small blade grew and morphed, taking on the shape of a glowing white sword.

Zenos swung at the golem's right leg, severing it clean off at the knee, before doing the same to the left leg. As the creature's upper body collapsed, the healer rolled away, quickly getting back on his feet and slashing at the golem's

exposed left pectoral, carving into it and leaving a cross-shape gouge.

With its rocky armor now cracked, the inside of the construct's chest cavity was exposed.

"Oh, hey. We meet again," Zenos said.

Aston was, indeed, in there. The manastone had already corrupted his body, and his skin was dotted with black splotches, his eyes vacant. A scratchy, guttural groan escaped his throat.

"Well, it's not like I *wanted* to see you again, if I'm being honest," Zenos added, raising his sword. "Today's the last time I see your face."

The healer brought the blade down on Aston's arm, severing it. A low shriek echoed through the air as night began to give way to dawn.

Their adventure had started with Aston's invitation and ended with Zenos's exile. But that'd been a far too sudden ending to their story. It'd left too many loose ends.

Tainted by the black manastone, stuck in a narrow space, Aston looked like Zenos once had, wrapped in a dark cloak and sitting on the ground with his knees to his chest after losing his mentor.

Their two stories had come together in a full circle, their beginnings and ends merging together and switching at the whims of fate.

"Now, then. Let's give our adventure a proper ending, Aston."

"Ah, so that's how it's going to be," the Conductor mused to themselves, nodding from atop their hill overlooking the battlefield. "I'll say, you don't hesitate to kill as much as I thought you would. Although given what you've been through, that much should've been a given, I suppose."

That wasn't the thrill they'd hoped for, nor was there any fear to be felt when one's opponent who acted within the bounds of the expected. Perhaps they'd overestimated Zenos.

"Well, that's the end of that, then. A disappointing finale, but what can—"

The breath caught in their throat.

“No, wait. This is—”

Relentlessly, Zenos slashed at Aston, who remained fused with the manastone. The swordsman’s cries of agony mixed with the golem’s groans in a bizarre symphony echoing all around them.

The rocky construct of war struggled, flailing its limbs as it, with Aston as its core, began to rebuild itself once more.

Zenos continued to hack away as it regenerated, occasionally stopping to cast a protective spell on himself before resuming. “Ugh! Settle down already! This is *exhausting!*”

The demi-humans watched from a distance as Zenos ranted in frustration.

“I wonder what’s taking the doc so long?” Zophia said.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Lynga agreed. “Why not just get it over with?”

Loewe pondered this. “Either his opponent is that tenacious, or...” She narrowed her eyes, hesitating for a moment before continuing, “Zenos might be trying to do the unthinkable.”

“He’s...healing the parts he cuts away?” the Conductor murmured shakily while peering through their magical telescope.

Zenos wasn’t just haphazardly swinging his sword. No, he was cutting away the parts of Aston that had fused with the manastone, and slowly restoring what little remained of the swordsman’s human body. Of course, cutting too much away would’ve been fatal, while any hesitation could easily have resulted in the manastone corrupting the newly regenerated body parts.

The man had treated hundreds, led the demi-humans in battle, and now he was trying to reverse the fusion of Aston’s body with the manastone, with the utmost caution and focus.

What manner of human could be capable of such a feat?

For the first time ever, the Conductor felt a chill running down their spine.

“What *is* this guy?”

Zenos slashed on, chipping away at Aston’s body and healing the bits of human tissue that remained.

Each time the manastone’s taint advanced, he’d treat that part again. He repeated the process, over and over, until the golem’s movements slowed to a crawl.

“—nos,” Aston rasped as he slowly regained his human form. “Why...?”

“If I’m being honest,” Zenos said between heavy breaths as he swung his blade, “it’d be best for the world at large, and for me personally, if you were just gone.”

Aston exhaled as night gave way to dawn. “Just...why...?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” Zenos snapped. “Do you even know the extent of the damage you’ve caused? There’s no way you alone can pay for all of this. I’ll have to collect from whoever’s behind it too. If you’re gonna drop dead, at least tell me where to find them first. That’s reason number one.”

As Aston’s human body regenerated, his stone armor crumbled away.

Despite the growing fatigue in his arm, Zenos managed to raise it. “Number two is that, even though you’re a worthless piece of garbage, you did have two positive impacts in my life. One, you took me out of the slums. Two, though it was on a whim, you gave me that gold coin.” Again he brought down his sword, then healed the damaged parts of Aston’s body.

That singular coin Aston had given Zenos had become the catalyst for saving Lily’s life and starting the clinic, which had ended up becoming a major turning point in the healer’s life.

“The third—and biggest—reason I’m sparing you—” With all of his strength, Zenos delivered the final blow. “I’m a *healer*, damn it.”

"Perfect. Our party happens to be in need of a healer."

"Psh. You don't even have a healer's license."

"We don't need your dodgy self-taught spells anymore. With how strong we've gotten, no one can hurt us anyway."

"Bullshit. Get a grip, Zenos."

With one final, decisive swing, as if severing more than just blackened flesh and rock, Zenos shattered what remained of the manastone.

"Do you get it now, you stupid moron?" the healer asked.

"Yeah... I hate it, but I get it. You're amazing. I see it now." As the last of his armor fell away, Aston collapsed to his knees. *"This...shouldn't be humanly possible..."* he murmured tiredly as he stared at his now pristine arms. *"I've lost...everything. And now you're...telling me to live? Is this your idea of punishment?"*

"You said it, not me. I haven't actually thought that far."

Aston fell silent as a damp breeze passed between the two. The mountains gradually illuminated in the distance, heralding dawn's arrival.

"I kind of hazily saw you supporting the demi-humans back there..." Aston whispered after a moment's silence. *"You'd been doing that for us the whole time, hadn't you?"*

"What are you scheming now?" Zenos asked. *"That sudden shift in attitude is giving me the creeps."*

"Ouch. But I mean, serves me right, when I think about it. Spent my life using people...and in the end, I got used too." Aston leaned down, pressing his forehead to the ground. *"I know anything I say now is too little too late, but let me at least say this,"* he muttered. *"I'm sorry. I'm...sorry, Zenos."*

That was the first time the healer thought anything coming out of Aston's mouth was genuine. With a small sigh, he gave the swordsman's shoulder a gentle pat. *"It's whatever. Raise your head, Aston."*

"No, that wouldn't sit well with—"

"I said it's whatever. Besides, how am I supposed to punch you with your head down there?"

"Huh?"

"Now that you're back to being a normal human, I don't have to hold back, yeah?"

"Uh, what?"

"*Enhance Strength,*" the healer chanted. "Tenfold. I saved a little bit of my mana just for this, you know."

"Wait, hol—"

"Here's reason number four for letting you live: payback wouldn't have felt *nearly* as satisfying while you were dazed like that." Zenos slowly wound up his right arm, bathed in a blue glow. "You made my life hell, asshole! You think prostrating yourself is gonna cut it?!"

"Gahhhh!" Aston screamed as a formidable punch exploded violently against his face.

His body was sent flying, disappearing into the bright glimmers of the morning sun.

Epilogue: Somewhere to Belong

“Come on, now. Wake up.”

“Urk... Augh...”

Aston must’ve been unconscious for a while, because he awoke to his face throbbing with pain and a blue-eyed, golden-haired beauty looking down at him.

“You...” he mumbled.

“I came here after I heard reports of a monster rampaging in the slums, and lo and behold, here you are. Again,” the woman said. “Last time you eluded capture, as I recall.”

“O-Oh.” That’s right. Aston remembered her. Krishna, the vice commander of the Royal Guard. “Where’s...Zenos?” he asked as he slowly sat up.

“I met him on my way here. He informed me of what happened,” she said. “‘Tis a miracle there were no casualties considering the scale of this disaster. You should be singing Mr. Zenos’s praises for the rest of your life.”

“Right... Yeah,” he murmured quietly, holding his aching cheek.

Krishna pointed her magical gun at the injured swordsman. “Aston Behringer. For attempted assault, evasion, perjury, soliciting to murder, wanton endangerment, and criminal damage to property, among other charges, you are hereby under arrest. You may expect appropriate punishment for your crimes. And, of course, you will tell us everything you know about your accomplice—the mastermind behind it all.” Krishna gave Aston a quick once-over. “Perhaps I shall add public indecency to the list.”

“Huh?” During the regeneration process, most of Aston’s clothing had been destroyed, leaving him in just the bare minimum. As he looked himself over, the swordsman realized something. “It’s gone!” he gasped.

His beloved sword, the treasure from the underground labyrinth, was missing.

He was certain he'd had it on himself the whole time.

"Ah, yes. I have a message from Mr. Zenos," Krishna said. "He said, 'I confiscated your sword while you were out cold. Since it's a rare piece of loot from the underground labyrinth, it should fetch a pretty penny. Enough to cover the cost of the buildings you destroyed, anyway. Also, I was the one who got that sword in the first place, so screw you, I'm taking it back. Thief.'"

"Heh..." Aston laughed weakly.

Everything. Truly, he'd lost everything.

This whole mess was of his own making too. He'd probably get his adventurer's license revoked, even. Everything he'd built over so long—his status, the team, his assets—had turned to dust.

"What are you gazing off into the distance for?" Krishna snapped. "You've made your bed."

"Yeah..." he mumbled. "Yeah. I know."

He had nothing left. Or, perhaps more accurately, he'd never really had anything in the first place. Now that all was said and done—"Huh?" he mumbled, noticing he'd been clutching something in his left hand. Slowly, he uncurled his fingers, revealing a single, old gold coin.

"Speaking of," Krishna said, "I have another message from Mr. Zenos. He said, 'Consider this *your* consolation prize, and stay the hell away from me.'"

Aston stared at the coin in silence. It conveyed a message: Zenos was saying farewell for good. Perhaps there was no other meaning to it, but...

"Zenos..." he muttered.

He'd lost it all. Everything had slipped between his dirtied fingers. But there was one man who'd proven that a single gold coin could turn one's life around.

Clutching the gold coin tightly, Aston squatted down, trembling, and began to sob loudly.

Watching him wail, Krishna shrugged. "A grown man like you, bawling pathetically like this? Worry not. I will give you something to cry about soon enough. My interrogation process is quite rigorous."

"I see. So the Royal Guard's made a move," the Conductor muttered quietly atop a distant hill.

Up until now, the city's central authority had seemed indifferent to the slums' plight. The Kingdom of Herzeth—also known as the Kingdom of the Sun—had always shone brilliantly upon its neighbors. But the brightest of lights cast long, dark shadows at their feet.

And now, something in the kingdom had begun to shift. At its center, no doubt, stood a certain healer, living in a certain corner of a ruined town.

"What a fascinating individual," they mused. "I'd like to know more about you, but..."

That man, Aston, would probably give away the location of the Conductor's hideout—a careless mistake on their part. They'd assumed the swordsman wouldn't survive. Now they'd have to go into hiding, or perhaps flee the country, and dispose of all of their ongoing research in the process.

"I'll remember you," the Conductor murmured softly beneath their gray robe.
"Let's do this again sometime, Zenos."

With that, they turned away.

"Ugh, I'm so tired..."

Zenos, meanwhile, shuffled along the streets of the ruined town like a zombie. In the middle of the night, he'd treated hundreds of people, assisted in the battle against the golem, and in the end, fully restored a human body while fighting, himself.

"I'm about to drop dead from overwork," he mumbled, struggling to make his way back to the clinic as fatigue washed over him in waves. The demi-humans accompanying him looked on with concern.

"You okay there, doc?" Zophia asked.

"Sir Zenos, you look quite pale," Lynga pointed out.

"Your steps keep getting less steady," Loewe added. "Let us help you."

"I'm fine," he insisted. "You all must be tired too. My stamina's just not great, that's all."

The three women silently exchanged glances before all moving to support Zenos.

"Hey!" he protested. "What did I just—"

"Oh, chill out, doc," Zophia said. "You're always looking after us."

"Yeah, this is the least we can do," Lynga agreed. "I mean, I wouldn't mind getting even closer, personally."

"No cutting in line, Lynga," Loewe snapped.

Zenos let out a small sigh. "Fine. I guess I could accept the help once in a while."

With the trio's support, Zenos finally arrived at the clinic. Upon opening the door, they spotted Carmilla sitting on the bed with her legs crossed.

"Ah, you still live," the wraith remarked with an eerie chuckle. "How resilient of you."

"My bad for not dropping dead," Zenos deadpanned.

"And here I was thinking I would finally have some peace and quiet," the wraith teased.

"You say that, Carmilla," Lily chimed in as she peeked out from the kitchen, "but you've been pacing around, worried sick because Zenos was late."

"D-Do not be ridiculous, Lily!" the wraith protested. "I did no such thing! I would never!"

"Uh-huh..."

"Wh-What are you looking at me like that for?!"

"I was worried too, after what you told me," Lily said, approaching the group with a broad smile while carrying a tray with a teacup. "But I knew Zenos was gonna come back." She handed the steaming cup over to the healer, exclaiming, "Welcome home, Zenos!"

The healer blinked several times in a silent daze. He thought back on when Aston had approached him, all alone in the slums. On how he'd been offered a place in the party, only to be unfairly kicked out one day. How he'd realized he'd likely never had a place with them to begin with. And how at the end of it all, he'd found an old, dilapidated house.

Slowly, he looked over the others and smiled. "It's good to be home."

At the edge of the royal capital was a place where a group of eccentric people had come together.

And it was there that Zenos had found somewhere to belong.



Epilogue: Omen

The afternoon following the golem incident, a group clad in pristine white cloaks stood at the entrance of the slums.

Emblazoned on their chests was an emblem depicting two hands enveloping the sun, as if healing it, indicating the group was affiliated with the Royal Institute of Healing.

"Why did it take headquarters this long to dispatch healers?" one of the girls among them said, a hint of annoyance in her voice. She wore glasses, and her blue hair swayed gently over her shoulders. "Look how late we are. Any injured would be far beyond help."

"What did you expect, Umin?" a male healer replied. "This is the slums."

"Whether it's the special district or the slums, wounded are wounded, in my opinion."

"Don't say that so loud," the other healer reprimanded her. "There's a difference. That's why we're here as volunteers instead of on official duty."

The female healer in question, Umin, adjusted her glasses with a small sigh. "We couldn't even get five people together..."

"Still beats zero."

"I don't even know what exactly happened here."

"Me neither. People were talking about a monster of some sort appearing in the slums, but no one could give any details. Seems the Royal Guard have apprehended a suspect, but they're keeping the details under wraps to avoid a mass panic."

"It's all very hazy..."

"Yeah, but our role isn't to find out what happened. We're here to help the victims, so don't sweat the details so much."

"I mean, yes, but still..."

The group of healers ventured further into the slums as they spoke, and were met with a scene beyond imagination.

"Whoa..."

Most of the surrounding buildings had collapsed, and some of the rubble was still smoldering.

"Did a monster *actually* appear here?" Umin wondered.

"I was skeptical too," the male healer said. "But if there really was one, where did it go?"

Voices of bewilderment rose from the group. Given the severity of the situation, they expected an overwhelming number of injured. Though they'd planned to set up a base of operations and treat the victims in shifts, there were only a handful of them.

The mere thought of how many days it'd take them to treat them all made Umin dizzy. "For now, let's ask for the residents' cooperation and gather all the wounded in one place," she suggested.

After splitting up, each of them approached the locals, who were busy clearing away the debris. But no matter whom they asked, the answer was always the same.

"They told me there are no injured," Umin murmured.

"Yeah, same here," the male healer said.

Further inquiries yielded no further details. There were simply no victims still in need of treatment.

"How is that possible? Look at all this destruction," Umin said, her mind swimming. "It all happened in the dead of night too. I find it hard to believe everyone could've evacuated in time."

Another healer folded his arms and said, "The only explanation I can think of is that there really were no casualties in the first place, and that this was all a ruse to stir up confusion among the authorities."

"And what would they achieve by doing that?"

"Beats me. The alternative is there are victims, but they just don't trust us."

"..."

"Either way, it's pretty obvious we're not needed here. What a waste of time."

Exasperated, the other healers left the slums. Left behind, Umin gazed at the streets, now reduced to piles of rubble. "I wonder..." she murmured.

First off, there was no benefit in destroying their own homes for a ruse. Second, while it was plausible that healers from the city wouldn't be trusted, one would expect at least one person to seek help if someone they cared about was injured.

Umin suddenly conceived another possibility. "Maybe..." There *had* been victims, but someone else had already tended to them. She quickly shook her head, however. "No, that couldn't be it."

Dozens of ordinary healers would've been needed to handle the number of victims expected in an incident like this, in the time it'd taken Umin's group to arrive. No word had reached the Royal Institute of Healing that such a significant number of healers had been mobilized. And, of course, she'd heard nothing about a high-class healer or the saintess being involved.

Umin was about to leave the slums, amused by her outrageous speculation, when a memory suddenly surfaced to her mind, giving her pause.

A little while ago, while visiting a remote village, she'd happened to cooperate with a party known as the Golden Phoenix on a mission to hunt emberfoxes. A comment their leader had made at the time flashed in her mind.

"You think someone without a license can use top-tier healing spells?"

She'd thought it a peculiar question then, but reflecting on it now, had he been referring to someone specific?

The Royal Institute of Healing oversaw all clinics in the kingdom, but an unlicensed healer would naturally not have been part of their network. That meant that somewhere in this country there could've been a top-tier healer, hiding out of sight of the central authorities. And if such an individual had been

involved, that would explain this baffling situation.

Nervously, Umin glanced back at the slums. “It couldn’t be, right?” she said shakily.

The footsteps of the Royal Institute of Healing drew ever closer to a certain shadow healer.

Extra Chapter: Carmilla's Long Nights

She loved the night.

It was to her as water to a fish, as the skies to a bird, as a mother's arms to an infant. Each creature had their own haven, a place to rest one's soul. And to the undead, that was the blanket of night.

When the burning sun—quite literally, as it scorched their skin—sank below the horizon, the world turned to a pitch-black paradise for their kind. The chilly darkness enveloped them like a silk blanket, and the lingering stench of death was to them as the finest perfume.

Though undead didn't need to sleep, their nights were anything but boring. Drifting in the still darkness was as intoxicating as the finest of wines. And so, one would think having nothing to do would hardly have been a problem to them.

"There is nothing to do!"

It was the dead of night, and even plants were asleep when, on the second floor of the dilapidated house acting as a clinic during the day, Carmilla slowly rose. She gazed hazily at the faint moonlight filtering through the gap in the curtains. The town, once decimated by a plague, was swathed in silence, as if time itself had stopped.

What an odd feeling.

She'd never felt bored at night before. Simply immersing herself in the shadows was enough. But this had changed when a certain strange freeloader planted himself on the first floor.

"Hmph," she snorted, gliding through the floorboards to the floor below, where the consultation room was.

It was directly connected to the front door, where the living room had once been. Now it was occupied by a reception desk, an examination table, a bed, and medicine shelves. The patients who frequented it were of dubious

character, at best.

Opening the door in the back of said room led to a crooked dining table made of scrap metal, at the center of what was now the new living room but had once been a parlor. There, the boisterous leaders of the demi-human factions had recently begun to congregate, acting as though they owned the place.

Continuing further led to a corridor, at the end of which were a washroom and a bathroom, both supplied with groundwater. Opposite of them there was a bedroom.

Floating gently, Carmilla phased through the bedroom door. Within, two beds sat side by side. A young elf girl slept on the one further away, whereas the clinic's owner, Zenos, took the one closest to the entrance, likely so he could act as a barrier in case an intruder broke in. Not that he'd ever said as much himself, but that was likely his reasoning.

That was just the kind of man he was.

However, whether intentional or as a result of being half-asleep, Lily often sneaked into Zenos's bed to sleep, so his consideration was wasted in the end.

Silently, Carmilla floated above the slumbering healer, narrowing her eyes as she gazed down at him. "This is all your fault."

His arrival had thrown her nocturnal drifting habits into disarray, after all. During the day, when she'd once remained still to avoid the sun, visitors were now frequent. Some would even come uninvited. Even nights were now busy with tasks such as organizing patients' personal and medical records, bookkeeping, cleaning, and preparing for the next day.

In other words, her beloved days of serenity were gone. Completely.

Carmilla slowly reached out her right hand toward Zenos. As a wraith, the highest form of undead, she could drain his life with a single touch if she so desired. Her cold, pale fingertips were close enough to nearly feel his breath.

"Cure," he mumbled.

The wraith let out an involuntary, "Ahhh!" before making a hasty exit to the second floor by phasing through the ceiling.

After cautiously observing the situation, she slowly and cautiously made her way back down. Zenos remained fast asleep, his breath soft and even. There was no sign that a spell had actually been cast.

"Wh-What in the world...? Was he talking in his sleep?" Carmilla said. "Do not startle me so! My heart very nearly stopped!"

Not that it'd been beating in the first place.

The wraith chuckled at the undead joke she'd cracked to nobody at all. "Saying a spell's name in his sleep. Hmm." *Is he healing people even in his dreams?*

Shrugging, Carmilla gazed down at his sleeping face. Everything had changed the day this man arrived. Her quiet and still days had drawn to a close, and now she occupied her time by observing the business of the living. The intriguing incidents at her doorstep had made her heart dance anew.

At times, she'd sit at the table, laughing and chatting with the demi-humans. She'd begun to enjoy the aroma and calming sensation of the tea they'd drink after meals. And more than anything, she'd begun to look forward to the mornings—the arrival of the sun, heralding the beginning of yet another noisy day.

"Honestly," she groused. "This is *all* your fault, Zenos."

How dare he make her nights feel so long?

The corners of her slips slowly curled, and she gracefully floated back up to the second floor.

Afterword

Hello! I'm Sakaku Hishikawa.

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of *The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows!*

I decided to write this story on a whim, and posted it as a sort-of hobby on Naro, but it ended up getting so much more support than I'd ever imagined! And then I was fortunate enough that it led to the story being published as a book and manga both.

No, really. I'm grateful beyond words.

When I first started posting, I hadn't anticipated such a huge response and only had a few chapters' worth of a buffer. Two days after posting, I ran out of content and thought, "Well, I guess if I ever get the will to keep writing I'll post more." But then it got so much praise that I just had to muster up the motivation to finish it quickly!

Because of that, there are some rough spots in how the web version portrays things. I made several revisions for the book, including not only addressing those issues but also adding new short stories, which resulted in more than ten thousand extra *moji*, or Japanese characters. I hope people who've read the web version enjoy this one!

This story's about a shunned genius healer becoming a "shadow doctor"-type hero. To me—and your mileage may vary—stories are the ultimate form of escapism. Even in the face of real-life problems, one can immerse themselves in a story and forget about everything else. Stories let people experience the thrill of adventure, the sting of fighting a powerful enemy, the leisure of a simple life, or the sweetness of romancing a heroine.

Right now, the real world is particularly challenging, so this aspect of stories feels even more critical. And so I'll be delighted if my book provides even a fraction of that experience to readers.

Wow, look at me! Practically a philosopher. Phew!

Now then, on to acknowledgments.

Firstly, I'd like to thank my editors, everyone involved in the editorial department of GA Novel, and everyone who worked on the book and manga adaptations of this story.

I'd also like to thank Daburyu-sensei, the illustrator, who brought the characters to life and made them even more charming than I'd anticipated! Every time the illustrations came in, I'd just go like, "Whoa..." and sigh dreamily at them.

This book wouldn't have been published without the outpouring of support the web version received, so thank you to all the web readers. And lastly, my deepest thanks to everyone who purchased the book!

I hope to see you again in the next volume!

The **Brilliant Healer's** New Life in the Shadows



Sakaku Hishikawa
Illustrator
Daburyu



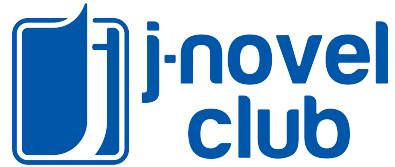


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The healer lunged forward,
enhancing his leg strength to dodge out of the way.
as the golem's arms came crashing down with a resounding rumble.
Immediately after, magic converged onto his right hand,
and he let out a loud cry as he cast Scalpel,
the spell he'd once used to treat Zophia and Loewe.





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