

6

story by
rarutori
illust. by
ciavis



Enough with This Slow Life!
I WAS REINCARNATED AS A

HIGH ELF
AND NOW I'M
BORED

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CHARACTERS

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Acer
A free and unfettered high elf with a lifespan of one thousand years. He has begun to understand his role as a member of the ancient races.



Win
Acer's half-elf adopted son. He has grown to the point of looking older than Acer himself.

Win

Heero
A phoenix. Once he matures, he will be large enough to carry people on his back.



heero



Airena
The organizer of the elven caravan. Her dream is to see the "White Lake" in the world above the clouds.

Airena

Accepting his new role as the Yosogi School's advisor, Acer promised to watch over the growth of Aiha and the other new generations of Yosogi students as he headed back to his home in the forest. Greeted by the elder Salix, he learned the location of the phoenix, only to find it was still an egg. Determined to make the egg hatch, his hard work paid off as he was able to witness the birth of the phoenix Heero. When asked to wait for a "short time" so the phoenix could grow to maturity, he set off on a journey to learn sculpting.

Wanting to leave behind the images of his old friends in his heart, he paid a visit to the famous Count Myos Marmaros, hoping to learn the skills needed to etch those images in stone. Though Acer was able to learn at a steady pace, the threat of political assassinations forced Myos to part ways with him.

After relieving Myos of that threat, Acer spent some time living in a developing village before heading on another journey west to reunite with Win. What he found in the West was a land in turmoil due to the human-supremacist religion taking root, and a group of elves suffering under its oppression who sought Acer's help in building a nation of their own.

STORY





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Chapter 1 — The Kingdom of the Elves

Destroying something was much faster and easier than building something. Whether it was a living being, an object, or anything else, that didn't change. For a life to be born, two parents needed to mate, and then wait for it to grow inside the mother. Sure, plenty of animals hatched from eggs that were laid after being fertilized, but that still took a great deal of time. Even after all that work to bring new life into the world, it could so easily be snuffed out.

A sharp blade to the heart was almost certain to do the job on any person. No matter how much time was invested in giving birth and letting that person grow, no matter how much work they had done, how skilled they were, or how much knowledge they possessed, that was all it took to reduce them to nothing. Animals and monsters were no different. Monsters were indeed strong, but compared to the time it took for them to grow up, the time it took to kill them was barely anything.

Objects were the same. Even a sword forged to be unbending and unbreaking in battle could rust away to uselessness if left covered in blood or exposed to the elements for too long. Or it could be melted down in no time at all. There were vanishingly few things that took more effort to destroy than to create. As far as I knew, the only thing that qualified was mithril.

All of this is to say that kingdoms were quite similar. Compared to the time and effort it would require to build this kingdom of elves, it would be much easier for me to wipe out the human kingdoms that were attacking them. I wasn't really interested in doing that, though.

I wasn't a destroyer; I was a creator...is what I would like to say, but I knew I didn't really have that right. I had killed all manner of creatures for food and didn't hesitate to wield tremendous power, even to violent ends when the situation called for it. But I had drawn a line in the sand for myself, and it would take a lot to force me to cross it.

If I were willing to destroy those enemy kingdoms, the elves that had been

taken as slaves would be rescued much sooner. However, it was just as likely that they would be used as living shields and killed instead. Destroying those kingdoms would mean killing a large number of humans too. The people of those kingdoms held to the western religion, so they really were enemies to the elves, but that didn't mean I wanted to go around slaughtering them.

That was just the way humans were. The elves were their target in this case, but they would inevitably find lines to draw among themselves to fight and enslave each other. So while I was interested in stopping the damage being inflicted on the elves, I wasn't particularly angry at what simply amounted to human nature. And I knew there was more to them than that; they had an unparalleled ability to create new things as well. Strangely enough, the human tendency toward oppression and destruction of outsiders wasn't actually in conflict with that ability. In fact, in many cases they worked hand in hand.

I wanted to resolve the situation here as peacefully as possible, and as long as the elves wanted my help, they'd have to do things my way. Bloodshed was inevitable, but I wanted to prevent as much of it as I could. Luckily for me, the elves' decision to band together and create a kingdom powerful enough to protect themselves played perfectly into that idea.

Sunlight peeked through the gaps between the leaves and ivy that made up the rooms the elves lived in. Opening my eyes to the new morning, I was greeted by the songs of birds coming from outside. The smell of the trees and the presence of the forest felt extremely close. And in this peaceful forest, I needed to build a kingdom of elves.

The difficulty was that even now, the morning after I'd declared my intention to stay with the elves for ten years, I had no idea where to start. I had no experience in running a country, so that was only to be expected.

From all the countries I had seen in my travels, and all the changes I had seen them go through, my conclusion in the end was that the core of a nation was its people. So before making decisions as to where to start working, what I really needed to do was get to know those people—the elves that had gathered here in Inelda. That had to happen before I started doing anything. Once I got to know the elves and the problems they faced, I would be in a better position to

decide where to direct my effort. Their kingdom should be one they made, not a product of my own design.

After I got my appearance in order and stepped out of the room prepared for me, the elf waiting outside turned and gave a smart bow. This really was way too formal. It was enough to make me laugh.

“Good morning, Reas.” My greeting did nothing to relax his stiff posture, but there was nothing I could do about that for now. Airena had been just like that, long, long ago. Even if it was just a little at a time, as long as he came to understand I didn’t like that kind of behavior, things would work out in the end.

Reas had been assigned as my bodyguard for now. It was hard to believe that anyone in a kingdom of elves would even consider trying to hurt a high elf like me, and frankly, I was stronger than Reas. But even so, the elves wanted to at least keep up appearances. The elders would no doubt quickly come under fire if the people learned that nobody was around to accompany me.

I felt it was a waste to have one of their frontline leaders assigned to protect me far from the battle lines all for the sake of a formality...but actually, having someone to support me while I didn’t know the lay of the land very well was quite encouraging. Reas was also quite popular and skilled among the elves despite his youth, something that positioned him well for consideration to be trained as their representative.

Of course, the actual decision as to who would take on that position would come after I learned more about him and the other elves living here.

“What will you be doing today, Lord Acer?” he asked as I started wandering aimlessly about the settlement. I was really just taking a walk, but if he was going to ask, then I had a good answer for him.

“I’d like to find some people who can work with me to think about the future of this place. Do you know of any good candidates?” As Reas himself was one such candidate, I wanted to hear his opinion about other elves I might consult with.

The elders held a great deal of respect for the vast experience their long years had given them, so I could hardly ignore them when it came to building a kingdom, but I needed the strength of the young elves just as much. No matter

how long the elders had lived, none of them had built a country before. There would be times where their experience would be invaluable, but the flexibility of those who lacked that experience was equally necessary.

Finding skilled leaders among the elders wouldn't be particularly challenging, but singling out the exceptional elves from among the younger crowd would be much more difficult. So I wanted one of those young, exceptional elves to give me his recommendations.

There were many elves gathered here in Inelda: those who had always lived here, and those who had fled here from the other forests for protection. Some had lived alongside humans, while others hated them. The choice of which elves I would spend time with, who I would talk to and work with, would greatly shape the future of Inelda.

As improper as it might have been, that thought filled my heart with excitement.



The next person was the seventh elf Reas had suggested.

"I'm not really sure if this fits your definition of 'exceptional,' but..." he said hesitantly before giving me a rundown on this individual's history.

It was indeed hard to judge if they could be called exceptional, but there was certainly merit in meeting them.

The criteria that made one elf superior to others was, in their estimation, quite simple. It all came down to how close they were to the spirits, and how effectively they could draw on their power. Elves typically gathered in communities small enough to survive on nature's bounty. With no thirst for growth or expansion, there were few skills they really needed. Possibly due to their long lifespans, skills like archery, weaving ivy and leaves together to make structures, and weaving plant fibers together into clothing weren't all that important to them. Given enough time, anyone could learn to do these kinds of things.

But now, in this place where there were too many elves to rely on nature's bounty to survive, and all kinds of new problems were rearing their heads, Reas

understood that I wasn't just looking for something like aptitude for the Spirit Arts. He, himself, hadn't been chosen to lead the warriors on the front lines because of his relationship with the spirits. Of course, he also possessed enough aptitude with them to earn the respect of the other elves, but that would hardly be enough to stand against the raiding human armies. Rather, he had been assigned that role for being able to keep a level head, give precise orders, and command the obedience of those around him.

Reas was exactly the kind of exceptional elf I was looking for, one able to use his experience to figure out what I actually needed. He was able to look at the other elves in an entirely new way and discern who was worth recommending. I imagined it had to be a rather complex process, but nevertheless, he was expending every effort to fulfill my request, giving me name after name of unique elves of all kinds.

The seventh name on his list was an elf called Tyulei. I hadn't met her yet, but judging by her history and Reas's description of her, there was no doubt she was quite the strange one. She was currently acting as the de facto leader of the elves who had taken over the farmland left behind by the human Ineldans to make up for the food shortages the elves were facing. However, she hadn't only started when the food problems began. She had a history of working with the humans to cultivate produce before they left.

It was quite an interesting story. From my experience, most elves who left the forest in search of a more stimulating life ended up becoming adventurers. That was often far too *much* stimulation for them, but for elves who knew nothing of the outside world, there were few other options.

In the east-central region of the continent, the elven caravan had started to help give elves a chance to experience the outside world and aid them while they were there, so many were beginning to walk other paths in life.

But here in Inelda, elves had already lived alongside humans, so there were many more who had found other professions to pursue. If someone like Tyulei hadn't been around, learning how to grow crops from the humans while they were here, even having the cultivated land left behind would have been little help in staving off food shortages. Things would have been far worse than they were now.

The previous relationships between humans and elves were now a source of support for the elves, even after the humans had left. I found that really interesting.

Whether Tyulei was the kind of flexible, exceptional person I was looking for was yet to be seen, but considering the food shortages faced here in Inelda, there was no doubt it was imperative that I meet her. Above all, I wanted to see her for myself. It would take quite some time to get from this settlement to the cultivated land she was managing, but my interest had been piqued to the point that it didn't bother me.

The farmland left behind by the human Ineldans was fairly deep in the territory, situated a bit east of the kingdom's center. With how much of Inelda's land was covered in forest, there was little room left for farming, especially since the Ineldans weren't willing to cut down the forests to create more space. Additionally, conflict with nations to the south and west of Inelda had destroyed much of the land along those borders, leaving even less for the elves.

It wasn't enough to force the elves to expand their farmland at the expense of the forests, not with the way elves thought. I had an idea about how to deal with that issue, but for now, I was focused on my meeting with Tyulei.

Arriving at the farmland, I could see it really was quite cramped. While not hopelessly small, compared to the expansive fields of wheat around Janpemon, the space they had available here was still quite tight.

But the heads of grain were nevertheless coming in thick and strong. And it wasn't just grain either. Were those shoots potato plants? They looked quite different from the varieties I was familiar with that grew underground, but they seemed like they'd bring a bountiful harvest soon.

Though not to the same degree as high elves, elves did possess a power over plants. That power was normally enough to support themselves off of the bounty of the forest. But it was naive to think that would translate into success in farming. At the very least, even with my superior abilities, I doubted I could produce results like these.

Those long, straight stalks were corn, weren't they? Win's letters had told of

his confusion when he learned that it was eaten in the Far West. I guess religion wasn't the only thing that had spread here from that region. Of course, I wouldn't know if it was the same corn I was familiar with until I ate it for myself, but if it was anything similar, it would go a long way to helping with the shortages Inelda was facing. The fact they were growing so well could only be attributed to the skill and knowledge of Tyulei and the other elves working with her.

As I admired the fields of crops, an elven woman emerged from the stalks of corn, eyes growing wide as she saw me. Though she hesitated a little, she eventually worked up the courage to walk over toward us.



"I thought the spirits were acting awfully excited. I had heard rumors there was a high elf in the kingdom, but seeing you face-to-face is still quite a shock." the elven woman spoke with obvious anxiety. I glanced at Reas beside me. He gave a small nod, confirming that this was Tyulei.

I knew the elves could see a light around us, but the spirits also got excited when we were nearby? It seemed I'd be revealed everywhere I went. Learning that was a bit of a shock. Had the other elves like Airena noticed the same thing, but simply not mentioned it because they'd assumed I was already aware? But, I mean, I'm a high elf. There was no way I'd know what the spirits were like when a high elf *wasn't* around.

Ah, though now that I think about it, the merfolk Mizuyo had said something similar, hadn't she? Something about "the water getting all excited." My memories of Fusou were already starting to take on a nostalgic tint. I was sure Mizuyo was fine, but I guess Old Gon would be gone by now.

But now wasn't the time to be getting shocked at this revelation, nor to get lost in reminiscences. Turning back to Tyulei, I nodded.

"Yep, it's just what it looks like. I heard about you, so I came to meet you myself. But I have to say, you've already exceeded my expectations. All of these crops are excellent."

I stretched a hand out toward her, hoping her long history with humans would be enough to understand what I was getting at. And sure enough, after

only a few moments of hesitation, she reached out and grabbed my hand. Reas looked like he was about to lose his marbles, but this handshake was exactly what I had hoped for.



The success brought a smile to my face. This was a huge win. As someone labeled an eccentric by the rest of the elves, she wouldn't function well as a leadership figure for them. However, when it came to understanding the actions and intentions of the human kingdoms bordering them, I had no doubt she could work as an aide or consultant. And with her around, there would be someone who understood what I was looking for as well.

"If we can get more farmland like this in places safe from human invasion, do you think you could expand what you're doing here to help with the food situation?" I asked a probing question. Of course, even if she was on board, putting her in a consultant role like that immediately was being a bit overeager. I mean, we didn't even have anyone for her to advise yet.

So first, I would get her to help with a problem I knew she must have already spent a great deal of time worrying about, which would allow us to build trust in each other. The issue before her right now was acquiring enough land to produce the food required to solve the shortage. After seeing the results of her work here, I had no doubt at all about her personal abilities. And when it came to growing crops, elves could call on the spirits for protection against droughts and extreme weather, so most catastrophic events related to farming could be avoided.

The fact that their food production wasn't enough, even with those abilities, must have bothered her. If they couldn't secure more food, it wouldn't be long before the whole kingdom project fell apart. Seeing that potential future, knowing she had the knowledge and the skills to solve that problem, but lacking the land to do so and being unable to cut down the forest around them...it was exactly that excellence of hers that would have made this situation so frustrating.

But as I hinted at earlier, I had an idea for how to solve that problem. Or perhaps more accurately, I had the power to force a solution through. If the amount of available land was restricted because of the threat of invading armies, I could just reinforce the kingdom's borders with rivers and mountains. Using the spirits for such brute-force solutions was the easiest thing for me to do.

Creating mountains could completely seal off Inelda from the outside world, but I would try using rivers instead. The guaranteed safety created by perfectly sealing the border would put the elven soldiers out of a job, and discourage the elves as a whole from interacting with the rest of the world even after the situation in the West changed. I wanted the elves to be ready and capable of defending themselves should the need arise, and I definitely didn't want them to give up all interaction with the rest of the world.

On the other hand, if rivers were used to make those borders, bridges, and boats could be made to cross them. The power of the water spirits would also provide a much stronger advantage in combat than drawing enemy armies inland and fighting them in the forests. On top of that, it would allow friendly nations to cross into Inelda's territory, and those nations could also use the rivers to transport goods with the elves' help. That would improve the standing of the elves in the eyes of the other nations.

Of course, in exchange for that help, the elves could acquire information and supplies from the outside world, and it would allow the elves and their allies to put more pressure on their enemies. It might be the first push needed to get change happening here in the west-central region.

If such huge ramifications could be generated by creating a few rivers, then there was no reason not to. The elves might object to changing the landscape so drastically, even if it was outside the forests...but abandoning their smaller forests and gathering here was already a drastic change. The elves had fled their forests for their own safety, thus allowing monster populations to boom. In the same way, I'd be creating rivers to keep the elves safe.

"If such a thing were possible... Oh, it's not that I doubt your words, but the scale is just hard for me to imagine. If it were to happen, I would do everything I could to help resolve the issues we are facing." Tyulei responded slowly, choosing her words carefully. Meanwhile, Reas seemed to be reeling from what he'd just heard.

That was exactly what I wanted to hear. The food shortage wasn't the only problem this kingdom was facing. She knew that and was telling me she wanted to be of use in solving those problems.

Of course, we still didn't have nearly enough hands on deck. In order to secure a stable life for so many elves, we'd need a huge workforce. But we had now started gathering them, one by one. And just as Reas had introduced me to Tyulei, she very well might introduce me to other interesting, exceptional elves.

The circle was getting bigger.



A good deal of time had passed since I started recruiting elves to help. To be precise, it had already been three months since I arrived in Inelda.

We were currently making preparations to enact my plan of creating rivers to enclose the kingdom. There were quite a few volunteers who had stepped up to help and were currently digging holes around the kingdom's borders to serve as markers. When it came time to actually make the river, I'd use those holes as focus points, digging channels a few dozen to a few hundred meters wide between them, and then filling the newly created trenches with water.

In a way, it felt more like a moat than a river, but once it was done, I could worry about connecting it to other rivers and getting the water spirits to help circulate the water. The idea of making a living river sounded much more fun to me than a simple moat.

In truth, I could make the river myself just by looking at a rough map, but the elves' assistance would make the process much more precise, allowing the river to line up better with the kingdom's borders. And above all, I was really happy to see them so eager to work themselves instead of relying on me to do everything. So for now, I was waiting for the preparations to be complete.

Though I had decided to gather a group of exceptional elves, I was making an effort to avoid focusing too much on those who were exceedingly skilled. For those with talent, especially at a level one would call genius, being recognized and put to work was a thing of joy. There was nothing wrong with that.

But even those who didn't stand head and shoulders above the rest still craved recognition, and that was just as valid. Everyone wanted to be recognized, wanted to be praised. It was nothing out of the ordinary. And what was even more obvious was that in a group of hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of people, only a small few met that bar of extreme talent. If I only

paid attention to those top few talents, unrest would start to grow among the rest of the population.

That was why I was happy to have so many elves helping with building this river. Once the work was finished, I'd make sure to thank each and every one of them individually.

Now, I had some time before the preparations for the river were complete, so how would I spend that time?

"Lord Acer! Is this good?"

By teaching the elven children sculpting, of course.

Well, we weren't actually using hammers and chisels or anything. Instead, I had prepared a number of small stone blocks for them, and had the children trace their fingers along the stone, getting the earth spirits to help them carve it. It was more like a game, and if they worked hard at it, they'd end up with a small statue they could carry home.

"Yes, exactly! That's great. This is a bird, right? What kind of bird is it?"

The child beamed at my praise. They never ended up telling me what kind of bird it was, but it didn't matter as long as they were having fun. Naturally, being made by a child, there were plenty of distortions, and the finer details were all amateurish at best. But the fact I could recognize what it was despite all that meant it was pretty well done in my eyes.

Using the earth spirits to carve a statue out of stone was actually much harder than it sounded. In order to get the help of the spirits, one needed a close relationship with them and a precise mental image of what you wanted to accomplish. If you weren't that close to them, they would just ignore your request. And no matter how much they liked you, if you couldn't clearly communicate what you wanted, there was no way they could respond properly.

Of course, factors like one's personal affinity for the spirits and ability to empathize with them also came into play, but in the end, Spirit Arts came down to getting along with the spirits and asking them for help. That's why I thought that practicing in the Spirit Arts should always be done in a way that was fun for

the trainee and the spirits. Doing something that left a permanent result would be fun for both of them, and the sculpting process would help the children practice holding more precise images in mind. While I had been learning under Professor Myos, I had done everything myself, but that didn't stop the spirits from watching with a keen interest.

It would be decades before these children grew up, so the situation here in the West would likely be entirely different by then, but it was never a bad thing for them to have more tools in their belt. While the current situation was very much a crisis for the elves, from the perspective of their extensive lifespans, it was still only a temporary rough patch. I had no idea what kind of future would be waiting for these children, but no matter how the world changed, the spirits would always be at their sides.

So I was teaching the children how to interact with the spirits and ask them for help. Of course, if any of them actually wanted to take up sculpting for real, I'd have to break out the hammer and chisel, but I figured it was too early to be worrying about that.

"Who is this, Lord Acer?" one of the children asked, looking at my handiwork.

While watching them practice, I had been carving a sculpture of my own, modeled after a friend of mine who had passed away a long time ago: Rodna, the guard of a distant city. I couldn't really tell you why I had picked him...but maybe the kind, gentle feeling I got from watching the children had brought him to mind. He was always kind, always looking after me.

"Ah, yeah. This is a human who was a friend of mine. He was a great guy. When I had difficulties in a human city, he always took care of me."

I was a bit unsure of how to explain it to the children. Some of them had come to Inelda fleeing from humans. If it had been Clayas or Shizuki, I could have given them fascinating or funny stories about their incredible swordsmanship, but there wasn't much I could say about Rodna other than that he was great. I had been incredibly lucky to meet someone like him right after emerging from the Forest Depths. It might sound like a bit of an exaggeration, but to me, Rodna was the face of the good side of humanity, even long after he had passed.

The child turned quiet, facing the yet incomplete statue. “Mr. Human, thank you for helping Lord Acer!”

I was quite surprised. I hadn’t expected anything like that. Kids were really amazing. I felt like I was about to tear up.

An emotional display like that would probably confuse the children though, so I forced myself to calm down and patted the child on the head with a smile. When the other kids saw that, they crowded around as if hoping I’d do the same for them. The feeling growing in my chest was something I really couldn’t express with words.



Five months after my arrival in Inelda, the elves had finished the preparations needed to make the river that would close off their borders. Though I’d broadly said I was closing off its borders, that didn’t mean they were cutting off all contact with the outside world.

Where Inelda bordered with hostile nations, the river would be wider, and bent and twisted to increase the speed the water flowed to make building bridges or crossing in boats more difficult. Naturally, the neighbors who were friendly to the elves would receive the opposite treatment: not only getting a calmer, slower river that made crossing easy, but also considerations would be taken to make the river itself a useful resource for them.

Luckily for us, the nations that were hostile to the elves and friendly to them had divided themselves up neatly. Currently, Inelda was bordered by five nations: Kazarya to the south, Kirgia to the west, Durigle to the northwest, Koffel to the northeast, and Wyforen to the east. Kazarya, Kirgia, and Durigle ascribed to the western religion, and so were hostile to the elves. Having spread here from the West, the western religion was much stronger in that direction...well, it would be nice if things were always that simple. But at any rate, that was the current geographical situation, so dividing them from the friendly nations wasn’t hard.

Inelda’s northern border came up against a mountain range outside the claims of any nation, so anything west of that and south of Inelda could be given difficult-to-cross rivers. There was a possibility Koffel and Wyforen could

end up adopting the western religion, or even being toppled and conquered by another enemy, so we were still building a river separating us from them just in case.

With the aid of the spirits, the elves would have no trouble defending those water crossings. Even without them, I intended to have the elves train so that they could fight as a true army that wouldn't lose to any human invader. This solved the largest problems when it came to defense. Blocking human armies from entering Inelda would also open up more land for safe cultivation, drawing us closer to solving the food shortages as well.

It wouldn't solve all the issues the elves faced, and once they had that added layer of security and stability, other problems they had been quietly enduring would quickly start bubbling to the surface. Once their lives weren't in danger anymore, they would feel much more free to start complaining. Though maybe they wouldn't be as quick to complain as humans, elves still needed to vent those stresses to maintain their health. If those complaints were left to develop into unrest, it had the potential to trip up the growing kingdom and lead to its early collapse from the inside. To prevent that, they needed a strong leader to act as their representative...and if we wanted to promote a feeling of solidarity among the elves, we'd need to give the kingdom a new name.

I didn't think the community here would fracture while I was present, but I wouldn't be here forever. There were only nine years and seven months left on my time limit. In that time, I would set them on a course that would keep them united. However, that was a much more difficult problem to solve than just making a river. But this was something I could do, so I would do it.

All I had to do today was make that river.

The other elves watched as I put my hands on the ground and closed my eyes. We were in the heart of Inelda right now, so they wouldn't actually be able to see anything happening. I didn't think there was much point to them watching me...although, unlike humans, they could see the spirits at work, so I guess there wouldn't be nothing to see.

"Spirits of the earth," I called out, tuning my mind to the spirits, merging my

feelings with theirs, and searching outward.

The elves had used the earth spirits' power to dig the holes, so of course the spirits knew where they were. Asking them to tell me where they were, I got an image in the back of my mind of countless points, which when connected, would draw the border of Inelda. All that remained was to apply what I had taught to the children the other day. I traced a line between the points in my mind, connecting them together. Though rather than going straight between each one, I bent and twisted the line as I went.

This simple act of tracing a line with an invisible figure reshaped the landscape around Inelda in the same way the children had reshaped the stone. Long ago, I would have been much rougher, bringing about quite a bit of noise and shaking. But as I was now, there would be no unnecessary spectacle. Or rather, I was able to choose not to have it. Perhaps that seemed unimportant, but I felt it was a marker of my personal growth.

I was focusing rather hard, so I didn't know exactly how long it took, but I finished tracing the line in what felt like a little under ten minutes. Of course, that was matched by a huge, deep trench being dug out around the kingdom as well. But I couldn't discard the image in my mind quite yet. Next, it was time to call on the water spirits, the ones in the sky above me.

"Spirits of the water."

Gather together, make clouds, and bring us rain. In response to my request, the water spirits gathered the moisture from the air up into the sky, which soon began falling to the earth in a torrential downpour. But the clouds only formed—and the rain only fell—exactly above the newly formed trenches. If I had made it rain like this over the entire kingdom, those crops we had finally managed to grow would likely be ruined. Keeping the image of the trench in my mind, I sent the water spirits to fill it with water. The wind spirits helped out too, but most of the work was shouldered by the water spirits. I was, of course, grateful to both of them, as well as to the earth spirits.

If left like this for a time, the trenches would eventually fill with water. Once it was done, I would ask the water spirits to inhabit it, create a moving current, and start the water circulating. Later, I would need to connect the river to a

source up in the mountains and to an outlet outside the kingdom so we could invite aquatic life into it, but there was no need to rush.

The elves were on their knees, facing me as if in prayer. It was really too much...but whatever. This would secure a safety for them they never had before. There was no need for me to rain on their parade, as it were. The real difficulties would come when I had to solve problems where brute force like this wasn't useful.

"Hey, Elder. What did you guys actually call the forest here?" I asked a question that suddenly popped back into my mind. For example, back in the east-central region, one of the many groups of elves in Ludoria called the woods around their settlement Mi Forest, while those in Zieden called theirs Ha Forest. There should have been a name for the forest here in Inelda too.

"O-Oh...I suppose we never told you. What an inexcusable discourtesy. My sincerest apologies. The name we use to refer to our home is Shiyou Forest."

I nodded. Shiyou Forest, was it? "Shiyou" was likely referring to the first leaves that sprouted from a baby plant. That was a great name.

"Then until the humans come back to Inelda, let's call this land Shiyou. We'll need a name for ourselves when we send letters to Koffel and Wyforen, after all."

The interim leader of the elves could be the elder of Shiyou Forest. Considering the values held by elves, elders would easily be able to slip into a role of leadership. But simply leaving things at that would no doubt irritate the elves who had come here from other forests, so I would also create an organization of exceptionally skilled elves from across the nation to assist him. That elder would one day step back, and hopefully through the hands of that organization, Shiyou would become a place that reflected the thoughts of all the elves who lived here.

I might need to send letters back east, asking for help from Airena or Professor Myos. Ah, speaking of which, I had a letter from Grenda Welbs, the lord of Tomhans in Jilchias that I still needed to respond to. I wondered if getting a response from the nation of Shiyou rather than the elven forest would surprise him.

There were still all kinds of things we needed to do, but they could all be set aside for now to celebrate the creation of the river. We had plenty of time to wait until the trenches filled with water, after all.



Two years had passed since I came to Inelda, which was now called Shiyou. During my usual daily sword practice, Reas, who was always around to watch, suddenly spoke up.

“Lord Acer, why on earth do you go so far?”

The question was honestly pretty abstract. It was hard for me to grasp what he was talking about. If he was asking me now of all times, that must mean he was talking about my swordsmanship, right? Or was there something else he had seen in me that made him curious?

When I responded with that question, he shook his head. “I mean with everything. Everything you do is a mystery to me.”

I see. It seemed the two years he had spent shadowing me were starting to have an impact on him. Until now, Reas wouldn't have dreamed of doubting anything I did. And even if he had, he would never have voiced those doubts. While that was born from the absolute respect that elves had for high elves, it also was an excuse for them to stop thinking for themselves. The fact that he was finally willing to share his doubts and ask questions was an undeniable sign of growth.

“Of course, I'm talking about your swordsmanship too,” he continued. “Even without such a skill, I cannot imagine anyone being a threat to you. I also wonder why you take the time to go and meet with so many people who are unhappy here. Even if you ignored us entirely, we elves would always obey.” And so he asked me again why I “go so far.”

Ah, that was a good question. The fact he was willing to voice these doubts made me so happy that I felt obliged to give him a really good answer. However, I had my own doubts about whether words would be enough to express everything I was thinking. Luckily, Reas and I had plenty of time allotted to us, so we had no shortage of time to talk and try to understand each other. Just giving one or two words might leave room for misunderstandings, but a

hundred, thousand, or ten thousand words would get across my intentions with a great deal more accuracy.

“Well, it’s because I like doing things this way. I practice with a sword because I enjoy it. Though it’s also useful for when I’m up against someone whom the spirits can’t help me with. I’ve fought someone like that before.”

Everything I did was because I wanted to. My reasons for practicing swordsmanship were too many to put into words. I wanted to be capable of performing in a cool and beautiful way with a sword. This swordsmanship was the bond between me and Kaeha, and I wanted to recreate that final display she had shown me. Beyond all that, I enjoyed the practice. I also needed to refine my skills for the next time I met Win. And so on, and so on. But if I wanted to summarize all of them together, ultimately they came down to it just being what I wanted to do. I simply enjoyed doing it.

As for vampires like Rayhon, where the powers of the spirits couldn’t help me, I had more or less figured out how their powers worked now, so I doubted I’d have similar issues in the future. Even against the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire, the spirits would be a powerful ally. Back then, his Mystic Arts had been like using water to put out a fire. He was just using his own power to neutralize the phenomena I created.

But that power wasn’t unlimited. In Rayhon’s case, it was drawn from the people he had killed, and in the case of a real mystic, it would be from the energy they’d drawn out of nature and taken into themselves. All I would have to do is keep attacking until that power was exhausted. There was no way a mystic, proper or not, would have greater reserves of power than the spirits of nature themselves. There was absolutely no possibility of losing against them in a war of attrition.

That said, people like the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire wouldn’t let it devolve into something as simple as that. But I had no intention of fighting them anyway, so I didn’t need to worry about it. Still, there was always a chance I’d come across someone who could do something similar, or who could at least make me think so. In that one-in-a-million chance, having experience in swordsmanship would be valuable. And of course, I had chosen to refine my swordsmanship because I liked it.

Anyway, to get back on track, I had also gone around talking to the unhappy elves for the same reason; that's what I wanted to do.

"People are happy just to have me listen to them. If their concerns are something that we can resolve, their input becomes invaluable. If it's not, it gives us a chance to explain and help them come to terms with reality. I don't see a downside to it."

When it came to humans or other races, there were plenty of people who would stubbornly try to force their own opinions through, but elves were extremely obedient to high elves like myself. The fact that they would be so happy for me to just hear them out and talk things over with them made it fun for me too. Even if it was only one or two people a day, that added up to hundreds in a year, and eventually thousands over time. That was only a fraction of the tens of thousands of elves living in Shiyon now, but the impact I had on that small fraction would spread throughout the whole population.

If this had been a kingdom of dwarves rather than elves, it would have turned into drinking and fistfights rather than talking things through...and while that would be fun in its own right, making it a daily routine would be rather taxing. I was glad elves were so easy to work with, though this kind of interaction felt a little bit lacking in the end.

"If I can make others happy and improve their lives just by doing the things I want to, that makes me happy too. It's a lot more fun than lying back and issuing orders all day. I don't think I've done anything that would count as 'going so far,'" I said, turning to Reas with a laugh. Answering his question was more of the same. If this kind of exchange would help Reas grow as a person, that would make me happy.

Reas sank back into silence, chewing over the response I had given him. I didn't mind if he took his time with it. Both of us, elves and high elves, had plenty of time to live and grow. In fact, you could say that we *needed* a long time to grow. If he had questions or doubts, he could ask any number of times, and I would answer every single one.

And so my peaceful days in the forest continued.



After spending three years in Shiyou, I received a report from Tyulei on the amount of food they had managed to grow this year. Though it wasn't quite enough to call it a document, passing my eyes over the brief written summary filled me with both a sense of relief and of fear. I was relieved that the amount of food produced was enough to account for the needs of the elves. But I was afraid because that need had been met many times faster than I had anticipated.

It was good news, of course. This was a result of the hard work put in by Tyulei and the other elves who had dedicated themselves to farming. However, there weren't really all that many of them. If humans wanted to achieve the same results in the same space, they might need as much as ten times the manpower to produce the same amount of food. And yet these were the results.

They worked the land that was available to them, developed the new land that had been secured for them, and at the same time managed to produce enough food to support the entire kingdom. It had only been two and a half years since the rivers were created to make more safe farmland. For the humans of my past life, those results would have been entirely impossible without heavy machinery like tractors.

Elves were extremely proficient at farming. This was my first glimpse into how capable the elves would be at conquering this world. The population of elves was small because they intentionally avoided growing, keeping their numbers low enough to survive off the bounty of the forest. But what if they learned to farm, to produce huge amounts of food like this?

With such long lifespans, their population wouldn't explode like humans' could, but it only took around a hundred years for a new generation to be capable of reproducing themselves. If they really tried, they could multiply tenfold in five hundred to a thousand years.

In comparison to humans—or any of the other races, really—individual elves were much stronger thanks to the power granted them by the spirits. With a larger population, they would have no problem exterminating their neighbors and claiming that land for themselves. Really, it wasn't hard to imagine the elves driving out all other races from the continent within my own lifetime.

That was what scared me about this report.

“Lord Acer, once the situation in Shiyou settles down, I think I will give up on farming.” As I struggled between relief and terror, Tyulei broke the silence between us with an ironic laugh. “When it was just me, the humans were really happy to have me around. They said I was a big help.”

I can imagine that. Hard, unworkable ground could easily be tilled by an elf, and there was no threat of lacking water. Having someone be grateful for her help was no doubt a great experience for her.

“But after working with other elves like this, on such a huge scale, I doubt I’ll be able to really enjoy having a small field ever again. And that large-scale work...it’s quite scary, isn’t it? Just reading those numbers sent a chill down my spine.”

This woman was truly exceptional. As faint as they were, my memories of my past life were what taught me that these numbers were something to be feared. But even without that knowledge, Tyulei was able to see the same future I had. And it seemed she didn’t find it particularly pleasing either.

“Please don’t give me a look like that. Actually...let me take that back. Maybe I ought to be proud that I could get that kind of expression out of *you*. I doubt there are many elves out there that could strike such shock and fear into a high elf.”

Though not immediately, Tyulei was saying she planned to give up farming. Without her strong leadership, the elves likely wouldn’t be able to continue this massive rate of growth. The other elves would likely only work to make the amount of food we needed, planning in the long-term to return to their forests. Unlike Tyulei, most of them only worked the fields to meet the need for food in Shiyou, and weren’t much interested in pursuits beyond that.

Yes, she alone was the source of this threat. But...while I was here doing whatever I liked with my life, could I really make her give up the farming that she loved? It was an aggravating situation.

Of course, Shiyou’s food crisis hadn’t been my fault in any way, and even if this report had never made it to me or I hadn’t noticed any danger in it, Tyulei

would have come to the same conclusion all on her own. But the fact that I couldn't tell her to just do what she loved filled me with a special kind of disgust.

"I have to say, this all has me very excited. If I can't spend all my time farming, who knows what else I'll be able to do?" Tyulei continued, as if trying to encourage me. There wasn't a trace of worry in her smile. "That was something I learned from you, Lord Acer. So I wanted to ask you, why did you take up blacksmithing and sculpting?"

After a long, mostly trivial conversation...

"I'll let everyone know that you were thrilled with their results."

Tyulei left with those words. I felt awfully pathetic having her so clearly worried over me. She was the one who was really suffering, being forced to give up what she loved.

The whole thing reinforced my idea that I just wasn't suited to leadership. But even so, I needed to use my authority as a high elf to support Shiyou. We still had seven years to go.



I am glad to hear you are well. I am saddened to hear you have been caught up in a path not of your choosing. And I am proud of you, willing to take that path anyway for the sake of your comrades.

That was the beginning of the letter I was reading—a reply from the count of Marmaros in Siglair, Professor Myos, after I'd sent him a request for advice. The rest of the letter was filled with practical advice, and explanations behind the meaning and intentions of each of them. It was a very serious letter, very much like Professor Myos.

Reading it made me feel quite nostalgic. He had been similarly strict and capable as a teacher when I was learning to sculpt. By now, he had probably retired from his role as count, leaving the government to his son while he indulged fully in the arts. He was happy, saddened, and proud. It was exactly the kind of answer I expected from him, making me quite happy to read it.

However, I also noticed something else. Though I had told him we should meet again after everything in Marmaros had been resolved, it was quite likely we wouldn't actually get the chance. There was always the possibility that someone could suddenly die without warning, but even without that, after spending ten years in Shiyou and however much time in the Far West, he might not be around anymore when I finally made it back to the east-central region of the continent.

Professor Myos had been over forty when we first met. After five years in that developing village, then ten years in Shiyou...if I spent five more years in the west, that would leave him well into his sixties. Humans in this world rarely lived much longer than that.

Professor Myos was a noble, though. Maybe he would last a bit longer thanks to the better nutrition available to him. But on the other hand, he was definitely the kind of person to neglect himself in the pursuit of his art. I couldn't imagine him living all that long.

I found myself sighing. Things always seemed to turn out this way. I knew being gloomy about it wouldn't help things, but human lives always seemed to pass by in a flash. I was still sending letters back to the dojo as I had promised Aiha, but I suspected I'd never be seeing Souha or Touki again either. Of course, I had been well aware of that when I declared I'd spend ten years supporting this kingdom. And again, being gloomy about it wouldn't help.

Professor Myos's advice came from someone who had been educated in the art of rulership from an early age, and had decades of experience on top of that. It was invaluable advice for a nation like this, full of nothing but elves with no experience in ruling at all.

The letter from Myos wasn't the only one that arrived today, though.

Actually, it was only recently that we could start getting letters. They now came in from the neighboring friendly nation of Wyforen, carried there overland from Jilchias, which received them by ship from the east-central region. The elves being involved in helping with ships traveling along the newly formed river had created that opportunity. Thanks to their ability to call on

water spirits to create currents in the river, the elves played a significant role in developing water freight industries in both Koffel to the northeast and Wyforen to the east.

On the other side, the rivers had proved useless to Kazarya, Kirgia, and Durigle on Shiyou's southern and western borders for transporting goods by water, and had been responsible for foiling a number of their attempts to attack Shiyou. The consequences of making the elves one's enemy or ally were starting to spread and gain weight throughout the region. It wouldn't be long before Shiyou was able to engage with friendly nations like Koffel and Wyforen as equals on the political stage.

I had been a little worried about individual elves taking the responsibility of aiding others in their ships before Shiyou had a chance to form stable political relationships with its neighbors, but unfortunately, our political position was still too weak.

Thanks to the efforts of the elven elders and the exceptional individuals I had gathered under me...really, thanks to all the elves in Shiyou being willing to do as I instructed them, we were barely managing to keep our own ship afloat. Naturally, there were no elves with experience in diplomacy here, so there was always the fear that contact with other nations in an official capacity would lead to binding contracts that would leave the elves at a disadvantage. So first, we were trying to improve the station of elves in the region, making them a valuable asset to those around them and thus improving Shiyou's value, before forging concrete political ties.

To get back on topic, the other letter I received today was advice on how to carry out that diplomacy. It was from my personal friend, the only elf I knew...and quite likely the only elf in the world who had experienced diplomacy with human kingdoms as an equal. Reading over Airena's letter, I couldn't help but laugh. In the end, it all boiled down to "learn about human common sense, but act as if you are ignorant of it."

I couldn't say she was wrong. By learning human standards and also submitting to them, we would be negotiating with them as equals. That would put us in an arena where they were experts and we were amateurs. There was no way we could stand against them. Koffel and Wyforen might have been on

good terms with the elves, but when it came to politics, there was no way to avoid them putting the interests of their own nations above ours.

So Airena's advice was to avoid submitting to their way of doing things except when it was absolutely necessary. Deliver a first impression that lined up with their expectations and images of elves, and open negotiations in a completely new way. We would make them believe that humans had their place, and elves had their own far removed from it. That distance would create the opportunity for equality in negotiations. There was nothing to gain from entering their arena.

Of course, we couldn't pretend to be ignorant forever. We'd slowly have to demonstrate that we were coming to understand their way of doing things. But if we grew too close too soon, it would cause both of us to misapprehend each other.

This all seemed very much like something I wouldn't be good at, but I couldn't expect Reas and Tyulei to shoulder a burden like this on their own. I would inevitably have to participate in any meeting with ambassadors from abroad.

Airena finished her letter with an apology, saying she was unable to come to the West herself right away, and so was leaving the elves here in my care.

Yeah. This would all be quite difficult, but I guess I'd give it a shot. Even if she wasn't here to see it herself, I still wanted to show off what I could do for Airena every once in a while.



In my sixth year staying in Shiyou, the war between Kazarya to the south and their neighbor Jilchias grew more intense. Religious differences between the two had made them hostile from the beginning, but until now, the conflict had been confined to Jilchias brushing aside Kazarya's incursions on their territory.

Jilchias's access to the sea had brought them incredible profit from trade, while Kazarya, despite their warmongering attitude, was constantly on the brink of ruin due to the large monster populations within their borders. Jilchias never really had any reason to invade Kazarya themselves. Anger and hatred would inevitably continue to grow as they constantly bore Kazarya's violence, but crushing their kingdom and being forced to take ownership of their ruined

territory wasn't a particularly appetizing prospect.

But that had changed recently due to the birth of Shiyou in what was once Inelda, as well as the creation of the enormous river surrounding it and the profits it brought to nations who were friendly to the elves. Kazarya had received none of the river's benefits because they were enemies of the elves, but they were positioned along that river nonetheless. In other words, the leadership of Jilchias believed that if they could take that position from Kazarya, there was hope of them getting a piece of that pie for themselves.

Well, I say the leadership, but I was referring to Count Grenda Welbs, a man I had been exchanging letters with. He had quite specifically sent me a letter asking if the elves would support their water freight if they were to gain access to the river.

Personally, I didn't like the idea of approving the escalation of a war. But from the perspective of Shiyou, the destruction of an enemy nation in Kazarya and the addition of Jilchias to the water freight industry surrounding it was nothing but gain. There were virtually no downsides, and great advantages to be had.

Of course, even if the Kazaryan leadership were ousted, the beliefs of the people in that territory wouldn't change so easily. It would still be difficult to trust the people who lived there, but if Jilchias were to take control of and responsibility for those people, I doubted Shiyou would have much in the way of an objection.

Jilchias exploded into action almost immediately after receiving my reply. They had put up with Kazarya's aggression before because there was no profit to be gained from retaliation. Now that there was profit to be had, they had no reason to leave Kazarya on the map. From what I had heard, Jilchias's army had been quite energetic in its occupation of Kazarya's towns and villages. I guess there was already a rather significant gap in strength between them, and with the number of troops Kazarya had lost trying to cross the river into Shiyou, they weren't exactly in top shape to defend themselves.

From an outside perspective, Kazarya's behavior looked absurd, but that just went to show what kind of terrifying power religion could have over people. A group united under a single idea gained an incredible power to push forward,

though it tended to rob them of the ability to look in any other direction. The Kazaryans, under the belief of the Western religion that humans were superior to all other races, couldn't fathom the possibility of losing to elves, and so continued to whittle down their own forces.

It was easy to laugh at them for their foolishness, but it would be just as easy for any of us to get trapped in the same rut. Whether it was religion or any other motivator, anyone—humans, elves, and even high elves—could easily blind themselves to the world around them for the sake of what they believed in. There had been plenty of times when I had felt myself growing close to that in my own life.

I stared out at the river running along Shiyou's southern border. Compared to the river on the east side, the water here moved incredibly fast. On top of that, the way the river bent and curved meant the flow of the river changed speed frequently, making it much more difficult for ships attempting to follow or cross it.

Of course, all of that was something I had done on purpose. But if Jilchias managed to completely overpower Kazarya and make it to the river, I would probably end up gradually reducing its intensity. The river would become so peaceful that you could forget it had swallowed up countless Kazaryan soldiers. That left me with an indescribable feeling.

A fish suddenly leaped out of the raging current. It looked like life had finally decided to make its way here now that we had connected this river to others. Would the river becoming calmer impact these fish negatively? Maybe it would be best to keep the water moving at a decent speed.

There weren't many fish or plants in the water yet, but eventually, even aquatic monsters would take up residence here. In only a few more years, this river would be out of my hands. How would it change once I had left?

Pondering these things, I watched the river flowing by, still trying to come to terms with the fact that this river I had made to defend the elves had now brought about even more war.



“This is...terrible,” I muttered as I spun around and slashed, taking a leech the size of a human head leaping toward me out of the air. It was a kind of monster I had never seen before. I was in a forest south of Shiyou, in what had been known as the nation of Kazarya just one year ago. The kingdom had at last been toppled, and was now in the process of being rebuilt according to Jilchias’s demands.

From the perspective of the elven kingdom of Shiyou, Kazarya had been an enemy, a hostile nation clinging tightly to the religion of the West. Now, the nation of Jilchias that had displaced them was showing a much friendlier face to the elves. Of course, that was because they were hoping to profit from the river we had created to protect ourselves, but it was only natural that people would seek to better the situation of their own nation. Unlike Kazarya’s attempts to profit by enslaving the elves, asking to use the river for commercial reasons was a proposal that could benefit both sides of the equation.

I wasn’t here exactly for that reason, but in this forest now ruled by Jilchias, I was hunting monsters nonetheless. By culling monsters before they could emerge from the forests, Jilchias’s power structure would take hold more smoothly. On top of that, I’d be able to survey the condition of the forests left behind by the elves who had fled to Shiyou.

I had every intention of allowing the elves who had built Shiyou to return to their old homes. Once the situation in the West had changed and the idiots taking elves as slaves had been driven out, I wanted them to return to their old lives. That would be best for both elves and humans.

However, when that day came, the elves would have to take back their forests from the monsters themselves. They would have to exterminate them entirely to set up new settlements. Surveying their situation now was part of preparing for that coming day. Beyond just their numbers, if the monsters that had taken up residence in the forests were especially strong, I would have to travel around to the many forests and dispatch them myself.

That’s what I had thought at first...but things were actually much, much worse than I had anticipated. I had traveled through here once while it was still Kazarya, around seven years ago. My objective had simply been to pass through, so I hadn’t spent much time investigating the situation, but I had been

attacked by a frustrating number of monsters.

And this was far worse than it had been. The monsters here had grown both in numbers and strength. Forests were places of great natural power, and without the elves to manage them, they would become breeding grounds for monsters.

There had to be some other factor involved for the situation to get so much worse in only seven years. Thinking about it, the only cause I could think of...was the collapse of Kazarya. A war that was enough to destroy a kingdom would involve an incredible loss of life. Those deaths drew out more monsters.

Though it sounded like superstition, there might have been more to it than that. Corpses themselves could turn into revenants, or serve as food for a growing monster population. But something in the back of my mind told me there was some deeper connection between the amount of death in the area and the increase in the populations of monsters.

“Lord Acer, we have finished disposing of the monsters behind us. I see things are quite bad here as well...” Reas scowled as he glanced over the area.

I couldn't blame him, not with the heaps of corpses laid out around me. Our objective here was to reduce the monster population, so we'd need to dispose of these carcasses. Otherwise, they would just serve to feed others. The fact we weren't going to use them for food or resources rubbed me the wrong way, though.

Reas was supposed to remain with me as my bodyguard, but I fought much more effectively when I was alone. I could reliably cut down any monsters that rushed toward me when I was their only target. Once I had a partner, we then had to worry about covering for each other, making fighting a much more tiring endeavor.

So instead, we had brought a troupe of skilled elves from Shiyou, who Reas was leading around in support of me. He had grown quite flexible in his thinking after these seven years. Killing the monsters would be easier for me alone, but disposing of all of their carcasses was still quite a task, so I was grateful for the help.

I guess seven years was quite some time, after all. I thought Reas's growth in that time was even more remarkable than the growth of the monster population here. If I weighed them against each other, the result was a definite positive. I was starting to feel motivated again.

Of course, if my predictions were correct, the change in the forests here had only started with Kazarya's collapse, so it wasn't that easy of a comparison to make, but there was no need to push the comparison that far. Reas's support was enough to lift my spirits, so I didn't need to worry about the details.

While we talked, a howl echoed through the forest. A particularly strong monster, probably the king of the forest, was getting closer. Had it been drawn here by the excessive blood that had been shed? Or had those deaths been taken as a threat to its territorial claim? Unfortunately for the monster, if it was the latter, it was about to bite off quite a bit more than it could chew.

This forest belonged to the elves. The monsters that had taken up residence here were no more than ruffians that had waltzed in while the true owners were away. Of course, thanks to that, the humans had been kept out of the forests as well, so it wasn't all bad. But if the monsters were under the impression that the forest belonged to them, it was about time we taught them how wrong they were.

Putting up a hand to stop Reas as he moved forward to intercept the approaching beast, I called on the spirits.



One day, eight years after I had come to Shiyou, a group of elves traveled with me on a selfish request of mine to the northeastern nation of Koffel. At this point, it had been about a hundred years since I first left Pulha behind and found my way to Vistcourt.

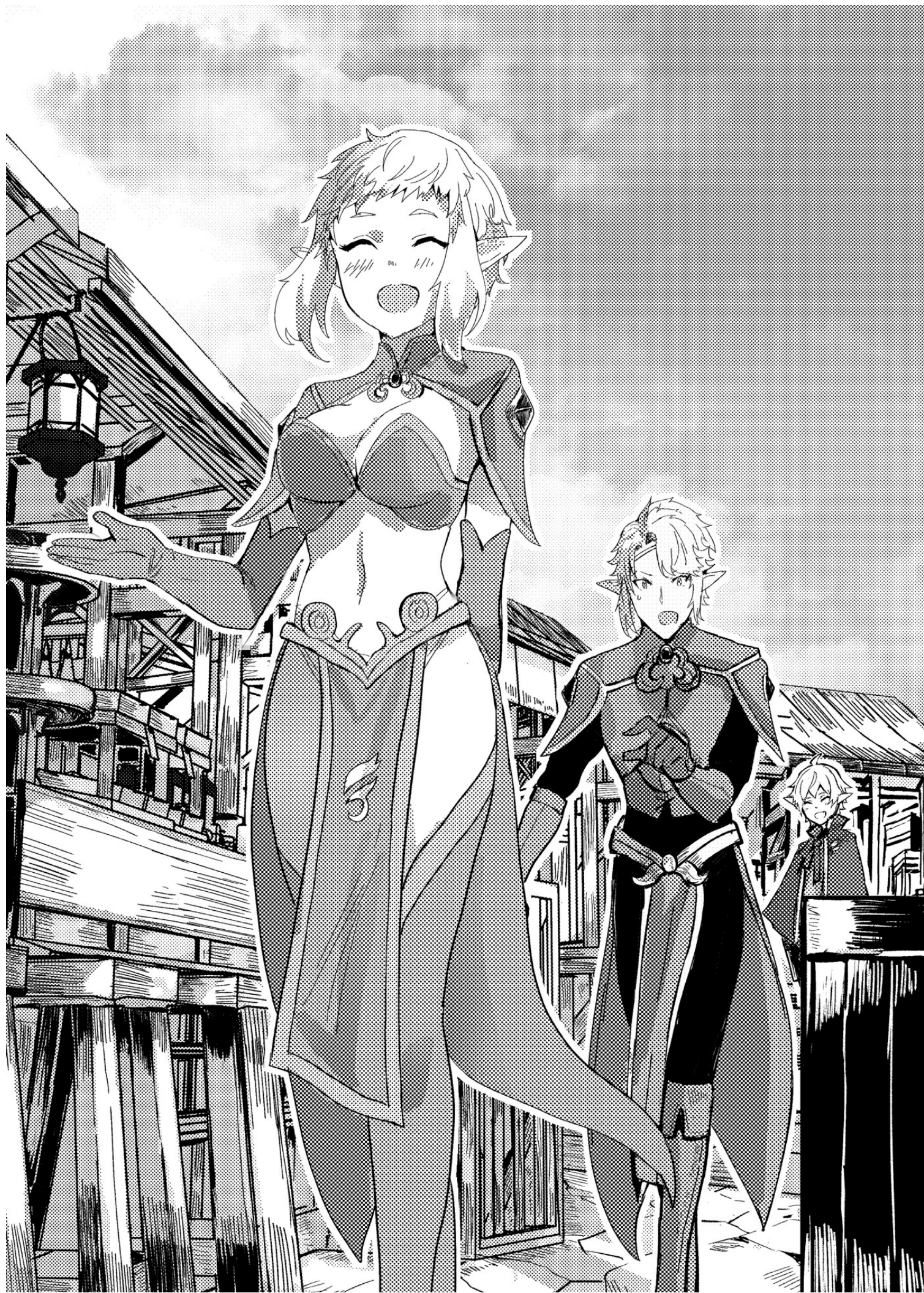
It wasn't as though this day in particular was the anniversary, but I still wanted to use this opportunity to celebrate the occasion by looking around a human city, finding a bar, and enjoying some drinks. And not in some small, run-of-the-mill village either. I wanted a big city, where there was plenty to see. Yes, it was entirely a selfish request on my part.

"Lord Acer, what is it they are selling over there? Let's go take a look."

“Wait, Tyulei! I know Lord Acer is very kind, but that does not mean you can be so careless.”

Tyulei and Reas had agreed to tag along for my selfish little adventure. Well, okay, I suppose Reas would have to be here since he was my bodyguard, and Tyulei was probably just interested in seeing a human city. Before the creation of Shiyou, Inelda had still been covered in dense forests. The nation hadn't developed much, and so even with her experience with humans, Tyulei had yet to see a large city. That said, unlike Reas, she wasn't used to fighting for herself, so it was dangerous to let her go gallivanting off on her own.

As she wandered back and forth, pulled every which way by all the sights the city had to offer, Reas grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, dragging her to a halt.



If she had actually run off on her own, things would be pretty serious. But I knew Reas wouldn't let her out of his sight, so I permitted myself to laugh at their antics.

I had also asked the spirits to keep an eye on things, to warn us if anyone watching us with malicious intent made any funny moves. Though I could laugh as I watched them, my guard was up at all times.

Right now, Reas was acting as the leader of the group of exceptional individuals I had gathered to work under me, while Tyulei was serving as his assistant. Though he was still a bit stiff and overly cautious, seeing him getting dragged around by Tyulei made me feel like they were a great combination.

The current leader of Shiyou was the elder of the group of elves who had been living in Inelda before the humans left, but Reas would eventually shoulder that responsibility. The elves still believed that obeying the commands of their elders was acceptable, but when it came to negotiating with human nations and governing the whole of Shiyou rather than their individual forest settlements, they agreed to leave the leadership to Reas and his group of elites.

To put it simply, the settlements themselves were still headed by the elders, but the nation as a whole would be run by Reas and the others. Of course, not every elf in the kingdom was happy with this arrangement, but having been at my side ever since my arrival here in Shiyou was a great mark in Reas's favor. His earning my trust and companionship was seen as a great accomplishment by the others. I really couldn't understand why they felt this way, but that was just how important high elves were to these people. There was no doubt that Reas was competent enough for the task, though, so if that "accomplishment" was enough to earn the respect of the others, I wasn't about to complain about it.

As we indulged Tyulei's curiosity, and as I found myself laughing at how perplexed Reas was at the assortment of foods he had never seen before, I was hit by a tremendous wave of nostalgia.

Was this what I had looked like a hundred years ago? Though I had memories of my past life, I had stumbled into a world of humans completely unlike the

one I knew. Everything I saw was shocking and fascinating. With no money to pay the gate toll for the city, Rodna had been worried about me, but then Airena had come along and helped. And when I tried to pay her back with an apua, she was so shocked she ended up scolding me.

The style of the weapons made in the forges here was a bit different from what I was used to, but the thick smell of iron in the air was very much the same. I had spent the last little while surrounded by elves, so I hadn't had a chance to do any blacksmithing.

I became an apprentice under Oswald, and we called each other "damned elf" and "damned dwarf." And that was all a hundred years ago.

Or maybe I should say it was *only* a hundred years ago? So much had happened between then and now that it made me wonder if I had miscounted somehow.

I really didn't understand time. It seemed to move so quickly, pulling all sorts of things out of my reach in the blink of an eye, but when I looked back, only a hundred years had passed. I had left the forest, learned blacksmithing, learned swordsmanship, caused an earthquake, traveled around the east-central region, adopted a son, helped in the contest for the dwarven throne, killed a vampire, said goodbye to a precious loved one, traveled to the Far East, met the mystics, met a dragon, climbed an enormous tree, returned to visit that special someone's grave, hatched a phoenix, learned to sculpt, and now was building a kingdom of elves.

The first ten years I spent out of the forest had felt so dense compared to my life up until that point. I had thought it had been a special time, a time of making irreplaceable memories. That ended up being absolutely true. Even now, those ten years shone brilliantly in my memory, but the ninety years that followed it shone just as brightly. Not everything was fun and exciting. There was plenty of sorrow and heartbreak to go along with it. But that made those memories all the more vivid, all the more enduring.

I really wanted something to drink. Even if I couldn't drink myself into a stupor, I was going to make good friends with my glass tonight. If I didn't, I felt like all these feelings would start spilling out in words and tears instead.



One summer night, nine years after I arrived in Shiyou, while I was lying down with my head on a bundle of dried grasses that were serving as my pillow, an incredible heat bloomed near my head. Considering the season, it was quite uncomfortable. If it had been winter, I would have loved it, but no matter how cool the night was compared to the day, I wasn't excited to have extra heat like this in the summer.

That said, since it was his first visit in a while, I wasn't about to roll over and go back to sleep on him. I took hold of Heero, whose true body was still within the heart of the sacred ground in the Forest Depths. I guess this was more like his avatar? Anyway, the tiny bird here wasn't the real thing. If the real Heero had shown up, things wouldn't settle at being uncomfortably hot. He was many times bigger than I was and gave off quite a bit more heat.

But even this little avatar of his was giving off an incredible heat. Maybe I just hadn't noticed last time because it had been winter, but he was way hotter than I remembered. Of course, that was still just in comparison to other living things. There was no risk of getting burned from touching him or anything.

"It's been a while, Heero. You seem rather hot today. Is something wrong?" I asked, wondering if he wasn't feeling well. Even if he was an ancient being, the current Heero was still just a baby. Raising Win had taught me that children were quick to get sick and break out into a fever. At the time, I had descended into a total panic.

I came to inform you that I will be unable to visit you for a time. But there is no need to worry. I have simply arrived at an age where I will begin molting and growing.

The telepathic message that came along with Heero's chirping was knowledge of his mysterious life cycle.

Molting was the process of losing one's feathers and growing new ones, I was pretty sure. The little Heero avatar looked no different from usual, but was it possible the real Heero had lost his feathers and was now sitting naked? The image of Heero sitting bare and featherless looked comical in my head, but I stifled the laugh. If it was true, it was really nothing to laugh about, and would

only serve to make him angry.

But he was growing, huh? I didn't know much about the life cycle of birds, but I supposed crossing the borders between chick, adolescent, and adult took some time and involved this tremendous heat he was now giving off. I couldn't help but wonder if the process was painful. But of course, Heero had gone through the process countless times already, so there wasn't much point in worrying about it.

"In that case, I guess you'll be able to fly soon? That's exciting."

I tried to be positive instead, stroking the tiny Heero and enjoying the texture of his baby feathers. I guess if he was moving on to the next stage in life, I'd be saying goodbye to this sensation. If he was going to take us to the land of giants above the clouds, he needed to grow to the point he was capable of flying...but I felt it was still a regrettable loss. But when I had asked before, Heero had been fully confident that his adult feathers would satisfy, so I guess I just had to look forward to that too.

Heero struggled out from between my fingers, jabbing at me with his beak in protest of this treatment. He wasn't actually angry, though, so it didn't hurt.

But I was wide awake now. When Heero said it would take "a little time" to be able to fly, I had to wonder what that meant for a being as ancient as he was. High elves like myself already had a pretty loose relationship with time, so I expected a phoenix would be even more extreme. Whether it was a few months or a few years—or in the unlikely event that it was a few decades—this would be the last chance I had to speak with him in a while, so I wanted to make the most of it.

There wasn't much we really had to talk about, but spending the night in casual conversation wasn't the worst experience either.



The promised ten years had passed, and so the day came for me to leave Shiyou. Naturally, if you asked if I could now head west without any second thoughts, leaving Shiyou in perfect shape, the answer would be a resounding no.

Reas, Tyulei, and the other leaders I had gathered were exceptionally skilled, managing to root out and resolve problems I never would have even considered. The elders had thrown their full support behind the young elves, and the general population had accepted the new ruling structure forming above them as they went about their daily lives. An enemy nation in Kazarya had been erased from the map, and the friendly nation of Jilchias had taken its place, while the water freight industry developing along Shiyou's eastern river was growing steadily.

From a wider perspective, it looked like things were all moving in the right direction, and that was definitely the case. But even so, there were plenty of problems left to be resolved. For example, there were a number of elves coming up with a desire to take special roles in Shiyou like Reas and Tyulei had, but there was no system in place to train or make use of them in their chosen paths. Though Kazarya was gone, the nations of Kirgia and Durigle remained and were still hostile, along with a host of other nations in the region that still adhered to the western religion.

Realistically speaking, ten years was far too short to solve all the problems faced by Shiyou. Problems were inevitable anywhere people interacted. As long as a nation was a place where people gathered and lived together, there would be an endless stream of problems for them to face. It was unlikely everything would ever be resolved...and there was no need for me to wait around until they were.

As I said before, from a wider perspective, things were moving in the right direction. The elves were working together, discerning and resolving the issues as they cropped up. Today was better than yesterday, and they were working hard to ensure tomorrow would be even better. They would be fine without me.

A large group of elves had gathered to see me off. Actually, even the elves that weren't here were crowded along the road I would take out of Shiyou, waiting for me to pass by. They were making a much bigger deal of this than they needed to...but there was nothing I could do about that. If I told them I was against them gathering like this, or tried to sneak out without them

knowing it, it would cast suspicions on the qualifications of Reas and the other leaders. I had no choice but to say goodbye properly, to meet their sadness at my departure head-on.

And for some strange reason, that didn't bother me. A long time ago, I found the elves' penchant for worshipping me quite off-putting, but now that behavior felt a lot less frustrating to deal with. I'm sure part of that was just from having grown used to it, but I had finally come to understand that that behavior was a result of how much they liked me. Now that I had matured somewhat, I could reflect on that time and realize that what had bothered me was not their behavior, but the fact that it felt like they were only seeing illusions of their ideal, not the real me.

But I knew now that Reas, Tyulei, and the many other elves I had come to know were not sad because a high elf was leaving them. They were sad because I was leaving them. Of course, any relationship between me and an elf would be burdened with my nature as a high elf. I was born into that life, constantly surrounded and aided by the spirits in everything I did, so there was no changing that. There was no separating that from who I was, nor would I if I could.

But now, I could tell that the people didn't see what they imagined a high elf to be when they looked at me. They chose to worship and serve the high elf Acer, not some delusion they had dreamed up. So while I found their behavior exaggerated and overdone, it didn't feel nearly as uncomfortable as it once had.

"Lord Acer...I have heard that the Far West is in much worse shape than this place used to be. Perhaps it is unnecessary worry on my part, but even so, I...no, we will be praying for your safety," Reas said just before I left. Just like I would keep worrying about Shiyu after I left, they were still worried about me. Putting it like that was also a bit of an exaggeration, but I was happy to hear it nonetheless.

But now, as I was about to set out, I thought back to ten years ago. I had planned to raise someone here to be like Airena, but really it had been a silly idea from the start. Looking at Reas now, he was different in almost every way. Well, of course, he was a man and she was a woman, but beyond that, Reas still lacked the sense of stability that Airena possessed. But with Tyulei supporting

him, I felt he was more than competent enough to bear the burden of leadership here.

“Don’t worry, I’m just going to meet a child who’s been working hard out there in the West. And this won’t be goodbye forever either. We both have long lives ahead of us, so I’m sure we’ll meet again someday.”

With that, I waved to the elves gathered around us, then turned and started walking. What would the land of Shiyon look like on my next visit? Would it have developed in a way beyond my imagination, or would its role have already come to an end? If there came a time when the elves decided to return to their small forests, I hoped I could be here to help them.

I started walking west. Once I left Shiyon’s borders, I’d need to avoid human settlements for a while again, but I was well used to that. There was plenty of rough terrain dividing the west-central region from the Far West if I planned on going by land, but I was sure I could manage it.

As I was leaving, I came across a brand-new stone statue. It wasn’t one that I had made myself. One of the adults had probably prepared the stone...and I bet one of the children I had taught “sculpting” had carved it, tracing their finger along it to instruct the earth spirits where to move. It was clearly, without a doubt, a sculpture of me.



It was far from perfect, but the piece still expressed the artist's feelings quite strongly.

Ah, so this is how the people here saw me. Once again, I felt like I was making a bigger deal of things than was necessary, but as always, I was saying goodbye to people, and as always my journey continued.

As always I felt the land I was leaving pull on my heart, asking me to stay, but as always I pressed onward—to a future full of all sorts of new experiences waiting for me.

Chapter 2 — The Road Forward

As I traveled west, avoiding all human settlements, I eventually found a range of impressive mountains blocking my progress. In the same way the Great Pulha Woodlands divided the East and the West, and the Man-Eating Swamp divided the east-central region from the Far East, there was a similarly dangerous territory separating the west-central region from the Far West.

The obstacle this time was known as the Mountains of Mist, the passes winding between them known as the Valleys of Death. While the outer regions of the Mountains of Mist were no different from any other steep mountain range, once you pushed past the outer reaches, you'd find yourself enveloped in a thick fog that threatened to confuse your sense of direction. To top it all off, the fog was apparently the work of magic, being heavy with mana. The rich natural mana of the area had coincidentally reproduced something akin to a spell of concealment, creating the dense fog the area was known for.

Even for the most experienced of mountaineers, a trip through the Mountains of Mist typically ended while lost in the fog, either wandering in circles until dying from exhaustion or taking a sudden plunge off an unexpected cliff. Then again, any experienced mountaineer would know better than to try traversing a mountain locked in perpetual fog, so that's really just speculation.

As for the Valleys of Death, they formed natural paths between the mountains. The mountains served as walls, while their fog blocked out the sky, creating what had also come to be called the Labyrinth of Death. As their nickname suggested, the path through the Valleys of Death was anything but straight. The valleys twisted, turned, branched, and converged, with plenty of dead ends to befuddle travelers.

And of course, being a dangerous region, it was chock-full of monsters. In particular, there were predatory birds that had taken to the mystical fog filling the sky, swooping down on unsuspecting passers-by without warning. They were all but angels of death to those reckless enough to brave the valleys.

One theory was that long, long ago, a tribe of demons took to the region, creating the Mountains of Mist and the Valleys of Death as a layer of protection for themselves. These were obviously just rumors, but it seemed plausible. Though exceptionally rare, there were cases of natural formations coincidentally forming the rituals needed to create magic, but for something on such a large scale that had persisted for so long, the idea that it had been caused accidentally strained the imagination. Long years and constant weather would reshape the mountains over time. If this fog had really been around for so long, there needed to be some function designed to maintain it, some clear intent that had put it in place, for it to make sense.

Though really, whether it was a natural phenomenon or a spell cast long ago, it didn't change much for me. Though I couldn't help but be curious as to the fog's true nature, I didn't have the time to scour the entire mountain range in search of clues to its origin. What mattered most to me was reaching the Far West.

Of course, just as with reaching the Far East, there were a number of paths I could take that would avoid the dangers blocking my way. Or rather, the path through the mountains was famous for being dangerous because no one would choose to go that way. However, taking a ship to reach the Far West would actually land me on that southern island rather than the mainland; even if I got to the mainland from there, I'd end up in a human nation. Alternatively, heading north and diverting around the mountain range would take a tremendous amount of time, not to mention the cold.

Win had made the smart choice and taken that northern route on his journey, but I wasn't so willing to brave that kind of cold. I had already braved plenty of dangerous regions in the past, so I was more than happy to challenge one more. The Mountains of Mist were one thing, but the Valleys of Death would at least give me the option to turn back if I changed my mind. Above all, the thought of seeing something no one else had seen by traveling through a place everyone else avoided was quite enticing.

The Valleys of Death apparently had a number of entrances, so I walked along the border of the mountain range, searching for a way that would take me through. Maybe because of the fog cloaking them, the wind coming down off

the mountains was strangely heavy and humid. The spirits also seemed affected, acting slow and sluggish. In this state, I imagined they might ignore the wishes of any ordinary Spirit Callers who came through here. In fact, if this was how they acted with a high elf around, they were probably much worse normally.

It was quite a curious situation. Ordinary humidity would never have an effect like this on wind spirits. Water and wind were very deeply connected. Wind carried clouds through the sky, bringing water across the world. Wind ran along the rivers, drawing cold moisture along with it. I guess it wasn't entirely impossible for the spirits to feel sluggish like this, but I had never seen it happen myself. I could only think it had something to do with the magical nature of the fog covering the mountains.

Maybe something in the spell was causing the air to remain stagnant there, since blowing wind would cause the fog to disperse. The wind I felt coming down from the mountains had likely come from the same direction I had, turning back toward me as it struck the mountains, or possibly the fog beyond them. Maybe the magic in the fog, or just the stagnant air around it, was leeching the energy from the wind spirits?

If my guess was right, even I would have trouble relying on the wind spirits if I tried to travel across the mountains, and potentially through the Valleys of Death as well. No matter how much they wished to help me, they would never choose to live in stagnant, stale air. Well, there was a chance I'd just never met spirits like that before. There was always the possibility that a few odd spirits could take a liking to a place like that. But at the very least, none of the spirits I had ever met were like that.

As I walked along the edge of the mountain range, I finally found a gap that looked wide enough for me to pass through. As expected, the dense fog still hung over the pass, making it look more like the entrance to a cave than to a valley. Recalling memories of a particular water spirit I once met and the fog she had created, I stepped into the Valleys of Death.



Being closed in by mountains on both sides, and with a dense layer of fog

blocking the sky, the Valleys of Death were exceptionally dark. The fog was dense enough that most sunlight never reached the ground. The monsters inhabiting the valleys were well accustomed to the lack of light, hiding in the shadows and using senses other than sight to find their prey. However, if you brought light in the form of torches to stave off that darkness, you would only be screaming your position for the predators lurking in the sky.

I don't know who gave this place its name, but "Labyrinth of Death" felt quite appropriate. Like Pulha and the Man-Eating Swamp, the natural environment itself wasn't the only threat. It felt like the dangers in this environment had been hand-crafted.

The tunnellike valleys gave the impression of being underground, and despite being quite spacious, they still twisted and turned to block your vision. The road often forked, and many of those forks led to dead ends, leading people astray and pressuring their sanity.

Calling this place a labyrinth made a lot of sense...but had I ever heard that word before in this world? A "labyrinth" was something man-made, wasn't it? The term was familiar enough to me thanks to memories of my past life, and I could see something like a densely forested area being considered a naturally occurring labyrinth. But that's just it; it made more sense to mention that it was "naturally occurring" because a labyrinth itself was normally artificial.

All of this was to say that I had started to wonder where the person who named this place the Labyrinth of Death had come up with the name. Had they known that this place had been created intentionally, and so used the term appropriately? If that was the case, they likely had some strong connection to whoever had created the Mountains of Mist and the Valleys of Death in the first place. Alternatively, it could have been someone like me, a high elf who had lived thousands of years ago, with memories of their past life. That seemed almost as likely.

At any rate, knowing the answer wouldn't actually help me navigate the labyrinth, so it was all just idle conjecture at this point. There were plenty of mysteries in this world, and not even a high elf like myself could hope to wrap their head around all of them.

I carefully picked my way through the Valleys of Death. Luckily, the air in the canyon wasn't totally stagnant, so there was still a gentle breeze flowing through it. Thanks to that, I could rely on the wind spirits to search for monsters without having to use a light source, and I could follow the air currents to find my way. The wind spirits were also quick to warn me of poisonous gasses, a phenomenon quite common in regions like this.

As for what was happening in the fog, or even around it for that matter, the wind spirits very much disliked drawing close to it, so I instead treated it as a body of water and left that region to the water spirits. If you treated the fog like water and the birds within it like fish, searching through it was much the same as searching the ocean from aboard a ship, as I had done plenty of times before.

As I looked up to the sea of fog and contacted the spirits inhabiting it, I found a surprisingly large number of monsters flying within it. A number of them had already spotted me and decided I was prey, now circling above me and fighting over who would get the spoils. I imagined the winner would quickly turn to a dive bombing attack as soon as their fight was over.

I had a lot of experience in dangerous regions like this, so I knew the trick to getting through these kinds of places was adapting to the environment. Of course I didn't know anyone else who braved these parts of the world, so I didn't have anyone to compare "tricks" with to find out what did and didn't work.

The main difficulty in these kinds of regions was their huge size. For example, if the Man-Eating Swamp could be crossed by foot in just a few days or a week, a party of six-or seven-star adventurers would be able to handle it. In fact, if it were that small, the countries bordering it would likely take matters into their own hands, making large-scale military incursions into the region to cut open trade routes through it and connect both sides.

The reason that didn't happen was, of course, the sheer size of the regions. Even for someone like me, who could pass through trees and over water like they were no obstacle, the time it took to pass through them was measured in months. In that time, elite adventurers would exhaust themselves or succumb to wounds. Spending more than a week there was basically guaranteeing death at the hands of the local wildlife. Even for someone relatively powerful, having

no time to rest between battles would inevitably lead to exhaustion and collapse.

For an entire army to attempt the same thing, progressing much slower and constantly fighting the whole way, it would take years to break through to the other side. Considering the resources it would require to sustain an army like that, even more resources would be needed to keep supply lines open to them. The cost of any such endeavor would be astronomical. And even if one were to front that cost, such a large group passing through the region would likely draw huge monsters that were entirely impossible for humans to fight. Provoking them at the wrong time would put not just their expedition, but their entire nation in jeopardy.

In short, unless you were as powerful as a dragon, forcing your way through these dangerous regions wasn't really an option. So instead, adapting to the locale, finding places to rest, and getting your food and water from the environment was smarter. In my estimation, becoming a participating member of the ecosystem was critical in passing through it.

I dropped a hand to the ground and created a stone wall, finishing it just barely in time to intercept the charge of one of the birds swooping out of the fog. Though it had managed to win the right to first pickings on me from among its comrades, it wasn't able to make it through the stone wall, instead crashing into it and killing itself.

In other words, if I surrounded myself with sturdy stone walls, I'd be able to rest in relative ease even here. If I did that, I could then start a fire to cook a hot meal harvested from the monsters of the area. Smoke and light would inevitably leak out from the air holes I would need to create, but that couldn't be helped. If anything appeared strong enough to break through the stone walls, I could dig a hole and hide underground until it passed.

I had no idea how long it would take me to pass through the Valleys of Death, so instead of rushing, I focused on acclimating to the environment. I needed to adapt enough that I could live comfortably here, ideally reaching a point where I could enjoy my time passing through.



With the winding corridor through the Valleys of Death branching out into a complex maze, I followed the currents of air. Judging by the airflow, I figured that at about two months of walking, I had made it to the center. Obviously it was slow going compared to Pulha, where every tree and branch was my ally, but progress was even slower than making my way through the Man-Eating Swamp. The number of monsters wasn't especially different, but the constant darkness and the need to divert around mountains made it quite the slog.

That said, thanks to the bizarre mist and somewhat eccentric water spirits living inside it, I wanted for very little on my journey. I had plenty to drink, and even sufficient water to wash myself or my clothes as the need arose. Most of the monsters in the sky above me were birds, so their meat was also quite tasty. The only issue was that my reserves of salt used to season the meat would run out if I didn't make it out soon enough.

Now that I thought about it, I supposed there was always the option of getting the earth spirits to carve a straight path through the mountain range for me to follow. Well, actually, that would cause quite a stir in the outside world if anyone saw the path, and cleaning up afterward would likely be a huge pain. Taking the long, winding, natural route was probably less work in the end.

But as I walked through that winding corridor, in one branch that was likely a dead end because no wind blew through it, I saw an enormous black figure blocking the way. When I stopped to look closer, I discovered it was a colossal statue, down on one knee with its head bowed.

It was much bigger than the large statue I had left behind in Siglair, and so finely detailed as to put my work to shame, and cast from some kind of metal. Why would there be a statue like this here of all places? Before I could even consider the question, my desire to see it up close, learn more about it, and find out what kind of metal it was made of had already won out.

As soon as I started approaching, the enormous statue lifted its head, and its soulless eyes fixed on me. Had it really moved? The shock brought me to a halt, and the two of us stared at each other for a time.

As hard as it was to believe, there was no doubt that the statue's head had moved. I didn't know how or why, but it was very clearly on guard against me.

Wait. Hold on. There was no way. The unbelievable and entirely unexpected discovery brought a smile to my face. As much as I knew there were many things in this world I didn't know about, an encounter like this was far beyond what I had ever imagined possible. This was really starting to be fun.

I had a few ideas about the true nature of this statue, as well as the mechanism that moved it. For example, if this was some kind of disguised monster, or if the inside of the statue was hollow and some monster had taken up residence inside it like a suit of armor, there was nothing odd about it moving. But if that was the case, it would be strange for only the head to move. It would have made more sense for the whole thing to lunge forward and attack me.

So what if it was actually an inanimate object, a relic designed to move under certain circumstances? Of course, among the magic formulas I knew, there were none that could create an effect like this. But there were plenty of formulas and rituals that I had no knowledge of.

Honestly, I was rather underdeveloped in the magic arts. I was obviously a total amateur compared to someone like Baimao Laojun from the Ancient Gold Empire, but even a human who had dedicated their life to the study of magic would far outstrip me. For example, someone like Kawshman. I couldn't rule out the possibility that this was actually a massive relic. In fact, it seemed likely.

Actually...since people of any race could turn into demons, it only made sense that some of them would be dwarves. I didn't know if this had really been a dwelling place for demons, but I imagined if it was, they would have had ample knowledge of rituals and formulas, and if there had been dwarves among them, I wouldn't be surprised at all if they could make such an incredible monument. And though I had never even imagined that something of its like could exist in this world, I knew exactly what to call it.

Even in my past life, they had only existed in the domain of fiction and fantasy. But I couldn't think of any name more appropriate for the massive moving statue than a "golem."

Slowly and quietly, I took a few steps back, and the golem lowered its head.

That seemed to be its resting posture. The fact that it returned to its previous position meant it was extremely unlikely it had turned into a nest for monsters.

So if it was actually a relic, what was I supposed to do? I was incredibly curious about what kind of rituals were being used to make it work, and even what material it was made of. For something this large to have survived in the middle of the Valleys of Death meant it must have combat capabilities far exceeding that of the monsters that lived here.

That said, even if I wasn't sure I could restrain the colossal construct, I was fairly confident I could destroy it. The question was whether I *should* or not. Destroying the golem just to sate my curiosity by rummaging through its remains felt like such a waste. After all, with my limited knowledge of magic, there was no telling if I would even be able to understand everything inside that made it move.

But what if, with someone's help, I could research it and create more of them? That person would be able to conquer at least half of the continent with these things alone. In that case, wouldn't destroying it be the smarter move?

No, that was still too much of a waste. The fact that this thing was still able to move at all was practically a miracle. I didn't know how long the golem had been here in the Valleys of Death blocking this path, but I imagined it was far longer than I had been alive for. It might have even been here ever since the Mountains of Mist were first formed. If someone was capable of creating a golem like this, I was more than happy to accept that they could create and maintain the mysterious fog that blanketed the mountains here.

In other words, this golem was a miracle that had survived since the ancient past. The technology that had gone into making it held all sorts of potential. If that technology was used correctly, it could be extremely useful, not to mention further innovations it could lead to. Even if it was impossible for me, even if there was no one alive now who could do it, there was always that possibility for someone in the future.

So I decided to leave the golem untouched. I didn't think there would be many people capable of coming all the way here and destroying something like this. Though maybe not the most inhospitable place on the continent, it was

certainly gunning for one of the top spots on that list. Anyone who had the capabilities of reaching this place might also have the knowledge needed to glean its secrets. Or, like me, might be wise enough to know to leave it alone for future generations.

If something like a large country forced their way through, trying to open a path to the other side of the mountain range, I doubted that knowledge of the golem's existence would make such a huge impact on the world.

With those thoughts in mind, I made my way back to the proper path, once again following the wind in search of the exit to the Valleys of Death.



It had taken me two months to reach the center of the Valleys of Death, but thanks to becoming more accustomed to the environment over time, it only took me a month and a half to make it out the other side from there. In total, three and a half months had passed since I left the west-central region.

As with most other places in the world, the greatest power in the Far West had once been humanity. Or rather, since they held to a religion that put humanity in a special place above the other races, their fervor in suppressing others and building their own strength here was greater than most. But now, the nonhuman races in the region had gathered together and were making great strides in pushing back against them. The Far West was likely in the midst of a great change.

Of course, the greatest factor in all of this was their religion. There was a saying in my past life that went something like “know your enemy and know yourself.” After spending ten years in the elven nation of Shiyon, I had gathered quite a bit of information about the Western religion that opposed them. It was all information gleaned from traveling merchants and the people of Koffel, Wyforen, and Jilchias—people who all opposed the Western religion—so I couldn't exactly take everything they said at face value. But I had a good grasp on their beliefs as a whole.

The current form of the religion was actually a relatively recent development. These teachings of Quoram had been only one of many religions practiced in the Far West. They worshipped the god of the sun, and put a heavy emphasis

on the concept of justice. One day, at the behest of the head of their religion, their doctrines underwent a massive shift, and they began rapidly expanding their influence and absorbing the other religions around them. Soon, all humans in the Far West subscribed to their teachings.

What on earth could have provoked such a massive change? There were two main factors. The first, a fact I have mentioned a number of times before, was that the beastfolk of the Far West once held great power here. Conflicts over water and other resources often ended in the beastfolk's favor, laying the groundwork for enmity between the races. For example, when humans would clear new land and found villages to develop it, the beastfolk would grow enraged, claiming it was sacred ground belonging to their ancestors, and would drive out the human settlers or burn down their villages. This left the humans of the Far West ready to passionately accept the teachings of Quoram, which claimed that humans were superior to the other races.

The other reason lay with medicine. You might think of something like a drug being used to control the populace, but that wasn't the case. Well, perhaps it could be interpreted that way, but the main reason was that the head of the Quoramite church had brought all kinds of medicines to the people of the Far West. The most incredible of these was a mystical drug that could reverse aging. In hopes of securing this miracle for themselves, the kings of the Far West were quick to allow the Quoramites into their territory.

I had actually heard rumors of this cure for aging long ago. It was probably a story brought back by a high elf who had traveled the world before I was born, but I knew that one of the key ingredients was the apua. Eating apuas helped cure all manners of diseases and gave one a surge of vitality, so I had assumed the rumors were just exaggerations of that. If such a miracle drug actually existed, I had to believe that the apua was related.

On top of that, the drug that was used to keep elven slaves subdued was something that had come from the West—or more accurately, from the Quoramites. If the medicine that reversed aging came from apuas, then the elves who lived around the Spirit Trees that grew them would inevitably become a nuisance. Or perhaps they had enslaved the elves as a means of obtaining those apuas.

The head of the Quoramite church—a woman known as High Priestess Orië—had held her position for hundreds of years. All the leaders of the Quoramites had lived far longer than was possible for humans. Whether that was because of some miracle drug, or because they were actually fallen mystics like vampires or soul eaters, I couldn't say for sure, but they claimed that their long lifespans were a blessing from their god.

Thanks to these medicines, and the growing hostility toward other races, the humans of the Far West had largely adopted the teachings of Quoram. United under a single banner, the human kingdoms became a powerful force that was more than willing to oppress the other races around them to secure what they saw as their own rights.

“Yeah...it's much better when you can see the sky.” With a big stretch, I filled my chest with fresh air. The ceiling of fog hanging over the Valleys of Death had been a persistent and stifling weight on my shoulders, so seeing a bright and clear sky at last was a relief.

The Far West was in the midst of a great change. I imagined that whatever was driving that change forward, Win wouldn't be far away. However, the region was still very much in chaos. There was no telling which way the scales would tip. There was no telling what would happen...and really, at this point, there was no telling what was happening right now.

What would happen if the alliance of nonhuman races won out? Would the enmity they had built up over the past centuries leave any human survivors in the West? There was certainly a possibility of mass slaughter, no matter how much Win would want to avoid it. More than that, the fact he had human blood as a half-elf meant he was likely to get caught in the cross fire.

Hopefully I was worrying about nothing.

No matter what changed on earth, the sky always remained the same. The sunlight filled it, clouds and rain came and went, and the great winds traveled through it, following nothing but their whims. Today's wind was blowing north and west, and so I let my feet carry me in the same direction.



If you traveled for a while, you'd eventually come into contact with bandits and highwaymen. With the help of the spirits, I was always highly aware of what was happening around me, so I could avoid interacting with them altogether most of the time...but not always.

But even so...

"The West seems a lot worse than I thought. I never imagined I'd get jumped by a merchant."

I had stopped to ask a traveling merchant for some directions, and his reply had been to attack me together with his escort. Traveling merchants were normally good at balancing risk versus reward—a vital skill for their own survival—so they were supposed to be pretty smart.

"You know what happens to subhumans like you who treat humans this way, right?!" the merchant spat, all attitude despite being buried up to his neck. I guess it didn't really matter how smart you were. It was hard to look the part in a situation like this.

But "subhuman?" *Subhuman*. It was a single word that really encapsulated the swollen egos of the humans living here.

Ignoring the ranting merchant, I turned instead to his two bodyguards, buried nearby in a similar fashion. They were still glaring daggers at me, but as they had only fought me as part of their job, they were much more willing to admit when they had lost. They seemed much more likely to talk than the merchant.

"I just want to know about this area, so if you answer my questions I'll let you go," I offered, causing the two guards to sink into thought. Of course, if they refused at this point, no amount of talking would get me anything of value from them. Once I was gone, their fate would be decided by whoever found them next...be it human, beast, or monster. I couldn't bring myself to subject their horses to the same fate though, so I'd be taking them along with me.

"You think we'd take a subhuman at his word? You're probably planning on leaving us this way whether we tell you anything or not. If you want us to talk, let us go first." Luckily, however, the guards at least seemed willing to negotiate, so it seemed I wouldn't need to concern myself with the safety of their horses.

I responded with a nod, and after clapping my hands twice, the ground spat the two men back up to the surface. Apparently they hadn't expected to be freed so easily, as both of them stared at me with wide eyes for a time before suspicion crept back in. Regardless, it didn't seem they had any intention of fighting now. They understood that I was willing to release them so easily because I'd have no problem putting them right back underground if they tried anything.

The merchant they had been guarding was still throwing a fit behind me, but I didn't need anything from him at the moment. If he wanted to be saved, he could have his two guards dig him out after I was done talking with them.

"Okay then. As promised, please answer some questions for me. First of all, what's this place called?"

The two guards shared a resigned look, then started talking.

Putting together the guards' stories with what I'd learned about the Far West while I was in the west-central region, I was able to get a rough idea of the region's layout.

First of all, the largest nation in the Far West was the Mizunth Commonwealth. The first eleven states to adopt the Quoramite religion banded together to form a single nation, allowing them to maintain some semblance of autonomy under the larger federal government. In addition to these eleven states, the Quoramite holy land was also located in Mizunth, so it was all but certain that they held the true power in the Commonwealth.

Rulers for each state were selected from among the old royal families that had once governed there, sustained by the mysterious drug that kept them forever young. However, that didn't mean their reigns were particularly long. The life-giving drug was provided mainly to the governor of the state. It wasn't impossible to obtain for others, but as the one who had the most access to the drug, it became an exceptionally sought-after position. With no risk of the governor dying to old age and so opening the position, more forceful means had to be brought into play to trigger a succession. And so, the governors of the Mizunth Commonwealth changed from time to time, heralded by rivers of

blood.

The Commonwealth was situated roughly in the middle of the region stretching far to the south, taking up about a quarter of the Far West. Besides them, about the same amount of geographical space was occupied by other human kingdoms, such as the one I was currently in.

The remaining half of the Far West was occupied by other races, but a great deal of that territory was made up of arid wilderness to the north. The races had lived interspersed among each other for some time, but once the Quoramites took over, the nonhumans were forced to flee north to evade being pressed into slavery.

As a result, the borders between human and nonhuman territories grew quite pronounced. Human armies raided enemy territory in search of slaves, and nonhumans fought desperately to maintain their freedom.

At least, that's how the situation in the Far West *used* to be. Now, the nonhuman races had joined forces, forming a coalition to fight back against the Mizunth Commonwealth. They had even successfully taken the Quoramite holy land itself. However, the High Priestess had managed to escape and call for her allies in other human nations to send their forces to join in on the fighting. It seemed the situation in the Far West was even more volatile than I had imagined.

Once the humans had organized their efforts to retake the holy land, the war would likely grow even more intense. And as more blood flowed, the humans would be even less willing to back down. Their grudges would continue to pile up, driving them to continue fighting for fear of their own annihilation. And the more they fought, the more the other races would seek vengeance.

I suspected Win had been involved in trying to prevent that from coming to pass by leading the coalition's armies to capture the holy land and break the humans' will to fight. Since the Quoramites were the cause of all this suffering, excising them first should have led to at least a small reduction in the amount of bloodshed necessary. But with the High Priestess having made her escape, the humans had remained firm.

What was Win planning now? What would be his next move? I needed to

meet with him and find out for myself. Even if the road he walked was soaked in blood, he was still my adorable son. No matter how big he had grown, if he was in trouble, I wanted to reach out and take his hand.



With this new information in mind, I continued traveling northwest. If I was looking to get to the Quoramite holy land, it would have been faster to head directly west, but my priority was to get out of human territory. Even if Win wasn't in the holy land itself, I suspected he was close. If a large fight was happening, I knew he'd want to be as close to the front lines as he could manage, not hide somewhere in the back. As much as that troubled me, that's the kind of boy he was.

So one might assume my best option was to cut a path directly toward him, but unfortunately, I had quite a long way to go. It would involve cutting through numerous human kingdoms, as well as Mizunth itself. I was well accustomed to avoiding roads and settlements as I traveled, but in the months it would take me to cross that distance, the whole situation in the region could change, and I'd have no way of getting that news. I suppose, as I'd just done, I always had the option of interrogating any humans who attacked me, but that wasn't a strategy I wanted to use very often. Even if I wasn't technically doing anything wrong, it still made me feel like a bandit myself.

Sometimes I'd have no other options, but if I could get into the territory of another race, particularly that of the beastfolk who had supposedly become the heart of the nonhuman federation, I could get information by much more peaceful means. Also, though it was of much less importance than the issue of getting accurate information, my reserves of several traveling necessities like salt were starting to run uncomfortably low. It had been almost half a year since I left Shiyon behind, and my route had given me no chance to resupply.

After interrogating the two guards, I tried convincing the merchant they were guarding to sell me some things, but he was adamant that "he had nothing to sell to a subhuman like me." He was extremely stubborn, despite the danger he was in. I had to wonder if he had some deeper, more personal hatred toward the nonhuman races. The two guards had told me what I wanted to know without a fight, so I really wanted to believe that the merchant was an

exception rather than the rule.

At any rate, if I could get into the territory of another race, I could resupply without issue. It would mean taking a rather circuitous route to get to the Quoramite holy land, but there was no avoiding that.

Mobilizing the army to retake the holy land wouldn't be a quick affair. It was one thing to gather the armies of Mizunth itself, but with the call to arms going out to all other human kingdoms as well, it would take considerably more time for their forces to move. Conscripts and volunteers would need some bare minimum of training and equipment, and they would need to secure logistical support to keep the armies fed. It would then take time to move them to the staging area where more concrete plans for the attack would be hatched. It wasn't the kind of issue that could be resolved overnight. Since she was calling other nations to her aid, it seemed the High Priestess was intent on making an ostentatious display of force to show that her authority was still very much intact, which she would use to drive the Federation from the holy land.

No matter their intentions, the fact that the call to arms had gone out even to the border countries I was currently located in meant that I still had some time. It probably went without saying, but a single experienced traveler like myself could move a lot faster than a massed army of humans. The fact that the Quoramite holy land was so far away actually gave me a lot of time to work with, but I obviously still needed to hurry.

Ignoring the lay of the land, I cut a straight line northwest, passing through a number of human kingdoms and out into the territory of the other races in about two months.

The land here was untamed as far as the eye could see. There were no maintained roads, with blistering hot days and frigid nights.

However, it wasn't uninhabited, as evidenced by the herd of buffalo I saw crossing the wilderness from a distance. There were also a number of large carnivores loitering around the outskirts of the herd, waiting to catch any buffalo that might lag behind or otherwise get separated.

Now that I thought about it, I had seen far fewer monsters here in the Far

West than I had seen in my travels in the west-central region. And that was despite the Quoramites being in power here for so much longer. I imagined that was because the forests that the elves abandoned, or were captured from, were all razed. Perhaps they understood that removing the elves from the forests would cause monster populations to increase, or maybe that was something they only came to discover during their conquest of the region, but either way, that seemed to be how the Quoramites dealt with the problem of the missing elves.

For some reason, though, the people of the west-central region hadn't adopted the same strategy. I wondered if that was an attempt to sow more unease in the region, making it easier for the Quoramites to seize control. If that was the case, then as a high elf, even discounting the perspective of ordinary elves, I couldn't bring myself to like the teachings of Quoram.

Anyway, to get back on topic, no matter the wilderness around me, if there were people living in this place, there would be traces of them. The Great Grasslands were the same way. The people of the grasslands had turned to a nomadic lifestyle in search of the food necessary to keep their livestock fed, but their constant travel left a trail of evidence that could be followed to catch up to them.

Even as barren as this place was, even if the people living here weren't humans, that wouldn't change. If they hunted animals for their meat, those buffalo were likely one of their prime targets. So like the wild carnivores following the herd from a distance, there might have been hunters in pursuit of them as well.

Even if they weren't here at the moment, I might be able to find traces of their previous hunts. And once you found one clue, there was surely more to follow. Following that trail, I would eventually find my way to a settlement.

I didn't know whether I'd be encountering the beastfolk or some other race first, but for now, all I could do was follow these buffalo.



A few days after I began tracking the herd of buffalo, I encountered three hunters hiding at a watering hole. Though I call them hunters, none of them had

bows. Instead, one had a large stone axe, another a plain wooden spear, and the third had no weapons at all.

They didn't look like they'd be hunting much of anything by my standards, but I imagined that was all they needed, as the three of them wore masks and black fur pelts. Those were the particular characteristics of the Fanged Tribe of the beastfolk Win had told me about in his letters. Maybe for them, who were supposedly specialized in combat, hunting wild buffalo with even their bare hands was within the realm of possibility.

They had yet to notice me, but if I were to boldly approach them at this point, I'd probably scare the buffalo and interrupt their hunting. If I tried to sneak up close to avoid being detected by their prey, I'd probably take the hunters by surprise, and could very well be thought of as an enemy. So instead, I decided to hide myself, taking some time to watch the hunters at work.

After a short while, the herd of buffalo had their fill of water and left in search of grass for their next meal. Among them, a few had been especially thirsty, as they had spent too long drinking and now were lagging behind the rest of the herd.

The hunters were quick to make a move on them. Their first move was to throw a wooden spear toward them, causing the slow group to panic and scatter. I was just guessing, but that was probably a measure to minimize the number of buffalo they'd have to bring down. I say that because next, the axe-wielding hunter ran out, brandishing his weapon and scaring the scattered buffalo back in the direction of the herd.

All except for one. The one buffalo that had failed to escape was confronted by the last hunter, bearing no weapons. Recognizing that this hunter planned to foil its escape, the buffalo began to rage, lowering its head and charging, horns and massive body weight poised to eliminate the threat. But despite being many times smaller than his prey, the hunter stood his ground, grabbing the horns that were about to gore him and twisting hard. With a dry snap even I could hear from where I hid a fair distance away, the bones in the buffalo's neck snapped.

Ah, I get it. So this was how the Fanged Tribe hunted: killing as few animals as possible and taking down their prey as painlessly as they could manage. And it was all done with no more than their own strength and skill. It was really an interesting style of hunting.

Doing the same thing myself would be...pretty challenging, given my physique. A dwarf might be burly enough to accomplish it, and the earthfolk of Black Snow Province could almost certainly manage something similar.

Though perhaps not quite at the level of those earthfolk, the beastfolk of the Fanged Tribe possessed incredible physical prowess. Weaponry aside, if things came down to a fistfight, I think my chances would be rather slim. I'd still love to give it a try, if possible. But of course, now wasn't the time for that.

Once the three had started processing their prize, I showed myself and began to approach. The moment they saw me, the hunters all stopped, clearly raising their guard.

"Stop there, elf. What business do you have with us? You're not a human's slave, are you?" They immediately called out in challenge. Though they didn't immediately take a hostile stance, they weren't showing any sign of weakness either.

I shook my head. "I'm just a traveler. I can show you the power of the spirits if you don't believe me. I have a friend in the Federation's army, and I'm on my way to meet them. I don't know my way around here, so I was hoping I could ask you for some direction."

As I lifted my empty hands to show that I had no hostile intent, the three beastfolk shared a look. It seemed the one who had taken down the buffalo bare-handed was the leader, as the other two deferred to him. The leader mulled over the issue for a bit before finally making up his mind and sliding off his mask. I imagined that being masked was the same as being ready for combat to them, and so this was a show of peaceful intent.

"I am Gauba, of the Black Bear clan of the Fanged Tribe. We are but novices protecting our homelands, with no part in this Federation you speak of, but we recognize your skill in not revealing your presence. We will guide you through this land."

The beastfolk had a custom of worshipping ancestral spirits. It seemed the ancestral spirit of Gauba's clan was a black bear, meaning the pelts they wore were likely the same. Among the Fanged Tribe, each individual had to prove themselves against their ancestral beast, slaying it by their own hand. Eating its flesh and blood and donning its fur were customs that called their ancestral spirit to dwell within them, a rite of passage necessary to become a fully-fledged warrior.

This meant there was no way Gauba was a novice like he claimed. I couldn't say whether he truly believed that or was just trying to make me let down my guard. Soldiers on the front line were only able to fight at full strength because there was someone they trusted behind them, guarding their homes. I suspected Gauba was exactly the kind of person those frontline soldiers put their faith in. It was too scary to think that there was a tribe of people who saw someone who could catch a charging buffalo many times their size by the horns and break its neck as a novice.

At any rate, I had just hoped to get some directions and information out of them, so the offer to guide me through the area was more than welcome. After introducing myself, I waited for them to finish processing their kill before the four of us set off to the home of the Black Bear Clan.



"Do you guys always hunt like that?" As we were walking, I started to grow bored of the silence, so I turned to Gauba beside me.

One of the men in front of us scowled at that, but Gauba raised a hand to stop him before he could say anything.

"No. That was a special method for the great horned buffalo. It is part of a ritual to pray for the safety of those who go off to battle, a ritual that requires the buffalo's head to be intact. Taking the beast down alone is also part of the ritual."

Ah, I see. I nodded in response to Gauba's explanation. If this was a special ritual of the Fanged Tribe or the Black Bear Clan, it was no wonder they'd be upset at having it referred to as something plain like hunting. That was clearly a misstep on my part.

“I see, sorry. For me, hunting was always something done with a bow. Even if it wasn’t a monster, seeing someone take down a beast bigger than they were with their bare hands is a first for me.” I bowed in apology, and the man ahead of me shook his head while Gauba grinned. It seemed they were happy to accept it.

“Though not bows, we do use blowguns when hunting birds, with darts coated in a paralyzing poison. Hunting birds with your bare hands is a bit tricky.”

Though Gauba spoke lightheartedly, he was describing something rather terrifying. Maybe I was just thinking about it too much, but wouldn’t a paralyzing poison be something that attacked the nervous system? Never mind being unable to move, something like that would leave you unable to breathe. You’d suffocate.

If it worked on birds, it was more than likely to work on humans and other people as well. Actually, it was probably the fact that it *did* work on people that made Gauba bring it up. It was a veiled warning to be careful about the kinds of things I said after my faux pas earlier.

“We have a legend of a great warrior of the Black Bear Clan who downed a great horned buffalo that had turned into a monster with his bare hands. This ritual—taking down an ordinary one in the same manner—is to seek his blessing.”

But even so, Gauba’s willingness to explain so much to me was a great show of kindness. I wondered if this was due to the respect he said he showed me due to my skill.

“Of course, I am far from that level myself, but all warriors of the clan train themselves in hopes of accomplishing such legendary feats themselves. Jiliu up there is no different, hence his rude response. I apologize on his behalf.”

The man ahead of us, Jiliu, turned back and stroked the side of his face with the back of his hand. I imagined that was a symbol of apology here. It was the first time in a while I had come into contact with such a plainly different culture. I felt an odd blend of nostalgia and freshness.

A settlement surrounded by wooden fences came into view ahead of us.

Seeing a beastfolk settlement for the first time had me a little excited.

“Elven visitor, this is the home of the Black Bear Clan. You are welcome here, Acer.”

As we entered the settlement constructed of tents made of what I imagined was some kind of animal leather, Gauba stopped, turning to me with that declaration. The intent was likely to announce how the others in the settlement were to treat me. I had been greeted with no small number of guarded stares since entering, so it was likely an attempt at helping the others accept my presence here.

And seeing Gauba and the other hunters in their home, I was once again confronted with the fact that these were beastfolk. Despite being of a different race, they weren't visibly all that different from humans. I had been told there were some differences between the Fanged, Tribe, Horned Tribe, and their individual clans, but the members of the Black Bear Clan at least were mostly human in appearance. The main differences were their animal ears and larger canine teeth. Oh, and they also had stubby little tails.

Their pointed ears were on the sides of their heads, like humans and elves, but were covered in soft fur. Their canines were large, but not quite at the same level as a vampire's. Their short, round tails spoke of their heritage linked to the black bear.

Apparently the Horned Tribe lacked those distinctive canines but instead had actual horns on their heads. Win had said the Fanged Tribe were carnivores and the Horned Tribe were herbivores, but I wondered where that put things like boars and elephants. Were a boar's tusks considered to be more like teeth or horns? Besides, there were plenty of herbivores that didn't have horns. I guess I'd have to wait to find that out until I met a boar clan for myself.

As I took in all the fresh new sights around me, Gauba clapped me hard on the back. It seemed the clan chief had arrived, and I was to pay attention.

“Elven visitor, invited here by warrior Gauba. It appears to me that you are not of this land. What business has brought you to our home?” The Black Bear chief was well advanced in years, but nevertheless regarded me with bright,

sharp eyes. It was the same question Gauba had when I first approached him. I had heard there were elves involved in the Federation fighting here in the Far West, but it seemed there still wasn't much contact between the elves and the beastfolk.

"I am looking for a friend. Actually, he is my adopted son, who has joined the Federation. He is a half-elf by the name of Win. I came here hoping to find him."

But even under his sharp gaze, there was no need for me to be shy. I had nothing to be guilty or ashamed of. Quite frankly, I was proud to have anything to do with Win. That wouldn't change, no matter what he was doing here or how the people here felt about him. So I puffed up proudly, answering his hard gaze with a smile.

I lost track of how long it took, but eventually the chief lowered his gaze. "I see. You are quite strong. So much so, it feels ridiculous to have doubted you. I am aware of this half-elf. He is quite famous, particularly among our Fanged Tribe, as the steel worker who saved the Tiger Clan," he answered.

It felt like he was exaggerating his estimation of me a bit, but I understood. It looked like Win was doing his best out here. Of course I knew that from his letters, but hearing it from a stranger made me all the happier, and even more proud of him. I know I just said that it didn't matter how the people of this land thought of Win, but the fact that they liked him was quite easily improving my opinion of him as well. Apparently my thoughts were alarmingly easy to shift, but there was no helping that. Even if I hadn't seen him in so long, he was my own son.

"If you wish to travel through beastfolk territory, it would behoove you to seek the aid of the Goat Clan, those who have taken the role of traders. None among us would ignore a friend of the steel worker." However they felt about my response, a soft smile soon rose to the chief's lips as he explained the best route for me going forward.

The Goat Clan of the Horned Tribe, traders among the beastfolk. Having the help of a group like that would make finding my way to Win a lot easier.

"But for this night, find rest among our people. On the morrow, Gauba shall guide you to the Goat Clan."

Maybe saying he was exceedingly polite was going too far, but nevertheless, I bowed my head in gratitude for the warm welcome they showed me.



The Goat Clan were traders. No matter how I thought about it, I couldn't reconcile the idea of goats with merchants, but Gauba explained the situation to me as we traveled. The Goat Clan hadn't taken up their current mantle until after the beastfolk had been driven into the northern wilderness. Basically, it had only started in the past few hundred years, once the Quoramites began taking over.

Before that, the Goat Clan had been mapmakers and couriers. Revering the spirit of the goat, they were a people who excelled in conditions with little access to food, and could travel over rough terrain with ease. My first thought was that a goat was more likely to eat a letter than deliver it, but of course beastfolk would be different. So the far-wandering members of the Goat Clan visited settlements across the West, delivering letters and maps as they went.

With the rise of the Quoramites, the nonhuman races were all pushed into the northern wilderness, a place with a harsh climate that swings wildly in temperature between day and night. There were many small clans who found themselves unable to sustain themselves in this new environment. The clans of the Horned Tribe, who had relied more on gathering wild fruits and nuts or farming to supply food for themselves, were hit particularly hard by the change. If they couldn't support themselves, they would need to supplement what they lacked from other clans. Cooperating with other clans by trading away what they had in excess to obtain what they lacked ended up becoming vital for their survival.

Inevitably, such an arrangement called for someone who could carry goods to and from each place. The Goat Clan, having already mapped out the entire Far West, found either a lack of need or ability to continue mapping the north, and so began carrying more than just letters in their travels.

This interdependence led the beastfolk to build strong ties between the clans, where previously they'd had little interaction but to exchange letters and participate in occasional festivals. These new bonds gave them the strength to

survive the oppression they faced at the hands of humanity for the past centuries. The Federation army centered around the beastfolk, and even that core only became united due to the birth of a new common enemy. It was very similar to how the oni threat in the Far East nation of Fusou had driven the humans, merfolk, and skyfolk to cooperate. With humans as their enemies, the other races of the Far West had joined hands.

But what would happen to this union once their enemy had been destroyed? Would they split up and go their separate ways again? I hadn't seen what would happen in the Far East. I'd left their land without raising my hand against the oni. Whether I could do something about them or not, I felt I had no right to interfere, and I still believed that I'd made the right choice.

But here in the Far West, Win was deeply involved...

After five days of travel, we reached a small settlement belonging to the Goat Clan, or perhaps more accurately, a way station belonging to them. With an introduction from Gauba of the Black Bear Clan, the Goat Clan accepted me without complaint. My new horned hosts immediately welcomed me with gifts of milk in leather bags, allowing me to stay with them. They agreed to take me to the place where Win was staying, a gathering of the Federation's races.

It was all great luck, but something that could only happen because of the trust Gauba showed me when we first met. He would be leaving us the next day, but I was dying to know what had led him to trust me so freely. Both he and the Black Bear Clan's chief had said something about trusting me because of my strength, but I didn't understand the logic in that. There were certainly people who used their strength to evil ends, so I couldn't imagine they wouldn't be on guard against them.

But when I asked Gauba while we sat in a tent of wood and leather the Goat Clan had given the two of us for the night...

"Strength can be measured as one's power, skill, heart, or knowledge. There are good and evil, even among the strong. But in general, those who are truly strong have no need to deceive others to achieve their ends. Assuming they don't do so just for their own amusement," he replied with a laugh.

In short, if I had intended any harm toward the Black Bear Clan, I wouldn't have needed to lie and get in their good graces.

"The strength the chief saw in you might have been entirely different from what I saw. But if you intended to hurt us, you could have attacked us while in hiding, or covertly followed us back to our settlement."

I supposed he was right. If all I wanted to do was find the Black Bear Clan's settlement, it would have been easier to just track and follow them from the shadows than to appear before them and try to win their trust.

"But you showed yourself, surrendering the advantage of surprise in hopes of a friendly interaction. That's why I trusted you. That was the strength I saw in you. Because you were strong enough that you could throw away such an advantage without concern, there would be no reason for you to deceive us."

Knowing the sly and cunning people that I did, I felt that way of thinking was rather simplistic and honestly, somewhat dangerous. But the fact that was enough for Gauba to trust me left me feeling a little happy. I didn't know much about the customs of the beastfolk, but when I extended a fist toward him, he returned the gesture with a fist bump.

I didn't know him well enough to really call him a friend, but I would certainly remember there were people like him among the beastfolk.



The Goat Clan had a number of settlements scattered across the region where they collected goods together before distributing them to the settlements of other clans. Their primary means of transportation were domesticated horses, cattle, donkeys, and goats. In human terms, the Goat Clan was like an enormous trading company.

One big difference would be that they never rode the animals they used for transport, always guiding them by hand instead. As you might expect of the Goat Clan, they worshipped an ancestral goat spirit, and there was even a Cow Clan out there somewhere. The need for physical labor was undeniable, so having their livestock carry goods back and forth was unavoidable. It was much the same as how the Black Bear Clan had no inhibitions about hunting and killing black bears for food. But in their culture, riding atop a beast that

represented their ancestral spirit was the height of disrespect. I didn't quite understand how the beastfolk thought of their ancestral spirits, but I'm sure there was a logical through line hidden in there somewhere.

I traveled together with the Goat Clan, moving from station to station. They had their own business to attend to, so the people traveling with us changed occasionally as we went, but each and every one of them was kind to me. Since I wasn't a beastfolk myself, it seemed they didn't mind if I were to ride a horse, donkey, or even a goat, but I decided to do things their way, walking on foot beside them. With how much they were doing for me, about the only thing I could do to match their custom was to walk at their pace.

The rugged wilderness around us made the journey anything but easy, but it was no harsher than the other environments I had faced in my time. In fact, with the help of my kind guides, it was basically no obstacle at all.

We walked and walked and walked. After months of walking, I ended up in a city named Clausula. This was one of the first cities to be conquered by the Federation, and was now their main operating base. Though it wasn't on the front lines, it was positioned to be able to react immediately to anything happening there, so it was a convenient spot.

Though originally a human city, there was no longer a single human to be seen in the streets. According to the Goat Clan, there were effectively no humans in any of the cities controlled by the Federation. It wasn't that they had slaughtered the previous inhabitants, but that those inhabitants fled of their own accord. When one of their cities was about to fall, the humans remembered the treatment they had levied against the nonhumans, and so fled in fear of receiving the same.

Well, that was a logical course of action. Your behavior as a victor tended to come back around when you finally lost. It was only natural they would sense danger in that. As a collection of separate races, it would probably be difficult for the Federation to come to an agreement on how to treat the humans living in the territory they captured. Some would have deep-running grudges and demand slaughter, while others might seek to reduce the amount of bloodshed at all costs.

In truth, the nonhumans were still outnumbered, so entirely wiping out the humans in the Far West would be quite a challenge. If they were to carry out such a slaughter, it would start ringing alarm bells in the west-central region, and even possibly as far as the east-central region.

Even so, using logic and reason to suppress hatred and a thirst for revenge wasn't an easy task. So for now, the humans choosing to abandon their cities and flee before they ultimately fell was best for both sides.

Despite the lack of humans, there was a huge number of people in Clausula. Guided by my friends from the Goat Clan, I was taken straight to the center of the city, where the Federation's command center was situated. I felt no small number of gazes as we walked.

The elves who saw me were overcome by shock, recognizing me as a high elf. They immediately prostrated themselves, but I let them be. I didn't have time to go talk every single one of them out of it. The beastfolk looked with befuddlement at the elves dropping to the ground as we passed.

The dwarves noticed not my face but the mithril armband I wore, each nodding in admiration as I passed. I imagined there wasn't much shock from them because a certain someone else with a mithril armband had already come through. In other words, another elf recognized as a comrade to the dwarves, Win, was already hard at work here.

Another group that stood out was the halflings, a race also present on the grasslands of the Far East, looking very much like children at first glance. There was also that group with lower bodies like horses...were those a kind of beastfolk, or were centaurs a separate race here?

But even more bizarre were the arachne with spiderlike lower bodies, and the antfolk who had feelers and compound eyes.

At any rate, Clausula was full of people of all kinds of races. My curiosity was being pulled in every direction at once. Even so, my top priority was reuniting with Win. Without stopping for a moment, we headed to the command center of the Federation, and after having our identities confirmed numerous times, were permitted inside.

And waiting within, I saw none other than Win, having grown so much to look

even older than I did.

Chapter 3 — The Monstrous and the Truly Monstrous

“You really are shining. Yeah, it’s definitely you, Acer. Though I should have known, with how bad your timing is. Long time no see,” Win laughed at the sight of me.

He had really grown since we last met, and not just physically. He held himself with a much greater sense of calm. I had watched over him from when he was a tiny seed until he grew into a fresh sapling, but now he was a great tree.

If I calculated correctly, he was about ninety years old now. That would put him in his early thirties from a human perspective, I suppose. Like high elves, elves didn’t really age physically. Once they reached full maturity, their appearance stopped changing...but that wasn’t the case with half-elves. Though he still had a youthful glow to him due to his elven heritage, his other half would gradually start wearing away at it.

“I’ve heard all sorts of rumors about you on my way here. It sounds like you’ve been working quite hard.”

Win’s smile clouded slightly at that. Though he didn’t let it surface, I could tell that smile was covering something. A faint sense of frustration, anger...and grief. Even if he tried to hide it, I could still tell. We might not have been related by blood, but I was still his father. Even if this was our first time meeting in fifty years, that didn’t change. Rather, we had been so close during the time we’d spent together that I had started to miss things. From my current perspective, Win’s smile looked no different from if he was openly crying. Or maybe it was the exhausted expression of someone who had just finished crying themselves out.

Well, I was sure that he had plenty of reasons to do so. He had almost certainly lost something very precious to him. But if Win was trying to keep it hidden, then I’d let it lie for now. Regardless of who it was, I wasn’t in the habit of poking my fingers in people’s open wounds.

Considering the fifty years since he'd left the east-central region, he had likely met and parted with all kinds of people. Even as a half-elf, he had a much longer lifespan than the humans and beastfolk around him. When you added the current situation in the West, it wouldn't be a surprise if some of those goodbyes weren't under pleasant circumstances. Though from his expression, I could make a few guesses.

Naturally, if Win felt like talking about it, I would be all ears. As someone who had plenty of experience with saying goodbye to people, I could offer him a bit of consolation. It would really be no more than that, but I understood how meaningful that could be to someone. But of course, that was all assuming he needed or wanted it.

The two of us spent a good deal of time talking. We had been apart for so long that we had no shortage of things to share, and I had a lifespan that would far outstrip even his as a half-elf.

But unfortunately...

"Acer, I really am glad to see you, but there's going to be a huge battle soon. The West has always been dealing with war, but this is going to be the biggest battle yet."

It seemed the circumstances surrounding him wouldn't allow us all that much time to catch up. I had come here fully knowing all that, though. I was sure Win was trying to be considerate of me, since when we were together, I took great lengths to avoid being involved in such large-scale conflicts. Small scuffles like bar fights were one thing, but actual warfare was something I didn't like.

But my aversion to war had lost out to my desire to see Win, and my desire to help him. If it hadn't, I never would have set foot in the West in the first place.

"It's a bit late for that, Win."

Saying that now wasn't going to get me to leave.

And after seeing his reaction, I understood I had made the right choice in coming here. I was sure they were up against a problem that would be difficult to face alone. Win might not have wanted to get me involved, or might have had some circumstances that made it difficult to do so. But I'd say it no matter

how many times I had to: I was his father.

“I came here to help you. Or maybe I should say...to save you.”

No matter his feelings on the matter, I was here to help, even if he would find my interference a nuisance.

Win answered with a silent, troubled expression. I could only imagine the thoughts spinning around his head at the moment. Until he had sorted them all out, I'd wait for his reply.

Practically speaking, my power would be a great help to him. He knew that. If it had just been an emotional issue of not wanting to get me involved, or not wanting to rely on my help, he wouldn't be this troubled by it. Win was surrounded by people now. The problems he faced concerned many more people than just himself. If it would resolve things even a tiny bit faster, if it would save even one life, he wouldn't hesitate to call on my help. He had always been that kindhearted. He must have had another reason, then.

Eventually he lifted his head, giving a big sigh. “True, we are facing a crisis at the moment. You've probably heard, but the Federation's army managed to take the Quoramite holy land. We were hoping to strike down the Quoramite High Priestess.”

That was the story I'd heard on my way to Clausula—a Federation of races centered around the beastfolk had captured the Quoramite holy land.

“If we had succeeded, it would have meant the dissolution of the Mizunth Commonwealth, and even driving the Quoramite religion from the West would have been possible. But...we failed.”

They had been unable to take down the High Priestess, who was now gathering a large army to retake the holy land. It wouldn't be long before that army came knocking. The bigger problem was that they had failed to kill the High Priestess in the first place. I didn't know how strong Win's companions were, but at least Win himself shouldn't have had any problem taking down an ordinary human.

“We weren't able to beat her, and lost a lot of good people in the process.” I

could feel a visceral hatred underlying those words, along with frustration and anger at his own failings, and grief for those who had been lost. “The weapons of the elites among the beastfolk...the power of the spirits...none of it worked on her. I remember you telling me a story before about one of these. I think the Quoramite High Priestess is a vampire.”

Ah, so it was going to be that after all.



A vampire was a type of failed mystic. Instead of internalizing and sublimating the power of nature, they took the easier path of stealing that energy from the lives of other people. Those who did so by eating the blood and flesh of their victims were called “vampires.”

If Win was correct in his assumption that the High Priestess was a vampire, a lot of things started to make sense. From my perspective as a high elf, mystics had all sorts of mysterious powers and possessed a vast wealth of knowledge. It wouldn't be that much of a surprise if a fallen mystic took those teachings and used them to create a drug that could reverse aging. To have a body that couldn't be cut by blades, or to have the ability to nullify the powers of the spirits, was also something I had witnessed.

The current High Priestess, a woman named Orie, had apparently held the position for centuries. That would be easy enough for a vampire. That had even been my first suspicion when I'd heard about her.

Fallen mystics could share the life energy they had gathered with others, but once someone received that blessing, if they were to lose access to it, they would devolve into ghouls. Someone perpetually in close proximity to the mystic could sustain themselves like that, but it wasn't a method suited to ruling multiple nations at a time. That was why she had used the drug as a method of expanding her influence in the West.

Actually, if the drug to reverse aging was something known to the mystics in general, that might have been what those in the Ancient Gold Empire were using their mystic peaches for. For their disciples, who had yet to properly learn how to internalize nature's power, that drug could serve as a method to prolong their lives to give them more time to practice.

I never saw a single student of theirs while I was in the Ancient Gold Empire, but it wasn't like they showed me all of their cards while I was living with them. If there were such students, they likely resided in Red Mountain Province with one of the mystics I never met, Huang Mu. It would explain her name, which meant something like "Mother Phoenix." She was the mother bird caring for her baby chicks, the mystics in training.

That would mean the mystics had intentionally hidden the depths of their strength from me. This was all conjecture on my part, and even if I was correct, it wasn't like I was trying to say they had done something wrong. It was perfectly natural for them to hide something from me, who had effectively been a total stranger.

But while I was speculating, I could also guess that this age-reversing drug became less effective the more one used it, or maybe had some other side effect to make repeated uses of it undesirable. Otherwise, I would have expected there to be many more mystics in the world. If they could extend their lives indefinitely with medicine, there would be no need for people to take the shortcut that led to becoming a fallen mystic either.

And of course, I couldn't say for sure whether the High Priestess was actually a vampire like Win had guessed. After all, any other kind of fallen mystic—or even a proper mystic, for that matter—would be capable of the same feats. Comparing the two, a true mystic was definitely a much stronger opponent. I wouldn't expect a true mystic to use religion to control such a huge area as the Far West...but I wouldn't expect them to set up something like the Ancient Gold Empire either.

Underestimating my opponent because of my personal assumptions was too dangerous. Win had only heard my stories of slaying a vampire, so he wouldn't be able to discern one's true nature so accurately. But before that, there was a bigger problem.

"But even so, we gain nothing if we don't defeat the High Priestess ourselves." Even with the assumption she was a vampire, Win was still determined to fight her himself.

I could guess why. The High Priestess wasn't just a symbol for the humans of

the West. She was bringing long life and youth to the rulers here. You could say she was both stoking the fire of their greed and satisfying it. Even if the Federation currently had the upper hand, as long as the High Priestess was still there to agitate and encourage the humans, they'd never stop fighting.

On top of that, I couldn't imagine every race in the Federation feeling the same way toward humanity. As I might have mentioned before, while some would hope to end the fighting as soon as possible, others would seek vengeance by eradicating them. In order to get those disparate attitudes and opinions all in line, the Federation needed someone with tremendous achievements to stand at the helm. And in this case, the qualifying achievement would be bringing home the head of the High Priestess, someone hated by each and every race of the Federation.

That was why Win wanted to kill the High Priestess himself, not by relying on my help...though putting that thought into words was quite unpleasant. But with how the Far West currently was, that was the way one needed to think. If we wanted to change that situation, having someone like Win accomplish it would be best.

Besides, I could imagine the friends Win had lost in his first encounter with the High Priestess. It was only natural that he'd want to seek revenge for them, even if it was no more than an emotional urge.

However...was that something he was capable of? I'd killed a fallen mystic and spent time with several true mystics. I knew how to deal with them. Though they were impressive beings, wielding incredible power, they were still living creatures. They could use their bizarre techniques to make their skin as hard as steel or regenerate their physical bodies after being wounded, but an instantly fatal injury would still be fatal. For example, beheading them might not work, as they could use their power to preserve their life, but destroying their brain would kill them instantly.

Alternatively, the life or natural energy they possessed wasn't infinite. Compared to the vast expanse of nature, the power a single mystic could wield was barely a drop in the bucket, fallen or not. If a fallen mystic had enough life energy to rival the strength of a forest, you could just appeal to the spirits in the far greater earth below or the sky above to crush them.

However, the prior method had worked for me because I was a Yosogi swordsman with a magic sword that was capable of cutting through steel, while the latter would require the strength of a high elf that was very in tune with the spirits. If Win at least had the talent to activate a relic, then I could have lent him my sword, but...

Actually, maybe something like that would work.

Win was also a Yosogi swordsman, and was certainly much better now than I had been when I fought Rayhon. And while Win didn't possess an inborn talent for magic, he *did* have the symbol of friendship granted to him by the dwarves: his mithril armband. Things might be different if we were dealing with a true mystic, but we had everything we needed if he wanted to fight a vampire.

We also had dwarves here. And even without them, Win had learned blacksmithing from the same master as me. It just might be worth a try.



After finishing my discussion with Win, it was decided I would stay at an inn in the city that had been converted into lodging quarters for the Federation army. My room seemed to be on the higher end of what was available, as the building itself appeared extremely high-class. I was happy enough to have had a chance to talk to Win, so I didn't need such treatment, but they seemed intent on making sure I was well taken care of.

Win had actually invited me to stay with him at the Tiger Clan's camp, but I declined. There was plenty we still could talk about, but we had lots of time for that. Compared to the distance between the East and West, the distance between where we were now sleeping was next to nothing. He had his standing with the Federation to think of, as well as with the Tiger Clan in particular, and I didn't want to put stress on that. We could relax together once the coming battle was finished. We weren't children, so there was no need for us to spend every waking moment beside each other.

The day after I reunited with Win, I received invitations to meet with the heads of the various races now occupying Clausula. Naturally, the first came from the elves. The various elves who had seen me around town reported my presence, and their leader immediately tried to meet with me. Their

representative's willingness to wait an entire day to approach me spoke well of her character.

Apparently when Win had first approached the elves to seek their help, what had caught their attention was not his nature as a half-elf, but his talent in using the wind spirits to announce himself. As always, the elves put a tremendous weight on one's ability to interact with the spirits, and that was something Win excelled in. Unfortunately, prejudice against half-elves still ran deep, so the elves had a difficult time accepting him despite his skill.

I had learned of the situation of the elves here in the Far West from Cartessa, their current representative in the Federation. The Quoramites had targeted the elves above all other races, capturing and enslaving them wherever possible. Many fled to the larger forests for protection, but the Quoramites were able to breach the protective barriers made by the Spirit Trees and follow after them. As a result, the only free elves remaining were those who had lived in the north.

The birth of the Federation had started a tremendous change in the region, but many elves were still enslaved. Even if they were liberated, it would be a challenge to integrate them back into society after having been away from their homes and lives for so long. Beyond that, the forest in the Quoramite holy land had been recaptured, but many other large forests and their Spirit Trees still remained in human hands.

It was no wonder they had come asking for help the moment they heard a high elf was in the area. I had come here intending to help Win and the Federation, but if I stood out too much, I could threaten the bonds that held their alliance together. So I asked the elves here to keep my being a high elf a secret, and though it sounded awful to say "in exchange," I would work to help the elves of the Far West return to their original way of life.

When that day came, I was sure I'd be calling on Airena, Reas, and Tyulei for help. But of course, that would be after the Quoramites had been expelled from the Far West, making it safe for elves to travel here. So it was likely quite a distant future as yet.

After meeting with the elves, the next request for a meeting unsurprisingly came from the dwarves. Among the other races, the dwarves had suffered comparatively little at human hands, though that wasn't due to the humans showing mercy to them. Sensing the winds of change in the region, the dwarves had retreated back into the mountains and cut off all ties with the outside world just as the Teachings of Quoram were beginning to spread.

As with the dwarven kingdoms in the east-central and Far East regions, their kingdom here was deep in a precarious mountain range. Never mind humans, that put them beyond the reach of the entire world, leaving the dwarven race almost entirely forgotten in the region. That is, until Win traveled into those mountains himself, looking for a way to increase the Federation's production of weaponry.

It went without saying that had been no simple task. But Win had all but grown up in a dwarven kingdom, so his understanding of dwarven history, customs, and society was extensive. When it came to knowledge about the dwarves, Win's surpassed even mine. He had found the kingdom with help from the earth spirits, then used his mithril armband to prove he was an ally and enter into negotiations with them.

He had offered them food and drink in exchange for weapons and armor, and if at all possible, he wanted the dwarves to lend their own strength toward changing the West. He stood his ground against those who insulted him for his elven heritage, brawling and drinking with as many as it took for them to accept him as an ally.

I was honestly quite jealous. Win hadn't been able to drink alcohol back when we lived together. I still remember him scowling whenever he smelled the stuff. Apparently the leader of the dwarves here, a man by the name of Guvold, had found drinking with him quite fun, and had immediately hoped he'd get a chance to drink with me one day too as another elf accepted by their Eastern brethren. So he told me, over a mug of ale.

While the elves and the dwarves cooperated as part of the Federation, they still weren't on good terms here in the West. They were willing to put up with each other while fighting their common enemy the humans, but kept at arm's length for their own sake. But it seemed Guvold was intent on changing that.

For the past few centuries, the dwarves had only done the bare minimum of blacksmithing to meet their own needs as a country, meeting the demand for food by hunting on the frozen seas to the northwest. It had been a trying time for them.

But now, with so many beastfolk customers, they were able to work the forges to their heart's content, trading weapons and armor for food and drink. And the one who had brought all that about was Win, a half-elf recognized by their people from across the world, who had come to seek them out while they hid among the mountains.

Win had also told them about the dwarves of his homeland, who traded with elves and drank alcohol made from their fruit. He said I was responsible for setting up that relationship, as another elf acknowledged by the dwarves. When the dwarven representative heard there were kinds of drink out there he had yet to experience, he was immediately willing to trade with elves to get his hands on them.

Win had managed to bring the elves and the dwarves together for the Federation, but it had taken everything he had to get that far. So Guvold was now eagerly anticipating what changes I would bring, he explained around mouthfuls of ale.

After meeting with the dwarves and the elves, I was also approached by the halflings and centaurs. The beastfolk also approached me, though instead of having a leader representing all of them, I met with the chiefs of their individual clans. Unfortunately, as much as the arachne, antfolk, and other insectoid races had piqued my interest, I wasn't able to meet with them. Apparently they were very rare in the Far West, and so the number of them participating in the Federation's army was exceptionally small.

As I heard the stories of all these different peoples, I began to build a better picture in my head of what was happening here in the West, both the challenges faced by the Federation and the future Win was striving for. Though admittedly, only little by little.



I brought my hammer down on the bright red steel before me. Sparks flew from the metal and danced through the air, mimicking the excited fire spirits in the furnace. While I worked in the sweltering forge, Guvold and a number of other dwarves were watching from a small distance away. One of the audience members sighed in wonder at the rhythm of the hammer.

I was currently making a straight sword, in the style of the Yosogi School. Win and I were probably the only ones in the West who practiced it, and I already had my own magic sword, so this one was for him. Although, I was still at the prototype stage.

The main weapon Win had been making for the beastfolk had been their favored short spear. Short enough to not hinder their running, they called these weapons their “fangs,” using them with sheer force to punch through steel armor.

The more I learned about the situation in the Far West, the more I understood why Win needed to bring down the High Priestess himself. As I had predicted days earlier, opinions within the Federation about the humans were quite varied. For example, once the war had settled down, the dwarves hoped to restart trade with them to gain more access to food and drink.

In contrast, there were two races who utterly despised the humans and would jump at the chance to exterminate them entirely if they could. One was the elves, a race the humans had particularly singled out for oppression; the other was the beastfolk, who had been locked in conflict with them for so long. At least as far as the elves, they would likely calm down somewhat once their forests were liberated and their captives freed. Elves weren’t an especially warlike race, and they didn’t have the strength to fight a war against humanity on their own.

Elves had exceptionally long lifespans, but in exchange took much longer to reach maturity, so they couldn’t grow in number at the same pace as humans. They couldn’t sustain war over a long period of time. Of course, that was assuming I offered them no help. Their grudge against humanity was great enough that if I were to take down the High Priestess myself, they would likely push for the extermination of the remaining humans. Cartessa was a logical,

levelheaded woman, but I couldn't imagine all of the elves here were the same. Win seemed to be on guard against that possibility as well.

But the bigger problem was the beastfolk. They were the core around which the whole Federation was built. Even if the Federation were to dissolve immediately, they stood a chance of continuing the war on their own thanks to their newly acquired dwarven weapons. It would obviously be extremely difficult for them to win, but if the coming battle whittled away enough of humanity's strength, the beastfolk would be positioned to continue fighting afterward on their own. In other words, they had no reason to quell their hatred.

Maybe not the Horned Tribe, but the Fanged Tribe prized strength and loved battle. But the West was a big place, and humanity by no means a small opponent. Continuing their war would cause untold harm to both sides. Hatred would give birth to deeper hatred, and their war would turn into an eternal mire. The few hundred years of human oppression would be only the beginning of a much, much longer conflict.

So Win was determined to kill the High Priestess himself, proving his strength to the beastfolk. While the Tiger Clan was every bit part of that warlike Fanged Tribe, Win's long stay with them had led them to acknowledge his strength and way of thinking, so they were in full support of his efforts. Though the beastfolk were quick to fight, the value they placed on strength meant they were also quick to respect the opinions of those who were strong. To convince the beastfolk that the fighting needed to stop, they would need to be told to do so by one who possessed overwhelming strength.

To that end, the Tiger Clan and Win had hatched a plan together to overpower the High Priestess, making any sacrifice necessary to restrain her, force her mouth open, and deliver a blow to her from inside with a dagger coated in paralyzing poison. This insane plan was the only method they could contrive to combat a fallen mystic.

But I wasn't exactly eager to risk Win's life on such a bad gamble, nor did I want to see him lose more friends. I could see how much he had been hurt without even asking. And besides, I had finally made it here. I figured I could at least give him a better way.

I was now engraving magic symbols into the sword I had made. It was now, without question, a magic sword. Yes, this was the method I had thought up for Win to defeat a vampire. I was well aware that he had no talent for magic, but he still had a way to produce mana—his mithril armband.

It was kind of a crazy idea, but it was the only thing I could think of. By rubbing my golden dragon scales on the armband, a huge amount of energy would be created, akin to the power of the dragon itself. A tiny part of that could be used as mana. Or I suppose it would be more accurate to say a small portion of the golden dragon's power *was* mana, just like how mana made up a part of nature's power. That was why places strong in natural energy were more likely to produce monsters, after all.

Basically, if I lent Win some of my dragon scales, he could use them to activate the magic sword, giving him the power needed to take down a fallen mystic. It was a risky method, since most of the power would dissipate into the air, and we were using uncontrolled mana to activate a relic, but the only other idea I had was to travel to the kingdom of the dwarves and make an entire sword out of mithril.

Mithril was an invaluable treasure to the dwarves, so it wouldn't be that easy to get permission to use it. That was why simply having these mithril armbands was enough for most dwarves to accept us as comrades right away. But even if the dwarves somehow *did* give us permission to make a mithril sword, we just didn't have the time to go back to their kingdom and make one. Besides, when I thought of how surprised Kawshman would have been to learn that the magic swords we'd created would one day be used to take down a fallen mystic, I started to get really excited.

I worked some Fairy's Silver into the hilt of the sword, allowing it to take in mana without it having to come from the wielder directly. Unfortunately, there was no Fairy's Silver to be had in Clausula, so I had to take some from my own scabbard. I didn't know if a single magic sword would be enough to defeat a fallen mystic, but if it allowed them to harm her, it at least gave them a ray of hope.

It would be up to me to turn that ray of hope into something more certain. Even if I couldn't bring down the High Priestess myself, I could at least help out in the battle.

Of course, this was all assuming we were dealing with a fallen mystic. If the High Priestess was a true mystic, we wouldn't have the freedom to choose who got to deliver the final blow.



Human troops were still gathering in the territory surrounding the Quoramite holy land, currently under Federation occupation. According to halfling scouts, their numbers already exceeded two hundred thousand, and it seemed quite likely they'd make it to three. About six or seven parts of that army were from the Mizunth Commonwealth, while the rest had been gathered from the surrounding human kingdoms.

It was quite a sizable army, but I guess that's what happens when you unite an entire region. Even so, I was sure there were plenty more soldiers available in the West. Of course, even the other human kingdoms needed to maintain standing armies to protect themselves, but they also needed to supply the soldiers they sent abroad.

The farther away they sent their armies, the greater the burden of supplying them became. Sending a huge army on a mission like this was hard to imagine, so this was likely far from the full strength the human kingdoms of the West had to offer.

Of course, even what they had was many times the size of the Federation's forces, so it would doubtless be an intense battle. But the leaders of the Federation were honing their tactics with the intent of winning, not just surviving, so it looked to me like they still had a fighting chance. It sounded a bit wrong to put it this way, but it really reminded me of how different the races were.

First of all, the human armies had been entirely incapable of dealing with halfling scouts, allowing us to understand the full makeup of the human army. With dwarven hands to reinforce the Federation's cities and fortresses, they would be much more defensible than they had been while in human hands. The

beastfolk were not well suited to defending a fortified position, but the dwarves made up for it in spades. Once a dwarven army had chosen to sit tight, it was virtually impossible to dislodge them with numbers alone. Magic often played a huge role on the battlefield, but no human magic could compare to the power wielded by the elven Spirit Callers. That was one reason for the resentment I'd faced from other mages when I started learning magic.

And once the humans attacked, if they found themselves forced to a halt by the Federation's defenses, the beastfolk would swoop in and rip them apart. With excellent night vision and the ability to locate their foes by other senses like smell, together with their superior physical abilities, the beastfolk had an unquestionable advantage in night ambushes and open-field warfare. Forced to fight perpetually day and night, the human army's morale would quickly crumble, and so would their defenses.

The biggest threat they posed was in the users of Divine Arts that the Quoramite church had gathered. They might have had supernatural powers, but they likely didn't have the power to sway a battle of this scale on their own. And besides, humans weren't the only ones with access to the Divine Arts. In particular, the beastfolk of the Horned Tribe were quite inferior to their Fanged brethren when it came to physical conflict, but their focus on the intellectual had led to them seeking out and training the users of those supernatural abilities in much the same way human religions did.

On top of all that, though there were quite a few of them, the Federation also had the arachne, antfolk, centaurs, and other races on their side that brought their unique abilities to the battlefield. Even though being outnumbered would make the battle a challenge, the assets of the Federation army seemed poised for a victory.

But there was no doubt that the one who had gathered that human army, the High Priestess herself, was well aware of that fact. She would likely join the battle herself, attempting to shift the tide with her mystic arts. That would be the opportunity we needed to take her out. For Win, and thus for me as well, the biggest problem would be if she hid in the back, hiding herself away until eventually losing the will to fight altogether.

Either way, the hour of reckoning was close at hand.

As the day of battle approached, Win invited me to go on an outing outside of Clausula. Our destination was rather close to the front lines, but would nevertheless be unlikely to see any fighting: the huge forest in the Quoramite holy land. As a forest large enough to be home to a Spirit Tree, it was a place of incredible importance to the elves, and so the Federation had avoided fighting within it.

On top of that, one of the many goals of the Quoramites' attack to retake the holy land was to gain access to that tree and its apuas so they could continue making their life-giving medicine. In a way, the forest itself was the prize both sides were fighting over, so neither was willing to risk harming it in battle.

Win never told me why he wanted to visit the forest, but when I saw the two wooden swords he carried along with his usual weapons, I immediately understood. Win had mentioned many times in his letters that he wanted to spar with me again. I didn't know if right before the big battle was the best time for this...or maybe it was.

It seemed he thought if we let this opportunity slip us by, we might lose the chance to ever do it again. That might have been a bit too pessimistic of him, but I was sure Win had experienced his fair share of unexpected partings during his stay in the West. Enough so that even with the magic sword needed to take down the fallen mystic, and me at his side to support him, he was still uneasy about the outcome of the coming fight. Or perhaps *because* I would be there to support him, because I was participating, he couldn't help but think of a future in which I wasn't around anymore.

At any rate, if he wanted to spar with me, I wasn't about to refuse him.



After a few days of travel, we found ourselves at the foot of an absolutely enormous Spirit Tree. He had brought me all the way out here to spar because of his position in the Federation. Though he hadn't mentioned it himself, I had gleaned from my time in Clausula that he was actually a rather central figure there.

He had rescued a young girl of the Tiger Clan who had been captured by

humans, brought weapons to the beastfolk which gave them the edge they needed to stand their ground against humans, discovered the hidden kingdom of dwarves, and even drew the solitary elves out of their forests. In other words, he was personally responsible for building the Federation as it was now.

Even if he didn't say so himself, it was obvious enough by looking around. It was no wonder they treated him as such an important figure. Important enough that even losing a casual sparring match would send ripples throughout the Federation.

He really had chosen a stifling way of life. There should have been any number of paths open to him that were much less difficult to travel, but I wasn't about to criticize his choice. If I was going to do that, I would have said something fifty years ago, when he first set out for the West. The only thing I could do now was help him a little in realizing the future he aimed for.

There was no one currently living in this forest. Such a place would normally be inhabited and managed by the elves, but trying to take up residence here while the conflict with humans still raged would only make them a target. So aside from efforts to keep monster populations in check by the Federation, the forest remained effectively untouched. In other words, no matter what happened between us today, no one would ever know of it.

"Do you remember, Acer?" Win asked, looking up at the Spirit Tree.

Of course. There was no way I could forget.

"Long ago, you took me to see a Spirit Tree. It was pretty big, but this one might be just as tall, huh?"

That had been back in Ludoria, right? The Spirit Tree before us was far, far bigger than the one we saw back then. After all, this one was big enough to grow apuas. But back then, Win had been so small, so the tree must have looked much larger to him. The thought was bringing back all sorts of nostalgic memories.

"I never thought I'd see you standing under a Spirit Tree again," I said from the bottom of my heart. A half-elf standing beside a Spirit Tree. I knew just how difficult a sight that was to accomplish.

But Win had made it happen. He came to the West all on his own, overcame his own hardships, made his own friends, and built bonds of trust between them. He had chosen a difficult path, and while that made me worry for him, I was also extremely proud.

It was a really complex feeling.

Win laughed at my words and tossed me one of the wooden swords. Catching the weapon by the hilt, I took a ready stance, prompting him to do the same. There really didn't need to be any more words between us. He had truly grown up in the time I'd last seen him, and now it was time to feel that through our weapons.

I stepped in, and our swords clashed.

Dodge, a swing, and the swords made contact. The air was filled with sounds of boots kicking off the ground, of clothes rustling, of wooden swords striking each other. Our gazes and breathing were in sync. We shared so much, and all without a single word.

We employed no unique, ingenious tactics to take each other by surprise. We made no effort to overwhelm each other with sheer strength. This match wasn't about proving who was stronger, it was about measuring how each of us had grown. We used nothing but the basic stances and techniques of the Yosogi School, and they served as the vehicle for our communication.

Gradually, our speed started to climb. It had only taken one exchange of blows for me to realize that Win had already surpassed me. I couldn't say the gap between us was huge, but I could tell he had crept slightly ahead of me. And I could imagine the tremendous effort it would have taken him to claim that small distance.

Win wasn't a born genius when it came to swordsmanship. He didn't lack talent by any stretch, but it couldn't really be called anything beyond "exceptional." I guess I was about the same. Neither of us had been born with as much natural affinity for swords as someone like Shizuki. So this gap between the two of us wasn't about innate talent, but quantity and quality. Or perhaps, the number of times we had wagered our lives on our swordsmanship.

Both Win and I could practice swordsmanship for longer than any human. Someday, both of us could likely reach the same level as those geniuses. And at this rate, it seemed almost likely that Win would make it there before I did. I found that thought a little frustrating.

As our match dragged on and on, that gap in skill between us became more and more apparent. Eventually I was forced into a corner, with no option but to fight defensively, and after that, it was only a matter of time before I failed to stop the wooden sword from reaching my throat.

“You got me.”

The smile on Win’s face when he heard that was one of pure childlike joy, one that very much reminded me of his younger days.





“Huh. Your joints are built completely different from those of other people. That’s really interesting. Thanks for showing me.”

I gave my visitor a word of thanks after carefully inspecting their limbs. I had really seen something quite rare. This was exactly why I loved traveling.

“Pay no mind. But, you are, strange elf. Many see us, grow surprised, frightened. You are first, curious.”

My guest was, well, certainly different. His body was covered in a hard carapace and had six limbs. His compound eyes made it exceptionally difficult to read his emotions, and perhaps due to the different construction of his vocal tract, his speech had a unique quirk. Apparently the humans had seen them as monsters and tried to exterminate them...and quite frankly, I could understand how they’d get that impression.

Yes, today my visitor was an antfolk, going by the name of Adant. He was one of the rare insect races in the Federation.

“Yeah, I can see that. If you had felt embarrassed by your body, I probably wouldn’t have asked to take a look at you, but you seem quite proud of it. So I felt like I should take a look as well. And well, it would be hard to make weapons for you if I didn’t.”

He—actually, I had no idea how to tell if antfolk were male or female, but I was pretty sure “he” was correct—had come to me in hopes I could make him a weapon. Apparently by antfolk custom, they didn’t use weapons. They were covered in a thick carapace and, with two of their limbs serving as legs to walk on, they had four thin but incredibly strong appendages left to them. Their jaws were also powerful enough to crush wood, a common food for them. In other words, their physical attributes made weapons unnecessary for them to fight.

But Adant had come to the Federation and seen what kind of power dwarven weapons had brought to the beastfolk. He had seen how those weapons had turned the tide in their war with the humans. So he thought that if the antfolk had weapons, they might have been able to avoid coming so close to annihilation by human hands. Well...I found it hard to believe that weapons

alone would be enough to enact such an enormous change, but there was still a chance it would improve their situation.

But that's where the problems started. Adant had immediately approached the dwarves with his request upon joining the Federation, but they had coldly refused him.

"It's fine that you want a weapon, but you got no fingers! Even if you could carry one, how're you gonna swing it?"

I couldn't help but agree with them. The antfolk were blessed with many natural abilities, but almost as if in exchange, they had no fingers. They could curl the ends of their arms to hold or pick up objects, but holding a weapon firmly enough to fight with it would be quite difficult. When they ate, they needed to use two arms to bring the food to their mouths. Naturally, they had nothing in the way of cutlery.

They could almost certainly hold a weapon in the same way, using two arms, but that didn't mean much if they couldn't swing it properly. Holding a weapon pinned between their two arms wouldn't be enough to fight with it. They might be able to manage something by using all four arms, but the result would almost certainly end up making Adant weaker, not stronger.

Adant had been quite disheartened by their reply, so the dwarves had taken pity on him and suggested he ask Win for help. He was skilled enough at blacksmithing to be acknowledged by the dwarves, and was smart enough to bring multiple disparate races together to cooperate. If there was anyone who could come up with something, it was him.

The idea certainly had some merit. Adel pressed on in his quest and approached Win himself, convinced that there was something in the Federation that could help his people.

But of course, as a leader of the Federation, Win was extremely busy. Though he had taken an interest in Adant's request, he didn't have the time to see to it personally. Instead, he referred him to me. He said he was a little more open-minded in his thinking than most because of my influence on him, so I should be able to help. Win was quite convinced that I would take a vested interest in Adant's request.

“Honestly, I thought, just give up. But, like Win said, you make a happy face. May I anticipate, from you?” Though I couldn’t read anything on his face, it seemed Adant could read mine just fine.

I looked happy, did I? In that case...

“Of course you can. You let me see your body after all. I’ll have to test a few things out though, so I’ll need your help.” I was in perfect shape right now, so he could definitely expect great things from me. After all, Win had introduced him to me in faith that I would deliver.

“Understood. If you show interest, in my body, shall I bring friend, arachne?”

Adant said, rubbing the tips of his four arms together. While I certainly couldn’t read anything from his expression, I could tell that had to be an expression of happiness.

“I...well, uhh. That would be great, but the arachne in the Federation are all women, so I’m not sure I could inspect them in the same way.” I was glad he enjoyed the experience so much, but I had to shake my head.

Unlike the antfolk, the arachne had upper bodies that were very much human in appearance. And with no culture of clothing among them, they were quite...exposed. Setting aside their spiderlike lower halves, rather than weapons, what they really needed was armor...or at least clothes.

“I see. By the way, I am also, woman.” Adant’s arms had come to a stop, and once again I could feel the emotion in that. *She* wasn’t all that happy anymore.

I guess now that I thought about it, soldier ants were always female, weren’t they?

All of that aside, it was time to choose a weapon for Adant. Normally I would stress that armor was as important as the weapon, but antfolk came already equipped with a sturdy carapace. Adding more on top of that would make it difficult for them to move, so it was only natural Adant had prioritized finding weaponry.

But was that really good enough? This was a formal request of me as a blacksmith, so I would do what I could to meet Adant’s expectations, but I

would be really happy if I could accomplish something more than that.

He...or rather, *she* would need a way to hold the weapon properly, but that was far from enough. The conditions were rather restrictive, but there were still a few options available to us. We could make a choice among several candidates by having Adant test them out and seeing which suited her movements best.

Apparently antfolk had difficulty applying much strength when moving their arms away from their bodies, but could pull them back in with a lot of power. It made me think that the idea of a weapon you swung around was ill-suited to them from the start.

A few weeks after receiving Adant's request, my work was done. I had made a set of four patas. The pata was a piece of armor much like a gauntlet, on the end of which was attached a long blade. In other words, it was both a weapon and armor. I had taken an interest in the antfolk's thin arms, and wanted to make something that could protect them without impeding their movement.

A pata was supposed to have a crossbar inside to be gripped when using it as a weapon, but I had reworked the design so that Adant could hold it firmly just by curling the end of her arms. It was quite a difficult weapon to use, and could quite easily injure the user's wrists if used poorly, but there was little danger of that with how antfolk arms were built.

Among the four patas, two had curved, inward-facing blades like scythes. Swinging a weapon outward was difficult for them, so I discarded the thought entirely, designing them to be used for cutting inward. The other two blades were straight, and could be used for stabbing. While they could make fewer movements than other races, having two additional arms would more than make up for that. With four arms and two kinds of attacks, any enemy would be sliced to pieces in no time. To be quite honest, even I didn't want to try fighting an antfolk using these.

After taking the patas and testing them out for a bit, Adant was clearly ecstatic. In her joy, she didn't even remove the weapons from her arms, rubbing the blades together...it was actually a bit unnerving. But I was mostly happy that she liked them.

Though Adant was certainly pleased, that didn't mean every antfolk would take to these. But if any other antfolk came looking for weapons, hopefully the dwarves of the West could take inspiration from what I had made and figure something out for them. I had no idea what form those weapons would take, but I hoped one day I'd get to experience the shock of discovering them.



Three months had passed since I reunited with Win. The battle between the High Priestess's army and the gathered forces of the Federation had already begun. That said, things were still in their earliest stages. So far, the only actual battles had been halflings leading human scouts into beastfolk ambushes, or the beastfolk raiding human encampments in the process of building siege weapons and torching them. In short, the beastfolk were terrifying.

But having the numbers they did, the humans could afford to lose any number of these small skirmishes without losing momentum. All we had accomplished so far was slowing them down a little. The real fighting would begin when the human army began their first assault on one of the Federation's fortresses. With so much time to prepare, the human army had abundant supplies. They had taken extreme care to ensure those provisions made it to the front lines unimpeded, dispersing them among multiple staging areas before bringing them forward. Even if a number of their supply camps were burned to the ground, the army at large wouldn't receive a crippling blow. I was actually a bit surprised that the human army didn't underestimate their enemies.

So in the end, things would come down to a large battle. Many people would die. As a high elf, I could use the powers of the spirits to considerably reduce the number of casualties the Federation would take, but this time I had no intention of fighting the humans directly.

The humans, beastfolk, elves, dwarves, halflings, centaurs, and even all the insectoid races needed to feel the pain of this confrontation. They needed to understand that if you tread on someone, they would fight back. That if you tried to kill someone because of your own hatred, you and the ones you loved could very well be killed in turn. My intervention could very well steal away the pain that would be instrumental in bringing an end to this war in the West.

I wouldn't be using my powers against anyone but the High Priestess herself. So until that moment inevitably came knocking, I waited patiently. When the human army finally began their assault on the fortress, cries of anger, screams of pain, and the scent of blood filled the air.

As expected, the humans had no way to breach the dwarven defenses. While they struggled against them, they began taking heavy losses to the beastfolk. But the Federation had its own losses to count, a number that grew steadily day by day. Win was focusing all his efforts on the battle, so we had next to no time to see each other. Little by little, I was starting to grow impatient. I never realized that being capable of helping but standing by and doing nothing instead could be so painful.

The biggest change in the situation occurred one week after the human army began its assault on the fortress. One night, called to the rooftop by the wind spirits, I saw enormous thunderclouds bearing down on us from the south. It seemed the High Priestess's mystic arts were capable of controlling even the weather. Thanks to the senses of the spirits, I was able to determine that there was a strong power in the middle of the humans' formation drawing the clouds closer. All that power was coming from one woman, staring at the sky as she made signs with her hands.

There was no doubt. That was the person who had led the Quoramites for centuries, and was now the one calling down storm clouds on us. No doubt she intended to shatter our defenses with a rain of lightning bolts. But because of that, I had found her precise location.

And I also knew her true nature. Perhaps because he was inexperienced, Rayhon's nature as a vampire had been clear as day. I could sense his repulsive aura without even looking for it. This time, however, I hadn't been able to detect the High Priestess's presence on my own, meaning she was at the very least much more refined in her use of the mystic arts than he was.

But thinking back on the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire, I didn't think I'd be able to pinpoint their location just from one or two uses of the mystic arts. This High Priestess might have surpassed Rayhon, but she was far from a true mystic. She might have learned how to hide her presence better after many

centuries of practice, but she was still a fallen mystic. Judging by her general aura and the lack of the scent of blood on her, I imagined she was a soul eater rather than a vampire.

And that was all I needed to know. If she wasn't a true mystic, then Win and I together would be enough to handle her. Pointing to the billowing thunderclouds above us, I whispered to the spirits.

"Spirits of the wind, blow hard, disperse the clouds and take them away."



I hadn't expected her to be able to manipulate the weather with the mystic arts, but unfortunately for her, as a high elf that was kind of my specialty. No matter what disaster she tried to conjure forth, I was confident I could put a stop to it.

As a strong wind blew in, a look of surprise overtook the High Priestess's face. It seemed she had recognized my presence. She might not have noticed I was a high elf, but she must have understood that there was someone in the Federation army with a power that rivaled her own. If she had been the cautious type—and as a fallen mystic that had survived for so long, there was a very good chance she was—she might have abandoned the human army and fled on her own.

But even if that happened, I wouldn't be worried in the least. Now that I had seen her once, I could find her no matter where she fled. Though of course, I'd leave Win to deliver the final blow.



For the next two weeks, the battle proceeded in the Federation's favor, more or less how we expected. The High Priestess's mystic arts must have taken some amount of preparation, as there was a two-day gap between each of her attempts. I was able to interfere with her efforts every time.

When the earth suddenly split open, I'd fill it back in. Unnatural fire would ignite all across our stone fortress, but rain would appear just as mysteriously to extinguish it. As this continued, her attacks became bigger and more desperate, but it never amounted to anything all that challenging to handle. The human and Federation armies were clearly aware of this silent war happening behind the scenes, and though many were starting to feel uneasy, it had yet to make a real impact on the battle.

If things continued in this fashion, either the Federation would soon make a decisive break into the human camp, or the humans would retreat and rethink their battle plan. We figured the best chance to take down the High Priestess would be in that confusion, so I was on guard against her mystic arts tonight as well. But as I searched for her presence, I found her quite distant from the human army, moving away from it. It seemed she had decided to abandon the

army and save herself.

To her, the human army was nothing more than her arms and legs. There was no sense sticking her neck out to save them. A normal human might bleed out and die after losing an arm or a leg, but a fallen mystic could recover from such a blow. If she retreated and kept to the shadows, she could raise new armies again and again. It was quite an obvious plan.

But there was one thing she had failed to realize. We hadn't gone to take her down personally because the human army around her had been in the way. Now that she had left that army behind, she was all but defenseless. She still thought of herself as being all-powerful, yet had to acknowledge she couldn't match me. It was a difficult predicament to be in.

If she had at least run the first time I thwarted her efforts, then we wouldn't have had so much time to prepare for a pursuit. Her half-hearted attempts at trial and error would come at the cost of her life. Well, I suppose after I had seen her once, it didn't really matter how quickly she ran. I would be able to find her regardless. I guess her fatal mistake had been coming to the front lines in the first place.

I imagined she had treated this battle like any of her other games. The fact that the nonhuman races still survived in the West, and the reason the races of the Federation had been able to gather into a single force before being individually crushed, was because she thought it was a game she could end anytime she pleased. But that negligence was what had given me the chance to make it to this land in time to stop her.

"Send Win a message. The prey has left its cage. If we leave now, we should be able to finish things tonight." Upon hearing my message, the elf at my side immediately ran to where the centaurs were lodged.

Judging by the speed at which she seemed to be moving south, she was likely taking a carriage. The beastfolk might be able to catch up to her on foot, but it would be difficult for Win or me. But having foreseen this possibility, the unit built to pursue her contained some especially quick-footed centaurs.

Five beastfolk and three centaurs quickly came up on the carriage, racing

down the road at full speed. And on the back of each of those centaurs were a number of people including Win, the elf I had sent to him, and myself. Right now, the Federation was making a bold assault on the human lines, so there was little risk of them attacking us.

The escort for the High Priestess's carriage had already been drawn away by another unit of beastfolk. A number of carriages had left the human encampment in many different directions, but thanks to my senses, it was easy to find which one we were after. Once we stopped that carriage and took the head of the High Priestess inside, we'd have taken a huge step toward ending the conflict in the Far West.

I couldn't say I enjoyed the idea of chasing someone down as they fled and killing them, but it wasn't like we were dealing with any old lady here. It was more accurate to think of her as a parasite, someone trampling over the weak here in the West to sate her own appetites.

The beastfolk with us were a bit faster than we were on centaur-back. One of them used his momentum to leap up onto the carriage's roof. From above, he tore the carriage's door open and leaped inside to drag the High Priestess out.

But that's when things went wrong. A single shudder went through the beastfolk before he stopped moving altogether. A few seconds later, his lifeless body was thrown out of the carriage. His once gray hair had turned snow white, his once young and fit body like an ancient, mummified husk. It seemed that soul eaters didn't need their contact to be sexual to drain the lives of their victims.

I had assumed that vampires and soul eaters were just fallen mystics of different tastes, but perhaps a soul eater was just a vampire that had grown skilled enough to drain the life force from their victims without having to consume them.

In that case, giving Win a magic sword had absolutely been the right call. If she could kill people by simply touching them, then holding her down and poisoning her was entirely impossible. Only Win and I had a chance in a fight against her. But considering she had skipped right to her trump card of stealing life from people, it seemed our two weeks of competition had drained her

considerably.

“Spirits of the wind.”

There was no need to hold back now. With the help of the wind spirits, I destroyed the harnesses binding the horses to the High Priestess’s carriage. Freed of their restraints, the startled horses immediately fled. The now out-of-control carriage quickly toppled, throwing its driver to the ground.



As we surrounded the toppled carriage, its occupant was forced to crawl out of its skyward facing door. Her clothes were pure white, thin, and loose like a priest’s robes, yet somehow strangely sensual. But despite her change in outfit, she was without a doubt the same woman I had seen using those mystic arts.

She glanced around at her assailants. “Is *that* how you stop a carriage? This is exactly why I don’t like you fake people. But to think there was such a bottomless spring of life among you. Why would a true one like you travel with this filthy rabble of imitations?” she said, her gaze landing squarely on me. Her eyes showed a clear respect, a faint sign of hidden fear, and the unquenchable light of greed. It seemed that as she looked for a way out of this situation, my being a high elf had captured her interest.

A bottomless spring of life, huh? What a perfect expression of her nature. It really revealed her true colors. For someone who consumed other people for sustenance, a high elf like me would be an incredible resource.

The other four races born directly from the Creator’s hand—the spirits, the giants, the phoenixes, and the dragons—would all be far too much for the likes of a fallen mystic. The mystics sustained by the dragon’s guardians in the Ancient Gold Empire were exceptions among exceptions. But the gods copied the high elves to make the elves, and so began the births of the many other races. In other words, at least in comparison to the other ancient races, the high elves were rather close to other people.

For a fallen mystic, taking the life of a high elf would seem like the only way to obtain the power of the truly immortal ancient races. But I didn’t much care about the circumstances of a fallen mystic. I could only see her as pathetic and pitiful, torn between her greed and desire to protect herself. She no doubt still

saw herself as incredibly strong, and while she might have been at a disadvantage here, she still had enough composure to consider how she might make a meal of me. So as she asked the question, probing for a weakness in my guard, I felt no desire to answer her.

“Wind, earth, water of the air,”

With a whisper and the motion of my hand, I aimed to crush her between the earth below and a burst of wind from the sky above. Of course, just because I was a high elf didn’t mean I was guaranteed to win. Though I was born with incredible power, if I couldn’t actually use it well, I’d be exactly the meal she was looking for. Really, thinking back to how difficult my fight with Rayhon had been, if I were still only as strong as I had been then, I likely wouldn’t be a match for the High Priestess.

But I had gathered all sorts of experiences since then. Just like Win had grown up so much in this place, the flow of time had brought me to meetings with true mystics, a dragon, and even a phoenix. A fallen mystic was no more than an old nemesis long buried.

“By the verse of metal, I command the verse of wood!”

Pointing two fingers skyward, she released a burst of energy upward, dispersing the blast of wind aimed at her. At the same time, she leaped high into the air, dodging out of the way of the earth trying to swallow her from below. It was the same technique to interfere with natural phenomena that Rayhon had shown.

But that wasn’t going to be enough. As she jumped, the water that had gathered into the air above her formed into crystals of ice, raining down on her. With no time to prepare another of her techniques, she swept the rain of icicles aside with her bare arms. The graceful demeanor she employed to lure her opponents into a false sense of security had been entirely discarded.

It was all about as I had expected. The mystics’ ability to neutralize phenomena of nature was done by throwing something of an opposing element at it. It wasn’t quite as simple as “water beats fire,” but it was something along those lines.

But it took some time to align the power inside them—for a fallen mystic, the

life force consumed from others—with any given element. To put it in their way of speaking, the energy had to be kneaded into the correct form before it could be used. Thus, they were only able to neutralize one phenomenon at a time. Multiple attacks of the same type could be neutralized by releasing the same kind of energy over and over, but switching from one element to another to handle attacks of different types required more time. That was why she had neutralized the blast of wind with her mystic arts, but physically dodged the earth attack.

A true mystic might have been able to drop that time down to a negligible level. As people who had sublimated the power of nature into themselves, applying a natural element to the energy within them was exceptionally easy. I had used three attacks at once to gauge her ability, and now I had a pretty good idea of how strong she was.

“Lord Acer! I will assist you!” Urged on by my attack, the elf with us stepped forward to fight, but I lifted a hand to stop him.

“No need. Just like we planned, everyone but Win should step back and watch from a distance. Otherwise, you might get caught in my attacks.” I then swung that hand around, releasing a few blasts of air at the High Priestess as she tried to use our conversation as a chance to escape.

I didn’t really have that much attention to spare. In order to keep her abilities in check, I had to constantly unleash attacks with a power and speed that she couldn’t ignore. With that taking up so much of my focus, I couldn’t spend that much time working on control. It would be difficult to stop my attacks from hurting the beastfolk as they fought...or at least, I didn’t want to waste my attention worrying about them. Adding the efforts of another elf working with the spirit arts was exactly the same problem.

You might ask then, was I not worried about accidentally hitting Win? The answer was...not really. Even with my lack of control, the spirits were in tune with my thoughts and feelings. There was no way they would ever allow harm to come to Win. They knew just how much it would hurt me if the boy I had raised since childhood came to harm because of them.

So the most efficient strategy right now was for Win and I to take on the High

Priestess ourselves.



Until now, the battle had been between the High Priestess and myself, but Win was being added to the mix. The effect he had was profound. To be specific, once Win began rubbing the dragon scale on his mithril armband to power his sword, the High Priestess was immediately seized with terror, her movements growing chaotic and desperate.

Seeing the sword, realizing it had been crafted specifically to kill her, and knowing it was strong enough to do the job...were not part of it at all. Instead, she had been terrified by the sudden surge of the golden dragon's power. Only a tiny fraction of that power would actually be usable, with most of it dissipating harmlessly into the air, but her response had been far too strong. Perhaps before she had strayed from the proper path, she had been involved with the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire. I couldn't imagine there were all that many schools training mystics out there.

For the mystics who guarded the empire, the source of their power was ultimately the golden dragon. If she knew of the mystics there, the power born from that scale would likely remind her of them.

But I had no desire to press her for the truth of the matter. No answer she gave would be enough to stay my hand. Instead, it would be much smarter for us to finish this fight before she realized we couldn't use all of the power created by that scale, or to pressure her enough that she couldn't come to that realization.

My attacks through the spirits continued, the rapid succession of blows seeking to block in her movement and wear away at her stamina. At the same time, Win approached with his magic sword made for killing fallen mystics, his Yosogi School techniques reaching for her life.

It was hardly a fight. For a battle that was supposed to decide the fate of the Far West, the spectacle wasn't anything so heroic. Hemmed in on all sides by the spirits, the High Priestess could do nothing but mount a terrified, desperate defense.

Even an execution would have felt better. A single clean slash to end it all

would have been much more merciful for her. Instead, she wielded the full weight of her very substantial power, her desperation turning her defensive battle into an extended tragedy.

Win charged fearlessly through the barrage of wind bullets. The High Priestess neutralized many of the blasts as she tried to run, only to run into arms made of earth grabbing her legs. She had the brute force to kick those earthen arms to pieces, but as she did, Win's blade drew ever closer.

Even so, she never surrendered. Throwing her arms up to shield herself, she used the brief seconds it bought her to throw herself from harm's way, continuing her desperate flight now short two limbs. For a fallen mystic with this much power, she could regenerate her arms in no time. And so the "battle" continued. Not a fight nor an execution, but simply torture.

Considering her appearance, we inevitably would have looked like the villains from the perspective of an uninformed observer. If someone with no knowledge of who she was and a strong sense of justice happened by, they would doubtlessly intervene on the High Priestess's behalf.

But that wasn't enough to stop Win or I. Of course, it wasn't that we enjoyed doing it, but everything would have been for nothing if we stopped now. The battle, which had claimed so many human and nonhuman lives, would have been entirely pointless. Therefore, suppressing our displeasure, we would keep up our pursuit and finish things here.

Win's sword eventually found its way to her neck, though beheading her proved insufficient to kill her. He followed up with one more blow, splitting her head in two and finally ending things. The moment before everything ended for her, she looked at me with eyes full of venom.

"You monster!"

That was perhaps the greatest curse that the fallen mystic Orie could conjure.

But why now, of all times? It was far too late for her to realize that now, and I knew exactly what I was.

As the battle came to a close, there was no sense of satisfaction, only a bitter aftertaste. I could only grimace with the understanding that this is what it

meant to take a person's life. For Win, who had lost so many friends to the High Priestess, there might have been something more. But for me, who had only come along to help at the very end, it was an empty, unpleasant experience. But it had been absolutely necessary, and I regretted nothing. I would just have to find some good drink to wash that unpleasantness away.

Not long after, the army that had gathered to retake the Quoramite holy land crumbled, signaling a decisive victory for the Federation. The loss of the High Priestess who had led the West for so long—or perhaps more accurately, controlled it from the shadows—had that much of an impact. That impact was felt not just on the battlefield, but throughout the entire Far West, and even into the west-central region of the continent.

It was the start of a great change.

A month after the battle ended, Win had become quite busy dealing with his future prospects. He had already brought the Federation together both in name and in deed by slaying the High Priestess. His next objective was to bring an end to the fighting, but that would require a number of conditions to be met, from conquering the Mizunth Commonwealth, to dissolving the Quoramite church, to freeing the elven forests under their control. Most days were spent constantly giving out orders and glaring at maps and reports, rapidly swinging between a state of joy and anxiety between each one.

But there was no real role left for me here. I was an outsider, and as Win's father, my help in the fight against the High Priestess had been about helping him. The credit for the deed fell squarely on his shoulders.

But I had shown myself a bit too publicly now, so I doubted I would be able to maintain this image for much longer. If I wielded my power too openly here, it would end up becoming a hindrance to Win. If I wanted to help Win in the future, it would have to be from outside the West. For example, I could work with Airena's caravan or the elves of Shiyon to bring support to the elves here in the Far West.

It didn't really feel like I had been given a chance to really sit down and talk things through with Win. He was always so busy, and I didn't want to get in his

way. And that was probably just right for the relationship between a parent and his child, one who had grown up to stand on his own.

But we'd had our chance at a rematch...and above all, I was happy to see my son so heavily relied upon by others. Honestly, he was really cool. So I was satisfied.

Until the West calmed down once and for all, Win would likely continue to throw himself into the fighting. It was possible this would be our final chance to see each other. But I didn't have much of anything to say about that now. Long ago, I might have claimed I would never let anything happen to him, and sworn to take revenge on anyone who hurt him...but seeing him as he was now, I realized that would be treating him like a child. Win would act on his own will now, and he would take responsibility for his own choices.

No matter what happened to him, there was no need for me to become a monster. Of course, I would still celebrate his fortunes and grieve for his losses. But for now, all I had to say in our parting was "Let's meet again."

Writing that at the bottom of my letter, I asked an elf to pass it to Win before leaving Clausula behind.

I didn't really have that much time. Someone was coming to pick me up, but my escort would stand out an awful lot, so I wanted to meet them where not many people would see us. Otherwise it might start a weird commotion.

Feeling something calling for me, I looked up to the eastern sky, where I saw a shadow approaching from a distance. I had made all sorts of friends since I left my home in the Forest Depths over a hundred years ago, but there weren't all that many of them who could fly. Among them, the only one I could think of who would come all the way to the West to see me was Heero.

Feeling the pain of my departure once again, I turned for one last look backward. I was leaving in a bit of a hurry...but how would the West fare now? However it changed, I knew that Win would be instrumental in it. So whenever there were rumors about what was happening here, I'd always be listening with a keen interest.

Win would meet and part with a great many people from now on. As a half-elf, his lifespan was much longer than many others, so that would be

unavoidable. But he didn't need to worry. No matter how many of his friends he would have to say goodbye to in his long life, I would definitely be there for his last days.

He was my beloved son. There was no way I'd ever let him be alone in the end.

Interlude: Win's Monologue

This was what I was thinking, right up until the very moment of our victory.

By saving the young Sabal, I ended up with a connection to the Tiger Clan, making them weapons and changing the way they fought altogether. Because of the results they had, the scattered beastfolk tribes started to gather around us to form a stronger, united power.

By finding the hidden kingdom of the dwarves, I secured a steadier source of weapons for them. Luckily, I had spent over ten years in a kingdom of dwarves in the East as a kid, so finding a place they would like wasn't too difficult for me. The mithril armband Uncle Oswald made for me got the door open, and an exchange of fists, drinks, and blacksmithing ended with them deciding to trust me and join us. It was exactly like how I had seen Acer do it with the dwarves in the center of the continent.

With dwarven weapons, the beastfolk became incredibly strong. Until then, I had been entirely unable to meet the demand for weapons among the beastfolk, so they had just barely managed to grind the human advances to a halt by relying on their speed for surprise attacks. With a huge number of dwarven weapons making their way into beastfolk hands, they were able to face the humans head-on. The proud human armies that had oppressed the Far West were shattered by a head-on attack by the beastfolk.

The impact of that new reality didn't just affect those two races; it sent ripples through all the beastfolk races living in the Far West. Halflings, centaurs, and many other races that had suffered oppression at human hands joined with us. There were even a few cases like the arachne or antfolk, whom the humans considered monsters to be exterminated, that we began to offer protection to.

And at long last, I was able to contact the elves, the ones who suffered the most under the humans. Most of the elves in the Far West had already been enslaved, but not all of them. The beastfolk in the northern wilderness had

continued to resist human expansion, so the elves living farther north had yet to fall into their hands. With the help of the wind spirits, I was able to send them a message and request their help in fighting back, to help free the elves, beastfolk, and many others who had been enslaved.

One step at a time, searching for just the next small thing we could do, we clawed our way back and forced the world to change. Putting it down in words like that makes it sound like it was all so easy, but that was hardly the case.

I had spent close to fifty years here. The gathered beastfolk clans and other races came to be known as the Federation. I stopped being seen as a guest of the Tiger Clan and started to be treated like a high-ranking officer, and eventually as a leader in the Federation's army.

The largest human nation in the Far West was the Mizunth Commonwealth. The southern half of the region was occupied by humans, and Mizunth took up about half of that. But with the Federation winning victory after victory, our influence in the region was rapidly expanding.

Even so, I knew that there was a limit to the progress we could make. Our numbers simply couldn't compare with theirs. The individual strength of our warriors allowed us to hold our own against a larger force in a given battle, but as our domain of influence expanded, we would quickly exhaust the manpower needed to maintain control. The dwarves would likely remain holed up in their mountains. The elf, beastfolk, and even halfling and centaur populations could catch up after a few centuries in the prosperous southern regions, but we needed those numbers now.

If we spread out over such a wide territory as things were, we'd lose to the sheer numbers of the human armies. And if we gathered together, we wouldn't be able to control wide swathes of land.

So why not cull the human population until they were no longer a threat? Unfortunately, that wasn't an option. If we tried, our forces would be wiped out long before finishing the task. While we fought in the east, we'd be attacked from the west, leaving the women, children, and elderly behind to be slaughtered. Our warriors were mighty beastfolk, but there was still a limit to

how many enemies they could kill. Ten or twenty each, maybe. But hundreds? Killing others wore away at your own strength and spirit. If we truly wanted to fight until extinction, the number of humans against us would make it a losing battle.

So we needed a breakthrough. Of course, that wouldn't be so easy either. My aim was to take down the ones responsible for stirring up the humans against the other races, the source of their oppression: the Teachings of Quoram. If that religion—the source of all the troubles in the Far West—could be destroyed, the humans would lose the will to fight, and the thirst for revenge of those who they had persecuted could be satisfied, at least to some extent.

Destroying a religion that people had taken to heart would be difficult, if not outright impossible, but there was a figurehead leading the Quoramite church. The High Priestess, a woman who had led the Quoramites for centuries, responsible for spreading its influence across the Far West. Of course, there was no way a human could live that long, so it was most likely an inherited position, but the humans believed she was immortal. Presenting them her head might just be enough to break their faith. It wasn't an exaggeration to say all humans in the Far West held to the Teachings of Quoram, so that one move could change the Far West in its entirety.

There were all sorts of opinions within the Federation, but I felt it was best to spill as little blood as possible. Luckily, the holy land where the High Priestess made her home was at the heart of the Mizunth Commonwealth. We were already at war with them, so all we had to do was break through and reach the Commonwealth's heart.

The Federation gathered its strength, growing its influence until it could challenge the Quoramite holy land itself. Victorious over the Mizunth defenders, we made it into the Great Temple of Quoram, where we saw that thing for the first time. Waiting for us before the statue of their god was a single woman, the picture of grace and refinement...but I could tell at a glance that she wasn't human.

The aura about her was so twisted, so distorted, it was hard to believe she still had a human form at all. It was like the water of a large lake had grown stagnant and rotten, then forced itself into human skin. There was simply no

way she was human. But the only ones who saw that were me and the elves who could also see the spirits.

The beastfolk had no reason to doubt her humanity, and so approached with every intention of tearing her head off with their bare hands. My shout to stop, from a dry and pained throat, came just a moment too late. Or maybe we had already lost the moment we stepped into the temple.

“Have you no shame, presenting your repulsive selves before me like this? That’s exactly why I despise you fake people.” With a tearing sound, a beastfolk fell to the ground, his head cleanly ripped from his body. She had removed it with no more effort than a farmer plucking an apple from its tree, discarding it with a look of disgust.

Everyone froze, unable to comprehend what had happened.

That was only natural. A muscular beastfolk warrior had just had his head ripped off by a slender, frail human. It was no surprise they’d doubt their eyes, or even their sanity. The bizarre spectacle had consumed us all.

But that wasn’t the correct way to act in front of such a monster. She reached for the next of the beastfolk nearby.

“Spirits of the wind!” I managed before she touched him, making it in time for the whirlwind to throw the woman away and protect the beastfolk...

Or rather, that’s what should have happened.

The woman murmured something under her breath, using her hand to disperse the gathering wind, before that same hand once again popped the head off another beastfolk warrior.

Two had died. With that, everyone came back to their senses. Whether in rage or fear, everyone rushed her at once. But neither the claws of the beastfolk nor the weapons of the dwarves nor the spirits called by the elves could put a scratch on her.

At that moment, I recalled an old story of a monster Acer had told me about when I was a boy. A warped, twisted thing that grew by consuming others. It had been able to nullify the attacks of the spirits, and was exceptionally physically powerful and resilient.

A vampire. An opponent even a high elf like Acer had difficulty against. If she was a vampire as I suspected, then it made sense the same woman had led the Quoramites for hundreds of years. According to Acer's story, vampires consumed the vitality of people around them to extend their own lifespans. All of our victories up until this point were only possible because this creature had ignored us. If she had stood at the front, our armies would have been slaughtered. Or to put it another way, the nonhuman races hadn't been entirely wiped out only because the High Priestess had decided to toy with us instead.

I had heard a rumor. Apparently, high-ranking members of the Quoramite church lived tremendously long lives, not just the High Priestess herself. But like all other members of the Federation, I had written it off as human nonsense, the desperate clinging of deluded humans to their idea of a god. I had assumed that at most, they had probably taken a few apuas from one of the larger elven forests. If I had taken those rumors seriously, I might have been able to guess that the High Priestess was actually a vampire.

Every time the High Priestess, that monster, reached out her hand, another one of us met an ignoble end. This wasn't a battle; it was a one-sided slaughter. Though we were the elites of the Federation army, we had no way to fight...no, not even a way to resist.

I had to do something. My mind raced, searching for any way out of this situation. I sifted through my memories, searching for the answer to how Acer had killed the vampire he met. But I only kept coming up with the same answer, the thing he said to me again and again and again: if you ever meet a vampire, run away.

Victory should have been within reach. The change we were hoping for in the West should have started right there. After all the lives that had been lost to make it this far, was I really supposed to run away? Wasn't there anything I could do?

Acer had used magic to create an opening, finishing off the vampire with his Yosogi swordsmanship and a magic sword. I was confident my swordsmanship had surpassed his capabilities at that time. But I had no talent for magic, no ability to activate a relic sword.

Even without one, I trusted in my skills as a Yosogi swordsman, and so stepped forward. But just as I resolved myself...

“Win, get back!” someone called out to me from behind.

It was Sabal, the girl I had saved all those decades ago, the woman who had supported me for so long. She had been a child when we first met, but now she was well into her later years. She had forced us to bring her along, promising this would be her last time heading into battle. And at some point, she had moved up to stand in front of all of us.

“Warriors of the Tiger Clan! The time to repay our debt to our guest has come! Brave warriors, let us face death together!”

The High Priestess snorted derisively at Sabal’s speech, reaching for her as every other before her. But Sabal dodged, delivering the dagger I had crafted just for her into the High Priestess’s stomach.

I had no time to stop. I was the one who wanted to tell her to run away. But anything I could do would be too slow.

Sabal’s blade cut through the High Priestess’s clothing, but left no mark on her skin. The proof that my weapons would be useless against her stood bare before me. Having thrown her full weight into the attack, Sabal had come to a stop, giving the High Priestess enough time to reach out and touch her.

I heard a crunch.

The warriors of the Tiger Clan roared, jumping on the High Priestess as one, trying to pin her down. Just as Sabal had instructed them, they charged to their ends bravely, being thrown off and ripped apart one by one.

Someone yanked hard on my arm as I stood frozen. I didn’t remember anymore if it had been a dwarf, another member of the Tiger Clan, or an elf. But I had no choice in that moment but to run. That was the only thing I could do here, making use of the time Sabal and the Tiger Clan warriors bought for me.

After that, the High Priestess disappeared from the Great Temple. No matter how much of a monster she was, apparently she either wasn’t confident she could handle the entire Federation army alone, or couldn’t be bothered to, and

so had fled. She had decided taking back the holy land later would be easy enough.

Though we had conquered the holy land, it was hard to call it a victory. I had lost Sabal, so many soldiers had died, and we hadn't put a single scratch on the High Priestess. Never mind bringing back her head, she hadn't even recognized me as an enemy.

But we needed to kill her. As long as she was alive, the West would never change. Really, I had no place swearing revenge after seeing how powerless I had been to hurt her, after running and saving myself. No matter what I tried, there would inevitably be more victims, and I would likely be among them.

Resolving myself to that fate, I began to spread the word that the Quoramite holy land had fallen into our hands, to build morale for the next battle. Though I knew it was a false victory, there was no way I could hope to match the human armies without everyone's help.

However, while we leaders of the Federation army wracked our brains for a solution to the problem that was the High Priestess, something came to us from the east. Following my footsteps, that gentle breeze of kindness from my distant past blew into the room, as if he had been called here to cast out the hatred welling up in my heart.

"I've heard all sorts of rumors about you on my way here. It sounds like you've been working quite hard."

His words, his smile, the hope he brought with his presence, was like a shining ray of light cutting through the deep darkness.

Chapter 4 — King of the Dwarves

The experience of flight, even if not under your own power, was really something else. I had used magic to float through the air before, but that couldn't compare to the altitude I had now, riding on Heero's back. I suppose the heights of the Fusou tree had been similar, but flying through the air instead of just falling slowly was an entirely different experience. Everything below us looked so tiny, yet the ground seemed to stretch on forever.

Of course, having come all the way to the West to find me, Heero was no longer a little chick. He was now about the size of a small house. I was quite impressed with his growth, but according to him, he would still get quite a bit bigger. Fully mature phoenixes were apparently much, much larger.

At any rate, flying on Heero's back was incredibly fast. The journey that had taken me months on foot had been reduced to less than half a day. It was a little similar to my memories of riding a plane in my previous life, though it was quite different in that this left me exposed to the open air. But whether because of Heero's warmth or some other power at work, I didn't feel the least bit cold as the wind howled by.

Before long, we were flying over a mountain range cloaked in a thick fog—the Mountains of Mist and the Valleys of Death that lay hidden underneath their misty canopy. Flying effortlessly above them after the struggle of passing through the valleys on foot left a somewhat hollow feeling in my chest.

"By the way, do you know anything about this place?" I patted Heero lightly on the back, to which he responded with an affirmative tweet. As expected of an immortal bird that had lived and died plenty of times in the past. I was impressed by the breadth of his knowledge.

Those mountains were a stronghold of demons who were the cause of the previous End, the burning of the world by the dragons. However, the giants proposed that the mechanisms built there would serve to delay the world's destruction, and so the dragons let them be. Thus, the demons residing there

were dealt with by the giants instead.

Heero's explanation left me entirely speechless. He so flippantly described the end of the world. I knew the dragons had destroyed the world at least once, judging by the fact Heero had returned to being an egg. But I had assumed that the details were some deep, arcane secret.

"Is it actually okay for you to tell me stuff like that?" I asked after taking a few minutes to let my heart calm down.

There were plenty of things in that short speech that had caught my attention. His use of the word "the End," and the cause of that End being the demons. I was also curious about how the giants dealt with them. Thinking of a connection between giants and demons, I couldn't help but remember the oni.

Of course. As the one who hatched me, I am happy to share any of my knowledge with you, Heero responded, almost confused by the simplicity of the question.

I stopped to think for a moment. Apparently he was willing to tell me anything he knew, but it still felt like I needed to be careful what I asked him. I didn't want to be faced with all the truths of the world at once. I doubt I could handle that, and it probably wasn't something I *should* handle. Being led blindly forward by my curiosity could take me to a very dark place.

Until now, my chances of touching upon the underlying secrets of this world had been very different. The knowledge passed down by the high elves was just that: stories being passed down. The information I gained from the mystics had been carefully curated and given out sparingly. I had come into contact with the golden dragon, but what he told me wasn't...okay, actually it had been pretty heavy stuff too. Either way, it wasn't like he was willing to tell me anything and everything like Heero was.

Of course I needed information. There were plenty of situations I couldn't handle without knowing these things. But even if I were to come across those problems in the future, I'd rather approach them at my own pace, digesting that information as it was needed, and making judgments from my perspective at the time. Getting such a high volume or high-density information at once could threaten to crush my own sense of judgment.

So what was I supposed to do? I could tell Heero was excitedly waiting for me to ask something. If at all possible, I wanted to ask something harmless. But I knew so little to start with that I couldn't tell where those boundaries were.

“What were the demons like?”

So to start, I asked directly about the demons. They weren't one of the ancient races, so likely wouldn't be much related to the deeper secrets of the world.

Or, so I thought.

Demons were an experiment by the giants to transform the people of the younger races. However, because those they transformed became exceedingly hostile and aggressive, the experiment was deemed a failure. Judged to be an existential threat, the dragons rose to burn the world, and thus the demons are no more.

But Heero's response once again left me speechless. I knew from what he said just before that they had been the cause of the previous End, but they were an experiment by the giants?

Didn't that mean the giants were responsible for the dragons destroying the previous world?

“Why did the giants do something like that?”

So without thinking, I ended up blurting out another question. My shock had squeezed those words out of me, but it ended up being far too reckless of a question.

To answer that, I will need to first explain about the End.

I had messed up big time with my questions, and so ended up here anyway.



In the beginning, the world was no more than a whirlpool of chaotic energy. This chaos was discovered by the Creator, who gave the swirling energies consciousness, thus giving birth to the spirits. This led to the creation of the earth, the sky, and the seas.

Next, the Creator fashioned people, those who in the world of today you call

high elves. The high elves gave direction to the spirits, giving the world and its environments a sense of stability. Together they fashioned the plants and beasts, the clouds and birds, the fish in the seas, and all life that filled the world. The plants, beasts, and birds still retain a fondness for the spirits and high elves from their memories of that time.

In order to keep a record of the ever-changing world below, the Creator then created the giants in the world above the clouds, to watch over and witness everything happening below. The giants gathered all sorts of knowledge, becoming wiser than any others.

But whenever the high elves or the giants were in need of help, they would need a way to reach each other. To bridge their two worlds, the Creator gave birth to us, the phoenixes. Thinking it would be quite a burden to carry someone on their back all the way to the world above the clouds, he gifted them with large wings and power over life. Ah, and so that the high elves and giants could call on them when needed, he also gave the phoenixes the ability to connect with their minds from a great distance.

Next, the Creator sought to fashion a powerful defense mechanism for the world, around which its residents could rally to defend themselves. These were the dragons. The Creator had come from an entirely different world, so there was no guarantee other, more malicious beings wouldn't someday appear as well.

With that, the Creator deemed that his role in this world was finished. He had created those to stabilize the world's power, those to guide it, those to store up knowledge and watch over it, a bridge to connect them, and finally guardians to protect it. The world would change and grow without any more input from him.

So the Creator turned to slumber, believing that when he awoke, he would witness a completely changed world. But just before his eyes closed, he grew uneasy. What if a problem arose that his creations could not handle on their own? If he were to awake to find an empty, lifeless world, his grief would be immeasurable.

So finally, he created one last group of beings, those whose role was to awaken the Creator should a great calamity fall on the world. They are now

known as the gods.

After the Creator fell into sleep, the world continued to develop without issue. Peaceful days continued for a long time, the world slowly growing and changing just as the Creator had expected.

But the gods eventually grew bored of those peaceful days, even though they had been born last. They wanted to see incredible changes, like the first creation of the world which they hadn't witnessed for themselves. So the gods attempted to imitate the Creator, making replicas of the spirits, high elves, giants, phoenixes, and dragons. However, they were not able to effectively use the powers that made up this world. The only one they could use well was what is now called mana, causing the natural order to fall into chaos once again.

They created a distorting power that imitated the spirits, elves that imitated the high elves, titans of death that imitated the giants, rocs that imitated the phoenixes, and wyverns that imitated the true dragons.

Among them, the rocs and the wyverns posed no problems. The power of the true phoenixes and dragons was far too much for the lesser gods to imitate, and so their creations were imitations in appearance only. But the titans were more dangerous, bringing death and rot wherever they tread. Thus, the giants transformed them into stone and sealed them deep beneath the earth.

But the true threat came from the distorting power, and the elves...or rather, all the races which had been fashioned in the likeness of the high elves. Imitating the high elves, who ascended to spirithood when the lives of their mortal bodies came to an end, the other races gave birth to this distorting power upon their death. Their souls would depart to be reincarnated anew, but their bodies would generate these warping energies.

As the name suggests, they warped and twisted the world around them. This power was close in nature to mana, and so could mix together with it. Mana was originally only a single element out of the many that formed the world, but the distorting power's influence caused it to grow immensely. In truth, the world should only have as much mana in its entirety as is produced when you rub your dragon scale. But the world of today is now suffused with it.

The problem was that this mana, mixed together with the distorting power, could corrupt and transform living things. While it would strengthen both their bodies and minds, it would also make them violent and aggressive. In short, the monsters you know are those born of this warped power.

Of course, not every creature was distorted in the same way, just as not all monsters are horrendously evil. But as the new races grew and died, the distorting power would continue to grow, creating more and more monsters that would wreak havoc on the world around them. On top of that, when monsters would come together to reproduce, their offspring would be monsters as well, even without the influence of the distorting power. These new creatures could then be warped again, creating even more terrifying beings. There were in fact examples of monsters many generations deep, preying on other monsters and growing extremely powerful.

All of us, including the high elves many generations before you, saw this as a threat to the world. The easiest method of dealing with them was to awaken the Creator. With more knowledge of this world than anyone else, he should have been able to annihilate the distorting power. But he had left the world in our care. We did not wish to awaken him unless it was absolutely necessary. As the easiest solution, we chose to leave it as a last resort.

The next solution proposed was to exterminate the new races. Luckily, the distorting power consumed itself and disappeared whenever it acted upon the world. If the source of it all was cut off, the rest would eventually disappear.

But to that, the gods pleaded with us. They would accept punishment themselves, but they begged us to spare their creations. This caused quite some conflict among us.

The dragons believed it was only natural that the gods should be punished and their creations be exterminated. Being tasked as the guardians of the world, they were furious with the gods for what they had done.

We phoenixes were a little less aggressive. We understood that punishing the gods would accomplish nothing, and so we would be satisfied with simply erasing their creations. Though the gods had been foolish, they were still our siblings.

But the giants thought very differently. They believed that the creations of the gods were themselves innocent, that even the birth of monsters was no different from the many other transformations the world had undergone. They believed it could even be considered a form of evolution. They argued that rather than punish the gods, we should accept the changes that had happened and find a way to preserve the world with their creations still intact. Of course, the giants were the observers of the world, and so these new creations had given them much more to see. It was no surprise that they developed this opinion.

After quietly listening to everyone's arguments, the high elves eventually said their piece. The gods were our siblings, born from the Creator's hand. If they desired punishment, let them have it. Until the Creator awakened once more, the gods would be forbidden from intervening with the world. In exchange, the high elves would accept the request of the gods. Above all, they didn't want to exterminate people who had been crafted in their own likeness.

That declaration settled the dispute. The spirits naturally were in full support of the high elves, but the dragons, phoenixes, and giants were also all fond of their tiny siblings. After rigorous appraisal, all came to accept the high elves' suggestion.

However, allowing the new races to grow and produce more of the distorting power would only lead to the world's destruction. As new people were born and died, the amount of the distorting power grew, but if the monsters were culled, the amount of it being exhausted could overtake the amount being produced. If that balance was overturned—if the number of monsters grew too great, or if the number of people grew so large that the distorting power became too plentiful, or should some other unexpected event come to pass—the dragons would destroy the distorting power along with the rest of the world, eliminating all monsters. This system of destruction meant to preserve the world came to be called the End.

The dragons would burn the world, the giants would protect a small group of each people until their work was done, the phoenixes would bring life back to the scorched earth, and the high elves would spread it across the world. And of

course, the spirits would maintain the newly born world. And one day, when the Creator awoke naturally from his slumber, the cycle of destruction would end. Alternatively, as the cycle repeated, the people might eventually find a balance between the creation and exhaustion of the distorting power.

The giants, not content to sit back and wait for the world to be destroyed each time, did what they could to help those people advance further with each cycle. One such attempt at this was allowing the people to take in the distorting power for themselves, undergoing the same transformation as monsters. Strengthened by this transformation, they would be able to fight the monsters and thus create a sense of balance. If at all possible, they hoped it would also prevent the distorting power from being created by the deaths of those people.

Of course, it did not go as they hoped. The experiment failed, the newly created demons wielding their power violently and aggressively, making war against the high elves. In order to prevent the high elves from suffering too many losses, the dragons burned the world.

That is the truth behind the creation of the demons, and the previous End.



So the story went. As expected, it was far more information than I could digest all at once.

There were some things I had already known, some I had predicted, and others I had never even considered. I didn't want to come to a conclusion on the process of the End quite yet, so I decided to set that aside for the time being. Regardless of what I thought or felt about it, there was no changing it.

One thing I learned was that the Mountains of Mist collected and consumed mana and the attendant distorting power to create its fog, so it was convenient to have around. This process also gave birth to a tremendous number of monsters, but apparently the ancient races didn't find monsters of that level to be much of a threat.

Also, it seemed the situation in Fusou might have been another experiment of the giants. That was really...okay, I had decided not to think about it, so I wouldn't. The giants probably thought of things very similarly to how I did, and that was exactly why I had so many complaints about their actions.

Even after hearing this story, I still considered monsters to be living things like all others. For example, there were the horned monsters living among the horses of the Great Grasslands, almost as if protecting the herds around them. And there were the enormous turtle monsters of the Man-Eating Swamp that went out of their way to avoid harming others. Of course, many monsters were dangerous to those around them and so their numbers had to be kept in check, but there were always exceptions.

That said, the transformation of people into demons seemed very, very different. And it was all part of an experiment? I needed to avoid thinking too much about it. Doing so would run the risk of developing all sorts of prejudices against the giants before even meeting them.

As I processed the long story Heero had given me, we made it past the Mountains of Mist and into the west-central region. I didn't know the geography of this area all that well, but I could at least clearly recognize the river I had created and the nation of Shiyon that it encircled. Seeing something I knew well—something I had created myself—from a brand-new angle like this was a little encouraging.

And so, though I very much didn't want to know the answer, I asked the question I needed to.

“Hey, Heero. How long do we have until the next End?”

The answer to that question could greatly influence my actions going forward. If it was soon, I would have to spend the rest of my life doing what I could to delay it as much as possible.

There is no need to worry. As long as there are no irregularities, the End will not come for much, much longer. In truth, I should have remained as an egg for just as long. I am here today because you helped hatch me.

Heero's answer gave me a bit of relief. Even if the world was going to be destroyed eventually, I wanted it to stay the way it was at least while Win, Oswald, and Airen were alive. At least while Kaeha's descendants were still around. Though that was all selfishness on my part.

His mention of “irregularities” caught my attention though. I figured the presence of demons counted as one of those irregularities, leading to the

dragons destroying the previous world. In other words, the existence of the giants meant there was always a threat of another one of those irregularities coming to pass.

Either way, I was already planning on going to visit them with Airena. When I did, I'd have to take the time to learn about the giants myself. Once I met them in person, I'd easily be able to decide whether I liked them or not. If I decided I didn't like them, I could start quite the fight with them. Yeah, that was the easiest, surest way. And the way that best suited me. I could always send Airena back to the surface if I didn't want to get her involved.

I thanked Heero for everything he told me, which earned me a happy chirp as he accelerated further.

Considering how long it had taken me to travel to the Far West, the time it took to get back to the east-central region was unbelievably short. Even so, I couldn't just land in Ludoria or start looking for Airena's caravan. Even if he wasn't fully grown yet, Heero was still pretty large and would stand out immensely. His aura was also quite close to that of a monster, and sharp people would pick up on that very quickly, so he couldn't show himself so easily.

After giving it some thought, I directed Heero north as we passed over the Great Pulha Woodlands. Before going to the world above the clouds where who-knows-what would happen, there was someone I absolutely had to see first. Even if Heero was spotted there, word wouldn't spread through the human kingdoms—because I was heading to a kingdom of dwarves.

The dwarves might have been sticklers when it came to drinking and blacksmithing, but they'd easily brush off any other small things. Yes, I was heading to meet my master in blacksmithing and my friend: the current king of the dwarves, Oswald.

By the time we reached the mountains over the dwarven kingdom, the moon was more than halfway through its arc. Looking north, I could faintly see the volcanic region in the distance.

"I'll be getting off here this time. Thanks for everything, Heero."

We had landed a few times to eat and sleep, but for the most part, we had

spent two days straight in flight. Spending so much time on Heero's back left my body feeling a little sluggish, so as I thanked Heero for carrying me here, I gave a big stretch. Really, it wasn't just that he had carried me here. He had also given me a lot of important information. Whether I had wanted to hear that information or not was another issue—I would most definitely say I did not—but it was still information I needed to know. I hadn't sorted out everything he'd told me quite yet, but once I had, I'd then make for the world above the clouds.

“Next time, I want to go above the clouds, and I want to bring another elf with me. Is that okay?”

I once again asked Heero if he could take Airena and me there.

Heero responded with an energetic tweet. *Of course. I can guarantee I will bring you and your friend safely to the world in the sky,* he answered affirmatively. I knew he wouldn't refuse me if I asked for myself, but I had no idea how he would feel about bringing Airena, so his cheerful reply was quite a relief.

So while I was staying in the kingdom of the dwarves, I'd send the elven caravan a letter and get Airena to come meet me there. That would be far easier than us trying to chase each other all over the continent.

“Okay, I'll call for you when we're ready. See you later, Heero.”

With that, I jumped off Heero's back. Now that I was no longer sitting on him, the night wind became startlingly cold. It seemed Heero was the one protecting me from the weather after all.

Enjoying the sensation of the wind, I let myself free fall for a while. I doubted I ever had an experience like this in my previous life, but it was probably what skydiving would have been like. That said, I didn't have a parachute, so I'd need to find my own way to land safely.

I had the spirits around to help me, and I also had magic I could use to slow my descent.

Little by little, the tiny world below me started to expand and grow. Watching it change was surprisingly fun.



For the first time in about sixty years, I found myself in the dwarven kingdom. And despite me arriving in the dead of night, they were happy to receive me. The guards at the gate were young dwarves who had never met me before, but they had apparently heard more than a few stories about me.

After introducing myself and showing them my mithril armband, one guard ran off to confirm my identity, while the others immediately invited me into the guardhouse. I suppose I couldn't really knock on Oswald's door this late at night and ask for a place to stay. For that matter, I didn't even know if he was still in his old house or if he had moved to the castle.

After confirming my identity, the guards led me to one of the few inns in the dwarven kingdom. Since there were virtually no visitors to the kingdom besides its own citizens, there wasn't much need for them.

In exchange—though maybe that's not the best way to phrase it—there was always a bar open and waiting for you, whether it was morning, noon, evening, or night. Many of them had rooms prepared on the second floor for those who got sleepy after drinking, or those who got knocked out in fights and needed a place to recover. If you didn't mind the rowdy voices of dwarves getting drunk downstairs, it was more than enough to get some rest. I would have been fine spending the night at a place like that, whether that was a night of sleeping or of drinking. But knowing that the castle would be sending someone to find me, the guards wanted to put me somewhere a bit easier to find.

Remembering how different my experience was here than my last visit, I couldn't help but laugh. It had been fun in its own way back then, and it had been necessary enough for what came after, but I didn't mind the polite treatment I was getting now either.

Despite having flown here by Heero's efforts, it seemed working through the stories he had told me had left me rather exhausted, as I was already asleep the moment I lay down and closed my eyes. The castle would probably send someone in the afternoon to take me to see Oswald. I was worried seeing that damned dwarf sitting on a throne and wearing a crown might make me burst out laughing.

And with that thought, it was morning. Maybe not exactly first thing, but considerably early in the morning, I heard a knock on my door before it swung open and let someone in. I had been woken up by the knock and so, not expecting the visitor to come in on their own, I was caught quite cleanly by surprise.

And that intruder was...

“Oh, did I wake you up? Sorry. But the time is just right. Let’s go grab something to eat. I skipped breakfast myself, since I figured we’d eat together.”

Of all the people I might have expected, I did not expect this familiar face. His hair and beard had turned snow white, giving him quite the elder look, but...

“Wow, you’ve gotten old, Master Damned Dwarf.”

The smile that lit his face was exactly the same one I remembered. It was Oswald, my master in blacksmithing.

My teasing, retribution for waking me up like this earned a snort from him. “Shut it. It’s you damn elves that don’t change enough when you get older. But really...you look exactly the same. It’s almost funny,” he said. And then laughed.

I couldn’t say he was much different than I was, staying so much the same as he used to be despite growing and looking older. Of course, he now had a new standing in society and had many more experiences under his belt, so he wasn’t exactly the same as the Oswald I knew before. But despite the passage of time and his ascension to the throne, seeing Master Damned Dwarf acting just like he used to was a wave of relief.

“Is it all right for His Majesty to just walk around town like this?” I asked with a stretch. I was half joking, but it *was* something I was wondering about.

“What’s wrong with me coming to meet you? As your master, I’ve got the right to wake you up, and as your friend, I’ve got the right to invite you to go out and eat.”

But Oswald just waved off my concerns, saying he’d wait for me downstairs before stepping out of the room. Ah. Sounds like it would be enough of a problem that he’d get some complaints later.

Even so, he had come to meet me himself. Instead of meeting me in all his royal splendor, he decided to show up exactly as the dwarf I had remembered.

Getting out of bed and washing my face at the basin on my side table, I quickly put myself together. My master and friend had come all the way here to see me. I couldn't make him wait.

The late breakfast served at the inn consisted of steamed potatoes, moss salad, sausage, bacon, and milk, and all in huge amounts. All of it was stuff native here to the dwarven kingdom. The potatoes and mosses were grown underground in the kingdom itself, while the meat and milk came from goats kept up in the mountains.

Imported food was treated as fairly high-class here, but I was quite fond of these native options as well. It really made me feel like I was back in dwarven lands again. Though I would have preferred something a bit stronger than milk.

"So, the boy found our comrades to the west?"

As we ate, we talked about what I had been doing in the West. After being apart for sixty years, we had no shortage of things to talk about, but the best place to start was to talk about someone we were both connected to: my adopted son and Oswald's apprentice in blacksmithing, Win.

"It seems the mithril armband helped quite a bit. That was enough to get them to listen, and when they saw his blacksmithing, they were willing to trust him."

As he smiled in reminiscence, I explained how Win got the help of the Western dwarves.

I didn't realize it until I was telling the story, but it occurred to me that Oswald had likely given the mithril armbands to us specifically for that purpose. Considering I had only really used the thing to scrape dragon scales, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Well, Win was always a serious and talented student. Anyone with eyes could see that in him. If it brought some wealth to our comrades in the West, I'm glad I went through the trouble of making it," Oswald said, taking a bite of

sausage.

From another perspective, you could say that armband was also responsible for dragging the dwarves in the West into Win's war. But neither Oswald nor any of the dwarves I had met in the West thought of things that way. No matter the circumstances leading up to it, the dwarves had made that decision themselves, laughing all the while they made weapons and armor. They probably felt Win had saved them too.

As we talked, our plates eventually grew empty, so after thanking the owner of the inn, the two of us stepped outside. As we walked toward the palace, we experienced an endless stream of calls from the crowds around us. I guess it wasn't that surprising that the king of the dwarves walking together with an elf would stand out a bit.

But the fact the king could walk around the streets without a bodyguard, and the fact the people felt comfortable calling out to him as he walked by, was a really unique part of dwarven culture. It made me really happy that I had been accepted as one of them.



It had now been three months since Oswald invited me to the castle where he now lived. If you asked what I had been doing all that time, I would have to say...blacksmithing, blacksmithing, and more blacksmithing.

So all I did was blacksmithing? Actually, yes. That was basically all I did. The dwarven castle was equipped with the best forges in the world, so I couldn't help myself. Naturally, I wasn't allowed to use the secret treasure of the dwarves—the furnace of the king that drew heat from the true flame deep in the earth—but there were still all kinds of facilities I had never seen before.

On top of that, the dwarves used all kinds of metals that were kept secret from the world outside their borders. It was basically impossible for me to *not* have fun. There was no helping the fact I got completely lost in it. I had already sent my letter to Airenna, so I had all the time in the world to get lost in blacksmithing.

“For someone who spends their whole life traveling, you’ve really managed to up your game...”



Hearing my master praise my work like that just after I had finished was a rather pleasant experience. He was right that I was often traveling, but whenever I stopped somewhere for any length of time, there was a good chance I'd pick up blacksmithing there. Above all, after experiencing so many things that *weren't* blacksmithing, it felt like those experiences drew out great results when I had a chance to spend time in the forge.

"I just learned to face the steel properly." That might not have been good enough of an explanation, but it was the kind of sincerity in blacksmithing I liked to brag about. My skills were built from the many experiences and many people I had met, on top of the foundation laid by my master here, to form the shape they took today.

The next thing likely to take hold of my time was Oswald's request that I make a katana. In the center of the continent, the special steel that was needed to make them was produced right here in the dwarven kingdom. That said, it wasn't like it was being produced literally here in the underground dwarven city. Apparently they had developed a new settlement along a river to the north specifically for the production of iron sand.

In the long history of the dwarves, I was the only one who had convinced them to make two permanent settlements outside their own city, Oswald had said with a laugh. It took me a moment to realize what he meant. I guess I had convinced them to set up a hot spring near the volcanic area, which was now being used as lodging. Now that I was back here, I thought I should probably take the chance to go visit it again. From hot springs to iron sand and katana, it seemed my influence here in the dwarven kingdom was all related to Fusou in some way.

Though not as stubborn as the elves, dwarves were a people who didn't like change. Though they holed up in their city in an attempt to refine and polish their skills, their way of life never changed much. Oswald's comment was proof of that. Even so, they recognized that the changes I brought were good things, and so accepted them wholeheartedly. That open-heartedness was another thing I loved about the dwarves.

"This is some good steel," I murmured, dividing the material up. I had used

some dwarven steel to make katana back when I was still at the Yosogi dojo, but the quality had definitely improved since then. It seemed they had spent the last twenty years not just copying the instructions I gave them, but experimenting on their own to find ways to improve it.

This katana would be made from the steel taken from iron sand, but it might be interesting to try making one out of more unique dwarven steels next. For example, there was assteel, a secret metal of the dwarves made by mixing the powdered bones of monsters into the steel and letting it settle in barrels of mud. It grew more and more resilient as it aged, so it should make for some interesting results if used to form the core of the blade.

But in that case, what would I use to make the shell? The harder the metal the better...but I doubted they'd let me use mithril, so I'd need to look for something else. The kingdom of the dwarves was the only place I could carry out experiments like this on a whim. I wanted to test as many of my ideas as I could, feeding my future development.

"You really love blacksmithing, huh?" Oswald mentioned as he watched me happily dividing the steel up between core and shell steels.

I could agree to that with confidence. Blacksmithing had been my constant companion in the hundred years since I left the Forest Depths. It sounded like a bit of an exaggeration, but I couldn't even imagine how I'd have spent all that time without it. It was undeniably a part of me. Blacksmithing had helped me grow, had connected me to so many people, and had led me to so many discoveries.

Kaeha had positively danced with joy when I'd given her a new sword, Kawshman taught me magic in exchange for my skills as a blacksmith, and it had been my blacksmithing skills that let Win and I make that pendant as a gift for Nonna. No doubt my closeness with the dwarves was born from my abilities as a blacksmith, and I had only considered the idea of bringing the techniques to forge katana back from Fusou because I was a blacksmith myself.

My opportunity to learn sculpting in Marmaros had been created by my blacksmithing skills catching Professor Myos's attention, and quite recently, defeating the High Priestess of the Quoramites had only been possible because

I had the skills and the knowledge to forge a magic sword for Win to cut her down with.

“I do. I feel like if I hadn’t been born as a high elf, I would have been born as a dwarf.” That was how much blacksmithing meant to me.

Of course, it wasn’t the only thing that had brought me to where I was today. If blacksmithing was my right leg, then swordsmanship was my left, magic was my walking stick, and the spirits were friends walking alongside me and pushing me onward. Recently I had taken on the skill of sculpting, making myself a dual wielder of walking sticks...or would you just call that pole walking?

I was sure that as I continued to live, I’d keep picking up even more skills, but as the first of all of them, blacksmithing would always have a special place in my heart.

“Yeah, if you had been a dwarf...ha, you likely would have been one of the heaviest drinkers in history. Probably one of the best smiths too,” Oswald laughed after thinking over my answer for a bit.

That kind of exaggeration was something that seemed somehow both in and out of character for him. But I didn’t press the issue with unnecessary questions; I just continued my work.



Eight months after I began staying in the kingdom of the dwarves, I received a reply from Airenna. It was delivered by a group of dwarven traders, now composed mostly of dwarves I was unfamiliar with. She had sent a letter rather than coming in person due to how extremely busy she was at the moment...for which most of the blame could be put at my feet.

Thanks to the war in the east-central region settling down, the elven caravan had begun expanding its activities further afield. Of course, the main reason was so they could provide support to Shiyon in the west-central region, a place normally unreachable except by ship due to the Great Pulha Woodlands dividing the continent. Purchasing a state-of-the-art merchant ship from Vilestoria, the elven caravan had hired a crew of sailors to run it, thus opening a new path to the west.

They had started to resemble a large trade corporation more than a caravan, but they nevertheless continued to refer to themselves as one. They had gone through so much trouble to connect with their people in the West because of their shared heritage as elves, but probably more because I had asked them to.

I wanted them to help establish Shiyou as a true nation in the west-central region, not an isolated island with no contact with the outside world. That's what I had said to Airena in my letter before I left Shiyou for the Far West. And so, she made the journey from east to west and back multiple times, secured sea and trade routes, and curated an inventory for select members of the caravan to sell in the West all to make that wish come true.

She must have been pretty shocked to hear I had skipped over the West and appeared in the kingdom of the dwarves. Honestly, I hadn't predicted Heero would come to pick me up in the Far West either. It was beyond my expectations too. If I had walked back, I likely would have passed through Shiyou and met up with the elven caravan. Of course if that had been the case, there would be no telling how far along Heero was in his growth, so we wouldn't exactly have been able to make plans to visit the world above the clouds from there.

According to her letter, Airena wanted me to wait for the trade situation with Shiyou to stabilize, something she anticipated would take two or three years. As excited as she was to find the White Lake for herself, she couldn't step away while their relationship with Shiyou was still so much in flux.

I planned on waiting for her, of course. I was the one who asked her to do it in the first place, so I was nothing if not thankful that she was willing to put her own wishes aside to make mine come true. I couldn't really say we could go to the world above the clouds *whenever*, but Heero would live a lot longer than I would, so a wait of two or three years was virtually nothing.

However, once the situation in the Far West had settled down, I wanted the caravan and Shiyou to help the elves living there as well. That didn't need to be dealt with for some time, but with how busy Airena already was, it was a difficult request to make of her, even though I was sure she'd gladly accept if I asked.

Win was now a leader representing many of the races in the Far West, so it would be difficult for him to focus his attention on the elves alone. That's why the elves of the Far West needed the help of elves from elsewhere. It would take a tremendous amount of time and support to get the elves of the near and Far West back to living their old lives in their forests. Having long-lived elves take up residence in the forests to stabilize the environment and prevent monster populations from getting out of control would go a long way toward staving off the next End.

I planned to focus my efforts on resettling those elves back into their forests once I returned from my visit to the world of the giants. At any rate, I had a bit of time before I made that journey. I'd spend it relaxing here, in the land of the dwarves.

I had recently managed to carve out a bit of time between my trips to the forge to work on my sculpting. My model was, of course, none other than Oswald, thanks to having him in the flesh on hand.

Dwarves didn't show their age quite as clearly as humans did, but with his white hair, he now looked much older than when we'd first met. Even so, no matter how old or young he was, he had a uniqueness to him that never changed. I wanted to find a way to express that in stone.

As a race that lived underground, there were naturally extremely skilled stone carvers among the dwarves. However, they didn't often carve likenesses of people. Sculptures of people were typically made for those with outstanding achievements or high status, but for the dwarves, those people would mostly be famed smiths and warriors. Blacksmiths preferred to leave behind their works rather than any images of themselves, while warriors left behind legendary weapons, armor, and tales of their feats. In other words, dwarves of high status didn't much care to leave behind imagery of themselves. That was one of the reasons why Rebees's portraits of the children here had gone over so well when the elven caravan first visited; it had been something new and special.

So when I asked Oswald, a dwarf who would doubtless go down in the history books, if he minded me making a sculpture of him, he responded with a rather

conflicted expression of equal parts exasperation and embarrassment. But Oswald had known me for a long time, so he knew that when I set my heart on doing something, there was nothing he could do to stop me.

“Do as you like.”

With that, I had secured his permission.

I had encountered this issue before, but dwarven beards were actually quite complex, requiring a great amount of precision to recreate. But that was only a superficial challenge. The greater difficulty lay in capturing the uniqueness I saw in him, translating that into an image, and expressing that image accurately in stone. How would I express the *idea* of the dwarf named Oswald?

I knew everything that made him fantastic. He was a true dwarf among dwarves, but also cared deeply for others. He was exceptionally broad-minded and was always ready to take care of those around him. And so on. If I started listing out all his good traits now, I’d never finish. It would be impossible to express all of what made him fantastic in a single sculpture, but I wanted to get at least half...or honestly, even one-tenth or one-hundredth of that in the stone.

With those feelings in mind, I slowly chipped away at the block of stone before me. It would take a great deal of time before I was finished, and dwarves might not appreciate it for what it was, but I didn’t really mind. I had plenty of spare time, and no matter how Oswald thought about the finished piece, I knew he wouldn’t take the work I had put into it lightly.

That was enough.



The dwarven kingdom had plenty of bars and few inns.

It had many bars because the dwarves loved their alcohol so much, and few inns because they rarely had any visitors. So, as I mentioned a bit earlier, many bars had rooms open for guests to take a quick nap. Besides these watering holes, there were also a similar number of forges in the kingdom, again because of the love they had for blacksmithing.

But there was one more type of facility that was just as common here.

“Thank you for coming today, Mr. Acer,” a dwarven woman bowed politely, one of the teachers of this school.

Yes, in addition to bars and forges, one of the most common facilities here in the dwarven kingdom were schools for children. That’s not to say that the dwarves put more emphasis on educating their children than the other races. Each race and culture had their own way of educating their young; among dwarves, it was done through these schools.

For humans, such education was typically handled by the church. The harvest god religion commanded quite a bit of authority in the east-central region, so most cities had multiple churches where children would go to learn reading, writing, math, and about how their society was structured. Smaller villages would still often have a church to fulfill the same function, and those that didn’t would have older members of the village specialize in teaching, or the village chief themselves teach the children these basic skills. There were more than a few villages so poor they couldn’t afford to go to such lengths, but even a child who grew up entirely without an education could find a church in a city willing to teach them basic literacy. The practical value the churches offered to society ingratiated them to the people around them, making them and the faith they espoused a critical piece of infrastructure in human society.

In the case of elves, children were raised by the entire settlement, so it fell to the elders and other older elves to gather the children together and educate them. Elves spent a great deal of time as children, so they inevitably came to learn a lot more. Skills like reading and writing weren’t actually all that useful for them compared to humans, but considering the amount of time they had, they ended up learning them anyway. However, it was also partly out of respect for the Creator and the language he had created for the people of this world.

Though...now that I thought about it, the Creator had given the people *language*, not reading and writing. But just as all people spoke the same language—aside from some small regional variation—everywhere I had been on the continent used more or less the same writing system.

So who had spread literacy among the people here? I guess the most natural explanation would be that the Creator also shared a writing system with the people when he made the language. Language shifted and changed over time,

so one reason this one had remained stable for so long could have been attributed to the fact that a concrete written form for it had been established since the beginning.

Another possibility was that the giants, in their role as record keepers for the world, had created the writing system out of a personal need. It seemed the giants had intervened in this world a number of times in the past, so if the writing system had been designed by them, it would be no surprise that it persisted even through the End brought about by the dragons.

All of that was pure conjecture, though.

All people, be they elves, humans, or dwarves, educated their young in some way. But the fact that the dwarves set up schools for this purpose was some indication that they were rather passionate about the enterprise. After all, dwarven schools taught not only reading, writing, math, social studies, and history but also the basics of blacksmithing and metallurgy.

I had been invited to the school that day to teach one of their classes. Many of the students here were going to become blacksmiths, but it was custom for young blacksmiths to head out into the human world to make a name for themselves, both to make money and as part of their training. Dwarven women usually didn't leave the kingdom and so were exempt from the ritual, but they could make a request to do the same.

But as obvious as it was, human common sense and dwarven common sense were quite different. There were plenty of cases where these cultural differences caused friction when the dwarves ventured out into the human world. So, dwarven schools taught their children the basics of living in human society as part of their curriculum.

Of course, since the dwarven teachers themselves had never left the kingdom, they instead invited dwarves who had finished their training abroad to come and teach those classes. Compared to the dwarven blacksmiths, I had much more experience living in human society. With the amount of time I had spent there, the breadth of my travels, and the number of people I had interacted with, that was inevitable.

So the other day, Oswald had come to me with a request.

“Could you go around to the schools and talk to the kids about human culture? They’d probably love to hear your stories.”

And now here I was.



To be quite honest, I didn’t know why Oswald had suddenly asked this of me. Sure, I was quite familiar with human customs and had plenty of interesting stories to tell, but I imagined the children would have an easier time relating to stories coming from a dwarf. The most popular aspiration among dwarven children was to become a blacksmith, so many of them wanted to learn about the training in human lands that blacksmiths underwent. Was there much need for my brand of “interesting stories”?

The request left me perplexed, but nevertheless I did as I was asked, and so now was standing in front of a group of dwarven children. There was no way Oswald would ask me to do something pointless. Even if I couldn’t tell what his true goal was, I knew he had a plan.

That said, even just talking to the children at the schools about human society was quite a big deal. It wasn’t just one or two schools; with a population of forty to fifty thousand across the dwarven kingdom, there were quite literally thousands of children attending school at any given time. Even if a single school could handle one or two hundred students at once, that would still leave dozens more I would need to visit.

Maybe this was going back on what I’d said earlier, but dwarves actually did seem to be more passionate about education than most other races. After thinking through their whole system, I could really feel the intensity of their drive. I would need to visit each and every one of these schools to tell my stories.

I was a student of the current dwarven king. For someone of that status to visit only one or two schools—on orders from the king himself no less—would be taken as showing an untoward amount of favoritism. It wouldn’t look like I was favoring those schools either. The blame would fall on Oswald.

It went without saying that the children of the dwarves were a precious treasure to them. Even if Oswald had fond memories of his own school or the one his children had attended, he needed to appear fair and unbiased in his treatment of them. That would ordinarily be a monumental task in its own right, but he was already renowned as a wise king, so the people had high expectations of him. In the face of those expectations, I couldn't let them down just because answering them would be a lot of work.

On this day, I was meeting with about fifty children. It was only half the population of this school, but the other half were still too young to understand the things we'd be talking about. With the help of their teachers, I laid out four sheets of paper on a board placed in front of the students. If I was going to be doing this multiple times, it would help to have some tools to smooth things out.

The papers had hand-drawn maps of the Far West, west-central, east-central, and Far East regions of the continent. Putting them all together, we had a map of the entire continent.

"Hello, everyone. My name is Acer. I'm a blacksmith and a traveler. My teacher in blacksmithing was Oswald, your king. Today, at his request, I'm here to tell you about the outside world."

I doubted any of the children had ever seen a map before. I could tell a lot of them were getting confused about what we were going to do. Ah, not just the students either. The teachers looked just as lost.

I guess that was to be expected. The adults might have seen maps of Ludoria or the Empire of Fodor, as they were relatively close to the dwarven kingdom. But even they had probably never seen a map of the whole east-central region, let alone the whole continent.

I was able to draw a map like this because I had visited all of these places myself and interacted with people who would have access to maps of all these regions. I had traveled personally to most of the nations in the east-central region, and had been shown maps by the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire of the Far East while I stayed there. As a member of Shiyon in the west-central region, I negotiated with people from Koffel, Wyforen, and Jilchias, allowing me

to gather a lot of information about that area. Finally, Win's Federation had spent a great deal of time studying the layout of the opposing human kingdoms, and so had maps that I could access.

This was one of the obvious rewards from all my travels. I imagined there were few people in the world who could draw such a wide-ranging map as this. Of course, I had no intention of bragging about something like that to a bunch of children. All I wanted was for them to understand how big the outside world was.

"As far as I know, there are three kingdoms of dwarves on the continent. There's this one in the mountains separating the northern and southern parts of the east-central region. Another is over here, south of the largest nation in the Far East, near a place called Red Mountain Province. The last one is in the Far West, hidden in mountains in the northwest."

As I pointed out each of the three kingdoms, the children let out voices of awe and surprise. Apparently they could feel just how startlingly distant they were just from looking at this map.

I could understand how they felt quite well. The dwarven kingdoms were extremely far apart. You would expect them to pick places that were a little easier to travel between, but with how they were laid out, it felt like someone was trying to spread them evenly across the continent. Of course, it could have all been because these remote locations were the only places with enough of the ores needed for dwarves to found a kingdom.

"If you wanted to visit one of the other kingdoms, it would take months by ship, not to mention a tremendous amount of money. If you tried to walk, it would probably take you years. On top of that, the different regions of the continent are divided by these dangerous zones, making it extremely difficult to travel between them."

As I continued talking, I could acutely feel the students' interest starting to grow. It seemed my hook had worked. As I mentioned, before I got into any of the nitty-gritty details, I wanted them to get a feeling for just how massive the world was. Maybe there was no point in capturing their interest like this, but maybe some among them would get something from all this.

“Whether you’re traveling or staying in a human nation, the one thing you need above all else is money. It’s a lot more powerful out there than it is here.”

I then shifted to talking about the concrete details of life in the human world. I began by talking about differences in the ways humans and dwarves saw the world, using currency as a jumping-off point. Among dwarves, blacksmiths were highly valued because they could produce incredible works. Among humans, blacksmiths were prized because those incredible works could earn them large amounts of money.

There was a huge difference there. One’s worldview often blinded them to that of others, so it could be difficult to pick up on differences like that on your own. But if these students could come to understand those differences, then my visit today would have paid for itself.

And this was just the beginning. I had plenty of time, and plenty to talk about. If my stories could bring about an even slightly better future for these children, nothing could make me happier.



In the dwarven kingdom, one of the duties of a good king was blacksmithing. At regular intervals, the king needed to show the people the results of his work. This will start getting into the political structure of the dwarven kingdom, but the king here didn’t actually have much influence on how the kingdom was run.

From the start, kingship was earned by being the most talented blacksmith in the kingdom, so naturally the only candidates would be those who had dedicated their entire lives to blacksmithing. Most dwarven kings had no political talent at all. I imagined Oswald was one of the more knowledgeable kings in dwarven history, though I didn’t know any of the others except for the one who had immediately preceded him.

The kingdom itself was run by a group of ministers. The king’s role was to earn the trust of the people so that the ministers could go about their work smoothly, and to watch over the ministers to ensure none of them overstepped their bounds. That was why the king was chosen by selecting the most skilled, most renowned blacksmith. There might be some smiths who would grow drunk on power after taking the throne, but that would easily show in the work

they put on display.

In other words, to maintain one's position as king, one had to continue to earnestly pursue the craft of blacksmithing, to gather and keep the respect of the common people. Though the idea of blacksmithing would have no connection to royalty in any other culture, it felt appropriate here for the dwarves. After all, if each individual citizen didn't have an eye for what made a piece of work high or low quality, the whole system would fall apart.

So, one day, three years after my return to the dwarven kingdom, I was helping Oswald working in the forge.

"Hmm. I think I'm losing my edge," he muttered, much to my surprise. I knew that the day would come eventually, but hearing him say it out loud was like being struck by a bolt of lightning. It was way too sudden.

"You think so? Your work looks as good as ever to me," I replied, almost as if to argue.

He knew himself better than anyone. Even so, I didn't want to admit that he could be right.

"Maybe. But being 'as good as ever' isn't enough. My growth has been slowing down for quite some time, and will eventually come to a stop. I can keep trying, but if today's work is no better than yesterday's, if tomorrow's work is no better than today's, that means I've hit my peak. And the only direction to go from the top is down," he said, only the faintest tinge of frustration in his laugh.

Just like with Kaeha, as people grew old, they grew weaker. Near the end, she couldn't even stand anymore. Looking back on it now, her last performance had been no less than a miracle.

"Either way, I plan on hitting the metal till the day I die. But if I'm starting to go downhill, I need to think about selecting a new king. I'll need to call back the smiths training out in human lands... Yeah, about ten years should be enough for the contest."

Though they lived for much longer than humans, dwarves still aged and

eventually passed away. It was the way of the world. There was nothing you could do to stop it, nor would it be right to try.

But, I see. The discussion brought back fond memories of us working together to win the throne for Oswald back then. The contest over the dwarven throne, the selection of one recognized by all dwarves to be the best smith among them, could take ten to twenty years. What kind of person would succeed Oswald?

“Your son is training in Ludoria, right?” I asked, my thoughts turning to exciting possibilities. “It would be great to see him again.”

Oswald’s eldest son, one of Win’s close friends growing up, was no doubt now a fully-fledged blacksmith. Putting aside whether he’d be fit to inherit the throne from his father, I was sure Oswald was looking forward to seeing how his son had improved over the years.

“I haven’t seen him since he left for his training, but I hear he’s made quite a name for himself. There just might be a chance,” Oswald responded with a big smile.

Back when they were kids, Win and Oswald’s son had proudly declared that they would someday work mithril together. With Win now living in the Far West, it seemed unlikely that dream would ever come true, but nevertheless, it seemed they had both grown into splendid men.

Oswald grew old, the children grew up, but I didn’t change at all. In a way, it felt like I was being left behind. I wanted to think about all the exciting things the future held, but it was getting more and more difficult to do so.

“Of course, that’s assuming you don’t join in on the contest yourself. If you tried, I’d put money on you being the next king of the dwarves,” he said, turning to me with a suddenly serious expression.

It was almost like a command to enter the running. The unexpectedness of it had me at a loss for words.



Sure enough, it wasn’t long before Oswald made that command explicit. Thinking back on it, my circuit visiting each of the schools had probably been a

ploy to get my face out there, to make me better known among the dwarves. Oswald must have been thinking about stepping down even back then. But why on earth did he want *me* to be the next king?

In the face of my silence, Oswald snorted. “I know the title of king sounds like nothing but a pain in the ass. But Acer, once I die, you’ll have no reason to come back here, will you?” He minced no words.

And he was right. As much as I loved the dwarves as a people, it was most of all because Oswald was a dwarf. The sensibilities and values of the dwarves meshed well with mine, and I loved drinking together with them. As true as all that was, Oswald was the one who had taught me that.

“That’s why I want you to become king. You’ve got the skills, and you’ve got the right.”

I knew he was speaking from the bottom of his heart. I could feel that quite clearly from his words. I really understood how lucky I was to have him as a friend.

So I closed my eyes and sank into thought. I considered what kind of life would await me if I became the king of the dwarves.

First, I would have to win the contest for the throne. I hadn’t compared myself to the other dwarven smiths much recently, but according to Oswald at least, I was a cut above. Even if I didn’t win, competing with the other skilled blacksmiths would certainly be a lot of fun.

And if I *did* become king, what would I do with this kingdom? While I could throw myself wholeheartedly into blacksmithing, I knew I would bring about a number of changes just by being here. Dwarves weren’t a people who liked change. They would resist any change I might bring at first, though if it was really for the better, I knew they would accept it in the end.

Being king would no doubt have its share of frustrations, but it would be just as rewarding, and just as fun. So I could answer with confidence.

“I can’t become the king of the dwarves, Oswald.”

I shook my head in flat refusal. Becoming king here would be endlessly rewarding, and so I would inevitably devote myself wholeheartedly to it. As a

result, I would end up ruling over this kingdom for a long, long time.

Oswald's reign—if one included the extended period of time covering the selection of the next king—would have lasted for about a hundred years. But if I were to become king, I would hold the position for centuries. Of course, I could abdicate the throne at will, but I wasn't confident that I could bring myself to do so. There was also the issue of whether the people would accept an abdication from someone who had yet to grow too old for the task.

I would live much longer than the dwarves around me, so I could only imagine what influence I would have on the kingdom as their king. I couldn't act like the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire.

The dwarves had their own pace for succession. The fact that the one standing at the top would eventually pass away encouraged others to devote themselves to study and experimentation, that they might fill that void someday. For example, the last contest for the throne had instigated Rajudor's study of magic and the creation of relics. If I were to become king, that impulse toward growth would be entirely stifled. On top of that, if I stayed as king for too long, it would teach the dwarves to give up on aiming for the top themselves.

And as much as they had accepted me as one of them, I simply wasn't a dwarf. I could be their friend and walk side by side with them, but I had no place ruling over them. This wasn't a kingdom of many diverse races. It was a kingdom of dwarves.

"I see. I won't force you, then." Oswald seemed to deflate a little, sitting down and resuming his work.

So I did likewise, taking a seat beside him. The smell of steel being tempered did wonders for a trembling heart.

"Thank you. But there is one thing I'd like to correct you on. Once you're dead, I'll still stop by to visit your grave. That's more than enough reason for me to visit, you damned dwarf." I was quite grateful for his faith in me, so I couldn't help but poke fun at him by using the old nickname.

Oswald barked a laugh. "Is that right? I'll look forward to your visits, then. Make sure you bring some good drink with you when you come. You've got

great taste in alcohol for a damned elf.” He inserted the piece of steel into the blazing furnace. The spirits of fire within danced happily, helping to heat up the metal.

After that, we were entirely silent, focused completely on our work. There didn’t need to be any more words between us.

Just as Airena had written in her letter, she arrived in the kingdom of the dwarves after three years had passed. She was alone this time, having left the elven caravan behind. In other words, it was time for me to depart as well. We wouldn’t be leaving right away, as I was sure Airena would be exhausted from her journey here, but I had nothing that demanded I stay here any longer.

After giving her a few days to recover, we were on our way. On the day we left, Oswald came to say goodbye, but we didn’t have much to say in farewell. It was possible that this was the last time we’d see each other. But even if it was, the past few years we’d spent together left no regrets between us. So, clapping our fists to each other’s chests, we smiled and said goodbye.

The sky was startlingly clear, the mountains around us incredibly magnificent. Our destination would be the world above the clouds, far higher than the peaks of these mountains.

What could possibly be waiting for Airena and I there?

Chapter 5 — The World Seen from above the Clouds

Airena and I walked through the steep mountains. Occasionally helping each other, and occasionally getting help from the spirits, we cut a path north.

This leg of our journey wasn't an especially meaningful one. It just felt more appropriate to call for Heero near the volcanos to the north of the dwarven kingdom. I also remembered the monsters in the volcanic region being quite strong, so by hunting for food, I could get a good idea of how well Airena and I could coordinate.

There was also the dwarven hot spring. We had no idea what was going to happen in the world above, so I felt like it was best to take some time to relax while we still could.

"Lord Acer, thank you once again for making my wish to see the White Lake come true. I know it couldn't have been an easy task for you," Airena said as we walked.

It was a bit early for that kind of talk though. I couldn't help but laugh.

"I think it's a bit early to be thanking me. I have no idea if the giants will actually take us there," I shook my head as I helped her up a particularly steep cliff.

But as she climbed up, she held tight to my hand, turning a serious look on me. "No, that is exactly why I want to say it now. Our dream should have ended as exactly that, a dream. And in a way, it did." There was a faint tremor to her voice.

Ah, *their* dream. Her, Clayas, and Martena. The three of them had held this dream together, so with two of them dead, it would never be more than a dream.

"All that is left are my own regrets. Even so, to clear up those insignificant lingering feelings, you have traveled across the entire continent and opened a path even to the sky itself. You even searched out a legendary phoenix."

She was trying to say that I had already done enough for her. Surprisingly enough, even adventurers of her stature still considered things like giants and phoenixes to be the stuff of legends. If one were to stand in their way, they would lose their spine all the same.

But Airenna wasn't afraid because she might die. As a high elf, I was quite powerful, but that was only in comparison to most other life in the world. Among the old races born from the Creator's hand, the high elves were likely the weakest. In simpler terms, there was a good chance that the giants we were about to meet were stronger than me. If the giants reacted to our visit with hostility, we would be in incredible danger.

So she wanted to say that I didn't have to accompany her on this dangerous, selfish journey of hers. What I had done was already enough. But those words wouldn't faze me in the least. So I spoke, cutting her off before she could continue.

"But you want to go there, don't you?" I asked.

I already knew the answer. As an adventurer, there was no way she would turn down the chance to visit this entirely unknown world above the clouds. Her fear was that I, someone who wasn't even an adventurer, was risking my life to fulfill her selfish desires.

But she was underestimating me. Not just me, but the whole journey I had taken to get here, though I knew that wasn't her intention. I had the brute force to solve many situations, but that didn't mean my life was never in danger. Far from it. It only took one slipup to lose your life in a battle against a powerful monster. One wrong move in the various dangerous regions I'd crossed, or one wrong word to the mystics or dragon I'd met could have spelled the end for me. The potential danger in the world above was no different from anything I'd experienced before.

It was natural she'd fail to understand that, as she hadn't taken the journey with me, and her concern about the threat the giants could pose was a practical one. I had no intention of belittling her for these concerns. We had lived very different lives, so it made sense we didn't see the world in the same way.

However, just as she was worried that something might happen to me if I

accompanied her to the world of the giants, I was worried that something might happen to *her* if I didn't. There was no compromise for either of us, so I could only make a decision based on my personal feelings. Above all, after all the work I'd done to get us this far, I wasn't about to balk at the last step.

"I'll be going with you. I want to see the White Lake too, and I'm curious about the giants. Also, if I wasn't going, I have no idea whether Heero would actually take you there." So I answered like I always did, starting off north again. There was nothing left for us to discuss on this topic.

"...Okay. I suppose I knew that from the start. I knew you would never give up on something like this, no matter what I said," she sighed as she followed after me.

As long as she understood. She was exactly right. I'd never back down on this.

"But please understand. If anything were to happen to you because of our foolish wish, even if we were to make it there in the end, I would never forgive myself."

I nodded silently. We still had quite a ways to go to reach the volcanic region, but the dwarven hot spring was getting close.



"Ahhh..." As I soaked in the hot water, many thoughts sprung to mind.

We were in the dwarven garrison built on the edge of the volcanic region, north of the dwarven kingdom. It was a place for dwarven warriors to stay while they hunted the monsters around the volcanos for materials to bring back home.

But it was more than just a simple garrison. It had a hot spring, the one I had dug on my last visit here. I guess it would be more accurate to say that the garrison had been built around the hot spring so their soldiers could make use of it. It wasn't that rare for dwarven traders and transporters to drop in as well.

But right now, I had the place to myself. Airena and I had come here without any dwarven traders, and the soldiers manning the outpost were busy at their posts, training, or maintaining their equipment. Thus, I imagined Airena was also alone in the women's bath. It was quite a luxury.

But at the same time, it was a little bit lonely. Just a few days before, I had been surrounded by a lively kingdom of dwarves. They were always bright and cheerful once they started drinking, and I was living in comfort thanks to Oswald's hospitality. As I sat alone thinking of all that, despite having so readily left the dwarves behind, I couldn't help but start missing them already. One would have thought I was used to saying goodbye to people at this point.

Scooping up some water and splashing it over my face, I looked upward with a sigh. The heat seeping into my body was pleasant.

I imagined I was getting these lonely feelings because I was traveling with Airena. When I was alone, the quietness of the nights and the feelings of solitude were exactly what I expected. If I focused on where I was going rather than where I was coming from, the pain of saying goodbye would fade and eventually disappear. That was how I had done things before, and likely always would.

But now, with someone like Airena at my side who I could travel alongside so comfortably, I was starting to become spoiled by it. I didn't have any other explanation for why I'd started feeling this way as soon as I stepped into the hot spring.

That said, I didn't consider these feelings to be pathetic or worthy of shame. Rather, it was a refreshing new experience for me. And with Airena at my side, someone who I could rely on so thoroughly, I really did feel the urge to take things easy. She would always scold me—or in a more positive light I suppose, worry about me—without any concern for my "status." I couldn't think of a single elf I'd met in all my travels, as admittedly brief as each stop was, who would treat me like that.

She was definitely a strange one, and a true hero beyond a shadow of a doubt. She was already famous among the humans across the east-central region. Her many accomplishments had earned her a place in history. Of course, she hadn't achieved everything by herself, but she was always at the forefront of any development between humans and elves, leading the charge. How would her life be judged when it was all over? Secretly, I was quite looking forward to finding out.

But more importantly, I would first have to take her to meet the giants above the clouds and bring her back safely. I had no idea what was waiting for us up there, nor how the giants would react to our visit. From the stories I had heard, it seemed the giants saw things in a different way than the dragons and phoenixes. There was no guessing how favorable they'd look on our visit until we actually went.

In other words, the world above the clouds was likely more dangerous than any place I'd visited before. So while it was frightening to think about, it was also kind of exciting.

The gods had been forbidden from interfering in this world, yet even so, there were certain events in history that nobody could explain as anything but divine intervention. Although, many of those events were probably caused by high elves like me. Even I had done some incredible things, like moving mountains and creating new rivers.

But for those miracles that couldn't be pinned on the high elves...had they been brought about by the giants? What had they been thinking as they interacted with the world below? I was interested in finding that out. Did they feel sad when the world they had been tasked with recording was reduced to ashes by the dragons? I wanted to ask them that. If I wasn't careful with my words, it might start a fight, but I still wanted to know. And on that note, what would a fight between me and a giant even look like from a size perspective? If possible, I'd like to give it a try.

Feeling quite well boiled, I stood up and climbed out of the hot spring. Soaking in hot water brought all sorts of thoughts out of me, but rarely helped me put those thoughts in order. My musings were all still vague and disordered. But that was pleasant in its own way.

After getting a glass of water, I decided to return to my room and spend the rest of the night idly. I had plans to dip into this hot spring more than a few times while we were staying here. I hoped Airena was able to relax as well.



"Airena, up!"

As I jumped back with that warning, Airena followed suit without a moment's

delay. And not a moment later, a rather nostalgic breed of monster—a lava frog—smashed into the spot where we had just been standing.

With a frighteningly powerful jump, skin that was heat resistant enough to allow them to swim in rivers of magma, and oily bodies that caused normal arrows to slip and deflect off of them, they were rather challenging opponents. Ah, and I couldn't forget that their tongues also had all the range of a bow and the penetrating power of a spear.

I guess my last trip here to hunt them had been over seventy years ago. It might have even been a bit longer, but the threat these things posed was still perfectly clear in my mind. They would take you by surprise by jumping out from hiding in a river of magma, following up their incredible jump with an equally intimidating tongue. They had been quite terrifying to deal with. But after so long, maybe because I had seen so many other monsters, or maybe because I had just gotten stronger and more used to fighting, I didn't feel very threatened by them anymore.

The frog's tongue shot for Airena like an arrow, but not quickly enough to dodge my magic sword cleanly dismembering it. Having seen this attack pattern from them before, I knew exactly what to look for to predict the next move the frog would make. The frog howled, apparently able to feel pain through such a weapon of an appendage. It attempted to leap away, only to be caught out of the air by a blast of wind. Trusting me to block the frog's tongue attack, Airena had already turned to her Spirit Arts.

Never mind that it had attacked us out of nowhere, we couldn't let it go after we'd wounded it; there was no telling what a wounded monster would do in the future. It could burn with a desire for revenge, hunting us down in the future. It could be killed and eaten by other monsters that found it in its newly weakened state. It could heal its wounded tongue completely and return to its ordinary life in the volcanos. Or it could be driven from its home, forced into other places by the dangers it could no longer handle here.

That last possibility was the most dangerous one. Monsters that were weakened and driven out of their homes could come to evolve in new ways from a different environment, and starvation could bring them close to human settlements. Considering we were in the depths of the volcanic region, the

chance of this frog wandering all the way to a human settlement was vanishingly small, but there was a distinct possibility it could make its way to the dwarven kingdom.

Driven to the ground by the blast of wind, the frog reeled in confusion for a few moments before I finished it off with a chop from my sword, quickly and precisely, giving it no opportunity to think of running again. I would not hesitate to take its life, but I also wouldn't let that life go to waste. That was the way I did things, and Airena was willing to accommodate me. We would eat what parts of the frog we could, and leave the rest for the other monsters. I remembered just how delicious these things were as clearly as I remembered their strength.

The monsters of the volcanic region were certainly strong, but they weren't quite enough to pressure us. After all, she was a seven-star adventurer. She had way more experience fighting monsters than I did. But more than that, she had much more experience fighting alongside both swordsmen and elves. She never failed to spot when to step back and take a support role, or step forward and bring the attack herself.

Of course, her proficiency in using the spirits couldn't compare to mine, but she was head and shoulders above other elves. She could read the movements of the monsters, respond exactly as needed to impede them, and create the perfect opening for me to step in and attack. She was also adept at using me as bait, letting the monsters focus their attention on me while she delivered a powerful attack to catch them unaware.

Fighting alongside her was surprisingly easy. We had known each other for a long time, but hadn't actually fought together all that often. I imagined watching her fight alongside Clayas and Martena would have been incredible. The fact I would never get the chance left me feeling rather sad.

However, we couldn't just hunt monsters in the volcanic region until we reached that level. We were on our way to the world above the clouds. Hunting monsters here was just a way to test our ability to coordinate. Airena had even gone out of her way to create an opening in her duties to the elven caravan to come all the way to the dwarven kingdom. Taking a few days or weeks off likely

wouldn't have much of an impact, but for someone like her, leaving for a few months or years would be a tremendous sacrifice.

Hunting monsters as we traveled, we made it to the peak of one of the volcanos. Looking up, I could see a single bird circling above us. Even at this distance, it was big enough I could tell that it was Heero, our ticket to the world above. Even though he was many, many times older than I was, it seemed he wasn't quite as patient, as he had shown up to find us before I even called for him.

I imagined he would have grown a bit bigger in the past three years. I had to wonder if I'd get to see him fully grown while I was still a high elf.

Following my gaze, Airena also looked upward, eyes going wide as she saw the phoenix above us. Though entirely different from a high elf like myself, a phoenix was still one of the truly immortal races. I had to wonder how he appeared to someone like her.

Heero gave a sharp cry, echoing down to the mountains around us. With that, the monsters would likely go into hiding.

Long ago, dwarven traders had told me that this particular volcano was called the Dragon's Peak, and that there were legends of a dragon living here. Of course, my conversation with the golden dragon had taught me that there were no other dragons living on this continent, so that was likely some sort of mistake. Or perhaps it was the home of a wyvern, one of the gods' failed attempts at recreating the dragons. If there was a wyvern living here, would Heero's voice lure it out? Or would it get scared and hide itself like the other monsters? The wyverns were considered failed creations, so I was interested in seeing just how much they differed from real dragons, but nevertheless we reached the caldera without incident.

Heero then came down from the sky, and our journey upward finally began.



As Heero's wings lifted us into the air, Airena turned to me with a nervous look.

"Lord Acer? What do we do if, by some one-in-a-million chance, we happen to

fall off?”

I couldn't help but give a small chuckle. It was pretty rare to see her acting so timidly. As much as Airena was a hero among the elves, when faced with an entirely new experience like flying, she'd still feel a bit nervous.

But that was to be expected. I wasn't trying to make fun of her. It was just fun to see an expression like that on someone who had lived their life as an adventurer, always side by side with danger. I guess it was also in the spirit of an adventurer to take precautions against a one-in-a-million chance. I didn't think Heero would ever let us fall, but who knew what would happen once we were in the world above the clouds? I guess figuring out a plan ahead of time was a good idea.

“If you're falling from the sky, just spread your body to catch as much wind as possible and ask the wind spirits to gradually slow you down. While you do that, I'll either come after you with some floating magic, or Heero will swoop down and catch you.”

Without Heero or I, her only option would be to ask the water spirits to soften her fall if she were falling into the sea, or the earth spirits if she were going to hit land. I doubted she'd come out unscathed, but for someone of Airena's skill, she would probably at least walk away. Of course, the best solution was to avoid being thrown into the sky in the first place.

I have carried millions on my back in the past, and not once have any of my passengers ever fallen. Such a possibility does not even exist, Heero's voice of protest echoed in the back of my head. Apparently our conversation had touched a nerve with him.

But the scale of his reply was so big, I couldn't help but laugh again. Appealing to numbers so large was exactly the kind of response I'd expect from a phoenix like him.

As I laughed, I patted Heero on the back. “We're not worried about falling off of you, Heero. But we have no idea what'll happen once we're in the world above the clouds. If we fall from there, it would help a lot if you came to catch us,” I tried to console him.

I mean, from the start, people couldn't exactly walk on clouds. Airena and I

could ask the water and wind spirits to help us, but I had to wonder how the giants did it. I had also heard that the giants protected people of the other races here to preserve them while the dragons burned the world.

In other words, though I had no idea how it worked, it seemed there was an environment up here that allowed people to function to some degree. If that was dependent on some power of the giants, and thus their will, there was a chance they could send us tumbling back to the ground on a whim.

The impression I had of the giants from my dream on the Fusou Tree was definitely positive, but after hearing that demons were born from their experiments, my confidence had started to waver. Enough that I was afraid to let my guard down around them just because they were another of the ancient races.

It would be simpler if I were alone. If they attacked me I could fight back, and if they sent me hurtling back down to the surface I could easily catch myself. But I wasn't alone, and that made me a lot more nervous.

No matter what happens, I am your ally. Both of you. Please rest assured, as long as I am on your side, the sky is your world.

I responded to his strong declaration with another pat. For some reason, hearing that from him while seated on his back didn't sound like an exaggeration at all. I fully believed that no matter what happened, Heero would be there to save both of us.

As we gained altitude, we headed south. The cloud on which the giants lived floated around the world as it was carried by the wind, so it was constantly on the move, but apparently it remained south of the continent we called home. I imagined that it was so that the giants could watch what was happening on our continent as well as the one said to be on the southern side of the ocean. I had no idea how they were able to see what we were doing from so high up, but that *was* their job.

Apparently the cloud they lived on was higher up than other clouds, so as we rode on Heero's back, he took us up into a sea of them. The world the giants inhabited was much higher and further away than I had imagined, though I

suppose if it had been any closer, the Creator never would have needed to create the phoenixes to bridge the gap between us.

“Amazing,” the thought leaked out. Though this was the second time I had ridden on Heero’s back, the awesome breadth of the sky and the power in his wings hit me in a different way this time. No one could ever hope to stop us. Airenna nodded beside me.

Heero puffed up proudly and accelerated, carrying us past the mountains, Ludoria, Giatica, Vilestorika, and out over the open ocean. Normally we looked up to see the white of the clouds and the blue of the sky, but now we looked down to see the white of the clouds and the blue of the sea. It was a bizarre sensation.

But at long last, a much more incredible sight came into view: larger and denser clouds hanging high above all the others. It felt so obviously different from the rest that I could immediately tell that it was where the giants lived. Heero put further strength into his wings, taking us higher as we approached.



Heero landed on the seemingly endless expanse of clouds. Okay, I’m not sure if “landed” was the right word, but the fluffy white stuff took his weight without so much as budging.

It was like a scene out of an anime from my previous life. I could no longer remember anything about said anime, but that’s the kind of surreal impression this place gave me.

I shook my head, driving out these unnecessary thoughts. No matter how unbelievable it looked, this was the reality I was now living in. No matter how fluffy and soft these clouds looked, I couldn’t let my own brain be the same.

Steeling myself, I leaped off of Heero’s back. I was a bit relieved to feel that the clouds were much firmer than I expected.

They were definitely made up of water, like all other clouds. My connection to the spirits could tell me that much. But for some reason, even without the spirits’ help, I was able to stand on them like solid ground.

The first thought that sprung to mind was magic, but my intuition...really, my

senses didn't agree. Among the forces of nature, mana was the easiest to use and the easiest to change, but that wasn't what made up my footing here. These clouds were made solid by the power of nature itself. Not just one element like mana, they were made from all the forces of nature in concert. It was no different from what the spirits did.

Of course, the spirits weren't involved in this case. If they were, I would have a much clearer idea of what was happening. From my experience, the closest thing to what was making these clouds solid would be...the mystic arts, I suppose.

Though they weren't on the same level as spirits, mystics could still influence nature directly to bring about phenomena. Unlike magic, their arts used all of nature's power.

Now that I thought about it, mystics were pretty impressive. Even the gods, one of the ancient races born directly from the Creator's hands, were only able to use one element of nature. And yet, their creations had found a way to utilize all of nature together. It was kind of ironic.

Anyway, the idea that giants could use the power of nature wasn't much of a surprise. Both phoenixes and dragons excelled in the use of power. Of course, the spirits were head and shoulders above everyone when it came to nature, and we high elves needed to work through them to do much, but we were still operating on the same level.

But the way the giants' power worked seemed a bit too similar to that of the mystics. Though the precision with which they could work was like night and day, it was close enough that I could believe that the mystics based their arts on what they had seen the giants do. Well, it wasn't really the kind of thing you could just copy by watching someone else do it, so it was more likely the giants had taught them the mystic arts themselves.

It was probably another one of their experiments, like the creation of the demons. I imagined the connection between the mystics and the giants was still alive and well today too. After all, Wanggui Xuannu, one of the mystics ruling the Ancient Gold Empire, had been the one to tell me that the oni were descendants of the demons who had survived under the giants' protection.

How on earth would she know that? I had gone to Fusou myself, but couldn't remember anyone there ever telling me anything similar. The oni themselves probably knew of their own origins, so I had assumed that Xuannu had found a chance to talk to them herself. But if there was a connection between the giants and mystics, it made perfect sense that the mystics would have been told that story by the giants instead.

However, none of that changed what we were going to be doing here.

After helping Airenna dismount from Heero's back, I loudly clapped my hands together once, stirring up a strong wind around the clouds. This was my announcement to the giants that we had arrived. In truth, I had considered using the help of the wind spirits to search around the world up here, but it didn't seem like that was going to be necessary. So instead, I felt it was best to just give the giants some warning that we were coming.

"All right, let's get going," I said as I started walking.

The clouds were certainly firm enough to walk on, but they weren't flat and smooth like the ground was. They were quite round, rough, and uneven. Maybe the giants were large enough that this level of unevenness was irrelevant to them, but to us, it was like walking through a field of boulders. Being careful not to trip as we climbed over the enormous bulbs, we struggled our way forward.

Our destination was a large structure, easily visible even from the edge of the clouds where we were. It looked something like a large castle, or maybe a temple. It was big enough that I didn't even need to send the wind spirits searching for it. It was quite obvious that the giants lived there. As much as I had just admonished myself for saying this earlier...it really did feel like I had stepped into an anime.



Aside from the unfamiliar terrain, there were no obstacles between us and the enormous structure. It really was huge. The entrance alone was big enough that I had to crane my neck upward to see it. Judging by the size of this doorway, the giants had to be at least five times the size of the average person.

Putting a hand on the wall beside the doorway gave a pleasantly cool sensation, slick and polished. It felt closer to some kind of metal than wood or

stone. That meant these clouds were solid enough to support an enormous metal structure. That said, just because it was metal didn't mean it was necessarily all that heavy.

I was admittedly a little...okay, extremely curious about it, but I set that aside for now and stepped inside with Airena. Everything was equally enormous. The ceiling was incredibly high, and the area was so large I couldn't tell if it was a room, a corridor, or a kind of lobby. The support pillars, the walls, even the decorations were all enormous, easily stealing our attention. It was so impressive that I already felt coming to the world above the clouds had been worth it.

"Lord Acer..." Airena spoke up in warning, pulling me from my reverie.

I knew what she was going to say. The walls, the pillars, the floor, all of them were made of metal, but none had any earth spirits in them. As strange as it sounded, it seemed the metal wasn't made from anything related to the earth. Of course, there wasn't any fire or water here either. The wind could blow through freely, but if that door were closed, even the wind spirits would have nothing to manifest themselves in here. It seemed to me like the giants had clearly designed this place with that express purpose.

"Yeah, let's get some torches ready."

That said, we could always bring things that carried the spirits in ourselves. Both of us had skins of water, and by lighting torches we could bring a few more friends along to help. Luckily, both of us were on pretty good terms with the fire spirits.

Maybe that wasn't the right way of putting it. Since most elves and high elves lived in forests where fire had to be handled with so much caution, most of them had virtually no contact with fire spirits. The fire spirits were just as fond of elves and high elves as the other spirits, but with so little opportunity to come into contact with them, they didn't have much chance to offer them help. Thus, most elves and high elves had little experience calling on the fire spirits.

Airena and I both had plenty of that experience, so we were well accustomed to calling on them. However, it wasn't as though we were particularly special. Even without dedicating oneself to a path like blacksmithing, any elf or high elf

could get just as close to them as we had if they were willing to come into contact with fire more often.

As we walked through the building, we eventually came to a large spiral staircase in the center of the room. Looking up, I could see it went above the ceiling, continuing upward out of sight. More important than its overall height was the size of each step. The first one alone came up to my chest. Climbing all the way up would be more than a bit of a struggle. If there had been earth spirits here, we could have had them carve out a staircase suited to our size, but we were out of luck on that front.

Just as I decided to put off the stairs and suggest exploring the rest of this first level, the first step of the staircase began to glow. It was like it was telling us to hurry up and get on.

“I’ll go first,” Airena said, stepping bravely forward, but I put a hand on her arm to stop her.

Even if it did look suspicious, there was no point in setting a trap for us here. If the giants wanted to get rid of us, they probably would have blocked the wind from coming into the building in the first place, and they could always collapse the ceiling and bury us alive. With no earth spirits in the structure around us, there would be little I could do to save us.

“You don’t have to worry that much. If they’re inviting us in, we can go together.”

Above all, I wasn’t willing to risk getting separated from Airena. While she was extremely competent as an elf, there was no way she could fight a giant on her own. If we were separated, she would instantly become a hostage.

But even if she could do nothing against them alone, that didn’t mean she was entirely powerless. If we were together, there was a reasonable enough chance that she’d be able to do some serious damage while they weren’t expecting it. As a member of one of the younger races, there was a good chance the giants would underestimate her, or even better ignore her entirely, making such an attack even more potent. Though of course, I’d much prefer this not become a fight in the first place.

As we climbed up onto the first step, it started carrying us upward like an escalator. Naturally, it functioned through entirely different mechanics than the escalators I knew from my past life. For starters, no escalator I'd ever seen would work in a huge spiral like this.

Though taken by surprise by the moving stairs, Airena quickly retook her composure and raised her guard. I was just looking forward, so it seemed she decided to watch every other angle. Even amid a brand-new experience like a moving staircase, she didn't panic but instead searched out whatever action she found to be most necessary. It was really encouraging.

But for such an exaggerated invitation, there was no doubt in my mind that the staircase was taking us to see a giant. An enormous, incredible structure, with a moving staircase. Seeing all this had me much more interested in the giants than before.

I had first started thinking of the giants when Airena asked me to help look for the White Lake. Afterward, my experience dreaming on the Fusou Tree taught me that they were real. That was all quite long ago from my perspective, but now I was finally going to meet one face-to-face. I had no idea what was about to happen, but as imprudent as it might have been, I was more excited than anything.



As the spiral staircase carried us upward, the scenery changed dramatically. The walls gradually grew more faded as we ascended, eventually turning transparent like glass. There was no wind, so we were definitely cut off from the outdoors, but the unimpeded sunlight filled the world with a natural glow. It was a brilliant reminder that this was the world above the clouds, a place one could really call "the heavens."

The staircase continued taking us up through the sunlight, eventually depositing us in a room where its floor, walls, and ceiling were all built from the same transparent material. In the center of the room was a large table, and seated around it were equally large people.

But none of them reacted to our arrival. After all, those people were...

“...Stone?” Airena murmured.

They all looked like stone statues. Well, not all of them, I suppose. Of the thirteen figures around the table, a single one of them seemed to be made of flesh as he turned to face us.

“My apologies for failing to greet you at the door. As you can see, we were in the middle of a meeting. I am Cordes, the giant currently on active duty. Wandering high elf, Acer. And you, elf Airena of the younger races. I know quite a bit about you two. Welcome to our world.” The giant’s voice was incredibly loud, yet still calm and gentle, full of dignity and authority.

But what mattered more was that this giant, Cordes, knew not only mine but Airena’s name as well. That meant the giants, or at least Cordes, knew of Airena specifically among all the elves. It was highly unlikely he’d underestimate her. Just how much did the giants see from up here in the sky?

“For the giants to know my name already...well, it’s an honor, but also a bit scary,” I replied with a light joke, trying not to let the atmosphere overwhelm me. It seemed Airena was content to leave this to me, as she gave a smart bow in reply but otherwise stayed a step behind me.

“A high elf leaving the forest casts unbelievable ripples across the surface of the world. We all take a great interest in watching those stories play out. Thus, we’ve been watching your journeys from the very beginning.” Though his voice had a volume to match his size, he still spoke with a calm gentleness.

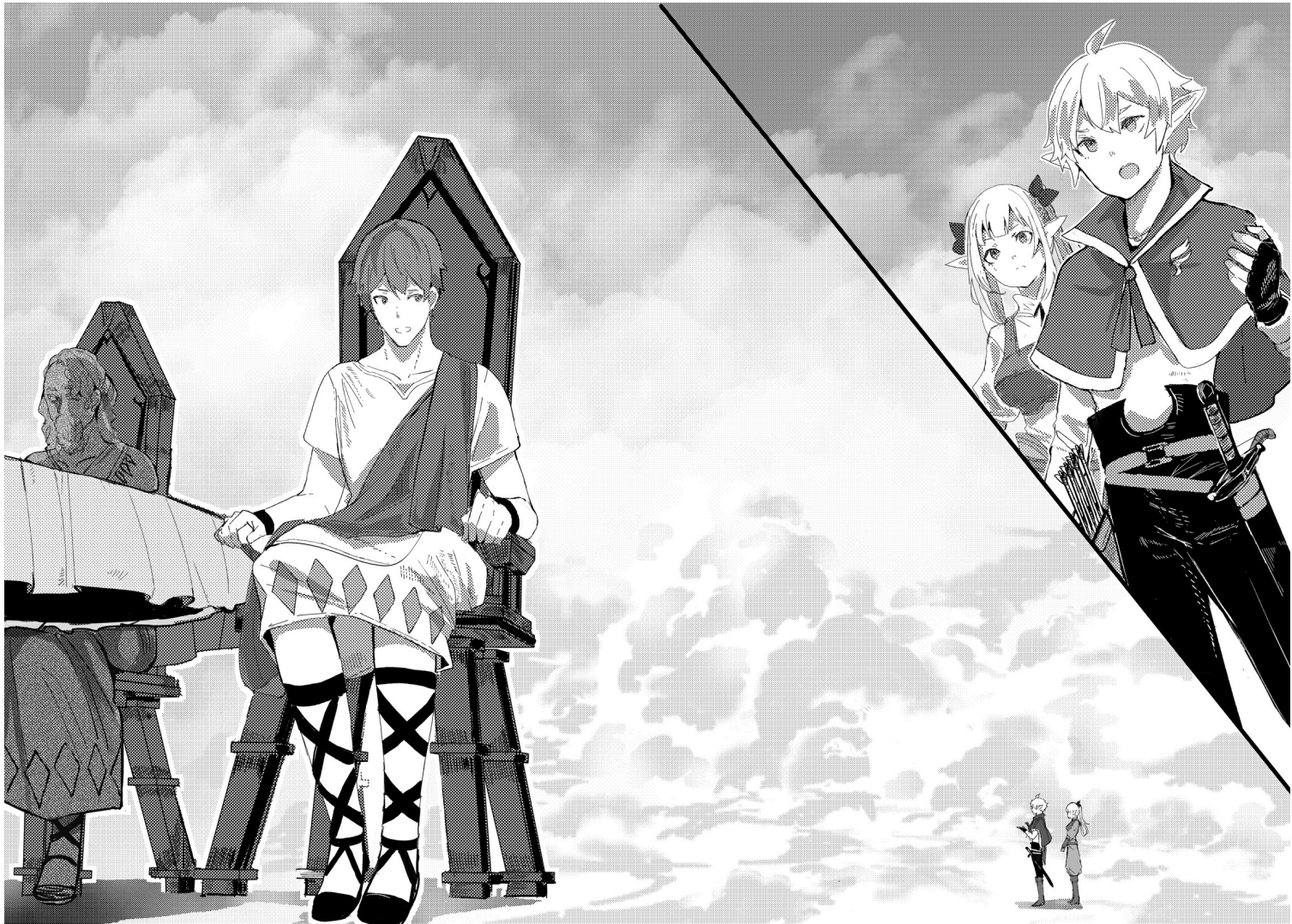
Even so, what he had said was extremely unsettling. Your *journeys*? Why plural?

Did he mean me and Airena? No, I doubted that. That wouldn’t make sense with what he had said just before. Had other high elves besides me left the Forest Depths? Salix never mentioned anything like that going on. Maybe Cordes was referring to high elves in the past?

Either way, the words he had chosen caught my attention. However, the more important part was that he’d been watching me from the very beginning. I didn’t think there was anything particularly wrong with that. High elves leaving the forest undeniably had a huge impact on the world around them, so keeping an eye on us was definitely part of the giants’ job. I couldn’t say I especially

enjoyed the idea of being constantly observed, but I didn't have reasonable grounds to complain about it.

“Really? In that case, you probably already know why we're here.”



But if that was the case, how had he figured it out? All kinds of similar questions came to mind.

I looked around at the stone giants seated around the table. Earlier Cordes had said he was the one on active duty. I guess that meant these stone giants were asleep, then? He had also said they were in a meeting...with these statues?

I was suddenly reminded of the fairies. Fairies all shared a single collective consciousness, each individual like a node on a greater network. I wondered if the giants could do something similar. Actually, it was quite possible the fairies had been created by the giants in the first place. In that case, the giants' network would be much stronger, allowing them to share their consciousness and the information gleaned from their observations without obliterating their individuality.

Those thoughts sprung to mind. Or maybe I should say they were *brought* to mind. Though I couldn't see it, I could feel this network of the giants having some influence on me.

That's what brought such an outlandish idea to the forefront of my mind.

Information was flowing into me, so naturally that it was frightening. This place really was scary.

But I couldn't sense any malice in that. And maybe the spirits had avoided this place because they'd be influenced by the giants' network in the same way. Giants, high elves, and spirits were all ancient races, so we couldn't be that different from each other. Considering the individuality of spirits was already weak to begin with, the giants probably didn't want to risk the influence they would have on them. In their own way, they were trying to be kind and considerate out of their love for this world. That's what I learned from coming into contact with them.

"Ah, I suppose even you should not stay here for too long. I know of your goal, of course. But before that, I have one question for you as well." There was a hint of bitterness in Cordes's voice this time. The small traces of loneliness and concern really spoke to an underlying sense of familiarity.

Sure, I had only met him just now. But after watching my travels for so long, I imagined he felt much closer to me than I did to him, much in the same way a reader felt close to the characters of a novel.

“Acer, high elf who has now met with each of the ancient races. Why do you travel?”



After our meeting with the giant, we left the room behind, spending one night in their building before setting out across the clouds once again. We had learned basically everything we were looking for. I was quite surprised and even a bit scared at first, but after I got past that, the giants’ network turned out to be quite convenient.

While staying in their building, whenever I thought of a question, the answer would naturally slip into my mind. Once I could distinguish between information drawn from my own mind and that coming in from the network, it didn’t feel so different from having a conversation with them.

Consciousness and memories were what made up a person, so having new information from the network mix with yours ran the risk of distorting you. But even with that risk, I had quite a few more memories than other high elves did in the beginning. I was pretty used to sorting my thoughts out in my head at this point. Even Cordes was surprised with how easily I was able to draw information out of their network.

Why did the giants interfere with the surface world from time to time, and in rather major ways, unlike the other ancient races? That came from their deep love for this world.

The dragons were tasked with protecting this world, but also destroying it. They remained asleep until it was time for them to carry out their work, so they avoided interacting with the world as much as possible. Therefore, they weren’t particularly attached to it.

The phoenixes interacted with few others than the high elves and the giants, so while they had a strong affection for the other ancient races, they didn’t feel much of a connection with the rest of the world.

The high elves lived on the surface, but they had little view of the world around them, and little interest in things beyond what they could see.

The spirits filled the natural world, occasionally growing deeply attached to certain living things. But they lacked individuality and the will to make changes in the world.

That left just the giants. They could see the entire world and were deeply fond of everyone they watched over, so they became quite eager to change the status quo. However, they were not omnipotent. Their efforts so far had resulted in multiple failures.

For example, in order to help the younger races grow, the giants had taught them how to use nature's power. Yes, this was the origin of the mystic arts. But only a vanishingly small number of individuals among these younger races were able to learn the techniques. In contrast, a far greater number of people failed to follow that path to its proper end, straying to become predatory fallen mystics instead. Even those who succeeded—those who truly made the mystic arts a part of themselves and became mystics in truth—lost their ability to reproduce by doing so.

And so, the giants gave up on attempting to teach the younger races how to use nature's power. Instead, they taught them magic, a much easier force to manipulate, in the same way the gods had resorted to mana for its ease of use in creating the younger races. But those who acquired their magic continued to seek ever more power, taking mana into their bodies and transforming themselves. In the same way animals turned into monsters, the people turned into demons.

If the giants hadn't given people magic, there never would have been demons. That was why the phoenixes said that the demons were a result of an experiment by the giants. They considered the birth of the demons to be the giants' failure, and thus their responsibility.

That wasn't completely wrong. The kind of magic that people used now was far weaker than the stuff the giants had taught. Having such immense power dropped into the lap of those ancient people, rather than earning it through long decades of study and trial and error, it was no surprise how they ended up.

And there were many other such issues caused by the giants' meddling. The giants were just too soft when it came to the people below. They loved the people they watched over too much.

What they were doing wasn't right, but I couldn't bring myself to say they were wrong either. Even now, in their petrified slumber, the giants were constantly discussing how they might help the people below live in peace, without fear of another apocalypse.

"I had thought for sure you would try to fight the giants," Airena said as we walked across the clouds. It seemed she thought I was quite violent.

It was true I had been preparing myself for that eventuality, though. If they had been arrogantly toying with the people of the world below, I would have been all fists. But they were simply locked in their own struggle, trying to find a way to change the world and save it from being reduced to ash yet again. I couldn't say they were doing the right thing, and from time to time their mistakes caused huge losses of life, but they were trying desperately to push past all of that to create a world that would be spared from the dragon's flames. With no better suggestions myself, I could hardly criticize them. After all, no one suffered as much as the giants, having to see the people they loved punished for their own failures.

"I don't know if I could even beat them. Cordes wouldn't have underestimated either of us," I joked, giving an exaggerated shrug.

If the giants had been more arrogant, they would likely have shown more openings, and more reasons for me to fight them in the first place. For example, if they had looked down on Airena or ignored her, I was fully intent on having her bring her full power to bear against them.

Of course, as an elf, she didn't pose much of a threat to them even with the help of the spirits, but that was only an issue of firepower. Airena was incredibly precise with her spirit arts, so if the spirits were to suddenly give her much more power, she would likely have no issues controlling it. In that case, the rest would be easy. I would just have to ask the spirits to lend Airena more help. That would be enough for her to have enough strength to frighten the giants.

But I think Cordes would have seen through all of that. Having a high elf strip the limits of an elf's control of the spirits was an exceptionally dangerous technique...and I'm sure high elves had come up with similar ideas in the past. The giants had probably recorded it happening many times already.

"But I'm glad we didn't have to fight," I said honestly.

If either of us just wanted to eliminate the other, we'd have plenty of ways to go about it. Because of the way the giants had built their dwelling, they could have crushed us with basically no resistance. On the other hand, if I really wanted to hurt them, I could turn the clouds beneath their structure back to water, sending them hurtling back to the surface.

But I wasn't looking to get into any pointless fights.

Cordes had asked why I continued to travel. I could have stopped anywhere. But instead, though I often stopped in one place for a time, I always inevitably started traveling again. Why?

It was honestly a rather difficult question. I didn't really have an answer for him. In the short-term, I had my objectives. I wanted to leave the forest, or I wanted to learn magic, or I wanted to find the origins of the Yosogi School, or I wanted to meet Win.

But as for why I traveled in general...I guess that was just the way I lived. There is no objective to life. We create short-term objectives for ourselves, but we hardly need them to survive. We can look back and draw meaning out of what we've already done, but it's impossible to tell what that meaning will be until after the time has passed. I simply lived according to my wishes, and one of those wishes was to keep moving.

There were things I wanted to see, foods I wanted to eat, and people I wanted to meet. In simple terms, I was just selfish. After returning from my journey to the world above the clouds, I might settle down in one place for a while. I might even choose to stay there forever. Or maybe, even as soon as tomorrow, I'd think of a new destination and set off once again. Even if I wasn't particularly proud of it, that was the kind of person I was.

So I was glad I had learned so much. Knowing how the giants felt wouldn't

change how I'd act, but every time I'd look up at the clouds, I'd now know there was someone up there looking back down at me. That was enough to satisfy me.

Now there was only one thing left to do before we returned to the surface.



And so, we finally arrived. Among the white clouds that seemed to stretch on forever, there was a single large hole from which we could see the world below. Underneath that hole was the sea. If you looked at it from directly above, it would indeed look like a lake in the middle of a pure white world.

In the past, when the dragons were burning the world, small groups of the younger races were brought to the world above the clouds to save them from extinction. But those people couldn't handle the endless, empty world of clouds. In order to give them some relief, the giants created a hole from which they could observe the world below. Of course, they could have seen that by walking to the edge of the clouds as well, but the cloud bank on which they sat was enormous.

So in reality, the "white" in White Lake referred to the clouds around it, not the scenery within the hole. But nevertheless, the people were thankful for the giants' kindness, and so came to call the place the White Lake. The white of this world came to be symbolic of the giants who had saved the people there. That story was still passed down among the elves today.

But I wasn't the one who had business here. The one who really wanted to see this was Airena, together with her adventuring companions. I could only imagine the feelings gripping her at this moment. My role here was done. This moment was for Airena. I wasn't about to intrude on that.

By bringing her here, my business in the world above the clouds had come to an end. Relieved of my anxiety and filled with a sense of satisfaction, I lay down on the clouds. I had wanted to try this since the moment Heero brought us here. The clouds weren't hard and solid, but not too soft either, gently but firmly supporting my weight.

Yeah. As I had expected, this was really comfortable. Taking one last look at Airena standing on the edge of the enormous hole in the clouds, I leaned back

on my cloud and closed my eyes. The sunlight was bright and warm, the wind cool and refreshing, and the clouds were comfortable. There was no reason not to take a nap, really.

I had spoken with a dragon, hatched a phoenix, and met a giant. I was a high elf, so I always had the spirits at my side. So I began to think. What kind of person was the Creator who made all of us? The dragons, phoenixes, and giants had all existed since that time of the first creation, so they should remember what the Creator was like. There were probably even some spirits that still remembered. I couldn't help but be a bit jealous.

This leg of my journey had come to an end. I had learned a lot, but there was still plenty I didn't know. Where were the gods now, if they weren't allowed to intervene in the world? What were they thinking back then? I imagined they had to possess some love for this world. That was why they had interacted with it in the first place, why they had tried to leave their mark on it.

But the dragons, phoenixes, giants, spirits, and even the high elves like myself loved this world tremendously. Our interest in it never waned. Knowing wouldn't change anything, and perhaps it was best if there were things I *didn't* know. But it was impossible to judge that without knowing those things already.

I opened my eyes, feeling someone at my side. The sun had dipped down to the horizon, casting an orange glow across the clouds.

"Huh. So sunset looks like this up here too," I said to Airena as I sat up.

She gave a small laugh. "Yes, it seems that way. I never would have known if we hadn't come here ourselves," she said, watching the sun sink lower and lower.



I wouldn't ask if she was satisfied with our journey here. There was no way she would be. Not without the companions who would have been so excited to make this discovery along with her.

"If it weren't for you, I never would have been able to see this. Even if I hadn't known, our dream had really been a thoughtless one, hadn't it?"

Nor would I ask what feelings brought those words out of her. Airena was grateful that I had led her here, and that was enough of a reward for me.

Once the sun disappeared from sight, the world above the clouds would see night. The red glow of sunset wouldn't last for long, and the wind was growing colder.

"Thank you. I know I said it before we arrived, but once again: I am really happy. But...can I perhaps ask one more thing of you?"

As I nodded to her thanks, she asked for yet another favor. What could it be now? Surprised, I looked at her, but in the glow of sunset, I couldn't make out her expression.

"If you do not mind...of course, this will only be once I have left the caravan to my successor, but...I know I will leave this world well before you do. Would you allow me to accompany you until that time?"

Though her speech was filled with "ifs" and "buts," in the end she managed to come out and say it clearly.

Ah. I see. That wasn't a terrible idea. Actually, having her with me would make me quite happy.

Again, I wouldn't ask her if she was satisfied with our journey. I knew the feelings she had for her lost friends would never disappear entirely. Even if they faded with time, they would eventually spring back to mind as strong as ever. Just like how my feelings for Kaeha returned every time I swung my sword.

But it was possible to set those feelings aside, just as I had after those feelings took me across the world on a journey, to find its conclusion in my visit to Kaeha's grave. That had allowed me to set new goals for my next trip.

If we had stayed together back then, our relationship likely would have been

no more than mutual consolation, but we were different now. And it was no exaggeration to say that Airena understood me better than anyone else in this world. Though I knew how it sounded coming from me, I knew how much of a hassle I was to deal with.

“Actually, that would make me really happy.” I couldn’t help but feel a bit shy as I answered, using my hands to wipe the seat of my pants despite the clouds not really being able to dirty them.

But...there was a small problem. *Now* what was I going to do? I had planned to ask her to help with the elves in the Far West once we got back to the surface. It would be quite some time before the war there settled down and the elven caravan was able to extend its operations that far, but preparing for that would be a lot of work by itself. Asking her to take on even more work after she’d left the caravan behind to stay at my side felt...wrong. Would she get angry? I guess that wouldn’t bother me, but I didn’t want to ask her if it would make her sad.

I suppose I had no choice but to stick with the caravan for a while. Hmm.

Oh well. I could think about it all later.

“I’ll look forward to it,” I said, standing up and offering her my hand. And for once, instead of getting on her knees and bowing, she accepted it, pulling herself up to stand alongside me.

Excerpt — Dripping Memories

The Victory Feast

Three days after Win and I were victorious in our battle against the High Priestess of the Quoramites, the Federation confirmed that the human army had retreated, and held a feast to celebrate.

Naturally, the man of the hour was Win. He was a half-elf hero, having brought home the head of the leader of the religion that had oppressed them for so long. He wasn't human, nor was he an elf. And of course he wasn't a beastfolk, a halfling, a centaur, or any of those other races. Though he had a place of honor among the Tiger Clan, the fact he held no special allegiance to any race meant he was able to interact fairly and equally with all of them. Everyone thought he was the perfect candidate for leader of the Federation's army. Of course, that was also because of the deep trust he had earned in his long dealings with all of them.

Luckily, there had been few witnesses to my own direct involvement in the battle with the High Priestess. Most people were only concerned with who got the finishing blow, so I was able to hide pretty easily. That was what Win and I had both hoped for.

From now on, Win would stand as leader of the Federation, uniting all the races of the Far West. In order to do that, he would need the fame from taking down the High Priestess to be attributed to his name. In contrast, such an honor being attributed to me would make me stand out much more, making life quite a bit more difficult. So this result was the best for both of us. For me, I was satisfied that I was able to be of help to Win in his hour of need and rescue him from a dangerous situation.

But now, as I looked at Win surrounded by the big shots from all the different races and factions, I couldn't help but feel for him. This kind of stress would be something he'd be dealing with quite often. Back when I had first agreed to

take care of Win, I never expected that this was the kind of man he'd grow into.

I felt like I spoiled him a bit, and I certainly had more than a few flaws as a parent, but he nevertheless had grown into a splendid person. I couldn't help but feel moved at the sight of him. Maybe that was why the drinks tasted so good tonight.

Maybe I had only served as an example of how *not* to do things...but whatever. The path ahead of him would be a rocky one, but he had chosen it for himself. I didn't have the right to get in his way.

As I gulped down my drink, the dwarves around me began to grow excited at my lack of reservation, while the elves grew worried and began bringing over water. Though this was a party, this had been the front line of the war just yesterday. The food was no more than our ordinary provisions, and there wasn't all that much variety in the alcohol. But even so, it was quite a fun night.

"Ah, here you are."

Once the party had started dying down—okay, the dwarves were still going hard, but the other leaders had started turning in—Win came looking for me. I could see the fatigue peeking through the smile on his face. I was once again reminded of how tough things were for him.

"You're pretty popular, huh?" But I wouldn't bring that up. As I had said, this was the path Win chose. This suffering was his to carry. Though I guess if he got too tired, I could always force him to eat one of the apuas in my bag.

"The beastfolk leaders were all asking me to marry their sisters and daughters. Looks like everyone's already looking at what comes next," Win grumbled with a sigh.

I nodded. That made sense to me. There was no telling what would become of the Federation now, but I doubted the end of the war with humanity would lead to its dissolution. Some of the races might bow out, but I suspected many more would stay on.

The Federation itself had become a huge benefit. They had taken rich, prosperous land from the humans, and had strong trade relationships with

races like the dwarves. That wasn't something that could be sliced up and divided out like a cake. Instead, the Federation was likely to transform into an organization for distributing the wealth between its members. It would be like a multiracial kingdom.

"Even though they wouldn't be able to have any kids with me," Win said with an air of self-deprecation.

Actually, that might be exactly why they wanted one of their relatives to marry him. For example, if he married one of their sisters, the fact that they couldn't produce any children meant succession might go through her nieces and nephews instead—in other words, children of the brother who had proposed the marriage in the first place. Though as a half-elf, Win would outlast the beastfolk by quite a large margin, so it would more likely fall to the children of *those* nieces and nephews instead.

"Even for you, if you found a human wife, there would be a chance." I had said it in an attempt to console him, but I scowled the moment the words left my mouth. Maybe I had been drinking too much. The dwarves and the elves might forgive Win having a human child to carry on his legacy, but the beastfolk absolutely wouldn't stand for it.

"Maybe. But that would be a challenge in its own way," Win replied with a wry smile as I took a drink of water this time.

It didn't have to be a human either. As a half-elf, Win had a chance at having children with another elf as well. But I couldn't say that without crossing beyond the territory of jokes. If word got out that a high elf wanted the leader of the Federation to take an elf as his wife, it would kick up waves that would transform the Federation utterly.

As for whether I actually wanted that or not...I guess if I had to say, I wanted to see Win have kids. But that was something I could never say out loud.

Besides, I was pretty confident Win had already lost someone quite important to him. If he wasn't forthcoming about it, I would never ask...but I could make a pretty good guess. In Win's letters, and in the stories of Win I had heard on my way here, there was mention of a woman from the Tiger Clan. But once I'd arrived, I saw no sign of her, and not a single person mentioned her. Almost as

if out of consideration for someone. In that case, it wasn't hard to guess what had happened.

"You've got lots of time to think about it," I laughed, clapping him on the shoulder.



There were plenty of choices available to him. He could even adopt, just as I had adopted him. Though not as long as mine, Win did have a considerable lifespan thanks to being a half-elf.

“If I spent half the time thinking that you do, I’d be an old man before I made any decisions,” Win returned with a laugh of his own, draining the mug in his hand.

I still remembered how angry Win would get when I came home stinking of alcohol, and now here he was. I suppose I had heard about it from the dwarves already, but now I got to see it for myself. The sight made me strangely happy.

Enough so that I felt it called for a toast, I thought as I reached for another mug myself.

Side Stories — Fragments of Meeting

Tyulei's Monologue: Conquest and Control

As far as I could remember, the other elves in my village called me weird, and I understood they were right.

In particular, they thought I was strange for having an interest in humans. In my opinion, humans were creatures of conquest and control. That was the way they lived, and something they enjoyed. To give an example or two, they used dogs for hunting and horses as a method of transportation. Humans didn't have a dog's strong sense of smell, nor did they have the speed or strength of horses, so they dominated both in order to make their lives easier.

Basically, the human way of life was conquest and control of the world around them to make up for what they themselves lacked. At the same time, the wild animals they captured and domesticated then began to change to suit the humans' needs. It was a domination of life and a conquest of nature. This outrageous idea wasn't cooked up purely out of necessity either. I felt it was born from an innate human desire to control their environment.

It wasn't something aimed only at dogs or horses. They carved out stone to make houses and statues, and drew metals from the ground to make tools and weapons...I'd never be able to list all the ways they exercised that desire for control.

Of course, humans weren't the only race that acted this way. Elves used grasses and ivy to make homes, clothing, bows, and the like. But no other race took to the project with such vigor. Their desire for control extended not only to other creatures but even to people of their own race. Slavery, statecraft, currency, laws, all of these were methods of conquest and control.

That was why I was interested in them. Their strength to exert control over the world around them had caught my interest. Though weaker in almost every capacity compared to the other races, they were still the most plentiful and

prosperous.

I'm not sure whether it was lucky for me or not, but at any rate, I happened to be born in Shiyou Forest, a place where elves lived alongside humans. I suppose that was probably why I learned enough about humans to take an interest in them in the first place. Maybe if I had been born somewhere else, I would never have tried to learn about humans, and never been labeled for it.

Once I became old enough to be called an adult by elven standards, I chose to leave the forest behind and live together with the humans. That was a choice born from my desire to fulfill my curiosity, but also partly out of feelings of rebellion against the other elves who had always thought I was so strange.

Upon leaving the forest, I took up farming, a profession pursued by many humans. This was another way they sought to conquer and control nature: digging up and cultivating the ground, growing plants known as "crops" for the sake of food. Sometimes they even mixed plants together to create entirely new breeds. And they did all that as if it were perfectly ordinary, seemingly unaware that what they were doing was on the same level as the acts of the harvest god they believed in.

Most elves had no idea what humans were doing in their fields, but if they ever figured it out, they would probably frown on their activities. From an elven perspective, it looked like exceptionally reckless behavior. But while I originally found myself confused by a lot of what they did, I quickly found myself becoming totally absorbed in the work. After all, since this agricultural work was without a doubt the same kind of conquest and control that humans exercised everywhere else...for some reason, I seemed to be a lot better at it than they were. I found that rather amusing.

It was enough to make me feel I might not just be a strange elf, but a dangerous one too. And the one who confirmed that for me was a certain high elf.

As humans began aggressively hunting down elves to enslave them, many elves moved to Shiyou Forest to take advantage of the barrier that protected us. The humans in Inelda continued to live alongside us as neighbors, but the

other nations weren't so friendly, regularly making raids into our territory. Unable to bear these constant attacks, the human Ineldans fled while the elf population continued to grow.

As large as Shiyou Forest was, it wasn't large enough to support such a huge population with its natural bounty. In hopes of making up for some of the lack of food we were experiencing, I continued working the fields the Ineldans had left behind.

As for the elves being targeted by humans...while many of the elves coming to Shiyou Forest from the outside resented them, I wasn't especially bothered by their behavior. I knew humans were that kind of creature from the start. If you wanted to avoid being targeted by them, you needed to interact with and live alongside them, as we had in Inelda. Alternatively, you would have to wipe them out whenever they got close, not allowing them anywhere nearby.

But the elves weren't willing to do either of these things, simply holing up in their forests and ignoring the outside world. It was no wonder that the world eventually brought disaster down on them. Never mind avoiding it, they couldn't even see it coming. The elves of this region might have been on track for extinction.

But even as I thought that, I kept at my work. Realizing how necessary my work was, a number of other elves began to pitch in, but even with their help we couldn't make enough. As an elf, I couldn't bring myself to cut down the forests to clear the land we needed. I suppose even if I could resolve myself to do so, the other elves would never allow it.

But then one day, we suddenly had a visitor. The spirits in the forest, even those in the earth and the sky, suddenly became hyperactive. It was like a gust of wind had swooped in to blow away the gloomy atmosphere in Shiyou Forest.

Only a few moments later, the wind spirits carried a message of greeting throughout the forest. A high elf had arrived. It was almost impossible to believe something so convenient had happened, but seeing how the spirits were acting, there was no doubting it.

That day had marked a clear change in Shiyou Forest, the day when hope returned to the eyes of the elves.

My first meeting with the high elf, a man by the name of Lord Acer, had been while I was finishing up some work in the fields. I noticed the spirits had started going crazy, so I went to take a look. I found someone who seemed to be glowing, having the time of his life looking over my crops.

Honestly speaking, I was quite shocked. For elves, the high elves were a huge deal. They existed somewhere between the elves and the spirits, eventually destined to become spirits themselves, becoming a part of nature. That was why the elves admired and loved the high elves.

But that was only from the perspective of an ordinary elf. For a weirdo like me, I had my suspicions as to whether high elves were all they were cracked up to be. That was, until I met one face-to-face.

The man I saw in front of me that day surpassed the idea of “incredible.” Even if you took every elf in Shiyou Forest and combined them all into a single person, they still probably wouldn’t match his aura. I had never imagined a single individual could compare with nature itself like this.

And yet, faced with the immensity of him, I didn’t feel even the slightest bit of envy. People might be struck with wonder or admiration at the vastness of the sky, but they were never envious of it, were they?

Even so, this high elf, Lord Acer was...I know this would sound quite rude, but he seemed so *human*. After all, he immediately recognized the value of my work and promised to get me more land to work with. And the way he chose to do it was to make a huge river separating Inelda from the other human kingdoms, thus making more of our land safe for farming. While the scale of his actions was enormous, there was no denying that he was creating a new environment suited to our needs, a conquest and control of nature. It was the exact same kind of thinking that led humans to build rivers, bringing water to their fields.

Since he was a high elf, many of the other elves considered this feat to be an act of divine creation. But as someone who had spent so much time with humans, I felt like his ideas were very much like theirs.

I ended up learning later that Lord Acer had spent a great deal of time living

among humans, as I had. Really, he had learned much more from them than I had, from swordsmanship to magic and even sculpting. I heard he even learned blacksmithing from a dwarf. In other words, he was much stranger than I was.

Reas had been assigned as Lord Acer's escort. Among the young elves in Shiyou Forest, he stood foremost among their elite. It was adorable seeing such an elite being led around by the nose, constantly being caught by surprise by Lord Acer's different values.

I ended up spending a lot of time with these two. Apparently Lord Acer had decided he wanted to leave Inelda—whose name he changed to Shiyou—in the hands of the younger elves like me and Reas when he left. He believed that if we were going to behave as a country and not just some forest settlement, relying on the old system of elders would work.

Lord Acer's arrival changed Shiyou immensely, a change that extended to my life as well. A few years after he created the river protecting Shiyou and expanded the amount of land we could use for farming, the food crisis we were facing had been resolved. Yes, in just a few years, he fixed a problem we had thought to be all but hopeless. Of course, much of what made that possible was his immense power, making him capable of fending off the humans who threatened us, and I imagined many of the other elves didn't see anything beyond that.

But I noticed the hidden possibilities lurking behind the exercise of his power. Food was the primary determining factor in how many people a place could support. That was why food had become such a problem in Shiyou when the population of elves exploded. But on the other hand, a surplus of food would allow the elven population to grow even further. We wouldn't be limited to accepting refugees from other forests, but we'd also be able to grow our numbers naturally ourselves.

The biggest factor behind the strength of the humans was their prosperity as a species. In short, it was their force of numbers. But what would happen if elves gained the same advantage? Wouldn't they easily trample the humans who currently filled the world and take it over for themselves?

That would certainly take a great deal of time. I don't know if it would be

possible within my own lifetime. But the seed for that future rested in my hands now. If elves became the most plentiful race in the world, would they still hold to the same values we did now? Would they turn into people like humans, obsessing with conquest and control? It was an extremely interesting idea.

When I reported the resolution of Shiyou's food crisis, Lord Acer came to the same conclusion I did. He really was very human. Seeing the anticipation, unease, and fear all mixed together in his expression was quite vindicating. And that sense of satisfaction taught me that I was more than just a weirdo. To the elves, I was dangerous. After all, taking a dark pleasure in being able to scare a high elf with my own abilities was nothing if not heresy to an elf.

That said, I wasn't actually interested in making that future into a reality, nor in destroying the way of life the elves currently ascribed to. If I did that, all elves everywhere would end up like me. That sounded a bit boring. It wasn't at all what I wanted. I just wanted to hold on to ever more possibilities.

"Lord Acer, once the situation in Shiyou settles down, I think I will give up on farming."

Acer's expression was full of both regret and relief. I couldn't help but enjoy it. There was really nothing for him to worry about. He was asking me to do something with far more impact than farming in running the country of Shiyou. That had far greater possibilities for conquest and control than there were in farming. I really should have been thanking him.

"I have to say, this all has me very excited. If I can't spend all my time farming, who knows what else I'll be able to do?"

There wasn't the least bit of dishonesty in that statement. I was longing for something new. I was a dangerous, heretical elf. Spending so much time with a paragon of elven kind like Reas had really reinforced that. But I kept it all a secret, acting only as a bit of a weirdo.

How far could my desire for conquest and control take me? How many times could I scare this high elf? I was really looking forward to finding out.

Possible and Impossible

“No, Airena, that’s ridiculous! It’s impossible!”

So said a young member of the elven caravan. Though he was normally so competent and reliable, this time his refusal came out as almost a scream.

I guess I could understand his feelings. I was certainly asking a bit too much this time. So that was all the more reason I replied to him with a gentle smile.

“Really? Are you sure?”

Responding to someone who was running high on emotion in kind would only hurt us both. This wasn’t a battle, it was a meeting. There was no need to hurt each other.

“Yes! Even if it’s at Lord Acer’s request, even if it’s to help our own people, crossing the sea for elves so far away is far too dangerous! Never mind the lack of experience, it’s entirely unprecedented.” Apparently my quiet response had helped, as his came back a bit more measured.

Looking around at the others who were present, it seemed the other heads of the caravan mostly agreed with him. Though those participating in the caravan were a bit more adventurous than ordinary elves, it seemed the activities of the caravan had grown stable enough that their adventurous spirit was starting to wane. I didn’t mean to insult them for that, but I did find it a little boring. However, I did have to praise them for not immediately accepting the request just because it had come from Lord Acer.

The only real exceptions seemed to be Rebees and Huratio. They were calm from the beginning, already getting excited at the idea. They were particularly strange for members of the caravan, and had been strongly influenced by Lord Acer personally. I’d bet the two of them were already dreaming about what they’d see and do in the west-central region.

“Experience and precedent, is it? I suppose you aren’t wrong. Our current caravan is not equipped for traveling by sea. I can understand why you’d feel it’s impossible.”

But aside from those two, I had some convincing to do. Luckily, they were all smart individuals capable of listening calmly and thinking about what I said. It would be much easier to convince them than someone who was rashly and

emotionally disagreeing. I had dealt with many such people, arguing back with all emotion and no reason, out of a fear of the elves rising to new prominence.

“But think back to when you first decided to leave the forest. You thought it was impossible back then, didn’t you? I felt that way when I was a child too. And yet here we are, all living outside the forest.”

There were no lies in my words. When I was young, stories of the outside world had piqued my interest, but I still believed it was entirely impossible for me to go there myself. But here I was.

“I left the forest after growing up, learning the skills I needed to survive, and holding on to my curiosity for the outside world. In other words, my desires never changed as I matured.”

In many ways, the elven caravan was like a child. It had huge room for growth. It might not be able to operate outside the east-central region yet, but it still had room to grow into something that could span the whole continent.

This request was a great opportunity to begin that growth. Acquiring a ship, hiring a crew, and finding goods to sell would no doubt be a tremendous endeavor. It was still true that we had no experience, but if we could shoulder that burden and make it happen anyway, we’d earn the trust of some forty thousand elves in the West. Instead of visiting each tiny settlement one by one like we had in the East, we could reach all of them at once. And when the nation of Shiyou eventually dissolved and the elves returned to their own forests, they would carry that trust back home with them. We could use that trust to create more opportunities for trade and even recruit new members for the caravan.

It was truly a golden opportunity. Of course, it still came with its fair share of risks. But saying it was absurd or impossible was going too far. There were many things in this world that were beyond our control.

For example, people all had differing lifespans. There was nothing we could do to change that, we probably shouldn’t even if we could. Even Lord Acer had been forced to say goodbye to people that he cherished. But aside from those things, Lord Acer’s behavior had taught me that you couldn’t write something off as impossible before you tried it.

I had asked him to look for the White Lake, but not because I had naively believed someone as impressive as him could find it. I had thought that, after losing someone so precious to him, having an objective might make his steps a little lighter as he set off for the Far East. In other words, when I asked, I had assumed it would be impossible. Though that is an extremely rude thing to say after he actually went out searching for it.

And yet, not only did he discover that the White Lake existed in the land of the giants, but he went so far as to hatch a phoenix chick to take us there. Of course, that was all only possible because of who he was, but every time he surprised me with another story, it reinforced the idea that “impossible” was just something we told ourselves. We might fail, all of our efforts might amount to nothing, or we might exhaust ourselves and collapse before reaching our goal, but you really couldn’t say something was impossible before making the attempt.

Someday, I hoped to attempt something that I had decided beforehand was impossible like Lord Acer had. Compared to that hypothetical challenge, this request felt like nothing at all.

I slowly looked at each of the leaders of the caravan. I had explained the need for change, the possible gains, and my personal feelings. So I asked them again.

“Lord Acer has asked us to help the elves in the nation of Shiyou. Is it *really* impossible for us to do so?”

The elves gathered around me soon admitted that it wasn’t entirely impossible, thus allowing the meeting to proceed smoothly. We needed to decide in concrete terms what we would be doing, and we needed a solid plan for actually helping.

Once it had been decided that we would act, they all settled back into the competent and dependable people I had come to know.

The Old Master’s Request, and a Friend’s Request

I had actually been thinking of making Acer the next king of the dwarves for quite a while. His skill as a blacksmith had long surpassed that of the average

dwarf. Even his powers over fire that helped him work the furnace wouldn't be anywhere near enough to get him a master blacksmithing license in only ten years alone. He had really worked himself to the bone.

The greatest opposition from the blacksmithing guild came from the dwarves there who didn't believe anyone could develop that kind of skill in such a short time, let alone a non-dwarf. It was one thing if the rejection had been an emotional one. All you had to do was silence the opposition with your fists. That was, in fact, what I had done. But this was a reasoned, coolheaded argument. Answering that would require strong evidence.

The evidence I provided was the steel Acer had worked for those ten years. Poor quality nails, much better ones, pots that barely seemed capable of doing the job, others with personal touches he had added to make them easier to use, like uniquely fashioned handles. Sharp but fragile spearheads, sturdy yet dull spearheads, spearheads that had married both. Useless failures of swords, swords that passed with a fair grade, and others that could truly be called masterpieces. I showed them all this, putting his growth across those ten years on display for the guild.

"Ten years is certainly a short time. But I saw the progress he made in those ten years with my own eyes, and I want to see where he'll go in the future. That is what this license is for."

Such was my case.

I really wanted to see what heights he was capable of reaching. I had no doubt he would continue to grow. In addition to his incredible talent, he also had a love for blacksmithing that rivaled any dwarf's, enough to keep improving while he traveled with few opportunities to actually practice his trade. Having both the talent and the passion for blacksmithing had brought him to a place of famed skill even while traveling across the continent.

But I couldn't help but think, if he hadn't spent so much time on swordsmanship, magic, and even sculpting...if he had just settled down and focused on his blacksmithing, how far would he have come?

So I wanted to see him become king of the dwarves. If I entrusted the throne to him, I knew he wouldn't disappoint me. He had a strong sense of duty, and

would spare no effort on any job given to him. The king of the dwarves should be the greatest blacksmith in the kingdom. If he took that position, he would no doubt pour every ounce of his spirit into living up to that title. I knew that if he settled down and focused his passion, he would make something that could change the world.

I also wanted to give him, someone who wandered across the whole world, a place to call home. No matter how much longer he would live than the rest of us, he needed a place that would accept him. The kingdom of the dwarves could become that for him. I had been building it up to be that kind of place.

However...when I told him I wanted him to be king, he shook his head.

“I can’t become the king of the dwarves, Oswald.”

He loved this place, so he didn’t want to become king and so put a limit on what the people here could do. It was exactly the kind of answer I would expect from him. Though he clearly seemed intrigued by the idea, his perspective as someone with such a long lifespan led him to making the choice that he thought was best for the country as a whole. Even if the picture he was drawing wouldn’t include him.

So there was nothing else I could do. A bird could be kept in a cage, but no cage could trap the wind. Even the purest water would grow stagnant and dirty if kept in one place for too long. Though I still couldn’t help but wonder what he’d accomplish if he gave up his travels and settled down in the kingdom of the dwarves, asking him to do so might have been like trying to tie down the wind or stop a river.

As much as I was his master in blacksmithing, I was also his friend, even if I was constantly getting older while he remained exactly the same. If I forced him to change his way of life, I’d probably regret it until the day I died.

“I see. I won’t force you, then.”

I was a little disappointed, but there was nothing I could do about it. Whether he cultivated his inborn talent or left it to die was his decision, not mine. Though as his teacher, it pained me somewhat to be unable to bring out the entirety of his potential. But as a friend of that damned elf, that was the end of the discussion.

Acer would next be heading to the land of the giants. Apparently it was in some place above the clouds. I thought you had to be crazy to go so far just to sate your curiosity, but it was just the kind of adventure I'd expect Acer to go on. I'd have to hold on to my health for another few decades so that I could hear Acer's stories of the place. And I'd get some great drink ready for whenever he decided to visit again.

The most I could do right now was live for as long as possible, waiting for the stories he'd bring back for me. As his friend, I only had one request for that damned elf: come back safe and sound.

EVENTS
SO FAR0 ▶
YEARS

I was born into this world. I grabbed at a maple leaf soon after, so ended up being called the Child of the Maple, or Acer.

30 ▶
YEARS

I slowly started to become conscious of myself, and realized that I possessed memories of events from my previous life. This was probably when I really became who I am.

50 ▶
YEARS

I tried to copy the adults around me and pick up a bow, and ended up getting scolded for it. Later, they made a child-sized bow for me, which I played with almost daily.

80 ▶
YEARS

The elders taught me how to read and write. They passed down legends of the high elves to me, and taught me there was a world outside of the Forest Depths. This was when I realized this world also had humans.

120 ▶
YEARS

I became recognized as the most skilled archer among the young high elves. I wasn't particularly praised for it, nor did anyone seem frustrated to lose to me, but the event made me quite happy. I started to have strong feelings of being different from those around me.

150 ▶
YEARS

Having reached the age of adulthood for a high elf, I took the chance to leave the Forest Depths.

I ended up in the Kingdom of Ludoria, at a frontier city called Vistcourt. I met Rodna (Human, 28), Airenna (Elf, 140), Martena (Human, 20), and Clayas (Human, 20). My days became so densely packed with happenings that my previous years couldn't even compare.

The next day I became the apprentice of Oswald (Dwarf, 80) and began learning blacksmithing.

160 ▶
YEARS

Leaving Vistcourt behind, I reached the capital of Ludoria, Wolfir. I became an apprentice swordsman under Kaeha (Human, 16) and started my life at the dojo. The food made by her mother Kuroha (Human, 36) reminded me a little of my past life. Half a year later, I met with Clayas again, and Kaeha became an adventurer.

163 ▶
YEARS

Kaeha returned to the dojo and I learned of what was happening to the elves in Ludoria from Airenna. Leaving the dojo behind, I began work to free the enslaved elves. Half a year later, I brought about a massive earthquake in Ludoria's eastern region.

164 ▶
YEARS

I arrived at the port town of Saurotay in the Vilestorika Republic. A city guard introduced me to Grand (Human, 22) and his bar, where I also met the waitress Caleina (Human, 22) and got into a fight with the fisherman Dreeze (Human, 22). Caught up in the dispute between the merchants and fishermen, I spent a month there enjoying the seafood.

A few months later, I met Nonna (Human, 10) at an inn in Janpemon, a city in Travoya of the Azueda Alliance.



- 165▶
YEARS I arrived in Odine, the city of magic within the Azeuda Alliance. I met the mage Kawshman (Human, 25) and made a deal with him to teach him blacksmithing in exchange for him teaching me magic. Our goal was to make a real magic sword.
- 170▶
YEARS In Sviej, the capital city of Zaints, I met with Airena and took custody of Win (Half-Elf, 6), adopting him as my son. Looking for a place to raise him, I returned to Janpemon where I met a grown-up Nonna who was a great help during my stay there.
- 172▶
YEARS I returned to the Yosogi dojo in the city of Wolfir, reuniting with Kaeha and Kuroha and meeting Kaeha's children Shizuki (Human, 7) and Mizuha (Human, 7). The time I spent surrounded by children was peaceful and happy.
- 173▶
YEARS Taking Win and Shizuki with me, I visited Vistcourt again, meeting Rodna, Clayas, and Martena again. I experienced firsthand how quickly humans grow up, and how quickly they grew old.
- 180▶
YEARS Kuroha passed away (Age of death, 56).
Perhaps due to her frail constitution, she passed away fairly young.
She had been a strict but kind woman. Her passing taught me how to face the many goodbyes I would have to say in the future.
- 182▶
YEARS I took Win to the kingdom of the dwarves where I was reunited with Oswald. My master in blacksmithing was a tremendous influence on my life.
- 187▶
YEARS Oswald was chosen as next in line for the dwarven throne. As a title granted to the most skilled smith among the dwarves, it was the natural result.
A few months later I headed to the Empire of Fodor, where I assassinated the vampire Rayhon and his thrall, the emperor.
- 188▶
YEARS I began working to establish a trade relationship between the kingdom of the dwarves and the elves. It felt like an entirely utopian goal, but I had many people around me who helped.
- 189▶
YEARS Airena visited the kingdom of the dwarves together with a group of elves. Among them, the minstrel Huratio (Elf, 221) and Rebees (Elf, 201) stood out the most. To my surprise, they soon became accepted by the dwarves.
- 193▶
YEARS I returned to the Yosogi dojo in Wolfir. I lived there together with Kaeha up until her last moments.
I also met Shizuki again, now head of the Yosogi School, and met his children Souha (Human, 6) and Touki (Human, 4) for the first time.
- 195▶
YEARS Heading to the city of Vistcourt, I visited the graves of Clayas (Age of death, 65) and Martena (Age of death, 65), where I met Airena again. She had lost two incredibly important people in her life, and I knew it wouldn't be long before I experienced the same thing.
- 196▶
YEARS Win left on his journey. Now that he was grown, I suspected he would follow a very different life from mine.
- 208▶
YEARS Kaeha passed away (Age of death, 64).
She was a very important person to me.

No amount of words I wrote here would be able to express how much. Leaving Ludoria, I headed to the Far East.

209 ▶
YEARS

Passing through the Man-Eating Swamp and out onto the Great Grasslands, I met the Balm tribe, including Zelen (Human, 10) and Shuro (Human, 8). A little while later, I fought with the Dahlian tribe, where I captured the boy known as the Child of Fire, named Juyal (Human, 13). I then began teaching the three of them swordsmanship.

212 ▶
YEARS

I freed Juyal, allowing him to return to the Dahlians. I felt it was awfully quick to let him go, but I knew he'd be okay.

214 ▶
YEARS

Saying goodbye to the Balm tribe, I took my horse Sayr and crossed the Great Grassland. Half a year later, I arrived in the Ancient Gold Empire, the greatest nation of the East. In White River Province, I met Jizou (Earthfolk, 40), and the two of us launched an attack on the Merchant Association. The two of us then headed to Black Snow Province, where he introduced me to Wanggui Xuannu (Mystic, Age Unknown).

215 ▶
YEARS

I learned the secrets of the Ancient Gold Empire from Longcui Dijun (Mystic, Age Unknown) and met the golden dragon. I spent a good deal of time in Ancient Gold Province talking with the golden dragon and interacting with the mystics. The golden dragon, an ancient friend of the high elves, turned out to be kind and gentle despite the role he bore.

223 ▶
YEARS

Leaving the Ancient Gold Empire, I boarded a ship heading for Fusou. Traveling through Fusou, I ended up at the capital of Outo where I met Gonzou (Human, 71) and Mizuyo (Merfolk, Age Unknown). I was then introduced to the old swordsmith Sakuji (Human, 69), and we exchanged knowledge of blacksmithing techniques.

224 ▶
YEARS

I saw the world from the top of the Fusou Tree. This marked the end of my journey east, so I began the trip back to Ludoria. On a ship from the Ancient Gold Empire to Mintar, I met with the ship captain Suin (Human, 34). Visiting Janpemon, I met Nonna's granddaughter Sheyne (Human, 30) and great-granddaughter Aina (Human, 8). Though the girl I knew was long gone, not everything in Janpemon had changed.

225 ▶
YEARS

In Zieden's Ha Forest, I met Sheez (Elf, 62) at the elven settlement. Without realizing it, enough time had passed for an elven baby to grow into a young man. A few weeks later, I created mountains to seal the gates of Zieden's capital city as a threat against them.

226 ▶
YEARS

I reunited with Airena and the elven caravan. We began taking action to end the war Zieden had brought to the region. Half a year later, I returned to the Yosogi dojo in Wolfir to visit Kaeha's grave, marking the end of my sixteen-year journey to the Far East. While there, I reunited with Shizuki, Touki, and Souha, and also met Touki and Souha's children. I grew particularly close with Touki's daughter Aiha (Human, 10) and Souha's son Kairi (Human, 17).

227 ▶
YEARS

Materials I had ordered from the dwarven kingdom arrived, and I began the production of katana with the Yosogi School smiths. There was no telling if usage of the katana would take off in this region.

○ Aiha took her monster-hunting exam. Though she was still a child, she was able to cut her own path into the future.

229 ▶
YEARS

At the Yosogi dojo in Vistcourt. I met with Mizuha for the last time before heading into the Great Pulha Woodlands. I knew I wouldn't see Shizuki or Mizuha again while they were still alive, but they had still given me so much. There was no way I would ever forget either of them.

230 ▶
YEARS

Reaching the Forest Depths in the center of the Great Pulha Woodlands, I was reunited with Salix (High Elf, over 900) and learned of the location of the phoenix, in a place barred to all but the high elf elders. However, the phoenix was still an egg, so I tried my hand at hatching it.

233 ▶
YEARS

The phoenix hatched from its egg. Naturally what hatched was a baby, so it would take quite some time before I would be able to ride it to the world above the clouds. Leaving the Forest Depths, I headed for Sigclair. Passing through Giatica, Vilestorika, and Kirkoim, I ended up in Travoya where I visited Janpemon and met Sheyne and Aina again. I stayed there for half a year, making swords for Aina and her boyfriend Bireck.

234 ▶
YEARS

In the city of Marmaros in Sigclair, I made a dagger for the lord of the city, Myos Marmaros (Human, 42) and was granted an audience. He agreed to teach me to carve sculptures. I also met his son Claytos Marmatos (Human, 14).

236 ▶
YEARS

Claytos Marmaros left to begin his first term of military service, wearing a suit of armor ordered by Myos and crafted by me. I prayed it would help him make a safe return.
A short time later, a series of murders occurred in Marmaros, which ended up being connected to a struggle for the acquisition of marble by the higher-ups in the church, so I left Marmaros.

237 ▶
YEARS

I reduced the cathedral under the authority of Archbishop Vischea to rubble, getting the help of the earth spirits to leave behind an enormous and furious stone giant. The result only reminded me of how unskilled I was in sculpting. A few months later, I arrived in a developing village in south Zieden, where I decided to spend five years.

240 ▶
YEARS

I was visited by Aiha at the village, and we had a sparring match. She had decided she was going to start a new Yosogi dojo which focused on use of the katana. Since it was still going to be affiliated with the Yosogi School, I was responsible as a consultant for them too.

242 ▶
YEARS

Humans really grew up so fast. There was no telling what kind of flowers the young would eventually bloom into.

I began my journey to the West after hearing rumors of a disturbance there. Boarding a ship in Vilestorika, I reached the country of Jilchias in the west-central region. There, I met the lord of the port town of Tomhans, a man by the name of Grenda Welbs (Human, 45).

I arrived at Inelda, the kingdom of elves, and decided to help raise a representative who could lead them.

Looking for people who were up to the task, I met many young and exceptionally skilled elves, like Reas (185) and Tyulei (170).

Five months later, I separated Inelda from its neighbors by creating a river, and the nation of elves took the name Shiyou.

○

245 ▶
YEARS

Tyulei's team of elves who were focused on agriculture effectively solved the food shortage in Shiyou. I had always felt that elves familiar with humans were reliable, but this may have been the first time I had been afraid of their potential.

248 ▶
YEARS

The nation of Jilchias launched an attack on Kazarya, one of Shiyou's enemies. Kazarya fell a few months later, and Jilchias began making use of Shiyou's river for water freight.

250 ▶
YEARS

One hundred years had passed since I first left the Forest Depths.

252 ▶
YEARS

With my role in Shiyou finished, I left things in Reas and Tyulei's hands and headed west.

After a few months of traveling through the Labyrinth of Death in the Mountains of Mist, I arrived in the Far West region. Within the Labyrinth, I discovered an enormous statue that seemed to have been left behind by the demons.

A few months later, with the help of the beastfolk of the bear and goat clans, I made my way to the city of Clausula, a meeting place for the Federation's many races, where I finally reunited with Win.

253 ▶
YEARS

Together with Win, we took down the High Priestess of the Quoramites who was leading the religion that had overtaken the Far West. She had been a type of fallen mystic called a soul eater.

Afterward, Heero came to pick me up and took me back to the East. After taking over ten years to get there, returning in just a few days felt quite strange.

Without visiting the east-central region, I headed straight for the dwarven kingdom in the north, where I reunited with Oswald.

255 ▶
YEARS

Oswald suggested I become the next king of the dwarves, but I declined. It was an enticing prospect, and I was happy to be a friend of the dwarves, but I couldn't be their leader. That was not my role there.

256 ▶
YEARS

Airena arrived in the kingdom of the dwarves, and Heero took the two of us into the sky in search of the land of the giants.

We found an enormous structure built on a bank of clouds. Inside, we met the giant Cordes and learned a great deal about the nature of the world. Afterward, we found the White Lake Airena had been searching for, and decided to spend more time together.

Afterword

Hello, this is Rarutori. Thank you for picking up volume six of *Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored*.

Man is it hot!

Actually, I guess this book will be coming out in September, so I suppose I should say it *was* hot. I certainly hope it's cooled off a bit by then. This poor author is quite weak to the heat. Unfortunately, this weakness does not come with resistance to the cold. Autumn is definitely the best time of year.

In this series, the passage of time is one of the major themes, but since it's typically passing in increments of a year or more, you may not feel the changing of seasons all that much.

Spring has its vegetable tempura that isn't quite fried food, and summer has its soba, *somen*, sweetfish, and eel. Eel is especially good when matched with dried plum, don't you think? Autumn is the season of new rice, so almost anything you eat then is delicious. Winter's best offer would probably have to be hotpot. Then there's meat and alcohol, which are good all year round.

Of course, if we really got into the weeds, we could name tons more and really break them down on a month-by-month basis. The refreshing feeling of taking a mouthful of *sake* in the summer compared to the cold sensation of taking a drink in autumn are entirely different, but both are great. Really, it's fine as long as it tastes good.

If we look at Acer's journey in even greater detail, we *could* probably find all sorts of small joys like that. For now, though, let's take a look at the themes from volume five.

The first chapter was about that which was inherited. Having finished his journey to the East, it told of his reunion with the Yosogi School. The theme really comes down to exactly what was written in the title—the skills the Yosogi School students inherited from Kaeha—but also the relationship with Acer they inherited from her.

But Kaeha's swordsmanship will forever remain hers. Even having taken her place, Shizuki's swordsmanship would never be the same as hers. In exactly the same way, the relationship between the school and Acer would change with him as its new head. While Kaeha treasured her personal relationship with Acer, Shizuki and Mizuha were more interested in developing a lasting connection between him and their schools.

And of course, Aiha was probably looking for something entirely new as well.

The second chapter was about Acer's home, the Forest Depths. The theme was looking over one's hometown after a period of growth. When Acer had first set out on his journey, he felt like he was already complete as a person. Maybe that was due to his youth, or because of the memories he retained from his previous life. But by traveling across the world, he came to learn that not everything was exactly how he imagined it to be.

After having grown himself, he could get a new appreciation for the home he had come from, and how the people around him had watched over him there. The fact he had noticed there was a phoenix hidden in the Forest Depths was yet another sign of his growth.

The third chapter followed the same whims and travel as always. Once again, it was exactly like the title suggested. He traveled wherever the wind carried him, following his own personal goals. However, he had already visited many of the places he was now traveling through, so it was also a journey of rediscovering those places.

Chapter four covered Acer picking up a new skill for the first time in a while. But after having followed so many paths to the point of mastery already,

starting from the very beginning again as a student wasn't the easiest thing for him to do. As much as Acer seemed to enjoy it, it was something that would give his teacher pause. He was already a master of another path, so it might have felt to them like he was there more as a tourist than as a student.

But his teacher in sculpting, Professor Myos, though certainly being a skilled sculptor, did not make it his profession as a noble. He wasn't a craftsman so much as he was an artist. That allowed him to empathize with Acer's desire to learn something new.

Chapter five was a bonus added for the light novel version. It was a story of how effective Acer could be if he actually put down roots somewhere for a while. He wasn't just an accomplished swordsman who could protect people, but a good teacher too. He could hunt to provide food, and use his blacksmithing to help develop a village. And being a high elf allowed him to find sources of water with ease.

He really would be extremely convenient to have around. Any village would want to have their own Acer. If he was part of a village-building video game, he'd throw the balance of the whole thing off entirely.

The sixth chapter was about war. He began his journey to the West in search of Win. The thing I wanted to express most in this chapter was that if Acer had decided to head west instead of east when he first left the Forest Depths, the story would have turned out entirely differently.

That wraps up volume five.

Acer's journey west continues in volume six, so I hope you enjoy it.

Now then, let's get to the alcohol.

This time, I want to talk about something a bit stranger than usual.

I saw a crowdfunding campaign, probably on Twitter, for something called "phonograph *sake*" or "record *sake*." One of the breweries I am particularly

fond of was taking part in it—in fact, one I already mentioned in these afterwords: Miyoshikiku—so I decided to give it a try.

But trying to imagine what difference the vibrations of music would have on the brewing process is kind of difficult. I really don't know much about it, but I do know that the bottle I received was exceptionally good. The aroma and taste were extremely showy, like it was screaming, "*Sake!!!*" at you. It really came across as a high-class product. It seemed like a good kind of drink to pair with a meal. I tasted it alongside some others who were quite experienced with alcohol, and they all gave it good reviews. Also, the bottle it came in was extremely cute.

Actually, that was my first experience participating in a crowdfunding event, so getting to see the *sake* I was supporting come to completion was an interesting experience. These things can be quite fun, can't they?

As Acer comes to the end of this leg of his journey in volume six, it feels like we've reached a good stopping point. But even so, the story will continue. This book itself probably has an advertisement for the next volume in it too. I hope to see you there. I would be ecstatic if you were to stay to watch over the decisions Acer comes to in the future.

Afterword

Congratulations on the release of Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored volume 6!

In celebration of Acer and Airen tying the knot(?), this is an image I dreamed up on my own. I picked a festival atmosphere because this year, my spirits were lifted by a fireworks festival near me. Okay, not really, ha ha.

Even though he wasn't a genius of swordsmanship, Win's hard work finally paid off and brought him a victory when he and Acer were reunited! It made me wonder how I'd feel if I were to lose to my own child. I'm sure it would be a rather complex feeling, but in the end I would probably feel happy.

That day is coming for me too!

*That is all for this time.
Thank you for reading!*





"I never thought I'd see you standing under a Spirit Tree again."

"Do you remember, Acer? Long ago, you took me to see a Spirit Tree. It was pretty big, but this one might be just as tall."

win

A half-elf standing beside a Spirit Tree—I knew just how difficult that was to accomplish. But Win had made it happen. He had chosen a difficult path, and while that made me worry for him, I was also extremely proud.

ACER



HEERO

"Lord Acer, what do we do if, by some one-in-a-million chance, we happen to fall off?"

AIRENA

"You can just ask the wind spirits to slow your fall."

"I have carried millions on my back in the past, and not once have any of my passengers ever fallen. Such a possibility does not even exist."

Apparently our conversation had touched a nerve with him. But the scale of his reply was so big, I couldn't help but laugh.





Bonus Short Story

One Twisted Guy Hides His Embarrassment

It was time to go home. We had finished everything we wanted to do up here, so there was no reason for us to stick around any longer. But just like any other experience looking out over something enormous, like the sea or the mountains, it could be quite difficult to peel yourself away from it. It wasn't that we weren't satisfied, but it felt like something was pulling at us to stay.

Well, I guess there was also the fact that walking back the way we came across the arduous cloudscape sounded like a huge pain. It would be dark soon too. I had no issues traveling through the night if we absolutely had to, but if there wasn't a good reason, it was something best avoided.

But as I thought that, an idea suddenly occurred to me. Looking at Airena by my side, I saw her smiling gently at the setting sun. It was rare for her to be so relaxed. She had no idea about the little prank cooking in my mind. This was my only chance.

Our hands still clasped, I pulled her toward me.

"Huh?" Taken by surprise, she offered no resistance as I quickly swept her off her feet, one hand supporting her back while the other held her legs, holding her just like a knight would carry a princess in a fairy tale.



It was a very efficient way of carrying someone, and was apparently also used as an expression of love or desire for another. However, in this case, I wasn't particularly worried about efficiency, nor was I trying to express any particular feelings.

While I was certainly strong enough that I could carry someone her size without issue, carrying her back across the clouds would obviously be far more exhausting than just walking normally.

As for an expression of desire for her, she had already shared that once her work with the caravan was done, she wanted to spend the rest of her life with me. Any desire I had for her had been far more than answered already. And as for expressing feelings of love for her...that would be a bit too embarrassing, you know?

So right now, the one and only reason I had lifted her up like this was to take away any chance she had at resisting.

"Umm...Lord Acer?" As she saw the grin on my face, I could see her starting to put the pieces together in her head, her voice filled with concern. But unfortunately for her, she was too late.

"Let's take a shortcut home," I said, evidently triggering full understanding as her face immediately paled. But again, it was already too late.

"U-Umm, I will walk back, so please don't worry about me." As I started to walk, she started to protest, but only vocally. She understood that fighting back here would be too dangerous. Of course, if she had *really* hated the idea, I wouldn't force her.

"But you said you wanted to stay with me, right?"

That was what she had told me.

Her face suddenly turned serious. "Perhaps I was too hasty," she said.

Honestly, that was probably true. Unfortunately, I couldn't really deny that. In truth, this was something I had been wondering about ever since our conversation about what we would do if we fell. Jumping from this height would likely be incredible. That was the kind of guy I was. You had to know

what you were signing up for if you asked to be my partner.

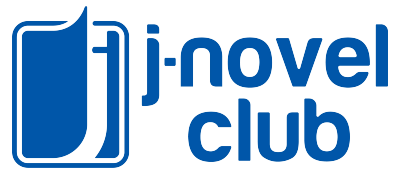
Finally accepting defeat, Airena wrapped her arms around my neck and clung on tight. Now that I thought about it, if I had been here with anyone else, I doubted I would have done something like this. Though she would certainly be furious at me afterward, I knew she'd also forgive me, so I could justify it as just a prank.

With every bit of strength I could muster, I kicked off the clouds and leaped into the White Lake—a hole in the clouds, with the sea far, far below us. Gravity pulled us down toward the water, the two of us quickly picking up speed as we fell.

Our weird behavior excited the spirits in the wind around us, whipping them up into excited dancing. Yeah, this was really fun. Airena could see the spirits as well, so she could see exactly the same thing. For a while, I decided to enjoy the sensation of falling, wrapped in the wind, surrounded by beautiful scenery in every direction.

From quite a distance away, I could feel Heero coming closer. I imagined he'd be in quite a rush to come pick us up. Maybe I was actually in for *two* scoldings when we finally touched down. But, at least for the moment, I was having a lot of fun.





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Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored: Volume 6

by rarutori

Translated by Nathan Macklem Edited by Austin Conrad

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