



SKELETON KNIGHT IN ANOTHER WORLD

III

WRITTEN BY Ennki Hakari
ILLUSTRATED BY KeG

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“Arc, you big
meanie!
You sayin’
I can’t hold
my booze??
Hic!”

Ariane

SKELETON
KNIGHT IN
ANOTHER WORLD

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written by Ennki Hakari

illustrated by KeG



Chiyome

Arc

Ponta

She managed to make her way up behind me without making a sound.

"You seem to be in need of assistance."



*"I'll be done in
five minutes!"*

*"I CALL FORTH
THE FIRE DEMON
Ifrit!"*

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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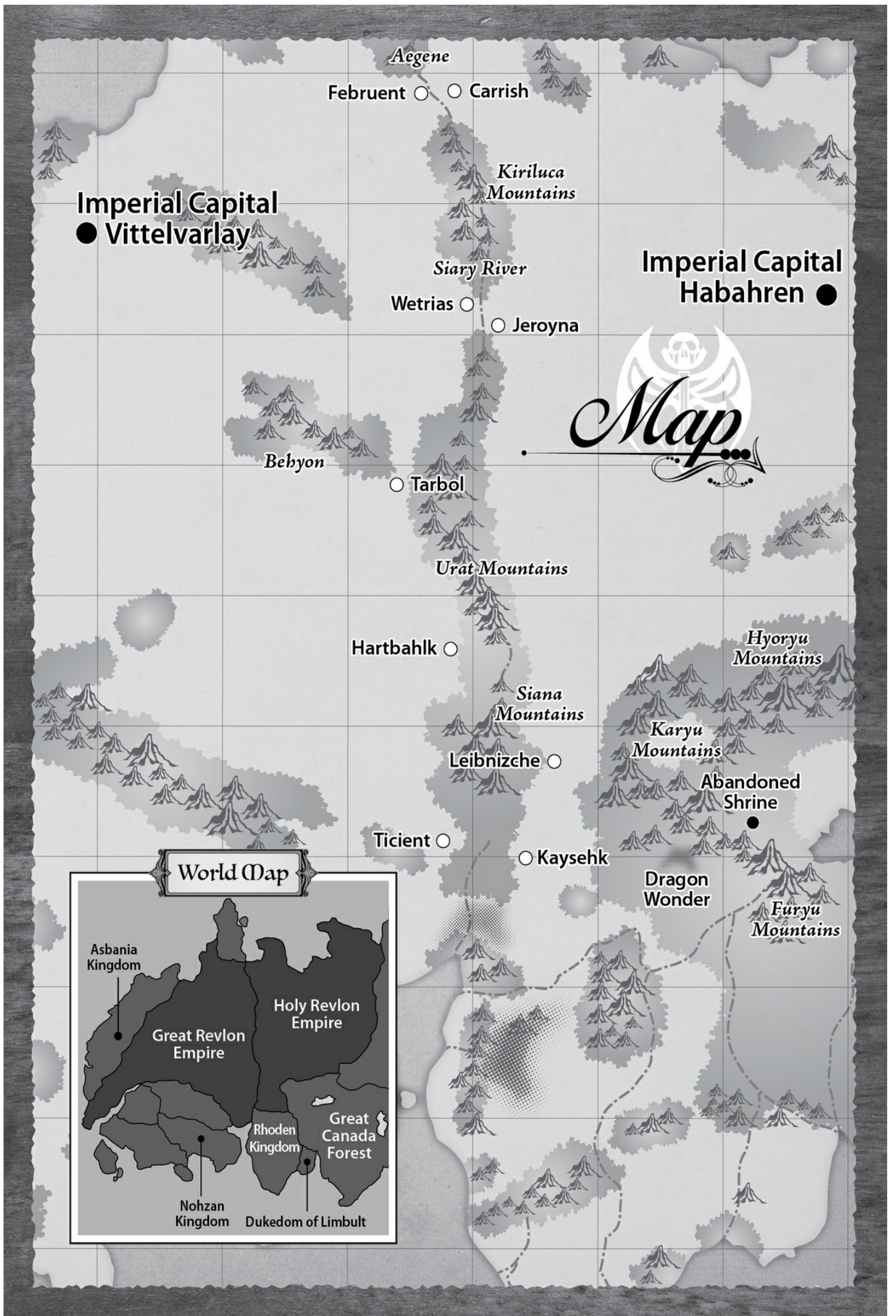
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Prologue

Vittelvarlay, capital of Revlon, sat in the center of the great empire, which spanned the entire northwest area of the northern continent.

In the days of the unified Revlon Empire, this massive capital had been the seat of power for the entire northern continent, and it had managed to maintain its splendor even after the country was divided in two.

Towering buildings constructed of beautifully polished stones, broken up by expansive roads and parks, sat behind the capital's colossal wall. The city gave off a festive atmosphere, as people dressed in all manner of clothing passed through or stopped to chat with one another.

In the center of the capital sat the majestic Dyonburgh palace, which completely dwarfed the city surrounding it.

Off in a far-flung corner of the palace, several people—who, together, essentially ran the Great West Revlon Empire—were talking animatedly among themselves. At the front of the intricately decorated parliamentary chambers, Emperor Gaulba Revlon Selziofebs sat atop the throne, giving him a commanding view of the room.

The emperor's forehead was creased with deep wrinkles below his delicately combed, soft, white hair, which matched the long beard sprouting from his chin. His eyes were sharp, intense, and piercing. Atop his head he wore a golden circlet, practically buried in precious gems—the imperial crown. Dressed in luxurious clothes and a flowing cape, the emperor sat with his chin propped on his fist, the intricately designed royal scepter by his side, making it known to all who entered the kind of power he wielded.

A sloppily dressed, though handsome, young man stood next to the displeased emperor. Five consuls sat in designated seats in front of these two. Facing them all was a room full of senatorial seats, arranged like an amphitheater. However, all fifty senators were currently standing, yelling as loudly as they could to be heard above one another.

“The number of monsters in Wetrias has increased dramatically as of late, and

they've taken heavy losses. The town itself is practically closed off! We should send the imperial army at once. Wetrias borders the river, and while the eastern empire currently seems content to wait on the far shore, it's only a matter of time until they cross!"

"What are you saying?! We already have a contingent of the Northern Imperial Army permanently stationed in Wetrias! They should easily be able to wipe out whatever little monsters are bothering them!"

"He speaks the truth! We'll be the laughingstock of the east if we mobilize the Northern Imperial Army—2,000 soldiers if you count the surrounding domains—to provide support. To say nothing of the financial burden it will put on the nobility. You don't think they'll simply pay with a smile, do you?"

"Watch your tongue! It must be nice to stay walled off between the forests surrounding the Urat and Siana mountain ranges down south! Would now be a good time to bring up the stories I've heard about soldiers from the Southern Imperial Army being dispatched to slay monsters and perform other menial work?"

The senators were evidently out for themselves, each only interested in securing whatever was best for their own faction. The argument continued as the men hurled insults at one another. Since the Great West Revlon Empire was broken up into four regions, scenes like this were common, with the senators constantly jockeying for power.

The emperor glanced at the handsome man beside him as the unpleasant argument continued. Salwis du Ohst was the steward of the royal palace, charged with assisting the emperor in both public and private affairs. He rarely ever showed any emotion, save for the simple grin that permanently graced his face.

Emperor Gaulba leaned over to Salwis, whispering so the nearby consuls couldn't hear him. "What do you make of these monsters?"

The consuls and senators were too busy arguing among themselves to pay any attention. Salwis continued to face forward as he spoke in a low voice.

"My guess is that the east finally secured the beast tamer ability our spies previously caught wind of. I'd imagine they're planning to make their way down

from Wetrias to the port of Bulgoh.”

The emperor grimaced at this.

“According to reports, ogres and giant basilisks have been sighted around Wetrias. If this is true, it’s a threat we can’t afford to ignore.”

“But the east hasn’t responded to this threat, meaning we can’t be certain they’re not the ones *behind* the attacks. What if they’re just trying to tie up our forces?”

The emperor shifted on his throne, his eyes never leaving the scene in front of him.

“Hmph. If the eastern brat was that simpleminded, we’d have swallowed him up long ago. Maybe they just haven’t been able to muster their full forces yet. Maybe they’re planning a surprise attack.”

“So, should we leave the defense of Wetrias up to the Northern Imperial Army?”

The Northern Imperial Army was led by Lieutenant General Minzaya du Orberoid. He was charged with defending the entire northeast region of the Great West Revlon Empire, and was currently stationed where the Aegene and Siary rivers met, forming the boundaries with the Soowin Kingdom to the north and the Holy East Revlon Empire to the east.

“No. If we do nothing and things escalate in Wetrias, we could very well be inviting Jeroyna to attack us as well. We need to avoid further driving a wedge between the north and the south.”

The emperor drummed his fingers on one of the throne’s armrests.

“However, if we leave this up to Minzaya and his aggressive posturing, he might just abandon Februent and make a mad dash to Wetrias. We can’t leave the north undefended.”

Emperor Gaulba let out a heavy sigh.

Salwis continued. “I imagine the events in Rhoden pushed the east to act now.”

The emperor’s brow furrowed at this offhand remark.

Salwis was referring to the coup d'état currently underway in Rhoden. The Holy East Revlon Empire had supported the second prince, Dakares, as the successor to the throne, while the Great West Revlon Empire was backing the first prince, Sekt. Prince Dakares had attempted to assassinate both Prince Sekt and Princess Yuriarna, another possible successor to the throne. However, they had recently received reports that Prince Sekt had managed to turn the tables on Dakares. Still, with Princess Yuriarna dead, it left Sekt as the heir apparent to the Rhoden Kingdom.

With Prince Sekt's support, the Great West Revlon Empire planned to join forces with the Rhoden Kingdom to invade the Holy East Revlon Empire. If all went well, the two sides would once again be reunited.

But before they could act, the attacks in Wetrias had begun.

Gaulba figured that the Holy East Revlon Empire had decided now was the time to draw first blood, before Prince Sekt could take the throne and formalize his relationship with the Great West Revlon Empire.

"Without a doubt. We need to get that little Rhoden runt to hurry up and put himself in power."

Emperor Gaulba stood, grabbing his scepter and stamping it on the ground several times. The squabbling senators immediately went quiet and turned their attention toward the emperor. He cast an angry gaze across the room.

"Quiet!" The emperor's voice boomed throughout the chamber. "If we leave Wetrias to fend for itself, it will only be a matter of time before those insurgents to the east make their way across the river. In addition to dispatching the Northern Imperial Army to Wetrias to secure a swift victory, I will also be dispatching troops from the Southern Imperial Army, based in Tarbol."

A wave of groans rippled through the gathered senators. An older man within the crowd raised his hand. The emperor tilted his chin, inviting the man to step forward. The man bowed briefly before speaking.

"The Tarbol region is frequently under attack by monsters from the Urat and Behyon mountain ranges. Excuse my insolence, but I fear that...were we to dispatch the Southern Imperial Army to Wetrias, this could have an impact on

trade between the north and south.”

Several other senators nodded in agreement. The emperor stroked his beard, contemplating the situation.

“Send Lieutenant General Keeling’s army in Hartbahlk to Tarbol. The Tarbol militia will have to suffice until they arrive.”

“But that will leave Hartbahlk undefended...”

The ridiculing voices of the other senators cut the old man off.

“That region is protected by forests on either side. What is there to defend?”

Several senators laughed at this.

“Have you said your piece? If there are any other objections, let them be known now.”

The senators exchanged glances before returning to their seats. Only the old man remained standing.

Salwis looked around the room, declared the issue settled, and moved on to the next agenda item.

Chapter 1:

Travel Companions

Two figures walked west along the dark road, the sun barely cresting the horizon behind them, turning the eastern sky an almost imperceptible shade of blue.

A cool wind blowing through the Calcut mountain range to the north brought with it a dense fog, obscuring their vision of the forests and plains off in the distance, almost as if intentionally trying to send the travelers down the wrong path.

I was one of these travelers, and the woman to my left, dressed in a charcoal-gray cloak, walked jauntily through the fog. As her cloak billowed, I caught glimpses of the intricately detailed leather corset she wore underneath, providing her with protection without impeding her movement. Despite the rather complete coverage of her armor, her well-rounded figure managed to show through.

Even the briefest glance at her face made it apparent that she was not human.

Between her smooth, amethyst-colored skin, her long, snow-white hair tied back in a ponytail, her golden eyes locked straight ahead, and her long, pointy ears, her appearance was rather distinct.

She was a dark elf, a species unique to this world. She was also my boss. Her name was Ariane Glenys Maple—a resident of the Great Canada Forest and a soldier of the capital city of Maple—and she'd hired me to join her on her journey.

She wore a long sword at her waist, its hilt adorned with a lion. Her swordsmanship would put even the best-trained mercenary to the test. She was also well versed in spirit magic, a skill often mentioned in ancient tomes, though completely inaccessible to humans.

As for me, I'd woken up in this strange world, suddenly inhabiting the body of a character I'd been playing in a video game.

The wind snapped at my cloak—as dark as night, the inside glimmering like stars ripped straight out of the sky—revealing gleaming, silver armor, its intricate patterns ornamented in blue and white. It was the type of armor a knight of legend might wear. On my back I wore a large, elaborately decorated shield and a massive sword—which inspired awe in all who caught sight of it.

Most noteworthy of all, however, was the fact that inside this armor, I was nothing but a skeleton.

A bright blue flame—my soul—flickered deep within my skull, where my eyes should have been. Fortunately, I had thus far been able to avoid frightening people by staying in my armor.

Ariane was the first person I'd revealed myself to who'd accepted me for what I was. Given that I could count the people who'd seen my true form on one hand, I wasn't in any hurry to take my helmet off in front of just anyone.

Still, despite the small number of people who knew about my predicament, I felt blessed to have found so many who had accepted me. I'd always had awful luck in games of chance, so I felt quite lucky to have ended up in another world surrounded by such great people.

Ariane turned to me with a thoughtful expression, breaking my train of thought.

"Arc, what did you think of the magic we saw that Chiyome girl perform back in the capital?"

Arc was the name of my character in the game. I continued pretending I was the avatar I'd played as in so many sessions back home. Though, I wasn't sure "pretend" was the right word anymore. It all felt natural at this point.

The Chiyome girl Ariane spoke of had recently asked for our help in freeing her enslaved comrades from Rhoden's capital. She belonged to a species known in this world as mountain people—or, more pejoratively, as "beastmen"—marked by their animal ears and tails.

About six hundred years ago, someone like myself had also come to this world and brought them together as the Jinshin clan, a group of ninjas who roamed across the northern continent. The mountain people, like Chiyome, and the

elves, like Ariane, were commonly hunted and enslaved throughout this continent.

This alternate world seemed to be mirroring the same conflicts we had back in my own world based on skin color. Being Asian myself, I found all kinds of complexions appealing, but my worldview was probably coming from a more modern place than this world's. Come to think of it, I used to become tanned easily, though that wasn't the same as having naturally dark skin of course.

Realizing my mind had wandered pretty far off track, I tilted my head to the side as I tried recalling whatever important detail I seemed to have forgotten. I knew there was something I was forgetting; it was just a matter of what that something was...

I shook my head to try to refocus and turned my gaze to Ariane.

I assumed Ariane was referring to the ninjutsu techniques she had seen Chiyome use during the assault. Here in this world, where magic was commonplace, it made sense to refer to such techniques as magic.

"Is there something bothering you, Miss Ariane?"

"That thing she called ninjutsu...it's really just spirit magic."

I let out a gasp of surprise. "I thought only elves were able to use spirit magic. Is that not the case?"

Ariane shook her head. "Spirit magic isn't restricted to any one species. Even humans would be able to use it if they entered into a binding compact with a spirit. But, of course, it's incredibly difficult for humans to communicate with spirits."

That all sounded like semantics. It amounted to the same thing in the end. But then I remembered something and hit my fist into my open palm.

"Now that you mention it, I heard that the mountain people are also able to bond with spirit creatures."

"Spirit creature" was a general term referring to any animal that had spirit energy running through it. They were incredibly cautious and usually kept their distance from humans. Apparently, the elves and mountain people were among

the few species who were easily able to bond with them.

“That’s right. However, the mountain people typically have a low affinity for magic, so even when they’re able to communicate with spirit creatures, it’s rare that they’d enter into a compact. Rare, but not unheard of. Still...”

Ariane looked off into the distance, as if recalling something that had happened back in the capital.

“It almost seemed like I was watching a spirit creature itself...”

Her golden eyes locked on Ponta, the foxlike spirit creature perched atop my head.

Ponta was sixty centimeters long, though its fluffy, almost dandelion-like tail took up over about half its length, which was why it was known as a cottontail fox. A thin membrane stretched between its front and back legs, giving it the appearance of a Japanese flying squirrel. Except for its white stomach, the rest of its body was covered in light green fur.

Ponta and I had become fast friends when I saved it from a bandit hideout.

By summoning up magical gusts of wind with its spirit abilities, Ponta could glide freely through the air. It was the kind of animal you’d read about in fantasy books.

Ponta looked back inquisitively at Ariane. “Kyii?”

Could it be that Ponta and Chiyome were both spirit creatures? I decided to ask this exact question.

“What do you mean?” Ariane looked straight ahead again, as if to collect her thoughts before speaking. “Though they may seem similar, there’s a difference between the spirit magic we elves use and that used by spirit creatures. We transfer the mana within ourselves to the spirit, who turns that into magic based on our compact. Spirit creatures, however, have spirit energy within themselves. They’re able to directly convert their own mana into magic.”

“I’m still not sure I understand. Are you saying that Miss Chiyome didn’t make a compact with any sort of spirit, but is actually a spirit herself?”

“That’s correct.”

Ponta let out a deep yawn from atop my helmet.

Another question sprang to mind. “Can you and other elves see things like that?”

Ariane nodded firmly in response. “Unlike humans, elves are able to see mana. This allows us to see spirits, and probably makes it easier for us to enter into compacts with them. Do you remember what happened when we entered the Great Canada Forest?”

I assumed she was referring to when we’d visited the elven village of Lalatoya, her home. I nodded as the image of the massive forest came to mind.

“We were able to minimize the chance of encountering any sort of powerful monsters by choosing a path where there was relatively little mana. While dark elves might be superior in terms of physical strength, light elves have better sight.”

It was all starting to come together. When we’d first entered the forest, the women had cut a long, snaking path through the trees rather than heading straight to their destination. I’d thought it was an attempt to confuse me, an outsider.

“Oooh, so you weren’t just trying to keep me from memorizing the route to your village?”

Ariane made a face and slumped her shoulders as she realized what I was saying.

“Arc, you can use teleportation magic. The route wouldn’t matter.”

She was right.

I had the ability to teleport both short and long distances. So long as I could see or picture the exact location I wanted to go, the route to get there was meaningless. This power was incredibly useful to me, since I normally couldn’t navigate my way out of a paper bag.

However, my long-range teleportation spell, Transport Gate, only worked for places I could call to mind, and the short-range teleportation spell, Dimensional Step, only worked for places I could physically see. Here in the forest, both were

of little use.

“So, that’s how elves are able to safely travel through monster-filled forests?”

“Well, everyone’s abilities are different of course. Legend has it that Evanjulin, the founding elder of Canada, was only faintly able to see mana.”

From everything I’d heard, the founding elder of Canada—and Maple, its capital—sounded like a person from another world, just like me. He might have looked like an elf, but it sounded like he didn’t have any of their abilities.

However, there was a marked difference between “faintly able” and “totally unable.” Did that mean he’d at least been able to see mana on some level? Unfortunately, there was no way I could check, since he was long dead.

The sky continued to brighten at our backs as we marched on, my mind mulling over the meaning of all this. The fog that had rolled down from the valley between the mountains began burning off as the sun rose, the rest of it blown away across the plains by a gentle wind. The grass and trees rustled in the breeze, as if eager for the morning’s warmth. As the air cleared, I could see fields running along the side of the road and a village off in the distance—a short journey by foot. Behind me, the capital city was still a vague outline in the fog.

“Now that we can see, let’s speed things along before people start coming outside.”

Ariane gave a quick nod and, in a well-practiced motion, grabbed onto my shoulder. I focused on a location in the distance and summoned my short-range teleportation magic.

“Dimensional Step.”

A moment later, we were much farther down the road, the capital behind us a mere shadow. We repeated the process, finding new landmarks and teleporting in short bursts along the road toward Lamburt, our movements somewhat obscured by lingering fog.

The morning air brought a slight chill to my skin...well, my bones anyway. I didn’t have skin.

Other than Ariane, me, and Ponta atop my head, there were no signs of life on the road. Actually, calling it a road hardly seemed appropriate. It wasn't paved with brick or stone, merely a lane of packed earth where no grass grew.

We continued teleporting until we hit a fork in the road. Given my abysmal sense of direction, I asked Ariane to navigate.

"Which road leads to Lamburt?"

But she just looked up at me with half-lidded eyes and offered a curt response.

"You're guiding *us*, Arc. I don't know anything about human lands, remember?"

She was right on all counts. I was the one who'd uncovered the information about Lamburt back in the capital. It was the town where we believed we'd find the next group of enslaved elves.

I'd yet to see any maps of this area for sale, much less maps of the entire kingdom. Asking locals was the only surefire way to get to where you were going.

The man I'd asked for directions to Lamburt had told me to head west out of the capital then north when I hit the coast. He hadn't said anything about a giant rock and two roads splitting off. Both roads continued west, but the one on the right seemed to be heading slightly north, while the one on the left angled south. Still, since they were both going west, I figured either road should be fine.

Unlike in my world, it was uncommon to find truly straight roads here, since they usually followed the lay of the land. They might veer around hills or even take large detours to circumnavigate cliffs, which greatly increased the time it took to travel anywhere in this world.

I wasn't sure what the roads were splitting off to avoid, but I figured I could just use my teleportation magic to return us to this spot if we went down the wrong one.

I glanced around and found a fallen tree branch by the side of the road. That would work perfectly. I picked it up, returned to the fork, and stood the branch

upright where the road split. As soon as I let go, the branch toppled to the ground with a crack. It was pointing toward the northwest road. I nodded, pleased with the outcome.

“Well, I guess we’re going right.”

The voice behind me, however, sounded less impressed. I turned to find Ariane, her eyes defiant, her cheeks slightly puffed out.

“You’re really going to choose our path by chance? You told me you’d asked about the route to Lamburt back at the capital!”

“I did ask, but he didn’t say anything about the road splitting like this.”

Ariane let out a loud sigh and rubbed her temples. “So you thought it would be a good idea to just randomly pick the direction?” Her eyebrow twitched as she spoke.



“No, I’m leaving our fate up to god!”

“Well, I never agreed to that!”

Ariane knelt beside the branch. She closed her eyes and clasped her hands together, as if in prayer.

“I beg you, spirits, guide us down the right path...”

She stood the tree branch on end and let it fall again. Just like before, it hit the ground pointing toward the northwest.

“Harrumph. Looks like the right path is where we need to go.”

Ariane didn’t sound entirely convinced, but she grabbed onto my shoulder all the same, evidently willing to leave her fate up to the spirits.

I decided to try and lighten the mood.

“What’s the matter? If we go down the wrong road, we can always teleport back here.”

With that, I turned toward the northwest and cast Dimensional Step, once again making short hops along the empty road as the sun continued its slow journey into the sky.

The environment slowly began changing as we traveled down the road.

Flat, expansive plains gave way to rocky hills the color of umber. The road took on the consistency of fine sand. To our right, a sprawling forest stretched to the base of a mountain range off in the distance. To our left was a desolate wasteland. Without any vegetation to mark where the boundaries of the road were, I worried we’d soon stray from it.

With no sign of any human settlements, I began wondering if we’d picked the wrong path.

Suddenly, a heavy wind blew in from the south, enveloping us in red dust and blocking our vision.

“Kyiii!”

Ponta clung to the top of my helmet as Ariane's and my cloaks snapped in the wind, adding to the cacophony.

As soon as the wind died, I began searching the horizon for a spot we could teleport to, hoping to move us away from whatever had conjured up the wind. I looked to Ariane, but she was frozen, as if listening for something.

"What is it?"

She brought a finger to her lips, her eyes scanning our surroundings. Ponta darted its head around rapidly, just as alert.

I wanted to ask what she thought was out there, but I knew better than to speak again. I glanced about the red earth and the various fang-like stones jutting up from the ground, but nothing stood out as a threat.

Then I heard the faint sound of flapping wings.

I turned toward the sound to see over a dozen creatures flying in our direction. They were still a fair distance away, so I couldn't get a good read on their size, but they looked like large birds.

"Wyverns?!"

Ariane glared up at the shadowy beasts. They were close enough that I could count them now. There were twenty-four of the winged creatures—wyverns, as she'd called them—in total, flapping their massive wings and heading straight for us.

Ponta hopped down from my helmet and wrapped itself around my neck like a scarf, flattening its ears against its head.

"Huh. So, those are wyverns?"

As they drew closer, I was finally able to get a good look at them.

They had a wingspan of around eight meters, with bird-like heads at the end of their long necks, and small, reptilian bodies. A dusky yellow, striped pattern mottled their skin. The wyverns were about three meters from head to tail, the latter slicing deftly through the air as they flew, almost like a rudder.

These were nothing like the wyverns I'd faced in the game.

Ariane seemed confused as well.

“These aren’t anything like the wyverns I know. I’ve never seen anything like them before. Plus, they typically only hunt in the heat of the afternoon. It’s way too early for them to be out like this.”

Hmm. Maybe she was just unfamiliar with this particular type of wyvern. Or maybe this was a subspecies. Or a species *similar* to wyverns. It made sense that the characteristics and appearance of a given creature would change depending on their environment.

But there were more pressing matters than identification at the moment.

“Are wyverns powerful?” I kept my eyes on the sky as I asked Ariane.

Compared with other monsters in the game, wyverns weren’t all that strong. They maxed out around Level 100 and didn’t have any special attacks. But even though they were mid-tier enemies in the game, I wasn’t sure if that applied to the ones coming toward us.

Ariane shot me a glance.

“One or two on their own? Not really. But numbers like these... I think we’d better just teleport away from there.”

She had a point. Our short-range weapons wouldn’t be much use against them.

It was easy to beat down wyverns in the game, even with just a sword, since they hovered about a meter off the ground. These ones, however, were way out of strike range. Running was probably the best plan.

But I also thought this might be a good opportunity to test out my abilities, especially considering future situations I might find myself in. Better to try things out now, when the stakes were low, than to have a spell backfire when it mattered most. Plus, we could still teleport out of danger if need be.

“I’d like to try something out. Would you step back a bit, Ariane?”

I stepped forward to face the oncoming wyvern swarm. I could hear Ariane start saying something, but then she decided against it. I swung my bag down from my shoulder and set it to the ground before taking a proper battle stance.

“Rock Shot!”

I decided to start out small, with one of the basic spells from the Magus job class.

Large stones shot from my outstretched palm straight toward the wyverns. However, in the ten meters between them and me, they were easily able to evade my attack. I tried the spell again and again, but I never came close to hitting any of the wyverns. Not only was the attack easy to read, but the wyverns were also quite adept at dodging.

The creatures were now right above us, circling like vultures. My magical barrage was the only thing keeping them at bay.

“Let’s see if you can dodge this. Lightning Damper!”

Judging by the wyverns’ harried response, they must have sensed the sudden change in atmospheric pressure brought on by the spell.

The next moment, a bright flash tore across the sky, followed by a thunderous, reverberating roar. Tendrils of light shot through the air and down onto the wyverns, almost as if the sky were raining lightning.

I’d known this kind of mid-tier area-of-effect magic was pretty powerful, but seeing it in action took my breath away. It definitely didn’t disappoint. I watched as, one by one, the wyverns who’d been hit fell into tailspins and dropped to the ground.

However, more than half of them were still in the air.

“Hmm. Not exactly the most accurate of attacks...”

That was an understatement. Despite how impressive it looked, the lightning’s hit rate was abysmal. If it had been modern-day weaponry, it would have been considered broken. Moreover, the spell wasn’t even a fast-hitting attack. It was like taking shots with a single-action revolver. Add on the fact that it hit indiscriminately, and it didn’t seem to be all that useful.

However, the unexpected lightning *did* seem to strike fear into the wyverns circling above us. They began scattering.

Ariane, who’d been watching all this from behind me, finally piped up.

“Warn me next time before you pull out something powerful like that! That was terrifying!”

When I looked back, the corners of Ariane’s eyes were damp, and her hands were firmly clamped over her ears.

It was only natural, I supposed. Anyone would have been shocked to witness such a sudden display of thunder and lightning right in front of them. I quickly offered my apologies. Ponta simply blinked a few times—still wrapped around my neck—and engaged in a bit of self-grooming with its tongue. The lightning didn’t seem to have fazed the cottontail fox, but the static electricity had made its fur stand on end.

“I have to admit, that was pretty impressive. Is there nothing you can’t do?” Ariane let out a sigh, her expression a mix of awe and exasperation. Several wyverns had crashed to the ground just in front of us.

A phrase I’d heard somewhere before came to mind. “There are many things I cannot do, but I try my best.”

I approached one of the dead wyverns. Despite a few scorch marks, it was still in pretty good condition.

“Can this be used for anything?” I turned the body over, looking back at Ariane. Despite its massive size, the wyvern was lighter than I’d thought it would be.

“Hmm. I know wyvern hides can be made into leather armor, but again, these looks different from the wyverns I’ve seen. They also don’t taste very good, so that just leaves their rune stones.”

In the game, the materials you could gather from wyverns were only useful early on. It made sense they’d be about the same here.

“What leather is your armor made out of, Miss Ariane?”

If common armor was made from wyvern hides, then I had to imagine her armor was made of something far better. I was quite curious.

“This armor was made using leather from a grand dragon.”

I let out a loud gasp. “Whoa!”

I had no way of knowing if grand dragons here looked anything like they did in the game, but it was clearly a high-grade material regardless.

Ariane muttered a response under her breath. “It’s still nothing like what you have on.”

The Belenus Holy Armor I wore was from the mythical-class line of equipment—the highest attainable. Merely gathering the supplies to make it was a harrowing endeavor.

I had my doubts such materials even existed in this world. My armor was probably one of a kind.

While we bantered back and forth, I pulled a dagger from my bag and began cutting open one of the dead wyvern’s bodies. Up close, they almost looked like pterosaurs.

“Miss Ariane, do you know where the rune stone is located?”

“If they’re anything like the wyverns I’m familiar with, it should be over here.”

She pointed to a spot just below the rib cage. I jammed the dagger in and sliced the wyvern’s chest open, revealing a small, glimmering purple stone. After collecting the rune stones from the seven other dead wyverns, I put them and the dagger into my bag.

“What should we do about their bodies?”

Ariane seemed entirely uninterested in the topic. “Why not just leave them? If someone wants them, they can cart them off.”

She had a point. If the hides could be used to make leather armor, then we may as well leave them for whoever wandered past. Even if no one did, at least some scavenger could make a meal of them. There was no harm in leaving them behind.

“You’re probably right. Shall we get going?”

I hefted the bag over my shoulder, and we continued down the road using Dimensional Step.

After some time, we finally caught sight of a stone-walled town atop a hill beside to the road. Beyond the wall, several tall, boxy buildings peaked out

from inside. The whole thing had a rather simple, dull appearance—nothing like the highly decorated towns I'd been to thus far. I wasn't even sure "town" was the right word for it. It looked more like a fort to me.

The area around the hill was full of lush greenery, in stark contrast to the deep red earth along the road. Fields had been cut into the side of the hill, stacked like a massive staircase. I could see the tiny outlines of people tending to the crops, though there were relatively few compared to the size of the fields.

"Maybe we should stop and ask for directions."

"I agree. The road is starting to turn north anyway."

I was surprised to realize she was right. Out here, along a winding path and with no compass, it was a lot harder to keep my bearings. I tried not to show how worried I was by this and instead started walking confidently toward the town.

Set against the expansive scene that lay before us, the town initially looked rather small. However, the closer we got to it, the larger it seemed to grow. The town's walls were around five meters tall, the stones perfectly aligned, sporting a walkway along the top where several guards patrolled.

The massive gate had been left open, with just a single guard standing watch. When he noticed our approach, he jumped to attention.

I offered up a wave and called out to him. "Excuse me, I'd like to ask for directions. We're on our way to Lamburt, but I'm not sure if this is the right road."

The guard cocked his head to the side, looking me up and down before turning his gaze to Ariane. She kept the hood of her cloak low over her face to conceal her identity. The guard turned back to me.

"Lamburt? Never heard of it. But I never done left this town before neither, so I only know the villages 'round these parts."

The man frowned slightly and scratched his head.

Unlike in my world, where you could easily travel to another town or even

another country, it seemed unlikely we'd be able to find the best route to reach such a faraway town.

I reached into the leather pouch that served as my wallet.

"Hm. In that case, maybe we'll ask around town. How much is the entrance tax?"

The man just shook his head and moved out of our way, waving us in.

"We don't levy taxes on people entering here. Given how few visitors we get as it is, no one would ever bother to stop by the town if we did. We do collect a nominal fee when you leave though."

The guard laughed at his own joke before offering a salute and gesturing again for us to go on in.

"Welcome to Branbayna."

I nodded to the man as we walked past him and into the town.

Despite the early hour, the town was a lot livelier than it appeared from the outside, with many people milling about the streets. The buildings were all built close together, making the narrow alleys feel like a maze. Clothes hung between the buildings to provide some shade from the harsh sun, though this only made it harder to see where we were going the farther we traveled in.

As we walked through the town, we ran across a sleepy-looking group of men—likely mercenaries, since they were outfitted in a motley assortment of armor and equipment—heading into different buildings where it seemed they were being put up for the day. Almost as if passing off a baton, other men left as the mercenaries entered and made their way toward the fields.

We traveled against the flow of people and found ourselves at a group of stalls that made up a sort of morning market. Ponta let out a little squeal and started wagging its tail about excitedly. I turned to see what had caught Ponta's attention and saw a large pile of beans, about the size of lentils. They sat next to a roaster, which filled the air with a delicious aroma.

We hadn't eaten anything since leaving the capital, so I could only imagine how hungry Ponta must be. Prompted by the constant mewling from atop my

head, the crowd cleared out of my way as I approached the bean stall. The man behind the counter offered us a smile as we approached.

“Can I interest ya in some beans, kind sir?”

“I’ll take two scoops of the roasted ones, please.”

The old man thanked me and poured two scoops of freshly roasted beans into my open leather pouch. Figuring I should make the most of this encounter, I started to ask him if he happened to know the way to Lamburt, but he asked another question before I had a chance to.

“Are you here to hunt sand wyverns?”

He must have been talking about the swarm that had attacked us earlier this morning.

“Not exactly. Are sand wyverns a common occurrence around here?”

“They used to come in from the desert on occasion, but recently there’s been a large swarm of them lurking about and destroying our crops.”

I looked around at the other customers in the market, but none of them seemed concerned. In fact, they all looked quite cheerful.

“No one seems particularly bothered.”

The stall owner laughed. “Sand wyverns don’t travel much during the day. So long as you’re in town by nightfall, you won’t have any problems.”

“You seem pretty knowledgeable about monsters.”

I was making an observation, but the man laughed again and deflected the compliment with a wave of his hand.

“Not at all. There’s a researcher living in town who studies them. It’s thanks to him that we’ve managed to keep casualties as low as we have. Anyway, that’ll be three suk.”

He seamlessly transitioned back to business.

I dug around in the coin pouch at my waist. “A researcher, you say? Hmm. Ah, I only have silver...”

I handed the man a silver coin and received seven coppers in change. He

leaned in close as he dropped them into my hand.

“And that researcher is an elf, y’know. Pretty rare to see ’round these parts.”

Ariane perked up at this. “There’s an elf living here? In a human town?”

As soon as she’d said it, she clapped a hand over her mouth and tugged her hood farther down.

“That’s right. The lord of this town even arranged a place for him to live. That must’ve been about, hmm, ten years ago?”

I decided to ask what I suspected Ariane was thinking. “Could you tell us where we might find this elf researcher’s house?”

“Well, I hear he’s living with the lord in his estate. I doubt you’d be able to meet with him without a good reason.”

“I was simply curious. Anyway, do you happen to know the way to Lamburt?”

I decided to allay the old man’s suspicions by asking him my original question.

He tilted his head to the side and called out to a nearby stall.

“Hey, old man! You said you used to be a merchant in your younger days, yeah? Do you know the way to Lamburt?”

An unshaven, elderly man sitting in the stall took a puff from the pipe hanging out of his mouth and looked lazily in our direction. He spoke in a slow voice as smoke curled up in front of his face.

“If you want to get to Lamburt, you’ll need to head south through the Hibbot wastelands and make your way west. It’s on the other side of the Riebing mountain range.”

If what he said were true, then we’d gone in the completely wrong direction. We probably should have taken the southern route at the fork in the road.

I thanked the two men and turned from the stalls, offering a handful of roasted beans to Ponta as we walked away. The spirit creature eagerly shoved them into its cheeks.

I looked back over my shoulder, locking eyes with Ariane.

“What would you like to do?”

She hesitated for only a moment before tilting her head up to look straight at me. I knew exactly what she was going to say.

“I want to try and meet this elf researcher.”

If the bean seller had been telling the truth, then there was an elf living here—in lands where they were usually hunted and taken as slaves—under the protection of a local noble. That must have been hard for Ariane to believe. But the old man hadn’t made it sound like the researcher was being held as a slave.

I tried asking around—nonchalantly of course—to see if anyone knew the way to the noble’s estate...and if there really was an elf researcher living there. To my surprise, almost everyone I asked knew of his existence.

Apparently, the elf was sometimes seen walking around town with a contingent of guards, likely provided by the noble in order to protect him from anyone with ill intentions.

There were also a few stories of him taking down a drunk and rowdy mercenary with ease, implying that he was also an experienced fighter.

Through the gaps between the buildings, I caught sight of a series of boxy towers, connected by a large wall, in the center of town. On the other side of the wall stood a building shaped like a massive cube. This was the noble’s estate, where the researcher was supposedly living. The entrance was a large gate that could be dropped down at the first sign of trouble. Four guards stood watch in front of it.

It seemed unlikely that we’d just be allowed to waltz on in, but I was hesitant to sneak in as we’d done at other, similar estates. Things were a little different this time. I decided there was no harm in asking, even if it led nowhere.

The men were on edge the instant they noticed us. They clutched their spears—some of them with shaking hands—and spread out, forming a half circle around us and blocking our path forward. I had to admit, we must have struck a pretty bizarre sight: a two-meter tall knight with a green fox atop his head and a woman wrapped in a dark cloak.

“Apologies for the sudden intrusion. We would like to meet the elf researcher who lives here.”

Tension washed across the men's faces.

"No one meets Carcy without an appointment. You best move along."

The guard's response was rather curt, but it was no less than I'd expected. I looked back at Ariane, unsure of how to proceed.

Ariane pulled back her charcoal-gray hood and approached the guards.

"I am a messenger from the Great Canada Forest. I request an audience with this Carcy."

Ariane's smooth, amethyst-colored skin shone in the sunlight, and her pointed, elven ears poked out of the snow-white hair that fluttered loosely from the hood. Her green-flecked, golden eyes, set beneath her long eyelashes, stared straight through the men, leaving them frozen in place and gaping as they searched for words.

An older man, dressed in more regal attire than the guards, appeared from inside the gate and started yelling at them.

"You idiots! Go report to Carcy and the lord at once!"

This got the guards moving. Two of them turned toward the estate, stumbling over each other as they dashed inside.

"Please wait over here." The man, apparently the captain of the guards, gestured toward a bench near the entrance.

Ariane and I sat down, and I poured a handful of roasted lentils into my palm for Ponta to munch on while we waited.

Soon, one of the messengers came running back. He saluted the captain before breathlessly offering his report.

"Carcy is willing to grant them an audience!"

The captain nodded and the guard saluted again before returning to his post.

So, we'd be meeting the elusive elf researcher after all.

However, I doubted we'd *only* be meeting with the researcher. My shoulders slumped as I realized that the noble housing him would likely also be in attendance. I worried that encountering influential people in this world would

cause problems for me down the road. Come to think of it, I'd already done that with Ariane's father, Dillan, in the elven realm. What would the repercussions of *that* be?

"Please, follow me."

The captain's voice gave me a brief reprieve from my thoughts as Ariane and I turned to follow him.

At the center of the estate was a square garden surrounded by a covered walkway and several buildings, each of which was connected to the next by the walkway.

We were led from the guardhouse to a two-story stone building with the same boxy design as the rest. It was rather short compared to the other buildings towering over it, though it was larger than the typical residence.

The wooden door was adorned with a beautifully engraved symbol and a relatively simple knocker. The captain gave a loud rap, and a man inside answered.

"It's open!"

The voice was surprisingly cheerful given how nervous I—and Ariane, too, I assumed—felt. But the captain didn't seem to notice. He simply pushed open the door.

"Greetings!"

The captain stepped through the door and moved off to the side, allowing Ariane and me to enter. We stopped at the threshold and looked around the room.

It was large and open, taking up much of the first floor of the building. Thick wooden pillars lined the walls, and in the center of the room sat a long table with benches on either side and tall chairs with elaborate armrests at the ends. Though it appeared to be for dining, the room looked mostly unused, the unadorned stone floor giving it a rather dreary air.

The captain made his way toward a room on the far side of the dining table,

waving us along as he went.

The next room was in complete disarray.

Though there was another table in this room—that appeared to be for receiving guests—its entire surface was covered with books, parchment, and scrolls. The walls were lined with bookshelves, but they, too, were filled to the brim. On the floor was a beautiful carpet adorned with an intricate design, though it was covered in rocks and what appeared to be various animal claws and fangs, leaving us few options for where we could stand.

On the far side of the room was a large glass window, in front of which sat a drafting table, and a man in a chair.

“I’ve brought the messenger from Canada.”

“Ah, yes, thank you.”

The captain saluted the man before turning on his heel and leaving the room.

The man stood from his chair.

“To think someone would come all the way from Canada just for me. Welcome, welcome.”

The man’s long elf ears stuck out through his haphazardly trimmed, green-tinged, blond hair. His green eyes peered out at us from behind a pair of round glasses. Rather than the traditional elven attire I’d seen thus far, he was wearing the same clothes as those of the human town folk, though it was several sizes too big and hung loosely on his body.



“Greetings. My name is Ariane Glenys Maple. I take it you’re the one named Carcy?”

Carcy looked surprised when he heard Ariane’s name. “A soldier from Maple? Well, I’ll be. I’m Carcy Held, but you can call me Carcy. And this knight here... Ohh! Is that a ventu-vulpis?”

His surprise only increased as he caught sight of Ponta sitting atop my head. He shoved several boxes out of the way to get closer to us, excitement evident in his voice.

“My name is Arc, and I am here serving as Miss Ariane’s travel companion. This cottontail fox is Ponta.”

“Kyiiii!”

Ponta scooted to the back of my helmet, seemingly put off by Carcy’s enthusiasm.

“Travel companion? I’ve never seen an elf wear armor like that. I suppose that means you’re a human?”

I simply nodded.

Carcy started to look me over, as if taking in every detail from head to toe, and somehow managed to look even more surprised than before.

“I’m hardly one to speak, but you make quite the unique pair. And a spirit creature bonding with a human? Practically unheard of.”

Carcy grinned as he slowly reached out toward Ponta. The fox hopped down and wrapped itself around my neck to escape. Carcy frowned slightly at this, but his expression quickly changed to a dejected smile.

Carcy let out a short sigh. “Spirit creatures never did like me much. Ah, well. Sit down, sit down.”

He removed a few boxes from atop a chair, throwing them into a corner, and gestured to it. I offered the chair to Ariane and stood behind her.

“Is it true that the village sent a messenger all the way here for me?”

Carcy slumped into his own chair and pushed his glasses up with a finger, just

before they slipped off the tip of his nose. He regarded us with keen interest. Judging by the way he spoke and acted, he seemed to have a pretty good grasp of the situation.

“No, I’m actually on a quest to save some of our fellow elves who have been kidnapped by humans. We only happened to end up in this town on our way to Lamburt.”

Carcy smiled and nodded, seemingly satisfied with this answer.

“I see, I see. And then you heard that there was a strange elven man here and decided to check it out. You do know that you’re quite a ways from Lamburt, don’t you?”

I knew what he was hinting at.

Ariane fixed her gaze on the bespectacled man and deftly changed the subject. “I’m quite impressed you’ve been able to live here in this human town without any problems, Carcy.”

Carcy slowly looked around the room before responding in a low voice. “I came here around, well, it must have been ten years ago or so. I left my village forty years ago, travelling from place to place, keeping my identity a secret. Compared to other countries, this is one of the better ones.”

He offered us a tired smile.

“Ten years is quite a long time to be living here.”

“Considering our lifespans, it’s little more than what a year or two would be to you humans. But you’re right, it has been a while. With the Hibbot wastelands to the west and the Calcut Mountains to the east, it’s the perfect place to investigate and research all manner of monsters.” Carcy gave a wry smile and adjusted his glasses again. “But alas, it’s not such a nice place to live.”

Ariane finally cut straight to the question that had been on her mind this whole time.

“What brought you here to this human town?”

Considering the job we were currently tasked with, Ariane had a healthy distrust of humans. We’d both been surprised to learn that the elf in front of us

was living openly in a human town, and under their protection no less.

Ariane's golden eyes were fixed on Carcy.

"When I first arrived here, I kept my identity a secret. However, the lord of this town heard about a man researching the various monsters in the area and took an interest in me. He invited me to his estate and, after learning I was an elf, offered me this place to stay. Now I'm living here, carrying out my studies, publishing books on my findings... It's pretty much what I was doing back home."

I took another look around the room and saw that much of the parchment scattered about contained intricate drawings of monsters, with notes written haphazardly in the margins. As far as I could tell, all the books crammed onto the shelves were also about monsters. Carcy was the real deal.

Ariane, however, didn't seem entirely convinced. She stared at him intently, as if searching for something.

"I notice you didn't include your village in your name. Does this mean you've cut ties with it?"

Carcy hit his fist into his hand, as if he hadn't even realized what he'd done. "Aaah, no, that's simply because I've adjusted to the human way of referring to myself. I don't use it in any of the books I publish either. I'm from the village of Landfrea."

"The trading town..."

Ariane seemed familiar with the name. She looked satisfied with his response.

"Right now, I'm studying the sand worms that live out in the Hibbot wastelands, but they spend most of their time underground so I rarely see them, much less observe how they live. They're incredibly strong, too, making it all the harder to get my hands on a specimen."

Carcy scowled, then his eyes widened, as if he'd suddenly realized.

"That's it! I've been trying to figure out a way to get my hands on a sand worm, but maybe you can help! It should be a trivial matter for a Maple soldier such as yourself, and with your companion here..."

“I’m sorry, but we’re in the middle of another mission.”

Ariane delicately deflected Carcy’s request. I thought she would have at least entertained the idea, since it came from a fellow elf. I was rather surprised at her quick response.

Her golden eyes were still fixed straight on Carcy. “Elven soldiers don’t only train with blades and spells. They also spend a great deal of time reading bestiaries to learn about monsters and how they live. If you write books on these subjects for humans, then they’ll *also* be able to fight monsters.”

I finally understood what she was getting at. Why was Carcy, an elf, helping humans?

Carcy returned her intense gaze with a rueful laugh.

“Those bestiaries you read? They were probably written by me, back when I lived in Landfrea.”

“That’s all the more reason not to do it!”

“Sooner or later, elf or human, someone’s going to get around to studying these monsters. And it’s important to me, as an elf, to be that someone.”

The two locked eyes as Ariane struggled to come up with a response.

I could understand where he was coming from. Every life he saved in this town, thanks to his research, would only improve the elves’ image. If humans began to see elves as their allies, they might start protecting them, rather than enslaving them.

However, judging by the fact that Carcy had to live in the noble’s estate, hidden by walls, protected by guards, there was still a long way to go before most humans accepted elves as their equals.

“As I mentioned earlier, this country is far better than the rest. The lord of this town has taken good care of me. But, of course, if it came to Canada and Rhoden either going to war or achieving peace, I’d much prefer the latter.”

Carcy pushed his glasses back up his nose, and his expression softened.

“Besides, humans aren’t all bad. The man behind you is one, isn’t he?”

Ariane stiffened, her face a mix of emotions.

He was technically right; I was a human. But with the curse on my body, I looked more like one of the undead.

I felt like I was forgetting something incredibly important...but before I could try to figure out what it was, I sensed someone looking in my direction. Ariane's beautiful golden eyes had turned to me, an unspoken question in her gaze.

She seemed to be debating whether or not we should honor Carcy's request.

Whether this meeting was one of chance or fate, I let her make the decision. Personally, however, I wanted to take this opportunity to try and improve how humans viewed elves.

"We could very well have been called here by the spirits. But I will leave the decision up to Ariane."

My horrible sense of direction had played a large part in us coming here in the first place, but it was Ariane who'd prayed to the spirits to direct our path.

"Of course, I'd be happy to reward you for your assistance. I don't have a lot in the way of money, but maybe I could offer you a monster bestiary? It's a two-volume collection of all the monsters I've researched since leaving my village. It couldn't hurt to learn more about the world around you."

Carcy pulled out two thick books and set them down in front of us. They were leather-bound, with the image of some dragon-like creature seared onto their covers. On the spines, the name "Carcy Held" appeared prominently.

I paged quickly through one of the books, its interior filled with detailed illustrations of various monsters and all manner of information about their habits, habitats, and special characteristics. I'd loved looking at encyclopedias like this as a kid, and that same excitement came back to me now.

Carcy reached up to one of the shelves and pulled out another volume.

"This book contains information that I've thus far kept from the humans, information about all the spirit creatures I've encountered. Of course, the entries aren't nearly as detailed as those on monsters. For some reason, I just can't get close to spirit creatures, which makes it rather difficult to study them

in depth.”

He ran a hand through his hair, a wry smile on his face as he looked up toward Ponta. The fox scooted away again, as if trying to get out of his line of sight. Carcy’s shoulders slumped, dejected.

I turned my attention to the spirit creature encyclopedia. It was only one volume, not nearly as thick as the monster bestiary, and the binding had been done in a haphazard manner. Evidently, Carcy wasn’t exactly eager to share his findings on spirit creatures with the humans, since the information might only encourage people like the ones who’d captured Ponta.

Ariane returned her gaze to Carcy and spoke in a slow, deliberate tone. “We’ll help you, but we can’t devote a lot of time to it.”

Carcy led us along the path through the center of the castle’s walled courtyard, bowing to various servants and guards as we passed. From time to time, someone would stop to gawk at Ariane, probably due to how rare dark elves were in human lands, though none seemed to display any sort of malice.

In fact, I received far worse looks.

Carcy brought us to a building in the middle of the courtyard, by far the largest in the whole estate. I guessed it was the home of the noble who lived here. After taking us up a few steps, Carcy greeted the two guards standing at the entrance. They silently opened the massive door to allow us inside. Carcy thanked the men and stepped casually into the entry hall. Just as we were about to follow him, one of the guards rushed forward.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we have to ask that you leave your weapons here with us.”

I figured they were referring to the dual-handed Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg strapped to my back and the Sword of the King of Lions hanging from Ariane’s waist. It made sense that they wouldn’t allow anyone to enter the lord’s residence armed. I worried a little about leaving my weapon behind, but I didn’t have much of a choice. I nodded at the guard’s request and handed my sword over, sheath and all.

The moment I set the blade in his hand, however, the guard lost his balance,

stumbling about.

“Nng, this is heavy!”

He locked his legs in a desperate attempt to keep from dropping it.

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I’m really sorry about that!”

The blade didn’t feel all that heavy when I hefted it, but I realized it must have been rather unwieldy to a normal person. At the very least, this made me feel more comfortable about leaving the sword behind. No matter how powerful it was, if no one else could even lift it, then it wasn’t much of a threat.

Ariane handed over her own sword.

Now, with the guard’s permission, we passed through the door. In front of us, a female servant stood in the entry hall, calling out to Carcy.

“Ah, Master Carcy. May I ask what brings you here today?”

“I take it Skitts is in his usual room? I can find my own way there.”

He quickly climbed the stairs to the second floor. Ariane and I hurried after him, before we could be left behind. The servant looked on in wide-eyed surprise.

“B-but...Master Carcy, we need prior notice if you’re going to be bringing any guests with you!”

The flustered woman chased Carcy up the stairs but lost her balance in her haste. Ariane was instantly at the woman’s side, gently catching her before she hit the floor.

“Are you all right?”

“Ah, um, yes, I am. Apologies for bothering you, ma’am.”

The woman’s cheeks flushed a deep crimson as she gazed up into Ariane’s golden eyes. Then she quickly stood and bowed her head.

“Master Carcy, please wait!”

She yelled at the researcher again, possibly to hide her own embarrassment,

before once again chasing after him.

“There’s no need for such formalities, Brita.”

“Well, I’m the one who’s going to get yelled at!”

“Has Skitts ever gotten upset about something like this?”

“The head chambermaid certainly will!”

After reaching the top of the stairs, the servant, Brita, continued shouting at Carcy’s back as he walked away from her. The guards in the hallway couldn’t help but laugh under their breath as the two moved past. Evidently, this was a common routine. Ariane made a strange face at the whole affair.

“Hey, Skitts, I’m here.”

Carcy reached an intricately decorated door at the end of the hall, opened it without so much as a knock, and called to the person inside.

Brita, hard on his heels, was now holding her head. She let out a meek apology for the intrusion before stepping inside.

Carcy beckoned us into the room. Ariane and I exchanged a glance, then joined the two of them inside.

“I heard that you were entertaining an elf. I was planning on visiting you as soon as I finished this task.”

This new room contained a long table covered with decorative furnishings and was bordered by a small bookshelf on either end. Two large windows took up most of the wall at the far end of the room, illuminating the ornate ebony desk that sat between them.

The older gentleman sitting at the desk looked up from his paperwork to address his unexpected visitors. There was a soft lilt in his voice as he stroked his unshaven chin. I guessed he was the man Carcy referred to as Skitts. He looked to be around forty and wore his dark brown hair cut close to his head. Even masked by his elaborate clothing, it was evident that the man was quite muscular, making him look more like some sort of military commander than a member of the noble class.

Carcy casually cut to the chase. “I was thinking of collecting some sand worm

specimens, like we discussed earlier.”

The surprise was plain on Skitts’s face.

“You’re still hanging on to that? I’ve already told you, I can’t devote any soldiers to collecting sand worms. I’m thankful for your help in expanding our farmable land, but we don’t have enough people to work and patrol the fields as it is, let alone if we were to expand beyond what we have now.”

Skitts let out a sigh, a deep crease appearing between his brows.

“I suppose I could offer up three, maybe four men...but that’s the best I can do.”

Carcy smiled brightly and waved Ariane and me over.

“Perfect! These two will be helping me. This is Ariane, a messenger from an elven village, and her companion in the armor is...umm...”

Ariane interjected before Carcy could continue. “He’s my bodyguard, Arc.”

I offered a curt nod in greeting.

This was probably an effort on Ariane’s part to avoid anyone asking questions about why I was still wearing a helmet. If I was a bodyguard, then the humans would probably let it slide. I had no idea if the concept of diplomatic immunity existed in this world, but I decided it was best not to say anything at all.

Besides, Skitts didn’t seem particularly interested in me.

“And you plan on conscripting this messenger to do your dirty work?”

Skitts leaned back in his chair and sighed dramatically, looking up at the ceiling, an expression of barely concealed incredulity on his face.

Carcy smiled broadly.

“I’m planning nothing of the sort. We negotiated for it.”

Behind him, Brita bowed deeply in apology.

“Now, if you would be so kind as to lend me the men you mentioned—and bait—Skitts, I’d be ever so grateful.”

The noble gave Carcy a stern look. “I suppose we have those rotting goblins in

storage... Fine, they're yours. I've been receiving complaints for five days that they're stinking up the place."

Skitts turned his attention back to Ariane. "Greetings, Miss Ariane. I am Viscount Skitts du Branbayna, the lord of this town. However, you may call me Skitts. It's rare for us to entertain guests in this out-of-the-way town of ours, so please forgive our lack of manners."

"My name is Ariane Glenys Maple. Please, don't worry on my account."

Skitts extended his right hand, and Ariane promptly gave it a firm shake.

"Ah, well, in that case, I would like to invite you to a feast this evening."

Ariane quickly turned down Skitts's offer. "That won't be possible. We don't have much time, so we'll be leaving as soon as we're done assisting Carcy with his work."

Time aside, I also wasn't enthusiastic about the idea of taking my helmet off in front of people, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Is that so? If you're just being polite, there's no need for it. But I suppose a messenger like yourself must be quite busy. All the same, please keep a close eye on Carcy."

Skitts's cheerful expression changed to one of puzzlement as he looked in Carcy's direction.

"Hm? Where'd he go?"

We all glanced around the room, but Carcy was nowhere to be found.

Brita spoke up. "He left a moment ago. He looked rather cheerful."

Skitts sighed and turned his attention back to Ariane. "Same old Carcy..."

Ariane stared at the man, as if taking everything in before voicing her next question.

"If I may ask, why are you sheltering an elf?"

Skitts looked confused for a moment, as if unsure whether there was another question behind her question, but then he grinned.

"He's truly a talented researcher. Around ten years ago, we were plagued by

constant monster attacks. Our population dwindled rapidly as people fled to safer towns. When Carcy arrived, he provided my soldiers with information about the monsters' behavior and how to repel them. He gave us the opportunity to completely rebuild the town, better than it was before. I... We are forever grateful to him."

Judging by the interaction we'd just witnessed, it seemed like Carcy was constantly giving Skitts headaches. But the trust between them was also readily apparent. Ariane nodded in understanding.

As we left the room, Skitts saw us off with a smile, telling Ariane she was more than welcome to visit anytime.

Though the town wasn't all that large, Skitts had given me the impression of a charming mayor type rather than a local noble.

While we retrieved our weapons back at the entrance, we asked the guards if they knew where Carcy had gone. They directed us to one of the storehouses.

We arrived at a small, bland building, its walls unadorned save for the occasional, small window. As soon as I opened the doors, we were greeted with a horrendous stench.

I leaned in for a better look, and the smell hit me even harder. Ariane wrinkled her nose and scowled. Ponta, however, didn't seem to mind at all and simply wagged its tail.

A cart sat in the middle of the nearly empty storehouse. There were around ten stocky, little green bodies piled up inside it, reeking of decay. Carcy peaked over the side of the cart when he noticed our arrival.

"Wyverns chased these goblins to the outer limits of town. Now that they've fermented—quite nicely—I can use them as bait to lure out sand worms."

Since Ariane was pinching her nose and trying to hold back tears, I decided to ask the obvious question.

"When do you plan to go hunting for sand worms, Carcy?"

"They're active at night, so I figured we could head out after lunch. Have you eaten yet? I know a delicious orc restaurant."

I glanced at Ariane, but she shook her head in response, her fingers still firmly pinched over her nose.

Carcy looked slightly disappointed but turned to me inquiringly.

“I think I’ll pass as well.” Not only did I not want to eat in front of anyone in the first place, but after seeing a bunch of decaying goblins, I had no appetite for trying out orc dishes.

“Really? Well, that’s a shame. It’s quite good, you know.”

Carcy pouted as he eyed the rotting goblins. However, this only lasted for a moment.

“Well then, could you come back here a little later in the afternoon? You can wander around the estate or town if you’d like.”

We left Carcy with the corpses and made our way back to town.

No matter where we went in town, it seemed like all eyes were on us. Ariane had her hood down for now, allowing everyone to catch a glimpse of her face. There were plenty of reasons for people to look too. From her golden eyes to her amethyst skin to the curves of her body, she was a sight to behold.

“It just seems so strange to me that an elf would live among humans of his own will.”

She glowered at the townsfolk before finally pulling her hood back over her head, putting an end to all the attention she was getting.

“Perhaps we should make arrangements for an inn tonight.”

Ariane looked back at me, puzzled. “Why? Aren’t we heading straight for Lamburt after we capture the sand worms?”

“If we don’t start looking for them until the afternoon, the hunt could run well into the evening. At the very least, we’ll be spending tonight here, no?”

“You’re right. Sorry, I was only thinking about myself.”

“I am but a hired hand. I’ll go along with whatever you decide. Besides, half the joy of traveling is sleeping on a bed of grass under the stars.” I tried to make

light of the situation. To be honest, I quite enjoyed being able to see so many different places in this mysterious world. “But I also want to make sure you aren’t neglecting your own health. Even elves need a proper bed once in a while.”

“Thank you, Arc.”

Ariane averted her gaze and picked up the pace as we made our way toward a street with several inns. I increased my stride in order to keep up.

The largest inn was full of mercenaries and the like, so we ended up having to book two rooms in one of the smaller buildings. According to the innkeeper, there was little traffic along the road bordering this town, and they rarely had any visitors other than mercenaries looking to harvest supplies from monsters.

After securing our lodgings, Ariane and I wandered around town until the sun started its downward journey across the sky—the signal that it was time for us to make our way back to the noble’s estate.

This time, Ariane merely had to pull down her hood and the guards let us through the gate without any words exchanged.

Carcy was waiting for us on the other side, waving eagerly in our direction.

Behind him was a large cart drawn by four horses, along with a driver and three other men in light armor who appeared to be guards. Everyone—other than Carcy—had cloths covering their mouths, making them look like bandits in an old western.

A layer of dried grass had been piled over the rotting goblins in the cart, which served to mask the awful sight and slightly disguise the stench of death. But the smell was still enough to make the guards, townsfolk, and anyone else who got too close scowl.

Carcy, however, was cheerful as ever.

“Let’s get going, shall we?”

With that, he led the way, greeting the guards at the gate on the way out of town and heading down the hill toward the road. From there, we turned north. After traveling a short distance, we left the road and made our way west into

the desert.

Along the way, Carcy told us what he knew about sand worms: They burrowed deep into the earth during the day and only came out to feed at night. They also usually fed on the dead, which was why we were using corpses as bait.

Sand worms were apparently weak against fire, though they could withstand a certain amount of heat thanks to their outer skins. However, their bodies would quickly begin to burn once they exceeded a certain temperature, so we wouldn't be allowed to use any fire attacks during this excursion.

"Can't you just sever their heads? I know that works with soil worms."

"No, the soil worms you've seen back in the forest are around three meters long, but that's nothing compared to sand worms. They're around twenty meters long, and as thick as a person is wide. What's more, their skin is highly elastic, making it difficult to pierce with a blade. Not only are they incredibly strong, but they dart back underground at the first sign of danger. It's quite a challenge to kill one."

I tried picturing the sand worms based on Carcy's description. They sounded a lot like the massive, burrowing, man-eating worms I remembered seeing in an old movie once. What was it called again? *Tremblers*?

At twenty meters long, they must have been absolutely massive. But if they truly were only as wide around as a human's torso, then it should be no problem to chop off their heads with my trusty Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg.

All we had to do now was find one of them.

We continued on until we reached a place where the dirt was soft and we could no longer proceed with the cart. Carcy turned around to address us.

"Well, this looks as good a place as any! Go ahead and put the bait out, then we'll take the cart and hide behind that rock over there while we wait for the sun to set."

The spot he pointed to seemed like a rather unremarkable patch of dark red desert. Beyond that, a large rock protruded from the earth, looking almost like a horn. There was no way anyone—or *anything*—would be able to see us once we were on the other side.

The three guards did as they were told, grabbing their spears from the cart, piercing the goblins, and carrying the corpses over to the designated spot, disgust etched on their faces.

After the bait was placed, we hid behind the rocky outcropping and chatted among ourselves. Ponta curled up into a ball and slept contentedly on Ariane's lap.

The guards took turns looking out from behind the rock to see if anything was happening on the other side. Carcy spent the time looking at the nearby plant life and making sketches on a scrap of parchment.

As the sun finally began setting, the grass and shrubs that somehow eked out a life in this patch of dark red earth began taking on a reddish hue of their own. The shadow of the rock grew long, stretching across the desert floor. As the temperature dropped, Carcy's excitement grew. He poked his head around the rock over and over, unable to contain himself. The guards chuckled to themselves as they watched him.

With dusk, came monsters. Unfortunately, these weren't the monsters we were looking for, but they were a familiar sight all the same. As soon as the sound of flapping wings filled the air, Ponta darted up from Ariane's lap to wrap itself around her neck. Ariane, for her part, looked rather pleased with this.

Carcy mumbled to himself as these newcomers approached the bait. "Well, well, sand wyverns. How interesting. They don't usually scavenge dead bodies."

Two sand wyverns landed next to one of the dead goblins and began pecking at it. One of them, seemingly on edge, kept poking its head up to look around. A moment later, with no warning, it rocketed off into the sky. Its companion, however, preoccupied with its meal, let out a shriek as something erupted from the ground and swallowed it whole.

As if on cue, massive worms began springing up from the earth, one after another.

Their bodies were a dusty yellow color mottled with green, their mouths opening like four-petal flowers spreading to catch the morning sun. Inside these gaping maws, row upon row of tiny teeth moved about, as if searching for their next meal. Behind their mouths, they had gills, like fish, which I presumed were used to expel dirt. Along the sides of their bodies wriggled hundreds of tiny legs, reminding me of centipedes.

Even with only their heads sticking out of the ground, they were still an impressive five meters tall. They twisted about, moving their heads toward the rotting bait. I counted five in total.

Carcy looked slightly dejected. “I didn’t imagine we’d attract so many. It’d be suicide to face off against all of them at once.”

But the sight we’d just seen had given me an idea.

“Do sand worms not just eat the dead? That one ate a wyvern.”

His eyes never left the sand worms.

“They prefer to scavenge, but they’ll eat living creatures as well.”

That meant we were just as likely to become a meal.

If I used my magic, I could probably take down the whole group, but I wasn’t sure it’d be a good idea to draw so much attention.

It soon became clear that the goblins we’d brought weren’t enough to feed all five sand worms. They began fighting among themselves for the tasty morsels, and one of them was forced away entirely. The excluded sand worm began looking around. When it turned in our direction, it seemed to sense our presence. It drove its head back underground and started rushing toward us, a mound of dirt piling up as it sped along.

“Waaaaugh!”

One of the men, shocked at this monster’s speed, let out a shriek of fear and made a break for the road, leaving the relative safety of the rock behind. The mound of dirt followed the guard as he ran.

“No! Stop!”

I jumped out from behind the rock and chased after the guard, quickly

catching up to him. Just as I did, the sand worm's head exploded from the ground, splitting open and exposing hundreds of teeth as it lunged toward us.

There was no time to draw my sword, so I simply threw my body against the sand worm. I grabbed it by the gills, yanking with all my might, trying to hold it back. Up close, its numerous, gyrating teeth made it look like some sort of bizarre alien baby. My ears rang with their unsettling grinding as the massive beast tried tearing itself from my grasp, but I doubled down, putting all my strength into keeping it in place.

“Gyaaaaaagh!”

The guard's legs had given out in fear, and he was now crawling backward, away from the worm, leaving a damp trail in his wake. The crotch of his pants was damp as well. I wondered if sand worms were particularly sensitive to smells.

With most of its body still firmly under ground, the sand worm started twisting around to try and throw me off of it. It was incredibly strong—as you'd expect from anything that was twenty meters long—and I had to crouch down and lower my center of gravity in order to keep myself from being tossed away.

“Nnnnng!!!”

I knew I wouldn't be able to properly fight the sand worm with so much of its body buried. I needed to find a way to get it out of the ground. However, given how much of a fight it was putting up, our struggle had rapidly descended into a game of tug-of-war. I slowly started pulling back, dragging the sand worm out of its hole, until it was fully exposed, thrashing about on the ground. Its mouth opened and closed, snapping uselessly as I held it against my chest.

It was like a real-life horror movie unfolding in front of me as I watched its body writhe about and heard its bone-chilling cry. I wrapped my arms around its gills, in my best attempt at a chokehold.

“Arc!!!”

Ariane came running up, sword in hand, looking for her opening to strike. But the sand worm seemed to realize what was going on and continued twisting and writhing about, keeping her from getting close.

“It’s fine, Ariane! Just stay back!”

I tightened my grip on the sand worm even further, trying to keep it still so we could stab it. The harder I squeezed, the more it struggled to get away. At this point, our battle was down to sheer, brute strength.

Finally, the worm slumped weakly to the ground. When its body stopped spasming, I let up on my chokehold. The worm lay limp on the desert floor, a much darker shade than it had been mere minutes ago. There was a dark impression on its skin right where I’d been squeezing.

“Never in all my years have I imagined that someone could take down a sand worm with their bare hands...”

The awe was apparent in Carcy’s voice as he came running to my side. After thoroughly examining the massive worm, he turned his gaze to me, eyes peering out suspiciously from behind his glasses, as if he were trying to see through my helmet.

The two remaining guards were close behind him. As soon as they arrived, they surrounded me, their faces filled with astonishment.

I was starting to wish I’d used one of my spells rather than expose my superhuman strength like this. It was too late now, of course, but I wondered if the latter would have made less of a scene.

I stood and brushed the dirt from my cape and armor, trying to pretend like nothing out of the ordinary had taken place.

For his part, Carcy chose to say nothing and instead refocused his attention on the sand worm.

I looked toward the area where we’d left the goblins as bait, but it was now completely clear; no corpses or sand worms in sight, just an empty expanse of desert.

“I take it we can consider the sand worm hunt a success?” I turned back to the sand worm to find Carcy busy touching and pulling at its massive body.

“More than a success! I never imagined we’d secure a specimen in such excellent condition!”

The researcher was ecstatic, excitement evident in his every movement.

“Master Carcy, it will be fully dark any moment now. If we don’t load up the sand worm immediately, the wyverns will almost certainly return.” The guard who’d been crawling away just a few moments ago urged Carcy to hurry.

The sky was a deep purple now, the sun hidden behind the mountains to the west.

“I suppose you’re right. I originally anticipated spending the night out here, but we finished much faster than I anticipated.”

Carcy directed the men to take the sand worm back to the cart and coil its long, snaking body tight enough to fit it inside. Once they had, we turned the cart around for the trip home.

As we headed back to Branbayna, Carcy made an offhanded comment to the other guards.

“There’ve been a lot of sand wyvern sightings in the area lately.”

“We also ran into a swarm of them on our way to Branbayna. We killed a few, but we left their bodies in the desert.”

“Is that so? I don’t suppose you’d mind if I had Skitts send some men to pick them up, would you?”

Ariane and I had no particular use for them, so we readily agreed.

The hill on which Branbayna sat came into view, like a beacon in the dark, and the tension among the guards eased noticeably. The town’s gates were already shut for the night, but after Carcy explained the situation to the watchmen, they let us inside.

As we passed through the town square, making our way to Skitts’s estate, I called out to Carcy.

“I believe we’ll be leaving you here.”

Carcy hit his fist into his hand as if remembering something and rushed back to the cart, pulling out a cloth-wrapped object.

“This was an incredibly productive day. As promised, here are the books I

offered you as payment. I hope they may be of some help to the homeland and, if I'm lucky, maybe they'll inspire others like myself to take an interest in life beyond the villages."

Carcy's eyes locked on Ariane's as he handed her the books with his left hand and offered her his right.

After a moment's hesitation, Ariane gave his hand a firm shake. Carcy smiled.

"Thank you again. Oh, and one last thing. You may want to be careful who you allow to read these books."

Ariane returned the smile, and Carcy made his exit, waving back at us as he walked alongside the cart toward the estate.

"Shall we make our way to the inn?"

"Yes, let's."

Carcy disappeared into the darkness as we started down the deserted street.

Ariane and I left Branbayna early the next morning. As soon as we were out of sight of any townsfolk, we used Transport Gate to return to the fork in the road where we'd wandered astray the day before.

Ponta pranced excitedly around the large rock where the road split, chasing a butterfly as it lazily fluttered past. Ariane sat on the rock and took a swig from her water skin, letting out a deep sigh. I sat beside her and pulled a fuzzy plant out of the ground. It resembled a cat's tail, and I waved it in front of Ponta to try and get the fox's attention. But Ponta ignored me and, with a dismissive flick of its tail, pointedly looked in the other direction.

Feeling a bit lonely, I turned my attention to the gently rolling hills that spread out ahead of us. Far off to the west, I could just barely make out the fuzzy rise and fall of a line of mountains stretching from the north to the south. I figured this must be the Riebing mountain range. Lamburt, our destination, was on the other side.

According to what we'd been told back in Branbayna, the road snaked around the southern end of the Riebing Mountains and continued from there. Given

how clear the air was, I figured we'd be able to cover a good portion of distance by teleporting. Though, while there were certainly fewer monsters along this path, there would be far more villages, fields, and travelers, increasing the chances we might get spotted. I sighed as I looked around, realizing the journey might take a lot longer than I'd originally anticipated.

"I guess we should probably get going."

"Probably." Ariane stood, catching the attention of Ponta, who'd been lazing about in the sun. It summoned a magical gust of wind and glided toward my head, just barely missing the mark and landing on my face. I pushed the fox up onto its perch, hefted my bag over my shoulder, and began making my way down the southwest road.

Whenever I was sure no one was looking, I used Dimensional Step, sometimes teleporting us off the road in order to avoid people seeing us. In what seemed like no time at all, the sun started to set above us.

Even though we'd been traveling all day, the landscape alongside the road remained an unending series of tree-covered hills, though the Riebing Mountains now appeared much more massive. We were practically at their base.

Tonight, we'd stay at an inn in the small town at the edge of the forest. Tomorrow, we'd tackle those mountains.

Chapter 1.5:

Ariane's Drunken Misadventures

There was a small town built just off the road. To the west, a large swath of forest and the Riebing Mountains loomed behind it.

The town's stone walls looked sturdy, and it sported an elegant, multi-story gate. However, the whole scene looked rather desolate, with only the two guards standing watch out front. I called out to them, asking to be let inside. Despite how suspicious we must have looked, draped in our dark cloaks, armor peeking out from underneath, the guards quickly let us in.

Maybe they didn't get many visitors? But that seemed unlikely, given the town's proximity to the road.

As we passed through the gate, I asked one of the guards for directions to the town's inn. The streets were crowded with people rushing back home before night fell, though a few of them offered us side glances as they hurried past. The inn the guard had pointed us to was near the center of town facing the square, which was bustling with activity.

The inn was larger than the buildings surrounding it. Judging from the din of voices and the smell of food drifting out, I guessed that the first floor was some sort of tavern.

A bell clanged as I pushed open the old wooden door, announcing our entrance.

The tavern was filled with several round tables, men and women with glasses in hand crowded around, bantering as they drank. Behind a counter, I could see several middle-aged staff members bustling about the kitchen. A large, well-built woman dried her hands on a towel hanging from her waist and looked over toward us. She seemed to be the innkeeper.

The boisterous atmosphere quieted like a receding tide as everyone followed her gaze to the two mysterious new guests.

"Welcome!"

The woman stepped away from an old man grumpily stirring a pot in the back and offered us a wide grin.

I cut through the crowds of men whispering among each other, my armor clanking on the stone floor, and approached her.

“I’d like two rooms for the night.”

The woman nodded, all business. “Right-o. And whaddya think about dinner?”

I glanced over my shoulder at the crowd. Several of them were still staring at me, though they quickly turned away when they noticed me staring back.

“I’d prefer to take it up in our rooms, if we can.”

She caught sight of the helmet under my hood. “I see, I see. Ya know, I have some nice liquor just right for a knight like yerself. All the blokes ’round here order the cheap stuff. If ya buy a drink, I’d be okay with ya eatin’ in yer room. Whaddya say?”

The woman patted a small cask sitting next her and grinned. It looked much smaller than the other liquor barrels, no more than five liters or so.

A drunk man watching us shouted toward the woman.

“Ya got it all wrong, lady! Momma jus’ won’t give us enough money to pay for the good stuff!”

The tavern burst out into laughter, shattering the silence.

She’d probably taken one look at me and figured I had money to burn. I couldn’t help but smile at her sales tactics.

“That’ll be fine. Is this enough to cover the cask and two rooms for the night?”

I reached into the leather pouch at my waist and showed her five gold coins.

“Th-that’s way too much!” The woman’s eyes went wide as I dumped the coins into her hand. She immediately started counting out my change. “Jus’ hold yer horses. Lessee, five sok, so I owe you...”

I gestured for her to stop. I’d always wanted to say this. Now was my chance.

“Keep the change, ma’am.”

I struck a pose. The women simply looked back and forth, wide-eyed, between the coins and me. It seemed as if she wanted to object, but instead, she thanked me. I put the small cask under my arm.

“Now, about our rooms?”

She hurried out from behind the counter and showed us to a pair of nicely decorated rooms at the far end of the second floor before rushing off again to grab our dinner. I instructed her to bring both meals to my room and closed the door after her. Even in the back of the building, we could still hear the muffled bustle from downstairs.

“I was supposed to pay for our lodgings, you know. Anyway, can your body actually consume liquor?”

Ariane drew back her hood and tilted her head up to fix her golden eyes on me.

“I’m not particularly hurting for money right now. Besides, it’s been a while since I’ve had any liquor.”

I’d also figured that if I set myself up as a heavy spender, it would keep the innkeeper and other townspeople from meddling in our affairs. My armor made me stand out as it was, so I didn’t think throwing money around would draw any extra attention.

I’d originally become a mercenary to eke out an existence, but now that I had more than I could possibly need, my attachment to it had faded. It also didn’t really feel like I was even spending money, given how different the currency was in this world. But maybe that would all change once I adjusted to living here.

Right now, all I wanted to do was get a taste of the local liquor.

A delightful blend of wood and something I couldn’t place wafted up from the small cask under my arm. There was probably more than enough alcohol inside for both Ariane and me, but carrying it around in my bag didn’t seem like a viable option.

The innkeeper soon reappeared with our dinners. After locking the door, Ariane took off her cloak and we sat at the small table. She shook her head,

running her fingers through her long, white hair, and let out a sigh.

I gently lifted Ponta from my head, then removed my helmet and set it on a chair.

The meal consisted of vegetable soup, with a piece of black bread and some flame-broiled meat. It was much simpler than what we'd eaten back in the elven village, but it was also better than a lot of the human food I'd tasted in other inns.

I looked at the cask on the table, then up at Ariane.

"Do you drink, Ariane?"

She scowled in response.

"Of course I do! I was drinking back in Diento, remember?"

I noticed she didn't look at me directly as she said this.

I thought back to our time in Diento, searching through my memory. I recalled Danka and Ariane buying some alcohol while we waited for night to fall so we could rescue the enslaved elves, but I didn't remember her getting drunk or anything.

I grabbed one of the glasses the innkeeper had provided.

"Well then, would you care to have a drink with me?"

She took the glass from me, and I pulled the cork from the cask, pouring a measure of amber liquid into it while she watched with narrowed eyes.

"If you don't drink that much, there's no need to push yourself."

Ariane replied by tilting the glass back and downing it in a single gulp. She slammed the empty glass onto the table and shot me a defiant look.

"I'm not a child, all right?"

"Kyi kyiiii!"

Ponta wagged its tail excitedly, as if asking for its own glass.

"Sorry, Ponta. Have some of this instead."

I cut off a chunk of flame-broiled meat and set it on a separate plate in front

of Ponta.

“Kyiiiiiiii!”

As soon as the plate touched the ground, Ponta let out an excited squeal and buried its face in the meat. I poured myself a glass of liquor and took a whiff. It had a unique smell, with just a hint of herbs.

I took a swig, and my mouth was immediately filled with a slightly bitter taste followed by a sweet tingling that assaulted my senses. The back of my throat burned as I swallowed, warmth filling my body.

The alcohol content was much higher than I’d assumed.

“This tastes pretty good! I wonder if I could put it on the rocks with a little ice magic,” I mumbled to no one in particular.

A hand slamming onto the table startled me from my thoughts.

“Jussa second there! Are ya gonna refill my glass or what?”

“Huh?”

I did a double-take at Ariane, surprised by her already-slurred speech.

The room was lit only by oil lamps, which were far dimmer than the magical ones used in elven villages, and filled the room with a pungent smell. The glow they gave off was about the same as you’d get from a bean-sized bulb in my world. I couldn’t be sure in such low light, but I thought Ariane’s amethyst hue had taken on a reddish tinge.

“Hey! Didja hear me?”

In stark contrast to her usual, cool demeanor, Ariane glared at me through half-lidded eyes.

“Huuuuuurry uuuuuuuup!”

She held her empty cup out to me unsteadily, her eyes struggling to focus.

It was certainly strong alcohol, but if I had to guess, I’d say it wasn’t higher than forty proof. And she’d only had one glass. It had become quite clear that Ariane was a lightweight when it came to drinking.

Hmm. Now that I thought back on it, I couldn’t remember having seen her

take a drink in Diento. Had she not even touched the glass back then?

“Miss Ariane, I really think it’s best that you quit while you’re ahead.”

I picked the cask up from the table and set it down behind me. Ariane’s hands lunged forward at lightning speed, grasping my skull on either side.

“Aww, yer such a tease, Arrrc! You’re not gonna gimme anymore booze?”

She continued glaring at me through unfocused, glistening eyes, shaking my head back and forth. The world started to blur, and I could hear my bones clattering about.

If I’d been in a human body while this was happening, I’d have certainly thrown up by now.

“C-calm down Ariane! Why are you acting desperate?”

She tightened her death grip, raised her voice, and brought her face even closer to mine.

“Desperate? No one here’s desperate for nuthin’!”

Her golden eyes widened, and I could smell the sweet scent of alcohol on her breath as it blew across my fleshless face.

“You ’member that thing Carcy was sayin’ about elves and humans comin’ together? D’ya really think that’ll ever happen?”

She snatched the cask away from me and poured herself another glass, once again drinking it in a single gulp. She let out a satisfied sigh.

Obviously, Carcy’s view of the world was at odds with Ariane’s, at least for as long as humans were buying and selling elves. Given everything Ariane had been through, it only made sense she would have a negative impression of humans. However, compared to someone like Danka, whom we’d worked with back in Diento, her disdain toward humans seemed less extreme. I’d like to think it had even decreased since meeting me.

Ariane had treated the children we’d met back in the Houvan slums no differently than she treated any of the elven children I’d ever seen her with. She’d even taken a chance on me, despite my humanity.

Looking at it in that light, perhaps Carcy and Ariane's feelings toward humans weren't all that far apart, though she seemed a bit uncertain about it herself, at least, when she let her guard drop.

"There are many kinds of humans, Ariane. It can't hurt to believe that there are at least some people out there willing to move forward together."

Like she and I had. Though, I left that part unsaid.

Her golden eyes stared at me, and she looked like she might fall asleep at any moment.

"Hmm..."

"Besides, I'm a human. Or...at least, I think of myself as one."

I took the cask from Ariane's hands, filled up my own glass, and took a drink.

"What're you talkin' about? There's nuthin' human about you, Arc."

Her rose-tinted cheeks drew close again, her unsteady eyes still trying to focus. She raised her voice, as if trying to compete with the cacophony rising up from the floor below.

"Harrumph. Humans and elves, hand in hand. What a joke."

Maybe she was right. But it was precisely that kind of thinking that made it necessary to build up relations, bit by bit.

Ariane continued muttering to herself as she tried to stab one of the pieces of meat, chasing it around the plate. I used my own fork to hold it down for her, earning a half-lidded glare from her. She almost looked like some sort of dangerous beast. Her golden eyes bore straight through my empty eye sockets, locking onto the blue-white flame that danced about inside my skull.

The atmosphere in the small room had grown tense.

"I thought all elves were vegetarians."

"What're ya talkin' about? Soldiers can't survive on a diet of leaves!"

I blocked Ariane's fork with mine and pulled the meat toward me. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glint of the knife in Ariane's other hand. With a slash, she chopped the meat in two, sending a chunk flying into the air. Both

our forks shot up after it, looking like gleaming arrows arcing into the night sky.

“Heh. You’ll get a stomachache if you eat something you’re not used to, Ariane.”

“Don’t worry about me. If yer not gonna hand over the meat, then gimme the booze!”

“Kyiiii!”

A certain green, cotton-tailed fur ball dove through the air and expertly caught the meat in its mouth, dashing away into a corner of the room and munching happily on its prize.

Ariane and I shouted in unison.

“P-Ponta?!”

“Pontaaaaaa?”

Ariane’s golden eyes once again locked on the flame flickering inside my skull.

“You know, Miss Ariane, sharing is caring. We both could stand to learn that.”

“Ya know, yer right. We’re both fighters, but at the end of the day, we’re on the same side.”

After offering up our apologies, we clinked our forks together.

“Hahaha...”

“Hyahaha...”

We shared a warm, broad smile. I broke the silence.

“Oy, Ponta!”

Ariane turned to see what I was shouting about. While she was looking away, I stabbed my fork toward the last piece of meat.

“It’s mine!”

“Too slow, Arc!”

A gust of wind blasted me in the face.

“Only a coward would use magic!”

“Big words coming from someone playing dirty tricks!”

Ariane had already snatched the meat from the plate and offered it to Ponta. She held the cask of liquor by her side.

“Gonna need to watch your flank better, Arc!” She shot me a sweet smile.

“Slow down, Ariane! I really think you’ve had enough for one night.”

But she paid no heed to my protests. She tilted the cask back, preparing to drink straight from the spout. I rushed over to try and stop her.

While we battled over the alcohol, Ponta finished eating the meat and curled up on the bed, falling asleep instantly.



It took much longer to calm Ariane down and get her to bed.

The next morning, the innkeeper remarked that it had sounded like we'd had a pretty wild evening the night before, apparently misunderstanding what we'd been yelling about. All I could do was bow my head in embarrassment.

My room had been pretty trashed after last night's events, but somehow, I'd managed to make it presentable come morning. If I'd been hoping for some sort of compliment from the innkeeper, none was forthcoming.

Ariane hadn't taken to liquor well. As for me, it seemed like I wasn't able to get drunk in this body. I hadn't felt my senses dull at all last night, and I wasn't feeling hungover this morning. I felt a bit jealous of Ariane's ability to laugh and have a good time.

I looked over toward her. She returned my gaze, giving me a glimpse of her ashen face beneath her charcoal-gray hood.

"Nng...my head huuuurts. What happened last night?" she groaned, rubbing at her temples in a vain attempt to make the headache go away.

I made a mental note as I watched her walk out on unsteady legs. In the future, it'd probably be better if I just drank alone.

Chapter 2:

The Elf Bride

Unfortunately, the sunny skies of the previous day had given way to a thick cloud cover.

We left the town early and followed the road west, using Dimensional Step to teleport over the mountains. We soon found ourselves atop a small hill, a vast sea on the other side. The water reflected the dark gray of the clouds above, giving it a rather ominous appearance. Nevertheless, the change in scenery lifted my spirits a bit.

“Well, we finally made it to the sea.”

I put my hands on my waist and let out a loud breath. Above my head, Ponta caught a gust of wind blowing off the water and floated up into the sky for a better view.

I looked over my shoulder to find a still-ashen-faced Ariane trying to maintain her balance.

“Are you still feeling ill, Ariane?”

She wobbled over and sat on a nearby rock before popping the cork from her water skin and taking a long gulp.

“I’m feeling a lot better, thanks to your detoxify spell. I appreciate it.”

She claimed to have forgotten much of what had happened the night before, retaining only a few fuzzy memories of the events and no recollection of what she’d said. With no idea whether it might work on a hangover, I’d decided to try one of my Monk class detoxify spells on her. Apparently, it had been successful.

I gazed at the endless expanse of blue that lay before us. Ariane walked over to join me. She spoke quietly, her eyes crinkling in a smile.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen the ocean on this side of the continent.”

She pulled down her hood, letting the sea breeze blow back her hair. The fresh air seemed to do her some good—she was already looking a lot better.

I turned my gaze north.

“So, now all we need to do is follow the coastline, I suppose.”

The only problem was, now that we were on the far side of the mountains and back on the road, we’d have to contend with the occasional traveler. Once again, we wouldn’t be able to use Dimensional Step however we pleased.

We stepped off the road and, after making sure there was no one watching, started teleporting alongside it. Moving away from the road slowed our pace a bit, but it was still far faster than walking.

However, going out of our way to keep out of sight also increased our chances of running into *other* people trying to keep out of sight. As we walked down a hill through some shrubs and wild grass to get to a better teleportation spot, we ran across a large group of people. Or, rather, a small group surrounded by a much larger group, both in defensive stances with weapons drawn.

The group in the center consisted of five well-groomed young men, all outfitted in high quality leather and metal armor, probably mercenaries. They were each armed with a shield and a sword, which they used to keep the men circling them at bay.

The eleven men surrounding these mercenaries, however, looked like a much more rough-and-tumble crowd, dressed in leather armor and tattered cloaks. Judging by their style of dress and the way they were acting, they could have been an older group of mercenaries intimidating a bunch of newly minted ones. But the sinister grins on their faces, and the way they sized up their opponents, suggested they might be bandits.

Mercenaries or bandits, I supposed it made little difference.

I glanced over at Ariane, asking her the unspoken question. Should we get involved, or just move on?

I could see another hilltop on the far side of the road, so it would be no problem to teleport away as if we’d seen nothing. But it pained me to ignore those in need. I’d have dived right in without a second thought if these men had been intimidating women or children, but when men squared off against each other, it was harder to summon up such sympathy.

I decided on a compromise. I picked Ponta up by the scruff of the neck and handed it to Ariane.

“Kyi?”

Ariane smiled, wrapping Ponta in a tight embrace. The smile widened across her face as she brushed its head and neck.

I set my bag down. “I’ll be right back.”

I jogged down the hill toward the group of men and called out to them, trying to sound as bright and sunny as I could.

“Well, hey there! I hate to bother you, but I was wondering if I could ask for some directions.”

All the men’s heads swiveled to looked at me. One of the men in the outer circle immediately started yelling.

“Oy! Are ya here to join yer friends?!”

Before he’d even finished, two of his comrades broke away from the circle and began running toward me, swords in hand. The blades didn’t look particularly sharp. I didn’t even bother to pull out my shield and simply blocked them with my gauntlets. The mythical-class Belenus Holy Armor was truly impressive and could easily absorb blows like these. I didn’t feel even a twinge of pain.

Looks of surprise washed over the men’s faces as their blades bounced away futilely. Their surprise turned to anger as my cloak billowed out, revealing the armor underneath.

“Whoa, he’s fully armored?!”

One of the men began moving around me, looking for a place to strike. I grabbed his blade and squeezed, crushing it into a useless lump of metal.

“Aaaaugh! My sword!”

My fist caught his chin, dropping him to the ground where he stood, his eyes rolling back into his head.

“Damn you!”

The other man spat angry epithets as he searched for an opening, lunging in to stab my neck. I seized his sword and pulled him toward me, headbutting him. Blood erupted from the man's face as he doubled over on the ground, groaning.

Even though they'd gone down easy, the fact that they'd both changed their method of attack so quickly told me I was dealing with an experienced group.

I let out a dramatic sigh as I looked down at the two men at my feet.

"I was hoping to handle this amicably, but it looks like you're not going to leave me any choice..."

I looked back up to find the older mercenaries attacking the younger ones. The latter stood back to back, swords and shields in hand, as they fended off the onslaught.

They may have been young, but they were certainly talented.

The men surrounding them began panicking as their prey fought back harder than they'd anticipated, though it was clear that the men in the middle couldn't hold out forever. It was like watching a game of chicken: Who would blink first?

I called out again.

"I hate to bother you, but is no one interested in fighting me?"

Once again, all eyes turned toward me.

The older men exchanged glances, uncertain of what to do about me. The young men, however, took advantage of the moment and redoubled their efforts.

One man's finger was severed, causing him to drop his sword. Another was knocked to the ground by a shield. A third was stabbed in the eye.

The attackers were definitely talented, despite their age. In response, they moved as one, like a well-trained mercenary unit. Still, of the eleven men originally forming the circle, four were out of the fight entirely, and a fifth—the man who'd lost a finger—didn't seem too keen on sticking around. Now that the numbers were no longer in their favor, the attackers began drawing away.

The young mercenaries, however, weren't about to let this opening go. They launched themselves at the remaining men, each picking a single opponent. The

one man lucky enough to not be targeted immediately tried to turn tail and flee.

His luck, however, was about to run out.

“Alas, you cannot escape.”

The man found me squarely in his path, arms outstretched, blocking his exit. He stopped in his tracks, a frightened look on his face as he took in the massive two-meter knight standing in front of him. He changed direction in an attempt to duck past me, but I easily pivoted back in front of him.

“Alas, you still cannot escape.”

The man’s expression changed from fear to dread. He probably felt like I did any time a random encounter in an RPG found me suddenly facing off against an impossibly powerful enemy. There was nothing worse than being unable to escape from a battle I knew I could never win, especially when I had only myself to blame for forgetting to save right before.

“But there’s no saving in real life!”

In situations like this, people were usually limited to one of two choices: fight or flight.

This man made the wrong choice.

“Get outta the waaaaay!”

He swung his blade wildly as he lunged at me. I easily dodged this straightforward attack, which came more from a place of desperation than actual skill. I thrust my fist into his chin, sending him sprawling back onto the ground.

I turned my attention back to the young mercenaries, where the last of their opponents was throwing down his sword and surrendering. The fallen mercenaries—or bandits, or whatever they were—glared at me as they were tied up.

One of the young men walked over and took a knee in front of me, bowing his head and offering his thanks.

“Sir Knight, I would like to offer you my sincerest appreciation for coming to

our aid. Thanks to you, we were able to apprehend these bandits.”

So, they were bandits after all.

“There is no need. I am but a simple mercenary.”

The man looked up at me in surprise, his eyes taking in my armor. He glanced up the hill at Ariane. After a moment, he nodded to himself and stood back up.

“I see. Ah, excuse my manners. I am Axe, the leader of this troop. Thank you again for your assistance.”

Judging his polite manner, it seemed like he thought I was some sort of noble trying to conceal my identity. He may have been young, but he clearly had a proper upbringing.

“Apologies for my insolence, but would you allow us to keep these men here? Of course, I’d be more than happy to offer you a reward.”

“We were simply passing through. We have no intention of taking what is yours.”

Axe looked surprised at this. “A-are you sure? Someone would almost certainly buy them for a tidy sum at the Nohzan slave market in Lamburt.”

That was no doubt true. In addition to beastmen and elves, any slave market would probably deal in criminals as well. Tax cheats probably also filled their stalls.

“Hm, and this Nohzan you speak of, they’ll buy *all* of these bandits?”

Axe looked out over the ocean. “Nohzan is actually the name of a kingdom on the far side of the Gulf of Bulgoh. The slave markets there have recently been sending ships to Lamburt and buying up criminals en masse.”

I had to imagine that anyone buying enslaved criminals in bulk would have a hard time selling them. Most people wouldn’t want one in their home. My guess was that the country was carrying out some sort of public works project—like land development, or large-scale mining—and needed a lot of manual labor. I had no idea what a criminal went for on the slave market, but it couldn’t be all that much.

“We’ll be fine, thank you.”

I turned to take my leave.

“Thank you again!”

I waved over my shoulder as I made my way back to Ariane, who was busy playing with Ponta at the top of the hill. I found them nose to nose, staring into each other’s eyes.

“Sorry for the hold up, Miss Ariane. Let’s get going.”

Ariane stood up, cradling Ponta in her arms.

“Bandits?”

“Seems so.”

I picked up my bag and resumed the trek toward Lamburt. The cloud cover had grown thicker, and the sky was starting to darken.

“Hmm, looks like it might rain.”

“We should probably look for an inn as soon as we get to Lamburt.”

After multiple jumps using Dimensional Step, we finally caught sight of a sprawling, seaside town. It was surrounded by two massive waterways connected to the gulf. I spied several small paddleboats moving about. The walls around the town were only around five meters tall, rather short compared to what I’d seen elsewhere.

The town also boasted a huge port, where countless ships were docked. Even from here, I could see many boats coming and going. I did note, though, that most of them were small- to mid-sized, with very few large ships in sight.

The reddish-brown roofs of the town contrasted starkly with the green fields stretching across the surrounding hills and the expanse of blue ocean beyond. Sadly, the dark skies dulled the town’s bright colors, detracting from the dynamic scene.

The closer we got to Lamburt, the more people we began seeing.

We soon found ourselves in a long, snaking line leading to the town’s southern entrance. We followed it at a slow, even pace across a large stone bridge and up to the gate, where we paid a fee and entered the town.

The wind carried with it the sounds of people and carts bustling through the streets. The stone buildings throughout looked clean, as if they'd been rather recently built, though the alleys seemed to cut through them at random, giving the town a somewhat disorderly feel.

Down one alley, I caught sight of many people in tattered clothes sitting on the ground. It seemed like there was a pretty large disparity between the rich and the poor here, and that created the possibility of strife.

After proceeding down the main thoroughfare for a ways, we came across several large buildings facing the town square, with various stalls out front. One of the buildings' doors had been left open, and a constant stream of people flowed in and out. Inside, I could see row upon row of shops, with customers milling about, inspecting goods. It appeared to be some sort of fixed market, like a department store, making it different from the other markets I'd seen so far, but it was instantly familiar to me.

Ponta squirmed in Ariane's arms and started sniffing the air as all manner of exciting smells wafted our way.

"Shall we take a look around?"

Ariane nodded.

A large, middle-aged man's voice cut through the crowd, clapping his hands together and trying to draw in customers. It looked like he was selling some sort of juice squeezed from an orange-colored fruit, though the liquid itself was a dark red.

"Excuse me, sir. I'll take two."

"Thank ya kindly! That'll be two sek."

The shopkeeper offered us a warm smile and grabbed several fruits, tossing them onto a cutting board.

"Two silver coins? That's pretty expensive."

"Not at all, Sir Knight! If you return the cups, I refund half the price."

After cutting the fruit in half, he put a wooden cup under the juicer and began pressing down.

So, the cup was included in the price?

“If I may ask, do you know the way to the local noble’s estate?”

“Hmm, well, you’ll want to take the road running in front of the market past the first waterway. That’ll get ya there.”

The man put a piece of straw—which I assumed we were meant to drink through—into each juice-filled cup and handed them over. I paid him.

“Are you here to meet the lord’s new bride?”

I tilted my head to the side. “New bride?”

This seemed to take the shopkeeper by surprise. “Oh? Haven’t you heard? The lord took some elf to be his wife...”

Ariane and I exchanged a knowing look. Her eyes went wide, and her hood almost slipped off her head. She hurried to pull it back down.

“We haven’t heard. Could you tell us more?”

The man crossed his arms. “I, umm, of course. About a month ago, I think, the lord invited all the local nobles together for a wedding ceremony. I only caught a glimpse of the bridal carriage as it rolled by, but the elf inside was quite fetching.”

Ariane interrupted the wistful man. “Was she wearing anything around her neck? A metal collar perhaps?”

She was referring to the so-called mana-eater collars, items that prevented the wearer from using magical abilities, which was particularly disastrous for elves. Every enslaved elf we’d found had been wearing one.

The shopkeeper shook his head. “Hmm, nope. I didn’t see anything like that. Her hair was done up real pretty though.”

I caught Ariane’s eye. She seemed to be completely at a loss as to what was going on here.

Personally, I wasn’t confused. If this lord had invited other members of the nobility to his wedding, an unadorned metal collar might have raised suspicion. The way I saw it, there were two possible explanations: either he had some

other way to keep the elven woman under his control, or she'd decided to marry him of her own volition.

"Was the groom named Lundes du Lamburt, by chance?" That was one of the names written on the elf purchase contracts.

"No, Lundes was the previous lord of Lamburt. This was Petros, his son."

"Lamburt is under new leadership?"

"That's right. It happened about a month ago."

Ariane and I exchanged another look.

After asking some of the other marketgoers about the marriage and receiving similar information, we made our way to a corner of the square where I handed one of the cups of juice to Ariane. She took it and put her mouth to the straw. I followed suit, sliding the straw through the gap in my helmet. My mouth filled with lukewarm liquid. It had the sweetness of orange juice, though it was slightly more acidic. The hay straw was pretty convenient. It was nice to be able to drink something without taking off my helmet.

"Do you think what they said is true?"

Ariane held her cup in one hand and Ponta in the other. The spirit creature was desperately trying to get at the cup, but Ariane kept a firm grip on both of them.

"If it is, then the most likely explanation is that Lundes du Lamburt bought an elf and that elf became Petros du Lamburt's wife."

The question was whether she'd been forced into the marriage.

"I find it hard to imagine Petros going out of his way to invite the nobility to a wedding with a slave, since it's illegal to enslave elves here."

But if she *had* been forced into it, then there was another possibility...

"Are mana-eater collars still effective if they're placed around an ankle or some other part of the body?"

If so, that would have allowed Petros to hold a public wedding without

revealing his secret.

However, Ariane shook her head. “They really aren’t that useful unless they’re around the neck.”

“Hmm. Then it seems less likely that she was forced.”

Ariane shot me a look, but she said nothing, sipping at her juice in silence instead. Something about her eyes told me she felt uneasy. I understood of course. We’d come all this way to rescue a kidnapped elf, and now it sounded like she’d married the son of the man who’d bought her.

But trying to guess the truth of the matter wasn’t a productive use of our time. It’d be better to talk to the people involved directly. The way I saw it, there were two ways to make that happen.

We could do what we always did and sneak into the estate, find the elf, and talk with her. Or, we could go through official channels and ask for an audience with her.

Even if she *had* married Petros of her own free will, it was unlikely she’d flat-out refuse to meet with an elven messenger. Rather, it’d be a pretty clear indication that something was wrong if she did.

I offered both options to Ariane. “What would you like to do?”

She closed her eyes, thinking it over. Up until recently, she would have chosen the first option without a second thought. However, I had the feeling that our recent meeting with Carcy was pushing her to at least consider the second option.

Despite being an elf, Carcy not only lived in a human town, but he was even accepted by many of the humans around him. I could only imagine what a shock that must have been to Ariane’s worldview.

She opened her golden eyes. “We’ll go to the estate, and I’ll request an audience as a messenger.”

“In that case, I suppose I’ll pose as your bodyguard again?”

Despite the gravity of the situation, a grin teased at the corners of Ariane’s mouth.

Once we'd finished drinking, I took our cups and began making my way back to the shop to return them. Just then, a loud yell erupted from somewhere in the middle of the busy square. I turned toward the noise to see a burly, middle-aged man arguing with a mother and her two children. The people around them backed away, apparently not wanting to get involved in the argument.

"It takes a lotta guts for trash like you to come here and start stealin' from people!" The man sent spittle flying about as he screamed.

"That's not what happened! My daughter knocked it off the table and was trying to return it is all. She would never steal anything!"

"Shut up! You lowly refugees are all the same. Nuthin' but excuses!"

The man appeared to be some sort of greengrocer. The mother and her children—a baby boy clutched to her chest and a young girl at her side with puffy, red cheeks—weren't exactly dressed to impress. Their clothes were tattered and dirty. The woman bowed her head over and over to the shop owner as she desperately tried to defuse the situation and calm her crying children at the same time.

I couldn't just stand idly by, so I called out to the man.

"There's no need to hit a child."

The man's face was beet red as he turned to yell at me. "Shut yer face! Who the hell do you think you are, butting in like..." He cut himself off as soon as he caught sight of me, turning white as a ghost and starting to shake.

I approached the man slowly, hands on my hips, purposely pushing back my cloak to expose my armor. Ariane let out a loud, dramatic sigh from behind me.

"N-no, you misunderstand, S-Sir Knight! This brat here was stealing my..."

The man's eyes darted about as he rambled incoherently.

I put a little force into my voice, drawing the man's attention back to me.

"How many did she steal?"

"O-one..."

I cut the man off. "Let's try again. How many?" This time there was even more menace to my voice.

The man groaned. “N-none. She didn’t steal anything.” He managed to choke out a response before darting back into his shop to hide.

I may have been a bit forceful, but I had no regrets about what I’d done.

I knelt before the young girl and waved my hand over her face.

“Heal!”

A soft light emanated from my hand, wrapping around her cheek before dissipating. The young girl’s face flooded with relief, and she forgot all about her crying.

“Th-thank you, Sir Knight.”

The girl’s mother bowed her head in appreciation while still trying to comfort her son. I nodded my head up at her before handing the two empty juice cups to the young girl.

“I have a special present for you, little lady. See that man over there? If you return these to him, he’ll give you a little spending money.”

I pointed out the man from the juice shop, who gave me a wry grin in return.

The girl looked from the cups to her mother. Her mother bowed her head to me again and took the girl and the cups off to the juice shop.

A polka-dot pattern began appearing on the stone tiles of the square as fat rain drops fell from the dark clouds above. The people around us began hurrying away.

“We should probably go find an inn,” Ariane spoke up from behind me.

It looked like we would need to put off visiting the estate until tomorrow. I let out a sigh and stood up.

“You’re right. We’d best get out of here before it starts coming down harder.”

Ariane and I made our way through the sprinkling rain, asking anyone we ran into to point us toward an inn. It had grown dark by the time we finally found a place to stay.

The next morning, the cloud cover from the day before had completely blown away, leaving clear blue skies in its place. The breeze brought with it the salty

smell of the ocean, a unique scent that seemed to fill every corner of the port town.

I opened the shutters covering my room's window and gazed out at the bustling streets below. It was already rather late in the morning.

After stretching to loosen up my body, I grabbed my neatly folded black cloak and slipped it into my bag. I decided it would be better not to wear it, since I would be posing as Ariane's bodyguard. Sometimes, standing out had its benefits.

Ponta sat patiently as it watched me go through my routine.

"Welp, now the question is whether or not they'll meet with us. You coming, Ponta?"

"Kyii!"

Ponta hopped up and, with the help of a gust of magical wind, glided up to its rightful place atop my helmet. After making sure the fox was firmly in place, I left the room.

Ariane stepped out of her own room at almost exactly the same moment, dressed in her familiar charcoal-gray cloak.

"Good morning, Arc. You'll certainly draw some eyes like that."

"If I'm playing bodyguard, I may as well look the part."

We made our way outside.

We'd wandered quite a ways from the south gate we'd entered through the day before and now found ourselves closer to the central gate. We took the street in front of the inn west to the first waterway. From there, we followed it south until we hit the large bridge that led into what was apparently called the old district.

Unlike the new district between the first and second waterways, here, the town consisted of a collection of ancient stone buildings that had somehow stood the test of time. They were much larger than those in the new district, the streets much wider.

We made our way down the main thoroughfare and up a small hill, where we

found ourselves at a gate built into a large wall. Beyond, I could see the outline of a massive, imposing castle. Several guards stood in front of the gate, watching over the area.

As we approached them, the guards snapped to attention.

“We seek an audience with Lord Petros’s wife.”

One of the guards stepped forward, his eyes taking in my entire frame before settling on my helmet. I quickly realized why he found the sight of me so odd and reached up to my helmet to remove Ponta, though the strange look on the guard’s face didn’t change.

“And where do you harken from, sir?”

“We are messengers from the Great Canada Forest.”

The guard furrowed his brow. Before he could respond, however, another guard came running up and whispered something into his ear.

The first guard shot me a steely glare. “If you are an elf, as you claim, then please remove your helmet and state your name.”

Ariane pulled back her hood.

Her long, snow white hair spilled out, dancing in the sea breeze. The guards swallowed hard as her pointy ears, amethyst-colored skin, and golden eyes came into view. Surprised gasps erupted from several nearby townsfolk as well, who had been watching the exchange.

Ariane’s voice rang out clearly in the now-silent street.

“I am Ariane Glenys Maple, a messenger from the Great Canada Forest. Please allow me to see the lady of the house.”

The guards exchanged looks, frozen with indecision, until one finally managed to pull himself together and speak.

“Notify the lord!”

“Y-yessir!”

Another of the men hurriedly climbed through a small door and disappeared. Ariane pulled the hood back over her head.

A short time later, a call came from the other side of the gate, followed by a deep clunking sound as it slowly raised. The guard from earlier stood on the other side, saluting.

“Lord Petros has agreed to meet with you!”

Upon hearing this, the line of guards in front of the gate parted to make a path for us.

I relaxed slightly. Even though I’d suggested this plan, I hadn’t thought it would be this easy to arrange a meeting.

An older gentleman stepped toward us, offering a reverent bow. He fixed his gaze on me, speaking in a slow, easy tone.

“I take it you are the bodyguard?”

I nodded, and the man waved us in. I let Ariane go in first, and I brought up the rear.

The older gentleman led us through a large garden and up to the front door of a towering castle. He gestured us inside, and we found ourselves in an entrance hall. Almost no surface had been left unadorned, from the decorated pillars and joists, to the dazzling chandelier hanging from the roof, to the large paintings mounted on the polished marble walls.

We took one of the staircases that sat at either end of the room up to the second floor, where we continued through another door and down a hallway overlooking a smaller garden. We eventually reached a large room, where the older man left us to go call the lord of the estate.

The room was impressive and filled to the brim with luxurious, high-quality furnishings. Compared to what we’d seen in Branbayna, this place was downright palatial, clearly a sign of the financial power its occupant wielded.

Ariane sat down in one of the chairs while I stood behind her with my arms crossed, in my best imitation of a bodyguard. Foreign diplomats always had an air of importance about them, so I figured this would look appropriate...or at least, I hoped it would.

A door opened in front of us, and a young man and woman entered the room,

followed by the old man from earlier.

The young man had wavy, blond bangs that fell in front of his eyes. He brushed them out of the way as he greeted us with a gleaming, toothy smile. I assumed this was Petros du Lamburt, the lord of the estate. He walked toward us with a casual, even gait, reminding me more of an actor than a noble.

As soon as he reached us, he spun around elegantly on one foot and stopped, facing us.

What the hell?

Before I even had a chance to think about what I'd just seen, the man spoke.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting. I am the lord of this town, Petros du Lamburt, twenty years old and newly married!"

Petros threw out his arms in a grand gesture and offered up another wide smile. He looked like the kind of prince you'd see in a comic marketed to little girls. I was more interested in the odd addition after his self-introduction though.

Ariane, still in a state of shock at his behavior, stood up as Petros walked over to her. The lord of Lamburt pivoted on his heel, took her hand, and gazed into her eyes.

"And you must be the beautiful little messenger I heard about. Welcome to my estate."

A loud cough echoed through the room at the conclusion of Petros's greeting. It had come from the tall, slender, pale-skinned woman he'd entered with. She was wrapped in a deep green evening dress that nearly brushed the floor. Between her green-tinged blonde hair, elongated ears, and green eyes, she was quite obviously an elf.

As far as I could tell, she didn't seem to be here against her will. She silently approached the young Petros from behind, a warm smile on her face, though there was something chilling about her presence. Petros turned around leisurely to shoot her a charming grin.

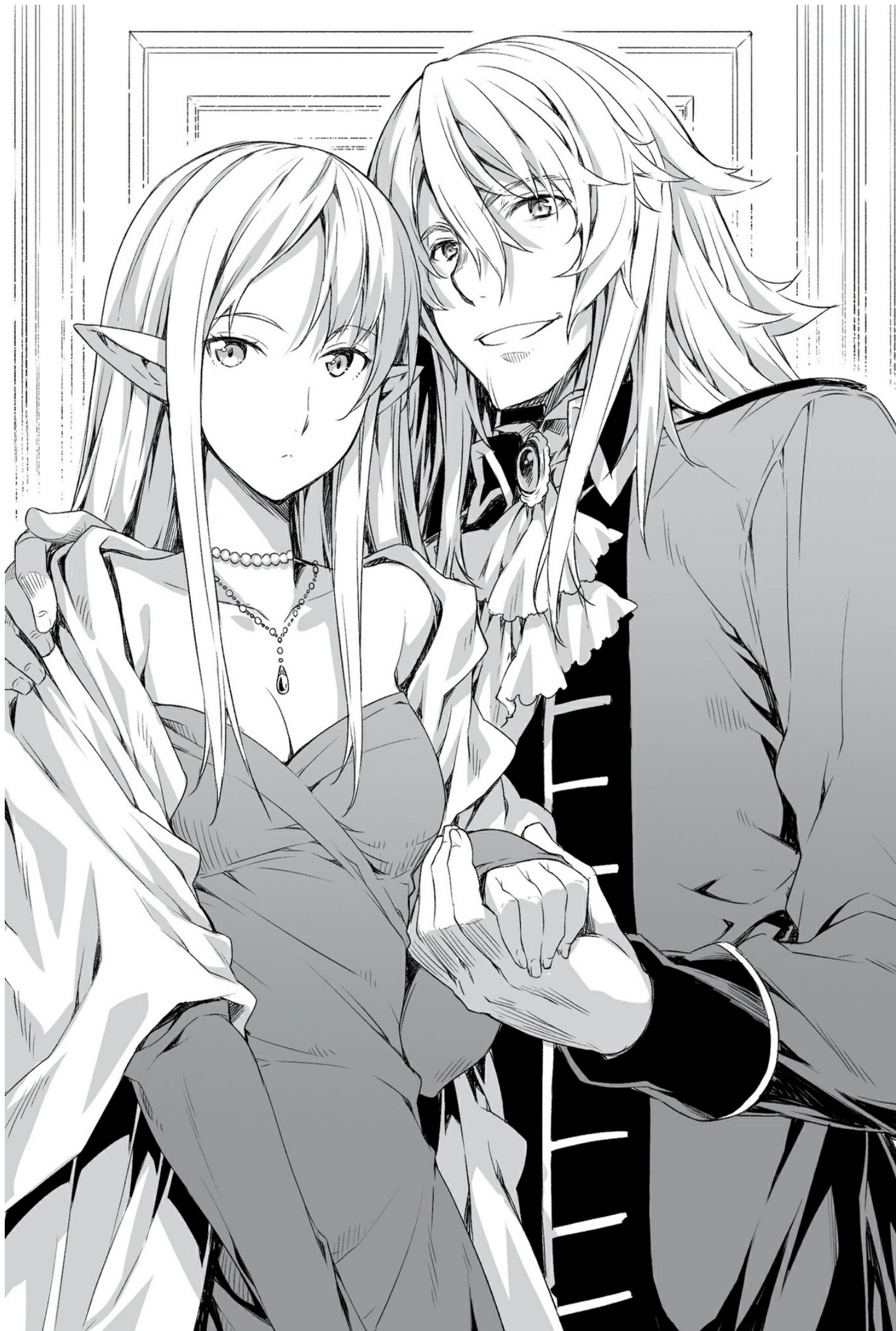
"Ahaha, excuse me, Toreasa. You are, without a doubt, the most attractive

woman in the land! But I can't help but recognize the beauty of other women. It is simply like admiring a lovely flower to me."

As he continued moving about like a performer in a musical, he dramatically took Toreasa's hand and brought it to his lips. Assuming this wasn't all some sort of affectation, he made for quite the bizarre fellow.

Toreasa seemed used to this behavior, though, and simply gave a small shrug, bowing her head.

"Thank you for traveling such a great distance. Honestly, I can't believe a messenger would come from Maple just for me. My name is Toreasa, though I am now known as Toreasa Darine Lamburt."



As she spoke, she approached the chair directly across from Ariane. Petros cheerfully slid it back for her to sit before seating himself beside her.

I thought for a moment about pulling out Ariane's chair for her as well, but she sat down before I had the chance. She didn't seem to care about such things.

"Greetings. My name is Ariane Glenys Maple. And this is my bodyguard, Arc."

I bowed low. "It is an honor to be here in your presence."

Toreasa watched me with great curiosity. I didn't think she'd spotted Ponta, since the fox was currently curled up in my bag, but something had certainly caught her eye.

"Wow, wow, wow. To think...an elven knight. You truly put the human knights to shame!"

Petros's eyes narrowed slightly as he regarded me anew, a grin spreading across his face. Ponta popped its head out of my bag.

Toreasa seemed like she was about to say something, but Ariane spoke first.

"I apologize for being so blunt, but I heard a rumor that you and Lord Petros had gotten married."

Toreasa's expression changed almost imperceptibly, a faint smile gracing her face, as if she'd suspected that this was the true reason for our visit. She looked over toward Petros.

"Yes, it's true. We held a wedding ceremony about a month ago. There was quite a lot leading up to that though."

Petros and Toreasa joined hands and rested them on the table in an easy, natural motion. They gazed deep into each other's eyes, as if they were alone in the room. Ariane tilted her head, seemingly as confused—and uncomfortable—as I was. It certainly didn't seem like this was a forced marriage.

Ariane shot another question at Toreasa, breaking up the loving atmosphere.

"We came here in pursuit of a band of men who have been hunting elves. Until we heard about your wedding, we were under the impression you'd been

captured.”

The couple unclasped their hands and shifted in their seats.

“I see. So, you’re no messenger after all. You’re a soldier on a rescue mission.” Toreasa didn’t seem all that surprised. “Well, it’s true that I was captured by slavers and brought here to Lamburt.”

Her gaze drifted off into the distance. Petros let out an uncomfortable laugh, smiling awkwardly. But his expression quickly turned to one of concern for Toreasa.

“My father, the previous lord of Lamburt, was the one who bought her. I was absolutely stunned to learn that my own family would so flagrantly violate an international treaty.”

Ariane shook her head. “So then, what happened to your father?”

“He is currently confined to another section of the castle. When I found out he’d broken the law, I took over everything. It’s probably not proper to speak so casually about such a scandalous affair, but seeing as how you’re a messenger sent from my wife’s home country, I see no reason to hide the truth.”

Petros looked troubled as he explained the events leading up to their marriage. Apparently, Toreasa had been brought to Lamburt approximately one year ago, and Petros’s father, Lundes, had purchased her from an underground slave market. When Petros discovered what Lundes had done, this began a power struggle between father and son, until Petros finally overthrew Lundes on the grounds that he had violated international law. From what I could tell, Petros had made no attempt to hide these events from the other nobles. Otherwise, it would have been quite difficult to keep Toreasa by his side.

“So then...why did you two marry?” Ariane still looked puzzled.

Petros stood from his seat, gesturing theatrically as he spoke. I wouldn’t have been at all surprised if he suddenly burst into song.

“That’s quite simple! The moment I saw this enslaved woman, it was love at first sight! It was as if I’d finally met the person my heart was calling out to...”

“Teehee! Oh, Petros...”

Toreasa gave an adoring sigh as Petros continued to wax romantic, her cheeks flushing a deep shade of red. She reached out to take his hand. The elderly gentleman beamed from the back of the room. I couldn't help but feel like I was part of some elaborate musical. Would I be the next to launch into soliloquy? But the two stars were in a world entirely of their own, seemingly unaware of the rest of us in the room.

Ariane watched this all unfold with a look of astonishment. Then she shook her head, as if returning to herself. When she spoke, her voice was strained.

"And you're okay with all of this?"

She must have been worried at the thought of another elf living among humans. Had we not already met Carcy, I'm sure she would have been downright distraught. The differences between species ran even deeper than I'd known.

For example, there was a huge disparity in the lifespans of the husband and wife that sat before me. If I recalled correctly, elves lived for something like 400 years. Petros, on the other hand, would be extremely lucky to reach one hundred. Actually, considering the barbaric state of medicine in this world, making it to the age of sixty would probably be impressive. Barring any unforeseen circumstances, Petros would almost certainly pass away first. Was that part of what Ariane was getting at? Surely Petros and Toreasa had already considered this...

As I watched the two of them stare into each other's eyes, I knew how Toreasa would answer Ariane's question.

"Of course. This is the life I chose."

Ariane still looked troubled by all this, but she also seemed to accept Toreasa's response.

"I see. Well, if you're happy, then there's nothing more for me to say. It would be my honor to pass a message along to your parents or family, if you'd like. Where do they live?"

"I'm from the village of Millest."

Ariane repeated the name, as if trying to remember where she'd heard it

before. “Mill...est. Millest combined with several other villages bordering on human settlements to form one large village. It no longer exists.”

That was right. I recalled Ariane’s mother, Glenys, telling me something similar.

Toreasa seemed taken aback by this. Sensing her sadness, Ariane changed the subject.

“Lord Petros, you said your father was confined to the castle. But what became of the slave market?”

Petros crossed his arms and frowned. “Yes, well...the main people involved in the underground slave markets have already been punished. However, many of the slavers escaped our raid and made their way outside the town walls. Some have even set themselves up as bandits. It’s a mess I’m still dealing with.”

Petros’s story reminded me of the group we’d encountered attacking the young mercenaries. Ariane turned back to look at me, as if thinking the same thing.

“Just yesterday, we ran across a group of young mercenaries who managed to defeat and tie up several bandits.”

Petros nodded. “I received a report that around a dozen men had been captured. That still only puts us at about half of those we’re looking for though.” He let out a loud sigh and slumped deeper into his chair.

Toreasa leaned over and whispered something in his ear. His face brightened in surprise and he nodded firmly before sitting up straight as an arrow.

“I have something related that I would like to discuss with you. Actually, I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Wait,” Toreasa cut in. Her face was serious as she turned toward us. “This is my request, so I would like to be the one to ask.” She lowered her voice. “I would like you to find someone for me.”

Ariane perked up, suddenly interested.

“Perhaps it’s unreasonable for me to ask something like this, but since you two have come so far just for me, I hope you’ll consider it.”

Toreasa looked at Ariane hopefully. Her green eyes brimmed.

Ariane returned Toreasa's gaze. "Who do you want us to look for?" She sounded suspicious yet willing to hear the other woman out.

"When I was first brought here, a chambermaid told Petros about what his father was up to. Her name is Frani Markham. She disappeared three days ago, and we have no idea where she may have gone."

Toreasa's eyes implored Ariane for assistance.

"And you owed a debt to this...Frani woman?"

Toreasa responded with a single nod of her head. "I am truly indebted to her, of course, but she was also my very first friend when I came to Lamburt. When I was in hiding while Petros wrested power from his father, she took care of my every need. She was my confidante."

"Is it possible she was captured by the bandits you mentioned?"

Petros immediately rejected Ariane's theory. "We believe that that is incredibly unlikely. However, there *have* been many merchants coming to Lamburt from across the sea to buy enslaved criminals, and, in some cases, people have even been kidnapped and taken away on their ships."

The face of the whimsical bard, who had only moments ago professed his love for Toreasa, had taken on the somber bearing of a lord.

"I don't understand humans. Enslaving elves isn't enough? Now you enslave your own people?"

Toreasa nodded her agreement with Ariane.

Being the only human at the table—or so he thought—Petros could offer nothing but an uncomfortable smile in response.

"And is it your belief, Lord Petros, that the chambermaid was taken by one of these kidnappers?"

Petros nodded, wearily.

"That's what I assume. With the underground slave markets driven out, the town is in chaos. Various gangs are vying for power, going so far as to drag

merchants from across the ocean into the fray. This is all my fault of course. I may have overthrown my father, but I still don't have full command of all our forces yet, which has hindered our ability to look for Frani. Toreasa wanted to conduct a search on her own, but the situation in town is too dangerous for me to allow that."

If this Frani had been abducted by kidnappers from another country, they would have to leave Lamburt by ship, which suggested one obvious place to look.

"If you know people are being kidnapped and exported through the port, what's stopping you from inspecting each ship before it leaves?"

Assuming she actually had been kidnapped, this seemed like the easiest way to find her. Unless she'd already been taken across the ocean.

"Our trade ties are tenuous as it is. We can't afford to risk that without at least some proof of foul play. Besides, inspectors can be bribed to keep quiet. I've temporarily prohibited any ships from entering or leaving the port, but I doubt I'll be able to keep it up beyond tomorrow."

Toreasa's face darkened at this. Petros took her hand in both of his and stroked it gently.

Even as the lord of this town, Petros knew he couldn't just indiscriminately inspect ships that belonged to foreign nobles. The only other option was to watch for any suspicious freight being loaded onto the ships, but that would also prove difficult if he didn't yet have complete control of his forces.

For me, the question remained as to *why* a country across the sea needed so many slaves, even going so far as to kidnap people. I had to imagine it was some sort of massive public works project...or war.

"Why is Nohzan buying up so many slaves abroad?" I figured it couldn't hurt to ask.

If this had been a contrived story plot in a novel, then there would be some sort of massive conspiracy underlying all these kidnappings, but it didn't seem like that was what we were dealing with here.

Petros knitted his brow and shook his head. "Nohzan isn't the one gathering

up all the slaves. It's the Holy Kingdom of Hilk. They claim they're doing so to give sinners a chance to atone for their transgressions, but I think they're using them as laborers in their mythril mines."

"Ah, mythril mines?"

I was quite familiar with mythril, a magical metal that existed in the game. It was a mid- to high-class material there, and it seemed to be held in similar regard here. But even if the criminals were being used as laborers, something still didn't sit right. Criminals or not, importing slaves from across the sea seemed like it would cost a fortune in transportation alone. I couldn't imagine there was much profit in it.

I voiced my concerns to Petros, and he agreed.

"Temple knights from Hilk are apparently making their way through Nohzan, visiting towns and buying slaves along the way. Once they gather enough slaves, they ship them off to the mythril mines. The western part of Nohzan is currently suffering monster attacks on a massive scale, so they're willing to buy magic-resistant mythril weapons at a high price."

I understood. In that case, the merchants' transportation costs would be offset by the higher premium on slave labor, which in turn would incentivize them to acquire slaves by any means. It also meant that Hilk was bearing the brunt of the transportation costs, at least upfront. Though it sounded like they were eventually passing that on to the people of Nohzan.

"To make matters worse, people have been fleeing western Nohzan, crossing the ocean, and coming here. But many of the refugees end up getting kidnapped and sent back to Hilk as slaves."

I remembered the day before and the way that man had treated the mother and her young children. It seemed like a rift was beginning to form between the citizens and the refugees.

Toreasa spoke up again, her eyes pleading. "I've heard that dark elves have better sight and hearing than we do. I beg you, help me find my friend." She bowed her head.

Petros, despite his noble status, bowed his head beside his wife.

“I have heard much of the prowess of elven warriors. I will reward you handsomely if you provide your assistance.”

Ariane turned back to me again, her golden eyes asking for my input.

“I will go along with whatever you choose, Miss Ariane.”

I was more than willing to provide my help, so it truly was up to Ariane. The look of determination in her eyes told me she’d already made up her mind.

“I don’t know if we’ll be able to find your friend, but we’ll certainly try.”

Toreasa and Petros were both overjoyed to hear this.

They told us what they knew of Frani’s situation before the chambermaid had disappeared three days prior. Even with every ship confined to the port, there were a lot of places in Lamburt she could have been taken to in that time, and that was assuming she was still in town.

The two went on to describe Frani’s notable features. When they’d finished, Ariane made to stand. But before she could, Petros put up a hand to stop her.

“I imagine you’re not very familiar with human towns.”

Petros looked back at the older gentleman who’d stepped up behind him and whispered something into his ear. The man bowed in acknowledgement and quickly left the room. A short time later, he returned with a well-dressed man.

The new arrival stood beside Petros’s chair, his gaze fixed on Ariane. He looked surprised for a moment before a soft smile appeared his face.

“This is Gio Clintos, second-in-command of my knights. He will serve as your guide.”

Once his introduction was complete, Gio bowed with curt military professionalism, the smile still on his face. He looked to be in his early thirties, with short-cropped, light brown hair and an ever-present smile—absolutely nothing like the brutish figure I would have envisioned as a commander of knights. He looked more like a civil administrator to me. However, he was quite tall, and very muscular.

“As the lord kindly stated, I am Gio Clintos. It is an honor to meet you.” After introducing himself, he stepped back behind Petros.

“With Gio at your side, you will have no problem getting into places that would otherwise be restricted. Now go, and please find Frani.”

Petros and Toreasa looked pointedly at Ariane, grave expressions etched on their faces. How much of that gravity got through to Ariane was unclear, but she nodded firmly.

Gio accompanied Ariane and me out of the castle. Ariane glanced up at me once we were back in the town proper.

I tilted my head and returned her gaze. “Something on your mind?”

She looked away. After a moment, she spoke in a low, timid voice. “I’m sorry for always dragging you into my own personal business.”

Personally, I had no complaints about her decision, though I felt a certain degree of guilt about the fact that I was looking forward to playing detective.

“Our objective merely changed from finding Toreasa to finding Frani.”

My nonchalant response caused Ariane’s lips to curve up ever so.

“Thank you, Arc.”

Even if it was just a small gesture of appreciation, her smile still warmed my heart.

Men truly were like animals, when you got down to it. If a pretty woman asked for a favor, we’d jump at the chance to help. Deep in my heart, I felt that perhaps I finally understood that famed, third-generation thief.

Lamburt was located on the Gulf of Bulgoh, its port poking out into the middle of the water. This was the closest spot between the Rhoden Kingdom and its neighbor across the sea, the Nohzan Kingdom. If you were to head due west from the port, you’d find the island known as Bis, which traditionally served as the center for trade between the two kingdoms.

Looking out across the sea from where we stood in the port, I could just barely see the outline of the island on the horizon. Gio explained that it was about a two-hour trip by boat.

Two immense piers jutted out from the port, where numerous ships of all shapes and sizes were docked. Since Petros had prohibited any ships from leaving or entering, however, there were pretty much no ships anywhere else.

There were quite a few soldiers in the area, keeping an eye on everything, though their work ethic seemed questionable at best. As soon as Gio had appeared, however, they quickly got themselves in line and went back to their duties.

It had been two days since the travel restrictions were put in place, and it seemed unlikely that they could reasonably continue much longer. Nevertheless, the port seemed vibrant and full of life, though I could still sense an uneasy tension in the air. Among the crowds around the port, I spotted a large group of people dressed in dirty clothes grouped together, somewhat detracting from the serene, seaside scene.

Ponta also seemed to notice them and hopped down from its usual place atop my head to wrap around my neck like a scarf.

Gio spoke in a low, troubled voice, his eyebrows deeply furrowed.

“Due to the troubles the Nohzan Kingdom has been facing in the west, there’s been a massive influx of refugees, leading to an increase in crime in Lamburt. The current movement restrictions on the port have done something to limit the flow, but the number of refugees will likely increase again as soon as it’s lifted. To make matters worse, there have been sightings of ghost ships off in the bay, causing the residents to panic even more.”

His usual calm demeanor returned as he began leading us through the port.

“Is the Nohzan Kingdom doing nothing to prevent people from leaving?”

Considering that the refugees had to cross a great expanse of water just to reach Lamburt, the danger they were facing must have been on an immense scale. It was hard to imagine that the country was simply doing nothing. It suggested that the king had little control over the country.

“From what we hear from the refugees, temple knights from the Holy Kingdom of Hilk are coming in to deal with the monster crisis, but it’s all they can do to hold back the tide.”

Considering their proximity to Nohzan, Hilk was in no position to ignore the monsters. But were they the only country trying to quell the problem?

I asked Gio about this, but he only shrugged in response. Apparently, he didn't have any additional details.

Unlike the world I'd come from, where information was at everyone's fingertips, most people here seemed to have a very limited understanding of the whole picture. Gathering and recording massive amounts of information was a huge undertaking, so it was likely that only a select few had a full understanding of what was going on within another country's borders.

Or maybe Gio was just being tight-lipped about the whole situation. Either way, I had no means of learning any more.

Petros had mentioned that the Holy Kingdom of Hilk was buying up all these slaves. But I couldn't help but wonder if mythril mining was their true purpose. Sure, they would need slave labor to speed up the production of mythril-based weapons, but the sheer cost of it all still didn't make sense to me.

I continued mulling this over as I turned to Ariane. She was fidgeting a bit beneath her cloak, her hood pulled low as usual.

"Did you find something?"

She put a finger to her lips, her golden gaze locked onto me. "Several people have been watching us for a while now."

I tilted my head within my helmet, careful not to move too much, and looked around. I spotted a suspicious man watching us, just as she'd said, though he kept his body carefully turned away. I couldn't see anyone else however.

Were all elf warriors able to pick up on such things? Or was it unique to dark elves? Or just Ariane?

In any case, her senses were far more fine-tuned than a human's.

But what was the purpose of watching us? Sure, we might stand out a bit, but I couldn't recall anyone keeping an eye on us in any of the other towns we'd visited. Perhaps it had something to do with Frani. Perhaps they were spies, working with a group of abductors... But who even knew we were looking for

her aside from Lord Petros and Lady Toreasa?

I turned my gaze toward Gio, walking in front of us.

As the second-in-command of Lord Petros's knights, he was probably closely watched by those involved in the underground markets. Perhaps *he* was the one our shadows were keeping an eye on.

I stopped and looked over at Ariane. "Do you think they're watching Gio?"

Ariane shook her head. "No, their attention seems to be focused on us."

I was impressed that she could tell. No one would ever get the jump on her. But this still left the question of why we were being watched.

Gio realized we were no longer following him. He turned around and walked back to us.

"Is something the matter?"

Ariane gestured with her eyes. "We're being followed."

Gio was about to turn his head to look, but he stopped himself, instead letting his eyes wander across the scene.

He lowered his voice. "Is that so?"

Ariane nodded. "I don't know what they're hoping to do, but they've been following us since the port."

Gio frowned. "We can't say for certain that they're involved with the people who took Frani."

"Where exactly was she last seen?" I asked.

Chambermaids generally spent the vast majority of their time within a castle's walls. I didn't know the specifics, but I had to guess it would be rather difficult to abduct someone like Frani. If she'd disappeared while in the castle, that would change our search entirely.

Gio stared at his feet. "It's all my fault." His voice dropped even lower, as if he were choking on the words. "I asked her to run an errand outside the castle walls. I could just as easily have asked one of my soldiers to do it, but she told me she had some errands of her own. That's why I asked Lord Petros to allow

me to serve as your guide. I want to help find her. It's the least I can do."

"Hmm. In that case, would you mind leaving us here?"

The already-melancholy Gio looked as if he'd been punched in the gut when I said this. His eyes darted between Ariane and me.

"Why?! I want to help—"

Ariane put up a hand to silence Gio's shocked tirade.

"We're going to act as decoys to draw the men away, isn't that right?"

I nodded. "You're rather well known around this town, Gio, so it would be best if you left us for a bit while we draw the people following us in."

"B-but..." Gio mumbled a bit, struggling to find words.

Ariane spoke in defense of my plan. "We don't have much time, right? We need at least some sort of information to work with."

The tone of her voice left no room for discussion. Gio hesitated a moment before nodding, letting his head hang.

"I understand. I'll make my rounds through the port area and show my face in some popular spots."

"All right then. Let's meet back here in an hour."

We parted ways with Gio. After walking for a bit, I turned to Ariane.

"Do you think they'll fall for it?"

Ariane shot me a cool, challenging smile. "If the two of us together don't work, then we'll just have to separate."

Granted, Ariane and I could both easily handle a fight on our own. But I hoped we'd be able to lure one of our followers in together. Either way, we couldn't afford to let our guard down.

Ariane and I wandered around the port, occasionally stopping to talk with ship's hands or other people milling about to ask if they'd seen anyone matching the chambermaid's appearance. It seemed like some people had the information we were after, but they either gave vague responses or wouldn't talk to us at all. They probably wanted to avoid all the infighting Lord Petros had

alluded to.

Coming up empty-handed, we decided to lead our watchers down to the warehouse district at the southern end of the port. There was a fair amount of foot traffic on the main street running along the front of the district, but this dwindled to a trickle as soon as you went even one street beyond that. The warehouses back here were quite far from the docks and looked rarely used.

A few homeless people sat by the side of the road and eyed us suspiciously, but otherwise kept to themselves.

I broke the silence. "So, how did we do?"

Ariane's golden eyes glinted eerily in the depths of her hood, and her lips curled into a smile.

"There are six people approaching us from behind. Another ten or so are coming in from parallel streets to surround us."

I looked up to see a group of men in the distance, sneers on their faces as they watched us approach. Behind, I spotted another group blocking the street we'd just come down. The homeless people I'd seen earlier had vanished. They must have sensed the violence in the air.

All told, it looked like we were surrounded by as many as twenty men.

"Well, this certainly is a lavish welcoming party."

Ariane let out a dramatic sigh. "And yet, it doesn't look like any of them will present much of a challenge."

This elicited a derisive sneer from one of the men ahead. "Why doncha say that to my face, so I can beat the hell outta you two? You think your helmet can take summa this?"

The man wielded some sort of blunt instrument that looked like a mace. As he jeered at us, the men around him burst into bouts of laughter.

A sinister-looking man with short-cropped hair spoke up, licking his lips. "That one in the armor might be an elf, so don't rough 'im up too bad! And whatever ya do, don't leave any injuries on the lady. She's the one we're after!"

He didn't look like the type of person who might head up an abduction ring.

But I'd bet he was sent by the person who did. Regardless, now we knew that they were after Ariane.

"Hehehe! Can you believe our luck, boys? A dark elf, here in our town! I'm excited just *thinking* about how much we'll sell 'er for!"

"I'm gettin' excited, too, but in a different way, if ya know what I mean!"

Ariane drew back her hood eliciting even more jeers and leering stares from the men surrounding us.

She was rare, even among elves. It made sense that these humans, who saw elves only as a commodity, would be drawn to her. I'd allowed myself to slip into a false sense of security, to forget how dangerous this world could be, thanks to how well the humans in Branbayna and even Lamburt had treated us.

"At the end of the day, I guess all humans are the same. I'll make you regret coming after me."

Ariane's golden eyes burned with rage. She drew the Sword of the King of Lions from her waist. The men sneered. Either they'd forgotten that elves were incredibly gifted fighters, or they were overconfident in their own abilities.

I let out a sigh, pulling the shield off my back and muttering to Ariane.

"I have some questions for these guys, so try to not kill them all."

She seemed eager for the upcoming fight. I wanted to make sure she showed some restraint.

"No promises."

Usually, I was the one charging into situations without thinking. She was more like me than she'd probably care to admit.

"Let's do this!"

Ariane took off in a run, a smile on her lips, quickly closing the gap between her and the man closest to her. A moment later, the man's cries were echoing through the street.

She moved past him, toward the rest of the group, sweeping her sword across. An instant later, three severed legs dropped to the ground. Before the

other men could even respond, she was already closing in on them.

Her sword moved faster than anything I'd ever seen. I couldn't tell if it was because she was throwing all her might into the attack, or because the Sword of the King of Lions lent her some unseen strength, but the men were no match for her.

Two of them, who'd been stabbed in the arms and chest, doubled over in pain. Moments later, another man took the broadside of her blade to his temple and dropped like a stone, his eyes rolling back into his head. A group of them rallied, rushing Ariane at once, but she was already darting away from them, focused on another trio.

As I listened to the angry screams reverberating through the street, I gripped my shield and advanced toward a large, brutish man in front of me. His face was a mask of murderous rage as he swung his weapon about wildly.

"Shield Bash!"

This was an incredibly basic skill from the Soldier class, which involved smashing your opponent with your shield. However, the mythical-class shield I had, combined with my immense strength, turned it into an incredibly powerful attack.

My shield glowed ever so slightly as it connected with the man, sending his weapon flying and him rebounding into five other men behind him, carrying them all into a brick wall.

Two of the men's arms bent at strange angles, while another man, who'd ended up at the bottom of the heap, had twisted his neck in a way that looked quite unnatural.

"Sorry! I totally didn't expect that!"

They couldn't hold it against me if it was an accident, right?

I glanced around for my next target, muttering about not knowing my own strength, and realized that the thugs were all running away from me. Among them was the brutish man with short-cropped hair who'd been talking big just a few moments ago.

“The rest can go, but you’re staying with us!”

My eyes locked on his back as I took off in a mad dash after him. This time, I was careful to hold back as I hit him with my shield. He still went flying.

“Gyaaaaauuuuugh!!!”

The man let out an eerie scream as he tumbled through the air, landing splayed out on the ground like an upturned umbrella. He lay motionless.

I decided to avoid using my special fighting skills against normal human opponents in the future. Or at least, against those I wanted to survive.

I grabbed the man by the scruff of the neck, wringing a scream of pain from him as he pleaded for his life.

“Pleeeeeease, stop! Spare me! I beg you, please, spare me!”

“Shut up, you prattling little thug.”

Ariane made her way toward us, staring at the backs of the fleeing men.

“What do you think, Ariane? Should we kill him? There are plenty of others who might be more willing to talk.”

I looked at the pile of men groaning behind her, many of them missing limbs.

“Are they even alive, Arc?”

Ariane gestured with her chin toward the men plastered to the wall.

“It just...kind of happened. Anyway, at least I found someone who might be able to tell us what’s going on.”

I held the wailing man out toward Ariane. Her golden eyes narrowed, as if weighing his worth. Blood dripped from the lion’s head engraved on the hilt of her sword, making her gaze even more intimidating.

A warm, wet stain formed at the crotch of the man’s pants.

I decided to try the kind of interrogation I’d seen in police shows on TV. Didn’t they always do a good cop, bad cop routine?

I whispered softly into the man’s ear, never letting go of his neck.

“Listen, you don’t need to be so scared. All you need to do is answer a few

questions truthfully. But, uh, I should tell you now that you don't want to make this lady angry. You've got four tries to get the answer right. Each time you answer wrong, she'll be chopping off a limb."

His face went pale and he began shuddering as I spoke, making me wonder just how well I was playing the good cop.

Ariane shot me an annoyed look.

I whispered into his ear again, in as friendly a manner as I could, while holding out his right arm.

"First up, a question for your right arm. Did you come from Nohzan to buy slaves?"

Ariane rolled her eyes, but lifted her sword above the man's arm all the same.

"Eaugh! Y-yes! We came from a slave market in Nohzan!"

The man squirmed, desperately trying to pull his arm away as he answered. I nodded, lightly patting his cheek before moving onto the next question.

"Great. Next up, your left arm. I'm sure you'll get this one. Have you ever abducted anyone from this town?"

I yanked the man's left arm out. Ariane moved her sword over to it, tracing the tip across his flesh.

"Yes, we have! But it's usually only refugees who don't have places of their own here! Please, ya gotta believe me! We were just out to make some quick cash!"

"I see, I see. So, just to be clear, you're saying that, on occasion, you do actually abduct people who live here?"

I brought my helmet even closer to the man's face. His eyes widened, darting back and forth.

"O-only a few times! If we'd focused on citizens, we'd have been easily figured out! I'm tellin' ya the truth!"

"All right then, on to the next question. Of the few times that you abducted citizens, did you happen to see a woman who looked like a chambermaid? A

woman named Frani Markham?”

I spoke the words slowly, massaging the man’s stiff shoulder to try and get him to loosen up. His back was soaked with sweat.

“Never heard of her, honest! A chambermaid, you said? There’s no way someone like that would come wandering down ’ere!”

The man looked pleadingly between Ariane and me, tears in his eyes as he sniveled.

“Well, we’d like to see for ourselves. Where do you keep the people you’ve abducted?”

“Everyone’s already on a ship. They’re g-gonna make sail first thing tomorrow morning!”

“Will you take us there?”

“Are you mad?! They’ll kill me!”

I ignored the man’s pleas and instead turned and began dragging him by the neck back toward the port. Ariane sheathed her sword and followed us.

We made our way from the warehouse district to the piers where the ships were docked. Fishermen stared at the man flailing about helplessly as we walked past.

“Stop your ship at once! You haven’t been granted permission to leave port!”

Several soldiers were yelling at a ship off in the water, slowly making its way past the piers and out toward the sea. When the slave trader dangling from my hand caught sight of the ship, his face went white.

“Dammit! What’re they doing?! Are they just gonna leave me behind? They ordered me to go out and pick up the elf, but as soon as things went south, those yellow-bellied pigs turned tail and ran!”

The man continued yelling all manner of slurs at the escaping ship. I tapped him on the back of the head and he went limp, like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

The men he’d worked for, now that their secret was out, would be branded as

criminals by Lord Petros and the Rhoden Kingdom itself. It made sense for them to run... But of course, I couldn't let them get away.

"Ariane, keep an eye on this one for me, will you?"

I dropped the slaver at her feet and raced off at top speed toward the ship.

It had to weave in and out of the ships still docked at the pier, which kept it from gaining speed as it tried to escape.

I could probably have reached the ship in an instant by using Dimensional Step, but there were too many eyes on me.

I leaped off the pier and onto a nearby ship, then jumped from that one to the one next to it.

Each ship shook violently as soon as I landed, causing the crews to scream and shout as many of them were tossed into the sea. I offered a quick apology each time—in my mind at least—before bouncing off again, traveling from ship to ship as I closed in on the fleeing vessel.

By the time its crew spotted me, shouting among themselves, it was too late.

I jumped onto the docked ship closest to the escaping slaver and, using it like a springboard, vaulted high into the air toward the ship's bow, where I clung for dear life.

One of the crew drew his weapon and came at me. However, before he had a chance to strike, I grabbed his arm and flung him, sending him crashing into the sea.

I hopped onto the deck of the ship.

Men's heavy footfalls echoed across the deck as they tried to figure out what was happening. One of them spotted me and let out a scream of terror.

"It's him! He followed us!"

He must have been one of the men who'd gotten away in the warehouse district. He was wide-eyed, sweating bullets, as they say.

"Hurry up and kill the intruder!"

A large, hairy man shouted at the cowering crew to get them under control.

My best guess was that he was the captain, though he looked just like a run-of-the-mill pirate. Some of the men calmed down enough to draw their weapons and rush toward me. I pulled my shield off my back and braced myself for the oncoming human wave.

“Shield Bash!”

Between the initial shockwave and the sheer force of the attack, most of the men were thrown straight off the ship and into the ocean. Screams of pain and surprise filled the air as, one by one, they plopped into the water, sending up spray.

The remaining men seemed to realize that they were no match and abandoned ship, leaving me and the hairy captain alone on the deck.

“I don’t know who the hell you are, but I’m not gonna go easy on ya!”

The tip of his sword shook as he screamed, spittle flying everywhere.

I approached him silently. He matched me, retreating step for step as fear took over his face.

I swung my shield wide and used Shield Bash to smash through one of the ship’s masts. A split second later, it snapped in two, showering the deck with splinters. The rigging went taut as the mast leaned precariously to one side, then the whole thing snapped off and splashed into the sea. A huge plume of water shot up.

A mix of screams and cheers erupted from the port.

I looked around, wondering if I’d overdone it.

The ship’s captain cowered at my feet like a frightened animal. At the very least, I’d stopped the slavers from escaping. Whether or not they’d face jail time was up to someone else.

The slave traders’ ship was pulled back to the pier, broken mast and all. Many people were found locked in the its hold. Just as the man we’d interrogated had said, most of them were refugees, though we also discovered a young woman who lived in Lamburt. The captain and his crew were arrested on the spot by

Lamburt soldiers.

“Could you at least give me a heads-up before you go and do something like that?”

Gio approached me and Ariane, his eyebrows knitted in concern. I could tell he was annoyed by the vein bulging in his forehead. Arresting criminals was the purview of the local knights and soldiers, so I understood why he might be upset at some stranger doing his job.

Ariane, however, looked puzzled. “They’re all criminals, aren’t they? What’s the harm in capturing them?”

“We humans have rules! I... I’m sorry. Thank you for your assistance. I would like to offer my gratitude on behalf of Lamburt.”

Gio’s thanks still carried a certain bitterness, a deep frown on his face.

Ariane’s eyes narrowed. When Gio wasn’t looking, she whispered to me.

“Arc, there’s something strange about him. Right after we parted ways, another person, unrelated to the slavers, started following us. I think they may have been sent by Gio.”

I frowned. How suspicious was that though?

Gio had been assigned to guide us—two people who’d just shown up out of nowhere—when suddenly we asked to be left on our own. I could see why he might want someone to follow us around and see what we were up to.

But if he *had* ordered a knight or some other soldier to shadow us, then they almost certainly would have joined the fray once we were attacked in the warehouse district. Since that hadn’t happened, the next logical explanation was that some other lackey was following us on Gio’s orders. But it still felt like I was missing something.

I glanced at the slave ship’s crew as they were dragged away by Gio’s soldiers. “Well, we caught the slave traders, but we didn’t find Frani.”

Ariane nodded absently, her golden eyes fixating on something.

“Arc, there’s another ship that looks suspicious.” She tugged on my elbow, pulling me along with her.

“What’s so suspicious about it?”

“The people aboard have been watching us for a while.”

“We don’t know that these people are slavers, Ariane. We can’t be so brazen about going aboard.”

“What if we have proof that there are prisoners aboard?”

Ariane looked oddly confident as she moved through the crowd, heading toward a black ship docked at the far pier.

It was a merchant vessel, far larger than the slave trader I’d just been on. As we drew close, I could see many of the crew members watching us suspiciously as they moved out onto the pier to block our path. By the time we reached the ship, a blockade of ten had already formed up in front of us.

“What’s yer business with our ship?”

We were approached by a large, shirtless man, his muscular, scar-covered arms gleaming in the sun. He hawked up a glob of phlegm and spat, glaring daggers at us.

Rather than answering his question, Ariane held her open palm up to her mouth and blew on it, then whispered something I couldn’t make out. A moment later, a faint glow appeared in front of us, then dissipated.

Ariane looked back at the muscle-bound man and shrugged her shoulders.

“We just thought this was such an interesting ship. We were hoping to get a closer look!”

“If you’ve got no business, then get outta here!” Clearly annoyed at Ariane’s feigned cluelessness, the scar-covered man took a step toward us as he yelled. “Yer disrupting our work. And take yer friend with ya too.”

Suddenly, a well-dressed man—possibly a merchant—stepped from the group.

“Now, now. May I ask what interests you about this Deoin Corp vessel?”

The man looked at us intently, a warm smile plastered to his face.

“Oh, nothing in particular. Not quite yet anyway.”

The man's eye's narrowed suspiciously at Ariane's reply.

A familiar voice called out. "Ariane! Arc! Wait up!"

I looked back to see Gio running down the pier toward us.

"Is something the matter, Sir Vizio?"

"Ah, Gio. No, it's nothing. It just seems that these two here have some sort of business with our vessel."

The merchant—Vizio apparently—shrugged dramatically, a disingenuous smile twisting across his face.

Gio stepped in between Ariane and Vizio in an attempt to smooth things over. "Miss Ariane, this is a Deoin Corp vessel, carrying out business on behalf of Count Ornaut from the Nohzan Kingdom. It has nothing to do with the recent... unpleasantness. Besides, we've already finished inspecting it." He scolded Ariane, though her attention was focused elsewhere.

So, this vessel had to be handled with care because it was backed by a foreign noble. We probably wouldn't be able to enter without some sort of evidence.

As Vizio and Ariane glared at each other, a sudden gust of wind blew up and the faint glow from earlier appeared again beside Ariane. No one else in the area appeared to have noticed it. They were too busy squinting against the wind.

Moments later, the glow faded again and Ariane turned back to the merchant, speaking as if the entire conversation up to this point had never happened.

"There are people being held captive aboard this ship. I would like to be allowed to inspect it."

Vizio grinned sarcastically.

"As Gio here already stated, this vessel is from the Nohzan Kingdom and..."

Before he could name his supporters, however, Ariane pulled back her hood, causing the man to abruptly cut himself off.

A loud commotion arose among the other men as they discovered there was

an amethyst-skinned woman with pointy ears in their midst.

“I am Ariane Glenys Maple, of the Great Canada Forest. Assuming you speak of the one and only Count Ornaut of the Nohzan Kingdom, then I ask you, is he truly prepared to stand against the elves?”

Ariane’s golden eyes bored into Vizio. Her defiant statement seemed to have shaken the merchant, judging by the grimace on his face.

“If there’s nothing improper going on here, then I ask that you grant me permission to board your vessel.”

Vizio’s face purpled with rage at the sight of Ariane’s smile, as if she’d personally insulted him. He screamed back at her.

“And what the hell gives a barbarian like you the right to talk to me that way?!”

The men grew tense at this eruption.

In a normal situation, it would have made no sense for someone like Vizio to let a stranger board his ship. In a normal situation, it would have made no sense for someone like Ariane to make such a request in the first place.

However, this wasn’t a normal situation, as evidenced by the curious grin on Ariane’s face.

In an instant, she dashed toward the scarred man, leaped into the air, and bounded off his head like a springboard.

“Get back here, hag!”

Ariane deftly darted across the pier toward the ship, leaving a crowd of angry and confused men behind. Vizio stood there stunned for a moment before screaming at his men in a shrill voice.

“Stop that elf immediately! And you! What’s going on here, Gio?! We agreed that my ship wouldn’t be inspected!!!”

The vein in Vizio’s head was bulging so much it looked like it might burst. He rounded on Gio, who was growing paler by the minute.

The second-in-command of Lamburt’s knights began backing away slowly,

glancing nervously around at the men closing in on him.

I glared at him. “Well...I guess you knew more than you were letting on, eh, Gio?”

His response was so rushed that I could barely make out what he was saying. “Don’t worry about that right now, Arc. Please, stop her! If she keeps this up, who knows what sort of turmoil this will cause with the Nohzan Kingdom! We need to make sure that doesn’t happen, no matter the cost!”

Taking Vizio and Gio’s words together, I had a pretty good sense of what was going on. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t have a little fun with them.

“Absolutely! I’ll put a stop to her immediately!”

I took off at a run, following closely behind the crew members who were already pursuing Ariane. Other soldiers around the port were also converging on the area, drawn by the sudden racket.

Ariane bounded about the ship like an acrobat, dancing circles around the shouting men. She’d already knocked a few into the water; others were out cold on the deck.

I made my way onto the ship, still under the guise of helping Vizio’s men.

“Ariane, you need to get ahold of yourself!”

I made a halfhearted attempt to jump after her. Ariane easily sidestepped me before flipping again and landing on the capstan.

I fell to the deck with a resounding crack, splitting the thick wood wide open, and tumbled down into the cabin below.



I could hear Vizio's shrill voice from somewhere above.

"My ship!!!"

"Kyiiiiiii..."

Ponta had tumbled from my neck during the fall. It slowly got to its feet, shaking its head all the while.

I readjusted my helmet and glanced around as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. At my feet, I found a bundle of long, thick rope. It was only then that I noticed just how big the cabin seemed for a ship this size.

Since Ariane was convinced that there were people being held captive here, I figured I should trust her judgment and begin my search of the inner holds.

"We're here to rescue you! If you've been kidnapped, please respond!" I called out as I made my way through the ship, but I didn't run across anyone other than a few armed crew members who tried to attack me. It was possible that whoever was imprisoned here thought my calls were some sort of trap.

After knocking out the crew, I continued my search of the ship, trying a different tactic this time.

"I am here on behalf of Miss Toreasa! Frani Markham, please respond if you're here!"

This time, I received a reply.

"I'm Frani Markham! Are you really here from Miss Toreasa?"

Following the sound of the voice, I found a grate built into the floor of one of the other cabins. I could see fingers poking up through the holes.

Convinced that the rescue attempt was, in fact, real, other voices joined Frani's.

"Help!"

"Help us!!!"

I easily sidestepped the two crew members guarding the grate and used my sword to cleave the padlock in two. Several relieved-looking people flooded out.

A woman with black hair tied back in a bun, wearing the livery of the servants I'd seen back at the castle, looked up at me with large, shining eyes as she approached me.

"I... I'm Frani Markham. Are you the knight sent by Miss Toreasa?"

"My name is Arc. I am no knight, merely a mercenary honoring a lady's request."

It was clear from the look on her face that she didn't believe me.

"We don't have long. Everyone, follow me!"

I made sure to keep Frani safely behind me as I kicked down the cabin's door and stepped out into the hall.

Several crew members tried to fight me as I led the prisoners through the ship, but a swift punch was enough to knock each of them out.

Once we'd made it to the stairwell leading back up to the main deck, I stuck my head out for a peek to find that Ariane was the only one still standing.

"Only you could tear through a ship's deck without even needing to use magic, Arc. Did you find Frani?"

Ariane's hair fluttered in the ocean breeze, her amethyst skin shining in the sunlight. She made her way toward us, a bright smile on her face as the crowd on the stairs behind me gawked at her, some cheering, others choking back surprise. It didn't look like she'd suffered even a scratch.

"Ah, yes. This is Frani, the one Miss Toreasa was looking for."

Frani stepped forward and bowed her head as I introduced her.

Ariane looked relieved.

"Great! I'm glad we were able to do some good for a fellow elf."

Once we'd explained the situation about Frani's kidnapping to the soldiers gathered around the ship, they rounded up and arrested all the crew. Ariane and I watched from the pier.

Gio, who'd been complicit in the traffickers' actions, was nowhere to be seen. He must have made a run for it while Ariane and I dealt with the crew.

We left the rest to the soldiers and made our way back to Lord Petros's estate, where he and Toreasa were waiting.

"Miss Toreasa!"

"Oh, Frani!"

Toreasa and Frani came together in a tight embrace.

Petros extended his hand out to Ariane.

"Thank you for assisting my wife and bringing Frani home safely to us."

Ariane looked back and forth between his hand and his face several times before grasping his hand and shaking it.

"It was nothing...really."

She avoided eye contact as she replied, though Petros maintained his warm smile as he invited us inside.

I didn't think it would be a good idea to sit on an expensive sofa in my full armor, so I chose to stand at Ariane's side, continuing my role as her bodyguard.

An older man I hadn't seen before stood stock-still, almost a mirror image of myself, next to Lord Petros and Toreasa.

Lord Petros had a slightly uncomfortable look on his face. "I'm quite impressed you were able to figure out that Frani was being held aboard a merchant ship licensed by Count Ornaut of the Nohzan Kingdom. May I ask where and how you uncovered your evidence?"

Before Ariane could answer, Frani spoke up.

"I remember hearing a woman's voice calling my name while I was locked in the ship's hold. I responded, but everyone around me insisted that no one had spoken my name. I realize now that it was Miss Ariane's voice."

Lord Petros seemed greatly interested in this sudden development. Toreasa, however, smiled knowingly.

"Aah, so you used a wind spirit?"

Ariane nodded. "Since I haven't entered into a compact with a wind spirit, I'm

only able to send my words about a dozen meters away.”

“Still, that you could get a moody wind spirit to assist you without entering into a compact is impressive indeed.”

Ariane flushed and averted her gaze.

So what I’d seen Ariane blowing from the palm of her hand was actually a wind spirit. It sounded like spirit magic allowed for radio-like communication.

“To think Gio was involved in the plot to kidnap Frani. I’m completely beside myself.” Petros let out a dramatic sigh, the grief plain on this face.

The older man stepped up from behind him and bowed low. “I am truly sorry for my failure to properly supervise my men. I have caused you all undue hardship. As commander of the knights, I, Herreid Ganconer, take full responsibility for what happened.”

The man wore his white hair brushed all the way back and had a mustache with the ends curled up. Despite his fervent attempt to take responsibility for the events, Lord Petros dismissed the comment with a wave of his hand.

“You are not solely to blame for this, Herreid. It is also my fault for not having fully wrested control away from my father.”

Herreid revealed that, even though Gio had managed to escape in all the confusion earlier, the knights under his command had already discovered his hiding place.

“Was he just in it for money?”

“That was certainly a part of it, but it also seems that he wanted to bring safety back to the town by handing as many of the refugees as he could over to the merchants. However, the merchants took this even further and started abducting citizens as well.”

Come to think of it, Gio had expressed some negative sentiments toward the refugees.

From what we could gather, Frani had just happened to stumble across Vizio and others from Deoin Corp amid a transaction. Gio had sold her to the company as a means of keeping her quiet. Vizio, for his part, had been more

than happy to buy a well-trained chambermaid for use as a slave. But it was thanks to their greed that she'd come out of this safe and sound.

"Do you plan to pursue this issue with the count? I know we're talking about another kingdom, but the fact that a company licensed by Count Ornaut would engage in such barbarism is unconscionable."

Petros shook his head, a grim smile on his face.

"We will notify Count Ornaut that we have arrested some men working for Deoin Corp with a falsified license. But I have no desire to squabble with foreign nobility. There's also the fact that we boarded their ship without permission. The loss of the ship and its contents will be a heavy blow for them, but I doubt they'll say anything about it. Not if they want to save face."

Though Ariane's spirit magic had provided us with the evidence we needed, we'd clearly overstepped our bounds by not following proper procedure. Then again, even if we *had*, it was highly unlikely they would have allowed us to search the vessel.

"I know this won't make up for all the commotion we've caused, but I have an idea about what you can do for the growing refugee population here in Lamburt."

Both Lord Petros and Herreid showed interest in my proposition.

I discussed the situation we'd encountered in the town of Branbayna on the way here. Initially, Ariane looked confused, but perked up as I continued speaking.

Viscount Skitts du Branbayna had lamented that there weren't enough people to work the land that Carcy had helped make farmable. It probably wasn't feasible to transport all of them en masse, but, at the very least, it could be a solution for both Lamburt and the refugees in need of a home.

"I didn't think it would be possible to increase their population. But you say there's an elf living there now? Perhaps I should pay a visit to the viscount to discuss the situation, to see what we can do about improving human-elf relations, and to invite him to join Princess Yuriarna's faction."

Lord Petros spoke aloud, seemingly to himself, as he mulled over my

suggestion. Ariane's face lit up as he spoke.

She stood from the sofa. "This Princess Yuriarna you speak of... Do you mean the member of the royal family?"

"Yes, the very same. The princess is one of the successors to the Rhoden Kingdom and is the only one interested in improving relations with your people. My father was a supporter of Prince Dakares, but, since marrying Toreasa, I have been considering putting my support behind Princess Yuriarna instead."

Ariane listened with great interest. Meanwhile, I was busy trying to remember where I'd heard the name Yuriarna before. But I couldn't quite place it. Figuring it wasn't a productive train of thought, I put it aside for the time being.

Lord Petros promised to offer us any assistance he could in the future and gave us letters of introduction with his royal seal, along with two copper travel passes for Lamburt.

I imagined the letters would come in handy as human-elf relations continued improving, and the travel passes would allow us to travel more easily. I drew enough attention as it was...

Ariane interrupted my rambling thoughts with a sharp elbow in my side, bringing my attention back to the room. Apparently, they'd finished talking.

After saying our goodbyes to Lord Petros, Lady Toreasa, and Frani, we left Lamburt and used Transport Gate to return to the elven village of Lalatoya.

It was good to be back in the Great Canada Forest, home of the elves. Right in the middle of these massive trees and random monsters was the lone village of Lalatoya, Ariane's hometown.

We'd made our way to a hill overlooking the port of Bulgoh. There, out of people's line of sight, I used my teleportation magic. After a moment of darkness, the world around us came back into view, and we found ourselves in front of a familiar house.

It looked like a massive tree, but it was, in fact, one of the unique elven houses built seamlessly into the forest. This amalgamation with nature was the

home of Lalatoya's elder, who happened to also be Ariane's father.

It typically would have been frowned upon for a human to enter an elven village at all, and even more so to teleport directly to one of the homes inside.

However, since I'd already received permission from Ariane's father, it was easiest for me to teleport straight here, as it was the location I had the strongest impression of.

The massive foliage above glimmered in the light of the setting sun, casting rapidly darkening shadows on the house below. A soft glow emanated from the windows, cast off by the magical lanterns inside, and the smell of what I could only assume was dinner cooking caused a pang in my empty, nonexistent stomach.

Ponta let out a mewling noise as it sniffed the air from atop my head, also drawn in by the enticing aroma.

Ariane opened the large front doors, stepping inside her home without a moment's hesitation.

We walked through the entrance hall and into a large, open room, at the center of which a massive pillar ran straight up into the ceiling. Walking along the outer perimeter took us to a stairwell. Halfway up, we ran into an older man coming down.

The man looked to be in his late twenties or, at most, early thirties. He had long, green-tinged blond hair, and was wearing the clothes of an elven cleric. This man was Dillan Tahg Lalatoya—Ariane's father and the village elder.

Dillan's face broke into a wide smile at the sight of his daughter.

"You two returned much quicker than I anticipated. How did you fare?"

Ariane explained the events in Lamburt, including what we'd learned of Toreasa.

"I see. Well, if she's decided that she wishes to live among humans, then there's nothing we can do about it. However, I'm deeply intrigued about this Princess Yuriarna. If the Rhoden Kingdom demands justice from us regarding the assassination you two were involved in, we should probably speak with

her.”

Dillan looked over the documents we’d received from Lord Petros.

“Also, while we were on our way to Lamburt, we stopped by a town called Branbayna, where we found an elf named Carcy Held, a monster researcher.”

“Carcy Held? The one who wrote those bestiaries? He’s from Landfrea, if I remember. I heard he left Canada a long time ago. He’s in Branbayna now? I suppose we’d better report this to the high elders.”

Dillan’s eyes fell on me, a certain gravity in his gaze.

“Where are you off to next?”

“The last slaver left is a man known as Drassos du Barysimon. According to Chiyome, our next destination will be in the western empire, I guess?”

Ariane nodded in agreement, though Dillan simply frowned.

“Not only are the lands of the eastern and western empires vast, but I hear stories of unspeakable things happening to any elves found there. I know how strong you are, Ariane, but please, be careful.”

“I will be. Besides, I’ll have Arc with me. We should be able to handle whatever comes our way.”

Ariane gave my armor a light tap. Apparently, she thought quite highly of me. If I’d had cheeks, I may have blushed. I didn’t feel like I deserved such praise, but if my actions were enough to earn Ariane’s trust, then it was all worth it.

“Elder Dillan, I promise you that I will bring Ariane back to this village safe and sound...er, again.”

Ariane looked over at me, a smirk forming on her lips as she gazed into the depths of my helmet.

“So, I guess that means we won’t be getting lost anymore?”

Come to think of it, I had absolutely no idea how to get to the Revlon Empire. I tilted my head to the side as Ariane elbowed me.

My inability to find my way around was going to continue earning me mockery.

Chapter 3:

Harbinger of Doom

The Grand Duchy of Limbult was located on the Librout River, to the east of the Rhoden Kingdom.

The stark white Meinsoir palace towered over the duchy, stretching into the sky—an imposing symbol of power to the lands it controlled. Off in one of the immaculately decorated rooms overlooking Aldoria Bay sat several women, talking among themselves.

One of them perched daintily on a beautifully embroidered chair, brushing out her shimmering blonde hair in front of a large mirror. Her warm, brown eyes followed the movements of her chambermaid as she walked around the room behind her.

“How would you like to have your hair done, Miss Yuriarna?”

The chambermaid wore her own glistening, black hair up in a bun, her uniform barely concealing her figure beneath. Her eyes focused on the reflection of the woman in front of her.

Yuriarna turned her gaze ever so slightly to look at her chambermaid.

“Nothing too fancy. Can you do something mature and reserved, Ferna?”

“Absolutely.”

The woman brushing her hair in front of the mirror was the second princess of the neighboring Rhoden Kingdom, Yuriarna Merol Melissa Rhoden Olav. The woman now busily holding a selection of extravagant hair ornaments up to the princess’s hair and frowning back into the mirror was Ferna, Yuriarna’s long-time chambermaid and childhood friend.

“I think this one looks good.”

Ferna picked a polished silver hair clip in the shape of a flower petal and slid it into Yuriarna’s hair.

The other chambermaids brought a trunk full of the princess’s dresses up to

her for consideration. Yuriarna shook her head, and the chambermaids ran off to retrieve more.

Ferna kept an eye on her fellow chambermaids as they bustled about the room. She tried keeping the princess's mind occupied by engaging her in conversation.

"We only just spoke to Duchess Seriarna about holding a meeting with the elves. I never believed we'd receive a reply so soon."

Yuriarna nodded.

Duchess Seriarna was the wife of the duke of Limbult, and Princess Yuriarna's older sister.

The Grand Duchy was rare, in that it was the only human country that had a trade relationship with the elves. Yuriarna had come here to convince her sister to open talks between the Rhoden Kingdom and the elves. Seriarna had agreed and dispatched an elf messenger stationed at the palace at once.

That was two days ago.

"I'm curious to see what methods the elves use to communicate."

Yuriarna mumbled to herself as she gazed out the window at the coast opposite Aldoria Bay. If she squinted, she could just barely see the outlines of mountains and forests through the mist.

The elven capital of Maple, where a vast majority of the elves lived, was protected deep within that vast, oppressive expanse of trees. If the stories were true, it was no easy feat for a human to travel there.

In fact, even those engaging in trade with the elves had never set foot in the elven capital, so no one could quite be sure exactly where it was located. All they knew was that it wasn't close to Limbult.

And yet, talks had been arranged in a matter of days.

"I'll be meeting with the elf elders no less."

Yuriarna was still speaking more to herself than anyone else, but Ferna

noded along, prompting her to continue.

“The high elders serve as the key decision makers for the elves, similar to the dukes in Rhoden.”

This seemed to spark Ferna’s interest. “I thought talks with other nations generally started with lower-level officials.”

“That’s true...”

Typically, lower-level officials would work together to decide on the schedule and details of the talks before they actually took place. However, even in cases where an urgent request was made, it would still typically take around a month or so to get the parties in the same place.

As the representative of the Rhoden Kingdom, Yuriarna had expected to wait here for at least a short while, since she hadn’t observed proper procedure when making her request. And yet, here they were, the date of the talks already upon them, just a few days later.

“I have no idea what means the elves use to communicate, but the speed at which they do is nothing short of amazing. I’ve heard stories that the Rhoden armies suffered fatal blows due to the overwhelming strength of the dragons that guard the lands they tried to take from the elves, but they clearly have more than just strength in their favor.”

Yuriarna let out a deep breath.

Ferna smiled at the princess’s image in the mirror as she delicately arranged Yuriarna’s hair.

“In that case, it would be an immense victory if we are able to win their assistance.”

The princess took another deep breath and let it out again.

“You’re right. One way or another, we need to get them to help us.”

She faced herself in the mirror, looking far more resolute.

“Ferna, could you change the hair adornment to something a little more colorful?”

Ferna hid her surprise behind a soft smile.

“Certainly.”

Yuriarna would be solely responsible for deciding the path the Rhoden Kingdom took from here on out. With this firmly in mind, she looked back out of the palace window, toward the Great Canada Forest in the distance.

Maple, the capital of the Great Canada Forest, was located deep within the endless sea of trees on the bank of the vast Great Servant Lake.

A grove of tree dwellings rose up from within the two massive walls that surrounded the city, which served as the home to over 100,000 people. At the center of this grove, one tree towered above all the others. This was the central council’s chambers, and it served as the administrative center for the ten elders, each of whom oversaw their own villages and came together to decide on policies for the entire forest.

On a balcony near the top of the central council tree, two men sat at a table, facing each other. Below, the lake spread out as far as the eye could see.

One of the men was Elder Dillan, charged with overseeing the village of Lalatoya. His long, green-tinged hair whipped about in the wind as he brought a cup of tea to his lips.

Across from Dillan sat a large, burly man with short-cropped white hair and amethyst-colored skin—the marks of a dark elf. An intimidating look was frozen on his scarred face. He stroked his long, white beard as he watched Dillan. This man was Fangas Flan Maple, one of the ten elders, and father of Glenys, Dillan’s wife.

“I apologize for having you make so many trips here from Lalatoya. The cost in rune stones alone must be immense.”

Fangas, large even by dark elf standards, spoke in a deep voice that, together with the expression etched onto his face, gave the impression he wasn’t someone easy to get close to.

Dillan, however, had spent many years interacting with Fangas and offered a

simple shake of his head before setting his cup back down on the table.

“Actually, a guest of ours was kind enough to bring us eight sand wyvern rune stones.”

“You’re talking about the mercenary my granddaughter hired? Can we trust him?”

Fangas stared intently at his son-in-law. To anyone watching, it might have looked like he was trying to get a sense for the man sitting across from him.

Dillan returned his gaze and offered him a shrug.

“I admit he’s a bit of an odd one, but he’s definitely trustworthy. He’s done a lot for Ariane, and for that I am thankful.”

“Well, if that’s how you feel about him, I certainly trust your judgment.”

Fangas crossed his muscular arms and let out a huff. Ariane was still his adorable little granddaughter; the very idea that she was traipsing about with some man he didn’t know made him uneasy. However, Fangas hadn’t called the elder of Lalatoya to the central council just for small talk.

Dillan was the one who broached the subject. “Why did you call me here, Fangas?”

“We received a message from Limbult that a Rhoden entourage has traveled to the Grand Duchy to discuss the events surrounding Marquis du Diento’s death. Arrangements have been made to meet with them, and the central council has decided to send the two of us.”

Dillan nodded, unphased, as if he’d already guessed the answer to his question.

“Well, things have certainly moved quickly.”

Fangas let out a sigh, looking almost disappointed at how nonchalantly his son-in-law was taking this news.

“However, the representative from Rhoden is no simple envoy. It’s the second princess, Yuriarna, of the Rhoden royal family.”

This time, Dillan’s face registered surprise, but it shifted into a smile as he

reached into his coat to pull out a piece of wax-sealed paper. He handed the document to Fangas.

“This is quite fortunate. I had just been thinking about arranging a meeting with Yuriarna.”

Fangas looked the paper over, then glanced inquisitively back at Dillan.

The elder of Lalatoya explained the story he’d heard from Ariane the night before about what had happened in Lamburt.

Fangas stroked his beard, a broad smile stretching across his face.

“I see. In that case, we may just be able to find some common ground after all.”

The next day, a contingent of soldiers accompanied Dillan and Fangas to the central teleportation shrine. They teleported to Saskatoon, the elven village closest to Limbult.

Saskatoon sat along the Sagune River, one of several large rivers feeding into Aldoria Bay, which served as the border between the Grand Duchy and the Great Canada Forest.

The journey between Saskatoon and Maple would typically take many days, but Dillan, Fangas, and their soldiers were able to cross the distance in a matter of moments thanks to the rune-stone-powered teleportation points.

The major port city and capital of the Grand Duchy would serve as the mediator between the elves and the Rhoden Kingdom, since Limbult was the only human nation the elves of the Great Canada Forest currently traded with. This meant that the city’s docks were constantly filled with human merchants from across the northern continent in search of high-quality, elven-made magical items.

Thanks to this, the Grand Duchy had become an incredibly prosperous nation despite its small size, and this was nowhere more evident than in the capital.

Dillan, Fangas, and their soldiers left Saskatoon and made their way down the Sagune River toward Limbult. They docked their boat in a section of the port

reserved for elven use. After disembarking, they boarded several horse-drawn carriages that had been waiting for them.

Under normal circumstances, mounted guards would accompany the caravan to provide additional protection. However, given how much time elves spent living among the trees, most of them weren't very skilled riders. Fangas knew this well. Though an elder now, and currently protected by many guards, he'd once been a soldier, as evidenced by his hulking frame. The dwarf-made war hammer that hung from his waist was no mere decoration. He was still a brutal fighter and could crush a dragon's skull if he swung his hammer in anger. Many of the elders, in fact, were talented warriors like Fangas. The accompanying guards were more for show than anything else.

A contingent of soldiers from Limbult's army marched up to the carriages and the whole procession lurched forward, straight toward the palace at the center of Limbult. The caravan crossed a stone bridge arching over the large moat that surrounded the palace walls. Once through the gate on the other side, Dillan and Fangas found themselves staring up at an imposing, chalk-white palace with numerous towers that jutted up into the sky, all covered in intricate carvings. This was the home of the Duke of Limbult.

Though far different in design and style from the central council building back in Maple, it evoked the same sense of awe in all who saw it.

Dillan was entranced as he looked out the carriage window. This would be his first time setting foot in Limbult Palace.

As soon as the carriages stopped, several servants came rushing down the palace steps to greet them. They ushered Dillan, Fangas, and their companions inside and brought them to a room deep within the palace, where a woman with bright blonde hair and gentle brown eyes waited for them.

The woman gently lifted the corners of her pale blue gown in a curtsy and greeted them with a smile.

"It's been a while, Fangas."

Fangas returned her smile and bowed low.

"It is truly an honor to be in the presence of the great and honorable Duchess

Seriarna Meria du Olav Ticient.”

“Thank you for coming on such short notice.” Seriarna’s gentle grin elicited an even wider smile from Fangas.

“Admittedly, we were quite intrigued that an envoy from Rhoden sought an audience with us.”

“This envoy is my younger sister, Princess Yuriarna. I trust you’ll be easy on her.”

“You have my word.”

Seriarna led them to another room, even deeper within the palace.

Though not as large as the last, this room was brightly lit by a massive window running along the entirety of one wall. It had been tastefully decorated and boasted a large, round table in its center. Three people were already seated at the table: two women, one of whom appeared to be a chambermaid, and a young man dressed as a knight.

As soon as Fangas and Dillan entered the room, all three of them stood from the table, and the woman who wasn’t dressed like a chambermaid bowed.

Her hair, done up in gentle curls, was the same bright blonde as Seriarna’s. She had a pale complexion and a beautiful face. Her gentle brown eyes, however, were tinged with a mix of apprehension and determination. She looked almost like a young girl, lacking Seriarna’s cool maturity.

The woman curtsied as she introduced herself.

“Thank you for meeting with me. My name is Yuriarna Merol Melissa Rhoden Olav, second princess to the Rhoden Kingdom.”

Fangas offered another bright smile.

“I am Fangas Flan Maple, an elder from the Great Canada Forest. I am a man of humble origins, so there’s no need for formality.”

The knight standing beside Yuriarna tensed, but Fangas paid him no mind.

“And this is...”

“I am Dillan Tahg Lalatoya, elder of the village of Lalatoya in the Great Canada

Forest. I look forward to speaking with you.”

Dillan was much more polite in his introduction, and the tension in the room lightened noticeably after he’d finished speaking. He grinned.

“My father-in-law may look intimidating, but he’s not as crass as he seems.”

Dillan gestured for Yuriarna to sit, and, once she had, Dillan and Fangas followed suit. Seriarna sat between the two parties. After formal introductions, the Rhoden princess got straight to business.

“I called you here to discuss events that have occurred in Diento, in the Rhoden Kingdom.”

Fangas cast his eyes down, his large arms crossed as he listened to Yuriarna. Dillan assumed a similar posture, but kept his gaze on the young princess, his expression flat.

“We were astonished and ashamed to learn that Marquis du Diento was kidnapping elves in violation of our treaty. However, we are currently investigating the circumstances surrounding his assassination.”

Yuriarna stopped there and looked across the table at Fangas. He sat motionless, merely raising an eyebrow in response.

“I am still learning about the situation in its entirety, but no matter what else may have happened, Rhoden owes the elves an apology. This matter reflects poorly on the king for having done nothing about it for so long. Please understand that the royal family has no objections to the outcome of events in Diento.”

Not only did Yuriarna already know that elves had been involved in the assassination of the marquis, she also affirmed their actions.

Fangas broke out in a toothy grin. “Then what do you want from us?”

Under normal circumstances, neither party would have been able to bargain. Assassinating a noble was generally frowned upon, even if said noble had been in violation of a treaty.

The princess regarded Fangas coolly, undaunted. “I’m here to ask a favor. I would like the support of the Great Canada Forest in my succession to the

throne of Rhoden.”

Yuriarna stood from her chair and bowed her head low. Fangas nodded for her to continue. She resumed her seat, explained the situation with the royal line, then apologized for airing her family’s dirty laundry.

Once she’d finished speaking, Fangas leaned forward, resting his large arms on the table.

“And what do we stand to gain by backing you?”

“My brother, Prince Sekt, has the support of the western Revlon Empire, the very empire that brought tragedy to the dwarves in the distant past. They are currently separated from the Rhoden Kingdom by the Furyu mountain range, but if Sekt is allowed to succeed to the throne, they will almost certainly begin meddling in the affairs of our country. I have also heard that the western empire is developing magical items using elf labor.”

The tragedy she alluded to was of humans who had hunted dwarves across the entire northern continent, in an attempt to steal their superior metalworking techniques. The former Revlon Empire, before it had split, was at the forefront of these efforts. Ultimately, the humans’ desire had led to the dwarves disappearing from the northern continent entirely, leaving nothing behind but their name in the humans’ history books.

Unbeknownst to humans, however, the dwarves had joined forces with the elves, who were also being hunted at that time, and had escaped to the city of Maple, deep within the Great Canada Forest. Their existence had been kept a secret ever since.

“So, if we were to back you, then you would serve as a barrier between us and the Revlon Empire?” Dillan, who had been quiet this whole time, spoke up. He wanted to ensure he understood what she was offering.

Yuriarna nodded.

Fangas let out a heavy sigh, his muscular arms still crossed on the table.

“We keep our distance from the affairs of humans. I can’t imagine we would be of much assistance.”

“In terms of direct impact, you’re correct. That’s why I would like to discuss the possibility of opening up trade between the Rhoden Kingdom and the elves.”

“Hmm, well, that’s...”

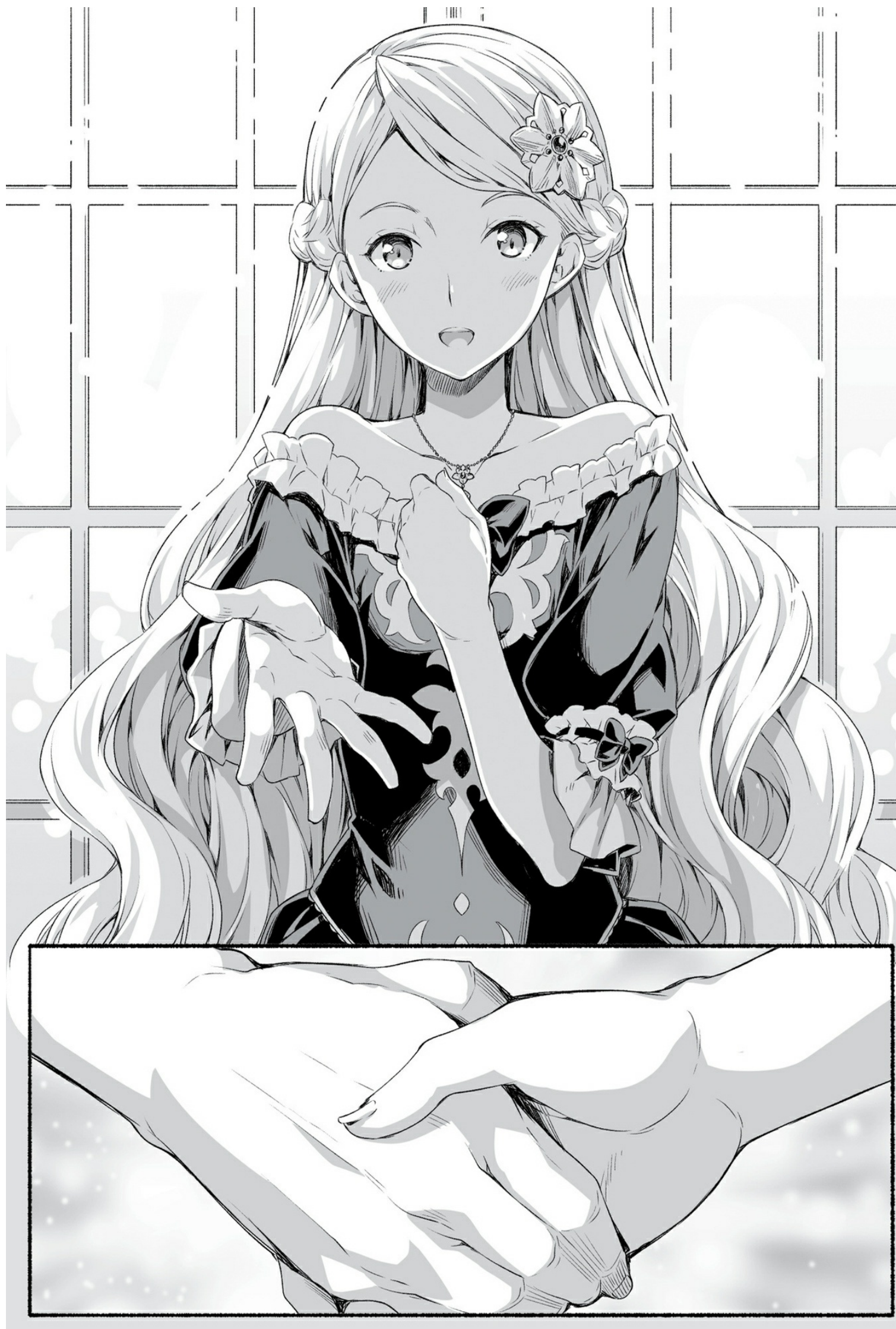
Dillan glanced over at Seriarna, who had been silently listening to the entire exchange.

Yuriarna answered his unspoken question. “I’ve already confirmed these matters with the Duke and Duchess of Limbult and received their blessing regarding the cultivation rune stones. Currently, Limbult is the only nation you’re trading these stones to. If we were to open trade with you as well, I believe it would not only improve the status of the royal family, but also bring many nobles into my camp out of their desire for the same.”

“I see. And, Princess Yuriarna, do you have any plans to improve relations with us?” Fangas shifted his large body in his seat as he ran his fingers through his white beard. “I have heard that the lord of Lamburt has taken one of our own as his bride. If relations were to improve between our countries, and more humans had a better understanding of the elves, well then I think this would be worth considering. I cannot make any sort of trade agreement yet, but I will do what I can to ensure a positive response when we convene the elders.”

Yuriarna gazed at Fangas in astonishment. She glanced at the chambermaid and the knight on either side of her, however they were just as stunned. Information of the lord of Lamburt marrying an elf hadn’t reached any of them yet.

Fangas observed their surprise with a satisfied smile. He offered his hand to Yuriarna. She shook it, a look of relief spreading across her face.



Leibnizche, in the Holy East Revlon Empire, was sandwiched between the Siana Mountains to the west, which formed the border with the Great West Revlon Empire, and the steep, volcanic Karyu Mountains to the east.

The land between these two natural barriers mostly consisted of gentle, rolling hills. Thanks to its location in the southern part of the Holy East Revlon Empire, Leibnizche enjoyed a relatively warm climate—at least, warmer than the capital—and was dotted with rich, fertile farmland.

Viscount Drassos du Barysimon, the lord of Leibnizche, was sitting in front of a large fighting arena. The center of the arena was an empty platform surrounded by tall stone walls with massive iron gates built into them. Raised seating along the outer wall gave spectators a view of this platform.

A hulking, four-legged monster sat at the center of the platform, growling low. Five necks, moving about like snakes, protruded from its turquoise, scale-covered body. The beast was at least ten meters tall; a ferocious creature, said to be able to level an entire town all on its own.

Men and women watched the monster from the safety of their seats. Among them sat a large man with a crude grin plastered to his face as he sipped from the glass of alcohol in his hand. He wore his black hair in a rather distinctive, braided style, and sported a scraggly, unshaven beard. Swirling tattoos covered his bare chest and body.

Two scantily clad women were curled up with him, one under each of his massive arms, tracing their pale fingers along his muscular chest. One of them looked up and spoke in a lilting voice.

“Oh, Fumba. Is that terrible monster really going to stay calm?”



The man, Fumba, flexed his upper arms and puffed out his chest. He smiled confidently and gestured toward the platform.

“Of course! That hydra is completely loyal to me. I’d never let it do anything to hurt one of my sweet little ladies.” He let out a loud belly laugh and poured the rest of the alcohol into his mouth.

The second woman promptly filled his glass again, putting her arm around his waist and pressed her cheek to his chest.

“Are you saying you have the ability to command even a big monster like that?”

Fumba raised his eyebrows. “Do you doubt me? Well then. Let me show you something exceptionally impressive. Heheh.”

A sinister grin twitched across his lips as he jerked his chin. Just then, a small gate leading into the arena opened and two soldiers dragged out a man bound in chains.

“Stop, please! I beg you!”

The man pleaded with the soldiers to no avail. They continued dragging him toward the hydra. The creature’s massive body rocked as it stood, its five heads hissing, split tongues darting in and out of their mouths.

The two women tensed as the man’s screams filled the arena.

Fumba, thoroughly enjoying himself, pulled the women into him and whispered.

“Watch closely.”

He kissed them each on the shoulder, then stood and stepped forward, calling out in a loud, booming voice:

“Halt!”

The hydra’s five snaking necks went taut immediately.

Taking their cue, the two soldiers dragged the chained man to a large ring attached to the platform next to the hydra and locked the man’s chain onto it, before beating a hasty retreat.

The man, now half-crazed with fear, screamed for help.

Fumba clapped his hands, the sound echoing throughout the entire arena.

“And...go!”

No sooner had the words left his lips that one of the hydra’s heads launched toward the man’s torso, its teeth sinking deep into flesh.

“Gyaaaaaaaugh!”

The man began frothing at the mouth, his gurgling scream cut short. His body began spasming as the hydra let out an immense roar. It then proceeded to swallow the man whole in a matter of seconds. Fumba grinned broadly, looking back and forth between his two companions who were desperately trying to maintain their smiles. One of them finally worked up the nerve to speak, her voice slightly shrill as she asked the exuberant Fumba a question.

“I, uh, whatever did that man do, Fumba?”

“I don’t know. He was probably a thief or something. As you can tell, that big, dumb beast down there is quite the eater, so we need to feed him a steady diet of criminals and slaves. You two better stay on the straight and narrow, or you might become a snack too. Gyahaha!”

Fumba guffawed as he pulled the women close again, sliding a hand under one of their skirts. Her face tensed immediately, and she choked back a scream.

“Come with me, and you’ll never be left wanting for liquor...or money.”

Fumba smiled lecherously as he slipped his hand down the front of the other woman’s shirt. She tensed as well but made no effort to stop him; not after what she’d just seen.

Emboldened, Fumba leaned over to kiss one of the women. However, he was interrupted by someone storming in unannounced from below.

“Master Fumba! What are you doing playing around when you still haven’t finished your assignment for the emperor? And how dare you bring such, such...*debauchery* into a sensitive place like this?!”

A vein bulged in the screaming man’s forehead. He had a narrow jawline and wore his reddish-brown hair neatly parted to one side, giving the strong

impression that he was a stickler for details. What his clothes lacked in extravagance, he more than made up for in the way he wore them. He directed his burning gaze straight at Fumba, who still had his hands under the women's clothing.

Fumba sighed dramatically. "Oh, Drassos. Listen old man, I just got back from my expedition to capture this monster all right? I'm sure Emperor Domitianus would want me to have a little fun." He chuckled to himself as he spoke.

"You bastard!"

Drassos, now fully enraged, strode toward Fumba and attempted to grab him. Fumba let out a low whistle, something huge stirred in the shadows. Drassos froze.

A hulking wolf, about two meters tall, padded out from behind one of the pillars. Its body was entirely covered in white fur, and its tail gave off a faint, bluish glow. It had a shackle on one of its front legs, though the shackle wasn't connected to any kind of chain.

The wolf stopped in front of Drassos and bared its fangs, a low growl emanating from deep within its throat.

"Yeaugh!"

Drassos scrambled back, glaring at Fumba.

"No need to be so scared, old man. What do you think of my haunted wolf? He's pretty smart. If it weren't for my abilities, y'know, that employ ring wouldn't be enough to hold him. But, as it is, he listens to my every command. Don't worry. Once I'm refreshed, I'll get back to the emperor all right? Quit being such a grump."

Fumba grinned again. He snatched the bottle of liquor out of one of the women's hands and took a swig from it.

"Oh, and you don't need to worry about these two spilling secrets either. I've already trained them pretty good. If they say anything, they'll be wolf food. Or hydra food. I haven't decided yet. But you girls are too smart to let that happen, yeah?"

The two women nodded emphatically.

Drassos turned on his heel and stomped away, his footsteps echoing loudly down the hall.

The viscount stormed through the palace with a heavy, purposeful gait, his body shaking with anger. Servants hurried out of sight as he barreled past.

“That savage little... Dammit! Just because he has the emperor’s ear doesn’t mean he can just do whatever the hell he pleases in my palace!”

For the rest of that day, Viscount Drassos du Barysimon, ruler of Leibnizche, could be heard screaming throughout his castle, casting a dark cloud over all the retainers serving under him.

A light layer of clouds still covered the early morning sky when Ariane and I came across a town just a little way off the road.

The town was surrounded by a three-meter-wide moat filled with water from the nearby Xpitol River. A light breeze blew through the crops that ran along the moat’s outer perimeter.

The town was Luvierite, the first town I’d visited after arriving in this world.

Not much time had passed since I’d last been here. It still felt fresh and familiar.

What had brought me back here? Well, we were off to the Revlon Empire, and Luvierite was the closest town I could teleport to using Transport Gate. However, from here, we’d need directions. I’d looked at a map of the northern continent back in Lalatoya, but it hadn’t shown much in the way of roads or towns, and none of the elves knew much about human routes.

As far as I could tell, all we had to do was head north and we’d hit the Holy East Revlon Empire. However, if we went straight north from Luvierite, we’d run into the volcanic Karyu Mountains. Given what had happened to us in Branbayna, I figured we needed to get a proper bearing first.

I pulled out the copper travel pass I’d received as a gift for saving Viscount Luvierite’s daughter and handed it to the gate guard before asking him how to

get to the Revlon Empire. It was rather common in this world for most people to live their entire lives in the same town, so very few could give any sort of meaningful directions. Most only knew how to get to the next town over. The gate guard was no different.

We made our way inside to see if we could find a merchant or someone else who might know. We hadn't gone far when a voice called out behind us.

"Arc?!"

I turned to see a familiar woman's face staring intently at me with just a hint of surprise in her brown eyes. She looked to be in her twenties and was dressed in a servant's uniform, her mussy red hair cut short at the nape of her neck. She was the very first person I'd spoken to when I'd arrived in this world.

"Ah, Miss Rita! Fancy meeting you here."

Ariane eyed me inquisitively from beneath her hood.

"I met Rita here when I happened upon her being attacked by some bandits."

Ariane's eyes narrowed. "Are you always off rescuing someone?"

I averted my gaze. I'd always loved that old show, *The Unfettered Shogun*, ever since I was little. Maybe that's where my desire to help people in trouble came from.

Someone behind Rita spoke up nervously. "R-Rita, who is this man?"

I turned to find a well-built young man looking suspiciously at me.

The man had soft blond hair and a pronounced nose. Judging by his figure, I would have assumed he was a noble, but the notched sword on his back said otherwise. Rita smiled gently as she introduced me to him.

"Oh, Giovanni! This is Arc, the knight who saved us from the bandits!"

The man, Giovanni apparently, snapped to attention and bowed deeply.

"Excuse my ignorance. I am Giovanni Borloo, a knight here in Luvier. I am forever grateful for your kind efforts in protecting the viscount's daughter and Miss Rita."

I bowed in response.

“I am but a humble traveling mercenary. I simply happened upon the events after getting lost. Miss Rita here has already thanked me enough.”

Rita smiled. “Have your travels brought you back here to Luvier, Arc?” She peered up at me, her eyes suddenly catching on something atop my head.

I felt a cottony tail swishing against the back of my helmet and realized what she was looking at.

“Ah, well, I’ve been traveling about here and there. This furball is my travel companion.”

“Kyikyiiiiiii!” Ponta let out a cheerful cry.

By now, I’d become so accustomed to the fox atop my head that I frequently forgot it was there, or that it might draw attention from passersby.

Rita giggled. “Wow, it looks like something straight out of a painting.”

I assumed this was some sort of compliment.

“So, where have your travels taken you?”

“Hmm? Well, all around Rhoden. I stopped by Olav for one.”

“You went all the way to the capital? I’ve never been there.”

While Rita seemed to be enjoying the conversation, Giovanni’s face was a dark cloud.

“The capital is an incredibly lively place,” I said. “Perhaps you should go for a visit sometime, Miss Rita. With your *boyfriend*.”

The young knight blushed a deep red.

“It’s not like that at all, Arc. Giovanni here worries about me when I go out shopping alone. He offered to serve as my bodyguard. He’s one of the best swordsmen in town, though, so his talents are wasted on me.”

Though Rita had cheerfully laughed off my remark, Giovanni looked utterly dejected.



I rubbed my hand against my chin, trying to think of a way to change the conversation.

I suddenly remembered why we were here in the first place.

The woman in front of me was the chambermaid to Lauren, the viscount's daughter. Next to her stood a knight of Luvier. They were both almost certainly better informed than anyone else we might run into around town.

"Actually, we have some business in the East Revlon Empire. We came here to ask for directions."

Rita frowned at this. "I know the way, but... Well, there have been many monster sightings along the border lately. The number of merchants coming through has dropped dramatically."

Giovanni nodded. "She speaks the truth. It would be rather dangerous for you and your companion here to make the journey."

Ariane and I exchanged glances.

"I have no concerns. Are you up for the journey, Arc?"

Ariane patted the Sword of the King of Lions hanging from her waist and gave a sly grin.

We were both quite powerful. Even if we came across a large group of monsters, we could always make a quick escape with Dimensional Step.

"I don't think we'll have any problems."

Rita and Giovanni both frowned in response, but gave us directions to the empire nonetheless.

After a few more minutes of small talk, Rita told us where we could find an inn for the night. I told her we were in something of a hurry, so we instead made our way toward the town's west gate.

After we'd traveled down the road away from Luvier for a bit, the land slowly gave way to a sloping hill, which gave us a good view of our surroundings once we summited it. To our left, the Xpitol River snaked off to the southwest.

We made our way down the hill, and the road forked off in two directions:

one continuing along the river; the other heading northwest. The latter path would take us to the border town of Grahd.

Once we passed through Grahd, we'd be in the Holy East Revlon Empire, though Rita didn't know anything about the route beyond that. We'd need to ask around again for directions from Grahd to the next closest town in the empire.

The trip from Luvier to Grahd normally took a day and a half by carriage, but using Dimensional Step, we were able to get there in less than an hour. We came across quite a few monsters in the process, but none of them tried to come near us. I could only imagine how deeply unsettling it would be for normal people—people not used to playing video games—to see so many monsters. But as we flashed past them, I almost felt like we were in some sort of drive-through safari park.

We didn't run into any people or carriages along the way. Usually I had to be more careful about how I used my teleportation magic, since the roads were busy, but that wasn't a problem here. We hardly had to walk at all.

When Grahd came into view, I was surprised at how small it was, smaller even than Luvier. It was more like a large village than the bustling border town I'd expected. The town was surrounded by a thick stone wall, probably meant to fend off the constant stream of monsters.

The town was in the shape of a distorted oval, with fields spreading out from its wall. It looked like most of the towns I'd seen so far, except for the fact that the fields were completely empty. I thought perhaps I simply couldn't see the people hidden among the thick crops, so I opted to walk into the village rather than using any teleportation magic.

“Waaaaaugh!”

Ariane and I looked at each other, and Ponta darted its head about at the sound.

A short distance away, among the crops, I caught sight of two young boys scrambling out of the fields. Behind them was a monster I hadn't seen since Rata.

It looked like a wild boar covered in dark gray fur, with four large tusks sprouting from its lower jaw. A fang boar. However, this was much smaller than the two-meter-tall beast I'd dealt with in Rata, maybe half the height.

One of the boys was holding a simple wooden shield with a thin piece of metal riveted to the front in one hand and a small dagger in the other. He turned to face the fang boar. Looking closer, I could see red splotches along the monster's body where it had been cut. It pawed the ground, glaring at the boy straight.

In their attempt to kill the fang boar, it looked like the children had managed to rile it up. Just one thrust from those tusks would be enough to snuff out their lives.

Ariane drew her sword and ran down the hill toward the children, her cloak billowing behind her. A large stone, summoned up by her spirit magic, flew through the air and crashed into the soft earth between the boys and the boar, sending a plume of dirt into the air.

The fang boar darted out of the way before turning its head in my direction and letting out a snarl. Deciding that I was its new target for some reason, the beast charged toward me, though its movements were anything but speedy.

By the time the snarling fang boar drew close, I'd already drawn my sword. I swung the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg down, cleaving clean through its skull. The blade met little resistance and slammed straight into the ground, carving a deep gash into the earth.

The two young boys stared in amazement, their mouths gaping open as they sat in the dirt.

"Are you two hurt?"

I wiped my sword on the grass and returned it to my sheath. The boy with the dagger staggered to his feet. He had short, brown hair that stuck up in back.

"We're f-fine! I was just about to give it the finishing blow, ya know!"

The boy narrowed his reddish-brown eyes at me. He pointed the dagger in my general direction, but his hand was shaking so bad that I couldn't tell exactly what he was pointing at.

The other boy got up from the dirt, his face completely white, and rushed over to the boy with the dagger.

“Cut it out, brother! What are you doing yelling at the people who just saved our lives?”

The second boy, apparently the younger of the two, had light brown hair that he wore somewhat long. He seemed more easily spooked than his bravado-filled brother, though also possessed more common sense. The two boys shared the same reddish-brown eyes.

The younger boy hit his brother on the back of the head and bowed politely.

“I’m sorry for my brother! My name is Lefit and this is...”

“I am Lyot Dalsen du Grahd, the future lord of Grahd!”

Completely ignoring the chiding from his younger brother, the older boy crossed his arms and puffed out his chest. To be honest, I found it endearing. It was quite impressive that he could act this way in front of a black-cloaked knight in full armor and a mysterious gray-cloaked woman.

“Cute kids.” Ariane snickered as she looked over the two boys.

So, these two were the sons of a noble? I decided to ignore Lyot for a moment and instead asked his younger brother what the two of them were doing outside the town’s walls. However, before Lefit had a chance to answer, his cocky older brother stepped in.

“Don’t call me a kid, got it?! There’ve been a lot of monsters around Grahd lately, so I decided to go hunting and bring the people some peace!”

Like most kids, he clearly thought he was older than his years.

“Well, don’t do anything too crazy. You could die, you know.”

“This isn’t crazy, really!”

Lyot grew red-faced, stomping angrily on the ground. We couldn’t spend all day here, however, so I turned my attention to the younger brother again.

“Lefit, could you perhaps tell me the way to the nearest town in the Revlon Empire?”

Lefit looked extremely apologetic as he shook his head. “The closest town? I don’t really know, but I’m sure Father does.”

I hadn’t thought we’d need to bother the nobility just to ask for directions, but since it seemed like we’d be entering Grahd no matter what, I entertained the idea. Lyot, however, had other thoughts.

“Don’t you ignore me! I’ll have you know...”

“Kyiiii!”

Ponta, apparently tired of the boy’s yelling, let out a mew from atop my head, sending a magical burst of wind into Lyot’s face.

“Mwaaugh?”

Lyot stumbled backward, the weight of the shield in his hand causing him to lose balance and fall on his behind.

“What was that? You... You green little devil!”

“Kyii! Kyiiii!”

I decided to let the glaring boy and spirit creature be for the moment and hefted the fang boar over my shoulder by its hind legs.

“Let’s make our way into Grahd. We can accompany you two back to your father.”

“Th-thank you!”

Lyot was busy wailing about something, but I left him in the dirt as Lefit led Ariane, Ponta, and me toward the town.

A wooden bridge extended over the deep ditch that encircled the town’s wall, leading to a front gate where several guards stood watch. The men came rushing over to us when they realized who was approaching.

“Lefit! Lyot! Where did you run off to?! Lord Dalsen has been gravely worried about you.”

One of the guards gave the brothers a quick check, a look relief spreading across his face. However, the sternness never left his eyes. Lyot, in stark contrast to the bravado he’d shown earlier, seemed suddenly at a loss for

words. Lefit explained the situation, and Ariane and I were allowed to enter the town without much of a fuss.

The guards led us to an open square in the center of town, where a large group of people bustled about. The atmosphere was tense. There were around twenty knights, all armored, and another dozen or so mercenaries in leather armor, wielding various weapons.

The guard who'd led us here ran to a man in the center of the group and saluted him.

"Lord Dalsen, your sons have been found!"

Dalsen was a large, muscular man outfitted in an exquisite suit of armor that stood out among the knights surrounding him. He looked to be in his thirties, clean-shaven with short-cropped hair. He shot me a scrutinizing glare, his eyes the same reddish-brown color as his sons.

He could almost have passed as the leader of a group of mountain bandits or mercenaries, were it not for his lordship and his armor.

Even from where I stood, I could see a vein bulging in Dalsen's forehead, though he contorted his mouth into a smile as he walked toward us with long, powerful strides. He slammed his fists down on Lyot's and Lefit's heads with a dull thud.

"Owwwww!!!"

Lyot dropped to the ground and Lefit crouched, both holding their heads.

Dalsen shook his fist in the air as he yelled at the boys.

"You little bastards, getting everyone all worked up when we have other things to worry about!"

He turned to me next, his words dripping with suspicion.

"What brings an outsider like you here?"

"My name is Arc. I am a wandering mercenary. This is my travel companion, Ariane."

Not wanting to be left out, Ponta piped up as well.

“Kyiii!”

Dalsen’s gaze came to rest on the fang boar hanging over my shoulder.

“What’s that you’ve got there?”

“Ahh, this. We came across this monster attacking your sons. I have no use for it and would be greatly honored if you would take it off my hands.”

I lifted the fang boar with one hand and held it out to Lord Dalsen, drawing gasps of amazement from the onlookers. The man in front of me, however, didn’t seem intimidated. He focused his gaze on Lyot.

Lyot scrambled to his feet and hid behind several of the nearby knights.

Dalsen rubbed his temple and let out a snort of frustration before turning his attention back to me, giving the motionless fang boar a kick.

“You said you were a mercenary, yes? If you were able to put this monster down on your own, then you must be quite the skilled fighter. Would you be interested in a short job? I’ll make it worth your while.”

I glanced at Ariane.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m already employed.”

Dalsen frowned and scratched the back of his head, letting out a sigh.

“In that case, may I ask what brings you to Grahd?”

“We’re traveling to the nearest town in the Revlon Empire, whatever that may be. Do you know the way, Lord Dalsen?”

He grinned, looking over at Ariane.

“Unfortunately, the road to the nearest town has been overrun by ogres. Heading into Revlon is quite a perilous journey at the moment.”

I’d dealt with many ogres back in the game. They weren’t all that difficult to defeat, despite their high strength and attack stats, though they could be a bit of a hassle if you ran into a mob of them. Still, they were good for farming experience in the early and middle parts of the game.

Ariane and I would have no problem tearing through them. We could even avoid fighting them altogether using Dimensional Step.

Judging from Dalsen's demeanor, however, it didn't seem like he was going to give us directions.

Dalsen turned to Ariane, probably assuming—correctly—that she was my employer.

"I have a proposition. You see, we were about to head out to eliminate the ogres. Perhaps you'd care to join us. It's rare for a mercenary to travel to the villages along the border, especially one with your man's talents. We could really use your help."

Ariane's golden eyes glanced at me. I nodded.

If they were willing to tell us how to get where we wanted to go, then we could certainly take care of any ogres we encountered along the way.

"That's fine with me." Ariane agreed to Dalsen's proposition, eliciting a smile from the older man.

"I appreciate your kindness. I will make sure you are both properly rewarded. Arc, was it? I trust this arrangement suits you?"

"I have no objections. How large is this mob of ogres?"

"According to our scouts, there are about fourteen of them."

I figured we'd be finished by noon.

"We've got ourselves a strong ally, but that doesn't mean we can let down our guard yet, men! Proceed with caution!"

The soldiers let out a loud cheer.

"Oorah!"

Ariane and I watched as the knights' friends and families embraced them, seeking promises of a safe return. Ariane shook her head. Apparently, she saw something I didn't. Dalsen didn't seem all that worried about the expedition. Then again, if the leader of a hunting party exuded hopelessness, then the chances of success were practically nonexistent. It also seemed rather remarkable that the lord himself was leading this expedition. However, given the size of the town and the number of knights, they probably needed all the manpower they could muster.

Ariane stepped forward and looked pointedly at Dalsen. “Well, shall we get going?”

Dalsen’s eyes went wide. “Actually, I figured you could stay here and await our return.”

“I’m a powerful magic user and a gifted swordsman. You’re going to need me.”

Ariane summoned a small flame in her palm, letting everyone get a good look at it before closing her fist and extinguishing it.

“Well, well! It seems our luck has gotten even better, boys! I expect to see you all back here with me at the end of the day, alive and kicking!”

“Oraaaaah!”

The crowd of men let out a thunderous cheer.

The soldiers marched along the road leading out of Grahd in a long procession.

Lord Dalsen led his contingent of twenty knights and another dozen or so men from the town who could fight. Ariane, Ponta, and I followed along behind them.

Less than an hour later, and not that far out of town, we turned off the road as it began sloping upward, making our way toward the western woods.

A short distance into a small cluster of trees, I caught sight of a steep cliff in the distance, where the hill ended. Dalsen crouched down and motioned for us to do the same. We moved forward like this, doing our best not to make a sound.

Once we reached the edge of the cliff, Dalsen motioned for everyone to look over the edge.

At the bottom of the cliff, a large mob of ogres wandered about.

The ogres were large and muscular, standing about two-and-a-half meters tall. They had ruddy skin, a small horn sticking out of each of their foreheads

and tusks protruding from their lower jaws. Around their waists, they wore animal pelts, and they wielded various crude weapons such as stone axes and wooden clubs.

Many of the men shifted nervously at the sight.

Dalsen whispered to one of his knights. "Hand over the bows and arrows. We'll launch the attack from up here."

He passed the weapons along to Ariane and me.

I tilted my head to the side, unsure of what he wanted. Dalsen simply motioned over the edge with his chin.

"First, we'll fire off some arrows. Then, we'll lead the ogres back to the road. It's an easy climb up either side of the hill, so they could follow us up here if we aren't careful. The arrowheads have been dipped in poison, but it's only enough to slow their movement. The last thing we want is for them to disappear into the woods."

Humans' greatest strength was in fighting as a group. I wasn't sure the number of men with us was enough to assure victory, but I recognized that it would be even less assured with everyone running around the forest.

I didn't think it would have been much of a challenge for Ariane and me to simply head down the hill and take out all the ogres, but I figured it was best not to undermine Dalsen in front of his men. I wasn't here to be the leader.

I shot Ariane a glance. She shrugged, apparently thinking the same thing.

I hadn't actually used a bow before, but I figured I could copy the techniques of those around me. Since we were just trying to anger the ogres, I supposed it didn't matter how accurate I was.

"Ready your bows."

On Dalsen's command, they all leaned over the edge of the cliff, nocked their arrows, and drew back on their bowstrings.

Dalsen made a silent, sweeping motion with his arm, and, right on cue, all thirty of his men launched a volley into the ogres.

I focused my aim on one ogre in particular and pulled back hard on the

bowstring.

However, right when I was about to release the arrow, I heard an awful snapping noise and looked down to see that the bow had broken in two.

“Huh?”

I’d heard that it was difficult for a novice to properly draw a bow, so I’d put a lot of strength behind it. Unfortunately, it looked like I’d overdone it.

Ariane and Dalsen looked at me in stunned silence, mirroring the shocked expressions of the other soldiers. I always managed to stand out...but never in a good way.

I slid the broken bow behind my back. “Uhh... Seems like this bow is... defective.”

Ariane’s arrow had flown straight toward her target, grazing the ogre before embedding itself in the ground. She apparently wasn’t a gifted archer either.

I resorted to throwing arrows down the cliff side, still feeling a bit dejected, though I was at least successful in drawing the ogres’ attention. They roared in anger.

Several of the ogres now had arrows sticking out of them, but due to their thick, muscular bodies, not a single one had been killed.

I looked around for more things to throw. A stone from this height would at least be enough to knock someone out, but unfortunately, there weren’t any sizable ones nearby. I wasn’t sure a small rock would do anything but rile the ogres up further, but I picked one up and chucked it down at them anyway.

The rock hit one of the ogres like a speeding fastball. I heard a loud thud and saw it drop to the ground, a gaping hole in its head.

A cheer erupted from the men around me as they continued firing their arrows. I nodded to myself in satisfaction.

Dalsen wordlessly handed me several more rocks, a smile on his lips. It appeared this was a good way of thinning out our enemies’ numbers.

I chucked another rock and discovered that my first shot had been beginner’s luck. Any stone striking a target at breakneck speeds would almost certainly be

lethal, but the faster I threw it, the harder it was to be accurate. Even given the ogres immense size, they still presented relatively small targets from up here on the cliff's edge.

The ogres roared again and started making their way up to where we stood via the sloping paths on either side of the cliff. I felled another one with a rock, leaving about eight remaining.

“Kyiii!”

Ponta let out a surprised yelp from atop my head.

Right as Dalsen was giving the order to retreat to the road, two more ogres suddenly broke through the tree line. The men froze in surprise. Even Ariane and I had been too consumed with our attacks—Ariane with her arrows and me with my rocks—that we hadn't been paying attention to our backsides.

One of the ogres made a beeline for Dalsen, waving its stone axe wildly.

Ariane sprang into action. As soon as she saw the ogres come out of the woods, she discarded the bow and drew her sword. Just as the ogre's massive, tree-trunk arm swung the stone axe down toward Dalsen's head, Ariane slid in and brought up her own blade, easily deflecting the blow. The axe caught on her hood as it slammed into the ground.

Ariane's amethyst skin and golden eyes were now exposed for all to see. But this didn't stop her, not even for a second, as she gracefully swung her sword into the ogre's arm, which still clutched the axe.

The ogre let out a loud shriek, releasing the axe and scrambling backward to get away from Ariane. She pursued it.

It attempted to swing its massive fist at Ariane to keep her at bay, but its arm didn't respond, due to the muscle damage Ariane had inflicted. The arm dangled uselessly at its side. Ariane lunged in, driving her blade deep into the ogre's thick neck.

The ogre collapsed, its hand pressed tightly over the wound as blood gushed out like a fountain. After a few moments of writhing about in agony, it finally ran out of energy and fell silent.

Meanwhile, I had an ogre of my own to deal with.

If it hadn't been for Ponta's urgent cry, I probably would have taken the ogre's attack on my back. My Belenus Holy Armor would have protected me from any real harm, but there was still the real risk that something could have happened to poor Ponta.

The fox dropped down from my head and wrapped itself around my neck, as it did whenever I entered combat.

I spun to face the ogre, grabbing its thick wrists. The ogre tried to swing its club, but I only increased the strength of my grip. A look of pain washed over its face as it struggled to escape.

"Hehehe! You're not getting away from me!"

I could hear the bones in its wrists starting to crack. The ogre let out an agonizing cry. I head-butted it with all my might, crushing its skull and snapping its neck.

I pushed the ogre away, just as Ariane finishing pulling her sword from her own ogre's neck and drew her hood back up.

Dalsen and his men were completely awestruck.

"The rest of the ogres are almost here."

My warning seemed to wake Dalsen from his daze.

"Fall back to the road!"

The men moved in unison as they retreated.

At Dalsen's command, they broke into four-man squads once they reached the road, forming a line parallel to the woods in order to ambush the ogres as soon as they left the trees.

The ogres, enraged at seeing their own kind struck down in front of them, rushed at us. Dalsen waited for just the right moment before issuing his next command.

"Throw the oil pots! Miss Ariane, take it from here!"

The squads hurled small, clay pots filled with oil at the oncoming ogres,

drenching them as the pots shattered. Ariane began launching fireballs.

The oil caught fire as soon as the magic made contact, consuming the ogres in bright red flames. The first wave of monsters writhed on the ground, causing the ones behind them to stop in their tracks.

The squads broke from their line, each one focusing on a different ogre. They split off, raising their swords, spears, and other weapons to attack their targets from multiple angles at once. Each squad had one member with a large shield who took the ogre head on, drawing its attention and protecting the other squad members. They all moved about with ease, as if they were well accustomed to fighting together.

I decided I could learn a thing or two from these shield bearers.

A pair of screeching ogres, brandishing clubs, broke free and charged toward Dalsen, Ariane, and me.

I pulled the round shield off my back and drew my sword, readying myself for the assault.

I caught the first ogre's club on my shield, throwing the monster off balance. I swung my massive sword, cleaving the ogre in two with a diagonal slash.

I turned my attention to the other ogre and slammed my shield straight into its face before thrusting my sword through its stomach, severing its spine. The ogre went limp and fell to the ground with a thud.

After making sure it wasn't going to be getting back up, I checked on the progress of the squads and their respective ogres. Ariane and I split up to provide what support we could to the soldiers, quickly wiping out the remaining ogres.

"I had no idea you were an elf, Miss Ariane."

Dalsen smiled warmly as he approached Ariane, his men busily cleaning up the road and collecting rune stones.

"I can't thank you enough for your assistance."

Ariane drew her hood back and crossed her arms.

Dalsen didn't seem at all taken aback by her appearance.

“I’ve heard stories that elves used to roam the forests outside of town back in my great-grandfather’s days, but I’ve never seen one with my own two eyes.”

The way he regarded Ariane was completely different from most of the humans we’d encountered, as if she were something exceedingly precious and rare.

Ariane remained silent, a cautious look on her face.

“You’ve never seen an elf before?” I asked.

Dalsen nodded cheerfully. “My family has ruled Grahd since the time of my great-grandfather. It’s said that elves would often come to the aid of any humans who needed assistance. My great-grandfather himself, in fact, was once saved by elves in these very woods, though I never would have imagined I’d be saying the same.”

Ariane dismissed his praise. “Even without our help, I’m sure you could have dealt with this situation on your own.”

Dalsen shook his head. “If it weren’t for you two, I might never have seen my boys’ faces again.”

Ariane waved her hand. “Really, it’s nothing. We simply did what you asked. Anyway, could you tell us the way to the next town?”

“Ah, that’s right. But first, let’s head back to Grahd so I can properly pay you.”

Ariane and I responded at the same time.

“No, really.”

“We’re fine.”

Ariane nodded for me to speak.

“Really, we’d like to continue on to the Revlon Empire from here. We’d appreciate it if you could tell us the way.”

Dalsen looked surprised.

“But...I don’t have much on hand. I can’t possibly repay you here.”

He emptied the contents of a leather pouch into his hand—several gold and silver coins.

“This is more than enough. After all, I did break one of your bows.” I tried to make light of the situation.

Dalsen watched me closely. He opened his mouth again as if to say something, but Ariane beat him to it.

She smirked. “You can finish repaying us by making sure that your children and grandchildren hold elves in the same high regard you do and continue to rule Grahd long after you’re gone. End of discussion.”

I nodded, to show that Ariane and I were in agreement. If Dalsen’s family remained in power and continued to treat elves with respect and dignity, that would be more than enough payment.

Dalsen told us how to get to the next town in Revlon. We parted with the hunting party and continued on our way.

“Some humans aren’t so bad, I guess.” Ariane mumbled this once we were some distance from Dalsen’s men.

“You can say that again.”

The road turned toward the northwest, curving gently along with the forest that bordered it. The trees were now blocking us from the sight of the soldiers. I decided it was best only to use Dimensional Step for small jumps from here on out, since we were now entering the Revlon Empire. We’d been told that monsters were increasingly common here at the border, so it seemed unwise to teleport too far out and risk having to fight them.

I also wanted to avoid taking the wrong path and ending up in a completely different town like last time, so I made sure to confirm the correct direction with Ariane every time we teleported.

The road to Kaysehk, the closest town on the empire’s side of the border, was completely devoid of traffic.

We’d decided to see what we could learn about Viscount Drassos du Barysimon while we were in Kaysehk. Under normal circumstances, it’d be essentially impossible to find someone in a country like the Revlon Empire,

which was about five times as large as the Rhoden Kingdom. However, I was optimistic. Given that the viscount had captured and transported an elf internationally, it seemed likely that we'd find some sort of clue near the Rhoden border.

"Hold up, Arc."

Ariane's voice broke me from my thoughts, her hand on my shoulder from the last jump. There was a trace of worry in her words.

I looked back at her.

"What's wrong?"

We were standing in the middle of an unremarkable meadow next to a lone road that stretched off into the distance. It was all rather tranquil, really. There weren't any large forests nearby, and, thanks to my keen vision, I could tell that there were no monsters near us.

However, Ariane looked concerned.

Ponta tapped its paw against the top of my helmet, begging for something to eat as its tail swished across my back. At least the spirit creature didn't seem too worried.

Ariane furrowed her brow. "The mana is really dense here. Far more than it should be."

I cocked my head, unsure what was menacing about this. Back in the Great Canada Forest, she'd mentioned the density of the mana as well, which was why there were so many monsters there. The denser the mana, the more powerful the monsters.

"Usually mana is stored in certain types of trees and floats freely throughout the forest, or perhaps in pits or caves where it can't easily dissipate. It's almost unheard of to run into mana concentrations like this out in the open."

Apparently, mana was a lot like fog, in that it tended to settle in low spots.

Now that she mentioned it, I realized that we had a perfect line of sight in almost all directions, with very little in the way. There weren't any changes in the terrain or plant life for the mana to cling on to.

Even though I could neither sense nor see mana, I could still feel the same odd tingling sensation on my skin that I'd felt back in Canada. Well, maybe skin wasn't exactly the right word, but it certainly felt a lot like that.

Ariane wore a heavy expression on her face as she lowered her hood, her golden eyes staring intensely at our surroundings, looking for something.

She moved to a patch of grass just off the road and knelt, picking up some sort of fragment; a beautiful, purple splinter of crystal that caught the light.

Ariane spoke in a low voice. "It's a piece of a cultivation rune stone."

I was about to ask what a cultivation rune stone was when I spotted a similar fragment on the ground in front of me and leaned over to pick it up.

"Is this also part of a cultivation rune stone?"

"Yes. They're made by the elves."

"What are they used for?"

I rolled the shining, semi-transparent crystal shard around in the palm of my hand.

"Usually, they're broken into small pieces and spread throughout a field to cultivate a strong, abundant harvest."

"Huh..."

It sounded like they were some sort of fertilizer. But if that were the case, then why were all these fragments out here by the side of the road in the middle of a meadow? There weren't any farmlands or human dwellings as far as I could see.

Ariane continued. "These need to be handled with care. Throwing rune stones around in a haphazard manner like this could lead to an excess of mana in the area and attract all sorts of monsters."

Back in my world, using chemical fertilizers could ultimately strip the land of its nutrients, but magical fertilizers drawing in monsters was a different problem entirely.

"Do you remember all the massive trees and monsters that inhabit the forests

in Canada?”

I nodded.

“Back when the founding elder first arrived, Canada was nothing but barren land. No trees, no forest—nothing. He created the cultivation rune stones and built up the land, giving life to the massive forest you see today.”

Now that was impressive. Granted, the founding elder would have done this about 800 years ago, which was more than enough time for a great forest to spring up, but still. Ariane might not see this as a big deal, on account of her long lifespan, but for me, the very idea of turning barren land into a massive forest like that was quite shocking.

“According to the stories, he shattered the cultivation rune stones and scattered them across the land in order to give the elves a place we could defend as our own home...and escape the humans who constantly hunted us. As the mana-rich trees grew, the roads were slowly closed off and monsters began to gather, creating a place that separated us from humans. That’s what gave rise to the Great Forest.”

I scanned the ground, taking in the enormous number of cultivation rune stone shards scattered around us.

It seemed unlikely that these had ended up here by chance. Someone must have done this intentionally.

This had to be what was responsible for the sudden increase in monsters along the border between the Rhoden Kingdom and the Holy East Revlon Empire. But who was behind it?

“Did elves leave these here?”

I intended it to be a simple question, but Ariane’s eyes narrowed, and there was a certain edge to her voice when she responded.

“What would elves have to gain from scattering cultivation rune stones at the border between two human countries?”

I could think of a few ways elves might benefit from drawing monsters here, though I didn’t say any of them out loud. For example, if the region grew more

dangerous for the human nobles who interfered in elven affairs, it would force them to turn their attention away from the elves. But I knew pushing the issue would only annoy Ariane even more.

“Besides, these might be elven made, but we aren’t the only ones who have them. We’ve traded a lot of cultivation rune stones to the Grand Duchy of Limbult, and I hear that Limbult goes on to sell them to other countries.”

These stones sounded like a prized possession among humans, thanks to their ability to make barren land arable. Limbult must have been making a fortune in exports if they were the only place humans could get their hands on them.

Their rarity made it even less likely that someone would just scatter a bunch of these cultivation rune stones along the side of the road.

“I can only imagine, then, that these stones might be a point of conflict among humans.”

I crushed the shard in my hand and let the wind carry the dust away.

“The elves originally created them to build the forest. When we started selling them to humans, we left out the fact that they attract monsters. We simply told them that the stones should be used with care.”

“Oh? So humans don’t know about the side effect?”

Ariane shrugged. “The world is full of greedy people.”

“I see...”

If breaking them up and scattering them about increased crop yield, then it stood to reason that higher concentrations would increase the yield even more. It was only a matter of time until someone ignored the elves’ warning. Sooner or later, the humans would discover the cultivation rune stones’ secret. Had the elves done this intentionally in order to turn the humans’ land into monster-filled forests? Was their hope, then, to conquer these lands? If so, that would make them quite the long-term planners.

“Is there anything we can do to mitigate their effect?”

For the time being, I’d wanted to see if we could at least keep this area monster-free.

“That would be a challenge.” Ariane frowned. “Burying the exposed shards in the ground will eliminate some of the mana, but I don’t know how much has been spread around, or over how wide an area.”

“Still, for all the mana in the area, I’m surprised there aren’t any monsters.” I prodded at one of the shards with the tip of my boot while Ariane surveyed the scene around us.

Of course, there was the mob of ogres near Grahd, and the fang boar. But other than that, we hadn’t really run into any monsters, despite all the reports we kept hearing. Either they’d moved on, or there was something else we were missing.

The best we could do for now was crush any shards we could find and let the wind carry them away. We couldn’t spend all day playing in the dirt.

In all likelihood, this was the work of some noble and there wasn’t much Ariane and I on our own could do about it. It was about time for us to go.

Chapter 4:

The Monster Tamer

As we crested the mountains that ran along Rhoden's northwest border, the Holy East Revlon Empire border town of Kaysehk came into view. We found ourselves staring down at a sturdy-looking fortress surrounded by high walls that stood out starkly against the horizon.

Unlike Grahd, this border town was massive, likely due to the sheer space available here. Several small rivers and waterways cut through the land around the stately town, creating rather fertile farmland.

Even though Kaysehk sat at a crossroads—where the road stretching off to the east that we'd traveled met another leading south toward the Rhoden Kingdom—there was very little in the way of traffic, other than a few humans I'd assumed lived in the town. I guessed this was because of all the monster attacks.

The closer we got to Kaysehk, the more guards began appearing—and the more they eyed us with suspicion.

All of them were dressed in the same dark gray uniforms and wore light armor made of dull steel. They gave the impression of military platoons on patrol.

As we neared the gate, I observed just how many soldiers guarded it. Considering how few people seemed to be entering the town right now, I knew we'd stand out: one of us was a skeleton knight who refused to take off his helmet, and the other was a dark elf who refused take off her hood. Things might get ugly if we were interrogated.

"We should probably avoid going through the main entrance."

"You're right." Ariane seemed to share my concerns.

We started circling around the town, looking for an area with as few soldiers standing watch as possible. I could hear Ponta snoring from atop my head.

Many soldiers seemed to be coming and going from a small fort surrounded

by a wooden fence just outside the town's western wall. It looked like this was where the soldiers were stationed. Also, judging by its haphazard construction, this fort had been built recently and hastily. However, from this vantage, I couldn't see past the outer wall.

We decided to avoid the western side and instead used Dimensional Step to teleport to the east side of town, where there weren't any guards. From there, we teleported past the walls and into Kaysehk itself.

I couldn't help but laugh about how accustomed I was to entering towns this way.

In stark contrast to how empty the road had been, the town itself seemed full of life.

I noted a lot of soldier-like men in civilian clothes milling about the crowd, but I also saw a lot of other mercenaries walking around freely, so I figured I wouldn't stand out too much.

I turned to Ariane. "All right, we managed to enter a town in the Revlon Empire. Now we just have to find out where this Viscount Drassos du Barysimon is."

As to *how* we were going to find him... Well, we were pretty much limited to walking around town and asking random people if they knew anything.

We'd been told that, unlike in the Rhoden Kingdom, things wouldn't end so well if Ariane's true identity was discovered, so we decided not to split up. Nor did we want to draw undue attention to ourselves by throwing out the viscount's name. We'd need to ask discreetly.

After heading along the main thoroughfare for a way, we found ourselves at a market.

This seemed like a perfect place to gather information, since we'd have a chance to speak to merchants and other customers as we shopped.

Surprisingly, despite the aromas of all the foods being offered in the market, Ponta was still asleep. I slid the cottontail fox down from atop my helmet and handed it to Ariane before searching out a vendor selling nuts and berries, the perfect snack to eat while traveling. When I spotted one, I called out to him.

“Excuse me, sir. I’d like a handful of these walnuts here.”

“Absolutely!”

The man offered me a warm smile and scooped a heaping handful into a hemp bag, which he handed to me.

“All right, that’ll be one *lierre*.”

I’d been about to ask if the merchant knew anything about Barysimon, but was taken aback by what he just said. It had completely slipped my mind that different countries would use different currencies.

I reached into the leather pouch at my waist and pulled out a gold coin.

“Will this do?”

“Ah, Rhoden money. Sure, you can use that here. That’ll be nine *lierre* in change.”

The man handed nine silver coins back to me. They were almost identical in thickness and texture to the ones I was used to, though they had a slightly more detailed symbol engraved on their faces.

Assuming the man wasn’t taking advantage of me, I was relieved to find that the value of currency here seemed comparable to Rhoden’s. That would make things a lot easier.

“You new to Kaysehk, mister?”

“Actually, I am. In fact, I was hoping to ask you something. Do you happen to know where Barysimon is located?”

Back in Rhoden, most locations were named after the local nobility, so I figured that it would be much easier—and less suspicious—if I were to ask about the place, rather than the man ruling over it.

However, the merchant just shook his head. “Barysimon, you say? Sorry, never heard of it.”

“I see. Sorry for the trouble.”

I tried asking a few other merchants the same thing, but no one had heard of a place by that name. Our search was already off to a bad start.

“I’m surprised that we’re coming up with nothing.”

I cracked the walnuts open and passed them to Ariane as we stood by the side of the street. Ariane rubbed her cheek against Ponta’s head as it lay in her arms, happily gobbling up the walnuts.

After giving it some more thought, I decided that being a member of the nobility didn’t necessarily mean that someone had a town named after them. We’d have no choice but to ask for the viscount by name. Still, it seemed unlikely that the average person on the street would just happen to know the noble we were looking for.

Just as I was coming to this realization, a voice casually called out from behind me.

“Someone’s certainly having some trouble.”

I turned to find a familiar blue-eyed figure staring up at me. She looked no different from the last time we’d met.

Standing only about 150 centimeters tall, the young girl was dressed in comfortable-looking, all-black clothes and wore a large, oversized hat atop her head of short, black hair.

She also wore gauntlets and greaves and carried a short sword on her lower back. She didn’t look like she was from around here.

“Whoa, Chiyome? What are you doing here?”

Chiyome was a member of the Jinshin clan. Ariane and I had helped her rescue some of her comrades back in the capital.

Ariane looked as surprised as I felt to see her here.

Chiyome responded in her usual monotone manner.

“After we parted ways in Olav, I made my way back to the hidden village. The chieftain gave me a new mission, so I came here as fast as I could. I figured you two would come to Kaysehk looking for your next mark, and I was right.”

Though Kaysehk wasn’t nearly as large as Lamburt, it certainly wasn’t small by any means. The fact that she’d found us so quickly was nothing short of incredible.

“Do you need assistance again? I still have a job to do for Miss Ariane, so it might be some time before I can offer my services to you.”

Chiyome nodded, as if she'd expected this response, and turned her azure eyes to Ariane.

“I do plan on waiting to make my request until your job is completed, Ariane, but unfortunately, I'm in a bit of a hurry. Could I offer you my assistance, such as it is, to help you finish faster?”

Ariane froze, eliciting a curious look from Ponta, who wondered why she was no longer feeding it walnuts.

I looked at Ariane as well. “I don't have any objections.”

Ariane pursed her lips. “If we're able to finish our mission sooner, I don't see an issue.”

Chiyome beamed. “Then it's settled! Leave it to me. I've already tracked down the person you're looking for.”

Ninjas truly were masters at getting information. Here I was thinking our search had been stymied, and suddenly we were shown a way out.

“You've already looked into it? Where is this Viscount Barysimon?”

Chiyome pointed north. “He's living in a town called Leibnizche. All you have to do is follow the Siana mountain range to find it.”

I tilted my head to the side. “Leibnizche? That's not his name. Does that mean that he's working under the local lord?”

“No, Viscount Barysimon is the lord of Leibnizche. Up here in the Holy East Revlon Empire, nobles are assigned to certain regions by the emperor, and the region they oversee may change. That's why their names don't match up.”

Well, that made sense. I supposed it was more of an absolute monarchy here, compared to Rhoden. I felt a bit embarrassed at having overlooked the fact that each country would have its own method of government.

Chiyome continued. “The Revlon Empire, back before it split into the east and west, used to be a massive conglomeration of countries. Many of the towns have been known by the same name for a very long time.” She suddenly hit her

fist into her palm, as if she'd just remembered something. "Damn. You two can't really show your faces around people, can you?"

Ariane and I both nodded.

"In that case, why don't we tell people that you're my bodyguards? Mercenaries are only allowed here if they belong to troupes authorized by the empire, so calling yourselves mercenaries will put you under intense scrutiny. If you're questioned, they won't let you keep your faces covered."

Obviously, rules were different everywhere, but the more I heard, the more I understood that Ariane and I had come here knowing absolutely nothing about the Revlon Empire. I was exceedingly glad that Chiyome had shown up to help us.

Ariane had resumed petting Ponta's head. She looked from Chiyome to me and back. "Well then, shall we make our way to Leibnizche?"

"Not yet. It's about a three- or four-day trip by carriage from here, so even if we left now, we wouldn't make it all that far before we had to stop for the night. We should also only stop in the larger towns, since we'll stick out like sore thumbs in any of the smaller ones."

Now that she mentioned it, I could see that the sun was already low in the sky. We'd have to spend the night here and leave for Leibnizche in the morning.

Still, a three- to four-day trip by carriage should only take half a day using Dimensional Step.

I looked up and down the street. "In that case, let's find an inn. This is a pretty nice part of town, so there should be a decent one nearby."

Chiyome shook her head. "We're close to the Hilk church. It'd be better to stay just about anywhere else, like the northeast part of town, even if it's not as safe. Follow me!"

As Ariane and I trailed after her, I marveled at how much Chiyome knew about the geography and goings on of the empire.

We took the main thoroughfare up toward the northeast part of town. On the way, I caught sight of a large, somber-looking stone building.

The entrance was flanked by bell towers, their walls embedded with statues. An image of a club with a ribbed, spherical head had been painted above the entrance. It looked almost like a vajra, a mystical weapon used as a ritual object in Buddhism and Hinduism.

The building towered above those around it, as if asserting its dominance over this part of town.

“Is this the church of the...what did you call them, Hilk?” My eyes never left the building as I spoke.

“Yes. The Hilk have strong ties to both the eastern and western empires, and they teach that humans are superior above all other species. They claim that mountain people, elves, dwarves, and other non-humans are wicked, dirty... born from the devil.”

That sounded like pretty extreme dogma. I could only imagine how uncomfortable it must be for Chiyome and Ariane to be in the presence of such teachings.

Ariane glowered at the church from under her hood.

“Are there any followers of the Hilk back in Rhoden?” I asked.

While Chiyome and the mountain people were certainly persecuted in Rhoden, elves, at least on the surface, were supposedly treated like equals under the treaty.

“Hilk hasn’t spread very far into the Rhoden Kingdom yet. Traditionally, each region has their own houses of worship, and the king has used this as grounds to ban any Hilk proselytizing. However, there isn’t much difference in the way Rhoden and the Hilk treat us. They mock us as the bastard children of men and beasts, and they think elves tricked the gods and stole their magical abilities for themselves.”

“What the hell?!” Ariane shouted. “Where do they get off slandering us like that?”

Chiyome gestured for Ariane to lower her voice. In her outburst, Ariane had clutched her arms closer, squeezing poor Ponta against her chest.

“Well, I imagine that a lot of that has to do with their jealousy over your long lives and affinity for magic.”

I imagined that, among the human ruling class, they wanted nothing more than to extend their lives like the elves. Failing that, they would want to disparage the elves, who were clearly more blessed than they were. That type of thinking was just like humans.

I continued musing on this as we walked, while Chiyome tried calming Ariane down as she raged against the humans. Eventually, we settled on an inn to stay in and ended the day there.

First thing the next morning, we departed through the north gate of Kaysehk and I used Dimensional Step to carry us along the northern road, where Chiyome had indicated we should go.

Chiyome was taken aback by my magic at first, but she quickly grew accustomed to it. I had previously shown her my Transport Gate ability, but this was the first time she'd seen Dimensional Step. It was the kind of magic that must have come across as incredibly useful in the eyes of a ninja.

The road we were following was bordered to the west by the Siana mountain range and the expansive forests that ran along the foothills.

Judging by the number of farms and villages in the area, it seemed like the foothills allowed for very fertile land. All in all, it was a rather tranquil scene.

However, that tranquility was soon broken as we moved down the road and caught sight of an imposing group.

It was a procession of around a hundred knights or so, all outfitted in identical armor.

Toward the rear, a group of carriages clustered together, looking almost like the beads on a rosary. The carriages were completely covered in canopies, preventing anyone from looking inside.

I had no idea where they were going, but, judging from the direction the soldiers were marching in, I guessed they were coming from Leibnizche, where

we were headed.

“I wonder if they’re off to address the monster problem at the border.”

I wasn’t really speaking to anyone in particular, but Chiyome responded all the same.

“I think they’re going to be stationed at Kaysehk. I’m not really sure what’s going on, but I’ve heard that the emperor’s been moving soldiers all over the empire.”

“Hmm. Well, I suppose it has nothing to do with us.”

Something suspicious was definitely going on within the empire, but for now, there was nothing we could do about it. All we could do was watch and wonder.

I used Dimensional Step to teleport us into a distant field where we’d remain out of the soldiers’ line of sight. We continued on our way, keeping our distance.

Right around noon, we arrived in Leibnizche.

The town was larger than Kaysehk, surrounded by even higher walls. A solidly built fortress jutted from the western wall, where a stream of carts came and went.

Chiyome spoke quietly, the surprise evident in her voice as she looked out at the town in front of us. “I never imagined we’d be able to travel all the way here so quickly. I’m impressed I was able to catch up to you.”

Luck had probably played a part in that, considering we’d taken a bit of a detour after parting ways back in the capital. I suggested to Ariane that maybe the spirits had something to it, but she just glared at me.

We entered Leibnizche through the south gate, with Chiyome leading the way.

She showed the guards at the gate something, uttered a few words, then was allowed to pass on through without further inspection. I figured she’d gotten a travel pass before coming, once again impressing me with how much prep work she’d done.

The south entrance led straight to a large thoroughfare that ran through town, filled with people bustling about. There was another road along the perimeter of the town just inside the wall. Off to the east was a second wall, and even more town beyond that. It seemed like there had been explosive growth in the direction. This second wall, separating the old and new towns, was lower than the one surrounding Leibnizche, which probably explained why the buildings on this side were shorter as well.

Chiyome led us to the newer part of town, passing through a gate built into the old town wall along the way.

“First off, I want to get a room at an inn that can serve as our base of operations, in case this takes a while. Usually, when a town is divided, the new part isn’t nearly as safe, but in our situation, this is to our advantage. It will make it easier for us to move around.”

I nodded, my eyes taking in the town that lay before us.

The roads here were much narrower than in the old town, but the crowds naturally moved out of our way when they saw a two-meter-tall knight outfitted in armor, trailing a pitch-black cloak.

After making our way farther down the road, we settled on an inn deep in the new section of town.

“I’m going to head out and start gathering information,” Chiyome said. “What will you be doing? You can stay here in the inn where it’s safe, if you want.”

“Going out on your own doesn’t sound easy,” I said.

Chiyome shook her head, her black hair swaying with the movement. “The Jinshin clan has a rather unique way of gathering information, and we don’t usually travel in large groups. This is my first time in Leibnizche, but I’ve learned some things from other mountain people who’ve been here before. I’ll be fine going out on my own.”

She looked plenty confident.

There was nothing I’d rather have seen than a well-trained ninja gather information. But, lacking any of that training myself, I’d be more of a hindrance than anything else.

I let out a sigh. “We definitely aren’t nearly as adept as you are, so we’ll defer to you.”

Ariane looked up from massaging Ponta, a defiant look in her eye. “Since when do you get to speak for me?”

“You can’t deny the truth.”

Ariane puffed out her cheeks and scowled.

We had to consider the right person for the job.

And, of course, we couldn’t ignore our own shortcomings. I couldn’t take off my armor or helmet. Sure, those things might help me intimidate information out of low-level thugs, but it also caused a lot of people to avoid me altogether. Ariane was also stuck wearing her hood low in order to hide her amethyst-colored skin, pointy ears, and long, white hair—all traits unique to a dark elf—which made her come across as incredibly suspicious.

Maybe if she turned up the charm, she might be able to wrangle information out of some old pervert, but I couldn’t imagine her doing that.

Whereas all Chiyome had to do was hide her cat ears and tail and she could easily blend in with humans without any need to conceal her face. This made her far better suited than the two of us to talk to people. Since we had someone who was particularly good at information gathering, there was nothing embarrassing about leaving it to her.

I laid this all out for Ariane, and she finally relented.

“Fine, I got it.” She turned away, and I could see that her ears had turned a light shade of red. “But this is my assignment, so I can’t just leave everything to Chiyome. You and I will head into town too.”

She turned back to me, her glossy lips turned down and her eyebrows knitted for some reason I couldn’t understand.

“You’re coming, too, Arc! I hired you!”

“But I didn’t say anything...”

I appreciated the fact that people could rely on me. Perhaps this had become my purpose in this world. Besides, I had nowhere else to go.

“All right then, so we’ll meet back here at nightfall?” Chiyome asked.

Ariane and I nodded, and we all left the inn.

Chiyome disappeared into the sea of people. I turned my attention back to Ariane.

“Well, I guess we’ll just do the best we can.”

She nodded. “Right.”

“Kyiii!”

Ponta let out an excited yip and swished its tail about in Ariane’s arms, apparently also eager to get underway. Though, judging by how excitedly it looked up and down the streets, I had a feeling Ponta was just eager to find something to eat.

“How about we pick up something for Ponta and make our way to the old town?”

We started walking in the opposite direction Chiyome had gone, passing through the wall dividing the old town from the new, ending up in a large, open square in front of the south gate.

We walked past the shops lining the road, letting Ponta’s reaction guide us.

“Even if we wanted to ask people for information, they all seem to be avoiding us.”

“That’s because you’re just too imposing of a figure, Arc. Maybe...you should crouch down a bit?”

That would only make us look *more* suspicious.

However, I did have an idea.

“Ariane, are you able to use the wind spirit magic to listen in on people’s conversations, kind of like what you did back in Lamburt?”

“Hmm. You know, I’ve never tried. Give me a minute.”

Ariane handed me Ponta, whom I placed back atop my helmet. She whispered something to herself and blew on her open palm. The outline of a faint, glowing shape shimmered above it. Ariane looked up at me.

“So, who should we listen in on?”

I looked around for a bit before finally settling on a group of older men talking among each other at a shop on the opposite side of the street.

“How about that group over there?”

Ariane followed my gaze, nodded, and whispered something to the faint glow. I felt a light breeze, and the glow disappeared. A few moments later, another breeze blew past, and the glowing light returned to Ariane’s palm.

“Do you want to have a listen?” She lifted her hand to my ear.

The faintly glowing blob wavered about slightly, and suddenly I could hear the sounds of people talking.

“The soldiers in the western fort have been pretty busy lately, huh?”

“Apparently there’s been a huge increase in monsters near the border, so they’re supplementing the soldiers in Kaysehk.”

“That’s all well and good, but I hear they’re turning away anyone who gets too close to the fort. Pretty aggressively too.”

“I heard that if you get close, you can hear strange, animal-like cries coming from inside.”

“Probably best to mind our own business, if we know what’s good for us.”

The men’s voices faded as the glow in Ariane’s hand vanished.

Considering military installations were generally off-limits to civilians anyway, I didn’t find this information to be particularly noteworthy.

“At least we found a way to pick up on what people are gossiping about around town.”

Ariane grumbled. “It’s a pretty big hassle with hardly any reward.”

After grumbling a bit more, Ariane used her spirit magic a few more times, listening in on other groups of people gathered along the side of the road. Most of what we heard was just normal town gossip. Since Ariane’s spirit magic only lasted for a short amount of time, it was difficult to learn anything useful.

With nothing but vague information for our efforts, we decided to call it off

and leave the area.

We walked until we found a large open space full of several markets, split up by a number of roads. We could see a towering castle wall off to the west and a road leading toward it.

“I bet that’s where the local lord lives. Shall we take a look?”

We made our way toward the castle. On the right-hand side of the road, facing north, we encountered another large church marked with the Hilk symbol. This one had four bell towers, one at each corner, and was far larger than the one we’d seen in Kaysehk. It was more impressive than even the castle.

We walked through the crowd of people going in and out of the church. Among them, I saw several men in priestly robes. Their garb looked familiar, like I’d seen it somewhere before.

Ariane and I quickly left the church and its crowd behind, following along the castle walls toward the southern part of town.

The buildings here were much larger than those we’d just left behind, the roads nearly empty of people. I could hear the soothing burble of water coming from a stone-lined waterway built into the ground.

A man suddenly appeared in front of us and shouted, shattering the quiet serenity.

He was massive and looked nothing like any of the other people we’d run into around town. It was almost like...he was from another world.

He wore his black hair in braids. Under his loose-fitting clothes, I could see that he was covered in all sorts of strange tattoos. His unshaven face cracked into a grin at the sight of Ariane. He appeared quite drunk, given his bright red complexion and the way he stumbled through the streets.

“Well, hey there, girly! You’re quite a looker there, ain’cha. Why don’t ya come with me?”

By the way he was acting, I might have assumed he was a mere street punk. But the quality of his clothing gave me pause.

He was likely a noble or some other high official.

The man leered at Ariane's chest. He drew closer, as if enchanted, and reached out.

"Keep your dirty mitts away from me."

Ariane swatted him away, wrinkling her nose at the stench of his alcohol-laced breath. He hardly seemed to notice, however, and called out to her in an even louder voice.

"Oooh, I like a strong woman! Wanna get drunk with me? I've got the good stuff."

He reached for Ariane again. Before she even had a chance to pull away, I took the man's arm and twisted it behind his back.

"Owww, ow, ow! What the hell're you doin'?! Don't you know who I am?"

"Don't you know that 'no' means 'no'?"



The man flailed about in a desperate attempt to free himself, spittle flying from his mouth as he yelled. I wished he would stay still, fearing that if I put too much strength into my grip, I might break his arm or even snap his spine. However, the man continued writhing about in a drunken rage.

If he continued like this, it was only a matter of time until someone called the guards. We couldn't afford to let that happen.

"Whoa, calm down!"

"Nnngrah?!"

I gave him a light punch to the gut to bring him back to his senses. He tensed for a moment, then vomited everywhere and passed out on the ground.

I didn't see any blood or organs, so I figured he was probably okay.

I let out a sigh of relief.

"Well, at least it's quiet again."

Ariane looked down at the man sprawled on the stone walkway.

"Well, thank you, Arc. Now, what should we do about this...thing?"

"Kyii? Kyiii!"

The man stared vacantly up at the sky, a bit of vomit still drooling out of his mouth. Ponta batted and pulled at the man's hair with its front paws, entertained by his braids. Ariane picked the fox up, pulling it into a tight embrace.

"Cut that out, Ponta. Don't touch that dirty thing."

"Kyiiiiiii..."

The man's clothes suggested that he was someone important, so I wasn't keen on risking his wrath by sticking around until he woke up.

"We should get out of here."

"Agreed."

We left the man where he lay and made our way back to the old part of town.

Once the sun began setting, all the townsfolk began hurrying home. Ariane

and I made our way through the crowds and back to the room we'd reserved at the inn.

I didn't have much else to do, so I simply sat in one corner of the room with my knees to my chest while Ariane played on the bed with Ponta.

Chiyome, dressed like a traveler, entered a short time later and locked the door from the inside. She took off her hat, allowed her black cat ears to spring up, and glanced around the room.

"So, what did you learn?"

Ariane and I exchanged a glance. I shrugged my shoulders.

"We didn't find out anything particularly useful. We did run into a drunk man though."

Chiyome's cat ears twitched at this. She seemed to be excited about something. If her tail had been visible, I would have been sure. Back home, I could always gauge my cat's emotions by its tail. Maybe she was excited because Ariane's and my lack of results made whatever she'd learned even more valuable. She'd joined us, after all, to speed up Ariane's mission, so she was probably eager to prove that she could contribute.

It wasn't normally like Ariane to have any sort of negative feelings toward Chiyome; at least, not that I'd seen. But I couldn't help but notice that she pulled Ponta just a little bit closer to her.

Chiyome puffed out her chest. "I actually did have some success."

"Oh? That's great."

This was definitely deserving of praise. I gave a bit of an exaggerated clap, which sent Chiyome's ears twitching anew.

Part of me wanted to give her an affectionate scratch under the chin, but she was a cat *person*, not an actual cat. Besides, not only would it be rude to Chiyome, I could only imagine the grief Ariane would give me if I tried.

"I couldn't get a clear number, but some elves were seen being brought into the castle about four months ago. Then, about three months ago, at least one was taken away. I wasn't able to sneak inside, so I couldn't confirm if there are

still any elves locked up there.”

According to the purchase contract, five elves had been brought here. But it now sounded like that was some time ago, and they may have been taken away.

Ariane spoke up, the determination clear in her voice. “As long as there’s a possibility that someone may still be in there, we need to go inside and check.”

This was pretty much what I’d expected her to say. I nodded in agreement.

“So, when do we want to sneak into the castle?”

“As soon as possible. Why not do it tonight?” Ariane clenched her hand into a fist, ready to take swift action.

However, Chiyome jumped in to try and calm her down. “Hold on a minute. I haven’t finished my investigation into how many elves may have been left behind, or even where they’re being held. If we sneak in now, we may ruin any chance of a thorough search!”

Ariane furrowed her brow. “So we’re just going to sit around until we can figure out how many people are trapped inside and where they’re being held?”

“Correct. I’ll need about five days.”

Collecting information alone was difficult work. I was impressed she knew exactly how long it would take. This girl really was a pro.

There was just one problem.

“Can we really hide out here in this Hilk-controlled region for five whole days and not be discovered?”

Chiyome frowned, her ears turning downward slightly.

If the impressive church we’d seen was anything to go by, the Hilk, and their pro-human beliefs, were quite influential in this town. Chiyome may have been an expert in sneaking around undetected, but Ariane and I drew attention. It would be difficult to keep ourselves out of sight.

It might not have been so bad if we had some sort of hideout, but we were just staying at an inn. If some devout follower of Hilk teachings were to report

on Ariane's presence, then there'd be no way we could rescue anyone held in the castle.

Chiyome thought this over for a moment before letting out a sigh.

"All right then, we'll sneak into the castle tomorrow night. I've heard that the third platoon will be dispatched from the fort to Kaysehk tomorrow, making it our best bet if we want to limit the number of reinforcements they can send after us... I mean, if we're found out."

This was all the convincing Ariane needed. She nodded.

We began laying out our plan for sneaking in, based on the information Chiyome had acquired.

As usual, Ariane and I would infiltrate the castle while Chiyome hung back to keep any response forces at bay in case we were discovered.

The next day, Chiyome made her way to the fort for final preparations while Ariane and I stayed at the inn to avoid any encounters like the one we'd had with the intoxicated official the night before. It was unlikely he remembered us considering how drunk he'd been, but we figured we'd be better safe than sorry.

The weather got worse starting around noon. By nightfall, the sky was a blanket of thick, dark clouds.

Usually, a dark, moonless night would be perfect for an infiltration mission, but it only served to reduce my line of sight and limit my options for using Dimensional Step. However, this was only a problem for Ariane and me. For Chiyome, who was keeping a close watch on the western fort, the darkness provided even more places for her to hide.

We left the inn and found Chiyome under a dark and foreboding sky for a final meeting.

"Meeting" was probably a bit of an exaggeration. We discussed where we would reconvene after we escaped and confirmed a few last-minute details, like how to let her know if we needed her to create a disturbance back at the fort.

We finished the discussion quickly.

Shortly after midnight, we parted ways with Chiyome.

We wanted to avoid the church in the northwest and keep our distance from the fort to the west, so we followed a dimly lit road off to the southwest until we found ourselves on another road that gave us a good vantage of the castle wall.

Though there was no moat, a fairly wide path ran around the perimeter of the wall, which was occasionally patrolled by guards.

A light, silent rain began falling from the thick clouds above, making everything around us even darker. I looked around for a place to teleport, but the best I could find was a spot I could barely make out atop the wall.

Given how dark it was, I knew it would likely be difficult to teleport into the castle from atop the wall. Due to its height, and the shadow it cast, the interior would be nearly pitch black, which would really limit our options. But if I took my time, I figured something would eventually present itself, no matter how dark it was.

Ariane already had her hand on my shoulder as I looked back at her.

“Are you ready?”

She nodded.

“Dimensional Step.”

In an instant, Ariane and Ponta, who was currently wrapped tightly around my neck like a furry green scarf, teleported with me from the side of the road to the top of the wall surrounding Barysimon’s residence.

Due to dark elves’ keen night vision, Ariane was normally responsible for checking our surroundings after we teleported. But since most of the guards moving about the top of the wall held torches, this wasn’t necessary.

I fell back into the shadow of the wall and squinted my eyes, looking for a place that would be both easy to teleport to and offer us enough cover.

In front of us, a large building faced away from the western wall, and in front of *that*, I spotted several buildings in the shape of a “U,” with a courtyard at the

center. The courtyard was completely dark, save for some flickering lights—likely the torches of more patrolling guards.

We'd probably need to make our way toward the large building if we wanted to free any elves held captive inside. Unfortunately, there were practically no gaps in the lines of guards patrolling the main building, at least, not that I could see in the gloom.

Worse, the building was quite a distance away from the top of the wall, meaning that a great deal of trees and other shrubbery blocked my line of sight, making it even more difficult to get a feel for how many guards there were and their movements.

Rather than making our way straight to the main building from here, I figured it would be best to teleport from the wall to a closer building off to the south and look for a way to sneak into the main building.

While I was busy planning out our next move, I felt a light tap on my shoulder.

I turned to face Ariane. She held up two fingers and shook them to the left twice. Apparently, two guards were approaching us. We didn't have much time.

I nodded and quickly teleported us again.

Our surroundings changed in the blink of an eye, and we found ourselves behind a compact, two-story building a short distance from the other buildings off to the south. Compact, of course, was relative. The place was far larger than most commoners' houses.

The building was made of various colored stones, giving the walls a mosaic-like pattern that made itself apparent in the faint glow of the light from the windows.

I could see inside through a lattice-like structure that hung over a large, rectangular window built into the wall of the first floor. There was an expensive-looking red rug, lit up by magical lanterns lining the hallway.

However, I didn't see any signs of human life inside. Compared to the main building, there were relatively few guards in this area. We were enveloped in silence, save for the chirp of insects coming from the nearby shrubs.

I slid my body along the building's wall, chancing a glance around the corner toward the inner courtyard and the estate's entrance.

There were two men standing and several other groups patrolling the courtyard. Toward the main building, I saw several more guards illuminated by torchlight.

There weren't many places to hide in the courtyard, and my teleportation options were limited due to the sheer darkness. This would be no easy feat.

Our only option was to use this building as cover and make our way straight toward our objective, following the perimeter of the wall toward the main building. We could look for a way to sneak in from there. I relayed my plan to Ariane.

"It seems unlikely that we'll find anything of note if we stick to places where there aren't guards."

"Since we don't even know how many elves are here, or where they're being held, don't you think it'd be a better idea to start our search in a place where there *aren't* a lot of guards before we go barging in?"

She had a point. "All right, then why not start our search here?"

I glanced back inside the building and, after making sure the coast was clear, used Dimensional Step to teleport us into the hallway.

Ariane perked up her ears, as if listening for something. She whispered to me.

"The first floor seems empty...but I have a strange feeling about this place."

"I have no complaints about no one being here. Let's look around and make our way to the west side where we can see the main residence."

I turned the knob on a nearby door and peeked inside.

The room was entirely unlit, so I could only see a short distance in; however, I immediately noticed that everything in the room was covered in a light layer of dust, as if no one had been here for some time. A building this size should have had at least a dozen servants, so it seemed unlikely that this was simply someone neglecting their duties.

Could it be that the financial situation here was bleak? That they just didn't

have the resources to manage all their buildings?

I opened another door and looked inside. Same thing. I glanced back at Ariane. We both shook our heads. Apparently, she'd come up short too.

I continued along, checking room by room, relying only on the lights in the hallway. At the corner, the hallway made a ninety-degree turn and continued toward the back of the building.

At the end of the hallway was a pair of large doors, with no other rooms in sight.

I waved Ariane over and used Dimensional Step to teleport us in front of the doors. Ariane pushed lightly on one of them, and it swung inward with a creak.

The room was filled with large boxes stacked one on top of another, nearly reaching the balcony that ran along the second floor. Giant chandeliers hung at regular intervals from the high ceiling, and the floor beneath us was made of stones that had long since lost their luster. Pillars with intricate designs etched into them lined the room, and massive glass windows covered the wall to our left. It looked like this had been some sort of sun room.

However, there were no lights in the hallway just outside the room, and no moonlight coming in through the windows, so I couldn't see much farther inside. It was like a big, black pit yawning open in front of us.

Figuring this was a perfect time for Ariane to use her impeccable night vision, I turned to look over at her. However, she was already walking unsteadily off into the darkness, as if drawn in by it.

I whispered to get her attention. "Ariane?"

No response. Just as I was about to try again, I noticed something peculiar.

There was a dark, shadowy figure floating above her head.

It was almost impossible to make out against the surrounding darkness. But I could tell that it had a round body and was about fifteen centimeters tall, with small wings on its back, a short tail, and multiple bumps protruding from its head. The creature turned its red eyes on me and cried out in an unsettling voice.

“Gekyuu?!”

Whatever this thing was, it clearly wasn’t good.

“Khest!”

The mysterious, devil-like fairy flew at me, its hand transforming into a knife, but I batted it down. It hit the ground with a wet thud that echoed through the room.

“Nng, huh...?”

As soon as the creature fell, Ariane’s head started darting around the room, as if she’d come out of a trance.

“Are you okay, Ariane?”

Ariane shook her head. “I’m sorry. I seemed to have gotten lost in my own head...”

I motioned toward the broken figure on the floor.

“Could this be the culprit?”

Ariane’s eyes went wide. “What’s an imp doing here?”

Now that she mentioned it, it *did* look a lot like the monsters known as imps back in the game, though they definitely weren’t this small.

“Imps possess bewitching magic, right?” That’s how it worked in the game anyway.

Ariane nodded, staring down at the imp.

“But they’re usually only found in dark places like caves, or in spots where there’s a high concentration of mana.”

“That was my pet, y’know.” A voice called out from the darkness. “What an awful, *awful* thing you’ve done...”

Ariane and I tensed, turning in the direction of the voice. I reached up and gripped the hilt of my sword.

A man walked out of the darkness. A man I’d seen before. Last night, in fact, out in the suburbs when he was drunk and hitting on Ariane. He must have had

some sort of connection with the lord here.

He was tall and well-built, his familiar braids swaying as he walked. The edges of his mouth curled into a smile as he watched us.

“Well, if isn’t you two bastards.” He looked from Ariane to me as he spoke, a note of amusement in his words.

I guess he remembered us after all, despite how drunk he’d been.

“What’re the odds I’d run into you here? And who the hell *are* you anyway?”

The man seemed to be enjoying himself as he questioned us.

“We’ve got nothing to say to you.” The menace was thick in Ariane’s voice as she drew her sword.

“Hehehe. Well, I guess I should show my appreciation for what you did to me!”

Despite wearing a sword at his waist, the man made no attempt to draw it.

“Once I kill that big boy behind you, I’ll be sure to treat you reeeeeal good.”

He finally drew the sword from his waist and swung it around a few times in dramatic fashion.

Just then, two massive white beasts dove down from the second-floor balcony. Their muscular bodies stood around two meters tall, and their tails gave off a faint glow. These were the same wolves we’d encountered back in the forest at the base of the Anetto Mountains. They were able to create illusions of themselves at will in order to confuse their prey while hunting, making them quite a hassle to deal with.

Unlike last time, however, these ones each had a metal ring clasped around their front ankles.

“Haunted wolves?!” Ariane and I both blurted in unison.

As if on cue, the wolves rushed toward us, their bodies low to the ground. They both dove toward me, exposing their vicious fangs.

I spun my body to the side and used my shield to block one of the wolves while swatting at the other with my gauntleted fist. They both flew backward,

howls tearing from their jaws as they crashed to the ground.

The man seemed genuinely surprised by this.

“Whoa! So you aren’t just some useless puppet after all. Why don’t you give this one a try?!”

He waved his hands, a look of enjoyment on his face.

Out from the darkness lumbered a mob of ogres. Unlike the ones we’d run into at the border near Grahd, these were all holding massive battleaxes. Around their ankles, they each wore the same kind of metal rings as the haunted wolves.

“A monster tamer?”

This wasn’t a class available in the game I played, but it was common in other RPGs.

Monster tamers would usually put monsters under their control and use them to attack. However, I hadn’t seen anyone using monsters to fight like this since coming to this world, so I’d just assumed such abilities didn’t exist here.

“I’ve heard about them, humans living up north who have the ability to control monsters!”

Ariane held out her sword and aimed it toward the oncoming ogres, though never quite taking her eye off the smirking man.

“My, my, aren’t you well informed! My name is Fumba Soodu Rozombanya, the beast tamer. But you can call me Fumba. So, what’ll it be? No matter how strong your armor is, with this many ogres, it’s just a matter of time until they beat you to a pulp! Hahaha!”

I fixed the smiling man with a glare and drew my two-handed blade with one hand, holding my shield firmly in the other. I twisted my head from side to side, letting out a pop.

A vein bulged in the beast tamer’s forehead as he shot me a murderous glare.

“After I’ve slaughtered you, I’m going to make that girlfriend of yours squeal.”

He was practically licking his lips, his tone venomous.

Ariane, the subject of his lustful gaze, pulled back her hood to expose her face.

“I hate to break it to you, but I don’t lie with the likes of you.”

Fumba hardly seemed to notice Ariane’s insult and instead threw his hands up and let out a hearty laugh.

“Gyahahahaha! So you’re an elf, huh? I guess that means you’re here to do some rescuing.” He fixed Ariane with a cruel grin. “Good job getting this far! But unfortunately for you, they’re all gone.”

Was it true? Were there no more elves left in the castle?

“Do you know what happened to them? Gyahaha! They were used as test subjects to improve monster control techniques. It’s awful, a real shame. They were just women and children, y’know? At least let us use the women for a little fun, am I right?”

A look of rage twisted across Ariane’s face. “You son of a...”

Fumba laughed derisively. But Ariane wasn’t playing around. A flame enveloped her sword, illuminating the room in a wavering red glow. Fumba let out a low whistle, his lips contorting into a sneer.

“Don’t worry, missy. Unlike everyone else in the empire, I don’t discriminate between humans, beastmen, or elves. So long as everything’s where it needs to be, that’s good enough for me. Gyahaha!”

“I’m going to shut your mouth for good!” Ariane rushed toward Fumba.

The flame-engulfed sword trailed fire as she swung it down. However, Fumba deftly blocked the blow with his own sword. The beginning of this duel seemed to be a signal that the ogres and haunted wolves had been waiting for. They ignored Ariane and loomed closer toward me, murder in their eyes.

It seemed clear that Fumba had entered this building on his own, and that he had no plans on calling for any backup. So long as we killed him here, we might escape without anyone being the wiser.

I held the mythical-class Holy Shield of Teutates tighter in my left hand and retreated slowly, keeping my back to the wall. If I stayed here, I should be able

to cut down any oncoming monsters with my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg. Fortunately, I'd already encountered both of these monsters before, and neither were terribly strong.

I deflected a strike from one of the ogre's battleaxes with my shield and focused on the two haunted wolves approaching from my right. I could see another pair of wolves watching me from farther off, meaning that these two were an illusion.

"Not a chance!"

The last time, I'd been surrounded by a whole pack of haunted wolves, so the two I was facing—four, if you counted the illusions—wouldn't be a problem. They couldn't swarm me like before.

I swung my sword in an upward arc toward the oncoming wolves. The blade emitted a light azure glow as it chopped them in half. Pitiful howls escaped their mouths as their bodies slumped to the floor, staining the stone floor red.

I raised my sword again, swinging it in a horizontal slash, sending another three ogres to the ground. Watching their comrades fall, the remaining ogres cowered away from me. Then, as if ordered by an invisible commander, they rushed forward again to bang on my shield.

I shoved one of the ogres away, sending it flying through the air and into a pillar, where it slumped to the floor.

Another haunted wolf was now trying to get behind me. I sliced down, just barely missing it and carving a large gash in the stone floor instead. The wolf leaped backward, as if it could sense the danger. I sliced again, effortlessly cutting another ogre in half.

"You're no match for me!"

I swung my blood-soaked blade through the air, splattering the walls. Fumba, locked in combat with Ariane, looked over at me in shock.

They were talking about me.

"Just what kind of monster is he?! Is there a minotaur lurking under that armor?!"

Ariane grinned. “Unfortunately for you, it’ll take more than a few monsters to keep him busy. Honestly, I think you’d need a dragon!”

Her flame-covered sword came close to cutting Fumba, instead setting his shirt on fire. He shrugged it off, ripping away the burning fabric.

Fumba’s upper body was covered in tattoos, which almost seemed to glow, making it look like they were floating above his skin. Were they somehow related to his ability to control monsters?

Despite Ariane’s impressive swordsmanship, Fumba was holding his own against her. She was truly skilled with a blade, however, and as I watched them fight, I could see that she was slowly gaining the upper hand. I wondered if Fumba was distracted by the fact that I was tearing his precious monster corps to shreds.

The self-proclaimed beast master screamed in rage, sprinting backward to put some distance between himself and Ariane.

“Dammit! All right then, how about you try this on for size?!”

The windows running along the south side of the room shattered, sending glass everywhere as a swarm of monsters that looked like a bizarre hybrid of human and fish smashed their way in.

Each had the lower body of a human and the upper body of a fish—albeit with a pair of human arms, clutching a metal harpoon—and they were covered from head to toe in blue scales. The fins on their backs twitched as they let forth an eerie cry.

These sea creatures were pretty common in the game. I wondered if they’d been lurking in the lake in the garden.

The sight of them reminded me of something I’d seen in a popular anime. Before I could stop myself, I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Looks like they forgot their fishnet stockings!”

“Sahagin? Ha! That’s even a step down from your ogres!” Ariane shot Fumba a defiant smile and chopped down one of the creatures that had gotten too close.

Several sahin joined the mob of ogres surrounding me, so I swung my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg in a horizontal slash, chopping down as many as I could.

As Ariane had alluded to, sahin weren't known for their fighting prowess. However, what they lacked in strength, they usually made up for in sheer numbers.

"Gwahahaha! They're just to keep you from escaping. I've arranged a real treat for you, and it's on its way now!"

An immense roar echoed throughout the castle grounds, drowning out Fumba's laugh and the sahin's screeching. The ground rumbled underfoot and the building shook.

"What was that?"

"Huh?!"

Fumba grinned from ear to ear, as if already assured of his victory.

"Maybe you can massacre my ogres, but can you face off against my next surprise and live?"

The rumbling beneath our feet grew stronger. Whatever Fumba had called, it was getting closer. Had he brought an actual dragon to the fight?!

Ariane dropped several more sahin and chased after Fumba. The monster tamer, perhaps too confident in his victory, had let down his guard.

"Blazing embers, heed my call. Consume all to ash!"

A blueish-white flame burst from Ariane's blade, licking violently up into the air. With a mighty swing of her sword, the sahin surrounding Fumba were burned to a crisp in an instant, like sheaves of paper tossed on a campfire.

"What the hell?!"

Fumba had retreated behind his sahin mob only to have Ariane reduce them to ash.

"You wench!" Fumba shouted as his blade clashed with Ariane's.

But the bluish-white flames continued, wrapping around Fumba like a snake

until his entire body was engulfed.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaugh!!!”

The monster tamer’s dying screams filled the hall as he went up in a massive pillar of fire, reaching all the way to the vaulted ceiling. The flames spread until the whole ceiling was ablaze. The remaining sahagin dove back out the windows in order to escape. The ogres followed quickly after.

Ariane stabbed her sword into the floor, breathing heavily. I rushed over to her.

“Are you all right, Ariane?”

She put a hand out to push me back, smiling.

“I’m fine. I just used a little too much mana is all...”

She wasn’t kidding. The charred corpses of sahagin lay all around her, fires still burning in a few of them. The lump of charcoal that had once been Fumba was barely recognizable as human. That was some impressive magic.

“Can you stand?”

I sheathed my sword and offered Ariane my hand.

“Thank you, Arc.”

Ponta, still wrapped around my neck, stuck its head up.

“Kyiii!”

Right at that moment, a thunderous roar echoed through the room, causing the entire building to shake on its foundation—far more violent than any tremor we’d felt yet.

The chandeliers swung wildly above our heads. One broke free and smashed into the stone floor with a tremendous crash. I put myself between Ariane and the flying shards, letting them bounce harmlessly off my back.

“What was that?”

I glanced around the room. Ariane sheathed her sword and made her way to the now glassless windows before jumping through them. I followed close behind.

Outside the sunroom was a tree-lined garden and pond, and beyond that, the castle wall. I could see several guards atop the wall frantically pointing toward us.

No, not us. Something else entirely.

“Arc, over there!”

Ariane pointed across the garden to the corner of the building. I used Dimensional Step to teleport over.

When I peeked around the corner, I saw a monstrous beast covered in turquoise scales. Multiple heads sprouted from its body on long, snaking necks, their tongues darting out as each head hissed.

From the top of its outstretched heads to the bottom of its four large feet, the monster stood around ten meters tall. In all, I counted five heads connected to its mammoth body, each of which were busily swallowing up nearby guards.

As it lumbered toward the building, the monster used one of its heads like a whip and smashed through the entrance, sending the mosaic-like stones tumbling to the ground with an explosive crash.

“A hydra...”

My eyes were locked on the awful, awe-inspiring monster. Beside me, Ariane couldn’t take her eyes off it either.

This...thing was far different from the hydras I was familiar with. If it had the same characteristics as in the game, then it was a high-level monster with impressive regenerative abilities and a high affinity for water-based magic—as well as a strong resistance against the same.

I wasn’t sure exactly how the hydra fit into this world, but judging by the sheer amount of destruction it was inflicting and the palpable fear of the castle guards, I had a pretty good guess.

One of the hydra’s mouths opened and released a white beam of light into the ground, ripping a hole through the castle wall. Seconds later, I began hearing panicked screams from the town beyond the wall.

Apparently, this was the surprise Fumba had been talking about. But now that

he was no longer here to control it, the monster was free to rampage on its own. If it got through the wall, the damage to the town would be immense... assuming there was still a town left when it was done.

“What should we do, Ariane?”

“What *can* we do?! Unless you want to get into a wrestling match with it?”

“Mmm...”

Even if I could fell the beast, I would draw too much attention to myself, potentially hindering all our future efforts. On the other hand, I couldn’t just turn a blind eye to the countless number of townsfolk who would end up either dead or wounded.

The castle soldiers were already running for their lives, rather than even attempting to fight the hydra. It was only a matter of time until the beast was roaming the streets.

I sighed. Maybe I’d draw undesired attention, but it looked like it was up to me to take down the hydra.

“Give me five minutes!”

I waved my hand in front of me. A sprawling magical symbol appeared on the ground, emitting a hazy red light that slowly grew in intensity. It was the first time I’d used this particular skill here, but it seemed like I’d pulled it off without a hitch. If everything went according to plan, then I’d be able to settle this without calling attention to myself.

I began chanting. “I summon forth the fire demon Ifrit!”

A bright red light erupted from the magical symbol, followed by a massive wave of hot air and a pillar of flame shooting straight into the cloud-filled sky.

A black shadow appeared in the middle of the pillar, a beastly roar erupting from the flames. The air reverberated with a pressure wave that rippled through the castle and out into the town.

Once the pillar of flame dissipated, a five-meter-tall demon stood in its place.

He looked almost like a cross between a demonic lion and a bull, with a mane of fire and two twisting horns growing out of his forehead, the latter giving off a

dark, eerie glow. His upper body was covered in bright red, glowing scales, as if he were wearing a breastplate fresh from the furnace, while his lower body—consisting of two half-human, half-bull legs—was bare.

The demon opened his mouth to reveal rows of vicious-looking fangs. He let loose a blast of flame.

“Wh-what is that, Arc?!”

Ariane’s eyes were wide with disbelief.

This was one of the skills I’d learned from the Summoner class. It allowed me to call forth a demon—in one of several different colors—to assist me for a limited amount of time. However, while I could generally indicate a target, after that, the demon was free to act however it pleased.

Ifrit was an early-level summon who generally preferred physical attacks, though he could also use fire magic. However, a summoned demon’s power was also supplemented by the magical ability of the Summoner, allowing me to use Ifrit against even high-level monsters like a hydra.

Ariane, apparently never having seen a summon in her life, kept repeating the same question over and over.

I wasn’t quite sure how to explain it. “Well, it’s kind of like...umm...like I called a monster over from another world. Or something.”

Ariane didn’t seem satisfied with this answer. “This isn’t real, right?! I’ve never seen this kind of spirit magic in my life!”

I turned toward the hydra, who was still rampaging through the castle grounds, its five heads keeping a wary eye on the new challenger.

Ifrit, picking up on the silent command I’d sent to commence his attack, let loose another roar, sending bouts of fire into the sky. He bared his claws and charged.

Two of the hydra’s snake-like heads raised up, opening their mouths and shooting out beams of white light.

Ifrit deftly dodged these, lunging toward one of the hydra’s necks with his flame-covered claws. A moment later, the head fell to the ground with a thud.

“Gyshaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

The hydra let out an angry roar, stumbling backward to protect its severed neck.

But Ifrit didn't let up on. He vaulted over the hydra, grabbing ahold of its long, monstrous tail.

One of the hydra's heads swung around and attempted to take a bite out of Ifrit, but the demon's armor-like scales held strong, preventing the teeth from sinking in. He seemed unfazed by the hydra's bite and let out another roar as he began spinning the hydra around, his grip firm on its tail. The hydra's massive body lifted into the air, looking almost like a toy as Ifrit slowly picked up speed.

The hydra's body smashed through buildings as it spun, reducing everything it hit to rubble. The few remaining soldiers ran for their lives to escape the castle grounds.

I didn't recall ever seeing Ifrit fight like this in the game.

“H-hey, hold on a minute! Make him cut that out!”

Ariane didn't seem too pleased at seeing Ifrit unleashed like a destructive tornado.

I bowed my head in apology.

“Unfortunately, there's really nothing I can do until he disappears, which should be in five minutes.”

Honestly, I really hadn't expected this to turn into a monster brawl like you might see in a movie. I was worried the damage could easily spread out into the town before Ifrit was finished with the hydra.

Just then, however, a familiar voice called out from behind us.

“Arc! Ariane! Are you okay?”

I turned around to find Chiyome, dressed in her ninja garb.

“We're fine. And yourself?”

“Everything's all right on my end. That hydra appeared a short time ago near the western fort before tearing its way through the walls and smashing apart

the castle.”

Chiyome began giving a brief report of what had happened on her end, but she stopped suddenly, directing her gaze toward the battle between Ifrit and the hydra.

“Where did that fiery demon come from?”



I didn't have time to answer before Ifrit let go of the hydra's tail, sending it flying at almost unbelievable speeds. It crashed into the top of the castle wall and bounced over it like a rubber ball.

I heard a loud crash outside the castle walls, followed by a loud metal clang, like someone had just struck a bell. The ground shook and, a moment later, the whole area was filled with a massive plume of dust.

Ifrit dashed forward and dove over the wall, pursuing the hydra.

This was definitely not good.

"We need to follow them! Hold on!"

After making sure Chiyome and Ariane both had their hands on my shoulders, I focused on the top of the crushed castle wall and teleported. A moment later, we were standing atop it, with no guards in sight. I looked down into the town below, only to find that one of the Hilk church's bell towers had fallen over, nearly destroying the entrance.

Three of the hydra's heads were sticking up out of the debris, roaring loudly and glaring at something. I followed its gaze to Ifrit, his mane of fire beginning to swell.

The town was in a state of panic. Residents poked their heads out of windows, screaming as they caught sight of the carnage in front of them.

Ifrit let loose an immense roar as its mane of fire turned white hot. A ball of flame flew out from it like a shooting star, straight at the hydra. All three of the hydra's remaining heads opened their mouths and shot back beams of white light.

When the shooting star and the beams of light collided, a massive explosion rocked the town, sending up a cloud of dust that reduced visibility to practically nothing. This was followed a moment later by another explosion and a loud, booming shockwave. A pillar of fire shot into the air, a vortex of dust and debris forming around it.

Ifrit, floating in the midst of this pillar, which seemed to extend from hell itself up into the heavens, glowered down at the tragic remains of what had once

been a church. In this brief moment of serenity, the demon faded away, as if he had never been more than an illusion.

That...hadn't turned out quite as well as I'd hoped.

Chiyome and Ariane gaped as smoke and flames licked up from the wreckage of the church. The wind carried with it the smell of roasting meat and the panicked cries of the townspeople, audible now that the thunderous din of the battle had died.

"Well, at least it looks like the hydra was taken care of."

"Kyikyiiii!"

I brought my hand across my forehead as if wiping away sweat and let out a deep breath. Sensing that the danger was finally over, Ponta made its way up from my neck back to the top of my head.

Ariane plucked the fox from its perch and pulled it close to her chest, speaking in a cold, flat tone.

"Let's get you away from that dangerous thing."

Ponta looked confused at this.

"Kyii?"

Chiyome looked at Ariane, who was busy glaring at me, and tried breaking the tension.

"So, wh-what's our next step?"

After staring at each other in silence for a moment, Ariane and I both sighed and spoke at the same time.

"Back to Lalatoya?"

"We should head to Lalatoya."

I looked at the pile of rubble that had once been a church before staring up into the gray-cloaked sky. I would need to be a lot more careful using summoning magic from here on out.

The rain began falling even harder, as if hoping to drown out the screams echoing throughout the town.

Epilogue

Lalatoya was an elven village located deep within the Great Canada Forest.

The village elder lived in a three-story house that was an amalgamation of a tree and a elf-made structure.

Past the entrance was an open hallway, at the center of which a large pillar ran straight up through the ceiling. The door-lined hall ran around the outer perimeter of the house.

The first floor had stairwells on either side, the top of which opened into a large room that served as the dining area and kitchen. At a large, wooden table in the center of this room sat Glenys, Ariane's mother.

Glenys was a dark elf like Ariane, as evidenced by her amethyst skin and snow-white hair, which she wore tied back in braids that hung over her shoulders.

Ariane sat across from her mother, with Chiyome and me seated beside her. Ponta was under the table, wagging its large cottony tail around cheerfully as it munched away at a dried apricot-like fruit Glenys had prepared.

Chiyome was the first to speak. "I apologize for coming here unannounced." She hung her head, her black cat ears folding close to her head.

Glenys just smiled at the young girl. "It's nothing really. After all, Arc's the one who teleported you straight into town."

When I'd used Transport Gate to take us away from Leibnizche and return us to Lalatoya, I'd accidentally taken Chiyome right to the village elder. Bringing an outsider into an elven village without permission was a serious offense. But there really was nothing for Chiyome to apologize for—it was all my fault.

I bowed my head as well. "I apologize, Glenys. I will be more careful from here on out."

"Please do. However, since our guest this time is one of the mountain people, I think it'll be fine to grant our approval after the fact. We're both unwelcome as far as the humans are concerned, so I guess that gives us something to bond

over, huh, Chiyome?”

Glenys gave a sly grin and brought her hand up over her mouth at her own gentle teasing. Chiyome looked unsure how to respond.

Ariane lifted the white cup in front of her and took a sip of tea. “When will father be back?”

“He left for Maple the same day you two headed off to the Revlon Empire. He hasn’t been back since, though he did send a message. Anyway, why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Ariane explained all that had happened in Leibnizche. Glenys listened in silence, then let out a slow, controlled breath.

“So, the five elves who’d been brought there were no longer in town, and we don’t know where they were taken?”

“Correct. The town is also in a complete state of chaos right now after what happened with the hydra. We’ll need to give it some time before we start looking for new leads and...”

Glenys waved a hand to stop me.

“That won’t be necessary. It’s already been decided to table the rescue operation. Thank you, Arc, for your services.”

Ariane stood, the table shaking as Ariane pounded on it, fixing her mother with a steely gaze.

“Just what are you saying?! You want to turn our backs on the remaining five?!”

Glenys shrugged. “We’ve been hearing some unsettling rumors about the East Revlon Empire. If you have no further leads, then there’s no sense in continuing to put yourselves in danger out there. This decision came from Maple, so take it up with them if you have any questions.”

Ariane slumped her shoulders and sat back down. She looked unconvinced, and averted her gaze, her hands clenched tightly atop the table.

Chiyome looked back and forth between Ariane and her mother, as if to try to gauge the situation.

Glenys spoke again, her voice taking on a more cheerful tone. “Besides, we have a new assignment for you. We’ll need someone to guide Arc to the spring near the Lord Crown as his reward for aiding in the rescue operation. We’d like you to do that.”

I’d joined Ariane as a mercenary, and the payment offered for my assistance was a trip to a spring near the tree known as the Lord Crown. This spring, which had originally been mentioned to me by Elder Dillan, was rumored to be able to lift any curse. As such, it just might be able to cure me of whatever kept me looking like a living skeleton.

Ariane stirred in her seat, her face a mix of emotions.

Before I had a chance to say anything, however, she let out a heavy sigh, a melancholy smile gracing her face.

“Of course. Arc has been a great help in this mission.”

“If you tell me where it is, I’m sure I can get there on my own.”

The thought of having to part ways with Ariane saddened me, but I didn’t want to cause her any more trouble by making her accompany me all the way to the spring.

Ariane looked incredulous. “Arc, you’d never be able to find it. Not with your sense of direction.”

That stung, but I could hardly disagree with her.

Glenys clapped her hands together, a wide smile on her face.

“Then it’s settled! You may run into the Dragon Lord, in which case, your only chance to negotiate is if an elf accompanies you. It’s a rather unique place, and the route there is treacherous, so I want you to be careful, all right?”

I remembered them mentioning something about the Dragon Lord before. But I put thoughts of it aside for the time being.

“So, where is this spring located?”

“The Lord Crown is north of Lalatoya, in the valley between the Furyu and Hyoryu mountain ranges.”

Before Glenys could explain any further, Chiyome stood up from her chair, a look of shock plastered across her face.

“Miss Glenys, do you know the route to get there?!”

Glenys was visibly surprised at this sudden outburst, but she nodded all the same.

“I, um, yes. The Furyu Mountains, as the name implies, are full of Furyu wind dragons. Crossing them is no easy task. However, there’s a vast basin off to the northwest where the Karyu and Furyu ranges meet. There’s a cave there that will take you under the mountains.”

“Can... Can you take me with you?” Chiyome clasped her hands together and pleaded with Glenys, her eyes locked on to the older woman’s.

A look of uncertainty washed across Ariane’s face.

“What business do you have there?”

“Remember back in Kaysehk, when I said I had a request for Arc?”

I nodded.

“I was hoping you’d help me find the way to the land between the Furyu and Hyoryu mountains. Hanzo’s hideout was located there, and I thought your teleportation abilities might come in handy.”

Glenys looked deeply intrigued by Chiyome’s story.

Ariane arched an eyebrow at me.

Apparently, our party of three would continue for the foreseeable future. My heart welled with excitement at the thought. However, I tried keeping this in check, and instead focused on taking a sip of tea. It was only then that I realized I was still wearing my helmet. I set my helmet on the table next to me and lifted the cup again.

Chiyome let out a loud gasp, instantly springing to her feet.

“You’re undead?!”

Oh. Right. I hadn’t told her about my body yet. She may have been shocked, but I was starting to feel rather casual about the whole thing.

Houvan was located to the southeast, between Olav, the capital of the Rhoden Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Limbult, serving as a center of trade between the two.

Countless tents had been erected in the land around the city, serving as temporary homes to nearly three thousand soldiers.

In the largest of these sat Sekt Rondahl Karlon Rhoden Sahdiay, first prince of the Rhoden Kingdom. He sat in a chair so luxurious that one might almost forget he was in the middle of the wilderness. He looked well and truly bored as the officer in front of him delivered a report on the casualties suffered in their efforts to dispatch the haunted wolves along the road.

Tall and handsome, and impeccably dressed in an elaborate military uniform, Prince Sekt waved a hand to dismiss the officer before running his fingers through his light brown hair.

Another man entered the tent in the officer's place.

Everything about this new man's appearance gave the impression of a soldier, from his muscular body, to his uniform, to his immaculately trimmed mustache. Even his stark silence and curtness added to his stern appearance.

The man's name was Cetrion du Olsterio, lieutenant general of the First Royal Army. He was the son of General Maldoira du Olsterio, who had once overseen the Third Royal Army, though he'd killed his own father during the confusion in the capital a short time ago.

Lieutenant General Cetrion approached the prince and took a knee, looking pointedly at the other men in the tent.

Prince Sekt waved his hand in the same well-practiced gesture he'd used to dismiss the officer. He and the lieutenant general remained silent until the tent was empty.

"Is it urgent?"

Cetrion glanced around again, to make absolutely sure they were alone.

"I just received word from the lord of Tiocera. The men sent to retrieve

Yuriarna's body couldn't find anyone matching her description."

Sekt's eyes went wide in disbelief. "That's...impossible! Kaecks reported on the success of his mission and delivered her necklace to me! Maybe... Maybe her body was eaten by some monster roaming the forest?"

"There were some signs of monsters scavenging the bodies, and we were able to confirm the identities of several of the guards and bandits. However, both Yuriarna and her carriage were nowhere to be found."

Cetrion kept his voice low and steady, his eyes respectfully averted from the prince.

This only seemed to annoy Sekt further, even though he knew Cetrion was simply doing his job. He turned his gaze away, clenching his teeth.

"Send an urgent message to the capital and demand an explanation from Kaecks! And tell Lord Tiocera to double his efforts and do a more thorough search of the area! If Yuriarna is still alive, things will become quite troublesome indeed."

"At once, your Highness."

Cetrion stood and quietly left the tent.

After watching the lieutenant general depart, Prince Sekt pounded his fist on an armrest, fuming over the position he found himself in. He grumbled out loud to no one in particular.

"Dammit! So, I only eliminated that idiot, Dakares? If Yuriarna returns, the nobles in his camp will almost certainly align with her. Maybe I shouldn't have disposed of him so soon."

Until recently, Dakares's supporters had been against Yuriarna. But now that he was dead, support for her would almost certainly increase.

The prince rubbed at his throbbing head and took a deep breath.

"Pouting won't change anything. I need to put a stop to the uprising in Houvan and make my way back to the capital. If I'm not careful, I may be the next one snuffed out."

Sekt's eyes narrowed as he glowered at the town of Houvan, visible through

the flap of his tent.

It was his money and weapons that had made this uprising possible, and now he was commanding royal troops to quell it and bring peace back to the town.

He turned his gaze east, mumbling comforting platitudes to himself.

The Holy East Revlon Empire held domain over the massive swath of land on the eastern side of the northern continent. The town of Kaysehk sat on its southernmost border.

To the west, on the other side of the Siana mountain range and its dense forests, was the Great West Revlon Empire. To the south lay the Rhoden Kingdom.

Kaysehk itself looked almost like a fortress, surrounded by stout, stone walls that stretched high into the air. A military fort, made of simple, wooden structures, had been set up outside the town's western wall.

In one of the fort's barracks, a man sat alone.

Though the interior was simply furnished, there were a few decorations scattered about to give it some atmosphere. The large flag of the Holy East Revlon Empire above the door marked this room as that of the fort's commander.

A knock came at the door, and a man marched smartly into the room.

"You called, Commander?"

The man who'd entered had a thickset body and a wild look in his eyes. He sat across the table from the commander and saluted. The commander acknowledged the salute and set a wooden box on the table, sliding it toward the newcomer.

"These are the magical items you will need to carry out your operation, Major. Or so I've been told."

The commander spoke in a deliberate manner, his tone carrying a deeper meaning shared only between the two men in the room.

The major straightened. "Understood!"

He took the wooden box and carefully opened the lid, peering inside. However, upon seeing its contents, the major's eyes narrowed.

He wasn't exactly certain what he was looking at.

Inside the box was a crystal sphere, polished so brightly he could see the commander's face reflected on its perfect surface. Encased in the center of the sphere was a grotesque green and red eyeball that stared blankly off into space.

The major looked up at the Commander, his face a mask of confusion.

The commander let out a heavy sigh.

"This is, apparently, a magical item developed by the Runeology Cloister that can tell you how much mana is concentrated around you. The higher the concentration, the darker the crystal becomes."

The major picked up the freakish-looking crystal and squinted at it. "So, with this...?"

"With this you can find a safe route through the forest...or so they claim."

The commander shrugged, stood up from his seat, and walked over to the window facing the forests that stretched off to the west.

The major allowed himself a low chuckle. It was clear that both he and the commander weren't sure they could believe any claims that the Runeology Cloister might make.

The commander continued staring out the window. "Never mind that the Runeology Cloister brought about this whole situation in the first place. Anyway, that's all. Dismissed."

He turned back around to face the major.

"Yes, sir! I'll be off."

The major returned the crystal to its box and put it under his arm. After offering another salute, he left the commander alone in his room again and made his way to the parade ground at the center of the fort, where many soldiers stood in rows, waiting.

Behind them stood several more rows of ogres. The monsters wore metal battleaxes on their backs and steel collars around their necks that gave off a dull glow. Several minotaurs, even taller than the ogres, stood in the middle of this formation. The monsters made for an awkward sight behind the soldiers.

Suddenly, a massive roar broke the silence, causing the trees off in the forest to shake violently, as if being whipped about by a sudden breeze.

Side Story:

Lahki's Merchant Diary, Part 3

Olav, capital of the Rhoden Kingdom.

Through one district ran a street lined with various workshops, the craftspeople who owned them known throughout the capital for their excellence. One such workshop was devoted to leatherwork. Despite its modest size, this workshop was filled with experts in their craft. It was so famous that even nobles frequented it.

Off to the side, a small room served as the workshop's administrative office. It was a simple affair, built almost as an afterthought, that consisted of one wooden table and several stools. The room stank of leather treatment chemicals, making it difficult for those unaccustomed to the unique smell to spend much time there.

Two men sat across the table from each other, scowls gracing both of their faces.

One of them was clearly a craftsman, as evidenced by his dirty leather smock, balding head, and untamed white beard. This stubborn-looking old man was the manager of the workshop. He stroked his beard, his forehead wrinkling, as he fixed his piercing gaze on the young man sitting across from him.

The second man, a twenty-year-old merchant, wore fine clothing that complemented his attractive face and mussy brown hair. He smiled weakly.

"Forty-five! And that's the best yer gonna get!" The wrinkles in the old man's forehead deepened as he crossed his tree-trunk-like arms.

The merchant frowned and let out a sigh. "I guess asking for anything more would be a bit much, huh?"

"Yer damn right! And I'm only meeting with ya 'cause the old lady at the druggist introduced ya. Usually, I wouldn't deal in leather from unknown sources. My suppliers would give me all sorts of grief if they found out."

"That's certainly true."

Workshops in large towns typically only bought leather from specific guilds that they had preexisting agreements with. These guilds wouldn't care to hear about some stranger coming in and trying to make a deal behind their backs. Since workshops rarely ever purchased leather directly, they were able to demand heavy discounts to bypass the guilds.

When this merchant had sold kobumi flowers from Luvier to a druggist he knew, he'd mentioned to her that he'd stumbled across some dead sand wyverns, and she'd made arrangements for him to meet with the old man here in the workshop. Without her, this man never would have come to the negotiating table.

"So, forty-five sok each, yeah?"

"Yes, that works for me."

The older man uncrossed his burly arms and offered a hand to the merchant with a grin. The young merchant nodded and shook it.

"Oy! Come over here and pay this man!"

A young man came running over with a leather pouch. He opened it up to show its contents.

"Go ahead. Make sure it's all there."

The merchant took the pouch and began carefully counting the coins.

"Lahki, was it? Well, ya came at the right time! The whole capital's run out of sand wyvern leather. We have an enormous backlog from some of the nobility. Now we can finally get started on those orders."

The young merchant, Lahki, stopped counting the coins and looked back up at the old man with a wry smile.

If the affiliated guild didn't have any leather in stock, then dealing directly with a workshop was generally allowed. This meant that Lahki could have sold the sand wyvern leather at an even higher price than what the guilds normally sold it for.

"Well, looks like you got one over on me."

"Gyahahaha! No, I didn't. The guild would've given you no more than thirty,

y'know. I was treatin' you right."

The old man shot Lahki a white, toothy grin and patted him hard on the shoulder before standing and returning to the workshop.

After he'd finished counting the coins, Lahki said his goodbyes to the young man who'd brought them and left the shop.

His cart was now significantly lighter without the three sand wyvern carcasses. The horses made good time as they pulled him back to the inn. Along the way, a young man with short-cropped blond hair waved him down.

This muscular man wore leather armor, a simple sword at his waist, and a small shield on his back. He was clearly a mercenary.

Lahki acknowledged the man and slowed the cart. The man jogged over, calling out to Lahki as he got close.

"Hey, Lahki. If you're heading back to the inn, I wanna ride."

Before Lahki even had a chance to answer, the man hopped into the back of the cart. Lahki looked back at the newcomer.

"All done with your errands, Behl?"

Behl smiled back and nodded.

"Yup! I got my sword sharpened, so all that's left is to laze about on my bed and rest."

He crossed his legs and sat down in the back of the cart, looking at all the people as they rode past. After a few moments, he turned back to Lahki, as if he'd just remembered something.

"Did you get a good price on those sand wyverns?"

Lahki responded with a pained grin as he recalled the meeting at the workshop.

"Not really. He knocked me all the way down to forty-five sok each. Ah well, I don't usually deal in leather anyway, so I'll just tell myself it was a good price."

Behl laughed. "Anything's a good price for something you find lying by the side of the road, right? Hey, have you noticed how tense the guards here

seem?” His gaze narrowed in on a group of soldiers clustered in the already crowded streets.

The soldiers had surrounded a suspicious-looking man. Passersby picked up their pace, giving the group a wide berth. Several other guards stood nearby, fixing their steely glares on anyone who came too close. Lahki focused on the road ahead to avoid making eye contact.

“I wonder if something happened here in the capital.”

Behl sat up from where he’d been leaning against the side of the cart and pulled himself closer to the driver’s seat, glancing around before speaking to Lahki in a hushed tone.

“I heard that, just a few days ago, the slave markets here were attacked—a coordinated attack. A lot of slaves are currently on the run. And the biggest of the markets was completely leveled. I went to see it myself. It’s just literally a pile of bricks.”

Lahki knitted his brow. “Judging by how the guards are acting, it seems like they haven’t caught whoever’s responsible.”

“Seems like.”

The two lowered their voices even further, exchanging glances as they neared the guards.

“Probably best to not stay too long.”

Lahki let out a heavy sigh and agreed with his friend. Behl resumed his seat, leaning against the side of the cart.

“You said it. One wrong step and we might end up like that guy.”

The cart pulled onto a street full of inns, and the two began scanning the area.

Behl’s eyes fell on a woman standing in front of one of the inns and called out to Lahki, pointing in her direction.

“There’s Rea. Over there.”

Lahki steered the cart toward her. As soon as she spotted them, she began

waving.

Rea was dressed in mercenary garb, which allowed for easy maneuverability. She wore her chestnut-colored hair tied up in the back. She smiled at Lahki as the cart pulled up to the inn.

“Heya, Lahki. How’d it go with the leather?”

Lahki hopped down and started cleaning out the cart. “They really hammered me down on the price, but I sold them. The kobumi made me a tidy little profit, though, so this has been a good trip for us.”

Behl butted into the conversation. “Speaking of which, where are we going next? Should we just bum around the capital for a while?”

Rea glared at Behl, though she was curious how Lahki would respond.

Lahki stared off into space for a moment before looking back at his two companions.

“Now that we’ve got some coin to work with, and since the capital doesn’t look like the safest place to be right now, I was thinking about heading to Lamburt for a bit.”

A bright grin spread across Behl’s face at the thought of finally returning home.

“Ooh, maybe I can catch up with some friends!”

Rea, however, looked confused. “Does that mean you’ve finally saved up enough for a permit to run your own shop?”

“I dunno about that. I might have enough to buy a permit for a small shop at the officially listed rate...but I’d need some connections to make that happen. If it went to auction, there’s no way I could afford it. And that’s all assuming that there are even any permits for sale.”

Despite the despondent look on his face, Lahki still seemed like he was enjoying himself. His cheerful demeanor spread to Rea and Behl.

Behl hit his fist into his open palm. “Well then, whaddya say we start preparing for the journey?”

“Sounds about right. It’s a ten-day trip to Lamburt from here, so we’ll want to make sure we’re well stocked up.”

“I should to get some souvenirs from the capital for my family while I’m at it.”

The three returned to their room for a final, fitful night’s rest in the capital.

It had been nine days since they’d left the capital, and the trio was heading along a road flanked to the east by the Riebing Mountains as they made their way toward the glamorous port city of Lamburt. The road was usually well traveled, making it relatively safe from bandits.

However, the monster in front of them had apparently scared away most of the other travelers and sent them running for their lives. The three were completely alone.

A massive, three-meter-tall, bear-like creature covered in brown fur was blocking the road. Atop its massive body was the head of what looked like a wolf, its large, droopy ears giving it something of an endearing quality.

For Behl, who was slowly approaching the beast with his shield and sword at the ready, it was anything but endearing.

Though it wasn’t, strictly speaking, a monster, its massive body, combined with its sharp fangs and claws, made it far more formidable than the likes of goblins and orcs, putting it more in line with ogres in terms of raw power.

“Dammit! I never thought we’d run into a bear wolf out here! And now he’s fixated on us.”

Behl continued hurling insults at the bear wolf as he slowly advanced on it, swinging his sword at its face, trying to keep the beast’s attention on him.

Rea started chanting behind him. “Stone of flames, heed my call. Strike my enemy down!”

Two large, flaming stones shot off toward the bear wolf, but the beast avoided the attack by lunging toward Behl. It was surprisingly nimble for its size.

Rea’s failed magic attack had only served to infuriate the beast.

Behl lunched himself at the bear wolf, delivering a light gash to one of its front legs before diving back to safety.

“Lahki! On my mark, I want you to release the horses as a decoy and get out of here with the money. Start getting ready!”

“G-got it! Don’t do anything too dangerous!”

Lahki began looking over the cargo in his cart. A moment later, he retrieved the bag of money that he kept hidden away. He heard a whistling sound as something cut through the air, causing him to lift his head.

“Gwaaaaaargh!!!”

At the exact same time, the bear wolf let out a bellowing cry in anger and pain.

Lahki saw an arrow embedded deep in one of the beast’s eyes. It writhed about wildly, pawing the air with its front legs.

Another swishing noise, and three arrows embedded themselves in the bear wolf’s hind legs, causing it to lose its balance and stumble backward.

Never one to let an opportunity pass her by, Rea used her fire magic to sear the bear wolf’s face, the sudden heat causing the beast to tumble to the ground. Behl thrust his sword into the creature’s throat, the blade twisting and turning in his grip as it ripped through thick flesh, taut muscles, and bone.

He heaved a sigh of relief and yanked his sword out, sending up a plume of blood and filling the air with a warm, coppery smell.

Lahki looked around for the source of the arrows. He spotted a small group of young mercenaries standing atop a hill a short distance away.

One of the men, holding a bow, waved to Lahki and started making his way over.

Behl, who’d been catching his breath next to the bear wolf, suddenly noticed the man.

“Axe, is that you?!”

“Hey there, Behl! You’re still alive?”

Axe offered a warm smile, which Behl returned, and the two shook hands.

Axe turned his attention to Lahki and Rea. “Well, if it isn’t Lahki and Rea. It’s been a while.”

“And once again, thanks to you, we’re still here.”

“Heya, Axe.”

Axe was a longtime friend of Behl and Rea. They’d met him when all three of them were members of the Lamburt mercenary guild, back before joining up with Lahki. After that, Lahki got to know Axe as well, and would occasionally request his protection when doing business near Lamburt.

While the three chatted, Behl turned to the other mercenaries as they approached from behind Axe. Axe waved the four men over.

“I’m the leader of a small squad now, still working for the mercenary guild.”

Behl gave an overly dramatic gasp of surprise, then patted Axe on the shoulder and smiled brightly.

“Well, you’re moving on up in the world, Axe.”

“You could say that.”

Axe gestured to the bear wolf collapsed in the middle of the road, blocking traffic.

“Let’s talk business. We’re gonna split up this beast we just killed, right?”

Lahki nodded. “Fine by me, but how are we going to get it back to town? We don’t have a lot of room in our cart, so maybe we should just take the parts we can use and load them up?”

Axe agreed with this suggestion. He then motioned for his companions to start cutting up the carcass.

“How are things in Lamburt? Any new developments?”

“New developments?”

Lahki stood next to Axe as the other mercenary helped his man chop away at the bear wolf.

“Actually, now that you mention it, the town’s lord changed. Things were pretty messy for a while. But that’s all starting to sort itself out.”

Lahki breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s good to hear. I’d rather not open up shop in a dangerous town.”

Axe stopped chopping. “Still focused on that dream?”

Lahki nodded.

Axe smiled and snapped his fingers. “I mentioned that things were a mess, yeah? Well, some of the larger shops closed down. I hear that the new lord will be offering up some shop permits for sale soon.”

Lahki’s eyes went wide.

In towns like Lamburt, with a perimeter wall, space was at a premium. Most shops were already assigned to one thing or another, so spaces rarely opened up. It simply wasn’t possible to own a shop without a permit, and they were almost always purchased by someone from one of the larger towns. New permits were rare as well, since they required either a town expansion, explosive growth, or something equally unlikely.

The only other cases were when shops went out of business, like now, or when a permit was sold to settle a debt.

Axe was probably referring to the shops affiliated with the slave markets in the old part of town. With those gone, other medium-sized markets would likely try to secure more space for themselves. A lot of merchants with shops in the new part of town loved the idea of operating a business in the old part, which meant they might sell their existing permits.

“If only I had a way to buy them before they go up for auction.”

Lahki racked his brain, trying to think of anyone he might know who could help him get a permit.

“Well, it seems like we’ll be in Lamburt for a while then.” Rea snickered to herself.

Lahki nodded, his mind already hatching plans.

Afterword

This is Ennki Hakari, the author of *Skeleton Knight in Another World*. Thank you so much for picking up this story. It's thanks to you, the reader, that I was able to see a third volume of my story make it to print. I really can't thank you enough.

I would also like to thank my manager for dealing with all the hassles I've caused, the ever-talented KeG for always churning out such beautiful illustrations, and my editor for the wonderful corrections.

I decided to follow through on my shortcomings from last time and try to keep the page numbers down in this volume, which is why we've included character introduction pages.

I know it's a little late in the game to be introducing the characters, but I hope you'll overlook that little discrepancy.

Of course, the introduction pages still aren't complete as I write this afterword, so even I don't know how they'll ultimately appear. But I look forward to seeing them when completed.

Well, that's about it for now. See you again next time!

JANUARY 2016—ENNKI HAKARI



*Could you
lend us a
hand?*



Ariane Glenys Maple

DENIZEN OF THE FOREST; DARK ELF

This beautiful woman is a member of the dark elves, a species known for their amethyst-colored skin, white hair, elongated ears, and physical prowess. In addition to her unmatched swordsmanship, she has also been given the power to control both fire and earth thanks to her compacts with their respective spirits. Ever since hiring Arc to assist her in rescuing her enslaved comrades, the two have been constant travel companions. Ariane is the daughter of the elder of the elven town of Lalatoya, and younger sister to Eevin.

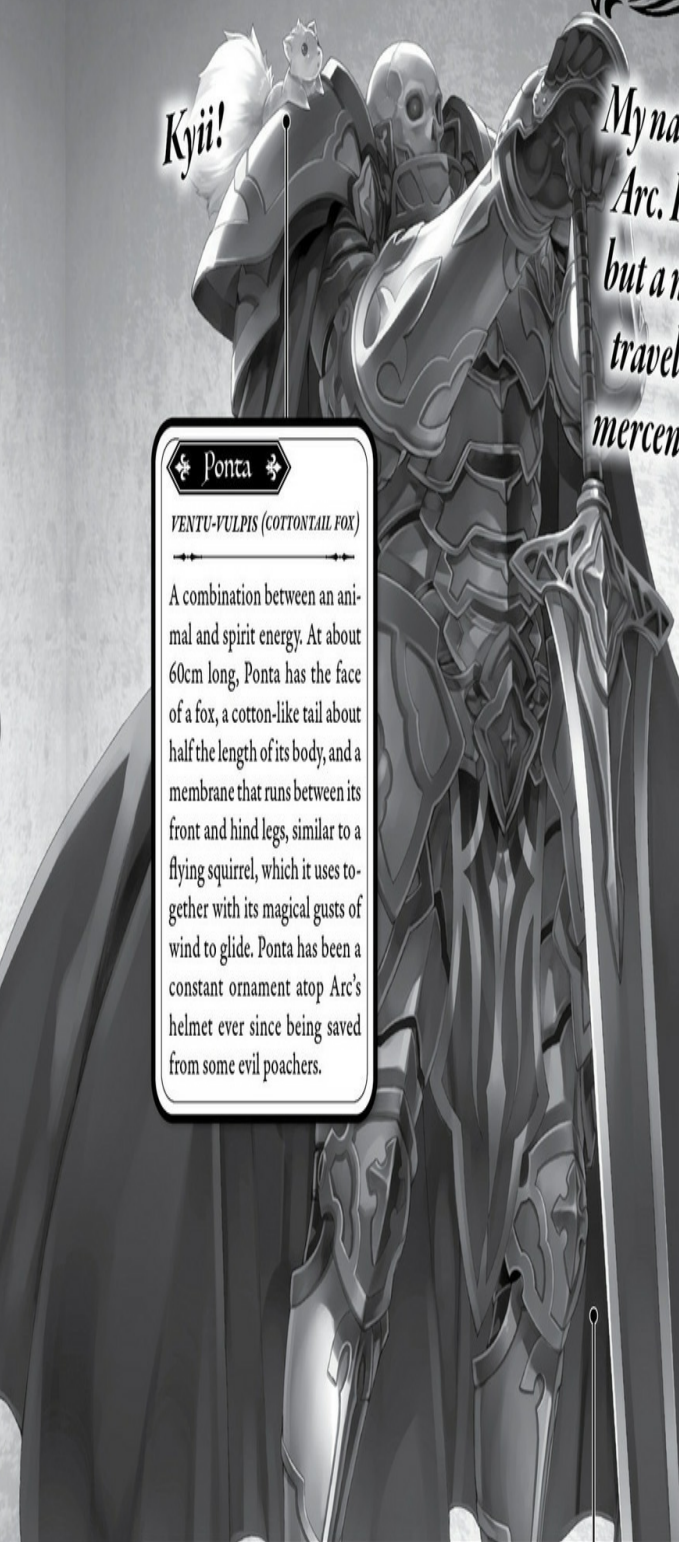
Kyii!

Ponta

VENTU-VULPIS (COTTONTAIL FOX)

A combination between an animal and spirit energy. At about 60cm long, Ponta has the face of a fox, a cotton-like tail about half the length of its body, and a membrane that runs between its front and hind legs, similar to a flying squirrel, which it uses together with its magical gusts of wind to glide. Ponta has been a constant ornament atop Arc's helmet ever since being saved from some evil poachers.

*My name is
Arc. I am
but a mere
traveling
mercenary.*



Arc

????

After falling asleep during an MMORPG gaming session, he awoke to find himself as a knight made up of armor and bones in a mysterious world. He possesses the skills of 10 different job classes, including the game's most powerful job, the Holy Knight. Standing at over two meters tall and weighing over 180kg, he could knock down the most powerful of beasts with a single punch. However, beneath that powerful exterior, he is incredibly naïve and has a horrible sense of direction.

*Water escape,
aqua fang!!*



Chiyome

MOUNTAIN PEOPLE; CAT SPECIES

One of the six members of the Jinshin clan, a secret group of spies brought together by their great founder Master Hanzo, 22 generations ago. She and her fellow clan mates are known by the humans as the “liberators” due to their travels around the country freeing their comrades that have been taken as slaves. Though usually calm and collected and hardly one to show her emotion, her childlike side comes out when she sees Ponta. After first meeting Arc back during their first operation to free the elves, they continue to run into each other along their journeys. After many twists and turns along the way, they wind up joining forces.



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