

Presented by **Tsukasa Tanimai**
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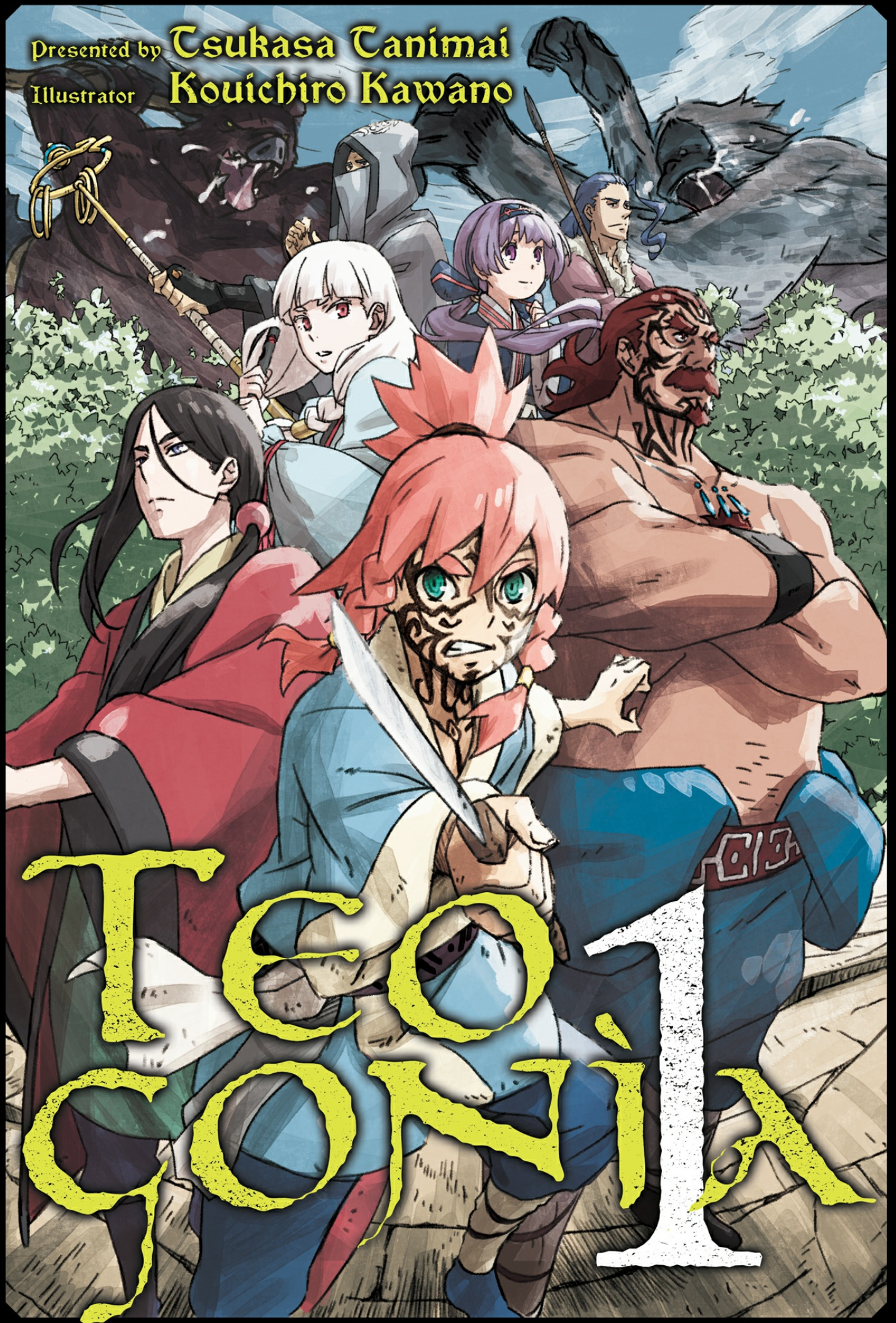




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Part 1 — The Boy from Lag

1

That day, it seemed the killing would never end. The boy's breath quickened as he felt the heavy presence of the god of death grip his heart. His vision was obscured, making it difficult for him to keep his footing; he avoided stepping on a corpse but then found himself treading into muddy ground that upset his balance.

Here and there the ground was sodden as if rain had fallen that day on the harsh, dry land known as the borderlands. But of course, there had been no rain. The ground was wet with blood and bodily fluids from the foul-smelling bodies of the dead.

"Shit..."

The boy held his breath and then suddenly threw himself to the ground based on some instinct.

A moment later there was a whoosh as a giant boulder flew through the air where his head had just been.

The physical strength of the demi-human macaques that would ravenously rampage through human territories was fearsome. The boulders they were occasionally throwing from the edges of the forest carried enough force to shatter a hardwood shield into a thousand pieces. Needless to say, a direct hit would have split the boy's head open like a melon.

Even as he fell, the boy kept sight of the backs of his squadmates and desperately scrambled to keep pace with them as they seemed likely to leave him behind. Members of the human race, to which the boy and these other frail foot soldiers from the village of Lag belonged, had to band together or they'd be killed before they could put up a fight. With their spears held in-line and ready, they charged as one toward their powerful foe.

Humans were incredibly weak compared to the stronger types of demi-humans. Without knowing how to fight as a group rather than as individuals, the humans would have had no chance of defending their land against the stronger demi-human they were facing.

“Let’s show ‘em the glory of Lag!”

The squad roared in response.

The boy stood near the center of this squad of five humans, where it was his responsibility to aim for the legs of the enemy. To his left and right, other spears were held slightly upward, aimed at the heart and lungs. Their spears formed a barrier of high and low spearpoints that couldn’t be avoided by jumping or crouching. Their assigned target was a warrior-class macaque, a high-ranking creature that was much larger than the others and had faint dotted markings in its fur.

The macaque sensed their killing intent and swung at them with the stone axe held in its hand. The swing came at the tips of their spearheads from one side, causing the two upward-facing spears to be pushed aside along with the soldiers who held them. The remaining three soldiers dodged past their falling squadmates and rushed forward.

The boy put all of his momentum behind the spear as he drove it into the tough fur that covered the shin of the macaque.

Kill it..!

The fur was as tough as metal wire, forming a natural defense against the spearhead and threatening to direct it off course. The boy forcibly corrected the course of the spear and drove it into the macaque’s inner thigh. Then the boy prepared himself for death as he pushed against the macaque with all his might. He could feel the gouging of flesh.

Just as his spirits were buoyed by the success of his attack, he was knocked down by his stumbling squadmates and the precious spear slipped from his grasp.

The moment the boy realized he’d lost his weapon, his body reacted spontaneously as a result of his intense training: in one smooth movement he

drew the cutting knife that hung at his waist.

“Fucking die!”

The macaque was leaning forward with its posture broken as the boy chanced his life on a single upward strike aimed at its throat.

The other soldiers each followed after him, their eyes wild. In an instant, the macaque’s body was covered with deep wounds. Its howling was loud enough to rupture an eardrum at close range, and its apelike arms flailed wildly.

Not deep enough...!

It still wasn’t enough to deliver a fatal wound.

The enemy’s long flailing arm hit the boy and launched him into the air like a frog kicked by a spiteful child. As the ground and sky were spinning in his vision, the boy felt as though he was someone else, simply watching.

Time in the borderlands was measured by dividing the day into twelve periods known as toki. The approach of sunset meant that half a toki had passed since the start of the battle.

A few moments spent flying through the sky above the borderlands felt like an eternity, but it abruptly ended when the boy’s body struck the ground and rolled. Even then, he still felt like he was someone else.

The smell of blood at the back of his nose mixed with the scent of grass and soil. Realizing that this broken body was in fact his own, he finally accepted that his death was approaching. For those unable to move on the battlefield, there was nothing left but to wait to be dealt with by the victors.

“Damn, I’m hungry...” The boy muttered to himself as he grew concerned about the pain caused by his empty stomach.

Satisfying meals weren’t given to useless foot soldiers who couldn’t even handle their weapons properly, let alone kill an enemy. When it came to food, the situation was equally grim for every village in the borderlands.

Just let me eat one onigiri...

The boy didn’t even know the meaning of the word that came to mind as he drank the blood flowing from his nose. Even his spilled blood was precious if it

could mask the feeling of hunger.

Just one onigiri before I die... Somehow, the boy was sure that whatever an onigiri was, it was both satisfying and delicious.

2

The country belonging to the human race was on the verge of a crisis that threatened its very existence.

For someone like the boy who lived in a village in the borderlands, the very concept of a country was vague. Needless to say, he had absolutely no concept of national crisis.

All he understood was that the land they'd inherited from their forefathers, the land that produced the food needed to ensure human survival, was gradually being taken from them by the demi-human races that surrounded them. The borderlands was quite literally an area of land that lay at the edge of the country, so it was only natural for this area to form the front line in their bloody conflict. This was the simple way that those affected understood their situation.

Next time... it'd be nice if I'm born in a world where I can eat enough to feel full.

The village elders had taught him that this place was just one of the worlds that souls in the cycle of Samsara could spill out into. If the boy died here, his soul would return to the cycle of Samsara and he might begin a different life in a different world.

"I want an onigiri." His stomach growled as he tried saying the words out loud.

A fuzzy image of something black and triangular came to his mind, but he couldn't imagine what type of food it might be. He'd heard that memories of past lives could sometimes come back to people, so he realized that he must have gained some of those unexplained memories himself.

As a vague memory of the taste came to him, he began to salivate.

Then someone struck his head.

“How long are you gonna be asleep?”

For a moment, the boy blinked, unable to understand the words.

The figure who spoke saw the boy react, then looked about to walk away as if he wasn't particularly worried about him.

“I'm not asleep.”

“If you wanna live, get up. If you'd rather be ape food, you can go back to sleep.”

“I want to live.”

“Well, get the fuck up then, dipshit.”

The boy recognized the toothy grin looking down at him. It was Manso, a fellow foot soldier five years his senior. In his younger days, Manso had always been a quiet child who rarely complained, but lately he was becoming foulmouthed and arrogant. Manso had an imposing presence, so his squad treated him as their leader.

“It looks like we won this one.”

The boy somehow got to his feet even though only one of his arms was capable of supporting his weight.

At first, the thought of them winning didn't make sense to him. His body swayed, causing waves of dizziness that made it hard to think about the situation on the battlefield around him.

He saw his concerned squadmates looking over at him, and at their feet a small mountain had been formed by the remains of the macaque warrior that they must have somehow brought down.

And then the scene beyond them... The killing continued across the battlefield. But now, they seemed to have more human soldiers than they'd started with.

It could only mean that the neighboring villages had learned of Lag's crisis, and had all sent reinforcements rushing to their aid. The air was filled with cries

such as, “House Tempel has come to your aid!” and “House Bofoy is with you!” as flagbearers attempted to win gratitude by waving flags displaying the crests of their respective houses.

With the tide of the battle turning against them, the macaque forces decided to retreat, making shrill cries as they withdrew from the battlefield. They hoped to escape into the forest where more of their kind were hiding.

Then a loud noise that sounded like two hard objects being slammed together got the boy’s attention. He looked over and saw an unusually large macaque with distinctive fur engaged in combat with a single human soldier.

It was clear from its size and the stripes of its fur that this warrior was renowned even among other macaques. The soldier taking on this toweringly large macaque was a tall young boy with his long black hair held back by a decorative round hair accessory.

This was Olha, one of the generals who led Lag’s soldiers. He was the eldest son of the baron, and to Lag, he was an invaluable guardian bearer. The blessings of a land god gave him inhuman strength and made him one of their most powerful weapons.

“Get a look at this... there’s a bastard ape taking on Olha.”

“Well, yeah, even demi-humans have guardian bearers.”

The striped macaque swung its stone axe at Olha, who caught the powerful blow on his iron sword. The sound of their weapons colliding reverberated in the boy’s guts, and an unnatural dip began to form in the ground beneath Olha’s feet.

It was a meeting of two exceptional powers. A battle between two guardian bearers was a battle like no other, and such battles were like sacred rituals in which outsiders were forbidden to intervene.

Olha leaped to one side, letting his blade slide across the axe, and then he swiftly began his offensive, pinning his opponent down with a series of strikes that were too fast to be seen.

The villagers knew a strike from Olha carried enough force to shatter a large boulder. Even when girls of the village would sing his praises, no one would

disagree with them. His features were pleasing and his physique exceptional, and to top it off, he was the likely heir to his father's house. In all, he was without match.

"Olha's kumadori markings are starting to show on his face. They're about to see what our guardian bearer can do."

"Olha's really something else..."

Though his long sword was forged from unrefined iron and weighed as much as a child, he wielded it effortlessly with the force of his entire body. Each strike carried Olha's incredible power with it, but each was countered by a sideways swipe from the crude stone axe of the macaque warrior. A barrage of sparks was sent flying each time one incredible force met the other.

With a heavy metallic clang that could be felt in one's skull, an invisible shockwave created a gust that violently shook the grass around them. Again and again they exchanged blows until finally the stone axe shattered and the iron longsword broke halfway along its length.

While Olha was still stunned by the loss of his precious sword, the crafty macaque warrior seized the opportunity and sent a shower of small rocks flying with a kick before swiftly turning to flee. The macaque must have reckoned that it had already bought its brethren enough time to escape. Olha appeared to be about to give chase, but then the handle of the stone axe came flying at him like a parting gift and he missed his chance.

The macaque warrior darted away with incredible speed. Its long arms served as additional legs as it used all four limbs to move along the ground with great leaps. A human running on two legs couldn't hope to keep up.

"Ah... It got away."

If the enemy's guardian bearer had been brought down, the result of the battle wouldn't have just been victory, it would have been a major triumph. Olha's frustration was visible as he watched his opponent's retreat.

A nearby foot soldier came to retrieve the broken blade, but Olha stayed him with some instruction, and then he raised his hand high to the Lag soldiers to indicate that the battle was won. As the soldiers saw his fist rise into the air, it

was as if the gesture itself had unleashed their loud cheers that followed.

“The bastard apes fled! Lag has won!”

“Let them hear our cheers of victory!”

Roars of celebration erupted across the battlefield.

The reinforcements from neighboring villages shared their excitement. They knew that the village of Lag would repay soldiers who came to their aid with some wheat. Though they’d been rescued, the gratitude of the Lag soldiers was dampened by the thought of the food they’d have to give up.

Now that the time seemed right, Manso and squad exchanged nods and gathered around the corpse of the macaque they’d brought down.

As their leader, it was Manso who drove his knife into the beast’s heart and then signaled to the others that it was dead without a doubt. The group cut open the body of the macaque in multiple places and plunged their hands into its flesh in search of something within. Then one of the men cried out with glee as his hand found something about the size of a fist.

“I’ve got its godstone!”

In this world, a rounded lump of matter could be found within the bodies of most living creatures. The stronger the creature, the greater the size of that lump. Naturally, a similar lump could also be found within the body of every human being. This object was actually a part of the skeleton, formally known as the jewel bone.

Manso took it in his hand and then showed it to the rest of the squad. With their unspoken agreement, he then broke it open against a rock on the ground. With the top half removed, the thick, amber-colored, marrow-like substance inside was visible. Manso used the tip of his knife to scoop it out and share it between his squadmates.

“Praise be to Mother Earth!”

“Praise be.”

“And we give thanks to the brave spirit of the land god who resides here in the land of our forefathers.”

“We give thanks.”

With their brief prayer finished, the boys began to devour the amber marrow.

The spiritual energy accumulated by a living creature would condense within the marrow of its godstone. The theory behind it was unclear, but consuming this substance made creatures in this world stronger. When this happened, it was just like leveling up. The boy felt heat inside himself in a place that must have been his own godstone. “Level up” and other strange words that were coming to his mind felt like more residual memories from a past life.

Somehow, I’ve lived through another day.

The boy was thankful to be one of the lucky ones as he savored the taste that filled his mouth and let it spread across his tongue. Opportunities to eat marrow from a godstone were rare, but for many, the rich flavor made it their favorite food. It didn’t just make people stronger, it also tasted great. For soldiers who’d been on the brink of death, a small helping of this substance was enough to make them forget their complaints. For these reasons, godstones were considered one of the most important treasures of this world.

Naturally, the godstone of every single fallen macaque was recovered. More than half of those would be given to the baron’s house.

Flocks of honks soon appeared and began to peck at the abandoned corpses of the macaques, as if they’d been sent to clean the battlefield.

“Let’s go back to the village...”

With that, soldiers from Lag collected the bodies of their fallen friends, and at a slow pace, they left the battlefield behind. A total of eighteen bodies were recovered. They had been a force of 138, but now they were reduced to 120.

For a village like Lag with a population of not even 1,000, the loss of so many capable workers was a heavy blow.

“Looks like our little one can’t walk. Let’s get him on the cart.”

“I’m not that small,” mumbled the boy as he let them load him onto the cart. He didn’t enjoy being treated like a child by his squadmates, but he was the youngest, and, as much as he hated to admit it, he was glad that they cared

about him. For a boy who had lost his parents and had no relatives, they were something like a family to him.

After being placed aboard the cart alongside long-cold corpses, he could feel dead flesh moving as they traveled, and it wasn't exactly pleasant. It may seem odd that he didn't feel a great sense of disgust, but since becoming old enough to fight as a soldier just a few months ago, the boy had been repeatedly thrown into bloody battles, and he already felt worn down and numb to it all. The boy kept his gaze fixed on the sky so that he didn't have to look at his "fellow passengers."

The boy's name was Kai.

Kai turned 13 this year.

3

Lag was located in the eastern part of the borderlands. The population was a little less than 1,000. In a place as sparsely populated as the borderlands, this village was one of the larger settlements. Expanses of meager farmland starved of moisture surrounded the village, and the surroundings also held several forms of grazing livestock for producing food and clothing. They also produced a dry form of cheese known as queijo, which some might have considered a local delicacy, but this was otherwise a poor village with no unique qualities.

The village was surrounded by towering cobblestone walls that seemed too grand for a poor village. Overall the village had the air of a fortress. The walls were of course there to defend against outside enemies such as demi-humans. They had once been mere embankments, but through much labor and expense they had become towering structures that stood as a testament to the efforts of the forefathers.

The village was the domain of a great house, known as House Moloch.

The head of that house was Moloch Vezin — a ferocious warrior also known throughout the borderlands as the Iron Taurus.

He stood so tall that he had to stoop whenever he passed through a doorway, his muscular body was built like a barrel, and a stumpy neck held his head firmly

in place. His stern gaze could fix an opponent in place just as well as that of any mad bull, and it had been known to make crying children instantly go quiet.

This baron hated to sit idle and was often seen on the soldiers' training ground. Today was not the first day that he'd scoured the training ground in search of a victim while the soldiers in training tried desperately to avoid his gaze.

"I'll give you some real training."

The Iron Taurus appeared to have chosen his partner for that day.

It was a rule in the village that boys would become soldiers once they reached the age of 13. They'd then be expected to help protect the village until illness or injury left them unable to fight or until it was accepted that old age had robbed them of their strength. The men knew well enough how serious the situation of this village was, so when afternoon arrived and their farming work was more or less complete, they would gather in the village square without needing to be told. There they would spend their time endlessly repeating drills that taught them how to kill their enemies.

Training was led by Basco, a mature man with a large scar on his forehead. He'd earned respect after living through countless battles. He'd earned his exceptional physical strength by killing many enemies and consuming the marrow of just as many godstones. Basco's strength was always enough to leave his sparring partners with numb hands, he always finished first in any race despite his age, and he could jump with such power that a single wall jump could place him on the roof of a house. Needless to say, he was one of Lag's greatest warriors, and young soldiers aiming for the top ranks considered him their ultimate rival.

Basco took on the task of training those foot soldiers without ever seeming dissatisfied... except at times like this. As the most noticeable soldier, he had found himself the target of the baron's "invitation."

The baron was the strongest guardian bearer in the village, and Basco was one of a select few capable of making the pretense of fighting against him, even in the context of training. Worthy opponent or not, Basco was always likely to be the one on the receiving end of the baron's invitations to train.

The baron appeared to be in a good mood as he brandished a long wooden training staff. Basco briefly tried to look pleased too in an attempt to hide his reluctance, then his face carried no expression at all as he stepped forward. His short black hair, flecked with gray, disappeared beneath a wooden helmet, and he deftly put on a well-worn breastplate made from yellowish-brown leather. Then he assumed an oblique stance with his staff projecting forward.

“Let us enjoy a good, fair bout, my lord.”

“Indeed. I’ll show you all myself how a fight should go. You’d all do well to watch closely. I’m going to show you what a fight against a powerful warrior looks like! If you’d avoid dying a meaningless death, you’d best never approach such a warrior unless you absolutely must... But the time may come when no one is up to the task, and you’re all forced to hold back such a warrior yourselves.”

With a brief nod, the baron began the farcical training.

After bowing and then lightly tapping their staffs together, Basco and the baron both began side-stepping as if their steps were tracing the same circle. This was a characteristic feature of martial arts in the borderlands, known as circle footwork. To be more precise, this footwork was part of the Zula-ryu combat system, a form of martial arts named after Zula, a famous mercenary leader who fought countless battles in the borderlands long ago.

There was soon cheering and heckling from the men lucky enough not to have been picked as the baron’s training partner. They’d become willing spectators the moment they knew they wouldn’t be the ones in harm’s way. In an instant the training ground was alive with a festival-like atmosphere, with happy cheers flying back and forth.

“Kai.”

Hearing his name, the boy looked round.

The uproar in the training ground was so great that he barely heard the voice. He saw Manso making his way towards him through the spectating soldiers and realized that it was Manso who’d called his name.

Manso gradually made his way over, apologizing to other soldiers when he

blocked their view, and once he reached Kai he sat down beside him and casually thrust something into Kai's hands.

Confused, Kai took hold of it before he knew what it was. It was a morango: a small fruit that grew in purplish red bunches between rocks in the grasslands.

His stomach rumbled the moment he laid eyes on it.

"Are you sure?"

"Eat up. It's just something I saw by chance and picked. I know you're struggling because they reduced your rations. They're brutal when they see someone can't work."

"Thanks. The hunger's really getting to me."

He threw the entire morango into his mouth, and the sour taste made him grimace. While the taste left a lot to be desired, this was a precious source of sustenance in the borderlands. Realizing that Manso had decided to share rather than simply eating it himself, Kai thanked him again. "Seriously, thanks."

Ever since losing his parents at a young age in a battle against demi-humans, Kai had been in the care of the village. Kai was still small and overly skinny, and it was clear to see that he wasn't growing as fast as most children around him. For this reason his squad leader Manso regularly fussed over him.

"So you're just watching again today?"

"They tell me I should at least weed the training ground if I can't work. But I already finished that. There's nothing I can do."

"We've got less mouths to feed now, so just rest up and ignore anyone who's nasty."

"I would, but I can't. They all start talking about me and I can't stand it."

"Just don't overdo it. We lose you and our squad's short one spear bearer. Word is, trouble's brewing for a nearby village again. We'll be in the shit if you're not better soon."

"You heard some rumors?"

"Just what I overheard, but there's orgs making trouble for a village not far

west.”

It was a common story in the borderlands: before a demi-human raid there were always warning signs — happenings that were like bad omens. Some species liked to kidnap human women and children, and if they noticed humans with their guard down, they often couldn’t resist running ahead to satisfy their foul appetites. Orgs were the classic example, and humans felt a special kind of loathing toward them.

“That means they’ll attack soon...”

“Right. So get healed up.”

Their gazes drifted back to the center of the town square where the baron and Basco were standing. They were both experienced fighters, so neither struck at the other carelessly, though every so often the ends of their weapons would come together just so they could gauge how far apart they stood. The sound of wood against wood reverberated across the training ground.

Then the two fighters began an intense exchange of blows, and it was mostly Basco who was on the offensive. But of course, everyone knew that as powerful as Basco was, the baron was overwhelmingly stronger.

It was likely that even a few strikes intended to keep his opponent on the defensive could result in Basco’s weapon being broken, no matter how lightly he tried to strike, so Basco quickly gave up on using simple blows and focused more on his footwork as he leaped from place to place. His many years of training and powerful lower body gave Basco’s attacks versatility, and he could deliver each strike so fast that it was literally quicker than the eye.

But the baron’s fearsome eyes seemed to track Basco perfectly; he reacted to each blow with minimal movement, knocking Basco’s staff aside each time.

“Haah!” With a vigorous cry, Basco put his whole body into the next strike.

His staff had consistently targeted the baron’s upper body, but now it struck downward as if trying to exploit some short-lived opening. Up to now, his attacks had been a feint, and the baron was caught off-guard.

His target was the baron’s leg... his left leg at the center of the circle footwork key to his defense.

He did it?! For a moment, the soldiers watching were cheering with hope for Basco, but it was short-lived.

The reality was soon clear to everyone watching.

The strike had indeed landed clean on the baron's leg, and the sound had been enough to make the spectators wince... but the baron hadn't budged an inch. When Basco chanced a glance up at his face, the baron was simply grinning back at him.

"You can't stop a powerful warrior with just a sweeping attack... Remember, the only attack a weakling fighting with a spear can rely on is a well-aimed thrust."

A sweep with Basco's full strength behind it wasn't even enough to put a scratch on a "powerful warrior" with greatly enhanced physical strength. The Iron Taurus had legs that looked as though they were carved from tree trunks, and there wasn't so much as a bruise on them.

The main reason for using a spear when fighting on foot was that the weapon's length made it possible to stay out of reach of the enemy until they'd been knocked down. A thrust was the only way to kill an enemy, but striking and sweeping at the enemy to break their posture before the thrust was one way of making it easier to land a fatal blow, so strikes and sweeps were still incredibly useful ways of using a spear.

But guardian bearers — those exceptional humans blessed by a god bound to their land — were on a level far beyond the reach of ordinary individuals. Much like his son Olha who'd fought during the recent battle, the baron was a guardian bearer in possession of one of the spirits passed down by House Moloch through multiple generations. This spirit was the greatest spirit in House Moloch's possession; it belonged to a god bound to the village of Lag, and it granted the bearer with exceptional strength.

The people of the village referred to this god as "The Great Lagdara of our village."

"You're not fighting a foot soldier. Don't sweep; thrust! Try it and you might just pierce your opponents' hardened defenses!"

“Hah...” Basco had decided to ignore this wisdom. He swiftly moved back, and with two skilled hands he began to spin the long staff with great energy. Though the baron had instructed him to thrust, Basco had no intention of doing as he was told.

As the most skilled spear bearer in the village, Basco hardly needed a lecture on the nature of the spear. Basco seemed determined to attempt another sweep, now with additional power from the force of rotation. With the staff spinning in his hands, Basco’s grip gradually shifted toward the butt of the staff. As his grip shifted, the circle traced by the staff grew larger. As the tip of the staff moved further and further from the center, it accelerated dramatically with the growing of the circle.

The baron saw what was happening. “Come at me,” he said, gesturing for Basco to approach.

The strongest warrior in the village seemed pleased that there was someone willing to challenge him.

When Basco judged that the rotational force had reached its peak, he chose that instant to slide his grip to the very edge of the staff, increasing the size of the circle to the maximum extent. Without hesitation, he finally directed that rotational force into the baron’s left leg.

The baron took the hit without even trying to defend himself.

The tip of the training staff shattered into small pieces with a cracking sound so great that the spectators felt an instinctive urge to close their eyes. Every man watching then fixed his gaze on the left leg of the baron. They all must have had a similar thought: *he might be a guardian bearer, but surely, with a hit like that...*

But there was his leg, unchanged and unharmed, while Basco stood with his broken staff withdrawn and his head bowed.

As for the baron, he was gazing down at Basco like nothing had happened. However, his face now looked as Olha’s had on the battlefield: it was covered by the red markings known as kumadori. It may have been that the supernatural protector that guarded the baron had sensed that its host was in crisis, automatically unleashing its power.

“I’m impressed.”

On hearing praise from the baron, Basco stepped back with his head still bowed. However...

“Someone get the man a new staff.”

With that order given, Basco’s opportunity to stand down was lost. Instead, he was given a replacement staff and forced to continue in his farcical training session with the baron. By the time Basco was set free, a quarter of a toki had passed and he was badly beaten. Guardian bearers had inexhaustible stores of energy.

Manso cursed as he watched Basco being carried off on a stretcher. “We needed Basco for the expedition!” His words produced some awkward laughs from the men around him. They all knew it was unlikely that Basco would be fit for the looming battle with the wounds he’d just received. Lag’s combat potential had just been severely downgraded.

The baron drank deeply from a pot of water, satisfied and seemingly oblivious to the anguish he’d caused for the commoners around him. He was in high spirits as he left the training ground. The baron was a compassionate ruler who commanded great respect from his people, but in the heat of battle, he was often quick to forget his surroundings.

As Kai watched the baron leave, he noticed his son Olha appear and follow behind him. Kai started to think about the unfairness of the world he lived in.

If you’re not a guardian bearer, it’s like you’re playing life on hard mode. He was confused by the words that came into his own head. Hard mode? What’s that?

Lately, Kai often looked like he was deep in thought, and people around him had taken it as a sign that he’d become more mature after being badly wounded in battle, but that was a misunderstanding.

As Olha fell in step with the baron and the two disappeared, several young girls, who must have been watching, came out from their hiding places and began talking loudly in shrill voices. These girls were often seen near Olha.

Continued fighting had left the village with many more females than males.

And yet, many of the men in the village were shunned by the women. The reason was simple. It was only natural for the women of the village to flock to the stronger men, and for the other men, this problem was worsened by an unreasonable rule set that left them with a vanishingly small chance of ever becoming strong.

Monogamy had never been an important concept in this world, and harems were generally encouraged.

The loud laughter from the girls then stopped as a pale-skinned girl appeared and dispersed the group with a wave of her hand. This was another of the baron's children. Her eyes were red like rubies, and there was no pigment to her white hair and skin. Most people knew her as Lady White. Her real name was Jose, and she was a young girl with dreamlike beauty. To the men of the village she was a prize beyond reach, and all felt some level of admiration toward her.

You'd call someone like that an albino, right? This new word left Kai deep in thought once again.

4

As a rule, all soldiers in Lag lived together in a barracks situated next to the village castle. It had always been claimed that this was for the sake of fostering solidarity between the men, but it would have been truer to say that the soldiers were kept close at hand so that they could be swiftly mobilized in times of crisis.

For the soldiers themselves, this arrangement meant they were guaranteed a meal in the morning and in the evening, so it wasn't without benefits.

"Praise be to Mother Earth!"

"Praise be."

"And we give thanks to the brave spirit of the land god who resides here in the land of our forefathers."

"We give thanks."

After prayers had been said, and the baron had been given enough time to take the first bite, everyone began their meal. The baron's table was in a special, slightly elevated position, with several other long tables arranged around it, packed with people eating dinner.

Today's dinner was a very watery soup with small pieces of potato, some hard bread, and prit that had simply been boiled. Naturally, before taking their seats, soldiers had to line up before the serving girls to be given their food. It was an unspoken rule that the less useful soldiers belonged at the back of the line, and that they'd be given only what was left after the fitter men had been served. As usual, Kai had been given some squashed rye bread with obvious spots of mold, and some soup with not a single piece of potato in it. Prit was currently in season, but none was given to Kai.

"Stare all you like, I'm not sharing mine with you."

"No, I was just curious..."

Kai stared at the prit given to the soldier next to him and thought, *That looks just like green asparagus*. He was interested, but not particularly fond of vegetables, so it wasn't a lie to say he was just curious.

Suddenly his thoughts were full of confusing information and terminology. Making sense of it all had been an unending task for Kai each day and night. Originally, Kai had been sorely lacking any understanding of the world, and most of these new terms that came to him just left him puzzled.

It looks like the kind of thing that's "nutritious"... but what are "vitamins"?

Kai was gathering these thoughts that seemed like memories from a past life, and was trying to use them to gain some new understanding of the world he lived in. This past self with all of their knowledge felt like a completely different person, and for a clueless young boy like Kai, the flood of information he was experiencing was enough to rapidly develop his sense of the world around him.

All this low-quality food is going to damage my health... This realization made him regret missing the chance to get some much-needed nourishment while prit was in season.

His sense of hygiene was also beginning to differ from those around him,

making it hard to ignore the mold on his rye bread. But when he tried to scrape away the mold with his fingernail, Manso punched him, saying, “Don’t waste your food!”

If I don’t figure something out, I’m probably not going to get enough of this nutrition stuff. I could die... In any case, I’d love to be able to eat as much as they do...

Kai looked jealously at the baron’s table.

It was mostly the same food, but the servings of soup were bigger and full of potato, the boiled prit was piled so high it looked like it might spill from the table, there was roast rare winter bird (*is that a mallard?*) that had been preserved after a hunt, and a serving girl was pouring delicious-looking white liquid over soft, freshly baked bread. It was probably milk.

There was an obvious “pecking order” to this society.

Even at the baron’s table, a sort of hierarchy of status was visible in the arrangement of the seats. The baron sat in the center of the table, with the others arranged on either side of him forming two wings, clear for the soldiers to see.

The baron’s wives sat beside him, and beyond them there were the children. The boys sat in the right wing starting with Olha, and the girls sat in the left wing starting with Lady White, or rather, Jose.

The amount of food set before them gradually declined from the center to the end of the table, implying a decline in status. That said, their smallest helpings were still generous compared to anything given to an ordinary soldier.

The amount in front of the baron looked like enough food for two, and it was always more than he could finish, but virtually no one minded that he enjoyed this luxury.

In the borderlands, strength to defend one’s own kind was highly prized. The baron was the strongest warrior in the village, and the village was much safer if the baron could eat as much as he needed so that he’d never be distracted by his empty stomach. If the baron said it was right of him to extend this treatment towards his own family, towards useless children just because they were his

flesh and blood, the villagers accepted that without argument, even if they secretly felt as though it was a wasteful extravagance. That was the extent to which the baron was revered by everyone, and the extent of the power he had over his villagers.

Kai couldn't help but growl as he watched the baron's family shoveling prit into their mouths one piece after another.

Then when he tried his soup, he found that it didn't taste right somehow...

"You're going to eat everything. You got that?"

"..."

At some point, the moldy bits of bread that he'd broken off had been put into his soup.

Do I really have to eat this?

Kai gulped as he noticed those around him were looking at him with disapproval.

**

Daily life in this world wasn't exactly what you'd call sophisticated. It was more like the life of rustic old folk who get up when the sun rises.

As soon as there was daylight, it was time to get up. Then after working until sunset, it was time for dinner and then bed. As the saying goes, early to bed, early to rise.

Each squad was allocated a cramped room in the barracks, where Kai lay on his side, unable to sleep a wink.

The room was already filled with the sound of snoring. The stuffiness and the smell of other men were both immeasurable.

The short rainy season had ended and it was now early summer, but fortunately, summers in the eastern borderlands were mild. In winter on the other hand, this was a punishing place to live... but now was no time to think about the harsher seasons.

Kai wasn't getting sleepy, so he decided to get up. He left the barracks and headed for an herb garden behind the castle where he could keep out of sight. The water from the well behind the castle was considered the best in the village, and so Kai decided to quench his thirst.

Kai brought up the bucket filled with water, and drank from it until he was satisfied. Then he looked up at the twinkling stars and felt as though the night was still young.

I guess I should just try it...

Kai left the herb garden and hid himself in the shadow of a tool storage hut so that he'd be completely out of sight. It might seem strange to worry whether anyone is watching in the dead of night, but the threat of a night raid from demi-humans meant that lookouts remained seated on platforms around the castle through the night.

Kai crouched in the darkness and let out a sigh.

He knew exactly what was stopping him from sleeping. After gaining so much knowledge recently, there was obviously a lot he wanted to test, and his curiosity had him constantly worked up.

This world feels so much like those "fantasy" worlds... I have to at least try it...

Godstones are like magic stones, and we're eating them to level up, and then there are superhumans protected by land gods.

If this strange "rule set" is all based on some kind of magic... or some kind of spiritual energy... there should be a way to take that energy and use it in a pure form... This flimsy reasoning that he seemed to have come up with from out of nowhere had put him on edge.

The real problem with Kai was that he still wasn't old enough to be an adult. He was at that age where children easily get carried away with groundless delusions about how they might be "special" in some way.

If I could use what you'd call magic...

If he could do that, it would surely boost him beyond the level of a petty soldier.

Kai began to take deep, slow breaths while focusing his attention on his body. He looked for some kind of alien sensation, something like a “shimmering” inside himself. He felt that strange powers from within would usually be carried in the blood or would come from some kind of unknown magical organ.

The obvious candidate for that kind of source of mysterious power was the round bone inside his body — the mysterious godstone that held the experience points belonging to Kai.

He could guess from his physical sensations where it was inside his body. He knew that his own godstone was somewhere near his heart because that area got hot every time he “leveled up.”

If the feeling of leveling up was his power of existence as a living creature increasing... then what people like Olha and the baron had, had to be something like a passive skill that further increased their physical abilities, caused by having a helpful god, a being on a higher plane of existence, within their bodies.

It was highly likely that a magical or spiritual power existed in this world. It didn't feel at all weird to call that “magic.”

Burn!

The first thing he tried was “fire magic.” The reason was simple: fire magic is cool.

As the mental image became clearer, he began to feel heat from the godstone deep in his chest. At first, he absentmindedly thought of it as a nice warm feeling, but then realized his heart was beginning to beat violently as the warmth grew.

What the...? This is crazy.

It felt as though the godstone was collecting up every bit of his life force to grant him a “wish.” *Is my godstone forcefully collecting up the energy it needs to create magic?!*

Finding it difficult to breathe, Kai curled himself up and began gasping for air.

Then after a few moments, the tip of his right index finger that had been the

subject of his mental image began to feel extremely hot. It became so hot that Kai held his right index finger away from himself as if afraid of it.

Then a moment later, he heard a sound...*poh*.

As if suddenly brought into reality from some unknown other world, a faint flickering light from somewhere far beyond appeared at the tip of Kai's finger in the form of the natural phenomenon known as fire.

It was a small light source, like a flame made by a tiny candle.

Kai crouched down and stared at the flame, but instead of feeling happy, he started to fear for his life. His body was getting cold as if all of his heat was being absorbed into this "flame."

"Oh, crap."

Unless he put a stop to his "fire magic," it was going to be the death of him.

He shook his arm wildly, but the flame didn't go out. He tried stubbing out the flame on the ground, but it didn't go out.

He expected that it would be possible to extinguish the flame if he could define the act of putting it out in terms of magic, but this was an emergency and he had no time to stop and think.

Then Kai remembered something.

The water! There was well water for putting out the flame.

Use water on fire. It was a thought too simple to even be called an idea, but it was the only thing he could think of. He climbed to his feet and rushed over to the well.

He had to pull up the bucket with the flame still on his finger, but he didn't have time to worry about that. Then he plunged his finger into the water he'd collected.

A hissing sound started the moment his finger entered the water.

It hasn't gone out?!

To his horror, the magic flame continued to burn under the water.

The inside of the bucket glowed the color of the flame, and the light it cast on

Kai caused him to be seen.

“Who’s there?!”

It was a high-pitched, clear voice.

Kai held the bucket close to himself in an attempt to hide it as he looked over his shoulder in the direction of the voice.

Behind him stood Jose wiping sweat from her brow with her hand... Lady White thrust her training staff into the ground and left it standing in the dirt.

She must have come to the well to quench her thirst. Water from a well was always cooler and more refreshing than water stored in a pot.

“That bucket... it’s glowing?”

Kai’s “magic” was suddenly on the verge of being exposed.

5

The flame at the tip of his finger didn’t go out.

Lady White was moving closer.

It didn’t help when the water in the bucket started to boil up and bubble. The water around the flame was rapidly heating up, and the heat rising from it felt like enough to cause burns.

“What’s inside that bucket?”

Lady White suddenly came running over as if she’d guessed that Kai was up to something.

Kai wasn’t ready to show this strange thing about himself to others just yet, and he was desperately trying to think of a way to stop it from happening.

Go out, go out, please go out.

“I recognize your face. That bucket...”

The “fire magic” at the tip of his finger wasn’t stopping. Though he was wishing for the fire to “go out,” he felt as though that wasn’t quite the right way

of stopping the flame. If the flame could continue to burn underwater, then any ideas involving “oxygen” didn’t apply.

Then what would work? “Disenchantment” magic? Or could the action of some other magic “overwrite” this one? But in that case, what other type of magic would cancel out this one?

Kai had been completely uneducated until just a few days ago, and these questions were too complicated for him to answer quickly. Situations in which fires go out came into his mind one after another, and then he found a mental image that felt like it was the one.

Closing... a floodgate.

Kai tried to picture the flow of life force being drained from his body being cut off, like closing a waterway. Even the village had waterways that drew water from streams to direct it toward farmland, and the flow of water could be controlled by gates that opened and closed.

Kai was hunched over the bucket in an attempt to hide it, but Lady White grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him backwards. At that very moment, the fire magic stopped providing fuel to the flame.

Despite her small frame and thin arms, Lady White had fearsome strength. This was no doubt the result of her being under the protection of another of her house’s gods. Whatever the cause, her incredible strength and her ladylike appearance were completely mismatched. Alongside the baron and his eldest son Olha, Lady White was one of House Moloch’s three guardian bearers.

Kai fell backwards and turned a somersault. The bucket he’d held in his hands flew into the air, spilling water all around him.

Just as Kai’s right hand was finally revealed from the bucket... the flame of the fire magic that had been burning at the tip of his index finger had been reduced to a dim blue flickering that soon vanished with a puff of air. Kai didn’t think she’d seen it, but it was too close to call.

Then Kai landed hard on his back, causing the pain in his healing bones to come back with a sudden intensity. The shock made him scream.

“Gyaaaaah!!”

Lady White froze in place, startled by Kai's loud outburst.

Kai quickly put a hand over his mouth, but it was too late. He'd already made enough noise to set off shouting here and there in the castle as people inside wondered what was happening. In panic, Kai tried to flee the scene.

"Wait," Lady White called after him.

But Kai didn't even look back; he focused on making his escape as he held his aching wounds. But then a thin arm grabbed him from behind with unreasonable strength.

"Did I not just tell you to wait?!"

Lady White gripped his collar tight, and despite being about the same size as Kai, she was able to lift him up like a miao picking up its kittens by the scruff of the neck. After helplessly flailing around in midair at first, he soon realized that the relationship of power between males and females that he was used to had just been turned on its head, and he resigned himself to his fate.

What followed was chaos as every sleeping soldier was awakened and told that demi-humans were attempting a night raid on the castle, and even the baron himself was called from his chambers. By the time it became clear that it was all a misunderstanding, there was no way for Kai to avoid being lectured and punished by a good number of furious adults.

Discipline in the borderlands was generally administered in the form of an immediate physical punishment.

**

"..."

"I'm really sorry."

Excessive punishment wasn't seen as a problem in this village, and discipline was carried out through real violence. The only mercy shown to Kai was that they didn't touch the areas where his bones had been broken, and now half a day later, he had been left tied to a pillar in a punishment room with his face

badly swollen and streaming with tears.

Once they were angry, the older men of the village were no joke, and they had no qualms over slapping a wounded boy full force. They took the idea of beating some sense into someone quite literally.

Kai couldn't manage much more than an incoherent mumble as Lady White took his hand and studied his face. "Are you sure you're all right?" she asked, sounding genuinely apologetic.

It was clear from looking at him that he wasn't all right.

Lady White must have felt that she was at least partially responsible. For the daughter of a baron to apologize to a low-ranking foot soldier suggested she was actually a very caring person.

"Now about that flame I saw..."

Her only flaw was that she tended to be incredibly persistent.

"I see. So you have the makings of a channeler."

Kai had accepted the fact that his secret was out, and had given her a full confession, only leaving out the part about having memories of a past life.

He'd felt that his own explanation sounded like he'd made it up on the spot when he talked about having nothing to do because of his injuries, accidentally making fire while messing around, and then deciding to practice it so he could surprise everyone later. Kai had looked nervous as if he expected Lady White to call him a liar, but she simply accepted his explanation without seeming to notice.

Kai felt she'd accepted it all a little too easily, but he reasoned that this "Lady" had never learned to distrust people and decided to just think himself lucky.

The main thing on his mind now was the word "channeler" that he'd heard Lady White use.

It seemed to be about the same thing as what Kai imagined a mage to be. According to Lady White, there were a few guardian bearers in the center of the country who wielded this mysterious power.

“Those techniques are dangerous. Make a mistake while using them and you could burn your own life force away and die. Father has even forbidden me from using them. Even in the capital, it’s only used by a few special families, and they keep their arts secret. You might have some potential, but I think it would be best if you never used that skill ever again. An ordinary little boy like you could very easily use up all the spiritual energy in his body in no time at all.”

Kai knew that much from experience already, so he didn’t try to argue.

Someone who used up all of their spiritual energy would drastically weaken their grip on life, and in practice this often meant they’d die of a heart attack. Kai’s hand unconsciously went to his chest.

“Let’s keep this whole thing between us. You won’t go telling everyone you know, will you? A lot of boys your age dream about having some kind of “special power,” and I just know someone would die trying it.”

“...Mhm.”

“They say that the amount of spiritual energy that most people start with will take no longer to burn up than a single candle. If someone like you keeps a flame going for too long, your heart will stop and you’ll die.”

“...Mhm.”

“I’ve even heard of guardian bearers using it wrongly and bringing death on themselves. I implore you not to carelessly share this knowledge with anyone else.”

As Lady White left the punishment room, leaving a pleasant scent behind her, Kai’s reckless mind was set on other ideas the moment he saw she was gone.

He felt he was already getting the hang of it. And now he had an actual estimate of how little spiritual energy he had to use. Now that he knew his limits, he intended to find a way for someone like himself to make use of this new ability.

I’ll claw my way up and get myself a good meal.

When a child is left to go hungry, their longing for food shouldn’t be underestimated.

The best thing I can do in this situation is...

He started wondering whether it was possible to cut the rope around his body, and that was the start of his experiments with the “techniques.”

Kai swallowed and winced as he tasted blood and felt pain caused by a wound in his mouth.

This changed his mind. First, he decided, he should try using magic to do something about the pain in his mouth. In a world as cruel as this one, having some sort of “healing magic” would be a big help.

He began to think about how he was actually going to test out that kind of magic.

I have one candle’s worth of spiritual energy...

If he was going to try a lot of things out, he was going to need some sort of safety measure in place so that it didn’t kill him.

He needed to decide how long he could use magic for without there being any risk, then sticking to that time limit would be a fundamental rule while trying different approaches.

Firstly, his previous experience had taught him that he could use magic for about ten seconds before reaching his limit. A second was a short period of time that lasted for just a moment. He knew about that now.

Secondly, he had to carefully manage the “floodgate” that controlled his spiritual energy. He had to make sure that he could reliably open and close the floodgate, just like controlling the flow of a waterway.

And thirdly, he had to think carefully about the theory behind the mental image that would result in a “healing” effect.

Kai looked about the spare storeroom of the castle that was currently serving as his punishment room. During the harvest, this storeroom would be full, but in the run up to the harvest it was completely empty, so it was used for this kind of punishment.

There was water dripping somewhere outside a window above him that led

out to the open air. Someone above must have thrown away dirty water outside.

1, 2, 3, 4...

The drips fell about two seconds apart, so he decided he'd forcefully stop his magic after hearing five drips. Even if ten seconds became twenty, he didn't think that would kill him, but there was no need to take risks when still learning.

After five drips, I stop no matter what.

He drew a deep breath of air into his lungs and then started his dangerous experimentation with magic. It was fortunate that he was bound to a pillar, because it meant that he wouldn't fall down if the strength left his limbs.

Kai waited for a first drop of water, then focused his attention on his godstone.

First, the small amount of spiritual energy inside him had to be drawn from his whole body. This extraction process started automatically as soon as he called on his godstone.

His arms and legs suddenly lost their color and became alarmingly cold as he directed the heat from his godstone over to the part of his mouth he wanted to heal.

By this time, two drops of water had fallen.

Wounds, heal yourselves...

He wished.

And he wished.

And he wished.

But it didn't work.

He tried another mental image.

Flesh, regain your shape...

He wished.

And he wished.

But it didn't work.

Another two drops of water fell.

His next attempt would be the last. He narrowed down his focus.

Cells, activate...

He wished.

He wished with everything he had.

And then a soothing heat filled the inside of his mouth.

He wasn't able to take his time and enjoy the sensation. The fifth drop of water fell outside the window, and it was time to forcefully cut off the experiment. The mental image he used was the closing of the gate, which had already been effective in stopping his magic before. The lines of heat flow coming from his godstone were cut off as if they'd been squeezed shut.

"Haah, haah..." His breathing was so heavy that his shoulders shook.

Ten seconds had been enough to leave him feeling exhausted, as if all of his strength had just been used up. As the heat gradually returned to his limbs, Kai came to his senses.

The wound in my mouth... Has it gotten better?

He probed it with his tongue and then winced at the dull pain this caused. But it wasn't the sharp needlelike pain that it had been before.

Had it healed or had it not? He wouldn't be able to judge for sure until he was released from this room.

Exhausted, Kai fell into a deep sleep as if he'd fainted.

6

The borderlands were vast.

Far north from the central plain that was the cornerstone of the unified kingdom, a nation of humans that had endured for 1,000 years, there lay a wasteland that was not quite grassland but not quite desert, stretching 1,000

yulds north-south and 2,000 yulds east-west.

The power of humans had grown as their numbers increased, and the masses of humans extended their reach to even this barren land. But that happy era was long past. The humans clung desperately to their inherited land as their power faded, and they were soon preyed upon incessantly by nonhuman species that came at them in droves.

If the fighting died down in the east, some new trouble would break out in the west. If the trouble in the west ended, next it would be the north. There was no reason to think that the conflict would ever end.

By working together, the people of Lag had repaired the damage to their farmland caused by the macaque invasion, but sure enough the cycle repeated itself, and some new trouble broke out to the west of the village.

The news was carried through the sky by tamed honks, the fastest messengers in the borderlands. The crest affixed to the bird's leg to indicate its owner was that of Count Balta. He was the lord of a large territory to whom many barons in the borderlands swore their loyalty.

It wasn't merely a call for reinforcements; it was a formal order to congregate, with the weight of a higher lord behind it.

Many of Lag's soldiers still had unhealed wounds, but Baron Vezin didn't hesitate to assemble a company of soldiers to send to Count Balta's aid. The village was left defended by a minimum number of soldiers as the company hastily set out, taking with them fifty foot soldiers and a single guardian bearer who was the core of their strength.

The company was of course led by their guardian bearer, the baron's eldest son Olha. Among those fifty foot soldiers, there was a Kai.

"Make haste! I can't afford to be late to the council!"

The soldiers wordlessly quickened their pace while Olha was yelling at them.

Soldiers who regularly fought in the constant battles of the borderlands had been fortunate enough to "level up" with the power of godstones from enemies they'd killed, and most had powerful legs.

Olha looked satisfied by the way the soldiers reacted, but they had their own reasons for being eager.

Several days earlier, reinforcements from neighboring villages had come to their rescue, and custom had demanded that they express their gratitude with gifts. In the borderlands where food was scarce, the most sought-after gift was grain that could be stored for a long time. Lag had therefore given the other villages more than a little of their wheat.

It was only natural to expect similar treatment when the situation was reversed.

Brave warriors who would rush to help an ally in need could expect to receive a substantial amount of food in return. The “expenses” they’d had to pay several days ago had left their village with barely enough food for everyone, so it felt worthwhile for them to risk their lives in combat for the chance to obtain a few sacks of wheat.

The village under threat was Banya, a settlement whose land was half covered by crops and half by livestock, and the request for aid had been made in the name of Count Balta, who was the leader of the allied lords of the borderlands. Count Balta’s domain was a walled town and seven surrounding villages in an area of the borderlands known as Baltavia.

When the request was made in his name, it suggested that the threat posed by the invading demi-humans was particularly great. It was likely that all of the lower lords in the northern stretch of the borderlands were being gathered together.

There was also the possibility that Count Balta would consider the speed at which others came to his aid as a measure of their loyalty.

The attending lords would all drink together as part of a council ceremony to build solidarity, and for lords attending for the first time, this was an opportunity to improve their standing with their peers.

“Kai, don’t overdo it if it’s hurting. You’re not healed yet.”

“I know. Don’t worry about me.”

Kai smiled wryly at the soldier showing him concern and shook his head to tell

him to stop worrying.

Kai's broken bones weren't fully healed, of course; he was going into battle with ragged cloth bandages covering his entire chest.

Why would they choose a wounded soldier to send into battle? He was trying not to think about it, but it wouldn't surprise him to learn that he was being thrown into battle so that there'd be one less useless mouth to feed.

The quick pace was enough to cause Kai a lot of pain, but his injuries were no longer as serious as the people around him thought. It'd been ten days since he was punished for the disturbance he'd caused, and Kai had continued his experiments with "healing magic" the whole time. As a result, he'd successfully managed to repair several of his broken ribs.

Kai had decided that most of the pain he still felt was all in his head, and was caused by worrying that he might not be fully healed.

After half a day's forced march, the Lag soldiers had traveled roughly fifty yulds west. Their destination was a broad stretch of land near Banya that lay between a forest and the village.

"Uhh... Don't tell me this was all crop fields..."

The cleared land had once been fields cultivated over the course of many years by the people of Banya.

This precious land had been torn up by uncaring feet, with corpses left to rot here and there, as if there'd already been intense fighting.

The various fluids that leaked from the corpses were of course rich with fat and salt that were like a poison to the soil. Once the fighting ended, that poison would need to be removed in some hellish restoration effort. Just the thought was enough to make the soldiers grimace.

When the company of 50 approaching soldiers was sighted, a soldier from Banya, where there was a rendezvous point established for the council of allies, came running to them. The soldier immediately identified Olha as their leader and guided him to the rendezvous point.

Naturally, the foot soldiers silently followed behind.

They soon reached the top of a gently sloping hill where they found the main camp surrounded by a wooden fence. Only Olha was summoned to the gathering of tents in the center, while the 50 foot soldiers were left outside the fence.

Groups of soldiers from other villages could also be seen waiting idly in the same area.

“There must be about 500 people here in total...”

“Something big’s happening, I know it.”

“Did you see all the corpses? Looks like the enemy really is orgs.”

With no one high-ranking around, rumors soon began to spread among the foot soldiers.

“I’ll go ask what’s up,” one soldier said, before running over to a group from another village.

Their lives could depend on any information they could gather, so no one tried to stop him. While everything was being explained to Olha in the main tent, the foot soldiers had their own ways of learning more about the situation.

They learned that the invading demi-humans were orgs.

This species had a massive body that was over two yules tall and weighed several times as much as a human. They could come charging with enough force to reduce even a hardened veteran to tears, and dealing with them was never fun.

The size of the invading force was somewhere between 150 and 200. Even as one of the larger settlements in the borderlands, Lag had only 120 soldiers, so for a medium-sized village like Banya, it was more than they could handle. When the fighting started, the invaders had been met with little resistance and took the lives of roughly 10 soldiers and roughly 20 farmhands.

After the first strike they’d managed to take refuge behind the strong defenses of the village where they were able to hold out against the invaders. Count Balta’s reinforcements had arrived just in time.

However, for the victims it was horrific.

Orgs detested humans. Anyone familiar with them could guess what had happened. Orgs liked to kidnap young girls and would delight in tormenting them. Although they couldn't produce children with them, they seemed to enjoy the sound of a human female screaming in distress. Lag's soldiers learned that several girls from the village had been abducted. Needless to say, the survivors from Banya were passionate in their hatred for the orgs.

"We're fighting damned pigs? They should be more like farm pigs, then we could at least eat the bastards."

Although they resembled pigs, orgs were similar in shape to a human from the neck down, only with more muscle. They walked on two legs, so the arrangement of their muscles was similar to that of a human. The pigs humans raised for their meat were smaller and had hooved legs.

"Has anyone actually tried eating one?"

"I've heard they're not that bad."

"So they taste all right?"

As you'd expect, soldiers from Lag were always hungry.

There was a rumbling sound from someone's stomach, and then a wrinkled old man named Setta, who was their second-in-command, told the men to start preparing to cook food.

It wasn't long since the rainy season, so it wasn't too cold to sleep without a tent, but a stove for cooking was still necessary.

The alliance forces eventually grew to 700 soldiers. Count Balta had brought 200 soldiers, and the lesser lords of more than 20 houses in the northern region of the borderlands had brought together another 500 soldiers. It took them two days to gather and organize themselves.

The orgs must have been scared by the sudden increase in the strength of the human forces, for they didn't even attempt a night raid, nor was there any visible activity from them the next day.

Deep down, members of the alliance waiting in the camp felt relieved, but the soldiers from Banya couldn't bear to sit and wait.

Several women from their village were still held captive, and they were eager to strike as soon as they were ready for battle.

"We know how you all feel."

"They're not attacking. Maybe they ran off when they saw how many of us there are?"

There were few members of the alliance who thought it would be sensible to charge into battle if the enemy didn't attack first. This was not their land after all, and none of the lords wanted to lose the valuable workers under their command.

It wasn't clear what sort of debate went on at the center of the camp, but when Olha returned to his own company, he sighed a great sigh and then ordered them to prepare to depart for battle. Somehow, Banya's baron had been able to persuade Count Balta, who was in the command of the forces overall.

"The orgs are watching our movements from the forest. They haven't run from us yet."

Olha began to don his armor as soon as he finished speaking, making it clear that he meant what he said and that there was no time for wishful thinking.

Banya had sent out their own scout who claimed to be keeping watch over the org's camp. The people of the village were growing more concerned because they couldn't hear the voices of the abducted girls.

For Count Balta, members of the alliance were like his children, and he refused to abandon a lord in need. Orgs were a constant source of trouble, so there was some meaning in pushing them back. He made the decision that they would rely on their superior numbers in a frontal assault.

When fighting against demi-humans with superior physical strength, an environment full of obstacles such as a forest would put humans at a serious disadvantage. The foot soldiers were visibly unhappy because they'd been prepared for a defensive battle on open ground to defend Banya's land. In a

forest, the spear formations that were their forte would be mostly useless.

“Seriously? We can’t just go home?” someone grumbled, as several others tutted with frustration.

The people of Banya would be offended to hear it, but the soldiers didn’t want to attempt to save a handful of lives while putting ten times as many at risk. What’s more, the people they were trying to rescue weren’t even from their own village. For Lag’s soldiers, the target of their anger was going from being the orgs to the people of Banya themselves.

The human forces quietly began to move out from the rendezvous point. Flags bearing emblems of each lord were held high across a broad stretch of land. Despite the disadvantageous conditions, they still had far superior numbers, and no one thought they could lose.

Their rows of silver spears glistened with the reflected light of the early summer sun. Lag’s soldiers were among those who kept their spears as their main weapons, but each soldier nervously checked that their knife was in its rightful position. Everyone knew roughly what to expect from the battle in a forest full of obstacles.

The fight against the orgs turned out to be just as gruesome as they’d feared.

7

In this world, the fact that demi-humans differed from humans in terms of appearance didn’t mean they were any less intelligent. They were just as capable of devising strategies, and they weren’t lacking original ideas.

The allied lords had walked right into an enemy trap.

Not a single soul had suspected that the information from the Banya “scout” was entirely fake. The trick had left the Banya soldiers seething with rage.

“How’d we end up in this mess?”

“How the hell would I know?!”

They were guided into the forest, but there was no org camp of any kind to be

seen.

They sent out new scouts, but their scouts were eliminated every time; not a single one came back.

They were deep in the forest with no information and it felt as though something wasn't right, but the confidence brought on by their superior numbers still kept them from stopping to rethink.

That was how they carelessly made their way to a low-lying area of land shrouded in mist, and were surprised when they found themselves in a marshland that was still storing rain from the recent rainy season. They hadn't had time to get over the shock when a large force finally charged at them.

The enemy was cunning.

The barrage of arrows that came flying at the humans made them retreat without thinking, pushing them back into the territory of a third party that would normally have been a spectator to the battle.

This marshland belonged to the lizard-like lagarto, and visitors weren't welcome.

With the humans caught off-guard by the threat posed by another species at their backs, the eager warrior-class orgs saw an opportunity to strike, and the human formations fell into disarray.

"Lord Olha!"

"Forget him! He's not even looking at us!"

Olha had thought that because he had power beyond any normal human, he would somehow be able to right the chaos by relying on his superior strength. This was nothing more than conceit caused by lack of experience. He was barely aware of the situation around him as he abandoned the soldiers under his command to charge at the enemy. For a lord's forces, their guardian bearer formed the core of their strength, and Lag's forces were no exception: Olha had been their core.

Like predators taking helpless chicks from the nest while the mother is gone, the enemy came charging in. An org with overwhelming body mass and tough

skin glared at them down its snout. On its face were the red markings of the kumadori.

It was the worst possible development... they faced an org guardian bearer.

Lag's soldiers were thrown into disarray with no way to defend themselves, and were forced to scatter. Many of the org foot soldiers were organized and ready to attack the defenseless backs of fleeing humans. The humans were seeing their usual fighting style suddenly turned on its head.



Kai was one of those who fled.

At first, he stayed with his squad as they fled together, but when they couldn't shake off their pursuer, they split into two so that at least one lucky group could escape. Predictably, the pursuer chose to go after the group that included Kai, who was slowing them down.

To compensate for Kai's wounds, their strongest fighter Manso had stayed with him, but they couldn't outrun their pursuer. Manso waited until the very last moment before saying, "Sorry, Kai," and leaving him. Manso was fast, so the org soldier gave up on him, choosing to go after Kai instead.

Damnit!

Kai wasn't ready to die this way.

Not just as he was starting to understand the principles behind magic.

Not just as new doors were opening to him and he had the chance to make something of himself.

He tripped several times, leaving himself covered in mud as he frantically ran for his life.

He had no idea which way he was running.

The mist that filled the air made him feel as though the lagarto marshland was close. The lagarto were aggressive toward humans who strayed into their territory, and they wouldn't hesitate to tear Kai apart.

The sound of footsteps behind him was growing closer, and then he could hear the sound of its heavy breathing too. The distance between the predator and its prey was little more than a hair's breadth.

Kai had never stood a chance of outrunning a fitter, stronger org.

Fear overwhelmed him and his breathing was wild.

Suddenly, a feeling of heat shot across his side. The mysterious burning sensation began to spread. Kai looked down in confusion and saw his clothing turning red.

He realized that he'd been stabbed by the org soldier pursuing him.

It was all too much, and Kai wanted to cry.

Kai had felt as though he wouldn't be able to run much further, so he'd been running into the dangerous misty region of the forest without thinking. It was now difficult to see, and he was blindly going deeper, cutting his way through thick undergrowth where there weren't even animal trails. Kai cut through thorny leaves and branches as he made his way deeper into the mist, desperately charging ahead. The ground beneath him suddenly became a steep decline, but Kai continued to throw himself forward, unintentionally throwing himself into the air.

He had no time to fall gracefully. His body struck the ground many times as he rolled downhill. Then he turned a somersault and found himself upside down at the very edge of a cliff, where he was fortunate enough to be stopped by a tree root that collided with his back.

He wheezed as the impact knocked the breath out of him.

His eyes filled with tears, but there was no time for self-pity.

Please, tell me I lost him...

Kai held the bleeding wound on his side tightly, and with a glimmer of hope, he strained to see the top of the steep slope through the mist. But there he saw his death was still approaching, in the form of an org carefully making its way down toward him.

Whatever happened, the org soldier was determined to kill Kai. Perhaps orgs were expected to kill a certain number of soldiers, like a sort of sales quota they had to meet.

Sales... quota?

The term that came into his head puzzled him as he tried to climb to his feet. Intense pain shot through his side, and he fell back down with a gasp.

"Gaah!"

Now that he'd had a moment to think, he'd become aware of just how painful his injury was, and he couldn't help but curl into a ball. He could feel thick, hot blood on the hand that held the wound, and he knew that the bleeding wasn't

going to stop. He'd been too frantic to realize it until just now, but the wound was more than serious enough to be life-threatening.

The org had made its way down to Kai now, and with a snort of excitement from its long nose, it swung at Kai with a long-handled stone axe.

Now that Kai was badly wounded and unable to move, the org was here to deliver the final blow.

Kai instinctively threw himself aside and just barely dodged what would have been a fatal hit. As a last resort, he drew the knife that hung at his waist. He'd forgotten about the wound at his side again, and now he was waving the knife to keep the org at bay as he slowly backed away... but he was in a narrow space with a cliff to his back, so he was soon left with nowhere to go. He was forced to stop another strike from the stone axe using his knife.

The blow was too powerful, and it pinned him down.

The difference in strength was clear to see. The org brought its snout close as if toying with Kai, and the stink of its breath made him go wide-eyed.

Shit... shit...

He couldn't understand anything the org said, but he knew that it was finding humor in the powerlessness of humans.

The handle of the stone axe pressed against his neck, and it became painful to breathe.

If only I'd learned more magic... If only I could roast this disgusting pig whole...

The harder he struggled, the worse the bleeding from his side became. His body was starting to feel cold, and even his thoughts were becoming clouded.

Then Kai felt it was time for desperate measures.

He didn't know whether his magic would be effective or not, but if he could just surprise the org...

He dropped the knife that hadn't been of much use to him and reached out to grab its snout. The org laughed at the sight of his shaking hand.

If I can just take out one of its eyes!

“Fire magic!”

He was already on the verge of death.

He didn’t worry about the consequences.

His godstone drew the life force from every inch of his body, directing it toward his outstretched hand.

It had only been a few days, but he’d given thought to the way “magic” worked in this world, and after finding which methods worked in practice he’d come to a certain level of understanding.

This “magic” isn’t a chemical reaction.

He’d concluded that this strange phenomena was actually energy released in exchange for an equivalent amount of his spiritual energy. And that spiritual energy could be directed using mental images. The reasoning was that simple.

The reason that guardian bearers didn’t concern themselves with magic, despite probably having great stores of spiritual energy, was partly because of the risk of depleting their resources. But a more important reason may have been that their physical strength increased dramatically the moment they inherited a divine spirit, and it was usually more convenient to use that strength to produce whatever result they wanted.

The reasoning behind the toughened flesh and incredible power that was given to a guardian bearer, however, was still unclear.

“Burn, pig!”

The flame that suddenly burst from his hand was close to its eye. The org cried out in surprise and arched its upper body back while still over Kai. It was covering its face with its hand, so the belly of the org naturally became exposed.

I’ll send this fucking pig back to Samsara!

He pressed his left hand down on the snout of the org soldier as his right hand picked up the knife again and drove it straight into the region of the org’s heart.

Kai stopped his magic subconsciously when his usual countdown was over. The flame went out but the org continued its muffled cries.

Kai felt sure he'd dealt a decisive blow.

But then he was pushed back by the weight of the collapsing org's head, and he staggered backwards.

Kai realized his mistake too late, and couldn't stop himself from falling backwards together with the dead body of the org.

He'd been careless.

Well, if I have to die, a quick death after a fall is probably a good way to go, Kai decided. The strength was gone from Kai's face, but a slight smirk still remained.

As he fell over the cliff he felt as though he was floating, and a moment later his consciousness slipped away.

In the center of the forest where the battle was taking place, a young human boy was silently falling into a valley through dense mist.

No one was there to see it happen.

8

The cliff was sheer, and the drop looked to be several dozen yules straight down.

A fall from such a height would have been fatal if there hadn't been a surprisingly large lake beneath the dense mist, which, by some miracle, broke the boy's fall. The god of death had allowed Kai to remain in the realm of the living.

It wasn't long before Kai began to regain consciousness. He felt himself floating in the cold water, and then he was truly awake.

Water...?

The water that filled the lake was exceptionally clear.

At first, he thought it must have been a pool of rainwater formed during the

rainy season, but the volume of water was too great, and it had the characteristic coolness of spring water. Water that collected during the rainy season always had warmth to it.

For a while he marveled at his strange surroundings and let himself float in the water as he gazed at the sky above, which glowed with the faintest white light.

Through the glowing white mist that covered the landscape, he caught sight of a hazy outline of steep cliffs. These sheer cliffs formed a circle around him, and “caldera” was the word that came to mind as he considered the terrain.

As he floated absentmindedly in the water, he slowly began to realize that he was on the verge of death. The warmth was completely gone from his limbs now, and even the pain of the wound on his side felt distant, as if it belonged to someone else.

Shit... I need to get to shore or I'll bleed out.

With that thought at the back of his mind, which had already become cloudy, he began clumsily swimming.

He barely kept afloat as he struggled to think clearly and determine the direction of land. Then his searching hand grabbed hold of something. Without knowing what it was, he pushed it away, propelling himself toward the direction of the cliff. It would take him some time to realize that the object was in fact the body of the org soldier he'd killed a short time earlier.

The lake didn't fill the entire base of the valley. Kai was able to make his way to what appeared to be the shore, where he dragged his body out of the water. The roots of a gnarled tree extended toward the shore, and Kai was able to drag himself over and rest his back against them.

His head felt just as blurred and foggy as the scenery around him as he tried to think of some way he might survive.

I have to close this wound right now or I'm dead... But I can't climb these cliffs with these injuries.

In his current state, he'd never be able to leave the valley. He didn't even know which part of the forest he was in, and with demi-humans living wherever

there were no humans nearby, there was little chance of anyone coming to his rescue.

The question was how to heal the wound in his side. There was only one option, and it didn't take Kai long to think of it.

If I can use my healing magic...

He closed his eyes and remembered how he'd healed his broken bones. He focused his attention on his godstone, and it began to draw in his spiritual energy almost automatically.

But Kai quickly gave up.

I'm down to the last dregs...

With Kai on the verge of death, the spiritual energy that was his life force was reduced to almost nothing. Without recovering his strength, the magic that had been his last hope wouldn't work. But if he simply lay still and waited for his body to recover, he'd die from blood loss.

For those born in the borderlands, it was essential to know which plants could be used to stop bleeding. Kai was looking for those plants now, but instead he caught sight of the body of the org floating near the shore.

Heh, I got the bastard, was his first thought... but then he realized that this presented a new opportunity.

Kai reached for his knife, but it was gone. With a tut, he looked instead to the long-handled stone axe that was still in the org soldier's hand. He'd have to borrow what he didn't have.

He dragged himself over and was able to reach the body of the org. With its axe in his hands, he used all of his strength to swing it down at the creature's chest. The skin of living creatures was tough, and tearing it apart by hand was surprisingly difficult unless there was already a cut.

Kai didn't hesitate to plunge his hands into the opening in the skin made by the axe. He rummaged through its cold, slippery innards and before long he found an object shaped like an ocarina, hidden behind its lungs. He'd found the org's godstone.

He quickly washed it in the water and then broke it open against a rock embedded in the soil nearby. He had to strike it against the rock several times before a piece broke off. His fingers scooped marrow from the opening, and he hungrily licked it from his fingers. The rich taste of the marrow made his work feel even more urgent.

Here it comes...

What came next was a sensation of heat inside his godstone... and then an increase in strength that he could actually feel. It felt as though his level of existence as a living being had increased.

He continued to greedily lick at the remains of the marrow as he tried to activate his healing magic once again.

Cells of mine, close the blood vessel.

Now he had significantly more spiritual energy to gather up and direct toward the wound in his side, causing the cells in that area to become active.

It had taken Kai several days of trial and error to realize that while magic had essentially unlimited potential, it wouldn't work without a specific mental image and an appropriate amount of spiritual energy ready to be consumed.

For example, the mental image of a flamethrower wouldn't work with just a matchstick's worth of fuel at hand.

He reasoned that his magic wouldn't work with a simple mental image of healed wounds because the image was too vague to be followed by the cells that made up his flesh. The site of the wound itself was made up of tens of millions of cells that would all have to work in coordination. Instead, Kai had to keep his expectations as reasonable as possible for his healing magic to work effectively.

In the case of a broken bone, it wasn't enough to hold some vague image of his body being healed. He had to focus his thoughts on the idea of many bone cells adhering to each other. Though it wasn't much use to form a weak bond at a single point, Kai found he could do this repeatedly at countless different points, and a strong bond would be created by the combined effect of many weak bonds.

In this case, Kai had decided that the amount of blood he was losing was the urgent problem, and so his attempts at healing had been focused on closing the blood vessel.

It feels like there's less bleeding... I'll just have to hope that it worked.

Kai began to drag himself along the ground again so that he wouldn't fall asleep on the damp shore of the lake. Some distance from the water's edge, he curled up in the roots of a great tree that looked like it would shelter him from rain.

Even in the thick mist, he could tell that this was an impressive old tree with branches that spread out like a roof over his head.

Damn... can't stay awake...

Kai didn't get the chance to check whether his bleeding had completely stopped.

He was fortunate that it was summer, but the warm weather wasn't enough to raise his body temperature while his clothes were still soaked. The mist around him made matters worse, blocking out the sun's rays and sapping his body heat.

Kai let his consciousness slip away once more, leaving his body in the care of the rugged roots of the great tree. The hand holding the wound fell limp at his side, and fresh blood colored his clothes before dripping to the ground.

The boy's lifeblood was slowly draining from his body.

Then, as if there'd been a gentle wind, there was swaying in the lonely bare branches of the great tree, whose countless roots appeared to embrace a huge rock.

The valley slept in silence, for it contained no living creatures, except for the boy.

**

Meanwhile, many of the human soldiers who'd scattered and fled from the

forest had somehow gotten behind the defensive walls of Banya, and so the human forces narrowly avoided being wiped out.

They were able to repel an org attack from behind the walls as they took care of the wounded, and exhausted soldiers were able to take turns in getting some much-needed food and rest. They also found enough time to reorganize when the battle reached a lull.

A roll call confirmed that many lives had been lost, and even lords who'd grown used to the gruesome sights in the borderlands were left pale. With less soldiers to defend the region, their continued survival in the borderlands was immediately in doubt.

"How could we let this happen?"

Losses on such a scale were rare in recent years.

The reduction in their numbers was so great that it seemed likely that the nation's border in the borderlands would need to be moved back.

"They played us for fools..."

Their great losses had occurred because they'd taken the fight to the forest where they were at a disadvantage, and also because they'd failed to locate the org camp that had reportedly been sighted.

The people of Banya had originally been viewed as victims, but they were the ones who'd been so impatient to rescue their women, and they were the ones who'd been so sure that the enemy camp had been seen in a particular location.

It was only natural that the villagers would fall under suspicion, and before long there were confessions of guilt, though many remained defiant: "We had no other choice!" The revelation caused an uproar in the human camp.

An urgent council of lords was convened, and the blame was placed squarely on Pinheroy Baruch, the baron who ruled Banya. The baron protested about his innocence: he had nothing to do with any of it; a handful of villagers had acted entirely without his knowledge. These excuses did nothing to quell the anger of lords who'd lost so many soldiers. In fact, it was more fuel to the fire.

“No one gives a damn what the circumstances were!”

“What did they promise you? That they’d release your women? And you believed it? To think, you were prepared to sacrifice countless people from our villages in exchange!”

“You’re nothing but a wretched traitor!”

“We were all taken in by your deception! But now those deceived will have their retribution!”

Realizing he was going to be executed before he could argue, Pinheroy unleashed the power of his guardian in an attempt to resist. But the lords that surrounded him were all guardian bearers themselves, and they had no trouble holding him down.

As the leader of the allied forces, it was Count Balta who delivered the guilty verdict, and those who were able left the building in haste.

When they returned, they had brought Baron Pinheroy’s eldest daughter with them. They threw the girl to the ground and forced her to prostrate herself by her father’s side before they announced to her that, “Lord Pinheroy is to be retired.”

His red-haired daughter was pale with disbelief as she looked at her father. Then she groveled before the other lords and begged them to spare his life.

His daughter’s pleading fell on deaf ears.

Under the laws of the country, it was not enough for someone recognized as a feudal lord to simply be given a title; it was a long-held tradition that they would be formally recognized as a lord the moment they received the blessings of a land god bound to their domain.

In this world, retirement meant that a transfer in the “right to a guardian’s protection” would need to take place, so it wasn’t possible to succeed a house on the basis of one’s name alone.

“We are not without compassion. We will allow House Baruch to continue in recognition of your father’s loyal friendship to us over many years. However, he is guilty of a heavy crime, and now his judgment must be delivered by your

hand so that you might inherit his guardian.”

“I beg you! Have mercy! Please!”

“Judgment must be delivered by the hand of his successor.”

Count Balta’s guardian was the most powerful in the borderlands, but even he had allowed his kumadori to show clearly. The markings on his face were far more intricate than those of any of the other lords, and his ashen blue eyes glowed as if his immense power was burning behind them.

The moment someone became a host to a guardian, they were more than human; they were a guardian bearer with the authority to pass judgment on common people.

One of the lesser lords offered her a dagger.

“You must succeed him by your own hand.”

Under ordinary circumstances, the transfer of a guardian, and the title that came with it, happened when a lord’s life reached a natural end. Their guardian would be allowed to return to its gravesite, where enshrinement could be performed once more.

However, when the retirement of a still-living lord was to take place in this world, it was equivalent to a death sentence. As long as the bearer still lived, the guardian could not be transferred to a new host.

“It would seem you’re incapable.”

“Please have mercy... mercy...”

“Someone must offer her assistance.”

“Please, stop...”

Without a moment’s hesitation, one of the lesser lords swung his sword.

That lord, like the others, was host to a guardian, which entitled him to deliver judgment. The head of Baron Pinheroy of Banya fell to the floor.

In that same moment, his daughter began to scream.

“Now! Do it quickly! Before the divine spirit returns!”

“No... no...”

“I’ll show you how!”

Another impatient lord grabbed the girl’s arm, placed a dagger in her hand, and then forced her to thrust it into her father’s body. Then, as the girl was vomiting, he pulled her arm sharply and forced her hand inside her father’s body.

To complete the transfer of Baron Pinheroy’s guardian, his godstone would need to be removed while his guardian was still inside, and the marrow consumed by his successor. But the girl had fainted the moment that her hand had been thrust into her father’s still-warm body.

Count Balta regarded the limp body of the girl with disinterest as he gave his orders.

“The succession ritual has been unsuccessful. The divine spirit will soon depart. Someone must hurry to seal off the gravesite of House Baruch. We must defend the divine spirit from anyone who might be impudent enough to seize it.”

With the trial of Baron Pinheroy of Banya concluded, the council of lords had a number of decisions to make before they could disband.

The org forces stubbornly continued to surround the village. Their invasion was to be resisted, and the allied force was to leave the region as soon as the human territory was declared safe. A lord from a neighboring village would oversee the succession process in Banya, and Count Balta would serve as the heir’s custodian until she was of age.

Olha of Lag was merely his father’s delegate and he was the youngest member of the council, so the council ended without him having any particular say in anything. His gaze was stern as he looked at the girl who had been left to lie where she fainted.

“You had no reason to hesitate,” Olha muttered, as if he was struggling to understand what had happened. Then, along with a number of other lords, he begged Count Balta’s permission to leave and left the grounds of House Baluch where the council had taken place. Outside, Lord Pinheroy’s retainers had

gathered and were watching the lords leave with cold stares. But Olha's expression remained the same. Even as other lords stopped to express their remorse through silent prayer, Olha simply continued walking.

"House Moloch's heir has a hard heart."

When Olha heard whispers from those watching him pass by, he showed no reaction.

During the night of the next day, the orgs threw something over the stone walls of the village before withdrawing.

The following morning, it became clear to the villagers that the orgs had fulfilled their part of the deal by returning the severed heads of the women. The people of the village expressed their hatred for the orgs and their callousness through cries of despair.

No more than a half toki later, the bloody battle between humans and orgs had begun again.

9

Am I... dead...?

A feeling of frustration had constantly been with him in recent days, but now what he felt was a sense of comfort, like the warmth of the sun.

A macaque had thrown him and left him severely injured. An org had pierced his side.

All his life he had carried the burden of weakness, but now he had been freed. This idea felt disconnected from his current reality, so Kai felt as though this feeling was merely a dream.

He was truly awakening now, and the fog was clearing from his dull mind.

He opened his eyes and was met by a soft light that shone down on him.

It's morning...?

He heard the chirping of small birds and echoes of insect noises.

The sun's rays found their way through gaps in the bare branches of the great tree that Kai had trusted himself to, and the light embraced him with its warmth.

At some point, the mist that shrouded the valley had cleared.

He still felt that he must be dreaming. In spite of his condition, when he sat up his body felt light and his muscles responsive, and there was no discomfort in his ribs that had once caused him pain each time he turned his neck.

Every inch of his body felt as though it was brimming with power, as if it waited impatiently for him to move.

His hand instinctively went to the wound at his side. He realized the pain was gone from even that area.

"It... doesn't hurt?"

He was used to having scrapes stop hurting after a night of rest, so he thought the wound had just gone numb. As if breaking free from a brief feeling of indecision, he began to remove his clothes.

The great volume of blood absorbed by the fabric had hardened, and he had to peel his clothes away from his skin. He braced himself for the pain of a scab being removed, but he felt no pain. He examined the region where the wound should have been, but what he found was a patch of pink new flesh covering the wound. It was as if he'd had months to heal.

Although the pain was gone, the scar was proof he'd been wounded, so Kai accepted that this was reality and not just a dream.

Kai jumped to his feet.

The mist is gone...

He'd thought that this area was part of the marshland inhabited by the lagarto, but with the mist gone, he saw that it was something very different.

The warm rays of sunlight shone down into the valley unimpeded, and what he saw was like a forest of trees with branches that looked as if they were always bare.

The shadows that the trees cast on the ground and the contrast against the

clear blue water of the lake looked simply beautiful to Kai.

Kai's unbelievable recovery had naturally lifted his spirits.

He moved a short distance, climbing over one of the gigantic meandering roots, to a spot where he could take in the full sight of the great tree that had held him. For some reason he felt a sense of gratitude toward the tree for taking care of him.

There was a giant rock that looked as though it had been broken apart by the great tree as it had grown. It looked as though a young tree had once taken root in a crack in the rock, and had broken it apart as it grew into the great tree before him. Kai was in awe at the sight. He turned his attention to the rock that the tree was forcing apart, realizing that it too was an impressive size. As he examined its shape through the roots that surrounded it, he noticed it was unusually square.

Then the realization took Kai's breath away.

"This is... a grave..."

This square rock towering above Kai was broken now, but he could tell that it had originally been a perfect square with sides about two yules long. The surface that faced toward the lake had clearly been engraved with some inscription. Kai had seen another "grave" just like this one.

He thought of the gravesite of the land god worshiped by House Moloch of Lag. The gravesite of The Great Lagdara, the land god of the village, was hidden underground below the castle, and Kai had seen it for himself during monthly cleaning sessions.

Is this one just like that one...?

To express his gratitude, Kai decided to remove the countless withered vines that had crept over the inscription. The inscription must have been left this way for years... or for hundreds of years. The roots were stuck tight, and even after pulling away vines, withered old roots were left stuck in the grooves of the inscription.

Kai felt well enough to try burning away the remains of the vines with a gentle flame. He had no way to remove the vines in the high places beyond his reach,

so he decided it was worth trying to burn them away.

The fire magic he was capable of producing wasn't good for much else, after all. Or at least, that's what he thought.

"Fire..."

His use of fire magic was limited to ten seconds.

He tried to burn away the vines near his hand, thinking that he would focus on small areas at a time, similarly to when he'd been recovering from his broken bones. He supposed that if he could burn the rough twisted roots into smaller pieces, the remains could be cleanly wiped away from the inscription.

Burn the decay from the inscription...

For now, his mental image included just the roots at eye level.

But what happened next shocked Kai. Just like before, the flame burning at his fingertip seemed to have crossed over into reality from a mysterious other realm, but this time it was instant. And the flame was exactly as Kai had pictured it, as if the very mental image itself had come into existence.

But what followed far exceeded his mental image.

The instant the flame emitted from his fingertip spread to the dry vines in the inscription, the flame suddenly covered the whole thing as if the inscription itself was glowing red. Within a few breaths, the vines had been completely burned away with ease.

"Haa... wha?"

Kai had imagined burning away a specific portion of the dry vines on the inscription, but the intensity of the blaze had turned the vines in that spot to ash in an instant, and the excess energy looking for someplace to go had surpassed his expectations by automatically moving on to accomplish his original wish: "Burn the decay from the inscription."

Unfortunately, the excessive power of his fire magic had left the inscription covered in soot.

Kai gazed up at the result in amazement, and then he looked to the finger that the flame had come from. He couldn't understand what had happened.

He tried using his fire magic once more.

Fire...

In the blink of an eye, there was a flame at his fingertip.

It wasn't like a flame produced by fire magic; it was simply the exact flame he'd imagined. To prove it beyond doubt, he tried producing the flame as a fireball floating above his palm, and it appeared just so.

In his surprise, he let the fireball continue to burn for a full minute. Only then did he start to feel that his spiritual energy was just beginning to run down, and he hastily closed the floodgate to cut off the supply and stop his magic.

In fact, he still felt that he had spiritual energy to spare.

The day before, he'd been able to use his magic for a maximum of ten seconds, but now that time had increased six-fold, and the amount of energy he'd needed to create a constant fireball was obviously a lot greater, so it had probably burned up spiritual energy at almost ten times the rate.

At first, Kai tried to understand this in terms of his own self-development.

He had, after all, consumed an entire org's godstone all by himself before passing out. He'd expected to level up considerably as a result.

But somewhere inside himself he knew that things didn't add up, and alarm bells were ringing.

Based on his experience, the development caused by sharing the godstone of a macaque between five people would explain about ten percent of his recent development at the very most. In fact, that was probably an overestimate, and it was unlikely to account for more than a few percent.

Even though he'd received all the benefits for himself, it wasn't enough to explain much more than ten percent of his recent development. If orgs made stronger soldiers than macaques, he could revise his estimate up somewhat, but even that wasn't enough to explain the discrepancy.

Could I have... gained a guardian?

The ancient ruined gravesite...

Based on its appearance, it was highly likely that the structure was the gravesite of a land god that had watched over Kai that night while he was on the brink of death. The feeling of being watched over by some formless being left him in awe.

This old gravesite had been abandoned for a long time, and it was possible that he'd somehow picked up a guardian from it. Given the dangerous terrain and the remoteness of the area, it seemed possible.

Kai went to check his appearance by looking at the reflection of his face in the shining blue lake that filled half of the valley.

He looked unchanged; it was the same vacant-looking face he was used to seeing, but he felt there was something else he needed to check to put his mind at rest.

Fire...

Fire magic appeared again at his fingertip.

Then he focused his concentration such that the flickering of the flame gradually increased. The flame grew to be as intense as a torch, and then he realized that his face had changed.



It had appeared on the surface of his face like a pattern of ripples.

There's a kumadori... on my face.

It was one of the most striking characteristics of a guardian bearer — one who was under the divine protection of a land god. In the same way that human faces could vary infinitely, each land god also produced its own unique pattern.

The lines formed a pattern similar to the rings of wood grain that appeared when shaving down a log, emphasizing his nose and eyes. The lines covered his entire face with a dark red color, like the color of bleeding beneath the skin.

A distinctive feature of Kai's pattern was a large area on his forehead that was round like an eye, and swirled like the Great Red Spot of Jupiter. It reminded him of the monstrous cyclops that ravaged the southern regions.

"Hah... Hahaha."

The kumadori was proof that he was a guardian bearer, and that he was a member of the human country's ruling class. The words "position of authority" came to his mind as he felt his legs give way, leaving him sitting down on the ground in a cold sweat.

Shivers ran through his whole body, and he hugged his knees while waiting for the feeling to pass.

It appeared that the unthinkable had happened.

10

The battle between humans and orgs that had started that day became nothing short of a bloodbath.

Humans and orgs were two humanoid species with an intense hatred for each other that led them to kill indiscriminately. It was no longer possible to tell which of these species the pieces of flesh and blood scattered across the land belonged to.

The living would tread on the fallen corpses, only to be killed the next moment, adding new flesh to the pile. Those left alive would trample the

freshly dead, spreading blood and entrails and creating pools of foul-smelling bodily fluids that would flow between corpses until they found their way into streams. Rivers of blood flowed between the piles of the dead.

The orgs drove back the human soldiers, braying with excitement as they crossed through the mush beneath their feet. The humans, with their superior numbers, maintained their formations and came to the aid of those under attack from the orgs. The hunters suddenly became the hunted, and the orgs were pursued by human war cries.

Org soldiers weighed several times as much as a human, and on the soft earth of the wheat fields they were easy prey. The cunning human soldiers had driven the orgs into this trap, where they killed them in great numbers.

Hoping that the human formations might break down, the org soldiers chose to fight where the footing was at its poorest and the ground was littered with corpses. Any human soldier that tripped was quickly set upon by an org. As the humans struggled to stay coordinated, the battle began to go in the orgs' favor.

The number of humans that had fallen on the battlefield was already beyond counting. It was hard to say who was winning and who was losing. Each soldier simply focused on killing the enemies before them. They killed and were killed.

After a half toki of continuous fighting that felt like an eternity, a guardian bearer on the org side was eventually brought down in a fight against multiple human guardian bearers, reducing the strength of the already-outnumbered org forces and changing the course of the battle.

"The foul swines are on the run!" someone cried.

The cry became a cheer that spread quickly among the humans, signaling that the battle was coming to an end and giving new morale to the humans.

Somewhere, a human lord let loose a roar, and it turned into a roar of victory. No one gave the order; every human simply took it upon themselves to raise their voice. Perhaps it was triggered by some deep-rooted instinct common to all living creatures.

As their roars shook the earth, shocked org soldiers began to flee the battlefield in ones and twos. The humans instinctively gave chase.

Now that the org forces had finally begun to leave the battlefield, Count Balta's forces who were held in reserve behind the stone walls of Banya came flooding out as if this was the moment they'd been waiting for.

At this point, the outcome of the battle was decided.

The org forces returned to the forest, leaving the region at peace once again. Most of the soldiers had fallen to their knees and were breathing heavily when Count Balta's announcement of their victory rang out.

"We've won! We are the victors!"

There were cheers of joy from the surviving soldiers.

A party of scouts from Count Balta's army was dispatched. There was some fear that the retreat by the orgs could have been a feint, but demi-humans would often use their superior physical strength to retreat to some place far off whenever defeat seemed highly likely. The forest was their garden, and it was hard to hunt them down once they'd returned to it.

Now that the soldiers knew they were victorious, the blood-soaked weapons in their hands felt as heavy as lead, and they threw their weapons down.

The moment cries of victory were heard, many soldiers had begun searching for survivors. They roamed the battlefield while holding up flags bearing emblems of their lord's houses as symbols of their villages.

Hundreds of names of the missing were called out, and one of those names was "Kai." Simple sounding names were incredibly common in the borderlands, so it could have been that they were searching for someone else with the same name.

The soldiers from Lag had of course searched for members of their own who'd been missing during roll call and hadn't returned since. Many men were found heavily wounded, and the bodies of many times more were recovered.

After some time, another count was performed to determine the losses that Lag had suffered in the battle.

Of the 50 soldiers sent out, there had been 21 missing. Now 12 of those had

been found dead, and 9 were still unaccounted for. Everyone accepted that those who'd been unable to make their own way back were unlikely to be alive.

Of those who'd survived the battle, a third were so badly wounded that they couldn't walk. There were just 19 soldiers who were uninjured. That was less than half their original number. It was proof of the ferocity of the battle they'd just fought.

Olha had remained on the battlefield until the very end, and had joined the search for missing soldiers before quickly returning to the main camp in the village when summoned by Count Balta.

All of the lords appeared to have been summoned, and the topic of discussion was how to deal with the aftermath of the battle.

Banya's farmland was already in a state of ruin. They had no way to offer gifts to the lords who were present, so that also became a topic for discussion.

There was much crying and sobbing from the survivors of the ruined village. The elders of the village were repeatedly crying, "Our village is done for." The women struggled to hold back their sobs when they saw how their fields had been mercilessly trodden down.

So much flesh and blood had been scattered, and so many footprints left by heavy feet that the effort required to restore the wheat fields to their original state was clearly beyond them.

To make matters worse, far too many of the men who'd been reliable laborers for Banya had died in the battle. The previous betrayal had caused the lords to lose many of the men in their command, and so they'd been unapologetic about their use of Banya's men as human shields on the front line.

It looked impossible for the village to recover. The other soldiers all faced similar problems in their own villages, so they knew just how bad Banya's situation was.

Other than the soldiers from a neighboring village who were to bear witness to the "guardian inheritance" by the girl who was the successor, everyone wanted to leave this hopelessly contaminated land as soon as possible.

It was predicted that the poorly maintained roads of the borderlands would

soon become jammed by lords returning home with carts filled with their dead.

“Don’t get flustered just because a serving girl made eyes at you.”

“I know you’re not used to attention from women, but don’t let them fool you. It’s pretty obvious they just want male workers.”

“No kidding.”

In a corner of the village, a gathering of Lag soldiers were hungrily eating the watery wheat gruel that the survivors from the village had given them, but the strange looks they were getting made it hard for some of them to relax.

“What’s taking Lord Olha so long?”

“Maybe he’s after something? He’s with that count of the borderlands, isn’t he?”

“Now that you mention it... our leader did spend a lot of time around the count’s position when we were in the forest...”

“...”

The reason Lag’s soldiers had suffered such heavy losses was because their leader, Olha, had so carelessly abandoned them to move to another position, and now his standing among the other soldiers had plummeted. The atmosphere was tense, and some of the soldiers were showing contempt for Olha behind his back.

“He’s never cared about us, has he?”

“He should think about his own people before he goes sucking up to that count.”

“He’s still young, and he still lacks experience. I won’t let you speak so critically of him. You hear me?” A few calm words from Setta, the second-in-command, put a stop to escalating criticism like sand thrown onto a fire.

The reason that their baron, Lord Vezin, had sent his eldest son to participate in the council was so that Olha could strengthen his position as heir, and everyone knew that House Moloch and its heir were under close scrutiny.

It was common for young people to make mistakes while they still lacked

experience. That was understood. But it was hard to accept the fact that so many lives needed to be lost for Olha to gain the experience he lacked.

The heavy atmosphere was suddenly broken when someone called out, “Hey...” The voice caused several people to look up.

As the soldiers looked around, they first looked to the man who had spoken, then they followed his gaze, and soon there were many eyes focused on the same spot.

“Ah!” Manso raised his voice in surprise.

The other members of his squad followed suit, raising their voices too.

“The kid was alive...”

“He made it back.”

One soldier pointed a finger at him, and there was laughter in response.

After everything bad that had happened, this was a little piece of good news, and they all wanted to be part of the celebration.

“You took your time!”

“What a tough bastard! The god of death must be scared of him!”

When he saw the smiles on the faces of his fellow soldiers, the small young boy waved at them as he approached. In the turmoil of the battle he’d gotten lost in the forest, and with his whereabouts unknown, he was thought to be surely dead. But now, the young boy had returned unharmed.

The laughter from the Lag soldiers soon got the attention of soldiers from other villages.

When they learned that someone had made it back alive and unharmed after being lost in the turmoil of the battle, many applauded and congratulated him.

“Kai.”

“It’s Kai!”

“Kai! Good to have you back!”

A stone axe that the boy must have taken from an org was resting on his

shoulder. He showed them that he could easily raise it into the air with one hand, and then he spun it in the air. His smile was bright and carefree.

“I’m back!”

After being missing for a full day, Kai had safely returned to his people.

11

The boy thought he’d heard a bird. The bird call echoed around him as if it was reaching his ears from somewhere far above.

Huh?

Kai stopped working on the field to look up at the endless blue sky in search of the source of the bird call. There were few clouds at this time of year, and the bright sky was colored a rich blue.

He’d very clearly heard a bird call, so he strained his eyes to look for the bird that he felt sure was nearby.

But he found nothing.

“Kai.”

A nearby worker with their spade deep in manure called Kai’s name angrily, causing him to come to his senses. But again, he heard the bird call, as if it was mocking him.

“Don’t just stand there doing nothing, Kai!”

The bird was nowhere to be seen.

He couldn’t understand it, so Kai tried hard to think of an explanation. Then he remembered something with unexpected clarity.

That’s right... It’s the same bird call I heard in the valley.

Here in the plains of the borderlands, there were very few bird species. What he’d heard was the cry of a bird that lived in the forest.

Just then, a shiver ran down his spine.

I want to see the valley... The thought suddenly hit him, and the desire was hard to resist. Every hair on his body stood on end with excitement.

“Kai! Get it together!”

“Wha—Kai?!”

No matter how strong his desire was, every villager had to work to support their meager way of life, and Kai couldn't abandon his duties. Kai took up his plow with renewed energy and began turning over the hardened, unsown soil of the wheat field.

It was tough work best performed by an ox pulling a plow, but Lag didn't have enough cattle to work all of their farmlands. Most of their fields were painstakingly plowed by human hands.

Little Kai was getting that work done rapidly. Those around him were struggling to keep up because Kai's strength was clearly on another level.

“Kai, wait! Calm down!”

“When did you get so strong?!”

Other men working in the next field laughed loudly at the scene playing out nearby, and some passing women guiding a herd of cattle watched with great interest. No one minded too much if Kai went all out because it meant that some of the more punishing work would progress quickly. In fact, some people were cheering him on.

Kai thought that if he could finish up the work in front of him he might be given some free time, but in reality, there was no way that he'd be given a break by himself just because work was progressing more quickly.

In the end, Kai's continued efforts meant that much more farm work was completed that day than anyone had expected. All Kai received in return were some words of gratitude from the other villagers, but that was enough to leave Kai feeling proud of himself.

Everyone had been surprised by Kai's sudden development after returning from the battle of Banya. Kai's newfound strength was visible to all in a variety of ways, and to everyone it seemed obvious that he was a “hatchling fed on

godstones” (which was like saying he was a bird that learned to fly young). Indeed, he told everyone that for one day and one night while he was missing, he’d collected godstones from the bodies of fallen enemies in the forest and eaten them one after another in an attempt to stay alive.

Anyone left to wander lost among the enemy would do the same thing in the same situation. Keeping a precious godstone all to oneself was generally considered shameful, but everyone understood the circumstances, so rather than criticize Kai, the village accepted his rapid development and recognized his great potential.

Just like the women who’d watched Kai’s farm work, other women in the village had also started to pay close attention to Kai. When a boy with potential stood out from his peers, even just a little, he’d have the honor of being listed as “marriage material” by the women of the village.

Unlike his fellow soldiers who worried a lot about how they looked in the eyes of the women, Kai was still 13, and his thoughts were more focused on food than sex. Unfortunately, Kai hadn’t even noticed this particular change in how they were looking at him.

In the afternoon training session for soldiers, there was once again a sudden difference in Kai.

It was already well known to the soldiers that Kai had been able to collect many godstones in battle, causing his strength to increase rapidly. Even though his past life memories would cause him to think about things deeply, Kai was still at that age when boys fantasize about having special powers, and impressing everyone around him with his newfound strength brought him great joy.

When everyone gathered for spear training, Kai wielded his spear with increased precision and a whistling of wind accompanied each of his movements.

This soon caught the attention of the higher-ranking soldiers, and he found himself receiving direct guidance from Basco and Setta, who were two of the most skilled fighters.

The leader of Kai’s squad was Manso, a soldier five years his senior who had

carefully built his strength and was currently the strongest in the squad. Manso and Kai were now treated as their two top fighters.

“You’re catching up quick!”

“Next time... don’t think... you’ll be able... to leave me... behind... in a forest...”

“Hah? You know... I had no choice. Sorry.”

“I’m not... blaming... you!”

Even in the middle of an intense bout, he could carry out a conversation without getting out of breath. Manso was a good match for him, so they became regular sparring partners.

In reality, Manso was worried about Kai’s sudden rise in the squad, and wanted to train with him for the sake of maintaining the balance of power, but Kai hadn’t realized that. That said, although he got carried away at times, there was a more mature side of Kai that knew to hold back a little. There was Manso’s reputation in the squad to think about, so Kai naturally stayed one step behind him. If Kai was their squad’s number two, and if he could stay one step behind Manso in terms of practical skill, that felt like the right place for him.

That put him in an “upper mid-level” position among the foot soldiers, where he was closer to the highest rank than the lowest rank, and although his skill as a fighter wasn’t exceptional, this was a considerable jump in status for a youngster with less than a year of service behind him.

His increased value as a person caused a big change at mealtimes too.

“You look like you need a good meal.”

“...”

When he lined up to be served his dinner, he was surprised to find that the soup served into his wooden bowl was rich with ingredients.

He was also given a good amount of boiled prit (asparagus, essentially).

He gulped as he looked up at the girl serving him. She was a slightly chubby girl, three or four years older than him, smiling at him affectionately.

Though he wouldn't have said she was beautiful, many of the soldiers were little better than dogs in heat, and she was more than cute enough to get their attention.

"Hey..."

"Keep moving, Kai."

For some reason he was rudely shoved from behind and forced to move on, but the girl continued to watch him as he walked away, and finally gave him an awkward smile.

Then there was an elbow in his back, then a kick to his shin, and Kai didn't know what to make of it.

"It's like spring's in the air, Kai."

Manso beside him looked coldly at the amount of food in Kai's bowl.

Kai had never noticed it before, but Manso seemed to have a slightly bigger helping than those around him.

Now Kai understood how Manso was able to share a morango with a hungry child: Manso's dinner servings were large enough that he didn't have to focus on just his own hunger. Manso was similarly well-treated by the women.

Then as the prayer began, he looked over at the baron who was reciting the usual lines. The baron's family were always assured good-sized meals, and Kai decided that someday he'd eat meals like that himself. He felt as though that wasn't beyond his reach anymore.

"And we give thanks to the brave spirit of the land god who resides here in the land of our forefathers."

"We give thanks," chanted everyone in unison.

Whatever prayers he might say to the god that had given him such incredible power, it would never be enough.

Kai had always felt that the standard prayer was tedious, but now he understood why the baron looked so serious each time he said the words. The baron was never hesitant to give thanks to the god who blessed him. At the same table, Olha and Lady White said their prayers with just as much feeling.

In contrast, the baron's first wife Lady Carolina, his second wife Lady Falda, and the children at the ends of the table would never inherit a guardian. Their prayers sounded less sincere, and they looked at their food with disinterest. They didn't feel gratitude, they just felt tired of eating the same food every day in this rundown village.

The fresh texture and slight grassy smell of the boiled prit filled Kai with a sense of satisfaction at the nourishment he was getting. The soup actually contained potato and cured meat, and it felt strange to have to chew. It was completely different from the soup he used to just drink.

He savored it at first, but then hunger got the better of him and he greedily finished the whole thing. Even though he had more than most others, it still wasn't enough. Kai was a growing boy in need of more nutrition.

He looked up at the ceiling and sighed, and then he felt he was being watched.

To the side of the baron was the serving girl from earlier looking right at him. She smiled when their eyes met. He'd heard that the women who worked in the castle would eat in another room after the men had finished their meals. There was a group known as the women's association that was led by the baron's first wife, Lady Carolina. The women's association set clear rules regarding appropriate behavior between the men and women of the village, and some said that the group controlled the foolish men of the village from behind the scenes. The serving girl was no doubt a member.

"She's not so bad looking, that one."

Kai froze up as Manso poked him in the side with an elbow.

That night, Kai waited for the other soldiers to fall asleep before slipping out of the barracks.

In the darkness, he scaled the towering stone walls of the village with ease and landed on the grass outside. For just a moment he gazed at the sky. It was full of stars, as if a box of jewels had been spilled over the borderlands. And then Kai began to run with great energy. He ran with the power of a guardian bearer, the power he'd had to hide during the day.

I want to see the valley...

The urge filled the boy's heart, and he couldn't resist the impulse any longer.

12

The valley was in the forest near the village of Banya.

In his impatience, he couldn't hold himself back. Each step forward launched Kai several yules into the air, and he'd travel as much as 10 yules before landing.

When he ran at his fastest, Kai must have traveled about 1 yuld for every 100 steps, which meant that he could travel the 50 yulds to Banya in just 5,000 steps. He sailed over the gentle hills and low vegetation of the borderlands, and Banya was in sight before even half a toki had passed.

This must be more than 50 kilometers an hour.

It was an impressive display of his power as a guardian bearer, but Kai's feelings were focused on what lay beyond Banya — he was thinking about the beautiful valley.

He'd traveled in roughly a straight line, making many large holes in the fields of the village with his feet. The soil was soft, and every step Kai took was like an explosion, sending dirt flying in all directions.

Whatever. They hadn't repaired the fields anyway. I worry about the village though...

They had at least cleared away the bodies of the orgs, but the ridges of the fields were still a mess, and soldiers' footprints were still visible in the soil.

Kai turned and watched Banya disappear into the distance behind him as he effortlessly flew through the air. The village was dark and lifeless, and it looked as if no more than a few dozen people could be left living there.

That village is done, I guess.

He continued to cut through Banya's fields until he entered the forest, at which point he felt he knew the way to the valley from intuition alone.

The valley... must be this way.

Somehow, he could clearly sense its location.

The valley and its beautiful lake weren't particularly deep in the forest, and yet they were unknown to humans. Most likely this was because of a large stretch of wet marshlands controlled by the lagarto which separated humans from the valley. Kai was careful to detour around the marshlands that were the lagarto's territory, and he did his best to keep his footsteps silent as he traveled through the forest.

Without losing his way even for a moment, Kai arrived at the spot where he could see into the valley. He pushed his way through dense greenery, and a breathtaking view suddenly appeared before him.

"The valley..." Kai felt ready to burst with happiness the moment he saw it.

The valley. He hadn't just dreamed it after all.

Less than a month had passed since he'd made it back from this place, but despite not having been away long, he was filled with relief to see that it was still safe.

Kai couldn't wait any longer. He leapt over the edge of the cliff. Although he knew that the lake was below him, jumping off a cliff in the darkness of the forest was a reckless act. But Kai's faith in the valley was strong, and he knew it was ready to catch him.

After a few moments flying through the air, he landed in the lake just as he knew he would.

He plunged into the cold water with a great splash and then surfaced to take deep breaths of the valley's cool air. He splashed his arms and legs playfully and then let himself float on the surface of the water. Then Kai laughed from his stomach.

I just love this valley, he thought with no uncertainty.

He even considered simply living right there in the valley.

His view of the starry sky above was narrowed by the cliffs that surrounded him. The village elders had tried to teach him the names of the stars many

times, but the only star he knew was the star over the northern pole. He gazed into it and pointed right at it. Istiara, the northern pole star, appeared to twinkle at that very moment, as if it realized Kai was looking at it.

“I’ll bet it was you making that bird call!” Kai shouted with a laugh. He felt a strange sense of friendship toward that bird call that he remembered hearing in the valley.

The trees whose branches had mostly been bare were now covered with green leaves, as if what he’d seen before had been an illusion. It should have been a surprising change, but to Kai it felt strangely natural.

For a short while, Kai carried on acting on whatever whim took him, but eventually he stopped laughing and got to his feet in shallow waters and examined the shore.

In the light of the stars he could only see the branches of the great tree as a vague silhouette, but the inscription that he’d cleaned during his last visit gave off a slight glow in the starlight.

Kai viewed the scene in a daze for a while before wading over to the shore and producing fire magic above his palm.

With the flame burning as brightly as a torch, his surroundings were made visible by the soft red light. The valley had been restored to life, but there were no signs of living creatures larger than birds or insects. Here and there were surprised cries from birds that must have been shocked by the sudden light.

“Sorry about that,” Kai told them, as if speaking to another human. “I’ll put it out in a moment.”

As promised, he soon put out his fire magic.

It wasn’t just Kai’s physical strength that had increased when he became a guardian bearer; his vision had also improved considerably. As long as he could be sure that nothing in the area meant him harm, the dim light of the valley was more than enough.

He splashed some water over the gravestone and began to scrub at the areas he hadn’t cleaned during his previous visit. He soon became absorbed in his attempts to repay the grave of the land god for the blessings he’d received.

He'd learned from women who washed clothes that the bark of a small tree known as cru could be removed and rolled to create a convenient tool for scrubbing away dirt. There was a similar tree nearby, so he borrowed some of its bark for the sake of scrubbing the grave.

"All right. That's about done."

He'd lost track of how much time he'd spent on the task, but Kai felt satisfied as he stretched his limbs and admired the gravestone that was now free from dirt.

Finally, he picked some small flowers that he didn't know the name of and placed them in front of the gravestone as an offering.

"I'll make an offering for you too."

The org that had fallen to the bottom of the valley with Kai had been given a burial based on Lag's traditions. A few rocks had been placed by a round mound of dirt to serve as a grave marker. Kai placed a single flower on top of the mound of dirt.

Though he hadn't slept a wink since leaving Lag, Kai didn't feel sleepy. Ever since gaining a guardian, his body seemed able to function with barely any need for sleep.

With nothing else to do, he found a recess in the roots of the great tree that matched the shape of his rear, and he rested there. But it's a rule in life that time spent comfortably passes quickly. He saw that the sky had started to brighten and quickly jumped to his feet in surprise, wondering where the time had gone.

He wanted to stay and felt as though he had to tear himself from the place, but he couldn't just give up on the village. He said a prayer once more to the grave of the land god and turned to leave.

The cliffs would have presented a challenge for most people, but Kai easily found the footholds as he climbed to the top. For someone with a guardian bearer's power, the cliff felt like a bouldering wall fit for a child. He virtually glided up the rock surface and reached the top with ease.

Even in the short time taken to climb up, the light of the sun had started to

give color to the leaves of the forest.

What even is bouldering anyhow? he wondered idly.

Kai clapped his hands loudly as if chasing those idle thoughts away, and then, in the dim light of daybreak, he began to run.

The past-life memories that had allowed Kai to be where he was today were now in harmony with his knowledge of the world from his current life. His rapid development as a guardian bearer had brought him a constant feeling of calmness that had let him think more clearly.

No matter how valuable a piece of knowledge might be, if it didn't fit in with his current reality, it was no more than trivia. A lot of the ideas that came to Kai were like that, but he was in the habit of quickly dismissing such thoughts. That way, Kai found he could organize his thoughts without getting caught up on the small details.

As Kai traveled the route home, he decided that he'd build his own cabin in the valley. He felt convinced that the valley belonged to him. His heart fluttered with excitement at the thought of turning the valley into a comfortable world of his own.

The sun had just finished rising when Kai quietly curled up in his own bed in the village of Lag.

When he heard the other soldiers starting to get up, he also got up while pretending to sleepily rub his eyes.

They said good morning to each other and then washed their faces by the side of the well. They discussed the weather as they walked toward the steaming dinner hall. It was just another day in the village he called home.

When Kai asked himself whether he felt a sense of belonging among the people here, he couldn't deny it that he did. But at the same time, he felt that half of his soul now belonged to the valley.

Kai's stomach rumbled in response when the smell of breakfast being cooked drifted over from the dining hall.

Kai had no parents. They'd been caught up in an attack by demi-humans on

another small village that had been controlled by House Moloch. When Kai was still an infant, House Moloch's reign over that village had been crushed and consigned to history, and Kai's parents had died in the process. Scenes resembling the downfall of Banya had once happened close to home. Kai had been left with no close blood relatives, so he'd been taken in by this village. Thoughts of his home were on his mind as he lined up to be served breakfast.

The reason he felt the need to return to Lag was because they provided the food that kept him alive each day. But he felt that there was more to it than just the food itself. He knew all too well how much effort was required to keep everyone fed in the barren borderlands.

"Remind me what work we're doing today."

"Probably putting the northern fields in order yet again. It's so damn boring."

"If you want food, you work to earn it," Manso scolded his squad. "I want no complaining from any of you."

Kai absentmindedly joined the chorus of "Yes, sir," as he did every day.

Manso sighed as if he thought Kai was only half listening.

The squad naturally moved with everyone ordered according to their age, and Kai was at the rear.

Kai rubbed at his plate with the sleeve of his clothing while the men made small talk that he didn't think was worth listening to. Then he realized that his clothes were still a little damp.

I should probably avoid jumping into the lake next time, he decided.

Part 2 — A Small Paradise

13

Thus began Kai's secret visits to the valley.

Kai couldn't bear to be away from the place for a single day, so he'd slip out of the village when it got dark each night, and then he'd travel 50 yulds to his beautiful valley.

"This valley is the best."

Each time he visited the valley, he never grew tired of cleaning the gravestone of the land god, and he would pray to it passionately after he'd cleaned away any dirt. Then he'd enjoy relaxing in the quiet atmosphere of the valley for a while before starting work on one of his personal projects.

Kai's current fixation was the search for an area of land where he could build his dream house. Over the past few days he had been exploring every inch of the base of the valley.

The inside of the valley was a circular space that was 300 yules in diameter. It wasn't particularly wide, but Kai had it all to himself, and to him it felt like a vast area.

He'd already found several spots here and there that were to his liking.

Fresh water came from the surface of the rocks in a small cave. Lots of tiny crabs were hiding in a narrow stream. An angular rock that jutted from the ground formed a rugged hill.

He named the cave "Western Water Cave," the stream "Crab Stream," and the hill "Rock Hopping Hill." To put it bluntly, he was really bad at coming up with names.

That island thing looks kinda interesting.

Some distance from the shore of the lake that filled a third of the valley, there

was a spot where grass and trees grew from something like a shoal. It looked like it was just wide enough to fit a small hut on it.

The wetness of the area would be a problem, but that could be worked around by building the hut from wood and giving it a raised floor.

After walking around the forest once and returning back to the grave of the land god, the “harvest” that Kai had gathered was so much that it was almost spilling from his hands. Further from the walls of the cliff, he’d found fruits and vegetables and an incredible variety of mushrooms. When he found a collection of small red fruit known as maca, he felt guilty for keeping them all to himself. Ever since demi-humans had started to invade, the villagers had rarely had a chance to eat maca, making it a treasured desert.

Kai sat down in front of the gravestone while he ate the maca and messily slurped the juice from it.

Wherever I decide to build my cabin, I need some wood before I can start.

While searching the forest, he’d been on the lookout for good wood, but unfortunately nothing he found looked like it would make good timber. The trees at the bottom of the valley were your typical broad-leaves.

Looks like I’ll never find good timber with all these broad-leaves around.

Based on his past life memories, he’d had to accept that the unusual plant life here at the bottom of the valley would make it hard to find materials.

Kai still didn’t understand all the complicated reasoning behind it, but the trees that grew in this area of the borderlands were generally needle-leaf trees because the winters here were harsh. And yet the base of the valley was like another world that had its own climate for some reason.

But Kai wasn’t pessimistic about collecting trees for timber. He could find much more suitable trees growing outside of the valley.

The trees in the vast forests of the borderlands included large balen cedars that grew everywhere and were a good source of timber, and it was common for humans to cut down these trees for the sake of building houses in their settlements.

I could just go up top and cut a tree down so it falls into the lake.

Kai looked up at the cloudless starry sky and saw the Milky Way. In this world those stars were known as Ispi Rio, meaning river of souls. He could judge how long he had until morning from the angle of these stars in the western sky.

Knowing that there was no time like the present, Kai made his way up the cliff to look for good trees on the bank where he'd almost been killed by the org. At first, he figured that it would take the least effort to drop the tree into the valley if it was already close to the cliff, but some piece of knowledge within him warned, "That'll make the valley walls crumble." Instead, he looked for trees further from the valley's edge.

It felt strange to think that the roots of a tree could grip the soil to prevent a cliff from collapsing.

At the top of the bank he found a thicket of trees surrounded by dense undergrowth that looked untouched. He only had to look at the area for a few moments before he found several beautiful balen cedars.

"All right. You can be the first."

He didn't want to choose a tree that was too broad. Not just because it would take too long to cut through; it felt wrong somehow to cut down elder trees unceremoniously.

Kai didn't have any tools of course. He had brought his knife, but that obviously wasn't going to be useful for cutting down a tree.

Let's see if there's a way to do it with magic.

He carefully considered what approach to take.

He had a lot more spiritual energy now that he'd gained a guardian, so he didn't have to be so careful about how he used his magic. He searched through the knowledge that came to mind from his past life memories.

The idea of using water or air to cut through an object came to him, but he would have to try those ideas out to find out whether they could work.

His first idea was that he might create cutting power using wind, and the word that came to his mind was "kamaitachi." His first attempt at creating

some sort of magic “wind cutter” failed because it was too difficult to mentally picture a whirlwind. The idea of pushing the air to create wind was easier to work with, but it used up a surprising amount of spiritual energy just to create a slight breeze.

He considered applying pressure by creating a forceful flow of water in some sort of magic “water cutter,” but the whole idea of a massive amount of water appearing from nowhere was absurd.

Kai considered fire magic his specialty, but his initial attempt to cut through a branch with his “heat cutter” set the branch on fire. After briefly panicking, he put the fire out and gave up on the idea of using fire completely.

Kai thought about it for a while and concluded that fire magic didn’t work according to basic laws of physics. Based on that, he theorized that magic was the power to take pure concepts and turn them into reality, making conceptual weapons a possibility.

What he imagined next was a sword. But the sword he imagined was a magic sword that embodied the very concept of “cutting.”

To cut through the tree... if I had an invisible blade that could slip between the “molecules.”

Plants and animals were aggregated organic matter. And organic matter was nothing more than a substance formed by collections of molecules.

Those molecules were mostly joined together by electrostatic bonds between positive and negative charges.

In a bond caused by what’s known as a Van der Waals interaction, an attraction between a positive and negative charge would cause the molecules to stick together, and if like charges were brought into contact, this would cause a repulsion interaction that moved the charges apart.

Kai was just a boy who’d had no education during his life in the village, so he obviously didn’t have enough fundamental knowledge to fully understand this kind of high-level science, but some part of his brain was wired up to accept seemingly ridiculous ideas.

Whatever these bonds are, I’ll split them apart when I cut!

The blade edge in this concept would easily penetrate the molecular-scale crystals within the wood, and would use force to break apart the powerful electrostatic bonds that held them together.

The object he applied this magic to was the edge of his hand. He decided on a time limit of three seconds for using this “invisible sword” after trying out several cutting motions. Kai had become comfortable with the concept of seconds by this point.

He imagined a blade capable of cutting through molecular bonds.

He held up his arm and applied the mental image to it.

He quickly swung his arm down while the effect was still active.

Immediately after swinging his arm, he closed the floodgate to stop the flow of magic.

He performed these actions as part of a smooth series of motions.

Kai put his strength as a guardian bearer behind his hand movement and didn't worry for a moment about injuring his hand if his magic failed. As soon as he could feel the heat that came with using magic around his hand, he swung his hand downward and chopped.

With barely any resistance, his hand sunk to about the center of the tree trunk. In fact, the straight edge of his hand had sunk into the tree like it was a lump of dirt.

Ugh...?

The gloopy sensation he felt was unpleasant, and he quickly pulled his hand away. An indentation the shape of his hand was left behind in the cedar tree, and although it had stood under its own strength until now, it wasn't long before the tree began falling in the direction of the cut. There was a great cracking sound as it collapsed under its own weight.

Kai had intended to choose one of the younger trees, but it was still one of the larger trees in the forest, and the sound of it falling was not an everyday

sound.

It caused the branches in trees around it to break as it fell, and the ground shook when it landed.

Sleeping birds woke up and squawked as they took to the air, and then after a short delay there was the sound of howling from the residents of the forest. It was unusual for such a disturbance of the peace to happen so late at night.

Now that Kai had gotten the hang of it, he cut down another two and then another three trees, which he threw down into the valley, without any concern about the noise he was making. But then his work was brought to a standstill.

“Buhshururu!”

Before he knew it, he’d been surrounded by demi-humans. Kai’s excellent night vision made it possible for him to identify them.

They’re lagarto...!

The residents of the forest’s marshland were an amphibious species with long tails, sharp teeth, and a hide that was tough like stone.

The marshland in which the lagarto lived was spread out fairly broadly around the valley, and Kai had to be careful to avoid straying into their territory. He had been careful up to now when traveling to and from the valley, but he’d been so absorbed in felling trees that he’d been slow to realize that he was being a neighborhood nuisance.

The unique sounds coming from the long faces of the creatures were probably a conversation between them, but Kai understood none of it.

What he did understand was that they weren’t very happy.

The area where Kai was cutting down trees wasn’t in the marshland, of course. Which meant it was the lagarto who had left the water to approach him after hearing the noise.

“Sorry. Was I annoying you?”

“Gurururu...”

They were both intelligent species, so they could communicate to some

extent as long as they paid careful attention to each other's behavior.

Kai was clearly a human, but the lagarto didn't seem concerned about that, and they didn't appear to be looking for a fight.

One of the larger members of the group slowly made its way to the front, and then switched from crawling on all fours to standing on its hind legs. In terms of body size, orgs looked bigger, but the lagarto had much more powerful looking muscles. The sight of the tough hide that could protect them against any ordinary weapon would have caused an ordinary human to wet themselves in fear.

This was clearly a lagarto guardian bearer.

The spikes on its back looked sharper than the spikes of the others, and its teeth also looked bigger. Most importantly, the skin around its neck was colored like the striped pattern on a red snake, and Kai quickly recognized that this was what humans would call a kumadori.

"I do not know you, but can see, you powerful warrior. You look like human."

"I didn't mean any harm. I'll try to keep it down."

"You often seen in this place."

"Yeah, I'm going to live in the valley."

"You say... the valley?"

Hearing this, the lagarto suddenly lost their calm and made agitated-sounding noises to each other. Kai guessed they were saying things like, "He lives in the valley?" and "But that can't be right."

"Fearsome god live in the valley," the lagarto guardian bearer said. "All who go near be killed."

Something didn't seem quite right, and Kai didn't trust them. He started by asking a question he already knew the answer to.

"A god? There's a god in the valley?"

"Indeed."

"Well, I didn't see him, and I've walked around the whole thing."

“You walk in valley?!”

The lagarto were becoming increasingly agitated.

Kai couldn't understand why, but the lagarto guardian bearer stretched its body upward in shock, as if this was some sort of great revelation. It blinked with shutter-like eyelids and then muttered a few broken words.

“Cannot be... *** has died?”**

A shudder ran through the red lagarto's body.

14

The lagarto showed no hostility towards Kai despite the fact that he was obviously a human. In the past, when human soldiers had strayed into their territory, the lagarto had killed them without warning, so the current situation was surprising to Kai.

He looked into the strange yellow reptilian eyes of the lagarto, and he became curious about the world that they saw through their vertical narrow pupils.

“You say you are next master of valley?”

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

The lagarto turned to leave as if it had learned all it wanted to know, so Kai had to move quickly to stop it.

When they'd seen Kai acting as though the valley belonged to him, they had decided that some creature with the hard to understand name of “*****” had died. The lagarto knew something that might explain why Kai had suddenly become fixated on the valley.

Even though their two species had been engaged in a bloody battle with each other not long before, Kai was calm and fearless as he looked at the lagarto guardian bearer.

The lagarto seemed unwilling to stop, so to prevent it from escaping he quickly moved in front to block its way. Kai could feel something like killing

intent from the lagarto now.

“What?”

“Who is *****?”

The name was difficult to pronounce, but when he pronounced it right, it had a clear effect on the lagarto, and they understood his question.

The lagarto guardian bearer went from standing on its two hindlegs to resting on four legs like a lizard, and it swung its long tail to clear any undergrowth that might get in its way. Kai didn't know it then, but this was something the lagarto did to make themselves comfortable when they wanted to rest in the same spot for a long time. The guardian bearer shook its head at the other members of its tribe, so they left and went back to their beds.

Kai and the lagarto guardian bearer were left face-to-face with each other.

Without either needing to ask, they naturally knew to exchange names.

“My name's Kai.”

“Mngoleh.

“That's a little hard to say. Can I call you Goleh?”

“...”

Humans always regarded demi-humans as their enemy, and for a human to communicate with another species like this was more unusual than Kai would have guessed.

As long as Kai was the occupant of the valley and Goleh lived in the nearby marshlands, the two would be neighbors. As a show of friendship, Kai took out one of the maca that were hidden in his pocket and offered it to the lagarto. He then took out another and took a bite from it.

Goleh quickly realized that Kai was trying to show him that they weren't poisoned, and it threw the red maca back into its throat with a single peck with its big mouth. It gulped the fruit down without needing to chew.

“Who is *****?” Kai asked for a second time.

Goleh blinked its shutter-like eyelids as if the question needed some thought.

“For long time, we live in fear of *****,” Goleh began calmly.

The pronunciation was difficult to understand, but Kai quickly got used to it and listened carefully to what Goleh had to say. He guessed that the lagarto were more comfortable when resting on four legs, so he followed Goleh’s example by sitting down in the grass and crossing his legs.

Now the nature of “*****” was revealed to him.

“Well, he sounds like a real monster to me.”

“He was survivor of the old ones who lived in the forest. Very proud warrior who give fierce punishment to ones who abandon faith.”

Lagarto lived long lives, but even they didn’t know how long the valley had been ruled by the survivor of the old ones known as *****.

Goleh was head of the lagarto’s Unega tribe, and even he didn’t know the original name of the “old ones.” Goleh claimed to have lived in the marshlands for over 200 years.

It wasn’t just the lagarto; the orgs and the few remaining koror also refused to go near the valley in fear of *****. Goleh claimed that no one had seen ***** for many years, but the lagarto still feared him so much that they wouldn’t even approach the valley.

The orgs were also unaware that the occupant of the valley was missing. The being known as ***** had used fear as a means of keeping intruders away, and the valley had become something of a sacred place that no one dared enter.

Through his connection with the land god of the valley, Kai knew it was true that ***** had died. A land god’s blessings could only ever be given to one person. As a guardian bearer, Kai knew this instinctively, and it was beyond all doubt.

Had ***** died in the valley, or in some foreign land? For some reason, Kai felt sure that ***** had died isolated and alone.

“None knew ***** was dead. It is by chance that you receive god of land as your guardian. That is all.”

The lagarto’s reasoning was calm and straightforward.

It was Kai's first time talking to a demi-human, and he was surprised to learn that they could speak so rationally.

But surprised as he was, he had no trouble accepting that this was just how the world was. The humans of this world weren't vain enough to think that man was the lord of all creation.

When they were done talking, Goleh thanked Kai for the maca and then slowly turned to leave.

Kai had learned that lagarto also enjoyed maca. He decided that next time he visited, he'd bring many more as gifts.

Although Kai didn't realize it, the lagarto had now formally accepted him as the occupant of the valley. As long as everyone kept to their own territory, the lagarto were an incredibly peaceful species.

In the end, he'd been given the go-ahead to cut down trees and carry them away. The trees had no value to the lagarto, so he was told to take as many as he pleased. But Kai had lost enthusiasm for tonight, so he decided that he should also return to his own territory.

After descending into the valley, he gathered up the trees that he'd dropped down, cleanly stripped them of their branches, and lined them up on the lakeshore. Between now and his next visit, he'd have to think carefully about how he'd cut them into timber.

"Am I really good enough for you, my god?" Kai asked, after finishing his prayers.

He'd made it a habit to put his hands together in prayer in front of the land god's gravestone before returning to the village.

He'd merely been lucky. If *****'s previous guardian bearer had still been alive, he'd have been slaughtered the moment he set foot in the valley. The thought of everything being pure luck gave him a lot to consider.

But Kai wasn't the sort of person to dwell on things that had already happened for too long. He didn't doubt that he'd just been lucky, so he decided he should set his mind to thinking about the peaceful life he could enjoy here in

the valley.

The sky was beginning to glow with a dull light that softly illuminated the gravestone. His time spent enjoying the valley had come to an end. Kai climbed to his feet and hurried back to Lag, and back to his everyday life.

As he ran like the wind through the natural landscape of the borderlands, all of Kai's lingering doubts were quickly and easily forgotten.

**

After agilely crossing over the defensive walls of the village, Kai would normally have sneaked back to his bed in the barracks, but today he was feeling thirsty, so he decided to make a detour to one of the castle's deep wells.

The buildings in the village were already colored with the faint purple light of the morning sun. Kai cast a long shadow on the ground as he stood pulling up the bucket from the well. Then he heard the voice of someone he wasn't expecting.

"You're up awfully early this morning."

He turned to see Lady White, who had broken a light sweat. In her hand she held one of the long training staffs that soldiers used on the training ground. Lady White skillfully spun the staff in her hand and then stuck it into the ground beside her.

The women in the village were not trained to fight under ordinary circumstances. They were given the important task of bearing children and raising them so that the population of the village would increase, and sending women out to die on the battlefield was considered unthinkable. This attitude was common to all villages in the borderlands. Fighting was a man's job.

"You've been training?"

"I enjoy the exercise," Lady White said with a slight smile before telling him that she wanted to drink some water.

He quickly drew the cold water from the well and held out the full bucket to

Lady White.

Lady White showed no signs of being humble enough to let Kai go first; she took the bucket without a second thought and appeared to savor the water as she drank. When she was finished, she wiped her mouth with her sleeve like a man.

“You’ve no need for training, My Lady,” Kai said without thinking. “You don’t have to fight, so it’s a waste of time.”

This appeared to put Lady White in a bad mood. “Even if I’m a woman, I’m still a guardian bearer, so I should fight.”

Now that he remembered she was a guardian bearer, Kai couldn’t help but think she might be right.

“They didn’t just make me a guardian bearer because it improved my marriage prospects...” she muttered.

Lady White used the remaining water to clean the part her mouth had touched and then gave the bucket back.

Although she’d said it quietly, Kai had heard her very clearly when she mentioned marriage prospects, but he wasn’t mature enough to grasp the nuance behind what she said, so he just ignored her.

“You won’t tell anyone about this, will you?” she asked him.

“...”

“It’s hard to know what to do when training alone. Why don’t you join me tomorrow?”

Lady White had kept the conversation going while taking Kai’s silence as a sign that he was interested. But Kai had absolutely no sense of the subtleties of conversations between men and women, and he was just ignoring her questions. Dealing with her just felt like a lot of trouble to him.

The only thing he wanted to spend his time on was the valley, so none of this was worth thinking about.

“Listen to me,” Lady White said, sounding slightly annoyed.

As usual, Kai gave no indication of whether he was actually listening or not as he drew more water from the well. He drank heartily before letting out a sigh of satisfaction.

Kai was about to just walk away, but Lady White called after him.

“Don’t ignore me!”

For some reason, Kai then received a long lecture and somehow found himself agreeing to meet her the following morning for training.

15

Lately, hunger pains hadn’t been such a problem for Kai, and he no longer stared enviously at the baron’s table during mealtimes.

The fruits of the trees in the valley were rich with nutrition, and after many years of Kai being an underfed child, the effect was visible on his skin. His entire body radiated energy, and his pained expression of hunger was long gone from his face.

It was the women rather than the men who were most sensitive to that sort of change; not being hungry was a sign that he wasn’t having any problems when it came to being served his meals.

It was proof that there were multiple women who had started showing favoritism towards him, and the women were particularly sensitive to subtle signals from the members of the same sex. If many other women had seen promise in him, it could only mean that he was worth paying attention to. Most of the women didn’t think deeply about this, they just tended to go along with it based on their intuition.

“Oh, come on... That’s a bit much,” another soldier said to Kai.

Kai looked in surprise at the mountain of food that had been piled into his bowl as if he’d only just noticed himself.

When someone wasn’t hungry, that resulted in them being given more food. Such was the unfair nature of the world.

Up until now, Kai had only had to deal with banter from slightly jealous

soldiers, but today it was outright hatred, and he didn't have a comeback.

"I'll share some of it..."

"Yeah, all right."

Manso had always been good to Kai, so Kai shared enough food to give Manso his usual sized serving. His fellow soldiers didn't react with gratitude, and it was an awkward meal.

The women who'd served the food were standing together near the baron's table.

Some of them were giving Kai meaningful glances, and others tried to get his attention by waving at him. There was no denying Kai's newfound popularity.

"They could at least spare a thought for the rest of us."

"I hear you're even talking to Lady White now. Whatever trick you've pulled, you need to cut that shit out."

The other soldiers nodded in agreement.

The time for Kai to stop his tricks came when breakfast was finished and some of the soldiers gathered for what they called "cleaning duty selection."

House Moloch, the rulers of Lag, made it a rule that gravesite cleaning would take place once a month. There were three guardian bearers in House Moloch: the baron, Olha, and Lady White. Accordingly, there were three gravesites where their land gods rested.

The baron's gravesite was of course the gravesite of Lagdara, which was in the center of the village, beneath the castle. Lag was a settlement that had grown up around the land god's gravesite at its center, and every child in the village was taught that the castle had been built for the sole purpose of protecting that gravesite.

The gravesites of the land gods that served as Olha and Lady White's guardians were in different places, of course. House Moloch had controlled two other settlements that were now left in ruin after repeated attacks from demi-humans.

One of these was the village of Elg, which at one point had a population half

the size of Lag. The other was a small village known as Eda, which had been half the size of Elg. Both had been in ruin for over 10 years now. They were covered by overgrown weeds and would soon be swallowed by the ever-expanding forests.

House Moloch had once been known as “The Lords of the Three Colonies,” and had been one of the great powers of the borderlands.

Although the settlements themselves had been lost, House Moloch had stubbornly held on to the gravesites of the land gods. The shrines had been built to cover the gravesites, and those had then been disguised as mounds of earth so that demi-humans wouldn’t find them.

It goes without saying that the blessings of those land gods were weakened after their gravesites had been treated with such disrespect. To prevent the favor of these land gods from being lost entirely, House Moloch had continued to make regular offerings at the gravesites after the villages were lost.

“The competition’s fierce for Lady White’s party.”

“You’d best keep out of it and leave a place for someone else.”

“...”

The gravesite of the land god that protected Lady White was in the village of Eda.

Offerings could only be presented by the person receiving the blessings of that god, so it was necessary for Lady White to visit Eda herself. For men shunned by the women, the chance to serve as one of Lady White’s guards was a simple dream.

Kai didn’t care about that, of course, so he agreed to keep out of it.

He’d promised not to take part in the “selection battle” that secretly took place between the soldiers after breakfast. Indeed, Kai didn’t raise his hand when there was a request for volunteers who would guard Lady White.

How’d it come to this? Kai asked himself as Lady White walked alongside him, talking incessantly.

It was true that he hadn't raised his hand to volunteer for guard duty. But no one could ever have guessed that Lady White herself would still ask for him as a guard.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Uh, yeah..."

"They really don't need to give me so many guards, but Father is always treating me like I'm a child. I do know how to make proper use of my guardian. That's why I've been training. Suppose we were attacked by macaques; don't you think I could handle that myself? I've gotten rather good with the spear, haven't I? You've seen it for yourself, so you must agree."

"You rely on brute force too much."

"Ugh..." Blood ran to her pale face, and Lady White puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction.

From a distance, she looked how you'd expect a refined lady of the baron's household to look, but up close, you could see she was actually a very expressive girl who wore her heart on her sleeve.

The wind that passed through her white hair carried a pleasant scent with it, and the young soldiers following behind were thoroughly mesmerized. Her red eyes, with pupils like beautiful rubies, were fixed on the way ahead, and every so often the guards in front would flare their nostrils as they sneaked glances at her.

The soldiers to the front and rear would also look at Kai, and then their stares would become cold and full of envy.

"But I move with such agility, and I do have strength. More strength and agility than you, Kai. So why..."

"It doesn't matter how agile you are, you'll still die if you jump onto your opponent's weapon. And even the baron says that if none of your attacks actually hit your opponent, then no matter how strong you are, you're little more than a fool."

"..."

“You can make up for a little difference in strength by being more skilled. All of our soldiers are trained in Zula-ryu, and I think about half of them could beat you without needing a guardian’s power.”

“But...”

“And the strength of your protection is nothing compared to the baron or Lord Olha’s. That’s not your fault, My Lady. Everyone knows there’s a big difference in the power of the protection that different land gods provide.”

“...” Lady White was annoyed, but lost for words.

The protection she was given by the land god she carried had been weakening with each passing year. People said that the blessings of her land god were fading because House Moloch no longer had full control of its land.

“I know. You don’t need to tell me.”

The baron knew this too, which was why he included many guards in Lady White’s party. It was about more than protecting her; if a greater number of people were sent out, there were more hands to work on purifying the gravesite, and they could better demonstrate their continued faith.

As offerings, they’d brought potatoes and turnips that had been harvested that year, along with some valuable ale that had been brewed in the village. Brewing ale required a lot of grain, making it a delicacy that the majority of villagers had never even tasted.

As they walked, the ruined village slowly came into view.

This deserted settlement covered by tall plants was the village of Eda.

Lady White’s land god resided here, and it was the true birthplace of Kai, who had lived here with his parents while still a baby 12 years ago. After a demi-human raid had left the village in ruin, the village was lost to the dirt along with the many lives of the people who’d lived there. It had been the baron who ordered people to gather in the main village of Lag where they could hold out against demi-human attacks.

Kai’s parents were buried somewhere in this village. But the passage of time had made the graves of his parents unrecognizable. The graves of the villagers

were little more than mounds of dirt, and the wind and ice of the borderlands would cause them to crumble during the winter so that they became unrecognizable. When the people of the borderlands saw their world return to its natural state like this, they accepted it as a part of life.

Kai felt no particular emotional attachment to a ruined village that he had no memories of. Regardless, he picked flowers from the roadside and left them at the foundations of the crumbling village gate, alongside offerings made by the other soldiers.

“All right,” said one of the soldiers while gesturing to the others. “I don’t want to see a single speck of dirt left on that gravesite!” The one giving the order was a man who walked with a bent back named Flynn. Similar to Manso, he was a squad leader.

The roof of every house had been pulled down and the walls demolished so that demi-humans wouldn’t take up residence in the village. The party moved through the ruins to the center of the village where the foundation stones of a large building were exposed. This had once been a temple where the people of the village would gather. The worship of land gods had taken the form of religion for humans. In most temples, villages would put their hands together in prayer before framed relief prints depicting the god of their land and the three powerful gods of the capital, which blessed the royal family. Occasionally, a traveling priest would visit and host a simple service.

A similar temple existed in Lag, but theirs was a little grander and even had rooms where traveling priests could stay, so strictly speaking, it was a monastery rather than a temple.

Clearing away some of the soil in the center of the ruins of this building revealed a large stone slab. With the strength of several people, the slab could be lifted up to reveal an underground passageway that led to Eda’s gravesite.

This was how the land god of Eda had been concealed underground.

When the slab was lifted, a strong smell of mold was released, causing Kai to wince. He couldn’t help but feel pity for the land god within.

The gravesite in Eda village was hidden at the end of the underground passageway.

When House Moloch gave the order to desert the village, they'd had to construct a hiding place for the gravesite very quickly. It was nothing elaborate, just a narrow underground passageway about 10 yules long, and at the end, hidden in the darkness, was the perfectly square rock that formed the gravestone.

"It's not exactly underground, is it? It's more like a half basement."

Once someone knew the location of the gravesite, it was surprisingly easy to see through the attempts made to hide it. It made no sense for there to be a round dirt hill in the middle of the temple ruins, but that's how they hid the gravesite of the land god. At some point, one of the stone walls of the temple had been pulled down so that the large pieces of debris could be used to cover it, but that hadn't made it a whole lot less obvious.

"There're no signs of anything besides us coming in here that I can see. But if anyone sees anything out of place, inform me immediately."

"We need several people to stand watch around the village. Those picked last in the selection battle, stay where you are as lookouts. Everyone else, you're cleaning the gravesite."

The group leader, Flynn, went down into the passageway first as a precaution. Lady White picked up a bucket and followed after him once he'd assured her it was safe. This of course led to a very quiet argument over who got to follow behind her.

"Kai, stay near me."

"..."

Kai had known that the best thing to do was to wait behind everyone else, but regardless, he now had to apologize to the other soldiers as he moved to the front of the line. Special treatment from Lady White was the last thing he wanted in this situation. It came with no benefits, but it made everyone else jealous. Someone even muttered that he should rip it off, though he wasn't

sure exactly what they wanted him to rip off.

The cleaning team crowded around the gravesite and waited for Lady White to finish saying her prayers. Then everyone began to polish the gravestone using pieces of rough cloth.

Lady White looked particularly serious about cleaning the grave. She was especially concerned about cleaning the grooves of the inscription, as if she believed the dirt in the inscription was what weakened her guardian.

Although Kai knew nothing about that, he started moving toward the inscribed side of the stone to help Lady White clean it. But before he could get near it, he felt cold stares from the other men who were gathering around Lady White, and he immediately turned back.

Now that Kai had his own gravestone to take care of, grave cleaning had a new significance to him. He was polishing the stone with almost as much enthusiasm as Lady White herself, when he happened to notice an inscription alongside some sort of pattern representing Eda.

This gravestone was roughly the same shape as the one in the valley, and just as large. The inscription was different of course. Inscriptions were written in a complex form of writing known as God Era Script, and besides the theologians in the capital and the high priests of their monastery, no one could read them. Kai learned nothing by looking at it.

This god's getting weak. That was Kai's feeling as he polished the gravestone.

As he touched the stone he felt a physical sensation on his palm.

He felt something like ripples of heat, or ripples of existence, from deep within the stone. If Kai hadn't been a guardian bearer, he might not have felt the sensation.

He tried tracing the inscription with his finger, and a vague sense of the meaning came into his mind. With each character, an image came into his mind, and these formed words, and then meaning.

I, Eydalen, swear servitude.

He felt a sensation like foam forming in his head.

Kai was barely aware of his own actions; it was as if something was guiding his finger as he traced the next line of the inscription.

I obey the god Lagdaratohka.

It was a written contract.

Kai opened his eyes, and for a few moments, he felt completely unable to move. But then he saw that the inscription continued for another line, and he moved his trembling fingertip toward it.

His finger slid horizontally along the inscription.

Lagdaratohka ranks among Baalitoliga's assembly of gods.

Eda's land god was subservient to Lag's land god, and Lag's land god served some other god known as Baal-something-or-other... That was as much as Kai understood.

The inscription was on the surface opposite the side that Lady White and the others were cleaning.

Kai tried to remember the valley's gravesite in detail and came to the conclusion that there was no inscription on the rear side of the gravestone. It was possible that it had just worn off, but he was certain that if there had been an inscription on the rear, it couldn't have been very long.

He wasn't sure why he was able to read God Era Script so suddenly, but it was a major discovery. In his excitement, he pretended to be cleaning as he moved around to the other side to read the inscription on the front face of the stone. And then...

"You're too close. Give me some space."

"Spread out, all of you!"

Flynn with the bent back waved a hand at the cluster of men, and they begrudgingly started spreading out.

The room wasn't just cramped, it also got very hot. When a lot of sweat-covered men gathered in one spot, the heat wasn't just physically tiring, it could also be mentally tiring.

With the men spread out to give her more space, Lady White recovered her enthusiasm and became absorbed in her work once more. Lady White wasn't the type of person who becomes guarded around members of the opposite sex.

Fortunately for Kai, enough space had opened up for him to touch the inscription on the front while cleaning it.

Huh...?

He couldn't understand the inscription on the front no matter where he touched it. He picked up meanings here and there, but when he tried to put the series of mental images together, they broke down and fell apart. The text was nothing more than a meaningless jumble of characters.

It's like ciphertext, was the thought that came to Kai's mind.

He wasn't exactly sure what ciphertext was, but he guessed that it meant that the original meaning of the words had been obscured somehow. If he'd had more time and if there was no one watching, he could have studied the inscription to try and figure it out, but he would probably never get the chance.

Kai glanced over at Lady White, wondering whether she could read the text. He immediately noticed that Lady White's clothing around her chest had started to come loose while she was cleaning, and he hastily averted his gaze.



It was causing the other men to move closer again. Kai struggled to think of some way to let Lady White know, but he never got the chance.

They were interrupted by shouting from the soldiers on lookout outside the gravesite.

“Get out, quick! Something’s coming!”

“Hide the gravesite!”

Everyone threw down the cleaning tools they were holding and scrambled out of the gravesite.

The stone cover standing by the entrance was pushed back into place, and then several soldiers began hastily covering it over with soil. Flynn was the first to grasp the situation.

“They’re headed directly for us,” he told Lady White, hoping to get her permission to act. “The enemy are macaques.”

The land around Eda was no longer under human control. Demi-humans had so much influence over the area that they’d had to abandon the village. It was fair to say that it was Kai and the others who were trespassing on another’s land.

From somewhere within the forest that lay close to the village ruins, they heard howling sounds. That was how macaques would call for more of their own kind to gather.

The fighting started quickly and things immediately went badly for the humans.

The macaques came at them yelling. Even without an understanding of their language, the message was clear to everyone: this is our land; humans aren’t welcome.

The human party had been assembled by a half-baked selection contest, so they could barely form squads to fight as groups. Flynn’s squad was able to put up a good fight, but the other soldiers were easily scattered and were almost ready to flee.

“Take the lady with you and run,” Flynn commanded three of the soldiers. But when they tried to escape with Lady White, she shook them off and ran toward the enemy, so they had no choice but to follow after her.

She boldly stated her name to her macaque opponents and several of them soon surrounded her. The soldiers defending her raised their spears to form a barrier, but they were already weak at the knees, and the situation looked grave.

“You can’t fight them, My Lady!”

“But I’m a guardian bearer! I don’t care how strong macaques are compared to humans. I can handle this!”

“Fighting is our job. Please, fall back and leave it to us.”

“But I’ve trained to fight...”

“My Lady!”

A warrior-class macaque leaped at Lady White’s back while she was still arguing with the soldiers. It leaped at her with great agility, perhaps wanting to capture this human with unusual hair. The soldiers swiftly raised their spears to greet it, but the tough, charcoal-colored fur of the macaque deflected every spearpoint.

Lady White had spoken bravely, but the attack left her paralyzed in fear, and despite all her training, all she could do was wave her spear around blindly as she stood there pigeon-toed.

Kai had already leaped into action the moment he saw that she was in trouble.

Fortunately for him, everyone’s attention was focused on Lady White and her attackers. No one noticed how powerfully Kai was able to leap, or how quickly he accelerated, as he rapidly closed in on the macaque soldier.

He put all of his might behind his spear and drove it into the defenseless back of the macaque soldier.

If the baron had been there, he probably could have used his overwhelming power to lift a macaque soldier off its feet and destroy its body like a toy.

If Olha had been there, the sharpness of the large sword he carried would probably have allowed him to effortlessly take a macaque's head off.

Lady White's in trouble.

The power of her land god itself had been continuously fading. And even if she was more powerful than an ordinary human, power had to be wielded correctly to be useful for anything more than brainless displays of strength. And if a guardian bearer left themselves exposed and defenseless, that was an invitation for a malicious enemy to put their toughened flesh to the test.

The threat posed by the hostile macaques had caused Lady White's kumadori to appear. The sigil it formed looked basic compared to the baron's, and the color was faint.

"I-I'm as strong as any other doi sigil!" Lady White yelled as she stood facing the macaques.

Doi? Kai didn't know what that meant, but he guessed that the word described the rank of her land god. Regardless, yelling courageously at her opponents did little to hide the fact that her whole body was shaking, and the spear looked like it might slip from her grip. It was hard to believe that this young girl had any power at all.

Kai twisted his spear and drove it deeper into the macaque's back, and he pulled it back out only once he felt confident that he'd completely destroyed its intestines. The body looked like it would collapse onto Lady White, but he changed its course with a kick.

Although Lady White was surprised when a macaque soldier in front of her collapsed, what left her wide-eyed in shock was the sight of the young soldier standing behind it with a spear in hand.

Now that death was far off after coming so close, her trembling knees gave way and she sat down on the ground. Perhaps it was because of the bright light behind him, but at first, she didn't recognize the boy as Kai.

“Are you all right, My Lady?”

Lady White’s eyes teared up as if she’d just recognized Kai, but she quickly wiped the tears away with her sleeve. She still couldn’t stand up, but she spoke with feigned confidence to save face.

“Well, it was my first fight. I was a little surprised, that’s all... You’re quite strong, Kai, even for a soldier.”

“Lately, everyone keeps telling me I’ve gotten a lot stronger.”

Even though they were still surrounded by armed macaques, they’d started a carefree conversation and neither friend nor foe tried to get between them.

Kai was unexceptional in terms of his rank as a Lag soldier, but he was somewhere in the top 30 out of roughly 100 soldiers, so he could probably be called strong, relatively speaking.

The three guards who’d stood helplessly at Lady White’s side were all older than Kai, but they were still young compared to most soldiers.

It was only the younger soldiers who fought to be included in cleaning duty, but those chosen were still the soldiers considered competent enough to guard Lady White. They could be described as being in the upper-low ranks.

The guards were clearly annoyed that Kai had completely robbed them of a chance to prove themselves.

They all knew of course that Kai was a promising soldier who’d quickly climbed to the higher ranks, and they knew how important it was to stay on the good side of higher-ranking soldiers. But even so, they couldn’t stop their pubescent brains from running wild with thoughts of how they might impress Lady White.

“We’re still here with you!”

“We can handle a few macaques!”

“Quick, get yourself some place safe!”

Their bad tempers and jealous behavior made Kai scratch his head in confusion.

He couldn't help but laugh when wondering if they were stupid enough to think they might actually have a chance with a baron's daughter. To the soldiers, that came across as sneering from someone suddenly full of themselves after becoming popular, and it made the three of them so angry that they were almost in tears.

Kai took a quick look at the surroundings.

There were still several macaques facing Lady White, but they hadn't moved since seeing Kai appear from out of nowhere and take down a warrior-class macaque. It was likely that they felt the aura of a strong warrior from him. When Kai looked a macaque in the eye, it was enough to make it back away.

Kai was still keeping his kumadori suppressed, of course. He hadn't the slightest intention of showing that to his fellow soldiers.

As he turned his body, his spear whipped around with him, sending globs of blood flying and creating a whistling sound that was hard to ignore. It was proof of the high speed of his weapon's movements.

"Kai..."

"My Lady, you should hide with the others. Guys, get her out of here."

The other soldiers might have been older, but Kai ranked higher and had authority over them. More importantly, he'd just saved their lives, and it would have been shameful not to show at least some respect. The young soldiers understood that much at least, and although they looked angrily at Kai, they nodded and took Lady White away as ordered.

"You saved me," Lady White said. "Thank you, Kai."

Kai looked at her just briefly and nodded. At that moment, his stare was the only thing keeping the macaques fixed in place.

When the macaques saw the four others trying to leave, they finally came to their senses and moved forward with their weapons held ready. But their movements came to a stop just a moment later when Kai thrust his spear into the ground with a thud.

"Your opponent's standing right here."

Other soldiers were watching the backs of the motionless macaques and were using this opportunity to creep behind him.

Kai needed to wait for the right timing.

He wasn't going to try to defeat these enemies alone. He didn't need to keep all the credit to himself.

Kai had set rules for himself when it came to how he should behave while on the battlefield. He knew that if he wanted to keep his current lifestyle in the village, he'd better not make waves for no reason.

Two of his enemies fell victim to surprise attacks from behind, and they screeched as they fell to the ground. Kai went for the remaining enemy while it was still distracted by the sudden screeching of the others. He drove his spear straight through its stomach, which was a hard target to miss.

Kai's strength was beyond the strength of an ordinary human, and the hardness of the macaque's fur wasn't enough to stop him from driving his weapon deep into its flesh. When the spearhead was fully inside its body, he twisted the spear handle, and then ripped the spear back out.

Blood and entrails erupted from the macaque's stomach like water gushing from a broken pot. A simple spear thrust alone wasn't always enough to kill the enemy instantly, so humans throughout history had developed many techniques for increasing the damage done to an opponent's internal organs.

As a species, macaques specialized in the use of violence, but even they were stunned to see Kai kill his opponent with a single blow. Flynn and his squadmates, who had banded together to kill just one macaque, were left speechless when they saw the effectiveness of Kai's attack.

His combat abilities were clearly beyond what anyone expected from an upper-middle-ranked soldier. They unconsciously acknowledged that this boy would someday be one of their top-ranking soldiers, and he became more than just a "hatchling" in their eyes—he was a young dragon on the rise.

When the macaques realized that their enemy included a powerful warrior who was too much for them to handle, they had decided that the battle was not going their way and were already turning to flee. It was a common way for

battles to end when only one side had a guardian bearer.

With the killing over, the soldiers could enjoy a festival of leveling up. They gathered around the enemies that they'd brought down to search for their godstones.

When weak soldiers could only take down an enemy while part of a group, the enemy's godstone was generally shared between the group. It was hoped that this would help them grow.

But the superior fighters who stood out from the crowd and could take down an enemy single-handedly would keep the first godstone to themselves, and then would have to offer every godstone after that to their lord's house as a rule.

Kai found the exact position of the godstone and had no trouble prying it out with his spearhead. He worked like an old veteran who'd gotten used to extracting godstones one after the other. He collected two godstones in this manner.

He placed one in his pocket to keep as an offering and used the butt of his spear to break open the bigger one that came from the warrior-class macaque. He swallowed the amber marrow that spilled from the opening in a single gulp. The lower-ranking soldiers watched enviously as Kai ate from his godstone like a man.

This was one reason why the gap in ability between soldiers only grew wider with time.

Marrow's so damn good!

As he ate, he felt the heat caused by his development within his godstone.

Even now that he had the blessings of a land god, he felt no less grateful for this feeling. The reason that soldiers were required to offer godstones to the lord's household was so the household could share in this growth. It was evidence that even guardian bearers had the potential for further growth.

The marrow probably tasted so rich because his body hungered for it and demanded more. Even though Kai wasn't particularly hungry, he felt sure that nothing could ever taste better than the marrow of the godstones that gave

him power.

It feels like the god of the valley is happy too.

He greedily scraped out and ate the marrow before dropping the round bone known as the godstone to the ground. He then moved away from it in consideration of the low-ranking soldiers who might want to feed on any scraps.

In front of him stood Lady White.

The macaques had run off quickly, so she'd probably given up on seeking refuge and had stood there waiting instead.

She looked at the scene of the battle with a vague smile, but the frustration she felt inside was still visible. For someone brought up on the lukewarm offerings presented to her household, it felt strange to watch soldiers win godstones by their own power and use them to further increase their strength.

Her gaze shifted to Kai for just a moment.

Then she suddenly gave up on trying to save face and let her frustration show clearly as she gestured to Kai to move closer.

Kai had a feeling that their early morning training sessions were going to be more intense from now on.

18

Rumors that Lady White's party had been attacked by macaques spread quickly through the village.

And then, when it turned out that every single one of the few dozen soldiers escorting Lady White had returned safely, the rumor went from being bad news to a heroic tale of conquest over macaques.

The name on everyone's lips when they talked about this conquest over macaques was Kai, the name of the youngest soldier in the village. Naturally, he became the center of attention.

"Which of you is the one named Kai?"

Kai knew that all of his fellow soldiers were talking about him, but he would never have imagined that the baron himself would come looking for him.

The baron took one look at Kai, and he could immediately tell that this boy was the youngest of the soldiers, but he was surprised to find he was so small and thin. The baron took hold of Kai's collar and lifted him into the air to find out whether the boy was as light as he looked.

"You could do with a little more meat on you."

The reason that the baron had come looking for Kai was not difficult to guess. He was there to give Kai a chance to take part in one of his farcical training sessions.

"I want to see it for myself. This spearwork that slaughters macaques one after another and can take them down with a single thrust."

As usual, the soldiers were training in the village square in front of the castle.

It was Kai's first time fighting the baron. As one of the highest-ranking soldiers, Basco pulled Kai over into the corner to give him a few words of advice.

"Listen. Whatever you do, it won't work against him, but don't get desperate. No dirty tricks. Making him angry is the last thing you want."

"Got it."

Kai was told that anything a powerless foot soldier might try against the overwhelmingly stronger baron wouldn't work. You can throw constant attacks at him or focus solely on defense, but whatever you do, give him a good fight to win his approval. In most cases, the farce of a training session keeps on going until he's satisfied. Expect to gain a fair few injuries, but keep your hands, joints, and other vital areas well protected so that you're not left with anything long-term. And you should know this already, but don't go for the eyes and don't go for the balls. That's the quickest way to gain the baron's disapproval, so don't even consider it.

Kai gained new respect for the amount of thought that this graying soldier put into each fight.

“Let’s get to it.”

To get Kai’s attention, the baron drove his staff into the dirt, which had been compacted by the feet of many soldiers. His grin was full of eagerness.

Kai looked courageous as he stepped forward, and the soldiers cheered for him as they watched. Manso and the rest of his squadmates were half-jokingly assuring him that they’d clean his remains from the training ground.

Kai searched for the source of their voices and found the faces of his fellow soldiers. When he looked toward them, they all gave him a thumbs-up.

Manso’s thumb then turned to point towards himself. “You’ll be fighting me next.”

Manso knew that Kai’s continued growth could trigger a change in the ranks within their squad. Contests of strength between high-ranking soldiers were an important way for the males to signal their strength to potential mates.

The men were always trying to become stronger for the simple reason that it gave them a better chance of winning over a woman they liked. The baron’s household and the women’s council also encouraged this behavior because it motivated the soldiers to further improve themselves.

Kai had only done what was necessary to rescue Lady White, so he was taken aback when he realized it had put him at odds with Manso. If he became leader of the squad, he wouldn’t just have to show leadership in battle, he’d also have all kinds of other unwanted tasks to deal with, such as coordinating the squad and giving out rewards and punishments. Relationships of power in this world were often easy to accept because older soldiers tended to rank higher, but for Kai, as the youngest soldier, these responsibilities would be nothing but a burden.

I’ve got to use this bout to set the record straight.

Kai decided he’d hold back and let everyone see him defeated spectacularly.

The baron’s staff cut through the air with an incredible whistling sound, so Kai brandished his staff likewise. The sharp whistling noises drew cheers from the spectators.

Kai still wasn't used to controlling his power as a guardian bearer. He'd intended to suppress his power a lot more, but his staff had moved through the air with such speed that even Basco beside him was surprised.

He let the tip of his staff meet the tip of the staff that the baron held out. This signaled that the training session had started.

The baron's eyes suddenly narrowed, and he began immediately with a thrust so quick it could barely be seen, aimed directly at Kai's stomach. Kai followed the thrust with his keen eyes and tried to decide whether he should let himself be hit. The staff was coming at him so fast that he worried it would leave him in unbearable agony.

Hold up... If that hits me, I'll be impaled through the stomach!

If the baron intended to stop at the last possible moment, then it wouldn't be such a problem, but if he let the staff keep going, this bout would end in tragedy.

Kai thought about Basco and Setta, and he remembered the terrible injuries they often received during these bouts. He started to worry that the baron might not be very familiar with the idea of going easy on someone.

In the end, he decided not to take a direct hit.

But he'd been slow to react to the attack, so now he had limited options. He drew his left leg back some distance and twisted his body so that the staff would hit him at an angle. Then he leaned his upper body backward and let himself fall.

But it still wasn't enough to evade the attack.

With no other options available, he raised the staff so that the part behind his grip that extended toward the butt grazed against the end of the baron's thrusting staff. The sound of their weapons colliding was soft. The sound was so quiet that it was probably only heard by the two fighters. The thrust was knocked off course ever so slightly, causing it to cut through the air and miss Kai's torso as he twisted and fell backward.

In that same moment, there was a wave of air pressure that tore through Kai's clothing.

“So you can dodge!” The baron’s face broke into a broad grin.

Kai was left sitting on his backside in the dirt, but the baron immediately drew back his staff and shouted, “Get up!” before holding it ready to strike once again.

The fact that Kai had perfectly evaded the baron’s first strike would look like a miracle to any ordinary person. But everything had happened so fast that this miracle went unnoticed by everyone except the two fighters. To the spectators, it just looked as though Kai had randomly stumbled backward and gotten out of the path of the attack by pure luck.

But the baron’s keen vision missed nothing.

“Get to your feet.”

Kai reluctantly got to his feet and then assumed his stance. The two fighters began to move around each other, using the circle footwork of Zula-ryu. It was the same style seen in bouts with Basco.

This movement could only mean that the baron had recognized that Kai was worthy of his respect, and now there were sounds of disbelief among the spectators.

Kai had also started moving his legs according to his own clumsy version of circle footwork so that he could stay face-to-face with the baron. As soon as the baron saw that Kai was ready, he began a new attack.

Their weapons collided twice and then three times, and then the baron used an ensnaring technique to capture Kai’s staff. Kai felt his weapon being sharply pulled away from him, and his stance broke.

The baron didn’t overlook this opportunity, of course.

While Kai was exposed with his body off-balance, the baron moved close, ready to deliver another devastating blow to Kai’s abdomen. Kai quickly moved his body to the side, but the thrust still connected lightly, and Kai’s face contorted. Then the baron unleashed a flurry of hits that came one after the other.

Such a fearsome attack would normally be enough to make someone collapse

in agony.

You've gotta be kidding me.

It turned out that the baron was pulling back each strike at the last possible moment after all, but that didn't mean that his weapon stopped the moment before it hit Kai, it meant that his weapon stopped at the last possible moment after hitting Kai without worrying whether he broke Kai's skin. This was why Basco had told him to be careful.

As powerful as each thrust was, these were hits from a training staff with a rounded end, and Kai had become too tough to be injured easily. However, this was an important opportunity for Kai to make a display of weakness, and he wanted to put on a good show of losing. He wanted to bleed.

He blocked an attack with his arm, and it broke the skin as it grazed him. He kept any bones that might break out of harm's way while meeting the staff with his flesh.

One moment he'd be leaning forward, and the next his back would bend backward so as to dodge the next thrust.

If Kai wanted a beating, this was the perfect opportunity. The baron had gotten carried away in his excitement, and there was no sign that his attacks would stop.

After being hit so many times, Kai had started to feel pain.

There was a sudden feeling of heat in his godstone as it was reacting to the danger he was in. Power began to flow to every part of his body, and then he felt that his kumadori was about to appear.

Not here!

Enduring the baron's attack was one thing, but he couldn't let his kumadori be revealed here.

Kai sighed. Then, with a feeling of desperation, he aimed a thrust at the baron while allowing himself to be hit. As a result of Kai's desperate attack, the baron's staff stopped just short of hitting Kai's throat, where a hit might have been fatal.

“All right!”

The baron drew back his staff happily. He had no intention of killing Kai.

The baron’s concern for Kai created an opening, and Kai’s staff seized it with a strike at the baron’s chest.

Just as Kai thought he was about to land a hit, the tip of his staff was repelled.

The baron had swiftly moved his other hand forward to defend himself.

Kai’s attack was parried leaving him off-balance, but in an attempt to force the bout to come to an end, he stomped a foot down on the ground with gritted teeth to steady himself, and then put his full weight behind a lunge attack as his toenails dug into the dirt beneath him.

That power behind his attack was the same incredible power that had allowed a young boy like Kai to ascend to the higher ranks. His attack was a fierce tackle powered by his incredible muscular strength, and it struck the undefended and exposed leg of the baron. As his shoulder collided with the thigh, he grabbed the ankle and pulled it forward. This throwing technique was designed to sweep an opponent off their feet.

It looked as though a small child was attempting to turn over a giant boulder, but the power hidden within Kai’s body was enough to create miracles. The baron’s huge frame swayed.

The cheering from the spectators lasted only a moment.

The baron stood up straight on his free leg and straightened his body to regain his balance. Then he grabbed Kai, who was still clinging on to his leg, by the head and smashed Kai’s face against his bent knee.

Kai was launched off the baron’s leg and then he fell to the ground and rolled, with red blood spraying from his nose. There was a unanimous feeling that this was a new and acceptable way to lose a bout. When Basco stopped spectating to rush to Kai’s aid, that was when the fight truly ended.

Kai was on the ground clutching his nose in agony when the baron came over and roughly pet Kai’s head.

“Good! Good!”

Kai looked up with his bloody hand still clutching his nose. The baron had come to give him praise.

“I like you, boy!” the baron said, sounding pleased down to his core. “I’d never have imagined anyone would attempt a throw when fighting me! I’ve decided. From tomorrow onward, I’m going to train you personally!”

Hah? Wha-?

There was a commotion from the watching soldiers standing behind Kai as they struggled to understand what it meant.

The baron had just declared Kai his new favorite toy. If he thought Kai was good enough for his farcical training, it could only mean that the baron had recognized Kai as a skilled fighter. More importantly, this meant that in terms of rank, Kai was now up there with Lag’s elite soldiers such as Basco.

Far from setting the record straight, Kai had just distinguished himself even further.

19

The other soldiers crowded around Kai, and everyone wanted to strike his shoulders.

Many were happy for this youngster who’d climbed high enough to rank alongside the baron’s favorites. But there was also envy from those Kai had left so far behind, and their words of congratulations carried an awkward feeling, as if there was more they left unsaid. Others congratulated Kai on becoming the baron’s new favorite training dummy, and they weren’t entirely joking.

His squad were among those hitting his shoulders to congratulate him, and the last of them was Manso, who was still smiling when he announced their upcoming fight: “We’ll do it tomorrow.” Whether he liked it or not, Kai’s status in the village kept on changing.

Kai felt happy when those around him recognized his potential, but at the same time he wished he could escape from it all.

Someday, I’ll live in the valley...

He'd find a girl he liked, they'd have children together, and then they'd move to the valley. The valley was so rich with food that it would be enough to feed Kai and the rest of his family.

It felt like a betrayal to think of leaving behind the community that had raised him, especially when they were at risk from the macaques that were becoming increasingly active in the nearby forest, but he allowed himself to dream.

That night, he planned to visit the valley.

He'd been wounded fairly badly, but that wouldn't stop him because he could secretly heal himself with magic. The thought of the sweet taste of the maca in the valley made his mouth water.

As a valued soldier wounded in combat, Kai was given treatment from an old woman who was one of the village healers. He was ordered to spend the evening resting, but Kai had managed to close all of his bleeding wounds using his healing magic and didn't want to wait any longer.

He removed his bandages and hid them in his bed and then slipped out of the barracks after the other soldiers had fallen asleep. He had no need to use the gates to the village when he was able to leap over the walls under the cover of darkness.

On the other side of those walls was the path to his beautiful valley.

His emotions spurred him on, and he traveled across 50 yulds in no time at all. The ruined settlement of Banya served as his usual landmark when deciding where to enter the forest.

The manner in which he'd make his way into the forest would vary day by day, but now that there was an understanding between him and his lagarto neighbors, he no longer felt the need to avoid their territory.

He wanted to establish the shortest possible route into the valley.

Well, the valley's in that direction, but...

Kai usually reached the valley by entering the forest from a point one yuld beyond Banya, and then altered his course slightly toward the east and headed

five yulds further in.

The valley wasn't very deep into the forest, but its existence was unknown to humans because the ground was covered by rough black rocks that made for poor footing, and heading there via a straight path was too dangerous. The scattered areas of marshland inhabited by the lagarto was another likely factor.

Orgs lived deeper into the forest than lagarto, and there seemed to be some pact that allowed them to move freely through the lagarto's territory. The lagarto wouldn't normally turn aggressive if the areas of water they inhabited weren't approached. Kai knew that from experience.

The rough black rocks were solidified lava. That was something Kai knew from his internal knowledge. Subterranean water was plentiful enough in this area to rise up and create many small brooks that fed into the marshland.

I want to find a good place to drop down into the valley, so I guess I'll explore around the outside first.

He already had a good idea of how the lagarto land was arranged, so he could imagine the shortest route that went through gaps in their territory.

They were fond of water, so those gaps were the screes and outcrops of rock that didn't retain water.

Here and there he could see rocks jutting out from the ground to form miniature mountains, breaking up the gentle, rolling hills of the vast forest. Kai checked their positions by eye and thought about how to proceed.

Okay, here goes.

As his starting point, Kai had chosen somewhere just outside of Banya village, thinking that no one would be there to see him. After a short run up, he leaped powerfully and raced past their defensive walls like a gust of wind as he reached his top speed, causing shrieks of surprise from the settlement.

There were loud cries of "It's the monster!" and "That's what's making holes in our fields!" Kai knew exactly what they were talking about, and he knew he was showing disrespect toward their village, but their problems weren't his problems, so he ignored them.

Kai counted to himself as he leaped into the forest.

This is the first step!

He leaped from a small rocky cliff, and his body flew through the air.

The high air pressure made his breathing erratic as he scoured for the next foothold. He jumped toward one of the larger old balen cedars, one with many particularly large branches.

The way the branch of the tree bent added to the force propelling Kai forward.

This is awesome! The branches are giving my jumps more power!

There were also rock surfaces here and there, but they were far outnumbered by the tall balen cedar trees that grew wild in the forests of the borderlands. He continuously searched for new footing, knowing that it was most efficient to seek out the larger of the balen cedar tree branches as much as possible. With each jump he searched for a new tree.

The word that came to mind was “ninja.” Though Kai obviously didn’t know exactly what that meant. But whether he knew it or not, he’d actually achieved their legendary technique of traveling through the treetops, which had been a near impossibility for them. He reached the edge of the valley with surprising speed.

From afar, the rising edge of the valley looked just like a range of low mountains.

Then, atop a tree at the valley’s edge that would serve as his final stop, he stared in wonder at the beauty of the valley. No matter how many times he saw it, he could never get enough. But then he spotted something out of place, something he wasn’t used to seeing at the opposite side of the valley. His mood soured in an instant.

Whatever it was, it was too small to see clearly, but he could tell at a glance that it was a living creature. In fact, it looked more like a group of living creatures.

There were countless types of wild animals living in the forests of the

borderlands, but very few of them moved in groups. The fact that these creatures were in a group made it much more likely that these were no ordinary animals.

The creatures that most commonly formed groups were intelligent creatures with social structures, which in the borderlands meant humans or demi-humans.

Intruders!

Kai became enraged. The thought of his valley being soiled by others while he was away made him irrationally angry.

You'll regret this. You'll all regret this.

Kai used his full power to rush toward them.

When a guardian bearer unleashed their full power, that was fearsome enough in itself. He became a rushing wind of wild rage, hurtling toward the opposite side of the valley with greater speed than a hunter's arrow.

As he got closer, he saw what was happening more clearly. As he'd thought, these life forms were humanoid. But they weren't orgs; they were even smaller than humans. This demi-human species was only as tall as a human child. Kai had never seen them firsthand before, but he had heard tales of the species, and he recognized them as the koror.

Their white clothing with its fine embroidery was clear to see even in the darkness, and he remembered that this species was said to excel in their artisanship.

The koror were a species known to exist in the forest in vanishingly small numbers.

They were looking over the edge of the cliff at the rim of the valley and were shouting down at the valley's base. Kai didn't understand their words, but he could easily guess that someone had fallen down and they were shouting their name.

There's been an accident?

Their sad cries echoed through the darkness of the night.

Their pained cries brought Kai to a shocked standstill. Several of the koror noticed Kai's presence when they heard the grass rustle at his feet.

“***!”

“*****!”

No sooner than they had begun looking at him and shouting, every one of them threw themselves down on the ground, prostrated before him, and began to mutter words of prayer.

Their reaction was so strange that Kai decided to ignore them and walk away. However...

“O revered god in human form.”

One of the eldest of the koror stepped forward from the group and began to speak in the human tongue. Kai felt the opportunity to leave had passed.

The elder koror held an object like a rosary, made from nuts and string, and he used his thumb to shift beads one after another as he stepped forward as a representative of his group. He shook the rosary before Kai and then fell to the ground, prostrated once more.

“I hope that my words are understandable to you.” The voice of the elder carried a hint of anxiety.

“I understand you,” Kai replied.

Some of the other koror raised their heads and looked at each other with relief.

“First, I must beg your mercy, for we have been so impudent as to intrude upon this sacred land.”

After the koror had apologized over and over, Kai's anger faded, and his usual calmness returned. He'd decided that he'd better hear their explanation, and was sitting down cross-legged before them.

“What are you doing here?” Kai didn't enjoy long discussions. He was blunt, simply asking them to state their business.

The elder koror introduced himself as the head of the tribe.

He went on to explain that his tribe had been driven out of the land on which they'd lived for many years and now they had no place to call home. Their land had been invaded, taken from them by the Geha tribe of orgs.

None of this had anything to do with Kai. As long as they weren't going to ask permission to live in the valley, their problems were irrelevant to him.

As expected, the koror knew nothing of the richness of the valley's floor. They had simply gathered here as part of their efforts to reclaim the land that was taken from them.

They said something about an "offering" that they'd made to the valley.

An offering?

The koror pressed their faces against the ground once again.

"O ancient god of arbitration," said the elder.

Kai remained silent.

"***** has long been the protector of the forest. And the koror have long been devout followers of *****. We came to make an offering."

"..."

"Now is the time for us to reclaim the land of our ancestors. We beg you to provide mediation."

They had come seeking his services.

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The koror tribe's leader was named Porek. Even he had forgotten how long he'd lived, but his people were certain that he was over 100 years old and the eldest member of their tribe.

Porek repeatedly addressed Kai as the "God of Arbitration."

"What's this arbitration thing that you think I'm the god of?"

“You are the avatar of the revered god who dwells in the valley, are you not?”

“How’d you figure?”

“In the past, I have had the honor of your presence many times. You once punished this foolish old man for a past transgression. I cannot forget you for as long as I remember that pain.”

“You were hurt?”

Although Porek had met Kai’s eyes several times, Porek’s eyes had barely been open. Kai realized that this old koror was blind. Looking more closely, he noticed an old scar that ran horizontally through both of his eyes.

“That punishment... was it your eyes?”

“This was my punishment for straying into the valley unpermitted and disturbing the gravesite of my revered god,” the blind koror spoke as if this was merely an old story of youthful folly and continued to meet Kai’s gaze as he responded.

“My parents wept and told me I’d been shown great mercy when my life was spared. But this was long ago.”

When Kai looked very closely, he saw faint kumadori markings around Porek’s eyes. Somehow, the power of his guardian was compensating for his blindness.

It stood to reason that the leader of the tribe would be a guardian bearer. Porek must have been young and greatly strengthened by his guardian when the previous resident of the valley made him yield and then didn’t hesitate to cut his precious eyes as punishment. This vicious behavior was consistent with what he’d heard from Goleh the lagarto.

“Although I lost the eyes that saw with the light of the sun, I instead gained the ability to see the light of spiritual energy that lies in all natural things. Your aura is no exception. It shines blue, as if you drew the light from the sky itself.”

“I’m... blue?”

“There are many colors worn by living creatures, but blue is seldom seen. Blue is the color that lies between white and black. In ancient times it was known as the sacred color.”

Kai knew his guardian's blessings amplified his spiritual energy, causing it to radiate from every part of his body. And now he knew that this spiritual energy had a color. Though he did suspect that the color found between white and black was actually gray. Kai put this minor issue to one side and returned to the main topic. He shared his thoughts very frankly.

"I don't care whether I'm the god of arbitration or not. All I know is that you should solve your own problems yourselves."

His rejection of them was blunt. This caused distress not just to Porek, but to all of the tribe members who had prostrated themselves before him.

"I-I beg you, wait!"

"I'm going back to my valley. Don't follow me."

"O great god! Great god of the valley!"

"Don't abandon us!"

Kai didn't feel like he was abandoning them because he'd never cared about them in the first place.

Whatever offerings they might have made in the past, none of those had been given to Kai, and whatever Kai's "predecessor" might have said in the past, that had nothing to do with Kai.

The koror spoke the human tongue surprisingly well. The rest of the tribe also pleaded with him in the human tongue.

"But we gave you Aruwe!"

"Give Aruwe back!"

Kai didn't want their offering and didn't care if they took it back. When he put this to them bluntly, the koror let out screeches that didn't even resemble voices. To them, the valley was a terrible place where their tribe leader, who was a guardian bearer, had once had his eyes torn out just for entering it. Despite Kai telling them to recover their offering, none had the courage to even enter the valley.

Kai also felt that he didn't want strangers entering the valley, so he decided that he should at least do something to avoid that.

“Okay, fine. I’ll bring it back up myself.”

With that, Kai agilely dropped down into the valley as he’d done many times before.

Kai acted casually as if their offering was a mere object, causing the koror to be more confused than angry, and their shouts were becoming nonsensical.

Don’t tell me they threw one of their own into the valley?

Kai tried not to think about it, but he couldn’t help but worry.

If I find a corpse down at the bottom... That’s the last thing I want.

Kai dropped down to the area directly below where the koror were standing and searched for the offering at the bottom of the valley in the darkness of the night.

They could have thrown it down from above the lake, but instead they’d chosen a place where the ground was hard earth. Even if the treetops had miraculously acted like a cushion, there was no surviving a fall like this.

Kai prepared himself for the worst as he searched, and in the shadow of a rocky area directly below the cliff, he found something white. Even in the darkness, he could see it clearly. It was a bare, white foot.

Oh, man. I hope they’re in one piece at least...

Kai started to pray as he walked around the rock to see what was behind it.

The body of the white foot’s owner slowly came into view. He was relieved when he saw that the scene was not as gruesome as he’d feared, but then the corpse sat up and made eye contact with him, causing him to fall backwards in surprise and land on his rear.

*“***... **...”*

What lay before him was a young girl, covered in blood.

The traditions of the koror may have demanded that any sacrifice had to be a beautiful young girl. At any rate, she was shorter than most members of her species. Even Kai, who wasn’t yet an adult himself, thought she wasn’t just a young girl, but a little girl. And now this little girl had come back to life, standing

unsteadily on her feet with blood gushing from her forehead. Her legs gave way and she fell down once more, but she continued to struggle. The sight was so horrible that Kai felt his gut clench.

He was frozen in shock for only a moment.

He knew that this young girl was in a critical, half-broken state.

The girl named Aruwe still had a straw rope tied around her waist, which had probably served as her lifeline when she started climbing down the cliff. The rope must have broken at some point as she fell. The short piece of straw rope lying beside her told the story.

My healing magic!

Kai had never imagined that he'd ever use that magic on anyone besides himself.

His healing magic wasn't effective if applied too broadly, so he dealt with each of the wounds he found in turn.

Then he looked for broken bones and made some makeshift fixes for the broken parts of her spine. He also put right the things known as "nerves" that ran through it.

Once that treatment was finished, the girl's expression lost its grim appearance as if her agony had been lifted. She stared up blankly at Kai who was continuing to treat her.

"***..."

"Don't move. Your bones haven't bonded together yet." Kai scolded the girl for trying to move and then went back to concentrating on his work.

When the girl saw the kumadori on his face, she began to cry anxiously. "Please save... ***, ****... k-koror."

The girl had realized that Kai didn't understand her and had started to speak in the human tongue. It was more evidence that many koror spoke the human language.

Kai remembered that the exquisite handiwork made by the koror was often sold by merchants here and there across the borderlands. Porek and others

may have had the chance to learn the human tongue through their dealings with humans somewhere.

“Please save, koror.”

“Nope. Just sounds like trouble.”

“Me, not enough? Then...”

“Do your people really think I’m going to be happy if they give me dead bodies?”

“Do not know...”

Kai focused his power and made sure the bones were at least adhered together.

Kai had seen firsthand how injuries like these might not kill someone, but could leave them unable to live a normal life. He’d seen several of his fellow soldiers lose the ability to move their arms and legs, and they’d die without someone to take care of them. In a village where people struggled to find enough food, no one was allowed to continue living if they’d simply eat without working. As soon as recovery looked unlikely, either someone would have to promise to spend their life caring for the person, or they’d be sent to the monastery under the guise of being sent for care. Their lives were ended in the monastery as part of what was known as a clearing ceremony.

Now that Kai had found a way to heal that type of injury, he could spare this girl from a living hell.

“Can you stand?” Kai asked her.

The girl moved her fingers to check that they worked, and then she sat up while twisting her body. She looked at Kai in surprise when she found that it didn’t hurt. Her face, which had looked lifeless before, now had a reddish tinge to it.

Kai offered her a hand, and she climbed to her feet and stood there just looking at Kai. The girl did nothing but stare in awe at this person who had wrought the miracle that Kai called healing magic.

“Now go back to your group.”

“Aruwe go back?”

“Go back.”

“No help?”

“Exactly.”

“...”

Suddenly she was clinging to him in desperation.

“Go back!”

“Me, no good? Worthless?”

The girl was clinging desperately to Kai’s legs just like a child as tears streamed down her face. Because she was so short, her face pressed against Kai’s waist, and her tears and mucus were absorbed by his clothes, creating a damp feeling in that region.

“Me is offering! If no want, I die!”

“Hey... Ah, give that back!”

She suddenly took the knife that was hidden in the folds of Kai’s clothing and was about to drive it into her own throat. Kai grabbed the knife and took it away from her.

Then, with the girl hanging onto his shoulders and demanding he give the knife back, Kai climbed the cliff, carrying her like luggage.

She tried biting his shoulder but he felt no pain at all.

Kai wanted to return this offering right away and then start building his cabin. Kai was already absorbed in thoughts of how he was going to work with and assemble the wood that he’d collected during the previous visit.

Kai only had until morning, and all of this was a painful setback in his schedule.

21

I’ve wasted so much time.

Kai sighed as he stood, arms folded, looking at the balen cedar trees he'd cut down during his previous visit, which were now lying in front of him. Now the question was how to work with them.

These trees weren't especially big, but balen cedars became impressively large trees as they grew old. Although Kai had chosen young trees, they were still broad enough that multiple adults standing around the trunk would just barely be able to join hands.

He could still hear commotion from the koror some distance away. They were calling to the god of the valley, and to the god of arbitration, but Kai didn't care about their gods, and he knew very little about the land god resting in the valley's gravesite, so he had no interest in the noise they were making.

Wow, they really are an annoying bunch.

Kai tried to ignore them while thinking about how he'd cut through the balen cedars to the right length. He wanted them to be roughly twice as long as he was tall. Then he would cut them lengthwise into long, thin pieces.

As for how to cut them, he could essentially use the same "invisible sword" method that he'd used to cut them down, but that only gave him a few moments of cutting power from the length of his fingertip to his shoulder, and he'd have to repeatedly apply the same magic before the cut with the blade. The balen cedars were so thick that just cutting them into two was enough to make Kai breathe heavily.

Over the course of roughly half a toki, Kai cut with the blade six times and created seven thick planks from a large tree.

Kai had never been taught any construction techniques, so he simply stuck the planks in the ground to create walls, giving the cabin its rough shape. His cuts weren't exactly straight, so there were gaps between planks, but for the time being he didn't worry about that because he knew he could fill in the gaps with scraps of wood from the balen cedars.

He soon finished making the walls by liberally using full planks. One face of the cabin was against the side of the gravesite, so seven planks was enough to create an enclosure.

Although it was an enclosed space, it was very different from the “cabin” that he’d had in mind. Then there was the question of how to make a floor and roof.

To start with, he cut another tree into planks, which he put on the top like a roof such that one end of each plank was resting on the top of the gravestone. The floor was already in place in terms of size, so he put down more planks as flooring.

This doesn’t look right.

The planks that he’d driven into the ground using his strength as a guardian bearer looked fairly sturdy, but he wasn’t so sure about the roof or floor, which both felt very makeshift. He’d have to learn some better approaches by asking someone more knowledgeable in the village. What he’d built himself could barely be called a cabin; it looked kind of pathetic. On the other hand, the rough construction did make it feel more like a secret base, so Kai couldn’t help but feel some level of affection for it. When he went inside, he found it was filled with the smell of freshly cut lumber.

He lay down to relax and felt his eyes closing, so he fell asleep where he lay. Ever since becoming a guardian bearer, he didn’t absolutely need to sleep, but at that moment he might have been tired from having used excessive amounts of spiritual energy to cut the wood.

When he slid his hand along the flooring planks, he could clearly feel warping and unevenness in the wood surface that wasn’t so easy to see at a glance. He still felt as though he needed to improve his invisible sword.

I suppose I’ll get some sleep...

Kai closed his eyes.

For the first time in a long while, he fell into a deep sleep.

He didn’t know how long he’d slept.

Kai suddenly woke up because his body didn’t feel right somehow.

He wasn’t in the habit of taking a long time to get up or complaining about feeling sleepy. Children of the village never had the luxury of sleeping late.

There was a feeling of warmth just below his armpit.

When Kai suddenly sat up, the movement caused the source of warmth at his armpit to detach, and there was a dull thud as something heavy landed on the wooden floor.

Kai couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the source of the sound.

"Why are you here?"

The little girl, the koror girl to be precise, named Aruwe was curled up in a ball with her face to the ground, trembling and holding her head.

She must have been holding onto Kai's arm, and her head must have hit the floor when she fell. Aruwe sat up quickly while still holding her head, and Kai saw her tear-filled eyes for just a second before she pressed her forehead to the floor and bowed before him.

"I sent you back to your group. Why are you here?"

"I am offering to God. I am God's."

"Well, I don't want you. Get out."

"Aruwe no go back. Aruwe is God's. Disaster happen to tribe if go back alive."

"It won't cause a disaster. Just go back."

"Unwanted... Will die."

"..."

The more Kai argued, the more determination he saw in Aruwe's eyes. Those eyes made Kai feel as though there was a real danger that she might kill herself if he left her alone.

Aruwe seemed to be able to sense the change in Kai's feelings, perhaps because she was a girl.

"Won't go back," Aruwe said with a sad smile. "Will stay here. Aruwe is God's."

Kai felt she was going to win by wearing him down.

Even though she had nothing to do with him, when she said that she would

choose death if he didn't accept her, it made him feel an irrational sense of responsibility for her. Also, it had been Kai who'd decided to save her life. It didn't feel right to let her life be thrown away once again.

"Fine," Kai told her, feeling cornered. "Do whatever you want."

"Yes!" Aruwe replied happily.

Then she immediately used cords on her clothing to make her long sleeves shorter and said, "I look after God," before running outside.

Kai stepped out of the cabin to see what she was doing and saw her waving to members of a tribe who were standing at the top of the cliff some distance away. It was as if she was trying to signal to them, "Negotiations successful!"

With that, the tribe members at the top of the cliff started lowering down a bundle of some sort using a rope.

"Wait. Will be quick," Aruwe said before running off to the foot of the cliff.

Aruwe soon came back carrying something. In her arms were a mountain of household items. They included various high-quality tools created using koror craftwork.

She worked fast, gathering up firewood from the forest, building a simple stone stove, and lighting a fire. Then she drew water from the lake using a silver container that looked like the watering cans used in herb gardens, which she put over the fire of the stove.

By the time Kai realized that it was a tool for boiling water, Aruwe was already busy on a new piece of work. She created a dining table using scraps of wood and then served food on large leaves.

To Kai, it all looked like magic, and he was genuinely impressed.

Aruwe poured the hot water into earthenware cups she'd brought with her, and she sprinkled pieces of dry leaves over the water to turn it into a pleasant-smelling drink.

"God, finished."

"Ah... yeah..." Kai was still spellbound as Aruwe led him to the table.

“Tastes bad cold.”

“Thank you...”

Without thinking too much, Kai recited the mealtime prayer that he’d known since a very young age, and then he moved his face closer to the curious steaming drink.

“Herb tea. Good for body.”

It was some sort of koror drink, and it almost smelled like something an old woman selling herbal remedies might brew up. But the scent was actually pleasant and drinking it left a warm feeling in Kai’s stomach. After drinking a few mouthfuls, he shifted his attention to the food on the table.

She hadn’t taken much time on the food, but it was clear to see that unseen work had gone into the food to preserve it without a loss of flavor.

There was dried meat that had been slowly flame-roasted with a gentle touch, powdery white slices of dried potato, and a small helping of sour, preserved figs.

Kai timidly reached for the food while Aruwe watched closely.

The dried meat was well-salted, despite the scarcity of salt in the borderlands, and it tasted delicious.

The dried potatoes were also surprisingly soft and sweet. They were almost as sweet as maca.

The figs were genuinely just sour and not at all tasty, but even the villagers knew that these were good for health, so Kai swallowed each one without tasting it.

“...”

“Want more?” Aruwe asked.

Kai silently nodded.

Even though Kai had essentially taken in Aruwe, he still had no intention of acting as a mediator in disputes between koror and orgs.

He didn't want to mislead them, so he went to the base of the cliff to tell this to Porek. The old koror simply nodded and said that it was good enough for now, as if he had something planned for later.

When Kai asked if there was anything he could do to make them take Aruwe back, Porek just shook his head. Kai started to think that Aruwe had told the truth when she said she had nowhere to return to.

Now that the koror had no safe place to go, they asked if they could stay near the edge of the valley, and Kai told them it was fine as long as they didn't enter the valley itself. The koror immediately set to work creating an environment where they could live.

As tents sprang up one after another, Kai realized all too late, *Oh, I could have used something like that.*

If he had a tent, he could move around the valley with it as he pleased. The village had several tents that were used for expeditions, and Kai started wondering if there might be some way he could get his hands on one.

By that time, the first rays of the morning sun were falling on Kai's closed eyelids. His time enjoying the valley had come to an end.

The sunlight was spreading across the ridge of the valley and lighting up the tents of the koror. With the arrival of a new day, they began their daily morning prayers.

Kai returned to his makeshift cabin in the valley where he found Aruwe sweeping up the wood shavings created when Kai had prepared the timber.

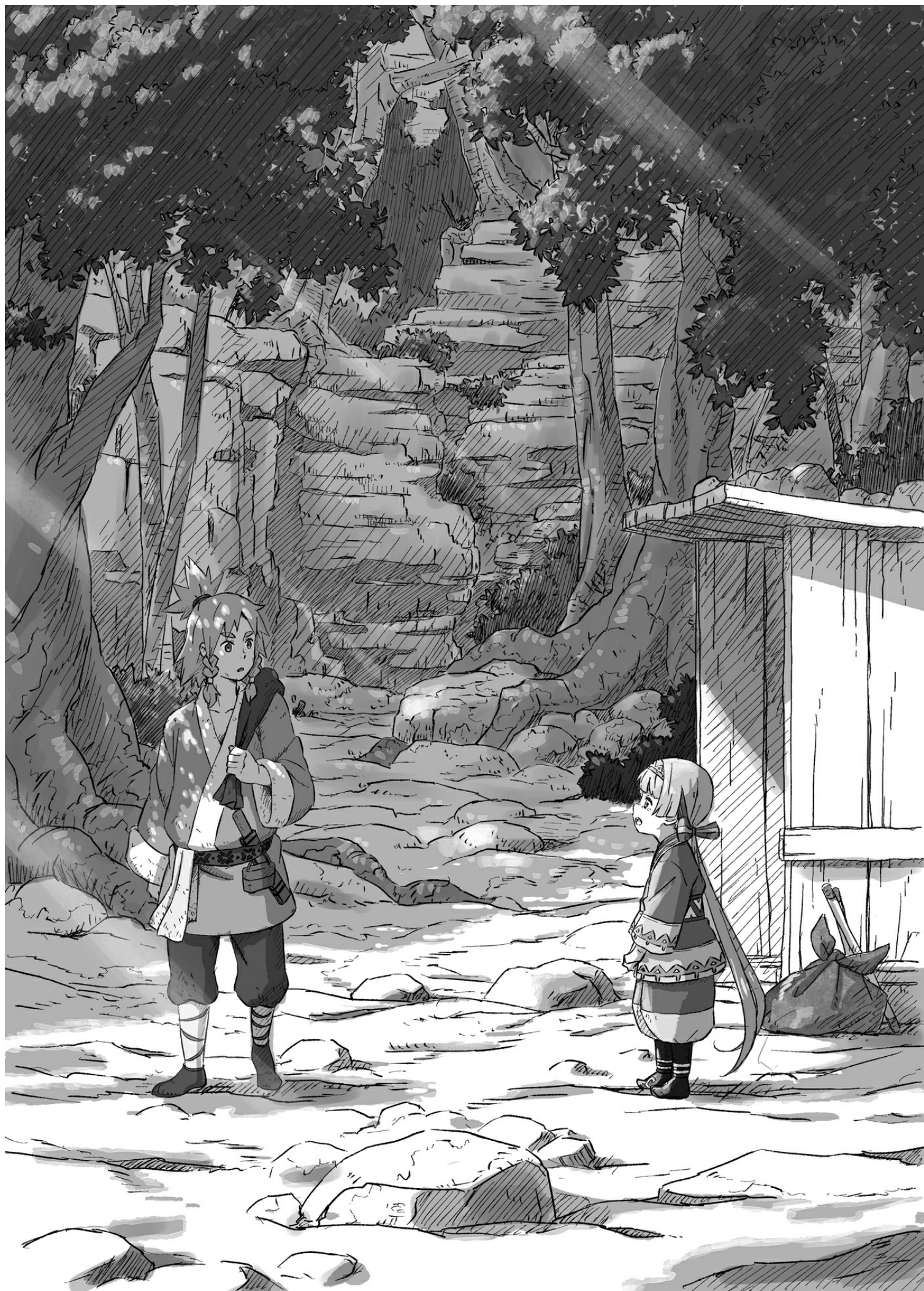
"I'll be gone for a while," Kai told her.

He told her that she could eat the fruit in the valley if she got hungry, and that she could sleep in the cabin. And he also told her that she was free to go back to her people any time.

The broom in Aruwe's hands stopped moving, and her light purple eyes teared up with rage.

"Aruwe no go back."

The long, beautiful, violet hair of the koror girl glistened in the morning sun.



Part 3 — God of the Valley

22

Maybe this thing called rice is made by boiling wheat grains...

In front of him was an open sack that was packed with wheat grains ready to be sown in the fields. Kai scooped up a handful of the grains while he was thinking.

I guess not... I need rice grains... but I don't know what those are.

If he had rice grains, he could boil them to make edible rice, which could then be salted and would harden into this thing called an onigiri. Then there was a black thing called nori that looked a little like black cloth. Wrapping that around the onigiri would make it even better. But the knowledge inside his mind suggested that he'd never find anything like that anywhere in a region like the borderlands.

Kai hoped that someday he could try this delicious "onigiri" for himself. He knew nothing about life outside of the borderlands, but there was a place people called the center of the country, and it was possible that rice and nori existed there.

Having delicacies delivered from somewhere so far away was the height of extravagance. Kai could perhaps ask a traveling merchant to bring him that type of food, and after many months of waiting he might have it. But of course, a merchant would want to be paid for the trouble, and Kai would need an absurd amount of money.

The only people with that kind of money in the borderlands were lords and their families. For anyone who wasn't in a position to gather wealth from large numbers of villagers, getting rich was an impossible dream. Kai was just a villager, and the only money he'd ever handled in his life were copper coins worth one measly shechem.

After thinking it over for a while, Kai simply gave up on the idea.

Society worked in such a way that your fate was already decided from birth, and for powerless villagers there was no way out. The one faint hope was to marry someone like a baron's daughter, but for a penniless villager, the idea of becoming betrothed to someone like Lady White felt so disconnected from reality that it wasn't worth thinking about.

Then again, maybe I'm a big deal now that I'm blessed by the god of the valley...

"Kai," a fellow soldier asked. "Do your wounds from fighting the baron still hurt?"

"The nosebleed he gave me was pretty bad, but the pain is gone now."

"Oh, that's good... Now maybe you can stop standing around and pick up that sack!"

"Oh... right."

Kai tied the sack of wheat closed and carried it over his shoulder.

Here and there, other men were busy moving sacks of wheat, gourds, and root vegetables still in their skins. They were in a storage room in one of the castle's kitchens, where precious seeds that weren't to be eaten were usually stored.

In ordinary circumstances, the wheat grain would be sown on the fields very soon, and the seed potatoes would have been allowed to sprout, but today, absolutely everything had to be carried down into this secret room to be hidden underground.

"We need everything hidden before the inspector arrives!"

The day had come for the village of Lag to face a troublesome event that happened once each year.

**

Inspector. That was the title given to the high-ranking officials from the

capital who would periodically visit the borderlands.

They would enter the scattered domains of the borderlands to assess them. They'd determine how successful their crops had been that year and what stockpiles they had accumulated, and then they'd determine the tribute that the domain owed to the center of the country. This task would be carried out by the inspector, along with four other officials serving as the inspector's assistants.

An inspector was supposed to be a representative who'd do no more than learn the circumstances of a domain and recommend a certain tribute be paid. But the government had become weak. Officials were increasingly doing whatever they pleased in recent times, making the inspector an uninvited guest who'd become a huge burden by demanding extravagant meals and large bribes.

"Father, a herald has arrived to inform us that the inspector will soon reach our village."

This report was given to the baron in his study on the top floor of the castle by his eldest son, Olha.

Baron Vezin turned away from the small window where he'd quickly glanced at the situation below. "Very well," he said briefly. He turned to the maids waiting in an adjoining room and commanded, "Make preparations!" in a voice that reverberated in one's stomach.

As this group of women began dressing him in new clothes, he turned to Olha and asked, "Which inspector is it? Did the herald give us a name?"

"Yes. It was not the same name as last year."

"Changed the inspector again, have they? What a pain."

"I heard from Count Balta himself that much has changed in the palace. The herald has informed us that our inspector will be Lord Severo Gandal, a cinquista sigil who is head of House Gandal."

"A cinquista sigil? So he has more power than our house?"

"The powerful member of House Moloch is yourself, Father, and the god of

our village has made you a quart sigil. I'm afraid we rank below him."

"Back in the days when House Moloch ruled the three villages, many of our ancestors reached the rank of cinqueta sigil. Our domain might have been reduced to a single village, but I hone my combat abilities through hard training, and some day my sigil may increase. Perhaps this inspector would accept an invitation to a bout. The standing of our house may have fallen, but the blessings of our village god are only strengthened through repeated battles. I'll show them we are every bit as powerful as those lords from the center."

"Father, I beg you not to invite Count Balta's displeasure again. Count Balta was quite clear that we must show more respect this time."

"Gah..." Vezin grunted angrily.

Olha knitted his brows just slightly and gave orders to the maids. His father prioritized comfort over appearance, so his clothes were usually worn loosely. He ordered the maids to make his robe tight so that it wouldn't fall open.

The robe he dressed in was the same type of robe worn by lords from the center to indicate their rank in the world of nobility. The robe hid the bold frame of the Iron Taurus completely, making him look like a well-mannered soldier of high rank.

Olha followed behind his father as he left for the room where he'd entertain the inspector. The baron's wives and other children were also waiting in the corridor, and they knew to follow behind the two of them without needing to be told.

Today's guest was so important that the whole family needed to be there to welcome him.

As they walked, Olha and his father continued their conversation.

"What of the stockpiles? Was everything moved, Olha?"

"I believe that was more or less finished a short while ago. The villagers were dragging their heels, but I gave them stern warnings."

"Very well... We need to take great care so they don't learn about our surplus food. I don't want to think about what'll happen if they find out. We'll need that

queijo ready to give to the next passing merchant. The goat's milk is thin this year, and we don't have much in stock. Manage what we have carefully."

"Queijo aside, I don't think it would be such a great loss if some grain was taken from us. We'd merely reduce how much we give to the commoners. Hiding it seems so unnecessarily troublesome that—"

"Olha..."

A cold glance was enough to silence Olha, though he still frowned slightly.

Vezin's body was host to Lag's god, giving him both authority and the power to fight; he had great power over the other members of his family.

But Olha's rebellious nature wasn't so easily fixed. He stared back at his father and resumed his protest. "In fact, it stands to reason that small gifts given to our guests will earn us friends in the center. There would be a loss in the short term, but—"

"You're naive. With that thinking, the gluttons in the center would rob you of everything down to the hair growing from your ass."

"But, Father..."

"The villagers are children of House Moloch. They are not worthless."

Olha was silent, but he still wasn't satisfied.

"If people don't eat, they become weak," Vezin told him. "If our villagers are weak, Lag's defenses become weak. But you are the heir to House Moloch. If you'd do things differently, then do so once I'm dead. There'll be no one to stop you."

No other member of the family attempted to interject in this discussion between father and son.

Though the white face of the other guardian bearer, Jose, looked increasingly fierce as she stared at her brother's back.

“Here he comes! Let’s see this year’s inspector.”

After they’d finished moving the food supplies, Kai and the other soldiers left the castle as ordered and moved nearer to the main village gate. There was already a large gathering there as if a festival had started. It looked like almost every one of the 1,000 or so villagers had gathered there.

The soldiers were told to line up at the side of the road like honor guards with their spears in hand. The aim was to show off their war potential so that the officials from the capital wouldn’t look down on their village.

Shortly after, a squad who’d gone out to meet the guests gave the announcement by blowing a horn. The villagers forced themselves to smile and began to cheer.

After a short time, a carriage drawn by four horses rushed through the crowd, sending up a cloud of dirt behind it. The carriage came rushing into the village with enough speed to surprise everyone, but the reason for their haste became clear when they saw the arrows protruding from their fancy carriage in multiple places and the damage that suggested that the carriage had been rammed into.

“Looks like the demi-humans had a go at them.”

“Ah, they’re with people from the next village over. I guess they needed escorts.”

Several soldiers on horseback came galloping in shortly after the carriage. Horses were in short supply, and lords generally had just a small number for use when hunting, making them a precious resource in the borderlands. The riders were probably the most skilled horsemen in the neighboring village, but the ride had left them exhausted. Some women of the village then screamed as one of the riders fell from his horse.

“Someone has to carry him! He’s injured!”

It was the quick-witted soldiers who acted first in situations like this. Manso immediately abandoned his position and ran toward the soldier who’d fallen from his horse. This of course led to Manso’s squad, Kai included, all coming to the soldier’s aid.

Kai took on the job of keeping the riderless horse under control, grabbing the

reins as it looked ready to bolt off. Kai had no experience taking care of animals, so he had no idea how to calm the nervous horse, and he was making it even more agitated.

Calm down.

The horse tried to break Kai's grip on the reins by throwing its head to the side, but Kai quietly used his incredible strength to hold the horse fixed in place. He held the reins firmly and kept the horse immobile, causing it to cower in submission.

Anyone who worked with animals probably would have been enraged to see a horse treated this way, but there were bigger things happening, and no one was watching Kai.

The carriage that had passed them by finally came to a stop in front of the gate to the castle, and someone inside had begun to vomit. The gold-plated frame of the carriage glistened in the sunlight. Three people climbed out from inside, and the baron greeted the man dressed in the finest clothing.

Kai could guess that this was the inspector everyone was talking about.

"Demi-humans are attacking the roads now?"

"We'll need to dispatch a company to subdue them."

Nearby, the senior soldiers were talking to one another in hushed voices.

One woman was whispering something about likely damage to the fields.

Someone else angrily asked no one in particular how many people had died this time.

The villagers directed their cold stares toward their guests, as if the carriage had carried death itself to their village.

23

"This is quite the reception..."

"I am Moloch Vezin, baron of Lag. I am honored to receive you, Inspector."

The inspector had been dispatched in the name of the king who ruled over

the Unified Kingdom. When two lords met, it was normal for both lords to show each other respect regardless of differences in rank, but in this case the higher-ranking lord was a government official wearing the royal colors, so the baron had to appear self-effacing and subservient.

“You have traveled far and must surely be tired, Inspector. We have made preparations in anticipation of your visit, and if you’d allow me to lead you inside...”

“Lord Moloch. Your domain is swarming with demi-humans, isn’t it?”

“The borderlands do lie close to the nation’s border, Inspector.”

“As long as there are many grotesque demons targeting the kingdom, every lord has a responsibility to patrol their domain and spread the glory of His Majesty the King. I do not intend to level accusations at House Moloch, but I am sure you agree that it would not do to be negligent in your duty to exterminate demon-kind?”

“You are quite right...”

The inspector, Severo Gandal, was a man who looked like a fat toad. The difference in height meant that he was glaring up at Vezin, who was forcing a smile while his temple twitched ever so slightly.

As the inspector was led into the castle, instructions were given to women in waiting. They were to prepare one of the finest luxuries of the borderlands for their guests: a hot bath.

Jugs filled with hot water were prepared, and women waited on them with fragrant oils and rough cloths to remove dirt. When Severo saw the group of fairly young girls and the rising steam, he glanced at the officials serving as his entourage with a much more placid expression.

The guests enjoyed a carefree conversation as their skin was scrubbed by cloths soaked in hot water. Vezin breathed a sigh of relief when he heard his guests sounding cheerful, but then he noticed that one of them was still standing by the entrance unattended, and he hurried over to him.

“How terribly rude of me. Allow me to guide you.”

“That’s quite all right. You needn’t concern yourself with me.”

The man held a light gray staff and was dressed in a long priest’s garb. His hood concealed a pattern that resembled the sigil of a guardian bearer.

When his eyes met the baron’s, he drew back the hood for a moment as a display of respect.

“I am a mere apprentice who just recently joined the great monastery of Maas. It would be improper for me to be touched by a woman’s hand. Please, do not concern yourself with me.”

“You’re... from the monastery...”

Vezin traced a holy sign over his chest as a show of respect.

The man was a priest of Manu, the state religion of the Unified Kingdom. The Manu monastery trained many holy men known as imilk. The imilk obtained power far beyond ordinary humans not through the blessings of a land god, but through training and the consumption of godstones. Vezin knew that such people had secret ways of influencing the royal household.

This priest was still young. He looked up with strong eyes, filled with willpower.

“If you’ve already obtained a sigil...”

“I’m ashamed to say that I’ve just barely obtained a doi sigil. I’m told that godstones are easily obtained here in the borderlands. The grand monastery has had much trouble procuring godstones. If it were possible, I would be most grateful if you had some you could provide to me as a donation before we depart.”

“I will see to it that some are prepared.”

“My sincere thanks.”

The priest introduced himself as a truthseeker dispatched from Maas. He gave his name as Nada. His kumadori appeared clearly on his face to prove that he spoke truthfully. He had not been mistaken when he called himself a doi sigil. Two sigil lines ran across his brow.

Theologians had found many rules describing the number of sigil lines that

could appear between one's eyebrows and the way the pattern would vary for each land god. Naturally, a greater number of sigil lines indicated a higher level of status. Priests who obtained sigils without the aid of a land god were deeply admired by most guardian bearers.

"A new land god has appeared somewhere within the kingdom."

Nada explained that he was dispatched as a truthseeker with the task of locating this mysterious land god.

"It is the belief of the high priests that the divine spirit we are seeking is one close to the source, and that it would spell untold disaster if such power were to fall into the hands of profane demons."

"The high priests... have they made a prophecy?"

"Indeed. The grand monastery is making every effort to find this new arch-god of prophecy, so its name might be listed alongside the others of the mausoleum. But in every region, the kingdom continues to lose the very land gods that form the fabric. We cannot allow the blessings of a newly discovered and powerful land god to be stolen by demi-humans... by profane demons. Other truthseekers have been dispatched all across the kingdom under similar orders so that we might quickly locate this new god spoken of in the prophecy. The inspector was kind enough to allow me to ride in his carriage, and we travel the same course."

"Perhaps I could hear more of this prophecy."

"I can share it with you, of course. Though I was not given permission to bring a written copy, so you must forgive me for reciting it orally. There are high priests in the grand monastery who hear the resonance of the realm of gods clearly. This is where the words of prophecy came from."

A disobedient spirit awakens in the borderlands.

Its power reaching to the very heavens like a soaring bird.

Its nature, a shadow that brings light, evil that is virtuous. To be feared and revered. A god of miraculous change.

The priest must have recited the same words in every region he visited. He recited it clearly and rhythmically, without a single stutter.

“The Council of Priests have ordered that the gravesite of this new land god must be found as soon as possible, and its name must be enshrined in the mausoleum where it belongs, so that it might become one with the fabric. We have been granted full authority by His Majesty the King to search within the kingdom without restriction.”

With his face hidden under his hood once more, Nada dropped to his knees in his formal priest garb, and traced a holy sign across his chest while bowing. This bow was how priests expressed the greatest degree of subservience.

“I beg your assistance in our survey of this land.”

“Please, rise. You’ll dirty your clothing.”

“I beg of you.”

“Of course,” Vezin replied without hesitation. “Whatever I can do to aid you, I will do.”

Nada dropped his head low in response.

The inspector was watching their conversation as his body was being cleaned. He scoffed with disinterest and said, “And of course, you’ll also be expected to cooperate with my assessments.” His drooping gut wobbled as his hand slowly crept up the arm of the woman beside him, coming to a stop on her shoulder.

“Let me give you some advice. If you’re planning on a search of the forest, send a good number of men out. We approached the forest at the suggestion of our dear priest not long ago, and we had quite a time of it. We were attacked so quickly that one might think the forest is well-within the demons’ territory.”

“I beg your pardon, Inspector,” said Vezin. “What were these demons that attacked?”

“They were gray baboons.”

It was a clear sign that macaques were active in the area once again.

Vezin shot a glance at Olha who was standing by the entrance, and Olha

immediately left the room. He'd gone to gather soldiers to drive back the macaques, which was likely to help the truthseeker's survey. It was also important to beat back demi-humans regularly to prevent them from attacking in large numbers later.

"I will demonstrate the ferocity with which soldiers serving under House Moloch fight day after day. Please let us make this first step toward the survey while you all rest comfortably."

"Very well," the inspector replied. "I'll ask to see it for myself some time later."

A dining table for guests was set up in a dedicated room, and the table was already set with a meal so extravagant that it would have made the color drain from the villagers' faces if they saw it. Although each dish was made from the typical food of this rundown village, the table was packed with dozens of dishes that made every possible use of the ingredients they had available.

Needless to say, this wasteful use of food would have to be compensated for by providing less to the villagers, but their baron took great care to ensure that this extravagant meal was served in a separate room where it would never be seen by the adversely affected.

**

A company of soldiers was quickly assembled and put under Olha's command. Their task was to hunt for demi-humans near the forests where the inspector's party had been attacked.

The company was made up of 30 soldiers. Kai was among their number. They expected that they'd have to fight in the forests where group tactics were difficult to use, so rather than selecting squads of soldiers, the soldiers had been selected according to their skill in combat. The weapons they carried were short spears, which were easier to use in tight spaces, and several of the men were carrying bows.

The invading demi-humans were likely macaques, and their numbers had been increasing in this region.

Every soldier knew the enemy they faced and was prepared for the battle ahead, but many wore unhappy expressions.

No matter how many times they were driven back, the macaques would always come back and attempt another surprise attack on Lag's land. As expected, they soon found signs of the creatures in the forest.

First, ten or so of the fastest soldiers charged in to ensure a given area of land was secure, and then the soldiers would move through the forest side-by-side, like beaters on a hunt.

Before long a soldier whistled through his fingers.

"Over there!"

Movement through the forest was slow, so it was most efficient for beaters to spread out over a broad area, and then the main force would charge in to meet any enemies in close-range combat.

When a beater found an enemy, they would turn and run without attempting to fight. Naturally, they would run toward the main force.

"There were five or six!"

"Don't let them get away!"

Helping the survey was a secondary goal. Their true intention was to kill as many enemies as they could, because with every kill, the safety of their land would be ensured for a little longer. These enemies would die before they had a chance to attack the village.

They killed this other species so that members of their own kind might live.

The futile cycle of life and death in the borderlands continued that day, just like it did every other.

24

It came as a surprise to no one to learn that this strangely dressed man from the capital was an esteemed priest.

Olha and even the baron himself showed great respect for him. When,

through some strange turn of events, the man agreed to spar with Olha on the training ground, their bout ended in a tie. Despite being a guardian bearer, Olha struggled to withstand his attacks.

“That priest’s not a guardian bearer, but it looks like he’s got the markings.”

“It’s like the wandering priests we see out here are nothing compared to priests from the capital.”

The borderlands was a place that valued raw strength, so visitors to villages in the borderlands would often be pestered with invitations to spar for the sake of comparing strengths.

The inspector was a cinquesta sigil, so the baron himself offered to spar with him. However, the fat, toad-like inspector brushed off the request and offered up the priest instead.

But the baron’s sigil was far higher in status than the priest’s, and it would have been rude to give him such a badly matched sparring partner. The baron was left frustrated as he was forced to send Olha in his place. After the bout between Olha and the priest took place, it was only the priest who was left unscathed, so the outcome was essentially a loss for Lag.

The god offering its protection to Olha was the land god of the ruined village of Elg, which gave him a tres sigil. The priest had a mere doi sigil, but was somehow able to force him into a tie. Olha looked less than pleased by this outcome.

“Your fighting style... It must be something taught in the capital...”

“How astute of you, Lord Olha. I’m well-versed in all aspects of the staff techniques of Raksha-ryu. I’ve gathered from your footwork that you’re trained in Zula-ryu.”

“You have keen eyes. I lost to you... even though I’m the one with the higher ranking sigil.”

“The priests of the monastery have long said that there is more to combat than one’s sigil.”

The conversation between the two was a friendly one. The priest explained

that he'd walked a dangerous path, pushing his body to its limits through godstones and harsh training, with no land god to rely upon.

The soldiers had watched the fight while imagining that someday it might be them standing where the priest stood, and they argued passionately about the details of the fight afterward. If they could just get close in terms of physical strength and speed, they could sharpen their arts through hard work to close the gap and stand abreast the guardian bearers. They had just seen it happen with their own eyes.

The soldiers around Kai were all trying to analyze the fight.

"What do you think, Kai? How would you fight the priest?"

"Well, he moves his weapon so fast that he can parry any attack from Olha... But Olha was using a wooden sword, so he should have tried thrusting more instead of just cutting..."

"Good point. A good thrust might've found some gap in his defense."

"Manso, how would you attack him?"

"Well I'm a spear bearer at heart, so I'd just thrust, thrust, thrust like mad. Not that it's going to work on someone with the markings. He's basically half-guardian bearer. But I suppose you could follow it up with a Zula-ryu grapple to break his stance."

"Right? There's no other way."

Kai folded his arms and thought carefully about Manso's analysis. Kai thought the real problem was that the priest's eyes were too sharp. But since no one else had noticed the shine in his eyes, Kai kept quiet about it. It was barely noticeable, but the priest's eyes had given off a faint light, like a torch burning in the distance. If that light was his spiritual energy, then Kai would be forced to conclude that he was using magic.

Priests can come up with prophecies, so maybe they have something like... a precognition ability?

He wondered how he'd fight against someone who could predict his every move.

Kai had also been imagining himself fighting in Olha's bout, and he absentmindedly went through simulations in his mind. Most of the spectating soldiers were still sitting while gesturing wildly with their arms. The scene would have looked comical to an outsider.

"Soon they're gonna start sending some of us out with the priest so he can explore the forest during training time. There'll be another selection contest, I bet."

Many of the soldiers wanted a chance to learn more from the priest, so it was likely that a lot of volunteers would step forward. Normally, no one would want the job of patrolling the forest and possibly fighting demi-humans, but this time the job had some real appeal.

"I'll go ask..."

Kai got up and looked for Basco, one of the top-ranking soldiers. He spotted Basco discussing something with Setta over in the corner of the training ground, so he walked over. Having to deal with little tasks like this was a responsibility that came with being a squad leader.

In a serious bout, it turned out that Kai's rapid growth had made him powerful enough to smash Manso's weapon apart, and Manso had actually looked relieved to give up his position as squad leader. Deep down, Manso was probably glad to be free from all the little responsibilities that came with leading a squad.

Kai, on the other hand, was now one of the ten highest ranked soldiers and often had to spend his time on small tasks.

Being in a position of responsibility also meant that he found himself on night watch more often while there were guests in the village, leaving him with fewer opportunities to visit the valley.

In most years, an inspector's party would leave after about a week.

Kai concentrated on the tasks at hand, feeling sure that this year would be no different.

“I see no sign of those ghastly baboons today.”

Truthseeker Nada had climbed to the top of a high rock in the forest, where he could see his surroundings clearly.

Olha had waited on the ground, but it wasn't long before the truthseeker climbed back down. Nada spread out the map of the region, which was an item passed down through many generations of House Moloch, and pointed to various parts of the map while describing things he'd *seen* and making notes.

“I see some rather large inconsistencies from what's drawn here.”

“This map was drawn by one of my ancestors, almost 100 years ago. The forests have been spreading ever since.”

The population of the borderlands had been dropping with each passing year, reducing the demand for wood and giving the forests a chance to expand. Places where the trees were once thinned out before they could grow tall were now left untouched because of the demi-human threat. Once the trees were allowed to mature, it was no easy task to cut them back.

“Can all members of Maas use the art of a hundred eyes with such skill?”

“I have sharpened my arts as part of my daily training. Those with particularly good eyes were deliberately chosen to be dispatched as truthseekers. This is a necessity, otherwise we might overlook subtle signs.”

“And in our bout earlier?”

“The art of Raksha-ryu staff fighting was developed to give traveling priests a means to defend themselves. The art allows us to sense and then deflect an arrow in flight. For that purpose, we learn to use the eye, and then the same principles are easily transferable to other techniques.”

“It's most impressive. Perhaps you could teach me...”

“Do you mean to tell me you wish to join the priesthood, Lord Olha?” Nada asked, still smiling.

Olha turned to look at him and realized that the priest wasn't smiling with his eyes.

“I see you are wondering why you must join the priesthood.”

“...”

“These are secret arts not taught to outsiders. Even members of the royal family must join the priesthood for a time before they can learn our arts. They do so merely for the sake of appearances, but still, the monastery demands it.”

“I see...”

Olha asked no further questions.

Once someone gained a land god as their guardian, they couldn't be away from that god's land for long periods of time. This was the cost of receiving a land god's blessings, often known as the curse of the land.

It was standard practice to join the priesthood and enter the monastery while not carrying a guardian. This was one reason that priests would go to great pains to gain power without a guardian.

Even for those with the same level of sigil, the cost they paid for it was different. A guardian bearer was bound to the land, meanwhile those who gained their power from the blessings of godstones alone would go through great hardships to gain power, but wouldn't be tied down by strange fixations, and kept their freedom to travel from one area to another.

“Perhaps there's a monastery nearby where I could...”

“I'm afraid there are none.” Nada breathed a deep sigh and then corrected himself. “More precisely, there are none that I see.”

Even with the secret art of a hundred eyes, he couldn't easily see beneath the ground or into the depths of bodies of water. As useful as the technique appeared, it was not all-powerful.

“There were four baboons exterminated yesterday by my count. How many would you say you kill per year?”

“I would estimate around one hundred.”

To kill so many macaques had cost Lag fifty of their soldiers, and they'd also lost a few dozen women and children. It was only because they had aid from neighboring villages that they'd kept their losses so low. But the number of

casualties was still significantly higher than the number of births, and there was less activity in the village with each passing year.

Nada pointed to the northeast and calmly said, “I’ve seen a large dwelling of the baboons in this direction.”

Olha looked into those still, silent eyes, and a shiver ran down his spine.

“There are many of them. This group looks to have several times the population of your village. I cannot say whether there were always so many, or if they all came to gather from other places.”

“That can’t be!”

“I have seen it for myself. There is no mistake.”

A large macaque dwelling. Those were the words that Olha had least expected to hear.

“I suspect it’s only a matter of time before they invade in great numbers,” the truthseeker said softly.

25

“Welcome home, My God.”

The night had already grown late when Kai arrived in the valley.

Aruwe appeared to have been sleeping inside the cabin, but the soft sound of Kai’s footsteps was enough to wake her up, and she greeted him happily. She then tried to throw herself down on the ground before Kai, but he grabbed a hold of her and forced her to stop.

The small koror girl’s body was very light. Kai’s method of forcing her to stop was to grab the back of her clothing and lift her into the air with a small amount of strength.

“A quick bow will do.”

“But...”

“Otherwise it’s annoying.”

He put Aruwe down and for a moment she was unsure what to do, but then she breathed a deep breath and said, “If that’s your request, My God,” before bowing her head politely.

Kai also wanted to tell her to stop calling him God, but he wasn’t ready to tell her his real name. He had no choice but to accept it until he was ready to open his heart to her.

The starry sky was reduced to a circle by the edges of the valley around him, but some of the light found its way down to light the area around them. Something much more interesting then grabbed Kai’s attention.

“T-The cabin...”

Aruwe smiled triumphantly when she heard the surprise in Kai’s voice.

“I wanted to surprise My God. Straightened it up as best I could.”

It had been several days since Kai’s last visit to the valley. Less than half a month since he’d taken in Aruwe, she was already more or less fluent in the human tongue, suggesting that Porek had been giving her lessons.

Kai’s eyes lit up as he examined his transformed cabin. It’d been a makeshift thing that he felt wasn’t quite worthy of being called a building, and he’d preferred to think of it as a child’s secret base. But now it had been reborn as an impressive cabin.

Kai saw the proud look on Aruwe’s face and soon became suspicious about the whole thing.

“Did some of the other koror come down into the valley?”

The color drained from Aruwe’s face when she noticed the change in Kai’s attitude, but she adamantly denied it while holding up her hands for Kai to see.

Her small hands were covered in painful looking scrapes and cuts.

“They only lowered down tools. My people build their village at top of the cliff. They give me materials, but no one enters.”

Kai could see that there were several pieces of wood in the corner of the cabin that were still being worked on, and there were various tools left lying here and there. Kai knew that the koror were good with their hands, and now

he realized that Aruwe was no exception.

“That’s all right then. You’re amazing, Aruwe.”

“T-Thank you!”

“How’d you get rid of all the gaps between the planks?”

“My people call it collard. They use it in the same way. It forms at the bottom of a pot when boiling down leaves. It’s waterproof, so we use it as coating for unglazed pots.”

“The entrance has steps now.”

“They took me half a day to make.”

When he entered the cabin, he was surprised to find that the floor had been adjusted to make it perfectly level. Aruwe had used what she called levers to lift up one side, and then she’d placed pebbles underneath to adjust the incline of the surface. The planks that Kai had cut were unusually thick, so they didn’t warp in the center.

Around the edges of the floor, gaps at the ends of planks had been filled in with black collard, just like on the walls.

He looked at the ceiling and saw that it still looked the same.

“Using land god’s gravesite to support roof is disrespectful.”

“...”

“The walls made by My God are strong enough to support the roof. I can’t do it myself. I hoped My God would help.”

That kind of small modification was something Kai could easily handle by himself. Following Aruwe’s instructions, he cut the roofing planks to the right length and placed them down so that they sloped down toward the cabin’s edges. The upper edges of the wall planks that the roof rested on were cut and made even by Aruwe, so they matched the incline correctly.

Then Kai dug up some exposed rocks from near the waterside and broke them apart to form weight stones, which he placed on the top of the planks. The roof needed to have gaps for ventilation, so those were left as they were.

This is amazing!

He never thought he'd see the day when he had a dwelling that was all his own.

Inside the cabin, a bed had been prepared by putting cloth over a pile of straw against the back wall. His plans for the night were decided right then.

"My God, if you wish... I-I am inexperienced... but!"

"...?"

For some reason Aruwe had thrown herself down on the ground again despite having just been told to stop, but Kai didn't stop her this time because he was too busy finding out how comfortable the bed was.

When he jumped onto the bed, he could smell the scent of straw that had been dried just right.

The bed was perfect.

"I-I'm inexperienced, but..."

"..."

Although Kai had no great need for sleep, the day had left him mentally tired and he was a prisoner to the comfortable bed. Before he could put up a fight, he was already asleep.

Aruwe unleashed a flurry of hits against his back as he slept, but Kai's toughened body was immune to that kind of attack.

Kai probably hadn't slept for very long.

He got up, feeling some sort of presence. His drowsiness was gone in an instant.

Kai could hear Aruwe's breathing as she slept soundly, almost buried in the straw by his side.

She showed no signs of waking up, and Kai guessed that she must have been trying hard to match her daily rhythm to his night-time visits to the valley.

Something... doesn't feel right.

Kai left the cabin.

For some reason the soft sounds of insects that he could usually hear had fallen silent. For now, he didn't know what to make of it, so he simply washed his face in the water of the lake and then began cleaning the gravesite as he always did during his visits to the valley. But then the cry of a bird in the distance caught his attention.

As if urged on by his intuition, Kai quickly clambered up the roots of the great tree and looked in the direction of the bird call. He concentrated on what he saw and trusted in his visual ability as a guardian bearer to allow him to see clearly through the darkness.

He could feel a battle going on in the area where the koror had been building their temporary settlement. And although he couldn't hear them clearly, the air carried the sound of distant screams.

Then several lights appeared.

At first, he thought that the koror must have lit their torches, but the light of the fire revealed a huge figure several times larger than a koror. The figure was an org swinging an axe, as if trying to cut back the grass, while its great, wrinkled snout twitched.

Then he heard a voice many times louder.

“God of the Valley!”

Kai heard it clearly. It was a clear voice speaking the human tongue.

The koror were the victims of an org night raid.

The cry must have caused Aruwe to wake up. She came leaping out of the cabin and stared, wide-eyed in shock at her people's settlement. Then she turned to look at Kai. Aruwe said nothing.

Kai had only ever given the koror permission to live by the edge of the valley. He had never said anything about giving them his protection.

But there was something in her eyes that ate away at him.

The whole time, they could still hear cries of “God of the Valley!” coming from the other side of the valley.

“The orgs come to steal the guardian.”

Aruwe’s words made the whole situation clear to Kai.

The orgs who’d stolen the land and gravesite from the koror wanted to kill Porek so that he’d lose the blessings of his god, and then the orgs could take it for themselves.

The orgs suddenly reminded Kai of the macaques that were always attacking Lag’s land.

Now I get why the macaques never give up on attacking our village.

Their intention wasn’t to take away their land. Stealing a gravesite had no meaning if it was missing its original power to provide blessings. The goal of the macaques was to cause the divine spirit of the land gods to return to their gravesites so that members of their own could claim them as guardians.

Since Kai’s birth, they had taken two villages from them, one of which was Eda. But House Moloch had snatched away the blessings of the land gods. The reason that the macaques were so fixated on the village of Lag should have been obvious.

Kai had only realized it now after having visited other lands.

“They really piss me off.”

“My God...?”

“They think they can come into my valley whenever they like?”

Kai began to run.

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Kai scaled the cliffs of the valley like an upward rush of wind.

When he reached the scene, he found the koror were being maimed and killed around him. Right in front of him was an org about to bring its axe down on a koror woman who was begging for her life.

It wasn’t a warrior-class org; it looked more like their equivalent of a foot soldier.

“God of the Valley...”

The koror woman’s voice was filled with joy when she saw Kai had put himself between her and the axe.

The org looked surprised to see Kai suddenly appear and get in the way, but then it realized that Kai was unarmed and it howled with laughter.

It swung the axe once more, this time aimed at Kai himself.

Too slow...

Kai had learned to follow the quick movements of Moloch Vezin, the warrior known as the Iron Taurus. Avoiding an attack from this org was mere child’s play in comparison.

He followed the path of the weapon until the last possible moment and then deflected it with the smallest possible movement. When the axe struck the ground, Kai stomped on it, forcing it deeper into the dirt.

Now that he had a moment to spare, his hand went to his waist and found the knife.

The org felt Kai’s gaze move across its body and realized that he was looking for a vulnerable spot. It gave up on the axe and tried to back away.

But there was no escape.

Kai watched as the org soldier turned around to run and then he aimed his knife at the spot where the back of the neck met the head. He mercilessly drove the knife deep into the creature’s brainstem.

The org’s body shuddered for just a moment, and then its huge mass stood up bolt straight. As Kai withdrew his knife, the org’s body fell forward, no longer obscuring his view of the assault. His eyes searched, hoping to find the next target as quickly as possible.

Cutting through the tough hide of the countless orgs with his short knife was going to be hard work.

Let’s use this instead.

He reached for the axe that the org had left embedded in the ground and

jerked it free. It wasn't the first time he'd held an org's axe, so it didn't feel too unnatural in his hand.

The axe he'd recovered from the body of the org in the valley had been taken away from him and carried back to the village as one of the spoils of the battle. The iron weapons that orgs often carried were of reasonable quality, so they made fairly valuable prizes here in the borderlands. The fact that orgs could give iron weapons to every foot soldier suggested that metalwork was prevalent in the orgish country.

"The god of the valley has come to us!"

"****, ****, **!"

The koror were speaking in a mixture of their own language and the human tongue.

Kai guessed from the atmosphere that they were throwing defiant taunts at the orgs. Faced with such a dire situation, the koror needed to maintain their morale somehow, so their reaction to Kai's appearance was understandable.

Several koror corpses were already scattered on the ground. The orgs had clearly intended to wipe out every last one. And then Kai realized why.

They wanted to end the bloodline that might try to cling on to the land god.

House Moloch of Lag were the same. Even after losing a village, they stubbornly refused to give up the land god and felt nothing but hatred toward those who'd taken control of the land. It wasn't just humans who treated their gods as treasures to be passed down to their ancestors through countless generations. If the koror lost their land god, they would just as stubbornly try to claim it back for as long as they lived.

This really isn't the right time to think about all that.

Kai had more pressing things to worry about.

He tried not to let his guard down as he searched for an enemy with the axe carried over his shoulder.

Although the orgs were driven by their desire to steal the guardian from the koror, it was still a problem that they'd dared approach the valley's edge when

the fear of the god of the valley was enough to keep other species away. Allowing them to return home unharmed would set an unacceptable precedent.

It may have been a mistake to allow the koror to build their temporary settlement here. When the orgs had seen the koror living peacefully at the valley's edge, they'd lost their fear of the valley.

KILL THEM

Kai felt as though he'd heard a voice inside his head.

Then he felt a feeling of heat fill his entire body. Kai knew his kumadori was starting to show on his face.

PUNISH THEM WITH BLOOD

It dawned on Kai that this was the only way to ensure peace in the valley.

Now he understood the true reason why the previous master of the valley had needed to ward off outsiders so aggressively. The previous guy had loved the valley just as much.

Kai felt himself fill with power.

Although Kai knew that he was a guardian bearer, he'd never measured the full extent of the god of the valley's power in any objective way. He was confident that he could handle just about any opponent who didn't have a guardian, but if the orgs had brought their own guardian bearer to this fight, he wasn't so confident that he'd be able to kill it.

But he had no time to sit and think about it.

I'll kill every last one of them.

Kai quickly surveyed his surroundings and tried to keep the relative positions of the orgs in mind. Then he took action, moving in the sequence that he thought was most efficient and using his superior physical strength to leap from one place to the next. Orgs fell one after another, each from a single blow.

The sight of Kai brandishing the heavy axe as if it was a light tree branch struck fear into the hearts of the orgs. He reckoned that he'd taken down three or four orgs by the time he realized that the org soldiers were disappearing.

The orgs had come expecting to fight a weak species, and it was only now that they were running around and trying to arrange themselves into formations.

Behind them was the one giving out instructions to the scattered soldiers. This org was no doubt a guardian bearer who was in command of this org company.

“God of Arbitration!”

Porek approached, carrying a narrow sword.

His sword was already glistening with blood and fat after having taken several lives. Porek was the koror's only guardian bearer, and he was in no way inferior to an org foot soldier.

“My sword and I are with you.”

“Don't go thinking I showed up to save you.”

“Those who enter the sacred region of the valley without permission cannot be forgiven. This is my understanding.”

Porek grinned as he emphasized the words “without permission.”

The koror had permission to be here. The orgs, on the other hand, were trespassing and had incurred the wrath of the god of the valley. It was a simple way of looking at it, and Kai saw the logic.

“You think you can use me?”

Porek took up a position beside Kai with a clear look of discomfort on his face.

Porek shook his head. “This situation came about by chance,” the old koror said apologetically with his head bowed. “Everything was mere chance and coincidence.”

Kai had nothing to say in response, so Porek continued speaking.

“Unless we demonstrate our power here, the orgs won't hesitate to enter the valley from now on. They are here to steal the wealth of the valley. Their greed

knows no bounds.”

“And what about your people? Aren’t you after the valley?”

“Most certainly not. We are a small and powerless people. We know our place all too well.”

“You can swear you won’t enter the valley?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I’ll believe you for now.”

“I am most grateful. On this day and at this moment, the koror of the village of Hacar swear their devotion to you.”

It was an easy oath to make when threatened by a stronger enemy. But when Kai heard the words, he felt a sharp feeling inside, like a tingling in his godstone. Without needing an explanation, he understood that a mysterious sort of pact had just been made.

The future could bring more than just orgs; demi-humans of all sorts might swarm the valley to seize the gravesite. It made sense to have someone act as the valley’s sentinel.

“Well then, we’ve got orgs to kill.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Kai slowly approached a group of org soldiers with his axe held low. The orgs were holding torches, and they must have clearly seen the enemy approaching.

A small human soldier with his kumadori visible.

The intricacy of the sigil on that face was enough to unnerve the orgs.

“***, *****, *!”

“**, ***!”

Kai didn’t understand what the orgs said, and nor did he care to. The only feeling that filled him was the desire to kill.

Kai had seen battles between guardian bearers before.

A meeting of two sources of power far beyond the reach of ordinary people was an extraordinary event, like a sacred ritual, and no one could watch those fights without feeling both fear and awe. But Kai had never seen one of these otherworldly fights reach a true conclusion.

“None of you are going home alive.”

This grim promise caused the org soldiers to huddle together, and they were visibly shaken. Behind them stood the stern-faced org leader, who was clearly the guardian bearer giving orders. The org leader let out a howl of rage.

To someone who didn't understand the orgish tongue, it sounded like nothing more than a high-pitched screech. But it was as if the voice at their backs pushed the org soldiers forward, sending them charging toward Kai. The anger of their leader must have scared them more than the thought of taking on an unknown, human guardian bearer.

Kai remained still, and watched closely as the cluster of orgs charged toward him with their eyes bloodshot.

Needless to say, Kai had no doubts about his ability to hold them off. What Kai was worried about was what was to come next. He might make the fatal mistake of leaving himself open to attack while dealing with their frenzied assault, or they might deplete his strength enough to leave him tired while facing the real fight that followed.

“Please, leave the formalities to me.”

Porek stepped forward as if he'd read the concerns on Kai's mind. Then, as if trying to demonstrate the devotion he'd just sworn to his master, Porek acted as his master's shield and intercepted the attack.

The narrow, slightly curved blade he held was made to exploit the most vulnerable parts of an enemy's huge body, and it allowed Porek to use his small koror body to his advantage.

Porek leaped at his opponents, moving to close the gap between them like a rush of wind. His narrow blade moved with each leap, licking at the bodies of his enemies and wearing them down.

Once Porek found an opportunity to get behind an opponent, in an instant, his sword would make cuts in the vital areas of their ankles and the backs of their knees. Porek left each opponent with blood spraying from their severed tendons, and before they knew what had happened, they found themselves unable to move.

It was clear now why Porek's sword had been covered in blood. The orgs had nervously approached him to start with, but now that they'd clearly seen this koror guardian bearer make fools of them with his swordplay, they hastily fled to the left and right, causing a path to open.

"You are free to proceed, God of the Valley."

Porek shook the blood and fat from his sword with a sharp flicking motion.

The old koror was far more skilled than Kai in terms of martial arts, but Kai still felt confident that he wouldn't lose in a fight between the two of them. Such was the incredible power that the god of the valley's blessings gave to him.

A path leading to the enemy's leader was now open before Kai. Orgs took up positions at either side of their leader, but none of them were willing to sacrifice themselves to act as a shield.

The orgs instinctively knew that they were no match for Kai and the koror guardian bearer. The org soldiers were trying to hide behind their leader, knowing that a guardian bearer opponent could only be dealt with by another guardian bearer.

It has to die.

By this point, the org leader's kumadori had appeared on its face. Kai couldn't read the information carried by the pattern of rings that the kumadori formed around the org's snout. If someone well-versed in theology had been there, they might have estimated that this org's sigil was roughly a tres sigil. This rank of sigil was the most common for creatures with the blessings of a land god, and this level of divinity was about right for the god of a small dwelling such as a village.

As Porek hurried toward Kai and threatened the enemy foot soldiers, there

was a doi sigil visible on his face, suggesting that the power of the blessing he received was slightly inferior. The blessings that both of them received might be considered appropriate for those living in a poor land such as the borderlands.

And on the face of Kai, who felt compelled to continue approaching his opponent, was a kumadori that was markedly different from the other two.

“***! ***.”

Porek yelled something incomprehensible at the org soldiers. Kai could tell from the enraged reaction of the org soldiers that Porek had said something crude and intimidating.

Not being able to understand what anyone was saying was a major inconvenience. He'd have to ask about it later.

The org leader had been whining shrilly at Porek in orgish, but now it fell quiet and assumed its stance while waiting for Kai to approach.

“Humans, no business here.” With some difficulty, the org managed to produce the sounds of the human tongue from its broad throat. It was hard to catch the words, but Kai understood. “This between koror and org. No business. Leave.”

“I do have business here.”

“Why?”

“You entered my valley without permission. So now I'm going to kill you.”

“Valley? But... Valley is yours?”

“Right. The valley's mine.”

“...”

The org's large, reddish body reared up in surprise.

“Valley... You say valley?!”

All three warriors had finally come to a shared understanding.

The org leader acted as though it was noticing Kai for the first time, and it looked at the kumadori on his face carefully. The change in its attitude was immediate.

“Stop...”

“I’m not stopping.”

“We leave. Yield... No need for—”

“If I let you get away, you’ll be back. So I have to kill you.”

“But please... I beg...”

“No buts.”

It was clear from this exchange that the org leader felt inferior, and the org soldiers were starting to become nervous. Then, when their leader took a step back, they threw themselves to the ground as if pleading for their leader’s life.

“***”

“** , ***!”

Kai couldn’t understand their words, but he understood their desperation.

But Kai’s resolve was firm. These invaders had come to murder every last koror, so it made no sense to forgive them if they threw themselves down and begged for their own lives. And then there were the koror who were under his protection. As long as he wanted to ensure their safety, there was no way he could allow these org soldiers to return home safely.

Kai gave himself to the anger that filled him and slammed the axe down against a rock by his feet. His strength was enough to split the rock in half and send out an explosion of large fragments that caused every org soldier to cower in fear.



Then Porek gave some command in the koror tongue to the koror who'd been watching everything.

“****!”

“*.*.”

There was an exchange of words between the many demi-humans, and then everything happened at once.

Every koror drew a bladed weapon that looked like a household tool, and they set upon the orgs who were unable to move because of their severed tendons. The fallen orgs tried to resist in the face of approaching death, but they could do little to delay the inevitable.

When the other orgs saw their fellow soldiers being slaughtered, they looked horrified to see the tables turned on them, but they continued to plead with Kai for the life for their precious guardian bearer.

But no matter how they pleaded, they were completely surrounded by the koror. The koror would never forgive the orgs for taking their village from them, or for the way they continued to kill so many of their people.

The koror moved in to torment and kill the prostrated orgs while their faces were still pressed to the ground.

Some orgs rose to their feet and ran to their leader, but they knew it was better to scatter and flee when they saw the koror draw bows.

At that point, even their leader decided to flee.

Kai gave chase.

Kai didn't hesitate for a moment. He threw the only thing he had on hand, the axe, at the org leader in an attempt to prevent it from using its incredible speed to get away.

The org leader acted on instinct, using its own weapon to deflect the axe that flew toward it, and just barely escaped death.

“God of the Valley!” Porek yelled.

Kai was barely aware of the fact that he'd just left himself unarmed.

“You die!” the org laughed.

When Kai lost his weapon, the org felt confident that Kai could never overcome it using his physical strength alone, and it turned to face him. Even for a guardian bearer, throwing away the weapon they used to attack was foolish. No matter how strong Kai was, he wasn’t so much stronger than the org that he could land a killing blow in hand-to-hand combat.

The org’s two-handed axe was specially made to be used by a guardian bearer, and the blade was large enough that it could split apart a human head with the force of its weight alone. The powerful muscles of the org sent the blade cutting through the night air.

It came toward him like a gale of death, but Kai greeted it with a cool face.

Invisible sword...

Kai had done no more than throw away a weapon that he wasn’t used to using.

It took just a moment of concentration to coat his hand with spiritual energy, creating the blade he’d made for cutting through trees.

The magic that created this sword was probably limited in terms of the mass it could cut through. It had never seemed particularly powerful when used against broad trees, but the enemy’s weapon was much thinner, and the blade was more than up to the task.

Kai met the org’s weapon with a horizontal chop, cutting straight through the handle and sending the detached blade spinning through the air. He’d cut through the handle with virtually no resistance, so it was as if the org’s swing had hit nothing but air. Its bodyweight had been behind the swing, and it never doubted that it would land a hit, but now the org’s body was thrown off-balance.

The org must have realized it was defenseless now that its stance was broken. It began to shamelessly beg for its life again. But Kai was done listening.

“You’re the first guardian bearer I’ve killed.”

“Wait... wait.”

“****”

One of the few remaining org foot soldiers leaped at Kai, risking its life in a desperate attempt to stop their god’s blessings from being taken from its species. But Kai sent the org soldier flying back with a single punch.

He knew that a punch was more than enough to deal with a foot soldier. Sure enough, after being thrown back and rolling across the ground, the org foot soldier was left unable to move.

Org soldiers appeared to be every bit as protective of their land gods. Kai thought of the koror who’d met the invading orgs. This was justice.

“Wait...”

He used his hand sword to gouge into the org leader’s chest and cut open its heart. At the same time, his fingertip touched something hard, and Kai saw no reason not to rip it from the org’s chest right there and then.

There was a spray of blood as his hand emerged from the fat flesh of the org. A white mass was there in his grasp.

Kai realized that the godstone he was holding was larger than any he’d ever seen before.

SEAL IT!

Kai heard the voice inside his head again.

He followed its command.

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In his hand he held a fearsomely large godstone.

The bone was rough and covered in protrusions, and there was something unfamiliar contained inside. Kai unconsciously brought his spiritual energy to his hand and spread his power across the godstone’s surface.

“You have the creature’s stone, I see.”

Porek's face was difficult to read as he looked at the godstone in Kai's hand, which was as big as a baby's head.

This was what remained of the org soldier who had killed many of his fellow koror and had almost driven his tribe to extinction. The corpse of the creature was lying at their feet, but it was the godstone that symbolized the life of the org to both of them.

"Not long after death, divine spirits return to their rightful gravesites. If you'd take it into yourself, I'd urge you to do so quickly."

"If I eat it, will I get the land god's powers?"

"It is not possible for one to carry two guardians. But divine power can be absorbed many times. The spirit will return any moment. I urge you to consume it now."

"I've sealed it so the god can't get out. We've got time."

Kai focused his spiritual energy and made sure it enclosed the godstone.

When its host died, the spiritual membrane around the divine spirit would be lost, exposing it to the outside world and triggering its return home. Kai didn't know how he knew this, but as long as he kept the godstone completely surrounded with spiritual energy, the spirit of the land god inside it would not be lost.

Right... there's no way I could have two or three guardians at once.

It was a little disappointing, but if it was so easy to have multiple land gods as guardians, someone else would have already done it a long time ago. For example, if the count of the borderlands had wanted to do so, he could have attacked all of the weaker guardian bearers around him and claimed their guardians for himself. Kai had never heard of such a thing happening, so he knew that Porek was telling the truth.

The voice inside Kai's head had told him, "Seal it." He guessed that there must be some other way to benefit from the godstone.

"God of the Valley?"

"Is there a way to use this thing besides eating it?" Kai asked Porek, feeling as

though the old koror knew much more than himself.

Porek knew that Kai had only just inherited the god of the valley as his guardian. He appeared to think about it for a few moments before he replied.

“The higher gods, those closer to heaven, are able to choose loyal followers and grant them a land god as their guardian.” He gestured toward the koror standing around them. “The chosen follower gains the land god as their guardian and in exchange become subservient to you.”

By loyal followers, he meant the other koror around them. But Kai still didn’t have complete faith in them.

Porek must have judged from Kai’s reaction that there was no chance of a new koror guardian bearer being born today. He followed up by asking, “Are there none worthy among your own kind?”

The faces of Kai’s fellow soldiers from Lag came to his mind, but he shook his head. He had many friends who he trusted, but it would only lead to conflict in their peaceful community.

“No.”

“In that case, you may use it to increase your own power without hesitation. There are many powerful guardian bearers in this world. If you wish to protect the valley, you’d best gain power quickly so that you are a match for the six mighty orgs of the Rigdaros who lead the orgish armies.”

Porek had knowledge of parts of the demi-human world that were unknown to humans.

There were many famous human lords who had two names, and it sounded as though the orgs also had powerful guardian bearers who were famous among members of their species. It seemed as though orgs had power over a nearby region, so the most direct threat to the valley was the powerful guardian bearers of the orgs.

Rigdaros? Kai wondered if any of them had been there at the battle of Banya.

Kai looked at the godstone in his hand and made his decision quickly.

He had no way to preserve it, and the marrow was best consumed while it

was fresh and would have the most effect. He wouldn't be able to win a new ally, but if he could gain much of the nourishment of the marrow while the spirit of the land god was still trapped inside, there would still be some meaning in following the strange instruction that had come to him.

The godstone of the guardian bearer was incredibly tough. The rough surface of the bony substance was an indication of its hardness. When Kai found that he couldn't break it against the rocks on the ground, he quickly lost his patience and created his invisible sword at his fingertip so that he could slice the bone open.

The part that was sliced off flew right into the hands of Porek, who was impressed by Kai's method of opening the godstone.

"Take it. That part's yours."

"Y-You are sure...?"

"You helped."

Through the round opening in the godstone, the rich, amber-colored marrow packed inside was visible. Even in terms of mass, it looked like it contained ten times as much as a normal godstone, and large amounts of rich juice dripped from it, making Kai's stomach growl with impatience.

First, he took a bite. Then he violently thrust his mouth at the opening, gnawing and slurping. Before long that small opening wasn't enough and he cut the whole thing in two using his sword. He continued to eat greedily.

Kai's feast was a mouth-watering sight for the koror. Even though many of their people had just died, some of them couldn't help but growl hungrily as they watched.

The koror were just like humans in that they collected every godstone except those of their own kind. Kai suspected that if he tried ordering them to eat those godstones, they'd only become sick and start vomiting. Kai had no knowledge of the ceremonies in which a retired lord's godstone would be eaten by their successor.

The marrow from the guardian bearer had tasted frightfully good. As he ate it, he felt a strange sensation as if the spirit of the org soldier was being absorbed

into himself.

Then when he had almost finished eating, there was a strange feeling inside him, as if a violent struggle was going on inside his stomach. Kai intuitively knew that this was the spirit of the land god, and for a few seconds he fought back, holding his breath so that he might absorb a little more from it. Finally, its feeble existence escaped like a gas leaking from every pore of his body.

It seemed it wasn't possible to completely consume a land god.

Kai's heart suddenly skipped a beat.

Hot...

His godstone inside him was burning up, and it felt as though his blood would boil as the heat spread. Then came a terrible sensation that felt like his body was being rearranged while leaving his human skin in its original shape.

I can barely stand...

Kai put the still unfinished godstone into his pocket and walked towards the valley on unsteady feet. Porek had also sat down as if his share of the godstone had made him drunk, but he was alert enough to notice Kai's strange behavior. He ordered his people to help him.

Kai brushed off their attempts to support him and said, "I'm going back."

He shook the koror off completely by using the last of his strength to run to the valley's edge where he made a calculated jump from the cliff. He intended to let the lake break his fall.

As his body sailed lightly through the air, he caught sight of Aruwe who had been left in tears at the bottom of the valley. She'd been crying against the god of the valley's grave.

While her people were being attacked, she hadn't tried to go to them. Instead, she's stayed there and prayed. Kai realized that she was sincere in her promise to serve him.

He wondered if she was someone he could put his faith in. He felt as though she was.

The lake caught him, and he struggled to put his racing thoughts in order as

he swam to the surface.

As the water dripped from his body, he began to feel as though there was no great difference between the beautiful scenery of the valley and the figure of the girl who was running towards him.

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“The hell is this? I need more.”

“Don’t give her a hard time.”

“I’ve been breaking my back all day. I can’t live on this. I need a little more at least.”

“I’m sorry... If we don’t reduce the servings there won’t be enough for everyone.”

The girl serving dinner had to bow her head and apologize each time a soldier asked for more.

Today’s dinner was half the usual amount of watery soup with some hard bread. Most of the soldiers ignored the little arguments that resulted.

Just like last year...

Kai’s squad had already gotten their food and was sitting at the table. Despite the favoritism the women had been showing him lately, even Kai was sitting with a half empty plate. The food situation in the village had really grown serious.

“How long’s that fucking toad going to stay in our village?”

“Till he’s done with his inspection or whatever.”

“I heard that the toad said he didn’t like the soup, and what we’re eating now are his leftovers, watered down. He doesn’t eat even half of the meals he gets given, but when they gave him less he went mad and slapped one of the girls waiting on him.”

“He’s not much nicer to the women they send him at night. You see them crying in the shadows sometimes.”

“...”

When guests who were used to the comforts of the capital visited the borderlands, they would often make demands without any care for the scarcity of food. This was especially true in recent times because the royal household's power over the region was fading, and their unreasonable requests were caused by their lack of confidence in their own authority.

The inspector and his party that were visiting this year were just as heartless as any other. The whole village was put at risk by their attempts to indulge a small number of people, and the situation had gone beyond a joke.

“Women...?”

“Do you even know what we're talking about, Kai?”

“Leave him alone. Kai's still a kid; he doesn't need to hear it.”

Kai's squadmates were all older than him, so they had a tendency to talk down to him. He knew that it was half in jest, but it was still more than he was willing to put up with.

“Just you wait until tomorrow,” Kai told them.

That made them go quiet.

“You guys are dead,” Manso said. “Nice knowing you.”

Manso was looking smug with his arms folded, and the other squad members couldn't help but smile. Then they started to laugh, and their shoulders shook as they tried to hold it in.

As unhappy as they were about the reduced amount of food, the soldiers accepted the situation for what it was. As far as the soldiers were concerned, the reduced quantity of food was something they would just have to endure until the next harvest. It was something they could deal with through individual stoicism.

The same could not be said for the women of the village. If they were to carry the child of a guest from another land, it would be nothing short of a disaster. All the more so if the guest was of such high social standing that they could treat women as objects to be used for their own pleasure. The women would

be cast aside and quickly forgotten.

There were herbal concoctions that could prevent a child from being born, but those came with lingering side effects. The women wanted to avoid carrying the child of any man who wasn't willing to stay with them as a lifetime partner.

There was an awkward look in the eyes of the girl who served Kai his food. Her eyes seemed to say, *please don't be suspicious, he hasn't touched me.*

The serving staff stood close to the baron's table, near the baron's children who received slightly better portions of food than soldiers. Lady White was there looking deep in troubled thought.

The baron, Olha, and the baron's wives were nowhere to be seen. They were all dining elsewhere together with the guests and were probably trying hard to win back their favor. One of the main reasons that Lady White was not dining with them was to keep her out of sight from the guests.

Few guests would be so bold as to ask for a lord's daughter to be sent to his chambers at night, but she still needed to be protected from them.

"Someone told me Lady White tried to argue with the inspector."

"I heard about that... you think it's true?"

"Well, Lady Carolina can't say no to the guests, so it was Lady White who stood up to them... Turns out the toad was asking for pure girls."

"Widows not good enough for him?"

There were many widows in the village whose husbands had died an early death. They were often selected for unpleasant duties because it was thought that the harm it caused them compared to other women was not as great. But there were many widows who would cry and protest despite the women's council leaving no room for argument when they made their selections.

Naturally, those women would have preferred to find themselves new husbands, and these unpleasant duties were damaging to their reputations.

"And we give thanks to the brave spirit of the land god..." Lady White started the prayer before the meal.

Her clear voice carried through the whole dining hall, and there was an

awkward feeling in the air as everyone recited the prayer with her.

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With the food situation in the village looking dire, the soldiers were assigned a new task. Everyone suspected that the order had been given as a means of quickly reducing the number of mouths to feed. The baron had announced that they would help with the survey being carried out by Truthseeker Nada, the priest staying in the village with the inspector's party.

"You'll be headed deep into the forest. People will be chosen by drawing straws."

No one relished the thought of visiting the forest's depths.

When humans faced demi-humans with superior physical strength, they compensated for this disadvantage by using group tactics, just barely making themselves a good match to their opponent. But group tactics weren't well suited for use in the forest.

This was one reason why humans rarely ventured deep into the forests, and would instead gather on cleared land, which they were better able to defend. The depths that could be reached within a single toki were the limits of ordinary human activity.

The leaders of 20 or so squads had gathered to draw straws made from narrow pieces of wood, some of which had colored tips. Kai's squad members were superior to most in terms of combat ability, but Kai was still an inexperienced leader, so he was the last to draw a straw.

Unsurprisingly, the final straw that was left for Kai resulted in his squad being selected with no room for argument. In reality, the pieces of wood used when drawing straws had been used so many times that some soldiers could tell which ones were the short straws just by looking. In effect, it provided an easy get-out for senior soldiers looking to avoid dangerous missions. The result was that the dangerous tasks would always fall upon the least experienced squad leaders.

The upside was that those being sent to perform dangerous work would receive slightly more generous servings at mealtimes, and there was always the possibility that they would find sources of food here and there in the forest. Nuts and fruits were in season, so there was a good chance that they could enjoy nuts, wild vegetables, and wild game rich with fat. Whether this benefit was worth it when weighed against the risk of dying in the depths depended on who you asked.

“Good news, lads. We’re going to have all the maca we can eat.”

It was Manso who broke the bad news when he saw that Kai was struggling to find the words. The rest of the squad must have half expected this outcome. They pretended to be pleased. Kai felt glad that they were his squadmates.

The squad noisily got their gear ready for the trip and put special attention into maintaining their weapons. They’d been urged to retire to their beds early to prepare for their departure the next morning, but the high chance of dying left everyone feeling tense, and no one wanted to sleep.

Manso told Kai to snatch up some food that they could take on the expedition, so he headed for the food stores. They would have been supplied with food the next morning without needing to ask, but they wanted to first pick the least rotten supplies and Manso said there was a chance of getting a little something extra.

That kind of knowledge was essential for any leader. There were already several visitors to the food stores beside the kitchen, and a large, redheaded woman was arguing with them angrily.

This redheaded woman was Adelia, a fierce woman who was considered one of the three highest-ranking members of the women’s council. She had been known to throw punches at adults and children alike in the name of discipline, and people knew to choose their words carefully around her. She was in charge of food in the village and was married to Basco, one of the highest-ranking soldiers.

“Three dried potatoes are all the extras you’re getting! Nothing more.”

“Give us something that’ll last longer! Ten at least!”

“I don’t think so. I’ve given you your fair share. If you don’t like it, well tough luck!”

“Hah... this old bitch...”

“You’ve got something to say?”

Adelia moved her ear closer to the man being rude, as if daring him to say it again. When he remained silent, she gave him a sharp head-butt and shouted, “Get lost! I’m done with you!”

Her control over the village food put her in a strong position. The scene had made everyone watching laugh.

Then Adelia noticed Kai.

She appeared to be thinking something over for a moment, but then she smiled as if she’d thought of something amusing and beckoned Kai over.

Kai didn’t dare do anything to upset her, so he hurried over. She beckoned him closer still and then whispered in his ear.

“There’re some dried potatoes in it for you if you can stick around and help us with our work here in the stores.”

“I’ve got things to—”

“Help us out, Kai. Go on, head on in.”

Kai was forced to help out without any chance to argue.

Kai’s rapid development had garnered a lot of attention, so everyone in the village knew how strong he was. He walked into the food stores expecting to be given some heavy sacks to carry. Inside were a number of girls who must have worked for Adelia, busy at work.

The moment they noticed Kai, they all came rushing over to him.

“This way.”

“Why...?”

“Just come this way!”

The food store room was quite spacious, but it was divided up into stalls like a

stable. Some of the stalls towards the rear were so dimly lit that it was hard to see.

Kai was led to a stall at the very back of the room. It was dark, but there were torches burning, so there was enough light to work in.

In the stall he found the girl who had once piled his plate high with food when serving him his dinner. Kai realized that it had been some time since he last saw her. When she looked up at Kai, there were tears streaming down her face.

Kai was surprised when she then threw her arms around him and held herself tightly to his chest.

The girl said nothing, so one of the girls who had led Kai spoke for her.

“Kai, Elsa needs you right now.”

“...”

Kai had no idea what that meant.

The softness of her body and her indescribable scent made him feel light-headed.

“Elsa was chosen,” the girl continued.

It took Kai a few moments to realize what that meant.

The girl’s grip on Kai’s clothing then tightened. Then everything made sense in Kai’s confused mind.

“You mean *he* wants her?”

It was so unexpected that Kai didn’t know how to react.

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Not this girl...

Kai remembered the horrible things he’d heard about the inspector wanting “pure girls.” It had felt like something unpleasant happening somewhere far away, but now the reality hit him like a slap in the face.

The warmth of the girl in his arms made the reality hard to ignore.

Kai turned when he heard the sound of soft footsteps approaching, and there he saw Adelia guiding the other women out of the food stores.

He wanted to ask why they'd forced her onto him, but before he could find the words, Adelia silenced him with an awkward wink before leaving the room.

Somehow, he knew that the wink had meant, "Take care of her."

Kai and the girl were left alone together in the storeroom late at night. The girl moved so she could look up at him. She was several years older than Kai, but Elsa's expression reminded him of a small, frightened child. Kai felt a strong urge to protect her.

"I want it to be you, Kai."

"..."

Until then, no member of the opposite sex had ever shown Kai affection so openly.

He was unsure how to react, but his instincts triggered passionate feelings. Rational thoughts vanished, and they followed their instincts as a man and a woman. The dizzying atmosphere of the room must have been prepared specially to make it happen.

Kai had been holding Elsa tight, unsure what he should do next. It was Elsa who took the lead.

Kai saw her face quickly move closer, and then their lips met. Then his legs gave way, and he landed awkwardly on his rear at the edge of the room.

Her body was entwined with his.

And then the two were one with the other in the darkness, in the clumsy fashion of two inexperienced lovers.

**

The expedition force left the village the next morning and headed for the forest.

The party was made up of Truthseeker Nada, who would lead the survey, together with the 20 soldiers of the four selected squads who were there to escort him. Many villagers turned out to see them off when they left the village, and Kai's squad were among those who looked back and waved to them many times.

"Something happened, didn't it?"

When Kai had returned to the barracks covered in dust, there wasn't a single man there who didn't immediately guess where he'd been.

Manso patted him on the back and asked, "How was it?"

In the end, none of them had gotten any sleep, so Kai was never given an opportunity to hide the evidence.

Manso was apparently "experienced" himself, and when he teased the other members of the squad they couldn't help but get angry at his taunts.

Regardless, Kai refused to tell them anything. Not just because it was embarrassing, but also because he felt he'd lose his sense of self-worth as a man if he brought shame on the girl.

"Will she be all right?"

"Yeah. She's probably fine now. Everyone said so."

If she'd wanted, Kai had been ready to fight with the loathsome inspector that very night. But she told him no. Kai's feelings were still eating away at him when he left the village with the deep forest expedition party as scheduled.

The women's council had promised to protect her, and they told him that the guest would lose interest in her now that she was Kai's. But Kai still couldn't help but be angry with himself for not doing more.

His focus now was on finishing their task so that he could return to the village. He decided that once he returned, he'd take the girl with him to the valley.

The closest edge of the forest was roughly one yuld from Lag.

The hooded priest spread out a piece of parchment that looked like a map and carefully adjusted the direction in which the party were headed. At first, it was the priest who walked in front, but that wasn't possible once they entered

the forest. Instead, the four squads surrounded him for protection.

Kai's squad was considered the most capable of the four, so they took the lead.

As the most skilled soldier in the expedition party, Kai's position was by the side of the priest. This meant that the priest spoke to Kai when he wanted someone to talk to, and he had many questions to ask about their destination and the forest. Kai was constantly annoyed by the priest's attempts to start a conversation.

"These scent bags smell quite awful, don't they?"

"We use them to hide our scents. It's best to wear them when you're in the forest."

"I see. The demi-humans must have a keen sense of smell. This smell of herbs makes our scent much more difficult to identify, I'm sure... But the smell really is quite awful."

"You just have to deal with it."

"I shall certainly try to do so... Now tell me, do the people of your village often enter this forest?"

"Yeah. But only people who know how to fight. And we never go this far in."

"Whereabouts would you say the macaques' area of activity begins? Would you say that they are the species we are most likely to encounter on this expedition?"

"Well, there're a lot of them around."

"I have had a brief encounter with them myself. They are rather aggressive, aren't they? The moment they saw us, they came charging over. Do they always approach humans with such hostility?"

"When we see each other, we kill each other. You don't take chances with macaques."

"I have heard that there are demi-humans who live in harmony with humans..."

“The koror, maybe.”

“These koror, do you suppose we might encounter them in this region?”

“ ... ”

“What other demi-humans have you encountered yourself?”

There was no end to his questions.

Even when Kai decided to start ignoring him, the priest continued talking for a long time, and only stopped when they spotted the first macaque.

In all likelihood, with such a large group so deep into the forest, the macaques had probably sensed the human presence and avoided approaching them carelessly. But now they were finally entering into an area that was true macaque territory.

“Will there be fighting now?”

“We’re just here to look around. We’ll avoid fights if we can.” Manso had started answering the priest’s questions after realizing that Kai was avoiding conversation.

If they were to start a fight here, they might kill several macaques, but then others would come seeking revenge.

For a while, they were followed by macaque scouts, but then they entered into marshland controlled by the lagarto and were able to shake them off.

The party trekked further into the forest and reached a region shrouded in fine mist that made their bodies shiver, where very few humans had ever ventured. What lay before them were the depths of the forest that demi-humans considered their garden.

The party were trying not to draw attention to themselves as long as they were in the forest, but they’d already seen several crude huts in the treetops that suggested there were macaque dwellings here. They also saw ash-covered clearings that looked like evidence of slash-and-burn farming.

It was common knowledge in this world that wherever there’s a village, there’s probably a land god, and probably a guardian bearer receiving that god’s blessings. All were left speechless to see signs of macaque activity so close

up and the obvious poverty in which they lived.

“Let us stop here for today,” the priest said.

Kai gave the order to start setting up camp using a simple hand gesture. The first day of the survey had come to an end.

They were setting up camp in macaque territory. They cut deep into a thicket where they'd be less noticeable and tried to make space for themselves to lie down. They all had nothing other than their cloaks to lie on, so no one was particularly comfortable. They couldn't light a fire. The smoke would have given them away.

“We've made good progress towards the destination. I expect we might reach it with just one more day of travel.”

“Two days one way? These depths aren't so hard to reach if you know how to use lagarto territory.”

Kai admired the unfamiliar forest scenery as he bit into hard baked bread.

It was the same old vegetation with many balen cedars, but the trees were so much bigger and there were many more creeping plants that grew low on the ground.

Someone tried picking and eating some of the thumb-sized berries that grew on the creeping vines and found they were actually edible and not so different from potatoes. This naturally led to all of the soldiers gathering up these berries for themselves.

The priest was normally very talkative, but now he had become quiet and meditative. Now and then, he seemed to come to his senses and he would write something on the map.

“Quite a large number have gathered...”

He wanted to tell his escorts more about the situation. He gathered up the soldiers who had nothing to do after their modest meal other than lie down, and he shared all the information he'd been able to gather that day, leaving nothing out.

He told them that roughly 1,000 macaques had gathered up ahead.

An equal number of another bulky species of demi-human had also gathered, as if they were preparing to fight them. Those were most likely orgs.

The priest had also looked at the area between the two armies and found what appeared to be the gravesite of a land god.

“The dwelling surrounding it was completely burned to the ground just yesterday. It was attacked by those pig-like demi-humans.”

“So they’re attacking macaque villages to steal from them?”

“That may be the case. Or perhaps not. What I can be certain of is that there have been many deaths on both sides. There were many souls lighting the path to Samsara.”

Demi-humans weren’t limited to attacks on humans.

Even in this area beyond human eyes, bloody battles would take place between other species. Humans were declining in number, but that problem wasn’t necessarily unique to humanity.

“I do wonder what type of land god these two species want so badly that they’re willing to accept so many deaths among their own kind.” The priest laughed to himself. “I must say I’m quite intrigued.”

Although the priest spoke calmly, the soldiers all caught a brief glimpse of something troubling within him that made them avert their eyes. No one doubted that the priest was mad.

Kai felt that only a madman would be willing to come to a place like this, but then he remembered and it made him think about how different his valley was. Unlike the other soldiers, Kai himself was in the habit of visiting a region controlled by demi-humans each night.

His thoughts then turned to the girl in the village, and he tried to imagine how her face would look when he took her to the valley. That thought made him restless.

Then he remembered that there was already another girl in the valley who he’d left to take care of it in his absence. “Ah,” he muttered to himself.

After reaching the end of a lagarto marshland, the party continued to walk in a straight line.

They were getting farther and farther away from the plains ruled by humans. The terrain was noticeably more treacherous, and they had to navigate mountains and valleys several times.

They climbed a rocky scree that had been blocking their view of the landscape beyond, and finally their view was unimpeded. At the edge of the forest there was a broad plain that very few humans could ever have laid eyes upon.

This was a fertile land unknown to humankind. For humans who lived in the plains, it was a comforting and familiar landscape, so much so they worried that they might have gotten turned around and approached the village once more.

The plain was uncultivated, and lonely trees could be seen growing here and there. They even spotted a small stream. It was enough to make a human clench their fists in frustration at the sight of this land going to waste at a time when food was so scarce.

And on this vast uncultivated land, there were countless demi-humans engaged in a chaotic battle. The fighting appeared to be at its peak.

The two species fighting were macaques and orgs. They screeched at one another and took each other's lives. Though the battle was happening far away, so much blood stained the soil that it was clear to see.

"How the hell do you expect to get through that?"

The priest had been calm and ready to rush straight through the chaos of the battlefield. He believed the enemy would be most careless while the fighting was at its peak, but as rational as he sounded, not a single soldier was convinced. The priest had strength comparable to a guardian bearer, and it was possible he might survive the battle, but any ordinary soldier would be massacred. Although the soldiers were ready to risk their lives, they weren't ready to let their lives be treated with such disregard.

"Well, this is quite a problem..." the priest said while scratching his head through the fabric of his hood.

Then, he used the power of his doi sigil in an attempt to charge toward the battlefield. It took every one of the soldiers to hold him back.

No one wanted to imagine the wrath they'd face from the baron if they were to abandon their responsibility to protect the priest after coming this far.

"Let's at least wait for the battle to end... Once the winning side starts hunting for survivors, we'll have a chance to slip through."

"Yes, let's wait for that!"

A fierce battle could never continue indefinitely.

Although they had to wait, the wait might be over after just a few toki if they were fortunate. And if not, Kai thought that they'd be wise to lie low and wait for a few days at least.

Hundred eyes is amazing...

This mysterious gravesite was probably dozens of yulds from Lag. The fact that the priest had found it from that distance suggested his eyesight was incredible.

Somewhat below them, they could see three towers made from sun-dried bricks, standing side-by-side. These short, round towers resembled upside-down bowls.

Scattered around the towers were the burnt remains of the settlement, and it was clear to everyone at a glance that these towers marked the gravesite they were looking for. It appeared that every species preferred to cover their gravesites with buildings.

There were several orgs standing guard around the towers as if they'd taken up positions to defend it. The settlement was occupied by the orgs while the macaques were attacking them in an attempt to take it back.

"Very well," the priest said. "We can watch the course of the battle for the next few toki and then sneak in when the time is right. As for who goes, we can't move quickly with too many people, so I'd like to take just Kai's squad."

The soldiers were assigned roles quickly and began to prepare in silence.

Everyone understood that their lives were on the line, and they quietly

accepted the fact that their lives were being used for the sake of a single priest's survey. They were unsure whether any of them would return to the village alive. After living through many situations in which they had killed and watched others be killed, something may have been broken inside all of them.

Kai quietly concentrated and listened for signs of life in the surroundings. He used as much of his power as he could without showing his kumadori, but he couldn't help but feel uneasy with the perceptive priest at his side.

The battle between macaques and orgs had finally been decided in favor of the orgs, the macaques had begun to scatter, and the orgs had naturally transitioned to hunting for surviving macaques.

The orgs were led by a massive armored soldier whose body shook with each quick movement it made. It ran with power that seemed to mismatch its heavy body as it chased down and killed macaques. A terrible reddish black snout was visible beneath its large horned helmet.

The armored soldier was very clearly a guardian bearer. And it was clear that this soldier was far more powerful than an ordinary guardian bearer.

A single word came to Kai's mind.

Rigdaros... Maybe he's one of them.

Although it was far away, this soldier clearly looked like a worthy commander of an army of 1,000.

The only human in the borderlands capable of gathering so many soldiers was Count Balta. It seemed reasonable to expect that this was a similarly strong guardian bearer with equal authority.

The excited orgs were relentlessly chasing down every last one of the fleeing macaques to claim their godstones. The hunt for godstones was a standard part of any battle. It meant that the soldiers pursuing the losers had no reason to let their enemy escape. The same had been true for the org soldier that chased Kai to the edge of the valley. Every species hungered for godstones and the growth they caused.

They didn't have to wait long before almost all signs of life were gone from the battlefield.

The priest was blessed with good luck.

“Let us make haste,” he said.

The priest began to run, and Kai and his squad followed.

“Godspeed.”

“Don’t get yourselves killed!”

The other soldiers wished them luck as they set out.

Although those soldiers were staying behind, they had been given the task of supporting Kai and the others if they needed to retreat, which was a dangerous task in itself. They needed to secure their path of retreat and if necessary, provide a diversion to draw the enemy away. They had no guardian bearer with them, so they may have been the ones in the greatest danger.

Kai and the others ran out from the forest and used the landscape as cover so that they could move toward the settlement without the org soldiers noticing them. The orgs’ hunger for macaque godstones was so great that it left them unconscious of their surroundings.

A single org did notice them, but the priest leaped at it quickly while it was feeding and broke its neck with his staff before it could make a sound.

When the human soldiers hesitated for a moment to consider taking its godstone, the priest scolded them and urged them to keep moving. He advised them that the task at hand was more important and that death awaits those whose greed prevents them from seeing beyond what lies at their feet.

Then they came to a place where they could see the land around the brick towers that they’d seen earlier. Up close, it looked similar to the monastery in Lag. There were incense burners that looked fitting for a temple and beside them was a wooden door leading into a tower.

The wooden door had been left wide open. Needless to say, there were guards standing by the entrance on the lookout for would-be intruders.

At the feet of the guards lay several bodies that must have belonged to the residents of this dwelling. Strewn across the ground were the corpses of deer-like demi-humans with horns like tree branches growing from their heads.

Although Kai had never seen them before, he knew these were uzelle, a species just as rare as the koror.

The copious amounts of blood pooled around the corpses suggested that their godstones had already been extracted. Their horns were highly prized among humans as ingredients for healing remedies, but those had been left as if they had no significance to the org soldiers.

Kai and the others studied the area and stayed alert for any signs of enemy approach. Then the priest, with power equivalent to a guardian bearer, charged at the org guards.

The first was probably dead before it knew what was happening. The priest extracted a hidden blade from the top of the staff that he used like a cane while walking. The blade pierced straight through the guard's brainstem.

The group tactics that followed were as natural to the soldiers as breathing. Kai and the others had leaped from the shadows the moment the first guard fell. This drew the attention of the other guards and left them unable to deal with the priest who emerged from behind the collapsing body of the guard he'd just killed.

A great shudder ran through the second guard's body as the blade entered from below its jaw and pierced through to its brain, and then the org's back hit the wall as it collapsed.

The priest was deadly.

Kai had no time to be awestruck if he wanted to keep up with the priest advancing into the tower.

Inside the tower there was a pungent smell of blood and entrails. The tower had no windows to provide ventilation, so the strange stink of the dead lingered.

Everyone followed the priest deeper into the darkness while holding their noses.

"Fire, I call upon you," the priest muttered, causing a blue flame to appear above his hand.

This was undoubtedly the same fire magic that Kai used himself.

The priest didn't seem to notice that Kai was watching him closely. He took a small booklet from his pocket and began to read the engraved words that were in front of him.

At first, Kai wondered why the priest needed to go to the trouble of using the booklet, but then he remembered that this priest wasn't a guardian bearer. If he'd been blessed by a land god, he probably could have read the inscription on the grave simply by touching it with his finger.

Kai managed to touch the inscription with his finger while the priest was still examining it.

As expected, the text on the front was a jumble of words that Kai couldn't understand. He tried moving to the rear of the grave instead and there he found a short piece of text.

I am Nazelkazeel.

That was the entirety of the inscription.

There were no names of gods that this god served. This god must have existed in this land in isolation.

Kai checked that no one was watching him and then he softly put his hands together. With the land in chaos, this god must have been weakened. He felt sincere pity for the god.

Then he felt some sort of presence.

Kai looked up, thinking he heard the priest walking towards him. That wasn't surprising. If he simply wanted to know the name of the grave's owner it was quickest to read the rear face.

Kai didn't realize that those footsteps were too soft to be those of the priest.

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As Kai moved toward the rest of the group, he pretended to be searching the area so that the priest wouldn't notice that he'd been reading the inscription.

Huh...?

Something seemed wrong, but rather than dwell on it further, he strained to hear the priest's muttering.

"It seems the land god who lies in this grave is named Nazelkazeel. The monastery has developed means for deciphering these inscriptions. It would appear that the guardian bearer blessed by this god still lives. It is an ancient, founding god, but alas, this is not the god spoken of in the prophecy."

The priest had deliberately spoken his thoughts aloud for the soldiers to hear. Now that he knew this was not the gravesite he was looking for, he made his next decision quickly.

The party moved toward the exit with the priest leading the way. They had spent roughly a quarter of a toki by the gravesite, and the org forces were likely to return before long.

Their only wish now was for a swift return home. In their haste, they made enough noise to attract the attention of some org soldiers, but they concentrated on running and hoped to shake them off.

Now that they knew the uzelle guardian bearer was still alive, the gravesite was not so important. It explained why it hadn't been well secured. Kai simply saw this as good luck.

They hid themselves in the undergrowth at the edge of the forest and met up with the other soldiers. The group of humans then hastily set out on the return journey. Their first task was to reach the safe zone provided by the lagarto marshland, and they hurried there frantically without looking back.

The party crossed through the marshes and over rivers, hoping that the lagarto marshland had obscured their tracks, and they made it back to the macaque-controlled region of the forest in just over half a day.

The battle between two demi-human species had drawn the macaque forces out of the forest, making it likely that this was a safe place for the time being. This was where they finally rested and made preparations to set up camp. Night had already fallen, and their surroundings were dark.

"Some of our party haven't caught up yet."

“Ganz and El aren’t with us.”

In a world where godstones could be harvested to increase one’s power, physical ability varied greatly between individuals. While they waited, the slower soldiers gradually caught up, but it had been some time since the last soldier had arrived, and there were still two others missing.

The soldiers from Lag were silently exchanging glances, and it was the four squad leaders who gathered together to talk where the priest couldn’t see them.

Naturally they were talking about sending someone out to search for the missing men. The squad that the missing men belonged to was led by a soldier named Carick.

“My squad’s going to go look for them,” Carick said apologetically while rubbing at his hairy arms. “I know it’s asking a lot, but we need more men with us.”

The priest knew that the soldiers were having this discussion, but he pretended not to notice. Although the priest was the most powerful fighter of the group, it made no sense for the soldiers to ask for help from the person they were there to protect.

“I’ll go...”

Kai was the first to volunteer. Two other soldiers, each from different squads, were also chosen.

Carick smiled with relief when he heard that they’d be joined by Kai, the highest-ranking soldier. “I owe you one,” he told Kai with a nod of his head. The nervous-looking soldiers who would guard the rear also nodded to one another and began making preparations to set out.

Kai returned to his squadmates and told Manso to take care of things while he was gone. Kai then collected up his belongings. His squadmates were sitting on the ground exhausted.

“I don’t know how you’re not tired,” Manso said with a wry smile. “Good luck.”

The two bumped fists. "We're lucky," Manso said. "It's a bright night."

Kai looked up at the sky.

There wasn't a single cloud in the night sky, and the stars were shining like a million jewels. The brightest body in the sky, Ispi Rio, shone brightly above his head.

The giant body known as the moon didn't exist in this world. The nights were lightest when Ispi Rio was shining overhead.

It's so much like the Milky Way, Kai thought absentmindedly.

It was a strange feeling when the knowledge drawn from his previous life was slightly off the mark.

The lights in the river of souls would slowly move together with the flow of the whole. One way it differed from his past life memories was that these shining jewels overhead were not exactly stars. The constellations that appeared in the night sky of this world were slowly and continuously changing as if floating on water.

It was a beautiful scene, and Kai felt as though his soul was being drawn in as he stared into it. But he looked away from it with a wave of his hand. He had never seen the night sky as bright as it was tonight.

"Let's go."

Kai and the rest of the search party headed back the way they came.

With just over a toki having gone by after leaving the camp ground, they had traveled back a long way.

They'd spent the entire day running, so the members of the party were fatigued and walked with heavy footsteps. With the journey back to camp still to consider, Kai and everyone else were no doubt wondering if they were approaching their limit. But Carick's squad weren't going to say anything because it would mean giving up on their squadmates, and the search continued.

As usual, there was no sign of lagarto in the lagarto territory, but they found

danger waiting in the territory just beyond that, which was now controlled by the orgs.

The orgs had formed a group that was hunting through the mountains.

Kai and the others hid in the grass at the edge of the lagarto territory and watched the org hunters, who were communicating using their inhuman voices.

Carick and his squadmates gulped and broke into a cold sweat. The situation looked bleak for the missing soldiers.

All of the humans, Kai included, jumped to the conclusion that the orgs were there to search for the humans they'd sighted. It was easy to imagine how the hunters might have been enraged after returning to the gravesite and finding that outsiders had tried to defile it.

"Looks like the search ends here."

"But Ganz and El..."

"We shouldn't have to die just because they're both too slow. I say we head back. Anyone who says otherwise can go on without me."

"Wait, there's one pointing this way," someone whispered, causing the others to instinctively get ready to run.

Even though they were hidden in lagarto territory, the orgs could choose to trespass there for a little while just as easily.

Then things went from bad to worse. At the worst possible timing, they heard shouting that sounded like a human voice from within the forest.

Realizing that the two soldiers were still alive, Carick and his two squadmates broke away from the rest of the party.

"That's them!"

"Wait!"

"Forget about them!"

Kai and the others couldn't stop Carick and his squadmates from running out toward the voices they'd heard. The shouting had given away their position to the enemy. The nearby orgs were already gathering together and heading in

their direction.

Kai gritted his teeth.

He knew that if he wanted to, he could drive away a few orgs no problem. But he didn't want to do it if it meant revealing to everyone that he was a guardian bearer.

Maybe I'm heartless...

If he was ready to give up on his current life, he could save everyone. But there'd be no place for him in the village afterward. These men were fellow soldiers, but they weren't close friends, and he had to ask himself whether he was willing to throw away his current lifestyle to save them from a mess of their own making. The answer was a definite no. He wasn't willing to give up so much for the sake of two soldiers from another squad, or for Carick and the others who'd just ran out.

"Let's get out of here."

"Forget those idiots."

Kai got ready to run while thinking about which direction the other two soldiers were likely to head off in.

The gathering of orgs headed straight for Carick and the other two careless soldiers, and the remains of the three of them were unrecognizable just a few moments later. Their screams stopped just a few moments after they'd started.

Human lives were fragile. The orgs began to fight over the godstones of Carick and the other two, reducing the number of orgs heading in Kai's direction.

"Don't go..."

"Help us!"

The slow soldiers who'd caused Carick and the others to die were still shouting from some distance away, but no one paid them any attention.

Kai and the two soldiers with him were all chosen for their physical fitness. They ran as fast as they could without looking back, believing that they'd survive somehow if they just kept going. But then something unexpected happened.

The orgs began to call for more of their kind with high-pitched cries, and within an instant something came flying toward Kai and the others before colliding with a tree on their path to escape.

The object embedded itself deep into the middle of the tree trunk with a sound that caused the soldiers to stop and cower. It was one of the familiar iron axes that orgs would often carry.

“...”

Then the undergrowth in front of the three frozen soldiers parted, and there appeared a massive figure that towered above them.

No one knew how long it had been there. No one knew how it had gotten there.

As it moved, its armor made grinding sounds and shone with the reflected faint light of the night sky.

The guardian bearer!

It was the massive armored org that had led the orgish army.

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Kai stared dumbstruck at the armored soldier that stood in their path.

It was easily three yules tall. It was more than a head taller than an ordinary org.

Its mass wasn't ordinary either. They had never seen a muscular org before, but this stout armored soldier looked to be hiding great amounts of muscle beneath its skin, rather than fat.

The proof was in the fact that every time the armored soldier took a step, the thick, exposed skin of its arms and legs would shake, and broad, vine-like muscle tissue would be visible for just a moment deep within.

The armored org effortlessly pulled the axe from out of the tree and used it to point in the direction of the humans.

Its strained cry was much deeper than the cries of other orgs. It may have said

something to them in orgish, but Kai and the others had no way of knowing.

Maybe this one can speak the human tongue too, thought Kai.

Demi-humans were more intelligent than he'd once thought. He'd heard of negotiations happening between humans and certain types of demi-humans in the west, and Kai's experience suggested that all of those negotiations were carried out in the human tongue. Humans were an important species that ruled over vast territories, so the demi-humans in neighboring territories must have been forced to learn their language, but Kai had never encountered a human who could understand the words of the demi-humans around them. He wondered if creatures able to learn the language of other species might actually be more intelligent than humans.

But the armored soldier said nothing in the human tongue. Instead, it regarded the humans as mere foot soldiers who weren't worth the time.

It was as if it had stumbled across some weak creatures while moving through the forest and had decided to kill them for fun. The armored soldier's first act was to swing its weapon straight down at the humans to see how they reacted.

"Spread out."

If the guardian bearer had come at them seriously, they'd have had little chance to dodge its attack. The org was reddish black, like the color of inflamed skin, and it hadn't yet shown its kumadori. It was obvious that it saw no need to get serious.

Its first target was the soldier named Chito, who had been running ahead of the others. He was a quick-witted man, more skilled with knives and short spears than with the long spear. He acted more or less instinctively. Times like these were the only times that the soldiers benefited from having watched those training bouts where the baron demonstrated how a guardian bearer fights.

He raised his short spear in time and its handle slid across the blade allowing him to just barely escape that first attack. But the incredible strength of the armored soldier was more than Chito could withstand. The wrist of the hand that held the spear was now bent at an unnatural angle.

Chito quickly realized that he'd just lost the ability to fight. He dropped to the ground and rolled out of the path of the armored soldier. At this point, the other soldier, Nail, was alone and fleeing the scene as quickly as he could. His back could be seen bobbing up and down as he ran through the grass.

Kai wanted to run off just as badly, but he knew that the armored soldier could catch up easily if he simply ran, so he needed to think of something that would give him a better chance of survival.

If we just scatter in all directions like always, we won't get far enough away without doing something to buy more time.

When human soldiers encountered an enemy beyond their abilities, this was always the way that they'd attempt to escape. To ensure that the maximum number of soldiers would survive, everyone would signal which direction they'd head off in, and then they'd spread out 360 degrees like a firework exploding.

They'd been taught that regardless of how fast the pursuer could move, it would take them more than three times as long to catch two targets running in opposite directions, and about ten times as long to catch three targets.

In this case, there were three people.

Nail was already running.

Chito had noticed this, and was running in the opposite direction.

If Kai followed their example and ran, he would be able to keep running for about ten times longer than the first person to get caught, if he was lucky. With his life in peril, time that could be spent putting distance between himself and the org was incredibly valuable.

But that was wisdom that applied to someone facing defeat in the face of an overwhelmingly more powerful soldier with no means to fight back.

I don't want to run...

Kai's chest filled up with emotion.

He looked at the armored org and then assessed the situation around him. In this situation, Kai would somehow have to get behind the armored soldier. Behind his enemy lay the sprawling marshlands of the lagarto territory.

If there were a way to leap over the soldier, the shortest path to escape would be found behind its back. Chito and Nail had run to the left and right of the armored soldier, which meant they couldn't escape into the forest.

It's off its guard right now.

It made Kai want to deal a decisive blow, crushing his opponent with the first attack.

Similarly to Chito, the weapon Kai was holding was the same short spear that the village gave to all soldiers. He was left behind, pretending to shake with fear and retreating while pointing his trembling spearhead toward the enemy.

Now that he could see the armor close-up, he noticed it was stained a reddish black with the blood of the soldier's enemies. The breastplate and torso section appeared to have been forged from iron and were bound together by cords made from tanned hide. The pelt of some creature was wrapped around its waist, but that had become stiff with the hardened patches of blood that covered it.

The armored soldier grunted and watched Chito and Nail as they ran in opposite directions.

Kai realized that his opponent's attention was distracted and began turning his back to it to show that he was also about to run. It was a glaring invitation.

The armored soldier came at him with its axe in a heartbeat. The strike would have shattered his skull if it had hit, but it was such a straightforward swing that it left the org wide open.

Now!

Kai continued to turn and in an instant he'd turned a full circle, leaving him facing his enemy once again. Though the enemy was a guardian bearer, its attack was half-hearted and easy for another guardian bearer to follow.

Kai kept his eyes wide and followed the movement of the attack with his keen vision to determine the trajectory of the axe. He then moved forward while thrusting out his short spear. The areas that were vulnerable to attack by short spear were small, so Kai needed to get in close. He slipped past the axe while watching it in the side of his vision and considered his actions calmly during this

crucial moment.

Tanned hide provided surprisingly tough protection, so the joints of the armor were no good. He had to aim for exposed skin. The face, below the jaw, the armpits, the thighs, or the wrists. If he was feeling greedy, he'd go for the face or below the jaw, but that might fail if he'd underestimated the armored soldier's ability to dodge.

The gap between the two fighters disappeared in an instant that felt longer due to Kai's well-honed nerves.

Kai knew that the armored soldier was caught off guard by his sudden leap forward.

You're mine!

He immediately gave up on the idea of attacking the head when the org held out its left arm, which was as thick as a tree trunk, to defend itself. Instead, he drove his short spear into its inner thigh where enough flesh was exposed for him to thrust at with confidence. But despite his confidence, Kai was hit from the side and sent flying.

His vision shook violently.

He rolled through the grass, turning somersaults and watching the sky spin through his vision. There was blood at the back of his nose, and it felt hot as it spread to his throat.

For a moment, Kai couldn't understand what had just happened.

Then in the corner of his vision he caught sight of the axe flying off in an unexpected direction and he noticed that the empty right hand of the armored soldier was balled into a fist.

Now he realized that the armored soldier had been unable to stop the axe and had simply released it into the air before striking Kai with its empty right fist. Kai found it hard to believe that his opponent could have such reflexes.

The shrill cry of the armored soldier filled the air. Although Kai didn't understand the words, he felt the malice coming from the armored soldier. The fact that Kai was a guardian bearer had now been given away.

Kai climbed to his feet amid the grass and brushed away the dirt from his clothing. Besides a bloodied nose, his body seemed to be more or less undamaged.

In terms of toughness, Kai's body too was beyond any ordinary human.

"You might be pretty strong."

Kai blocked one nostril with his hand and blew blood from the other.

"***"

"I've got no idea what you just said, but let me tell you, I'm pretty strong too."

Kai hadn't been able to cause any damage to the armored soldier's body with his first attack, but he had caused his enemy to lose its weapon.

Even guardian bearers lost much of their offensive capability when they were unarmed. In a fight between two guardian bearers, it was difficult for one to make the other yield without a weapon, because both would have such tough skin.

Kai's kumadori started to appear on his face.

When the armored soldier saw the unusual sigil that was showing on Kai's face, it fell silent for a moment.

Kai somehow knew that this huge, reddish-black org soldier was familiar with the god of the valley. The sigil that began to appear on its snout was pure black.

The org's sigil was one of the most intricate Kai had ever seen. It was even more detailed than that of Moloch Vezin, Lag's baron. The baron was a quarto sigil, which meant that this armored soldier had to be a cinquesta sigil, or perhaps something even higher.

"You're insanely strong, aren't you?"

"..."

"Are you part of that Rigdaros thing?"

The armored soldier was clearly affected by Kai's question. It moved as if correcting its posture to show Kai respect after recognizing him as a worthy opponent. The mouth beneath its large snout opened wide, and it laughed as if

pleased down to its core. Its unusually large canine teeth gave it the appearance of a dangerous predator.

“Now I see... *He* has died.”

Its laughter seemed to shake the ground beneath Kai’s feet.

When it was done laughing, the armored soldier stared piercingly at Kai.

“You grow weak, valley god.”

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Kai felt he was being mocked. It triggered a feeling of heat deep within his heart.

“I’m new to all this.”

Even if he hadn’t said it, it was obvious enough that he was inexperienced as a guardian bearer.

Kai felt as though his god from the valley was watching to see how he reacted. His god wouldn’t allow him to walk away from this fight in disgrace.

“Do you think you’re actually stronger than me?”

Kai watched his opponent’s movements closely as he tried to think of some way he might win. In terms of power as a guardian bearer, it was definitely possible that Kai was actually inferior because of his lack of experience.

Kai knew just by looking at the sigil on the armored soldier’s face that his opponent was fairly high-level. Deep down, Kai believed that he was capable of winning against an opponent stronger than the baron, but he had never actually tried fighting seriously against the baron because of his self-imposed restrictions.

The one thing that was surely in Kai’s favor right now was the fact that his opponent was unarmed, and there was also the possibility of surprising it with magic.

He tightened his grip on his spear and focused his thoughts on this dependable weapon.

The thing that made his spear such a strong weapon was its sharp iron spearhead. Iron was hard. The flesh of living creatures, however, was soft. Based on this easily-understood principle, iron could be used to cut through flesh.

Even the flesh of the guardian bearer standing before Kai was probably softer than iron. Or maybe not. Without actually putting it to the test, it was impossible to say for sure. Kai knew from the way his own skin felt to the touch that it didn't feel any different from the skin of an ordinary human. It had left him wondering how the bodies of guardian bearers could be unusually tough.

The armored soldier was unarmed, so it simply waited. Kai began to move using the circle footwork of Zula-ryu, and the armored soldier began rotating to face him. As Kai's position constantly changed, the armored soldier had to constantly move with him, preventing it from relaxing. One of the most fundamental principles of circle footwork was exploitation of the opening created when the opponent was forced to move their feet.

Kai aimed a quick thrust at the tip of the armored soldier's jaw.

If that was enough to cause his opponent to move its upper body backward, its posture would break when it let its center of mass shift.

But the armored soldier easily brushed the spearpoint away using the iron plate covering the back of its hand, and its center of mass remained firm and unyielding.

Kai made several attempts before accepting that cheap tricks wouldn't be enough to create an opening.

Kai held his breath and looked for another opening as their fight and its circular motion continued. While watching the movement of his opponent's feet, he tried to follow the rhythm of its breathing and then tried to match his own breathing to it. Doing this allowed him to influence his opponent through the natural entrainment phenomenon it caused. Then Kai abruptly switched from circular to linear movement. This was a means of deception developed by the mercenary Zula, the creator of this form of martial arts. The knack was to continue the circular footwork with one's eyes only, tricking the opponent.

As Kai suddenly moved closer, the armored soldier stepped forward itself,

unfazed. It used the plate of armor on its right hand to brush away Kai's charging thrust with devastating skill, and simultaneously it roared as it attacked with its clenched left fist.

Kai felt an instinctive sense of fear as its fist approached, carrying death with it. But still, he couldn't imagine a single fist being enough to deal a fatal blow to a guardian bearer's toughened body. Kai was ready to exchange blows, but his first priority was to find out how effective the iron weapon in his hand was against a guardian bearer.

Kai's eyes followed the movement of the approaching fist closely. All of his physical abilities were remarkably enhanced thanks to being a guardian bearer, but the enhancement to Kai's vision that his blessings gave him was exceptional. That said, Kai had no way to objectively compare his vision to that of anyone else.

He put his strength into his forward leg. His entire body leaned forward and then he pushed off, causing his foot to dig into the ground. His speed increased along with his degree of forward incline, and the fist grazed the side of Kai's face and his hair as it traveled past his head.

His target was his opponent's large stomach.

There were fine gaps in the defense provided by the armor where the pieces of hide between the plates were sewn together. Kai suddenly realized what living creature those blood-soaked pieces of hide had been collected from. This foul species delighted in the torture of women and children. Although he had no evidence to prove it, Kai felt sure that this hide was tanned human skin.

The spearhead found its way into one of the gaps.

As expected, even with the power of his reckless charge behind it, the spear met resistance. He could feel the skin of the armored soldier holding back his weapon.

I'm not done yet!

Kai clenched his right fist and slammed it into the metal butt of his short spear. The extra force was transmitted down the spear handle, and the moment it reached the spearhead, the spear suddenly felt as though it was

penetrating something soft, as if it had broken through a hard shell.

The body of a guardian bearer was softer than iron. That answered one question.

“****!” The armored soldier howled.

The short spear broke from Kai’s grasp and was left protruding from the stomach of the armored soldier. Kai was confident that he’d damaged its intestines. But he’d also been careless.

There was an explosion of heat within Kai’s stomach. The burning sensation filled him first, and then came the pain.

The armored soldier hadn’t so much as flinched in response to its injury. Instead, it had knocked Kai back with a front kick using the sole of its foot. The toes of its lace-up boots must have contained iron parts that had pierced the area below Kai’s ribs.

The armored soldier had never been unarmed.

Kai briefly flew through the air and then hit the grassy ground rolling before his back slammed against the rough roots of a balen cedar tree, bringing him to a stop. All of the air in his lungs was expelled at once, and he was left unable to move. Before he could even inhale again, bloody vomit erupted from his mouth.

It hurts!

It hurts! It really hurts!

When he was done vomiting, he was finally able to fill his lungs with air once more.

He felt as though his internal organs were all out of place. As Kai lay on the ground curled up and trying to endure the heavy, pulsating pain in his guts, the armored soldier approached with its gaze fixed on Kai. It paid no attention to the spear that was still embedded in its stomach.

Is this thing immortal? No... it must feel pain.

Just like Kai, the creature was nothing more than a guardian bearer. The fine layer of skin that covered its body was comparable to iron, but not the rest.

Skin was the toughest part of the body besides bones, and the divine will of the land god could reinforce it beyond ordinary levels, which was one reason that guardian bearers were so robust. Beneath that skin, the flesh and blood were not so hard.

Kai could guess that since bones were harder than skin, those probably became harder than iron. The bones of a guardian bearer were unlikely to break easily.

Kai rolled away from the sound of approaching footsteps and clenched his teeth as he tried to rise. The waves of pain were becoming further apart.

The internal organs of a guardian bearer were not so hard, but they were still more durable than common sense would suggest. The pain was not enough to leave Kai paralyzed, and he was gradually healing. His body's ability to recover to its original state was beyond what was normal.

Kai's questions about guardian bearer's bodies were all now more or less answered.

To reliably kill an opponent, it was necessary to deliver fatal wounds quickly enough to outpace their healing abilities. For example, just a few days ago, he'd been able to kill the org guardian bearer attacking the koror settlement with a single blow. Destroying the heart, which was essential for supporting life, was no doubt the most efficient and reliable method for killing a guardian bearer.

The armored soldier finally plucked the short spear from its stomach and angrily cast it aside. It was likely that it hadn't removed it immediately because it had been waiting for its recovery ability as a guardian bearer to reduce the size of its internal wounds.

Kai somehow got to his feet while praying that his own recovery would happen fast enough to keep pace.

The armored soldier also understood how this battle between guardian bearers needed to be fought. Put simply, it would be a mistake to give the opponent a chance to recover.

Kai's last hope was his knife, but no sooner than he drew it, a series of blows from the armored soldier effortlessly sent it flying from his hand. Kai was left

unarmed, and the armored soldier continued to deliver blow after blow, making it so that Kai couldn't afford to let himself be knocked off his feet and he had no way to retreat. Then its huge hand grabbed Kai by his neck.

As a guardian bearer, Kai's neck bones were harder than iron, but the armored soldier must have thought it could snap them in two with the power of its grip. Or perhaps it just intended to strangle him to death.

No matter how strong someone was, or how powerful their guardian, breathing was always a fundamental necessity for maintaining life.

The tissues in his neck were gradually being destroyed.

Kai knew this would kill him before long.

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Kai needed to think of something. He needed some way to fight back against this enemy whose strength was far beyond his own.

The cells of his brain were screaming as their oxygen supply was cut off. Kai was barely conscious as he brought his hand up to touch the wrist of the armored soldier that was choking him.

Scratching at the hand with his fingernails did nothing to loosen its iron grip.

It's not over. There's one thing I didn't try.

Even as he was being strangled with his airways cut off, the channels for his spiritual energy were still connected to the godstone in his chest as always.

Iron could destroy a guardian bearer's flesh because it was harder than the protection offered by a land god. The unanswered question was what would happen if he used a power that didn't follow the world's natural laws.

I'll roast you...

The godstone in his chest filled with heat. The heat moved with Kai's will and began to gather in his hands, which were clinging to his opponent's wrist. Then he unleashed his power.

“***!” The armored soldier's reaction was dramatic.

Kai's hands were suddenly coated by blue flames, and their heat burned at the hands that were clutching him and trying to kill him.

Fire magic. An otherworldly flame that burned persistently, even underwater.

“**”

“*****”

Kai hadn't expected to hear the shouting around him.

At some point, a great number of orgs had gathered to watch the fight between two guardian bearers. Kai had no way to express his annoyance at having gathered a crowd as he poured more spiritual energy into his fire magic.

Kai could feel the heat of the flames burning near him, but the sensation must have been limited because he was the one controlling the magic. This was the fire magic that had generated enough heat to boil a bucket of water in an instant; it was beyond what the tough skin tissue of the armored soldier could withstand, even with a god to offer it protection.

Meat would always be meat. Once exposed to a flame, those tissues would soon start turning into lumps of protein. The armored soldier's wrist was a region where the flesh was at its most thin. The heat concentrated in that area was so great that the tendons were instantly reduced to ash, causing the armored soldier to squeal and to throw Kai's body away from itself.

As the armored soldier stepped backwards, its pose was a strange one. Its wrists appeared to be bound together, as if it was a prisoner in shackles. The intensity of the flame must have fused together the flesh at both of its wrists.

After briefly examining its wounds, the armored soldier forcefully ripped its wrists apart. Pieces of loose skin were left hanging and fluttering in the wind.

“How'd you... like that...?”

Kai had been released, but he still couldn't stand up. His breathing was coarse, and he coughed many times. He looked up to see a drooling face glaring down at him.

It looked as though burning with fire was a highly-effective weapon against guardian bearers.

The reason that Kai had been willing to take on the armored soldier despite knowing it was stronger wasn't because he held the short spear. He'd never put his faith in a weak weapon used by human foot soldiers. He'd stood his ground because he knew he could use magic if he needed.

But Kai still didn't fully understand everything about guardian bearers. He'd received the blessings of the land god so suddenly that he'd never had the chance to learn from anyone with more experience. In some respects, ignorance had made him arrogant. Even when facing the armored soldier, this powerful warrior who had earned the title of Rigdaros, Kai had felt confident that it could do little to harm him.

"Curses...?"

It seemed that orcs referred to magic as curses.

Kai had done nothing more than channel his spiritual energy. Orcs were an intelligent species, so Kai should never have expected his magic to be unknown to them. His lack of knowledge was a persistent problem.

His fire magic had appeared to be highly effective against another guardian bearer, so Kai still felt sure he had the upper hand. But his illusions were about to be shattered.

Kai had allowed the flames to continue burning visibly around his hands as if trying to show off his advantage, but the armored soldier just looked at him and laughed mockingly.

It checked that its fingers were beginning to recover, and then it lumbered closer to Kai.

"You rely on curses? Pathetic."

Perhaps it was his imagination, but Kai could feel an overwhelmingly strong aura of hate coming from the armored soldier. Kai thought it must be the hate that fills someone fighting with another for their very life.

Just as Kai was climbing to his feet and feeling as though victory was within his grasp, the armored soldier came running at him to deliver a kick intended to make him lose any hope he had left.

There was no particular cleverness to it, it was a plain old kick, but it was a kick that came at him like a storm, with enough power to take the life of an ordinary person.

I'm not done roasting you.

Kai steadied his breathing and smiled slightly as he positioned himself ready for the kick. He had to catch the org's leg and burn it. That was his only thought.

He grabbed the iron-capped toe of the lace-up boot with both hands and channeled as much spiritual energy into it at once as possible in an attempt to burn away its leg completely. Kai had no trouble following the movement of the kick with his eyes and was able to grab its leg tightly.

He unleashed his fire magic with greater ferocity than ever before.

"Guh..."

The intensified fire magic created a roar as it consumed the armored soldier's leg.

At first Kai felt triumphant, but then his body was scooped off the ground and launched high in the air. That was when the realization hit him.

The leg had slipped from his grasp. When he caught sight of his enemy's leg, he found it completely unharmed.

The protection offered to a guardian bearer was controlled by the will of a land god. That power wasn't something that came from the guardian bearer themselves.

"My god's spirit is always inside," the armored soldier said while pounding its chest with its fist.

It opened its mouth wide and laughed loudly at Kai's inexperience.

"What gods give us... we vessels must protect."

Kai was wide-eyed in shock.

The armored soldier was essentially saying that it was unharmed by the fire magic thanks to the protection that its god had provided against it. When the guardian bearer, the vessel, was at risk of dying, the god would respond by

offering new protection that might nullify the threat faced by its vessel. The armored soldier's god had realized that Kai's fire magic posed a grave threat and had given a new form of protection to the armored soldier so it could withstand heat.

Though still in shock, Kai managed to orient himself in midair and he landed gracefully.

The only time magic would be effective was during that first strike when it might surprise the opponent.

No, not even then...

As Kai struggled to make sense of it all, he realized that his reasoning was still naive. Even the first strike wasn't necessarily going to succeed. Once it was clear that the opponent was a magic user, even that first strike might not work. Kai had made a huge blunder by revealing his secret. If a god could immediately provide resistance to their hosts, then it was the height of foolishness to have faith in such cheap tricks.

This was the main reason why guardian bearers rarely used magic. Rather than wasting spiritual energy on magic that was unlikely to be effective, it was easier to overwhelm an opponent with physical attacks. The focus was always on causing damage to the opponent so quickly that their healing couldn't keep pace.

Be it fire or lightning, the god would offer new resistance against magic whenever it was used. The armored soldier was currently enveloped in a strong protection against fire.

The rational part of Kai's brain warned him that his chances of victory were now very slim.

Kai soon decided that he would try to run at the first opportunity. Up to now, he had almost never seen a guardian bearer easily slain while fleeing from the battlefield. If a guardian bearer focused on running, they wouldn't be easily caught, even by a more powerful guardian bearer.

Kai glared at the armored soldier. If he were to escape, it would be best to head toward the region that lay behind this huge org soldier.

“Hand over your stone.”

His fire magic had been rendered ineffective, but it was still possible that some other type of magic might work against this opponent. No matter how tough a guardian bearer was, their body wasn't as hard as iron and their endurance surely had its limits. For example, if a single point on their body was subjected to a high temperature, there was the possibility of breaking through the makeshift protection offered by the god.

Kai also had one more trick to rely on.

The invisible sword...

His conceptual sword with its supernatural cutting power had once taken down an org guardian bearer with ease. This new enemy's skin was probably much tougher, but Kai had already proven that its body was softer than iron. He felt confident that he could cut through it.

His sword might just have the power to take this enemy's life.

The armored soldier saw that the will to fight was still visible in Kai's eyes and attacked him using a technique that was clearly some form of martial art. The armored soldier used all four limbs as it unleashed a barrage of blows that Kai's keen eyesight just barely allowed him to parry. But it was clear to see that Kai was at his limit.

Every blow that came at him carried enough weight to shatter a boulder.

This huge difference in the power behind the two fighters' blows came from the difference in their physical strength that existed before their guardians' blessings were applied. In terms of the volume of muscle behind each blow, the firm body mass that carried the force of the attack to the opponent, and the endurance needed to deliver such attacks so relentlessly, orgs were already far beyond the level of humans.

The differences between the two fighters went beyond physical aspects. They were also far apart in terms of their combat experience. The armored soldier had honed its fighting technique and had learned how to use its incredible strength effectively.

As Kai parried each attack, he felt the vibrations within his bones, and it was

gradually becoming painful.

Kai had underestimated the power of hand-to-hand combat when he'd thought that it was no way to settle a fight between guardian bearers. Now, he was slowly coming to realize just how wrong he'd been.

The armored soldier's attacks became more and more ferocious as Kai began to groan in pain. Each strike carried with it enough force to be fatal.

"This time you die!"

"...Ngh."

"Die! Valley God!"

The armored soldier was in a frenzy, and Kai was gradually being worn down.

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Kai was finding it harder and harder to defend himself. The assault left him unable to do anything besides move backward until finally he was driven back against a tree. With nowhere left to go, the deadly barrage of blows continued.

It felt as though his body was burning fire and might burst apart.

His bones, though harder than steel, were beginning to give way.

His mind was overwhelmed by the agony being ceaselessly delivered to him.

The only thing that made Kai able to bear it was the single glimmer of hope that was left to him.

Not yet...

Even though his life was in peril, Kai never closed his eyes.

He could feel the killing intent in the arms and legs of the armored soldier as they struck him, but still he held his breath and waited for an opportunity.

The way that magic resistance worked meant that Kai might only get one chance.

He had to find some opportunity when he could reliably take his opponent's life.

Kai's determination and his will to fight were never gone from his eyes, which caused a mad smile to appear on the face of the armored soldier. It switched to backhanded blows, which allowed for attacks with the iron plates on its hands.

Kai's eyes were good enough for him to see through the trick.

The armored soldier then straightened its fingers into a shape like a bird's beak and thrust them at Kai's body. Kai continued looking for an opportunity that might be created by the change in the nature of the attacks.

Contorting his body as each attack grazed him was the most he could do. Then there was an explosion of blood as an attack landed on his skin. As Kai watched the attack play out, his eyes went wide, more with surprise than pain.

"Fight back!"

While the people of the borderlands trained in the art of Zula-ryu, it appeared that the orgs had developed their own martial arts. The armored soldier's blood-covered fingers held a lump of flesh.

Somehow, the armored soldier had been able to grab a piece of Kai's flesh and rip it from his body with a twisting motion.

The armored soldier laughed loudly, sounding insane. It looked at the piece of Kai's torn flesh as if nothing could be more amusing before placing it in its mouth and chewing. Kai clenched his teeth in an attempt to endure the pain it had caused him.

"This is your successor...? You'll pay for your pride."

As tough as the skin of a guardian bearer was, the armored soldier was somehow able to tear it away easily using its fingers.

Why? How?

Over the course of the battle, he'd worked hard to determine a set of principles he could follow that might make him a match for this strong enemy, but it had all been turned on its head in an instant.

The armored soldier was delighted by Kai's confusion and continued the barrage of attacks. Kai was parrying each blow more or less unconsciously, but he couldn't stop himself from losing more pieces of his flesh.

The org ate each piece.

Why? Why is my flesh so soft?

A storm of confusion raged in Kai's mind. The strength of his defense had been something he'd taken for granted as a guardian bearer, but through martial arts or some other means, the org had easily broken through that defense with its bare hands.

The armored soldier laughed a deep laugh from deep within its broad throat.

"You are disgraced, Valley God!"

"..."

"Come on, fight."

The taunting caused the god of the valley to scream with rage inside him. It went wild, demanding that Kai kill the org.

The superiority of the enemy's attacks was understandable given the huge difference in physical strength between humans and orgs and their incomparable levels of actual combat experience. The only thing that had made it possible to endure being subjected to this devastating assault was Kai's unquestioning faith that the god within him provided an equal level of defense.

However, he now had no choice but to accept the reality of the events unfolding.

Kai's skin was weaker than the org's. It meant that the armored soldier's fingers could cut through Kai's skin like scissors and tear it away.

It meant that even in unarmed combat, it could use its hand like a spear to cut into Kai, allowing its hand to pierce his body as if it was an iron weapon.

I'm no match for this thing... It was then that Kai realized that his death was approaching.

He decided he would run without hesitation when he got the chance.

He needed to find some opening, and if possible, fight back somehow.

"I'll lay ruin to the valley myself," the armored soldier muttered.

A shiver ran down Kai's spine.

Now he remembered that his opponent knew about the valley.

If he ran now, the armored soldier would follow him all the way to the valley. And not alone. This thing would bring its army, and orgs would invade the valley in great numbers. Kai imagined how they would greedily take the wealth of the valley for themselves once they invaded it.

His god's gravesite would be defiled, and the girl... Aruwe would be tortured and killed without doubt. The despicable nature of the orgs meant that they would never allow her to die an easy death.

Kai should never have challenged this opponent.

He should never have let it know that he was under the protection of the god of the valley.

I have to kill it somehow.

The valley would be defiled.

His beautiful valley would be trampled over by these disgusting creatures.

It has to die.

Everyone would know that the god of the valley's successor lacked experience.

Those bent on claiming the god's power for themselves would flock to the valley.

Kai's decision to start a fight carelessly had left him backed into a corner with no way out.

I have to kill it!

He had to do it, live or die.

Even if it cost him his own life, he had to somehow kill the armored soldier.

If there was ever a next time, Kai would have to hide the fact that he was the god of the valley's successor. His true form could never be revealed until the day that he amassed enough strength to be one the borderlands' great powers.

Kai hid his right hand behind his back. He had to chance everything on the sword.

“Hiding another weapon? It won’t work on me.”

The armored soldier was clearly mocking Kai. It looked calm and posed itself to deal with whatever weapon Kai might pull out. It didn’t realize that Kai was forming his invisible sword around his hidden right hand with more power than ever before.

This thing’s fast... The sword needs to be long.

It was forming in the shape of the sword Kai held in his mind. As he made the sword narrower, it grew longer, and the tip reached down to the grass at his feet.

Just then, it cut through the grass at his feet, and he reacted by shortening the sword once more.

The change in the armored soldier’s expression made Kai worried that it might have noticed. He took a step back and placed a foot over the cut grass to hide what had happened.

Longer... It needs to be longer.

This time he bent his arm to give the blade more space to extend.

Kai fixed his eyes on the armored soldier and stepped forward by just half a step with his dominant left foot as if trying to show that he had no fear.

The distance between Kai and the armored soldier was roughly two yules.

Moving forward a half step would make it one and a half yules.

Another step forward would probably reduce it to just one yule.

Leaning forward at the waist would reduce the remainder to less than a yule.

I have spiritual energy left... I need to make the sword longer than one yule.

He gripped the grass with the toes of the left foot he’d just moved forward. He slowly began to shift his center of mass.

The armored soldier had recognized Kai’s movements as being part of his martial arts.

Kai gritted his teeth wishing his opponent would move toward him to close the gap even further. He watched the armored soldier who was standing ready

to counter whatever trick Kai might have up his sleeve.

The fact that Kai still hadn't lost the will to fight even in this situation must have made the armored soldier realize that Kai had another trick left. It was guarding all of its vital areas with both arms in a stance that made it look like a heavyweight boxer.

Heavyweight...?

The meaningless term that came to Kai from his past life memories made him smile as he began to move.

There's nothing this sword can't cut.

With his forward left foot as the starting point, Kai focused his power into an explosive forward charge. He could feel the blades of grass under the sole of his left foot being torn up. Those blades of grass had been held fast to the ground, so the power that Kai unleashed was efficiently converted into kinetic energy that drove him forward.

When Kai's hand appeared from behind his back, the armored soldier looked surprised to see that it was still the same empty hand as before. The armored soldier prepared an iron defense to meet what appeared to be a bare-handed chop. It may have considered Kai inferior, but it didn't take his attacks lightly.

To call the armored soldier's stance an iron defense was a perfect metaphor. The two thick arms it had guarded itself with weren't just covered in skin that was as tough as iron, they also contained broad bones that formed a core harder than iron.

Any ordinary attack with a weapon made from iron would have been stopped dead by those arms no matter how much power was behind it.

However, there was something the armored soldier didn't know.

Although it hadn't taken the attack from the human guardian bearer lightly, the concept behind the invisible sword was something beyond its knowledge.

The armored soldier and the god that protected it were about to learn of the nature of this attack based on knowledge from another world.

The principles governing the microscopic world that humans could not see... How many of this world's residents had ever turned their attention to the makeup of the matter that gives rise to the existence of solid objects?

“***!”

The armored soldier reverted back to its own language.

It must have been the result of it being overcome with disbelief.

The downward chop from Kai's empty hand had not so much as grazed the armored soldier, and yet it had cut deep into its body.

Kai's invisible sword had met the left arm that the armored soldier had held up to defend itself, and the blade had entered near the wrist with virtually no resistance, severing the hand from the arm. It wasn't until the blade was embedded deep in the flesh of the armored soldier's shoulder that the power forming the blade was fully spent.

The invisible sword had the power to interfere with intermolecular bonding, as Kai understood it, based on his past life memories.

This power known as magic that followed his will could easily break apart bonds between molecules that would otherwise be firm and unyielding, with spiritual energy being gradually consumed in exchange.



The principles that governed healing magic applied here too, meaning that the use of magic to affect a living creature without a well-defined objective was incredibly inefficient. Kai didn't understand this, but he'd been able to make it work by brute force with all the energy at his disposal.

As a result, the invisible sword squandered energy reserves when it was used. Much like it had when he cut through balen cedars.

“** , ***!”

The armored soldier took half a step back in shock while Kai continued moving forward under the same momentum to continue his assault.

His magic might be ineffective next time he tried this same approach. This fear made Kai rush to deliver the next blow. While stepping forward he formed the sword once again at the tip of his right hand. He had to deal more damage to the armored soldier quickly.

Without spending any time on fine adjustments to the blade, he threw his whole body towards his opponent. Then he slashed horizontally as if delivering the second part of a double-slash.

The damage to the iron chest plate was minor, but the skin that bulged out from the gap was slashed open horizontally causing blood to spurt loudly from the flesh within.

The armored soldier's reflexes caused it to counterattack by throwing a punch at the left side of Kai's head with the heavy fist of its uninjured right arm. The force of the punch swept away Kai's head and neck causing him to lose consciousness for a moment. While Kai was on the ground, the armored soldier stepped back as if it were about to run.

I'm not done. I can't let it escape.

Kai got up and checked the position of his prey. He started running, urged on by the same desperation, without waiting for his vision to become steady. In the phenomenal fights between two guardian bearers, a distance of several steps was equivalent to nothing.

With a thud, Kai closed the distance like a dart shooting through the air, and

the armored soldier tried to knock him back with a front kick. Kai cut away the skin from its leg as easily as peeling a potato.

The sword Kai had made was invisible, so it was the motion of the armored soldier's leg that brought it into contact with the blade. Kai gritted his teeth as the sword disappeared and tried to muster up enough spiritual energy to create it for a fourth time.

He realized that he'd been using energy more wastefully than when cutting the balen cedars. He no longer had spiritual energy to waste.

"How can you cut!?" the armored soldier howled.

It was enraged and hollering about the unfairness of the situation as it tried, but failed, to understand the paranormal phenomenon that Kai was using.

If the blessings of the land god protecting the armored soldier were going to offer resistance against Kai's magic, it would have to provide that resistance soon.

But nothing was happening.

Or perhaps something had happened.

Perhaps the god had offered new forms of protection, but none of them worked.

It may have been that, despite being capable of changing the living tissue of the guardian bearer, the land god's protection had no way to protect against a sword capable of cutting through intermolecular bonds.

The armored soldier had lost a large piece of flesh from the side of its leg, and now its stance was unbalanced. It had lost the muscle it needed to stand its ground.

Kai had no time to think about anything else. He lunged at the chest of the armored soldier while reforming his sword.

His sole target was the godstone. The godstone within the chest that was one of the vital areas of a guardian bearer.

The godstone that formed inside the bodies of living creatures was usually hidden somewhere in the chest, but that wasn't always the case. Kai knew that

its location varied enough that it was always necessary to search for it by hand. What he was doing was a gamble. If he couldn't deal a hit to the godstone with a single strike, he'd try to remove the nearby heart instead.

When the opponent was a guardian bearer, even the destruction of the heart might not be enough to be fatal, but it was still the next best option.

The armored soldier's crude helmet slipped back and fell to the ground.

The reddish black face of the org, covered in wounds and lit by the light of the stars, was now exposed.

“*****”

“** , **!”

“*** , ***”

There were cries of dismay from the nearby orgs that had followed them.

They must have gathered around to watch the fight while thinking there was no way that this great warrior of their people could ever lose. No low-ranking soldier dared to approach the ground where two guardian bearers fought each other. The same custom existed in the village of Lag. Anyone who dared to interfere with such a fight would be made to regret it later.

Kai's hand sank into the flesh of the armored soldier through the opening in its skin made by his invisible sword. The strength was gone from the armored soldier, and it was falling towards him, so Kai's hand sank deeper and deeper.

Then when the reaction ended and the invisible sword disappeared, Kai's bare hand touched against a rough lump. Kai had been in a frenzy, but this snapped him out of it. He used his shoulder to push against the body of the armored soldier as he gripped the lump tightly and pulled it out from within its body.

It was the armored soldier's godstone.

The moment that the orgs gathered around them and knew that the armored soldier, a great warrior of their people, had been defeated, they threw their heads back and unleashed wild howls. Kai couldn't tell whether they were howls of rage or howls of despair.

“***”

“****! ***, **!”

If he'd understood the orgish tongue, he might have understood the reasons for their strange behavior.

For the first time, one of them spoke in the human tongue.

“Won't let you!” The org sprayed filthy saliva as it spoke shrilly.

Kai supposed that these might have been the blood relatives of the armored soldier.

“You leave it!” As it moved toward him, its words sounded as though they came from some deep hatred that burned within it like black flames.

The others then followed and began moving closer to Kai.

“You leave it!”

“You ****!”

“That belong us!”

Wild rage spread among the orgs. There must have been dozens of them. Great pigs burning with hatred closing in on him from every direction.

He was surrounded.

Their determination to stop their precious land god from being taken away from their people was enough to make them forget their fear of the strong and unknown guardian bearer known as Kai.

Although he had very little spiritual energy left, he was confident that his power as a guardian bearer was enough for him to scatter a crowd of foot soldiers using violence. But then, countless more orgs appeared from outside the circle they'd formed. With the entire army of orgs that had wiped out the macaques now charging toward Kai all at once, it was more than he felt he could handle.

Kai broke into a run, following what he'd determined was the shortest route back to the human country—the route that had previously been blocked by the armored soldier. Any orgs foolish enough to try to stop him were knocked away effortlessly by the incredible power that his guardian gave to him. Kai broke

free from the circle, sending orgs flying backward as if they were barely an obstacle. However...

This is endless.

It was as if every org in the region was gathered in this one spot. Their army formed a swarm that tried to stand in his way in every direction.

Kai thought frantically for some way to escape this place as furious org soldiers attacked him from every side. He sent countless orgs flying back, but then one grabbed his leg. The org was already half dead, but it held tightly to Kai's leg and tried to bring him down.

Kai cut off its head using the invisible sword without any thought for what would happen next and then struggled free from its body. The axes belonging to the org soldiers he'd failed to kill then came swinging down at him.

Kai rammed one of them with his shoulder and knocked its large body down while scattering the soldiers that flocked around him. Kai jumped straight back up and swung with an iron axe that had been dropped by a fallen org. He hoped to kill any orgs he was lucky enough to hit.

When blood and fat made the axe slip from his grasp, Kai struck another close-by enemy and stole its weapon. As the endless swarm of orgs continued their frenzied attack, Kai's energy, which he had once thought was inexhaustible, began to run down. He'd already lost his chance to escape and was gradually climbing higher on the pile of org bodies forming at his feet. Before he knew it, Kai was covered in blood and standing on a pile made from the bodies of a hundred ordinary orgs.

He had lost the ability to think.

The ordeal was enough to leave Kai completely depleted of energy and wordlessly panting for breath.

The sight was enough to make the orgs that surrounded him hesitate, and now they simply surrounded the pile of corpses on which he stood.

I'm so hungry...

Kai remembered his empty stomach.

The food that he pictured in his mind was the black triangle known as onigiri. He began to salivate, but he didn't have even a single slice of dried potato with him.

Then Kai absentmindedly looked at the white lump in his hand.

It turned out that he did have something to fill his stomach. The blood-soaked boy began to smile.

Ah...

Cries came from the orgs.

He heard many orgish words, none of which he understood.

Somehow, he knew they were saying things like, "please stop," and "have mercy."

Kai considered it.

Yeah, right.

On the small mountain of bodies, he took the armored soldier's godstone in his hand and used his invisible sword to cut off the top.

From the opening he'd made, he scooped out the first mouthful. He quickly became impatient and used both hands, thrusting his fingers into it, to break the whole thing into two halves.

Liquid from inside flew out and was scattered in all directions.

"Aah!"

"***!"

"Dohd! Dohd Adohra-kahn!"

"Adohra-kahn!"

"***!"

"Ooh..."

No matter how much they pleaded, it was the victor's right to feed on the godstone of the defeated. Kai was exercising that right.

Adohra-kahn must have been the name of the armored soldier. The orgs

continued to cry that same word over and over.

He tilted his head back, poured the overflowing juice into his open mouth, and gulped it down. The flavor that filled his mouth seemed to be spreading through his body.

Once the rich juice was gone, he began to bite at the marrow. The godstone was as big as it was flavorful, and it was incredibly filling. The core had a deeper red color to it than the translucent, amber-colored parts at the outside, and this core tasted even better.

Kai could barely hear the cries of the orgs anymore. He was drunk on this sublime taste that was enjoyed by only the victors.

He bit and chewed at it in a daze. Then a certain feeling came as the marrow slid down his throat.

It's all my power now.

Kai felt something inside him struggling to escape.

Before that sensation was over, he swallowed the remaining marrow. Then the land god of the armored soldier, with its divine power drained from it, left Kai like a fine mist.

In that instant, Kai's own godstone filled with heat. It felt as though Kai's own land god, the existence of the god the valley within him, was being renewed. It was the second time he'd felt this sensation, so he didn't lose his sense of self this time, but he felt he wouldn't be able to remain standing much longer as the heat within him grew.

It had been a mistake.

If he lost consciousness here, he'd certainly die.

Kai cursed his own lack of foresight as he looked down on the orgs who were still stunned by the loss of their land god. Then he suddenly felt the ground shake, and one of his feet slipped from under him.

Part of the pile of corpses crumbled without the whole thing collapsing, and Kai was left awkwardly clinging to one of the stable bodies. A moment later there was another great tremor.

As a resident of this world who was unfamiliar with the natural phenomenon of earthquakes, Kai's mind was calm as if this was a familiar event, but his body couldn't help but cower.

The orgs had a similar reaction.

“**!”

“***!”

The dense swarm of orgs was thrown into turmoil. They had stopped looking at Kai and were bumping into one another as their instincts made them fight to find some path to escape.

Then came a third tremor, which caused the orgs to scatter like a cluster of baby spiders.

Kai was lying on his stomach on the pile of bodies and couldn't easily move. He watched the orgs run off into the unfamiliar landscape from high above.

Then it happened.

Countless sparkling lights appeared before Kai's eyes.

It was like phosphorescence in the night sky, but the countless lights were being born from the ground and rising into the sky with a shimmering faint glow. Then, not long after it had appeared, each light would fade before melting away into the deep blue world of the night.

Kai wondered how many people had ever witnessed this ghostly phenomenon. He was lost for words as he gazed at the scene.

Something unusual was happening in the land of demi-humans.

Then came the most violent tremor yet.

The strong vibration caused the mountain made of flesh to shake like the jelly produced when boiling the fat of a wild beast, and then it collapsed in spectacular fashion.

Kai was thrown off his feet and became caught up in the avalanche of corpses.

Those... those lights...

That was his final thought before his thinking stopped. Kai's thoughts were cut short as his consciousness slipped away from him.

The body of the young boy was an empty shell devoid of consciousness lying there defenseless as it became buried under a great number of corpses. For anyone else, it would have been a dangerous situation, but his breathing could soon be heard and it sounded like the healthy breathing of a sleeping boy.

The faint sound of the young boy's breathing was the only sound in this otherwise silent field strewn with countless corpses.

**

All had gone quiet.

Silence filled the forest, and the soft sounds of insects that had held their breath until now were then heard once more. The silence across the night forest made it hard to imagine that this had been where the battle had reached its gruesome finale.

“***...” The low voice melted into the forest air.

She slowly climbed to her feet and brushed away the blades of grass that were still on her head.

“** , ***”

She tilted her head to the side to relieve the stiffness in her neck, and it caused a dry sound as she became caught in the branches of the low tree above her head. Her horns were her pride, but at times like this they could be a nuisance.

Nirun looked back at what had once been a village and clenched her fists.

There was no one there now. Even Nirun had come to accept that they had all been slaughtered.

It was more than likely that almost every uzelle had been killed.

The orgs had massacred the uzelle with the intention of completely stealing the blessings of their land god.

Nirun and her fellow uzelles had sought help from their masters, the macaques, on the basis of the ancient contract between them. They had resisted and fought to the death, but in the end, they had lost. The macaques had not been as dependable as their reputation had suggested.

The uzelles had sworn devotion to the macaque guardian bearer, making it their protector. However, the macaque guardian bearer had been no match for the fearsome armored soldier of the orgs.

Nirun had lost them all in her attempt to live on. Her mother, the head of the village, had protected the land god from the orgs by drawing the army away from the village and giving up her own life. She had ordered her daughter, Nirun, to remain hidden in the secret room by the gravesite. Nirun was told to claim the land god as her guardian and then run. It was a final act of revenge by a powerless species.

It was necessary for Nirun to evade capture if this plan of revenge was to be carried out successfully.

I can't count on macaques anymore.

The macaques that should have honored the contract had run off in fear of the org army. Though the armored soldier may have been too strong for them to handle regardless.

And then there was their greed.

After being rescued from the orgs they were told to hand over 100 uzelle horns. Even the horns of uzelles killed in the battle with the orgs were cut off and carried away as an advance payment with no respect given to the dead.

Her own horns would no doubt be taken too.

More importantly...

Nirun grimaced at the rotten smell that hung in the air as she examined the pile of org corpses in front of her.

Within the gruesome pile of dead flesh slept the small warrior who had defeated the armored soldier.

He seemed as though he could be relied upon to enact vengeance on the

mighty orgs.

He was likely one of the humans who had disturbed the gravesite and given Nirun a chance to escape. Nirun had jumped to the conclusion that this boy must be the leader of a powerful herd.

But she did find it unusual to see a human who could sleep so soundly while crushed beneath such an incredible amount of bodies.

She was deep in thought as she sat down on the ground nearby and left the boy to his rest.

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“This is for you, Truthseeker.”

“...”

“Truthseeker?”

To Manso’s relief, the priest stirred when he heard Manso call him. Manso had brought him a wooden bowl filled with soup made from cured meat. He’d worried that he might be waking the priest from his sleep.

The priest broke his silence by politely saying, “Thank you very much,” and then he took the bowl.

He drew back his hood and put the bowl to his mouth, then he looked back at Manso. “Are you worried?” he asked Manso.

Manso knew exactly what the priest thought he was worrying about, so he simply said, “Yes” in response.

It was only natural to be worried about Kai’s safety while he was gone looking for the missing soldiers.

Although the soup was made from cured meat, it was a simple thing made by boiling a few pieces of meat in enough water to go around, so it was watery and far from delicious. The priest drank it without complaint and then gave back the bowl with a smile.

“If it’s Kai you’re worried about, I expect he’ll be just fine.”

The whole party knew now that this priest hadn't just advanced to the level of doi sigil without needing the blessings of a land god, he'd also learned some secret art that allowed him to see things happening far away. Manso took this into consideration when he accepted the priest's words.

"I see. Well, if you say so, Truthseeker, I won't worry."

"You'd be surprised to know Kai's..."

"Truthseeker?"

Manso had been about to walk away when the priest's unfinished sentence made him turn back. But the priest's face had disappeared under his hood once again.

Manso looked at him curiously, but the priest said nothing more. The priest had sat up and was no longer looking at Manso, as if whatever he had started saying wasn't important enough to be worth finishing. Manso thought no more of it.

The priest then looked back at Manso and told him, "We're no longer being pursued. Let's wait until tomorrow morning for the search party to return. I'm sure everyone is tired. Tell them it's safe for them to sleep."

With the four squad leaders absent, it was Manso who took charge of the soldiers.

He nodded and went to pass the message on to the soldiers who were gathered elsewhere. Now that the priest, with his mysterious abilities, had given them assurance, the soldiers were ready to start cheering in a way that was far from appropriate for the depths of the forest. Manso put a stop to that. The soldiers were exhausted and couldn't have been more thankful for the permission to sleep.

Meanwhile, the priest continued to sit in silent meditation at the edge of the camp.

For a short time, Manso watched the priest as he meditated, but eventually fatigue caused him to sigh, and he let himself fall into a shallow sleep with his arms wrapped around his knees.

Afterword

Truth be told, this isn't the first time I've written a story with the same title.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that this work was 10 years in the making because there was a past work, some old, low-quality writings that were left on my computer, that served as a precursor to this work.

Back when I was a young writer who neglected his studies, I had no idea that there was a literary great whose work had the same title as mine. It was something I happened to find out later, and the coincidence presented an excuse for me to look into the world of Hesiod. Needless to say, the story I was writing back then was very different from this one. That story was a full-on chuunibyou tale of world conquest with a young elf as the protagonist.

What's that you say? The story hasn't changed much? You'll have to forgive me. I am only human, and humans seldom change.

Moving on, the approach used in this work is different from Hesiod's attempt to summarize the births of the gods and their genealogies (it's different at its very core); this work takes the literal meaning of the kanji used to spell the Theogony (神流記) and is a record of another world controlled by gods. I ask that you forgive me for this.

Many gods appear in this work. But up to now it hasn't been the gods themselves, but those chosen to receive their blessings and act as a god's host vessel.

The idea to use "kumadori" as the name for the markings that appear when gods provide power to the host vessel was, of course, inspired by the stage makeup of the same name worn by kabuki actors. It's a form of makeup used to establish the characters that emphasizes things like blood vessels and muscles. Red generally means "virtuous" while blue generally means "evil." The concept also includes the difference between the dead and the living, which likely comes from differences in complexion. Chinese theater also features a type of kumadori known as renpu. These methods of expressing things through

appearance are very easy for the audience to understand, so they must have easily become aspects of theater production know-how. Likewise, in this work, some way of visually representing changes in the host vessels was needed so that the work could deal with the unseen gods.

To give some history to the many formless gods, “gravesites of land gods” became a mainstay when writing. These also symbolize the “true form” of the gods.

The “godstone” was conceived as a way to link the gods with the lower-ranking living creatures. The divinity residing in the body of the host vessel is sealed inside this special part of the bone structure, thus turning a metaphysical concept into a physical one.

With these three concepts relating to the gods, I was able to start writing this work.

As an author who was lost and unsure where to go, I decided to return to my starting point by reading through my past works, and this caused me to discover a treasured work written when the world was still alive and shining to me — this became the basis of *Teogonia*. It felt like I was reading through my childhood diaries. A lot of the content made me cringe. But that’s a good thing in some ways. It makes things interesting. Even as people grow older, their deep-rooted sensibilities are probably not something that changes easily.

I can’t give you any evidence to support this statement, but I think this work is going to get more interesting as it goes. That’s my feeling. That’s what the God of the Valley is telling me.

I’d like to thank Kawano-sensei from the bottom of my heart for the beautiful illustrations. Those illustrations represented things accurately in a way that really touched my heartstrings, and they stimulated me in a good way that made me half-jealous.

I’d also like to thank my editor for being there to support a naive author like myself. Their guidance was invaluable because it allowed me to look back on my own writings with a clear head.

And to the readers who have decided to pick up this work, I’m deeply grateful to you for spending your precious time on it, and I bow my head and ask that

you stay with me until this printed edition of *Teogonia* reaches the end of its run.

-Tsukasa Tanimai, March 2018

Bonus Short Story

Belmezzo, the Head of the Workshop

“Quality’s not what it used to be, is it?”

“Well... about that...”

“I’ll give you two ginsatsu.”

“Y-You must be making an insane profit! Give me a break, or my master’ll give me hell for this.”

“Well why don’t you go bring your damned master here with you. I’ll tell him myself that if he thinks he can pull one over on me, he’s got another thing coming.”

Belmezzo, the head of the Oni’s Anvil workshop, was known to everyone in the metalworking district called chimney road, itself a famous feature of the orgish capital of Mesa. He had long traded with royalty and the heads of powerful clans, and these connections meant that many of the axes swung by orgs had been forged by the workers of the Oni’s Anvil. Belmezzo was the face of the Oni’s Anvil, and some said that if he ever sneezed, every furnace in the metalworking district would be blown out at once.

The largest buyer of the ingots and other products that smelters exported to the capital en masse was the Oni’s Anvil. As the leader of the workshop, Belmezzo could maintain a stranglehold on the smelter’s guild without even trying. Even stubborn old smelters who fancied themselves artisans of fire were reduced to smiling meekly like talentless miao merchants.

“I’m not trying to be difficult here. But look at this thing. You can see the impurities. It was never melted down properly.”

Belmezzo casually tapped his hammer against the iron ingot he was holding. The ingot cracked down the middle with a dull thud, as if it were a piece of rotten wood.

The apprentice smelter struggled to come up with an excuse as Belmezzo glared at him. Firewood had become ridiculously expensive, heating to the usual temperature would put them over budget, they'd had to use cheap, ill-burning peat as an alternative, they'd already tried every trick they knew, and other such excuses...

"Oh, shut up," Belmezzo said with a slam of his rock-like fist. "You used peat? If you've forgotten how to make iron then why don't you just change the sign out front and call yourself a pickle seller."

"Now you're going too far. It's the heartless metalworking guild that's forcing the prices way up..."

"Are you saying that my metalworking association is trying to rip people off?" Belmezzo asked sourly.

Over the course of many years, the orgish country had been cleanly stripped of all trees. They had quite literally *all* been cut down to be fuel for producing iron, leaving the country filled with bare mountains. As a result, the winds would carry away the sandy soil, and the rains would trigger mudslides and flooding. More than once, the king had ordered that attempts be made to plant trees on these bare mountains. Those saplings were intended to be harvested after 10 years, but instead they were pulled up by clueless peasants for use as firewood, making it hard to believe the situation would improve.

The purses of the clans that bought the iron arms the workshop produced had been emptied by continued fighting. Far from driving up prices, the Oni's Anvil were finding it increasingly difficult to collect payments, and the workshop was on a straight path to bankruptcy.

"Instead of making excuses, go cut down trees from the great forests and all will be well. There are more good-burning trees there than anyone could use." Belmezzo threw down the shoddy ingot while massaging his shoulders by striking them with the hammer. The apprentice smelter picked up the ingot unhappily.

"Orgs are stronger than anything. There isn't a species that can stand against us when we go all-out. Something's not quite right about this world."

"If you ask me, Master Belmezzo's cruelty isn't quite right either."

“And what about your smelters? What was it you sell there?”

“I-I was just joking, master.”

It was no exaggeration to say that the war-potential of the orgs was superior to that of every species that surrounded them, but in practice, the level of cooperation between members of the species was lacking. Their tendency to follow their feelings and start fights with each other meant that all of the major clans were embroiled in long-standing feuds and were unwilling to help one another.

The Foss clan to the east was attacking the macaques in the eastern forest region, and the strength of the Brach clan in the south was enough to suppress and enslave all the various small clans in the great forest. And there were rumors that some had gone so far as to attack the humans who ruled the plains to the south, just to show them the power of the orgs.

“Forget all that. Just do a better job at getting rid of these impurities. Otherwise it’s useless junk that’ll break the second something strikes it.”

“I’ll pass the message on to my master.”

Belmezzo watched the apprentice smelter leave and then returned to the workshop filled with the noise of busy hammers. The workshop was slammed due to an order of weapons bigger than any they’d received before. The workshop leader had no energy to spare for anything else. He was in the middle of making an axe known as a gandr, from a secret compound of hard steel no less, to fulfill a special order made by Dohd Adohra-kahn, the leader of the eastern Foss clan.

Dohd Adohra wore weapons and armor made by Belmezzo over his entire body. His steel armor offered protection against any attack and it was one of Belmezzo’s finest works.

In the constant din that drowned out all else, Belmezzo could hear his apprentices improving day by day. These young artisans kept their large backs stooped over anvils and efficiently turned iron ingots into iron products using their superior orgish strength. The workshop’s stockpiles were always depleted quickly, so keeping his workers supplied was a big part of Belmezzo’s job.

It was sad to learn that the new shipment of iron was of such poor quality, but a severe shortage of firewood was a problem that had an impact on every metalworker in the district.

Whether it be the Foss clan or the Brach clan, he wanted someone to secure a forest quickly. For that reason, the workshop's main priority was to supply weapons to both of these clans.

Dohd Adohra was always rough with his weapons and would render even the highest quality steel unusable after two or three fights. That very minute, Dohd Adohra was carrying Belmezzo's work into the battlefield. Though it was hard to imagine Dohd Adohra ever being wounded or defeated, even if he'd leaped into the midst of the enemy empty-handed.

The large axe being forged now would be a masterpiece.

Belmezzo snorted happily to himself as he imagined how pleased Dohd Adohra was going to be.



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Teogonia: Volume 1

by Tsukasa Tanimai

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