

Presented by **Tsukasa Tanimai**
Illustrator **Kouichiro Kawano**



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TEOGONIA 2

Tanimai Tsukasa presents

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Part 4 — The Creeping Shadow

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What made him wake up was his difficulty breathing.

There was an incredible amount of pressure on him, as if he'd been buried under an avalanche of grain. As Kai came to his senses, he couldn't help but be amazed that he'd managed to sleep in this situation.

Kai struggled to free himself in the darkness and was able to crawl out like a frog emerging from the ground in spring. He emerged to find himself in a forest lit by the first rays of the morning sun.

The objects that had been in his way were the bodies of orcs. The sight of countless corpses lying there in the refreshing light of the morning sun was unsettling, despite it being a scene that Kai had created himself.

Kai belatedly cast his eyes over his surroundings and was relieved to find that he was no longer surrounded by enemies.

I survived...

The morning was so peaceful that the fight for his life that happened just a short while earlier felt like it must have been a dream.

My body feels light.

His body felt so light that it was as if he had been reborn. The pain that had lingered in his chest was very faint now. His body was filled with energy to such excess that he felt he might accidentally spring into the air if he climbed to his feet too quickly.

His senses had been sharpened further, and they naturally absorbed information about his surroundings.

The sensation of grass touching his skin.

The smell of grass, dirt, and the morning dew.

The choking stench of flesh and blood.

And then there was the smell of sweat from a living creature concealed somewhere nearby.

“...”

Kai leaped across the ground out from the shadow of the corpses and readied himself to face the creature that he knew was hiding near him.

He looked toward the source of the smell and quickly spotted a nearby uzelle girl who was sitting in the grass and hugging her knees. She didn't look as though she was trying to hide. She was sound asleep with her head resting on top of her knees.

Kai considered killing her before she could wake up, but while he was still hesitating the girl opened her eyes. When she saw Kai standing over her, her eyes widened slightly and then she hastily sat up straight and showed Kai a smile. Her actions seemed to say, *I'm not an enemy.*

Times like this made Kai think that girls had an unfair advantage. They could often just smile and trick others into believing that they weren't the slightest bit hostile.

“***...” She started to say something and then stopped herself.

Kai understood nothing of the uzelle tongue, so he continued to regard her coldly while considering how he might strike the vital areas of this opponent with the most efficiency. The girl sensed that she was in danger and hastily began to speak using a crude attempt at the human tongue.

It appeared as though every species of demi-human learned the human tongue.

“Not enemy. Me friend.”

The girl rose to her knees as Kai looked at her with suspicion.

Demi-humans walked on two legs, and uzelles were no exception. Although they were covered in thick fur, their faces were pleasant and looked very human. Her cute, round pupils, which tended to make her eyes completely black, contained a hint of fear as she looked at Kai.

The horns protruding out from her chestnut-colored hair like small branches made it clear that she was an uzelle.

“How can you speak the human tongue?” Kai asked while worrying that humans might be the only species so stupid that they couldn’t speak other languages.

The uzelle girl looked at him in surprise. “I daughter of village chief. Have to speak.”

Put simply, they’d sometimes have to negotiate with other species to plead for their lives, and if the leader of the herd couldn’t make themselves understood, this might prove fatal. It meant that tribe leaders needed to diligently study the languages of other species.

It made sense. The ones who spoke the human tongue were guardian bearers and their direct descendants. It reminded Kai that Aruwe was the granddaughter of Porek, who himself was a tribe leader.

Kai reasoned that members of the baron’s household, House Moloch, must have been able to speak the languages of other species, despite being human. It would be an embarrassment for humanity if they couldn’t.

“Okay then.”

Kai let his guard down somewhat now that he’d accepted that his opponent was a girl with very little combat potential.

Then, when he felt sure that his opponent didn’t pose a threat, he soon began to lose interest in her completely. If he was never going to see her again, then it didn’t matter whether she knew about him being a guardian bearer.

Kai had been looking around at his surroundings while thinking things over.

He decided that he should search for missing equipment before going back. In a poor village like Lag, even the equipment used by basic foot soldiers was hard to come by.

When Kai suddenly lost interest in the girl and walked off to search the surroundings, her initial reaction was confusion, but this soon turned to annoyance.

“Talk not finished!” She began yelling at Kai.

“Ah, found it.”

Kai paid no attention to the girl’s anger as he continued his search for missing equipment. It must have been his lucky day because all of his hunches turned out to be right, and he managed to recover all of his equipment without much trouble.

With that first problem out of the way, Kai continued to ignore the uzelle girl completely as he located the body of the armored soldier and put his hands together in prayer.

Before he could leave, he considered it basic courtesy to say a quick prayer for the opponent who he’d fought to the death.

First, he prayed that the armored soldier’s soul would easily find its way back to the cycle of Samsara, then once his basic prayer was finished, he proceeded to search the body for items of value without any sense of shame.

He ignored the armor because it was too bulky, but he took the hand coverings and the lace-up boots with iron fittings that had caused him so much trouble. While removing the hand coverings he found several rings on its fat fingers, so he kept those too. A small pouch was hanging from its waist, which turned out to be full of gold nuggets as big as the end of his thumb. Needless to say, he kept those also.

The armored soldier was now a half-naked org. Kai had no pity for the defeated.

Whatever you’ve got, it’s mine to use.

Kai started to think about getting back to the others.

From the pile of org corpses, he extracted as many godstones as he could carry. There was no way to carry them all back, and he wasn’t greedy enough to try.

Without a single look back, Kai began to walk away, but the uzelle girl had finally realized that she was about to be left behind.

“W-Wait!”

Kai's face contorted with genuine annoyance when he realized that the uzelle girl was running after him with tears in her eyes, and it made him quicken his pace. He was already going to draw enough attention to himself when he got back to the village and everyone learned that he'd somehow escaped unharmed after an org guardian bearer, the armored soldier, had attacked them.

He couldn't imagine what would happen if he brought an uzelle survivor back with him. It was more than likely that the villagers hated all demi-humans, so no matter how much she wanted to go with him, it was out of the question.

He knew that she was a survivor from the ruined uzelle settlement. What he didn't understand was why this survivor was following him.

"I will do... devotion... you."

"..."

"Let me, devotion!"

"..."

"Don't ignore. Please."

The uzelle girl's legs were incredibly powerful.

Kai had run ahead thinking there was no way she could keep up with a guardian bearer, but in no time at all, she was caught up and running alongside him. It was enough to shock him.

Her supple legs appeared to be specialized to provide power, and she was easily able to keep pace with Kai even when he began running more seriously.

It had taken Kai a full toki to travel along the route that he had taken together with the search party, but getting back to the camp would take no time at all because he could make use of the power his guardian gave him.

Once he'd crossed the lagarto marshlands, he gradually slowed his pace and erased his kumadori from his face so that the other soldiers wouldn't realize that he was a guardian bearer. Then he turned to the uzelle girl who was still following him. When he saw that there was also a kumadori on her cute and innocent face, he readied himself for what he had to do.

If she was a guardian bearer, he had no choice.

Kai leaped at the girl without hesitation. It surprised her somewhat, but she was able to jump back and dodge the attack using her innate agility.

“W-Wait!”

The girl was determined to follow him, and she couldn’t be argued with. It meant there was no longer any need for talk.

Kai had gotten a little hungry, and he decided that he wanted the godstone that contained the guardian within her. The girl shrieked in dismay as Kai brandished his short spear with his stomach rumbling.

“I want, serve, you. Please, let me.”

“Stop following me.”

“Your herd, I join.”

“No way.”

“I become concubine. Belong to you.”

“...”

“Please...”

The tip of the short spear was against the girl’s throat.

The girl was trembling and looking at Kai with tearful eyes now that she realized her life was in his hands.

If Kai hadn’t had experience with women, he might not have understood what her request meant. Although her body was similar to a human’s, the offer was coming from a demi-human who wasn’t exactly the same. It was unlikely that they’d be able to produce children together.

Kai spoke his mind frankly. “I can’t even imagine that.”

He’d never heard of any human keeping demi-human species and treating them that way. Though it was possible that such perversions were common between some species of demi-human.

“I, herd, join.” The girl managed to smile awkwardly despite her crying.

The look in her upturned eyes was clearly intended to appeal to him as a member of the opposite sex. The girl must have been fairly confident in her own good looks.

But it didn't work. The only reaction it got out of Kai was a clear look of irritation.

The girl was left feeling so frustrated that she wanted to stomp her feet on the ground.

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Although she'd sworn devotion to him, there was still no way that he could take her back to Lag.

This uzelle girl, Nirun, had thought that Kai was obviously the leader of a herd because he was a guardian bearer. She'd jumped to the conclusion that he must have a high enough social status to be what humans would generally call a baron. In reality, Kai would be nothing more than a lowly foot soldier once he returned to the village. As soon as they got back there, Kai wouldn't be able to protect her, and he'd struggle to convince the people of the village to accept an uzelle girl despite their strong prejudices against demi-humans.

That was why he'd had to stop and argue with her just before he reached the place where the expedition party had set up camp. The argument ended when he compromised by giving her permission to live by the valley for a while, similar to the koror.

Just moments ago, he'd intended to kill her and consume the godstone containing her guardian. His sudden change of heart surprised him.

The moment Nirun had sworn devotion to him, he'd felt heat within his godstone and then for some reason he'd felt warm feelings towards the girl as if she was a member of his extended family. He easily guessed that this meant the god of the valley had already accepted Nirun's land god.

The uzelle settlement where Nirun was born was named Najikaji and its land god was named Nazelkazeel.

When Kai told Nirun where to find the valley, she nodded as if she'd

understood very easily. She must have also received guidance from the god within her. With both the macaques and the orgs scattered, Nirun said she'd take the opportunity to search for survivors from her village before she headed to the valley. Kai trusted Nirun with some of his belongings, which were mostly inherited from the armored soldier, along with the godstones he'd collected. He told her to give them to a koror named Porek.

When it came time for them to separate, she suddenly hugged him.

"What are you doing?"

"Put scent on you."

He wondered why she was rubbing her head into his clothes around his chest, but apparently it was a unique way in which uzelles showed their affection.

With no sign of grief over her lost hometown, she waved goodbye to Kai and disappeared into the forest, which was lit by the rays of the morning sun.

After watching her leave, Kai put his nose to the part of his clothing that she'd rubbed her head against and tried smelling it. He found it had a sort of sweet smell and was covered in many hairs that could be mistaken for hairs of a deer if the season was right. He brushed the hair from his clothes with some irritation.

Time to get going.

After a brief attempt at fixing his appearance, he began walking toward the camp.

He already knew from the scent carried on the wind that the priest and the surviving soldiers from Lag were still there.

Thanks to Kai drawing away the armored soldier, the other two soldiers had safely made it back to camp before him. He thought about how he'd answer their questions. He couldn't tell them he'd defeated the armored soldier, so he'd instead tell them that he'd run in the opposite direction and was late back because he'd gotten lost.

The party should have been worried that the powerful org guardian bearer might be pursuing them and should have been on the move. It never occurred

to Kai that their decision to wait for him in the same place was suspicious.

The smell of breakfast cooking had driven away all of his concerns and made him quicken his pace.

**

The expedition party arrived back in the village during the evening of the same day.

Although they'd lost one of the squads that served as escorts, they had encountered no demi-humans on the way back, so Kai and the others were able to reach the gates of the village without incident.

The villagers that came to greet them had clearly noticed that they were fewer in number than when they'd set out, but none of them mentioned it. They simply said, "We're glad you made it back," and thanked them for their efforts.

Finally, the priest gathered together all members of the expedition party at the entrance to the castle and thanked them for risking their lives to assist his survey. Before they parted he performed a chant for each of them to ward off demi-human curses. With that, the expedition party disbanded right there. However, as the tired soldiers were heading back to the barracks to rest, the priest called Kai back.

"Could I have a moment of your time, Kai?" he asked, leaving Kai a little surprised.

The priest took hold of the hood that covered his face and lowered it so he could look Kai right in the eyes.

"There is something I wish to discuss with you. We can talk in my chambers."

"Truthseeker...?"

"I won't take up too much of your time. There is a small matter I need to confirm."

Kai's irritation must have shown on his face. With a wry smile, the priest added, "I can offer you some valuable sweet candy."

The priest had come from Maas in the country's center, so it was definitely

possible that he'd brought preserved candy or bean paste with him. It was an irresistible lure for boys like Kai, who were raised in the borderlands.

When they stepped into the castle where the guest rooms were, Kai realized that something wasn't right with the people he saw inside. Even as Kai and the priest, who had just returned from an expedition, walked by, everyone remained focused on their work as if something had made them angry.

While the barracks were filled with men, it was women who did all the work in the castle. Then the sight of Kai's face caused one of the young women to react.

"Kai!"

It was obvious that Kai was with the priest and had business to attend to, but this didn't seem to concern the girl who called out to him.

He recognized her as one of the girls he'd seen in the storeroom where he'd spent the night with Elsa before leaving the village. She took his hand and was about to lead him somewhere, but then she noticed he was with the priest and she quickly drew her hand away.

"Kai and I have matters to discuss. Is there some problem?"

The priest was polite enough to ask, but he was clearly someone demanding the same level of respect as the baron and the inspector, if not more. He wasn't someone who could be spoken to carelessly.

The girl became flustered, but the urgency of the circumstances that had driven her in the first place won out. She firmed her resolve before nodding and stated her business with Kai.

"The girl... Elsa is in a bad way."

Kai felt his heart skip a beat.

Something must have happened while he was gone from the village for a few days.

Kai wanted to go straight to her, but he couldn't just walk away from the priest. He glanced in the priest's direction.

"It sounds as though there's a problem indeed."

The priest was considerate enough to grasp the seriousness of the situation. “Well, if that’s the case...” He gave Kai permission to go to Elsa.

“Thank you, Truthseeker.”

“Not at all. Our discussion can wait. If it turns out that you could use my assistance, do not hesitate to say so. I am, after all, somewhat indebted to you, Kai.”

The priest bowed his head, and the girl likewise bowed hers.

Then, with the girl pushing him on the head, he hurried over to where Elsa was waiting.

At that time, Kai didn’t realize that the priest remained standing in the same spot, watching Kai the whole time as he walked away.

The place the girl led him to was the dormitory used by servant girls who worked in the castle.

The dormitory was in a fenced-off area to the castle’s rear where men weren’t ordinarily allowed to enter.

As the girl guided Kai in, none of the women objected to his presence. It was as if everyone there understood the situation. Some even told him, “Hurry to her.”

Unlike the barracks where the men spent their time, the women’s dormitory had a rich smell in the air and the atmosphere was overwhelming to Kai as he entered. Part of the interior of the dormitory was an area where members of the women’s council lived in rooms of their own, while everyone else would huddle together in a single room where they lived together.

The place Kai was led was deeper inside than either of those. It was a room with beds where the sick and injured who needed care stayed. There were four beds in the room, and a group of people were gathered around the bed deepest into the room. That was the only bed occupied at that time.

Kai’s ominous feelings about everything were continuing to grow.

Once she’d led him to their destination, the girl leading him couldn’t resist

any longer, and she explained the situation in a trembling voice.

“We all thought she’d be all right... We kept telling him, she’s not a ‘pure girl.’”

Kai gritted his teeth and tried to contain the rage growing within him as the girl began to cry.

There in the bed before them, they found Elsa, whose body was wrapped with bandages that covered painful-looking injuries. She lay staring at the ceiling as if her soul had left her body. Her eyes moved just slightly to look in Kai’s direction as he approached.

For a moment her eyes went wide, and then tears ran down her face as she began to cry.

The imploring look in her eyes intensified for just a moment and then she turned her head away from him and faced the wall.

In consideration of Elsa’s feelings, one of the visiting girls there caught Kai’s eye and began slowly explaining the details of the situation to him.

In short, the inspector had been upset about something, and it was Elsa who’d been punished for it.

“The women’s council had Jose give him a refusal again and again. But he just wouldn’t listen. He kept saying we were lying. He got so angry and said we must think he’s blind.”

Whatever blessings the toad’s guardian had placed on him must have made him awfully confident in his ability to assess women. He’d forcefully dragged Elsa into his room so he could examine her himself.

The rage from the inspector that followed was so awful that it made even the baron turn pale. In his anger, he’d pulled out his dagger and slashed Elsa wildly as she’d cowered in fear. In the short time it took for the baron to get between them, two other women who’d been present had already been killed.

He’d taken a liking to Elsa, and some lingering affection for her must have stopped him from taking her life, but he’d showed his affection by tormenting her until she screamed, and the poor girl was left in a dreadful state once the

ordeal was over.

The inspector then said he was outraged at Lag for trying to make a fool of him. He'd threatened to send false findings from his inspection to the royal capital, which might cause all ties to House Moloch to be broken completely. As a result, all members of the baron's household were left desperately trying to appease him.

This is bullshit.

Kai was left completely lost for words.

What filled him then was nothing but a feeling of pure rage.

As Kai looked at Elsa, who was still trembling and facing away from him, he couldn't stop the words "That fucking toad" from escaping his lips.

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They all told him not to even think about it.

But he didn't understand what they were trying to tell him.

Two precious members of their own had been killed, and then there was Elsa, the bedridden girl who lay before him with her body covered in deep cuts. Why were they telling him to let the man responsible get away with it?

An official from the capital? A noble from the center? None of that meant anything here. Lag wasn't the capital. They were in the middle of nowhere, far beyond the reach of the king's authority. There was no need to hesitate.

"Anywhere that shows disrespect to the king falls to ruin."

"We'll be cursed. We'll be left to rot and ruin."

The girls around him were talking complete nonsense.

Even after the inspector had treated girls from the village so cruelly, the baron had somehow remained subservient and accepting of the violent behavior while showing no signs of anger.

Just as Kai was about to lose himself to his rage, he heard a voice that hit him like cold water.

“What is it that makes our king the king?” the voice said. “It is the fact that our country is His Majesty himself. The blessings of a king god that form the foundation of our country are received through the body of His Majesty.”

The face that peered into the room from the entrance door was that of the priest.

“The nation of humans... It took its current form in the distant past, many thousands of years ago. In the beginning, the first king Yashadara ascended to the level of a king god, and the twelve god generals beneath him became arch gods, thus creating the foundation. So goes the tale of our nation’s founding. Make no mistake, the land of humans is not merely ruled over by the king; the country itself would not even exist were there no king.”

Kai had allowed himself to be led into the priest’s chambers.

The priest had then lectured him as if trying to dispel Kai’s short-lived rage.

At first, Kai was only half listening because he expected the priest was going to ask another series of difficult questions, but he soon realized that the priest was actually telling him things that every guardian bearer should know.

“Until the first king and his god generals formed the foundation, the land of humans was ravaged by demonic gods, and evil spirits ruled the world. This is no mere fairy tale; this is the well-documented truth of the distant past, which we know of from the ancient writings left behind.”

“...”

“Of course, no one alive today, myself included, has seen such a world with their own eyes. But I’m sure even you have heard of such things. Villages with no residents wither, and the god of the land loses its status. The rulers of Lag, House Moloch, had two villages of their own that they had to desert. I hear that the spirits of the land gods possessed by the family were weakened considerably as a result.”

The priest was basing his arguments on simple truths that Kai was already aware of. He knew that the land god of Eda village had declined in divinity after the people had left the village. This was why Lady White had to try so hard to

take care of the gravesite.

The priest leaned forward and looked into Kai's eyes, which were gradually widening.

"When the land god loses its power, the land rapidly loses its vitality. The quality of crops enters a continual decline. This is something that all guardian bearers should already know, but there are many examples of the reverse happening in this world. When this land's baron, Lord Vezin, zealously trains his body, he is more than likely attempting to improve crop yields for the village."

Kai felt a sense of vertigo, as if he was being drawn into the priest's eyes and the strong light that dwelt within them.

"The reason that Lord Vezin and others show such respect to visitors despite the problems they cause is that these visitors have the faith of His Majesty the King behind them. As long as Lag is on land belonging to Lord Vezin, it is entirely within the territory of the Unified Kingdom and is His Majesty the King's land. Consequently, if he invites the displeasure of His Majesty the King, this may have an adverse effect on the land itself. When the women of the village speak of a curse on the land, this is what they refer to."

"But... he can't get away with this."

"The young girl..."

"I don't get it, but... she's mine. I think..."

"Oh. So that's how it is."

The priest sighed softly and then appeared to be deep in thought, but his gestures looked somewhat theatrical to Kai. He couldn't tell whether the priest was his friend. Or whether he was an enemy.

Kai felt there was something strange about someone who could obtain a sigil without needing blessings of a land god. The word sigil itself was misleading. His kumadori wasn't a symbol representing any god dwelling within him; it merely represented the formidable strength that he'd gained as a human.

Kai couldn't imagine how many godstones he must have consumed or how intense his training must have been. The strength held by guardian bearers was

so far beyond that of ordinary people.

“If you must insist on punishing this individual, then please allow me to advise you first,” the priest said while looking into Kai’s eyes.

Although the priest was maintaining his composure, there was a look of excitement in his eyes as if he was just now saying something that he’d been wanting to say the entire time. Kai wasn’t sure whether it was the god of the valley’s influence or whether it was some experience from his past life that allowed him to realize this.

“Kai, I am aware that you have become a guardian bearer through some means or other. You needn’t hide this from me. I have seen it. It was made visible to me by the art of one hundred eyes.”

The priest didn’t even flinch at the killing intent that Kai began to give off subconsciously.

Killing the priest right there and then might have been the smart option. Whatever mysterious martial arts the priest might have mastered, he could still be crushed thanks to the blessings provided by the god of the valley.

The priest must have guessed Kai’s thoughts from the look in his eyes and the slight movements of his body.

“Please do not be rash,” the priest said while moving back just slightly.

He held up his hands to show that he had no intention of fighting Kai.

“I will tell no one of this. I have heard that there are many settlements in the borderlands that were laid to waste by demi-humans. If you have chanced upon one of their abandoned land gods and just happened to obtain its blessings, then perhaps this was meant to be. You are now eligible to become a lord in this country.”

“...”

“There are procedures of course, but if you so wish, you will become a noble, and the land of the land god that blesses you will become your domain. There is an ancient law that says nobles bearing guardians within our kingdom have the right to contest one another in order to gain status. It is a forgotten rule,

considered barbaric these days, but it remains written in the laws of the kingdom. If you are not concerned about your land becoming cursed, then there is no issue whatsoever with such a contest. In addition, if the party challenged has a high level of divinity, they may not refuse the fight.”

As he spoke, the priest slapped his knees and gazed at Kai with a look of exhilaration. It may have been that the priest himself also felt hatred towards the selfish and arrogant nobles from the center.

Or perhaps that was part of his act.

A sense of calmness grew inside Kai.

The priest seemed to think that Kai was controlled by his rage.

“If you’d like to leave the proceedings to me, I will gladly act on your behalf. The process is not particularly troublesome. All I need is a written pledge signed in blood, and then Maas can handle proceedings with the royal household. Naturally, I can write the text of the pledge myself.”

“I’m not interested,” Kai said bluntly.

It wasn’t a rational decision; it came from his gut feeling.

“Do you not wish to take your revenge?”

“I’m just a villager. None of this matters to me.”

“...”

Kai still hadn’t said anything to acknowledge that he was a guardian bearer, but the priest continued talking anyway.

“Do you not believe what I’m saying, Kai? What if I told you that I had witnessed your struggle against that massive org soldier? Would you believe me then?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Very well. I see how it is.”

Kai was speaking without giving his words much thought.

The priest must have then jumped to his own conclusion and decided that Kai was a better negotiator than his appearances would suggest.

“I suppose you’d like for us to pretend that none of this ever happened.”

“ ... ”

“I do not understand why it is you wish to hide your power. Is there some circumstance? Very well. I shall pry no further. I would rather you did not look at me as though you intended to kill me. I understand. I swear upon the gods that no word of this will ever escape my lips. This is a secret between you and me.”

The clear killing intent that Kai was showing was enough to make the priest change his attitude and make the promise.

It was common knowledge that such an oath made by a priest could be trusted. No matter how remote the region, traveling priests would always honor their promises. When a priest promised to deliver something to someone, they would do everything within their power to deliver it for as long as they lived. It was said that priests pledged to live their lives free from lies.

Kill him. The god of the valley’s voice was clear in Kai’s mind.

A good number of people knew that Kai and the priest were alone together in this room. If Kai killed the priest now, he’d have to leave the village afterward.

He knew that the day would come when he had no choice but to leave, but he didn’t want that day to be today. He couldn’t leave Elsa while she was in such a terrible state.

“It seems I will eventually be killed unless I do something, so please allow me to earn your favor.”

When the priest felt sure that Kai wasn’t going to attack him recklessly, he sat down in his chair looking calmer and let out a small sigh.

“The gods of demi-humans that roam the kingdom come to the land of humans to kill their guardian bearers. It is not uncommon.”

It was difficult to tell whether the priest was serious or speaking in jest. He sounded like a fraudster.

It was clear that he was trying to force Kai into his debt.

“If you appear to be a demi-human, rather than a human, I expect no

problems would arise so long as no one saw through it.”

Kai took action immediately.

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Kill him.

The god of the valley was awfully lively.

It wasn't clear why his god was so irritated.

Kill him now.

It was as if his god was very fond of killing. Or perhaps it just saw that as the most efficient way to deal with problems.

His god's murderous intent wasn't directed towards the toad that Kai was planning to kill. It was directed at the priest.

Kai wondered why his god would want the priest dead, but his god gave no reason and Kai was left to guess.

He knows that I'm a guardian bearer...

In that regard, his thoughts were aligned with those of the god of the valley.

It presented a crisis. He'd gone to great lengths so that no one would learn he was a guardian bearer and his lifestyle in the village would be maintained. He'd wanted to scream at the priest and ask how he'd found out.

At that moment, Kai was running towards the valley. His goal was to acquire the gear he needed to disguise himself as a demi-human. To be more precise, he intended to seek help from Porek.

He dashed across the great plains of the borderlands like the wind. It had already gone well past evening, and the darkness of the night surrounded him. It was a cloudy night and the stars couldn't be seen. The small amount of starlight that did make its way between the clouds was a valuable source of light that allowed him to use his enhanced vision as a guardian bearer. The brighter the light of a shining star, the quicker it would flow. Those closest to the main flow of Ispi Rio flowed the fastest and shone the brightest.

How could the priest have known about Kai's fight against the armored soldier? Not only did he claim to know about it, he said he'd seen it with his own eyes.

One hundred eyes... After his bout with Lord Olha, the priest had mentioned this secret art that allowed him to see things from long distances away.

Kai realized that there was a danger that even now the priest could be watching his movements with the art of one hundred eyes.

Kill him now.

He was finally close to understanding the god of the valley's desire to kill.

The way things were, the priest would soon learn the location of the valley.

Kai tried to imagine it.

If one hundred eyes literally meant that the priest possessed one hundred eyes, those eyes might be following Kai's movements at that very moment. It was known to everyone with good eyesight in the borderlands that no matter how well one could see, their range of vision would never exceed a distance of several yulds. This was explained by the fact that far-off objects appeared smaller and the way that many obstacles and the shape of the land itself would obscure objects from view.

The idea of the world being round wasn't known to the people of this world. A strange image of the Earth momentarily came into Kai's mind and then vanished. He couldn't quite understand the way that the spherical shape of the land made it impossible to see beyond a certain distance.

As Kai ran, he looked ahead and behind and to his left and right searching for some sort of presence. He wished he could see in the same way as Porek. If one hundred eyes was created using the same principles as Kai's magic, then it was likely that it used spiritual energy, which the priest then perceived as light.

At times, the blessings provided by the god within could change according to the wishes of the host, as they had for the armored soldier during their fight. The change that took place inside Kai must have been based on the same principles, because his vision changed dramatically right then.

He saw the world of auras that Porek had described, and it overlapped with the world of light.

Kai felt that it would be difficult to use magic to surprise anyone with this power. Perhaps it was predictable that the armored soldier would laugh at Kai's secret trick.

Magic was neither peerless nor all-powerful.

"Found you."

Kai had spotted it.

Somewhere above Kai and to his right there was a ball of light that followed him.

He couldn't guess how anyone could create such a thing using magic. Kai's magic had never gone beyond the level of imitating natural phenomena, but one hundred eyes wasn't so basic.

"An eyeball..."

The power that allowed the priest to see far-off objects in detail was an actual eyeball that flew out to the location.

The action of seeing was essentially the absorption of light from the place onto the retina, so to see a place as if one was there, the practitioner would need an eyeball in that location. The only visual sensory organ that humans had was the eye, after all.

However, this eyeball was fashioned from magic.

He reasoned that it saw images of the world of auras, which Kai himself was seeing at that moment.

When he looked closely, he could see a narrow beam of light trailing behind it like a thread. The term that came to his mind when he saw this was "optic nerve." That was the name for the nervous tissue that connected the eye to the brain.

Kai had been heading for the village of Banya, but now he turned and headed into the nearby forest.

As an experiment, he made his way through some dense trees, veering to the left and right for no apparent reason, and all the while he was watching the movements of the eyeball.

As he'd expected, the thread trailing behind it became caught. It appeared that the thread couldn't pass through the trees. The trees of the forest had their own auras, albeit weak ones, so it wasn't possible to ignore them or to see through them.

The eyeball suddenly began to rise into the air. It rose until it was high enough to have a bird's-eye view of the forest, and then it began to follow after Kai. When Kai had been with the search party, he must have been watched from above in the same way.

Kai knew what to do.

He ran through the forest at full speed.

The leaves and branches of the trees were spread out overhead, so Kai knew he'd be difficult to see from above. It was nighttime, and as he found and plunged into particularly dark spaces, he knew that those areas would be blind spots that couldn't be seen from above.

For someone with the toughened skin of a guardian bearer, recklessly charging through the forest was highly effective. The eyeball was caught off-guard and left behind as Kai continued to run through the trees. A quarter of a toki after he'd lost the eyeball, Kai finally changed direction and headed towards the valley as he'd originally intended.

Kill him now.

It was clear that the priest could not be trusted.

When Kai arrived in the valley, he decided he'd check in on Aruwe before visiting the koror settlement that had been set up at the valley's edge. When he placed his hand on Aruwe's head, she clung to him saying, "There's female scent on you." He had to peel her away from himself before he could leave. The koror girl could be a real handful.

Porek must have sensed Kai's arrival because he came out of his home

immediately, allowing Kai to get straight to business.

He wanted gear that would make him look like a member of another species. When Porek heard this request, he nodded without asking for further details and then disappeared into his home. When he reappeared he was holding koror clothing.

“This clothing was once worn by the greatest warrior of our tribe. It belonged to a member of our kind who was remarkably tall for a koror, so it should be appropriate for someone of your height, God of the Valley.”

“Isn’t this something precious to you?”

“Not at all. The wearer has died and has been buried. Please, think nothing of it.”

“Okay then.”

That was good enough for Kai. He allowed Porek to dress him in the clothing.

The koror clothing was similar to human clothing and could be tied at the front using a cord, but it was too well-made to be a human item. The dye coloring the garment formed geometric patterns designed by their ancestors.

It was obviously a valuable item of clothing, even to the koror, and it was made using a generous amount of fur. The thick fur that lined the collar and other places made it look very warm.

“Though we have small stature, the koror are otherwise no different from humans. If you are to put on this mask, all who see you will suppose you are a koror guardian bearer.”

Kai nodded with satisfaction as he examined the clothes he was wearing. He’d never worn anything so elegant in all of his life.

“What will be your objective?”

“There’s a guardian bearer I need to kill.”

“If you would like assistance...”

“I’m good.”

“Very well. That is a shame. I had hoped I might share in the rewards.”

Kai liked it when Porek spoke so frankly.

Kai then remembered that the uzelle would be arriving in the valley, so he asked Porek to welcome her. Porek was somewhat surprised, but he agreed respectfully. Kai was glad that everything had been taken care of so quickly.

As Kai began to run, the members of the tribe gathered around him and waved to him to see him off. It left Kai with a warm feeling in his heart that made him smile just slightly.

When all of this is over, this is where I'll bring Elsa. Here, to the valley.

He felt sure that the place would make her happy.

43

Somewhere, somebody was crying.

Those muffled waves of sadness had spread out through the castle, and conversations had become rare, creating an unbearable atmosphere of melancholy.

Those crying were the roommates of Sele and Shiina, who had both been killed. The reality of their sudden deaths had probably sunk in for most.

Jose felt as though she had the same lack of a sense of realism.

I'm so weak...

Jose looked at her own small hands.

Her skin had been sensitive to the sunlight ever since she was born, and it had little color. She repeatedly clenched and unclenched her fists as if it might make her feel like she was still alive.

I really am powerless.

As much as it embarrassed her to be called Lady White by the villagers, she could speak her mind during disputes while still allowing others to feel comfortable calling her by that title. And when the villagers found it difficult to ask for something from her father, she was often willing to make the request herself. Thus, she created the impression that she'd grown into a dependable

lady. But in her own mind, she was always worried that she might not actually have the strength that those around her had come to expect from her.

Recently, she understood all too well that she was a small girl who was completely powerless.

“My Lady, you should be resting at this hour.”

“Who has been chosen for today?”

“Sally. He had the least complaints about her, so....”

“Tell her to take every precaution. If she feels as though her life is in danger, her first priority should be to save herself. Tell her to run to Adelia or myself.”

“Very well, My Lady.”

Tensions were unbearably high among members of the women’s council.

Giving oneself to someone so unpleasant for the sake of the people of the village was a task given to several young women who’d recently lost their husbands. It was to be expected that those women were feeling unusually anxious.

Not long ago, two other women in the same circumstances had lost their lives simply because they had the misfortune of being close by when trouble started.

There was no longer anyone willing to spend the night with that particular guest. Until that point, those chosen by the women’s council and called upon by the ladies of House Moloch to act in the interests of the village had fulfilled their duties with no more than a few tears. Pregnancy was such a great fear for everyone that they’d asked for excessive amounts of the herbal medicines that could prevent it, and this had depleted the supplies of medicinal plants.

Their guest and his entourage had prolonged their stay far beyond what was expected, and this was causing problems. This was because the priest he’d brought with him had yet to complete a separate survey, but the inspector had deliberately tried to upset the women by whispering to them at night that they were lengthening their stay for the sake of displeasing them.

He was a loathsome man. The overall situation, and the need to continue meeting this man’s demands, had become difficult to accept.

The scene that played out half a toki ago was still surprisingly fresh in Jose's mind, and the memory made her shiver. She hugged her own body tightly in an attempt to stop herself from shaking.

"Don't play the gentle daughter when all we're talking about is one or two of your village's girls."

She'd asked for an end to the cruelty, and told him that she absolutely could not allow his request for a new "pure girl" to be answered. Her father had tried to stop her, but she'd gone to speak with the inspector directly when her father wasn't watching. The small man, who was supposedly there as an inspector, had leered at her body, which wasn't fully developed, and had spoken to her mockingly.

"I wonder, does Lord Vezin know of this?"

"This was my decision alone."

"Then I shall pretend I did not hear you. You are accusing me of demanding women to share my bed. Do you really think that's an appropriate attitude to have toward a messenger of the king?"

"But... How can you deny making such requests?!"

Custom demanded that the village offer up women to their guest without them needing to ask. This was standard practice when entertaining an important guest in a poor village that had nothing else they could offer.

This small man, however, had repeatedly made his own demands, and must have even pressed her father to ensure that the "pure girl named Elsa" was sent to his chambers. It was possible that he'd made his request euphemistically in the pompous manner of a noble rather than saying the words outright. But regardless of how he'd flaunted his high social status, coercion was coercion.

And then came the tragedy when he'd learned that Elsa was not what he'd call a "pure girl."

Even after spilling so much blood, he still didn't give up his hunt for women. In fact, he seemed to delight in their displeasure, and his demands became more frequent and exacting.

Men had it easy. They'd simply say, "Well, we can't refuse our guest's demands." But it was the women fulfilling those demands who found it hardest to bear.

The women's council was in an uproar. The loudest complaints came from the youngest members who were his most likely targets. It had been enough to drive the ladies of House Moloch away from the council, starting with Jose's mother.

As a member of the baron's household, Jose took responsibility by standing up for the other women and negotiating with their guest directly. However, the negotiations could hardly be called negotiations at all because he held so much power over her.

If he says he won't leave the village until he gets a "pure girl," perhaps I could give him my body and put an end to it.

Jose was alone in the room.

When she imagined losing her precious purity to that loathsome man she barely considered human, she had to hug herself to endure the trembling it caused. She understood Elsa's feelings all too well. It was out of the question.

We need help and I don't care where it comes from. Somebody, please, do something.

Once the first tear had slowly run down her cheek and fallen to the floor, she was troubled by more tears that began to flow from her eyes, one after the other.

She continued to cry like that for some time.

For a while, it felt as though the castle had fallen silent.

"We're under attack!"

Then there was shouting and the sound of alarm bells ringing.

Heavy footsteps could be heard moving through the corridor outside the room.

Jose sprang up from her chair and ran to the window. Bonfires lit by the soldiers were burning across the village's defensive walls.

Jose strained her eyes. She was a guardian bearer with enhanced vision, so she could clearly see the world that lay beyond the walls within a sea of darkness.

What she saw there was an all-too-familiar enemy. It was a macaque night raid.

**

Macaque night raids. They weren't uncommon in regions near Lag.

Although the village was fairly large, there were three divine spirits of land gods hidden within Lag, and the macaques would never give up on their attempts to claim them.

They kept a close watch over the village and made sure that several of their soldiers were positioned in the forest near the village at all times. The numbers of those soldiers had been rising steadily. The movements of large numbers of macaques that Truthseeker had mentioned to Olha was a clear sign that they intended to attack and lay waste to Lag.

The macaque army that attacked that night was over 100 soldiers strong.

But the village was surrounded by sturdy stone walls, and an army of that size couldn't take a fortified village like Lag. It would have made more sense for the macaques to wait until they'd amassed an army several times the size it was now.

This was an unexpected event that no one could have foreseen.

We need to fake a demi-human night raid.

A boy who appeared to be a koror had realized that macaques were gathering in the forest and had found their group. He'd then been merciless in using them for his own ends, demanding that they attack the village with the difficult condition that not a single villager be killed.

They should be enough to keep the village busy. Then there'll be an opening.

The koror-like boy, who was Kai in disguise of course, had approached the group from the rear. When he found their leader in a simple grass bed together with a female-looking macaque, he began the negotiations with a powerful

blow from his fist.

When the naked(?) female macaque saw Kai standing there with the leader held by the scruff of the neck, she screamed and ran off. The leader tried to resist, but Kai pushed his face down into the dirt and kicked his exposed red behind.

The leader was a guardian bearer of course, but little Kai was far stronger. The macaque leader could do nothing more than scream into the dirt as Kai pressed his face to the ground.

It was possible that this macaque spoke the human tongue.

After spending time with Porek and Aruwe, Kai had learned to imitate koror conversation with a few broken sentences. He began by talking like a koror before suddenly switching to speaking in the human tongue.

It gave the impression that he thought the macaque was more likely to know the human tongue than the language of the weak and persecuted koror.

As expected, the macaque leader felt his life was at stake as he began struggling to speak the human tongue.

With that, Kai released him.

“***.”

When the leader realized his assailant was a koror, he was suddenly enraged. Kumadori began to appear on his red face. Now Kai had a chance to see what level of kumadori could be expected from a macaque entrusted with an army on the frontline. The lines were less intricate than even those of the org leader who'd visited the valley.

Kai introduced himself to this fellow guardian bearer by allowing his own kumadori to show. The mask hiding his face was a thing carved from wood that covered him from the eyes down, leaving his forehead completely exposed.

The moment the macaque leader saw Kai's kumadori, he realized there was a large difference in the level of divinity between them and looked as if he was about to run away.

Naturally, Kai didn't give him a chance to run. The moment he began to turn

around, he grabbed him by the arm and kicked the back of his knees. The leader soon lost his balance and was forced into a sitting position where he was left looking up at the unnerving sight of Kai's mask.

"In the village. Need to kill someone. You'll help."

"W-What..."

"Listen. You'll help."

"..."

"Attack the village in some way or other."

"Keep it up for a while and then retreat. While that's going on, I'll sneak inside and kill my target."

That was the extent of Kai's demand. He wasn't asking for them to throw their lives away.

"If you won't help, I'll chase you down and kill you."

"I understand..."

And that was how there came to be an unexpected macaque night raid on the village that very night.

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The macaques were out in force.

Using their powerful, long arms to brandish stone axes was their specialty, but that wasn't all they could do. Their ape-like arms, which were far longer than a human's, made it difficult to deal with the rocks that they threw from great distances.

Macaques weren't completely stupid. Although they knew that they were protected from any half-hearted attacks by tough fur that resembled metal wire, they didn't expose themselves to unnecessary risk when fighting.

From their point of view, the attack on Lag was similar to a castle siege. Therefore, they approached the village under the cover of night and began

attacking by throwing rocks to knock the soldiers off their defensive walls.

As Kai watched their offensive from behind, he learned a few things about Lag's weak points.

Ah... They use the ridges of the wheat fields for cover.

The fields had been made close to Lag because they were so important for supporting life in the village.

The rainy season was relatively long in the borderlands, and there were many ridges and deep pits between the fields to improve drainage. The macaques would approach the village and immediately jump into the pits. From there, they could lie low while throwing rocks that they'd brought with them.

Kai didn't want any of the villagers to die, so he felt the need to act quickly when he saw soldiers trying to dodge rocks thrown with lethal force by the macaques.

As per Kai's request, the macaques focused their attack on the front village gate. Naturally, the defensive efforts from the village were also focused on that region, so most of the soldiers guarding the rear wall were gradually being drawn there. Kai watched their movements closely as he moved around to an area where few soldiers were posted.

Kai's plan to infiltrate the place was based on his knowledge as a villager.

Kai had often used the rear of the village in his nighttime visits to the valley, and he knew where there was a small blind spot for the lookouts. It was a shadowy place where trees with medicinal properties were cultivated within the walls. There were few eyes on the herb garden to the rear of the castle at night, and a shure tree that had been growing near the walls for several decades hid his movements from the soldiers on lookout as he scaled the wall.

Kai carefully monitored the movement of soldiers atop the wall, and the momentary gaps in their perimeter did not escape his notice. With his incredible ability to jump, Kai leaped over the seven-or eight-yule-high wall in a single bound. Several soldiers turned to look when they felt a slight breeze, but Kai was already gone from sight.

He knew the interior of the village well, so he was able to move around while

going from shadow to shadow, where he wouldn't be seen. The closer he got to the castle, the more eyes there were, so Kai used the physical abilities that his guardian had given to him to follow a course that would be impossible for any ordinary human.

Let's go via the roof.

He reached the castle roof easily using a few small footholds. The shape of the roof was already familiar to him, and he could guess where he'd find his destination.

Not including the area beneath the roof, the castle had three floors in total, and the second of these floors included the room where he'd find the disgusting toad. It was in a spot above the front entrance that provided good views. The roof above the front entrance doubled as a terrace for important guests.

When Kai got close and looked down on the terrace, he could see several soldiers positioned there. He remembered now that this position was used as a watchtower when the castle needed to be defended.

After some thought, Kai decided he'd avoid the front where the fighting was happening, and instead, he'd enter from a side window some distance away. The entire third floor was used by the baron's family. Kai searched and found a window conveniently left open.

If there's anyone inside, I'll knock them unconscious...

With that decision made, he gripped the edge of the roof and entered through the window feet first like an acrobat. Immediately, he found someone inside looking at him with fearful eyes.

He would have hit the person without a second thought, but he hesitated when he recognized who it was standing there staring at him.

"W-Who..."

Kai forcefully pinned the girl against the wall while covering her mouth to silence her before she could ask who he was. Her white hair against his nose had a faint scent of flowers, and the smell felt oddly out of place.



It was Lady White, one of the baron's daughters.

Kai soon lost his willingness to hit her and knock her out. He wasn't sure what to do, but he couldn't release her or she'd call for help.

"W-Who are..."

"Shut up."

He increased the pressure with the arm that was holding her in place, and covered her mouth once again.

He repositioned himself so that his mouth was close to Lady White's ear. He could tell that his threatening attitude was making her tremble.

"I've no business with you."

"..."

"I'm only here for him... I'm going to kill the fat toad staying in this village."

For a moment, her body trembled with shock, but then Lady White seemed to relax. She stopped holding her breath and began to breathe normally.

It might have just been because Kai was treating her more gently, or it may also have been the power of her guardian moving within her while she was forcefully restrained. It seemed as though she had trouble moving, but Lady White was able to look right at him, and the sight of the unusual mask he wore made her shudder just slightly.

"Stay quiet. Make a sound and I'll kill you."

Kai was nervous and wasn't quite sure what he was saying. It was an empty threat, but when he saw that it had scared Lady White, that was enough to unnerve him too.

Stay calm. Stay calm.

Kai used the same techniques that he'd used in the past when he was about to lose himself on the battlefield. He took breaths while reminding himself of his objectives.

He had to kill the toad.

He had to avoid killing any villagers.

He couldn't let his identity be revealed.

He needed to be seen by as few people as possible and then he needed to escape quickly once he was finished.

That was all.

He hadn't expected to be spotted by Lady White, but fortunately, she hadn't recognized him. Although they were inside the castle, sources of light weren't used wastefully, so it was dark within the room. Kai had also made some basic efforts to change his appearance, such as letting down his hair. He decided he'd continue with his task without giving Lady White time to regain her composure.

Fortunately, Lady White was also a guardian bearer. He could handle her fairly roughly and it wouldn't kill her. With that in mind, Kai felt he had no other choice.

"You'll kill him...?" Lady White said softly.

She gazed at Kai with an exhausted look in her eyes, but she somehow managed a faint smile.

"Let me help."

Her fingers had been gripping Kai's shoulder tightly in an attempt to resist, and her fingernails were digging into his skin.

If Kai hadn't been a guardian bearer, she might have even torn the skin from his shoulder. That was how intense the emotion visible in Lady White's ruby-red pupils had become.

"Kill him."

Her body trembled as she spoke words that Kai would never have expected her to say.

Lady White led the way.

As a result, Kai had no trouble making his way to the toad's room.

The laughter he heard coming from the room sounded wholly inappropriate

given that there was a battle raging just outside. He must have been enjoying his view of the killing, as if it was all far beneath him, while he drank wine.

Lady White gritted her teeth for a moment and then nodded before knocking at the door to the room.

Then she was very casually told to enter and a young girl somewhat lightly dressed emerged from the room to guide her inside.

“We’re done here,” Lady White said softly. The words were probably for Kai, who had instinctively hidden himself.

Lady White left with the young girl as Kai quietly slipped into the room, which had now fallen silent.

Inside he found the toad, the inspector from the capital, who was gazing out of his wide-open window with his robes coming loose. His hand shone with light reflected by a drop of the village’s precious wine, which he must have poured for himself.

Severo Gandal.

An inspector sent by Royal appointment. A noble from the center whose house held great power.

His level of divinity was cinquesta.

Everything Kai knew about this man he’d learned from rumors spread by the soldiers. As a cinquesta, he outranked the baron, but he was turned away and his back appeared defenseless.

The fat on his body suggested that he was a stranger to training, as did his drooping skin.

And even as Kai approached, filled with murderous intent, the toad didn’t seem to notice. He merely continued to watch and laugh as the killing played out in the world below him.

“Kill him,” Lady White had requested.

“Kill him outside the village.”

She wanted no one to think that the villagers had killed him to settle a

grudge.

She wanted the village to have some excuse when they faced inquiries from the capital.

Kai had never planned to cause trouble for the village.

Kai could see that the glass doors extending along the length of the terrace were open. The opening was wide enough for a person to pass through quite easily. Beyond the door, he saw the backs of the soldiers he'd spotted from the roof.

Kai's hand moved out silently and then gripped the inspector tightly by his neck.

The inspector stopped breathing with a start.

For someone with Kai's level of strength, the weight of this small man was nothing. With his other hand, he gripped the sash around the inspector's waist and then he used his full strength to throw out the disgusting sack of flesh in one toss.

"Hah?!" An echoing cry of surprise was all that remained of the inspector. In an instant, he'd been thrown from the room and launched high into the air.

45

After throwing the inspector outside, Kai had turned and run from the guest room without a moment's hesitation. It had only taken a short amount of time, and no one had noticed Kai was there.

A man dressed in koror clothing was rushing through the long corridor of the second floor of the castle with fearsome speed. It was then that he heard a commotion coming from the guest area, but the events caught the soldiers by such surprise that they were slow to take action. Slow enough that Kai had time to disappear completely.

After making an easy escape from the building, Kai took the shortest path through the shadows before jumping over the defensive walls and hurrying to secure his prey.

That toad might be weaker than I thought...

Weak or not, his opponent was a guardian bearer on the level of sigil cinquista. Kai knew that his rough treatment wouldn't have caused him any harm, but he was genuinely worried that the toad might be killed by the macaques, even though Kai himself had been the one to throw him outside.

The guardian bearer leading the macaques was nothing special, but he could become more of a problem if he was allowed to grow stronger by consuming the godstone of the toad.

Once he was outside the village, Kai must have been mistaken for an enemy, because several arrows flew by him. As Kai rushed by below the defensive walls, the soldiers of the village began to focus their attacks on him. Arrows rained down on him incessantly, and Kai had to use his hands to deflect them, much to his irritation.

He couldn't have been visible in the darkness, but the soldiers knew that something incredibly dangerous was there from the way he effortlessly brushed away their arrows. They must have thought he was a guardian bearer operating alone and searching for a hole in their defenses. The soldiers were yelling to one another and urging caution. Kai recognized one of the voices and chanced a glance toward the owner. As expected, he saw the faces of his squad members. It hurt to see his own friends aiming their arrows at him.

Kai held his breath and then quickened his pace. He bounded over the position of the macaques and slipped away into the darkness behind them. Once he was out of sight of the soldiers, he felt relieved.

“****!”

“**, ***!”

The macaques also looked somewhat confused when Kai leaped over their heads. They pointed towards Kai, who was brushing the dirt from his clothes, and appeared to be loudly asking one another why the koror was there.

Most of the macaques seemed to have no idea that it was this false koror who had forced them to start this battle.

As order began to break down, the leader let out a sharp howl to suppress the

disorder. He looked at Kai and said, "Finish your business quick." There was a sense of urgency in his voice. The macaques must have feared that this battle would not go well for them.

All right. I'll get this done quickly.

Kai strained his eyes and began scanning the area. When he found what he was looking for, he dashed straight toward it. The prey that he'd thrown outside appeared to be unharmed.

In the darkness of the night, beyond the drooping ears of millet waiting to be harvested, he could just see the head of a small man climbing to his feet. He'd been sitting in a high seat where he was free from danger, before suddenly being thrown down onto the bloodstained battlefield. Kai could tell from his confused attitude just how much shock it had caused him.

Corrupt as he was, the man was a guardian bearer and his body would have to suffer extreme damage before showing any signs of injury.

The small man was staring blankly toward Kai and appeared afraid of the macaques as he watched the night warfare under the light of the fires burning on the walls. When he saw Kai disguised as a koror leap out from the middle of the turmoil, his knees gave way and he fell to the ground.

"W-Wait!" he cried, with his palms raised in front of him. But there was no need for a demi-human to react to words spoken in the human tongue.

His toady face had been as repulsive to the women of the village as any poisonous beast. When Kai imagined that same face twisted into an expression of delight as he slashed at Elsa, Kai's heart filled with murderous desire.

He tightened his fist, and with the power of his leap behind it, he drove it straight into the toad's face.

There was a feeling like a hard object breaking, and then Severo's body tumbled backward. Severo flattened precious heads of millet as he fell, and Kai was annoyed to see further damage being caused by this man.

The first punch had left Kai feeling slightly calmer. He tried to breathe steadily as he slowly walked towards Severo. Kai began to feel that something wasn't right about the pathetic way Severo lay twitching and holding his face.

Is this guy really a guardian bearer...?

Blood trickled from between the fingers of the hand that he held to his face. The punch had carried enough force to kill an ordinary person, but it was an artless strike guided by rage, and any guardian bearer should have easily withstood it. Kai stood ready, expecting that, within a moment or two, Severo's guardian would heal him, and he'd climb to his feet.

However, the small man still appeared to be in too much pain to rise.

In his irritation, Kai kicked Severo with the tip of his foot so that he could see Severo's face. Severo was no longer bleeding, nor was there any sign of injury.

So he had healed after all.

"S-S-Stop..."

Severo displayed pure fear of Kai's violent behavior.

Although the bleeding had stopped, his face was now wet with an impressive flow of tears and mucus.

"D-Do you even know w-who I am?"

"You're some noble from the capital, right?" Kai responded indifferently.

Kai aimed a kick at Severo's legs, which were spread apart in a way that caused his penis to be unpleasantly exposed from under his robe. The sight of this man half naked was something no one would have wanted to see, which perhaps went some way to explaining his short temper.

When Severo heard Kai speak the human tongue, he seemed to realize what was happening. The fear that had been visible in his eyes was replaced by a look of rage in an instant.

"Y-You're from that damned village."

"..."

His disguise had been seen through easily, but Kai wasn't too concerned. Being recognized by a man who was about to die didn't cause a problem.

When Kai didn't respond, an inept smile appeared on Severo's face as if he'd just seen through Kai's plans. His speech became arrogant, as though he was

ridiculing Kai for thinking he could disguise himself as a non-human and get away with whatever task he'd been given.

"D-Did you really think you could lay your hands on an inspector appointed by the king and get away with it? Y-You think I'll stand for this? Well, I've decided I won't take any more!"

"..."

"It's going to be hard for me to overlook this! This is going to cause quite a stir when I make my report to His Royal Highness..."

"You still think you're getting out of this alive?"

Kai sighed as if genuinely surprised, and the crimson color that came to Severo's face was easy to see.

He'd been shaking like a child who'd seen a ghost the entire time. He must have really believed that being a noble from the center made it possible for him to assert absolute authority when dealing with any other human.

If this man was genuinely a *cinquesta*, if he genuinely had the blessings of an incredibly powerful land god like the rumors said, then perhaps that was enough to ensure his superiority over the three guardian bearers of lower status in the village, the baron included.

It was clear from Kai's height that he wasn't the baron, Moloch Vezin. Perhaps Severo thought it was Lord Olha who was hiding beneath the *koror* disguise.

By Kai's estimate, when someone's sigil level increased by one, their base strength would increase by roughly 50 percent. But a *quattro* had to be several times stronger than a *doi*.

If a doi is worth 1, multiplying that by 1.5 twice is about... 2.25.

That actually felt about right. Using the same logic, the difference in strength between a *tres* and a *cinquesta* would be a difference of just a little more than double. For someone who was so much stronger, only a few basic techniques would be needed to overpower an opponent.

Severo wiped away the mucus that was still flowing unchecked from his nose.

"You think you can take on a *cinquesta*? I-It's not too late. Stop now and I

might just overlook this.”

Severo produced a dagger that he must’ve kept concealed for self-defense. It was impressive that he’d kept it hidden despite how disarranged his clothes had become, but it didn’t change much.

The dagger that Severo drew while slowly climbing to his feet was well decorated with precious metals and inlaid gemstones. As he stared at Kai’s mask, his kumadori finally began to show. Kai studied his sigil carefully and was so surprised that he could hardly have believed his eyes.

“You call that a cinquesta sigil?”

“...”

Severo had nothing to say in response.

Even the most generous description of the sigil that appeared on the small man’s face wouldn’t include the word “intricate.” Since he’d fought with multiple guardian bearers already, that much was obvious to Kai at a glance.

Is that a doi? I guess you could call it a tres... maybe...

“That’s a cinquesta?”

“Y-Yes. And you’d be wise to fear it... The sigil cinquesta of House Gandal is...”

“Yeah, sure.”

“...”

Beads of sweat began to form on Severo’s forehead when he saw how calm Kai was.

Then he swung his dagger as if trying to slash at Kai’s eyes and stop him from further inspecting his sigil. It was a desperate attack from a guardian bearer, so as infantile as it was, it had the potential to do some serious damage. When used against an ordinary opponent that is.

Kai remained relaxed and waited until the blade was just about to reach his eyes before effortlessly catching hold of the tip, much to Severo’s surprise. His fingertips were more than strong enough for him to take the dagger away.

Then he looked at the small man who called himself a cinquesta with a

piercing gaze.

“Well then, why don’t you show me what you’re capable of?”

Kai’s own sigil then appeared.

Severo began to tremble in fear the moment he saw the unusual shape of the sigil that appeared on Kai’s forehead.

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“It can’t be...”

Severo’s trembling jaw dropped.

The eyes of the small man, which had only looked down on the people of the borderlands up to now, were wide with surprise.

“A glyph sigil!”

Severo’s fear began to color his face.

He took a step back without thinking, and his foot became caught in the grass, causing him to clumsily fall back and land on his rear. He must have realized that this disadvantageous position would make it hard for him to move, because the fallen pig quickly rose to all fours in an attempt to stand up and then began to crawl away.

His ass was dirty and fully exposed.

Glyph? What was he saying just now?

Knowledge was the one thing Kai lacked, so the words appealed to him like water to a man dying of thirst.

The priest had taught him a little, and Kai had come to realize how ignorant he was. His heart was swayed by an irresistible impulse that was common to all living creatures: curiosity.

He suspected that he’d just learned something important about his own sigil. There was an eye-like symbol in the center of Kai’s forehead that represented the uniqueness of the god of the valley. He’d wondered what it meant ever since seeing it reflected in the lake in the valley. It had reminded him of the

cyclops species from the south that he knew from fairy tales.

For just a moment, his curiosity won out.

Kai taunted Severo with words intended to draw out more information.

“Does my glyph scare you?”

He kicked the rear of the small man as he desperately tried to scramble away, causing him to roll over and face Kai. Then Kai moved his face closer as if showing off his sigil.

Severo’s bloodshot eyes couldn’t have been any wider as he gazed into the sigil on Kai’s approaching forehead. Even with his death so close, Severo couldn’t suppress his curiosity in the face of something he found so terrifying. Such was the nature of the knowledgeable race of humans.

“What does my glyph mean to you? Let’s hear it.”

“Hah... Haha. A human glyph bearer here in the borderlands... But there are none outside of the royal capital.”

“Am I not here right now?”

“...”

Despite his fear, he couldn’t take his eyes off Kai’s sigil.

Severo’s breathing was becoming shallower and more rapid.

“Sounds like you’ve seen more of these in the capital. What does my glyph mean to you? Tell me.”

“Glyphs only appear for the most powerful of gods. No urchin from the borderlands could ever...”

“It’s special?”

“Y-Yes...”

“Really?”

“But you... you must have...”

Severo’s whole body was trembling.

Some realization must have hit him. He began calling for the priest as if he

couldn't control himself. Then he tried to run once again. Kai put his foot to Severo's back and pushed him against the ground so he could continue the interrogation.

It was then Kai realized that he could feel some presence.

His intuition was correct. He'd felt something from the direction of the village, and when he looked in that direction, he saw a man dressed in familiar black robes standing together with the soldiers atop the walls.

He was no more than a tiny speck in Kai's vision, but Kai was certain that the man was looking right at him. He knew that the priest had just seen the sigil on his forehead and the glyph of the god of the valley.

Kill him!

The god of the valley was screaming.

His god was desperate to see the priest killed.

Kai felt as though he now understood the reason behind that clear desire for his death.

That priest's dangerous.

The priest couldn't be trusted.

There was no reason for him to have so much interest in Kai if he was no more than a villager.

The priest had been looking straight at Kai and nothing else.

Even though a high-ranking noble from the center was about to be killed, the priest showed no intention of coming to his aid. He was watching calmly, as if even Kai's method of killing the noble was something he wanted to see clearly.

"H-Help me!"

Severo pleaded for help, and Kai kept him in the corner of his vision while he was thinking.

When Severo saw that Kai's attention was now focused elsewhere, he began increasing the gap between himself and Kai by slowly inching backwards. He must have intended to break into an obvious run once there was enough

distance between them. Kai was empty-handed and didn't look as though he had enough power to take a guardian bearer's life with a single hit.

Severo had stolen a glance toward Lag and saw that the macaques were retreating, so Kai knew that the small man would be trying to judge the distance between himself and the safe zone provided by the village.

While still distracted by the priest, Kai mercilessly crushed Severo's hopes. He strode over to close the distance while still looking in the other direction.

The priest said he saw everything when I was fighting against the armored soldier.

If he'd seen that much, Kai no longer had anything to hide from him. But there was still the possibility that he hadn't really seen anything.

Kai's greatest concern at that moment was that the priest might see his magic. Just having an opponent know that he could use magic would put him at a significant disadvantage. In this case, his opponent already had far more knowledge and experience with magic, so he wanted to avoid revealing the nature of his own attacks.

"H-Have you even thought about what's going to happen if you kill me?"

"Not really."

"If I don't return to the palace alive, there are sure to be harsh repercussions for your village! House Moloch will take the blame. They will be given traitor's deaths!"

"..."

"They will be executed. The godstones will be ripped from their bodies while they still live..."

"Is that really true?"

"The executioner will tear their guardians away... What do you mean?"

"You lied about your guardian, so why should I believe anything you say?"

"Guh..."

He'd lied about his level of divinity.

Kai got the feeling that there was no real reason to take notice of any of his threats. This inspector who had claimed to be a cinquista sigil was in fact several ranks lower.

It meant it was possible that even the highest-ranking individual in the country, the king, hadn't inherited the full power of the previous king before him. The threat from the demi-humans that surrounded the borderlands may have been another consequence of the kingdom itself losing its power. It was said that human armies from the center had ceased to cull the other species that surrounded them, and despite the constant threats that the borderlands had faced for the past few years, no armies from the center had been dispatched to their aid.

From Kai's point of view, this place they referred to as the center was a place he'd never seen in his life, and for all he knew, it might not even exist.

"I assure you, I speak the truth."

"I've heard enough."

Kai drew the knife that hung at his waist.

Although he was wearing a disguise, he was still carrying the same familiar piece of equipment as always.

As he absentmindedly attempted to drive the knife into Severo, Kai was hit by an attack he was not expecting.

"Flames take you!"

Severo's palm stretched out before Kai created a burst of red flames that filled his vision. Somewhat instinctively, Kai raised his arm to shield his eyes and recoiled.

There were practitioners of magic in the center. Lady White herself had told him so.

For a man like Severo who spent no time training in martial arts, it would make sense to learn magic as a means of self-defense. Kai had been fully at fault for not seeing it coming.

By the time Kai had taken a few breaths, the flames had died down. The heat

hadn't been particularly intense, and Kai knew that he hadn't been burned, but Severo was nowhere to be seen. The temperature had been remarkably low, and the flames hadn't even burned his clothes, suggesting that they were merely for show.

Kill him!

Kai began to run.

He soon spotted fleeing Severo's back. He was intent on fleeing towards the village and wasn't paying attention to anything around him, causing him to dash straight into a wave of retreating macaques.

The macaques slowed him down enough that Kai could grab Severo from behind. With his arm around Severo's neck, he tightened his grip. This method of breaking the opponent's neck was one of the last hand-to-hand combat techniques that Kai had learned, and it came easily to him. Without much effort or any need to apply his body weight, the strength that his guardian gave him allowed him to twist Severo's cervical vertebrae until they broke apart.

Severo Gandal, the inspector who had terrorized the inhabitants of the borderlands, had never expected to be the one crushed so easily.

If he'd made some attempt to train his muscles, they might have acted like armor, and he might have been able to resist against Kai's strength. But the man had not taken care of his own body.

Kai then concealed himself among the retreating macaques and withdrew with the corpse of Severo trailing behind him.

The death of the inspector called for a secretive burial.

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The priest had left the toad to his fate.

He left it to Kai to kill him and then carefully watched how the events played out.

Kai had shown little respect to Severo Gandal's body as he dragged it over a long distance, and what was once the inspector had lost part of one of its legs

at some point. With the guardian gone, his robust body was reduced to plain old meat. His hair was a mess, and there was nothing left of the noble-looking facial features he was born with.

Kai looked down on the body of the man with no particular sense of emotion and considered his next move.

He needed to do something with the body. He looked for a secluded area where he could take the godstone. But the eyeball was following him persistently, and running a short distance wasn't enough to shake it off.

Kai had no choice but to ignore it when he spotted a group of macaques who had also run into the same forest. Although he hadn't called to him, the macaque leader was with them.

"You've done enough. Thanks."

Kai had no intention of working alongside macaques any further. The leader breathed a sigh of relief and then looked at the body that Kai was dragging.

"This is human who steals our guardian?" he asked.

"Stole your guardian?"

"We capture human village. But our god still stolen."

Kai had a moment of realization.

From the macaques' point of view, they became the rightful owners of the land gods of Elg and Eda when they took those villages from House Moloch. It was logical. Lord Olha and Lady White's guardians were not rightfully theirs in some sense.

The land gods of House Moloch's two villages had been carried out of their villages. He didn't know how they'd been able to hold on to the guardians alone, but several years after the villages had been lost, both guardians had been inherited down the same family line.

Everyone said that the baron was raising Olha to be a suitable successor, but Kai had come to realize certain things now that he knew more about this world's rule set, which was normally only known to the privileged classes.

When a guardian bearer dies, the divine spirit of the god goes back to the

gravesite. They might have taken the land gods away from the villages, but after a few years they wouldn't be able keep hold of them without preparing new hosts to hold the divine spirits... Maybe those two just happened to be the only hosts available.

As Kai collected together memories from his past life, his thoughts were becoming deeper than they had in the past. If Olha was the baron's true successor, then he should have inherited the guardian from the village of Lag. He would never be able to gain a second guardian, nor could he replace his current guardian with a new one.

With this considered, the dissatisfaction that Olha sometimes displayed towards the baron was understandable.

"It's different. It's a god from a different land," Kai told them bluntly in an attempt to brush off the greedy look the macaque leader was giving him.

The macaque leader looked suspicious, so Kai explained to him that the inspector was dead and that if he'd carried the spirit of their god, that spirit would soon be returning to its rightful gravesite.

The leader's eyes lit up in understanding, and he dispatched two of his subordinates to Elg and Eda.

"Koror soldier. You very strong."

Before leaving, the leader lifted his large stone axe to his chest in a salute to Kai.

To the macaques, Kai was someone who'd easily slipped into the village that the macaques had long been targeting, and had easily captured a guardian bearer inside. They displayed great admiration for him.

Kai watched them as they left and then he too began to act.

He concealed himself in the shadow of a large balen cedar and extracted the godstone from the body of the small man. The size wasn't remarkable and it was only as big as his clenched fist, but it felt heavy in his hand. He looked at the slightly blackened bone as it glistened in the light of the stars and made sure that it didn't arouse his appetite.

He had no desire to eat the godstone of a member of his own species.

As long as he still lived by that same rule, Kai felt that he was still very much a human.

Now the question was what to do with it. Kai studied the godstone in his hand.

Some time had passed since he'd killed the man. The god inside had probably returned to its rightful gravesite, so now no one could devour it to claim his guardian. But still, Severo had leveled up many times as a living creature, and his godstone had great potential.

When Kai thought about who to give those blessings to, many faces came to his mind. Porek, Aruwe, and the other koror. He ruled out the deer girl, so if he was going to give it to someone it would probably be Aruwe.

If she could level up, it would make her body stronger. Much like the priest, it was possible for people to obtain a kumadori without needing a guardian. Leveling up to reach the level of a guardian bearer was a long process, and it was unclear whether the marrow from this man who was a guardian bearer from the center would be particularly effective. But even without gaining the blessings of the land god, it could be possible for her to gain a similar level of physical strength.

I should let Elsa eat it. The thought came to Kai quite suddenly.

If he gave it to Elsa, it might cause the deep wounds that covered her body to be healed. He decided that the taboo of eating one's own kind wouldn't matter as long as she didn't know.

With his decision made, Kai began to act once more. The eye was still stubbornly following him, so he couldn't go to the valley.

Kai could almost feel the frustration from the priest at the other side of the eyeball when he began returning to the village instead.

He folded the koror clothing and left it hidden behind a tree before putting his ordinary village clothing back on. Even then, he had to move while hidden in the crop fields so that he could approach the village without being seen.

When he reached the field containing the millet that the toad had flattened, he found there were already a large number of people outside of the village's defensive walls. He could see them recovering the bodies of more than a few fallen macaques. There was a lot of damage to the fields, but they'd managed to obtain several godstones, so they must have felt as though it was a fair trade.

Kai didn't simply try to blend in with them. He'd seen his own squad fighting bravely atop the defensive walls, so he knew that many people would be wondering why Kai wasn't there as squad leader.

He made his decision quickly and then moved to a particular location.

One of the guest rooms on the second floor of the castle, hidden out of sight to the rear, was the room of the priest. It was this room he sneaked into. Kai had first disappeared when he'd entered the room of the priest. He expected that appearing again from this same place wouldn't create too much suspicion.

There was no one inside the guest room. He'd seen the priest atop the walls, so that didn't surprise him. Kai was just about to resume his role as a villager within the castle.

Then the priest appeared from the corridor outside.

"I see you have achieved your objective magnificently."

"..."

The eyeball had been following him the entire time, and the priest must have followed Kai's every move. When he saw Kai enter his room, he must have hurried there to greet him.

As the priest straightened his robe, he studied Kai and saw that there was clear hostility visible on his face. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Well, this is quite the dilemma."

"I promise you, I will never speak of this to anyone."

"..."

"Perhaps you might also entrust the stone to me, and I will provide it to the monastery as a donation."

He'd already seen through everything Kai had done. There was nothing to be

done about it now.

But Kai couldn't allow this to continue happening. If the priest continued to monitor him, he wouldn't be able to visit the valley regularly. That was something that Kai couldn't accept.

It went against his very nature as a guardian bearer.

"Don't follow me with that eyeball."

Kai's desire to kill was clearly increasing.

If it came to it, he knew that he could repeat the same process he had just been through. He now had experience in killing a guardian bearer without spilling blood.

The priest must have guessed what Kai was thinking. He finally sighed and said, "So you saw it?" He didn't sound overly upset.

"There have been others before you who have felt its presence, but I have never known anyone to see the technique itself."

"Did you hear me? Never use that technique around me ever again."

"Your eyesight must be one of the powers given to you by your glyph sigil. Yours must be a truly outstanding deity."

"..."

The priest clearly knew many things.

Kai suppressed the curiosity that burned inside him as he moved towards the priest as a warning. At the same time, the priest moved back.

The priest knew that Kai must have had some trick up his sleeve to defeat the armored soldier whose divinity had been so high. The knowledge must have made him wary.

"I shall ask you once more. Have you no desire to be a noble of the Unified Kingdom? It would allow you to use your power freely, and you might become like the baron of your village and live a life of luxury."

"Not happening."

There were already two demi-humans who'd sworn their devotion to the god

of the valley. If he dealt with humans, he'd be told to kill them, and Kai couldn't accept that. It meant that the offer was out of the question.

And then there was the fact the god of the valley was unlikely to accept being subservient to another god. The god of the valley's pride was as high as the heavens.

"I shall leave this village tomorrow."

The priest explained that the art of one hundred eyes only allowed him to see over a distance of several yulds, and if he left the village he would be returning to the monastery of Maas in the center, so there would be a distance of 1,000 yulds acting as a barrier between him and Kai.

The priest was clearly trying to win Kai's favor, and Kai didn't lose the desire to kill him, but what he said next made Kai hesitant.

"In the morning, the village will learn of the inspector's disappearance. Please do not forget that the only one who can explain why you were not there to defend the village last night is myself."

Kai gritted his teeth.

He was right. Kai had a clear motive to commit the crime. When the inspector had disappeared, Kai had been mysteriously missing, and everything had happened right after he'd learned that the inspector had injured Elsa, whose relationship with Kai was publicly known.

Kai was an obvious suspect.

"Please allow me to dispel any suspicion that might fall on you. I am the only one who can convince the inspector's entourage and the head of House Moloch. It seems reasonable that I should do you this great favor, and in exchange you might spare me my life."

Kill him now!

The god of the valley was still screaming.

But given the reality of the situation, Kai's hands were tied.

"I suspect ours will be a long acquaintance, Kai."

The priest chuckled, and Kai tutted in response.

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The inspector hadn't returned.

It was a cause for concern for the soldiers. The trouble started when the members of the inspector's entourage, who'd been there to ensure his safety, learned he was missing. They could hardly believe that he'd disappeared, and the situation terrified them.

His half-finished jug of wine had been poured out in the room along with the cup, and his bedding was left in a messy state, so it was clear to everyone that the inspector had been there a short while earlier. The strange event had occurred while the inspector was alone in his room, around the time that the woman accompanying him for the night had finished her duties and left the room.

The terrace of that guest room had been occupied by several archers who were defending the castle that night. According to a confusing testimony from the archers, the inspector had suddenly leaped out of the room and flown through the air. Although they had no evidence to support this testimony, it was well known that the inspector was a cinquesta with a powerful guardian, so he was indeed capable of leaping out of his room if he so wished.

The inspector had gone insane.

As the leader of Lag, Moloch Vezin swiftly came to the conclusion before giving the inspector's entourage space to interject, and then he started a major search effort. But after a night of fruitless effort, the whereabouts of Inspector Severo Gandal remained a complete mystery.

There were concerns that the reason for the sudden retreat of the macaques during their night raid might have been that they'd killed the inspector and were satisfied with this result of their attack. This unpleasant suggestion was confirmed correct when Truthseeker Nada, who was still present in the village at the time, used a technique known as one hundred eyes to find the corpse of the inspector, which appeared to have been carried off by the macaques at

night and unceremoniously discarded deep in the forest beyond human reach.

As for why he had leaped out of the village amid the chaos still wearing his night robe, and what the inspector had intended to accomplish, those questions remained unanswered. However, it seemed unlikely that an intruder could have entered the castle while it was so carefully defended, so his strange behavior could only have been the result of his own will.

Some supposed that the inspector may have underestimated the capabilities of the macaques, and while somewhat drunk, he may have suddenly decided to head out and kill some of them for sport. A tragic incident must have followed when the brutes had swept him off his feet.

There were eyewitness reports confirming that several guardian bearers had been part of the macaque force, so they supposed that the inspector was unfortunate enough to have been killed by one of them. This was how the strange death of Inspector Severo Gandal was explained.

“Was anyone seen acting suspiciously in the castle?”

There was one testimony by a woman working in the castle that did not fit with the explanation, but the figure she described was not dressed like a macaque. The clothing she described sounded very much like koror clothing, and the koror were only ever seen in the western regions of the borderlands, so this account was not taken seriously and was not included in the written report. This was largely because Jose had been nearby in the corridor at that time, and she said with confidence that she had not seen any signs of an intruder.

Thus, the investigation into the disappearance of the inspector reached its conclusion, and the inspector’s entourage began to feel calmer. It was only then that they realized that the inspector who had given them their authority was now gone.

While the inspector, as head of the party, had flaunted the authority given to him by the king, those who accompanied him had thought it only natural for them to follow suit and do the same. Most of them had behaved like inspectors themselves, so now they were targeted by cold, piercing stares from the villagers that they found difficult to bear.

The priest was understanding. “I suppose we had best head back to the

capital,” he said before hastily leaving Lag together with the rest of the party.

Needless to say, the smiles on the faces of the villagers as they watched their guests leave would have been unimaginable just a short while earlier.

**

“They might be gone, but the servings didn’t get much better.”

“As long as the soup’s not a guest’s watered-down leftovers, it’s an improvement.”

The baron had been busy entertaining the guests lately, and his face had become an unfamiliar sight, but now he was seated with the rest of his house in the dining hall. Lord Olha was also sat beside him, and it made Kai feel as though life had returned to normal in his village.

In his bowl there was a dumpling made from boiled and kneaded millet along with some thin, salty soup that included hard pieces of meat. Most likely, the millet that the toad had flattened during their fight had been quickly harvested by the villagers. If that explained the origin of the dumplings, then the meat in his soup... was something he’d be better off not thinking about. Meat must have been found outside the village like a gift from the heavens. At times like this, things they wouldn’t normally eat were used without hesitation, even by women who were normally insistent that certain things should never ever be eaten.

“Kai, you know we risked our lives for this meat, right?”

“Uh... yeah.”

“If you want to thank us, maybe you’ll tell us a thing or two later.”

“Damn right. He’s gotten a head start over us.”

One dumpling was stolen by the soldier to his left and another by the soldier to his right. His pubescent squadmates were just further frustrated when Kai still didn’t argue with them.

“While we were up on the walls firing arrows at an enemy guardian bearer, you were comfortably sitting on the floor in the priest’s room, right? I think these dumplings belong in the stomachs of people who actually worked for

them.”

“Did you say her name was Elsa? Hope you take good care of her.”

“...”

The reason given for Kai’s absence when the macaques attacked the village was that he’d been called to the priest’s room to be given a lecture.

The priest had explained that he felt the need to intervene because Kai had seen how terribly his girl had been treated and then lost his temper. The women who’d been there to see Kai’s reaction for themselves had nodded knowingly and confirmed this. It was already accepted fact among all the villagers.

Of course, this also meant that the relationship between Kai and Elsa became known to everyone at the same time. As a result, many of the men were united in their anger and were wishing Kai dead. Meanwhile the women had excessively sympathized with him and were being strangely kind.

His squadmates continued to taunt him even while chewing on his stolen dumplings. Even Manso was grinning as he watched the whole thing.

“Lady White’s looking this way.”

“What if she’s looking at me?”

“Yeah, in your dreams.”

Another squad of men the next table over were talking like idiots.

Kai looked away because the conversation was bothering him, and for no particular reason, he looked in Lady White’s direction. For a moment, their eyes met.

She’s looking at me...?

When Lady White realized Kai was looking back at her, she appeared flustered for just a moment, but then she seemed to become angry and began staring right back at him.

When she stared at him directly, Kai’s immediate concerns were about what had happened when he’d infiltrated the castle. He soon jumped to the

conclusion that Lady White must have recognized him despite the mask he was wearing.

He felt a cold sweat break out across his entire body. He looked away from Lady White for a few moments and then when he looked back, she was no longer staring at him. She was just casually eating her millet dumplings.

It was possibly just a coincidence, so Kai wanted to believe he was worrying about nothing. Then when he looked down at his bowl, he found there was nothing solid left in it. He sighed when he realized his squadmates had gotten carried away.

His state of mind was making it difficult to enjoy the taste anyway. He drank down the remaining soup in one go and then stood up. He hadn't tasted it at all.

"What's up, Kai?"

"I'll be back in a little while."

His squadmates grinned and waved to him as he hurried out of the dining hall by himself. Kai's carefree squadmates watched him leave enviously as if they thought that his minor errand could only be one thing.

Kai headed to the women's dormitory while holding his stomach, which was groaning in dissatisfaction because of his meager dinner.

Under special circumstances, Kai had once been able to enter the area despite it being off-limits to men. Since then, he'd been turned away no matter how much he pleaded.

Today was no different. He was stubbornly told that he couldn't go inside.

Kai was concealing the toad's godstone and wanted to give it to Elsa as soon as possible, but so far he hadn't been able to because he couldn't get inside.

He could, of course, have forced his way in during the dead of night using his guardian's power. However...

"I'm sorry. I really am. Elsa says she doesn't want to see you."

When Kai heard that, it crushed his spirit.

According to the women watching over Elsa, her wounds were badly infected and her face had also swollen up. She'd insisted that Kai was never to see her in that state.

Despite being a guardian bearer and despite the experience he'd earned, Kai was still a growing boy of just 13 years. Being told that she'd refused to see him left him feeling quite depressed.

He was about to head back, looking dejected once again, but that day he was caught by Lady White who just happened to be passing by.

"Do you have a moment?"

As he'd feared, she was scowling at him.

Kai braced himself for the inevitable and expected to be asked some difficult questions, but what followed was more like an older sister scolding her badly behaved younger brother.

"I always thought you were still a child, so I can't believe you're already doing that sort of thing. I know she's older than you, and it might have been her idea, but these matters aren't as simple as you think. Do you really think you can be responsible?" Lady White didn't hold back.

Lady White left Kai with his head tilted to the side in confusion. She'd spoken to various people in the women's council and knew that Elsa had refused to see Kai. "Wait here a moment," she said before entering into the dormitory. A little while later, she said, "Come with me," and urged Kai to enter. She'd convinced Elsa to accept a meeting.

The women who'd been barring his path shrugged their shoulders in resignation. Lady White's capacity for meddling was known throughout the village.

So she doesn't know it was me?

Now Kai was left wondering why she'd been glaring at him during dinner.

They were soon inside the room where Elsa was staying. Kai saw her lying on the bed facing the wall so that her back was to him. The other women in the room looked at him silently, and the looks they gave him seemed to say, "Be

careful what you say to her.”

“Please... don’t look at me...” Elsa sounded weak as she made the request.

Once Lady White started meddling, no one could say no to her. It had been Lady White who had constantly stood up to the heartless, fat toad. Whenever something happened, she was the one who would mediate the dispute. Even Elsa couldn’t turn down a direct request from Lady White.

But that didn’t change the fact that Elsa didn’t want to be seen. Her blood-soaked back was still a sign of her refusal to talk to Kai.

At that point, there were too many people watching for Kai to be able to give Elsa any treatment. He asked if they could be left alone together, but unsurprisingly, that wasn’t allowed. They worried that if Kai’s emotions got the better of him, he might force Elsa to show him her wounds.

Damn... I just want to help her...

If he fed her the toad’s godstone or attempted his healing magic, it would probably alleviate Elsa’s suffering to some extent. But he wasn’t going to get the opportunity.

As Lady White watched over the two of them from the corner of the room, she was listening to a detailed description of Elsa’s condition. The gloomy look on her white face made it obvious that Elsa’s outlook was bleak.

Is she really that bad...?

Through the gaps in the bandages, he could see that there was a slight yellow color to her skin. And the wounds were still bleeding, even though it had been several days since she’d been injured.

In a village in the borderlands lacking any real medical expertise, deep wounds were often fatal.

Kai had no words. His body shook with rage, and there was nowhere to direct his anger.

He decided he would do it that night.

The inspector's party had prolonged their stay much longer than anyone had expected. Now that the villagers were free from the constant tension caused by entertaining their guests, they were able to sleep soundly for the first time in a long while.

While everyone besides an unlucky few who'd drawn short straws were sleeping in their beds, Kai quietly slipped out amid the silence and stealthily carried out his task.

His senses had become incredibly sharp. No matter how dark the shadows, he could easily spot anyone who might be lurking there. It made it easy for Kai to avoid being seen, and he made his way into the women's dormitory without any trouble.

The dormitory was unexpectedly quiet as he made his way in, and he was able to reach the room where Elsa was staying. Costly torches were only burning in the corridor, so it was pitch black within the rooms. Although Elsa was in a critical state, her life wasn't in immediate danger, so there was no one at her bedside.

With no one else present, the sour and bloody smell that hung in the room was more obvious. If the odor had built up in the room, it would have been enough to make anyone wince, but the small amount of incense burning in the room was disguising the scent. Kai couldn't help but admire the women for being sensitive enough to take care of the smell.

Elsa was also lying there quietly in her bed, but Kai could hear her moving, as if she was unable to sleep comfortably.

Kai quickly crept over to her and moved his lips close to her ear.

"Elsa..."

"...!"

As he expected, Elsa wasn't sleeping and she reacted to his voice.

She looked as though she'd react by screaming, so Kai put his hand over her mouth to stop her.

"Keep quiet. I won't stay long."

“Kai...?”

“I’m sorry. I really need to talk to you, Elsa.”

“...”

He could tell Elsa had become more relaxed.

There was no light at all in the room, making it difficult to see a hand in front of one’s face, which must have been enough to lessen her anxiety. Until then, she’d strongly refused him, but now in the shadows, they felt something like a spiritual connection that bound them together.

She raised her hand slowly while touching Kai as if searching for something, and Kai then took her hand in his. Their fingers entwined and they squeezed their hands together tightly.

“I think... there’s no hope for me.”

“I’ll do something.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“I’ll save you.”

He wanted to touch her face, but it was covered in deep wounds, so he held himself back.

Elsa’s hand trembled as she sobbed softly.

“It was me who killed the toad.”

“...!”

Kai could feel Elsa shiver when he made his confession.

Then he felt her grip on his hand tighten.

“I thought you must have.”

“Elsa.”

“Don’t push yourself too far.”

Despite his flaws, the inspector was a high-ranking guardian bearer while Kai was just an ordinary village soldier. And yet, Elsa had no trouble believing that Kai had killed him.

It may have been the wholehearted confidence that a woman in love felt towards the man she'd chosen. Kai took the godstone that he had brought with him and placed it in Elsa's hand. "Do you know what this is?" he asked her.

"I don't know."

She smiled strangely as she touched the godstone. From touch alone, it couldn't have felt much different from an ordinary rock.

Kai explained it to her slowly, trying not to cause her too much surprise.

"If you eat this, it'll probably heal you."

"...?"

"It's the toad's godstone."

"...!"

"If you eat his marrow, it should make you stronger all of a sudden."

He hadn't intended to tell her.

But more so, he wanted to give her a life filled with hope. This was a special stone, it was the stone of a guardian bearer capable of causing a miracle, so it was worth eating despite the taboo. Before he knew it, he had told her everything.

Then Kai told her of how he had seen soldiers gradually gain strength by eating the godstones of enemies killed on the battlefield. He told her that eating godstones was what had made Basco, the leader of the soldiers, become so strong. He also explained about the priest who had been there until recently and how the strength he had obtained was on the same level as Lord Olha's blessings. It was generally thought that the women of the village didn't understand these ideas.

Elsa gripped the godstone she'd been given as if she couldn't believe it was real.

"A guardian bearer with wounds like yours would heal in no time at all. If you eat that marrow, then maybe you'll heal quickly too."

"..."

“Despite everything he was, he was still human. I know it might seem disgusting...”

“I’ll eat it.”

“All right.”

Elsa had made her decision quickly.

In this situation, there was no reason for hesitation.

Kai created a small invisible sword at his fingertip and carefully cut away the top, like peeling the skin from a piece of fruit.

Then he took a small wooden spoon from beside her bed, which must have been kept there for her to use, and he scooped out a small piece of the marrow. He lifted the spoon to her lips, and then after a moment of hesitation she opened her mouth.

“Uhh...” Elsa spat it back out immediately.

That seemed to trigger a reaction from her stomach, and she vomited spectacularly. She vomited repeatedly and kept saying, “I can’t. It’s horrible.”

The marrow of the godstone normally tasted delicious, but Kai couldn’t help but sympathize with her. When he thought about how it was a part of the toad’s body, the amber marrow that would normally have made his mouth water just made him feel disgust.

Kai was ready to give up despite his disappointment, but Elsa grabbed his clothing and pulled him towards her.

“I don’t like it... but I can eat it.”

When a person’s life is at stake, many things become possible to endure. If she’d given up then, a slow death would be the only thing that awaited her. She’d decided to fight.

She took the marrow into her mouth and it made her gag repeatedly, but eventually she was able to swallow it. Although she had eaten only a single spoonful, Elsa realized that her body had undergone a dramatic change.

Then she clutched at her chest and appeared to be in agony. She gritted her

teeth and tried not to cry out, probably out of concern for her friends who were sleeping in the same building. She endured her suffering in the bed silently while grinding her teeth.

Then, while Kai was watching, her raised upper body sank down into the bed. It was obvious to see that she'd passed out.

"Elsa?" Kai called her name, but she didn't react.

Kai saw that she was breathing healthily once again, and that her chest was rising and falling slowly. He breathed a sigh of relief knowing that his experiment had been successful.

When Kai had received the blessings of the god of the valley, he'd also made a dramatic recovery from a critical situation. The toad's godstone that he'd given to Elsa had been extracted days ago, so the god inside must have already left. It would be just a little better in quality than a godstone obtained from demi-human soldiers on the battlefield. Given that this was the extent of the godstone, he didn't expect the wounds covering her body to heal immediately after she'd eaten it.

But still, he hoped that the bleeding would stop to some extent.

Kai stroked Elsa's hair while taking care not to touch her wounds, and he said her name several times.

"Is someone there?!"

Suddenly, there was a voice from outside the room and a figure entered.

He'd tried to be careful, but his voice must have been too loud for a dormitory where everyone was sleeping.

"Oh, it's just you talking in your sleep, Elsa."

The woman who entered used her hand to check for Elsa's breath and made sure she was sleeping soundly. She breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm just glad you're getting some sleep finally," she said while adjusting Elsa's sheets.

By that time, Kai had already slipped by her and left the room. The woman had no idea that an intruder had been there as she continued to talk to the sleeping Elsa.

It was possible that Elsa would be somewhat recovered by morning. Kai wished he could be there to see the surprise on the faces of the women taking care of her.

He wished he could have stayed by her side until morning. He wished he could have been there to see everyone's surprise. The thought was painful to him.

Kai grasped the godstone in his hand tightly in an attempt to suppress his growing excitement.

The next morning...

To an extent, Kai had gotten what he wished for.

Once the sun had risen, there was a commotion around the women's dormitory, and the rumors spread through the village quickly.

The bedridden girl who'd been cut by the inspector had survived.

Not only that, the cuts that covered her body had mostly closed, so much so that the women who changed her bandages cried with joy and called it a miracle.

Her injuries had been serious enough that no one had expected her to live more than a few days, but she'd undergone a dramatic recovery in a single night. Miracle was the only word that anyone could think of to describe it.

The rumors reached Kai while he was eating his breakfast in the dining hall. He smiled to himself, thinking all had gone according to plan. But then he began to doubt his ears as he listened to the rumors more closely.

"She's all healed, but for some reason she won't wake up."

The wounds that had threatened her life had completely healed, but Elsa had not woken up when morning came.

The girl had fallen into a coma.

Kai had expected her to pass out after consuming a powerful godstone. He'd expected it because he'd been through the same experience himself.

But in the end, Elsa didn't wake up again.

"Elsa was moved to the monastery..."

When Adelia, one of the leaders of the women's council, called for him and broke the news in such a simple fashion, it took Kai some time to understand what he was being told.

When Kai's eyes glazed over in confusion, Adelia told him, "Look at me when I'm talking to you." She told him once again the village had decided to give up on the girl named Elsa.

Those who lost the ability to move due to illness or injury and those who couldn't contribute to the village through work were cast off when it was determined that they were unlikely to recover. In a poor village, they didn't have the resources to keep looking after people who couldn't work for their food.

Soldiers with no relatives who came back from battle with major injuries and weren't expected to make a full recovery were often transferred to the empty monastery of the village. They'd be made to die as part of a clearing ceremony, which was referred to as allowing them to pass on.

They were left alone to await death in the form of natural starvation. It was the sort of cruelty that only intelligent species were capable of.

The reasoning had applied to Elsa who was still comatose. It was as simple as that.

Kai objected to this conclusion of course, but then he was asked whether he could take care of bedridden Elsa for his entire life, and how he'd feed her when she wouldn't swallow wheat gruel. They explained that no one could extend her life.

The concept of an intravenous drip was unknown in this world. If someone continued to breathe despite losing consciousness, their chances of survival were already low, and in many cases, they were as good as dead.

Kai could picture the medical equipment he'd need if he was to provide nutrition to her directly, but he couldn't even guess how to make such equipment. A short while later, bedridden Elsa was transferred to the monastery where no one prevented Kai from seeing her, so he began to spend much of his time at her side.

Kai knew that Elsa's unconsciousness was caused by her leveling up, so he waited, expecting her to eventually wake up.

Time passed without mercy while Elsa remained comatose and gradually became emaciated.

When three days had passed, the villagers were ready to accept Elsa's death and had stopped visiting her in the monastery. Kai didn't eat anything either, but his blessings must have slowed his weight loss to a crawl while he wasn't eating.

On the night of the third day since Elsa's transfer to the monastery, Elsa and Kai both vanished from the village. Several people saw a young boy walking away from the village with the body of the girl on his shoulders, but nobody felt willing to stand in his way. Elsa looked lifeless as he carried her, and it was assumed that Kai had gone to bury her somewhere.

The guards on watch felt pity, and told him, "Just don't get yourself killed." Kai's last words before leaving were, "I won't be gone long."

Nights in the borderlands were dangerous. In the darkness with no light but starlight, demi-humans with superior vision were eager to assert their dominance. But the villagers knew of his grief and could not stop him.

They watched as the boy mourning his lost lover disappeared into the darkness of the night.

Kai ran.

He felt as though the warmth was already fading from the girl he held in his arms, and so he ran with all his power.

The full power of a guardian bearer was a thing to be feared. As Kai gained speed the scenery behind him disappeared into the distance. He formed holes

in the ground with every bound. He moved with the speed of someone tearing through the air itself, and every step he took seemed to carry him across an endless distance. He was almost flying.

I'm taking you to the valley.

Kai had said this to Elsa many times as she slept.

He still dreamed of showing the beautiful valley to the person he loved. He thought that maybe the sweet juice of crushed maca might find its way down Elsa's throat while she slept.

I'll wake you up, no matter what.

She'd ended up in this state after he'd made her eat the inspector's godstone. If there was something he didn't know, some knowledge that he lacked despite being a guardian bearer, he could ask someone who knew more than he did. That was his plan.

The koror elder, Porek, had lived for hundreds of years.

It was possible he knew something that would help.

He needed to pass close to Banya Village on his way to the valley, but he had no time to concern himself with the inhabitants' cries of, "There it is again!" and "It's the monster!" He passed right by the village, entered the forest, crossed over the territory of the lagarto, and took the shortest route into the valley.

For the first time in a long while, Kai saw the valley before him.

Kill him!

Kai suddenly heard a roar from the god inside him.

Recently, his god had been behaving like this a lot, and Kai didn't know who it was asking him to kill. He suspected his god had gone mad, and he'd stopped listening to it.

Behind him he heard lagarto voices one after another as if his sudden intrusion had surprised them. The threatening noises they made from their throats were louder than he'd expected, and he worried that he might have upset them, but he still hurried forward without stopping.

“Old man!”

Kai ignored the lure of the beautiful valley and leaped into the koror settlement at the valley’s edge. It was late and the night was already dark, but koror faces appeared from their tent-shaped homes one after another when they heard Kai’s voice.

Porek looked alarmed as he hurried over to Kai who was standing in the center of their settlement.

“Is there something wrong?” Porek asked him.

Kai lowered down Elsa from his shoulders and placed her on the ground. Without preface, he explained that he’d fed her a godstone, causing her to pass out, and that she hadn’t woken up since then.

Kill him!

The distracting voice in his head was becoming an annoyance.

His irritation must have shown on his face because Porek looked fearful. Without asking for further details, Porek gave a list of possibilities.

It could be that the development of her body was so intense that it made her pass out.

It could be that she’d eaten a poisonous godstone that had caused damage to her mind.

Kai asked what he meant by poison, and Porek explained that godstones could be poisonous if the owner was a creature too different from oneself, or if the owner itself had already been poisoned.

Then Porek offered a final possibility.

“There is also the poison that comes from eating one’s own kind.”

Kai’s eyes widened as he stared at Porek. And then tears began to form in the corners of his eyes. Now he knew the cause.

Porek appeared to understand the situation from the way Kai was trembling. He explained how same-species succession occurred within his tribe.

“I do not know if this applies to humans, but if there is some circumstance

that prevents us from waiting for the divine spirit to return to its gravesite, succession may occur by breaking the taboo on eating one's own kind. In such cases, the method of removing the poison..."

"Tell me what to do!"

"Enough time is allowed after eating for the divine spirit to take root, and then all the marrow eaten is vomited out. Then there are herbs that can be boiled to create an antidote..."

"She had to... vomit soon after..."

Kai howled like a wild beast. He began to scratch madly at his own face with his fingernails, and the koror around him rushed over to stop him from causing such terrible harm to himself.

Kill him!

The god of the valley once again yelled the same out-of-place command.

Kai couldn't suppress the emotion that welled up inside him. The inapt demand from his god seemed to spur him on.

He wanted to tear apart the koror, who were worried about him and trying to stop him. He knew it was mad, but he could not stop thinking about it.

He took one glance at Elsa who he'd left lying by his feet. Blood that had been sent flying from his fingertips had landed on her cheek. He felt he could not bear to be there any longer.

"Master," Porek yelled after him.

Kai threw himself down to the bottom of the valley.

He didn't think about what he was doing. He just wanted to be alone in the valley where he could vent the emotions that filled his heart.

Kai knocked down trees as he raged at the bottom of the valley.

Kill him!

The god of the valley was also going wild for some reason. Then, as if he'd planned it from the start, he arrived at the gravesite in the center of the valley and looked at the holiday home he'd once enjoyed building.

As he approached it, Kai decided he'd destroy the whole thing. He'd find Aruwe inside, throw her outside, and then he'd tear it apart until it was unrecognizable.

He stepped into the cabin and then he saw her.

The koror girl was on the floor and covered in blood. Aruwe moved when she felt Kai's presence, and blood spilled from her mouth.

What? What's going on? How can it all be happening?

Kai's mind went blank. He slowly began to approach the girl who lay in a pool of her own blood, and then...

He felt intense heat around his chest, and his breathing stopped.

"Finally, you have let your guard down."

A narrow blade had pierced straight through his chest.

As Kai was about to fall to the floor, something gripped his neck from behind.

"Finally, I have achieved my objective."

The truthseeker.

It was the priest who had visited the borderlands to carry out a survey. The priest who should already have returned home.

Kai looked at him and tried to cry out.

The only thing that came from his mouth was a large volume of blood.

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"I was uncertain whether it could work on someone with your level of divinity. A priest with the rank of daisōjō gave the instrument to me for this purpose, and it does indeed appear effective."

Truthseeker Nada's breathing was unsteady as he made sure that Kai's life was in his hands.

Then his breathing slowly turned into cynical laughter.

"The sight of your favorite koror girl in a pool of her own blood seems to have

caused you quite the shock. When emotions take hold with enough intensity, the protection offered by a god can sometimes be weakened. This is the art of the god killer, taught to the practitioners of Ryakusha-ryu.”

The tip of the blade that protruded from his chest was hard and shining, but it wasn't an ordinary iron or bronze weapon. It was some sort of sharpened horn or bone with a milk-white tip stained by Kai's blood.



The blood that spilled from his body ran along the blade before dripping to the floor.

It must have been a weapon developed by the monastery to kill guardian bearers.

“When I saw the clothes you wore to disguise yourself, I surmised that the location must be somewhere in the west where you might trade with the koror, though it never occurred to me that you might be building your own nation with the foul creatures. I see now why you turned down my offer to make you an honored noble.”

He rocked the strange white blade back and forth so that the wound widened.

The feeling of pain was eclipsed by a sensation of intense heat that extended to the very top of Kai’s head. He knew that Nada was taking care to destroy his heart.

It was an obvious precaution to anyone who knew just how quickly a guardian bearer could recover.

“It was just as the high priests of Maas had feared. They were right to prioritize this matter.”

“Urh... Agh...”

“New guardian bearers often struggle with the curse of the land. If you hadn’t borne it so well, you’d have given yourself away sooner. Despite being from a poor village where you received no education, you display a surprising level of wisdom at times. Did you know I lay hidden in the fields, waiting for you to become careless, constantly waiting for the day when you would visit the gravesite? It would seem that the death of your lover was what made you finally forget yourself.”

He knew from the pain in the wound across his back that something was forcing its way into his body. He felt the feeling of fingers moving and knew that the thing inside him was Nada’s own hand. Then the hand gripped something within Kai and tore it free with a sharp pull.

Something precious had been taken from him, leaving him feeling a sense of

loss and humiliation. For a moment, he saw the world in double as if his mind was torn in two, but one of those views soon faded as it was torn away from him. The god of the valley's voice was rapidly becoming distant.

Kai's eyes couldn't quite focus as he looked at the white lump in Nada's hand.

"This is the most efficient means of taking the life of a guardian bearer."

"..."

"This is your godstone. The precious rock that gave you a glyph sigil. It is a rare sight indeed."

After holding it up for Kai to see, Nada turned to look into empty space, his eyes shining with some insane light, and then he smiled as if he'd just now been freed from all of his sorrows. This madness was the exact opposite of his ordinarily rational self.

"It is not enough to be born into a prestigious family, and nor is it enough to train until you cough up blood. You cannot inherit the deity of your family line unless you are the chosen successor. Can you imagine it, Kai? The capital is awash with people willing to risk their very lives for a vacant god."

Nada had to stop himself from laughing before his lecture could continue. He looked triumphantly at Kai, who was now on the verge of death, and he spoke holy words that were used to bless the dead.

"For the son of a great house who does not receive a god, knocking at the doors of the monastery becomes their last chance to reclaim their dignity. I was once in that same situation, and if the sōjō had not taken me in, I do not know what would have become of me..."

Nada appeared proud and victorious. He looked down on Kai as if he was nothing more than a pebble by the roadside, and then he walked away.

All the energy was gone from Kai, and his death seemed certain.

Kai had forbidden others to enter the valley, so there were only three people there: Kai, Nada, and Aruwe who was in a critical state. Nada merely had to wait by the gravesite for Kai to die and then he'd be the next to become the god of the valley's host and receive its blessings.

Nada had sat down crossed-legged facing the gravesite, and he was chanting holy scripture. He looked like a devout and virtuous priest swearing his devotion to the gods.

It appeared that he intended to wait in meditation until Kai had died and the blessings of the god of the valley had been placed on his body.

As Kai's vision began to fade, he kept sight of the man who'd come and taken everything away from him. It wasn't exactly by choice; he couldn't move his neck to look away.

He's the new master of the valley...?

Kai would die, Aruwe would die, and the man would also kill the koror settled on the edge of the valley because he detested demi-humans. They'd sworn their devotion to a stupid child, and in the end, it would be a corrupt human priest, rather than the orgs, who would come for them.

Kai remembered the uzelle girl. She was lucky. If she was smart, the priest would never find her, and she could live on.

Kai let his entire body relax as he accepted his fate. It felt as though this was his punishment for killing someone precious to him. Elsa would soon die. He didn't care if he also died right here. Human lives were cheap in the borderlands. If he had thought some good would come of continuing to live, he'd have struggled a little more, but a happy future felt unrealistic.

His stomach felt completely empty, perhaps due to the blood loss.

Then he remembered that he'd insisted on staying by Elsa's side without eating anything for the past three days.

I'm really going to die without ever eating an onigiri...

The black lump that he pictured in his mind included glossy grains at its edges that looked like steamed wheat. If it was something that tasted good, then he wished he could have let Elsa try it.

Kai.

Someone was calling his name.

He was so tired that he couldn't so much as move his fingers, but suddenly his

body felt light somehow, and he was able to look in the direction of the voice without much difficulty.

The world had already lost all sense of form and was covered in a deep, impenetrable darkness. Through the darkness, so dark that he couldn't see his own hands before his eyes, there was a faint voice.

Just when Kai had given up searching for it in the darkness, he heard his name called once more.

Kai... For some reason he felt sure that this lonely-sounding voice belonged to Elsa.

The distant and anxious voice continued to call to him. Kai had to protect her. His consciousness returned, throwing him back into reality where he was losing control over the body he should have been using to protect her.

He heard a voice sobbing.

He knew he had to get moving.

He had to live.

Kai's consciousness had come back miraculously.

He was still lying on his side, but he found that he wasn't completely unable to move anymore.

Somewhat instinctively, he collected up the remains of his spiritual energy from his entire body and focused all of it on the hole that had been created through his body. A moment earlier, he'd been a guardian bearer, and the leftover blessings were enough to half-close the hole.

Despite being on the verge of death, he'd gathered up more spiritual energy than he expected. His godstone had already been taken away from him, but he could still scrape together the dregs that remained from the abundant spiritual energy that had filled him when he was a guardian bearer a short while ago.

Nada hadn't yet realized just how tenacious a human Kai was. Kai's strength had increased dramatically when he obtained the blessings of the god of the valley, but the large amounts of high-quality marrow that he'd consumed since

then had also affected his body and made him much more robust.

Get moving.

He'd managed to close the fatal hole in his heart, and it was beating once again.

He felt the heat returning to his body.

This new experience made Kai realize something.

I can live, even without a godstone...

That round bone wasn't particularly important for preserving life. Although he felt a great sense of loss, as though his soul had been torn from his body, he knew he didn't need it for his body to continue functioning. A loud voice inside his head assured him that it was merely an organ made necessary by the ruleset of this fantasy world.

The godstone may have been a spiritual organ that gave form to the wishes of its owner. Kai decided that if there was ever a next time, he'd also be sure to cut off every opponent's head even after their godstone was taken away.

Nada had already lost all interest in Kai. He was concentrating wholly on praying to the gravesite. It looked as though he was desperately trying to prove to the god of the valley that his faith was genuine.

In the cabin, Kai lifted himself up without making a sound. He then dragged himself over to Aruwe, who looked as though she was dying. She'd been a victim of the same attack, and she had a similar hole piercing through her chest.

Kai used his healing magic to treat the wound. As the remains of his spiritual energy were used up, he felt his heart begin to beat unsteadily, but somehow, he managed to seal up the opening in Aruwe's chest. Fortunately, her heart was undamaged, so it was only the blood loss that threatened her life.

Heal...

He mustered up the last of his spiritual energy and used it to force out the blood in her airway that was preventing her from breathing.

Aruwe still didn't begin to breathe normally.

Wake up.

Kai scolded her in his mind and slapped her face.

Aruwe moved with a start.

Then her small chest began to rise and fall. Once Kai was sure she'd continue breathing, he slowly climbed to his feet.

The small amount of spiritual energy Kai had remaining hadn't been enough to fully heal Aruwe, or himself. He'd merely closed up the fatal wounds to their organs, leaving large openings in the skin. It was a strange feeling to have an air current enter through his back and leave through his chest.

Kai was standing, but in a terrible, half-dead state. He knew he wouldn't last long in this condition. His body was abnormally robust, but a full death was still not far off.

He had one task to complete before that happened and he wasn't thinking about what came after.

He was going to kill the priest.

Kill him!

Kai felt he could still hear the voice of the god of the valley.

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He'd more or less used up what spiritual energy had been left in his body to heal Aruwe. He was sure now that even if he was turned upside down and shaken, nothing more would come out.

The only weapon he had was the cutting knife that he carried with him.

He'd lost a lot of blood, and the feeling of exhaustion was overwhelming, but the other guardian bearers he'd consumed must have been like a fuel to him. He still had full control of his limbs, and with some effort, he could still move.

He was able to walk without losing his balance. Somehow, he'd have to kill him while in this state.

Kai rested his trembling body against the wall of the cabin so he wouldn't

collapse to the ground while thinking.

Kill...

His god's voice kept cutting out, but it was still reaching him.

I get it, My God.

Although he could move with effort, something didn't feel quite right, and he couldn't shake off the sense of confusion. It must have been the effect of having his godstone missing.

Though many organs were vital for supporting human life, when organs like the liver and pancreas were lost there was a short delay before this caused an impact on the organism. The loss of an important organ wasn't always immediately fatal.

Kai was finding it hard to think. It was as if there was a thick fog around him that prevented him from seeing everything before him at once. Even his ability to use magic was fading as the methods he'd learned through experience began to fade from his memory.

Now... Kill...

Be patient, My God.

Although he gripped the knife firmly, he felt the need to support it further with his empty hand to stop himself from dropping it. It felt ridiculous to need two hands to hold such a small weapon.

His reserves of spiritual energy had dried up, so he couldn't use magic. Magic was always the basis of Kai's tricks, and without it, his chance of victory was close to zero.

Back when he'd first tried using magic, he hadn't been a guardian bearer; his godstone had been the poor-quality godstone of an ordinary soldier. No matter how long he waited, his spiritual energy wasn't recovering at all. It confirmed his original belief that spiritual energy was supplied from the godstone.

He closed his eyes for a short while and continued to think.

He had to think of some way to win.

He needed some means of fatally wounding a priest whose martial arts were so advanced that not even Lord Olha could defeat him. To his frustration, he seemed unable to collect his thoughts, so he tried breaking the problem down and looking at it more simply. It was unlike him to take such a logical approach to problem solving, but the approach allowed him to prune away all of his unnecessary thoughts.

Ultimately, Kai concluded that there was only one way for him to overcome the priest using force. But to grasp this single thread of hope that would give him the slim chance of victory, he needed something.

His thoughts became unusually intelligent, as if they were no longer the thoughts of an uncultured child of the borderlands. With his life in crisis, something from his past life began to influence him more powerfully, and it was determined to cause a change in this young boy.

Then something clicked in his mind.

He had no time to hesitate.

Kai took a deep breath and then set to work on a plan that could allow him to achieve his objective.

Kai quietly crept out of the cabin.

The grass beneath his feet made a slight sound as he stepped out, causing him to freeze for just a moment.

Then he began to move once again.

There he is.

Nada didn't seem to notice Kai approaching as he sat in place, focused on chanting holy verses and tracing sacred symbols in the air with his fingers.

If Kai still had the blessings of the god of the valley, he might have seen the priest's aura rising from his body like a bright flame as he offered up his prayers. But Kai's eyes could no longer see anything so strange.

Although Nada was absorbed in saying his prayers to the god of the valley's gravesite, he still noticed Kai's silent approach. He suddenly stopped praying

when Kai got very close.

Nada looked at Kai from within the hood of his priestly attire. He then crossed his chest as if apologizing to the god for the interruption to the ceremony, and then he uncrossed his legs and stood up. Kai knew that the eyes that were almost completely hidden beneath the hood were watching him closely.

“How is it that you still live?”

Kai had no answer to Nada’s sudden question.

He merely stared back at him.

As he slowly closed the gap between them, he held the knife out in front of him as if he was a girl who’d never held a weapon.

Nada was trying to find an answer to his own question as he looked at the fresh hole that was still visible in Kai’s chest. He slowly lowered the covering over his mouth, and his expression seemed to be asking why the wound hadn’t been fatal.

Kai couldn’t help it. The look of confusion on Nada’s face was so amusing that it made him laugh.

Nada raised his eyebrows.

“The wound was fatal... Your godstone has been extracted. You are merely the shell of a guardian bearer with the guardian removed. Your recovery should have been impossible.”

Then Nada’s eyes opened wide as if he’d realized what was happening.

With Nada clearly unnerved, Kai once again let out a strange, high-pitched laugh.

For some strange reason his hands had stopped shaking. He felt as though his fear of Nada faded every time he laughed.

And then he took the opportunity to lunge at him.

He knew that if his first attempt failed, he’d be unable to stop Nada killing him completely. He put everything he had into it, right from the start.

Even with his guardian gone, he felt as though he’d still be a match for Lag’s

top-ranking soldier, Basco. Without blessings, he could tell just how much his inherent physical strength, the power within his own flesh, had increased.

The truthseeker had gained a doi sigil and had shown that Lord Olha could be surpassed by his martial arts. With Kai wounded and missing his godstone, his movements must have been easy for the truthseeker to follow. He aimed a bare-handed chop at Kai's wrist that would have knocked the knife from Kai's hand, leaving him unarmed.

But holding his wrist out where it was easy to strike had been part of Kai's plan from the start. He pretended to dodge while actually using one leg to attack Nada's feet. Nada saw it coming and jumped back easily at the last moment, and then he instinctively tried to kick away Kai's outstretched leg as it was in midair.

Anyone who studied martial arts knew that this sort of exchange was common, so Kai had known to dodge it from the start, and he was able to dodge the attack just in time.

Then Kai began using circle footwork. This was the most reliable technique for anyone from Lag who'd been taught Zula-ryu, the martial art of the borderlands.

"Kai." Nada called his name.

Having someone who'd just tried to kill him call his name in such a friendly manner gave him chills.

Kai followed even his opponent's slightest movements using his knife and focused on holding him back.

"How are you healing?"

At times, Nada was struggling to take his eyes off the wound in Kai's chest.

It was as though it held some fixation for him.

Nada's power was equivalent to a guardian bearer's, so in a one-on-one battle, he would normally have been able to take down a promising soldier from the village using a single attack. But Nada was so wary of Kai that he didn't even attempt to do so.

Kai had begun to laugh so much that he was out of breath, as if he'd lost his mind. He began to cough, still without catching his breath.

"Answer me."

"Take a look and see."

"Without the blessings that protected you, you should not have been able to heal from such a heavy wound in such a short time. I have taken your stone away from you."

"Even now, I'm still healing, little by little."

Kai laughed a disturbing laugh. He was acting as though, even now, his wounds were being healed by the regenerative power shared by all guardian bearers. Then Kai kicked up the dirt at his feet.

It wasn't a particularly advanced trick, but Nada was so excessively wary that it caused him to move back. He was fearful, as if his opponent was a guardian bearer with abilities far beyond his own.

"Well, your recovery does not seem to be complete. I must deal the final blow before it's too late."

The priest took out the same instrument from his robe.

It was a white weapon that looked like it was carved from bone, and close inspection revealed that it wasn't a blade at all. The part that resembled a blade was actually more like a white pipe that had been cut diagonally, and the interior of the weapon was hollow.

The weapon must have been made to remove an amount of flesh corresponding to the breadth of the pipe. The handle looked like part of a tool that a priest would use to strike a standing bell in a place of worship.

Kai aimed for the instrument. A weapon designed to kill guardian bearers was a serious threat. It had almost killed him once, so it was the obvious target.

Through some unusual sequence of movements, Nada lured Kai toward himself, and while the instrument held Kai's attention, he used his other hand to reach for the hole in Kai's chest from a position out of Kai's line of sight.

Nada's fingers, which were hardened through his training, found their way

into Kai's body once again. He tore through several blood vessels that had just barely knitted themselves back together, and he grabbed hold of his target. Kai's knife never did strike Nada's left arm that held the instrument. Instead, it cut through no more than his black sleeve.

The thing Nada tore from the hole in Kai's chest, the thing that should never have been there, was a second godstone.

"T-This is...!"

For a truthseeker like Nada, a glimpse of that godstone through the wound in Kai's chest must have inspired an irresistible feeling of greed.

It was indeed a real godstone.

But this godstone had already been cut open. It was an old godstone, consumed long before.

While Nada was making sense of what had happened, Kai rolled across the floor clutching the object that had spilled from Nada's cut sleeve.

Recovering this object had been Kai's intention the entire time.

Wherever it might have been hidden, he would never have overlooked it.

Kill him now!

Yes, I hear you, My God.

He gripped the missing part of himself and plunged it back into the hole in his chest.

The tide of the fight had changed.

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Kill him!

The god of the valley's voice was suddenly loud and clear in his mind, as if he'd just tuned in to the right frequency.

A moment ago his body had felt like an empty shell, but now he felt the warmth come back to him. The life-threatening injury caused when a large

amount of flesh was gorged from his chest created an intense feeling of pain extending to the top of his head, which should have been there the whole time.

It hurts! It hurts hurts hurts!

If his life hadn't been in danger at that moment, the pain would have been unbearable and he'd have been writhing in agony.

Heal!

Kai never took his eyes off Nada as he held his breath and tried to endure the waves of pain.

A few moments later his heart began to beat powerfully. After another moment the blood was still spurting from the wound, and he hurriedly pressed his hand against it.

Heal!

Heal!

His supply of spiritual energy had recovered dramatically, and his healing magic could now work with vague mental images that came to his mind. He still had no time to think about the small things. The power of his magic spread out from the wound like ripples, and the rapid healing of his flesh caused the sensation to come back as something like an itch. He used these sensations to guide the healing process in his missing blood vessels, damaged nerves, and shredded muscle tissue.

Once he'd formed more precise images in his mind, Kai's healing magic rapidly became more efficient, and he directed it into his wounds once again.

The strange sight of Kai's wound repairing itself at such speed made the truthseeker cry out.

"Impossible!"

Kai wasn't surprised to hear that the speed of his healing looked impossible to Nada.

The armored soldier's ability to regenerate had been outstanding, but it had taken some time for each wound it was given to begin healing, and it couldn't heal injuries greater than cuts and broken bones, such as the loss of an arm.

Kai had lost a lot of flesh from the wound in his chest. A cylindrical chunk had been scooped out of his body using the oddly shaped tool for killing guardian bearers.

When Nada saw that hole in Kai's flesh seal itself back up in no time at all, he leapt forward, exhaling sharply in a manner learned through his martial arts training. But he didn't leap at Kai. He was headed for the edge of the valley.

The martial arts training that Nada received from Maas had given him such skill that he'd defeated Lord Olha, who was a tres sigil, despite Nada himself being a mere doi sigil.

However, when faced with Kai at full power, he began to run without hesitation. Kai's power was so great that ordinary martial arts couldn't suppress him, and Nada knew his defeat was inevitable.

When a guardian bearer began to run all out, they couldn't be easily caught, even by another guardian bearer. Failing to bring down an enemy guardian bearer as they fled the battlefield was an everyday occurrence.

Kill him!

The god of the valley was enraged.

Kai was still distracted by the need to heal the wound in his chest, and Nada's back was becoming smaller in his vision while Kai gave chase.

Nada's lack of indecision was impressive. His speed as he ran across the ground must have been a benefit of his training. He had some strange way of using his feet that allowed him to accelerate without making holes in the ground. This running technique must have been another of the secret arts taught by Maas.

The hole in Kai's chest was almost closed, and his heartbeat had become regular.

Kai didn't want to overlook the eyeball. His eyes saw into the world of auras as he stared at Nada's back. As expected, the eyeball was left hovering above Kai's head so that the priest could keep track of Kai's movements while his back was turned.

The eyeball was too high to be within reach, so for the meantime he ignored it and focused on accelerating. The moment he was in the eye's blind spot, he used his fearsome jumping power to leap into the air.

Destroy it!

With that thought in mind, Kai created an accumulation of magic at his fingertips.

Based on an understanding of natural principles, he could create his invisible sword that could cut through molecular bonds by interfering with the basic components that gave rise to solid objects. He wondered if there was some principle he could use to destroy something produced by magic that wasn't visible to the naked eye.

Even his invisible sword couldn't cut through something that wasn't made of matter. He expected that if he tried using the sword, it would just pass straight through the eyeball. Kai had learned that the eyeball existed to serve a particular function for its user, but had no form in reality.

Spyware.

With the brain as hardware, the eyeball was like a software-based pseudo life-form created by programming.

Kai gripped the eyeball tightly using a hand coated with spiritual energy and then released a torrent of spiritual energy into the eyeball while imagining a flash of lightning.

"Guuuh!"

Nada was now clinging to the cliff edge of the valley, but the pain had caused his body to curl up. It was as if the eyeball had been directly connected to his own eyes somehow.

Kai watched Nada closely as he moved toward him. He was eager to punish him for being foolish enough to trespass in the valley, and he couldn't let him escape.

When Nada realized that Kai was moving closer, he started to scramble desperately up the cliff with his one hand clutching his eye. He moved quickly,

thinking he could still escape, but then a figure appeared blocking his path. It was old Porek, who'd come fully armed.

"I heard your voice, My Master."

A single swing of his narrow sword placed the tip against Nada's nose, preventing him from climbing out of the valley.

Nada looked up at the koror elder and knew that he was at a clear disadvantage, but he must have decided that the bigger threat was Kai approaching from behind. He tried to force his way through the threat in front of him.

But the old koror had lived for over a hundred years and had made many tough decisions in the time spent protecting his tribe as their guardian bearer. He knew what to do without needing to think.

Without moving so much as an eyebrow, he used his sword to pierce Nada's hand that had gripped the valley's edge.

While Nada was about to fall and was still in shock, Porek followed up with a merciless kick.

Nada fell helplessly back down to the bottom of the valley. When he tried to rise, he found Kai standing over him.

"Would you have me leave the matter in your hands, My Master?"

"Yeah, this makes things easy for me."

"If you have need of my sword..."

"No, I can handle him. I've got some bad news, though. Aruwe's badly injured."

"And this man..."

"He must have attacked her while I was away. I've made sure her life isn't in danger. I still need to punish him."

"Then I shall leave matters to you."

Their eyes met, and for a moment, Kai saw an expression of rage as the old man learned of his granddaughter's injuries. It all left Kai feeling apologetic.

Porek truly was doing what he could to protect the valley.

After directing an unsympathetic glance at the shaved head of Nada, whose hood had now slipped off, Porek bowed his head deeply and then moved away from the edge of the valley.

Now Kai had to decide how to kill the man in front of him.

“The koror have demonstrated deep devotion to you, haven’t they?”

Nada looked straight at Kai while nursing his pierced hand.

Even for guardian bearers, their capacity to heal varied with their level of divinity. His left eye looked so bloodshot that it was probably bleeding.

“If you wish to kill me, then you may do so however you please. I have already made an attempt on your life, so I will not beg for my own.”

Even without the encouragement, Kai was ready to kill him.

But he still might use the weapon for killing guardian bearers, so Kai kept his wits about him.

“If I had not been willing to walk a path made from the bodies of those I defeated, I would never have ascended high enough to obtain a doi sigil alone and without a guardian. But now it is my turn to become sustenance for another.”

“...”

“It truly is a shame, Kai. If you had simply accepted the invitation I offered to you, it would never have come to this.”

Kai braced himself as Nada drew the weapon for killing guardian bearers once again, but Nada merely placed it at his feet to show that he had no more will to fight.

Nada swept back the skirt of his robe and leisurely sat down on the ground in the manner of a priest about to begin a sermon. Then he sat up straight and looked at Kai.

“Few people out here in the borderlands are aware, but the very structure of the kingdom is unstable. We need to replace weakening arch gods now or

territory will recede to such an extent that the effects will be felt across the nation. Maas has concluded that the new god found here in the borderlands must be made part of the fabric of the kingdom at once. It could destroy the social hierarchy of the kingdom, but it is feared that the kingdom itself may not survive for much longer if we do not act. The help of the god you carry inside you, the great god that dwells in this land, is demanded by the threat to the peace of a million humans. The south of the kingdom is being attacked by legions of foul creatures and is in an irreparable state of disorder.”

The long-winded speech made Kai frown.

But it felt wrong to deny a man his last words after he’d accepted his own death.

“When you rejected my invitation, you left me with no choice but to steal your guardian. I could see at a glance that yours is a fearsome god. But even so, I had to take the god of the valley back with me to the center. I was wracked with doubt when I thought that I would be making my own body host to the god of the valley after all I had done. I wondered whether I could truly be host to a god so great that it offers a glyph sigil. I tried through prayer to rid myself of doubt, but to no avail. I was so foolish. When I realized that I had failed, I tried to flee, leaving my pride and my reputation behind. If I had been able to escape, no good would have come of it, but I am an incorrigible fool. So much so that I astound even myself.”

With that, Nada kneeled on the ground and bowed his head as if offering it to Kai.

In the pose of a criminal awaiting his execution, he still continued speaking.

“Will you not reconsider my offer? Kai, you are human, are you not? I believe you were born a citizen of Lag and a subject of House Moloch. Will you not reconsider? I bow before you and I beg of you: offer your power to the nation of humanity.”

The priest had wagered his life on this final argument.

Kill him!

Kai’s god was shouting.

The god of the valley couldn't afford to show understanding or compassion.

Now that the priest could see his end approaching, he appeared to be offering himself up as he pleaded on behalf of the nation, and on behalf of humanity. Kai believed he was sincere, but Kai's resolve wasn't weakened in the slightest.

"Is that everything you have to say?" There wasn't a hint of emotion in Kai's voice.

The center of the Unified Kingdom that ruled over humanity was rotten to its core. He'd known this all too well after his encounter with the toad.

The guardian bearers that served as the royals and high-ranking nobles in the center had indulged so much in worldly pleasures that they'd forgotten how to train. They'd allowed themselves to decline so far that their government was falling apart. Kai understood that as a newfound god with great power, it would be his job to prop up the entire system. They'd place their burdens on the shoulders of an ignorant boy from the borderlands.

He believed that the center of the nation was a cesspool of corruption.

His answer was blunt: "I refuse."

The man remained prostrated. Kai could not allow him to leave the valley alive, and so he killed him.

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"Chi, chi, chi." The man made soft sounds as he used bait to lure in the honk at his feet.

He was a small man, and his large shins were exposed completely when he lifted up his long skirt. His completely black garb and hood made it clear that he was a bona fide priest of high standing, rather than some untrustworthy wanderer.

The bird pecked at the scattered pieces of dried meat as it came to a stop in the priest's arms. A piece of oil paper had been wrapped around its small leg.

The priest went through the familiar motions of removing the paper and carefully opening it using his fingernails. He stared at the words written on it

with great interest.

“What does it say?”

“Give me a moment...”

At the priest’s side was another man dressed in similar attire.

He was a priest of fairly high rank. He sat on a wayside rock drinking water from a flask made from a sheep’s bladder.

“Yes, I thought so,” spat the short priest.

“The little shami’s croaked.”

“Croaked...?”

After reading the scrap of paper, the short priest passed it over to the taller priest, who was waiting with narrowed eyes.

His voice was so loud that the honk spread its wings in alarm. The short priest tried to soothe the bird, and he crouched down facing his partner.

The tall priest stared intently at the scrap of paper while chanting some scripture to vent the frustration that grew inside of him.

The priest they referred to as the little shami had still been young. They’d found him when he was still a child, and they’d recognized his talent. Even when he grew into a capable adult, those around him still thought of him as the little shami.

Now that fellow scholar was dead at a young age.

The young priest who trained his body and mind while seldom resting had finally fallen in a faraway land and returned to the soil. The truthseekers dispatched to survey the vast borderlands in the northern part of the kingdom were all interconnected using the hidden arts of Maas, and others nearby would soon learn if anything unexpected happened to one of their own.

The priest had still been young and his legs had been strong, so it was unlikely that he had died due to some unfortunate accident or illness. If he had been far from the declining human territories and had been overcome in the regions where cruel demi-humans ruled supreme, that would be a different matter

entirely. But he had been operating nearby, and these two priests saw it as an ominous sign. As the power of the monarchy declined, the people of the borderlands were increasingly acting under their own autonomy. The priests had seen this development with their own eyes.

The lower-ranking lords of the borderlands were conspiring against the authority of the center, and outsiders who questioned this despicable behavior were likely to be killed to ensure their silence. The priests knew this from experience.

“What happens once can happen twice.”

“These are dark times.”

As the taller of the two priests drank water from the flask, blood dripped from the mouth of the human corpse lying at his feet. Even with a doi sigil, the power of a guardian bearer could not be underestimated. The priests had used their refined martial arts to work together and bring him down.

Anyone who looked closely would have seen traces of a fading kumadori on the face of each priest. Truthseekers dispatched to each region from the monastery were also chosen for their skills in battle.

“Even so, we had a dangerous task ourselves. When I heard we were to kill a guardian bearer in the borderlands, I did not expect they might hold their own against the two of us.”

“They called on old men because of the danger.”

“Although his territory is wasteland, he was a skilled fighter.”

There had been low-ranking lords secretly holding onto a wild god beyond the control of the center.

The village controlled by the lord changed its attitude quickly when the people learned the intentions of the visiting truthseeker. When the truthseeker doubted their sincerity, he pretended to depart while awaiting reinforcements, then they had set upon the lord’s household all at once.

When conflict arose, it was Count Balta, who held great influence in the borderlands, who would nip it in the bud in the name of the king. The

truthseekers' survey was an important affair that related to the future of the Unified Kingdom. It had been made clear to the count that any attempt to get in their way was an act of rebellion against the monarchy.

The back of the sitting taller priest was resting against a gravestone. It was dug out from a mound of dirt and belonged to a wild god, a new land god that had not been under the control of Maas.

The lord had lacked enough people to start a new village around it, and so it had been buried. His failure to report this to the center had been a clear violation of the noble's code as defined by national law.

To prevent this crime from being reported, the lord disrespecting the crown by concealing the gravesite had planned to murder the truthseeker dispatched by Maas. The plan had backfired, and now he lay dead. The priests had acted in self-defense, and the incident left them with no feelings of guilt.

His village would likely fall into chaos after the sudden loss of its ruler, but the priests were in the middle of an important mission, so they had no time to concern themselves with such things.

"The village was named Lag... It is suspicious."

"Indeed."

"We must recover his remains so that we might give him a proper burial. This region is suspicious also, but I doubt there is much to gain from a wild god such as this one. It was worth checking, but now that we see this is not the god, we must move swiftly to the next."

"Yes, indeed."

He tied the scrap of paper once again and released the honk to the skies.

The two priests stood up and rested on their staffs.

"Remind me what the little shami's name was."

"I believe it was Nada."

"Good. I can carve his tablet while we walk."

"In death he is a gon-no-sōzu, I believe. I suspect you have forgotten his rank.

Be sure not to mistake his posthumous title.”

“Gon-no-sōzu? You jest. He is a shami.”

“Do not blame me if you need to redo your carving.”

The honk had taken to the skies on a wind blowing from the northwest.

The priests watched it fly as they discussed where they should go next.

The narrow road extended endlessly through the short grass of the plain.

The black fabric on their backs rippled in the wind as they walked across the borderlands.

Part 5 — The Masked Man

55

With their leader gone, the inspector's party had left the village and daily life had rapidly returned to normal.

A vast quantity of food had been used up entertaining a small number of guests, but their stockpiles recovered thanks to some painful frugality and the millet and beans that were ready to be harvested. The scarcity of food was gradually becoming less of an urgent problem.

The men were breaking a sweat harvesting crops, preparing straw, and other such seasonal farm work. The women were working hard on important preparations for the winter, such as dealing with a backlog of repair work and preparing preserved food such as dried meat and smoked fish. As everyone immersed themselves in the many tasks that needed their attention, the gloomy atmosphere hanging over the villagers had already been swept away.

"Ah!"

"It's snowing!"

The children pointed at the sky in wonder when they first saw it.

The adults stopped their work to look at the sky and breathed sighs that hung in the air as white fog.

White particles were glittering and dancing through the sky of the borderlands.

It was proof that a harsh winter was almost upon them.

"The girl's sister is here again."

"Someone go fetch Kai."

The men who lived on the castle grounds were almost all stationed in the

barracks.

Around lunchtime when there would be many people going in and out, that girl would often appear there.

Kai stepped out of the barracks and breathed a short sigh when he saw the girl who was standing by the entrance.

At 12 years old, Elsa's little sister Lilisa was even younger than Kai.

She saw Kai and went running over to him and then gripped his sleeves and started shaking him.

"Tell me where my sister's resting."

"..."

"Tell me where she is!"

Lilisa wanted to say a prayer over the true resting site of her sister's remains. It was a natural request for a bereaved family member to make, and Lilisa was persistent.

After the difficult guests had left the village, several new graves had appeared in the village graveyard beyond the walls. The noble from the center who'd been there as a guest was no longer among the living himself, but there were also women unfortunate enough to have been killed by his violent behavior.

One of the graves had been engraved with the name Elsa.

"My sister is my sister!"

Although her grave had been made there, the only thing buried there was a single lock of her hair. Kai had taken her body to a different place to lay her to rest himself.

"I can't tell you."

"Then tell me why not!"

The girl was determined, and she wouldn't stop pestering Kai.

At one point, she thought that Kai might someday be an older brother to her, but now she was swinging her arms and beating him with her fists in rage. As much as it troubled Kai, all he could do was quietly take it as her tears formed

large drops that ran down her face.

When he had taken his unconscious lover outside of the village, Kai had said it was to show her some beautiful scenery that he'd promised to show her before she died. A group led by Adelia of the women's council had listened to the circumstances and then given him approval. When he then told them that the place had been so beautiful that he'd decided to bury her there, some of the women actually appeared jealous. The village graveyard was nothing much to speak of, and old bones were often accidentally unearthed whenever a new grave was dug. Anyone laid to rest in a special location of their own was someone to be envied.

"At least tell me the location," she begged.

Lilisa had lost a close relative, so she made her demand strongly.

Kai insisted that he couldn't take someone as weak as Lilisa to the location because it was in a dangerous part of the forest. He also said he couldn't tell her where it was because he worried she might try to go there alone.

Kai's argument was convincing, and some thought that his stubborn refusal to tell anyone the location was him being possessive of his lost lover. Opinions differed, but it made a favorable impression on most women.

The girl in front of him was an exception. As she held him and cried, Kai could only let her cry and apologize with a quiet, "Sorry..."

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A sense of calmness was gradually returning to the villagers, but the members of Lag's ruling household, House Moloch, were still troubled by problems beyond the understanding of their subjects.

A high-ranking official visiting the village from the capital had died under mysterious circumstances.

Then the officials serving as his entourage had hastily returned to the royal capital. Simply leaving matters to take their course would be a grave risk for the lord of a small domain.

As soon as the party left, Lord Vezin sent out a messenger to request an

interview with Count Balta, the head of the allied lords of the borderlands.

When a reply came back to them, Vezin and his legitimate son Olha headed out to Baltavia in hope of reducing the punishment that would be inflicted on House Moloch by the center.

Count Balta understood all too well that the pact between the lower lords was just barely enough to maintain the stability of the borderlands. With that in mind, a letter asking for the severity of punishment on House Moloch to be lessened was sent to Count Balta's contacts in the center, and the letter even made its way as far as the king.

Although the poor result of the inspection did not result in House Moloch being asked to make a large tribute of their crops, to prevent that outcome the house had needed to spend much of the coin that they had struggled to accumulate. Lord Vezin showed no signs of displeasure, but his son Olha expressed his irritation openly and said multiple times to his father that they should have been more generous towards the officials from the start.

And of course, it was a difficult task for Count Balta, who had needed to use a large amount of his wealth to ensure that the nobles in the center remained cooperative. All this was done so that the king's displeasure did not result in dire crop yields for House Moloch.

Unknown to his subjects, Vezin had gone to great pains to ensure that they wouldn't starve. When the expenses amounted to more than they could handle, they had to agree to give up half of the horses that had drawn their carriages to Baltavia. For Olha, this left a sour taste, and he argued with his father far more often after their return to their domain.

"With the money we've spent, we could have filled our stores with high-quality wheat from the south. Did I not say so myself!?"

"There's no use arguing over this now. None of us could have predicted it. No one knew the inspector would drop dead in our territory."

"You are too soft on your people, Father. Take the inspector's request for 'pure girls' for instance. We could have given him one or two. The purity of a few village girls stinking of dirt is hardly a tall price."

“Brother!”

Jose was no longer able to resist interjecting during the argument between father and son. Although the head of the women’s council was Olha’s mother Carolina, it was Jose who the women of the village had come to rely on, and she was clearly unhappy with her brother’s statements.

The uncomfortable atmosphere between the three guardian bearers of House Moloch caused the baron’s wives and other children to cluster together nervously. Their servants also kept to the very edges of the room.

“Women should remain quiet. I am speaking with my father as his successor.”

“No, I will not stay quiet. Take back what you just said, Brother!”

“If you cannot learn to be more ladylike, then I fear your proposed engagement will come to naught. Do not think you’ll find a better suitor than the one you have!”

“I don’t give a damn about any engagement! Do you really think the sixth son of a count is...”

“You forget your place, Jose!”

“Olha, Jose! That’s enough!”

When the argument between father and son became an argument between brother and sister, Vezin shouted them down.

His reprimand was enough to make both brother and sister bite their tongues. But both still had anger burning in their eyes, and their argument wasn’t settled.

“Jose, the winter solstice banquet’s happening soon, and I’ll be taking you there. Make preparations.”

“Father, I do not...”

“If it means we’ll have the count’s protection, then it’s a good match for you, Jose.”

“...”

House Moloch’s efforts at self-preservation had resulted in an unexpected

marriage proposal.

When members of House Moloch had visited Baltavia, they'd learned that a strange rumor had spread across the borderlands about a beautiful lady whose hair was as white as snow.

When the true identity of this beautiful lady turned out to be none other than Jose, the first daughter of House Moloch, it caused an unexpected amount of attention to fall on House Moloch within the social circles of Baltavia.

Count Balta had offered his sixth son as a suitor for this beautiful lady who'd been the subject of much talk. With House Moloch asking for assistance from the count, there was no way they could have turned down the offer.

As his sister lowered her head and bit her lip in frustration, Olha looked at her and puffed out his chest as if to say, *Do you see now?* His face seemed to ask her why his poor sister would take their father's side when he treated her so unkindly.

Their problems all stemmed from the fact that House Moloch had been negligent in its duty to ensure the safety of an honored guest. Beyond the eyes of their subjects, the members of House Moloch were enduring their own form of suffering.

"The winter solstice banquet happens in half a month. Don't forget, Jose."

Winter was coming to the village of Lag.

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Kai regretted his complete lack of consideration for Elsa's sister, Lilisa.

After Elsa became comatose and was transferred to a room in the monastery, the only people that Kai saw visiting her were people who worked in the castle, so he'd never seen any of her relatives. As a result, he'd jumped to the conclusion that Elsa was an orphan, just like himself.

It turned out she had a frail mother who spent most of her time in bed and an independent sister who took care of their mother, but the baron had instructed that Elsa's condition should not be reported to her family because the incident

involved his guests.

Kai was unable to sleep a wink, so he rose from his bed and stole out of the barracks.

He wasn't headed for anywhere outside the village that night. A girl who'd known Elsa had told him where her family home was, and he was headed there now.

The people of Lag didn't all live on the castle grounds. Several dwellings resembling longhouses were arranged outside of the castle grounds where most married men and women lived. Married soldiers such as Basco and Setta would commute to the castle rather than living in the barracks, and young children also lived in the longhouses prior to becoming soldiers.

Elsa's family home was part of this collection of longhouses.

It was already late into the night, so in a village where long-burning torches were an unacceptable extravagance, it was rare for anyone to be up so late.

Kai walked among the longhouses and the characteristic smells of everyday life looking for the house he'd been told about. He'd been told that there was a fruitless maca tree nearby.

It must have grown from a seed from fruit collected in the mountains. Trees grown by people with no experience cultivating fruit trees would never bear fruit in many cases. An amateur must have left it there hoping that someday fruit would appear.

There were many gaps in the poorly constructed longhouses and anyone who cared to peer through the cracks in the wooden doors could see inside.

There came a coughing sound from one room that was pitch black just like the other houses.

The figure laid up in bed and suffering from coughing fits must have been Elsa's mother. A familiar voice asked her, "Are you all right?" Despite how late it was, the girl had not gone to bed.

"We ran out of medicine. I'm sorry, Mom."

He could see Lilisa from behind.

Her hair was the exact same color as her sister's, and she was diligently taking care of their mother. Her shoulders shook as she began to sob.

"If my sister was here, she could have got more medicine from the healer in the castle. She was so healthy before it happened."

A thin pale arm reached out from the bed and wrapped itself around Lilisa's shoulders.

Lilisa couldn't help but cry when her mother held her from the sickbed. Her mother then said some words to comfort her.

"Can she really be dead? It doesn't feel as though she's gone," the voice said quietly. Kai couldn't help but look away. He now knew that the family Elsa had left behind hadn't accepted her death.

Kai turned away and tried to push the thoughts out of his mind. Then he ran from the village and headed towards the valley.

If it's a cough remedy they need, vine roots should work.

He decided he'd bring it to them himself.

And if they lacked nutrition, he'd bring them maca.

Many ideas went through Kai's mind as he rushed over the fields of the borderlands.

The valley had become unusually lively.

All were forbidden to enter the valley without permission from Kai, but species that had sworn devotion to him were permitted to live in the regions around the very edge.

The first residents were a little over 100 koror who started the first settlement on the eastern side of the valley's edge. They'd named their village Hacar, after the village they had abandoned.

New residents were also starting to settle on the southern edge of the valley.

That settlement belonged to the uzelle who Kai had picked up while helping with the truthseeker's survey. Nirun had inherited her people's guardian,

making her their leader despite her young age. She would run off from place to place in search of uzelles in hiding, so that she could guide them to the valley.

Thanks to her continued efforts, her people were continually increasing in number, but the settlement was still a mere 30 individuals. They had named their village Newnaji. The name apparently meant that it was a new Najikaji.

Many of the homes around the valley were tents at first, but as the residents settled into their new lives, the number of permanent dwellings made using traditional methods increased.

The koror would cut large balen cedars to the right height and then hollow out the inside to create a cylindrical interior. For the roof, they'd create a cone shape using layers of bark. Their dexterous hands and small bodies were what made these their preferred houses. Because balen cedars were so big, the inside could have multiple stories. The main part of Porek's house had three stories.

They'd been warned in advance not to cut down too many balen cedars. Kai had also made sure to introduce them to the neighboring lagarto.

The uzelle homes were built from sun-dried bricks in the shape of upside-down bowls, and mud was used to coat the outside. Their homes looked similar to the gravesite Kai had seen in their ruined village. After the mud dried, they finally coated the outside with tree bark, similar to that used for roofs of koror homes. They said this was a traditional way to keep out the rain.

Between these two villages, a road had appeared, suggesting that there was trade between the two. They had both sworn devotion to the god of the valley and were trying to develop a good relationship with each other.

Somewhere between them there was an area resembling a plaza, where the two species could enjoy everyday conversations and trade items with each other in a simple sort of marketplace. The main things traded were the craftwork that was a koror specialty and the woven materials of the uzelle.

Both species had sworn their devotion to the god of the valley, so they both felt comfortable living very close to the valley. Kai wanted to entrust both species with securing the valley's safety, so he hoped they would increase in number a little more.

After having seen the fearsome armored soldier of the orgs, he knew that he couldn't be too wary when it came to the orgs who held the greatest power on the other side of the forest. There were still five more soldiers of the Rigdaros remaining, so it was natural for Kai to be cautious.

It was always night when Kai, the master of the valley, visited. The villages of both species would be sound asleep, and those keeping night watch were usually the first to notice Kai's arrival. He always arrived in the same place more or less, so they never failed to notice him.

The koror had been thoughtful enough to create stone paving in the area where Kai always arrived and had even constructed gateposts where there were always night lights burning. It provided him with an impressive entranceway.

They would often be there to greet him by bowing deeply as Kai passed by and jumped into the valley.

Rather than heading straight for the cabin, he searched the forest of the valley. Aruwe was left waiting in the cabin until he had found what he was looking for.

Aruwe would know to expect his arrival thanks to a signal from those on night watch in the form of a quiet horn. She was always standing ready outside. That night also, Aruwe bowed deeply when she saw him and then let her face relax to form a smile.

Kai hadn't appeared until sometime after she had heard the signal, so in that time she'd been able to light the stove and had placed a pot over it. Aruwe made it a habit to prepare food whenever her master arrived.

"My God, you didn't come straight here this night."

"Yeah, I was looking for something in the forest."

Kai had arrived carrying several maca and the twisted roots of a type of ivy known as rakan, which were normally difficult to pull up.

"Do you want to boil those rakuhan roots? I can do it."

"Thanks."

“There have been several offerings. Would you like to eat first?”

Kai smiled wryly as he thought about the subtle differences in the names that humans and koror gave to things.

Kai knew he wasn't exactly well-educated himself, so he didn't try to correct Aruwe, and she was left to do things in the ordinary way of the koror.

Aruwe skillfully took over the work that Kai had brought her and began preparing his meal at the same time. Although she just looked like a child at a glance, she was actually very capable.

Both species settled at the valley's edge would regularly give offerings to the god of the valley. Most of those offerings were food because they knew that the worldly incarnation of that god, Kai, had the appetite of a growing boy.

The food that Aruwe served alongside the hot tea that day was a strange cake made by crushing fruit from the forest into a paste and then cooking it to remove the sour taste. It was a difficult type of food to make, so it wasn't something an ordinary villager like Kai would normally be able to eat.

As Kai sat on the steps to the cabin eating the food, he asked, “Is *she* here?”

Aruwe, who was busy putting chopped herbs into a pot, hesitated for a moment before replying, “In the cabin...”

Kai sighed a great sigh. He put down the things he was carrying and then parted the double-layered curtain at the entrance to the cabin. The thick woven cloth provided by the uzelles was a valuable item that could keep out the outside air.

The interior of the cabin had been heated by the warmth of someone's body.

Sprawled on the bed that Kai had once called his own was the uzelle girl with her arms and legs outstretched. It was Nirun.

“She's hopeless...”

Nirun had started sleeping in the cabin like this ever since she first brought her people to the valley. At first, Aruwe had been fiercely against the idea, and there'd been a lot of trouble. But when Aruwe learned that the uzelle girl had given herself to Kai as his concubine and was doing her best to serve her master

so that he'd accept her people, Aruwe came to see her as a sort of roommate.

The problem with Nirun was that she didn't know how to do any household tasks.

Whenever she tried to help, Nirun just got in the way, and Aruwe soon told her that her help wasn't wanted. Before long, Nirun ceased to do anything besides eating and sleeping in the cabin.

"Get up."

Kai had also started to treat her a little roughly. He pulled away her bedding without mercy and then prodded Nirun with his toe when she still didn't get up.

When she finally opened her eyes, he asked her, "Did you do the job I gave you?"

When Nirun saw Kai, she leaped out of bed, looked at Aruwe who was glaring back at her, and then scratched her head awkwardly.

"I'm doing it like you said."

Nirun didn't sound entirely convincing as she looked down at the other bed that had been made. In that bed of straw lay Elsa, who had been close to death.

Kai's expression softened somewhat when he saw her chest rising and falling just slightly.

"I've been giving your wife her feed like you said."

Kai grabbed Nirun's head and shook her. He didn't like it when she talked as if she was feeding an animal. She tried telling him to be more gentle, but Kai was her master and he wasn't in the mood to listen.

Kai knelt down by Elsa's bedside and stroked her face affectionately.



After seeming beyond hope for a time, Elsa's life had been extended beyond her godstone poisoning.

Kai had asked the koror to provide him with their traditional antidote and had learned that there were established procedures for treating the condition.

When a human guardian bearer was retired, it was a necessity for another guardian bearer to be present. The same was true for the koror. To ensure that the medicine could reach the stomach, the hollowed-out vines of rakan were boiled to sterilize them and then fed down to the stomach.

Boiling was also necessary to soften the hard vines, but a guardian bearer's powers were necessary to allow them to pass down the narrow esophagus.

In a way, the method was similar to Kai's practiced healing magic, and the guardian bearer would place their hand on the patient's neck then concentrate.

Accept it...

When he concentrated on that thought, his spiritual energy was transmitted to the patient's body. It was almost like using magic. Porek explained that this was relatively painless for the patient, and would cause the muscles in the esophagus to relax, allowing them to accept the food.

Kai had been able to put this into practice himself.

From then on, the sleeping girl was regularly given small amounts of the antidote together with a traditional koror soup made using sweet honey. If she was given too much, it would act like another poison, so it was Nirun's job to administer the antidote once a day while Kai was away.

Although she was still very thin, the antidote must have been working because Elsa's sleeping face was looking less pained. Kai prayed for her quick recovery as he stroked her cheek.

Kai paid no attention to the two "girls" standing off to the side and looking at him with unhappy longing. Polygamy was common in this world, and they both wanted to be Kai's wives, so Kai's focus on Elsa alone was a problem for them.

“Please keep taking care of her.”

When Kai gave them an order, they couldn't say no.

Nirun was going out of her way to be appealing to Kai, but her efforts were wasted because she was definitely not Kai's type. If she was as beautiful in the eyes of other uzelle as she claimed, then the current situation must have been disappointing to her.

“I think you need an herbal remedy too, My Master.”

Aruwe must have realized what kind of “remedy” Nirun was talking about because she very quickly started nodding in agreement.

“I'm not sick. I don't need a remedy for anything.”

“But it's such a very sweet remedy. If you won't try it, I don't know what else to do.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“I-I can prepare the remedy,” Aruwe added. “I'll add lots of honey to make sure it's not bitter!”

“Please, just try it.”

“...”

Kai tilted his head in genuine confusion over what they were saying.

Although he knew they wouldn't do anything to harm him, he realized it was some sort of prank, so he made it clear that he wouldn't take whatever remedy they were talking about.

The old woman who was Lag's healer only ever made bitter tasting remedies, so Kai felt sure that their talk about sweet remedies was complete nonsense.

The coming and going of koror and uzelle had become commonplace around the valley, which meant that the trade they performed with other species to support their way of life became commonplace there too.

Intricate craftwork made by koror hands was always in demand, so buyers would send merchants to the valley. Naturally, these merchants weren't

humans, but demi-human merchants that would facilitate trades between other demi-human species.

There was one individual merchant who appeared to have a good relationship with the tribe led by Porek, and this merchant was a long-haired, male miao named Fluu.

His luggage was pulled along by a strange armadillo-like creature known as a glypto, which would curl up into a ball to protect itself when attacked. This merchant would walk through the forests of the borderlands, bringing produce and ores to the koror from other species, and carrying away the koror's special craftwork in exchange.

Fluu was rather plump looking, but the way he carried himself made him appear agile, and he boasted that his black fur allowed him to disappear into the shadows of the forest within an instant. He would warm up to people fast and could be almost too friendly at times, but he obviously had ulterior motives, so beginners had to be careful when dealing with him.

When Kai came to the valley, Porek would wake up the miao gentleman in the middle of the night so he could greet Kai, who didn't visit at any other time. Each time, Kai would follow Porek's advice by wearing the mask to hide his face, so Fluu thought that Kai was a survivor of the old ones, who had also resembled humans.

Porek allowed the man to come and go while taking full responsibility for him. Porek made it clear that he'd bear full responsibility for any disrespect the man showed. Under pressure, Fluu's tail had soon curled into a ball, and he swore his allegiance to the god of the valley. However, he wasn't a guardian bearer, so he claimed that it was for his tribe's leader to decide whether he could swear devotion and he asked to be given some time to discuss the matter at home. Under the mask, Kai blinked in surprise despite himself.

It was as though Fluu felt that his people were under pressure to swear their devotion.

Fluu wasn't just a skilled negotiator, he was also able to bring them much useful information regarding many different aspects of the world of demi-humans.

The most powerful force in the region surrounding the valley was the orgs, and the powerful Rigdaros stood with their king at the center, with a collection of 108 gods below them. This meant that theirs was an unusually stable land in the world of demi-humans, and their crops were even more productive than those in the world of humans.

They had several metal ore deposits, and these included an abundance of iron. In the center of their royal capital was an array of large furnaces where the large bellows and flames never stopped, and smoke billowed from them continuously. Kai felt moved when he heard Fluu's description of a world he'd never seen.

Orgs would unexpectedly bear many children, so they hungered for land from all directions and were constantly engaged in bloody conflicts with other species.

From the viewpoint of the orgish nation, the forests that were home to the macaques spread out to the east, and they created an obstacle to orgish kind. To the west, a species known as the braganto, with snouts similar to orgs, had formed another nation that formed another obstacle to orgish expansion.

Most of the weaker species had been made to swear devotion to the major species and were able to ensure their survival by becoming subservient. That more or less summed up the world of demi-humans to the north.

There were rumors that uzelles had recently been forced out of many of their long-held territories.

"I was shocked to learn that those uzelles had gathered together to seek protection from the god of arbitration. It's a very convenient arrangement for me because it means I can obtain uzelle fabrics at the same time as koror goods. Though I'm not the only one who values the works of these rare species, so I expect rumors of this valley's existence are going to spread fast."

"Koror and uzelles are not the only ones who've found themselves threatened after having had their land taken away. If the tale of our master killing one of the feared Rigdaros of the orgs spreads, there may be more who seek protection in the old promises. There were once numerous weak species who once struggled against the greater species with the god of arbitration at their

backs.”

“I have heard that a key member of the Rigdaros was defeated and that a part of the orgish land was laid waste. The pigs are naturally sinful and avaricious, so there will be those plotting to take back the power of their great soldier that was stolen from them. They are more persistent than most. They seldom forget a grudge.”

“Fluu... Please inform me if you become aware of any movement within their nation relating to this incident.”

“As of yet, these feeble ears of mine have heard nothing. Though the pigs have been troubled with a particular demon emerging from the north, and I hear that their forces from each region are being dispatched there. They’ll need uzelle fabrics to protect them against the cold, so I’ll make a real killing if... Sorry, I forget myself.”

Fluu narrowed his eyes while scratching at his head.

It was hard to tell whether the gesture was natural or part of an act.

If the orgs were focused on a battle to the north, it probably meant that they were unable to deal with non-urgent problems such as the valley.

The macaques that caused endless trouble had been scattered by an army of 1,000 or so orgs. Considering that the army had been led by a single member of the Rigdaros, it was easy to imagine that the entire species might have an army of more than 10,000.

When the count of the borderlands had rallied together the lords of the borderlands alliance, the armies of lords from the eastern region of the borderlands had amounted to about 700, and their fight with an orgish army of only 200 had been a horribly bloody battle.

The forces causing such trouble for humans were really just the offshoots of the offshoots, but they’d caused enough damage to bring a single village to ruin. Rather than fighting with other demi-humans, it seemed that it would be much more efficient for them to take land from humans, who controlled more land than they were capable of easily defending.

But preventing a large-scale org invasion was the wall formed by the forest

that orgs didn't control, and the powerful lagarto species that had taken root there. The valley too may have been another factor. It made Kai realize that the people of the borderlands were on thinner ice than they knew, and it gave a new significance to his presence there as the embodiment of the god of the valley.

Kai felt that if he was one of the factors preventing orgs from advancing south, he should work to become stronger so that the borderlands would be protected from the orgish threat. Allowing tribes that would fight alongside him to gather around the edge of the valley would also be effective.

That was the first time that Kai had a sense of the nation that was forming with his valley at its center.

It was fortunate that he'd made contact with the miao trader, because it gave him a great opportunity to gather information about the world of demi-humans.

"In that case, I will consider it," Porek was saying.

"If we have our god's blessing, then I shall act immediately," Fluu replied.

For a few moments there was silence.

"My God...?" Porek said.

The conversation had moved on without Kai, leaving him confused. Porek guessed what kind of face Kai must be making under the mask, so he repeated the same explanation again as if nothing was amiss.

It turned out that the discussion had turned to trade some time ago.

Porek's koror and Nirun's uzelles were oppressed as weak species, and their kind had become rare even in the great forests. Fluu said outright that he wanted the same monopoly on trade with Porek and the koror as he'd had before. Porek also seemed to think they should avoid letting others see how disorganized the valley was in its current state, so he suggested that it would be better for security if they limited who came and went as much as possible.

Kai listened to them both carefully and then decided to follow Porek's advice.

Porek would decide who could come and go from the valley, and those

individuals would be allowed to stay in a gathering hall that would be constructed in Hacar, where they could negotiate trade agreements with the nation of the valley.

Goods to be traded would be collected in the gathering hall for a time and then they could leave with the goods in accordance with any agreements made. A goods storeroom for the gathering hall would be made somewhere separated from both the valley and Hacar village, and then other merchants without permission to come and go would only be able to collect goods there.

When Porek asked how far away it would need to be to avoid bothering his master, Kai replied with the first number that came to his head, which was half a yuld. Fluu said it should be built to the south of the valley in that case. When asked why he gave a very logical reason.

“Although our god’s power is strong in the north, it is clear that the pigs also come and go from there. No matter how vigilant the koror may be, all goods would soon be stolen in the event of an org invasion. But the pigs are wary of the humans to the south, and they will not go there carelessly for fear of provoking the lagarto.”

The miao were merchants first and foremost, and they often used roads that actually cut through human territory because they feared being attacked in the forest. In the west of the borderlands, there were several human lords who would trade with the miao directly.

That meant that koror craftwork could even make its way to Lag if it was carried by traveling human merchants.

It was at that point that Kai realized that the miao merchants were surprisingly skilled when it came to communication.

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“Smoke’s rising again.”

“They must have to cook because of how cold it is.”

“Why’d it have to be now? We’re busy enough with winter coming.”

The soldiers exchanged words in low voices as they walked side by side. One of them was looking nervously over toward the forest far to the east and pointing to a thin column of rising smoke.

The stone-axe-wielding macaques also used fire when cooking. The soldiers who'd gone deep into the forest had learned that the macaques used slash-and-burn agriculture. Rumors that they boiled up salted human meat together with their potatoes naturally came next.

Whenever smoke rose from the forest, it was proof that a creature there was using fire, and the creatures capable of using fire in this region were limited to the humans of Lag and the macaques who lived deep within the forest.

The smoke had begun appearing regularly half a month ago, and since then, the villagers had ceased to go into the nearby forest. It meant that the owner of the smoke coming from the forest could only be a macaque.

"That smoke... It's not far off the edge of the forest."

"Those bastard apes..." someone spat hatefully.

The village was under pressure to gather a large amount of wood that would see them through the winter. Most years, they would go to the nearby forest from the village to get what they needed, but this year, things weren't going as planned.

In fear of the macaques, the villagers had gone to gather their wood from somewhere further from the village.

Needless to say, the level of work involved made this more than a small job. It was starting to feel as though this was the main occupation of every man in the village.

"You know that priest that was here a while back? Well, someone who was there on his survey heard him talking to Lord Olha. He was saying that the apes are going to attack in large numbers soon."

"Tajik told you that? He said the same to me."

"But we were there in the forest depths. An army of the pigs showed up and massacred all the apes deep in the forest, right? I don't get it."

“It’s all happening right here in front of your eyes, so it’s true whether you get it or not. There weren’t so many back then, but they attacked our village just a while back, didn’t they?”

“The ones that came while Kai was getting lectured by the priest?”

“That was after the survey in the depths, wasn’t it? So the ones scattered by the pigs can’t have been the tribe targeting Lag. Manso, you agree with me, right?”

“The world of demi-humans is complicated. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re right. Anyway, we’ve nearly reached the forest. Time to put us to work, Kai.”

“Hm? Oh... All of you, get to work.”

Kai gave the order to them absentmindedly, causing his squadmates to laugh awkwardly as they began making preparations.

The other squads were also starting work at the edge of the forest.

“All right. Let’s take this tree today.”

“What? That’s too broad.”

“That is broad.”

Near the edge of the forest, it was easy to gather small trees, but these made poor trophies, and wouldn’t please the village women. Not only did their thin twisted shapes make them hard to carry, the smoke they gave off when burned would sting the eyes.

“It’s a pain, I know, but we can cut down a big one and drag it back to the village. Or we could just carry a bulky small one. Those are the choices.”

“We’ve got good help when it comes to carrying.”

“All right then, what’ll it be, Kai?” Manso asked while pointing his thumb at the large axe carried on his back.

Even someone as strong as Manso had to put the large axe on his back to carry it several yulds from the village. That axe looked very familiar to Kai.

It was an orgish axe.

The other soldiers helped Manso to loosen the cords around it and lower it

from his back. He picked it up once more and then tried carrying it over his shoulder while gripping it with both hands. It was a heavy object that a man could just about lift off the ground. The strength of human men was below average, and a weapon like this was too unwieldy for them to use as a regular weapon on the battlefield.

Manso swung it forcefully at the narrowest balen cedar in the area. His hands went numb, and he stumbled forward one step. The axe had stopped after just barely becoming embedded in the trunk of the tree.

Manso then stepped aside as if it was time for the star of the show to step up.

It was time for Kai to put his incredible strength to use. He gripped the handle of the axe and pulled it free with ease. He drew it back while twisting his body and then swung the iron blade straight back into the same notch in the trunk.

It was enough to make the whole balen cedar shake as if it was no more than a small branch, though it was actually as broad as the baron's waist. It was clear from the shaking of the tree that the fibers within were being shredded. Just two or three swings was enough to bring down a balen cedar, albeit a narrow one. The other squads nearby sounded impressed, and they knew it could only be the work of Kai's squad.

"All right. See you back at the village."

They quickly stripped off any branches that would have made it hard to carry, and the squad members then picked out the good ones from among the bunch. With that, Kai's squad had fulfilled their quota. It went without saying that Kai would be the one to carry the trunk itself. Ropes were hooked around the protuberances that had been left on the trunk when the branches were removed, and the rope was handed to Kai.

Kai scowled because he felt that all the difficult jobs were being left to him, but he began dragging the trunk back to the village all the same. It was a large tree with a diameter of one yule and height of twenty yules, but Kai's strength made it look effortless to carry, astounding most of those watching.

Many of the branches that Kai's squad left behind were fought over by the other squads. Branches from a large balen cedar were broad enough to make good war trophies.

“He’s not normal, that one.”

“Something special’s been born in our village.”

The men of the borderlands, whose lives were constantly in danger, found people like Kai easy to look up to. To them, strength was justice and it was what protected their species. Some felt something more like envy toward him, but Kai was so far beyond most soldiers they no longer felt the need to compete with him; he was in a league of his own.

The people of the village had begun to feel he was different.

They thought it must have been because he had eaten an unimaginable number of godstones on the battlefield.

Now that they had seen the priest who had obtained a sigil without being a guardian bearer, a human who had reached the level of doi sigil through the secret arts of the monastery rather than through the blessings of a land god, they found it easy to draw comparisons with Kai.

He’s already on his way to being another one of those...

A human who wasn’t a guardian bearer, but was already halfway to reaching their level. That was how the people of the village were beginning to view the boy named Kai.

**

“Akui...”

The woman who’d opened the window to let in some air turned around.

The woman knew that it was a lady of the baron’s house who had called her name, so she was about to quickly close the window thinking the feeling of cold air was bothering her.

“No, I’m not cold,” the voice said, “I can hear some sort of commotion outside.”

“They’re cutting firewood, Lady Jose.”

“Firewood...?”

The girl with skin as white as snow walked over, so the woman named Akui

moved away from the window and stood waiting.

Lady White looked out of the window. She was always interested in things happening around her. The woman waited, thinking that Jose would lose interest once she knew that the commotion was a few men who weren't worth her attention cutting firewood.

But Lady White remained there, leaning out of the window.

Akui hesitantly looked at the men at work for the first time. There she saw a group of men struggling with a large tree that was far too big to be firewood. She supposed that if that whole tree was to be used for firewood, it would keep the whole village going for an entire 7-day cycle.

"Lady Jose?"

"How'd they carry that thing here?! That came all the way from the forest?!"

"You are right. It is a big tree."

Things made more sense when Akui glanced down and noticed a young boy.

Akui recognized this boy who was standing there looking quiet and confused while the others shouted to him loudly. He was a young boy with great potential who often came up in the conversations of young women. She felt quite sure that the boy's name was Kai.

By now, everyone in the village knew about this boy's unusual strength. If there was anyone who didn't know, they would have to be a member of the baron's household on the third floor who never saw his strength on display out in the fields.

Lady White seemed to be one of those who hadn't been aware.

"I think that boy there... is named Kai."

"Looks like we'll soon be finished gathering this year's firewood."

Akui was about to reply but then another voice interrupted her.

It was a familiar voice, so Akui stood to attention once more without being overly surprised. In front of Lady Jose's face, there was Lord Vezin who at some point had appeared at the window to look at the scene outside.

“That kid, Kai... Just look how strong he’s gotten.”

“Kai?”

“He just looks like some kid starting out as a soldier, but he’s more than that. Something changed him when he went west.”

The baron made a sound in his throat that made it clear he’d taken quite a liking to the young boy named Kai.

It was undeniable that his strength was way beyond that of any ordinary person. Just a few days ago they’d seen the priest who’d obtained a sigil without blessings, so they thought the boy might be similar.

“If his personality’s not so bad, I might just make him one of our own. I do have a daughter of about the same age.”

Akui was surprised to hear the baron say such a thing about Kai. It wasn’t uncommon for a lord to take in one of their subject’s daughters, but to take in a man as their son-in-law was unheard of.

Akui couldn’t help but glance at Lady White when she wondered which daughter the baron was talking about, but then she shook her head internally. Lord Olha and Lady Jose were the children of his first wife, Lady Carolina, but he did have other children by his second wife, Lady Falda. Lady Falda’s oldest daughter, Lana, would turn 16 this year, making her closer to the boy’s age than Jose, who was a little older.

Lana was a proud girl who looked down on the common people, so she wouldn’t be pleased by this idea. Regardless, she wouldn’t be able to reject a commoner like Kai once the baron had made his decision. For a promising boy like Kai who was the target of many women, he might be dissatisfied to be married to someone he wasn’t suited to, but simply by becoming part of the baron’s household, he would gain many benefits. He’d be released from the need to labor each day, and he’d receive more food. It was also possible that he could marry other women afterward.

Akui thought of several other women who’d be disappointed to see the boy taken, and she sighed softly to herself. Men weren’t the only ones in fierce competition for a partner.

“Let’s bring the kid with us as an escort to the winter solstice banquet. Putting him to the test is the quickest way.”

“Father... you intend to take Kai with us to the provincial capital?” Lady White asked the baron.

Akui could only see her back, but somehow, she knew that Lady White looked happy.

She found it strange, but she was soon given some new work to do, and the strange feeling disappeared from her mind.

Lady Jose’s white hair with its silver shine swayed distractingly like the tail of an excited horse, and then disappeared from Akui’s field of view.

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As the days passed, macaque cooking fires sent more and more smoke rising from the forest.

At first, they were secretive, but as their numbers increased, they made their presence obvious. There were now so many columns of rising white smoke at noon and in the evening that the people of Lag were becoming nervous.

Working outside was difficult during the winters of the borderlands, and the harsh conditions would normally make demi-humans less active. During an ordinary year, winter was the season when white snow would cover everything and humans would live peacefully while focusing on their immediate surroundings.

No one was stupid enough to start a fight when winter’s unforgiving cold had chilled everyone down to the core. Most demi-humans were curled up in their burrows, or at least that’s what many of the villagers thought. Even Lord Vezin said so to admonish some of the restless villagers.

But the strange columns of white smoke spread out across the edge of the forest, and they never receded. A cycle later, the borderlands had its first snowfall. The world was covered in a layer of fine white snow, and the gathering of firewood came to an end in the village.

While some brushed off the concerns saying that the macaques would give up and disperse when the snow became deeper, the more hot-blooded villagers started saying that they should strike now to drive them away before winter reached its height.

The pro-war faction was led by the baron's son, Olha.

The macaque army numbered 2,300 at the most, and if the start of the fighting caught them by surprise, the combat potential of Lag alone could be enough to drive them back. Olha was adamant that the fighting should start soon.

At that point in time, Lag had just over 100 soldiers, and that was counting newly recruited children. Vezin denied his son's demands, saying that they couldn't afford to lose any more soldiers in a careless battle.

Instead, he ordered that they prepare for a siege, and pieces of equipment stored away below the castle were carried out one after another. They began to repair old weapons and armor with great haste, and much of the firewood they'd gathered instead became wood used to make arrows.

They'd put themselves on course for a cold winter with little wood to burn in their fireplaces. Their one piece of good fortune was that they had finished harvesting the crops they needed for their food, but there was little optimism now that they'd lost the firewood they'd been counting on.

"They got one of our scouts?"

"He got his head smashed in by a flying boulder. But listen to this: They've built a fort in the forest."

"A fort?!" The other soldiers cried in disbelief when they heard the rumors Manso was sharing with them.

The party had returned from a reconnaissance force operation under Basco's command. They'd brought back precious information about the macaque army, but it wasn't good news.

Within the forest, the macaques had made defensive walls by constructing sturdy wooden fences, and they'd also dug deep trenches around the outside, making the whole thing look like a fort. The macaques kept watch from

watchtowers enclosed by broad logs high up in a cluster of balen cedars that grew in the center.

When they climbed the balen cedars that served as their watchtowers, they were high enough to keep watch over the village of Lag. They were no doubt watching everything the villagers did at all times.

“And then they counted the beasts.”

Even taking into consideration the fact that the scout had been dodging flying boulders and barely escaped alive, the number of macaques he counted was cause for concern.

“They say there are about a thousand of them.”

“...!”

“You’re kidding?!”

The more Manso told them, the more surprised soldiers became.

The entire population of Lag was 1,000 people. But that wasn’t the number of men; it included women, children, and old people too.

The same number of macaques had gathered in the forest ready to attack the village. What’s more, they were obviously planning for a long battle because they had even constructed a fort. The thought made Kai shiver, as if he was facing death in battle against the enemy at that very moment.

If Manso had this information, then it was probably already known to most of the soldiers.

The voices they could hear from the other rooms of the crowded barracks had started to take on a different tone from normal.

“We’ll need help from other villages...”

“They’ve sent out runners already.”

“We’ll need the count...”

“They’ve sent messenger birds out.”

“...”

“...”

Needless to say, everyone was imagining the village in ruin.

Even if every man, woman, and child in the village fought to defend it, the difference in combat potential was so great that they couldn't imagine being able to defend the village.

They had sturdy stone walls to protect them, but walls had their limits.

There was already a clear difference in the physical abilities between humans and macaques. The macaques were slightly less intelligent, but they were far stronger than humans.

Not only were they stronger, they also had superior numbers.

They knew how many soldiers the neighboring villages could send if they offered their support to the maximum extent. The count of the borderlands had sent word before the battle in the west and had gathered 700 soldiers.

That was the largest number of soldiers that could be gathered out on the edge of the borderlands. That was exactly why the demi-humans kept on targeting the land in this region.

While his squadmates were quietly discussing something that they probably wouldn't have wanted their superiors to hear, Kai sat by himself, arms folded and deep in thought.

His squadmates would never have guessed, but Kai's thoughts weren't the simple thoughts of a single villager, he was thinking with the deep contemplation of a powerful ruler. Out of everyone there, Kai was probably the most knowledgeable about the world of demi-humans.

Firstly, there was the question of where the macaques planning to attack the village had come from. In the battle with the orgs deep in the forest, they'd been defeated while fighting to defend the uzelle settlement under their protection and many macaques had died. Although Kai didn't know how many might have escaped alive, he knew the number of casualties had to be high. He seriously doubted that they'd been left with enough resources to begin a new fight.

In the eastern part of the great forest, the macaques were known as the dominant species. It would make sense for them to have as many tribes as the orcs, and while one tribe may have lost the uzelles in battle, another unharmed tribe could be starting this battle in an attempt to claim new territory.

By this reasoning, it seemed likely that the macaques coming to the village were members of a separate tribe.

Then the next question was why they had chosen to attack during winter. The great forest to the north was filled with trees known as needle-leaves, so the forest wasn't particularly rich in sources of food at the best of times.

It was hard to imagine that creatures whose agricultural knowledge didn't extend beyond slash-and-burn agriculture would have ample stocks of food. So why would they dispatch an army in winter when food supplies were lacking?

They'd mobilized 1,000 soldiers for a battle that would decide the fate of their tribe. Regardless of how eager they were to obtain the land gods stolen by House Moloch, there was no reason for them to go to such extremes.

But still...

None of this changed the fact that their ultimate prize was the three gods of House Moloch.

Kai already knew about their intense desire to obtain the land gods, so he didn't doubt that this was correct. In other words, any logical explanation of their behavior should use this motive as the starting point.

In the end, he didn't have enough information to draw a conclusion.

Although the explanation felt within grasp, Kai still lacked enough knowledge of the demi-human world to find the answer himself.

Once Kai had accepted this, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply for a while.

He decided that he would have someone investigate next time he went to the valley, and then he simply stopped thinking about it.

"Let's just do our best not to die." Kai's conclusion brought his squadmate's discussion to an end.

Manso scratched his head and said, "Guess so."

The other soldiers stopped holding their breaths and sighed.

For soldiers born and raised in the village who'd never known anywhere else, the idea of giving up their land and fleeing didn't occur to them.

It wasn't a question of fight or flight. The only option was fight.

They'd thrown away the two offshoot villages they'd once held. But if they also abandoned the main village, they'd be left with nowhere else to live. The moment Lag was lost, their own lives would be lost with it. Like many in the borderlands, the squad members felt no strong attachment to life, and they accepted their fate easily.

"We'll count on our squad leader."

The members of the squad still saw Kai, their inexperienced leader, as a final ray of hope.

The squad members put their fists together and then traced holy signs in the air as they prayed for their own survival.

**

"You liar."

When Kai tried to leave the barracks, he was stopped by a familiar figure.

Elsa's little sister Lilisa was looking at him defiantly as always.

"Sis is alive, isn't she?"

"..." Kai's breath caught in his throat when he heard that unexpected question.

Lilisa must have noticed his reaction to the question because she smiled triumphantly and then grabbed hold of Kai's sleeve.

"There was a parcel left by our home. It had cough medicine in it. The same type that Sis used to bring us."

"..."

"It happened twice! Sis must have visited."

She tried to accept it but never could. Now she faced the person insisting on the death that she couldn't accept and stared at him in an attempt to make him take back his words.

The parcels she'd found were left there by Kai himself of course. They were left as a clumsy form of atonement.

He didn't know if he'd done the right thing. He'd given false hope to Elsa's struggling sister, so he couldn't help but think he'd made a mistake.

Kai had also left some maca along with the powdered cough medicine, so Elsa's sister must have eaten those. Maybe later she'd realize that it was a little late in the year to find maca.

The trees at the bottom of the valley continued to produce maca even as the winter approached. The flowers were also still in bloom, and the area was still warm. That might have been a miracle caused by the god of the valley's power.

"Is Sis really still alive?!"

Kai didn't know how to answer her question.

He couldn't tell her that Elsa was alive. Not yet.

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As the villagers nervously watched for activity from the macaques gathered in the forest, the long-awaited responses from neighboring villages finally arrived. Everyone knew that several responses had reached the baron over the course of several days, and yet he made no announcements.

The villagers guessed that there was nothing in those responses that he wanted to announce. And they were right. In a dreadful outcome, every response for aid to the neighboring villages had been met with refusal.

This wasn't such a surprise. Not only was the population of the borderlands falling, there were no lords in the borderlands naïve enough to send their subjects into a battle that they were obviously going to lose. In every village, people were already being killed by demi-humans faster than children were being born.

Instead, the messengers were told directly that survivors from Lag would be accepted, but they'd expect each survivor to come carrying two sacks of wheat or grain each. This response was so shocking that no one knew what to say.

They had no choice but to fight.

Although their request for aid had been refused, the people of Lag didn't hate them for being so callous. The tough environment of the borderlands meant that everyone was expected to live their lives independently without relying on others. And since reincarnation was considered a part of life by the people of this world, they didn't place high value on human lives.

Many truly thought that every villager could just return to the cycle of Samsara if things didn't work out.

"The count said he'd need at least a month to get an army to us."

"But he went charging into the battle in the west and got there after just a few days."

"My husband says it's because we're up against too many of them. It doesn't matter how big of an army they gather for us, we'll all be sent back to Ispi Rio before they get here."

"I don't doubt that."

That was the type of idle talk heard from the women.

While everyone was exhausted from their rushed battle preparations, the women would use what free time they had to start gossip.

But they weren't at all lax in their duties, so no one had any complaints to make. In fact, the men couldn't help but admire the women for being so mentally tough.

Kai caught sight of a familiar-looking girl carrying a basket behind a group of passing women. Their eyes met, but the girl very obviously averted her gaze.

In a situation like this, everyone had to pitch in and help, even the young children. Kai's fellow soldiers were busy blocking up the front gate to the village using earth from the inside. The gates were the weakest points in their defense and blocking them up like this would prevent the enemy from breaking through.

“Look at this. There’s a pretty girl here.”

“...”

When the soldiers nearby paused their work, Lilisa was already out of sight.

The fact that the words “pretty girl” was enough to make everyone look up from their work was a clear indication of how badly many of them were shunned by women. Even in a crisis with their death approaching, there were many unlucky men who still couldn’t get near members of the opposite sex.

They silently went back to the task they’d been given until the news they’d been waiting for arrived.

“It’s them! They’re coming!”

When the soldiers carrying the news came running over, everyone who’d been busy at work scrambled to get atop the walls. No one said anything. They simply hurried to get somewhere where they could see what was happening.

Once they reached the top of the walls, what Kai and the others saw was a wave of gray silently charging toward them over the fine snow that covered the soil of the borderlands.

The sight of the army approaching them from afar like a torrent of mud unnerved the soldiers in a way that was visible in their eyes.

The enemy approached silently because they were so far away.

But as they got closer the soldiers began to feel the vibrations in the pits of their stomachs.

“Shit, I really didn’t wanna die today.”

“Me neither, but we’re dying anyway.”

With shaking hands, soldiers began to drag large shields up onto the walls ready for a defensive battle. These would protect the soldiers from the boulders that the macaques tended to throw when attacking. One soldier would hold up the large shield while several others would prepare a great bow brought out from the castle to use as part of their offense.

From the castle's stores, they'd brought out 50 dust-covered great bows that were seldom ever used. They were powerful bows for use against demi-humans, so they had to be inserted into a groove in a pile of stones below the bow and used while fixed in place. The large size meant that the bowstring was tough, and two soldiers were needed at the very least to operate it.

If the bows had been smaller, they would have been virtually useless against demi-human opponents. Although they were fairly effective weapons when they hit, scoring a direct hit was difficult, unsurprisingly.

"Why's it always our village they're after?"

"I wish they'd attack another damned village for once."

When Kai heard these soldiers cursing and half crying, he told them to shut up. He was a squad leader with authority over them, after all.

They laughed awkwardly when they saw how strangely calm Kai was. "Wouldn't you be better at working the bow?" someone asked him frankly, but high-ranking soldiers were more useful in melee combat. Kai's job would be to push back enemies as they tried to claim the walls, so he couldn't take on any responsibility that would tie him to one location.

Kai wished he could speak his mind when he heard his fellow soldiers continue complaining.

They complained that it was always their village, but Kai knew there was an actual reason they kept coming back here.

Kai found it strange that the others hadn't figured out the reason when it was so simple. Part of him suspected that they might actually be pretending not to know.

They're coming to steal our land gods.

When House Moloch had lost the two villages of Elg and Eda, the land gods from those regions should have also become property of the macaques, but instead the humans had carried them away.

So now they were coming to take the land gods back as their rightful owners.

Once that reasoning was understood, it was easy to think of a method for

avoiding this hopeless battle.

If we just handed over both land gods, they'd leave us alone.

If House Moloch no longer had the power to protect them, it might have been better for them to quietly hand over the two land gods that they'd snatched away from the macaques.

If the macaques achieved their original objective, it seemed unlikely that they'd continue to expose their own kind to danger in a battle to the death against the human opponents who were fighting to protect their homes in this cold and unforgiving winter. The lands belonging to those gods were under macaque control, so it was only natural that those gods too should also be under macaque control. The gods too might be happier if they were enshrined in their proper places.

But of course, no one in the village would ever speak such thoughts out loud. The people of Lag had done the same thing as Porek and the koror, and Nirun and the uzelles. Members of every species held a deep fixation on the land gods of their ancestors.

And then there was the fact that this resolution would involve the death of two people from the village.

"Shit... They're really taking their fucking time."

"That's the signal. Draw the bows."

"Aim a little higher."

The battle for the very existence of the village was beginning.

There was a clashing sound as one of their boulders collided with a shield held by a soldier. The macaques had strong throwing arms, and their range stretched every bit as far as the great bows. Soon, boulders began to fly at them one after another.

"Not yet."

If anyone was hit by one of those boulders, it would've been no laughing matter. Soldiers cowered as boulders flew right by close to them, and their trembling was transmitted to the bows that they held. The shield bearers kept

their backs straight to better protect the soldiers operating the bows.

The macaques were in no hurry. They advanced steadily while being careful not to lose their footing on the treacherous layer of fine snow.

As they approached the village, some of them began to search the changed landscape near the village. It was clear that they were looking for the ridges and water channels in the fields that they'd used as defensive positions the previous time.

Unfortunately for them, lessons had been learned from their night raid, and all hands in the village had been busy filling in every trench and water channel close to the village. As a result, there was no longer anywhere for the enemy to hide once they got close.

"Now!" Basco roared.

Then the 50 tightly-drawn bows were released all at once. Arrows had been made from the wood that was supposed to see the village through the winter, but the number was still limited by the scarcity of iron arrowheads. Each arrow unleashed from the great bows was large enough to pierce through the tough hides of the macaques if it hit.

Several of the enemy fell. Their deaths then ignited the battle fury of the macaques. The gray giants all began to howl.

They were every bit as thirsty for blood as the humans.

The killing had begun.

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The macaque offensive began like a crashing wave.

These were the residents of the great forest, and the high strong walls that surrounded Lag were no trouble to climb as long as they could get within reach.

The macaque soldiers that survived three volleys from the great bows formed a surge that crashed powerfully against the cobblestone walls of the village like water overflowing from the river during the rainy season. Then they began to climb vertically upward without trouble.

With the enemy close, the great bows' work was over. The soldiers operating the bows took up their spears, and then they all thrust them at the macaque soldiers as one in an attempt to knock them down. Although the great bows were now useless, the shield bearers continued their struggle, unable to stand down while the barrage of flying rocks intensified.

The boulders flying toward them were aimed at the soldiers atop the walls, but those that missed went flying over the walls as if that had been their original intention. Hazardous fragments of rock that bounced and rolled along the hard ground caused the women and children within the walls to run screaming. A hit would cause serious injury, so the women hid in the safe zone created by the shadow of the wall as they transported necessary items to the men.

"Come on! Dump them on the ground!"

"You! Take that over there!"

Women exposed on the front lines atop the walls were scooping up steaming liquid from boiling pots here and there in the village. They ducked and rushed below flying boulders with just as much courage as any of the male soldiers. The foul smell that lingered in the air after they rushed by was enough to make the soldiers around them recoil.

"It's your favorite smell! Get a good whiff!"

The herbs used for driving off beasts during the survey of the forest depths had been boiled down to create this pungent smelling liquid. It struck the nostrils of the macaque soldiers trying to climb the walls one after another. This was a highly effective measure against any species with a strong sense of smell.

If the liquid got into their nostrils, the stimulating odor would leave them writhing in agony for a full day and night. No matter how strong a demi-human species was, there was nothing they could do to withstand this attack. The macaques screamed as the liquid satisfyingly stripped them clean from the walls.

But the speed of the macaque assault on the walls was extraordinary. Here and there, battles on the top of the wall itself were already taking place. In places where there weren't enough battle-hardened soldiers who could take

them on, they looked about to break through.

The top-ranking soldiers, including Kai and several other exceptional fighters, were waiting in locations here and there ready to rush to any place where the village's defenses looked ready to fail. They'd been given leather armor, a precious item that the village had in short supply. When the macaques saw how different these soldiers looked from the others, the tide of the battle changed in an amusing way. Most of the macaques lost their courage, and some even threw their weapons down and jumped from the walls of their own accord.

The reason was that kumadori were visible on the face of Kai and every one of the other top-ranking soldiers patrolling the walls. These weren't real of course; they were sigils painted on using a black dye made from crimson makeup and an oily soot-based paste.

It was a trick sometimes used in the borderlands when trying to defend a position. Preventing the enemy from accurately determining how many guardian bearers there were in their formation was an underhanded way of confusing them.

The walls of Lag were awash with more than ten guardian bearers.

Just like humans, macaques were reluctant to fight guardian bearers head-on. They instinctively knew to avoid anyone with such unassailable power.

Of course, the effect could only last a short while before the enemy saw through the trick. When guardian bearers appeared in the defenses, the attackers would naturally send their own guardian bearers to fight them. Once the real thing appeared, it was only a matter of time before the pretenders were exposed.

But this time luck was on their side.

The first macaque guardian bearer to appear on the walls appeared at the northern side near the center. That macaque soldier howled as if it saw through the sly deception when it was faced with a small human guardian bearer who was so short that he wasn't even up to its chest.

"D-Don't flinch!"

"Hold it back from both sides!"

With aid from the shield bearers around them, they were able to pin the enemy guardian bearer from the left and right simultaneously using the shields. When the top-ranking soldiers, disguised as guardian bearers, worked together, it wasn't impossible for them to drive the enemy over the edge of the wall because the footing was so poor.

Fortunately, the fake guardian bearer, a human warrior who looked like a young boy, was the youngster named Kai who'd just recently ascended the ranks.



When the macaque encountered such extraordinary strength from within the group of pretenders, this strange situation left it stunned. Even though their kumadori were drawn on with paint, it was as though they had the strength of true guardian bearers behind them. A thrust with the butt of the spear was enough to send the large macaque rolling backward, and a strike from the handle caused it to cry out in pain.

His extraordinary strength had already caused Kai to break several of the spears he'd held, but he acted like more of a guardian bearer than an actual guardian bearer. Even when he was left empty-handed, he continued to strike at the enemy with his bare hands, throwing punches with his clenched fists as if he was settling an everyday argument.

The macaque never imagined that the enemy guardian bearer was actually a powerful guardian bearer who had defeated a member of the elite Rigdaros of the orgs. It expected him to have power befitting the doi sigil drawn on his face, and so it had faced him with less caution than it should have.

The macaque then used its shoulders to push apart the shields that were pinning it down from either side and swung its stone axe.

Someone yelled, "Watch out!"

Kai carefully watched the crooked blade of the stone axe flying toward him and hastily stepped forward to close the gap between him and his opponent while dodging the attack. Then, without stopping, he slammed his clenched fist into the stomach of his opponent.

The body of the macaque, which was every bit as voluminous as the baron's, took Kai's fist head-on. Its tough fur appeared to fold inwards as Kai's fist plunged into it, and as the entirety of the kinetic energy was transmitted to its body, it was sent flying back through the air a moment later with no ability to stop itself.

The macaque couldn't believe its eyes as it looked at the human child that it had just lost to. Its huge body then fell on the heads of its brethren as it coughed up a great amount of blood.

Kai drew back his clenched fist and looked down on his opponent.

There was a roar from the human soldiers.

Since he had strength enough to take on guardian bearers, Kai soon became key to the defense in the center of the northern wall. Kai alone was enough, so the other top-ranking soldiers spread out to defend other places that were short of soldiers.

The macaques had approached the village from the north and so the northern wall was the main battlefield, and yet Kai alone held the central region of the northern wall spanning more than 100 yulds. Veteran soldiers like Basco and Setta should have known just how unreasonable a task this was. And yet they simply smiled wryly while leaving Kai to handle the situation himself.

The amazing power in Kai's legs allowed him to leap over the heads of the other soldiers as he rushed from one area of the northern wall to the next, just as each was about to be breached. He bounded from one spot to another, quickly dealing with each situation. With so many people crowded into the space atop the walls, fighting barehanded actually made it easier for him to move around.

Just as Basco and the others had expected, leaving Kai to defend the northern wall as he pleased proved efficient, even though it was under fierce attack. If nothing else, it was worth showing them how their fearsome fake guardian bearer could be seemingly everywhere at once.

"Wow! Wow!"

"Here next! Quick! We can't hold out!"

"Out of the way! Kai's jumping over!"

The false kumadori that had been prepared for Kai must have been taken for the real thing in the eyes of the macaques. They clearly feared Kai, and they became reluctant to climb the northern wall.

Their eyes scanned across the defensive walls of Lag and whenever they saw one of the many other guardian bearers, their reluctance to fight was obvious.

This village was home to more guardian bearers than they'd expected. The disguises worn by the other top-ranking soldiers now looked too threatening for the soldiers scaling the walls to ignore.

It was almost half a toki since the battle had begun. The people of Lag shared a gut feeling that this first wave of their attack was nearing its limit.

A sound like the ringing of a bell with a wooden clapper filled the air, and then the macaque soldiers gradually began to withdraw. A macaque soldier clutching the edge of the wall looked back in frustration before leaping back down to the ground. Once the swarm of gray fur had receded, the pile of corpses beneath them was exposed to view.

Lag had faced an army of a thousand macaques. Those who felt that the fate of the village had been decided before the battle had begun were now unable to hide their surprise when they saw the result of their fierce resistance.

The humans rested and watched their enemies retreating. Then, as they watched the enemy retreat in half disbelief, they saw the powerful macaque army beyond them, an army that remained unharmed and organized.

The macaque soldiers that had gathered at their walls to start the fight in the defensive battle Lag had just fought were no more than a third of the overall army.

Their battle was against a settlement that was considered large even for a human domain. Most of the human soldiers grimaced when they realized that the battle had been a mere test to determine their combat potential.

“All squads, roll call.”

“Report any soldier who’s missing.”

Now that the fighting had died down, the survivors carried out a roll call right there, and the extent of the damage was made clear.

Lag had fought a good fight. The number of known casualties alone amounted to several dozen. Most of those were hit by flying boulders or had been beaten to death by macaques who’d scaled the walls. Some appeared to have been grabbed by the legs and dragged off the walls. Their fallen bodies were quickly recovered from outside of the village walls. Fortunately, they were all recovered whole.

Naturally, many times more people were injured.

“Kai, you’re really something.”

Many wanted to pat his shoulders, and few bothered to hide their admiration as they looked at him. Most men in the borderlands were quite simple and would think well of those who were strong. There were many soldiers who wanted to touch Kai. There was even one who reached for his crotch, and Kai responded with a sharp head butt.

It was only natural that people would want to gather around him.

There were surprisingly few casualties in the area where Kai had been. In the other parts of the wall the damage had been far worse.

The winter wind carried with it a faint scent of blood, and it drew heat away from necks and foreheads where hair was matted down with sweat. Kai was simply stunned by the sight of the battlefield and how much they’d lost.

“Kai.”

“Hey, Kai.”

“Let’s go, Kai.”

Kai breathed out the heat collected in his lungs as several voices called to him. His breath turned to white smoke which was carried away by the wind.

Kai looked at the main force of the macaques, which was the group that the tribe leader was most likely part of. He tried to imagine what they must be seeing and what they must be thinking.

They were just testing us. Why are they so cautious?

Manso had come looking for Kai and now he put his arm around Kai’s shoulders.

Then everyone urged the stunned squad leader down to the bottom of the wall where they could warm themselves. Kai allowed himself to be led.

Given the size of the enemy’s army and the difference in Lag’s combat potential, it seemed as though they could have taken Lag very quickly if they’d attacked with all of their power.

The macaques were being so cautious, even going so far as to build a fort. Kai

couldn't help but feel uneasy. No one, not even Manso, seemed to have noticed Kai's confusion.

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The day of the macaque raid had finally come to an end, and the village had survived. But the villagers couldn't let their guard down, and a long night awaited them.

An eerie sort of peacefulness came after the temporary retreat of the macaque army. If anything had changed compared to before the battle, it was that the hostile macaques formed a perimeter around the village rather than being gathered in one place. They had completely encircled the village. Although they had superior numbers, there were still only 1,000 macaques, and the density of soldiers was so low that it was as though the village was wrapped in thin paper.

Those who'd experienced battles centered on villages laughed at the macaques' lack of wisdom and pointed out how easy it would be to break through the perimeter at any single point. In fact, some of the soldiers were actually making this reckless suggestion to their superiors, so while soldiers such as Basco were relieved to see an increase in morale, they had a hard time discouraging the idea.

I guess they don't want any guardian bearers to escape the village.

While looking at the macaques from atop the walls, Kai tried using his growing intuition to analyze the situation in his own mind.

Their ultimate goal was to drive the guardian bearers out of Lag and ensure their deaths so that they could claim the land gods as their own. When this desire was considered, their strange behavior became easy to understand.

They'd missed their chance to capture the divine spirit thief more than once in the past, and they wouldn't let it happen again.

In a sense, Lord Olha and Lady White had triggered this great battle, but most soldiers agreed there'd been no sight of either of them during the day when the raid was underway. From the point of view of a soldier forced to fight in that

difficult battle, it seemed unreasonable that important guardian bearers weren't used to help defend the walls. Even if some circumstance prevented the baron himself from joining the battle, Lord Olha was their next most important warrior, and some went so far as to say openly that the day's death toll would have been much lower if only Lord Olha had been there. There was also talk of how initial plans to defend the village had included Lord Olha, so many cast suspicious glances toward the castle as they delivered their criticism.

"Kai..."

The sun would soon set completely, and bonfires were being lit. The figure who came running towards Kai in the dim light was a squad member who should have been resting at the bottom of the wall.

Kai looked at him but said nothing. Sensing that something had happened, he braced himself for bad news.

When he descended from the wall, he found a familiar-looking woman from the castle was waiting for him at the bottom of the stone stairway. It must have been this woman who'd called for Kai, and it was her who took over and led Kai to the castle.

The woman introduced herself as Akui. She said she served as an attendant for the baron's family.

He was led to the third floor of the castle and to a room where members of the baron's house would usually pass the day. It was the first time Kai had ever set foot in one of the baron's personal rooms. Kai entered the room when the woman urged him to do so. There he found himself face-to-face with the baron, who was surrounded by several women helping him to get dressed.

"There you are, Kai."

The baron treated Kai to many training sessions, so Kai's name and face were familiar to him.

The baron was wearing a black tunic instead of his usual attire. He looked at Kai and smiled slightly before grabbing some clothing that one of the women was carrying and throwing it toward Kai.

Kai caught it instinctively and found it was another black tunic just like the

one the baron was wearing. He guessed it was for him to wear, so he immediately put it on.

The baron gave the women a look that caused them to leave the room without another word. Now that there was suddenly less activity in the room, the baron spoke.

“There’s work to do. Come with me.”

It was an order from his lord that left Kai no room for argument.

The baron walked with Kai at his side as he quickly explained the unusual state of affairs within the castle.

Lord Olha and Lady White had collapsed without warning.

Although neither of them had been unwell up until the raid, they had both developed high fevers and collapsed when the raid began. Both were now receiving treatment from the old healer.

There were three guardian bearers who were essential to the village’s defenses, and two of them had been lost immediately. The baron had of course ordered that this was to be kept secret lest it cause panic among the soldiers trying to defend against the enemy raid.

When the baron told Kai that he’d already lost all hope for the village at that point, Kai didn’t know how to respond. The news of the large role that Kai had played in the battle made him frown like a mortified child, but again, he gave his praise.

“So where are we going exactly?”

Kai still had no idea where the baron was taking him.

“To fix the sickness at its source,” the baron said with a toothy grin.

Dressed in black tunics, the pair scaled the wall near the lonely herb garden that Kai visited frequently. This was how they left the village without needing to explain themselves to anyone.

As for the living wall outside formed by the macaque siege, the baron took the opportunity to vent his frustration as they broke through it.

The tribe's leader might have ordered that no guardian bearers should be allowed to escape, but it should have been obvious that this thin wall of meat was never going to stop a guardian bearer.

"Good, good," the baron was muttering to himself as he smiled cheerfully and spilled the blood of the macaques. The macaques soon realized that someone from the village had broken through their circle, and soldiers under orders to hunt them down and kill them began approaching from all directions.

Despite how naturally athletic they were, it was unlikely that any ordinary macaque could keep up with a running guardian bearer. Indeed, the pair shook off their pursuers with ease.

Kai then realized where they were both headed.

By the time they arrived, stars filled the sky above the borderlands. Across the dark ground there was one place where there was still light.

Eda Village...

It was the lost village where Kai had been born, and where they'd find the ruined village of Lady White's land god.

It was clear that the gravesite near the center had been disturbed.

"The apes... They really have cursed the land god." The baron's breath poured out in great white clouds as he spoke.

Kai felt as though he could sense some stirring of emotion from the baron in the faint smell of his sweat.

Curse on the land god?

It raised several questions, but intuitively, it made some sense to him.

If the unusual power of a guardian bearer was given by the blessings of a land god, then the source of that power could only be the gravesite where the land god slept. Spirit thieves who'd given up ownership of the gravesite couldn't expect to continue stealing the power from it without any consequences.

"Kai. Forget everything you see here."

"..."

“You hear me?”

“Yes, I understand.”

The reasoning was simple.

If someone held on to a land god improperly in an attempt to steal its blessings, it was remarkably simple for their enemies to bring them down.

If they don't want the land god, they can just destroy the gravesite.

Kai didn't understand what a gravesite was exactly. It was just his own theory, but if the actual body of the land god was inside the stone, destroying that might also kill the land god.

If the land god was killed, it made sense that the guardian bearer receiving its blessings would then lose their power.

Land gods were a core element of the world. From the point of view of the creatures inhabiting that world, trying to destroy them was as self-contradictory as trying to strangle oneself. It was akin to suicide.

If the land god was killed, the land would forever be a desolate and barren place.

It wasn't something that would be done often. There was no reason to do it. The land itself would lose its value, and the desecrated land god would become weak.

When the baron had ordered Kai to forget everything, he must have seen Kai as no more than a boy raised in the village with no education. His attention was now directed toward learning the state of the gravesite damaged by the enemy.

In reality, Kai's mind had developed to an incredible extent as he obtained knowledge from a past-life self, and he was far from the ignoramus that the baron expected him to be. If the baron had been aware, he'd probably have taken more care to prevent Kai from learning things that were better left unknown.

Now I see. As long as they don't overdo it, it's a useful trick.

Through a sort of controlled destruction of the land god's gravesite, they could cause just enough harm to make the land god feel threatened. This would

cause the spirit thief to feel great pain, leaving them unable to act.

Oh man. The god of the valley's grave has a crack right through it. Should I be worried?

He understood that his god hadn't died at least. He couldn't help but sigh when he thought about how much there was that he didn't know.

The baron stormed the gravesite of Eda under the cover of night.

Kai too threw himself into the middle of the cluster of macaques. His first act was to kick over the brazier that held their burning fire to give an advantage to the guardian bearers, with their superior night vision.

The village of Eda was plunged into darkness.

The baron darted from one place to the next, and with each slash of his sword, he offered the blood of his enemies to the gravesite. Every macaque that tried to flee was killed by Kai. When they realized who their attackers were, they shouted at them in the human tongue.

"The land god is ours!"

"If you come to kill, then kill!"

"Forest people will always torment you!"

The baron cut off their heads one after another.

The macaques closest to the gravesite that they'd unceremoniously excavated were the last ones.

Kai couldn't stop his gaze from being drawn to the dreadful state of the gravesite.

"You mustn't look," the baron said assertively, causing Kai to avert his eyes.

Then the two began to run towards the home of the other land god.

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He moved with such resolve.

Kai watched the baron from behind as he acted in the darkness. Ahead of

him, the village of Elg where another grave had been desecrated was clearly visible, like a small island floating in a sea of black.

The baron ran with incredible speed as he tore through the cold air. Kai needed to use most of his power just to keep up.

The baron couldn't have known that Kai was receiving the blessings of the god of the valley. And yet the baron unleashed his own superior physical strength as he pleased, with no concern for Kai.

Kai was calm enough to gradually slow himself down. He reasoned that he should follow behind at a leisurely pace. The baron said that he'd go on ahead and then continued on toward the brightly shining village of Elg.

He moved with such energy.

Understanding the wild nature of guardian bearers that resulted from the power within them might only have been possible to those who had scaled those heights themselves.

Kai's shoulders shook with the laughter that naturally built up inside of him as the baron moved further and further ahead. The baron burned with a longing to protect the small area known as Lag, and that longing had been completely unleashed.

When they reached the gravesite in the ruins of Elg, they again found that this one too had been cursed by the macaques. The baron laughed a great laugh as he sent them fleeing. Kai belatedly charged into the battle and focused on eliminating any macaques that appeared hostile. If he could have used his abilities as a guardian bearer without restraint, a small number of demi-humans would be no problem at all, no matter how much stronger their species might be.

Kai felt as though screams of the macaques reached him through his skin rather than through his ears.

Maybe defending the village should have been easy...

With the macaques spread out to form a circle around the village, Kai and the baron could have raided their main camp and may have crushed them surprisingly easily. If the highest ranking enemy soldier was killed, the common

foot soldiers would probably go running back to the forest with their tails between their legs.

When every last macaque in Elg had been dealt with and the baron had vented all of his frustration, Kai expected him to rest to catch his breath. Instead, the baron turned to Kai and said, “Let’s head back.” Everything had been easy for him.

Kai half expected that they would have continued their rampage, so the remark caught him a little off guard.

The baron must have guessed what Kai was thinking because he sheathed his sword at his waist and then looked at Kai as though he was a small child who didn’t know when to show restraint. His hard hand gripped Kai’s head tightly.

Kai couldn’t tell whether the baron was trying to pat his head or punish him.

The baron shook Kai’s head so violently that it could have broken his neck, but Kai just stood there and endured it silently.

“Guardian bearers who ignore their surroundings die quickly.”

“...”

“Are you the same way, Kai?”

He felt like he would be declaring himself an idiot if he agreed. So he kept quiet.

For a few moments, the baron looked up at the stars as if thinking to himself, and then he slowly explained how guardian bearers should live, making it easy for Kai to understand. The baron clearly knew that Kai was a greenhorn who lacked a lot of the knowledge that every guardian bearer should have.

“No matter how strong you are, carelessly charging at the enemy without any thought is like flipping a coin and betting your life on tails. Maybe you win once or twice, but no one in this world has such good luck that they can go on winning forever. The same might be said of you some day, but guardian bearers are strong. Keep a level head, and you’ll realize just how many options are available to you.”

“...”

“Choose your methods carefully and find a way to make victory a certain thing. Most of the time you’ll find that your power offers a solution to even the toughest problems. There’s always more than one way to grasp the fruits of victory. There’s no help for anyone stupid enough to get carried away and leave their victory to chance without learning the exact strength of the enemy.”

The unusual and exceptional power that guardian bearers held always afforded them more choices than any ordinary human, whatever the situation. Throwing away the numerous possibilities without consideration was considered the height of folly for a guardian bearer.

Kai understood this reasoning, and he accepted it.

At the same time, he realized something.

If he’s not tied down by the village, the baron can do whatever he wants.

Just like the koror who moved to the valley from Hacar, he could always begin anew without worrying about the land base he called a village.

Someone like the baron was a match for any small army by himself, so he could single-handedly allow the subjects of House Moloch to successfully escape from the battlefield. Just as long as he could overcome the fear that comes with leaving the enemy in control of the gravesite of the land god that was the heart of his blessings.

As long as they could live on, they could establish a new Lag in a different place. Then they might seek assistance from other lords such as Count Balta and find an opportunity to fight to take back Lag. That was why the baron was so calm despite the crisis the village faced.

Just the thought of abandoning the village sent a shiver down Kai’s spine.

To Kai, the village represented the world that had given him half of his life. To the baron, however, it was a single possession; nothing more than a tradable commodity with some value.

Even so...

The mess made of the gravesite visible in the corner of Kai’s eye made him gulp. There was something terrifying about losing control of one’s land and

surrendering the gravesite to the enemy.

Although the baron had told him not to look, it wasn't so easy to suppress his curiosity.

The macaques had dug up the grave and had used their axes to carve away the strange letters on specific parts on the stone. If those letters had been some sort of information that defined the existence of the land god, scraping away the letters might have thrown the god into a state of madness.

Not only had they damaged the functioning of the gravesite in this way, the macaques had also smeared the stone with black blood from some unknown source. Land gods chose living creatures as their vessels, so the blood might have had some significance related to the curse.

Although it was a curse intended to make the spirit thief suffer, it would also weaken the land god, and Kai somehow knew that it was a highly blasphemous act. It was unlikely that the macaques would choose a strategy that involved damaging something they prized so highly unless they'd given up on all other options. This was further supported by the fact that the koror and uzelles who'd given up their villages hadn't fallen victim to such evil practices. It made no sense to claim the land god if doing so meant weakening it in the process. The proper means of taking over a land god was to directly kill whoever had taken it before consuming their godstone, just as the orgs hunting Porek had tried to do.

But in this particular case, they had for some reason decided to use a last resort that would cause irreparable damage. Perhaps they were unable to contain their hatred after seeing countless members of their kind killed day after day. Considering the degree of hate that had built up between the two species over the years, if another human from House Moloch was to escape with the blessings of another land god, the macaques might not hesitate to place a new curse on Lagdara of the village. Once they'd gotten their hands dirty through such blasphemous acts the first time, the sense of taboo associated with the act probably wouldn't feel so strong in the future.

Although this was all speculation, it suggested that surrendering the village would be highly dangerous.

“If it comes to it, will you give up on Lag?” Kai asked quietly.

The baron looked surprised by the question.

He nodded.

“That’s always an option.”

“But if we lose the village’s fields, we’ll have no food to eat.”

“If that’s all we lose, we’ll have food once more when spring comes and we sow new seeds.”

The baron was sharing new information with Kai while taking interest in his unexpectedly deep thought process.

“Even if they make Lag their own, they can’t hold onto it. The land of their ancestors is in the great forest, while we humans have ruled over the borderlands for hundreds of years, despite how barren it may be.”

“...”

“Kai, do you know how humans have been able to hold on to such vast territories when they’re so weak compared to other species?”

“I don’t know.”

“After humans used the powerful blessings of the first king to establish the foundation, they incorporated countless land gods into the fabric of the nation over the course of hundreds of years. Human territories were supported by many gods, making them stable and fertile. We harvested plentiful wheat. We ate the gruel we made from the wheat. Humans became great in number. The number of humans in our lands grew to a million.”

The baron looked at Kai and spread his arms out wide, as if trying to represent the nation of humans, the Unified Kingdom, as he pictured it in his mind.

“Suppose one thousand macaques try to steal land away from humans. The humans will get together an equivalent number of soldiers to take back the precious land of their forefathers. In the beginning, humans amassed several armies of more than ten thousand men to conquer each land. Obviously, our numbers aren’t what they were in the past. But the count can still scrape together more than a thousand men. Elg and Eda were both branch villages

started by House Moloch, so their restoration is a problem for House Moloch alone. But Lag is different. Our village is an official territory bestowed upon my house directly by His Majesty the King. If it was stolen, the king would have no choice but to raise an army large enough to overcome the enemy under the condition of the founding pacts. Kai, why else would they feel the need to build a fort in the forest? And why else would they be so fearful of us? To absorb Lag and claim a territory from the main territory of humans, they need to be ready for the war that begins when the battle for the village is over. They're scared because they're losing soldiers when the fight for Lag has only just begun. They thought that damaging two of our gods would help them bring the fight to a swift conclusion, but we fought back and did more damage than they expected. Because you fought back harder than they ever expected."

Kai blinked in surprise.

He'd already guessed that humans were more numerous than demi-human species, but he was surprised to hear that there were one million humans. Kai only had vague notions of the vastness of the human nation, the Unified Kingdom. The borderlands alone was unfathomably vast and was home to tens of thousands of humans. If there were so many humans when all the other territories were considered, then it made sense that an army of 10,000 could be easily assembled by the order of the king.

Kai gulped as he felt that he was just starting to see the true scale of the fight.

It was as though the scales had fallen from Kai's eyes. The macaque forces that had seemed so powerful had assembled because they knew they were treading on thin ice by inviting a major counterattack from the humans. The way they held back soldiers during the first fight was now easy to understand given the broader context.

The baron was so resolute because he was confident that he would have the power to fix things in the end. As a guardian bearer, Kai had also shared that same confidence. With someone to lead the way and clear the mist from his thoughts, the sense of urgency he'd felt since the start of the battle began to fade as if it was now someone else's problem.

Now that Kai's calmness had come back to him completely, he glanced again

at the horrific state of the gravesite of Elg and asked if it wouldn't be better for them to try to purify it before they went back. The baron laughed slightly at Kai's calm manner.

"It's a pain, but I'd better," he said.

They couldn't do any proper restoration so quickly, but Kai helped as they filled in the areas that had been dug up around the gravestone. Then the baron bit his finger, causing it to bleed, and he let the blood drip on the gravestone.

He then stood close to the grave and said some sort of prayer.

The baron's god, Lagdara, was the master to whom the gods of Elg and Eda swore devotion. There may have been some secret meaning behind the prayer that he said.

The gravesite was still a dreadful sight to behold as the pair headed back toward the village.

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By the time they returned to the village, about three toki had passed since their departure.

They'd quickly reburied the gravestones of the gods of Elg and Eda, and the dead of night was well upon them by the time they headed back to the village.

They'd had to fight with a group of macaques that followed them. Although they could have just hidden, the baron needlessly started a fight with them, delaying their return. The group of macaques included two guardian bearers, meaning that there were two guardian bearers on each side, making that fight not quite so one-sided as those fought when first leaving the village.

The baron got carried away and engaged them with his fists, so Kai did likewise, resulting in a tough battle that left them both covered in sweat. When they saw macaque reinforcements approaching, Kai and the baron ran away at the first opportunity.

Their guardian bearer had looked like a tres sigil, but the base physical strength of humans was far below that of macaques, so they were evenly

matched in terms of strength. And of course, Kai couldn't use his full strength without taking care not to draw the baron's attention.

And so the two were sweating in spite of the winter cold, and white steam was rising from their bodies as they returned to the village.

There were women awaiting their return to the castle, so Kai had the unpleasant experience of having someone else clean his body before the baron told Kai to follow him. He was led to the third floor of the castle.

See through it.

The god of the valley had been restless since around the time that they'd passed through the gates to the village.

The women in the castle gazed meaningfully at Kai when they saw him being led to the third floor. The baron meanwhile was acting as if this was nothing out of the ordinary. Although Kai had been there the previous evening, this was not a place he'd normally be allowed to enter.

The baron entered a room, furnished with a fireplace, where the people of his household would spend their leisure time. He drove out several people from the room who must have been his own wives and children. Kai felt awkward when the baron's children glared at him, but he entered the room at the baron's invitation nonetheless.

The comfort of that heated room was a far throw from the barracks where cold drafts were a fact of life. The baron's spoiled children would no doubt hold grudges against Kai for taking away this comfortable space and leaving them to the penetrating cold of the winter night. As comfortable as the room was, Kai felt as though it was no place for him.

Do not slaughter them needlessly.

His god was always commanding him to kill, but this night it sounded uncharacteristically kind.

The god of the valley's feelings and the cause of its concern were as difficult to understand as always. The only thing Kai could understand through his deep connection to his god as its vessel was that it was highly concerned about something.

Kai was trying to guess what the god of the valley was worried about. He still had a lingering sensation of unease in his chest as he followed the baron's instruction and sat down in a chair so soft that his body sank into it. The baron clapped his hands, and in no time at all someone came into the room carrying hot water.

Although Kai didn't understand what was going on, he knew that the baron was treating him as a guest for some reason.

"Supper is being prepared. Consider it a reward for good work. Eat with me."

Such favorable treatment was beyond the imagination of most villagers. The servant girl who brought the hot water was so surprised that she almost tripped over a rug.

Kai was spacing out as if his mind was somewhere else as well-salted wheat gruel was brought to them and the baron began shoveling it into his mouth.

"Eat up," the baron urged him, and so Kai also began to eat the wheat gruel left in front of him.

It wasn't ordinary wheat gruel. It was highly flavorful because it had been cooked in milk rather than water, giving it a rich and full taste that he'd never experienced before. Once he realized how hungry he was, he ate it up in no time at all.

When he realized that it contained queijo, it made him think of Parmesan cheese.

"It seems it's to your liking. Queijo is a valuable delicacy that we sell at a high price. I had it taken specially from my personal supply. Continue living up to my expectations, and I'll feed it to you again."

The baron laughed a throaty laugh and then he followed up their light meal with half a toki of rambling talk.

First, the baron wanted to know when Kai first became aware of his own power, and then he followed this up with probing questions about how many godstones he'd eaten, how he felt at the time, and other things. When the baron asked Kai in all seriousness how much he could lift when using all of his power, Kai had no choice but to massively understate his abilities. He could tell

that the response he gave was more or less what the baron expected.

When he was asked whether there were any girls in the village who he liked, Kai's eyes darted back and forth in surprise. Elsa came to mind and so he said yes. At this, the baron knitted his eyebrows together in displeasure just slightly and said, "I see..."

It was a strange night. The next raid from the demi-humans never came, perhaps because Kai and the baron had broken through part of the circle of macaques. Instead, the villagers remained wide awake and restless, and the village was full of the lively chatter of sleepless villagers.

There was roughly one toki left until morning when Kai and the baron finally parted. Kai had headed back to his squad where he belonged and decided he would rest with the others by taking a nap, wrapped in a cloak by the bonfire.

Everyone must have been exhausted because the conversation soon died down and they all fell asleep.

Likewise, Kai closed his eyes.

The valley came to his mind for just a moment, and then his consciousness began to fade as drowsiness overcame him.

See through it.

The god of the valley spoke to him.

He had no idea what he was supposed to be seeing through.

He knew from experience that something serious was likely to happen if he didn't figure out why the god of the valley was so agitated, so he went over the facts in his head while still half asleep.

He'd heard the human side of things from the baron and thought he more or less understood it. The next thing to consider was the other side: the reasoning behind the macaques' behavior.

There was some circumstance behind everything that he couldn't guess at.

Do not slaughter them.

The unnecessary drowsiness Kai felt had faded away. Guardian bearers barely

needed to sleep.

He found himself looking up at the castle, and there was something that drew his gaze toward one of the windows. It wasn't the baron; he was being watched by a woman who he'd met somewhere before.

The feeling of being watched made his consciousness come back to him completely. He made sure he wasn't being watched before he crept away, taking care not to wake his sleeping squadmates.

That was her... the woman who took me to the castle.

He recalled that she was a servant named Akui.

Kai was aware that he was attracting attention from women lately, but he felt she had some other reason for watching him.

"Going to take a leak," Kai told the nearby soldiers who noticed him approaching, before making his way toward the herb garden.

Kai estimated that he had another two toki to spare before daybreak.

He felt that he had to make the most of the precious time remaining before the great battle that was likely to start the next morning.

Kai scaled the walls of the village effortlessly, and his shadowy figure went unnoticed as he ran. As he checked the angle of Ispi Rio overhead, he laughed at the thought of how dutiful he was becoming.

**

She put her hand to her racing heart as she hid behind the frame of the window.

She didn't think she'd been seen, but his gaze felt so powerful that it was as if it might pierce right through her, and now she couldn't be sure.

Akui closed her eyes tightly and tried to calm her racing thoughts.

The baron had given her orders to show the boy an unusually warm reception after the two of them returned from somewhere outside the village in the middle of the night. She'd seen with her own eyes how he'd even chased away his own family. She'd been shocked when the baron went so far as to give him

highly nutritious gruel with precious queijo added to it.

The conversation that followed also made it difficult for the women who were listening to relax.

How could they relax?

The conversation had made it obvious to anyone listening that the baron intended to let the boy marry into his household.

The idea of an ordinary villager being taken into a lord's household was virtually unheard of.

It was a situation so extraordinary that Akui felt she needed to get some sense of the strong feelings that existed within the baron.

"Akui, Akui..."

"Young Master."

"Please, I want water."

"You're thirsty? In that case, I shall bring you water right away."

"Tell someone else to do it. I... I want you here, Akui."

"I can't treat you as though you're still a child. It will only take me a moment."

Akui moved away from the edge of the window and approached her young master while gazing at the face buried among the several layers of bedsheets. His face was regaining its color, as if his suffering had become less intense.

Her young master, Lord Olha, trusted Akui more than anyone and had asked for her to be at his bedside.

She had been given the task of taking care of him ever since he was very small, and though there was no more between them, Akui found herself being asked to attend to everything that concerned him.

The boy had grown to be so beautiful, and his favor for Akui felt like love, even though she was already beyond a marriageable age.

"Akui, Akui."

"What is it now? You really are like a child."

“You’re the one... I’ll protect. I’m going to become stronger than Father so I can protect you.”

Akui sighed quietly to herself as she checked her appearance.

If she was to fetch cold water, then she had best draw it from the well behind the castle.

When he’d collapsed the previous evening, it had all happened so suddenly. At that time, she had been hopelessly worried. Fortunately, his condition had rapidly improved in the middle of the night, and he’d regained consciousness around the time the baron returned.

His fever wasn’t gone, but he was fully awake asking questions about the state of the village. It anguished him greatly to learn that he’d passed out just before the raid on the village started. When he heard that the village had somehow overcome the initial crisis and that this victory had buoyed the spirits of the villagers, he said nothing more than “I see,” and then hid his face under his bedsheets for some time. His prideful nature made it difficult for him to hide the shame he felt when he learned that his life had been saved by villagers who he normally treated as insignificant.

Akui was the only person who knew that Lord Olha had a childish side that he normally kept hidden. Olha would only ever show that side of himself to Akui, and this special treatment made her proud.

Poor, poor Lord Olha.

Lord Olha still didn’t know.

Big things had begun to happen within his house while he was sleeping. Those events had the potential to shake up the path of succession within House Moloch, causing large twists in a path that everyone had thought was already decided.

There was no way she could tell him yet.

She wanted him to rest peacefully until his body was fully recovered.

“I’ll be back in a moment.”

When Akui left the room, other women in waiting moved to enter the room in

her place. But Akui stopped them. When he'd awoken in the middle of the night, hallucinations had sent him into a rage, and now the room was a terrible mess. She knew how sensitive her master was to the eyes of other people and could guess how he would feel. But when the woman in his favor behaved this way, it came across as condescending to the other women, and it was as though she was trying to keep Olha all for herself.

Akui pretended not to notice the cold stares that were focused on her as she walked off.

Other women had gathered outside of Lady Jose's room. It was clear that she'd also had a difficult night. The lady's screams had been heard multiple times the previous evening.

Akui had been unable to stop herself from pleading to the baron.

She'd begged him, please do something for the children that are your own flesh and blood.

Akui bit her lip softly and tried to behave like a calm servant girl as she walked through the long corridors of the castle.

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See through it.

What was it the god of the valley had seen?

Kai knew he'd be seen by the enemy, and he was ready for the turmoil that would ensue. He felt that even now, something ill-fated was happening, and soon the village would be caught up in the beginning of some great turmoil. As he ran through it all, he was preparing himself for battle.

The perimeter formed by the macaques had been formed about 300 yulds away from the village, beyond the reach of human arrows. When Kai got closer, he found only their unique shields, large things covered in tree bark, arranged side by side.

Beyond those, gray balls of fur were crouching down in an attempt to endure the cold. There were less of them than he expected, and they barely had any

lookouts. The only activity in the formation was around a bonfire, and that appeared to be the only fire they had. There was nothing to suggest that anything was happening here.

It was as if they lacked all enthusiasm, and Kai found that in itself suspicious. The day before they'd been eager to fight, and when the sun rose, they would probably mount another attack in an attempt to reduce the number of human lives. Yet the gray backs the macaques were showing had signs of agonizing fatigue.

Are they being forced to attack?

The piercing cold of the night was felt on both sides, so it was easy to imagine the mental fatigue they must have felt as they remained crouched and motionless. The chilling cold must have been eating its way into their bones, lowering their morale as an army.

When winter came to Lag, it brought with it a feeling of relief, as if all that remained was to hibernate in safety and spend the season living off the supplies they'd gathered. The harshness of the season would only increase. If the villagers had been torn from their settlement and forced to fight with another species, they would not have gone willingly. All the more so when expeditions made to the lands outside meant wasting food unnecessarily. It was easy to imagine that everything their settlements had gathered would be used up. Given the primitive nature of the agriculture of the forest's inhabitants, which consisted of foraging for the natural fruits and berries of the forest and harvesting crops grown by outdated slash-and-burn agriculture, it was unlikely that they had ample provisions to waste on the battle. At any rate, it was far from likely that their morale was high.

Based on the amount of smoke rising from the forest before the start of the battle, they had used up large amounts of food. Perhaps the macaques had been counting on using Lag's food supplies to see them through winter from the very start. Perhaps their leaders had even told them they would die unless they stole food.

Kai studied every inch of their formation on the western side and reckoned that there were about 100 macaques there.

So there are one thousand of them overall, but only one hundred on this side?

Their defenses were unexpectedly thin, suggesting that most of them were gathered on the northern side.

Kai realized that breaking through their perimeter was going to be child's play. It turned out that when the baron and Kai had broken through by force a short while ago, the macaques had been distressed to find that their superiority in numbers was not enough to stop them. The tribe leader had mistaken it for a night raid and had gathered up more soldiers in the main camp, causing the perimeter to be thinner here. Naturally, Kai knew none of this as he charged through their crude perimeter without a second thought.

Now that he was hidden in the darkness on the outside of the perimeter where fewer eyes were watching, he hurried towards the main camp on the north side.

See through it.

The god of the valley wasn't letting him shake off the sense of urgency.

Without having any idea what it was he was supposed to see through, Kai had some vague notion that he'd understand more after seeing the main camp. He saw a swarm of several hundred macaques that had gathered around his destination and determined that several of them were guardian bearers. That made him reluctant to move closer.

What now, My God?

He was completely outnumbered.

If a human guardian bearer was foolish enough to show himself, he could expect to be overcome by a surge of macaques and then tormented to death.

The god of the valley was telling him to see through it and not to slaughter them, but it was clearly the villagers who were at a disadvantage. Kai couldn't see how he could be in a position to go easy on them as if they were beneath him.

He thought things over for a while and couldn't come up with any particular plan, but he did decide that things might go better if he disguised himself,

rather than approaching as a human.

Kai remembered the disguise he'd hidden in the forest sometime earlier and then ran into the forest. A quarter of a toki later, a masked koror had appeared outside the main camp of the macaques.

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A koror silently approaching under the cover of darkness was spotted by one of the macaque guardian bearers, who let out a threatening howl.

“*****!”

Kai didn't understand the macaque tongue.

So he didn't stop.

The irritated macaque guardian bearer came charging toward Kai along with other soldiers that appeared to be its subordinates. They had no trouble surrounding Kai, but when Kai saw the kumadori that was visible on the guardian bearer's face, he felt a lot more relaxed because it was nothing more than a doi sigil. Kai hadn't planned anything beyond running away if things went bad, but from a third-person perspective, he looked like someone ready to meet his death with cold indifference on the battlefield.

But of course, Kai's objective was to see through it, not to fight with the macaques.

The fur on the macaque guardian bearers head was standing up in a way that caused Kai to name it Mohican in his mind. Mohican wasn't acting like a mature individual; it was continually screeching as if it couldn't calm down. Going by feeling alone, Kai guessed it was saying, “Koror aren't welcome here!”

“***.”

“****, **!”

The other soldiers were also howling to their heart's content in a show of support for their superior.

Kai felt they were trying to pick a fight by saying “Don't play dumb!” and “Got nothing to say?! Speak up!”

Mohican seemed to grow more confident when Kai said nothing back. It brought its face so close to Kai he could feel its foul breath against his skin, and then it let out a particularly loud howl.

The koror must have been one of the weakest species of the great forest. It was unlikely that such frail creatures won many fights against the larger species.

And yet they were a tenacious species that continued to survive. Even when they had disputes with other species, it was likely that their ability to produce high-quality craftwork was still valued. Although they were likely to be threatened into giving up their wealth, their lives were probably not taken in most cases. Rare species, such as the uzelles with their prized horns and woven goods, must have escaped being massacred by other species thanks entirely to the ways in which they were uniquely useful as a species.

The macaque in Kai's face showed no true desire to kill him, giving Kai ample time to consider his situation.

Mohican began to become irritated by Kai's silence, and when it became unable to hold back any longer, it grabbed Kai by his koror clothing.

Kai quickly grabbed its hand and took the initiative.

"We talk." Kai finally spoke in a crude attempt at the koror tongue.

Kai had spent a lot of time interacting with other species in the valley lately and had learned a good number of words, including some that were in the uzelle tongue. Kai knew that he'd have no choice but to deal with them more in the future now that they'd sworn devotion to him, so he'd taken the initiative by asking Porek and Aruwe to teach him.

He was surprised to find that learning the languages of other species was actually rather simple.

At its heart, it was vocal mimicry.

"Where's tribe leader? Take me."

At first, it was a struggle to understand the unfamiliar words, and producing sounds that normally came from a differently shaped throat was difficult.

But doing so was at the very core of learning the language of another species.

Porek had explained that the difference in the language of each species simply came about from differences in the nature of their throats, and that all species otherwise spoke one universal language, humans included. When Kai put this reasoning to use to help him master the languages of the species, he finally came to accept the idea as part of the rule set of this world.

A unique characteristic of language learning in this world was that there was no need to spend great amounts of time learning grammar or memorizing vocabulary; it was only necessary to speak by mimicking the sounds made by a particular species and to grow accustomed to hearing it.

Kai was holding onto Mohican's wrist.

Not only was he holding onto it, he was preventing it from moving in the slightest.

"Take me."

Mohican's face had frozen as it looked at the koror mask.

This display of power must have made it realize that the koror it faced was also a guardian bearer. It looked down at its own immobilized arm and understood that the koror in front of it was far superior in terms of physical strength.

From its perspective, a koror smaller than a macaque child was displaying far superior muscular strength. Mohican was stunned and confused, and the other soldiers were also losing their enthusiasm.

Kai became impatient while waiting for Mohican to come to its senses, so he grasped its wrist more tightly. When his fingernails dug into its flesh, Mohican was suddenly alert.

"U-Understood..."

Now that he had its agreement, he took his hand away.

Mohican had now pulled itself together. It quietly turned away and then looked back as if urging Kai to follow. The situation made no sense to the other soldiers around them. One of the soldiers suddenly reached out and grabbed Kai's shoulder, causing Kai to respond with a light punch.

It produced a short yelp and then the large body of the soldier rolled backwards and appeared to bounce along the snow-covered ground. It all happened so fast that it left the watching macaques frozen in place.

“Take me. Quickly.”

When Mohican stopped, Kai urged it onward.

Mohican must have regretted getting involved with a creature so dangerous. The way its shoulders drooped was clear to see as it walked. The soldiers around them had also decided that it was better not to approach this mysterious koror.

From beneath the mask, Kai could see movement in the main camp of the macaques.

They must have been watching the disturbance. Several guardian bearers gathered and were ready to take on the unexpected visitor. The other soldiers posted around the main camp had parted left and right as if they were afraid to block Kai's path.

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There were many eyes following Kai.

The koror clothing that Kai wore was dyed with patterns that appeared to be ancestral symbols of the koror species, and it was carefully decorated with embroidery here and there, making it clear that it was a well-tailored item of clothing.

Kai stood out from the macaques whose standard clothing was a very basic outfit made from pelts and strips of cloth worn over the shoulders. Their rich body fur retained their body heat, so macaques had little need for clothing. Differences in culture stemming from the different characteristics of each species created a strange feeling when the differences were so stark. Those that could find this amusing were mostly those knowledgeable enough to view the world as if they were looking down from somewhere up high.

There were several who caught sight of Kai's eyes, which were visible behind the mask. They viewed him suspiciously when they saw something in his eyes

that suggested he found them amusing.

Naturally, he couldn't be taken directly to the tribe leader.

The guardian bearers stopped at a makeshift barrier that had been built around the main camp, where their guide Mohican argued with someone for a short while. When he told them that the masked koror with him was a powerful guardian bearer, several macaques moved closer to Kai with noticeable killing intent.

Mohican tried to stop them, but they weren't listening. Kai prepared for trouble by squaring his shoulders and clenching his fists. The two macaques that came to bar his path were both particularly large guardian bearers.

The macaques blocking his way knew that Kai was also a guardian bearer, so they were already showing their kumadori. Kai had grown used to judging his opponents from their sigils, so he made his decisions quickly.

All right... they're both doi sigils.

So far, he'd never seen a guardian bearer with a level 1 sigil.

Although Kai did not know it, the theological theory developed by academics in the royal center stated that divinity could be measured based on the total number of vertical lines that the sigil formed across the brow. In most cases, the sigil would first appear in the form of circles around both eyes, so there would be at least two lines passing between the eyebrows, and the lowest level of sigil was described as a level 2, doi sigil, based on this theory.

In the borderlands where the gods belonged to barren land and populations were generally limited to a few dozen, the doi sigil that even Lady White could produce despite her weakened blessings was the most common form of sigil. But of course, the sigil level wasn't the only thing that determined someone's strength, and Kai didn't let his guard down.

The two macaques approached as if trying to intimidate Kai, but they didn't charge at him despite their visible irritation. Instead, they tried to emphasize the difference in body size between koror and macaque by standing close to Kai and looking down at him from above as if he was insignificant.

They must have mistaken Kai's subdued reaction for fear because one of

them brought its nose close to his face, looking proud and victorious, and then rudely sniffed at him. Meanwhile, the other poked Kai with its axe to provoke him.

“Koror never strong.”

“Ridor in bad mood now. Go away!”

Given the difference in physical strength between the two species, it was no surprise that they belittled him.

Mohican had also gone red in the face while being ridiculed for being scared of a koror.

Kai had stayed calm despite it all, but he had no choice but to return to the village before daybreak. He knew he couldn't play games with them all night, so he ignored them and walked on.

“Take me,” he once again commanded Mohican, who was standing in the middle of the group.

But then the macaque who had been in his face tried to block his path mockingly. It kept on throwing dumb insults at him, such as, “Koror weakling.” It tried to make a fool of him by moving its face close once again and exhaling foul breath against his skin.

Kai casually delivered a headbutt to its nose. The mask left his forehead region exposed, so it didn't get in the way of the headbutt.

The blow was enough to make that macaque fall backwards. Kai then threw down the macaque that had grabbed him, leaving it lying on its back where Kai could proceed by walking over it. Guardian bearers with doi sigils were like mere children.

The scene left the guardian bearers speechless, but a few moments later they were all about to charge at him at once. But then they were stopped by a cry of “Wait!”

“This koror soldier very strong.”

Another macaque had appeared from behind the rest.

Kai didn't recognize the macaque instantly, but it did look familiar. When Kai

studied the kumadori on its face, he realized that this was the macaque leader who'd led the group of 100 macaques back when Kai killed the inspector.

The macaque leader switched to the difficult-to-understand macaque tongue and appeared to be telling a story. The agitation on the face of the macaque with a doi sigil began to gradually fade.

Kai tried listening to the words as if he was another macaque, and he understood that it was the story of how Kai had infiltrated Lag during the battle a few days ago, and that he was being described as a friend whose enemy was their enemy. The way they looked at Kai changed when they heard that he'd single-handedly dragged a human guardian bearer from the village and executed him superbly.

Knowing that they shared the same enemy must have caused the macaques to feel a sense of kinship. They had newfound respect for him, knowing that he'd been able to deal a major blow to a bitter enemy of theirs. After hearing the army leader's story, they let him pass without trouble while Mohican and the army leader led the way.

The army leader's sigil appeared to be a tres sigil. This rank must have been befitting for a macaque who led a herd of 100 other macaques.

The center of the camp was awash with balls of gray fur. Several layers of great shields covered in familiar tree bark were set up within the fence, and behind them were shield bearers that looked like hairballs because they'd curled up to protect their arms and legs from the cold.

In the middle of the strong defenses there was a large tent made from hide, and it seemed likely that inside they'd find the highest-ranking macaque of this large unit, the chief of the tribe.

The army leader told Kai to wait for a moment and then disappeared into the tent. He heard some sort of discussion going on inside before he was invited in. Mohican watched Kai step into the tent without following after him.

Once Kai was inside the tent, he caught the scent of burned tallow and found the air was as warm as human skin.

They coated the tanned hide with fat? That must make this a sturdy tent.

The tent had a double layer construction, and he found himself in a surprisingly warm space when he passed through the second inner entrance. There was a soft feeling against his feet, and he realized that this was a carpet formed by animal fur.

“Dealka, what is this koror?” someone asked listlessly.

A macaque with unusually long hair sat down on what appeared to be a large cushion covered in animal fur and then looked at Kai. It looked as though it had lived many years, and its voice was hoarse and vanishingly quiet.

It was no doubt a guardian bearer. The kumadori of the tribe leader began to appear, presumably because it had been told that Kai was a powerful koror warrior.

Looks like a quart sigil... That makes it level with the baron.

Kai understood that this was common courtesy, so he displayed his own sigil. The glyph sigil representing the god of the valley appeared on the area of Kai's forehead that wasn't hidden by the mask. The thick, drooping eyelids of the macaque tribe leader drew back when it saw Kai's sigil.

A glyph would only ever appear for the strongest of guardian bearers. The macaques must have known this too, because the air of disdain that some were still showing towards him for being a koror vanished in an instant.

“You are the herd leader?” Kai spoke the words carefully while thinking about what he might say next.

The god of the valley had told him to see through it. The basic question of what it was he needed to see through was something Kai still needed to think about.

But events moved on without Kai needing to puzzle over it any longer.

The macaque tribe leader slowly climbed to its feet, then it looked as though it was falling forward because its legs were too weak as it dropped to its knees and pressed its forehead to the floor.

“*****!”

It screeched something in its own tongue as if it had forgotten that this was a

koror that it was kneeling before, and then it spoke to Kai in koror tongue once again, making it easier for him to understand.

“Great god of Kanae!”

This was a new word that Kai didn’t understand.

Porek had called the god of the valley, “God of Arbitration.” The armored org had less formally called him “Valley God.” The god of the valley’s previous host vessel must have been famous enough to earn himself a unique name among the macaques too.

The macaque guardian bearers inside the tent rushed over when they saw their tribe leader lose all self-control, but the tribe leader pushed them away and clearly didn’t want their help.

The tribe leader then began to crawl toward Kai, causing him to back off instinctively. But every time Kai backed away the tribe leader edged closer. Kai had no choice but to endure it when, just as he’d expected, the tribe leader clung to his legs.

“Praise the ancestor spirits who guided you! The great god of Kanae must be led to our domain...”

“...?!”

Although the tribe leader was several times Kai’s body weight, the power his blessings gave him meant that it wasn’t enough to move him. Standing still wasn’t difficult in itself.

The macaque’s needle-like fur was painfully pricking against him, but that was something he just had to ignore.

“A protector has been sent to bring salvation to our people!”

The real difficulty was trying to understand anything the macaque was talking about.

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Naturally, Kai asked for an explanation.

Although he was being pressured to go to the macaque dwelling without understanding what was going on, Kai had his own circumstances to think about, and the first thing was to decide whether or not he actually wanted to go there.

Obviously, he wasn't going to agree to solve their problems without understanding what the situation was. If it was some problem that affected their species, it made no sense for him to go out of his way to help them. They were convinced that Kai was a koror, so overall it was as though the macaques were asking for help from the koror.

But the koror, specifically the Hacar tribe that Kai pretended to belong to, were nomads driven out of their own territory. It didn't make much sense for the macaques to ask for help from koror when the macaques were the dominant species of the eastern forest. For a start, the Hacar tribe had never received aid from the other tribes around them back when their village and precious gravesite were being taken away from them. The macaques couldn't deny that they had been among those who'd stood back and watched as it happened.

If they turned a blind eye when another species was in crisis but then were rescued when a crisis fell on them, there was a good chance that this would encourage them to behave selfishly in the future.

So before hearing their explanation, Kai wanted to know more about the relationship between the macaques and Hacar, and how the species saw each other.

This resulted in the tribe leader shamelessly describing a relationship that matched Kai's prediction exactly. The macaques did indeed know of the koror from Hacar and the crafts they produced. They'd also known that the orgs had taken away the koror's land. Probing a little deeper, it turned out the macaques had stolen from the koror several times. The relationship of power between the two species was such that the macaques could steal from this weaker species without consequence and then boast of how they paid for what they took by letting the koror keep their lives.

These guys are no better than the pigs.

As shocked as Kai was, he couldn't just abandon the discussion because the god of the valley wanted him to see through it. The macaques must have realized that their species' past callousness towards the koror of Hacar might now be coming back to haunt them, because the macaques were looking awfully anxious. The tribe leader raised its hands in a gesture intended to make Kai calm down, and every other macaque present then copied the same gesture. It was rather irritating. As a species, they were either thickheaded or just incredibly brazen, and it was hard to tell which. Two female-looking macaques stood by the side of the tribe leader then began to groom its fur, which was surprising enough in itself, but then Kai felt the presence of one of them behind him reaching out to touch the hair on his head and his immediate reaction was to drive it away with a barehanded chop.

"Land rot has started."

The tribe leader then began explaining the crisis facing their species, as if it still felt sure Kai would give his complete cooperation.

The land was rotting in the eastern part of the great forest ruled by the macaques, causing the trees there to wither and die very quickly. The tribe leader looked straight at Kai and explained that the problem had started to the north of the great forest, from turmoil affecting the various species living at the northern limit, and the disorder had now reached the territory that they ruled over.

Naturally, Kai was thoroughly confused by what he was hearing. He was suddenly being told of events on a grand scale, and he lacked the background knowledge needed to follow the explanation. Unlike its host, the god of the valley remained calm and accepting, and this was just enough to make it possible for Kai to sit still.

Kai tried to be patient as he listened and somehow managed to make some sort of sense of the macaque's reasoning.

Beyond the forest, at the northern limit, in the unexplored plains where the orgs live, there are some territories that belong to demi-humans... There's a really strong enemy invading there from outside and they've made the territory unstable because they stole so many land gods. And now the effects of all that

are starting to spread to the great forest.

There was still much Kai struggled to understand about the world's rule set as far as land gods were concerned. He understood that many land gods belonging to other species had been stolen, but not why this would have an impact on the land of the macaques when they weren't directly related. That part was completely beyond his understanding.

The tribe leader went on talking in a boastful manner, as if it expected Kai to easily understand everything.

Kai let this long-winded speech go on just so he could learn more about the situation in the demi-human world, hoping that he might pick up some knowledge related to the secrets of land gods.

"In land of northern limit we had several exclaves. Those were all devoured. From there, curse spreads."

They had been trying to steal land gods from humans while their demi-human opponents were doing the same thing to them at the northern limit.

Land gods they'd stolen while driven by greed were attacked by their external enemy and horribly defiled and cursed. Vows of devotion or some other sort of connection had caused a serious impact, like a negative status effect, to develop across their land.

What came to Kai's mind were their secret activities in the villages of Elg and Eda, where the macaques had performed curse rituals themselves.

Defiling a gravesite would cause the land god to suffer terribly and might also cause some sort of impact to be felt by a higher god that the cursed god served.

In any case, the land was cursed, resulting in a serious condition where trees and crops would wither away, known as land rot.

As for the external enemy invading the northern limit, that was some fearsome creature who had threatened demi-humans since long ago, known as "the ones from the snow plains."

This was all so unfamiliar to Kai that he wasn't sure whether he could believe much of it, but then he remembered that the miao who visited the valley had

also spoken about something similar happening in the land of demi-humans recently.

Come to think of it, the big battle that the orgs are focused on is against some external enemy to the north.

He'd received consistent information from two unexpected sources, and now he was curious. Orgs were a fairly powerful species in the demi-human world, but they'd needed to fight as a nation to resist the strong enemy coming from the north, and even had to buy up supplies from visiting merchants despite knowing they were being overcharged.

Kai didn't know whether these two external enemies were the same enemy, but his intuition told him that they were related somehow.

The tribe leader then continued to speak and urged Kai to take action.

"Transformation happened. The diabo took Heju."

At that very moment, the god of the valley cried out in rage.

It was a hate-filled cry like the dulled sound of a cracked bell.

Diabo!

The word seemed to hold some sort of deep significance for the god of the valley.

Diabo! Diabo!

The one thing Kai knew for sure was that this was no small problem.

**

Kai had moved away from the macaques' main camp and returned to the forest where he could remove his disguise. He wondered whether he should make a quick visit to the valley, but the faint purple glow created by the rising sun made him think better of it. Instead, he went back to the village.

There were many things he wanted to discuss with Porek.

However, he knew the discussion would take a long time once it started. For that reason, he decided to leave the discussion until the following night.

He moved quickly in the dull purple light and found a blind spot between the

guards on watch near the shadowy herb garden where he crossed over the wall. He lay low at the top of the wall and studied the village for a brief moment before climbing down using a large tree.

Kai was about to go back to his life in the village as if nothing had happened, but then he was taken by surprise by someone who was about to make that difficult for him.

“Where’d you go?”

Kai had been careless. He hadn’t checked whether there was anyone behind the tree he used to climb down.

He also realized that he’d left the village from that same spot. His intuition told him that he’d been watched since that time.

Elsa’s sister, Lilisa, was standing there scowling at him. She must have been waiting for him ever since he had left the village.

She was trying to discover the secret location.

“Did you go to see Sis? You did, didn’t you?”

“...”

“Why don’t you answer? You didn’t think I’d see you, did you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Kai had done nothing of the sort and was completely exhausted from working tirelessly the day before. He had no desire to talk to her, so he kept a blank face and walked away.

Lilisa quickly grabbed Kai’s clothing and pulled him back.

“Stop! Wait!”

“What do you want?”

“I just said! I want to know where Sis is!”

“Elsa’s dead.”

“That lie won’t work on me anymore! Just tell me! I want to see her!”

“...”

A number of responses came to Kai's mind.

But none that he cared to speak. He kept his lips sealed tight.

Kai's mind was filled with the many things he'd seen and heard. The argument with this little girl felt trivial at that moment, and he looked at her with a gaze that lacked any emotion.

When Lilisa saw his expression, she let go of his clothing.

Then tears began to spill from the corners of her eyes.

When Kai started to walk away once more, Lilisa could only stand there and watch.

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The night grew brighter without mercy, and many soldiers held their breath as they looked into the sky. The sigh that escaped from these exhausted men formed clouds of white smoke that were carried away on the wind.

Everyone knew that the first attack that happened the day before was just the demi-humans testing them. Once morning came, it would bring killing much more horrific than what had come before. In the eyes of each soldier was the acceptance that this might be the fight that cost them their lives. The enemy were still standing there just as they had been the day before, and each of their soldiers held a weapon and looked ready for battle.

It was some time after daybreak when something happened.

It happened just as the women were bringing the soldiers hot water to wake them up.

A lone macaque whose fur was a different color from the others, making it look like a guardian bearer, approached from the macaque camp. It used a hand to knock away the arrows that flew at it from the village as if they were a small annoyance. This lone macaque then began to speak clearly in the human tongue.

Most of the villagers didn't even know that demi-humans were capable of speaking human language, so they were completely stunned. They were

shocked further when they understood the words the creature spoke.

“We people of the forest honor our promise. Protector of Kanae told us to stop fighting!”

The macaque guardian bearer was clearly displeased by its own announcement. It broke the handle of the stone axe it held in two and then respectfully placed it at its feet.

This was a ritual of cease-fire that had been used between demi-humans since ancient times, but none of the humans understood this and the occasional arrow continued to fly in the macaque’s direction.

“Protector said do not kill. I resist. Just this time!”

The lone macaque caught an arrow from midair, and the arrow was broken in two by the power of its grip. It then pounded the ground and headed back to its own camp.

As if this was some sort of signal, the air filled with the sound of the macaques’ howling one after the other.

“They’re retreating? They’re the ones running?”

When the news reached Lag’s ruler, Moloch Vezin, he mustn’t have believed what he was hearing. He immediately left the castle and headed for the top of the northern wall. The soldiers that were there looking to the north were pushed aside by the baron so that he could see the enemy camp from the wall for himself.

The hundreds of macaques that had surrounded the village were gathering together in the main camp, and it was clear that the cluster of gray fur balls were busy with some activity. As if trying to prove that their announcement to humans was true, they were taking down the basic fences they’d set up around the camp.

It could have been a deception. It would have been easy for them to have found a gap in Lag’s defenses while everyone had gathered to the northern side with their guard lowered. The human village was so entranced by the activity of the macaques that the other soldiers on watch had become distracted.

Before the sun was high in the sky, it became clear that the army was genuinely retreating and then cheers of joy erupted from the people of the village.

“We’ve won?”

“We did! They’re really leaving!”

“We’re alive!”

“We didn’t die!”

“We’re saved!”

They shook hands and they hugged one another.

One soldier even hugged Vezin by accident, and when the strongest guardian bearer in the village hugged back, he almost broke the soldier’s spine with just one arm. Vezin laughed a great belly laugh while Basco, Setta, and the other soldiers who’d risked their lives fighting on the top of the wall threw down their weapons and started to dance. The celebrations soon spread to the center of the village, and high-pitched cries of celebration from the women within the walls joined the cheers of the men.

Everything that could be called a window was thrown open in the castle, and women leaned out from inside to cheer and bash the window frames with their fists before hastily running back into the castle. They must have gone to deliver the news to the suffering members of the baron’s household.

The celebrations grew as if the village was holding a festival.

“My Lady!”

A woman with a bright red face went rushing through the castle on unsteady feet and couldn’t hold back her cries of joy. Some tried to admonish her for her improper behavior, but she paid them no mind and clung to her bed where a lone girl was resting with her upper body raised.

The sick girl’s red pupils were wide with surprise.

“The enemy has fled! The village is saved!”

Jose received the news while still in bed because she still hadn’t fully

recovered from the illness that came over her the previous evening. Some color came back to her white cheeks and in a small voice she asked, "Is it really so?" The woman nodded enthusiastically and smiled back at her before leaving her bedside.

Female attendants rushed to stop her, but Jose pushed them aside and stumbled out of the room. There she found her brother Olha, who appeared healthier than Jose but still looked unwell. Their eyes met, and they shared the same feelings of misfortune over the way both brother and sister had collapsed at the same time.

"We have both shamed ourselves," Olha said.

"Yes, it's true."

Their pride must have been something they shared as siblings related by blood.

She watched her brother walk off on unsteady feet so that he might reconcile with the people of the village, and then the younger sister also followed after with her attendants supporting her as she walked. Behavior befitting high-class individuals such as the family of a lord was something drilled into both siblings since they were very young.

Although they were guardian bearers expected to fight to defend their village, neither of them had been present. They couldn't change the fact that they had left the burden on the shoulders of their people at the time when they were needed most. It went without saying that now that both siblings had woken and learned of it indirectly, they couldn't simply sit still.

Even if they had been unlucky enough to be stricken by sudden illness, only a small number of people would believe that there was nothing they could have done, while most others would only believe what they had seen and heard for themselves.

The siblings had to at least make an attempt to reconcile with the people who'd survived the battle, and they unconsciously knew to look for their father. When they failed to find him in the castle, they realized that he'd left them behind.

The siblings left the castle with their attendants by their sides and found a large group of villagers who had sat down on the ground following their wild merriment. They spoke with them while searching for their father who was likely at the center of it all. As members of the ruling household, they considered it natural for them to stand by their father's side.

Among a group of soldiers on top of the wall, the two soon found their smiling father who was beckoning for a young soldier to come to him. The young soldier approached their father as other soldiers encouragingly pushed him forward.

The eyes of every villager were following their father and the young soldier.

Their father tousled the young soldier's hair and then picked him up a moment later just as he had once done to the siblings when they were younger. He placed the boy on his shoulders and showed him to the crowd as if it was his own son.

"My Lord!"

"Lord Vezin!"

As the soldiers cheered their father, they also called out the name of the young soldier at the same time.

"Kai."

"Kai!"

"You're the pride of our village!"



It was clear that the crowd thought the young soldier, Kai, had served a vital role in the battle.

Jose already knew a little about this greenhorn's unrivaled strength, and so some part of her wasn't particularly surprised. Olha, however, must have felt as though the place that was rightfully his had been stolen by a no-name child who shouldn't have been worthy of such attention.

"Brother, dearest..."

Jose intended to gently urge her brother forward while he was rooted to the spot in surprise, but even with his sister ushering him on, Olha remained frozen in place.

Then Jose noticed it. As Olha stood there grinding his teeth, his passionate feelings had caused his sigil to take form on his face.

Brother and sister made eye contact. The brother saw the concern on his sister's face and then turned to walk away so as to be rid of her. He headed away from his father and approached a group of villagers who were standing looking up at the wall.

The change in her brother's attitude caused Jose to release a small sigh. Ever since he was very small, her prideful brother had been prone to foul moods whenever things didn't go his way, and it was often cause for concern for those around him. In most cases he would manipulate the adults around him until his ego was satisfied, and his mood would improve before long.

Jose was not in good physical condition herself, so she stopped worrying about her brother. She knew her brother had grown into a responsible man, and she didn't have enough energy to spare worrying about him.

The brother had turned his back on their father, but the sister walked toward him without hesitation.

The steps were challenging, even with her attendants there to support her, but she climbed to the top and made herself part of the circle that had formed around her father and the village hero. The weakness caused by her illness did nothing to lessen the natural beauty she was born with, and the delicate lady formed a part of the radiant picture of her radiant household.

From atop Vezin's shoulders, Kai saw Jose approaching, and for a moment he scratched his head with embarrassment. Jose must have been remembering everything that had happened between them when she saw this, because her white features broke into a smile like a blossoming flower.

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House Moloch had single-handedly repelled a large-scale macaque invasion.

Thanks to an announcement carried to the provincial capital by honks and the word of mouth among neighboring villages, rumors of Lag's victory spread across the whole of the borderlands with the speed of Pegasus racing through the skies.

It was said that when the news reached Count Balta who was struggling to assemble any kind of army, he was initially enraged at House Moloch for sending him blatantly false news. When he received more evidence of their victory, he threw all of the orders he had been writing into his fireplace. He laughed loudly as he told his people of the brave exploits of Vezin of House Moloch, the Iron Taurus who must have gored the apes on his horns.

There had been some talk of canceling the winter solstice banquet, but now it was set to continue as it had every other year, and formal invitations were dispatched to the households of many lords. A letter congratulating Lag for their victory was sent along with their invitation. In what was a rather cheap price compared to the cost of raising an army and defeating the enemy, there was also a notification of a reward to be sent to them later. House Moloch was honored as a house of powerful rulers of the eastern part of the borderlands.

The nearby lords who had refused to send aid now wasted no time in dispatching messengers to send congratulations. They offered their help to rebuild the settlement along with small monetary gifts. This sudden change in attitude was obviously driven by the knowledge that their own villages might someday demand aid from the powerful village of Lag, which had repelled an attack by an army of 1,000 macaques. House Moloch graciously accepted every gift without a word of complaint regardless. Whenever money was offered, both sides were willing to accept the gift without hesitation.

Not long after, winter had truly arrived across the borderlands.

The ground was completely coated in pure white snow, as if there had never been a bloody battle raging a short while before.

Part 6 — Protector of Kanae (First Part)

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A merchant caravan had come to the village.

Most years, they came before the snow had begun to pile up in hope of carrying off the annual products of the land in exchange for the goods they brought from villages elsewhere. This year, they had remained in a neighboring village while they kept track of the battle against demi-humans that had started in Lag. Essentially, they had decided to hold back until they knew the outcome.

Contrary to their expectations, Lag had survived the macaque assault and successfully driven them away. The bravery of their lord Moloch Vezin, also known as the Iron Taurus, had already been famous. His reputation only increased now that he had shown himself powerful enough to defeat an army of demi-humans several times larger than his own. The soldiers of Lag also became known as the strongest in the borderlands, and merchants who thought there might be profit in strengthening ties with such warriors made the difficult journey through the snow to visit the village.

The villagers were overjoyed of course. When they heard that a caravan was coming, every available hand in the village set to clearing the snow from the roads and the village square, and many turned out to wave to them when they arrived.

There came 10 carts, 5 merchants with 20 servants, and 7 mercenaries who were escorting them. Their horse-drawn carts came to a stop in the village square where customers began to line up to see the goods, and the village became lively as if it was a festival.

“Let’s go, Kai.”

“Have you got your money?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it.”

The caravans that periodically visited Lag would come in the spring and fall carrying many strange goods from the center to the small village that had little culture.

Lag would sell the queijo that was the local specialty, wool products from livestock, and the fur of small animals they'd captured. In return they'd accept currency of equivalent value. Some of this was then given to the villagers as their salary for working all year round, providing them with a small amount of money that they could use to make trades at this temporary bazaar.

The soldiers were among those who received coins from the lord's household, albeit in small amounts. In a year, the lowest-ranking soldiers would generally receive two copper shechems, the mid-ranking soldiers three to five shechems, the core soldiers would receive a silver delshechem, and married men would receive an additional five shechems.

Obviously, they couldn't buy very much. A single shechem was only enough for a few candies made from boiled-down malt, so most of the villagers crowding around the carts would stare in wonder at the curiosities on display and would choose something to buy only after examining everything many times.

Single soldiers would generally spend their money on food and alcohol, causing any savings they had to disappear in an instant. Most of Kai's squad were already chewing on the candy they'd bought.

"What are you going to buy, Manso?" Kai asked while watching Manso continue to inspect the goods by himself.

Manso had five shechems in his hand. As one of the highest earners in the squad, Manso had a good amount of choice in terms of what he could buy.

He scratched his cheek awkwardly when he saw that Kai was looking at him.

"I don't care about the sweet stuff all that much."

"You're not going to buy food?"

"You've gotta think carefully, or they'll make you regret it. Take care, Kai."

Manso was holding a red hair clip in his hand.

It was obviously meant to be worn by a girl, and the fact that Kai understood why Manso was buying it was a sign of how much he'd matured. He guessed that this was a gift for a girl who Manso had some relationship with.

At times like these, women could find out just how much men cared about them. If there was any suspicion that a man's feelings weren't sincere, the favoritism shown towards them at mealtimes would be put at risk, so it paid to be careful. Everyday meals were obviously more important than candy that would only last a short time. Kai took this to heart and watched Manso carefully.

After seeing Manso give his purchase to a girl, Kai looked at the coins that he held in his own hand.

Two delshechem.

A delshechem was worth 7 shechems, so Kai could buy 14 shechems worth of goods. One of those delshechems was what he'd earned as a high-ranking soldier, and the other had been given to him separately as a reward from the baron.

It was naturally Elsa who came to Kai's mind. He followed Manso's example and bought a hair clip with a small bell attached. It cost him 5 shechems.

Kai still had money to spend as he put the hair clip in his pocket. He decided he'd also buy some for the two other girls waiting for him in the valley.

Three more coins left...

He was about to spend them on random pieces of food, but he was surprised to see a familiar face when he turned around.

It was Elsa's sister.

Lilisa and her mother didn't work at the castle, so they received no salary. Instead, Lilisa was left sketching in the dirt with her toes and watching jealously as other villagers enjoyed shopping.

Although he didn't want to get too involved with her, Kai considered Elsa his wife, which meant that her sister felt like something of a sister-in-law to him. He had leftover money, so he didn't mind too much.

“Is there anything you want?”

“...!”

Lilisa’s narrow shoulders jumped when Kai suddenly spoke to her.

She looked straight at Kai who was standing beside her, and her eyes couldn’t have been any wider.

She opened her mouth as if to speak but then she closed it without saying anything. Then glared up at Kai and said, “You know I don’t have money!”

Kai remembered that things weren’t all good between them because of the arguments they’d had earlier. All Kai had ever done for her was ignore her constant requests to see Elsa.

He knew dealing with her wasn’t going to be easy, but she was his sister-in-law, so his desire to do something for her won out.

“I’ll buy it for you.”

“...!”

Lilisa looked at Kai as if she was shocked at how he’d acted like an adult by offering to spend his precious money on her. Lilisa had never been given a gift from a member of the opposite sex before, so her eyes darted about with indecision and she noticed that several other females around them were sneaking glances over at Kai. It was then that she remembered that Kai was the hero who’d saved the village and earned the favor of their lord.

In other words, an exceptional man was offering to buy her something.

The fact that he was willing to spend his hard-earned money on other people was proof that he was a very useful man.

She didn’t know what had made her sister fall in love with him, but even Lilisa could see that this man named Kai was not so bad looking.

Several different ideas came to her mind, causing her to look down at the ground as her face turned red. It felt wrong to have these feelings toward the terrible person who’d taken her sister away from her.

“You were looking at this just now. Did you want it?”

The thing that Kai picked up was carved from wood. It was a hair clip that looked like a kanzashi, and it came with a small comb. A merchant watching what was happening told them, “That’ll be three shechems,” with a big grin.

Kai held out the hair clip to show it to her, but Lilisa just looked at the ground in embarrassment. She showed no sign of coming around, so Kai went ahead and bought the hair clip before putting it into Lilisa’s hair while she was still looking down at the ground.

“...!!”

“Don’t lose it.”

With that, Kai patted his sister-in-law’s head and walked off.

Kai had had two delshechems, but now that *large* sum of money had been completely used up. When he watched his squadmates show off the candies they were eating, he felt a deep regret, but at the same time he felt refreshed after spending the money that he wasn’t used to carrying.

Kai had no idea just how much attention he’d drawn from everyone around him.

“Oh, that so?”

“Someone known as the Iron Taurus was never going to be so small. The misunderstanding caused some amusement.”

The village population was small, and the further one went from the lively atmosphere in the village square, the less people there were to be found.

White smoke began to rise when another pinch was added to the well-used brass incense burner, which shone with a sharp light. In Lag’s place of worship, the vague figures of two traveling priests were visible as they struck bells as part of the service they were holding. The service was being performed to send the village’s recently departed to the Samsara, at the request of House Moloch.

Two of the people who had come to Lag with the caravan of merchants were traveling priests. It was standard practice for these traveling priests to visit periodically and send off those who’d died that year. House Moloch would also

ask any traveling priests who happened to be passing by to perform additional services.

The walls around them were adorned with scrolls bearing holy images, and wheat and millet from the village were piled on a plate beside the smoking incense burner as offerings.

The chants made by the traveling priests, words they spoke to pray for the dead, were heard by very few curious listeners. Most people were gathered at the bazaar, and few people in the borderlands would dwell on the deaths of people around them.

“He looks to be something of a hatchling.”

“The godstones of foul creatures are easily obtained here. Such people are bound to exist. He is not so different from ourselves.”

Although they both wore black in the style of priests, their long journey had left their robes dirty and terribly frayed in places. These two priests differed in height by more than a head, but they struck the bell more or less in unison as they continued to recite their prayers.

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The caravan packed up as much as they could carry from Lag and then hastily left the next day. No one knew when conditions might take a turn for the worse in this season, so it was easy to get caught in a snowstorm if one wasn't careful.

Although only a single day had passed, there was fresh snow covering the road and everything was colored the same white. The procession formed by the fast-moving caravan became hard to see through the light snow. With the caravan gone, winter would create a deep covering of snow that cut off Lag from any other would-be visitors.

But this year's winter was a little unusual.

Even after the caravan had left, the traveling priests that had been with them stayed behind in the village.

In the harsh winter, traveling priests of the borderlands would generally

become a burden for villages that had lodgings for priests, and they wouldn't leave until the following spring. Lag had such lodgings made from stone, and so the priests asked to pass the winter there and their request was granted by House Moloch.

The disused lodgings were quickly cleaned and bedding was prepared so that the priests could enjoy their stay in comfort.

Women were also chosen to tend to them. Needless to say, they weren't asked to spend the night with them, and their tasks were the ordinary tasks of a maid. One of these women was Lilisa, who had become an adult that winter.

"You can get water from the well behind the lodgings. If you can't use it because it's frozen, then there's a deeper well behind the castle that you can use."

"Yes, understood."

"You're to serve them the usual two meals per day. If you find there's not enough, please let me know. The baron has given us permission to make some small allowances for our guests."

"I'll ask if the need arises."

"Feel free to use firewood. Though if you need heat quickly, the communal fireplace in the barracks used by the men should always be warm. Please go there."

These various pieces of advice came from the most experienced woman. Along with the two other women who were with her, these three people would be caring for the priests. The shortest and youngest of the group was Lilisa.

This was the first job she'd been given since starting to work for the castle, and her excessive nervousness was visible on her face. When she was told she'd be caring for two smelly men, she couldn't stop worrying about the various types of trouble that could occur between men and women. However, the priests that were staying there this year had tattoos on their arms that proved that they had formally entered the priesthood, so the women looking after them felt no need to be particularly cautious.

While the women were talking to them, the priests sat very politely with their

legs crossed and their backs straight.

“We shall trust ourselves to your care.”

“Not at all. It is us who should be grateful to you.”

“Sorry for the trouble.”

Along with the other women, Lilisa went through the unfamiliar motions of bowing to the guests.

It was already warm enough inside the swept and cleaned lodgings. The place had developed a lonely atmosphere after being uninhabited for a long time, but now that atmosphere was gone. With the cleaning mostly finished, the women were able to sit down and relax.

The priests were sitting cross-legged in front of the older women. What seemed likely to follow was a very informal conversation between them.

The women served them tea, and the priests shared strange stories from outside the village. The women were hungry for conversation topics, and so they found themselves completely absorbed in the stories the priests told. Priests that had spent time at Maas near the royal capital had many stories to tell.

The priests never stopped smiling as they told their tales, and they turned out to be good listeners as well as good storytellers. They listened to trivial tales that the women told about the village and enjoyed their stories so much that their reactions appeared exaggerated. Outsiders would normally have been bored by stories about infidelities by unremarkable soldiers and stories about how bugs in the wheat would get baked into the bread, but the priests listened with great interest. The women soon began to get carried away.

“This important visitor from the capital. Was he really so picky?”

“He was. He wouldn’t eat anything green. It was like feeding a child.”

“And he was picky when it came to you-know-what, too.”

“I see. Disgraceful behavior. Haha.”

Lilisa was sitting on a pile of straw in the corner of the room where she

amused herself by touching the hair clip that held her hair back. She'd only just started work at the castle and couldn't keep up with the conversations of the others. She was still too young to find amusement in conversations with the adults.

She looked over at the priests and couldn't help but be impressed by the inquisitive nature of the pair.

They never seemed to grow tired of hearing about the official that had recently visited from the capital, the rumors about his entourage, or the important priest that had been with them.

Lilisa eventually grew tired of touching the hair clip and looked out of the lodgings. Women working in the castle would work day shifts and night shifts. Lilisa worked the day shift, so her work was finished around the time the sun was setting. She noticed that it had started to grow dim outside. She stood up when she remembered that her mother was alone in bed at home. The other women must have been too absorbed in the conversation to realize what time it was, so she feared she'd have to interrupt them.

Before she could speak, she realized that the conversation had turned to talk of a certain boy. They were talking about the boy who'd taken her sister away from her, and she couldn't resist listening.

Lilisa knew very little about Kai. As she listened to the conversation, she learned that there were many sides to Kai that she'd never seen. Her interest caused her to move closer to the circle of people, and a considerate priest tried to include her when he noticed. At first she was hesitant: "Yeah, even I know about him." Then before she knew it, she was talking about him as if defending him from the other women.

"He was my older sister's lover."

"He's awful. He took my sister away while she was still breathing and hid her somewhere."

"I just know my sister is still alive somewhere."

She insisted on all of these things even when the other women tried to stop her. She felt proud of herself for being able to join in the conversation with the

adults so easily. Then she got carried away.

“No matter how many times I ask him, he won’t tell me.”

The other women could only smile wryly as she passionately spoke of how horrible the boy was, but the priests clapped their hands in amusement as they listened.

She even told them that the boy would often leave the village in secret. She insisted that he was going to visit her sister.

The proof that her sister was still alive was in the medicine and fruit that was sometimes left by the entrance to their home for their sick mother. When she told them this one of the women hit her on the head.

“Can’t you guess where that came from?”

“You poor thing.”

A tug on Lilisa’s clothes forced her to sit down and then she listened with surprise as the adults, who acted like they knew everything, whispered the truth of the matter into her ears.

The reason he has to sneak out of the village is because he wants to visit your sister’s grave frequently but he can’t leave the village without permission. And as for the parcels left at your home, that must be him taking care of the family she left behind. It makes a lot of sense, doesn’t it?

“If he delivers things in secret, he must be a good man.”

“He’s in the good books of the baron too. He’d be a real catch. It’s such a shame about the girl.”

Lilisa still insisted that her sister wasn’t dead, but when she heard the shorter of the two priests’ assessment of the matter, she was left unable to argue.

“If your older sister is fit and well enough to visit the village and make these deliveries, why would she not show herself before her family?” he asked her.

“Though strange things do happen,” he added.

The priest was looking at her with his head tilted as if trying to make her realize something. When he smiled, his eyes looked as though they were full of some deep wisdom.

After the battle with the macaques had been avoided, Kai began visiting the valley daily. It was as if he was making up for all the self-control he'd had to show while various events had prevented him from leaving the village.

There were also things that he needed to talk about with his followers.

Now that he'd accepted the macaques' invitation, he needed to discuss how to deal with the matter.

"Master..."

Porek lowered his head respectfully as vapor rose from every part of Kai's body while he allowed the koror to wipe his arms and legs.

"Might I offer you a change of clothes?" Porek asked.

Kai was dripping wet.

He looked as though he'd been swimming in cold water while still in his clothes. Although it didn't seem to bother Kai, those around him couldn't help but be concerned.

Porek silently offered Kai new clothing.

"What are you trying to say?"

"I just couldn't help but notice that you're rather wet..."

"Oh, right. Someone saw me leaving. I kinda panicked and fell into a waterway."

"Please do take care."

"Someone keeps watching me."

He was only wearing simple clothes, so he took them off and threw them aside before putting on the change of clothes he'd been given. Kai struck his fist against the handle of the knife at his waist as if the memory annoyed him.

"I don't get what their problem is."

No one could answer him because none of them had actually been there. He sighed deeply as if he'd realized that muttering to himself was a pointless

endeavor that would gain him no sympathy.

Kai had jumped down from the wall in an attempt to escape the eyes that were following him. He hadn't wanted to leave footprints in the snow where he'd landed, so he'd made a half-hearted attempt at covering them up before concealing himself in a trench formed for a waterway. That was when he noticed a figure atop the wall, and so he had to carefully make his way to the valley by moving along the waterway.

It was as if someone knew about his excursions out of the village and had lain in wait for him.

"It's not so long since you were troubled by invaders. If life in the village displeases you, there is always the option of moving to the valley."

"I'm not ready for that yet," Kai said bluntly. "I don't want to abandon the village yet."

There were sounds of disappointment from his people.

None of them could understand why someone blessed by such a powerful god could want a meager life in a village under the protection of an inferior god.

When Kai was done changing, he pulled a chair, which was little more than a round log, over to the bonfire and sat down.

Now that he'd taken up his position, everyone else in attendance chose their own places. They all sat in a fan-shaped arrangement with Kai at the center.

Close by Kai's side were the koror tribe leader, Porek; the head soldier of the tribe's army, Kechak; an old uzelle named Noizen who had horns so large they appeared to make walking difficult for him and who'd been left with the responsibilities of a village chief by Nirun; and an uzelle named Rezik with impressive round horns that came to sharp points. The leaders from the two villages that made up the nation of the valley were in assembly.

As the member with the most experience and the most powerful guardian, it was Porek who ranked highest and he was the one who addressed Kai.

"Master."

Porek stepped forward by himself and gave his report while keeping his head

bowed respectfully.

The nation of the valley was conducting expeditions to the nation of the macaques so they could actively gather information.

“As per your request, I have visited the macaque territory.”

“Right.”

“It is true without doubt that a gravesite has been defiled and someone has been transformed into a diabo. Corruption seeps from the diabo to its surroundings like ink spilled in water. Unless it is slain quickly, irreversible land rot may spread across the surrounding regions.”

While Kai was unable to act, Porek had gone ahead and visited the macaque territory himself.

Of course, secretly infiltrating macaque territory had carried some risk, but the small koror were quick and skilled at blending into the shadows, making them well suited to such tasks. Porek had observed a fairly wide stretch of macaque land and had gone deep into their territory.

“The abridor left Heju, and the tribes that followed rushed south like an avalanche. A severe food shortage resulted in the south. They have resorted to stealing from subservient species, and there has been a general air of disquiet.”

The macaque nation was in a somewhat chaotic state.

Although the aim had only been to determine whether the macaques had been honest, Porek had gotten a good idea of the difficult situation they were in. It was likely that their attack on Lag had been carried out in hope of stealing the ample food supplies that the humans had gathered for the winter.

When Porek’s report was over, it was Kechak, the head soldier, who spoke next.

He had sent some strong-legged koror to keep constant watch over the state of the macaque forces following their retreat. Most of the 1,000 macaques had returned to the territory ruled by the species as promised, but around 100 of their soldiers had remained in their makeshift fort while they kept close watch on Kai’s village.

Those remaining soldiers would likely be a thorn in their side until the macaques had assurances that Kai was going to accept their invitation. The macaques probably felt that they had no other option, but it still left a sour taste.

The uzelles had reached out to some other species in the area and had heard similar rumors about the macaques. The macaques were the major species in the eastern region, and there were many species subservient to them. The things those subservient species were saying suggested they bore grudges against the macaques for taking away their land, backing up what Porek had already said.

When the series of reports was over, Kai still had some basic doubts.

“This Abridor guy couldn’t beat it?”

Abridor was the title given to the high chief of the macaques, and Kai felt sure that someone with such a title must have a strong god as their guardian. But Porek explained that their king god, who had the devotion of so many others, had been weakened when the curse of the diabo suddenly laid waste to much of the land.

By gathering devotion from so many, the god had also gathered curses upon itself.

Porek knew that Kai lacked experience, so he provided more knowledge about the diabo.

“A god that transforms into a diabo will greedily drain the blessings given to the land, causing it to become a powerful god beyond control within a short amount of time. The diabo drains and the king god is drained. If we sit idle for too long, the situation could irreversibly worsen beyond our imagining...”

Kai could tell that Porek was hesitating as if it was forbidden to speak of such things. As if some superstition made him fear he’d invite disaster.

He was lost for words, as if it was too difficult to speak of.

“It is said that such creatures writhe in terrible pain as they spread a calamity, before finally succumbing to their own curse and dying a mad death as blood sprays from their every orifice. In the worst-case, the diabo will eventually die

from its own poison even if we abandon our attempt to slay it. It is said that the land cursed by such gods of misfortune will rot and break apart, and then darkness, like blood from the depths of the soil, will spill out and plunge the land into darkness. However, if we can accept the loss of some land, then that itself is not a problem. The macaques will have brought about their own destruction by their own incompetence... There is no need for you to place yourself in danger to rescue them, Master. This problem will not bring ruin to the entire world. This means there is no absolute need for you to act. Please act according to your own discretion.”

“...”

Kai’s body shivered involuntarily.

He trembled as if they had just touched upon some forbidden subject.

Kill it!

Kill the diabo!

His god was shouting at him. Kai understood the reason behind the sense of urgency that the god of the valley felt.

He felt there was a reason why the god of the valley was called God of Arbitration by some and Protector by others.

The old ones had died out so long ago that their name was forgotten, and the last survivor must have guarded over the land for as long as he lived. Be it coincidence or necessity, he had taken on tasks that were beyond all others because he had the powerful blessings of the god of the valley. After the other old ones that were his own kind had died out, he may have lived only for the sake of protecting the valley he loved.

That was what Kai believed.

It felt as though this responsibility was placed on him as the host of the god of the valley.

“All right. I understand.”

“Master...”

“I’ll kill it.”

“Very well.”

Kai would have to turn a blind eye to the circumstances between the macaques and humans on this occasion.

He felt sure that his top priority had to be slaying the diabo.

A one-way trip would take two days. Four days for a return trip.

If he spent several days in battle at the location, he might need a full ten days' worth of time. But he couldn't just disappear for such a long time without the people of his village realizing.

I need to create an excuse.

He left it up to Porek to make contact with the macaques. They believed that the masked protector was a koror, so they'd have little trouble believing that another member of the same kind was acting on Kai's behalf.

He ordered the others to continue in the tasks they'd been given and then everyone present demonstrated their loyalty to Kai in their own way. The koror put together the two hands that they used to create their crafts while the uzelle lowered their heads to present their horns.

It felt as though there was power in the close group they'd formed. If more devout followers could be gathered around the valley, they might form a group whose war potential was great, even when Kai was absent. Performing the responsibilities shouldered by the god of the valley might even require such military units that could operate independently.

Kai left Porek and went down into the valley. There he enjoyed passing the time with Aruwe and Nirun. He also checked in on Elsa, who still hadn't regained consciousness. When he learned that lately her throat was able to move well enough for her to swallow small amounts of water, it was the happiest he'd felt in some time.

“Master smiled.”

Nirun laughed as she removed the tube placed into Elsa's mouth, and Aruwe began to smile too. Kai realized that they'd both been worrying about him, and

he patted their heads. The two had been left to take care of Elsa while he'd been busy.

"If you want to reward us, you should lay your hands on us already."

"I have the remedy ready for you, Master."

"..."

The unexpected course of events caused Kai to take another good look at the two of them, but they didn't stir any strong feelings inside him. "Maybe another day," he told them.

The two were annoyed by the lack of reward and tried to push Kai down onto the bed that was behind him. Kai had no trouble lifting them both up, one in each hand, and he threw them outside. The happy sounds they made when Kai threw them showed that they were both still young enough to be childish.

"Let me see Sis!"

When Kai looked at Elsa's sleeping face, the face of her younger sister suddenly came to mind.

He wondered how pleased she'd be to see her older sister was safe and well. He thought about how she'd smile and other trivial things.

72

Humans had no knowledge of the happenings in the great forest.

For better or worse, they remained ignorant of those events because it wasn't their problem. Even the previous battle triggered by the macaques' struggle to survive was receding into memory and had caused no major damage.

The trader's bazaar was over and all that remained was to shut oneself up for the uneventful winter. However, there was still one yearly event that was cause for activity in the village castle.

The winter solstice banquet.

As the highest authority in the borderlands, Count Balta would gather together those loyal to him to an event regularly held in the provincial capital of

Baltavia where they could strengthen their ties.

They chose to hold the event in the harsh season of winter when the borderlands would be covered in snow and enemies from outside would give up on invading, which was the only time that the guardian bearers serving as lords were released from the responsibility to defend their territory. To make the most of the rare opportunity to leave their territory, each lord would happily accept the invitation from their superior, Count Balta, and lead a party to the provincial capital. The name “Winter Solstice Banquet” naturally arose as a result.

Of course, the winter snow could get rather deep, so traveling by horse-drawn carriage was difficult. This meant that most lords brought a party of only people capable of making it through the snow.

If a lord lived close by, they might be able to take along a few tough soldiers. If they were further away, the journey wasn’t to be taken lightly. In such cases, only guardian bearers and perhaps a few exceptionally strong soldiers could make their way to the soil of the provincial capital through the winter cold.

Three official guests from House Moloch would be attending the banquet. These were the three guardian bearers of House Moloch: Vezin, Olha, and Jose. This year would be the first year that Jose had attended.

It was unusual for a house so far from the capital as House Moloch to bring attendants, but this year would be an exception. A single boy had been chosen to accompany them as an escort.

“How come only my sister gets to go?!”

Although the two sisters were related by blood, they received very different treatment because only one of them possessed a guardian.

Only guardian bearers and a small number of their invited guests were permitted to attend the solstice banquet. Although the baron’s children received special treatment in the village, being the child of a lord didn’t entitle them to attend the event. Guardian bearers on the other hand were the only ones that high society considered nobles worthy of respect. Simply being part of a bloodline imparted no social status.

Olha and Jose were both children of the baron's first wife, Carolina. There were no guardian bearers among the children of his second wife, Falda. Unlike Carolina, who had been born to House Bofoy in the neighboring territory, Falda had been born an ordinary village girl and originally entered the house as a servant.

Lord Vezin had said he would choose a successor after assessing the potential of his children from both wives, but he may have secretly preferred those carrying the blood of his first wife. Though many suspected that House Bofoy had actually influenced his decision from behind the scenes.

Lana was Falda's oldest daughter, and she was the next oldest daughter after Jose. She had inherited her mother's beautiful, flaxen hair, but there were prominent freckles around her somewhat low nose and she always envied the pale, blemish-free skin of her older sister Jose.

Since learning that Jose had been ordered to attend the solstice banquet, she had been repeatedly crying, "It's not fair!" Her mother, Falda, was a quiet individual who always tried hard to ensure harmony within the household, but her mother's subdued attitude only caused Lana to become irritated further.

Her brothers and sisters realized that this was causing Vezin to become more and more displeased, so they tried not to draw attention to themselves lest his anger also fall on them.

"Lana."

"Mother, be quiet! Father! I want to go too!"

"Lana, please..."

"My sister's going! It's not fair! Why does she get to go?! It's not fair!"

That was enough to make Falda turn pale. She grabbed Lana by the arm and tried to drag her out of the room. But Lana knew that her father was too kindhearted to raise his hand to his daughters, so she struggled free and began to stomp her feet on the floor like a spoiled child.

Olha had had about as much of this as he could take. "Oh, just take her along," he said, causing all harmony in the household to be lost.

“It’s not worth putting up with her tantrums any longer. The only way she’ll understand the harshness of winter beyond these walls is if we let her go out and experience it for herself.”

“Brother!”

Lana had mistaken Olha’s talk for words of support, and at first, she looked delighted, but Olha’s cruel words soon soured her mood once more.

“I hope you don’t think that there’ll be anyone to carry you when you complain that you’re tired. You will walk to Baltavia through the snow on your own two feet with no one to assist you. It’s a long journey. Baltavia is a thousand yulds from this village. For someone like you, I suppose it might be possible to somehow reach the provincial capital after walking for a hundred days.”

The solstice banquet was only a month away. By Olha’s estimate, Lana wouldn’t make it on time even if she left immediately. Math wasn’t Lana’s strong point, but she knew when she was being made fun of.

The real problem was that the march through the snow was going to be difficult even for guardian bearers. The previous year, Olha had experienced the five-day journey, hurrying during the daylight hours, across the 1,000-yuld distance to the provincial capital. Even as a guardian bearer, Olha had found the march taxing.

The only way Lana could attend the solstice banquet would be if her father or brother carried her. Even though Jose was a guardian bearer, she was going to find it difficult to complete the journey on her own two feet, and the issue of who would carry her had already been discussed. Count Balta had issued an invitation to the “beautiful maiden” of House Moloch, so it was a given that she’d be attending the event with them.

However, in the eyes of the younger daughter Lana, this was unfair.

If someone else was to be carried, then she wanted to go too. As far as Lana was concerned, Jose was nothing more than a sister who was a little older than her, so the difference in how they were both treated perplexed her.

“The only one left to carry you would be that hatchling. If you’re going to cry

at someone, why don't you bother him?"

"That's enough, Olha."

Vezin had finally become irritated enough to speak up.

When Olha spoke of a hatchling, it was a metaphor for an inexperienced warrior who'd gained a lot of power without knowing how to use it, just like a bird of prey not long hatched from its egg. Needless to say, he was referring to Kai, the young soldier chosen to accompany them to the solstice banquet.

Lana felt she might burst into tears if her father looked her in the eye, so she ran from the room as if trying to escape his gaze. Those who tried to follow after her were stopped by a few words from Vezin.

"Leave her be. You spoil the girl too much."

The difference in treatment between his first and second wives caused Lana to bemoan her position as Falda's firstborn child. Her inability to attend the high-class social events such as the solstice banquet with the lords of the borderlands was a sign of the growing difference in value between Jose and Lana as noble sisters.

Jose had kept quiet because she felt somewhat responsible for the fuss. She could only sigh to herself as, with some sympathy, she watched her younger sister leave the room.

Now that Jose had lost control of her gravesite and experienced the effects of a curse placed over it, she keenly felt the burden of being a second-rate guardian bearer with fading powers. She'd gone to purify the defiled gravesite after the macaques had retreated. She'd seen how the underground portion of the gravestone had been dug up and how red blood had stained the surface of the damaged inscription. The memory filled her with dread. It had made her feel as though her heart had been torn out and was in the hands of some stranger.

The population of Lag was decreasing with each passing year. Things couldn't go on as they were, but there was little prospect of restoring the lost village of Eda and securing the gravesite.

Now she was to attend the solstice banquet, largely for the sake of becoming

betrothed. Her suitor was the sixth son of Count Balta, and the best she could hope for was that he might be competent enough to help defend the abandoned village.

If I could trade places with her, I wouldn't hesitate...

Jose tried to forget about Lana. She thought about Kai, the hatchling boy who'd been chosen to accompany them to the provincial capital, and she listened to the discussion about the solstice banquet that the family had started.

Vezin had boasted that a journey of 1,000 yulds through snow would be no trouble for them whatsoever. Her father couldn't have failed to notice that her brother was lost for words when he heard this happy talk of the journey. Her brother had also inherited a land god from a village they'd lost control over, and it was easy to imagine that they shared the exact same misgivings. In fact, her brother had asked their father for permission to build a new settlement where Elg once stood when the spring arrived. The suggestion was rejected because there was no way that their few remaining subjects could be split across two villages, but Jose shared her brother's feelings.

If she could build a new village of her own where Eda once stood, she'd need a few villagers and a strong ally to help her defend it. When she thought about strong allies, it was that boy who came to her mind, and it made her cheeks hot when she thought of him. The fact that he was a greenhorn with no strong attachments made him all the more suitable.

Father does intend to make him a member of our household. Perhaps the chances of it happening aren't so slim...

She'd already had several encounters with the boy. He was often rude, but he was surprisingly skilled, and Jose had learned that he could be surprisingly gentle and considerate.

Jose had realized that she actually had no objections to her father's idea.

In about half a month, the four of them would be headed for the solstice banquet. When Jose thought about how she might see some new sides of the boy during their journey, it made her think that the long journey through the bitter cold might not be so bad after all.

The family discussion must have already been going on for half a toki. All the while, there was no sign of Lana, causing Falda to grow worried and head out with her attendants.

The women came back looking quite distressed when they failed to find Lana in her room or anywhere in the castle.

The family were surprised, but they didn't feel that this was a crisis.

A short while later, an attendant came charging into the room.

"A horse!"

The woman must have run all the way there because she was gasping for breath as she spoke.

There were never visitors on horseback in the winter.

"One of the horses is missing!"

Lana never returned to her room.

In fact, she never returned to the castle at all that night.

The village was thrown into pandemonium.

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The first thing Kai heard were cries of, "A horse was stolen."

It was hard to imagine the punishment that would befall anyone responsible for the horses if one of them was stolen. Everyone concerned and everyone nearby were dashing around looking for some way to help, and confusion spread rapidly.

"A horse was stolen? Who stole it? How?"

"Semal was on watch, but he didn't see it happen. Someone from our squad said he'd go out and search by himself."

"Wait... Why was the village gate even open?"

"How would I know?"

The news that spread by word of mouth was hard to believe. There were many parts to it that made little sense.

Then one of the women who worked in the castle came running toward the panicking soldiers to give them orders from the baron. By this point, even the least intuitive people were able to grasp the whole situation.

The baron's daughter Lana had run away from the village while sulking over some decision made by the baron. The little lady had gone crying to a young man who she knew was fond of her and asked him to take her out of the village. Because of the long distance to the provincial capital, she must have convinced him to steal a horse. That was everyone's guess.

The young man, Semal, liked taking care of the animals and had no experience at all with women. It was well known that Lana had used him to practice her ability to charm. If she'd gone to him in tears, he probably caved instantly.

This led to people being chosen by drawing straws once more, and the youngest squad leader, Kai, bravely drew the winning straw for his squad. The snow outside the village was so deep that their shoes disappeared into it as they walked.

Overall, the lineup of soldiers who left the village weren't so different from the lineup dispatched to search the forest depths. There was much resentment over the methods the older soldiers used to escape their responsibilities.

"Let's just grab her quick and then get back to the village."

Under Kai's instruction, three squads set out following the tracks in the snow left by the troublesome lady. Tracking her was a simple matter in itself.

But as slow as the lady was, she was traveling on horseback, so their speed had allowed them to put some distance between themselves and the pursuers. Visibility was high on the flat plains of the borderlands, so no one had expected that they'd have such trouble spotting the horse once they started searching.

And there was definitely no one who expected what happened next.

"Hey! Are you all right?"

Roughly a toki after they'd started their pursuit, they found Semal walking

through the snow on unsteady feet.

Semal had been kicked by the horse and now he was holding his abdomen in agony.

“I tried to stop her. I thought she’d die if I took her any further. I...”

They understood that he was head over heels for the lady and he’d felt she needed him, but they couldn’t understand why he’d gone rushing away from the village without a good supply of food or any gear to protect against the cold. Eventually, Semal had come to his senses, at which point he tried to convince her to go back to the village. But Lana had stubbornly refused and snatched the reins away from Semal.

Their behavior had spooked the horse. The horse was already being forced to travel through unfamiliar snow and must have been quite irritated. It kicked Semal without warning and then went galloping off in a new direction.

They could see that the tracks left by the horse extended endlessly across the plain.

They’d been headed due west toward the provincial capital, but after leaving Semal behind, the horse had headed toward the forest to the north.

“Shit... That’s a bad part of the forest.”

“Remember Banya? That was only a little further west.”

“You mean there could be pigs lurking there?”

“Shit. We’re not ready for this.”

Their fears were unfounded. At that time of year, there were only lagarto sleeping in the marshes; orgs were nowhere to be found. The home of the orgs was the plains to the far north, beyond the forest.

Kai listened to his squadmates’ clueless talk about the demi-human world within the forest. He didn’t tell them that he knew better. He had other ideas.

“I’m going on ahead,” Kai muttered before stepping forward.

His squadmates had gotten used to this, but recently, Kai had very rapidly developed into a leader who could give out instructions. At some point, the

squad had gotten used to following Kai's quick orders.

"Nail, you're fast. Take your squad back to the village and ask for reinforcements."

"Got it."

"Chit, your squad's coming with mine. You don't have to enter the forest. Just wait for me to come back. I'll shout if I need you."

"Right!"

"Kai, I know the lagarto are peaceful during the winter, but don't take any risks. Don't expect us to come running over while you're being eaten."

"I know. Look after the squad while I'm gone, Manso."

With that, Kai sprinted off.

He accelerated like an arrow unleashed from a tightly drawn bow. The deep layer of snow at his feet was scattered in all directions, and within a few moments, the rest of his squad were left behind.

To Kai, this was nothing. He hadn't even used half of the power he'd often use when heading to the valley. He used just enough power to make him seem like a guardian bearer, but not quite. Displaying his power this way was something he'd practiced well.

His dumbfounded squadmates began slowly following after him. Kai briefly checked that they were following and then focused on his destination.

Demi-humans don't move so much in winter. Everything should be fine.

He ran into the forest.

In no time at all he found the horse. The forest lacked the open space needed for a horse to run around freely.

While searching the area around the horse, Kai soon found a sorry-looking butt. She must have fallen from the horse and landed headfirst in the snow. Her pale legs were sticking out from the skirt of her clothing, but Kai wasn't quite old enough to find that interesting.

The unladylike sight of the butt actually irritated him. He prodded it with his

toe, mostly to check for signs of life.

When there was no response, he stood with one foot to either side and pulled her free from the snow. Her clothes and hair were a complete mess, and all the effort the girl had put into her appearance had gone to waste.

But she was still breathing. After checking that her life wasn't in danger, Kai put her clothing right so that he'd feel less guilty and then he brushed the snow from her hair. Lady Lana still didn't wake up.

This might just be my chance.

Kai felt he had to make the most of this opportunity. By some miracle, all the conditions needed for him to achieve his goal were right there before him.

Kai put Lady Lana over his shoulder like a piece of luggage and approached the horse, which was chewing on some bark. Using his incredible strength, he pulled the horse's muzzle and made it turn around.

"Go home, you."

The horse resisted the rough treatment at first, but when Kai stared at it from close range, survival instincts must have kicked in because a single hit to its rear was enough to send it galloping off in panic.

It was heading back by the way it came, so the horse was certain to encounter the other soldiers. Kai didn't know exactly how much a horse was worth, but he knew they were valuable creatures.

All right. Let's do this before she wakes up.

With Lady Lana still over his shoulder, Kai went running deeper into the forest.

He checked that there was no sign of the lagarto in their marshland, which meant that they were sleeping in their waterside nests, and then he ran straight across the watery surface of the marshland without a word's notice.

He went deeper into the forest, as he'd done many times. His destination was, of course, his beloved territory that surrounded the valley.

When Lady Lana appeared to be waking up during the journey, a light chokehold applied with one hand prevented it. Kai appeared unannounced in

the koror village of Hacar, at the valley's edge. The mysterious warmth of the valley reached the village, so not much snow had lain there and many villagers were busy at work outdoors. When they saw Kai, they put down their work and gathered around him.

"My God!"

"How unusual! The sun is still high."

"If you are free, you would be a welcome guest at my home."

"No, no. You must come to my place."

"Someone call Porek!"

He had always made his visits to the valley at night. The only time he'd visited the valley during the day had been his first ever visit, when he was on the verge of death.

When Porek came out at the villagers' call, Kai put down the luggage he was carrying over his shoulder, making it clear that this was the reason for his visit. Porek looked at the human girl lying at Kai's feet and made a wrong guess at what was happening: "You have found yourself a new wife, My Master."

"I need you to look after her for a while."

"Which is to say..."

"She's the daughter of the lord of my village. I don't know why, but she ran away from home, and now the poor girl's going to be kidnapped by koror."

"You've kidnapped her, My Master?"

"Basically. Just hold her here a while."

As Porek was just about able to figure out what was going on, Kai puffed up his chest proudly, as if to say, *you're not the only one who can come up with a plan or two.*

"She's the lord's daughter. If she's missing, he'll definitely send out people looking for her. I'm going to volunteer to lead the search. That'll give me a few days to go look at this diabo."

"Then I shall leave her in the care of my own household."

“She’s a spoiled brat. You can beat her if she won’t do as she’s told.”

“Master, I don’t expect there will be any need for...”

“I don’t think I left many tracks, but they might find something. I’ll count on you all to erase my tracks.”

“When will you depart for Heju of the macaques?”

“Once I’ve got permission, I’ll head out right away. I’ll have somewhere else to be soon after.”

“Then I shall prepare with great haste.”

“I’m counting on you.”

With that, Kai allowed himself just one glance at the valley before shaking off the temptation and heading back to the place where he’d found the horse.

74

A lady of the baron’s house had been abducted.

The soldiers that chased after her searched tirelessly until the sun went down, but it was fruitless. The one precious clue found through their time-consuming efforts was a collection of suspicious footprints near where the horse had been found. The unavoidable conclusion was that Lady Lana had been abducted by demi-humans.

Kai had gone on ahead, and when he returned, he was informed that no sign of the lady had been found through the whole region. After reinforcements joined them, it was Basco who’d taken the lead. When Vezin heard Basco’s report, he was so overcome with rage for a time that he punched straight through a wall.

The way that demi-humans treated abducted human females was common knowledge to those living in the borderlands. But if they were to persist in their vain efforts to recover her, it could only lead to more lives being lost from the already dwindling population.

Any leader capable of basic math could see that no outcome could justify the

risk. With little else to do in winter, it was an easy matter to put together a search party, but he couldn't order his people to risk death in the forest, even for his own daughter. The most he could do was take a few half-hearted measures to ease his conscience.

While the baron bottled up his wild emotions and tried to be reasonable, Lana's siblings and her mother Falda clung to the baron in tears. Jose felt as though she was responsible for Lana's unhappiness and asked to use her position as a guardian bearer to lead the search party herself.

Jose claimed that even the dangers of the forest could be avoided if the party was accompanied by a guardian bearer, and they might be able to reach its depths. When she actually began to gear up, her father had to scold her.

"You're barely even a doi sigil right now! Do you think that'll scare away a wild demi-human?! And what would become of us if I allowed my daughter to be scarred right before her engagement?!"

Giving up on someone so easily might just have been a habit learned by inhabitants of the borderlands. When Falda saw Jose being scolded so, she gave up on her own foolish demands and agreed to follow the commands of their ruler, Vezin. Olha prayed for the well-being of his foolish half-sister, and Jose felt overcome by her own powerlessness.

The household would normally be in high spirits in the run-up to the solstice banquet, but there was little appetite for conversation after this misfortune.

As a father, Vezin was overcome with worry and decided he had to do something for the sake of his daughter. He would choose an individual with great accomplishments in combat and a talent for survival, and the individual would be sent to search the great forest for a short time. Basically, a guardian bearer would set out to search.

At first, it seemed likely that Olha would be chosen for the task, but Vezin changed his mind at the last moment, and the task fell upon another.

Needless to say, the individual was Kai.

When everything went exactly as he'd planned, Kai felt proud of himself and

his own cunning. After returning home from the initial search attempt, he'd immediately begun preparing for a journey while his squadmates watched incredulously. When that preparation turned out to be worthwhile, even the quick-witted Manso was openly impressed. "You did well to predict that." Kai went from being proud of himself to being unbearably smug.

Later, Kai learned more about how he'd been chosen and realized that a lot of it had just been down to coincidence. That brought him back down to earth.

At first, Vezin had been willing to give up on all search efforts. It was Jose who changed his mind, and she'd used her influence over the women's council to ensure he was hounded over the issue.

The reality was that Olha had initially been expected to take on the task of searching, but he'd complained about it. "Why not just send out that hatchling?" That was how the torch was passed to Kai.

But still, everything had gone according to plan.

Kai secured a good supply of provisions and dried potatoes from Adelia in the food stores. Next, he borrowed a rucksack to carry a tent for the long journey through snow and a lot of clothing. It all felt light on his back. The rucksack was a special one that included a rack and was designed for use during the harvest, so once it was full it grew to be several times bigger than Kai himself.

"You're going to go walking through snow with that thing on your back? Are you sure?"

"I can handle it. Look."

"Don't jump! Everything's falling out!"

"Kai, you're not doing this for fun."

His squadmates understood the difficulty of entering the forest and spending several days there while searching for someone. They'd helped him negotiate with Adelia while she was preparing the dried potato.

Manso had sharpened Kai's knife during the night.

Two days after Lana had gone missing, Kai set out from the village. A good number of people turned out to see him off. Kai walked out into the deep snow

as they waved him goodbye. It wasn't until the village was out of sight that he began to run.

His destination was the valley. The fact that Lana had gone missing in that area was fortunate.

To be given the freedom to leave his community for even just a few days was almost a miracle. Kai could run through the snow to his heart's content and smiled when he saw the white clouds that hung in the air when he exhaled.

He spun in circles for no particular reason and then leaped into the air after a short run-up. He played with the innocence of a child.

He felt no need to hide, so he continued to run as he approached the village of Banya, causing the people there, who were probably soldiers, to make a fuss as they questioned what they were seeing. Banya must have been so short of men that they even had women acting as soldiers, because some of the voices yelling at him to stop were high-pitched women's voices. That made Kai worry about the state of the village once more.

Kai was acting with permission from House Moloch, so, in preparation for times like this, he'd brought along a small flag bearing the house emblem. He raised up the small flag dyed with the emblem of House Moloch in his left hand and waved it at the soldiers who were watching him from Banya. As the population dropped year after year, life in the borderlands could feel lonely. Particularly in Banya where the men had died in battle, the survivors yearned for human contact. Kai's perceptive ears heard a female soldier shouting to him, "Don't get yourself killed!"

Kai then disappeared into the forest. His face quickly became expressionless as he looked to his left and right. He did something unusual by walking into the marshland of the lagarto where he found steam rising as he approached the waterside, as if the water there was still hot despite the winter cold.

Am I still being followed?

Without looking back, Kai searched for any nearby signs of life and made his decision quickly.

Although lagarto activity was reduced, they would expose half of their bodies

from their nests to soak in the water while sleeping. There was no stirring from them, so they must have recognized Kai's familiar scent.

From the waterside he identified a path of stepping stones and made his way across while looking out for any dark-colored lagarto. The waters of the marsh were shallow but wide, and he knew that this detour would soon shake off any pursuers.

That worked. They're not coming after me.

Kai sighed to himself before climbing a nearby balen cedar.

He moved from branch to branch so as not to leave any tracks and headed deeper into the forest. After roaming the forest for quarter of a toki, he finally reached his valley.

Kai called for Porek and told him to make preparations before heading down into the valley to visit his cabin.

Despite it being winter, there was no sign of snow in the valley. The air was warm and his breath no longer formed white clouds. The sun shone through the leaves, which still hadn't fallen from the trees, and the whole scene made it seem as though summer had never ended.

Aruwe knew that Kai would be heading into the macaque country. Her master could eat twice as much as a regular person, so she'd prepared various types of food to make sure he wouldn't get hungry on the way. From inside the cabin she carried out various dried fruits, cakes made from steamed potatoes, and dried fish, all of which she wrapped up and attached to the rucksack, making Kai look like a turtle carrying its child. Kai told her he was impressed by how many things she'd made, and Aruwe smiled and said, "There's always a lot to eat here in the valley." She wasn't wrong.

"Guess who!" Nirun came leaping out of the cabin and covered Kai's eyes with her hands. After Kai put her down beside Aruwe, she told him, "I wish you'd show me more love." There were tears in her eyes, and she sounded serious, but the complaint came at him from out of nowhere, so Kai had no idea what she meant.

Next, he checked on Elsa, who was still sleeping in the cabin. As he stroked

her face many times, he could see just how much weight she'd lost. He gently squeezed a maca he'd collected on the way there and let the juice drip onto her dry lips. Some reflex made her throat move, and Kai could tell that it wouldn't be much longer before she woke up.

He decided that he'd need to build a new cabin once she did wake up. They were husband and wife after all, and they'd need a proper house to themselves where they could do the various things that husbands and wives do.

The thought filled Kai with joy, causing him to break into a smile.

"Will you be resting here in the valley today?" Aruwe asked, sounding restless.

"No, I'm leaving soon."

Kai's response made her look sad all of a sudden.

Nirun was also looking at him with her cheeks puffed out in dissatisfaction.

"Am I not... attractive enough?" Aruwe asked him.

"I'll always be ready, whenever you are," Nirun told him.

"..."

Kai wasn't moved in the slightest by the deer-like girl's attempts to seduce him.

He was a little concerned that he was making Aruwe feel down when she tried so hard to serve him, but Kai was still naïve in some ways, and he was left scratching his head.

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Although winter had arrived, there was not much snow lying in the forest where leaves and branches formed a natural umbrella. Kai and ten koror soldiers followed Porek as he acted as their guide and showed them the road made by demi-humans hidden in the snow.

Unknown to the humans, roads had been formed in the great forest that demi-humans could use to come and go, and just like the roads in the human

nation, these roads had names. The road that Kai and the others were following was known as Dragon Spine, a famous road that went through the center of the great forest from east to west, following along rocky areas and ridges.

Although it included steep inclines, the road wasn't blocked by snowdrifts and it was used most heavily during the winter. The road most used during the warmer seasons was a fairly flat, meandering road known as Serpent's Bed that followed rivers and valleys. There were also other roads, such as a special, hidden road known as Wind Spirit Path that passed through numerous windy caves.

It felt similar to the previous trip into the forest depths, but as the signs of the great forest's residents became fewer and farther between, they reached areas that were shrouded by fog irrespective of the season or weather. According to Porek, lands where the blessings of land gods were weak were often covered in fog.

Dragon Spine passed through some of these areas where the fog reduced visibility. To help them keep to the path, old strips of red cloth tied to the upper branches of trees served as landmarks guiding them forward. The red landmarks were visible overhead through the white haze, spaced roughly 50 yulds apart.

Kai didn't realize it until it had been pointed out to him, but they had entered the territory of the macaques some time ago. Most of the eastern part of the great forest was territory controlled by macaques, and "infrastructure" like the land marks above them were the fruit of their efforts to maintain the area.

The region also included territories belonging to lesser species subservient to the macaques. Each time they entered one of these "autonomous regions," they were asked to identify themselves and offer a small amount of food. This sort of toll was customary in the winter when food was scarce.

But of course, not every species was on good terms with the koror. They found their way blocked when they entered the territory of the badger-like woons, and Kai wasn't sure what to do when the koror suddenly became aggressive in response. Porek and the others from Hacar who'd had to flee from the orgs had been attacked by these woons in their moment of weakness, and

now there was a grudge between them.

At that point Kai had to get between them to restore order. After the woons saw him break a large balen cedar in two with his fist, getting permission to pass through wasn't so difficult. One characteristic of woons was that they became meek when facing a strong warrior. The smug look on the faces of Porek and the other koror made Kai sigh.

The whole trip was about 100 yulds, and it took them a full two days because they had to allow the accompanying soldiers to keep up.

Kai had seen a lake from atop the final hill.

Soma Lake supported life in the macaque city of Heju, and the grayish surface of the water was visible through a veil of falling snow.

Kai expected Heju would be a fairly large settlement, but its streets were nowhere to be seen. This was because they were hidden by a thick fog that covered all of Heju. Kai soon realized that this land had lost the blessings of land gods and was in decline.

"The macaque palace, Dehoushi, is in that region. If we continue to climb, you'll see the black smoke for yourself."

"Will it still be burning?"

"It would appear that the interior burns continuously. I would not say it to them, but the smoke provides a useful landmark."

"There's a weird smell."

"This is because many things are burning, and even the ice of the lake is rotten."

The wind direction was one factor, but being able to smell the place from several yulds away suggested that there must be an intolerable stench at the site.

Dragon Spine continued on to Heju, but Porek led them along another path that branched off. That direction took them to where the macaque king, their abridor, was housed.

The situation was bad enough that the macaques had wanted to summon Kai

even if it meant withdrawing from their assault on Lag.

As Kai turned his back on Heju, he felt as though he could hear the distant howling of some creature from afar.

Kai had never seen a macaque settlement so close up. The strange village that appeared before him ignited his curiosity, causing his gaze to wander to and fro.

Macaque nests were generally built in the tops of balen cedars. In the large trees they could make large nests by placing planks between branches, binding the pliable young branches with green leaves together at the top to form a dome, and then creating a single opening. As the macaques climbed up and down each tree, time and time again, they would strip the bark from the trunk, making their way of life damaging to the trees themselves.

Kai's eyes shined as he wondered how many macaques could live in one of those great nests, but then they arrived before a great, ancient tree that must have been the biggest in the settlement. There a male macaque greeted them and introduced himself as the chief of the Nenem tribe.

He displayed his kumadori, and Porek and Kai returned the greeting by displaying their kumadori in the same way. This exchange suggested that they were to be treated as important guests. "Abridor, wait," the chief then told them in broken speech before walking on ahead. Crude as his speech was, the words he spoke in the human tongue were easy to understand.

The settlement became lively in response to the arrival of guests important enough to be greeted by the tribe chief himself.

A great number of macaques, seemingly too many for the number of nests in the trees, nosily moved out of their path when herded by soldiers who were there to escort Kai's party.

Starvation must have been rampant because several long arms rudely reached out, trying to steal from the koror in their party as they walked. Kai and the koror held off the troublemakers with their spears, but the chief leading them was able to stop the rude behavior with a single howl.

"Sorry. Everybody hungry."

“We don’t have enough to share with you.”

“We get no food from human village. Very sad.”

As far as the eye could see, there were suffering gray creatures staring at them hungrily.

To know that they were just barely holding on to rationality behind those exhausted and dried-up eyes gave Kai goosebumps. He knew that they wouldn’t be able to leave the place in one piece if all of those suffering creatures came charging at them at once.

After a while, the chief of the Nenem tribe came to a stop.

The ancient balen cedar towered above them. The broad branches that grew from the tree had been used to make an unusually large hole at the top.

They imitated the chief by climbing a ladder formed by hanging vines. At the top, macaques who appeared to be servants pulled them up onto a deck and propelled them forward through a curtain formed by pieces of hanging hide.

The warm air embraced them. Porek came stumbling in behind them and bumped into Kai’s back.

There were close to ten macaques inside this one nest.

Their expressions changed when they saw the macaque who appeared to be the abridor, lying in a bed.

“Abridor cannot stand. Forgive rudeness.”

First it was the Nenem chief who bowed to them deeply, and then, as if following his example, the other macaques tending to the abridor also prostrated themselves.

These must have been the abridor’s family or attendants.

The male laid up in the bed was so big that he looked as though he’d find the ceiling of this nest rather low if he ever stood up. His carers helped him sit up so that just his upper body was raised up. Then the abridor looked back at Kai with wheezing breath and apologized in a weak-sounding voice. “Forgive my appearance.”

The land was polluted, and this foulness may have gathered in the “king” at the center of this great band of macaques, causing him to be cursed. At the height of battle, he had been stricken by a curse and collapsed, and his suffering was reminiscent of what had happened to Olha and Jose.

Having other land gods swear their devotion had given him some strength. Kai had experienced that for himself, so he could imagine what it might be like if the number of land gods swearing devotion increased.

A king to whom many land gods swore devotion would be able to absorb and collect small amounts of power from each, giving them power far beyond that of other gods. But of course, these blessings would not only come with an increase in strength, they could also cause the god to be pulled down by curses if the land was laid to waste like it had been.

“These happenings. Never before have we experienced this.”

The bed groaned under the incredible mass of the abridor. As he moved away from the feather pillows supporting him, it could be seen that his fur, with its vivid black and white stripes, had been lost in horrible fashion down his left side and on his abdomen. There was also purple bruising on his skin and a faint smell of rotting flesh.

“We had plan to organize and fight. But we were fools. The longer we waited, the more power we lost to sickness.”

The abridor clenched his fists and trembled in regret, knowing that he should have taken decisive action immediately while he still had his strength. As the diabo gained power, he had lost his own power. Before he knew it, they were fighting over power from the same source. For all the power that the abridor lost, the diabo gained power by stealing the land god’s blessings.

Even now, the diabo continued to greedily devour the power from the land. As time passed, the macaques were losing their power, and before long the situation would be beyond mending.

The abridor explained that their army had withdrawn upon the orders of the protector, but the assault on Lag had been necessary because they needed new land and food for the overwhelming number of suffering macaques.

He's trying to say it's my responsibility now.

Without saying it explicitly, he made it clear that they'd followed Kai's orders, so now it was his job as protector to take responsibility and slay the diabo. This use of tact in negotiation was something that was common to humans and demi-humans alike.

"Protector, we implore you."

The abridor fell from the bed to the floor, shaking off his carers as they tried to stop him. Then he pressed his forehead to the ground. He appeared to be willing to sacrifice his pride as the leader and defender of his people.

This king's once-grand fur had fallen out in the most unsightly fashion, and now he was prostrating himself before a member of another species while his own kind watched. The sight was enough to make the macaques grind their teeth, and they began to groan as if it was more than they could take. Some even stomped their feet as if unable to contain their frustration.

Kai couldn't help but feel uncomfortable at the idea of being called "Protector."

He didn't know the reasoning behind this name they'd given him, and he couldn't fully accept that it was him who their king was prostrating himself before.

Kill it!

The god of the valley was wild with a passionate hatred for diabo, and it was impatiently waiting for the fight to begin.

He wondered if perhaps the old ones, his predecessor included, had met their downfall after being weakened by a diabo. Although it was his predecessor who had lived many years in solitude in the valley after becoming the sole survivor of his species, Kai felt for a moment that it was his own experience.

"I'll kill the diabo," Kai told them softly.

Although he'd heard much from Porek and others, he still didn't feel as though he properly understood it.

Diabos had wrought disasters through the ages, leaving traces in the form of legends passed down by many different tribes. Porek and the people of Hacar told a story of how a band of soldiers, braced for death, had once been sent to slay a diabo created by the orgs.

Porek grimaced as he explained that they had acted as beaters, driving it into a deep pit, because the guardian bearers of their powerless species were capable of little else.

The uzelles had their own tale. It was the tale of how the then-leader of the uzelle had stabbed the diabo to death with their horns, but that was an absurd tale that sounded full of half-truths.

Legend had it that diabos could breathe terrible fire, they cursed all those who they touched, and they could come back to life even after their head was cut off. It was so hard to separate fact from fiction that Kai felt as if he'd learned absolutely nothing.

He'd recklessly taken on the task without actually knowing anything about the enemy he was facing, and now there was some part of him worrying that this might be a big mistake. He felt like a fool for promising so much just because they'd given him the title of protector.

But even so, this problem wasn't something that could just be ignored. Someone had to do something about it, and it just so happened that the task had fallen on him, as master of the valley.

There was also Kai's growing hunger for more knowledge that drove him to see for himself this bug in the world's design that they called a diabo. Naturally, his main motivation was his sense of duty to save the macaques from a difficult situation, but at the same time he figured that it would be a good idea to experience a diabo for himself while he still had the option of backing out if things went badly.

Kill it!

And then there was the god of the valley's enthusiasm.

It caused him to feel a strong sense of duty because he naturally shared his god's feelings as its host vessel. It was almost like being driven by instinct.

The Nenem chief guided Kai and his followers along a path that only macaques knew about, leading out to where they found Heju in the region of Meso Lake. As they traveled, the fog gradually grew thicker, and reaching their destination might have been challenging without someone to guide them.

The overpowering smell of rot was enough to make Kai pull his thick scarf up over his nose. Porek and the others did likewise without being instructed.

"The water of the lake is terribly rotten," Porek said quietly, as if he didn't want the macaques to hear.

Through the fog came a faint sound of water, and when they finally saw the surface of the lake there were stiff-looking macaque corpses floating there.

Here and there, bent reeds swayed in the breeze.

"Master Torud."

"Master Garam was defeated."

"The Hizel tribe can't... the males..."

Along the way they found wounded macaque soldiers crouching by the roadside, and they looked desperately at their guide, Torud, the chief of tribe Nenem. Efforts to reclaim Heju were still going on among the macaques.

Then there was suddenly a thunderous roar, and a red light lit up the fog.

It was the sound of something exploding, and then there was screaming. Soon after there was the sound of a cliff face crumbling, and fragments of rock came falling onto the lake surface near where Kai stood, sending up pillars of water.

An explosion?

It was an unusual phenomenon in a world where nothing like gunpowder should have existed.

Horried expressions appeared on the faces of the wounded soldiers, and those who could still move began dragging their bodies along the ground toward the explosion. Torud also began to hurry there as if drawn toward it, so

Kai and the others also had to do the same.

A pile of leaves that must have fallen from the rotting trees created an unpleasant feeling as it squelched beneath their feet. Every part of the land was rotten.

Torud pushed his way through a wall of macaque soldiers while Kai and the others followed along the path he created.

The cliff face that came into view looked like a rocky mountain full of holes. It was like some kind of giant apartment building. Kai's attention was so drawn to what he saw above him that he walked straight into the back of Torud, who was frozen to the spot.

Although he wasn't unfortunate enough to fall on his behind and dirty himself with the rotten fluids on the ground, he was surprised when the collision caused his mask to smash into his nose. Torud appeared oblivious to Kai's pain as he howled threatening words to black macaques that were standing in their way.

Unlike most macaques, these black macaques were actually wearing woven clothing, and the long handles of the weapons they held out were crossed in the style of guards, blocking the path ahead.

What's with these guys?

The weapons they held had strange shapes.

The metallic tips of their weapons were coated with green rust, and one end of the tip was shaped like a long, thin axe, while the other end had a sharp edge like a chisel made to break rocks. They were attached to long, wooden handles that curved like a bow.

If they were to swing these weapons, the weight of the metal part would surely make them bend. It was as though they were designed like whips used to strike at opponents.

The simple, pure black, woolen tunics that each of the soldiers was wearing were reminiscent of the black robes worn by human priests.

This black clothing was everywhere at the entrance to Dehoushi, making it

hard to estimate how many there were. There had to be more than 100 or 200.

It was hard to see from behind the black backs that blocked the path, but there appeared to be many macaques who had fallen just like the region's trees, and there were rising clouds of thick white smoke. They could also see workers picking up charred black bodies like mere objects and throwing them into the nearby grassy areas.

"Gahama has returned!"

"I saw the Princess of the North!"

Wounded macaques some distance away were shouting loudly.

They were behaving like a flock of birds alarmed by a snake in the grass where they'd hidden their eggs.

It made no sense for there to be killing between members of the same species at the entrance to Dehoushi.

Gahama? Princess of the North?

Kai was curious, but Torud argued vehemently with the figures in black without pausing to explain anything.

"You shan't pass!"

"Orders of Royal Tree!"

"We have Abridor's orders!"

"None shall pass!"

"We slay diabo! Stay back!"

Some sort of battle over who would lead the effort to slay the diabo seemed to be going on.

Torud tutted and asked about the "Royal Tree," which appeared to be a term they used to refer to the king of the macaques. If they were under orders from the king, then that would make these guys in black the royal guard.

Kai couldn't help but be confused.

The course of events didn't make sense. Kai had thought the macaque with

the title of abridor was the king of the macaques.

Kai knew they might have to break through if it came to it, so he tried to assess the combat potential of the macaques in black.

The army of macaques in black had already begun marching into Dehoushi while 30 or so remained standing in front and a similar number stood blocking the entrance to Dehoushi. The group appeared to operate based on a chain of command, rather than succumbing to whoever was strongest, which was unusual behavior for macaques.

Torud shot a glance at some other soldiers watching them from a distance, who came to stand with them. But even with two groups ready to fight, breaking through was going to be difficult.

Torud's attempts to assert his authority didn't appear to be improving the situation, so Kai put his hand against the muscles that bulged from Torud's shoulder and tried to push him onward. When Torud still didn't act, Kai tried throwing a punch at him.

"What?" Torud asked sternly, appearing a little hurt. Kai started off with the basics by confirming that the abridor wasn't actually the king. The question made Torud frown. "He's no king, but he is most powerful leader of our people."

He explained that he was a member of the oldest macaque family, the macaque royalty, and that he was a great noble host to a great god who was the next most powerful after the king. The chief who led each tribe was known as the ridor. The title of abridor, meaning high chief, was given to the top ridor, who was a chief among chiefs, but not the head of their royal family.

The current abridor had gathered the most devotion from the other macaque tribes and was now their de facto leader.

Which begged the question, who was this king that the macaques in black followed?

"Oldest family like pureness. Mad from rotten blood."

There had been mad kings for several generations, and the aspect of macaques that might have been called their "humanity" was not something

they associated with their royal family. Thus, the abridor faction was formed. Torud then referred to him as the “acting king” for the first time.

Now Kai understood that the ones in front of them blocking the path were what might be called “royalists” or “loyalists.” They might have been a fanatical faction that were steadfast in their loyalty to the royal family.

If they were going to continue barring the path, that left few choices.

We'll force our way through.

The macaque standing face-to-face with Torud appeared to be the commander of the group. It had already let its kumadori show as if trying to make it clear that they weren't willing to let anyone pass. Kai stepped in front of their commander and casually took hold of the spear-like axe it held before pulling it toward himself.

The commander looked down at this koror warrior who was no taller than its navel and tried to lift the warrior up to belittle him.

It was to no avail.

Despite being a koror, the little warrior was steady as a rock.

Kai then casually pulled the weapon toward himself once again. It was the commander who was easily moved. It let out a startled yelp and tried to regain its posture after having stumbled forward.

But Kai wasn't going to miss the opportunity. With his kumadori on display, Kai didn't give his opponent a chance to stand up straight again. He twisted its weapon from its grasp and then kicked the back of its outstretched leg, forcing it to kneel down. Then he stood firmly on its bent knee. This was a technique from Zula-ryu used to steal an opponent's weapon.

Now that it was sitting, it had been reduced to the height of its opponent and the tip of its nose was close to the mask, giving it a good view of Kai's kumadori. The way its eyes widened suggested that it had grasped the difference in power between them.

“Abridor found Protector of Kanae.”

It was unclear whether Torud's words reached it.

The gaze of the frenzied commander in black was fixed on the glyph on Kai's forehead. The macaques in black who'd been watching tried to move nearer, but Kai turned the stolen weapon against the command and they stopped.

He waited for a while, but there was no response.

Kai soon gave up on talking and gave a signal with his eyes to urge Torud to start walking. Porek and the company of koror watched him step forward and then, after Kai threw down the weapon he'd been holding, they walked on behind Torud.

There was much shouting from behind them.

"Too late! Protector not needed!"

Although the commander was shouting at them, they didn't look back.

"Wise Princess defeat diabo!"

Wise Princess.

That was the title given to the true leader of the macaques in black.

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The front entrance to Dehoushi that Kai and the others passed through had led them into a corridor with a high ceiling that was something like an atrium. The ground at their feet formed steps that were carefully carved into the stone, and they went downward as they traveled deeper in.

To the side of the path lay many charred corpses that gave off thin wisps of smoke, and the air was filled with the unpleasant smell of burned fur. Although there were corpses everywhere, they were fortunate enough to find the stone floor in the middle of the corridor clear, as if something large had been dragged through there.

The numerous holes bored into the walls of Dehoushi formed a strange array of twists and turns like the interior of an ant's nest, and some of them eventually connected to this main corridor. Here and there, the surviving macaques inside would peek out from within the holes with weapons in hand, showing that resistance efforts by their species as a whole were still going on.

As they followed the path, Torud shared as much useful information as he could about how to fight the diabo and the doings of the macaques over the past month or so.

Macaques tended not to embellish their tales, making them simple and easy to understand.

“One from Nova transformed. No one could believe.”

Nova was apparently a new territory that was being captured by the macaques at the northern limit. In the same way that macaques caused trouble for humans in the south, in the unknown plains beyond the forest they had stolen several land gods from other species and were continuing to claim more land.

In the midst of a battle to suppress those other species, the transformation had begun.

One guardian bearer had been stricken with a curse and soon transformed. The macaque army had scattered and retreated before they were able to deal with the chaos this created. No one had questioned the decision to bring back that early-stage diabo as they retreated. The creature hadn't looked so strange at that point, and they'd been able to hold conversations with it. The macaques had therefore taken it back with them to Heju without any sense of the approaching crisis.

But then it ate the family members that had accompanied it to the border, and when other guardian bearers came to see how it was doing, it took them by surprise, killing them and stealing their blessings. Finally, it was recognized as a diabo and there were many efforts to slay it. That was the gist of what had happened.

The first thing that came to Kai's mind was the way that Olha and Jose had collapsed after their gravesites were cursed.

It was inevitable that there would be grudges against those who greedily stole the land from other species. Once the strength of a curse reached a certain extent, the effect would extend to the nature of the land god itself, causing what they called a transformation, turning it into a diabo. That was the basic idea.

What was clear was that land gods who succumbed to the dark side were considered diabos.

A royal princess who'd made a name for herself in recent years had been there in the new land, Nova, that they were continuing to acquire in the north. The princess excelled in strategy and despite being female, she showed so much courage that she put the males to shame. She was known to have conquered the lands of many other species and stolen many of their gods. Thus, she earned the alias, *Wise Princess of the North*.

This Wise Princess of the North is going to slay the diabo...?

When they learned that their birthplace, Heju, was in chaos, their heroine had abandoned Nova and led her army home. Now, deep in these caverns, the diabo was being slain on royal palace grounds.

It would feel like a waste of effort to come this far without playing a part, but Kai absentmindedly supposed that it would make life a lot easier if this princess did all the work and slayed the diabo herself.

Torud, who was leading the party, came to a stop. He gestured for them to be quiet and then went on alone.

The slope that had continued downward into the cavern began to slope upward once more. There were a few dozen steps that led upward to a door decorated with reliefs. The reliefs looked like strange faces, but it was unclear whether they were the faces of people or gods.

This pit-like structure looked needless at a glance, but when under enemy attack, this area probably made it easier to protect the area they referred to as the royal palace grounds. The sturdy iron doors looked as though they'd been there for a long time. The doors were terribly warped at one side, which may have been evidence of the initial attack by the diabo.

Torud moved a corpse of his own kind out of their path and looked at Kai.

Kai scowled at the figures in black that were following them and waited for them to stop before he moved over beside Torud. From there they could see the royal palace grounds easily.

"These are the royal palace grounds?"

When he turned his head to look at what was pointed out ahead, the sensory information that hit first was the smell, rather than the sight. The rotting smell was worse than before and made it so difficult to breathe that it brought tears to the eyes.

Porek and the others in tow were also making groaning sounds. Kai had to shake off a sense of taboo before he could even look at the situation ahead of them. Then he saw exactly where the stench was coming from.

The bloody battlefield near the village of Banya had been horrific, but at least then the bodies had retained their original forms. There must have been some mechanism that supplied oil because evenly spaced flames were burning in the space that opened up ahead of them. The floor of that huge underground cavern lit by those small, flickering flames was littered with body parts that had once belonged to macaques.

It was a large limestone cavern that must have been 100 yules across and 30 yules high.

An uncountable number of stalactites hung from the ceiling, and stalagmites protruded upward like thorns.

Round, flat areas resembling platforms rose from the floor to the left and right like a terraced field, and the remains of furnishings rested on them, suggesting that people had once passed time here.

The macaques must have found this place and made it into a home for the royal family. Dripping water had been collected into water flows through ingenious remodeling, and there were various small springs here and there. Those would provide an inexhaustible supply of water that the residents could draw from.

The terrace of round platforms, which was formed by a very natural remodeling of the cavern, led up to a stone table in the deepest part of the cavern that was larger than the other platforms.

It was clear from looking that this space belonged to the king.

“That is where Abridor lived,” Torud said in answer to Kai’s question.

“Abridor is greatest, but not king. Abridor’s throne lower down, to right side

of the rock.”

“So what about this Wise Princess?”

“Mad Princess was on the fifth seat. Lower down.” Torud spat the name as if it left a foul taste in his mouth.

The “Wise Princess” that the people known as Gahama treated as their queen held the fifth highest seat while Abridor held the second highest.

Then who was sitting in the royal throne above them all?

“That... is the diabo.”

At the edge of the large stone table, limbs that were clearly taken from macaque bodies jutted out like branches woven into a bird’s nest.

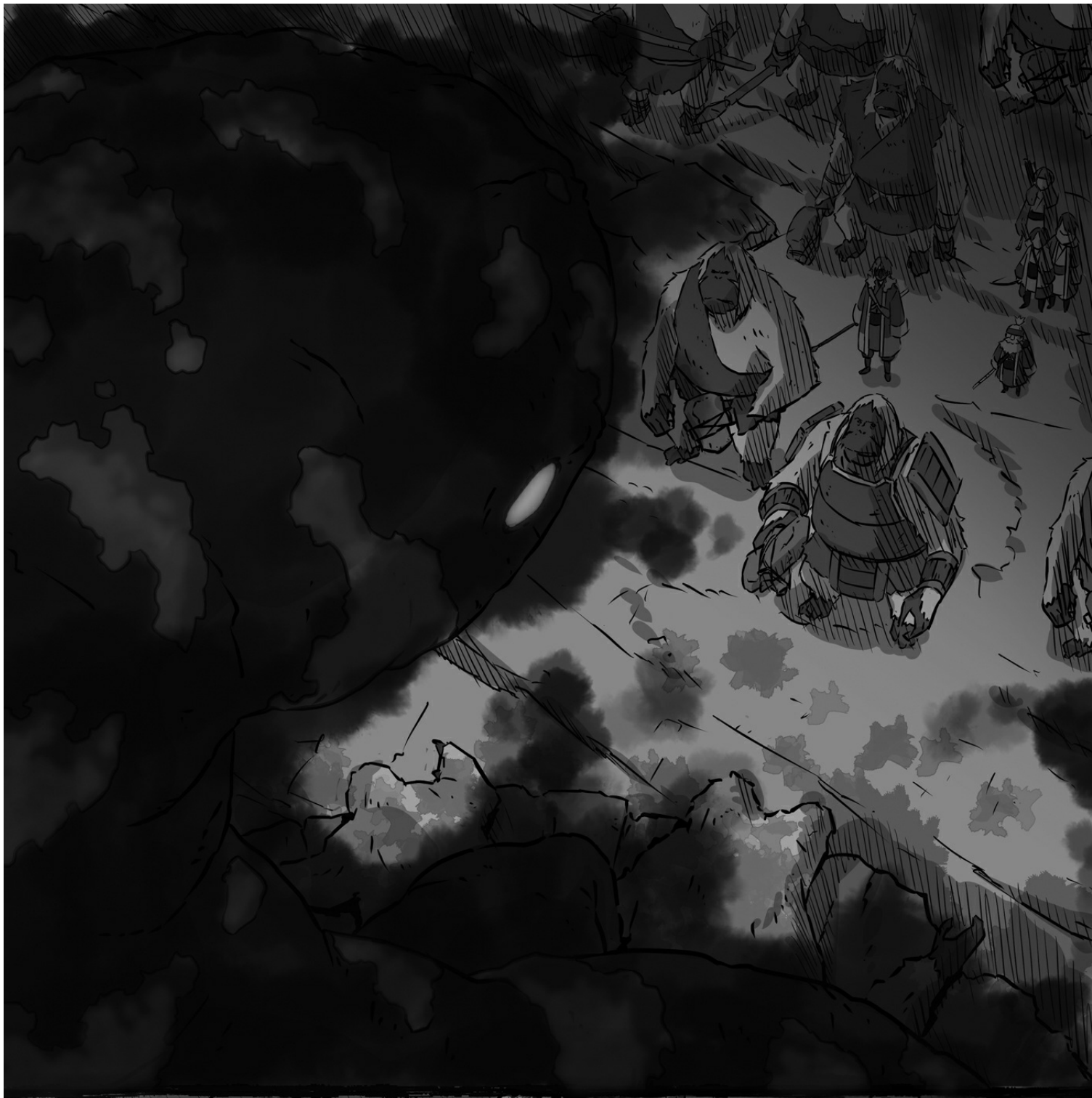
Rust-colored water from an unknown source steadily dripped from it.

They saw the creature’s blue back. It was a soft back like that of the salamanders that crept along river beds. The creature’s back undulated and gave off blue light in a pattern like leopard spots. It must have been feasting on the killed macaques.

There was a strange grinding sound. Kai looked and saw that Torud’s fangs were visible and he had been grinding his teeth.

Then the diabo raised its head like a snake poised to strike.

Its snake-like head then turned toward them, and its red eyes moved slowly.



Its throat then moved up and down, suggesting it had just swallowed whatever it had been chewing.

“It got too big. Cannot pass through door. We drove it into our home. Sealed it inside.”

The place where the royalty of their species should have lived was now home to the diabo.

The thick fog that covered Heju, the rotten trees and the lake... all of these happenings felt connected in Kai's mind.

The diabo sat in a nest it had made on the throne. Then what had become of the rightful owner of that space? Abridor, who ranked second, had been driven to a neighboring village, and the king too should have had to flee.

They must have lost so many of their kind, but the macaques would never give up on Dehoushi. That was a common story anywhere.

It must be in that throne... The gravesite of the macaque king.

Perhaps the king that ranked above all others was already in the stomach of the diabo.

With their king god lost, this entire region had rapidly become a wasteland. Kai was able to reach that conclusion easily enough.

“Diabo!”

A clear, gallant voice echoed through the royal palace grounds.

Kai strained his eyes and searched for the source of the voice.

Below the terrace of the royal palace grounds, the army in black parted to either side and kept their bodies low under the cover of their lined-up shields. There must have been hundreds of macaques forming a black carpet of wool across the milky white rock face.

But there was no sign of the owner of the voice.

Kai's eyes searched elsewhere.

Above the head of the diabo perched on the step, in one of the holes that must have been used by the royal family, there was a white figure.

A white macaque with armored limbs stood there with its arms raised as if it were supporting the ceiling of the small hole.

On its head it wore a hachigane that covered its forehead, and patterned scale armor covered its abdomen, making it clear at a glance that this was no ordinary macaque. The long tufts of white body fur that were visible through the gaps in its armor appeared to shine prominently in the darkness of the cavern.

The Wise Princess of the North.

In one hand she held up a wooden cage that contained a small beast. The small beast lay in the cage looking like a worn-out puppy.

“I have brought you a playmate. Rejoice, monster.”

Her clear, feminine voice resounded through the royal palace grounds, and it was followed by a howl that reverberated in the pit of one’s stomach. It was then that the form of the monster she spoke of appeared in Kai’s field of view.

The fur on its large muscles appeared to shine silver as it stood on end. A fearsome body resembling a small mountain was dragged along the many ropes that bound it in place as it stepped out from the shadow of the rocks.

Though macaques were many times the size of humans, they looked like children compared to this creature. It threw its head to the side and then blood was sent flying as a bitten handler screamed in agony.

An array of sharp fangs were visible when it slowly opened its mouth. Glistening sparks poured out when it exhaled, spreading out from its mouth in time with its heavy breathing.

There was an amber light dwelling within its eyes as it looked up at the diabo. Then its gaze shifted and seemed to pierce through the form of the Wise Princess.

“Deuswulf!”

Torud and Porek behind him both uttered the word at the same time.

It was at that moment that Kai fully understood what the Wise Princess of the North was planning.

He never came back...

Lilisa breathed white breath onto her numb fingers and then spread out the cloth she'd just wrung out. She felt as though winter was intensifying with each passing day. When she thought of the boy struggling through deep snow in the depth of a forest, she would mutter to herself, "Why doesn't he just come back?"

It had been four days since Kai's departure from the village.

It had been even longer since the lord's daughter had been abducted. An entire six days had passed since that day.

Most people had already accepted that the life of the lord's daughter Lana must have come to an unfortunate end. Human lives were lost easily in the borderlands. It was a tough world that they lived in, so the people of the village had learned not to dwell too long on the loss of a single human life.

Thus, Lilisa and the other villagers had come to terms with what had happened. They'd quickly given up on the foolish little lady and now they were more worried about whether their valuable defender of the village, Kai, would return safely.

The village was busy with preparations for the solstice banquet.

Jose's engagement had been decided, and many of the women were fully occupied by efforts to make her a formal dress for the occasion, so anyone with free time in the castle was given embroidery work to do.

Since Lilisa had only started working in the castle that winter, she had never even spoken to the missing lady known as Lana. She lacked the knowledge or the skill to get involved in the tailoring work, so she felt separate from the hurried work going on in the castle.

"Lilisa, we need you to clean the lodgings."

"Oh, all right."

Lilisa was cleaning the lodgings just like she'd been instructed.

Sometimes she would take her own hair ornament in her hand. She felt relief after assuring herself that it hadn't fallen out without her noticing, and then she absorbed herself in the familiar daily tasks.

The two priests were shut up inside the single room of the lodgings that day. Lilisa overheard pieces of the priests' conversation as she cleaned. She didn't intend to eavesdrop, but the work was boring and she couldn't help but listen.

"...twins...it seems...the problem is..."

"...indeed...the hatchling might..."

"...foul creatures...marshes...his way across...no trouble..."

"...hatchling...this rate...never return..."

She had no idea what they were talking about. She didn't care to understand as her work naturally took her closer to where they were. They must have noticed her because the conversation suddenly stopped.

It made Lilisa feel out of place, and so she quickly finished up her work and left the lodgings.

On that day, like all the others, the sky was full of heavy clouds and there was light snowfall.

It had been a silent day with no wind. But then the silence was broken by a sudden roar of distant thunder.

It happened so suddenly that it made Lilisa cower, but she wasn't too afraid of thunder to gaze off toward the source of the sound. A bigger shock came when the two priests came running out of their lodgings, causing her to jump with fright.

Again and again, the sound of distant rumbling filled the air.

In the castle, the out-of-season thunder caused many curious faces to appear at the windows. The boys cleaning the cattle sheds also came out to look. Everyone was looking up at the sky.

What is this? My ears hurt.

Lilisa felt pain like a tearing in the depths of her ears.

She couldn't calm her racing heart.

The two priests who'd come running out headed off to the village walls where they'd have a better view. Several men who weren't too busy did likewise and hurried after them.

The roaring of distant thunder brought a sense of unease with it.

Lilisa reached for the ornament in her hair. At the back of her mind she was thinking about the boy.

Afterword

This author is an atheist, but for some reason I do find myself believing in the myriad of gods.

Perhaps it's because my brain cells were damaged at a certain art university back when they were still simple, but I am a person who naturally likes the vague notions of fate that come from gods residing in all things. For example, I might want to look at a misshapen stump ready to be carved and say something like, *What I do is look at the thing to figure out what it wants me to carve it into.*

Similarly, *Teogonia* is like a natural piece of rock that this author has been carrying for many years. It is with excitement that I continue to sculpt the story and the world hidden within, but right now the second volume of *Teogonia* has come to its end, and I pray that it can find its way out into the world. It may be that I really am an author fixated on vague notions of fate who believed that this second volume was a part prepared to be published like this from the very beginning.

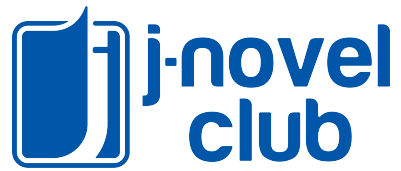
My gratitude is owed to Kawano-sensei who produced illustrations that, as always, matched my tastes exactly, to Aoyama-sensei whose superb artistic skill has turned this humble work into a manga, and to the editor Yamaguchi-sama.

And I would also like to express my heartfelt appreciation to all the readers who have supported me.

It is thanks to the support from all of you that volume 2 of this work was able to be published.

For as long as I have the opportunity to publish my work, I will do my best to continue sculpting the world of *Teogonia* in finer detail until its end. I hope that you can stay with me until the story has reached its conclusion.

Tsukasa Tanimai, September 2019



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Teogonia: Volume 2

by Tsukasa Tanimai

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