



SKELETON IN KNIGHT WORLD ANOTHER

WRITTEN BY Ennki Hakari
ILLUSTRATED BY KeG

VIII

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Ariane

“What makes you
think Arc and I
would ever be
married?!”

Arc

SKELETON
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ANOTHER WORLD

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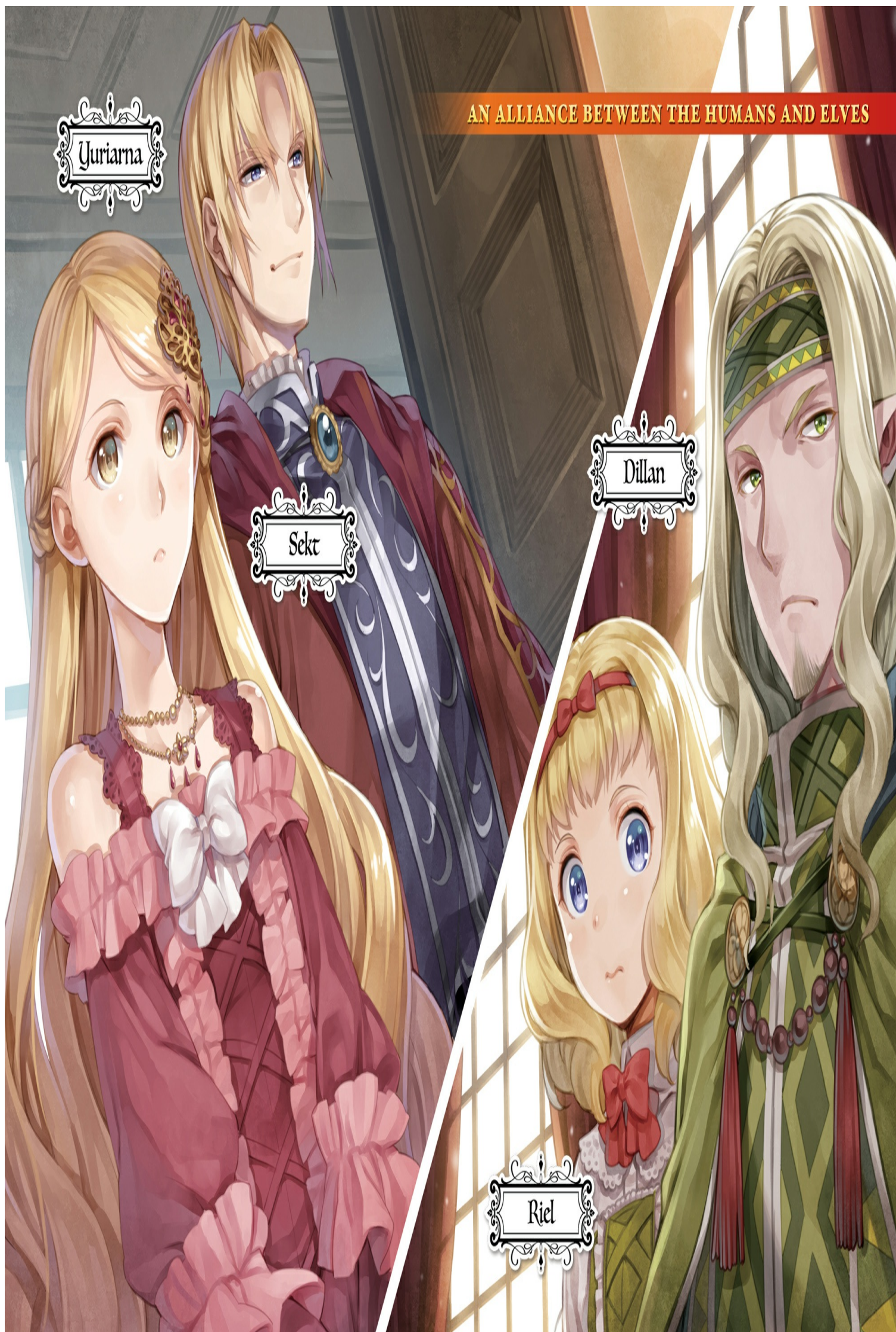
AN ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE HUMANS AND ELVES

Yuriarna

Sekt

Dillan

Riel



A full-page illustration of the character Felfi Visrotte. She is a young woman with long, flowing purple hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a dark, gothic-style outfit with a high collar and long gloves. She is smiling and looking towards the viewer. The background is a dark, cloudy sky with a large, bright moon. The text "Are you ready?" is written in a stylized, yellow font with a purple outline, positioned on the left side of the image.

“Are you ready?”

Felfi Visrotte

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrations by KeG

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Prologue

Up on the northern continent lay the Nohzan Kingdom, which was surrounded by three other kingdoms: the Delfrent Kingdom to the north, the Salma Kingdom to the south, and the Holy Hilk Kingdom to the west.

The Nohzan Kingdom was currently in a battle for its very survival.

Just a few days prior, shortly after dawn, Saureah, the capital of the Nohzan Kingdom, found itself under siege by a horde of over 100,000 undead warriors. The only thing keeping them out was the sturdy wall surrounding the city.

The assault continued unabated, with each side both gaining and losing ground until, on the seventh day, a breach was made in the capital's outer wall.

King Asparuh Nohzan Saureah, the commander in chief of the military, promptly issued the order for his soldiers to fall back to the inner wall and concentrate their forces.

Just inside the inner wall lay the old town district, the part of Saureah where the majority of the nobility and other wealthy citizens made their homes. Though generally known for being a quiet and tranquil place, its streets were now filled with refugees from the new town district.

The citizens looked up with apprehension at the massive inner wall that towered high into the sky, the sounds of brutal combat reverberating through from the other side.

Numerous citizens had packed themselves inside a grandiose building located at the center of the old town district—the Hilk church—to pray for salvation. The tension was palpable.

A man with delicately arranged black hair, wearing priestly robes and a gentle smile, spoke to the trembling congregants, not a hint of concern in his voice. The man was Palurumo Avaritia, better known by his title of Cardinal Liberalitas, one of the seven cardinals that served directly under the Hilk pontiff.

This high-ranking official of the Hilk faith speaking out to the fearful and weary masses elicited the image of a simple clergyman preaching his beliefs.

Alas, it was just an image.

While he was outwardly speaking words of comfort, inside, Cardinal Palurumo was filled with a perverse pleasure. *Gyahaha... Yes, yeeees. Gather here. Letting your fear run free in a desperate attempt to turn your minds away from your imminent demise. Alas, deep inside, you all know there is nothing you can do to escape the death that awaits you. I can feel your despair, and it feels...heavenly.*

Being here, among these people, was absolute bliss.

That was, until the cardinal received a report that put a swift end to his glee.

A massive pillar of light had been spotted beyond the outer wall in the midst of the oncoming horde of undead. It shot high into the sky from a magical rune traced into the earth. The light enveloped the entire city, bringing silence to its streets. A moment later, a massive creature covered in fire and surrounded by a tornado of flame appeared. It looked both distinctly human and distinctly not at the same time.

The creature floated into the air, kept aloft by six massive, flaming wings. With its scarlet and gold armor, a shield in the shape of a massive wing, and an elegant, burgundy blade, the creature looked like a servant sent straight from the heavens—an angel.

The angel managed to look both heavenly and avenging at the same time, its appearance evoking respect and fear.

The angel could have been interpreted as an offering from the gods—a servant sent down to answer the prayers of their faithful followers and save them from the undead army.

However, those who saw the woman aflame knew that this wasn't the case. They could feel it in their bones.

The men and women cowering in the church all turned to look up at the sky, bowing their heads in the direction of the angel and reciting prayers in unison.

All except for Cardinal Palurumo. He just stared in shock.

What is going on?! Why is an angel here?

He clenched his fists and shook his head vigorously in an attempt to get his

trembling body under control, and to fight off the thoughts that flooded his mind.

Gods don't even exist, much less angels! Just what is that...that thing?!

Cardinal Palurumo glared up at the floating angel. Fortunately for him, none of the surrounding people noticed the sudden change; so consumed were they with their prayers.

After a short time, the angel began shrinking before disappearing behind the wall.

And then, the city was silent...for a moment.

An instant later, a blast of flame roiled high into the air, accompanied by a massive crash from beyond the outer wall. A wave of panic washed over those inside.

Cardinal Palurumo grew visibly pale as he listened to the clash of battle. *What's going on out there? I can feel the presence of the undead beginning to fade!*

He struggled to regulate his breathing as he gazed at the spot where the angel had vanished.

The countless undead soldiers and thousands of specter warriors—half-man, half-spider creatures who kept the undead in line—had been created by the pontiff and entrusted to Palurumo. They shared a connection with the cardinal, which he used to control them. His body shook uncontrollably as he felt that connection weakening.

How did that...thing kill off my specter warriors and undead soldiers so easily? Where did it even come from? Am I supposed to believe that it's here to bring salvation? Preposterous!

The cardinal let out a low groan and shook his head, attempting to wipe the pained expression off his face. He stomped off in direction the angel had first been seen.

If it keeps up like this, the army will soon be too weak to continue the assault on the capital. I need to figure out who's behind this and stop them, even if I

have to do it myself.

The cardinal expertly weaved his way through the packed streets as he listened to the cacophony of destruction—the sounds of his plans falling to ruin. He clenched his jaw as his mind wandered to the other cardinals, wondering how well they were carrying out their own campaigns under the pontiff's direction.

Saureah's old town district looked like a war zone as refugees flooded in from the new district, their cries echoing through the narrow streets.

King Asparuh Nohzan Saureah and his advisors crowded into one of the towers of the castle, their heavy sighs filling the cramped space.

The undead had managed to breach the outer wall on the seventh day of the siege, plunging the capital into a rather dire state and putting the Nohzan Kingdom's very survival at stake.

The king's shoulders slumped, his face etched with worry as he leaned forward to look out one of the tower's small, south-facing windows. Suddenly, a flash of light many times brighter than the sun itself appeared in the distance. He instinctively turned away and squinted his eyes, letting out a yelp of surprise.

"What was that just now?"

But none of his advisors in the room could answer that question. All they could do was squint with him, as they, too, looked out the window, some using their hands to shield their eyes.

Once the light faded, and darkness returned to the room, the soldiers and political officials immediately began talking over one another as they discussed their theories, craning their necks to determine the source of the light.

It seemed like the light had come from beyond the outer wall, but the soldiers charged with protecting the capital had been ordered to retreat the moment the wall had been breached. The sheer number of undead now flooding into the city made it practically useless to send any troops out to face them.

One by one, the people crowded in the room fell silent. Clearly, something was going on beyond the wall. But the source of that something was a mystery.

King Asparuh was acutely aware of the unease rippling through the room, but there was very little he could say or do to alleviate it.

He stood silently, deep wrinkles etched into his forehead as he continued looking out the window. Just then, the door flew open, and all eyes fell upon a young messenger standing in the doorway.

“It’s awful! The undead hordes beyond the wall, there’s...there’s...an angel!”

The general scolded the babbling messenger. “You’re speaking to the king, you idiot! Make a proper report!”

The messenger straightened her back and offered a salute.

“Apologies, sir! Here is my report! A single unknown knight was spotted beyond the southern section of the outer wall attacking the undead. Moments later, a creature that looked like an angel appeared and began wiping out huge swaths of the undead army.”

All eyes, including those of the king and general, were locked on the messenger as they silently processed the contents of her report.

The general was the first to speak. “What kind of report is that? You’re seriously telling us that an *angel* appeared on the battlefield?!”

A vein bulged in the general’s forehead as he unleashed his anger on the messenger. The young soldier let out a squeak and tensed up, but quickly readjusted her stance and confirmed the report.

“That is correct, sir! I witnessed the angel myself, along with a number of other citizens. When I left to make my report, this angel had already wiped out a full third of the undead soldiers.”

The expressions in the room ranged from unconvinced to hopeful.

King Asparuh returned his gaze to the window, closing his eyes and mulling everything over. “Perhaps the gods have come to save us, just as the cardinal said.”

The king let out a sigh as he considered what might be going on outside the

city's walls.

If the messenger's report could be trusted, that meant that the Nohzan Kingdom might very well have been saved at the eleventh hour. He shook his head before anyone could notice the look of chagrin on his face, his thoughts turning to his two sons, whom he'd sent to seek reinforcements, and his young daughter, whom he'd sent to find refuge.

We can't let our guard down just yet...

Another messenger appeared at the door.

"Many undead soldiers have made it through the breach in the outer wall and are advancing through the new town district!"

The king groaned and began shouting to his advisors.

"Hurry up the evacuation to the old town district! General, I want your defenders to reform their ranks and prepare to meet the undead army's attack in the new district! If the first report can be believed, this is our chance to save the capital! Leave no enemy standing on our land!"

The general saluted and hurried about making preparations. The soldiers, advisors, and messengers all followed suit. The king turned his gaze back to the window, one fist clenched as he looked out across his lands.

Putting aside for the moment the question of what might have brought the angel here in the first place, he needed to seize this opportunity if he wanted to save the Nohzan Kingdom.

They had food stores in the old town district, of course, but the vast majority were located in the newer part of the city. If they let the undead roam free between the outer and inner walls, the citizens would soon be without food.

The king wished his men luck, and hoped that god would grant them good fortune, much as the angel had done.

His mind wandered to Riel, and he whispered a prayer for her safe return to the now-empty room. He had no idea when, or even if, he would ever see her again.

Chapter 1:

The Cardinal Revealed

Just outside the expansive wall that surrounded Saureah, the capital of the Nohzan Kingdom, stretched vast farmlands that had once been tended by the city's residents.

Moments before, an army of 100,000 undead had descended upon the capital and laid waste to the fields.

The ground just outside the breach in the wall near the southern gate was now littered with the charred remains of armored skeletons, the once fertile farmlands now covered in dust and ash.

I stood among this vast tableau of death, a solitary figure on the chaotic scene. I was outfitted in silver armor covered in intricate white and azure designs, revealed for all to see as the wind rippled through my black cloak. The blade in my right hand gave off an eerie, pale blue glow. The shield in my left was marked with several mystical runes.

"Looks like I might have overdone it just a little," I mumbled to myself. "Or, well, a lot."

I'd hoped to use one of my Paladin area-of-effect spells to wipe out half of the undead surrounding the capital. As far as I could tell, I'd managed to pull that off and then some. Excluding the undead troops that had made it through the breach near the southern gate, I'd wiped out nearly the entire army of the undead that remained outside the city. There might still have been a few scattered undead here or there, but they posed no threat, wandering the hillside now that I'd killed all of their handlers.

Just like with the undead I'd faced off against in the city of Tagent, it was pretty clear that they didn't really act with any sense of agency once they were cut off from their leaders. I figured there were at least a few hundred undead soldiers still wandering around out here, but I could safely ignore them for now.

The bigger issue was those who'd made it through the fallen wall.

My body still tingled slightly from the aftereffects of the spell, but it was hardly the time to take a break. As I turned to face the remains of the southern gate, I heard a familiar, annoyed voice call out from behind me.

“You don’t think you’re going in there alone, do you, Arc?”

A tall, beautiful woman closed the distance between us with purpose in her step. Her white hair—the color of freshly fallen snow—pointed ears, golden eyes, and amethyst skin made it clear to anyone watching that she was no human. She was a dark elf, dressed in a robe marked with intricately detailed runes and carrying a sword at her hip bearing a lion’s crest. Her eyes glanced around cautiously, her hand at the ready to draw her weapon should the need arise.

“Oh, Ariane. Well, I just about wrapped up things outside the city.”

She shook her head, a look of astonishment on her face. “Wrapped up? There’s nothing left, Arc.”

There really wasn’t anything I could say in response, so I decided to laugh it off and try to change the subject. “I guess I overdid it a bit, huh? Yeah, umm, sorry about that.”

Ariane raised an eyebrow. “Well, this time—actually, just like every other time, you messed up pretty bad. Riel’s guards are all scared out of their wits after watching you decimate the army of undead like that.”

She pointed her sheathed sword at me. All I could do was look up at the sky in contemplation.

“Kyiiiiii!”

The world went dark as a giant furball landed right on my face.

“Hey, Ponta! Would ya mind moving a bit?”

The furball—Ponta—skittered to the side a bit, letting light filter back in. Standing at about sixty centimeters—half of which was its long, cotton-like tail—Ponta had the face and body of a fox, with a thin membrane that ran between its front and hind legs. It was known by the elves as a cottontail fox, a spirit creature that could use magic to summon up a gust of wind that would

carry it around. Its back was a dark green, the color of grass, which acted like camouflage and allowed it to easily blend into the landscape.

Ponta assumed its rightful position atop my helmet and mewed as it turned its gaze toward Ariane. I could feel the large, cotton-like tail wagging against the back of my head.

Ariane let out a sigh and shrugged her shoulders. She sounded exasperated. “I’m serious here, Arc. If stories of dangerous elves get around, it will only increase the distance between our peoples. Of course, it’s too late to do anything about that now!”

All I could do was bow my head in apology.

Another voice broke into our conversation, this one belonging to a younger woman. “I’m not so sure about that. If they see what Arc can do, and assume that kind of power is common among our kind, they may very well decide that opposing us is a lost cause. And besides...”

The new speaker’s non-human features became all the more apparent as she drew closer. She was what the humans referred to as a beast person. The woman, Chiyome, was dressed entirely in black, and wore a dark headband with a metal buckle. Catlike ears poked out of her short black hair, and a long tail stretched out from her waist, swaying gently behind her.

Chiyome belonged to a group of ninja founded by a human named Hanzo, who’d been brought to this world much like I had. Hanzo had brought together the persecuted cat people in what would come to be known as the Jinshin clan. In spite of her young age, Chiyome was one of their six great fighters.

There was something about the way she moved so soundlessly and effortlessly that reminded me of a cat.

Chiyome turned her azure eyes away from me and looked off into the distance. I followed her gaze to find a young girl running across the scorched plains, carefully picking her way among the bodies. She looked entirely out of her element.

The girl was even younger than Chiyome, looking to be around ten or so. Her curly golden locks swayed gently around her shoulders with each step, lending a

sweet kind of innocence to her appearance. Though she was dressed in an elaborate set of leather armor, the beautiful dress she chose to wear under it was wholly unsuitable for the field of battle. What was more, she didn't even appear to be armed.

This little girl was, in fact, Riel Nohzan Saureah—princess of the Nohzan Kingdom. She had requested our assistance to come to the aid of her nation's capital.

Behind the young girl rode her two bodyguards, followed by around a hundred or so mounted knights. Every single soldier's gaze was fixed on me.

Niena, one of Riel's bodyguards, called out to her young charge as she raced toward us, the concern evident on her face. "Wait up, princess!"

However, the young girl paid Niena little mind as she ran as fast as her little legs would carry her. As soon as she reached me, she looked up at me with her large, steely gray eyes.

"That was absolutely amazing, Arc! Are all the other elves just as awesome as you?"

I hesitated, Ariane's warning from earlier still echoing through my mind.

However, as far as I could tell, Princess Riel looked upon us as allies. Even if she was the youngest member of the royal family, that had to mean something.

I slid my sword into its sheath and knelt slowly, so as not to frighten the young girl. I placed one hand over my heart and bowed my head low.

"I am truly honored by your kind words, dear princess. Alas, I fear I may have gone a bit overboard in my initial blow. Please forgive me."

"Kyii!" Ponta just had to get the last word in. It wagged its tail excitedly.

Princess Riel looked up at me wide-eyed. A slight smile crept across her face before she puffed out her chest and resumed her role as royalty. "All we could do was watch as you took the initiative. Your actions are truly worthy of praise!"

Her gaze bore into me, any nervousness all but gone. The same couldn't be said for her bodyguards, Zahar and Niena. They looked at me with trepidation.

Niena spoke to her young charge. “Princess Riel, it’s *dangerous* out here! Please, stay close!”

Judging by the extra emphasis on the word “dangerous,” I could tell she was referring to me. In any other situation, her reaction would have been entirely normal, if not understated. Behind her, I could see the ranks of cavalry hanging back, clearly balking at the thought of getting too close to me.

Regardless of their own personal apprehensions, however, these soldiers had still been dispatched to serve as Princess Riel’s guards, and would have no choice but to follow her wherever she went.

The young princess seemed to pick up on their hesitation and turned around, calling out in a loud, clear voice to the soldiers on horseback. Her voice carried a distinct royal authority.

“You have nothing to fear! Arc has driven away our foes, and it now falls on us to push our way into the capital, rid it of the enemy, and make our way to my father’s side!”

Both her bodyguards were initially taken aback by this.

Niena was the first to speak. “Princess, do you intend to have them join us in the capital? If Arc were to bring that kind of power to bear within the city’s walls, the capital itself would fall! Besides, they’re...”

Niena turned her gaze toward me and paused for a moment as she searched for the right words.

Zahar continued where his partner had left off. “Arc, I’m truly grateful that you helped save the capital...nay, the kingdom itself from certain collapse. Alas, I must ask that you use a gentler hand within the city. You’re a great deal more powerful than us humble soldiers.”

I could sense the apprehension in both Zahar’s tone and the hesitant look Niena gave me.

Ariane let out a sigh of exasperation.

Even if I were to promise Zahar not to do anything in the capital, there was still the unspoken threat that I was holding back a great power, which I could

bring to bear at any moment. Not agreeing, however, would only make things worse. I needed to be careful about how I worded my response.

I cleared my throat to ease the tension. But even this small noise caused the cavalry in the distance to shift uneasily.

“We fully intend to keep the promise we made to Princess Riel. For that reason, among others, we have no desire to see any damage come to Saureah. Furthermore, the technique I unleashed back there is not something I can use on a whim.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

What I’d said was true. This was one of the Paladin’s special skills, Archangel Executioner Michael. Not only did it have a long cooldown time before I could use it again, but also, to be totally honest, I really didn’t want to use it all that often. Summoning an angel from the heavens took a heavy toll on the body and mind. The whole experience had been nearly as traumatic as when I’d first returned to my elven body back in the mystical spring at the Lord Crown.

I looked closely at Zahar and Niena to try to gauge their reactions. They still looked uncertain whether they could take me at my word, so I decided to push them toward a response.

“That said...I may have wiped out the majority of the undead outside the walls, but several thousand still made it through the breach, and are raising hell within the city.”

Princess Riel, along with her bodyguards and the knights behind them, all turned toward the capital. If you listened closely, you could hear the sounds of combat from beyond the wall.

The princess turned her attention to her bodyguards. “We don’t have time to stand around and question Arc’s intentions! Zahar, Niena, we are entering the capital and making our way to Father at once, and they’re coming with us!”

Her tone left no room for debate. She turned, trudging toward the capital.

Niena chased after her young charge. “Please reconsider, princess! The city is much too dangerous. You should stay out here with a contingent of guards while we rescue His Majesty.”

While Niena pleaded with the young girl, Zahar signaled the soldiers. Then he turned toward me.

“We’ll enter the capital ahead of the princess, so I don’t want to see any of you fall behind! Arc, I trust that I can leave the princess with you?”

I glanced over to Niena, who nodded in agreement.

“Understood. I’ll keep watch over Princess Riel. C’mere, Shiden!”

At my call, Shiden came rushing over, crossing the vast distance in a matter of moments.

The driftpus was a little over four meters long from snout to tail, its body protected by a layer of reddish-brown scales and held up by six thick, muscular legs. It had two large, white horns rising out of the top of its head, and a thick band of white hair ran down the middle of its back to the end of its tail.

It almost looked like a tank as it smashed its way across the battlefield, paying little attention to the discarded armor or bodies.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

“Grweeeeeeeen!”

After quickly passing the cavalry, Shiden came to a stop in front of me to greet the spirit creature sitting atop my head.

“Chiyome, can you get up on Shiden with the princess? Ariane and I will provide security.”

Chiyome nodded. She wrapped an arm around the surprised princess and mounted Shiden, sitting Riel down behind her as she took the reins.

Zahar rode up beside Niena and leaned over to whisper something to her. She nodded and directed her horse over to Shiden. Apparently, she would be keeping an eye on us.

“There are still a large number of undead in the city. Keep your guard up!”

The cavalry responded to Zahar’s command with a fierce roar.

With that, Ariane, Chiyome, and I—accompanied by Niena and Princess Riel—followed the guards into the city. At last, we would be entering the capital of

the Nohzan Kingdom.

Thanks to my carelessness, our contingent of mounted soldiers was easily able to pass through the large hole torn in the wall near Saureah's southern gate.

I could only imagine just how much it would cost to rebuild the massive gate. Hopefully, the king would accept my explanation that it had been unavoidable collateral damage in my attempt to save the capital...and not demand that we pay for the repairs.

Up ahead, Zahar expertly led the troops into the city. Evidently, the rubble presented too much of a risk to the horses, so all the soldiers dismounted and led their steeds on foot.

Once they were inside, they encountered several undead, but Zahar and his soldiers made quick work of them.

The area was eerily silent, and showed no signs of life.

"They must have fallen back to defend the inner wall. We've no time to waste!"

After securing the perimeter, Zahar shouted out orders. His soldiers quickly mounted again and started racing down the main thoroughfare. Ariane and I ran alongside Shiden as we chased after them.

We encountered the occasional clump of undead soldiers as we made our way through the city, but they were no match for the mounted troops. The man-spiders, however, were another story entirely.

These massive creatures looked like a grotesque joke. Each consisted of two human torsos melded to a set of spider legs. They sported four massive arms, equipped with various shields and weaponry.

Though incredibly powerful, they were unable to attack in large numbers or even properly flank us here in the narrow city streets, making them easy for Ariane and me to dispatch.

"Wyvern Slash!"

As soon as I caught sight of one of the man-spiders, I launched a ranged

attack to keep it at bay.

It tried to deflect the blow with its shield, but to no avail. The energy lopped its leg clean off, leaving the creature unable to escape.

“Holy flame, heed my call! Devour thine enemy and burn it to ash!”

Ariane launched her own ranged attack to put an end to the man-spider’s misery. A blast of fire snaked from her blade and wrapped itself around the creature. Her ability to put such a swift end to the enemy was impressive.

Chiyome and Ariane used their superior senses to locate gaps between the buildings and other places where an enemy might hide.

“Body to water, aqua shuriken! Arc, over to your right, up on the roof!”

Chiyome was the first to spot the enemy. She launched an attack without dropping Shiden’s reins.

Fortunately, we were at the back of the column, and I didn’t have to worry about any of the soldiers seeing me use magic to close the distance.

“Got it! Dimensional Step! Shield Bash!”

I teleported next to the man-spider standing watch atop a nearby roof, taking advantage of his momentary confusion to smash him with my shield, knocking him off the building.

“What are you?!”

Its multiple eyeballs, strewn haphazardly across its human-like face, glared at me as it fell. The soldiers quickly put an end to it. The man-spider melted away, leaving nothing behind but a dark black sludge in the street.

Zahar’s soldiers had initially been spooked by the intimidating sight of the man-spiders. However, as they managed to slay one after another, with our help, they began marching through the streets with confidence.

I looked down to find Niena staring up at me, a look of shock on her face as she tried puzzling over how I’d ended up on the roof. In my zeal to exterminate the enemy, I’d used my teleportation ability without thinking about the fact that Niena was accompanying the princess. Apparently, she’d seen everything.

I glanced around to make sure no one else had seen anything. Fortunately, it looked as if all the other soldiers were focused on the route forward. Even Princess Riel, clinging to Chiyome's back, was looking ahead.

Ariane, however, simply shook her head, a hand to her temple, as if she were trying to suppress a headache. She let out a deep sigh of annoyance and urged Shiden on.

It was little comfort that none of the others had seen me teleport. Niena would almost certainly tell Zahar and Riel, and the story would spread throughout the Nohzan Kingdom.

"Ariane's gonna give me an earful," I muttered.

As my shoulders slumped, I could feel Ponta gently tapping my helmet and wagging its tail in an attempt to cheer me up.

"Kyii!"

"You're right, buddy. I just need to focus on getting to the castle."

I turned to look ahead and caught sight of another man-spider standing on the opposite rooftop. Sword firmly in hand, I launched another Wyvern Slash and teleported across, landing a deadly blow to the man-spider's torso.

Its humanoid half let out a blood-curdling scream as it tumbled off the roof, followed by its spider half.

Up ahead, in the distance, I caught sight of a towering wall behind the tranquil rows of houses.

"I wonder if that's the inner wall they were talking about?"

Glancing over my shoulder at the southern gate we'd entered through, I gauged the distance.

"Looks like we're about halfway there, give or take."

Ponta let out a gentle mew of agreement. I teleported down from the roof back to Shiden's side.

"Kyii."

Niena looked at me in shock once more, but she seemed to have decided that

this was neither the time nor place to confront me about my use of magic. She turned her watchful gaze back to our surroundings.

We soon found ourselves in a large, open space in front of the inner wall, facing a gate just a hair smaller than the one we'd passed through earlier. The main difference here being that the gate remained firmly shut, its thick planks of wood covered with massive iron bars.

As we made our approach, I caught sight of multiple guard towers filled with soldiers keeping watch. They'd clearly seen our large force marching through the streets and slaying undead, because they were cheering for us.

There were also shouts of surprise among the cheers, likely at the sight of Shiden. But even those took on a celebratory tone as the soldiers noticed Princess Riel waving up to them from atop the driftpus' back, which in turn lifted the spirits of Princess Riel's guards.

As soon as we reached the gate, Zahar split his soldiers into three groups to wipe out any remaining undead and secure the perimeter.

I drew my blade, figuring I could assist in cleaning up the area, but a sound from atop the wall caught my attention. The clamor spread as a figure—clearly not a soldier—stepped out from one of the towers.

The man was older, and dressed in nicer garb than the soldiers around him—though not excessively so. The people accompanying him also appeared to be nobility, and the soldiers they passed were all quick to pay deference.

I'd never seen the figure before, but judging by the way that Zahar and Niena immediately straightened up—not to mention the cry of delight from Princess Riel—I had a pretty good idea who it was.

“Father! I have returned!”

The older man—Riel's father and the king of Nohzan—immediately issued an order. “Open the gates! Open the gates at once!”

I could hear the sounds of soldiers rushing about, followed by the scrape of metal against wood as the massive bars were raised. A moment later, the heavy wooden gate creaked open.

Zahar motioned to Chiyome to continue. “Princess Riel, please hurry inside! The rest of us will guard the perimeter before following you in.”

Chiyome responded with a firm nod of her head and steered Shiden toward the open gate. Ariane and I jogged alongside. Our little party was met by a massive crowd of soldiers and citizens, cheering us on as we approached.

“There sure are a lot of people here.”

Ariane furrowed her brow. “Yeah, looks like this was going to be their last stand.”

With the outer wall breached, this inner wall was the city’s last line of defense. Judging by how closely the people were crowded together, I could tell that they were well over capacity here. Had the siege continued, I doubted if they would have lasted even a few days.

We’d brought with us a rather formidable force to bolster their defenses, and it looked as if we’d arrived just in time.

The regal figure from before appeared, running toward Riel, who quickly hopped off Shiden’s back and rushed to meet him halfway.

“Riel!”

“Father!”

The two embraced tightly, as if to reassure themselves that they were both still alive.

The king kissed Riel’s forehead and cheeks before offering a prayer to the heavens to thank them for returning his daughter. The princess, in turn, looked overjoyed to be back at her father’s side.

After the two shared their moment, the king’s gaze grew harsh. His voice was low, but powerful. “Riel, just what are you doing here? I told you to head to Count Dimo.”

He turned his attention to the two bodyguards standing behind her. They both hung their heads.

The massive gate slammed closed behind us with a satisfying thud. For just a moment, the world was completely silent as the king awaited a response.

The look in his eyes was that of an enraged father, fearful for his daughter's survival.

Zahar bowed his head low. "My apologies, Your Highness. I take all responsibility for what has..."

Before he could continue, however, Princess Riel stepped between Zahar and her father and interrupted the exchange.

"This isn't Zahar or Niena's fault at all! I was the one who decided that we would come back here. I just... I just couldn't stand by and watch my country fall."

I could hear the sorrow in her voice as she realized how betrayed her father felt. She might have been a member of the royal family, but she was still just a child.

However, she seemed to realize that all eyes were on her, so she cut herself off before she broke down into tears. The king smiled gently at his daughter and stroked her golden hair. He leaned in close and whispered into her ear.

"I'm sorry, Riel. I may be the king of this land, but I'm still a father who worries about his daughter's safety."

With that, his expression returned to that of a king, and his voice boomed as he turned his piercing gaze toward Ariane, Chiyome, and me.

"Now, could someone tell me who these people are and what they're doing here?"

I bowed and prepared to answer, but Princess Riel beat me to it. She dragged her sleeves across her eyes before speaking up.

"I hired them to come help save the kingdom. If it weren't for them, we never would have made it here."

The king eyed Chiyome and Ariane suspiciously. "A beast girl and an elf...?"

The king cocked his head in confusion, then turned his attention toward me. I reached up and lifted off my helmet—carefully, so as not to disturb Ponta—and revealed my face. Of course, I'd already anticipated that this might be an issue, and had drunk some of the mystical spring water from the Lord Crown to avoid

presenting my skeletal form. Instead, I presented the brown skin, black hair, and red eyes of my dark elf form.

The king looked back and forth between Ariane and me. “You don’t look anything like the elves I’ve heard stories about. Are you from the Ruanne Forest?”

Ariane, familiar with this question from our previous encounters, shook her head. “No, we’re from the Great Canada Forest. I’m a dark elf, and that dumb mountain of armor over there is...well, a different kind of elf.”

I offered up a weak smile at Ariane’s half-hearted introduction and quickly pulled my helmet back on, before the effect could wear off.

“And may I ask what brings elves, especially those from so far away, all the way out to our humble kingdom?” The king stared intently at us.

Zahar stepped out from behind Princess Riel. “Your Highness, I believe there’s something we should discuss regarding that...”

The bodyguard slid over to the king’s side and whispered something in his ear. A look of surprise washed over the king’s face. He glanced over toward me, then back at Zahar.

“Is this true?” The king spoke in a raspy whisper, his eyes wide.

Judging by his reaction, I assumed that Zahar had told him about how we’d joined their reinforcements. The king’s shoulders stiffened, and a bead of sweat trickled down his forehead.

The silence seemed to stretch, until a man pushed his way out from the crowd.

“What’s going on here, King Asparuh?!”

The man wore elaborate robes embossed with symbols that seemed to identify him as a member of the clergy. His hair was carefully combed, and he appeared to be in his thirties. He strode brazenly up to the king and fixed his bespectacled gaze on the other man.

I was taken aback by the sight of someone walking right up to the king and not even offering the barest semblance of pleasantries, but the king was quick

to respond.

“Cardinal Palurumo, how are your followers in the church doing?”

There were at least two among us that must have felt uneasy at the very mention of the church, a formidable presence in this region.

Ariane’s and Chiyome’s ears both twitched as they cast harsh glares in the man’s direction.

The man, perhaps sensing their angry looks, turned toward the two. A look of shock washed over his face.

Any semblance of civility vanished. “Just what is going on here, Your Highness?!” the man screeched. “What are a beast girl and an elf doing here, mingling with the rest of us humans?”

Neither King Asparuh nor any of his advisors attempted to stop the man’s outburst, opting instead to exchange worried glances among themselves.

The power dynamics were all too clear, even to an outsider like myself.

“Lock those dirty things up at once and send them to the Hilk church! I fully expect that you will provide us with a proper explanation for exactly what’s going on here. Anyone who’s involved in this should also be arrested immediately!”

The king, as well as the cavalry, the two bodyguards, and especially Princess Riel—who’d hired us to save the kingdom from destruction—all hesitated.

Just when I thought that the situation couldn’t get any more tense, Ariane erupted. “Oh, so we’re dirty *things* now, are we? Well, if it weren’t for us, then pieces of garbage like you wouldn’t even be alive right now!”

She drew her blade, and Chiyome did the same. The young cat girl snorted as she raised her dagger and narrowed her gaze.

Niena was the first to react, her blade drawn just a fraction of a second after Ariane’s as she stepped in front of the royal family.

“Back away from the king! Sheathe your weapons, or I will have no choice but to treat you as a rebel!”

Ariane let out a derisive laugh. “A rebel? I owe no loyalty to your king.”

I tried to gauge what Ariane planned to do next. Her gaze never left the cardinal.

“This fancily dressed guy is only pretending to be human. He’s actually undead, I hope you know.”

I glanced over at the cardinal in time to see his eyes go wide. As soon as he caught my gaze, he shot me a look of contempt. Ponta growled back in response.

“Grrrrrrruuuuuuu...”

This drew his attention away from Ariane and her blade for just a moment. Ariane lunged forward, a glint of silver slashing through the air.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaugh!!!”

The cardinal’s arm tumbled unceremoniously to the floor, a fountain of dark red blood spraying from his body. His screams were the only sound in the packed space, as everyone else fell into stunned silence.

Zahar and the rest of the guards hesitated for a moment before drawing their weapons as well.

The cardinal’s voice came out as a shrill scream. “What are you waiting for?! Kill these barbarians who dare strike a servant of the Hilk church at once!”

The soldiers slowly began closing in around us.

There was nothing about the cardinal that appeared to be anything but human. However, there was little doubt in my mind that Ariane and Chiyome were telling the truth about him being undead. Evidently, I still had a lot to learn about the Hilk religion.

But I didn’t have the luxury to sit around and think about it just then.

Both the king and Princess Riel seemed to be at a loss over this sudden turn of events. Neither had issued a command. The soldiers continued inching closer, hesitantly obeying the frantically screaming cardinal.

I needed to show them who this guy really was. I didn’t want to harm the

soldiers or citizens around us, much less the king or the princess.

“Well, this all got ugly pretty fast,” I muttered to myself as I pulled my sword from its sheath on my back and effortlessly swung the large blade in a circle to keep the area around me clear.

The whoosh of the blade as it cut through the air had the desired effect. The soldiers let out a shout as they jumped back in unison. One of them even dropped to ground, holding his head in his hands and trembling in terror.

I didn’t want to scare them too much, but for now, this would do.

“What do you think you’re doing, Arc?!” Zahar finally spoke, his sword held at the ready.

Alas, I didn’t think we could explain our way out of this one just yet.

A smile spread across Ariane’s face as she turned her attention back to the cardinal.

“How long do you plan on keeping your pathetic little act up? You know that elves and mountain people can see right through your charade, right?”

The moment the words left Ariane’s mouth, she was rushing in for a second slash. This time, the cardinal was able to leap out of the way. The speed at which he was able to do so was distinctly inhuman.

Gasps erupted from those watching, their uncertainty over the situation increasing.

Elves were able to see “contamination,” and mountain people could smell the stench of death that hung around the undead. Humans, however, had no such abilities, and no way of telling if the cardinal before them was living or not.

Even if I was technically an elf as well, I, too, lacked the ability to sense the so-called contamination. Other than his unnatural leap, I didn’t really have any way of telling either.

However, the only undead I’d witnessed thus far that had any sort of agency of their own were the man-spiders—and that bizarre creature I’d encountered back in Tagent. Neither of those looked even remotely human, but as far as I could tell, there was nothing abnormal about the one-armed cardinal’s

appearance.

That all changed rather quickly.

Cardinal Palurumo sneered again, hate and resentment thick in his voice. “Gah, you pathetic, lowly cretins. Today just isn’t my day. You’ve left me no choice but to finish my plan all on my own.”

His mouth contorted. A moment later, a new arm began growing out of his gaping wound.

“Wh-what’s that?!”

Someone in the crowd screamed, eliciting a fiendish laugh from the cardinal.

“Don’t worry, little ones. I, Palurumo Avaritia Liberalitas, one of the seven great cardinals, will personally lead you to your deaths! Relax, and accept your fate!”

Cardinal Palurumo’s body began writhing, as if some sort of creature were crawling about underneath his clothing. A moment later, his body was torn apart.

Two meaty appendages ripped out of the back of the priestly robes, like an insect bursting from its cocoon, and transformed themselves into what looked like arms. All the hair covering his body grew longer, and his face began swelling, turning into a cross between a monkey and an owl.

His nose and mouth morphed into a pointed, black beak filled with sharp fangs. A thin, nearly two-meter-long appendage that looked like a sandworm stretched out of his lower back. He was now completely covered in dense muscles and stood an impressive four meters tall.

His bloodshot eyes looked like a pair of red goggles as they focused pure rage on those around him.

I thought he resembled a massive squirrel monkey, but without all the cuteness.

To everyone else standing around, the very notion of a normal person transforming into a terrifying monster must have been shocking. So shocking, in fact, that most people were either screaming, dropping to the ground in terror,

or simply frozen in place. Several others decided to run.

Even the king and Princess Riel found themselves unable to move, their feet firmly planted as they stared in sheer terror.

Palurumo turned his attention to the royal family and let out a menacing laugh that resonated deep in his throat. His massive body slowly lumbered toward them.

“Gyahaha! I guess you’re as good a start as any for wiping out your beloved Nohzan Kingdom.”

No sooner had Palurumo said these words than he was lunging toward King Asparuh.

Zahar, anticipating this, raised his sword and shouted. “He’s after the king! Guards, stop that beast and protect His Highness at all costs!”

The soldiers immediately sprang into action.

“Princess Riel, get back!”

Niena adjusted her stance and raised her blade, stepping between the young girl and the incoming threat.

Despite the soldiers’ best efforts, however, they did little to slow Palurumo down. The cardinal used his hands to slap anyone in front of him out of the way. One of the soldiers was hit away so hard that when he slammed into the outer wall of a nearby building, there was little left but a hunk of motionless flesh.

The soldiers’ shields were also proving completely ineffective.

Palurumo continued straight for his target. We had to hurry.



Ariane took off after the monster, but he was too fast for her, and the soldiers weren't even slowing him down.

Palurumo effortlessly dodged Zahar's blade, passing the last line of defense, and finally reached the king.

"You'll lead this voyage to hell, Your Majesty!" His voice sounded oddly cheerful, and carried a wet, sticky quality.

Princess Riel screamed and tried to run to her father's side, but Niena restrained her.

"Father!"

Palurumo raised his massive fist into the air.

There was only one way I could make it in time. I couldn't worry about who might see.

"Hang on, Ponta! Dimensional Step!"

An instant later, I was standing between Palurumo and the king, holding my shield over my head. I felt the monster's fist strike metal, sending a shock wave out in all directions. The stone beneath my feet cracked, and I felt myself sink into the ground.

Gritting my teeth, I shoved my shield back and threw Palurumo's aside. Using this brief opening, I thrust forward with my sword.

Palurumo dove backward right as I lunged, causing my blade to miss its target. He leaped a few more times to put additional distance between us. Every time he landed, the ground beneath him cracked a little, splintering outward.

"The beast finally shows itself..."

I shook my left arm, still tingling from the blow to my shield.

Palurumo didn't seem to care for my nonchalant response and shot me an angry glare. His bloodshot eyes somehow managed to become even redder, and his face grew even more terrifying.

"Who are you, and how do you know the pontiff's teleportation techniques?! Not to mention that no human should be able to block my attack with one hand

like that!”

Thick, sticky saliva flew out of his mouth as Palurumo raged.

Ariane, Chiyome, and I exchanged glances.

Assuming what Palurumo had said could be trusted, that meant that the pontiff of the Hilk church could also use teleportation magic. This had been an incredible advantage to me so far, and could prove troublesome if our enemies possessed the same ability.

I’d originally figured that this high-ranking cardinal was the one pulling the strings behind this undead siege, but from the way he spoke, it sounded like it might go all the way up to the pontiff, the very top of the Hilk religion.

Considering the massive scale of this invasion, it seemed practically impossible that the pontiff wouldn’t have known about it. An army of 100,000 could hardly go unnoticed.

I let out a deep breath and focused.

Ariane and Chiyome were trying to slip into Palurumo’s blind spot, so I decided to try a frontal strike in order to keep him occupied.

I responded to the cardinal’s outburst with a shrug. “I’m not a human, I’m an elf! Apologies for being such a ‘lowly creature.’”

All the hair covering Palurumo’s body stood on end. “An elf?! Yet another elf?!”

He slammed his fists into the ground, sending chunks of rubble flying this way and that. He grabbed two large stones and threw them straight at Ariane and Chiyome, who were coming in from his sides.

“Nngah!”

“Whoa!”

They were both able to jump out of the way in time, thanks to their incredible reflexes, but just barely.

Unfortunately, the soldiers behind the two women weren’t so lucky. The rocks smashed into hundreds of pieces as they found new targets.

The fact that Palurumo hadn't needed to turn his head to throw stones at Ariane and Chiyome with such startling accuracy suggested that his bulging eyes gave him a better field of vision than I'd assumed.

This seemed to shake the confidence of some of the soldiers, now fearful that killing Palurumo might prove impossible.

A malicious smile sprang onto the cardinal's face as he turned his attention back to me. He blinked several times, as if he'd just remembered something.

"Aaah, yeessss. You, silver knight... You're the one who sent Charros to his grave!"

I cocked my head, unsure exactly what Palurumo was talking about. Ponta mimicked my pose and let out its own mew of confusion.

"Who's Charros? I don't recall killing anyone by that name..."

Unless...

Could that have been the name of the bizarre monster I fought back in Tagent?

Palurumo must have read my mind, because he let out a guffaw and pointed at me.

"So you do remember! Yes, you were the one who killed Cardinal Charros back in Tagent! He may have been the weakest of the seven cardinals, but toppling him was no small feat. Alas, you're still no match for the power I harness!"

Ariane and Chiyome looked concerned. Seven cardinals? That meant there were at least five more out there who were just as powerful as Palurumo.

It seemed that information about me, at least to some degree, had made it back to the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

"I see... So, that disgusting oversized potato bug was a friend of yours?"

Was the Holy Hilk Kingdom a country of undead then?

"Potato bug? Gyahahaha! Now that you mention it, he did crawl around in a rather unbecoming way. But that's neither here nor there. Just what were you

elves doing in the human city of Tagent anyway?”

His face contorted into a mockery of a grin.

The fact that I’d managed to dispatch Charros didn’t seem to alarm him. After all, Palurumo himself was still standing—proof that he’d been telling the truth when he said that Charros was the weakest among them.

To be fair, the monster I’d fought back in Tagent wasn’t particularly powerful, but I also wouldn’t have considered him weak by any means. Cardinal Palurumo here was apparently even stronger.

Worse, I could still feel the drain on my body from summoning the powerful Paladin skill outside the city’s walls. This would no doubt be a brutal fight.

At least this time, I had my trustworthy allies.

Ariane’s golden gaze caught mine. Looking over at Chiyome, she responded with a simple nod.

“We have our reasons. They’re no business of monsters like yourself.”

I’d wanted to say something truly intimidating to strike fear into his heart, but that was the best I could come up with. Either way, it seemed to have worked.

“You... You bastard! How dare a lowly creature like yourself call me, a trusted disciple of the pontiff, a monster!”

With his cheeks puffed out like that, he looked just like an angry monkey.

He flexed his massive muscles, veins bulging across his body. His bloodshot eyes managed to grow even wider. Then he threw his massive body straight at me. Apparently, I’d riled him up.

I focused my attention on the spot where I thought he’d land and brought down my glowing blade.

“Sword of Judgment!”

A rune of light formed on the ground, out of which a large glowing sword shot straight up into the sky toward the descending cardinal.

However, Palurumo let out an ear-splitting scream and brought down his massive fists right onto the tip of the glowing blade, causing it to shatter into a

thousand pieces.

“What?!”

I’d figured he might be able to dodge the Sword of Judgement, but I never imagined that someone would be able to shatter it with their bare hands. I truly thought that magical attacks were my best bet for victory.

“Gyahaha! I’ve never seen that one before, but it’s still no match for the likes of me!”

Palurumo landed effortlessly with a laugh and once again dove in to attack.

I deflected the first blow with my shield and dodged the second. One of the arms on his back stretched out for a weak third strike, which caught me in the chest. Fearing another round, I quickly spun away and slipped out of range.

Just then, Ariane and Chiyome entered the fight in earnest.

“Holy flame, heed my call! Devour thine enemy and burn it to ash!”

Spirit-generated flames grew up along Ariane’s gleaming blade before launching out from the tip toward Palurumo in the form of a large, fiery snake.

He spun around just in time and, with a mighty swing of his arms, sent the flaming snake flying.

It seems he was able to block other magical attacks with his bare hands as well.

However, it wasn’t a complete loss. I could see a dark burn on Palurumo’s arm where he’d made contact with Ariane’s snake.

Even if he was able to use physical strikes to defend himself from magical attacks, this evidently didn’t protect him from the high temperature of the flames. What’s more, he seemed to lack the regenerative abilities that Charros had used back in Tagent.

Now it was Chiyome’s turn.

“Body to water, aqua lance slash!”

Chiyome’s right hand began glowing, and a serpent made of water leaped out of her hand, transforming into a long spear. She threw it with all her might

toward Palurumo.

He fixed Chiyome with an angry glare and howled.

“The beast girl can use magic too?! Why, you little brat!”

As with the previous attack, I’d expected Palurumo to easily deflect the water spear with his bare hands, but he seemed to be more leery of piercing attacks, and instead decided to dodge it altogether.

However, Chiyome anticipated this and launched into her second attack, using her ninjutsu to summon two aquatic wolf companions to attack him from behind.

These semi-transparent water wolves were hard to see from a distance, which was one of their greatest assets in battle.

She’d led with a flashy spear attack to draw his attention and keep him from catching on to what she was doing. I couldn’t help but be impressed by her fighting style.

Unlike their counterparts who lived in the wild, Chiyome’s aquatic wolves obeyed her every command and attacked exactly where she instructed—in this case, Palurumo’s ankles.

At four meters tall, it was hard for the cardinal to actually see his own legs. Making matters worse, the wolves were mostly transparent and moved low to the ground.

Palurumo’s face contorted as one of the wolves sank its fangs into his ankle.

“Grauuuugh! You little beast freak!”

He swung his leg hard and yanked it free, keeping the other wolf at bay before it could strike.

However, Chiyome wasn’t done yet. She directed the wolves to press the attack while she prepared to strike where she anticipated her unsuspecting prey might try to escape to.

Chiyome leaped up to the top of a nearby building.

“Body to water, aqua lance slash!”

Having figured out how Palurumo tended to move around, she unleashed her water spear at him, stabbing straight through the matted hair that covered his body and through his shoulder. Unlike with Ariane's flame snake from earlier, the weapon actually managed to pierce him.

Palurumo let out a pained scream and doubled over. "Guuaaaaagh! You little shit!"

Up until now, it seemed like the cardinal had never come across an opponent who could hold their own against him.

I couldn't help but smile. Objectively speaking, the way I fought was rather crude. I wished I could so easily predict what my enemies would do, like Chiyome, Ariane, and Glenys.

At the end of the day, landing the blow was everything.

It was my turn now.

"Sacred Seal!"

The Paladin attack spells were highly effective against the undead. I hefted the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg up into the air and swung it down toward Palurumo.

The cardinal twisted his body to try to avoid the blow. Unfortunately for him, he was far too massive to dodge it so easily. My glowing sword lopped off one of the arms hanging off his back, sending it tumbling to the ground. The wound smoked and bubbled, as if acid had been poured on it.

I pulled back to follow up with a horizontal strike. My blade struck his chest, sending spurts of black blood into the air.

"Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!!!"

The air itself shook as Palurumo bellowed in pain.

I readied myself for another strike, but unfortunately, Palurumo dove out of range before I had the chance. He wasn't about to let it be that easy.

"Why, you little..."

Thick, sticky spittle dribbled out of his mouth, his large eyes darting around.

Finally, he seemed to find what he was looking for.

I followed his gaze and found the discarded arm I'd chopped off of him.

Ariane raced over and kicked it away with all her might, a defiant grin on her face. She murmured a spell.

"Smoldering flames, hear my cries! Leave behind nothing but ash!"

The severed arm began burning from the inside out, turning to dust in front of our very eyes.

Palurumo let out another enraged scream.

Judging by how frantically he'd been searching for the arm, I figured he must have some sort of ability to reconnect his body parts, even if he wasn't able to regenerate in the typical sense. But now that the arm was nothing but ash, that option was no longer available to him.

Palurumo took off toward Ariane. Given how massive he was, there was no way she could simply stop him in his tracks.

"Ariane, watch out! Wyvern Slash!"

Hoping to give her a chance to escape, I swung the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg horizontally, launching a powerful energy wave straight into the oncoming Palurumo. However, it didn't seem to have any effect other than getting him to change his course slightly as he slapped it aside.

The deflected slash continued on and smashed into a nearby building, caving in part of its roof.

Given the narrow confines we had to fight in, it was hard for me to use anything other than melee attacks.

I chastised myself and teleported in front of Ariane to block Palurumo. She shot me a wry smile. I instantly understood what she was trying to tell me.

"Mother Earth, hear my call! Take back that which belongs in your earthly embrace!"

Her words sounded almost lyrical as they traveled along the wind to reach my ears. She raised her sword and stabbed it into the ground. Her blade found its

way through the gaps between the stones beneath us. A large ripple spread out from her sword, causing the stones to shudder and mud to seep up through the cracks.



Within moments, the ground became a living swamp, sucking everything it touched down into it.

The effects of the spell continued spreading, reaching the foundations of nearby buildings and eliciting screams from the soldiers standing watch as they scampered backward to save themselves.

At the center of this swamp was Palurumo, still in the middle of his charge. The swamp was now at knee-height, and each step was slower than the last as he sank deeper and deeper into the muck.

“What did you do?! Dammit, I can’t get my legs free! Gyaugh! Something... Something’s climbing inside me!”

His large, bulbous eyes darted back and forth as he screamed.

A white moss had begun growing up Palurumo’s legs and enveloping his entire body, causing him to slow down even further.

The swamp then stopped expanding and began turning back into normal, solid earth.

But the damage to the surrounding homes was pretty severe. I was shocked that Ariane had used an area-of-effect spell like that in the middle of a city.

“I’m quite impressed that you’re able to retain your form after such a powerful spell. You must be rather strong. But I think it’s time you return to the earth, where the dead belong.”

Ariane pulled her sword out of the ground, shooting him a defiant smile.

“Damn you! Damn you fools!” The moss had grown up to his massive chest, and he was beginning to take the form of a dried-out, long-dead tree. Palurumo’s face registered disbelief as he watched his body crumble away beneath him. Ariane slowly approached.

“Holy flame, heed my call! Devour thine enemy and burn it to ash!”

The spirits responded to her call, and flames grew along her sword once more. The air shimmered as a snake’s head appeared from the tip of the blade. Ariane ignored Palurumo’s screams and drove the sword straight into his chest.

The flaming snake slithered inside Palurumo's body, causing the hulking creature to burst into flames, like so much kindling. Within a matter of moments, he was a large, burning pillar.

"Hyaaaaaaaiiissss..."

With his last, wordless scream, Palurumo's spell over Saureah seemed to have been broken. For a time, the only sounds were the crackling and popping of flames eating away at the lump of flesh that remained.

"Well, I guess we're done here."

"Kyiii..."

I slid my sword back into its sheath. Ponta stood up from where it had wrapped itself around my neck and gave its whole body a shake to loosen its tense muscles. It then turned its attention to my helmet and used its large, cotton-like tail to brush the dirt away.

I smiled to myself at what a considerate little companion I had and looked around to take stock of the situation.

Fortunately, there was no damage to the inner wall itself, but several of the buildings surrounding the open field beyond it had crumbled after their foundations gave way.

Compared to the widespread destruction that had befallen Tagent down on the southern continent, this wasn't that bad. The people who lived here, however, probably didn't see it that way.

I looked over at my two comrades, who were exchanging a congratulatory fist bump.

"Good job, Ariane! You, too, Chiyome."

Ariane had once described Chiyome as her friend, but right now, they looked like war buddies.

I had to admit that I enjoyed watching the two beautiful women in front of me celebrating, but it seemed like I was the only one thinking about that.

The people around us were slowly starting to return, but they kept a wide berth as they watched on.

Ariane paid them no mind as she walked over toward me, eyeing the smoldering object that had once been Palurumo, its mouth flapping open and closed.

“I wanted to try something a little on the flashy side. Hopefully, this will help take some attention off you, Arc.”

I understood now. She’d done this trying to rectify my earlier actions outside the city.

Not only had she also damaged part of the city with her own magic, but the image of her destroying Cardinal Palurumo would almost certainly stick with the people watching.

However...

“Is that truly why you decided to do something so out of character, Ariane? I mean, I’m sorry about earlier. But isn’t this just going to further reinforce the perception that we’re overpowered monsters?”

Ariane just shrugged her shoulders and averted her gaze. “Who cares? Besides, we’re going to talk to the king about all this anyway, right? Maybe it’ll do us some good to seem even more powerful.”

I suddenly became aware of the guards standing around us. At their center stood King Asparuh, who was watching us with his mouth agape.

An effective medicine can easily become a poison, as is said, but I wasn’t in a position to criticize Ariane’s behavior.

She turned back to face me, an intense look in her eyes. “That Palurumo guy said there were five more like him, and that he was more powerful than Charros. Do you think that’s true?”

Chiyome walked up beside me, her ears twitching, as if she was interested in hearing the answer too.

I thought back to my fight with Charros on the southern continent.

“I’m not trying to brag or anything, but I think the battle with Charros was more challenging.”

Ariane brought her hand to her chin and nodded. “Hmm, I see...”

“Of course, this time I also had you and Chiyome helping me, so...”

I wasn't sure what she was actually asking, so I tried to give them their due. Ariane laughed.

“No, no. I'm not worried about that. I'm just wondering if we'll have to do something about the Hilk.”

She narrowed her eyes and looked off into the distance.

Chapter 2:

Trouble Brews in the Holy Lands

Brahnief, once a part of the Nohzan Kingdom, now formed the eastern border of the Salma Kingdom.

Two generations back—nearly seventy years now—Brahnief himself, for whom the city had been named, was head of the royal cavalry. He'd been given this position by the king of Salma, as a sign of appreciation for his military victories.

The Brahnief family had also been granted the title of margrave, and had been entrusted with overseeing this region. They now lived in the rebuilt manor of the Nohzan lord who'd once wielded power over the domain.

The building's decorative architecture had been left as is, which stood in stark contrast with the newly constructed walls and towers that surrounded the manor. The two rulers' tastes in design couldn't have been more different.

An older gentleman, with an athletic build and a head of thinning white hair that matched his white mustache, sat at a large desk in one of the manor's many spacious rooms. His furrowed brow lent him an air of impatience, and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair, as if something were bothering him.

This man's name was Margrave Wendly du Brahnief.

Unlike the other nobles, who lived in the capital and were constantly bickering with one another, he had the bearing of a military man.

A hundred or so years ago, the ruler of the Holy Kingdom of Alsus had granted all authority over his lands to the pontiff of the Hilk church, and the country was renamed the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

The pontiff had used his templars to lay siege to the capital of Alsus, until the king gave in to the pontiff and converted to the Hilk religion. On that day, the Holy Kingdom of Alsus ceased to exist.

At the time, the pontiff claimed that this was all in the name of peace. From

there, he set firm borders around the Holy Hilk Kingdom, putting an end to the age-old territorial disputes. Though this was all a rather one-sided decision, there was little the other countries could do but agree to these new borders.

However, the disputes continued between the three remaining kingdoms, and the Salma Kingdom saw its final success with a large-scale invasion on the eastern front. Since then, there had only been minor squabbles. Now that the Holy Hilk Kingdom was free to wield its abundant resources, the other three kingdoms decided it best to maintain their military strength in the event that they needed to fend off an invasion.

For someone like Margrave Brahnief, who was in charge of overseeing his country's defense against the neighboring Nohzan Kingdom, it seemed like the nobles back in the capital were only concerned with solidifying their power bases.

While military acumen had once been a requisite for nobility, out of a necessity to defend the country's borders, nobles today were mostly concerned with staying in the king's good graces. Men like Brahnief were few and far between.

While the establishment of the Holy Hilk Kingdom had done a lot to bring peace to these lands, Brahnief had his suspicions over what this truly meant for the country's citizens.

Sure, the nobles were living in the lap of luxury, but that extravagant lifestyle could only be sustained through the hard labor of people who shared few of those comforts.

Margrave Brahnief screwed his face into a frown and glared up at the roof, muttering to no one in particular. "If some sort of disaster were to befall the capital, I doubt the nobles would be able to react in time."

He was worried about the odd events that had recently occurred within his domain.

The first report he'd received came from some commoners. Apparently, they'd witnessed bizarre creatures crossing into Brahnief and heading past the Wiel River toward the Ruanne Forest, where the elves lived.

The next report about these creatures also came from commoners, who claimed to have seen a military caravan being attacked.

Obviously wanting to know what was going on within his borders, Margrave Brahnief assembled scouting parties at once to look for this mysterious caravan and the creatures themselves.

According to reports from the scouts that encountered the creatures, they were hideous amalgamations of two human torsos and a set of massive spider legs. Four were discovered in total, and each scouting party that had the misfortune of encountering one suffered heavy losses.

Based on the locations of the reports, Brahnief dispatched a scouting party in the direction he believed the creatures to be heading—the capital in Larisa.

There was, however, another possibility. The military caravan might be traveling through his lands from the Nohzan Kingdom, and these monsters were pursuing it. He immediately dispatched a servant to check on the situation in Nohzan.

It would take a messenger at least three days to make it back to the capital of the Nohzan Kingdom, while it was, at best, a five-day journey to Larisa. Factoring in the return journeys, Brahnief still had quite a wait ahead of him.

Just to be safe, he'd entrusted everyone he sent out with birds that could report back to him in a fraction of the time. Still, Margrave Brahnief was not a man who enjoyed waiting.

He stood up from his chair and walked over to the map that hung from one of his study's walls.

"Depending on what is happening in Larisa, I may need to consider signing a truce with the Nohzan Kingdom."

The sound of footsteps outside interrupted his thoughts.

He turned his head just in time to see the door fly open. His secretary scurried into the room.

"Excuse me, Master Wendly!"

It was rare to see her lose her cool, and even rarer for her to enter a room

uninvited. The sight of his frantic secretary gave the margrave pause. It had only been three days since he'd sent everyone out. It was too early for any of them to have made a report.

Behind his secretary, Brahniey caught sight of a young man, someone he'd never seen before.

The man was dressed in a military uniform, probably a messenger of some sort. He offered a dramatic bow, looking brand-new to the job, and closed his eyes tight in an effort to make sure he recited everything perfectly.

"Larisa is under attack by a large force of undead and other creatures! The exact number is still unknown, but they're estimated to be around 200,000! We hereby request that the margrave assemble his forces and send them to reinforce the capital at once!"

After finishing his report, the young messenger straightened, then bowed again.

"Are you sure?" A vein bulged in the margrave's forehead as he looked wide-eyed at the young man standing before him.

The messenger responded with several firm nods of his head.

An army of 200,000 undead had descended upon the capital... Brahniey desperately wanted more information, but he could tell that the quivering messenger in front of him was in no position to provide answers.

Even entertaining, for the moment, the idea that undead would assemble in large groups and work together...an army of 200,000 still defied all logic.

There were several cases where the casualties of long-past wars had risen up as undead and attacked neighboring areas, but there were never more than a few hundred—maybe a thousand—at most.

To assemble a force of even 20,000 human soldiers would be a formidable task. But a force *ten times* that size? It strained credulity.

"And what does this undead army consist of?"

Margrave Brahniey could feel a cold, clammy sweat roll down the back of his neck as he tried to figure out how to approach this situation.

The reports had stated that the man-spiders melted into ooze after they were killed, which was similar to what happened to other undead, suggesting that the man-spiders were also undead.

Brahnies's greatest fear was that 200,000 of these man-spiders had descended upon the capital. If that were the case, then the kingdom itself was finished.

"The majority of them are armored soldiers, though there have been some half-human, half-spider creatures observed among them."

The messenger's response was a slight comfort, but it was still an overwhelming number of undead.

A name from an old legend Margrave Brahnies had once heard sprang to mind as he tried wrapping his mind around it all.

"This isn't... It can't be Hades, can it? According to the legends, he was stopped by the empire."

All the soldiers who'd been killed over generations of war had risen from the dead and formed an army that laid waste to the empire. At their peak, they numbered in the tens of thousands.

Margrave Brahnies shook his head and furrowed his brow. There was no sense in focusing on the cause of the problem. They needed a solution.

"It's still too early for our report to have made it to the capital, but what's become of our soldiers?"

Brahnies turned his attention to his secretary.

"The scouting party encountered multiple messengers who'd been dispatched from the capital to drum up reinforcements. They sent this man back, while the rest continued to the capital."

Though she was speaking faster than usual, his secretary maintained her usual cool tone of voice. The margrave nodded. A plan had begun forming in his mind.

"First off, it's unrealistic for us to try to reinforce the capital. I hate to leave them to their own devices, but we really don't have much of a choice."

This seemed to take the young messenger by surprise. However, he also seemed to understand that he was in no position to offer his unsolicited opinion. He kept quiet.

Brahnief's secretary also seemed surprised, and she looked at the margrave questioningly, one eyebrow raised.

Margrave Brahnief continued. "First and foremost, we just don't have enough soldiers to fight 200,000 undead. Then there's the problem of time and distance. It'd take several days for a large force to reach Larisa."

Brahnief turned his attention to the map hanging from the wall.

His secretary did some quick math. "It would take at least seven days for an army of foot soldiers to reach the capital. Ten, if you include preparation time."

Brahnief nodded. The area surrounding the capital was mostly flatlands. The odds of achieving victory were slim. If they were to fight, they'd best be served fighting at the Wiel River, where the enemy would be forced to cross.

But even that would hardly be a surefire thing, considering they'd be fighting undead, not humans.

Brahnief didn't know just how much of a deterrent the strong currents of the Wiel might be against an army of undead. But no matter how he looked at it, the situation was grim.

Assuming that the man-spiders observed earlier were some sort of spies, it was only a matter of time until the army made its way to Brahnief too.

The margrave's mind raced as he considered their next move.

"Issue an order to maintain constant contact with the forts along the Wiel River. If any of them catch sight of an undead army, they are to immediately abandon the fort and fall back here. I want all the weapons within Brahnief gathered here. Also, let it be known throughout the land that we will buy up any and all available crops."

The secretary quickly wrote down the margrave's commands. As she did, another man in military fatigues appeared.

"The bird from the servant dispatched to Nohzan just arrived! I have the

report here.”

The man slipped into the room, offered up a salute, and handed Margrave Brahamney a small piece of folded parchment before stepping back.

Birds were the fastest method of communication available to humans, but the drawback was that they would only return to their home base, which meant they had to be manually taken to the location from which they would be sent.

“Already? That was fast.”

The margrave read the piece of parchment. As he did, his expression began to change. His secretary watched his reaction with great interest. Finally, he threw the report in her direction.

She picked it up and began reading as the margrave ran a finger across the deep wrinkles on his forehead.

“It sounds as if the capital of the Nohzan Kingdom is already under attack as well.”

Margrave Brahamney nodded silently. This wasn’t entirely unexpected, but a new wave of unease washed over him. He wiped away the sweat accumulating on the back of his neck.

Just what was going on out there?

“It says there were countless skeletons covered in armor outside the city walls. The wall near one of the gates had been breached, but there appeared to be minimal damage to the city itself. In fact, there were even signs of people repairing the damage.”

The margrave couldn’t hold back the smile that began tugging at his lips. Was there still a chance? Was there a light at the end of the tunnel?

“Was this part of the same force that attacked Larisa? That would mean the Nohzan Kingdom was able to escape their fate.”

Ever the one to maintain an objective point of view, his secretary kept her face neutral. It was almost as if she knew what he was thinking. The margrave’s frown intensified as he let out a low groan.

If Brahamney fell to the undead, the army of 200,000 would almost certainly

head north and once again descend upon the Nohzan Kingdom.

But this wasn't entirely to Brahnief's disadvantage.

After all, the Nohzan Kingdom almost certainly didn't want to be on the receiving end of any more attacks. They would likely be receptive to allying with Brahnief in the interest of fighting a mutual enemy.

But even if they weren't interested in joining forces, the margrave could probably get the Nohzan Kingdom to tell him how they'd fought off the invaders. He'd have to offer up something appealing in return, of course, but it would be a small price to pay to ensure that Brahnief remained on the map.

However, if the Nohzan Kingdom was confident in its abilities to fight off another undead invasion, they likely wouldn't offer any help to Brahnief, and the margrave would be left with no choice but to try to fend off an army of 200,000 on his own.

This land had once belonged to the Nohzan Kingdom, after all, and it was his family that had taken it from them. If Brahnief fell to the undead, the Nohzan Kingdom would waste no time reclaiming it.

But why stop there? The capital of Larisa, and the whole Salma Kingdom, would likely have fallen at that point.

The Salma Kingdom's capital was a port town, so the nobles would likely flee by ship, but there wouldn't be enough citizens or soldiers left to defend against an attack by the Nohzan Kingdom.

The world grew darker and darker the more the margrave thought about the future.

"Well, we can't just stand around and do nothing. I'll assemble a small group of soldiers and head off to the Nohzan Kingdom myself. Joining forces is our best chance at success, but if that turns out to be impossible, then I at least want to secure safe passage for our citizens to seek refuge there. Time is running out for us."

The margrave looked up at the ceiling and shook his head, his face heavy with exhaustion. Then he returned his gaze to his secretary.

“I leave the rest to you and the captain of the guards. You messengers will serve under my secretary and do whatever she tells you. Our beloved Salma Kingdom may not survive to see another year, but I hope that Brahniey will live on. That is up to you.”

The messengers gulped audibly at this last part.

“Well, I’m off.”

Margrave Brahniey grabbed his favorite cloak from where it hung on the wall and abruptly left the room.

Back in Saureah, in the Nohzan Kingdom, a massive inner wall encircled the capital. Atop this wall was a pathway made of stone and plaster, connecting multiple guard towers at regular intervals. What the wall lacked in beauty, it more than made up for it in defensive capabilities.

The guard towers were dimly lit, small slits providing their only illumination, in order to keep out would-be invaders. In one of these guard towers, four figures sat around a hastily constructed table that was little more than a flat board with four legs haphazardly attached to it, one of which didn’t even reach the ground. It hardly seemed appropriate, considering who the figures were.

On one side sat King Asparuh, ruler of the Nohzan Kingdom, and his daughter, Princess Riel. Behind them stood the princess’s bodyguards, Zahar and Niena. Several advisors watched from the corners of the room.

On the other side of the table sat Ariane, easily identifiable as a dark elf by her amethyst skin, golden eyes, and snow-white hair tied back in a ponytail. Next to her, in a rickety chair, was a knight in gleaming silver armor. That was me.

Chiyome, dressed in her usual all-black ninja garb—which matched her black hair, catlike ears, and tail—stood a short distance behind us. She held Ponta tightly to her chest. Chiyome practically melted into the darkness of the dimly lit room. However, thanks to the purring furball in her arms, she wasn’t too hard to find.

A certain tension hung over the room. Princess Riel broke the silence. “First

off, introductions. This is my father, king of Nohzan Kingdom.”

The king bowed his head. “My name is Asparuh Nohzan Saureah. Be you elf or beast, I am forever in your gratitude for heeding my daughter’s call and saving our kingdom in its darkest hour.”

The king’s humility caused a small ruckus among the advisors lining the room, but silence soon returned.

I wasn’t surprised by their reaction.

According to the teachings of the Hilk church, elves and mountain people were inferior to humans, and subject to unending abuse at their hands. Seeing their king bow to these “inferior” species had probably brought several to the edge of voicing their objections, but it was clear that now was neither the time nor the place.

I could feel eyes wandering over to examine Ariane and me, but whenever I tried to return the gaze, they quickly looked away.

Ariane smirked at this, her shoulders shaking gently in a silent laugh. After all, the people in this room were acutely aware of the power we could unleash. They were right to be afraid.

The fact that we wouldn’t accept any sort of contempt or scorn toward other species was undoubtedly to our advantage.

“I am Arc Lalatoya, sitting here on behalf of the Great Canada Forest. Next to me is...”

“Ariane Glenys Lalatoya.” Ariane kept her own introduction short.

I turned my gaze to Chiyome, who was stroking Ponta’s fur. Her ears twitched, but there was no indication that she intended to speak, so I continued.

“The woman standing behind me is Chiyome.”

“Kyii!” As soon as I finished introducing Chiyome, Ponta let out a sharp mew of self-introduction, drawing the king’s gaze.

“And that’s Ponta.”

King Asparuh inspected my face closely before turning to Ariane. “Are you two husband and wife?”

“What?!”

The bemused expression disappeared from Ariane’s face in an instant. She nearly fell off her chair in shock.

“Whoa, wait a minute! Where did that come from?!”

The tips of her ears were burning red, though she tried to hide her embarrassment by raising her voice. The advisors lining the wall behind the king all gasped. Princess Riel also looked surprised.

“My apologies.” The king smiled. “I merely assumed that since you have the same family name...”

Ariane shot me an angry look.

Having spent a lot of time living among the elves, I’d become rather accustomed to their naming system. But back here in the human world, the only people who shared names were parents and siblings.

Now, as for why the king hadn’t asked if we were siblings, I figured this was because he’d seen my face earlier when I took off my helmet. Though Ariane and I were both elves, we had different skin colors.

I leaned over and whispered to Ariane. “Here in the human world, usually only direct familial relations share a name.”

She frowned at this, but said no more.

She’d calmed down a bit, and the fear that had gripped the room seemed to subside. I realized that the king’s advisors were probably worried that if they upset her too much she might use her magic on them, like she had with Palurumo.

I turned back to the king and tried explaining how things worked in elven society.

“We elves take on the name of the village we belong to.”

The king seemed to understand. He bowed his head again. “I apologize for my

misunderstanding. I haven't had many opportunities to interact with the elves."

I gently waved it off. "Now, to the topic at hand..."

The atmosphere in the room suddenly became very tense again. It felt a bit like gunboat diplomacy, but I wasn't going to let an opportunity go to waste.

"I'm sure you've already heard about this from Princess Riel, but we agreed to her request for assistance on the condition that the living conditions for the elves and our allies, the mountain people, be improved."

I paused there to gauge his reaction.

Though the reason why we'd agreed to save the capital had already been explained to the king and his advisors, there seemed to be some surprise over the revelation that Princess Riel had hired us.

"Yes, Riel told me the details of your payment. I give you my word, as king of this land, that you will be properly compensated for your efforts. But I'd like you to reiterate specifically what it is you want from us so that everyone may hear."

I glanced over at Ariane, but she gestured for me to continue.

"What we're asking is twofold. First, that we be allowed access to your vault, to look around. Second, that you set all elves and mountain people free, and outlaw their capture."

My demands seemed to cause a bit of controversy among the advisors, who began murmuring among themselves. I couldn't entirely blame them. A mercenary demanding they change the kingdom's laws as a form of payment was a bit much.

But I fully intended them to accept these terms, even if I needed to force the issue.

"We're talking about payment for saving your country from the very brink of extinction. I understand your desire not to show favoritism, but we did a lot for you. I don't think what we're asking for is unfair."

I spoke slowly and clearly, catching Princess Riel's gaze. She nodded.

"From the brink of extinction" was a direct reference to the battle we'd just fought, but I'd also implied that we had the power to decide whether the

country survived beyond today.

I couldn't tell if King Asparuh had picked up on this nuance, however. Rather than tensing up, as I'd expected, he simply smiled and nodded.

"Of course. There's nothing wrong with having your own demands. In fact, slavery of elves and beastmen is prohibited within our country. Would it be sufficient for us to hand over those who are being kept as slaves illegally?"

The advisors fell silent at this.

It seemed as if the king was willing to accept our terms. I turned to Ariane, who nodded.

Now we just needed them to shake free of the Hilk religion that so firmly gripped their city. But given the overwhelming resources available to the church, this was probably a pipe dream.

Even if the people themselves demanded to part ways with the Hilk, it was unlikely to happen. In fact, it might even lead to civil war, between those who wanted to stay with the church and those who wanted to separate.

And it was all my doing.

Apparently, the commoners had determined that it was the Archangel Michael—a messenger sent down from god—who'd destroyed the undead hordes. Of course, all the high-ranking government officials in this room, along with members of the military who'd been holding the lines during the retreat to the inner wall, knew the truth. Though I imagined it was still difficult for them to believe that I, an elf, had called down this angel.

There was also no shortage of people who'd witnessed Cardinal Palurumo transforming into a monster. Rumors that the cardinal had been involved in some kind of black magic, and had even been behind the attack on the capital, abounded.

The Hilk church was in a rather precarious position right now.

Though the commoners' faith in church officials was at an all-time low, the miracle brought about by the angel's sudden appearance served as a strong counterbalance.

King Asparuh broke the silence.

“Assuming what you say about Palurumo is true, that means the pontiff himself was behind the cardinal’s monstrous form. That presents us with a rather...grave situation. Hilk is by far the most powerful religion here on the northern continent. To claim that the cardinals, those serving directly under the pontiff, are actually monsters...well, that truth will be hard for many to swallow.”

He let out a heavy sigh, adjusting himself in his chair, and leaned in close, holding my gaze.

“There’s one thing I’d like to ask of you, if I may. Cardinal Palurumo seemed familiar with you, Arc. He said you’d fought another cardinal before. I assume this cardinal was also a monster. How long have you known about their true forms?”

He sounded as though he suspected that the elves had known about the church’s machinations well in advance. However, it was pure coincidence that I’d run across Cardinal Charros down in Tagent. In fact, it was Chiyome’s search for Sasuke that had led us to look into the Holy Hilk Kingdom in the first place.

I hesitated as I tried figuring out how best to answer the king’s question. Ariane spoke up before I had the chance.

“Our encounter with him was by chance. That said, it was inevitable that we would uncover their plot.”

She looked around the room, her golden gaze challenging everyone inside to speak up against her. Several advisors let out hushed gasps and shrank back as her eyes locked onto them.

Ariane didn’t have a particularly high opinion of humans—especially nobles—due to her experiences with them enslaving her people.

Human children seemed to be something of an exception, however. She seemed fairly fond of Princess Riel at the very least.

The king eyed Ariane suspiciously. “And what do you mean by that?”

“I know little about the Hilk church and its teachings, but after witnessing

Palurumo's behavior, I could easily understand why they were so intent on removing elves and mountain people from human society. He may have looked human to the rest of you, but to us, it was obvious that he was undead."

A collective shudder rippled throughout the room. I heard several people swallow hard. All eyes were on Ariane.

An older man stepped forward hesitantly. "You mean to say that you could tell Cardinal Palurumo wasn't human the moment you saw him?"

"That's correct. No matter how well the undead conceal their appearance, it makes little difference to elves. The church has been making you do their dirty work by disposing of anyone capable of seeing through their illusions."

To be fair, I couldn't see through the illusions, either, but I didn't think that was relevant right now.

Did Ariane really intend to make good on what she'd said after the battle with Palurumo? About doing something about the Hilk church?

The older man slumped at Ariane's reply.

He was probably thinking about how they'd been played and preyed upon by the Hilk church. They placed such a strong emphasis on demeaning the two—arguably superior—species, that they were able to pull the wool over the eyes of the humans.

However, pushing this point further would likely only fan the flames of discontent and distrust toward the elves. Though, considering I was sitting next to a woman who was capable of causing the very city itself to be sucked up by the earth, I didn't think anyone would fight back too hard.

But we'd gotten off track.

Ariane crossed her arms. "Shall we return to the subject at hand?"

"I think we can comfortably say that Cardinal Palurumo and the Holy Hilk Kingdom were behind the plot to attack Saureah with the undead. We don't have much insight into the inner workings of the Hilk, and can't speak to their intentions, but this most recent incident has given us some ideas."

I turned my gaze to King Asparuh. He swallowed and motioned for me to

continue. Riel tensed slightly and put her hands to her chest, looking much like a young child listening to a ghost story.

“When we encountered Cardinal Charros, he was also using a large army of undead to lay waste to a town. At first, I wasn’t sure why he would attack a city that had a church in it, but perhaps the sheer number of undead we encountered here might offer an explanation.”

“You don’t mean...” A voice spoke up out of the darkness before fading off mid-sentence.

On their own, there was simply no way this many undead would come together naturally—and certainly not outfitted in military gear. Someone must have brought them together.

Cardinal Palurumo had mentioned a power that was entrusted to him by the pontiff. From that, we could assume that the pontiff was able to create undead. Taking it a step further, that meant that both Palurumo and Charros were likely undead monsters created by the pontiff.

And the base ingredient for them would have been...

Chiyome, who’d been listening quietly the whole time, butted in with a question of her own. “So, my brother, and all of our comrades who’ve been taken off to the Holy Hilk Kingdom, were...?”

I offered a weak nod.

“They were likely used to create the undead. According to the stories I heard in Lamburt, the Holy Hilk Kingdom was buying up slaves and criminals en masse from across the continent. The person I spoke to thought they were being used for manual labor, but I’m not so sure anymore.”

I decided to share my thoughts on the situation with everyone in the room. It might influence whether they continued working with the Hilk church going forward.

Princess Riel appeared the most surprised by this information. “Oh, that’s awful! Father, we should cut ties with the Hilk at once!”

King Asparuh leaned back in his chair to look up at the ceiling, and to conceal

his expression from his concerned daughter. He tried his best to calm the situation.

“Things aren’t so simple, Riel...”

The vast majority of the citizens in Nohzan, as well as many other human countries, were followers of the Hilk religion. It would be hard to convince the ardent believers that leaving the church was the right course of action.

Even without the recent wave of fanaticism caused by the angel sightings, this would be no easy task.

If the king were to use his power to force a separation between church and state without explaining the situation to his people, a rebellion was all but assured. Depending on how large such a rebellion grew, the country itself could be torn apart, or the monarchy overthrown.

Moreover, assuming that the Holy Hilk Kingdom had been behind this all along, would they really just let the Nohzan Kingdom cut off all ties without taking further action?

It was more likely that they would either launch a second wave of attacks or find another way to apply pressure.

Even if the Nohzan Kingdom found a way to successfully appeal to its neighbors regarding the Holy Hilk Kingdom, would they even believe it? Here in this world, where communication was still rather primitive, it would take days just to send a message.

The Hilk had us between a rock and a hard place.

The advisors seemed to have finally absorbed the gravity of the situation. They began talking animatedly among themselves, each voicing their own thoughts on the matter. However, it was clear to me that we weren’t going to arrive at a conclusion anytime soon.

Of course, there was a rather simple solution, but those who’d spent their whole lives believing in Hilk faith would be hesitant to present it. Alas, I wasn’t in a position to say anything without first consulting with Dillan, and even he might need to talk things over with those above him.

“What about asking for assistance from our allies in the Rhoden Kingdom?”

The advisors seemed receptive to this idea, but skeptical at the same time as to what kind of assistance the Rhoden Kingdom, separated by a vast body of water, would be willing to offer them.

Princess Riel looked back and forth between her father and me, tears in her eyes. “Wh-wh-what should we do, then?”

I figured it was time I returned this conversation back to the matter of our payment.

“It’s unlikely that we can come to a solution right now regarding your country and the Hilk church. But as a preliminary measure, I think it would do some good to announce to the public who was behind this attack. You should also start publicly rounding up church officials, to see what you can learn from them. After all, there may still be some undead in your midst, pretending to be human.”

The young princess looked up at her father as he put his hand to his chin, mulling over my suggestions. He looked at me and scowled.

“We will round up the church officials for questioning, but I would want you to be there.”

His request made sense. After all, it was rather unlikely that anyone would give themselves up under questioning alone.

Only elves and mountain people could see through an undead’s disguise. Though, to be honest, I doubted there was anyone else hiding within the capital. Anyone able to blend in with everyday people would almost certainly have fled the capital after the cardinal’s fall.

Still, I didn’t want to turn down an opportunity to generate some goodwill.

“Do you mind if I leave it to you, Ariane and Chiyome?”

Chiyome responded with a quick nod, but Ariane hesitated.

“Why are you dumping all the pointless jobs off onto us? What gives, Arc?”

A wave of concern washed over me at how brazenly she referred to the king’s request as “pointless.”

“I was thinking that I would eliminate any of the undead still within the city limits.”

With that, I stood from my seat and picked up my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg and Holy Shield of Teutates and put them on my back.

It wasn't like I could see if someone was undead or not. I might as well use my time effectively and help mop up the undead soldiers still wandering between the inner and outer walls. Since most of the undead kills I'd racked up had been unfairly attributed to the angel I'd called down, a part of me wanted to try to even the score.

Besides, having an elf like me join in the defense of the capital could help our image, though I wasn't sure how effective it would be if I wore my helmet the whole time.

The king spoke, interrupting my train of thought. “I greatly appreciate your offer, Arc, but I'd like to leave the city intact this time.”

I could feel everyone's eyes on me.

They were probably afraid that I would summon an angel again and blow the whole city away in my attempt to rid the capital of the undead. Alas, that wouldn't do a lot of good for improving elven relations.

“You have no need to worry, I won't do anything drastic this time around. I'll just be walking the streets, waving my sword around.”

I made to leave the room. Ponta hopped out of Chiyome's arms, summoned up a gust of magical wind, and glided over to its rightful place atop my head.

“Kyii!”

“You coming, too, buddy?”

Ponta thumped its cotton-like tail excitedly against the back of my head.

After leaving the tower behind, I made my way toward a building where a large number of soldiers were standing guard. Several citizens pointed and whispered at the sight of me, a large, armored stranger.

The local troops would be more than capable of handling the run-of-the-mill undead soldiers, so I figured eliminating any remaining man-spiders would be

the best use of my time. I turned toward the gate that closed the old town district off from the outside world.

Hopefully, I could get this out of the way before sunset.

I started walking.

The sky above Saureah grew dark, the buildings casting long shadows out into the streets, announcing the end of the last day of the siege.

From my perch atop one of the tallest buildings in the area, I gazed upward. With a flick of my wrist, I cast off the remaining flashes of electricity that ran along the body of my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg and slid the blade into its sheath on my back with a long sigh.

Down below, I could see countless soldiers patrolling the streets.

Thanks to Dimensional Step, I was able to quickly make my way around the city and wipe out the powerful man-spiders that still lurked within it. The soldiers were able to clear out the city without incurring any major casualties.

Due to their size, it was relatively easy to spot the man-spiders from a higher vantage. Furthermore, without Cardinal Palurumo to serve as a central point of command, they seemed to have lost much of their focus and were fairly easy to kill.

I was pretty sure I'd found almost all the man-spiders out there, but it would likely be a few days before the king could safely open the gate to the inner wall. The capital was vast, containing countless streets and alleyways where undead might hide. The soldiers and guards had a monumental task ahead of them.

Once the majority of the city was cleared out, and the people began moving back into their homes, the next stage of work would begin.

"Kyiiiiiiiiiii..."

Ponta let out a long, hollow mew from atop my helmet, interrupting my thoughts. It was time to finish up here and get some dinner.

"Wanna go and see what Ariane and Chiyome are up to?"

“Kyii! Kyii!”

Ponta wagged its bushy tail excitedly.

I was teleporting from rooftop to rooftop using Dimensional Step, slowly making my way back along the inner wall, when I spotted some lit torches.

I quickly teleported down to street level and started walking toward the gate, greeting the soldiers I saw. Most of them saluted, freezing in place until I passed. Whether that was a good or bad thing, I couldn't say.

I weaved my way between the soldiers standing guard and entered the old town district through the small passageway next to the gate. Once on the other side, I heard two people call out to me.

“Took you a while.”

“Welcome back, Arc.”

They were Ariane and Chiyome.

“The city is a lot bigger than I would have imagined. This will definitely be a multi-day job.”

After giving them a rough overview of my exploits hunting the undead, I asked how things had gone with them.

“Did you find any other undead members of the church?”

They exchanged looks.

Ariane shook her head. “We met with everyone affiliated with the church, but there wasn't a single undead among them.” She sounded tired. “However...”

Chiyome picked up where Ariane had trailed off. “However, some church officials couldn't be found. They either died during the attack or escaped once news got out that Cardinal Palurumo was dead.”

While it seemed unlikely that all the people who'd disappeared were undead, it was a fair bet that at least a few of them were.

“As with Tagent, it's probably best to assume that news of the events here has reached the Holy Hilk Kingdom.”

They both nodded in agreement. After all, Cardinal Palurumo had been fairly

well-informed about who'd killed Charros on the southern continent. Going forward, the watchful eye of the Holy Hilk Kingdom would only grow more intense. They might even decide to do away with us.

I'd become what I'd hoped to avoid most: infamous.

Ariane tapped her index finger against the side of her head. "This pontiff guy of the Holy Hilk Kingdom...what's he up to? You'd think he'd be too important to worry about a few people like us."

All I could do was shrug. "That's true."

But considering the power the three of us had combined, we'd be able to deal with most threats thrown our way.

"Kyii!"

Okay, the four of us.

I reached up and scratched Ponta's chin, wondering if there were any threats out there that we couldn't handle.

Even if we were able to deal with the immediate threats, I couldn't help but feel incredibly shorthanded with just the three of us—plus Ponta—around.

I glanced over at Chiyome, who'd been deep in thought ever since we started this conversation. She frowned as she gazed off into the distance, her expression sad.

"What's wrong, Chiyome?"

Her cat ears batted about for a moment, then her face returned to its usual calm look. She shrugged. "It's nothing, really..."

Ariane's golden eyes met Chiyome's azure ones. After a moment of silence, Chiyome spoke again.

"Does that mean the undead soldiers we were fighting were my friends? The ones captured by the Hilk?"

Ariane and I exchanged glances.

The majority of the undead soldiers had been outfitted in armor, beneath which was nothing but a skeleton, like me. It seemed likely that these skeletons

had all been human, but considering their vast numbers, it wasn't impossible that there were dead elves and mountain people among them.

The Hilk church taught that all mountain people and elves should be banished from human society. So what happened to those who were banished?

"If they were your friends, then putting them out of their misery is the best thing we could do for them."

Chiyome looked at me in silence, her ears tilted to the side, then dropped her gaze to her hands. Was she thinking about Sasuke?

With her own hands, Chiyome had ended the life of a man she'd thought of as family. She of all people had every reason to hate the Hilk.

Ariane wrapped an arm around Chiyome's shoulders. The younger woman looked up, her ears twitching. Ponta batted its ears in sympathy.

The silence continued for some time, until it was broken by a stifled laugh.

Turning my head, I spotted Zahar.

"So, there you are. Words alone can't express the gratitude I owe you for what you did today. I know it's only a token of our appreciation, but the palace chef has prepared a small feast. We would be honored if you could come."

Ponta puffed out its chest and mewed loudly in excitement.

I glanced over to Ariane. She nodded.

Of course, I'd need to drink some of the mystical water from the spring near the Lord Crown to change back from my skeleton form before we could sit down to eat with anyone. There was also the risk of the effect wearing off in the middle of dinner, which had already happened once.

It might have been better to bow out of dinner entirely, but who knew when I'd have a chance to eat the cuisine of a palace chef again?

Imagining a delicious meal after a hard day's work, I could practically hear my non-existent stomach growling.

"I've made arrangements to call upon several people once you're done. The king has approved your first payment, so you may go into the national vault. But

I want to confirm that you only have plans to look around, is that correct?"

Zahar seemed rather confused on this last point, but Chiyome nodded.

Ariane explained. "Thank you. And yes, we only intend to look. We seek a clue."

"I see..." Zahar said, under his breath. He pulled a young soldier out from his shadow and pushed him toward us. "He will guide you."

With that, Zahar gave a quick bow and left us with our guide. I imagined that a man of his status must have a lot to do.

We followed the young soldier as he marched jerkily through the halls, leading us to our destination.

We eventually found ourselves in a large guest room built into one of the corners of the palace. The room was large, and ornately decorated. A huge dining table adorned with a vast array of food served as the focal point.

There was more than enough food for the four of us. I estimate that the table was meant to sit at least thirty.

I couldn't help but wonder how they'd managed to secure this much food for us after the siege they'd just endured. Even if we were honored guests, it still seemed a bit much.

That alone made me not want to leave anything behind...though eating like gluttons also felt wrong, given that there were probably people out in the city going hungry tonight.

It was hard to say what the right thing to do was. I mean, it wasn't like we could just go around the castle and ask if anyone wanted to eat.

Two maidservants stood against one of the walls, but we told them they weren't needed. They hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do, so I slipped them a coin as a tip and sent them on their way.

While I knew coins were immensely valuable here, coming from a mostly paper-based economy, I felt like I'd just handed them a 500-yen coin while acting like a high roller.

I shook my head and looked around the ornately decorated room once again.

It seemed likely that we'd be spending the night in the palace.

I couldn't be sure how the rest of the evening would play out, so I figured it'd be a good idea to teleport back to the shrine near the Lord Crown and get some fresh spring water.

"Kyii! Kyii!"

I looked over to find Ponta excitedly inspecting the food.

"Ponta...you're not supposed to be walking around on the table like that."

After chastising my partner, I took a small plate and started filling it with food. I could only imagine the looks the maidservants would have given us if they were still in the room.

After dinner, we would make our way to the vault to try to pick up Sasuke's trail. I glanced over at Chiyome to find her nibbling at a piece of food. After taking a second, tentative bite, she popped the whole thing into her mouth.

Checking for poison perhaps. To be fair, that was certainly a possibility.

I glanced over at Ponta to find my fuzzy partner ravenously chomping down on the food I'd given it earlier, its cheeks puffed out like a squirrel.

I chuckled at the sight. Ponta looked at me curiously, and I gave its cheeks a light prod before turning back to Chiyome.

She seemed to be doing all right.

Tracing Sasuke's steps had brought us to the Nohzan Kingdom in the first place, but after our encounter with Cardinal Palurumo, looking for clues in the vault felt less pressing.

After all, Palurumo transforming into his undead form had pretty much told us everything, from the truth about the monster I'd encountered in Tagent to the fact that the pontiff was the one who'd given them their power.

We'd suspected the Holy Hilk Kingdom was somehow behind Sasuke's transformation, and that was all but confirmed now.

Was Chiyome still thinking about avenging her brother?

It seemed unlikely that our small party would be able to overthrow the whole

Holy Hilk Kingdom. As well, if the pontiff could use teleportation magic, as Palurumo had said, we wouldn't even be able to escape him if we got ourselves into trouble.

After we looked through the vault, we would need to discuss our plan of action.

Ariane and Chiyome were talking animatedly about something, so I turned my attention back to my own food and brought a forkful of meat up to my mouth. It was nice and chewy, with an earthy taste from the vegetable sauce coating it. I had no idea what kind of meat it was, but it was good.

I grabbed a bowl of orange soup. There were several sliced root vegetables inside, giving it a relatively simple appearance, but the soup itself tasted strongly of meat. It had a nice aftertaste that reminded me more of fresh herbs than traditional spices. It was delicious.

I've always really enjoyed soup, so I hoped I could get someone to teach me the recipe.

I grabbed a piece of bread and let the soup soften it before popping it into my mouth. A marvelous flavor danced on my tongue.

I devoured the rest of the bread and let my eyes glide up the walls to the vaulted ceiling, where I caught sight of a painting.

It was an incredibly detailed depiction of a religious scene, filled with people living out their everyday lives. At the top were winged creatures—angels perhaps—watching over everyone. Nearby, skeletons dressed in rags were presided over by a god of death.

It looked like a scene from a story I hadn't heard yet.

There was something about the way the skeletons were depicted that made me wonder: Just who—and what, for that matter—was the pontiff of the Holy Hilk Kingdom?

From what I knew of his abilities, he could best be described as a necromancer.

A necromancer of the cloth? Now that was either a great piece of irony, or a

sign that the gods had a sense of humor. Though, as a skeleton Paladin, I wasn't really in a position to say anything.

While the necromancers in the game were usually limited to summoning undead monsters to fight on their behalf, the pontiff was able to control them completely. Depending on how he chose to use his powers, he could very well conquer the whole world.

If the undead we'd encountered here in Saureah were all that he had at his disposal, then we might actually have a chance. But considering what we'd witnessed back in Tagent, that seemed unlikely.

Rather than focus on the negative, I decided to turn my attention back to the delicious food in front of me.

We could deal with the rest once I had a full stomach.

We wound up polishing off pretty much everything except the bread.

It was incredibly rare to see Ariane and Chiyome eat human food, much less human food fit for a king. They tried everything.

After eating its fill, Ponta collapsed on top of the table and took a nap, snoring lightly.

I ate more than everyone else. Since skeletons like myself didn't have to worry about their figure, and since I had some sort of fourth-dimensional stomach that sent whatever I ate to who-knows-where, I could eat as much as I wanted. I counted myself lucky.

We relaxed for about an hour or so after dinner, sipping tea until a guard came to our room to escort us to the vault.

"Please follow me." She offered a smart salute before turning on a heel and marching out of the room.

Ariane let out a large yawn and hugged the snoring Ponta even closer as she gently stroked its fur.

Chiyome, cool as ever, rubbed absentmindedly at her stomach. It looked like she might have eaten a bit more than she'd intended.

Our guide led us along a complicated route deeper and deeper into the castle. It almost felt like we were making our way through a maze.

All the twists and turns down various hallways made sense to me, but I was surprised when we suddenly descended a stairwell. For a moment, I thought the guard was playing with us.

At every major corridor we passed, the guards would trade off, and a new one would guide us, suggesting that none of them actually knew the entire route to the vault. This level of complexity made sense. No doubt the king wanted to avoid anyone breaking into the royal vault at all costs.

It was a simple, but effective, security measure.

“It’s quite impressive that Sasuke managed to make it all the way here on his own...” I muttered.

I glanced over at Chiyome. Her chest puffed out ever so slightly in pride.

I truly was curious how Sasuke had managed not only to navigate past all the guards unseen, but also to do it all over again on the way out. How was that even possible?

If it had been me, I would almost certainly have been found by the very first guard and then just brute-forced my way through waves of soldiers until I reached the vault.

I clearly wasn’t suited for spy work or heists.

We arrived at a door deep within the castle—in some kind of basement, maybe?—that looked like it might lead to a vault.

The walls and floor were made of heavy stone slabs. The guard standing watch over the door snapped to attention when she heard the echoes of our footsteps.

Come to think of it, the floor also served as a tool to detect approaching intruders.

The guard swung the door open and waved us inside. We found ourselves in a spacious hall with yet another door at the far end of it.

We weren’t alone. A familiar figure stood in the middle of the long hall:

Princess Riel.

Gone was the simple dress she'd worn when we met her, replaced with an elegant gown the color of the morning sky. Small, jeweled ornaments adorned her curly blonde hair, pinning it up in the back to expose her neck. She truly looked like royalty.

Behind her were her ever-present bodyguards, Zahar and Niena. They were outfitted in splendid military uniforms decorated with various medals and insignia. It was definitely a step up from the plain garb they'd been wearing before.

Apparently, they were here to supervise our tour of the vault. But why was Riel with them?

"What brings you here, princess?"

"I was the one who made this agreement with you, wasn't I? So I must honor my promise! Besides, I have Father's permission." She spoke in a proud, dignified tone.

Glancing over her shoulder, I caught a hint of annoyance on Zahar's face. I got the impression that the king had relented rather than agreed to this.

"We've never let visitors into the vault before, so Father said that if a member of the royal family accompanies them, that will prevent similar requests in the future."

Royal palaces varied wildly when it came to rules and customs. Even if the princess herself had promised us access to the vault, we were still outsiders. It was in their best interest not to set a precedent with us.

It was difficult for a commoner like me to understand fully, but judging from Ariane's reaction, this all made sense to her. Perhaps it was because elven villages tended to be enclosed, self-sufficient units.

Zahar spoke up, locking eyes with each of us in turn.

"Let's get down to it, shall we? I doubt you're thinking of stealing anything, but all the same, I'd appreciate it if you stayed in sight."

We each nodded.

Not only did we have no interest in stealing anything, none of us were even armed. Zahar and Niena would have no problem putting an end to any funny business.

But I *was* interested in seeing what kind of treasures a kingdom collected.

The door stood directly ahead of us. It took up almost the entire width of the hallway, and was made entirely of reinforced metal. It looked more like the gate to a fortress.

Six guards, lined up shoulder to shoulder on either side of the hallway, stood watch over the entrance to the vault. They saluted Riel as she walked over and handed one of them a pair of keys. The guard slid them into the massive lock and gave them each a full turn. A loud *clunk* resonated through the hall, followed by another. The guards began pulling the heavy metal door open.

A low gasp escaped my mouth. I could feel my pulse quicken as I watched all of these security measures. Just how had Sasuke managed to sneak into this place?

Zahar's gaze met mine. "We've improved our security since the incident with the intruder."

Well, that made sense. They'd probably never expected any thieves to make it all the way to the vault...until a lone ninja had slipped past their defenses.

I began wondering what had become of the guards charged with watching over the vault during the incident.

One of the guards activated some sort of magical lighting device, bathing the vault in a dim glow.

"After you." With a wave of his hand, Zahar urged Riel into the room, with us in tow.

An ornately decorated room, crammed full of jewels and works of art...was what I'd been expecting. Instead, we were met with statues, cloths draped over them to keep away the dust. Paintings in intricately decorated frames were tightly wrapped up to keep them protected from the elements.

I couldn't spot any gold or other treasure out in the open. Best I could tell, it

was all locked away in simple wooden chests stacked neatly on shelves.

The room itself lacked any decoration. The walls were made of plain stone, and simple pillars held the magical lights. It was more like a large storehouse than the exquisite treasure vault I'd been looking forward to. In fact, the hidden room we'd broken into back in Diento was a lot more impressive than this.

With Riel's permission, we started looking through several of the wooden chests. At least their contents proved that we were in the right place—they were positively brimming with gold, silver, gems, and decorative items. Their contents ranged from bizarre wooden idols that looked practically worthless to large, translucent jewels the size of coconuts.

"Hmm..."

"Kyiiii..."

We walked around the storehouse for a bit, but there didn't seem to be anything here that hinted at where Sasuke might have gone next.

Considering that this world largely lacked in forensic science, and that I wasn't much of a detective, I realized it was rather naïve of me to think we might find clues here. In that respect, it was rather fortuitous that we'd run across Cardinal Palurumo.

Riel watched with great curiosity as I wandered around the room. It must have seemed rather absurd to her that we had no clear objective.

I checked in with Ariane and Chiyome, but they'd also come up empty-handed.

There wasn't even a hint of dust on the floor or shelves, and therefore no fingerprints or footprints to follow.

I ran a finger along one of the shelves in the back, and it didn't even leave a trail.

I turned to Zahar. "It's awfully clean in here..."

His face was grave. "After we discovered that there had been an intruder, we went through every single item in the vault and checked it against our records to see if anything had been stolen. The decision was made to clean the vault at

that time.”

I stared back at him in disbelief. “You mean that you have a record of everything in here?”

Zahar nodded. He directed me to a shelf in one corner of the vault.

At first glance, I’d thought it was full of spell books or forbidden tomes, but apparently it was just a catalog of everything in the vault. It would take ages to make it through every single book, so I decided to skim as best I could instead.

Princess Riel spoke up. “Now that you mention it, while no items had been taken from the vault, I remember hearing that the record books had been thrown about. Isn’t that right?”

One of the guards grabbed a book and handed it to me. “That’s right. We found this one sitting on the top shelf, wide open.”

I took the book from the guard and opened it. Inside, I found a drawing of something I’d seen before.

“Chiyome...”

Chiyome looked over at the page I was pointing to. Her azure eyes went wide.

The drawing was of one of the items located within the vault: a diamond-shaped gem. Next to it were comments about the gem’s unique characteristics. This was, without a doubt, one of the Jinshin clan’s mystical treasures, a pledge spirit crystal.

I showed the book to Zahar. “Is this gem still here in the vault?”

He consulted several other books on the shelf before finally shaking his head. “According to our records, this was given to the Holy Hilk Kingdom. It’s no longer in our vault.”

Chiyome and I locked eyes. This pretty much confirmed that Sasuke was the one who’d snuck in here. He must have entered the vault, seen that the pledge spirit crystal was with the Holy Hilk Kingdom, and made his way there. That’s when the pontiff had ensnared him. At least, that was my best guess.

Chiyome gazed down at the drawing for some time before closing her eyes, her thoughts undoubtedly on the now-deceased Sasuke.

Niena, who'd been watching us in silence, suddenly narrowed her eyes, took a step forward, and drew her blade. She fixed Chiyome with a steely glare.

"I knew there was something strange about you. You know the beastman that infiltrated the castle last time, don't you? Breaking into the royal family's sacred vault is inexcusable! Tell me what's going on, and what your connection is with that thief!"

Riel went pale, looking back and forth between me and her bodyguard, trying to make sense of the situation.

Niena had to know that she wouldn't stand a chance in a fight with Chiyome. She'd seen the power the cat girl could wield. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the hilt of her sword was trembling.

Zahar was trying to get Niena to stand down, but Chiyome threw more fuel on the fire.

"Assuming I did know this person, what are you going to do about it?"

Her azure gaze was as cold as ice, each spoken syllable literally chilling the air around us. Her breath came out in white puffs that reflected the magical lantern light.

Everyone in the room froze, like frogs facing a snake poised to strike.

Chiyome, deep in her grief over Sasuke, didn't seem to be in the mood for Niena's rude treatment. She slowly approached the bodyguard, leaving frosty footprints on the stone floor behind her.

The room had gone completely quiet, as if the air itself was frozen. Chiyome's voice cut through this crisp silence with all the bite of an icicle.

"Do you even know where this came from, before it ended up in your precious vault? Do you have any idea why my people hide in the mountains? Do you ever think about the sins you humans have committed by hunting, capturing, and enslaving my people?"

Sweat beaded on the back of Niena's neck as she tried, and failed, to stammer out a response. "I... Well, I..."



I decided I had to put a stop to this before it escalated further. The rage welling within Chiyome was palpable.

“I think that’s enough, Chiyome.”

The temperature in the room seemed to warm by several degrees as she eased up.

“Princess Riel has already promised that all the enslaved mountain people in the capital will be released tomorrow, so there’s no point in you and Niena having it out. The more pressing matter is deciding what to do with your newly freed comrades.”

Chiyome was in the right, and she deserved answers to her questions. But violence would only harm our cause.

“The mountain people *are* being freed tomorrow, right, princess?”

The young girl snapped back to her senses. She nodded several times in quick succession.

“Th-that’s right! Father will gather everyone in the square in front of the castle and make an announcement!”

Chiyome closed her eyes and let out a deep breath.

The frost on the stone floor melted away and the fog that had begun filling the room faded. Princess Riel and the other humans let out audible sighs of relief.

“I’m sorry, Arc. I kind of lost control just now. I think I’d like to be alone for a bit.”

Chiyome gave a quick bow before heading for the door. I glanced over at Ponta, who was snuggled tight in Ariane’s arms.

“I’ve got a job for you, buddy. Can you keep an eye on her for me?”

“Kyii!”

Ponta let out an excited mew and took off after Chiyome, pawing at her tail. The ninja girl leaned down, picked Ponta up, and made her way out of the room.

I looked at Riel and her bodyguards apologetically. “I’m sorry about all that. It’s just that the gem depicted in this book is sacred to her clan. I don’t know how it ended up here in the first place, but given the strained relations between mountain people and humans, I doubt it was under pleasant circumstances.”

Zahar bowed his head. “I didn’t know we even had such a thing. I’m truly sorry, Arc.”

Princess Riel hurried over to stand in front of her bodyguard.

“No need to apologize. There’s nothing that can be done about it now. Chiyome is just in a bit of a bad spot.”

The events surrounding what was supposed to be our payment had all gotten bent out of shape. I was hoping to get them back on track.

While everyone still looked uncertain as to what to do next, I tried to brush the whole thing off. All the slaves in the capital would be set free tomorrow, and slavery would be formally declared illegal, except in cases where the person had been convicted of a crime. Still, the barriers between the two species weren’t just going to disappear overnight.

For those who’d spent years living under oppression, and those who’d profited from that oppression, trust would be a long time coming. Chiyome and Niena were the perfect example of that.

Riel looked up at me, her steely gray eyes brimming with tears. “I’m truly sorry about that, Arc! I’ll give Niena a stern talking to later tonight.”

Niena closed her eyes in shame at the sight of her young master having to apologize on her behalf. She tried hiding her embarrassment by casting her gaze down.

When I stepped out of the vault, I found Chiyome standing next to the door, Ponta held tightly in her arms.

“I’m sorry, Arc.”

Her cat ears were practically lying flat on top of her head, and her tail drooped lifelessly behind her.

I brushed it off with a wave of my hand. “There’s nothing for you to apologize

for, Chiyome.”

She shook her head and stared down at her feet.

Ponta let out a low purr in an attempt to soothe the young girl’s torment.

Chiyome was a warrior, of course, but at the end of the day, she was still a child. She didn’t quite have the coping skills to let insults slide.

In a weird way, it was comforting to see that the emotional side of her still existed.

“We’ll have our work cut out for us tomorrow, finding homes for all the former slaves—either in the hidden village or in the new one under construction. It’ll be a busy day.”

I tried keeping my tone light, but I accidentally let out a heavy sigh as I thought of all that we had to do. This brought a small smile to Chiyome’s face.

“Anyway, we’ve had a long day.” Ariane squeezed Chiyome’s shoulder. “What do you say we go to bed? They seem happy to let us stay here in the castle, but I was thinking maybe we could head back to the village for the night.”

Ever the observant one, Ariane sensed that having Chiyome sleep in a room provided by humans wasn’t going to help her relax, and instead suggested I teleport us back to the village.

But Chiyome shook her head and clutched Ponta tighter to her chest. “Don’t worry about me. We should just go to bed now so that we’ll be well-rested for tomorrow.”

Ariane gazed deeply into Chiyome’s eyes, then took her hand and began leading her away.

“All right then. You can stay in my bed tonight, and Arc will...sleep in another room or something, I guess.”

Ariane spoke in a cheery but decisive tone—there was no room for argument. Chiyome’s eyes went wide at this, but she conceded with a nod of her head.

Since Ponta was still firmly buried in her arms, it looked like I’d be sleeping alone tonight. Glancing down the hall, I could see faint moonlight cascading through the narrow window slits.

When I woke the next morning, the sky was a sea of ashy clouds. It was hardly an auspicious start to the day that would see the freedom of all mountain people in Nohzan.

The undead cleanup operations were still underway, so the majority of the citizens were crowded into the old town district. Everyone was making do as best they could, but it was clearly a trying time for all.

Still, the crowds looked slightly more cheerful than the foreboding sky.

The streets buzzed with gossip about the mass destruction outside the city walls and bustled with soldiers clearing out the remaining undead.

There were even a few ordinary citizens who expressed interest in going out to the new town district and seeing the undead for themselves. It was beginning to look like life was returning to the city.

I caught snatches of conversation about the city's restoration and rumblings about the mountain people being set free. This wasn't a leak, but rather information that Zahar had given to a select few in advance, to start preparing people for the new reality.

"I heard that while we were rushing back with reinforcements, they were running short on soldiers here in the capital and starting mobilizing the slaves that had been hidden from the Hilk church." Zahar frowned, trying hard to keep his face neutral. "However, I can't help but wonder if any of the beastmen were planning to use this as their opportunity to escape. There might even be some who fled as soon as the fighting ended. That's why I started the rumor...to try to put any beastmen still in the capital at ease."

There was a certain logic behind his plan.

We were standing with Zahar on the second floor of a large reception hall built next to the castle, looking out over a sprawling garden below.

Commoners would never be allowed to enter the castle grounds under normal circumstances, but right now, the garden was packed with mountain people. Zahar estimated that there were around a thousand.

The crowd only consisted of those who were physically able to attend. There were undoubtedly more throughout the city. However, the goal was to make

sure at least some mountain people heard the proclamation from the king himself. After that, they could tell the rest of their comrades. At least, that was the plan.

Chiyome looked excitedly out the window at all the people assembled in the garden.

Zahar approached her. "I'd like to apologize to you for Niena's actions yesterday."

Chiyome's expression remained neutral as she watched the goings-on below. Ariane looked over at me, silently urging me to say something.

"Chiyome doesn't seem too troubled over the situation, so please don't worry about it." I decided to change the subject. "By the way, where is Niena? I haven't seen her around. Is she with the princess?"

This elicited a chagrined look from Zahar as he scratched the back of his head. "After what happened last night, Princess Riel took her back into her room for a thorough lashing. Niena is reflecting on what she did."

I heard faint gasps from Ariane and Chiyome's direction. When I looked over, they both quickly averted their eyes.

"That must be tough."

I imagined the young Princess Riel giving her tough bodyguard a whipping. With each lash, Niena's face flushed pink as she shouted an apology. I knew of a few people who might find this image rather exciting.

Zahar's cough brought my mind out of the gutter.

"Do you have any ill will toward the mountain people, Zahar?"

He let out a short, self-deprecating laugh. "Niena and I are different in that respect. I'm the simple son of villagers. She's nobility. When I was a child, I had some non-human friends I'd play with in the woods. They helped me out of a lot of dangerous situations. I paid it back whenever I could by telling them where the slave hunters made their rounds."

Zahar offered a slight bow of his head.

I wanted to ask what had become of his friends, but judging by the look on his

face, it seemed like that was a topic better left alone. I nodded.

“I see...”

Several trumpeters snapped to attention in the corners of the garden and blew a few sharp notes. The crowd fell silent. All eyes focused forward.

After the fanfare, King Asparuh appeared on the large, second floor balcony, flanked on either side by guards. One of them belted out an introduction.

“Asparuh Nohzan Saureah, honorable king of the Nohzan Kingdom, presents himself before you!”

Most of the mountain people crowded into the garden had probably never even seen the king before. A frenzied murmur broke out among them as they speculated about whether this was actually the king.

Asparuh took a step forward and approached the railing of the balcony so he could look down over the mountain people gathered before him. After a short pause, he began speaking.

“First off, I would like to thank you all for coming. As you all know, up until just a few days ago, our kingdom stood on the brink of destruction. It is only through your concerted efforts that we are still here. I offer you my thanks on behalf of the entire Nohzan Kingdom.”

The mountain people exchanged confused glances. They weren’t sure how to feel about a human king personally thanking them for their sacrifices. Something like this had never happened before.

Several of them were clearly angry at the king’s words, their faces twisting into scowls. For them, such words rang hollow, coming from a man who only saw fit to use them as fodder, when human existence itself was threatened. However, the armed guards around the garden’s perimeter kept them from spitting or jeering at the king.

“I’m sure several of you have already heard the rumors, but I would like to assure you that the hordes of undead that fell upon our capital are now almost entirely gone, with only a few pockets of resistance remaining. I am confident that they will soon be wiped out and life will return to normal—nay, better than normal—for you here in the capital.”

A small but hearty cheer erupted from the crowd.

“I am only standing before you today thanks to the tremendous efforts of my daughter Riel, who recruited three fine heroes to save our city from almost certain destruction. I owe these heroes a debt of gratitude that I fear I can never repay, but I have promised that I would do my best.”

A commotion broke out among the crowd at this. It was hard to imagine that three people alone could have saved the city.

Some of the people wondered whether the danger facing them had been overblown, if three people had been able to handle it. Others suggested that perhaps there'd been no attack in the first place. However, these theories were quickly shouted down by those who'd witnessed the undead hordes with their own eyes.

A few in the audience asked why they'd been gathered just to hear about these three heroes. Various theories were shot back and forth. Many spoke of the heroic deeds they witnessed.

Also, I couldn't help but notice that the story had been changed to Princess Riel heading off with the express purpose of hiring mercenaries, rather than just happening to stumble across us while she was fleeing the kingdom. It sounded better that way.

“The reward these heroes asked of me is simple. They want all the enslaved elves and beast people within our fair kingdom to be immediately set free, and for the law to change so that the owning of slaves be expressly forbidden. I promised to do so, and hereby announce that such a law will be enacted at once.”

Silence fell over the crowd for the briefest of moments before they erupted, clamoring among themselves while the king watched. While many had already heard the rumors of emancipation, it was another thing entirely to hear it from the lips of the king. Given what they'd been through, I understood why this news might seem hard to believe.

That said, knowing that their freedom had been insisted upon by outsiders changed the situation.

“And now, I would like to introduce these three heroes to you! Coming all the way from the Great Canada Forest, the elven soldiers, Arc Lalatoya and Ariane Glenys Lalatoya!”

As soon as he announced our names, Ariane and I stepped out on the balcony on either side of him. The crowd began murmuring anew at the sight of us.

Even though we’d discussed how this would all play out beforehand, I still didn’t feel comfortable being the center of attention. Sure, it was probably the same amount of people I’d normally encounter simply walking through a square on any normal day of the week, but it somehow felt more intimidating when accompanied by a royal introduction.

The murmuring grew louder as some people recognized us from our battle with Cardinal Palurumo.

“Can you believe it? Elves saved a human country from destruction!”

“Hey, ya think that guy in the armor is really an elf? I never heard of an elf wearing armor before.”

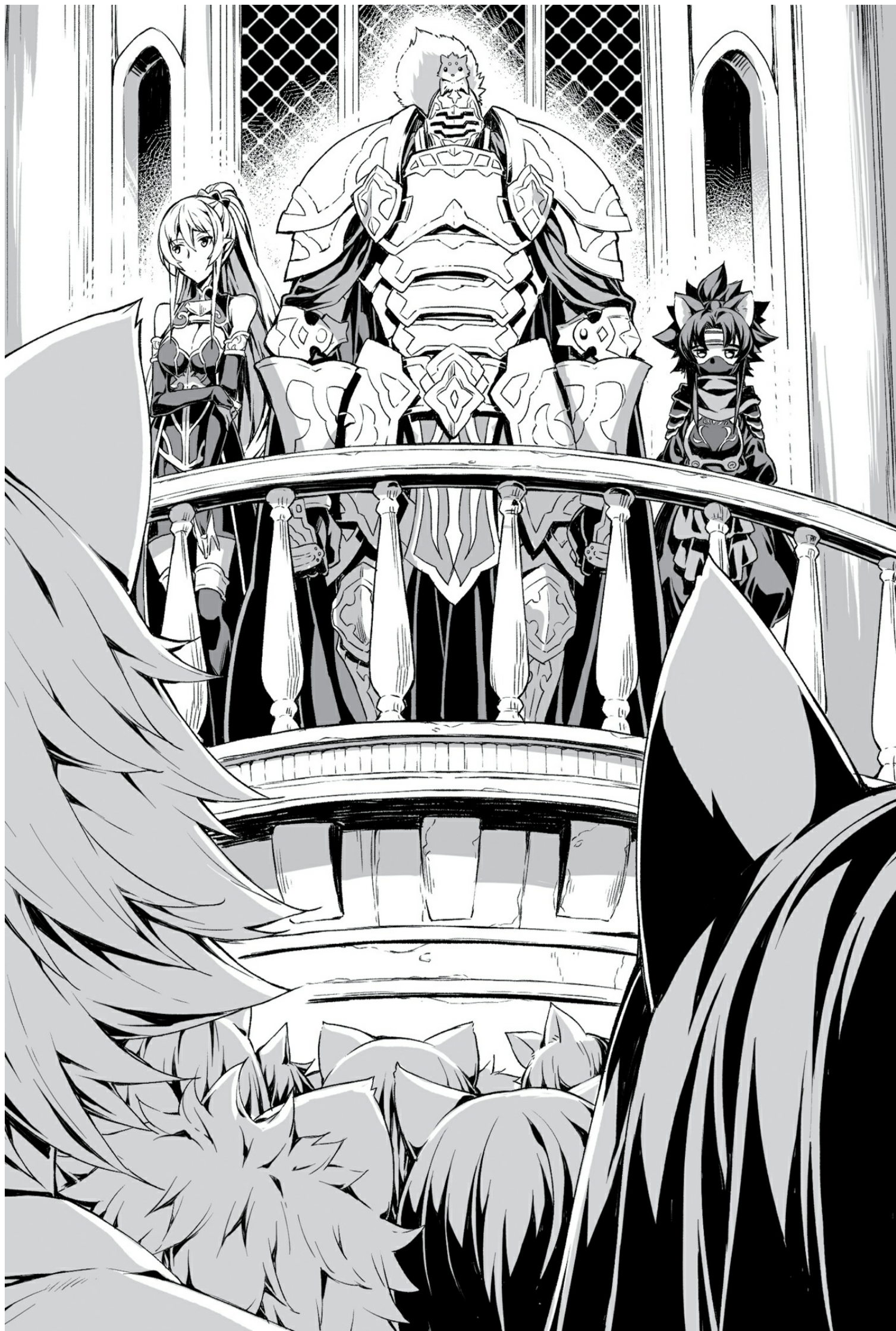
“And look at that helmet! Is he just gonna leave his face covered the whole time?”

“You idiot, aren’t you paying attention? No hero would *want* to hide their face. So either he’s trying to keep his identity a secret, or he’s an absolute nobody.”

There were others who tried defending my right to privacy, which I was grateful for, considering I was just a skull and bones in a suit of armor.

“Next, I would like to introduce Chiyome, representing the Jinshin clan!”

Chiyome looked as cool as usual, though I noticed that she was wearing a scarf over her mouth in addition to her ninja garb, either out of respect for her traditions, or to hide how nervous she really was.



Cries of excitement and joy erupted throughout the crowd at the mention of the Jinshin clan. I was surprised at how well-known they were among the mountain people.

“D-did he just say the Jinshin clan?”

“No way! They came all the way here?! Does that mean we’re really free?”

I saw Chiyome’s tail sway gently from side to side as she gazed out across the crowd.

The mountain people cheered for a long time before King Asparuh gestured to the trumpeters to play a short fanfare. All eyes returned to the king.

“All slaves within the capital are free! Once we have things settled here, we will then begin to free the slaves throughout the country. Chiyome here will be in charge of helping all the mountain people relocate to a newly created colony. More details will be distributed at a later date. Thank you all for your time.”

With that, the guards escorted the excited crowd out. It didn’t look like their enthusiasm was going to die down anytime soon.

Without taking my eyes off the departing crowd, I addressed Chiyome. “How many people do you think we’ll take to the new colony at first?”

“I was thinking around a hundred or so. There’s still a lot of work left before we can accept so many people, so we’ll want a tough group that can handle some hard living.”

Ariane sighed. “It’s going to get even more cramped...”

A guard hurried toward the king, but Zahar intercepted, demanding to know what the man wanted.

“Halt! Declare your business.”

“I, uh, well, a servant sent by Margrave Brahnief of the Salma Kingdom is outside the inner wall. He claims that the margrave is requesting an audience with the king. What should we do?”

King Asparuh’s face drew back with suspicion. “Are you sure this is one of Margrave Brahnief’s servants?”

The guard shrank back and let out a yelp as the king approached him, but he composed himself quickly and pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, which he handed over to Zahar.

“My, my apologies! I forgot that the servant wanted me to give this to His Highness. A-about the servant...he says that he was dispatched by the margrave himself, and bears all the proper crests.”

Zahar nodded. He inspected the crest pressed into the wax seal on the back of the envelope.

Something about the exchange seemed to spark Ariane’s interest, and she leaned over toward me.

“That country we passed through...that was the Salma Kingdom, wasn’t it? You don’t think this has anything to do with the soldiers being attacked, do you?”

Zahar and I nodded in unison. That all felt like an eternity ago.

Zahar whispered something in the king’s ear before handing the sealed envelope over.

“Did Riel really give that order? No one told me anything about you being pursued by monsters into the Brahniey domain. The margrave is different from the rest of the clueless nobles in the Salma Kingdom. I wonder if he realized that it was Riel trespassing through his lands. By why send a servant all the way here?”

The king broke the seal and unfolded the letter. As his eyes scanned the words, a look of surprise appeared on his face.

“What did the margrave say, Your Highness?” Zahar could barely contain his curiosity.

King Asparuh’s forehead creased as he raised his gaze from the paper. “Apparently, they’re in a bit of a bind. The margrave would like to meet with me for a secret discussion. I can’t imagine what could have made him ignore protocol like this.”

The king turned his attention back to the guard who’d barged in.

“Prepare a reply to the margrave at once. I apologize for treating my honored guests this way, but I’m afraid I must be going.”

With that, the king swept himself out of the room.

“Hmm...”

Ponta looked up at me curiously as the echoes of the king’s footsteps faded.

“Kyii?”

Ariane didn’t seem particularly interested in this turn of events and continued gently stroking Ponta’s tail. Chiyome and I, however, sensed something amiss. Her cat ears were standing straight up.

“I feel it too...”

We both looked up at the foreboding sky, which seemed to have grown darker since we’d woken up. It looked as if it might fall and crush us all at any moment.

King Asparuh penned a quick letter in response to Margrave Brahnief and dispatched a messenger at once.

Assuming the margrave made preparations to leave the moment he received the letter, it would take him around five days to arrive at the capital. That was why King Asparuh was surprised when his guest arrived a mere three days later.

Zahar had been giving a report on Arc, Ariane, and Chiyome when he heard the news. He couldn’t help but express his misgivings.

“In terms of the distance alone, this shouldn’t be possible. Are you sure it isn’t some sort of trick?”

“No, his identity has already been confirmed. I suspect that he may have started making his way here without waiting for my response.”

The certainty in the king’s voice won Zahar over. It made sense after all. The letter from the margrave had hinted at a rather dire situation. But between not bothering to wait for a proper reply and the margrave himself coming out to visit the king, the whole affair was rather strange.

Zahar's face clouded. "I have a terrible feeling about all this, Your Highness."

The king pursed his lips. "So do I. All the same, let us meet with him. Guards, show Margrave Brahnief in at once!"

Several minutes later, the two men were sitting across from each other in a cozy room in one of the far corners of the castle.

They sat on either side of a small table, silently sizing each other up. This was the first time the men had ever met.

From the margrave's perspective, the king looked to be on the younger side, though the intensity and experience in his eyes betrayed his age.

The king, on the other hand, felt admiration for the margrave's muscular build and fierce gaze, which he'd won through hard years on the field of battle.

Both men smiled politely.

Compared to the mostly useless nobles the king knew, the margrave seemed a rather magnificent specimen, capable of anything he put his mind to. Likewise, Margrave Brahnief was impressed at the confident ruler sitting across from him, particularly when he thought of the weakling who led the Salma Kingdom.

"I am Asparuh Nohzan Saureah, king of the Nohzan Kingdom."

"My name is Wendly du Brahnief, a margrave of the Salma Kingdom."

The two shook hands.

The only other person in the room was Zahar, serving as a bodyguard for the king. He was surprised to see that the margrave had come without protection.

The king cut straight to the point. "So, you come seeking an unprecedented secret meeting. I believe we can skip the unnecessary formalities and get straight to the point. What brings you here?"

"Yes, I would appreciate that. But first, would you mind telling me how many undead attacked your country?"

The king narrowed his gaze, but he saw no reason to withhold the information. After all, the other man must have known at least something

already.

“Around 100,000 at our best estimates.”

The margrave slapped a hand against his knee. A smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

“Well, that’s certainly good to know! I apologize for how this must come across, of course, considering the hardships you certainly endured while protecting your fine capital. Suffering as few casualties as you did against an army of that size could be easily be considered a miracle. But I wonder...how would you defend yourself again, should another force of that size descend upon your kingdom?”

The smile faded from the margrave’s face, and his voice took on a dark edge. The king listened quietly as the other man spoke; it was all he could do to keep his cool.

“Has such an army appeared in Salma? How many?”

“Around 200,000, or so I’ve been told.”

The king sat in stunned silence.

The sound of someone clearing their throat prompted the margrave to continue.

“The undead hordes are currently laying siege to Larisa, the capital of the Salma Kingdom. I fear it’s already too late for reinforcements to be of any use. If I were to put everyone of age on the front lines of battle, I couldn’t even muster an army of 20,000. The capital is a lost cause. Therefore, I’ve come to you to propose we join forces. It’s our only chance for survival.”

The king thought about this. If he were to dismiss the margrave’s proposition, and the other man fell in battle, then it would only be a matter of time until 200,000 undead turned their spears toward Saureah. They’d already failed to take the capital once, and would certainly be back to finish what they’d started.

King Asparuh let out a heavy sigh. “As you say, it’s unlikely that our luck will continue to hold out.”

Brahniey smiled. “All’s not lost! Tell me how you were able to drive off that

massive army. If I need to make any preparations, I can begin at once. Judging by the condition of your outer wall, it seems like you had to use a fire magic trap of some sort and...”

The margrave trailed off, seeing the dark look on Asparuh’s face. Perhaps the king had already used up whatever it was that had helped him fight off the invaders. Perhaps there was nothing left to defeat the next wave.

The answer he received, however, was something he never could have imagined.

“We weren’t able to fend off the enemy hordes, at least not on our own. It was two elves and a beast girl who saved the capital.”

The margrave stared at the king. He’d no idea that the Nohzan Kingdom had strong relations with either the elves or beast people. None of this made any sense.

The beast people were hunted and captured in accordance with the teachings of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, leaving very few left out in the wild. Not to mention that the majority of the elves had long ago escaped to the vast lands of the Great Canada Forest off in the Rhoden Kingdom, making them scarce as well.

That left only one possibility.

“Ruanne?”

The king shook his head, explaining that the elves were from Canada.

What really threw the margrave for a loop, however, wasn’t the species of heroes, but the fact that Saureah had been, supposedly, saved from destruction by just three people. He could no longer contain his surprise.

“Wait just a moment. Do you mean to tell me that all it took was two elves and a beast girl to defeat an army of 100,000 undead? You’re not just toying with me, are you?”

The king let out another heavy sigh. “Zahar, could you please summon Arc, Ariane, and Chiyome for me?”

Zahar saluted and quickly left the room. Once he was gone, the king turned back to Brahniey.

“Do you know who is behind all this, Wendly?”

The margrave had been wondering about this, but the threat of 200,000 undead had been a more pressing matter. However, the sheer number alone raised a lot of questions. After all, undead usually only appeared in small numbers.

He'd considered the possibility that Hades was behind this, and mentioned his suspicions to the king. But Asparuh shook his head.

“My prime minister originally suggested the same. However, if the legends are true, then Hades was defeated at the hands of the Revlon Empire. It could be, however, that he was only sealed away, and that seal has now been broken, but...”

The king hung his head. There wasn't a hint of mirth in his voice.

“Our enemy is not some legend. The man who created these monsters is very real, and is closely tied to your lands as well as mine. This is the work of the Holy Hilk Kingdom.”

Margrave Brahnief's eyes went wide. He found himself temporarily speechless. The thought of the Hilk being behind this had never crossed his mind.

“Assuming what you say is true, how did you learn this?”

King Asparuh explained the whole situation, from Cardinal Palurumo's visit, to the elven woman seeing through his disguise, to the final battle with Palurumo's monstrous undead form.

“And only elves and beast people can see through their disguises?”

The king nodded.

“At present, yes. However, there are very few of either group living here in Nohzan.”

Before the margrave could respond to this, Zahar returned, three figures trailing behind him.

The man immediately behind Zahar was dressed from head to toe in the magnificent silver armor of a knight. The light reflected off the metal so brightly

that it was hard to look at him directly. Riding atop his helmet was some sort of strange creature covered in green fur, with a long, fluffy tail. From a distance, it could have easily been mistaken for a decoration.

The knight was followed by a woman of indescribable beauty. She had pointed ears, skin the color of amethyst, eyes of gold, and hair as white as fallen snow. She was a dark elf, a species the margrave had never even seen in the Ruanne Forest. In contrast to her exquisite looks, however, she was dressed not in the gowns common to women of her beauty, but crude leather armor and a dark gray cloak, clothes usually reserved for soldiers or mercenaries.

Bringing up the rear was a girl who walked so lightly that her footsteps didn't even register.

She was dressed entirely in black. Atop her head were two triangular ears, and a long, black tail dangled from her waist. She was one of the beast people. Her intimidating azure gaze locked onto the margrave the moment she entered the room, though he wasn't one to easily give in to pressure.

Zahar arranged for three more chairs and gestured for the guests to sit at the table. They looked back and forth between the king of Nohzan and the margrave from Salma.

"First off, introductions. Wendly, these here are Arc, Ariane, and Chiyome, the three I told you about before. They saved our kingdom from the most dire of circumstances."

Margrave Brahnief reached out and shook each of their hands in turn.

He could tell these were no ordinary people. The man in armor particularly stood out. It was odd that he made no effort to take off his helmet, and that an animal rode atop it no less.

He stole a glance at Asparuh, but the king's face remained as grim as ever.

"I apologize for calling you all here like this. You see, Margrave Brahnief has informed me that his domain is under threat of attack, apparently by a force twice the size of what we saw here. Their target is currently the capital of the Salma Kingdom, but if the Brahnief domain were also to fall, then the armies of the undead would likely cross the border to attack Saureah once again. I

understand that it is incredibly selfish of me to ask this of you, but I was hoping you might be willing to assist us once again.”

The margrave didn't know what to make of a king bowing to three non-humans. Moreover, he was surprised to see that they didn't even bat an eye when the king mentioned that this new army was twice as large. The only one to speak up was the dark elf. She turned to the knight, sounding more annoyed than anything.

“Listen, we already handled Riel's request. I don't see why we should get ourselves involved again.”

“But if the country's overrun, then all our efforts to build decent relations between humans, elves, and mountain people will be for nothing.”

King Asparuh watched as the two debated.

Though the margrave didn't know how the three of them would be able to defeat such a large army, it was clear that the decision made at this table would determine his country's very survival. He felt compelled to do whatever he could to sway the decision in his favor, by making sure they were aware of all the facts.

“If I may, I would also like to let you know that some of the undead, quite possibly scouts, have been observed making their way toward the Ruanne Forest, home to your fellow elves. I believe it is likely that they plan to attack not only Brahnief, but Ruanne Forest and Count Dimo's domain as well.”

This was nothing more than speculation on his part, but it couldn't hurt to have them factor it into their decision.

Arc, the knight, was the first to speak up. “Considering what Cardinal Palurumo said, I wonder if the previous attacks on the Ruanne elves were an attempt to make some in-roads for a later attack.”

Ariane narrowed her eyes at this.

This type of reaction was exactly what the margrave had hoped for. He wasn't sure how large the initial group that attacked Ruanne had been, but if they'd suffered casualties, it must mean that their warriors were nowhere near as powerful as the three who sat before him.

Throughout his many years sharing a border with them, Margrave Brahnief had never heard of any group of elves who were more skilled in the art of war than those who inhabited the Ruanne Forest. This was one reason why the idea that these three alone could have taken down an army of 100,000 seemed so preposterous.

While Brahnief didn't know much about the relations between the elves of the Great Canada Forest and those of the Ruanne Forest, he was at least fairly certain that they weren't on bad terms.

Ariane crossed her arms. "In that case, shouldn't it be up to the central council to decide if we should send forces to aid Ruanne?"

Arc leaned over to whisper in Ariane's ear. "There will likely be far more elven casualties if we wait for that to happen."

"Don't be stupid. If we take this up to the central council, my village will be tasked with sending soldiers. Considering how powerful you are, we might even call upon the Dragon Lord."

The room was briefly filled with the sound of angry whispering. None of the humans dared say a word.

The "Dragon Lord" Ariane had mentioned was considered to be the pinnacle of all life forms, at least among the elves. It was said to be so powerful that even mountains and valleys bent to its whims.

The margrave grew lightheaded at the thought that the elves could mobilize such a creature.

Ariane spoke up again. "The central council will likely not be terribly concerned to hear that a few human nations will be wiped out. However, considering that we would prefer to leave some human kingdoms intact, at least, those that are willing to treat elves and mountain people properly, our interests align for now. If you can agree to our terms, then the high elders of the central council may be willing to provide assistance."

She glanced between the two human men sitting at the table.

"And what are these terms?" the margrave asked.

“No different from those the Nohzan Kingdom already agreed to. We ask that all enslaved elves and mountain people be set free immediately, and that the practice of slavery be made illegal.”

The margrave didn't hesitate. “Understood. On my honor, I promise that these policies will be enacted.”

Since his lands bordered the Ruanne Forest, the margrave had always been careful to avoid unnecessarily interfering with the elven way of life.

As for the mountain people, much like the Nohzan Kingdom, Brahnief had already forbidden the practice of slavery—in order to follow the directives of the Holy Hilk Kingdom and avoid any discord with those back in the capital—so he generally avoided getting involved in the affairs of those that lived in the mountains and forests.

Ariane threw in another possible condition. “And what would you say if the high elders decide that the Holy Hilk Kingdom must be overthrown? Would you offer your support?”

“What?!”

“Well, I...”

Both men seemed flabbergasted.

“This whole ordeal was brought about by the pontiff of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, was it not? I would think you'd want to get rid of such a person. I don't see what the problem is.”

She gazed at the two stunned nobles. Arc decided to offer them a little help.

“Ariane, many humans follow the Hilk faith. Trying to go after the pontiff could drive an even deeper rift between humans and elves. Asparuh and Wendly here could very well face being overthrown by their own people if they were to try to denounce the faith.”

The two men nodded vigorously at this.

For the first time since entering the room, Chiyome spoke up, offering a compromise.

“Well then, what about spreading the word about what the pontiff is doing?

Once we've overthrown him and his cardinals, we could have the church change its teachings regarding the treatment of non-human species. No matter what we choose to do, leaving the Holy Hilk Kingdom alone is simply not an option."

Both men groaned.

She wasn't wrong, of course. Now that the Holy Hilk Kingdom had used its armies to invade its neighbors, the way forward was clear. The pontiff would need to be removed from the Hilk church.

Ariane made it clear just how important this requirement was. "Considering what a massive thorn the church has been in our side, the odds of the high elders electing to offer their assistance will increase dramatically if they hear that this will also reduce the Hilk's power. Frankly, it will be a hard sell if there's nothing in it for us."

"How about we head back to the Ruanne Forest first and talk with Dillan at least?"

"That's a great idea. My gramp...uh, grandfather is a high elder, so I'm sure that we can get him to bring this matter up."

While Arc and Ariane figured out their next move, the margrave felt a sense of unease wash over him.

"Sorry to interrupt, but the Ruanne Forest is a four-day trip from here. After that, you would still need to head west to the Rhoden Kingdom and then onto Canada, wouldn't you? I'm afraid that our countries will no longer exist by the time you arrive."

His fears weren't unfounded. However, Arc assured him that there was no need to worry.

Before the margrave could press the issue further, King Asparuh spoke up.

"I understand that you can use the spirit paths, Arc?"

Margrave Braham's mouth fell open.

There were legends of so-called "spirit paths" that the elves used to travel long distances in the blink of an eye. Or at least, the margrave had assumed they were only legends. If the elves *did* have access to such mystical arts, then

why had it been possible for the humans to so easily capture them in the first place?

The large man in his ominous suit of armor simply shrugged and looked over at Ariane.

Worried that Arc was perhaps confused, the king went on to explain what spirit paths were.

“When Cardinal Palurumo tried to attack me, you used your power to come to my side and protect me. Did you not use these spirit paths to move about so quickly?”

Arc finally seemed to understand what the king was talking about and clapped his hands together. “Aaah, you mean teleportation magic?”

The king slumped back in his chair. He coughed into his fist to draw attention away from his surprise.

The margrave, however, managed to keep up a calm demeanor and asked for further clarification. “Ah, um, yes... I assume this teleportation magic allows you to instantaneously travel anywhere you like?”

Arc didn't seem to notice the king and the margrave's surprise. “It's not exactly that easy. However, the Ruanne Forest won't present any issues.” He turned his attention to Ariane. “How long will it take to assemble the high elders for a meeting?”

Ariane shook her head and shrugged. “Honestly, with what little we have to work with, I doubt it will be an easy win. Probably three days at the very minimum.”

“In that case, we shouldn't waste any more time sitting around. I believe we should get going.”

Arc stood up, bowed to King Asparuh and Margrave Brahamiey, and made his way toward the door, Ariane and Chiyome close behind.

The two men and Zahar watched in silence until they were once again alone.

“Just how did we end up here anyway?”

The margrave's question was more rhetorical than anything else, but his

sentiments echoed the thoughts running through Asparuh and Zahar's minds as well.

Chapter 3:

An Alliance with the Humans

What a strange turn of events...to be called into a secret meeting between King Asparuh, ruler of the Nohzan Kingdom, and Margrave Brahnief, noble of the neighboring Salma Kingdom. Their respective countries had been at war for generations.

You'd have to be either absurdly out of touch or dead inside not to want to attend such a monumental meeting.

What's more, our attendance hadn't been requested. More like...insisted upon.

We were in the midst of choosing who among the recently freed slaves would leave Saureah for the new colony when Ariane, Chiyome, and I were summoned.

Chiyome and I first traveled to the hidden village in the mountains to discuss the situation with the Jinshin clan's leader, Hanzo, and the village chief, Gowro. After that, we went off to visit the new colony, to get an idea of how many people they could take on.

Traveling around the continent using Transport Gate, and having to choose who among the beast people would stay and who would go, kept us busy for a few days.

Despite my initial misgivings about attending the meeting, Margrave Brahnief's report blew my mind. There was a massive army of undead assaulting the capital of the Salma Kingdom right across the border. Not only that, but both King Asparuh and Margrave Brahnief were asking for our assistance.

Ariane wasn't too excited about this, feeling that we'd already fulfilled our obligations by saving the Nohzan Kingdom, as we'd promised Princess Riel. She thought it best to discuss the issue with her father and the high elders and get their blessing first, before we entered into any prolonged involvement with

these human nations.

Honestly, I felt like it was a little late to start worrying about such things, but considering that I was now a member of Lalatoya Village, I decided it best to side with Ariane.

Still, after all the work we'd put into saving Princess Riel's kingdom, it'd be a shame to see all that effort go to waste.

According to Margrave Brahnief, once the Salma capital fell, Brahnief would be the next target, meaning that another 200 undead soldiers might soon descend upon the Nohzan Kingdom.

The Brahnief domain would likely buy some time for the people of Nohzan, but once it fell, so too would this land that had finally freed its enslaved people and outlawed the practice entirely.

And it wouldn't end there, either. With the fall of Brahnief, the elven village of Drant would also be subject to the threat of a massive undead army.

After suffering severe casualties from an undead patrol, the high elders in the Great Canada Forest agreed to dispatch Dillan—Ariane's father and the elder of Lalatoya—along with soldiers from Maple, to offer their assistance.

It was probably best that we explain the situation to Drant's elder and Dillan as soon as possible. Ariane and I set off toward Ruanne to try to get ahead of the situation.

"Are you sure you don't mind being left here in the capital, Chiyome?" I looked apologetically at her. We were both sitting in the room we'd been provided in the castle.

"Kyii?" Ponta glanced up at me curiously from where it dangled loosely in Ariane's arms.

"I'm really sorry," Ariane said, "but things would likely get even more complicated if we brought you along to Drant. I really don't want you to see the worst my people have to offer. Heck, I don't even consider them elves." She practically spat out those last words.

Due to the rather cold reception she'd received upon arriving in Drant, Ariane

wanted nothing to do with those people, even if they were also technically elves.

“Really, it’s fine. It’d be a waste of everyone’s time to add extra hassle by having me along. Please give Dillan my regards.” Chiyome’s cat ears twitched.

I nodded. “You’re probably right. There’s a lot to do and not a lot of time, so we should probably get going.”

Ariane, I, and my constant helmet warmer Ponta looked over our gear. After ensuring that my two travel companions were ready, I pulled a book of loose-leaf paper out of my bag and flipped through it.

Each page contained a different sketch of a location I’d been to. My long-distance teleportation spell, Transport Gate, could teleport me anywhere I’d been before in an instant, but the downside was that I needed to have a firm recollection of the place I wanted to go. That’s where this teleportation diary came in handy.

I found the page I was looking for and stared at the sketch to jog my memory.

Chiyome took a step back, and we said our goodbyes.

“All right, see you shortly, Chiyome. Transport Gate!”

A magical rune of light appeared under my feet and stretched out just far enough to encompass Ariane as well. For a moment, the world went entirely black, and I felt a sense of weightlessness.

Before we knew it, the ornately decorated room in Saureah was gone, and we found ourselves in the great outdoors.

In front of us was the very scene I’d drawn in my teleportation diary.

Sitting atop a small hill were three massive trees twisted together like a giant corkscrew shooting up into the heavens. Their branches and leaves splayed this way and that, providing a thick layer of foliage.

Though nowhere near as large as the Lord Crown, their sheer immensity defied belief.

But what truly made the scene fantastical were the houses built into the trees’ giant roots.

We were back in the Ruanne Forest, at the village of Drant.

“Well, we’re here. First off, I should go find Father to...”

I cut in before Ariane could continue.

“As far as the elves here are concerned, we aren’t much different from Chiyome. They don’t see us as their kind.”

I let out a gentle laugh, but Ariane sighed dramatically.

“We can talk about it until we’re both blue in the face, but one way or another, we need to get going.”

Ponta let out a cheerful mew in agreement with Ariane and began waving its tail excitedly from atop my head.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

We started walking toward Drant, but there was something about our perspective of the giant intertwined trees that made it hard to gauge distance. We didn’t seem to be getting any closer. Still, slowly but surely, elven houses began filling more and more of my field of view.

A sturdy wall made of stone and wood surrounded the village. It looked like it could repel a fairly concentrated attack, even from a small horde of monsters. Fields full of crops stretched in all directions beyond the wall, reminding me less of the villages in the Great Canada Forest and more of the human towns I’d been to.

After traveling a bit farther, we finally reached the gate marking the entrance into Drant. Two guards standing watch glared daggers at us as we approached. As soon as we drew close, they crossed their spears in front of the gate, blocking our path.

One of the guards waved his free arm in a dismissive gesture, as if to tell us to turn back.

“Non-elves and outsiders are forbidden from stepping foot in Drant.”

His companion nodded.

Ariane scowled at their rude behavior and shot them an angry glare. Anger

punctuated every word she spat at them. “I am the daughter of Dillan Tahg Lalatoya, the leader of the rescue forces dispatched by the Great Canada Forest. I am here to speak with my father. Please let me through, as I don’t have time to waste.”

However, the guards didn’t budge.

“We cannot allow that. If you have business with someone in the village, you may tell us, and we’ll dispatch a messenger while you wait here. Now, what is your business?”

Despite having come out here to offer military support, and despite being the daughter of an elder, the fact that Ariane was a dark elf was reason enough for them to bar her entry. No matter how stupid this decision might be, a part of me admired these men’s guts.

Had it been me, I would’ve hurried to open that gate, as if my life depended on it.

“Don’t you understand? Your very lives are at stake! The monsters that hurt so many of your people were just the tip of the spear. You must tell my father at once!”

Her long, white hair rippled like a flickering flame as Ariane yelled at the guards.

The two men exchanged glances. After a brief pause, they burst into raucous laughter.

“Bwahahaha! Now listen here, girly. You may be the daughter of a village elder, but there are some lines you shouldn’t cross, y’know? That threat that you say is gonna wipe us all out...it’s not those undead again, is it? They simply caught us off guard!”

The other man, still holding his sides, glared at Ariane. “Listen, the elves who patrol the outer borders of the village aren’t our most skilled warriors, mostly rookies and screw-ups. They were probably done in by some monsters while fighting off the undead. The rest of us, with actual experience, wouldn’t let that kind of thing happen. This whole thing is completely overblown.”

Ariane looked stunned. “Are you serious? You know that these were your

fellow elves, don't you?"

The man snorted at this. "Hah! I heard from the soldiers who first came across the scene that the creatures that killed them were nothing to write home about. Just a few dozen undead wearing armor."

Ariane lost interest in the men and marched forward, as if to barge past them. The guards didn't take kindly to this.

"Hey, lady! You can't just enter the village without permission!"

I couldn't help but wonder if these two idiots were aware of the minefield they'd just stepped into.

A moment later, I heard a loud crack, and a circle of fire burst out of the ground to surround Ariane and the two guards. The flames grew higher and higher, until the three of them were completely closed in.

"You dare use spirit magic within the village limits?! Are you mad?"

It was funny, in a way. From where I stood, these two guards were the crazy ones.

"Kyiiiiii..."

Ponta mewed at the stupidity playing out in front of us, then quickly pulled its tail back to keep it from getting singed.

One of the men clicked his tongue in annoyance, but Ariane ignored him and began chanting.

"Winds of justice, I summon you from the skies on high!"

Wind howled down and circled one of the guards' hands.

"Begone!"

No sooner had the word left Ariane's mouth than a ball of fire appeared in front of her. It grew larger and larger until it exploded with a massive shock wave that echoed throughout the village.

The wind forming around the guard's hand was blown away in an instant. The two guards were frozen in place, speechless.

But Ariane wasn't done with them yet.

“Listen to my heart and hold fast my enemies, Mother Earth!”

This chant lacked the usual singsong melody that accompanied her use of spirit magic. She was practically yelling now as soil and stone closed in on the guards. The men waved their spears in a desperate attempt to protect themselves, but the dirt wrapped around their ankles and locked them in place.

“You were the experienced fighters, weren’t you? You’ve gotta be, what, 200 or 300 years old? Well, I was only born a hundred years ago—a mere child to you. Maybe you were just holding back?”

Ariane’s lips twisted into a mocking grin. Tears began streaming down the guards’ faces.

“Gaaaaugh! My feet...the bones...they’re going to break!”

“C-curse you, woman!”

A large group of elves came running up to the gate to see what all the ruckus was about. However, not a single person stepped forward to help the guards.

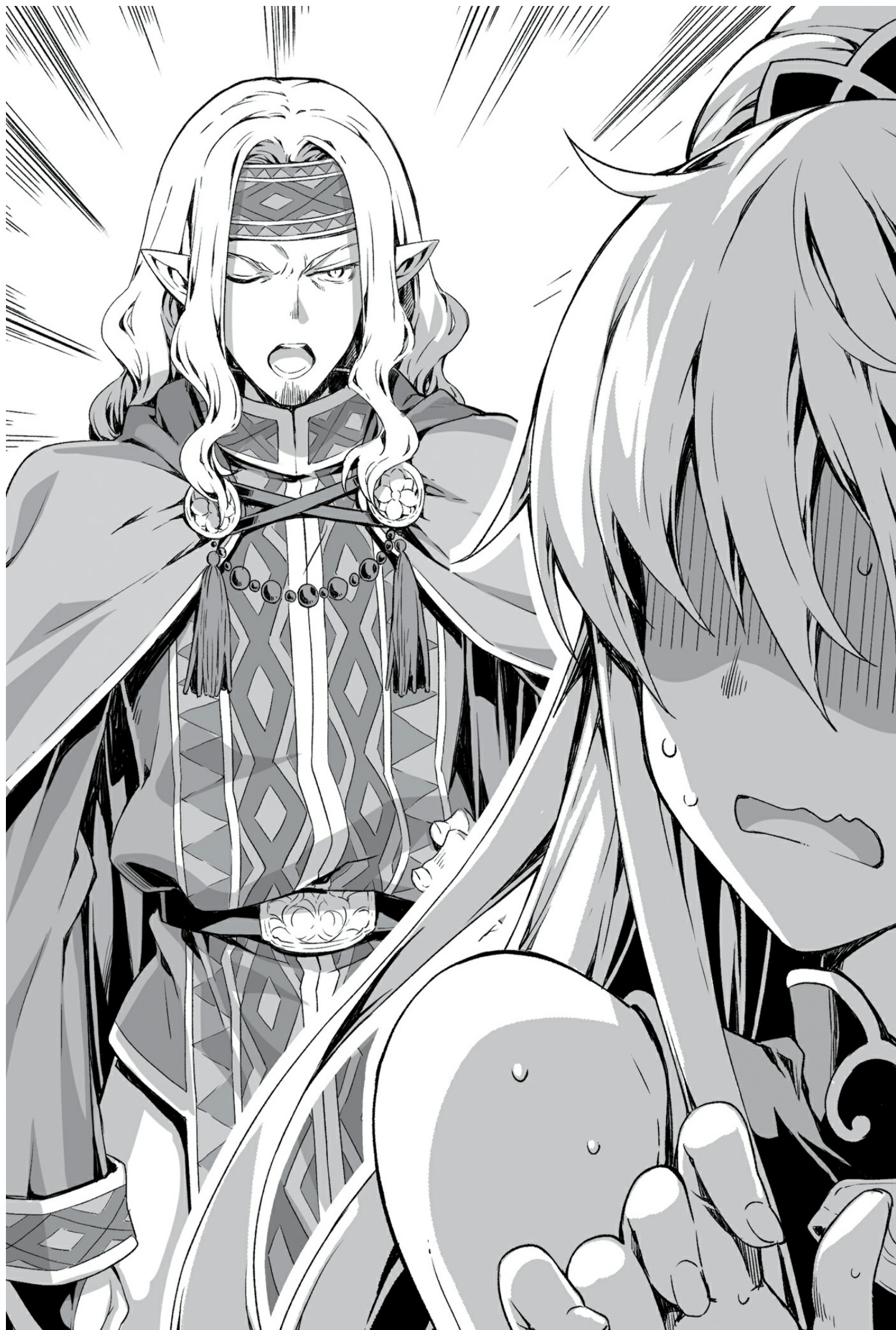
A man who looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties pushed through the crowd. He had long blond hair with a light green tint, and was dressed in priestly robes. The man looked rather annoyed, one hand pressed to his forehead, as if to stifle a headache.

“Cut it out, Ariane! Let them go at once!”

The man was Dillan, Ariane’s father.

Ariane frowned, like a child who’d just been chastised for playing a prank on some other kids.

“What do you think you’re doing? Coming into someone else’s home and attacking them...” Dillan let out a dramatic sigh. Despite his calm voice, his anger was evident.



I was about to explain our side of the story when another voice broke through the crowd.

“This wasn’t all her fault! There’s more to the story.”

An elf with short hair and a gaunt, unshaven face came running up beside Dillan. He was dressed in well-worn leather armor, with a sword hanging from his waist. He looked nothing like other elven men I’d seen. Dillan glanced between this newcomer and Ariane.

“She was trying to get a message to you, but the guards refused to let her through. I can’t say that I agree with her decision to settle the matter by force, but these men are an embarrassment to our village.”

The rest of the crowd nodded in agreement. Ariane blinked several times, unsure what to make of this unusual turn of events.

It was difficult to gauge an elf’s age, but if I had to guess, the unshaven man was quite a bit younger than the two men who stood watch at the gate. Drant was a village of people who didn’t think highly of other species, but it seemed that not everyone shared this opinion.

Dillan cleared his throat. “Assuming that what he says is true, what brings you back to Drant, Ariane?”

Ariane gave a quick overview of what we’d learned in Nohzan about the undead who were now descending upon the Salma Kingdom. Dillan stood in silence for a moment before slowly casting his eyes over the crowd surrounding us. Though Ariane had explained the situation in hushed tones, the gathered elves all possessed superior hearing. They looked on in disbelief.

I couldn’t blame them. After all, until I’d seen the horde of undead with my own eyes, I’d thought the size of the army had been exaggerated.

Dillan held Ariane’s gaze for a moment before asking the young man to free the guards. Then he turned his attention to me for the first time since our arrival.

“We’ll need to begin preparing immediately if we hope to survive. Ariane, Arc, come with me. I want you to meet one of the elders. We’ll need to speak with

him if we hope to call a village meeting.”

Dillan began walking away. Ariane and I exchanged a glance before hurrying after him.

We made our way toward a large house located outside the village wall.

Dillan knocked on the door, and a moment later we were greeted by a masculine elven man who appeared to be in his thirties. His muscular body strained against his simple clothes.

Most noteworthy about his appearance, though, was that one of his ears looked as if it had been torn off halfway. He was clearly an experienced warrior who'd seen much of battle.

He introduced himself as Serge Ful Drant, then invited us in and led us to a spacious living room. Serge gestured for us to sit.

Ponta hopped up next to a window and gazed outside while gently wagging its tail.

Apparently, Serge had known Dillan for some time. He was the one who'd sent the request for assistance to Canada.

He let out a hearty laugh. “There's no shortage of narrow-minded fools in our village. I'm sorry to call you all the way out here to deal with our problems.”

Dillan groaned, recalling the talking-to he'd gotten from Glenys when he'd first announced the mission. “My wife certainly wasn't too pleased.” He shook his head and steered the conversation back to the topic at hand. “But that's a story for another time. Right now, we need to figure out how to move forward.”

Serge nodded. “I need to make preparations for the meeting. You two may attend as well, but I ask that you not cause any trouble...like you did at the gate.”

Ariane opened her mouth to defend herself, but Serge cut her off with a gentle laugh. He told us to make ourselves at home before leaving the room again.

Dillan slumped down onto the sofa and fixed Ariane with a hard stare. He looked deeply troubled.

“Could you go over once again what you’ve been up to since we parted ways? Unfortunately, I don’t believe the village of Drant has many options. They’ll either need to leave their homes and escape to Canada, or we’ll have to send for reinforcements. However, the prospect of fighting beside humans is a good one. Efforts with the Rhoden Kingdom and Dukedom of Limbult are also moving forward to prohibit enslaving the beast...err, the mountain people.”

This caught Ariane and me by surprise.

“Is that so?”

“Well, that’s certainly a fortuitous change of events.”

“I was surprised as well. Though I have to admit that I was even more surprised to hear that you’d pushed similar changes through to several countries all on your own.”

Dillan let out a wry laugh. I responded with a humble bow.

“Anyway, now that the situation has escalated here, I’ll have more leverage when I report to the high elders in Canada. The reason we came here in the first place wasn’t just to help our comrades in Drant, but to put a stop to the enslaving of other elves and mountain people that’s so prevalent across this continent.”

I knew that Dillan had been busy traveling around the Rhoden Kingdom, but I’d no idea that there was so much going on behind the scenes.

Ariane looked over at me and made a face. “Why do I get the feeling that you’re grinning like an idiot right now?”

I brought my hand up to my face, but only found the cold, hard steel of my helmet. How did she know what expression I had?

“You’re too easy to read, Arc. So, what were you thinking about anyway?”

I slumped slightly, dejected, knowing how easily Ariane could read my mind.

“Nothing really. I was just thinking about how nice it would be to have a town filled with humans, elves, and mountain people, all living together in harmony.”

That was my ideal fantasy world—each species using their talents to help their neighbors. I’d love to live in such a place someday.

Ariane and Dillan smiled.

“It’s great that you have such big dreams. It may be some time before they come to fruition, but the terms you’ve given these countries are an important first step, Arc.”

Ariane nodded at her father’s praise. “But we need to ensure the survival of Nohzan and Brahniey.”

I agreed with her, but there was an even more pressing matter we needed to address. “Before that, we need to convince the people of Drant about their next plan of action.”

Dillan’s smile widened. “There might be a little arguing, sure, but with Serge in our corner, I think we’ll be fine. This is not only a big change for Nohzan and Brahniey, but also for the people of Drant.”

Dillan looked over at Ponta, who was now snoozing in the warm sunlight coming in through the window.

Serge returned a short time later and announced that the meeting was about to begin. We accompanied him out of the house toward Drant, drawing stares from the villagers we passed. Serge and Dillan appeared unfazed by this attention. They led our party to a fat, cylindrical building in the center of the village.

The interior was made up of large tree pillars whose branches stretched out along the vaulted ceiling like the ribs of an umbrella. It looked completely different from any elven building I’d seen before. It was basically one large, vast room, which was currently crammed so full of people that it seemed nothing short of a miracle that everyone could breathe. It looked as if the whole village were here to watch over the meeting.

As soon as the crowd caught sight of Serge, they parted to let us through.

At the center of the room was a large circular table and three chairs. Two men were already seated, awaiting our arrival. The third chair remained empty. I took this to mean that these were for the three village elders.

I’d originally assumed that the meeting would take place behind closed doors, so the whole atmosphere of a town square meeting surprised me.

One of the seated men addressed Serge. He looked none too pleased.

“May I ask why you deemed it a worthwhile use of my time to call us here? Not just us elders, but the entire village as well? And as if that wasn’t enough, I see you’ve brought outsiders with you?”

The man didn’t look at all like any of the elves I’d met so far. Though he did have the elves’ signature pointed ears, that was where the similarities ended. He was short, balding, and looked to be somewhere in his forties. According to Dillan, the man’s name was Loreto Borni Drant.

Many of the villagers lining the walls of the room nodded in agreement with Loreto.

The meeting was already off to a bad start.

The other man at the table was almost polar opposite in appearance to Loreto. He was tall, with long, pale hair and a beard to match. He sipped calmly at his tea, as if unaware of the tense atmosphere around him. His bangs were so long that it was nearly impossible to get a clear look at his face. He looked exactly like what you’d imagine a hermit living alone in the mountains might look like. A wooden cane leaned against the table next to him.

This man’s name was Iwahld Waley Drant, and he was, apparently, the oldest of the elders.

A cluster of women stood behind him, with a woman on either side of him. Groupies, maybe?

The last one to sit at the table was Serge Ful Drant. Behind him gathered a group of young, muscular men.

Dillan, Ariane, and I—with Ponta still sitting atop my head of course—stood in front of these men.

As far as I could tell, the people standing behind each of the elders were their supporters.

The majority of the hateful glares directed my way were from people in Loreto’s corner. They really didn’t take kindly to outsiders.

Elves’ appearances didn’t seem to change much, no matter how old they

were, but even then, there was still an incredible variety among them.

All of them generally looked to be between their teens and their forties. In fact, many of the supporters in Loreto's corner looked to be on the older side, maybe around thirty or forty if they'd been human, while the people behind Serge were all younger, looking to be in their twenties. Iwahld's supporters' ages ran the gamut, and most of them were women.

Interestingly, the group of men behind Serge didn't show any of the hostility I'd noticed among Loreto's supporters. If anything, they simply seemed intrigued by our presence. Maybe because they were younger, they were more tolerant?

The elves with Loreto were around 400 years old, so I assumed that meant that the ones behind Serge were around 300.

Much like with humans, elves of the older generation didn't look positively on change.

Serge called for silence. "Order in the chambers! The meeting of the elders to decide the future of our fair village is about to commence! But first I would like to ask that our allies from Canada report on the situation."

Dillan stepped forward and began explaining things, skipping all the introductions and formalities. This seemed to annoy Loreto further, but he seemed to think better of voicing his opinion and instead listened to Dillan in silence.

"And that's about the size of it. If you don't take action immediately, I'm afraid Drant may cease to exist."

The hall was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop.

Loreto was the first to break this silence, his voice booming. "You expect us to believe that an army of 200,000 undead are going to attack us? Ridiculous! What proof do you have?"

The men standing behind Loreto all murmured in agreement, while Serge's supporters began arguing back.

"We've already engaged in combat with similar monsters, and suffered

massive casualties at that! We wouldn't even be able to stand up to 10,000 of those things, let alone 200,000. If you want to write this all off, be my guest. But our blood will be on your hands!"

Others nodded eagerly in agreement, adding fuel to the flames.

The older men, however, refused to be so openly disrespected.

"The very idea of working with humans is preposterous! If the humans are wiped out if we do nothing, then by all means, let them be wiped out! We'll make better use of their lands anyway. We can build more villages!"

"You old fool! Do you even know how many humans are out there? If the Salma and Nohzan kingdoms were to fall, then their neighbors would just take their place!"

"There's not a human alive who would actually honor their word! They have short memories, and will change their minds the moment a threat is gone!"

"It's that kind of thinking that deepens the divide between us! What harm could it do to build a relationship with humans who want to be our allies?"

"Let the humans and undead fight it out and kill each other! I see no reason to join their ranks!"

"And when the rest of the undead come for us? What then? It will still be our warriors defending Drant. You cowardly old bastards just want to hide in your homes while you send the young out to die for you!"

"Who are you calling a coward?!"

What had started as a civil meeting had quickly turned into a screaming match. Some people even began hurling objects at one another.

Up until now, I'd always viewed the elven species as one of great intellect. However, what I was seeing here proved to me that they were no different from humans.

Elder Iwahld decided he'd had enough of this ruckus and reached for his wooden cane, striking the stone floor with it several times. The tip of the cane began glowing, filling the room with a blinding light.

"Whoa! What's that?!"

“What?!”

“Kyii!”

Ariane, Ponta, and I pulled up our cloaks (and tail) in unison, to shield our eyes. I could hear the cries of the rest of those in the room.

The light faded. I opened my eyes and saw a room full of people holding their hands tightly to their faces and groaning. At least the shouting had stopped.

“Gah! What do you think you’re doing?” Loreto wasted no time grumbling about Iwahld’s sudden and aggressive use of magic.

The older man ignored the outburst. “If it comes down to fighting alongside the humans and building a relationship with them, then we might as well leave this village and move to Canada. Our people will benefit regardless of the outcome.”

Loreto smiled. “Gyahaha! I like your style. If the elves of Canada are so eager to fight alongside the humans, let them do it!” His short body shook with boisterous laughter.

The people murmured among themselves at this latest suggestion. Iwahld quickly put an end to this with a few loud raps of his cane. A smile graced the old man’s face. He let out a raspy laugh.

“Since this was all my idea, perhaps I should head off to Canada myself?”

Iwahld let out another raspy laugh, though the crowd remained unsure how to respond. The oldest elder turned toward Serge, making eye contact as best he could through his long bangs.

“And what about you? I’ve always been rather fond of Maple’s famous syrup. What if you could come and enjoy their delicacies with me?”

A broad grin spread across Serge’s face. “Hahaha! I suppose I could make time, old man.”

Serge’s supporters all agreed with this plan, many of them even proclaiming that they would become citizens of Canada.

Many women, ostensibly Iwahld’s supporters, initially seemed shocked at the suggestion. However, with all the young warriors of the town backing Serge,

their lovers, wives, and mothers also began declaring their intentions to leave.

Lacking the support of the military class, and even their own families, the men in Loreto's corner followed suit.

This just left Loreto and one other old man as the remaining voices of dissent.

"Now wait a moment! You think you can just decide this all on your own?! Even if you were to go to Canada and ask for help, it would take days before they could assemble their forces and return. It would be better for us to lie low and wait for the dust to settle."

The gathered elves all looked to Iwahld and Serge, seeking a response. Iwahld merely smiled and turned to Dillan. Dillan turned to me.

All eyes in the room, including Ariane's, fell on me. I knew at once what he was asking, and replied with a simple thumbs-up.

This brought a smile to Dillan's lips. "You have nothing to worry about."

Iwahld's smiled widened. "Well then, I see no issue."

Serge turned to the men standing behind him. "All right! Prepare to move out! More specific instructions to follow!"

With that, people began leaving the building for their own residences. Loreto and his men stood in stunned silence at what had just happened.

As we followed Serge back to his house, Ariane's face broke out in a broad smile. She stretched her arms triumphantly above her head. Ponta tried to mimic her pose.

The Drant issue was resolved for now.

Back at Serge's house, Dillan discussed our next steps. "If forces aren't dispatched immediately, this village and the human kingdoms will almost certainly fall. I must return to Maple to ensure that we start mustering our armies."

Ariane nodded firmly.

"We'll need to make the most of your magic, Arc. Even so, I don't think we have much time. How long did they say it would be until the undead armies

arrive at the humans' front lines?"

I shook my head, which sent Ponta slipping onto my shoulder. Dillan looked to Ariane next, but she didn't know either.

"All right, we'll pick Chiyome up and ask King Asparuh and Margrave Brahniey while we're there. I'm sure they're eager to hear what's happening on our end."

Dillan shot me an excited grin. "Good plan. Do you mind if I accompany you? I'd like to meet this king of Nohzan and begin building a relationship with him. Besides, I haven't had a chance to experience your fabled teleportation magic yet."

Serge's eyes went wide in surprise, but I shot him another thumbs-up. The elder gave me several hard, but friendly, slaps on the back.

"Well, I'll be! It looks like we might have a shot after all! Gyahaha!"

Ponta, who'd just regained its position atop my head, slid down the front of my helmet with each hard slap, plunging me into darkness. I was glad my abilities would be of use.

"We'd best get going. We'll be back in about a day or so. Transport Gate!"

I used my long-distance teleportation magic to send us on our way.

The world around us went dark, and I felt completely weightless. After the briefest of moments, the darkness faded to reveal that we were now back in front of the crumbled remains of the southern gate at Saureah, the capital of the Nohzan Kingdom.

The sun was low in the sky, nearly dipping behind the peaks of the mountains off to the west.

"So, this is the Nohzan Kingdom's capital? It certainly looks like it's seen better days."

Dillan gazed out across masses of fallen undead soldiers, still wearing their charred armor, as the setting sun cast the whole scene in a scarlet glow.

This was what was left after using my powerful Paladin ability to summon the Archangel Michael.

To my surprise, figures were milling about the charred fields here and there.

Upon closer inspection, I saw that they wore baskets on their backs and were collecting any salvageable weapons or armor. They weren't all human, either, as I spotted a few mountain people among them.

As far as I could tell, they were collecting the raw metal to reforge into new weapons.

Turning my attention to the southern gate, I saw numerous bricklayers and carpenters hurriedly repairing the damage that had been done to the wall.

I was glad to see that the town was beginning to recover.

"Hmm, pretty impressive."

Ariane agreed. "It is, isn't it?"

Dillan urged us onward to the capital. "Let's look for Chiyome and get these introductions with the king out of the way, shall we?"

With that, the three of us made our way to the gate.

A few of the people working near the southern gate recognized Ariane and me, so we were allowed to enter the capital with little issue. I figured the king probably had something to do with this.

Several guards along the way asked that we pass along their thanks to Chiyome. Apparently, she was helping the soldiers in the new town district wipe out the remaining pockets of undead warriors.

Ariane appeared comforted by what we'd seen so far. "You know, I was a little worried about this place, but it looks like they're doing all right."

Dillan shot a teasing grin toward his daughter. "You're growing up into a fine young lady, Ariane. If only you'd remembered that back in Drant, with those two guards..."

Ariane trembled slightly and quickly turned away.

I decided it best not to intervene.

A young girl dropped soundlessly off of a nearby roof to land in front of us.

She was dressed entirely in black ninja garb, cat ears springing out of her black hair, and a long, black tail drooping from her waist.

Chiyome looked over to Dillan and bowed.

“Aah! Chiyome! What’ve you been up to?”

The young girl’s ears flittered a bit at Ariane’s question. She reached back and drew a dagger from the sheath at her lower back.

“I was hunting undead. Some of my fellow mountain people have joined me, since we’re able to smell them out.”

Chiyome sniffed the air to emphasize her point. But she must have caught a whiff of dust or something, because she immediately started sneezing. After composing herself again, she responded with a question of her own.

“Did everything work out with you two?”

Ariane and I exchanged a look. I kept my response vague.

“Things aren’t exactly going to plan, but...they worked out well enough, I’d say.”

Chiyome didn’t press any further. “Do you know where you’re heading next?”

Dillan responded. “I’d like to meet the king and see if we can share some information.”

“Well then, let’s get going.”

Chiyome turned and began leading the way back to the palace.

As we walked, I mentioned the stories we’d heard. “By the way, some of the guards send their thanks. Apparently you’ve been quite busy.”

Chiyome blinked at this. “Ah, is that so...” Her tail began wagging with a bit more vigor than before.

We reached the castle gate and asked one of the guards to open it. She led us to a room deep within the castle.

It was the same room we’d been brought to for King Asparuh’s secret meeting with Margrave Brahnief. The two men were once again in the room waiting for us, looks of anxiety on their faces.

King Asparuh was taken aback for a moment by the sight of Dillan.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure. You are...?”

Dillan bowed his head low. “My name is Dillan Tahg Lalatoya, the elder of Lalatoya, in the Great Canada Forest. It is an honor to meet you.”

King Asparuh and Margrave Brahnief looked like they were hoping Dillan’s presence meant that the reinforcements had been approved. However, Dillan shook his head before they had a chance to ask the question.

“I was only dispatched to oversee the forces in the Ruanne Forest. I don’t have the authority to approve any additional reinforcements.”

The two men managed to hide their disappointment well.

Dillan smiled and continued. “Though, I don’t believe the central council will agree to simply abandon the Ruanne Forest. The people of Drant have expressed a willingness to fight, and they’ve agreed to join forces.”

The two nobles listened, wide-eyed.

“The next step is for me to head to the central council and encourage them to muster their forces.”

The two men finally smiled. This was the news they’d been hoping to hear.

“Well, that’s good news.” King Asparuh sounded drained. “So, we still have a chance of surviving this then.”

I hadn’t noticed it when I first entered the room, but the king looked as if he were wasting away. Even Margrave Brahnief looked a bit gray.

What had happened while we were gone?

Before I had the chance to ask, a soldier barreled into the room. The man hesitated as soon as he caught sight of us, but the king urged him to speak with a wave of his hand.

“Apologies for the interruption, Your Highness! We’ve just received a report from one of our spies in the Delfrent Kingdom. ‘Capital under attack by strange monsters. Downfall imminent. Number of enemies impossible to count.’”

The report took everyone in the room by surprise.

If I recalled correctly, the Delfrent Kingdom was located to the north of the Nohzan Kingdom. That meant...

“Chiyome, isn’t Delfrent where Goemon was heading?”

Ariane and Dillan also looked to Chiyome. She nodded, and Ponta copied her.

“I haven’t heard anything. I can’t say anything for certain, since I don’t know exactly where the capital is located, but I doubt that Goemon and his team are unaware of recent events.”

That made sense. Not only were Goemon and the rest of his platoon mountain people, but they were the best of the best.

Assuming the force was on the same scale as the one that attacked Saureah, the stench alone should have tipped Goemon and his people off and given them a chance to steer clear.

This report meant that the Nohzan Kingdom was caught in between massive armies to both the north and the south.

King Asparuh thanked the soldier and sent him on his way. As soon as the door closed, he let out a heavy sigh. The exhaustion was evident on Brahnier’s face as well, despite his best attempts to hide it.

It was probably rare for these two men to show their feelings, given their social standing, but it looked as if they’d hit their limits.

The tension in the room was palpable, the silence hanging heavy. Finally, Dillan spoke.

“Well, this certainly is problematic. I’d planned to go back to Canada to muster our forces, but unfortunately, we don’t have nearly as many soldiers as you humans do. If we wish to stand any chance of fighting off either of these threats, we’ll need to concentrate all of our forces on one enemy. How far is the capital of the Salma Kingdom from Saureah?”

King Asparuh furrowed his brow. “Hmm, I’d say...maybe ten days by horse.”

Dillan nodded, then asked the same of the capital in Delfrent.

“I believe it’s around a seven-to eight-day journey.”

Dillan looked to the margrave. “And how far is the capital of Salma from Brahnief?”

“Seven days by horse, six to the border,” the margrave answered immediately, anticipating Dillan’s question.

Taking both of their answers together...

“So...we’ll be attacked on two fronts at nearly the same time.” Ariane’s words hung heavy in the air.

“But that means that the Holy Hilk Kingdom launched an attack on three different countries at once. Just how many undead do they have anyway? We’re talking about at least half a million troops dedicated to attacking Salma, Delfrent, and Nohzan.”

My words only managed to make the whole thing seem even more dire.

King Asparuh and Margrave Brahnief looked at the ground, their bodies trembling almost imperceptibly.

Dillan muttered to himself. “Without any further information on troop movements, it will be hard to concentrate our forces on just one front. Plus, there are no assurances that the undead armies will head straight here. The timing of their attack could vary dramatically depending on when the other cities fall. We need more soldiers...”

Something seemed to click in his mind. He looked up and locked eyes with King Asparuh.

“Soldiers...yes,” the king replied. “Actually, my son Terva should be returning soon with the reinforcements he was sent to muster. We may also be able to ask for assistance from the Rhoden Kingdom. And then there’s Arc here, assuming he’s willing to offer his skills once again.”

The Rhoden Kingdom was separated from the Nohzan Kingdom by the sea of Bulgoh, but they maintained stable trade relations, so it seemed entirely possible that they’d be willing to send at least some reinforcements.

Ariane looked at me, apparently thinking the same thing, but she just shook her head.

Chiyome's cat ears perked up, and she turned her gaze toward the door.

Before I had the chance to say anything, however, King Asparuh continued.

"My younger sister, Melissa, was the Queen of the Rhoden Kingdom. She's already passed, of course, but Princess Yuriarna is my niece, and she may be willing to help us."

This was a surprise to me. However, I had a nagging feeling that I was forgetting something. What was it?

Ponta looked down at me and mewed.

"Kyii?"

I put the question aside for now. The pressing issue was...who would we send to the Rhoden Kingdom to ask for reinforcements?

Considering that the Nohzan and Rhoden kingdoms shared a connection through their royal bloodlines, it only made sense to send a member of the royal family.

Dillan seemed to be thinking the same thing. "I would think it best to send someone who has a connection to the royal family as a messenger. I've had some meetings with those in power in the Rhoden Kingdom, so I would be more than happy to make the introductions if necessary."

The king scowled as he realized the obvious answer. "Riel would probably be the best for the job. I can think of no one else." He sounded resigned.

It was clear from the tone of his voice that he had reservations about sending Princess Riel out on such a mission. She was only ten, after all.

The young princess was certainly reliable, and she'd taken a great risk to bring back soldiers from Count Dimo to save her kingdom. However, the love of a father toward his one and only daughter was not to be taken lightly.

Another figure burst through the door, and a girl's voice filled the room. "I'll do it! I'll deliver your request to the Rhoden Kingdom!"

Princess Riel stood in the doorway, her eyes red and puffy from crying. She wiped them on her sleeve and looked pleadingly at her father.

Had Chiyome told her about what was going on while we were away?

I glanced over at the ninja, but she just shook her head. She'd probably been too busy running around the new town district to engage in gossip.

"Didn't you say you were going to rest, Riel?"

The king regarded Riel not as a princess of the royal family, but as a father concerned for his daughter.

The young girl shook her head vigorously. "This isn't just for me, but for Seyval as well! I want to do everything I can to ensure that our country still has a future! I can't just sit around crying while our country..."

Big, fat tears rolled down her cheeks. Her sleeve grew damp as she continued dragging it across her eyes.

Another figure appeared in the doorway, drawn to the scene by the princess's cries.

Niena, one of Riel's bodyguards, pulled out a handkerchief to wipe away the girl's tears. Then she stood at attention and saluted the king.

"My apologies, Your Highness. I took my eyes off of her for just a moment and..."

The king dismissed her apology with a wave of his hand. "Riel, the Rhoden Kingdom is quite far from here, way off to the east. I was going to ask Arc to..."

I could tell where the king was going and butted in before he had a chance to finish. "I have no problem with it." All eyes were now on me, so I continued. "I'll escort Princess Riel to the Rhoden Kingdom. If we're able to secure reinforcements while we're there, then I'll lead them back as well."

Ponta also chimed in, its chest puffed out with pride. "Kyii!"

King Asparuh blinked at me. "Are you sure you're okay with this, Arc?"

I pumped a fist in the air while Ponta wagged its tail back and forth excitedly.

Princess Riel's sniffing stopped, and she grinned at the odd sight.

"We've come this far. It'd be a shame for me to hold back now and not see this whole thing through."

Sensing that his daughter was firm in her resolution, the king stood up, walked over to her, and ran a hand through her unkempt hair.

“The sun’s already setting, so why don’t you start making preparations and go to bed early. You’ll leave tomorrow. I’ll prepare a letter of introduction. Also...”

He carefully removed the intricately decorated flower necklace that hung from his neck. Then he draped it around his daughter’s neck and took a step back, a warm smile gracing his face.

Princess Riel glanced down at the necklace and back up at her father. “What is this?”

“It’s the necklace I gave your Aunt Melissa when she moved to the Rhoden Kingdom to be wed. Think of it as a protective talisman.”

Princess Riel fixed her steel-gray eyes on the king. “Thank you, Father.”

King Asparuh turned his attention to Niena. “Take good care of her.”

The loyal bodyguard offered up another salute and urged Princess Riel out of the room. “Come on, princess. We have a lot of work to do for tomorrow.”

As she followed Riel, Niena stopped and looked back into the room one last time. Her eyes caught Chiyome’s.

I was worried for a moment that we’d see a repeat of the other day, but instead, Niena bowed.

“I’d like to apologize for my rash behavior the other day, Chiyome. I know you’re busy right now, so I hope you’ll allow me to offer a proper apology tomorrow.”

Niena bowed again.

Chiyome looked away. “It’s... It’s no big deal.”

Niena seemed a bit let down by this. “I see...”

Chiyome’s ears twitched atop her head, and the faintest of smiles tugged at the corners of her lips. She turned the conversation back to Niena with a dramatic wag of her tail.

“Shouldn’t you be keeping an eye on Riel? You’re going to get punished again,

y'know," she teased.

Niena made a face. "W-well then, I best be going. Thank you, Chiyome." She left to chase after her young charge.

Chiyome stared at the now-empty doorway for some time before letting out a breath and turning her attention back to the rest of us. At least we'd been able to resolve one issue.

However, there was something that still struck me as odd. "Your Highness, if I may ask, what was Riel talking about earlier?"

The king didn't respond right away, instead slumping back in his chair and staring off into the distance. He closed his eyes and began speaking in a controlled tone of voice.

"When we first learned that Saureah was under attack, I sent my two sons off on a mission to drum up reinforcements from across the kingdom. This afternoon, I received a report that my son Seyval was ambushed and murdered."

I'd figured as much from the way Riel had looked when she'd first appeared. Ariane and Chiyome seemed to be on the same page. Judging by the way the margrave showed little surprise at the news, he already knew of this.

I gained a newfound respect for Riel upon hearing this. In spite of her young age, she was able to compartmentalize the devastating sadness she must be feeling over the loss of her brother in order to do whatever she could to protect the country he'd died for.

Her dedication humbled me.

"We've got an intense day ahead of us tomorrow."

Ponta let out a shrill cry of excitement and puffed up its tail.

Ariane's eyes seemed to drill straight through the steel of my helmet. "If you spend too much time hyping yourself up, you're going to lose track of what's actually important."

All I could do was nod in response. Atop my helmet, I could feel Ponta shrink back as well.

The next morning, we gathered in an off-limits garden in one of the corners of the castle. There were eleven humans, including Princess Riel and her two bodyguards, Zahar and Niena. Behind them stood another eight guards.

All told, it was a rather small party heading off to the Rhoden Kingdom.

A short ways behind the group stood Dillan and Ariane from the Grand Canada Forest, along with Ponta and me. Representing the mountain people—and more specifically, the Jinshin clan—was Chiyome. In total, the whole envoy consisted of fifteen people and one furball.

Completing the image of a proper royal convoy was a four-horse-drawn carriage, and two additional horses for Zahar and Niena.

We were all inspecting our armor and supplies.

King Asparuh and several of his ministers stood to the side, talking among themselves.

Apparently, news of my ability to use the mythical “spirit path” had spread among some of the nobility, and they were eager to see it in person.

Dillan gazed at Princess Riel’s carriage with a look of concern.

“What’s wrong, Dillan?”

He frowned as he turned to me. “It’s just... I was looking at the royal crest Princess Riel is using to mark her as a messenger of the Nohzan Kingdom, and I couldn’t help but think that we don’t really have anything to identify us as elves. I was wondering if we could find something.”

I wasn’t sure I understood what Dillan was saying, and looked over at Ariane for clarification. However, she only scowled.

“If we want to draw attention to ourselves, we can just have Arc lead the way.”

Dillan shook his head. “Dressed up in flashy armor like that, he’s not instantly recognizable as an elf. I was thinking we should do something to make us stand out a bit, and to make it obvious to observers that we’re part of Princess Riel’s envoy.”

Finally, I understood. Even if there was a relationship between the royal families of the Rhoden and Nohzan kingdoms, people still might doubt that we were actually an envoy from the Nohzan Kingdom.

If our luck was exceedingly poor, then we might be stuck for several days while the authorities tried to confirm our identities.

Considering that Dillan had recently held high-level talks with the decision-makers back in the Rhoden Kingdom, he had a good understanding of the situation. And of course, anyone could see from a distance that he was an elf.

If he led our party into the capital of the Rhoden Kingdom, it would be even more likely that people would accept Princess Riel and the rest of us as part of a royal envoy.

Which meant...

I looked up at Princess Riel and her carriage, then back to Dillan, then over his shoulder. A goofy grin lit my face as I was struck with an idea.

“You know, I just remembered that I left Shiden in the castle’s stable!”

“Huh?”

“Oh!”

Ariane and Chiyome looked at me before exchanging a glance.

I had a palace guard lead me back to the royal stables only to find my precious mount lazing about a small, open field. Apparently, it was too big to fit into any of the stalls.

“Sorry for taking so long, buddy.”

Shiden looked up at me and blinked in disbelief, then wagged its tail and rolled over to face away from me.

“Looks like it’s pretty mad about you abandoning it, Arc.”

“How could you just leave behind a loyal battle companion like that?”

Ariane and Chiyome didn’t seem to think very highly of how I’d treated Shiden.

Though it wasn’t entirely my fault.

“I agree that it wasn’t very kind of me. But to be fair, neither of you are above criticism here, are you?”

Both women averted their eyes.

But regardless of who was at fault, I couldn’t just leave Shiden lazing about in a field forever. I decided to try a different tactic.

“Kyii! Kyikyiiii!”

I followed up Ponta’s entreaty with one of my own.

“All right, Shiden, what do you think about heading home and running around for a bit?”

I figured it’d do my buddy a little good to see some familiar sights.

“Grweeeeeeeee!”

Shiden pushed itself up onto its massive legs and joined us on our way back to the enclosed garden, where the rest of our party was waiting for us.



I rubbed Shiden's snout gently as I made my proposal to Dillan.

"I think if you lead the envoy on good ol' Shiden here, you'll definitely stand out...for better or for worse. What do you think, Dillan? As long as I hold the reins, I don't think it'll have any objections."

Shiden, at least, seemed sold on the idea.

"Grween!"

Dillan hopped onto Shiden's saddle, and Ariane slid up behind him. Chiyome stepped up to my side, apparently choosing to walk with me.

"Well, this is certainly more than I could have ever expected! Thank you, Arc. Now, shall we get going?"

After ordering all the onlookers to step back, I prepared to summon my long-distance teleportation spell.

It had been a while since I was in the Rhoden Kingdom. In fact, it was so long that I didn't have anything drawn in my teleportation diary to help jog my memory. I ran through a list of locations in my mind, trying to find one that I remembered clearly.

Since our ultimate objective was the capital of Olav, I racked my brain to pick somewhere close by.

The first image that came to mind was the field overlooking the capital, where we'd teleported all of Chiyome's newly freed comrades before escorting them off to the hideaway in the Calcut Mountains.

"Transport Gate!"

Considering the large group we'd be taking with us, including Princess Riel's carriage, Shiden, and all the soldiers, I put a little more power into my spell to create a large enough rune to encompass the entire envoy.

The world went black for a moment before the Rhoden capital appeared before us.

Olav looked a fair bit different from the city in flames we'd left behind so many moons ago. Chiyome and Ariane were quiet as they looked at the capital,

the site no doubt stirring up many emotions.

The rest of the envoy was looking around to get their bearings. This situation was beyond anything the royal guard had ever trained for, and they were startled by the sudden display of magic.

Princess Riel leaped out of her carriage and looked off toward the mountain ranges to the north.

“Wow! This is like nothing I’ve ever seen!”

The land around Saureah was completely flat, so the mountains must have been quite a treat for her.

Shiden also jerked its head in surprise, before settling down and munching on some grass.

Dillan called out to the young girl from atop my driftpus. “We haven’t a lot of time, so we should make our way to Olav as soon as possible. Please, return to your carriage, princess.”

“Got it!”

We pulled the envoy together and started making our way south toward the capital of the Rhoden Kingdom.

Unfortunately, the location we’d teleported to was quite far from the nearest road, and traveling by carriage was more than a little challenging, but after a few false starts, we were finally under way.

If I remembered correctly, taking the westward route would lead us to the port town of Lamburt.

I thought back to the time when I’d lost my bearings and ended up leading Ariane to the desert town of Branbayna. I felt an odd sense of nostalgia for those days.

As we continued down the road, we drew a great deal of attention, due to how bizarre our group appeared. By the time we’d made it to the outer gates of the capital, the guards were already rushing about, making preparations.

With a six-legged, four-meter-long lizard leading a horse-drawn carriage, this reaction was to be expected. After all, Shiden must look like some kind of

monster to them.

As we approached the west gate, two soldiers on horseback came racing toward us. I could feel a sense of unease ripple through Riel's guards.

These two were either a scout patrol or messengers.

I doubted we would have drawn as much attention if the caravan consisted of just Princess Riel and her carriage, so in a way, Dillan had been right.

The two horses gave us a wide berth as they approached. One of the riders called out to us.

"Halt! Identify yourselves immediately and state your business!"

The soldier's horse bucked in surprise. He reached down and stroked its neck in an attempt to calm it while also keeping an eye on Dillan. After a moment, he seemed to realize what he was seeing.

Dillan shouted back in as polite a voice as he could manage at that volume. "I am Dillan Tahg Lalatoya, from the Great Canada Forest. I was recently granted an audience with your king, but now I'm here to serve as a mediator for an envoy from the Nohzan Kingdom. I'm afraid there's great trouble brewing, and we haven't much time. I request an audience with your king at once!"

At the direction of one of the soldiers, the other raced back to the city's gate to convey Dillan's message.

A short time later, a messenger arrived with King Karlon's decision.

Though he had no idea what this whole affair was about, King Karlon had granted us an audience. This approval came as a great relief to the entire Nohzan envoy. Dillan, meanwhile, clearly felt a bit conflicted over his decision to come out into the Rhoden Kingdom in such a showy manner, considering how easily the king had agreed to meet with them.

"I should have just handed over King Asparuh's letter of introduction from the start."

The king of Nohzan had entrusted Princess Riel with a letter explaining her purpose here to the king of Rhoden, but Dillan had deemed it easier to avoid spending a lot of time sitting around outside the city waiting for a response.

The Rhoden soldiers led our envoy through the gates of Olav.

Olav was far larger than Saureah back in the Nohzan Kingdom. The four layers of walls encasing the city were a testament to its strength. Everyone in the envoy, including Riel, who pressed her face against the window of her carriage, looked around with great interest as we made their way into the city.

“I never would’ve figured we’d be back here. Especially not under these circumstances.”

I spoke in a low enough voice so as to not be heard over the drone of the surrounding crowds, but Chiyome picked up on it thanks to her sensitive cat ears.

“Right?”

The last time she was here in the capital, Chiyome had been running a secret operation in the middle of the night to free her fellow mountain people who’d been enslaved. It seemed odd for her to be walking out in the open now.

Though I couldn’t see her face, due to the scarf wrapped tightly around her head, she seemed to share this sentiment, judging by how Chiyome’s tail was wagging about.

There currently weren’t any free mountain people here in the Rhoden Kingdom, as far as I could tell, but according to what we’d heard from Dillan, that was about to change.

The sight of my intimidating driftpus marching toward the palace elicited cries of surprise from citizens everywhere. But once they got over their initial shock, they noticed the two elves riding atop it. Traffic coming our way gave us plenty of room, to avoid drawing too close to us.

After making our way through the crowded bustle of the outer parts of the city, we passed through the elegant residential districts where the nobles made their homes. Soon after, the palace came into view.

Unlike the battle-hardened fortress that served as the castle in Saureah, the palace in Olav was a thing of beauty, with grand spires soaring high into the sky. The sight of it took the entire Nohzan envoy by surprise.

Our escorts led us into an open field in front of the palace, where we were greeted by a crowd of people, all of whom watched us with surprise and curiosity.

A man stepped out of the group. “M-may I ask who leads this envoy?”

Princess Riel stepped out of the carriage. “That’d be me.”

The man looked around with a bemused expression, as if someone was playing an elaborate prank on him. But once he caught sight of Zahar and Niena standing behind their young charge, not to mention the intense stares from Ariane, Chiyome, and me, he realized his mistake. He offered a broad smile and gestured for us to follow.

“Y-yes, of course. Please follow me.”

The man glanced at Dillan, no doubt catching the bemused expression on the elven elder’s face, but said no more as he led us into the palace.

We left Shiden and the horses behind with Riel’s royal guards and followed after the man.

Her eyes went wide, her head darting back and forth like a kid in a candy shop, as she tried to take in all the sights and sounds. It was nothing like what she was used to back home.

After leading our party down a long hallway, the man stopped and looked back at us. A guard opened a door, and the man ushered us inside.

“Please wait here.”

Princess Riel’s face tensed for a moment as she stepped into the room. Zahar and Niena accompanied her inside, followed by Dillan with his ever-present grin, then Ariane, Chiyome, and me.

This wasn’t exactly the type of room I’d expect to hold an audience with a king. In fact, it looked more like a large meeting room, with several maidservants standing at attention along one of the outer walls.

The sight of our motley crew was more than these simple maidservants could handle. Several sets of eyes went wide, and a jaw or two fell open, before the maidservants managed to compose themselves.

I alone made for quite the spectacle—a tall knight dressed from head to toe in armor, and armed with a large sword sheathed at my back. And, of course, Ponta sitting on my head.

Ariane and Chiyome were also armed, though they mostly kept their weapons hidden.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized just how important it was to have Dillan here with us, given his previous experience with the king.

According to Dillan, the last time he'd visited the Rhoden Kingdom he was accompanied by a large number of elven soldiers. I wondered if both sides had taken this as an opportunity to show off their respective military might.

Elven warriors were skilled with various weapons, of course, but even unarmed, every one of them could have easily taken on a few human soldiers at once.

Someone like Ariane's mother, Glenys, could probably take down the entire complement of guards here in this palace armed with only a sword. She was that strong.

With that in mind, the Rhoden Kingdom was probably doing their best not to provoke us. The guards at the door looked incredibly tense.

Not finding anyone to talk to in the room, Princess Riel sat down in the chair at the end of the table, with Dillan at her side and Zahar and Niena standing watch behind her.

Ariane, Chiyome, and I stood behind Dillan.

I was starting to think we'd be waiting here for a good while, but after a brief moment, footsteps echoed from beyond the door on the far side of the room.

The door opened wide, and a man and woman walked into the room.

The woman looked just barely older than Chiyome. Her long, bright blonde hair curled at its tips, accenting her pale skin and warm, brown eyes that blinked as she took in the sight before her. Despite her regal appearance, she wore a simple dress and a necklace with a flower design. The look of intensity in her eyes made it clear that she was no ordinary young woman.

She was accompanied by a tall, young man with chestnut hair and intense blue eyes. He was dressed in an elegant robe, also giving off the impression of royalty. But there was something off about the smirk on his face. He felt...fake.

The two stood on either side of the door to make way for an older man of around fifty or sixty. His eyes scanned the room, taking in its occupants.

The man had faded blond hair, blue eyes, and a long white beard. His forehead was etched with deep wrinkles, and his face wore a grim expression, which spoke of long years carrying a heavy burden on his shoulders.

From the way the younger man and woman bowed to this newcomer, I took it that he was the king.

Princess Riel and Dillan also stood up and bowed. Before I could follow suit, the man put up his hand.

“This is an informal meeting, so let’s skip the formalities.”

Everyone hesitated for a moment. Rather than sit down, Princess Riel lifted her gown to keep from tripping and stepped forward.

“I beg your pardon, Your Highness. My name is Riel Nohzan Saureah, and I am the princess of the Nohzan Kingdom. I am truly grateful that you have chosen to grant us this audience.”

Her words came out slightly stilted, either because she was nervous, or because she was reciting a rehearsed speech.

The king registered surprise at the young girl’s name. “Oh? So you’re from Melissa’s...?”

Princess Riel nodded.

“I am Karlon Delfriet Rhoden Olav, ruler of this honorable kingdom. And your uncle.”

King Karlon smiled down at Riel before turning to introduce his two companions.

“This is my daughter, and your cousin, princess...”

The young woman at his side stepped forward and curtsied. “Yuriarna Merol

Melissa Rhoden Olav, but please, just call me Yuriarna.”

Her infectious smile spread to Riel, causing the younger girl to relax a bit.

King Karlon continued. “And this here is my son, Prince...”

The young man smiled at Riel and executed a perfect bow. “Sekt Rondahl Karlon Rhoden Sahdiay. I look forward to getting to know you, Princess Riel.”

King Karlon turned his attention to Dillan. He raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “I believe we’ve seen each other quite recently. I take it you accompanied my niece?”

Dillan smiled cheerfully and bowed to the king. “It’s nice to see you again, Your Highness. We’ve already met, but for the sake of formalities, I am Dillan Tahg Lalatoya, elder of Lalatoya Village in the Great Canada Forest. You are correct. I was given the opportunity to join Princess Riel for today’s meeting.”

King Karlon’s eyebrow arched higher. “I have to admit, I’m surprised to hear that you have relations with the Nohzan Kingdom.”

Dillan responded with a gentle laugh. “Let’s just say that our paths have crossed. It’s funny how the world works, no?”

“Shall we sit? Then we can get down to business.”

The king sighed and slid down into the seat prepared for him. Yuriarna and Sekt sat on either side of him.

Riel curtsied and sat, followed by Dillan. Zahar and Niena continued standing behind their young charge, so I decided to do the same.

I could feel the king watching me. Dillan answered his unspoken question.

“These are my attendants—my daughter, another elf from our village, and their companion.”

The king’s eyes went wide. “They all look...quite different from you.” From his tone, it seemed he was most surprised to hear that Ariane and Dillan were related.

Dillan laughed. “Yes, well, my daughter takes after her mother.”

Ariane scowled and looked away. The tips of her ears seemed to have turned

ever so slightly pink, but it could have just been my imagination.

King Karlon cocked his head and let his gaze fall on Chiyome and me, though he didn't say anything more. He returned his attention to Riel.

"What brings you all the way from the Nohzan Kingdom? I can't imagine it's a social visit. Is there some sort of emergency?"

Riel pulled out the letter from her father and set it on the table. Zahar picked up the envelope and delivered it to the king.

"I've come here to ask a favor of you, Uncle Karlon. My father, King Asparuh, has laid out our request in this letter."

Riel's face turned gravely serious as she regarded the man across from her. She wasn't looking at a fellow royal, or at the ruler of the Rhoden Kingdom, but at her uncle.

King Karlon didn't respond immediately. He picked up the envelope and broke the wax seal. His face tensed as he read the letter, soon turning to a look of shock.

Yuriarna and Sekt watched this change in their father.

King Karlon looked up from the letter and addressed Riel. "Is this all true? That the Holy Hilk Kingdom has attacked Salma, Nohzan, and Delfrent with an army of over 200,000 undead soldiers?"

Yuriarna let out an audible gasp, while Sekt merely put his hand to his chin and furrowed his brow.

"Let me see that, Father!" Yuriarna jolted to her feet. She rushed to her father's side and attempted to read the letter over his shoulder.

"Calm down, Yuriarna! I'm still reading!"

Thoroughly rebuked by her father, Yuriarna looked to Riel for confirmation of the letter's contents.

"Is the Holy Hilk Kingdom really raising the dead and attacking its neighbors? How can that be?"

"Y-yes, everything my father has written is true! We were attacked by

monsters! They nearly destroyed our city!” Princess Riel’s regal poise crumbled.

Never one to worry about proper decorum, Yuriarna began pacing back and forth. “But the Hilk church has been around for a long time, y’know? Their teachings are usually pretty reasonable, and I’ve never known them to take a particularly harsh stance on anything...”



King Karlon let out a resigned sigh, apparently deciding it was pointless to chastise his daughter's behavior further. Once he finished reading the letter, he looked back up at Dillan. The cordial smile remained on the elf's face.

"It says there that elves from Canada intend to send reinforcements. Are you really willing to fight on behalf of humans?"

Dillan nodded, his smile never once wavering.

"To be frank, it would be to our advantage to have the Hilk removed from power. I'm confident that I can gain the support of the high elders."

King Karlon scowled at this. "So you mean to say that you have yet to secure approval from your council?" He made no attempt to hide his incredulity.

Dillan simply offered a casual shrug. "Not yet. But this is not a matter that a single village elder can decide on his own."

The blood seemed to drain from Princess Riel's face. Her bodyguards didn't look much better.

I could certainly understand their dismay. The elves' assistance would be absolutely essential if they hoped to defeat the undead armies of the Holy Hilk Kingdom. If the council of high elders back in Maple withheld their support, the Nohzan Kingdom's destruction was practically guaranteed.

However, Dillan appeared certain that this wouldn't be the case. "You've nothing to worry about, princess. The people of Canada will rise to the call to defend our brothers and sisters in Ruanne. We have little choice but to enter this battle."

No one seemed to think much of Dillan's reassurance, other than Prince Sekt, who grinned and raised his hand. Dillan turned toward the younger man, looking slightly perplexed.

"Yes, Prince Sekt?"

"What does Canada seek from the Nohzan Kingdom in exchange? I find it hard to believe that you would offer your assistance and ask for nothing in return."

Karlon and Yuriarna also appeared interested in Dillan's answer.

Dillan smiled. “All we ask in exchange is that the Nohzan Kingdom, and the land of Brahniey in the Salma Kingdom, agree to prohibit slavery of the elves and mountain people. These terms have already been agreed to.”

“That’s quite a big thing to ask for, especially if you’re including the beast people.”

Sekt glanced over at Chiyome, who was glaring daggers at him. But the prince simply shrugged and offered yet another roguish grin.

“These are merely promises made by mouth, no? Do you have any assurances that they will be kept?”

Riel puffed out her cheeks in anger. She banged her fists on the table as her eyes filled with tears. “Papa’s no liar! Of course he’ll do what he says!”

King Karlon and Yuriarna both shot scolding looks at Sekt. With a dramatic sigh, he mumbled a vague apology. “Ah, excuse my choice of words. I didn’t intend to call your father a liar. I’m simply concerned about whether such weak terms will be enough to convince the elves to join us on the field of battle, given the tumultuous history between our peoples. The elves might not know what a great man your father is.”

Apprehension once again washed over Princess Riel’s face. She turned back to Dillan, who offered a comforting smile.

“Let’s just say that we have ways to ensure that these promises are kept.” He glanced over his shoulder at me.

Prince Sekt cocked his head quizzically.

I didn’t want to threaten them into accepting our terms, but I couldn’t exactly help it, given my appearance.

Ariane leaned in close to me and whispered. “After what you did back there, no one would put it past you.”

I whispered back. “The only people who saw what I did were Riel and a few of her closest guards. That’s nothing compared to what you did to Cardinal Palurumo, and in front of King Asparuh, no less.”

Ariane and I locked eyes, neither willing to give in.

“Kyii!”

Ponta decided to enter the fray with a swing of its tail, sending my world into darkness. This was the fox’s way of mediating our argument.

Princess Riel continued speaking, paying no mind to our quiet spat. “I beg you, Uncle Karlon, please help the people of Nohzan!”

Yuriarna looked at her father to gauge his reaction.

The king, however, responded with a question of his own. “Assuming that the elves of Canada agree to send reinforcements, how much time do we have until the Hilk armies close in on your allies?”

Dillan pursed his lips. “Assuming they make their way straight toward Nohzan, around seven days.”

The king sputtered in surprise. “S-s-seven days?! Then the battle is already lost!”

Prince Sekt’s response was more collected. “Even if you were to leave right now, the battle would probably be over with by the time you arrived in Lamburt.”

King Karlon looked at Riel sympathetically. “That’s enough, Sekt. Asparuh likely sent her here so she wouldn’t suffer the same hardships.”

A deep sadness filled Yuriarna’s eyes as she, too, gazed at the young princess.

All three of them had come to the conclusion that King Asparuh had sent his only daughter off on this fool’s errand to ensure her survival.

Under any other circumstances, this would have been a reasonable conclusion.

Riel searched for a way to explain the situation to them. “No, you don’t understand! We just left our castle today! With Arc here, distance is no object!”

Her rambling explanation had no effect. The king continued regarding his niece sympathetically.

“So, what shall we do?” Sekt pressed.

Dillan spoke up before the king had a chance to answer. “There’s more than

enough time to send reinforcements. That's why I brought Arc with us. For the time being, you need not worry about the distances involved."

The three faces across the table registered confusion. From the way their gazes converged on me, I could tell they needed proof. Dillan let out a hearty laugh as he came to the same conclusion.

I nodded and summoned my spell. "Dimensional Step!"

An instant later, I was standing behind King Karlon.

"Wha?!"

"Hey!"

"Huh?"

The royal family's eyes went wide as saucers. They were completely at a loss for words. The maidservants were practically beside themselves too.

Having a giant knight disappear before your very eyes and then appear behind you must have been truly terrifying.

"Dimensional Step!"

I teleported back to Ariane's side.

The room remained in stunned silence until Sekt spoke up at last. "The spirit paths... I thought they were nothing but a fairy tale."

Dillan smiled at this.

Apparently, spirit paths and other aspects of the elves' lives were not entirely unknown to humans. Perhaps Evanjulin, the founding elder of the Great Canada Forest, had spoken of the elves' teleportation shrines to humans.

A bead of sweat ran down the king's forehead. "Well, I, umm, certainly had no idea that you had such power at your disposal. But I have to ask...why, Dillan?"

Dillan flashed the king another charming grin. He was clearly enjoying himself. "Why what, Your Highness?"

The king's voice was so low that everyone in the room had to strain to hear him. "If you have such power available to you, then why assist us humans in the first place? What could we possibly have to offer you?"

Dillan laughed dryly. "You have a point." He turned his gaze to Sekt. "However, as you pointed out earlier, there's something we'd like from you as well."

Prince Sekt snorted and leaned over to the king to whisper into his ear.

"Hmm, I see..."

More sweat beaded on King Karlon's forehead.

Yuriarna looked at her father with concern, then turned a harsh eye toward Sekt. The prince leaned back, a sly grin on his face.

The king stared at the letter in front of him. After a moment, he nodded his head firmly and turned his gaze back to Princess Riel. The young girl looked like she could hardly take any more of this.

"We cannot simply stand by and watch as these events unfold. Due to the limited time available to muster troops, I fear that we can only spare around 5,000. Are you sure that you can teleport such a large number of people?"

Dillan put his fears to rest. "That will be no problem at all."

"Well then, I entrust all matters regarding the reinforcements to you, Sekt. I want you to aid in planning their defense."

Riel was clearly overjoyed at this.

But Princess Yuriarna seemed to take exception to the king's decision. "Wait a moment! Please reconsider, father! I should be the one to lead the armies that fight alongside the elves. After all, it will do wonders to help build relations with them!"

The king, however, did not give in to her pleading. "And that, dear Yuriarna, is precisely why you should not go. I have plenty for you to do here, which is why I have entrusted Sekt with the task. My decision is final. Please return to your seat."

Yuriarna puffed out her cheeks in anger.

Sekt ignored Yuriarna's outburst and stood at attention in front of the king.

"I gladly accept the appointment, Your Highness. I will do my best to carry out

your wishes.”

The king smiled in satisfaction. “The decision is made then. Once the reinforcements have been mustered, you’ll transport them back to the Nohzan Kingdom.”

Dillan glanced toward me, and I nodded.

King Karlon declared the meeting finished, and everyone hurried to begin their preparations, including me.

This was the first time I’d be teleporting 5,000 people at once. Despite what Dillan had said, I didn’t even know if it was possible.

First, I needed to find a place here in the palace to sketch for my teleportation diary, to make it easier to travel back and forth between Nohzan and Rhoden.

Prince Sekt approached Dillan and spoke in a low voice, barely above a whisper. “Do you also plan to ask the empire for reinforcements?”

While it would certainly make sense to seek assistance from the empire, considering they weren’t lacking in soldiers or other military resources, that simply wasn’t possible.

Dillan responded with a smile. “Unfortunately, we don’t have any connections to the empire.”

However, Sekt pressed on. “If an introduction could be made, would you ask them?”

Dillan bowed his head apologetically toward the younger man. “At this time, we aren’t considering the empire as a potential ally for...various reasons.”

Prince Sekt smirked.

I figured that Dillan was just focused on our current request for reinforcements as a means to convince the elves as well, but there was also an even bigger issue.

I wasn’t able to use my teleportation magic to travel to the empire.

Or, more accurately, there were only a very few places within the empire that I could travel to.

In order to use my long-distance teleportation magic spell Transport Gate, I needed to have a clear image of the place I wanted to teleport to, meaning that I couldn't travel to a place I'd never seen before.

Speaking of which, whatever happened to that Hilk church that was destroyed during the chaos while we were out in the empire? For some reason, thinking about all our past adventures brought back a strong feeling of nostalgia.

Prince Sekt turned to me with a grin. "Well, that's too bad. I must be going, but I promise to give this task my all, for the future of both our peoples."

He gave a shallow bow, turned, and left the room.

While he certainly played the part of a prince, there was just something about the guy that was utterly reprehensible. Judging by the scowls on their faces, Ariane and Chiyome felt the same.

Intermission:

Dragon Lord Felfi Visrotte

Early morning light bathed the massive trees in gold as a gentle breeze rustled through their thick foliage.

These trees were actually homes, a perfect blend of natural and artificial construction, connected to one another by aerial walkways suspended high above the ground. Due to the early hour, it didn't seem like anyone was awake yet.

We were in the Great Canada Forest, a large swath of land that covered the southeastern part of the northern continent.

Eight hundred years ago, these lands were nothing but barren fields. Then an elf transformed them into a massive forest that became a sanctuary for all persecuted elves. Its borders had only continued to expand.

Within the forest lay elven villages of all sizes, from small communities to large towns, the largest of which was the capital of Maple.

Built on the banks of the imposing lake known as the Great Servant, and home to over 100,000, the capital was surrounded by a massive wall to keep out any monsters that strayed too close. Within the confines of this protective barrier were countless buildings that stretched up into the sky.

In the residential district, a young woman rubbed at her golden eyes with the palm of her hand, in a desperate attempt to wake herself up.

"Yaaaaaaaawn. I'm so sleepy..."

She clenched her jaw to fight back another yawn and began yanking off her clothes and tossing them aside. This motion caused her ample bosom to jiggle.

Amethyst skin, a sign of a dark elf, peeked out from the thin undergarment that wrapped around her perfectly proportioned body—well-toned, but with just the right amount of softness. Then she removed even that too.

Nude, she stepped into a cubicle. Using various magical implements, the roots

of the tree pulled water up through the trunk, heated it, and sprayed it out like a gentle shower over her head. This was her morning ritual.

“That feels goood.”

She ran her fingers through her shoulder-length white hair as the warm water ran over her head. She carefully washed the rest of her body and massaged her tense muscles.

“Aaaaaah...”

She let out a long sigh that transitioned into a yawn. Finally, she felt awake.

“Mmm, I think I’m ready for the day. I need to head out a little early.”

Due to her many years living alone as a soldier here in Maple, the woman spent a lot of time talking to herself.

She turned off the magical shower and hummed cheerfully as she toweled herself off. She stepped out into her room and walked around, not bothering with clothes yet.

“Now, where did I put my bag?”

Her eyes fell on the object she was looking for. She stooped down and did a final check of her supplies.

“Wha?! I need to get dressed!”

Realizing she was still nude, the woman hurriedly pulled a pair of clothes identifying her as a soldier of Maple off a shelf. She paused. After staring at the clothes for a minute, she slid them back onto the shelf.

Though she was fond of the skirt’s design and the fact that it shared the same markings as her younger sister’s uniform, she was heading out into dangerous territory today, and protecting herself from harm was the priority.

She opted for a long-sleeved tunic instead, over which she pulled her well-worn leather armor. Lastly, she clasped on the belt for her two short swords.

This clothing showed off the delicate curves of her body, and was also easy to move in—which was vital for a soldier.

She tied her hair back with a string and then shook her head a few times to

make sure she could move it freely. She picked up her bag and hefted it onto her back.

“All right, time to meet up with my adorable little sis!”

As she stepped out of her room and locked the door behind her, she noticed her neighbor doing the same.

The other woman smiled brightly at her. “Wow, you’re up really early today, Eevin.”

Eevin Glenys Maple returned the smile. “I guess I am, aren’t I? I’m heading out to the Columbia Mountains.”

Despite her casual demeanor and occasionally forgetful nature, Eevin was well-known among the soldiers of the Great Canada Forest for her skill in battle.

As was her younger sister, Ariane Glenys Lalatoya.

The woman’s eyes went wide as a look of concern spread across her face. “What? Columbia’s quite a way off to the west, you know. Are you going to be okay?”

The Columbia Mountains were part of a towering range that ran straight through the center of the Great Canada Forest. Their peaks were capped with snow year-round, and they were renowned for their danger.

There were no villages anywhere near them, and powerful monsters ran free among them. Most people chose to keep their distance. However, Eevin seemed rather easygoing about the whole thing. She just waved her hand with a smile.

“Oh, it’ll be fiiiiine. I’ve made multiple trips out there before. By the way, if anyone stops by my house, just let them know where I went.”

“Well, uh, be careful, okay?”

With that, the two women parted ways. Eevin made her way to the building’s ascender to head down to the teleportation shrine.

There were no teleportation shrines anywhere near the base of the Columbia Mountains, but she could at least head to the nearest village.

Despite what great shape she was in, it would still be at least a nine-day trek through the forest if she were to head to Columbia from Maple on foot. From the closest village, however, it was only about a day and a half.

The only problem was that her destination was on the move.

Once she made it to the Columbia Mountains, her search would begin. Depending on how long the search took, she could be out there for days. She shook her head, trying to clear it of negative thoughts.

“They’ll hear my calls, I’m sure of it. Totally...sure. As long as they aren’t sleeping, that is.”

She tried her best to keep herself positive, but the worry kept finding a way back into her thoughts. Instead, she decided to think about all the fun things she had waiting for her once her mission was complete.

“My sweet little Arin asked me to do this, so the first thing I’ll do is report to her on how it went. Now, what should I ask for in return? I deserve some sort of present, I think...”

Eevin stopped in her tracks as a wicked smile spread across her lips. She cut a rather imposing figure, standing in the middle of the fog-covered street, her hair whipping about in the morning breeze.

“Maybe I’ll have Arin join me for a bath. After all, as her sister, it’s my solemn duty to make sure she’s growing up into a fine young woman.”

Her cackle echoed ominously through the village, making her look all the more alarming to the few souls venturing out so early.

Despite how it might look to passersby, however, Eevin was having a great time thinking about the fun that awaited her. She started walking toward the teleportation shrine again, this time with a slight bounce in her step.

After thanking the teleportation shrine’s attendant and stepping outside, Eevin looked at the new village around her and the Columbia Mountains off to the west. The snow-capped peaks stood out in stark contrast to the vast sea of green beyond the village’s gates.

She let her gaze follow the mountain range as it ran down to the southwest,

and prayed for a safe journey.

“All right!”

Eevin stepped left of the confines of the village’s walls and headed west, straight toward the forest. She was off to find the Dragon Lord known as Felfi Visrotte, who lived in the Columbia Mountains.

This mission had come to her several days prior when a whispering fowl arrived at her home with a message from Ariane.

Ariane had apparently encountered a Dragon Lord who lived somewhere beyond the Furyu Mountains, and had promised to introduce him to Felfi Visrotte, the guardian dragon of the Great Canada Forest.

Eevin was no stranger to Felfi Visrotte, and had spoken of their encounters with her sister on more than one occasion, so she was the first person Ariane had thought of.

After speaking with her fellow Maple soldiers, Eevin was granted leave and began making plans to head into the Columbia Mountains. This would be the fifth Dragon Lord that the elves had an opportunity to welcome into their midst.

The Great Canada Forest had four guardian dragons living within its limits. Felfi Visrotte had been the first to come here, at the request of Evanjulin, the founding elder.

Despite their immense size, not all Dragon Lords cared about protecting their domain. Some preferred to spend their days in one spot, while others roamed the woods like nomads, never settling.

Felfi Visrotte was immensely curious about the world and the places the existed within it, but Eevin was fairly certain that she could be found in her usual home in the Columbia Mountains, so she chose to start her search here.

First, she would make her way to the nearest outpost, stay there for the night, then make her way to the Columbia Mountains the next day.

Eevin adjusted her pack and stepped into the untamed forest without a single path or sign to guide her.

After walking for some time, she suddenly stopped and listened. “That’s

strange... I don't hear any monsters."

Even powerful monsters usually steered clear of areas where Dragon Lords made their roost, which in turn allowed smaller animals to thrive in these areas.

This meant that the area just beyond the Dragon Lord's influence tended to be full of monsters that had been driven out. But right now, the forest was calm and serene.

"Maybe the Dragon Lord is nearby?"

Eevin looked around at the forest, but she could see little more than trees.

"Ah, well, I should probably head to the outpost anyway."

Eevin shrugged off the feeling and continued on her way.

A short while later, she arrived at a clearing in the forest with three large trees, spaced an equal distance apart, with a large elevated platform built out of their branches.

Also in the clearing was an unfamiliar sight...or, rather, a familiar sight in an unlikely place.

"Felfi Visrotte?!"

The Dragon Lord herself towered beside the outpost.

A voice echoed in Eevin's head, the unique—and rather convenient—method that the Dragon Lords used for speaking.

So, you've finally arrived. You certainly took your time.

Despite her rather conversational tone, the creature in front of her was one of the world's largest and most powerful dragons.

Felfi Visrotte was covered entirely in midnight black scales, with two large black horns jutting out of her head. The Dragon Lord's large wings emitted a dull violet glow as they flapped back and forth rhythmically. Large, sword-like protrusions tipped with gems juttled out of her long tail, like protective armor.

Violet eyes stared straight at Eevin. The only emotion evident was the way the Dragon Lord's wings occasionally fluttered out of beat, sending the nearby trees twisting in the sudden gust of wind.

At about eighty meters long, the Dragon Lord could barely fit into the clearing.

“You weren’t waiting for me, were you, Felfi Visrotte?”

The response that came back betrayed a hint of annoyance. *Didn’t I already tell you to call me Rotte?*

Eevin tried again, even more friendly. “Apologies, Rotte. What brings you all the way out here?”

I saw you coming before you even entered the forest, so I figured I’d meet you here. You’re talking funny. You okay?

Rotte let out a laugh, and Eevin was overcome with relief at her good fortune. She’d been ready to spend the next few days searching the forests and mountains in pursuit of the Dragon Lord.

Dragon Lords’ senses were in a class all their own compared to those of the elves and mountain people. Eevin had likely been watched the moment she’d left the village.

Though she was grateful, of course, this made most of the bags and gear she’d brought with her absolutely useless.

The black dragon tilted her head to the side to get a closer look at Eevin. *What is it? You came here looking for me, no?*

The two had always enjoyed a rather friendly relationship. “Actually, my sister wanted me to ask a favor of you...”

Rotte butted in before Eevin had a chance to finish. The conversation sounded more like normal friends gossiping than an elven soldier meeting a Dragon Lord.

Oh? And how is your sister doing?

Eevin was always happy to talk about one of her favorite subjects: her little sister.

“You’ll never believe this, Rotte! Recently, Arin decided to change her registration from Maple to Lalatoya. Can you believe that? And there’s more! She did it because some new guy also joined the village. Wild, right? I just can’t

wrap my mind around it!”

Her father had filled her in on the latest about life in Lalatoya, Ariane, and her recent absences with this mysterious man. Eevin was absolutely beside herself over the news.

Rotte seemed to share in her excitement, judging by the chortle that erupted from deep in her throat as she nodded along with Eevin’s story.

When Eevin finally paused for a breath, Rotte followed up with another question.

And what about you, little one? Did you and that man you were so close to part ways?

Based on Eevin’s story, Rotte assumed that the elven woman had broken up with her own boyfriend, and was perhaps even jealous over her sister’s love life. However, the Dragon Lord couldn’t have been further from the mark.

Eevin was taken aback by this sudden line of questioning, unable to put together any connection between a discussion about her adorable little sister and the love of her life.

“What? No, no, no... We’re getting married!”

Rotte laughed. *You’re always thinking of yourself, little one. If you have a love of your own, then why worry about your sister’s companions? It’s her life.*

“It’s... That’s different. Father claims that this man is an elf, but a different kind. One he’s never seen before. He has brown skin, black hair, and red eyes. Weird, right?”

Felfi Visrotte’s lizard-like eyes narrowed slightly at Eevin’s description, though the elven woman didn’t notice the change.

Ah, yes, I have to say I’ve never heard of such an elf before. And where did Ariane meet this man?

Eevin’s voice grew harsh. “Well, y’know, Arin said she met him when she was on a mission to save our comrades from the humans. But this guy can apparently use teleportation magic, and he and Arin have just been teleporting all over the place. I can’t even get in touch with her. Can you believe it?”

Her shoulders slumped as she got all of her frustrations out. However, Felfi Visrotte listened patiently.

I see, I see. This is all very interesting indeed.

A low growl emanated from deep in Rotte's throat.

Eevin finally picked up on the Dragon Lord's strange behavior, and looked at her companion inquisitively. However, Rotte changed the subject before Eevin could ask about it.

I believe we've strayed from the topic. You said you came here with a request?

This jogged Eevin's memory. "Oh, right! Well, you see, Arin apparently ran into another Dragon Lord on one of her adventures, and he said that he'd like to meet you. I think his name was Villiers Fim."

Rotte had never heard of this Villiers Fim, but she did have an idea of who he might be.

I wonder if that could have been what I was feeling?

While she was alone in her roost in the Columbia Mountains, Rotte occasionally felt as if there were eyes on her from somewhere far off.

Someone, or *something*, had kept just outside the range of her senses, either under the belief that she wouldn't notice, or possibly waiting for her to make first contact. Could this have been the Dragon Lord Eevin was talking about?

Rotte started feeling an indescribable anger welling up within her. *Men! Cowardly fools! I can't believe he'd send a servant rather than use his own wings! That's the proper way to do these things!*

Rotte twisted her neck up to the sky and let out a powerful roar, causing the very earth to tremble in response. Birds and animals scattered in terror.

Eevin threw her hands over her ears and braced herself as she felt the shock wave blow past her.

Rotte looked down at the elven woman apologetically.

Ah, I'm sorry, little one. Recently, I've sensed the gaze of someone looking upon me from above the clouds, and frankly, it's quite annoying.

She seemed to have calmed down somewhat, and she let out a sigh that sent a flurry of leaves flying high into the air.

Well, I suppose I should be happy that he finally reached out.

Eevin wondered if it might be better to change the subject. “By the way, Rotte, is there any reason why you’re not in your human form right now? That’s pretty rare for you.”

Rotte spread her massive wings, their shiny membranes reflecting the sunlight in strange patterns.

Ah, yes. Sometimes it feels good just to bask in the sunlight in my normal body.

She described it like airing out a down blanket. Eevin figured it was probably something only another Dragon Lord could truly understand.

Though the creature sitting before her was currently taking the form of a massive dragon, Dragon Lords could also take on humanoid forms at will, which Rotte typically did. Eevin was slightly disappointed to see her this way.

When Rotte was in her human form, Eevin would ask her to spar with her, and Rotte would usually oblige. The two shared a lot in common, including their love for martial traditions.

There were very few people, of any species, who could truly challenge Eevin in a fight, which made Felfi Visrotte’s companionship all the more important to her.

Rotte seemed to pick up on Eevin’s disappointment. *Now that your task is complete, can you spare a bit of time? If you’re free, I’d like to have another go at you, but it’ll take a while for me to transform back. How does that sound?*

Eevin nodded. After all, she hadn’t encountered even a single monster on her way here, making all of her equipment and preparations pretty much useless.

Once we’re done, I think I’d like to stop by Maple. It’s been quite a while.

The elven warrior agreed to the plan and made her way to the outpost above. After dropping her bag, she pulled out her gear and began setting up camp.

It was growing dark, so she might as well stay the night. They could spar first

thing in the morning. She had to make the best of what free time she had, so she rushed through her setup as quickly as possible.

While Felfi Visrotte watched over her elven companion, her mind kept going back to the new type of elf she'd described earlier. He sounded just like Eva. If that were the case, things were about to get a lot more interesting.

The Dragon Lord's eyes gave off an ominous glow.

Chapter 4:

The Elves' Commitment

A large crowd had gathered in the open square in front of the Rhoden palace.

“When can we expect a response from the Great Canada Forest, Dillan?” King Karlon looked expectantly at his elven companion.

The older man ran his fingers through his beard and furrowed his brow, staring off into the distance. “About three days, I’d say. As soon we win over the high elders, they’ll call the reinforcements.”

A look of concern washed over Princess Riel’s face. Her voice was low, her steel-gray eyes pleading. “Three whole days? And we’re just going to wait here?”

Dillan smiled at the young girl. “I’m sorry, Riel, but there’s little else we can do. Your father entrusted you with an incredibly important mission.”

Zahar and Niena, her two bodyguards, nodded in agreement.

Zahar made a fist. “The king would be proud of you. At this very moment, he’s preparing his soldiers for war and awaiting our return.”

Niena, however, took a more measured approach toward their young charge. “Besides, there’s still much for you to do here in Rhoden, princess. For example, establishing a relationship with Princess Yuriarna will do wonders for both of our kingdoms after this battle has run its course.”

Riel lifted her head and clenched her little hands into determined fists. “Got it!”

Yuriarna, who’d been watching this whole exchange, walked over to Riel and crouched down, looking directly into the young girl’s eyes. “That’s right, dear. We’re cousins, after all, and there’s much for me to tell you about life here in our palace. You can teach me about your own kingdom too.”

The two princesses smiled at one another.

“All right! So does that mean we’re friends now?”

I sat a little way off in the square, trying to sketch the palace and its surroundings in my diary. This image would be essential in order for me to remember exactly where we’d be returning when I teleported all the soldiers and supplies over to Nohzan.

I’d finished most of the outlines and was now doing the shading. I wished I had just a little more time to get all the details of the ornately decorated palace walls just right.

A voice spoke up next me. “Well, you’re quite the artist.”

Prince Sekt stood beside me, wearing a cheerful grin. Despite his warm appearance, however, there was something cold in his demeanor. Ponta tensed at his sudden presence and retreated slightly down the back of my helmet.

“Ah, it’s just a hobby.”

I turned back to my teleportation diary, but I could still feel his gaze on me. I stopped drawing again and looked up at him. He glanced at Ponta, his gaze sending my furry companion scurrying down my back.

Sekt bowed slightly. “I look forward to the elves’ response.”

He turned and walked away.

“Kyiii... Kyii!”

Ponta growled after Sekt as he grew smaller in the distance. For better or worse, the prince was a pretty typical example of human royalty. Those who wore their hearts on their sleeves, like Riel, were definitely in the minority.

Generally, social interactions went a lot smoother when people kept tight control over their emotions, but Ponta didn’t seem to care for this attitude, probably because it could sense what people were really feeling under their false exteriors.

Though, now that I thought about it, Chiyome also kept her emotions closely guarded.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the black-clad ninja cat girl moving about the square silently.

Her cat ears flittered about excitedly atop her head, as if trying to pick out individual sounds from among the din.

Though she didn't usually let her emotions show, they were often at least somewhat evident from her animalistic body language. Ponta was probably able to pick up on that.

Considering Chiyome's recent interactions with Niena, it wasn't entirely fair to say that she always repressed her emotions. Rather, she just worked really hard to keep them under control.

It was easiest to tell how she was feeling when a tasty meal was involved.

Just then, a rather large chest suddenly appeared in front of me.

"Stopped drawing, huh?"

I turned my gaze up to Ariane's face. She was right, I'd kind of given up on sketching the rest of the palace walls.

"I guess this is good enough."

I'd gotten most of what I needed, so I closed my sketchbook and put it back into my rucksack.

"Thanks for bringing Shiden back here."

"Grweeen!"

I heard a loud yawn that could have easily been mistaken for a roar, and Shiden stepped out from behind Ariane.

The human guards still weren't used to the sight of the giant driftpus, and they stumbled over themselves in an effort to get away. The scene was reminiscent of a slapstick comedy act.

Ariane waved her hand dismissively. "It was no big deal. Anyway, did you finish your prep work?"

"I think I have everything in order, so long as I can easily teleport back here."

Truth be told, I only really intended to return to the Rhoden Kingdom in an emergency.

Not only would having an outsider like me in the palace be a security concern

for the guards here, but it would also draw unnecessary attention.

It wasn't really the time to worry about things like this, since we were in the middle of a war with the Holy Hilk Kingdom, but once the dust settled, I didn't want the humans to think that all elves could teleport around at will.

Once I actually teleported all of these soldiers to the battlefield, it would become real to them.

I expected some soldiers would casually ask about the teleportation magic and show some interest in it, but this was far from the general attitude.

I led Shiden through the square past Dillan, Ariane, and Chiyome before stopping in front of Princess Riel.

"Well, I have to get going, princess. However, I promise to do my best to return to you bearing good news."

She responded with a firm nod. "I'm counting on you, Arc! I'll be waiting here for your safe return!"

Zahar and Niena bowed to me, a gesture that I returned.

"Well, I'd best get going."

"Kyii!"

I made my way back to Ariane and prepared to teleport.

First, we'd be heading to Lalatoya, in the Great Canada Forest.

"Transport Gate!"

A large rune of light spread beneath us on the ground, then everything went dark.

The next moment, we found ourselves in front of Ariane and Dillan's home.

Glancing up, I saw faint splotches of light through the heavy leaf of the massive tree that served as their house. Elven homes truly were splendid feats of engineering and nature.

To the side of the tree house lay a large, well-manicured garden, currently being tended to by a dark elf woman.

She noticed us and gave a cheerful wave. “Welcome back, dear! And Ariane, you’re back too!”

The smiling woman was Glenys, Dillan’s wife and Ariane’s mother.

Not only was she physically gifted, like most dark elves, but she was also the one who’d taught Ariane the art of swordsmanship, which spoke to her skill. Before Dillan had a chance to get out a greeting of his own, she crossed the distance and pulled her husband into a tight embrace.

“Nnngh!”

Dillan grunted from the pressure, but somehow managed to hold up under it. He looked both apologetic for and suspicious of his wife’s sudden greeting.

The tips of Ariane’s ears flushed slightly at the embarrassing reunion between her parents.

“Take it back to your room, jeez.”

With a huff, Ariane led Chiyome into the house.

Dillan wrapped his arms around his wife and looked into her eyes.

“Well,” she said, “you finished sooner than I expected. Now can we finally spend some time together and relax?”

However, the look she got in return clearly wasn’t what she’d been expecting. “I’m so sorry, Glenys. Things have actually grown even more troublesome, which is why I had Arc bring us here. I need to go to Maple at once, to speak with the high elders.”

Dillan explained the connections he’d made with the human nobility and other village elders, until his voice gradually began trailing off.

The once-warm smile on Glenys’s face faded, and her face became a blank slate. “Ah, I see...”

Glenys was slightly taller than her husband, and between her impeccable posture and his hunched back, the difference in height only increased. Looking at their stances, it was easy to tell who dominated the relationship.

The silence lingered, until Glenys turned her back on Dillan and returned to

the house.

Dillan brought both hands to his sides and let out a low groan. “Gah, that really hurts...”

Though he sounded absolutely gutted, one could argue that this was better than having no one to greet you at all. I decided to mention this.

“Well, wasn’t that at least better than getting the cold shoulder?”

He thought it over before letting out a chagrined laugh. “I suppose you’re right. That would be worse.” He smiled warmly toward the doorway his wife had disappeared into. “We’d best finish up this little errand before her attitude gets any worse.”

I nodded and brought my fist up to my chest, giving the armor a hollow thud. “I’ve got a lot to do to get my shrine back in order...but yes, I’ll give it my best, Dillan.”

Not one to be left out, Ponta also let out a battle cry of its own.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

Dillan let out a deep breath, looking relieved. “All right then. I should head to Maple right away. They’ll need to convene a meeting of the high elders, but I think it would do a lot of good if you attended as well. I’ll need to get permission before you can enter, though, so please be ready to leave by tomorrow.”

I, of course, readily agreed. It had been my dream to set foot in the Great Canada Forest capital of Maple.

“Roger that.”

“All right, I’ll be going.”

Dillan waved over his shoulder at me and made his way toward the village’s teleportation shrine.

“Grweeeeeeeeeeeeeen!”

Not wanting to be forgotten, Shiden let out a loud roar and gave the empty saddle on its back a frustrated shake.

I ran a hand through the furry white mane that ran down Shiden's back, eliciting an excited sound halfway between a growl and a purr.

"Ah, right, buddy. How about I take you back to the shrine and replenish my supply of spring water? How does that sound?"

"Kyiiii!"

Ponta let out another cry to remind me that it was way past lunchtime.

"I know, I know. First, let's head back, and then we'll worry about food."

With that, I used Transport Gate to take us back to our forest shrine.

Ariane stretched luxuriously the moment she entered her house, in an attempt to work the tension out of her muscles.

Chiyome followed her, and Glenys was close on both their heels. The older woman's cheeks were puffed out in barely concealed anger, quite a different look from the gentle smile she'd worn just moments ago.

Ariane called out to her mother as she stormed past. "What happened with Father?"

Glenys spun, her face contorted in anger. "Your father, Ariane, apparently has to go see the high elders in Maple on some sort of big, important business. I thought he'd come back early... Instead, he let me get my hopes up, then threw them away and went to Maple!"

Ariane was a bit taken aback by her mother's behavior. Sure, her anger was justified, but it was incredible that she'd managed not to let it out on Ariane's father.

Glenys had had an illustrious career as a soldier, and was known for hunting down monsters throughout the Great Canada Forest. In combat, she could read an opponent's tells before they even had a chance to strike.

There was just no way that Dillan could have teleported into Lalatoya and kept Glenys from learning that he'd entered the village. Dillan didn't have any sort of military training at all, so he was unable to keep track of where Glenys might be at any given time.

Ariane sighed. She couldn't help but side with her father on this issue. It really wasn't his fault.

"If he's already on his way, I guess that means we won't be going anywhere today."

She was speaking more to herself than to anyone else, but it made her realize something: There was someone missing.

"Hey, Chiyome, where's Arc?"

"Hmm?"

Chiyome leaned out the open door to look around, then pulled back in and shook her head.

"I don't see him or Shiden anywhere. I'm guessing they went back to the shrine so Shiden could run free."

Ariane nodded.

Realizing that they were still wearing their battle gear and packs, Ariane gestured for Chiyome to follow her upstairs.

"I guess we'll just take it easy for the rest of the day. There's no way the elders in Maple will finish anytime soon. We have a spare room you can use."

Chiyome hesitated as she watched Ariane walk up the stairs, but then she shook her head and followed soundlessly after the elven woman.

"Thank you for your hospitality."

Ariane just smiled, leading Chiyome to the room she'd be staying in for the night.

After getting Chiyome situated, Ariane went back to her own room, took off her leather armor and sword, and put on the traditional tunic worn by many around town.

"Aaaah..."

She let out a deep sigh of relief at the sudden freedom of no longer having her large chest confined. She then reached up to untie her hair and let it fall down her back.

With that done, she dropped back onto her bed, enjoying the feel of her lazy clothes and the familiar scent of her own room.

Her mind went to Chiyome, left alone in a strange room she didn't know. She suddenly felt a strong desire to check up on the girl and hopped back to her feet.

Upon stepping out of her room, Ariane found Chiyome looking up and down the hallway hesitantly. She was no longer wearing her traditional ninja gear.

"Is everything okay, Chiyome?"

Chiyome tensed up, her tail going straight. "Ah, no, I...well, I just can't seem to relax. My mind keeps going back to my comrades in Nohzan and Goemon in Delfrent."

The cat ears atop her head drooped as she spoke.

Ariane looked the younger girl over. She'd already taken off her gauntlets and shin guards, but she was still dressed in all black. There was no way she could relax like that.

A thought sprang to mind, and she dashed back to her room to get a set of clothes for her younger friend. She knew just the perfect thing.

Ariane wore a large grin on her face as she held the clothes out to the ninja girl.

"So, what do you think, Chiyome? These were mine when I was younger, but I want you to have them. Wanna try them on?"

Chiyome blinked her large azure eyes several times as she tried catching up to Ariane. She slowly accepted the elven tunic and examined it.

Ariane wagged a finger in front of Chiyome's face. "Fretting won't do you any good right now, so there's no sense in worrying! All you can do is try to relax, eat good food, and get some rest. You'll never be able to fight if you don't take care of yourself, Chiyome. At least, that's what grandpa always says."

Chiyome was grateful for Ariane's attempt to help her, and she started unfolding the tunic in her hands.

Mountain people weren't affluent by any stretch of the imagination, and

she'd rarely possessed more than the bare minimum needed to survive. The outfit she held was made of dark, earth-toned cloth, and was covered in beautifully embroidered patterns.

She stroked her fingers across it, enjoying the luxurious feel of the fabric. Her flittering ears and wagging tail gave away her excitement far more than the expression on her face ever could.

Ariane smiled down at the younger girl, but before she could say anything more, she was interrupted by the sound of a stomach growling loudly.

Both women instantly put their hands to their bellies and glanced down, unsure exactly who'd produced the sound. They looked up and locked eyes.

Ariane let out an embarrassed chuckle. "Well, I'm famished. I'll go ask Mom if there's anything to eat."

She started off toward the kitchen at a slow jog.

"Mooooooooom! Ya got anything to eat?"

The response wasn't what she'd been hoping for. "I haven't gotten anything ready yet, dear. Besides, shouldn't you wash up first? You've been away for quite a while."

Glenys's annoyance was still evident in her voice.

Ariane pulled up the collar of her tunic and leaned her head down to sniff. Honestly, she didn't think she smelled all that bad, but her chest did tend to get a bit musty from being confined under leather all day. Besides, it'd hardly hurt to clean up while her mother was cooking.

She headed back to Chiyome to suggest they wash up. "Hey, Chiyome, it's time for a bath!"

Ariane didn't leave any room for argument, instead taking the younger girl's hand and dragging her back downstairs. She threw open the front door.

Suddenly, she paused.

Chiyome, still not entirely sold on this idea, looked back up at Ariane in confusion. She glanced around outside.

“What is it, Ariane?”

Ariane ignored Chiyome’s question and narrowed her brow as she glanced around. After a few moments of silence, she let out a dramatic sigh.

“I was hoping to have Arc take us to the hot spring outside his shrine, but it looks like he’s still not back. I thought he’d just gone to drop off Shiden...”

Chiyome’s ears twitched. “Maybe Arc also decided to stop by the hot spring?”

Ariane could see Arc in her mind’s eye, relaxing in the warm water. She glowered and slumped her shoulders.

“You’re probably right, Chiyome. I doubt he’ll be back for a while.”

One of Ariane’s eyebrows twitched in annoyance. She ran her finger along it absentmindedly.

“Oh well, guess we’ll just have to use our own bath.”

She dragged Chiyome toward the back of the house, out a door, and down a covered path running through the private garden behind her home.

At the end of the path sat a small, mushroom-shaped building, a little way off from the main house. Ariane opened up the door, revealing a changing room, and pulled Chiyome in with her. She closed and locked the door behind them.

“We’ll work up a good sweat here first, and then get some food in us. Hurry up and undress.”

Ariane grabbed the rope holding her tunic closed and gave it a tug, exposing her curvy body to the open air.

Chiyome stood in silence, crossing her arms self-consciously over her still developing chest.

“What’s wrong?”

Ariane looked back at Chiyome in confusion, her perfect body on display. The young girl shook her head and started stripping away her ninja garb.

The two women put their clothes in the wicker baskets sitting atop the shelves that lined the walls of the changing room. Ariane then opened a pair of sliding doors decorated with frosted glass and led the way into the bathing

room.

In the middle of the room was a large tub built into the ground. It was lined with wood, and hot water lapped against the sides in little waves.

Ariane made her way across the stone floor to a metal pipe built into one of the walls. She waved Chiyome over and turned a knob on the pipe, sending warm water spraying out over their heads from a faucet in the ceiling. Chiyome instinctively covered her delicate cat ears.

A moment later, she felt Ariane's hands delicately running through her hair to wash out the dirt. The older woman let out a gentle laugh.

"Your hair... It's all plastered against your head, Chiyome!"

She massaged Chiyome's scalp. The cat girl let her eyes close, basking in the sensation, her tail wagging excitedly behind her.

Warm water was precious resource back in Chiyome's village. The idea of using it on something as frivolous as this was unimaginable.

This was also the first time anyone had ever washed her hair for her.

Though she absolutely loved soaking in the hot spring outside the abandoned mountain shrine, the feeling of having her head massaged under a shower of warm water was pure bliss.

Her lips curled up ever so slightly, and she let out a small sigh as the tension began melting from her body. Ariane continued rubbing her head, treating Chiyome like the little sister she'd never had.



“Your hair’s so beautiful, Chiyome. I’m jealous.”

Chiyome was perplexed by this, and turned to face Ariane, her gaze gliding past the older woman’s delicate, snow-white hair to look her in the eyes.

“Really? I’ve always thought your hair was quite beautiful, Ariane.”

Ariane smiled at the younger girl. “Thank you, Chiyome. But it’s only natural to be jealous of what other people have.”

Chiyome’s eyes dropped to Ariane’s chest. “I guess...”

Ariane laughed, all too aware of what Chiyome was thinking. She crossed both arms under her bountiful chest to make it even more pronounced.

“Oh, you wish you had something like this?”

Chiyome’s face skewed into a complicated expression. She tried imagining herself in the body of Tsubone, one of her peers in the Jinshin clan.

“Honestly, they seem kinda heavy. I can’t imagine it feels great when they get sweaty.”

She rolled her shoulders back and let them drop again, as if considering the weight.

Once the two finished washing off, they slipped into the tub and relaxed in silence, the only sound that of dew dripping down from the ceiling to land in the tub with a faint splash.

Ariane broke the silence. Her words echoed throughout the room. “The more I think about it, the more amazing it all seems.”

Chiyome nodded, sensing what the other woman was thinking.

These two had spent their lives freeing their comrades who’d been tortured and enslaved at the hands of humans. They’d tried to disguise themselves and sneak around human towns in order to accomplish this. It was hardly an easy task.

That had all changed for both of them when they’d met Arc.

Arc used his peerless abilities to help them save even more of their enslaved comrades than they’d ever thought possible. Since he never turned down an

opportunity to help, they'd now managed to free the slaves in entire countries.

"Once this battle's over," Chiyome mused, "there will be so many freed slaves that I don't think we'll even be able count them all. The Jinshin clan will have its hands full trying to figure out where to put them."

Ariane nodded. "Maybe the human kingdoms will even change a bit, once the Hilk church falls out of favor."

Chiyome tapped her finger on the surface of the water and watched the ripples spread in all directions. "Do you think there's a bright future awaiting our peoples?"

Ariane could only shrug. "It's hard to say. I think it'll be better than it has been."

"What do you think Arc'll wind up doing?"

This innocent question brought a smile to Ariane's lips.

"The same as usual. He'll keep on helping people and sticking his nose in anything and everything that interests him...and then wind up blowing everything up in the process."

The two women shared a laugh.

A peaceful calm once again descended on the room. They sat in the silence for some time until a light growling sound interrupted their thoughts. Ariane stood up; it was her stomach reminding her that it was time to eat.

"C'mon, we'd better hurry! Arc'll be back any minute, and I'm sure Ponta's starving!"

Chiyome followed quickly after Ariane, and the two left the bath behind.

In Maple, the elven capital of the Great Canada Forest, Dillan sat in the waiting room of a magnificent tree house not unlike his own back in Lalatoya.

Sitting across from him was a large dark elf, the owner of this home. His muscles rippled under his amethyst skin. A large scar running from the edge of his short-cropped white hair and down the side of his face only made him look

more intimidating.

He ran his fingers through his long white beard and fixed Dillan with an intense stare.

The man's name was Fangas Flan Maple, one of the central council's ten high elders. He also happened to be Ariane's maternal grandfather, which made him Dillan's father-in-law.

Fangas hung on Dillan's every word. "I see... Things really have taken a turn out there." He crossed his muscular arms and snorted.

Dillan had just finished explaining the events that had unfolded in the Nohzan Kingdom. It was all rather hard to believe.

Fangas knew that his son-in-law wasn't joking, of course, but that didn't make the story anymore believable.

"Right when I thought we'd finally made some major in-roads with the Rhoden Kingdom, here they are demanding the Nohzan Kingdom agree to all sorts of terms."

The high elder groaned, eliciting an apologetic bow from Dillan. However, when he looked back up, Fangas wore a broad grin on his face. None of this was Dillan's fault, as far as he was concerned.

Under normal circumstances, it would have been practically treasonous for Dillan to have acted on his own like this. However, the terms he'd gotten the humans to agree to were quite favorable.

"I suppose what's done is done. Besides, the terms are incredibly advantageous toward us, even if they're only giving us rights that we should have been granted to begin with. The bigger concern is whether this king can actually get his nobles to abide by the new law."

Despite clearly having grown up on the battlefield, Fangas's concern with the human legal system was one of many reasons why he'd been made a high elder.

Dillan agreed with Fangas's assessment. "That is certainly true. However, since the humans *do* agree to abide by these terms, then I think it's incumbent

upon us to hold up our end of the bargain and provide them with soldiers. I doubt an opportunity like this will come around again, so it's in our best interest to send troops."

Fangas continued stroking his beard, furrowing his brow as he listened to Dillan.

The implications this had for such a vast swath of land as the Nohzan Kingdom—not to mention Brahniey, in the neighboring Salma Kingdom—were quite impressive.

According to Dillan's story, the Salma and Delfrent kingdoms were likely already a lost cause. Reports that the capitals had fallen were already starting to trickle in.

Even if the ruling elite had somehow managed to survive, it would be difficult for them to rule their kingdoms as they once had.

So, what would their next step be? Would a stable power in the region annex the lands of all the remaining nobility, perhaps offering the nobles their protection?

In short, if Brahniey and the Nohzan Kingdom remained standing after this war, would the nobles of the neighboring fallen kingdoms rise up together to form their own fiefdoms, or would they seek out the strength of the remaining regional powers?

If the elves of Canada could join the Nohzan Kingdom and suppress the threat, then there was little chance that any of the remaining nobles would risk an encounter with a country backed by elves.

What's more, the current terms also dictated that all the mountain people be set free.

Fangas and his brethren were already in negotiations with the Rhoden Kingdom to have similar terms put in place here, and they were making some headway under Princess Yuriarna's leadership, though the king seemed uninterested in the idea.

If they were able to push this through, the mountain people would likely be the first out of bondage in the Nohzan Kingdom, which might push the Rhoden

Kingdom to follow suit.

After taking a moment to gather his thoughts, Fangas locked eyes with his son-in-law. He let out a low groan. “Hmph. The problem is that we don’t have much time to get this written down on paper and distributed to all the necessary officials. Those in opposition will make the obvious point that there are no assurances that the humans will make good on their promises once we dispatch our forces.”

Dillan offered a reassuring smile. “I don’t believe that will be a problem. Considering what Arc did back there, few would want to risk standing up against someone so powerful.”

Fangas grinned broadly as he thought about the havoc Arc had unleashed.

“Still, having the power to wipe out an army of nearly 100,000 undead...that’s nearly on par with a Dragon Lord. If Ariane herself hadn’t attested to this feat, I’d never believe it.”

Before Fangas ever joined the high elders, he’d risen through the ranks as a soldier, and was still well-known among the military class for his fighting prowess. But even though he’d unleashed all manner of destruction upon his foes, none of it was anywhere near the level of a Dragon Lord’s power.

“I didn’t see the actual events unfold, of course, but from what I saw of the capital in Saureah, I’d agree with you.”

Dillan had only heard about the events from Ariane and Chiyome, but the sheer wonton destruction surrounding the capital, and the endless fields filled with the charred remains of undead, spoke to the immense power that had been unleashed.

Princess Riel and her guard had also witnessed the event. While many commoners in the capital still believed this to be the work of an angel, the king’s advisors knew the truth.

“We just need to prove to the rest of the high elders that there’s no way the humans would turn back on their promise now that they knew of Arc’s power. So...”

Fangas gave a wide, toothy grin. “So you’d like permission for Arc to enter

Maple to attend a meeting of the high elders? First off, are you even sure that he *is* an elf? I mean, he looks quite...different.”

“That much I’m sure of. I’ve had Ariane keep an eye on him, and from what I’ve heard, he has all the characteristics of an elf. In fact, he’s even become a member of our village.”

The older man let out a sigh at this revelation. “Well, if you’ve already accepted him as one of your own, then you hardly need my permission.”

“Considering his rather...unique traits, I think it would do some good to have a few more supporters in his camp. Between his black hair, red eyes, and darker complexion, he tends to stand out.”

This made sense to Fangas. “While there certainly have been elves with different colored hair in the past, he truly is a unique specimen. It’s probably best to address that from the get-go.”

There had been elves who looked like him in the past, but they were considered peculiarities.

The most notable example was Evanjulin, the founding elder of the Great Canada Forest. Though technically an elf, by most standards, she had some traits that were entirely unique to her.

One of these traits was her rather large chest.

In terms of voluptuousness, dark elven women were unmatched. However, according to the stories, Evanjulin was even more incredible to behold. This could also be seen in her descendants, as all the women in Evanjulin’s line of succession were well-endowed.

In addition to the founding elder, there were others with unique traits. The Great Canada Forest was known to welcome all elves who’d been driven out of the plains, which led to a fair amount of diversity. Maple also served as the last bastion of the dwarves, a species largely believed to have been wiped off the face of the planet, though this was generally kept secret from the humans.

Fangas finally addressed the awkward issue the two had been dancing around. “I’m guessing not much needs to be said about how useful his teleportation magic would be to us. On that point alone, I don’t think anyone

would even think about denying him entry into Maple.”

The two men were in full agreement. The reason for this was also quite simple. Evanjulin had also been known to use teleportation magic, and she was the one who’d created the magical teleportation shrines throughout the Great Canada Forest.

The teleportation shrines were a matter of daily life to the elves, but the founding elder was the last living person known to use teleportation magic. This left the elves unable to create any new teleportation shrines, which potentially made Arc an even more valuable resource.

Dillan had one last concern that he wanted to clear up.

“Now, about the reinforcements we’ve requested... We’ll be facing a vast enemy, and I have doubts about whether we can actually win through traditional combat. I was hoping that the central council would consider calling on a Dragon Lord.”

Dillan frowned at his own request. As they’d just touched on, Dragon Lords were known for the immense power they wielded. They were practically peerless in terms of raw power.

There were four Dragon Lords currently living in the Great Canada Forest. They served as guardians to the elves.

While it wasn’t entirely without precedent for the elves to ask a Dragon Lord to join them in battle, this had only happened when Canada itself was under attack. The Dragon Lords were merely performing their roles as guardians.

There was also the fact that the elves had never engaged in any large-scale military maneuvers that might call for mobilizing the Dragon Lords. Plus, Dragon Lords tended to be free spirits, traveling the lands as they pleased. They weren’t exactly easy to contact.

Fangas leaned forward and gave Dillan a few hearty slaps on the shoulder. “That can certainly be arranged! In fact, just the other day, the Dragon Lord Felfi Visrotte accompanied Eevin back to Maple. We can ask her ourselves.”

Fangas let out a boisterous laugh at the wide-eyed look Dillan on Dillan’s face.

“Felfi Visrotte has really come here?! And with my own Eevin?!”

An image of Dillan’s elder daughter sprang to mind. He shook his head and steered the conversation back on track.

“That’s not important right now. I’d like to ask you to do whatever it takes to convene a meeting of the high elders tomorrow. I will be meeting with several others shortly, in order to lay the groundwork.”

“Understood. Can I leave Arc to you?”

“He’ll be here tomorrow.”

Dillan stood and bowed to his father-in-law, then left the room.

After seeing Dillan off, Fangas made his way to a large war hammer hanging from the wall. He gave it a few good swings, the weapon tearing through the air with a loud *whoosh*.

The high elder grinned.

“It’ll be nice to be back on the battlefield.”

I arrived at the teleportation shrine in Lalatoya just as the sun began peeking over the mountains off to the east.

The shrine was of similar construction to Dillan’s house, and was crowned with a massive network of leaves and branches spreading every which way, casting dark shadows around the base of the tree.

I was joined at the entrance by my faithful helmet companion, Ponta; Ariane, who was desperately fighting back a yawn; and Dillan, who would be serving as our guide.

Chiyome, unfortunately, hadn’t been granted permission to enter Maple, since she was one of the mountain people, so she would stay in Lalatoya with Glenys.

After entering the shrine, we found ourselves in a large hall with a vaulted ceiling and pillars running along the perimeter. A circular platform had been built in the center of the room, its intricate runes glowing eerily upon it.

The shrine's attendant spoke with Dillan briefly before directing us to step aboard the platform. After the teleportation pad was turned on, the runes let off a blinding flash, and I suddenly felt as if I were floating.

When my eyes adjusted again, we were in an entirely different place.

No, that wasn't exactly true. We were actually in a very similar place, except the building was a lot bigger and more ornate than the one we'd just left, and there were multiple teleportation pads here. We were now in the teleportation shrine in Maple.

There were also a lot of guards in the room.

Dillan spoke briefly with them before receiving permission to leave the building. We made our way toward the exit.

"So, I finally get to see Maple!"

"Kyii!"

Even given the dire circumstances that had brought us here, I was excited about the opportunity to see the elven capital. My excitement was so contagious that it even spread to Ponta, who let out a cheerful mew and wagged its tail in anticipation.

The cottontail fox attracted a great deal of attention from the elves we walked past, probably due to how rare it was to see spirit creatures out in the open.

It hit me just how different things were here when compared to the quaint little village of Lalatoya. Maple was a massive, sprawling city full of towering tree buildings as far as the eye could see. Everywhere I looked, elves went about their day.

Thanks to the large number of shops that lined the streets, and the staff in front of them trying to drive traffic inside, a huge crowd had already formed despite the early hour. It was nothing like what I'd seen even in the largest of the human towns. An indescribable sense of wonder welled up within me.

I also noticed that there were some non-elves mixed into the crowd, much shorter than the rest. They couldn't have been more than 130 centimeters tall.

If it were their height alone that was different, I would have written them off as elven children, but these figures looked quite a bit different from the elves. They had muscular arms as thick as logs, barrel-chested bodies, and thick beards that grew to their waist. Their ears were pointed, but nowhere near as much as the elves. My eyes followed a few of them as they moved through the crowd in front of us.

“Are those...?”

Ariane cut me off before I could finish. “Yep, those’re dwarves. They were wiped out of existence in the human countries a long time ago, but quite a few of them still live here in Maple.”

Dillan tossed a warning back over his shoulder. “Remember, don’t tell the humans anything about their existence here.”

Ponta and I both nodded, swearing ourselves to silence.

As Dillan led the way through the busy city streets, Ariane filled me in on how the dwarves had come to live here, and why their existence was such a closely guarded secret.

“Huh, so the dwarves were hunted for their superior blacksmithing skills?”

Ariane concluded her short history lesson. “Our founding elder, Evanjulin, was the one who decided to offer the dwarves our protection, which is why you must never speak of them outside Maple. Do you understand, Arc?”

She looked deep into my eyes, as if to emphasize the point.

“I understand. I’m a Lalatoya now, after all.” I puffed my chest out with pride.

“Kyii!” Ponta chimed in as well.

I noticed that we were attracting a fair bit of attention, though there wasn’t much we could do about it, given how much a hulking knight in gleaming silver armor tended to stand out.

Ariane didn’t seem to care for this, and hurried after her father. I had to double my speed to avoid getting left behind.

Everywhere I looked in Maple, there was something new and exciting. Even the towering apartment complexes built into the trunks of the massive trees

seemed to be a beautiful amalgamation of nature and science fiction.

I was especially taken with the aerial walkways suspended between the buildings, something that would be difficult to pull off using even the most sophisticated techniques back in my world.

I started falling a little too far behind for Ariane's liking. I felt her grab the collar of my cloak and yank me along after her as she tried catching up to Dillan.

"Listen, I understand this is all new to you, but you can come back for a tour some other time. Right now, we've got Chiyome and a slew of other people counting on us, so we've gotta focus."

She had a point. I'd let the excitement get to my head. "I'm sorry, Ariane. It's just all so...different."

We arrived at a large, open space, at the center of which stood an enormous tower. At the very top, a modest amount of leaf cover spread out in all directions.

The tree tower was both thicker around and taller than the Lord Crown, bringing baobabs to mind, though it was difficult to accept the fact that the thing standing before me was an actual, living tree.

It reminded me of...

"It's like a real-life Tower of Babel."

Soldiers stood guard at the entrance built into the base of the tree. Their eyes all instantly fell on me as I approached.

One of the guards called out to Dillan. After a brief word, we were quickly waved in through the entrance and into the expansive lobby.

Looking ahead, I spotted a large reception desk staffed by several smiling receptionists. The whole scene was reminiscent of a lobby in an upscale office building.

One of the receptionists made a gesture as soon as he spotted Dillan. A woman came out from a back room and motioned for us to follow her. She led the group to a space with several large, cylindrical rooms, and directed us to enter one of them.

The cylinder was somewhat on the small side, and consisted of a large platform with a large, round crystal set in the center.

The woman reached out and pressed her hand against the surface of the crystal, causing it to glow. I suddenly felt as if I was ascending.

“Huh?”

From what I could tell, the floor was silently moving up through the cylinder, gliding so easily along the walls that it was almost hard to tell what was happening. It took me a moment to realize that this was an elevator, though it seemed almost insulting to refer to it as such considering the technology at work here. The floor was simply floating up the shaft, with no wires or supports of any kind.

I’d always figured that elevators like this were the domain of sci-fi anime, but seeing it at play suggested otherwise. I walked around the room, enjoying the strange sensation of the floor moving beneath me.

The woman smiled shyly at my strange behavior, though Ariane didn’t seem to find it so cute. Her cheeks burned red, and she covered her face.

The floor slowed below us before coming to a stop. The woman gestured for us to follow her out.

We found ourselves in a corridor that ran along the outer perimeter of the tower, giving us a view of the entire city of Maple.

I made my way to the window and looked down. “This view is absolutely breathtaking...”

I could see a forest of tree buildings, along with something that looked like a stadium.

Directly in front of me, a massive lake stretched as far as the eye could see. A fine morning mist hung low over it, but I could still see the vague outlines of ships moving across its surface.

The sheer beauty of the scene cut me to the core. A part of me wished that I could nominate it as a world heritage site. But, when I thought about it, there were a lot of places in this world that deserved to be considered heritage sites.

It was hard to say where to draw the line.

From the valley of the Dragon Wonder, which tore through the earth, to the Lord Crown, home of the Dragon Lord; from the Calcut mountain range, dominated by powerful monsters, to the Black Forest, down on the southern continent; there was no shortage of natural beauty here.

My wonder was cut short, however, as Ariane's hand grabbed my collar and yanked me back to reality once more.

"If you don't hurry up, I'm just going to leave you here."

I turned to find an annoyed look on Ariane's face. Behind her, I could see Dillan and the other elf waiting for us.

"Ah, I'm sorry."

I mumbled an apology and hurried over to where they stood, in front of a pair of ornate doors with flowering vines carved into them.

As Dillan and I had discussed beforehand, I unhooked the waterskin hanging from my waist and slipped the reed straw through the gap in my helmet to drink the mystical water I'd picked up that morning from the mystical spring near the Lord Crown.

The other elf took this opportunity to slide into the room, closing the door behind her. A moment later, she stepped back out and told Dillan that we had permission to enter.

We found ourselves in a large, open room that was only modestly decorated, devoid of the excesses we'd seen on our way up here. At the center of the room stood a large, circular table with eleven people sitting around it. It had no positions of high or lower rank.

The majority of the attendees were elves, though I did notice a burly dark elf, as well as someone who looked like a dwarf I'd seen earlier this morning. These must have been the ten high elders of the Great Canada Forest and the grandchild of Evanjulin, otherwise known as the third founder.

Some of the high elders were leaning over and whispering among themselves. Their eyes were on me, but I figured this was pretty normal, given the armor I

walked around in. People loved to talk.

A reserved-looking man sat at the far end of the table. “I’d say it’s been a while, Elder Dillan, but we’ve seen you quite frequently as of late.”

He appeared to be in his forties, and wore his long, green-tinted blond hair tied up with an intricately braided ribbon. He also wore a necklace, and several decorative pieces of jewelry, but there was nothing pretentious about his demeanor.

The man had a strict, stately look about him. I could tell at once that this was the third founder, Briahn Bond Evanjulin Maple.

The whole room went silent.

Dillan made his way to the elder and bowed, before turning to greet everyone else in the room.

“Thank you all for coming here on such short notice. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedules.”

Founder Briahn smiled. “I see great value in this opportunity, which is why I made the arrangements to gather everyone here today.”

Several of the elders in the room looked taken aback by this. Did it mean that Founder Briahn was in favor of supporting this action? Things had gone askew before the meeting even started.

Dillan smiled brightly and nodded one last time to Briahn before turning to face the rest of those seated. “Now, before I get into the matter we’re here to discuss, I’d like to introduce my companion, and the newest member of Lalatoya Village, Arc.”

Several people exchanged skeptical looks at this.

I stepped forward and slowly raised my hand to my helmet—a sign for Ponta to hop down to my shoulder so I could take it off.

“My name is Arc Lalatoya. I look forward to working with you in the future.”

I gave a small bow, Ponta clinging to my shoulder for balance, then looked back up at those gathered. I caught several smiles, but they seemed to be directed at Ponta more than me.

The high elders looked me over and openly discussed their misgivings.

“He certainly looks different.”

“I’ve never heard of any elves with red eyes and black hair.”

“His ears are certainly elven, and he’s built like a dark elf.”

“I didn’t expect him to look so strange.”

Apparently, at least some of them had been told about me beforehand.

Once the murmuring died down, Dillan spoke up again. “Arc accompanied me to the Ruanne Forest, along with my daughter, Ariane, and a girl belonging to the mountain people. After we parted ways, they went on to a human country known as the Nohzan Kingdom. On their way, they encountered a member of the Nohzan royal family, who requested their services.”

This was met with several confused looks.

“I’ll keep the story short, but essentially, Arc offered to take on this request in exchange for the royal family imposing a new law. Much to everyone’s surprise, they agreed.”

Dillan reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. He unfolded it and set it down in the center of the table.

“I apologize for the crude map, but the Nohzan Kingdom is located here. For reference, here is the Ruanne Forest and the village of Drant, where our comrades live.”

One of the high elders raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, but what does this map have to do with what you were just talking about? Can you get to the point?”

Founder Briahn silenced the man with a stern look. The high elder crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, nodding for Dillan to continue.

“Thank you. As I was saying, I’m sure you’re aware of the fact that we sent reinforcements to Drant after they suffered heavy casualties at the hands of an enemy. However, does anyone know where that enemy came from, or what their motives were?”

Dillan looked around the table. When no one responded, he continued.

“Originally we’d just written the attackers off as monsters, but it’s come to light that Drant was, in fact, attacked by undead soldiers created by humans.”

The high elders stared back in surprise at this information.

“You mean to say that humans were able to create undead?”

“That’s inconceivable! I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

“Now wait just a minute! How did you come to this conclusion?”

Dillan ignored these questions. “We learned of these human-made undead straight from the mouth of one of the high-ranking officials in the organization that created them—a cardinal of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, essentially the equivalent of a high elder.”

The high elders exchanged glances. They still seemed unconvinced about the accuracy of this information.

“This cardinal used the undead to attack the Nohzan Kingdom, which is the threat that Arc and his comrades put an end to. By the time the information reached me, it had come to light that the situation was far worse.”

Dillan tapped the Salma and Delfrent kingdoms on the map, and indicated where their respective capitals were thought to be located.

“The Holy Hilk Kingdom formed its undead soldiers into multiple armies and attacked the capital of the Salma Kingdom with approximately 200,000 soldiers. Among their ranks are some of the same monsters that attacked Drant.”

Founder Briahn closed his eyes and let out a deep breath, though it looked as if he’d already heard about this.

I was impressed that, despite their shock and disbelief, none of the high elders interrupted Dillan as he spoke. In fact, several of them had assumed similar postures to Founder Briahn, suggesting that they’d also already been told about these events, and knew them to be true.

One of the others spoke up. “Assuming what you say is true, does this mean that the group that attacked Drant was just a scouting party? And that the full force will soon be descending?”

Dillan nodded. He pointed back to the map. “The capital of Delfrent was also

attacked, with an army of around the same size. According to our most recent reports, both capitals have now fallen. This means that an army of nearly 400,000 is encircling the Nohzan Kingdom, as well as our reinforcements in Drant.”

Another high elder raised her hand. She wore a puzzled look on her face. “I’m not sure I understand. Of course we need to do what we can to save our fellow elves, but what’s the reasoning behind rushing to the aid of this Nohzan Kingdom? What’s the point?”

Several high elders nodded in agreement.

“I think it’s time to discuss the terms that Arc arranged as payment for his assistance. You see, he insisted that the humans free all enslaved elves and mountain people immediately, and completely outlaw the practice going forward.”

Many of the elders looked shocked.

“And the humans actually accepted such terms?! What could he possibly have offered them in return?”

It was a fair question.

Dillan hadn’t actually mentioned yet that we’d wiped out an army of 100,000 undead. There was a reason for this. If we came out of the gate with such absurd-sounding claims, it would hurt the believability of the rest of our conversation.

“A noble overseeing the neighboring lands has also agreed to these terms. Therefore, it is in our best interest that these countries survive. Two kingdoms have already fallen to the undead armies of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, which means that only two influential humans remain in the region. If they, too, were to fall, that would put a quick end to this bright future we’ve secured.”

This seemed to shake the high elders, though Founder Briahn was the first to speak.

“Be that as it may, there’s a more important issue at play here. We can take this as an opportunity to reveal how unjust the Holy Hilk Kingdom truly is. The two rulers have agreed to attest to the wrongs committed by the cardinal, and

the pontiff himself, and stand against them, which will allow us to put an end to the Hilk religion once and for all.”

Most of the high elders were quick to voice their agreement, though there was one who expressed doubt, choosing his words carefully, so as not to offend the founder.

“B-but what proof do we have that the humans will make good on their promises? I’m worried that they’ll turn their backs on us as soon as the threat has passed.”

The high elder next to him grinned at this. “Then I suppose we’d better show them just how strong we really are, so the thought won’t even cross their minds.”

Many elders nodded in agreement with her suggestion.

It was Dillan’s turn to drive the point home. “Whether we help the humans or not, in the end, we simply cannot avoid a fight with these human-made undead.” Some around the table looked skeptical, so he continued. “I beg of you to think this through. We aren’t yet sure how the Holy Hilk Kingdom has managed to produce undead, but I believe we can with certainty say that they’re using some kind of dark arts.”

An awkward silence fell over the room.

Founder Briahn spoke up. “Corpses. It has to be.”

The entire room tensed. It was something that everyone had guessed, but no one wanted to acknowledge. The undead we’d encountered so far were all humanoid in form and outfitted in metal armor.

The ingredients to make each undead warrior were relatively simple: armor, weapons, and, of course, a body.

The big question, then, was where were they getting all these bodies.

In the case of the Hilk church, the most obvious answer was from their cemeteries.

We weren’t exactly sure what happened to the bodies of the undead we’d already killed, or to the citizens who fell at the hands of the undead, but it

seemed entirely plausible that the corpses could be taken back to the Holy Hilk Kingdom in order to provide more raw materials for their armies.

Basically, they could be multiplying like rabbits.

Considering how easily the neighboring kingdoms had accepted the Holy Hilk's teachings and handed over the elves and mountain people, it was pretty easy to imagine what made up the majority of these armies.

Ariane turned her golden eyes toward me as she came to this same conclusion.

The high elders scowled, but no one offered a better idea of how to address the issue. The room fell into silence once more.

If we were to leave the Hilk alone, it would be all the more difficult to stand up to them later. We were left with no option, other than to fight.

One of the high elders cleared his throat. "I understand that we simply cannot ignore the Holy Hilk Kingdom any longer. Given this, we need to figure out how to send our forces to join the fight. Do we even have enough boats between Saskatoon and Landfrea?"

Another elder piped up. "Transportation is certainly an issue, but there's also the problem of sheer numbers. Even if we were to assemble all the soldiers from every village throughout Canada, at best we could bring together an army of around 10,000. How much help would this actually be in the face of 400,000 undead?"

The high elders all began talking animatedly about the logistics.

"We actually have a solution to both of these problems," Dillan said. "First, concerning transportation, Arc has something to share."

Dillan turned to me. Apparently, that was my signal to show off what I could do.

"Dimensional Step!"

As all eyes focused on me, I disappeared, only to reappear behind Founder Briahn. The high elders looked around frantically, their eyes so wide they threatened to pop out of their sockets.

“He’s gone!”

“What in the name of...?!”

The first to spot me was the hulking dark elf named Fangas—Ariane’s grandfather. Founder Briahn simply looked over his shoulder and smiled.

“Teleportation magic... We haven’t seen this since the time of the founding elder.”

The men and women around the room finally noticed me, shocked expressions on their faces. Even those who’d already heard about this from Dillan couldn’t seem to believe their eyes. Apparently, hearing about something and seeing it in practice were entirely different.

One of the high elders looked incredibly excited by this development. “If this really is teleportation magic, then I’m beyond impressed! May I ask how many you can bring with you?”

The high elders awaited my answer.

“I actually have two types of teleportation magic at my disposal: short-and long-range. I just showed you my short-range teleportation magic. My long-range teleportation magic allows me to travel to any location that I’ve previously visited, regardless of distance. The only restriction is that I need to have a clear memory of the location. Unfortunately, I haven’t had a chance to test the exact limits of how much I can bring with me, so that I cannot say.”

All eyes in the room were fixed on me. One by one, the elders asked questions about the extent of my abilities, and I did my best to answer them.

One of them stood up and approached me. She ran her finger along my white Belenus Holy Armor and blinked her green eyes. “Can you teleport me somewhere then?”

She looked much younger than the rest of the high elders, maybe in her thirties, but it was always hard to tell with elves.

Ariane glared at me and the woman running her hand over my armor.

Other voices burst out, and hands shot up.

“Me too!”

“I want to go!”

I looked to Dillan for permission. He responded with a nod, so I decided that letting them try it for themselves would probably be faster than explaining.

“All right, you three, step over here, and I’ll take you to Drant.”

The high elder woman let out a squeal of anticipation and reached up to my shoulder to scratch under Ponta’s chin, who let out a long mew.

“Kyiiiiiii!”

We were soon joined by the other two elders who’d expressed interest. Founder Briahn and Fangas also stood up, crossing their arms expectantly. Dillan shot me a wry smile.

Apparently, I’d be taking five of them.

Before I could teleport us to Drant, however, I had to make sure I committed the room we were in to memory. Otherwise, we faced the very real risk of never being able to come back.

Thanks to the rather modest appearance of the room, I could take it all in with just a quick glance. Once I was satisfied, an image of Drant to mind.

“All right, let’s go. Transport Gate!”

A glowing rune appeared on the floor at my feet and began spreading out, until all five of the high elders were standing within it. Then the rune flashed, the world went dark, and we reappeared someplace entirely different.

One of the elders cried out in astonishment, pointing at three large trees that corkscrewed together. The whole village was built among the large roots that stuck up from the base.

“Well, I’ll be! I’ve heard of those trees... This is certainly Drant!!!”

Another of the elders looked around in disbelief. He knelt to pluck a couple of blades of grass from the ground, popped one into his mouth, and began chewing.

He mumbled to himself. “Hmph, it’s bitter. I guess this isn’t just an illusion then.”

Founder Briahn was smiling from ear to ear. “Well, this truly is amazing.”

Off in the distance, we could see the people of Drant preparing the village for the upcoming battle. I was glad to see that they’d taken our warning to heart.

Judging from his intense gaze, Fangas felt the same.

Some of the high elders were beginning to wander away, so I figured I should end the field trip.

“Well, we can’t keep Dillan waiting all day. We’d best return. Transport Gate!”

The rune appeared at our feet once again, and a moment later, we were back in the tower in Maple.

When we reappeared, the high elders still seated at the table looked at us incredulously. Dillan smiled. Ariane let out an annoyed sigh.

The one high elder popped another blade of grass into his mouth. “So, we really did teleport, didn’t we?!”

“Thank you for that,” another high elder whispered. “I loved every minute of it.”

“Kyii?”

Ponta let out a confused yelp, and I felt my faithful companion being yanked off my shoulder and dragged down my back.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw Ariane glaring daggers at me.

“Welcome back, Arc.”

Dillan resumed his explanation. “So, I think that addresses the issue surrounding transportation. Next is the concern you raised over our numbers. I was thinking of asking the Dragon Lords to help us. As some of you already know, Felfi Visrotte is in our capital as we speak.”

Most of the high elders let out excited gasps.

“If we can get Felfi Visrotte to join us in battle, then all our problems will be solved!”

“Would the legendary Dragon Lord really agree to help us?”

“That would be amazing...”

However, a few of the elders seemed unconvinced.

Dillan frowned. “Actually, there’s one small hitch with getting her to help.”

The once-excited high elders murmured among themselves, their faces clouding with worry.

Dillan glanced over at me.

Suddenly, the chamber was filled with an ominous voice, coming from the other side of the door. “Well, well, well. I guess it’s finally my turn. You shouldn’t leave a girl waiting, Dillan.”

The high elders looked around in confusion.

The door flew open, a blast of wind filling the chamber.

“Hyah?!”

“Kyii?!”

“Whoa!”

Ariane slid behind me, using me as a human windbreaker, while Ponta was blown back a few meters. The cottontail fox quickly dashed back and jumped onto Ariane’s shoulder for protection.

Once the wind died down, two mysterious figures walked casually into the room. One of them appeared to be a large woman, standing around two meters tall, with two large horns growing out of her forehead. Her long, violet hair rustled as she walked, and her violet, lizard-like eyes darted about as she took in the room.

She had two small wings growing out of her back, a pale body with hourglass dimensions, and a large chest that jutted out—in fact, that was where many people’s eyes went first. Most notable, however, were the dark scales that ran from her shoulders, to her arms, and down her back, like natural armor.

A similarly scaled tail, almost as long as she was tall, grew out of her lower back, its tip full of jagged crystals.

Considering her sudden appearance, and what we’d just been discussing, it

seemed obvious to me who she must be.

“Dragon Lord Felfi Visrotte...”

She turned her gaze toward me and grinned.

“Bingo, kid. Is that right, considering where we are? Maybe ‘righto,’ ‘I have been summoned,’ or something like that would be better?”

She put a finger to her chin, as if thinking it over.

Between her intimidatingly large stature and natural body armor, she struck a rather imposing figure. However, her friendly, casual manner of speaking gave the opposite impression. She managed to exist in two different extremes at the same time.

Though she spoke differently from Villiers Fim, the other Dragon Lord I knew, they were very similar in appearance.

Ariane stepped out from behind me and cleared her throat.

That’s when I noticed that the woman who’d followed Felfi Visrotte into the room was a dark elf like Ariane. They shared the same powerful golden gaze, though this woman’s hair was shoulder-length. She seemed to be glaring right at me.

There was something about her face that reminded me of Glenys, but it didn’t click until I heard Ariane shout out.

“Sis?!”

So, this was Eevin Glenys Maple—Ariane’s older sister.

Dillan smiled in Felfi Visrotte’s direction. He turned back to me and nodded. The Dragon Lord’s face lit up, and she smiled.

“Huh, so you’re that Arc Lalatoya guy Eevin was talkin’ about. You do strike an interesting figure, I must say. I can see that your spirit is different from most. Actually, you’re a lot like Eva, now that I think about it.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Founder Briahn watching us with great interest.

Felfi Visrotte didn’t seem to notice this. She walked toward me, her long tail

swishing along the ground. She made a slow circle around me, inspecting me from head to toe. Her reptilian eyes were practically slits as she gazed at me.

“I’ve heard about you from Dillan. He said he wants me to help you all out in a little battle. But I want a favor in return. Whaddya think?”

We were about the same height, so I had little choice but to maintain eye contact with her.

“Hmm, well, I’ll certainly do what I can. What did you have in mind?”

The edges of her lips curved up at this.

She waved a scaled hand dismissively. “It’s nothing big, I promise. I’m not gonna eat ya or anything. I just need you to help me and the little one here with a game of sorts.”

I cocked my head to the side, not quite sure what Felfi Visrotte was asking of me. She raised her large tail and prodded my leg with the sharp, crystalline tip.

“I want you to join me in the stadium for a little playtime. If you make sure I have fun, then I’ll help you guys out in your little battle. You in?”

She beamed at me, turning her voluptuous body from side to side, causing her large chest to sway. It took all of my willpower to focus on the conversation, and keep my eyes on her face.

Under normal circumstances, Ariane would have butted in by now, but apparently she thought better of interrupting a Dragon Lord. Even so, I could still feel her gaze boring into me.

Considering she wanted me to join her in a stadium, something told me that Felfi Visrotte didn’t intend for us to build sand castles.



Dillan already seemed to know what she was going to ask. As to why he hadn't bothered to mention it to me, I figured it was because he knew I would have refused. Perhaps the Dragon Lord had even asked him not to say anything.

Felfi Visrotte flashed me a peculiar smile.

I recalled what she'd said a moment ago: *"You're a lot like Eva."*

My guess was that Eva was a nickname for Evanjulin, the founding elder and creator of the Great Canada Forest. She must have meant that there was a quality we shared.

From how she was talking, her conversation with Dillan must have been enough to interest her in me.

I let out a heavy sigh. "May I ask the terms of the battle? And when it will take place?"

Her face lit up.

Maple's stadium was, in a word, enormous.

From the outside, it reminded me of the Roman Colosseum. Though, unlike its real-world counterpart, this one was made up of massive wooden pillars reinforced with stone, giving it a rather unique look.

Once we stepped inside, however, things really took a turn.

First off, there were few seats for spectators. Sure, there was some stadium-style seating rising two or three stories into the air, but it looked like more of an afterthought to fill up some of the space between the walls and the grounds.

The majority of the stadium was devoted to the arena itself, suggesting that it hadn't been built with spectators in mind.

According to Ariane, the stadium had been built primarily as a place for soldiers to train, and was rarely used for spectating.

One of the training features was a pair of rising doors on the east and west ends of the stadium. Beyond the west-facing door was a large, heavily reinforced tunnel that led right out into the Great Canada Forest.

The reason for this was simple: The elves would lure monsters out from the forest and into the stadium, and use them to practice their fighting skills.

Sometimes, they would simply leave the gate open in a sort of endurance battle, where soldiers could see just how many monsters they could slay. But this also wasn't really an event that crowds were invited to.

Now, however, the stadium was practically overflowing with people. I could hear the shouts and cheers of the crowd before I even entered the building.

The already-limited seating was packed full of elves, dark elves, and dwarves clamoring to see. I couldn't help but wonder how they'd all heard about this on such short notice.

We'd only left the large tower—known as the central council building, according to Dillan—a short time ago, after Dragon Lord Felfi Visrotte's sudden appearance.

I'd been advised to head to the stadium shortly after noon, since they still had some preparations they needed to complete. By the time I got here, it was already packed.

Whether the Dragon Lord had spread the information herself, or the people of Maple were merely starving for a good fight, I couldn't say. However, I was left with little choice but to do as Felfi Visrotte wished, and let her have her fun.

After all, we'd be fighting undead armies on two fronts this time.

Assuming that I was powerful enough to take on the enemies that had laid waste to the Delfrent and Salma kingdoms, I would still need another person to take on the army that I couldn't fight.

Though she had a rather carefree demeanor about her, I could tell that this Dragon Lord was different from Villiers Fim, whom I'd seen reduced to coughing fits just from getting a bit of water up his nose.

On some level, I could understand the need to engage with her to get her amped up for the fight ahead, but I was confident I'd be able to do that. There were far better fighters than myself out there.

Felfi Visrotte was most certainly one of them.

Looking out at the seating running along the perimeter, I spotted a special section raised higher than the rest. Ariane, Eevin, Dillan, Briahn, and the high elders were all there to watch the fight.

Looking closer, I also spotted a ball of green fluff, Ponta, dangling from Ariane's arms and sniffing at Eevin.

I stepped through the eastern gate and into the stadium proper, but Felfi Visrotte was nowhere to be seen.

As soon as I appeared, the crowd burst into cheers.

Many of the spectators appeared to be soldiers, so I figured I should show myself off a bit, since we'd soon be fighting together.

I stepped into the center of the event space, took my Holy Shield of Teutates in one hand and drew my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg with the other.

The moment I did, a powerful blast of wind came down from the sky. Looking up, I saw a humanoid figure with a pair of tiny wings on its back slowly lowering itself to the stadium floor. Dragon Lord Felfi Visrotte had arrived.

Apparently, I wasn't going to be fighting her in dragon form.

I had no idea how large her dragon form actually was, but if she were any bigger than Villiers Fim, the stadium wouldn't be able to contain her.

As soon as Felfi Visrotte landed on the stadium floor, the mini tornado she'd kicked up evaporated.

Another massive cheer erupted from the crowd.

"Well, they sure seem excited! Teehee! Anyway, are you ready to play? I'm not gonna take it easy, ya know."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than Felfi Visrotte launched toward me like a missile. She came in swinging hard and fast with an overhand strike.

I barely had time to think. I tried to deflect the blow with my shield, but the sheer force of the impact felt like it would rip my arm right out of its socket. I unconsciously stumbled backward when the next strike started coming.

"Nngrah?!"

I heard a thunderous crash, like a freight train smashing straight into a wall.

“Now, see that? You’ll never win if you only play defensively.” There was a gentle lilt to her voice.

My intuition told me that something bad was about to happen, and I felt my body jump back automatically.

It turned out that I was right. Her armored tail came whipping out at high speed, the sword-like crystalline protrusions missing me by a hair’s breadth. The pointed tip of her tail slammed straight into the ground, kicking up dirt and rocks.

Felfi Visrotte smiled. “Huh, I didn’t think you’d see that coming. Looks like your reflexes are better than I reckoned.”

She whipped her tail out for another strike. If she managed to land the blow, I knew I’d be in pretty bad shape.

This time, I used my sword to catch the crystalline protrusions and deflect them. I took another step back to put some distance between us.

The longer she kept me on the defensive, the worse things would be for me.

Considering that she was able to attack with both of her hands and her tail—all independently of one another—she had the clear advantage. Worse, each of her blows could prove fatal. I was hopelessly outclassed.

The only thing keeping me in the fight was all the combat training I’d done with Glenys. I’d be dead if it weren’t for that.

Blow after blow, I felt like I was being pummeled by a giant.

She barely missed me with a downward swing. Just as she was about to bring her fist back into an uppercut, I swung my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg straight toward her, sending a spray of sparks high into the air.

To my surprise, she’d caught the sword, blade first, with her scale-covered hand.

Had it been anyone else, such a mystical weapon would have cleaved them in two. In fact, I’d even landed a blow on Villiers Fim during our first encounter. And yet, somehow her armor was able to hold up against my blade.

The whole stadium filled with the awful screeching of metal on metal, making my ears ring. Throughout the stands, spectators threw their hands over their ears to block out the auditory onslaught.

I couldn't help but notice the wicked smile on Felfi Visrotte's face. "Well, color me surprised! I never figured you'd try to take me head-on like this. I love it!"

Even though we were locked in place, I remembered that she still had a two-meter-long tail at her disposal.

Well, might as well make the most of her praise.

"Rock Fang!"

The ground at Felfi Visrotte's feet began rumbling. Then, large, fang-shaped rocks jutted out around her, as if a giant beast were trying to swallow her whole. However, the Dragon Lord flipped backward through the air, deftly avoiding the jaws of stone. She swung her tail, using its razor-sharp tip to chop them down.

I watched, helpless, as my attack was reduced to rubble.

Considering how strong she was, I wondered if she'd even needed to jump out of the way in the first place. But she seemed to be enjoying the battle.

"Magic, huh? Pretty impressive, kid, but a little weak for my tastes."

She smirked. This was a game to her. And here I'd thought I was going to be the one to draw first blood. She'd put a swift end to that fantasy.

Well, no sense holding back.

"Wyvern Slash!"

I sent three Wyvern Slash attacks at her tail, trying to keep it at bay. However, she deflected every one of them. The energy blades dissipated upon hitting her arms, the scattered waves of energy slamming into the ground, kicking up a fierce dust cloud.

I couldn't see anything...which hopefully meant that she couldn't, either.

"Lightning Damper!"

No matter how fast you might be on your feet, lightning is always faster.

I felt the air begin sizzling as electricity filled the air. A moment later, my world went white as the lightning bolt struck. My ears felt like they were about to explode as a thunderous roar washed over me.

I was pretty sure the stadium was large enough that the attack wouldn't kill any of the spectators, but there would almost certainly be some injuries.

When my vision cleared, I saw many of the spectators hunched over, covering their ears; one downfall to elves' superior hearing was that they were susceptible to loud noises.

Felfi Visrotte, however, seemed fine. Despite the scorched earth all around her, there was a small circle that remained completely untouched. Somehow, she summoned a barrier to protect herself from the lightning.

I was starting to fear that there was nothing she couldn't do. My mind raced to try to come up with another plan.

"Now that was a surprise, kiddo! But is that all you've got? It hardly even tickled."

She brushed some dust from her violet hair, acting as if my attack had been little more than an annoyance.

"Nnngh..."

She seemed to have noticed that I was holding back out of a desire not to hurt any of the people watching. But how could she tell?

"I'll show ya how it's done!"

The Dragon Lord suddenly launched six energy balls toward me.

I barely managed to dodge them, the air sizzling as the balls whooshed past. They hit the ground and exploded violently, pitting the earth with large craters. With each successive blast, it became harder and harder to maintain my balance as the ground disappeared beneath my feet.

Several more balls of light formed around the Dragon Lord and launched in my direction.

I was a sitting duck.

“Dimensional Step!”

I teleported behind her and slightly to the side, just out of her line of sight. Gasps erupted among the spectators when they caught sight of me again.

“Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg!”

A surge of purple electricity ran up my sword, and it began glowing. A blade of light grew out of it, doubling in size, crackling with the fury of a thousand lightning bolts.

The Dragon Lord figured out where I’d teleported to and smirked, her eyes locking on to the electric sword.

“Oh, whaddya got there? That’s a new one.”

Another volley of energy balls flew at me, but they were no match for the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, which cleaved them in half.

With all the dust floating around, I felt like I was standing in an early morning fog, though that only lasted for a moment. Felfi Visrotte shot out a blast of wind to clear the air. Seeing my chance, I teleported behind her again.

“Dimensional Step!”

With my electric sword held high, I teleported again and again to keep her guessing, until I finally swung my blade right down toward her back.

KACHOOOOM!

I was absolutely stunned to see her grasping the part of my blade that was made of pure energy. She gave it a violent shake, throwing me off balance.

“Well, well! This just keeps getting more and more interesting! But ya know, with your sword crackling like that, I don’t know how you plan on getting the drop on me. Listen kid, I’m not gonna say that attacking from behind is the coward’s way out, but ya really need to start using your head.”

I watched her smirking face, never letting go of my sword. “Nng... So...do you mind telling me how you’re able to hold the...Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg?”

Purple bolts of lightning continued surging up and around the blade, which

she held as if it were nothing. The electricity seemed to have no effect on her.

It was then that I noticed her body had begun emitting a light glow.

Now that she'd stopped moving, I was finally able to get a good, clear look at her. We locked eyes.

"Dragon Lords aren't easily harmed. If I really wanted to use the power of my scales, I could put an end to your magic right here."

As she spoke, I saw her tail rise up behind me, its crystalline tip pointed forward. Without warning, it launched straight toward me.

I desperately tried to yank my sword away from her. By sheer accident, I unleashed all the pent-up electricity in the blade, blasting her hand away.

"Haugh?!"

Felfi Visrotte's eyes went wide, and we both moved back to put some distance between us. She launched back in, striking at me with her tail. I deflected the blows with my lightning blade, every strike resulting in an ear-splitting clash.

We broke for a moment, and she glared at me.

The fact that she was able to grab the lightning blade without suffering any damage was proof that magic had no effect on her.

Assuming the glow her body was giving off had something to do with how she was able to nullify magical attacks, it meant that she was also immune to physical strikes in that state.

That in turn meant there was no way I could beat her. Unless...

There was something about her reaction earlier that suggested I'd caught her off guard. But if I ever hoped to win, I'd need to throw everything I had into this.

Up until now, I'd always tried—and even practiced—to limit my power as much as possible.

That was because, unlike in the video game, the more magic I put into an attack here, the less control I had over it. If I lost control of a magical attack,

then it could strike pretty much anything, or even ignore my intended target.

That's why I worked hard to practice restraint during my free time at the shrine, or back in Lalatoya.

However, it was clear that weakened magic would have no effect on Felfi Visrotte's impenetrable scales.

It was time for my secret weapon.

I tossed my shield to the side, grabbed the hilt of my sword with both hands, and held it at the ready.

"Come forth, Guardian of Time! Aion, I summon you!"

A large rune appeared on the ground beneath my feet and began glowing. It looked like the inner workings of a clock, with intricate springs and cogs all moving together in unison.

The rune began warping, and a giant snake with the head of a lion appeared from its center.

The snake-lion coiled itself around my feet and worked its way up my body. To anyone watching, it must have looked like it was attacking me. But all was going as planned.

Felfi Visrotte watched with a bemused expression on her face.

This wasn't going to give me the deciding advantage, but I figured it best to at least show off everything I had.

The lion head made it all the way up to my shoulder and flashed its fangs, then it bit my neck.

My armor took on a snake-lion design as flames began licking out of the gaps in my armor.

Summoning Aion would lock the player's status for a full three minutes. Due to the high casting cost, and the short window in which you could use it, the demon was of limited use. However, you could do a great deal of damage while you were invincible.

This also meant that I didn't need to worry about her attacks.

“Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg!”

I put all of my power into my attack this time, thick bolts of purple lighting surging up the blade as it began glowing. I focused my attention on the blade, willing the out-of-control lightning storm to form along it.

“Nnnngraaaaaaaw!”

The sheer power flooding through my body brought up the memory of when I’d summoned the Archangel Michael and used its Ruby Flamma ability, whipping my flame-engulfed sword around without a care for who or what it struck.

I had to force my mind back to the task at hand and get the rampant magical energy under control. It was a bizarre, indescribable sensation, as I fought to both unleash my power and rein it in at the same time.

“Here I come!”

I raised the sword in both hands and launched toward the Dragon Lord. Though I would have teleported under normal circumstances, I didn’t have it in me to do so now.

A large grin spread across Felfi Visrotte’s face—she was enjoying this. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of balls of light began appearing around her, before flying at me.

It felt like I was standing in the middle of a meteor shower. However, I made no effort to block the blows and continued focusing my power.

The blasts landed around me, blowing massive craters in the ground. Fortunately, due to Aion’s power, each blast that landed was deflected harmlessly to the side. I felt like I was standing in the middle of a hurricane of hand grenades.

“Uwaaaaaaaagh!!!” I let out a fierce battle cry and closed in on my enemy.



Just then, another orb of light skimmed past my head and exploded, sending my helmet flying...which meant that Aion's power had just worn off.

I'd spent so much time trying to get the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg under my control that I'd run out of time. If another blast hit me, I'd be done for.

The dust in front of me cleared, and I caught a glimpse of the Dragon Lord. She was grinning from ear to ear.

Right at that moment, her tail came lunging in, and I raised my sword to strike...

"Nnggh..."

The spear-like tip of her tail glanced across my shoulder, gouging out a chunk of flesh. I felt a splash of warm blood on my face, but just my skin had been torn. Only a flesh wound.

I looked up to see that all the electricity had dissipated from Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg...and it was buried about halfway down the blade in Felfi Visrotte's stomach, blood gushing from the wound.

The crowd fell silent in shock.

I let go of the sword's handle and looked down at my trembling hands. They were covered in blood...*her* blood.

Felfi Visrotte's head went limp, and she fell to her knees.

From a distance, I heard a faint voice break through the static in my head. "What do you think you're doing, Arc?! Hurry up and heal her!"

I turned to find Ariane screaming at me, desperation on her face. I came back to my senses and rushed over to the Dragon Lord. As soon as I arrived at her side, however, Felfi Visrotte reached down and yanked the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg out of her stomach and threw it right at me.

Swoooooosh!

I watched as the hilt of the sword closed in on me and knew that it was too late to dodge. Without a helmet to protect me, it smacked me right in the face,

sending me tumbling backward.

I'd decided to drink some of the mystical spring water from Lord Crown before this event, to keep my body in its elven form. I could smell the copper scent of blood as it poured from my nose.

I couldn't make sense of what had just happened. I watched in stunned silence as she picked up the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, slung it over her shoulder, and glanced back at me.

She was smiling brightly, and pointing a finger in my direction.

"Ya got me good, kid. But not good enough."

"Wha?"

The gaping hole where the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg had pierced her stomach was gone. There was no scratch, or any other mark for that matter.

"B-but...how?"

I held a hand to my face to suppress the pain as I looked at her.

Felfi Visrotte shot me a teasing grin and casually ran a hand across her stomach as if nothing had happened.

"There's something you should know about Dragon Lords' human forms. They're a little...unique. An injury like that is nothing to us. I can't tell you all our secrets, but let's just say that normal people would never be able to pull it off."

The way she spoke seemed to imply that the Dragon Lords were immortal.

"And no, that doesn't mean we're immortal."

Somehow, the fact that she could read me like an open book was the most terrifying thing of all.

"Anyway, I had a really good time, kid. Why don't we end our little playdate here?"

She stabbed the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg into the ground in front of her and turned to look at Founder Briahn.

"All right, let's talk about that little battle you need help with!"

Founder Briahn nodded firmly and stood in unison with the other high elders. He turned to address everyone in the audience.

“Listen here! The people of the Great Canada Forest will soon engage in the biggest battle we’ve encountered since our founding. I ask you to fight not just for your own village, but for those of our comrades and our allies!”

The stadium responded with a thunderous cheer.

As I lay on the ground, I took comfort in the fact that I’d at least helped secure the might we’d need to win this battle. I reached up to cast a healing spell on my face.

“Haaah...it’s been a quite a day.”

I stared up at the darkening sky and let my mind wander.

Epilogue

It was on that same day that an announcement was made—an announcement that would shake the very foundations of the world.

Parietal Association Cortex Connection Terminal.

Known colloquially as a PACC Terminal, or a neuron access terminal, it was a revolutionary technology developed by a venture capital company in Canada, which had already been making a name for itself with its groundbreaking technologies—and by drawing talented engineers away from the United States. Even so, the announcement shocked the world.

Through a simple surgery, a small PACC module could be implanted at the base of the skull. When connected to an external device, the module would connect the user to a virtual world, allowing images to be streamed straight to the brain.

These virtual worlds engaged all the human senses, making them indistinguishable from the real world.

Of course, the dangers and ethical issues associated with this technology were countless. But that did little to stop it from finding traction in various industries, proving especially useful in astronaut training and other scenarios where avoiding risk to life and limb was an absolute imperative.

There was no real difference between the training conducted in these virtual worlds and real-life experience, with the important exception that no one would die in the event of an accident, allowing for incredibly realistic training scenarios.

From firefighter to police training, or even allowing athletes to work on improving their form, this technology gave people a chance to practice incredibly repetitive tasks without putting undue strain on their bodies.

One issue, however, arose with the use of a program intended to minimize the risks of soldiers suffering from PTSD. By allowing soldiers to train on a virtual battlefield where pain was reduced, the PACC Terminal greatly minimized the stress soldiers felt on the actual field of battle. Soldiers who

hadn't undergone such training described those who had as unnatural in their lack of concern for death, leading to accusations that the government was brainwashing its soldiers.

The soldiers who'd undergone training through a PACC Terminal, however, praised the system, which only lent credence to the idea that they'd been brainwashed, and sparked more debates between those who wanted to end the program and those who wanted to expand it.

Due to these debates, use of the PACC Terminal began waning and, for a time, it looked as if further development might come to a complete standstill.

That was, until the International Standardization Organization (otherwise known as the ISO) finally decided to step up and put in place some agreed-upon rules for how the world would use PACC technology.

Around that same time, though, the VC company in Canada developed a new technology for the PACC Terminal: the "Spirit and Time Room System."

As if ripped from the pages of a popular Japanese manga, the STR System allowed the user to experience time passing much more slowly in the virtual world than it was in the real world. This meant, for example, that a person could spend one hour in a virtual world created within the STR System and feel as if three hours had passed.

This technology was the stuff dreams were made of, as it would allow people to conduct training in a fraction of the time it would normally take.

However, there were concerns over the burden this might put on the brain, so the compression was limited to a maximum of three times normal speed.

Eventually, the PACC Terminal began finding use outside a select few industries and started enjoying wider adoption among the public, especially gamers.

Due to the surgery required to implant the module, the PACC Terminal was limited to users eighteen or older, but there was still a large, untapped market of people who were enticed by this unparalleled form of virtual reality.

One of these users was a man who became so completely entranced by the promise of these PACC-generated virtual realities that it consumed his entire

life.

In spite of their newfound popularity, the technologies needed for the PACC Terminals were still relatively expensive, as was the equipment needed to run them. Add in the surgery itself, and a PACC implant cost around the same amount as a modestly sized car.

Moreover, none of this was covered by insurance, as it was seen as an elective procedure. The man felt this was fair.

Day after day, he crammed himself onto a crowded commuter train for a meager paycheck, only to return to a cramped apartment. His life could charitably be described as monotonous.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, however, he knew that this wasn't the life for him—there was a greater story waiting to be told.

When he learned that a European company needed playtesters for a VR game it was developing for the PACC Terminal, he applied without hesitation.

The game was a fantasy RPG in which the players would become powerful magicians. The goal was for them to expand their territories, invade and conquer those held by other players, and build their empires.

Since it was still in the testing phase, there were only a limited number of magician types to choose from, but players had the option to be either a human, an elf, or a goblin.

The man chose to be an undead human magician. He took control of the human territories and used his magic on the residents to reinforce his armies.

After playing the game repeatedly over the course of a month, he felt as if he were a forerunner of humanity's journey into the future. And he was having a great time of it.

Some playtesters felt that the deaths in the game were just a bit too real, and suggested that it might be better to make them less realistic. Others, however, like the man in question, felt that since this was the first PACC-based game to be released, the developer shouldn't spare any detail.

They'd created a whole new world, after all. The man felt it would be an

absolute shame to neuter it this early in development, no matter what the reason. This may have been because his character primarily focused on magical attacks, and he was largely unfazed by the deaths of his rivals.

As far as he was concerned, this was all a made-up world, no matter how real it might seem.

However, one day, everything changed.

After taking a break for lunch, the man returned to his condo, plugged the PACC Terminal into the base of his skull, and launched the game.

He lay down on his bed as the low hum of the system booting up whirred in his ears.

That was the last time he would ever be seen.

A figure stirred in the bed, looking as if the dead had just woken.

He wore elegant robes and a large headdress with the symbol of the Hilk church emblazoned on it. His face was completely obscured by a veil.

His mind was still foggy from the deep sleep he'd just awoken from. Hazy memories of another person in the distant past flittered about in his mind. He waved his hand through the air in front of him, but the screen he was expecting to see failed to appear.

It'd been a long time—a hundred years or so—since he'd seen the logout screen, back when this was all just a game.

He suspected that there was something wrong with the STR System, which had allowed him to live here in the game for a lifetime while mere days were passing in the real world, though how many days was still a mystery. None of this particularly bothered him however.

Assuming that a dozen or so days had passed in the real world, he would surely be dead by now from starvation, or more likely dehydration. But the fact that he was still here meant that his body must be fine.

He stood up from the bed and made his way to the window, gazing out from the central cathedral in Alsus, the capital of the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

The man's name was Thanatos Sylvius Hilk, the pontiff and ruler of the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

A sudden realization struck him. His voice escaped through his veil as a mere whisper.

"Hmm, one of my loyal subjects has fallen. This is not entirely unexpected."

Skeleton knights, the most common and plentiful of the minions he could create, were easily defeated by even low-level NPCs.

The loyal subjects who served directly under him, however, were more powerful than any NPC the world had to offer. Only a player character could have been able to destroy one of his subjects...which meant that there was another player nearby.

The pontiff couldn't help but wonder if this player had contact with the outside world, or if they'd encountered the same bug he had.

No matter how fun the game might have been, he'd grown bored with it over the past 100 years.

In the beginning, he'd chosen to kill time by building a kingdom where the living were protected by the undead. But after a while, the citizens all died off and joined the ranks of his undead army, which slowly but steadily increased in size until it was a formidable force.

He would have normally just thrown this army into the field of battle, but since he had the time, he decided to repeat this process over and over, his days blurring into mind-numbing monotony.

A part of him was excited by the prospect of meeting another of his kind, though he was annoyed that one of his loyal subjects had been destroyed.

Maybe it wouldn't hurt to play the game a little longer.

Pontiff Thanatos looked out the window and laughed. The lands spreading to the horizon were all his own.

A strong breeze blew down through the valley and into the window of the pontiff's bedroom, whipping away his veil.

Underneath, the pontiff wore no expression. In fact, he didn't even have a

face—just a skull marked by two pitch-black cavities, inside which flickered a red flame.

This skeleton wore no facial appearance, but the clacking sound its jaw made as it let out a low chuckle echoed ominously.

Afterword

This is Ennki Hakari, the author of *Skeleton Knight in Another World*. Thank you so much for picking up volume seven of this story. We've made it all the way to the seventh volume! I really can't thank you enough for supporting me through it all.

What's more, the first volume of the manga is set to release concurrently with volume seven, so I guess that means some of you may already have it. Now that Arc's misadventures are also available in comic form, I hope that it will be even easier for you to recommend it to all your friends, haha.

As always, it's only thanks to the hard work of my editor, the talented illustrator KeG, my proofreader, and all the others who helped out that the *Skeleton Knight* was able to return to store shelves for volume seven.

I hope you'll continue supporting *Skeleton Knight in Another World*.

Well, that's about it for now. I look forward to seeing you again in the next book!

JULY 2017 – ENNKI HAKARI



Character profile

*"I guess it's
finally my
turn. You
shouldn't
leave a girl
waiting!"*

Felfi Visrotte

DRAGON LORD

One of the guardian dragons sworn to protect the elves, Felfi Visrotte has spent the past one thousand years of her life building up her skills, leaving her peerless on the field of battle. Though her true form is that of a monstrous dragon, she is also capable of transforming into a body that resembles a human. Although playful and curious by nature, Felfi Visrotte will see her promises through, no matter the cost.



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