

8

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



**Zhang Shegong**  
One of the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire. Adept at making money.



**Shani**  
A half-elf adventurer.



**Acer**  
A free and unfettered high elf with a lifespan of one thousand years. He can feel himself approaching spirithood.



**Airena**  
Acer's partner. She continues to support the elven caravan after retiring as their leader.



**Soleil**  
Win's true daughter, raised by Acer and Airena. She went to the Ancient Gold Empire to train to be a mystic.

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While spending his days in peace, Acer was suddenly visited by the golden dragon.

On the southern continent, many high elves had died at the hands of humans, spurring the ebon dragon to initiate the End of the world. In order to prevent that from happening, Acer hopped on the golden dragon's back and flew across the ocean, where he encountered the high elf Lilium who had awoken the ebon dragon.

Though momentarily cornered, with the help of Kaeha's swordsmanship plus the spirits of Salix and the other high elf elders, he was able to defeat Lilium and avert the End.

After Acer moved with Airena to the island of Pantarheios and resolved a murder incident involving a student of the Yosogi Katana-Style Dojo, Win summoned him to the West for assistance in the selection of his successor...to hide the fact he was giving his own daughter, Soleil, over to Acer's care.

Acer and Airena raised her with love and care as a true family—until a visitor eventually arrived from the Ancient Gold Empire to inform them that Soleil had the talent to become a mystic. After much deliberation, Soleil herself chose to accept the invitation for training.

Soon after, Acer headed to the southern continent, and after speaking with the new high elf elder, Lilium, began to help rebuild civilization there.

# STORY





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# Chapter 1 — A Journey That Gained Nothing, Gave Nothing, Yet Left Something Behind

Time continued to flow. At times busy, at times quite calm. At times quite fun, at times rather hollow and empty. Sometimes it felt like it was going by so fast, and other times so slowly, but it never stopped.

Though the efforts to support the revitalization of the southern continent were centered around Airena and me at first, things had developed considerably over a hundred years or so, to the point the relationship was less about support and more about trade. Thus marked the end of Airena's and my involvement. Trade with the southern continent would continue to solidify the importance of the elven caravan in this world.

To be honest, getting everything ready had been quite difficult, but when things had actually started—and with all the traveling between continents we had to do—I didn't remember much about the experience except being busy all the time. Like many things, it was a challenge to start, but once we began, the momentum carried us forward.

Of course, there were difficulties along the way, but none of them were worth dwelling on. If there was one thing I could bring up, it would be our creation of the levees. That had been quite a flashy bit of work, and honestly rather fun. That's just sort of how it was.

It had been three hundred and fifty years since I left my home in the Forest Depths. I was five hundred years old. Before I realized it, half of my incredible lifespan as a high elf had passed me by. Of course, I knew I would be a spirit after that, so that realization didn't leave a particularly strong impression on me.

How much had I grown during this time? Thinking back, I had been quite the piece of work back then, so I wanted to believe I was a bit better now, but in a way, it felt like I was much the same.



But even if I had only changed a little, the northern continent had changed massively in that time. For example, first of all...the nation that I no doubt held the strongest connection to in the North, the Kingdom of Ludoria, no longer existed.

I believe I mentioned before that Darottei had expanded its territory significantly and started coming into conflict with Ludoria, causing frequent skirmishes between the two. Ludoria was a much more powerful nation, and so little by little they chipped away at Darottei's territory, growing even stronger as they went. But that new power wasn't being funneled into the hands of Ludoria's royalty, but into the noble families that lived in Ludoria's eastern regions. There had once been a large-scale purge of the nobility in eastern Ludoria, so there weren't many long-standing families left there.

As if to make up for that, Ludoria had set up many families with strong martial accomplishments in the East to help ward off the threat Darottei posed, giving them noble titles and land there. The Yosogi family was a good example. Having been given titles because of their military exploits, those families continued to exercise their might and skill against Darottei, making great gains against them.

But they didn't just strengthen their own force of arms either. Binding together, the noble families of the East cooperated in their defense against Darottei, and quickly turned the tide to begin invading it themselves. Without these martial families, Ludoria's eastern region might well have suffered constant raiding and pillaging by Darottei.

But as those same families continued to be successful in war, they became too powerful. Enough so that they came to rival the political influence of Ludoria's royal family and more storied nobility. Of course, the old powers had taken steps to try and curb the rise of these young noble families, but as I mentioned, they had been instrumental in dealing with the threat Darottei posed in the East. The new families couldn't be disposed of so easily.

So instead, half-hearted measures were applied to try to restrain and pressure the new nobility, which ended up opening a rift between them and the old political powers.

The royal family and older nobility saw the new nobility as green upstarts,



threatening the foundations of their kingdom. The new nobility saw the old as shackles dragging them down as they made war against Darottei. That said, the royal family had been the ones to give them their titles, so they still felt somewhat indebted to them. So for a considerable time, the gulf between these two political factions remained unaddressed, with the new nobility continuing to succeed and gain power for Ludoria.

However, about twenty years ago, the gulf between them became a fatal issue when the next king was to be chosen. The first prince was weak and sickly, making it difficult for him to inherit the throne. The Ludorian tradition of primogeniture was then called into question.

The second prince was more civic-minded. He floated the idea of making peace with Darottei, earning him quite a bit of support from the old nobility but plenty of pushback from the new.

The third prince was the exact opposite, proving himself time and again as a general on the battlefield and earning the support of the military families. However, the third prince had no ambition for the throne, having always said he would support the next king regardless of whether it was the first prince or the second.

However, before the next king could be chosen, the third prince met with a suspicious death. Not on the battlefield, but in the royal palace. Not from some external injury, but from suddenly vomiting copious amounts of blood. The official statement claimed he died due to illness, but the military families of the East refused to accept that explanation, convinced that he had been poisoned by the old nobility. The old nobility, in turn, accused the military families of being the murderers, claiming the assassination was a false flag attack to give them an excuse to take up arms.

The actual cause of the third prince's death was still a mystery. In my personal opinion, I figured it was probably sickness. But for humans, a presupposition once accepted became an unassailable truth. Okay, there were plenty of humans who weren't like that, but at that time the vast majority chose to believe the truth they had woven for themselves over any sort of objective reality, and the minority were drowned out.

And so, with the gulf already present between the old nobility and the new military nobility of the east, this incident easily snapped the kingdom in two. Considering their long history and tradition, the old nobility should have had more than enough skill and knowledge to keep the nation together over something as minor as a succession. But the military families were just that; their martial mindset lacked that knowledge and experience. Convinced that it was a do-or-die situation for them, they chose to plunge into the quagmire that eventually led to Ludoria's collapse.

The kingdom split in two, but those resulting nations continued to further fragment over time, leaving the old Kingdom of Ludoria now a collection of smaller states. One of which, by the way, happened to be called the nation of Yosogi.



As I'd played no part in the Yosogi nation's founding, I knew very little about it. I hadn't had much contact with the Yosogi family after they became nobility, and once I started working on the southern continent, it would be years, sometimes even decades, between visits back north. I could only watch from the outside as the Yosogi family transformed. However, as obvious as it sounds, the creation of a Yosogi nation had an impact on the entire Yosogi School.

Once I learned of the Yosogi nation's founding, I headed to my old haunt in Vistcourt. After Ludoria's fall, it was now ruled by the newly born nation of Luranta. Relations between Luranta and Yosogi could hardly be called good. As such, with the Vistcourt dojo being a branch family of the Yosogi nobility, I figured it was probably in quite a bit of trouble.

There was no way Luranta could sit on their hands doing nothing while a martial institution like a school of swordsmanship—with ties to the royalty of a foreign, and potentially hostile, nation—grew within their borders.

That said, the Vistcourt dojo was over two hundred years old. Removing it wasn't going to be particularly easy either. But it wasn't hard to imagine why current events had Luranta even more on guard against the Vistcourt dojo.

Right now, Yosogi swordsmen were beginning to gather in the new Yosogi nation. It was a huge chance for them to move somewhere they had strong



connections to...but above all, keeping the Yosogi name elsewhere was more than a little risky. The past couple of centuries had seen the Yosogi School grow and branch out into multiple dojos, but the birth of the Yosogi nation might well lead to them all converging back into one.

However, while the majority of the students of the Yosogi Katana-style Dojo moved to the new Yosogi nation, the head of the dojo instead moved to Pantarheios, hoping to start a new dojo there. As a prosperous island off the coast, it would serve as a way to spread Yosogi swordsmanship across not just the Ludorian region, but the entire northern continent. And someday, it could even reach the island of Fusou, the old Yosogi homeland they had once been driven out of. I thought that was a wonderful ambition.

But what choice would the Vistcourt dojo make? If they planned to merge with the Yosogi nation, the dojo head would no doubt receive a warm reception, likely being granted land and title. They might take an entirely different route, but that would still likely end with them moving away from Vistcourt. In either case, it looked like my role as advisor to the Yosogi School would soon be coming to an end.

Upon reaching Vistcourt, I was greeted by a nostalgically familiar cityscape. Though no small number of cities and villages had met with battle after the fall of Ludoria, it seemed Vistcourt had been spared most of that.

But that wasn't down to luck. Being on the edge of the Great Pulha Woodlands, Vistcourt was home to many adventurers and boasted a strong garrison. Unthinkingly dragging the city into war also threatened to provoke the monsters in Pulha, the worst possible scenario for everyone involved. Though monsters were a threat to people and one of the elements that could lead to the End being triggered, they weren't exclusively a negative influence on the world. There were some situations like this where the existence of monsters fostered peace.

Passing through the city gate, I made my way through the streets toward the Vistcourt dojo. The people I passed by all had a nervous air about them. The once great nation of Ludoria had fallen, and now this land was ruled by the much smaller nation of Luranta. Vistcourt's defenses had received generous

support from Ludoria, as the nation had been well aware of the threat Pulha posed, but they couldn't hope for the same level of support from the much smaller Luranta. Even beyond that, there was the threat of the city's adventurers being drafted into the army to bolster Luranta's military might. I wouldn't expect something like that to happen unless they got desperate, but people didn't always act with the future in mind. Though the city had avoided direct conflict, the peace and stability Vistcourt had once enjoyed was still gone.

I walked through the city, easily finding my way. Old cities like this were a lot like long-lived creatures. Buildings were constructed, old ones were demolished, new roads were created, all gradually changing the city's face. If you stayed away long enough, it could feel like you had returned to an entirely different place. But even so, it still held traces of the place you once knew.

It wasn't like the extreme change of a child becoming an adult, but more like a young adult growing to full maturity, or someone in their prime passing into middle age. And of course, because of the Vistcourt dojo and its changing dojo head, I found myself visiting once every couple of decades, with at most no more than thirty years between visits.

This was my first visit in about twelve years.



The current head of the Vistcourt dojo was Makatsu Yosogi. To be quite honest, my appraisal of him when he first took the headship wasn't especially good.

The Yosogi School was one of swordsmanship, but the Vistcourt dojo was aimed at training adventurers, so they also taught things like spearmanship, archery, and unarmed martial arts. Though they were both branch families of the Yosogi family, you could consider them to have run in the exact opposite direction of the Katana-style dojo, which had embraced the traditional weapon of the Yosogi style's past.

Makatsu himself was comfortable wielding one and two-handed swords, spears and throwing weapons, shields and bows. He could use just about anything, but didn't particularly excel with anything either. At this point I wasn't sure the term "swordsman" was appropriate for him. In my personal opinion, I



would have preferred a Yosogi swordsman to focus chiefly on the use of the sword. As a Yosogi swordsman myself, I was pretty fixated on them. But as I said, that was just my personal opinion. It didn't have much to do with my appraisal of him as a dojo head. There had been plenty of dojo heads before him in the Vistcourt dojo who specialized in weapons other than the sword.

But unlike them, Makatsu wasn't particularly excellent in swordsmanship, nor with any other weapon either. It wasn't that he was lacking in skill. Obviously, someone like that could never become the head of a dojo. Though he expressed a clear talent for all of the weapons taught in the Vistcourt dojo, he wasn't extremely good with any of them.

In other words, he was "safe" in every respect. Not just when it came to martial arts either. Whether it was his strength, his personality, or his abilities as a leader, they were all no more than a solid passing grade. He was prominent in nothing, and had no glaring flaws. That meant I had no particular objections to his taking the headship, but I didn't have a particularly high opinion of him as dojo head either. That was the kind of person the current head of the Vistcourt dojo was. Or, so I thought.

As I sat across from Makatsu, I found myself a bit taken aback. There was something about him now, like a flame had been lit inside his heart, the air around him all but on fire. Of course, that was a metaphor. There was nothing supernatural about him. But the strong pressure he gave off was enough to give an almost supernatural impression like that. It was like he was an entirely different person.

Had he grown that much in his twelve years as dojo head? Alternatively, it was true that difficult situations had a way of drawing out a person's true character. Was he the type to grow under this kind of pressure?

By the way, I figured I was the exact opposite. Times of peace were when the best parts of me flourished, making me a little weak to danger and pressure. That would be because the vast majority of things couldn't threaten me. In my long life, I had only been in real danger a handful of times. So when true danger presented itself, panic and fear would probably cloud my judgment too much. With her long experience in adventuring, Airena seemed like the type who could exercise all of her strengths in any situation, no matter how peaceful or

dangerous it was.

“I am touched by and grateful for your concern for us, Sir Advisor. But nonetheless, we have no intention of leaving Vistcourt behind.”

I had come here because if they were planning on leaving Vistcourt, I was going to offer to protect them on their journey to their new home, be it the Yosogi nation or anywhere else. The chances that Luranta would let them just up and leave weren't particularly high. While it was true that the Vistcourt dojo was a smoldering ember waiting to burst into flame in Luranta's back lines, Makatsu and his students heading to Yosogi would be a considerable bolstering of the foreign nation's military. It wasn't hard to imagine them using Makatsu's flight as an excuse to arrest and execute the entire dojo.

So I had planned to protect them on their way to a safer home. With me at their side, the densest forests could be traveled through as easily as the best-maintained roads. But for some reason, Makatsu declined.

“You understand the situation, right? It won't be long before Luranta moves to crush you.”

With a two-hundred-year history in Vistcourt, getting rid of the dojo would be no easy task. In particular, Luranta was still young enough that they probably didn't have the resources to make a move against them. But once the political situation had stabilized, no matter what reaction it might inspire in the people, they would inevitably come to snuff out this small ember. Or worse, if the political situation didn't stabilize, they might move in force against the dojo, fearing that ember would ignite a wildfire.

In any case, there was nothing here for Makatsu and the Vistcourt dojo but danger. He had to understand that my offer was their best chance.

“Even so, the youth of our nation is precisely why we cannot leave.” There was no hesitation in his reply. I could tell this was something he and the dojo had long since decided on. “Vistcourt exists to guard against the Great Woodlands. Without us here, the unrest in the region could draw monsters out into Ludoria.”

Ah, that was certainly true. Monsters were attracted to death. That wasn't just because new monsters were created by the distorting power given off by



death either. Those that already existed were often drawn to the scent of blood and signs of battle.

“It is the role of adventurers to defend against that threat, and it is the role of our dojo to support those adventurers. I am sure you know far better than anyone that this dojo has always strived to do that.”

He was right, I did know that more than anyone. I was here when they decided what path they were going to take. I had been watching since Mizuha first made that choice, looking forward to seeing the new kinds of swordsmanship her dojo would give birth to. In a way, I suppose you could say their time had come.

“That mission is our pride. And if we have to choose between our pride or the Yosogi name, we will choose the former. Though I feel bad after how much help you have been to us over the years, Sir Advisor, I am afraid that is the decision we have made.”

And so Makatsu declared his intention to separate from the Yosogi family.



They were throwing away the Yosogi name. That wasn't something you could say with a half-hearted resolve. After all, that name had been with them for the same two hundred years as their “pride.” No, actually, much, much longer.

And besides, throwing away the Yosogi name didn't mean that Luranta would be any less wary of them. Above all, it would doubtless enrage the main branch of the Yosogi family, and thus the Yosogi nation. But even so, Makatsu had chosen to stay here and continue fulfilling the role that had been passed down to him and the whole dojo throughout the generations. No doubt they had many plans besides just discarding the Yosogi name to try and appease Luranta.

It would no doubt be a difficult, treacherous path. But seeing Makatsu as he was now, willing to make that declaration to the face of the Yosogi School's advisor, it made me think he might be able to pull it off.

This was the end of the Yosogi School in Vistcourt. I would likely have nothing to do with them from this point onward. But for some strange reason, it didn't feel like a loss. Rather, it felt like I had managed to successfully fulfill my

promise to Mizuha to watch over the school until the end.

A new style of swordsmanship was being born. Ironically, it came from discarding the Yosogi name instead of reuniting with it, but I imagined Mizuha would look happily on all of this. Even I hadn't seen it coming, so Makatsu's choice struck me as brave and refreshing. Ah, but of course, there was at least a tinge of sadness to it all.

After asking Makatsu for one last sparring match, I took a look around to engrave the sight of the Vistcourt Yosogi dojo into my memory. I then left the place behind, with no knowledge of what its new name would be.

I headed east. This road would take me to Wolfir, what had once been the capital of Ludoria, and then to the newly born nation of Yosogi. I currently had virtually no influence on the Yosogi nation, but as advisor to the Yosogi School, my opinion still had a little weight to it. If I told them that the Vistcourt dojo had given up the Yosogi name, they would surely be angry. "How dare they try to cut ties with the main family?!" or something like that. But since I would be the one to deliver that news, and I acknowledged and accepted their decision, a little bit of that anger would be directed at me instead. I didn't really have a place to say anything about issues inside the Yosogi family, but I could say something about issues in the Yosogi School.

Now that they were no longer part of the Yosogi School, there was no reason for me to come to the Vistcourt dojo's defense...but they were still Mizuha's children, and so Kaeha's children.

I should also mention that my last match with Makatsu reminded me of something. I had mentioned he was moderately skilled at everything, not excelling or lagging behind in any particular regard, and used every weapon with the same general level of ability just like twelve years ago. But no matter what weapon he held, his stance was incredible. Yes, the way he held his guard was strong. Thinking back, I realized he had been similar when we first met. That was why he had no particular weakness among weapons. So this was in a sense both an apology to him for underestimating him so much, and in a way thanking him for reminding me of that fact. For the first time in quite a while, I felt like I had been pretty immature.



Getting a meeting with the royalty of the Yosogi nation would probably be a challenge for me, but I should at least be able to get someone to send a letter to them. That's what I thought as I made my way east through the chaos of what had once been Ludoria.

One part of the Yosogi family had risen as a true warrior family, eventually leading to the destruction of Ludoria and the widespread ruin of the countryside. It was possible that peace would return once they had established and stabilized their own nation, but there was a good chance war with other nations would bring even more chaos.

The second part of the Yosogi family had instead discarded their own name in favor of the roots they had set down in their land, in an effort to protect that land and resist the burgeoning chaos.

The third remained unchanged, leaving this chaotic place behind altogether in order to continue developing themselves.

The three of them had each chosen their own path. It wasn't a case of any of them being correct or incorrect. The growth of the Yosogi main family into nobility and eventually into their own nation no doubt had saved some part of them.

For example, if the Yosogi family hadn't fought so hard to protect the land they had been given, Ludoria in its entirety may very well have been trampled underfoot by Darottei's aggression.

The Vistcourt dojo hadn't guaranteed its own survival by discarding the Yosogi name. In fact, there was a reasonable enough chance that Luranta itself would fall in war to the Yosogi nation, and that the Vistcourt dojo would be forcibly disbanded. It also seemed quite possible that the other Yosogi dojos would be destroyed, leaving the Vistcourt dojo as the only survivor.

Whether the Yosogi Katana-style Dojo would grow or decline was anyone's guess. However, since they had decided to move to Pantarheios, it would be pretty easy for me to support them. I felt like I could be of great use when it came to producing katana for them or helping them gain fame.

In any case, as time passed, all three of them would continue to change as they walked these new paths. As they changed, my relationship with them

would naturally follow suit.

But that wasn't something to be pessimistic about. Naturally there was some sadness in it, but I was also looking forward to seeing how they would change. My Yosogi swordsmanship, the skills and techniques I had learned from Kaeha, lived on in my own arms. It would never disappear.

Leaving my letter with swordsmen of the Yosogi nation to pass on to the crown, I continued walking east. I had already come all the way here, so I felt like I might as well take the chance to stretch my legs a little on a detour.

My next destination was a land once known as the Azueda Alliance.



As for the place that was once the Azueda Alliance, it too had undergone some massive changes. Last time I brought them up, I think I mentioned that the northern half of the Alliance had merged to form the kingdom of Azaley, while the southern half had united under the name of the Kingdom of South Azuetta.

But that was all over a hundred and fifty years ago. After that, Azaley had invaded South Azuetta, but the southern kingdom's lines held firm. Azaley was clearly superior in terms of military strength, but unlike an isolated battle, the victor of a drawn-out war was not determined by strength of arms alone. Morale was low among the northern troops, whose nation had been forcibly annexed by Azaley. Meanwhile, the southern troops had all banded together willingly to defend their homes, leaving them in high spirits.

South Azuetta's borders holding firm was just one of many factors leading to hardship for Azaley. For example, Radlania, the seat of the eastern region's chief religion, criticized Azaley's behavior, and the once rich resources of the southern Azueda Alliance were now being denied to them by South Azuetta. Having their previously comfortable lives forcibly taken from them, the common people of Azaley began rising up in rebellion. As they had once been city-states, the people were already quite independent. You could say that Azaley was brought down by its own people.

However, even with Azaley's fall, the old city-states knew they could no longer stabilize as independent nations. The people needed some way to unite

them to take the place of the old Azueda Alliance. So the people of what was once Azaley pledged fealty to the kingdom of South Azuetta, leading to a new Kingdom of Azuetta covering the entire territory of the old Azueda Alliance.

Of course, Azuetta learned from Azaley's mistakes, and its governance put great emphasis on the independence of its cities. Naturally that led to the royal family being relatively weak, and made it difficult for the nation to act quickly and decisively, but that was the style of government that suited this area of the world best.

On top of that, Darottei, who had once been the greatest threat to the Azueda Alliance, found themselves in a position where they couldn't afford to wage war after their string of defeats to Ludoria.

As such, Azuetta had enjoyed over a hundred years of peaceful rule. The influence that the breaking apart of Ludoria would have on Azuetta was yet to be determined, but as far as I was concerned, at least relatively speaking, the region was pretty stable.

I was currently on a ship traveling the rivers of Azuetta. These ships had apparently been stopped in the time of Azaley, but once Azuetta took control of the region, much more importance had been placed on them. With Lake Tsia at its center and numerous rivers branching off of it throughout the kingdom, this quickly became the best method of traveling. Though the name of the nation had changed, that remained the same, as did the feel of the wind on my face as we sailed.

My ship eventually made it upriver into Lake Tsia itself, where we docked on the northern shore at the city of Luronte. Originally, Luronte had been built as a twin to another city on Lake Tsia's southern shore, called Folka. However Azaley's conquest of the northern half of the lake had destroyed a good portion of the city, and with both cities controlled by different nations, they had developed in different directions.

Disembarking at Luronte, I continued walking north. You may have been able to guess at this point, but I was heading toward Odine. Founded by the Azueda Alliance to do research into magic, its mission had remained the same even



with the Alliance gone. However, since it was deeply involved in the creation of Azaley, trust in Odine from the other parts of Azuetta had been significantly damaged.

It honestly wouldn't have been strange for Azuetta to have put an end to Odine, but they still needed it for research and education in magic, and for maintaining the strength of the kingdom. Disbanding Odine would scatter its research and educational facilities to the wind. So Azuetta had permitted Odine to stay.

Of course, they couldn't just ignore Odine's part in what had happened, and the northern cities of Azuetta still held a strong grudge against them. So Azuetta had permitted Odine to continue to exist, but put strict restrictions on its research and educational facilities, removing the city's independence.

But, like I said, this all happened quite a long time ago. Though they had borne those restrictions for decades, Azuetta's iron grip on Odine's freedom was starting to loosen, and trust in Odine was beginning to grow again. Of course, they weren't back to their old freedom, but they had some leeway to do as they wished as they researched and taught all things magical.

This now unfamiliar place was the city in which I arrived.



Walking through the streets of Odine and seeing few of the spires I remembered was a bit unnerving. In the past, those who excelled as mages earned the rank of archmage, living in these spires and looking down on the city they ruled from above. But Azuetta had reduced the number of archmages and taken away their leadership role, and in turn had removed many of the spires that had become symbolic of them.

I never had a very good impression of those archmages, but the absence of something so iconic left me a little sad. Maybe I had just liked the old skyline of Odine, regardless of who was living in it. Or maybe I was just getting sentimental over something familiar to me being gone.

As much as the lack of spires made Odine feel unfamiliar, that wasn't the only thing that had disappeared. For example, the military I had come into conflict with on my last visit some two hundred and fifty years ago was also gone

without a trace. They were the very ones responsible for bringing up the idea of unification and so bringing about the war that broke apart the Azueda Alliance. The people had treated them as something akin to venomous serpents, and there had been a considerable effort to root them out after Azaley's collapse.

But much was lost in that process. Odine's military, being trained in the use of relics, had been pitted against the huge crowds of ordinary people that made up the rebel army. The loss of life had apparently been enormous. On top of that, the rebels had treated the relics and facilities used to produce them as objects of hate, and so had proactively destroyed them. If Odine had been conquered by Azuetta instead, they would likely have been kept as precious research materials, but a rebellion born from anger and hatred had no such logic to it. So the relics were systematically collected and destroyed. The legacy of Kawshman's research had been mostly lost.

As I walked through the streets of Odine, my head spinning at how much it had changed, I found myself at the doorstep of the city's blacksmithing guild. Though I had updated it a number of times, my Master Blacksmith license was still quite old, so the employees there were quite shocked before they guided me inside.

After being led to a reception room, the staff carefully brought out a sword for me, one that had been very carefully maintained and showed little signs of its age. Drawing it from its scabbard and inspecting it...okay, there was really no need for me to inspect it. I could tell at a glance that it was the flaming magic sword Kawshman and I had forged together. Being reunited with it after so long had me feeling quite emotional.

Having been kept in the care of Odine's military, the rebel army had been intent on destroying it. But even though they had no way of using it as a relic, they hesitated when they saw it, enchanted by its craftsmanship as a sword. Avoiding destruction, the people of the rebel army secretly hid it, and it eventually found its way to the blacksmithing guild where it was appraised and immediately purchased. Apparently being made by the same blacksmith as the famed sword owned by the blacksmithing guild in Janpemon had driven up its price considerably.

Odine's blacksmithing guild had been caring for it ever since. Very recently,

that story had made its way to a member of the elven caravan, and eventually reached my ears. It was an exceptional bit of good luck, but also exceptionally disappointing.

I looked over the sword once more. Honestly speaking, I thought it was pretty good. From a technical standpoint, I could now spot some things in it that bothered me a little, but my passion from that time was still clear to see. The dream of a magic sword had driven me back then, but would I be able to pour that same kind of passion into a single blade now?

Considering the value this piece held, I was unbelievably happy that it had managed to survive and that I could see it again. However, as a *magic* sword...it seemed people didn't quite value it the way Kawshman had hoped they would. Though I suppose this was still better than Odine's military keeping it locked away. Back then, its value as a sword had been thoroughly ignored. The direction Odine's military took Kawshman's research was far from what he was hoping for.

With permission from the staff, I took the sword by the hilt and poured some mana into it. The flame that burst forth was exactly the same as I remembered it, a blazing fire born from the combined spirit and passion of Kawshman and me.

"Hey, Kawshman. What do you want to do?" I found myself asking the sword.

Naturally, it didn't respond. It just continued to burn, with me basking in its warmth.



I was now in a position where I could spread the popularity of relics. I had the elven caravan to help me, and all the time in the world. I was confident I could make them a tool for adventurers to use against monsters, not for armies to use against people. I could probably even get Baimao Laojun, one of the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire, to lend me his incredible knowledge of magic in that pursuit.

But...that didn't feel quite right. We had never wanted relics to become popular. We had simply been pursuing a dream of ours, to create something like this. Odine's military had taken notice of Kawshman's research, but that was only a side effect.

I extinguished the flames and returned the blade to its scabbard. I had considered buying this blade for myself, but decided to hold off on that for now. I would prefer it to remain here, where others could see it, rather than be locked away in one of my closets.

If it was in the care of Odine's blacksmithing guild, it would be able to enjoy a relaxing life of being put on display. Among the many people who saw it, maybe someday one of them would take an interest in making their own magic sword. *They* would be Kawshman's true successor, not me.

Of course, there was the possibility no such person would ever appear and the sword would simply end up lost, but this was Odine, the city of magic. I didn't think there was much worry about that happening.

I decided that I should make another magic sword of my own every once in a while. Others might see them and take an interest in them too. Ah, in that case, it would be a contest. Whose magic swords would create a successor first: mine or Kawshman's?

Even long after his death, my rivalry with him was heating up again. I was sure that someday it would take back its place as a blazing flame.



I left Odine, heading south. Now that I thought about it, I'd never actually been north of Odine before. North of what was once the Azueda Alliance—now the Kingdom of Azuetta—used to be the nation of Darottei, but they were no



more. After being crippled by their war with Ludoria, another country farther north attacked and destroyed them.

Speaking of countries in the Far North, the only one I'd ever visited was the Empire of Fodor, but apparently they no longer existed either. Maybe I'd have to find some time to take a trip up there sometime. I wasn't exactly eager to experience the same cold I'd found in Fodor again, but it should be a bit easier if I went in summer.

Though I entertained thoughts of traveling north, my feet nevertheless took me south. I was curious about the Far North, but I had no business there. And above all, it wasn't summer.

South of Azuetta was Radlania, the seat of power for the harvest god religion. Radlania held the greatest authority in the east-central region, so it had avoided being drawn into war and remained steadfast to this day. But the countries to its east had changed.

However, it was not because of war this time. Or at least, not because they were destroyed in a war. When the Azueda Alliance split into Azaley and South Azuetta, the nations of Dolbogarde and Siglair, along with the city-states of Bardoth and Ortenon, responded by merging together.

Bardoth and Ortenon were once fed considerable resources by the Alliance in order to keep the threat of the Man-Eating Swamp in check. With the dissolution of the Alliance, and river transport in general coming to an end, the two city-states found their support drying up, leaving them entirely unable to shoulder their burden.

But their fall would be no laughing matter to their southern neighbor, Siglair. While Siglair also bordered the swamp and was deeply involved in defending against its monsters, the loss of two allies in that endeavor would substantially increase their burden. The ramifications of that would be felt even in Dolbogarde, which lay behind Siglair.

So the four states banded together to form the nation of Shegarda. Apparently, both Radlania and the elven caravan had been great supporters of the merger. One could say the formation of Shegarda had kept the east-central region mostly intact, despite multiple wars shifting the borders back and forth.

For how long I'd lived, it seemed like the world was always at war, with no sign of that coming to an end. That wasn't meant to be a criticism though. Even with the great threat posed by monsters, humans couldn't stop fighting each other. That was part of what it meant to be human.

Some trampled others to sate their own greed, others took up the sword to protect those they loved. Some took to the battlefield out of hatred, while for others it was their only home. There were as many reasons for fighting as there were people who fought. But the result was the same: humans couldn't stop fighting.

That said, many dedicated their lives to reining in the chaos, and plenty of people wished for peace. Humans were chaotic creatures. So many conflicting traits existed in the same vessel, forming a single creature that existed without being self-contradictory.

However, even knowing that, or perhaps specifically *because* of that, I loved them. It was quite late in my life to be bringing this up, but the humans in this world were entirely different from the humans I knew in my past life. At least as far as I knew, humans in my past life didn't create any distorting power when they died, and they couldn't fight monsters with swords or spears.

But I didn't think that mattered. I liked the humans of this world just as much as I did the humans I knew in my past life. Strong, fleeting, tenacious, kind, cruel, anguished but decisive, creative, destructive...I loved them all.

As I rested at an inn in a city I was visiting, I noticed the girl working the floor wearing a pendant inlaid with a garnet. The sight made me so happy I decided to order another drink. It was an extremely old pendant, and looked like it had been repaired more than once. Its shape had changed a little bit from its original one. But I was fine with that, and in fact thought that was a good thing.

The next day, I set my course to leave Azuetta, pass through Radlania, and after a bit of traveling make it to a port town in Shegarda. From there, I'd hop on a ship headed for Pantarheios. In other words, my journey was almost at an end.

I hadn't gained anything on this journey, nor had I been able to help anyone else. I had accomplished nothing, just walking around the east-central region.

Even so, something had left itself in my heart, something I couldn't quite put into words.

It was kind of mysterious, but the sensation was pleasant, so I could definitely say it was a good journey.

## Chapter 2 — The Person Best with Money

Another thirty years passed, and in the summer of the year I turned five hundred and thirty-two, an elf visited Pantarheios with a peculiar request for me.

“Lord Acer, I would humbly request that you come with us to meet Zhang Shegong.”

He was Kaylel, the man currently in charge of the elven caravan. In other words, he was Airena’s successor, but to be quite honest, I didn’t know him all that well. Of course, I’d met him a number of times when he had been one of Airena’s aides, but the two of us never got all that friendly or talked much. Maybe that left just as much of an impression, but I never had the chance to get to know him well.

Even after Kaylel became its head I had worked with the caravan time and again, but naturally he was an extremely busy person. After all, the elven caravan was involved in trade all over the continent...and for that matter, in the production of unique spices in the southern continent as well, so really all over the world. I didn’t have any knowledge of commerce to give much in the way of advice to such an organization, so my authority as a high elf would only stir up chaos if I tried. So when I needed something from the elven caravan, I went through Airena instead of going to them directly, as she knew them quite well.

And yet now, the head of the elven caravan himself was all but begging me, sitting with his head bowed waiting for my reply. It seemed something significant was brewing here. Zhang Shegong, huh?

“I see. You guys have helped me out more times than I can count, so I don’t mind. But...could you tell me why?”

The largest nation in the East, the Ancient Gold Empire, was ruled by a group of mystics. The eastern region of the Ancient Gold Empire, known as Blue Sea Province, faced its titular sea and was known as a prosperous place rich in commerce. Zhang Shegong was the governor of Blue Sea Province, and so was

likely the most financially intelligent person in the world. If the elven caravan had business with him, it was almost certainly to do with trade or money, something I was a complete layman in.

So why did Kaylel want me involved? No matter how much I was indebted to the caravan, tagging along without knowing why was just too scary. Neither the caravan nor Zhang Shegong were the types to try and set a trap for me, but I at least wanted to know what was expected of me.

So I tentatively accepted the request, asking for more details.

Kaylel lifted his head and looked right at me, squinting a bit as if looking at a bright light. I knew elves saw high elves like me as shining, but that was the first time I'd seen such a reaction. I was kind of bewildered.

"My deepest thanks. As you are aware, once we began getting involved in sea trade, your assistance enabled us to establish a strong trade relationship with the Ancient Gold Empire."

Kaylel's story brought back some fond memories. The elven caravan had exploded in size when it decided to get involved in places other than the east-central region. Until then, as its name suggested, it had just been a caravan made up of elves. After that, they had taken on human sailors, absorbed a human trading corporation and a major family in the Republic of Vilestorika, and grew to many, many times their old size.

Even through its explosive growth, the caravan had persisted in its goals of working to support elves the world over, entirely owing to Airena's hard work and incredible talent as a leader, and the united efforts of the elves working under her.

I suppose I had been involved in helping out quite a bit back then. But I had done little more than introduce them to business opportunities. It was Airena and the others who really turned those meetings into something profitable.

"That relationship was a major driving force behind the caravan's growth, and even now is one of our major supporting pillars. However...over the past few years, our volume of trade with the Ancient Gold Empire has begun to decline."

Ah, that made sense. No wonder Zhang Shegong was involved. If they were



trading with the Ancient Gold Empire, their point of contact would be Blue Sea Province. If the volume of trade between them was shrinking, there was an extremely high possibility Zhang Shegong was personally involved. So Kaylel was hoping I'd help mediate between them, as I had done in the past for so many others.

I see, I see. I suppose there wasn't much harm in me trying then. Taking a quick trip over to the Ancient Gold Empire was the least I could do after everything they've done for me. It was even possible that I'd be able to meet with Soleil there, my and Airena's adopted daughter.

But one thing caught my attention. If Zhang Shegong was reducing trade with the elven caravan, it was likely he anticipated my eventual involvement from the start. There was no guarantee that my going would prove profitable for the caravan.

The other mystics had told me Zhang Shegong was "good at making money," but they didn't mean that in the sense of gathering wealth. His real talent was manipulating value. Money, goods, information, people, life itself...everything in this world had some sort of value attached to it, and those values weren't fixed.

For example, the money used here in the east-central region would be pretty low in value if I brought it to the Ancient Gold Empire. Even without considering the threat of people trying to take advantage of you, money from a foreign nation wasn't exactly easy to put to use for the merchants there. Of course, the metal it was made of had its own value, so it wasn't entirely worthless.

Even horse excrement had value to the bugs that gathered around it, or for people like the nomads of the Great Grasslands who dried it out and used it as fuel. Knowledge of impending wars could turn a great profit for people who could amass food and arms beforehand. Once time had passed after the war started, though, prices for food and weapons would be driven high enough that it would be hard for people to make money off them.

On the northern continent, the elves had a reasonable amount of influence and were generally treated with respect, but even two or three hundred years ago, it wasn't unheard of for some states to take elves as slaves. Life was the

same thing. In times of peace, a single life had tremendous value, but much less in times of war. That wasn't an issue of one being right and the other wrong; it was just how the world worked.

Zhang Shegong was a mystic who understood this concept of value well and was skilled at manipulating it. In that case, he couldn't have been reducing trade with the elven caravan for no reason. Though of course, I would have no way of knowing what his goals were without meeting with him myself.



We traveled to Blue Sea Province by ship.

Considering the distance, asking Heero for a ride would have been the quickest way, but there was a true dragon sleeping in the Ancient Gold Empire. Taking another member of the ancient races there ran the risk of waking him up. Of course, it wasn't like he'd set fire to the world just because he woke up, so I might actually enjoy the chance to meet with him again, but it would be quite a crisis from the mystics' perspective.

They had built the largest nation in the East entirely to protect the golden dragon's slumber. There was a chance they might see my arrival on a phoenix as a threat in and of itself. I might do something like that if I learned that Soleil was being treated poorly, but there was no reason for it now.

Besides, while it was fine for Airena and me, I didn't really want to force that on Kaylel. The transport capabilities Heero offered would be endlessly appealing to the merchant in him. The caravan would never try to force Heero into anything while knowing he was my friend, but I knew Kaylel wouldn't be able to get the thought out of his head for quite a while. So for his own sake, it was best if he didn't know about Heero.

Anyway, traveling by boat wasn't that bad. In my past journey to the Ancient Gold Empire and Fusou in the sea beyond it, I had to cross the Man-Eating Swamp and the Great Grasslands on foot, so it had taken an incredibly long time. This journey would be no more than a few months. And compared to back then, both the speed and safety of ships had greatly improved thanks to elven influence. Especially this time, with the head of the elven caravan on board, the trip would feel so fast it would almost be disappointing.

More than anything, the Ancient Gold Empire was a lot closer than the southern continent, and there were many coastal nations we could stop at along the way. Compared to my intercontinental voyages in the past, it was extremely easygoing.

“Speaking of which, why did you choose Kaylel to be the head of the caravan?” I asked Airena as we saw him off on his way to meet with some dignitaries from a nation we’d stopped at along our route.

Back when she had headed the caravan, there were plenty of candidates for her to choose from. I had to wonder what made him stand out above the rest. With how busy he always was, I still didn’t have a good grasp of him as a person. That seemed like something I needed to remedy before meeting with Zhang Shegong.

“Well, the biggest reason was that he was smart enough to lead, yet still rather cowardly.”

Her answer took me a bit by surprise. She didn’t say he was cautious, but that he was cowardly. That had to be an exaggeration, right? After all, he certainly seemed quite adventurous.

For example, though the efforts to assist the southern continent’s reconstruction were spearheaded by Airena and myself, it never would have happened if he had strongly objected. If he was really a coward, why hadn’t he been against such a risky endeavor?

“Yes, he’s a coward, but smart enough to act when circumstances demand it. But his cowardice means he puts the utmost effort into ensuring all possibility of failure is removed.”

Ah, I see. So even when he feared adventuring into the unknown, if the return met the risk, he wouldn’t hesitate to trek on. I supposed that *was* different than just being cautious, though it sounded like a stressful way to live.

“I chose him because he can balance that cowardice with wisdom. The other elves, myself included, were a bit too boldly adventurous.”

That was true too. Among elves who left the forest to experience the human

world, most were quite bold and endlessly curious. Without a driving force like that behind them, they'd never leave the forests in the first place. Though Airen had learned caution through her days of adventuring, she was fundamentally a person who sought out excitement in the unknown.

That must have been why she chose the second head of the caravan to be someone so different from herself. The caravan had grown much as it took on many new and fresh challenges. She likely felt the one steering the ship needed something new and different to keep it moving in the right direction—what she called cowardice.

“He actually refused at first. He claimed that a coward like him would never be able to keep the caravan together like I had. But when I explained to him that cowardice was exactly what the caravan needed moving forward, he changed his mind,” Airen said, reminiscing with a smile. Kaylel was much like one of her students.

I was a bit jealous of them. I had masters who would think fondly of their time teaching me, and students I could be proud of, but they had all passed away long ago. You might say that I should just take on an elven apprentice at that point...but elves were more likely to try and worship me than learn from me, so it wasn't that easy.

But I now understood Kaylel a bit better. If that's the kind of person he was, I knew he must have struggled long and hard to get to the point of involving me in the talks with Zhang Shegong.

Trade with the Ancient Gold Empire drying up would lead to sailors losing work and merchants going out of business. Once I learned why Zhang Shegong had started reducing trade with the caravan, I would likely come up with my own opinions about it.

And with the elves calling the wind spirits to accelerate our voyage, it wouldn't be long before that day came.



Our ship docked in a foreign port. Okay, most ports were foreign to me, but this port in Blue Sea Province felt especially different. From the architecture to the dress and appearance of the people walking the streets, despite being from

the same continent, the atmosphere of the place was entirely strange. Even the smell of food in the air was completely different from that of the east-central region. The nations along the southern coast of the Far East were all culturally different from what I was used to, but the Ancient Gold Empire was different yet again. I could really feel myself getting excited at experiencing it all again.

But as I looked up at an unfamiliar sky, I saw a rather familiar bird flying a circle overhead. To be perfectly clear, it wasn't Heero. If Heero followed me to a place this crowded, and into the Ancient Gold Empire no less, even I wouldn't be able to cover for him. Instead, it was a bird for which I harbored rather complex feelings.

The bird—one of the golden dragon's four sacred beasts, the sacred eagle connected to the mystic Huang Mu in the south of the Empire—hadn't really done anything wrong. But because of that bird's influence, my family with Airena and Soleil had undergone quite a change. If Soleil hadn't made friends with that bird, she would have lived her life as a perfectly ordinary human. Of course, she also would have passed away a long time ago. It wasn't my place to say whether that was good or bad, but seeing it again after so long inspired conflicted feelings in me.

However, the bird itself wasn't that important right now. What mattered to me was that if the bird was here, Soleil would also be in Blue Sea Province.

"Father! Mother!" a familiar voice called out to us.

I could hear Airena gasp at my side. Yeah, I had to imagine it was a huge shock for her. I had met with the mystics and their like a number of times, so I knew what awaited Soleil when she came here. But Airena had only ever met Bailang Daoshi, a student of the mystics, when he had gone with us to the southern continent.

Even though Soleil should have died long ago, seeing her looking and sounding just like she had the day she left Pantarheios brought tears to her eyes. Yet another one of the humans that should have passed away before her was standing in front of her again, unchanged. Well, not *entirely* unchanged, as she now wore the clothing of the Far East.

I could only imagine the feelings that triggered in her. Joy, of course, but if a



miracle like this was possible, why hadn't it been granted to the other people she had been forced to watch pass away? I couldn't say I never felt the same way. Rodna, Kaeha, Nonna, Kawshman, even Oswald and Win were no more. But this reunion was a bit of good fortune we couldn't have hoped for.

Well, maybe whether it was good fortune or not remained to be seen. Only a vanishingly small number of people possessed the qualities required to become a mystic. Even so, many of them strayed from the right path, their frustration at slow progress leading them to become fallen mystics who preyed on the lives of other people. And those who succeeded would find the people they loved long gone from the world by the time they did so. Right now, Soleil was still a student, one of the Daoshi. She couldn't be called a proper mystic yet. I didn't know whether Airena or I would still be alive when that day finally came. Of course, as a high elf, I would still be around as a spirit, so I'd still be floating around somewhere.

So while this was certainly a miracle, it wasn't such a convenient one. But maybe bringing all of that up would be in bad taste.

"Soleil!" Airena broke off running, wrapping Soleil in a big hug. Watching her mother break down into a teary outpouring of emotion seemed to leave Soleil at a bit of a loss, but there was nothing we could do about that.



It was pretty rare for Airena to be so openly emotional, but a reunion with someone she cherished like this was a huge deal for her. So I stood looking up at the sky, letting the two of them have their moment while Airena got it out of her system. Shuu kept his flight above us, continuing in tireless circles. Maybe he was also trying to be considerate.

Kaylel also seemed rather shocked at what was likely the first time he had ever seen any kind of intense emotion from Airena, but he quickly recovered and set about giving orders and keeping the area clear for them.

It felt like I had learned another interesting fact about him: he seemed to be a pretty good guy.

I couldn't say whether becoming a mystic was a good or bad thing. The existence of the mystics was tied to the giants, and I now knew that they did the bidding of the giants from time to time. But whether the mystics were good or bad, the fact of the matter was that this reunion was a joyful one.

Once Airena had her fill, I decided I'd trouble Soleil with an equally emotional greeting.



"Please allow me to introduce myself. Right now I am going by the name Shengjiu Daoshi. I have come to guide you, Mother, Father, and Mister Kaylel, to your meeting with Zhang Shegong," After clearing her throat, Soleil introduced herself with an unfamiliar name, putting both hands to her chest and bowing. It seemed Zhang Shegong had sent her to be our guide.

Man, that was a good move. Airena and I were here at the behest of Kaylel to sit in on the meetings with Zhang Shegong, but both of us had secretly hoped we'd get a chance to meet Soleil. Neither of us would have expected to see her so soon though. The fact that Zhang Shegong had arranged things like that for us would naturally make us grateful to him. Even knowing that was part of his plan, a reunion with a family member we hadn't seen for so long was too strong of a joy to overcome.

Soleil then clapped her hands three times, prompting three large horses with rather fancy saddles to make their way through the crowd toward us. For some

reason, the people in the street didn't seem to notice the horses, but they also naturally moved out of their path. On top of that, the three horses were all staring quite hard at me. They were kind of cute.

Without thinking, I reached out a hand toward them. The three all moved to nuzzle up toward it, though they stopped as if held back by something. Man, they really were cute.

So I opened my arms wide, stroking the heads of the two horses on the sides at the same time, while using my face to nuzzle up to the horse in the middle. Of course, this wasn't something you should really do with horses you'd never met before, but I felt like it would be safe with these ones.

They each had different coloring. One was white, one black, and the other a golden brown. And for some reason, they all...*smelled* familiar. Yeah, they smelled a lot like Sayr, the horse I had once ridden.

The three of them were clearly quite excited to see me but holding back, careful not to trample me in their excitement. They were really smart too. After petting them for a time, I turned back to Soleil.

"Hey Soleil, these horses are...?" I knew it for a fact. But I still wanted to hear her say it.

"Yes, they're the descendants of the mystic horse you brought to the Empire. But this is kind of a problem. They're not normally like this...it feels like they'll get into a fight over who gets to carry you. I guess I'll find a carriage for them to pull for us."

Ah. So it was that after all. Nodding to Soleil, I turned back to pet the horses one by one.

"Then I'll drive. Or I should say, please let me. Though I'll need you to show me where to go. Is that okay?" I knew that this kind of request would be trouble for a guide, but I still wanted to spend more time with these horses. Also, being in the driver's seat would help with my motion sickness a bit.

Taking a seat on the carriage we rented, I set the horses to walking. Well, really the three of them did almost everything I wanted without any input from

me, so I was mostly just calling out to them every once in a while.

The carriage Soleil found for us was designed with an open front, allowing those sitting in it to face forward and see where we were going. In that case, I might have been able to survive sitting in the back as well. But with Sayr's kids here, I had no desire at all to go back and check for myself.

Following Soleil's instructions, I guided the horses out of town.

"Where exactly are we going? Zhang Shegong's office should be in the city..." Kaylel asked.

Oh, I see. Apparently he had met with the mystic before. So when he noticed we were heading somewhere different, he started to grow wary.

"Yes, Zhang Shegong uses his office in the city for normal meetings. But this time, because the caravan has brought a most important guest along on their visit, he has decided to invite you to his personal retreat." Soleil didn't miss a beat, replying with a formality very much unlike the way she spoke with Airen and me.

Well, no doubt that "guest" was the high elf, or in the words of the mystics, the "true one" sitting right beside her. Hearing her treat me like some honored guest, being very much on the side of the mystics, left me feeling a bit awkward. Considering her position I couldn't ask anything different of her, but I felt it was kind of boring.

My personal feelings aside, I was starting to wonder if Kaylel asking me to come along had been a mistake. This meeting was to be between the head of the elven caravan and the governor of Blue Sea Province. But so far, it seemed they were putting much more emphasis on receiving me as a guest. It was starting to look more like a meeting between Zhang Shegong and *me*, someone who wasn't directly involved with the caravan.

Of course, I was here at Kaylel's request, so I would do what I could to mediate between them. Generally speaking, what was good for the caravan was good for me as well, but I was still technically an outsider. I really wasn't in a position to be going to battle against Zhang Shegong for the good of the caravan.



Luckily for me, as always, I had Airenna here to help me.

“Lord Acer is here to help mediate the meeting with Zhang Shegong, but Kaylel is the one with business. The greatest reason we came here was to see you.”

The main actor in this party was Kaylel, not the two of us. As someone with experience leading the caravan, Airenna was much better at handling this situation than I was, sitting here twiddling my thumbs with worry. Well, Kaylel was also the head of an enormous corporation now, so he would likely be fine on his own. But I could understand Airenna wanting to back him up.

“Yes, Mother. Umm, if you like, after the meeting, would you like to go out into town together? I’d like to see you try on some of the clothing that’s popular here,” Soleil nodded, following up with a rather bashful invitation to go shopping.

I imagined the shyness came from how long it had been since they last met. No matter how overjoyed she was to be reunited with her mother, it was hard for her to honestly show it. But one look at her face gave all those feelings away.

One thing I found interesting was that, since Soleil had helped Airenna with her work during her time on Pantarheios, she should have had a pretty good understanding of the inner workings of the elven caravan. If she hadn’t chosen to become a mystic, she likely would have ended up working for them. But right now, she was on Zhang Shegong’s side. Fate was really a strange thing, wasn’t it?

Right now Kaylel was being pretty reserved around her since she was our daughter, but there was a good chance she could become quite the obstacle to him even before the meeting with the governor. If she did, was that something I should praise her for?

As I sank into thought, the horses slowed a little, beginning to glance back at me. It seemed they were a bit concerned about me.

Anyway, things would turn out however they turned out. There was nothing to gain by stewing over it now. In any case, I didn’t understand the subtleties of conversation between people like merchants, government officials, and

nobility. If Soleil was working hard at her job here so far from home then I'd praise her, and as Kaylel asked, I'd join him in his meeting with Zhang Shegong and put in a good word for him.

I couldn't do much else, so all I needed to do was what little I could.



A while after leaving town, we turned off the main highway and onto a small side road. The horses did exactly as I said...or rather, walked carefully on their own to ensure the carriage never left the road, but as the driver, it was kind of scary.

After another short while, the horses came to a stop at the foot of a mountain beside a river. Just as I began to steel myself for the long climb up the staircase carved into the side of the mountain, the stairs began to move on their own, carrying us upward. Ah, it was the same kind of thing we had seen in the land of the giants. I once again felt the strong connection between the giants and the mystics.

And while Airena had experienced this kind of thing with me before, Kaylel was very much unable to hide his shock. I suspected he had only ever met Zhang Shegong in his capacity as governor of Blue Sea Province. Even if he knew he was a mystic, he probably had no practical understanding of what that meant. I imagine he didn't see the mystics as anything more than humans with particularly long lifespans. That wasn't really his fault, but being swept away by the atmosphere before even meeting Zhang Shegong wouldn't do him any good.

"Soleil, what kind of person is Zhang Shegong? I've heard he's good at making money, but I've never actually met him. I'm starting to get the impression he really likes surprising people, though." So I asked Soleil a question, though not entirely for Kaylel's sake.

I had met three mystics before: Wanggui Xuannu, Baimao Laojun, and Longcui Dijun. If you included their student Bailang Daoshi, who was likely doing great work as a full-fledged mystic on the southern continent by now, I suppose that would make it four.

But anyway, my impression of Zhang Shegong was that he was a little

different from the others. The way he did so many things to prepare for my arrival personally, the way he made these stairs as if to show off, it all seemed very...*human*.

Wanggui Xuannu was kind and honest, but at her core she was quite strictly disciplined. Being the governor of the earthfolk in Black Snow Province fit her personality well, but she would have a much harder time if she were in charge of a large number of humans. Baimao Laojun understood humans well, but his interest in them was mostly academic. Longcui Dijun existed in a headspace so far removed from the real world, so he gave off a very shady impression. If I had been meeting with any of them, I would have received a very different greeting.

“Zhang Shegong is...well, he’s quite strict, but I think of all the mystics, he treasures the world as it is now, built by so many ordinary people, the most.”

I nodded at that. This was just conjecture on my part, but aside from Huang Mu who I didn’t know anything about, I figured Soleil probably got along with Zhang Shegong best out of all the mystics. At the very least, the way she spoke about him carried strong feelings of respect and closeness.

Maybe it was obvious, but Soleil and I were of different races, so we had fundamentally different natures. Though I got along great with Wanggui Xuannu and Baimao Laojun, that was because of my ability to resonate with their deep interest in martial and magical arts. Maybe it was weird for me to say this myself, but as a high elf, I was pretty detached from the world myself.

On the other hand, at least up until she had chosen to follow the path of the mystics, Soleil had been a very grounded girl. To put it in another way, she was very much “normal,” at least relatively speaking. Though she was born with the heavy weight of being the daughter of the emperor of Sabal, she only really understood that as “coming from a rich family.” So I imagined she resonated quite well with a person like Zhang Shegong, someone who treasured the world “woven from people’s lives” despite being a mystic.

It was kind of a relief. Seeing that Soleil was doing well in her training as a mystic—or even more importantly, that she was enjoying her life here—was a weight off my shoulders. No doubt the path of the mystic demanded strong feelings and dedication from the individual walking it, but I was sure Zhang

Shegong was guiding her well.

The moving staircase carried us to the top of the mountain. A glance to the side showed that Kaylel had managed to recover himself after listening to our conversation. Turning around, we could see the entire port town laid out below us. I felt like that spoke something of Zhang Shegong's character as well.

Putting all of it together, I had to imagine that he had reduced trade with the elven caravan for a reason, something more than just personal profit. He must have had some other goal, something much less small-minded. Alternatively, there may have been a reason they were so deeply involved with the caravan before, aside from just their connection to me, and had lost that reason.

When the elven caravan had first begun getting involved in the sea trade, they had needed power to help their elven comrades across the continent. After that, they continued to need power to solidify their position and influence and to protect their people. On top of that, their efforts in the southern continent had required a tremendous amount of money. Now, the elven caravan was more than big enough, and their involvement with the southern continent was less one of support and more one of trade, meaning they were making their own profits now. If Zhang Shegong simply said there was no need for him to support the caravan anymore, I wouldn't really be able to disagree.

Soleil...or maybe I should be calling her by her student name now: Shengjiu Daoshi, pulled open the sliding door in front of us.

"Please, go on in. Zhang Shegong is waiting for you."

And we were invited in.



Built from wood and bamboo, Zhang Shegong's retreat was quite modest in design. If he was planning on doing negotiations with trade partners, the office in the city Kaylel had visited before would probably be better. The fact we had been invited here definitely meant we were getting special treatment.

It would be similar to Airena inviting guests to stay at our house in Pantarheios instead of at the elven caravan's offices, I suppose. In other words,

it was basically unheard of. And if it were to happen, it would require two conditions to be met.

First, they had to be important enough that Airena would want to offer them hospitality on a personal level. Secondly, they had to be someone who would recognize and appreciate that kind of special treatment. Inviting someone over to your massive mansion was a different story, but our home on Pantarheios wasn't like that, nor was this retreat. An invitation to a place like this could actually be seen as rude, so only someone who understood the meaning of the gesture would receive it. It really was special treatment.

"I see you have arrived. Head of the elven caravan, Sir Kaylel, and former head Miss Airena. It has been quite some time since our last meeting. Your unchanging nature as forestfolk is a great relief to me. And you, true one, sir Acer. It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. I am the one known as Zhang Shegong."

A middle-aged man with a sharp gaze came out to greet us. He was rather slender, with a sharply defined figure, and gave a bit of a high-strung impression. The other thing that stood out about him was his long black hair and beard, coupled with the white snake wrapped around him. A snake...ah, that explained the name, "Great Snake Lord."

After waiting for Kaylel, the real leader of our party, and Airena to give their greetings, I gave my own. "Nice to meet you. I'm Acer. I'm just here for moral support, but I'm really happy you sent Soleil and Sayr's descendants to greet us. Thank you." I had nothing to say but my thanks. The kindness he showed in our reception had made me exceptionally happy.

"I am elated that you appreciated the gesture. For us of the Ancient Gold Empire, or really all of us as mystics, there is no more important guest. No simple reception would do justice for your visit...and beyond that, I am deeply grateful to you myself." Zhang Shegong's face softened a bit at my greeting...and then he said something rather interesting.

Saying I was an important guest was understandable, I suppose. I could see why they felt they needed a proper reception for me. As a member of the ancient races able to avoid the influence of the true dragon sleeping beneath

the Empire, the mystics would consider me an important guest, but one they wouldn't want to actually invite in. In particular, I was quite active and impulsive for a high elf, so I could see why they'd be so careful around me.

But he was grateful to *me*? Had I done anything for the mystics, or more specifically for Zhang Shegong, to be thankful to me? Though I was quite curious, I didn't have time to ask before he went on.

"I can largely guess what the goal of your visit today is, especially considering the letter that preceded you. But even so, please allow me to ask. What would you like to discuss, sir Kaylel?"

With that, the meeting between the head of the elven caravan and the governor of Blue Sea Province began in earnest.

Honestly, I wasn't that good when it came to talking about money. When I had first left the Forest Depths, Airena explained to me the breakdown of the value of different kinds of currency, but I really had no sense for money. Maybe because I'd always had a way to make money, or because I could just step into any forest and feed myself for free, I always just collected money over time and spent it on whatever whim took me. It always felt like if I ever ran out, I could just make more.

Of course, when I was raising children, I needed to be a bit more strict to teach them how to handle money in the future, but I went right back to my old ways once they were gone from my care. On top of that, though I felt bad for saying it, Airena was quite rich, so even with a relaxed approach to making money, I never really wanted for anything. So I had presumed that large-scale financial talk between trade corporations would soar way over my head.

And honestly, I couldn't keep up with their conversation or add anything to it, but strangely enough, I at least understood what they were saying. Of course, I didn't think I had suddenly become financially literate overnight, so I assumed Kaylel and Zhang Shegong were dumbing things down for my sake. I guess they had each spent multiple human lifetimes dealing in trade, so they were skilled enough at it to come down to my level.

Kaylel's main point was that trade with the caravan had generated a large

amount of profit for the Ancient Gold Empire, and there was no reason that wouldn't continue to be the case. The caravan hadn't been taking advantage of them at all. Both sides had been profiting equally from the arrangement.

But Zhang Shegong showed no signs of being moved by his words, while Kaylel seemed to be getting flustered. He couldn't understand why the mystic would react so negatively to something that should have been a benefit to both of them.

Maybe because I wasn't all that interested in the financial world, I was starting to catch a glimpse of Zhang Shegong's intentions. I suspected that Zhang Shegong's goal was to deliver substantial damage to both the elven caravan and the Ancient Gold Empire. His goals were the exact opposite of Kaylel's, so there was no way his appeal would work.



So, *why* did Zhang Shegong want to do them harm? That required some thought. The best hint so far, though really it was probably almost the answer already, was in how Soleil had described him earlier.

*“Zhang Shegong is...well, he's quite strict, but I think of all the mystics, he treasures the world as it is now, built by so many ordinary people, the most.”*

In other words, he didn't want the elven caravan or even the Ancient Gold Empire to be winning on their own. If you broke it down a bit more, maybe you could say he didn't want the commercial world being led around by the ear by only the long-lived races and people.

It was similar in principle to why I refused to become king of the dwarves. If elves began taking leadership roles in commerce, humans would come to accept that as normal. Like Kaylel, the elves would have more experience than humans could ever attain. If the elves continued as they were, resistance and competition would eventually fade away and the elves would quietly take over everything. Once they controlled the flow of goods, no nation would be able to stand against them. Humans would grow to accept that the elves had full control over them, and though it was a harsh way of putting it, would end up accepting an existence that was little different from slavery under them.

Of course, there was no guarantee things would turn out that way, but Zhang



Shegong himself could have taken the reins of the entire world of trade long before the elven caravan got close to them. The experience he had as a mystic far outweighed anything even the elves could muster. But he hadn't done so, because he treasured the world as it was, built from the interweaving of people's lives. He wanted people to be as free and unfettered as possible, in hopes of seeing what they would create.

So his goal was to shrink the still-growing elven caravan, or if that was impossible, reduce the scale of their operation even at the cost of hurting the Ancient Gold Empire. That was the meaning behind his actions.

"Have you figured it out?"

I suddenly realized Zhang Shegong was looking right at me. I guess my realization had shown on my face. I felt a little bit flustered by the way it seemed like he was reading my thoughts. But that question from him all but confirmed my suspicions.

"I think I get the general idea. I know what you're trying to do. But don't you think that'll require an agreement on both sides? If done too quickly, a lot of people will lose their jobs. Those people's leaders will be desperate to prevent that from happening."

Being the man Airena chose to succeed her, I suspected Kaylel might have reached the same conclusion I did if given enough time. Right now, his responsibility as the head of the elven caravan was blinding him to that truth, but he might eventually stumble his way there. But we couldn't just lounge around here in the Ancient Gold Empire until he figured it out. Even if Kaylel didn't mind, a high elf like me couldn't stay here for long without disturbing the golden dragon.

"Hmm, I suppose. We mystics have a bad habit of thinking too greatly of ourselves. I thought I was being careful, but it appears I must apologize," Zhang Shegong replied, bowing his head slightly. He received the criticism so well it almost made me feel bad for giving it, but I wasn't overly surprised. I already had the idea he was that kind of guy. "My intentions behind limiting trade with the caravan were to slow its growth. One group having so much control inhibits others from blossoming."

With a gentle expression, Zhang Shegong began running fingers through his long beard. Among dwarves I would have said “scratching his beard,” but the way he did it was much more graceful than one would see from a dwarf.



“The caravan has grown to save its comrades, to improve the situation of the elves, and to support the southern continent. All of these are good, but it must come to an end. In my estimation, growth beyond this point serves no one.”

So I was right on that too. When the elven caravan needed help, the Ancient Gold Empire was proactive in providing it. But they had now decided that need no longer existed.

Kaylel likely had plenty of excuses. If one stopped aiming to improve, what resulted was not stagnation but decline. But from my perspective outside the caravan, Zhang Shegong’s point made a lot of sense. He was letting the caravan continue to aim high, while at the same time hurting both of them.

But what he said next took me by surprise. “However, true one Acer, I find myself quite indebted to you. It is thanks to you that this continent has been spared from destruction by fire.”

Well...huh. I guess he wasn’t wrong. I didn’t think it was worth making such a big deal out of it though. Anyone would work to protect their homes and the people they loved if they were in danger. That’s all I had done.

“As such, if you request it, I will continue trading with the elven caravan as before. What do you think?”

The serious look he gave me had me at a loss for words. I mean...why did I have to be the one to decide this?



I stepped out of Zhang Shegong’s residence and heaved a sigh. The sun had already set, the moon large and bright in the sky.

“He’s an interesting person, isn’t he, Father?” Soleil called out to me, jolting me back to reality from the moon’s enchanting beauty. She must have been talking about Zhang Shegong...and regardless of whether we got along or not, she was right. He really was an interesting guy.

But man, was I tired. I was done with these hard topics for quite a while now.

“He’s told me over and over about you two. How we owe you for saving the northern continent, and Mother for saving the southern one. And about how

great the elven caravan is.”

They owe us, huh? I was just doing what I wanted, and I imagined Airena was much the same, so I couldn’t really say anyone “owed” us anything. It was true the elven caravan was a great organization though. I couldn’t help but be impressed that the small group Airena started because of my small whim of getting the dwarves and elves to start trading had grown into such a huge entity. So many elves had become involved, and now people of other races were joining too. I doubted there were any other trade organizations that had Zhang Shegong on guard like this one.

Kaylel, Zhang Shegong, and Airena were discussing the details and conditions of their partnership at the moment. The elven caravan would be making a contract with the Ancient Gold Empire, with a guarantee that their combined assets wouldn’t exceed a certain percentage of the entire continent’s wealth. Apparently it would also include conditions to support each other, should their finances experience an extreme drop.

Though Zhang Shegong had offered to continue trade according to their previous agreements at my request, Kaylel had been the one to decline. Now that he understood Zhang Shegong’s intentions, he himself suggested that they make some new contract. So I was freed from the difficult discussions and left to enjoy the night sky.

Kaylel really was perfect for inheriting Airena’s position. If he had said nothing, he might have gotten everything he wanted. Speaking up in that situation must have been a difficult decision to make. But he was intelligent enough that after accepting Zhang Shegong’s reasoning, he chose to make a new contract, knowing that in the end, it would serve to provide further stability to the caravan.

“The other mystics talk about you a lot too. By the way, is it true that you once punched Longcui Dijun? He’s the *emperor*, you can’t just do that!”

I found myself suddenly gulping as Soleil started dredging up my old mistakes. I guess I *had* done that, hadn’t I? I had punched him because I thought he was really shady, but it turned out he wasn’t as bad as I had feared.

But the idea that I wasn’t allowed to punch him just because he was the

emperor was a bit funny to me. After all, I was the *father* of an emperor, and she was that emperor's daughter, though of an empire on the other side of the continent.

"A lot happened back then. Because of the influence of the golden dragon stirring, Longcui Dijun was acting really stuck up toward me. So I figured he was the culprit behind everything." As shameful as it was, I couldn't help but argue back. Though really, I was just making excuses. At first, I thought she'd laugh, but instead, Soleil just nodded in understanding. Maybe she saw him much the same way I had.

A pleasant night breeze brought the chirping of insects to our ears. I had left Pantarheios in the summer, but it was now well into autumn. Though really, I should have been surprised that I had made it all the way to the Ancient Gold Empire with only a single season changing.

"I hope their talks go well," Soleil said, earning a nod from me. She had been deeply involved with the elven caravan in the past, so it was only natural she'd feel an attachment to it.

Behind us, in that small retreat, a conversation that could reshape the world was taking place. Or maybe I should say it was a conversation being held so that they *wouldn't* reshape the world. At any rate, it was a huge topic for such a little house. I found that thought rather amusing.

"I think it'll go fine. I don't know anything about business, but I know that within his own field, Zhang Shengong is just as amazing as Wanggui Xuannu or Baimao Laojun, if not better."

It wasn't like I had underestimated him before, but his expertise was in a realm I couldn't understand very well. I knew something about the other two, so I could immediately tell how incredible they were. I had to assume Huang Mu was equally incredible, even if I'd never met her.

And Soleil was learning under all of them. I was really happy that I could see for myself what a wonderful place she was living in.

After that, Soleil and I continued with trivial conversation, like about how Wanggui Xuannu's training was too intense, or about how worried she was about Baimao Laojun when he was lifting really heavy things because of how

old he looked.





It seemed Baimao Laojun was still blacksmithing. I would have loved to test my swordsmanship against Wanggui Xuannu again...but that would involve staying in the Ancient Gold Empire for a lot longer than would be healthy. And if she couldn't leave the Empire, we'd probably never get the chance to spar.

"Hey, Father. Could you tell me about the last time you visited here again? In full detail this time."

Soleil asked me for quite the long story. But the discussion happening in the building behind us likely wouldn't be much shorter.

So I nodded, beginning the long tale as a way to pass the time. With Soleil as she was now, there were plenty of things I had kept secret before that I could finally tell her. It would be fitting retribution for the mystics saying all that stuff about me.

## Chapter 3 — The Flow of Time and Good Drink

Another ten and some years passed since I visited the Ancient Gold Empire, leaving me at five hundred and fifty years old. This year marked the four hundredth anniversary of me leaving the Forest Depths and meeting Airen and Oswald. That didn't mean much in and of itself, but it was a good excuse to do something.

I used that excuse to head south on Heero's back and hunt those seals we had once found, to bring them back and have someone cook them for us, to refuse the cook's request to start going on those hunts regularly, and to make jerky from them and find a good drink to pair with it.

With any reason or excuse, I'd get the urge to do things I never did normally. In the same vein, I took the jerky and alcohol I had chosen and went to visit Oswald's grave.

I left at night when there were few people around. The water spirits supported me as I walked over the ocean, taking some distance from Pantarheios before calling for Heero. It took only a day on his back to fly past the Great Pulha Woodlands and to the dwarven kingdom in the mountains to the north.

Looking down on Pulha from the sky, I was sure it hadn't changed a bit since the day I left four hundred years ago. I could see some large creatures moving between the trees, big enough that their heads popped up over the treetops. I imagined they were some kind of bear monsters standing on their hind legs. If a creature that big wandered out of the forest, how many countries would it destroy?

The world would eventually be destroyed by the dragons, but even without that threat, it felt like a terribly fragile thing. Even so, everyone spent their days living earnestly, pressing on toward tomorrow.

That was why I loved it, why I found it so irresistible.

Showing my mithril armband and giving them my name, also maybe in part because I arrived during the day, I was immediately let into the kingdom.

I no longer knew anyone here. I'd once traveled around the kingdom, telling children in schools about the continent beyond their mountains, but even they had long since passed. That was how long it had been.

I was allowed in so easily because Oswald's last instruction as king was for the dwarves to pass down knowledge about me. They were taught that I was a friend of the dwarves, a citizen of their kingdom, and a craftsman capable of rivaling the king.

I had my doubts about that last one. I didn't know who the current king was, but I also didn't feel like I had yet caught up to Oswald in his prime. But with that said, if it was just limited to swords and katana, I probably wasn't any worse.

Anyway, thanks to that tradition, I was allowed to freely enter the kingdom of the dwarves. Dwarves I had never met took one look at me, saw my armband, and immediately nodded and accepted my presence. It would be one thing if it were one or two people, but having a whole nation know me before I'd met a single one of them gave me a strange feeling.

But anyway, I headed to an inn first. Though traveling on Heero's back was easy enough, I didn't have much freedom of movement while we were flying. It wasn't a great environment for sleeping or eating, so I was pretty tired and hungry. I'd save visiting Oswald's grave for after I had eaten and slept.

The dwarven kingdom rarely had visitors from outside, so you could count the number of inns in the city on one hand. But recently, the elven caravan had begun visiting to discuss important deals, and sometimes dwarves wanted to spend a luxurious night out, so the inns that did exist were fairly clean and high class.

When I asked for a room, the innkeeper was overjoyed to lead me to one. Even dwarves who weren't blacksmiths themselves held blacksmiths in high regard, so they had a deep respect for famous craftsmen. And since they seemed to believe I was as good as the king, the innkeeper was more than happy to have me. Though I was grateful, I hadn't actually done anything to

earn that treatment, so it left me feeling a bit uneasy.

The meal prepared for me clearly had a lot of effort put into it, and though the ingredients used were all native to the dwarven kingdom, it was still quite good. For example, the goat steak they served me wasn't just plainly cooked; something had been done to it to leech out most of the meat's odor. I had spent quite a while living here before, so I was used to the goat meat's peculiarities, but not everyone felt that way. But that peculiarity was nowhere to be seen here, instead boasting a strong but gently soft flavor.

What kind of magic did they use for this? I couldn't figure it out at all just by eating it. Besides curing, smoking, and pickling it, I couldn't think of any other ways to treat meat, but I was sure it wasn't any of those. I knew they used butter made from goat's milk in the cooking as well, but I found it hard to believe that was all. They must have found some other method to improve the taste of the meat.

And not just the meat either. The soup, the salad, the potato bread, everything was phenomenal. Since I was planning on taking a drink to Oswald's grave, I wasn't really in the mood for drinking, but the fantastic food had me ordering drinks anyway.

Of course, I didn't drink myself into a stupor. With my stomach full of food and drink, I made my way upstairs and fell on my bed. Maybe thanks to the alcohol, I was asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.



I woke up in what was probably the middle of the night.

The innkeeper informed me that while I was asleep, a messenger came from the king asking for me to pay him a visit. However, he said waiting until tomorrow was fine, so I decided to put it off for a day. I was here to visit Oswald's grave, not meet with the current dwarven king. I was a bit curious about what kind of craftsman he was though, so staying for another few days wouldn't be a bother. I honestly had tons of time.

As for the grave in question, though the dwarven kingdom was already underground, the graveyard was another level down.

In this world, magical energy—or more accurately, the distorting power—could turn corpses into a kind of monster known as a revenant. As such, rituals for the recently deceased tended to include precautions to prevent that. Each race and region had their own way of doing that. For example, people in some rural human settlements would slice open the stomachs of dead bodies before burying them, in order to prevent the distorting power from accumulating within the body.

For the dwarves, their answer was cremation. As a race that loved blacksmithing, they felt a strong affinity for fire. So when their life came to an end, they relied on fire once again in their mourning rites. After they had become one with the fire, the remaining ashes were placed in an urn and interred in a grave. The practice may also have been influenced by the fact that dwarves gained new territory not by expanding outward, but by digging down, so it served to save space.

At any rate, the road to the dwarven graveyard led out of the city and farther underground. It was lined with glowing moss, making it look much the same during the day and night. That said, not all that many dwarves had a habit of visiting graves during the middle of the night.

As I reached the end of the dimly lit passageway, the amount of moss in the area suddenly exploded, filling the place with a unique, pale blue light. The air was cool and quiet...yeah, it was exactly the kind of place you'd expect to see a ghost. But I wasn't the least bit scared. Any ghosts that appeared here would be dwarves; the most they'd want from me was a drink. That wasn't any different from a living dwarf. And besides, if I could meet with Oswald again, I wouldn't care if he was a ghost.

Of course, I knew nothing so convenient would happen. As a high elf with memories of a past life, I could see the spirits and knew full well that souls existed, but I had never seen a ghost. If ghosts existed, I should have been able to see them just like the spirits of high elves. In other words, I highly doubted they did. Yet for some reason, visiting a friend's grave like this brought back so many clear memories of them.

Oswald's grave was placed deep in the graveyard with the other dwarven kings, but he didn't have an extra large grave or anything like that. Most

dwarves were buried in their collective family grave, but kings and those who had equally strong impacts on dwarven society were given their own. Despite how he'd looked, Oswald had a tendency to get really lonely, so I felt like he should have been buried with his family anyway.

I stood before the grave marked for him. Though I called it a grave, those for individual dwarves consisted of only a stone monument listing their accomplishments, with their ashes buried beneath it. Oswald's grave alone had something different, something placed alongside the stone monument: a small statue of him that I had carved. Even though he knew it would look bad for the other graves around his, he had apparently asked it be placed here after he died. He really was a good friend.

Deep underground as it was, the statue wouldn't suffer weathering like one on the surface, so that image of him would survive for ages. That made me unbelievably happy.

The stone monument placed for him was crowded with text, proof of all he had done for the dwarven people. But among all those accomplishments, there were a number that involved me. From forging mithril before even becoming king, to building the hot spring for the soldiers, to setting up production of the materials needed to make katana, they all brought back a flood of memories and smiles as I read them.

"As I promised, I came for a visit, master damned dwarf," I greeted him, taking a seat in front of the grave.

Of course, there was no reply. All that stood in front of me was a carved stone tablet and a statue in his image. The real Oswald was no longer here.

But strangely enough, I thought I heard someone snort a laugh. It had to be an illusion born from my sentimentality, but it was exactly what I wanted to hear.

While I was certainly sad I wouldn't be able to meet Oswald again, I wasn't really grieved by it. He had lived life to the fullest, left behind children, been loved by everyone, and then passed away. I was proud of him, both as my master and my friend. And he had left me with so much. Kaeha's swordsmanship was always with me, and so were the skills in blacksmithing



Oswald had taught me. The loss of Oswald was something I had faced head-on and come to accept.

I poured two glasses of the alcohol I brought and lifted one to my lips. I had already been drinking during the day, but here I was, drinking again. Drinking and eating dried meats in front of his grave brought back all sorts of memories. His favorite snack while drinking was dried venison, not just from any deer, but from a certain kind of monster that lived in Pulha. Though he gave the impression of someone hard and serious, he had quite a taste for luxury when it came to food and drink.

I continued to drink, thinking back on all these things. People were born, and eventually died. They all eventually disappeared. Humans, dwarves, elves...all of them were the same. Long ago, one of the high elf elders and my grandfather Salix had told me that interacting with the other races would give us nothing but sentimental feelings, but I think he was wrong. Sure, once separated by death, the bonds we held would begin to fade with time. But the mark those people had left on my life remained. And if I was destined to become a spirit and persist until the end of the world, their impact would be equally eternal.

Maybe these were just my drunken ramblings. But the drink tonight was quite good.



Once I returned from the dwarven kingdom, I set about finishing the statues of all my old friends. I had been slowly working on that project for a while, but the visit to Oswald's grave had filled me with nostalgia.

But there were still a few problems. The issue wasn't my ability as a sculptor, but where to put the statues once they were finished.

To be more precise, there wasn't really anywhere on Pantarheios to store a large collection of statues. I may have been able to claim a spot for them if I were making them for the people on the island to enjoy, but these were just statues of my friends. It seemed a bit too selfish to take up public space with them.

On top of that, they wouldn't maintain their shape for very long as the island's sea air weathered them away. The whole point of this endeavor was to

preserve the images of my friends for a long time. Pantarheios just wasn't a very good place for that.

In that case, it seemed like I might have to move. I was sure Airena would gladly come along if I suggested it, as she was now considering passing her position down to someone else. Airena had kept her position of influence with the caravan to help with my desire to support the southern continent, but now that we had finished that project, there wasn't much reason for her to stay.

And though it wasn't something I really wanted to think about, even as long-lived as elves were, she wouldn't live forever. She probably had about a hundred years left...certainly no more than two hundred. From a human perspective, that might have seemed like a huge amount of time, but it was very different for the two of us. We could already see the end.

So I imagined she'd soon retire from the caravan entirely. Of course, she wouldn't just drop everything and run. It would come after she had trained someone to take her place.

But even without the problem of Airena's job, I had mixed feelings about leaving the island. I had been involved in developing Pantarheios with the elven caravan since the very beginning. I had been involved with building roads and docks and deflecting storms until the port was finished. Almost all of the nails and other metal implements used in these homes were made by me. When I had first started blacksmithing, I daydreamed about replacing every nail in the city with one I had made by just making nails for long enough, but that had actually come true on this island. In other words, I was quite attached to this place.

That wasn't something I normally thought about, but once the option of leaving the island came up, I felt myself naturally resisting it, even after all the wandering I had done both around this continent and the southern one. Also, for someone who liked to travel like me, Pantarheios was an extremely convenient place to live. Ships heading all over the continent docked here, and I could just walk out on the sea for a while to find a hidden spot to call Heero. In that respect, I wasn't sure I could really leave this place. Maybe I could if Airena said she also wanted to leave, but this was also a place full of memories for her.

Which brought me back to the first problem. Where would I put the statues? I continued to turn the problem over in my head as I kept carving the stone. If there were only one or two, I could probably find people who would want them. For example, I could see the elven caravan asking to put a statue of Airená up in their office or in the middle of the town square. But I didn't want to make one or two statues; I wanted to make statues of *everyone* who was important to me. But who would care about statues of a bunch of people who no longer existed?

I could leave them in some cave somewhere, but that felt like it defeated the purpose. Unfortunately, the whole point of this was that I wanted people to remember what they looked like.

As I mulled over the problem and got my feelings in order, the answer came quite naturally to me. If I wanted the memories of these people to last, I needed to leave them with people who would also live forever. Yes, the other ancient races like myself, those who would persist until the end of time.

I suspected the golden dragon, who had listened intently to all my stories so long ago, would watch over these statues for me. And I had to assume the giants had at least one room in their huge castle that they could store the statues in. The world would be burned again someday, and people would be brought from the surface to the giants' castle to preserve life for the next world. What would those people think when they saw those statues?

Having grown too large for his place in the high elf sacred ground, Heero had made a nest for himself somewhere else. I was sure he'd take care of any statues I gave him. And I knew the spirits would remember not just my statues, but every work I'd made and every step I'd taken, for the rest of time, even if they wouldn't share that story with anyone.



I didn't know how many statues I would have to make before I was satisfied, but I decided to start with statues for the golden dragon. With that thought in mind, I wrote a letter to the mystics in the Ancient Gold Empire. There were plenty of ships that traveled to the empire, and I was sure the mystics would have no problem transporting them. In other words, it would be one of the

easier places to send them.

Of course, that was just because I was considering them alongside places like the giants' castle in the clouds and Heero's nest, so it would still be quite a bit of work. But thanks to previous events, the bond between the elven caravan and the Ancient Gold Empire was stronger than ever, so I was sure they'd accept the request. In their eyes, the greatest concern was always the golden dragon's condition. If they thought this could pacify the sleeping dragon even slightly, I imagined they'd be on board. And when the sleeping dragon awoke to find those statues in his cavern, I suspected he'd immediately guess what they were and be quite happy with them.

He would probably be happiest if I brought them myself and shared my memories of those people with him again, but that would probably take a decade or two. I couldn't afford to spend that kind of time right now. It would be fun, but I should wait until after another century or two with Airen...once she was gone. I was sure I'd be depressed when that time came, so I'd likely end up wandering around the world and find my way to him. If that day came and I arrived at the golden dragon's cavern to be greeted by statues of all my old friends, I imagined that would do wonders for my heart.

Anyway, there was no need to think that far ahead. Right now, it was just good that I had decided on a plan. So it was time to carve.

The first had to be Rodna, the first human I ever met. City guard and gatekeeper, protector of the place we called a city, where people's lives happened.

In my long travels, I had seen the ugly side of humanity plenty of times. They enslaved other races and warred among themselves. But that was only one side of them. There were plenty of good things to be seen in them as well. The fact I was able to see past the bad and to the good in the first place was because he had been the first person I met. If I had met someone evil instead, I likely would have viewed humanity with much more suspicion throughout my life. That would have greatly changed the relationships I'd made with the people I met later, like Kaeha, Nonna, and Kawshman. In fact, I may have never met them at all.

That wasn't the only reason, but nevertheless, I slowly and carefully worked on my statue of him first, putting my gratitude into every stroke of the chisel. Seeing a rough, shapeless stone taking form because of the work of my own hands was a lot of fun. Little by little, an image that existed only in my mind was making its way out into the world. Blacksmithing was fun, but so was this.

I was really lucky. I had found so many things I liked, and had been given so much time to enjoy them. I don't think I could've been more blessed. I owed it all to my wonderful teachers.

That aside, I had actually made a number of practice runs at statues of people I knew. Not just Rodna, but Clayas, Martena, and even Airena. There was the statue beside Oswald's grave, and ones of Kaeha and her mother Kuroha. Caleina, Grand, Dreeze, Nonna, Kawshman, Win, Shizuki, Mizuha...I didn't have enough fingers and toes to count all the people I had already made statues of.

But this time, I decided I wouldn't rest until I was satisfied with the final product. My hands worked smoothly and unceasingly. Understanding what shape the stone wished for was second nature to me now. It felt like I had become something of an earth spirit myself.

Maybe that wasn't just a metaphor. Sometimes it felt like this eternally unchanging body was more like a cage. The wind would come in off the sea, and my heart would long to follow it up into the sky, but my feet stayed rooted to the ground. I had never felt like that before, so I imagined it was a result of getting older as a high elf.

Little by little, my soul was coming closer to being a spirit. When I left this body behind, would it be like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon? Of course, that was hundreds of years away, but recently it felt like time was flowing faster than before. Maybe it would be best if I finished everything I wanted to accomplish while still a high elf sooner rather than later. It was one thing while Airena was with me, but once she was gone, I imagined my remaining time would pass in the blink of an eye.

After a month or two of work, the statue of Rodna was complete. For some reason I couldn't explain, the sense of accomplishment came with an equal

sense of loss. His expression, so gentle and friendly, had come out so well, like at any moment the statue would open its mouth and speak. This was no doubt a great piece.

So after spending a night with the statue, talking over all my old memories with him even though obviously he couldn't respond, I carefully packed it up and made preparations for it to be moved. There was a lot of work left to do, but my desire to keep going was only getting stronger. Maybe next I'd make statues of the mystics in the Ancient Gold Empire and send them along.

Wanggui Xuannu, Baimao Laojun, Longcui Dijun, Zhang Shegong. Unfortunately, I had never met Huang Mu, so I couldn't make one of her. I guess it was her own fault for never coming to see me. I could only wonder how Wanggui Xuannu would react to seeing a statue of Jizou alongside one of herself. Just imagining it was fun.

But first, I'd take a small break. Airen would scold me if I didn't eat a proper breakfast. It was nice to have someone who cared so much about me, but that didn't mean I wanted to needlessly worry her. So after having a meal and a bit of rest, I'd get started on the next one.



After finishing the statues, I'd pack them up on trade ships to take to the Ancient Gold Empire, or take them out on small boats for Heero to come and carry them up to the giants. The endeavor made the next decades pass like a flash, soon taking me past six hundred years old.

Of course, I was still making tools and nails for houses on the island and the ships that visited, so it wasn't like I was carving stone twenty-four seven. I also did some fishing, and poked my head into the island's Yosogi Katana Style Dojo every once in a while. All of that kept me busy enough that making the statues took me decades.

Around the time I finished, something happened on Pantarheios that left a lasting impression on me.

The island's population had continued to grow over the centuries I'd been here, but there was a hard limit on how many people could physically fit on it. While the island developed to the point of any city on the mainland, and indeed

beyond that, the population itself never went that high. As such, there had never been institutions for finding and training people born with the innate talent for the Divine Arts.

The Divine Arts, also known as the Psychic Arts, were miracles born from intense spiritual training or a remarkably powerful faith. Basic reading, writing, and math were taught by the Church, who would screen children for talent in the Divine Arts. Those who showed promise were sent to their headquarters for proper training. Families of such children were compensated handsomely, and the children themselves were all but guaranteed a bright future in the Church, along with an extensive education.

But on Pantarheios, people came from all different places, and so the religions they ascribed to were equally diverse. You could even say that Airena, with all her efforts in building and supporting the island, had come to be worshiped there in a sense. At any rate, no individual religion held much sway on the island, and basic literacy and arithmetic were taught by schools set up by the elven caravan.

There probably had been children born here with talent for the Divine Arts, but they had gone undiscovered and so lived their entire lives with that talent staying dormant. I couldn't say whether that was a good or bad thing. Not every talent brought happiness by being cultivated. It was also hard to say whether a future guaranteed by the Church would be better or worse than a life lived with one's parents.

Talent came in many levels, as did parents. Some might have blossomed into powerful practitioners of the Divine Arts, but others might be left suffering on the wayside watching other people succeed where they could not. Many parents treated their children with love and led happy lives, but there were also those who would get drunk and beat their kids. Which choice was the right one, which one would lead to greater happiness, wasn't something I could decide on my own.

But the fact of the matter was there was no institution here for discovering that talent, and so those talents went undiscovered. However, it hadn't yet been an issue because those talents were too weak to surface without training.



For example, long, long ago, I met a boy from the Dahlian tribe on the Great Grasslands with the ability to set fire to anything just by looking at it. Even without any training, he demonstrated powerful pyrokinesis. Children like that were exceptionally rare. Juyal was the only one I'd ever heard of, and I never expected to see it again. If I had brought up that possibility with Airena, I bet she would have even made preparations for that eventuality.

Yes, the event in question was the birth of one such gifted child capable of using the Divine Arts from birth. Luckily, the power they manifested wasn't something capable of killing others. If it had been pyrokinesis like Juyal's, it very well may have gone wild, hurting or even killing the child's parents and others around them.

Thinking back on it now, it was actually remarkable Juyal had managed to survive until he was old enough to control that power on his own. He was praised as the Child of Fire and thrown into battle like a living weapon, but his power could just have likely killed him before then. The birth of this child on Pantarheios had been such a big stir it brought these memories out of me.

The child itself had no ill intentions, and so once it was past it would just be remembered fondly as a small storm in their family's life.

And that little storm's name was Badwin.



Badwin's affinity for the Divine Arts was discovered when he was still five or six months old. Badwin's mother had been holding him, seeing his father off as he left for work, when suddenly he had disappeared—and his father felt a thump on his back. The father immediately turned around when he heard the mother scream, and saw Badwin falling to the ground. Without even realizing what was happening, he instinctively grabbed the baby out of the air, saving him.

One might assume the mother had thrown the baby at the father, but he knew his wife well enough to know that would never happen. So he took the day off from work, spending it instead trying to soothe his panicking wife and find out the truth. What he learned was that Badwin had just vanished from his mother's arms, and the next thing they knew he was at his father's back. It was

like he was trying to go with his father to work.

Though it was entirely unbelievable, Badwin's father accepted that story immediately—because as he was holding on to Badwin, the child vanished again and appeared on the ground crying. Yes, Badwin was born with the ability to move from place to place instantly: teleportation.

After witnessing this, it was impossible for the family to live normally. They had to constantly watch over him, checking to make sure he hadn't disappeared, without a moment's rest.

The only small blessing was that he could only teleport a short distance. If he had teleported somewhere his mother and father couldn't reach, he could very well have died. We believed that this short range was because infants at his age still had very poor sight, so he probably couldn't see well enough to go any farther. To put it another way, his sense of sight hadn't developed enough to use his teleportation until then.

But even so, with a child on their hands that they absolutely could not handle, the normal course of action would be to seek help from the Church. As an organization that sought out and trained people with such abilities, they should be well used to handling cases like these. They would be elated to see a child with such potential, reward the parents handsomely, and take the child under their care.

But this was Pantarheios. The various churches had little in the way of power, so instead they turned to the next most reliable person: Airena. She had already given up the position of island overseer to her successor, but the people still had an unwavering trust in her after having ruled the island for hundreds of years. So when they felt lost and had nowhere else to turn, the parents sought out the wise elven woman with generations and generations of knowledge. And of course, once Airena knew, I found out as well.

Though it was quite a long time ago, Airena had been close friends with a user of the Divine Arts named Martena, and so immediately recognized what was happening with Badwin. The first thing she told the parents was that they could take him to the mainland, leave him in the Church's care, and receive considerable compensation.

But Badwin was their first child. The two parents were heartbroken at the thought of giving him up, and so pressed her for a solution that would let them stay with him. I doubted Airena wanted to take the boy away from his parents either. So after a bit of thought, she made another proposal. Though he wasn't an expert on the Divine Arts, what about getting Badwin a babysitter who could keep him safe no matter where he teleported? With that babysitter's help, they should have at least been able to stay together as a family for a while.

I'm sure you've figured it out by now, but Airena's proposed babysitter was none other than myself. As she said, whenever he was about to teleport I could get the wind spirits to keep him from falling, or just ask them to keep him safe whenever it looked like he was going to fall. Even if he got curious and jumped into an open fire, I could save him with the help of the fire spirits. On top of that, I liked kids and had experience raising them...so if the parents weren't interested in handing Badwin over to the Church, Airena felt that getting me to help as their babysitter was the best way to keep him safe.

No ordinary elf would ever dream of asking a high elf to do something like take care of a human baby for them...but of course, Airena had no such inhibitions. Well, maybe she would have at one point, but she understood me quite well by now. She knew that once I heard the story, I'd be asking to get involved myself.

So she suggested the two hire me as a babysitter. Apparently they were quite hesitant, though not because they had any concerns about me. Leaving the care of your child to someone else because they're too much for you to handle takes some resolve. Relying on other people for help in raising your children was normal enough in this world, at least as far as I knew, but when that child had the ability to teleport at will, the normal stopped being so applicable. Badwin's parents didn't know what they could do or what decision would make him happiest. All they knew was that they didn't want to let go of their baby boy.

But that meant they had already given their answer: they didn't want to let him go. That was answer enough, wasn't it? But even though they had chosen their path, as they could see how dangerous that path was going to be, it was normal to hesitate with the first steps.

So Airena had let them mull it over on their own. Of course, in the end they

decided—or maybe I should say they resolved themselves—to raise Badwin themselves, having me along to help. But those hours of agonizing over the right choice were still important for them.

Because that time spent in painful indecision finally leading to a resolute decision was proof that no matter what happened, they'd always have an unfailing love for their son.



So as it turned out, I became Badwin's babysitter, but that didn't mean I was stuck to him twenty-four seven. I was just being hired to look after him, so unlike Win or Soleil, I wasn't raising him as my own child. His parents were still doing most of the work. Besides, though the father's job paid decently well, it wasn't enough to hire a live-in babysitter. So to provide some relief to his mother who could barely sleep at night for fear her child might disappear, I came in the afternoon for three hours to give her a chance to rest.

To be honest, Airena and I had plenty of money, so I hardly needed the pay of a babysitter. But without the exchange of some kind of money, there was a real risk that either of us could misunderstand the nature of our relationship.

Badwin, and indeed his mother and father, were strangers to me. As neighbors living on the same island, I'd help them if they needed help, but it wasn't like I was going to give up everything for nothing in return. And without at least some measure of compensation, there was a good chance I'd start taking my role and responsibility too lightly.

If I were a normal elf, I wouldn't be able to make considerations for all those circumstances. I'd be stuck with that baby every waking moment. Really, it would be more likely I wouldn't be able to handle him on my own at all, and so would have to set up a rotation with others to look after him in case he teleported.

But as I mentioned before, I could ask the spirits in advance to take care of him, so with just a few hours a day I could keep him quite safe. That regular time spent with him was as much to show the spirits that he was important to me.

Aside from all the unique circumstances surrounding him, if you asked my

opinion of Badwin...I thought he was super cute, of course. I liked kids a lot, and Badwin was no exception. And with his Divine Art, I was definitely curious as to what kind of life he'd choose to lead.

However, I could only relax until he was about two years old. At that time, he was able to see quite far, and so his world rapidly began to expand. Even normal children had a tendency to wander off if you left them unattended at that age. For Badwin, you didn't even have to take your eyes off him. If something in the distance caught his interest, he'd be there instantly. A child tottering through the town square in an attempt to catch a bird, which then flew away, was common enough. But in Badwin's case, he would teleport up into the air after the bird, then immediately plunge back to the earth. The wind spirits would break his fall, so it wasn't like this could kill him, but it wasn't exactly good for his mother's heart.

The big problem was when something caught his interest, causing him to teleport multiple times in a short period. Once his mother lost sight of him, it was all but impossible for her to find him again, so in those cases I got the spirits to help me locate him and collected him myself. Naturally, I couldn't restrict that to just three hours a day, so as time went on, I ended up spending more and more time with him.

He was really way too much for ordinary parents to handle. But even so, their love for him never wavered in the slightest. As far as I could tell, he was quite a happy child.

According to some information the elven caravan was able to purchase, most religious organizations dealt with children like Badwin by restricting their vision. Apparently, most children born with strong innate tendencies toward the Divine Arts relied on their vision, just like Badwin and Juyal. For example, if Badwin's ability was actually to teleport to anywhere he could imagine, at that age he wouldn't be able to imagine places other than those he could see. Repeatedly using his power like that would unconsciously lead to him developing a dependence on sight to use his power, greatly restricting its potential.

In other words, if you blocked their vision, most users of the Divine Arts would be no different from anyone else. On top of that, if you only allowed them to see for training their abilities or learning church doctrine, they would

naturally grow to become quite passionate about these things as they sought them just for the chance to see.

That was how most religious organizations handled children like Badwin, apparently. I wasn't about to judge them for being "evil" or anything; there was probably no other way for humans to handle him. If you tried to raise him like an ordinary child, he'd go missing once and that would be the end of it. And that was just for Badwin. For children possessing more dangerous powers, there could be much graver consequences. Keeping them blind was really a last resort for them. Criticizing that would just be arrogant.

But even so, I couldn't help but think that Badwin was especially lucky to be able to live with parents who loved him. Once again, Badwin found himself running off, only to start crying when he realized he was lost. I retrieved him from where he ended up and brought him back to his mother, praying that these happy days for him would continue as long as possible.



"Aaaaaaceeeeeeeer, help meeeeeeeee!"

The four year old Badwin cried from the top of the tree he had found himself in, unable to climb down on his own. His foolishness was honestly kind of adorable.

So I was laughing as I started climbing the tree. He could have easily just teleported back to the ground, but apparently that was still scary for him. It was likely an instinctual fear of the possibility of teleporting *into* the ground instead of on top of it.

By the way, Badwin was actually afraid of heights, though that hadn't always been the case. Once he learned the wind spirits would catch him out of the air, he turned it into a game, teleporting himself into the air over and over. But after I got the wind spirits to stop helping him so much—just enough to keep his head from hitting the ground or to save him from falling from a fatal height—the pain of hitting the ground quickly taught him to be afraid of doing so.

Of course, I hadn't done that to be mean. If he lost his natural instinct to be afraid of falling, he could get seriously hurt in the future.

Falling hurts. Children learned danger by experiencing that, and completely protecting them robbed them of that. But the fact that he was afraid of teleporting into objects was quite curious. It made logical sense, but I had no idea where he got the idea from.

Anyway, despite being afraid of heights, every once in a while he'd end up somewhere like in this tree. It was the kind of silly mistake you'd expect from children, no matter what special abilities they may have had. Climbing up to within arm's reach, I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him off the tree. This tree was tall enough that we could see over the buildings, giving us a good view of the sea.

"Look, you're fine. Why were you up here?"

I patted Badwin's back to try and calm him down while I held him. Once he had stopped crying, I asked him what he was doing...but he just responded with a teary, snot-covered look of confusion. It seemed he'd forgotten what he was doing among all the crying.

I pulled out a cloth and wiped the mess from his face. Baldwin had gained quite the vocabulary at four years old, and his range of action had grown to match it. Sometimes he acted for a reason, other times out of sheer impulse. The fear and intrigue of him seeming capable of doing anything at all was just like any other child his age. Of course, with his ability to teleport, the fear side was very much winning in his parents.

But from my perspective, what was really incredible about his parents was that despite how much they constantly worried about him, they never once said anything bad about his teleportation. As a high elf, I could handle his abilities to some degree. If he teleported up into the air, I could stop him from falling to his death. If he teleported out into the sea, I could catch him before he hit the water. That was why I could handle him.

But his parents were just ordinary humans. There was no telling when he'd disappear from their sight.

*"Don't leave mommy behind, okay?"* I had heard his mother say once, and that was really a desperate wish on her part. But she never once spoke negatively about his powers. His father was similarly patient in his love for his

son. That was honestly incredible.

Badwin was a child born with an extra pair of wings, known as teleportation. Despite his parents not having those wings themselves, they never tried to cage him. Instead, they wanted to see him fly to his heart's content, loving him and his special talent just the same. Once he grew up a little more, Badwin would come to realize just how special his power was, and thus how much it made his parents worry, and he would begin to learn self-control.

But there was no way he'd live an ordinary life. Right now, he was fine living under his parents' protection. Okay, there was quite a bit of protection from me too, but since they had hired me to help, I counted that as part of their efforts. But once he grew up, there would be no shortage of people looking to take advantage of his abilities.

There had already been many requests to take Badwin from his parents. Badwin had become somewhat famous here on Pantarheios, so it was only a matter of time before sailors brought word of him back to the churches on the mainland. Among the Divine Arts, teleportation was a particularly useful power. It only made sense that they'd be dying to get their hands on a child that could do that naturally from birth. Pantarheios was a stronghold of the elven caravan, so they couldn't make strong moves against him yet, but...that would only last for as long as he lived on this island.

Born with that extra pair of wings, Badwin would inevitably grow to find Pantarheios too small for him. Someday he would leave. But the mainland wasn't as peaceful as our little island. The longstanding Republic of Vilestorika in the East had finally collapsed, and the Empire of Sabal in the West had split into three in a civil war. I had no idea what path Badwin would take when he left the island, but whichever one he chose, he would need to be able to defend himself. This Badwin right here, brought to tears by his fear of falling from a tree.

The world wasn't quite as free as we wished.



"Acer, Acer, Acer!" As I sat with my fishing line in the water, a seven-year-old Badwin ran up to me calling my name.



Ever since his younger sister was born two years ago, he had been referring to me as his older brother. When his sister was born, his mother had said, “You’re her older brother, so you need to look after her, just like Mr. Acer looks after you.” Apparently he had interpreted that to mean I was his brother.

In any case, he was quite passionate about taking care of his sister, and worked very hard at school. Most importantly, he had done much less teleporting around following his whims, so I didn’t really mind how he referred to me. However, being called his older brother when I was actually centuries older than his parents made me feel a bit bad for them.

“Ah, hold on a sec,” I said, noticing my line start to move. My battle with this fish was about to begin. There was quite a bit more pull on the line than I expected, so instead of trying to force it out of the water, I moved the rod in sync with the fish’s movements, occasionally pulling it back in, in an attempt to exhaust the fish. Focusing on snaring this fish made it kind of difficult to keep up a conversation with Badwin though. That said, he seemed to understand what was going on, and so patiently and eagerly waited for me to bring the fish in.

Finally having exhausted itself, I snapped my rod back and pulled the fish from the water in one motion. As expected from the amount of resistance it had offered, it was big enough that it would take two hands to hold it. I didn’t know the name of this kind of fish, but I knew that it was edible. Throwing it in my wooden bucket, I turned to Badwin.

“Sorry, what’s up?”

He immediately shook his head. “Nothing, I just wanted to fish. I want to bring something home for Manon to eat,” he replied.

Manon was, of course, his younger sister. He had really taken to the role of big brother.

But what was I going to do now? I only had the one rod. I didn’t mind letting him use it, but it was far too big for a child his size. He’d also probably get quite upset if he failed to catch anything, so I’d prefer to catch a few fish alongside him just in case.

“Really? Then tomorrow, let’s go to the forest and make a fishing rod for you. I guess we’ll need hooks and lines too. For today, you can take this fish home

with you.”

But above all, I wanted to send Badwin home early today.

The bucket holding the fish was pretty heavy for a child his age, but with his ability to teleport it would be no struggle to get it home. With a happy if somewhat apologetic smile, he thanked me as he picked up the bucket and vanished. I was quite used to his ability by now, so I wasn’t surprised by the disappearance. It did remind me of how convenient it was though.

It appeared the group watching me from a distance wasn’t quite so used to it, as a bit of a commotion seemed to ripple through them at the sight. Even if they had heard about Badwin before, seeing him teleport like that would no doubt be a surprise. Especially since their target was that same little boy who had just vanished a moment ago.

Groups like these had been showing up every once in a while lately. Sailors were never particularly renowned as honest and upright individuals. The dangerous work attracted equally rough people, as well as those who desperately needed to pay off all kinds of debts. Considering the reward in question here, grabbing a single child and sneaking him onto their boat wouldn’t ruffle their feathers all that much.

Of course, I wasn’t trying to say sailors were naturally evil or anything. Pantarheios owed everything it had to them, after all. The goods they brought made our port quite lively, and the money they spent made our island flourish. But of course, that didn’t mean I was about to hand over one of our island’s children to them. I was happy to welcome the good they brought to us, but if they threatened us, they’d receive a fitting retaliation from me.

After a small whisper to the spirits, I heard their cries of surprise turn to screams. There was no point in dealing with them head-on. I’d leave them buried up to their necks for a while, then get Pantarheios’s guards—the private guard hired by the caravan—to arrest them. Hopefully, we’d get some info about who had put them up to this.

I had a pretty good idea of who was after Badwin, but I didn’t have enough evidence to justify retribution. Putting Badwin in danger just to get that

evidence kind of defeated the purpose.

His parents wanted to raise him in peace. I wasn't really a babysitter anymore, but as a member of their community here on Pantarheios, I wanted to help them live unmolested. My treatment of Badwin was a special case here.

The next time a child like Badwin was born on this island, they'd likely go with handing them over to a religious organization or restricting their vision. Without me around, raising a child with such inborn talents was extremely difficult. On top of that, in order to provide more opportunities for the children on the island, the schools were gearing up to start testing their students for aptitude in the Divine Arts. Being taken in by the Church and given an outstanding education was a stroke of extremely good fortune for most people.

There were also thoughts that Badwin himself should be handed over to the Church to strengthen ties between them and the elven caravan. Really, there was nothing for the caravan to gain from keeping Badwin here. The caravan had been founded to help elves across the world. Were they obligated to protect a single human child, just because it was born on an island they happened to control?

Apparently not, was the opinion of the leadership on the mainland. Their protests didn't grow very strong because they were afraid of angering me. And they were right. If someone had made that declaration in front of me, I would have been quite angry. But when I heard it from hearsay—more specifically when Airena shared that some people on the mainland thought that way—as heartless as it was I had to admit, it was a logical position.

We had been giving Badwin special treatment. The only reason for that was because Airena and I were personally involved. I couldn't deny that. But it was far too late to complain about me giving people special treatment.

I had stopped Fodor's invasion of Ludoria because I wanted to protect the place Kaeha lived. I had interfered in the war in the West because my adopted son Win was involved. I was giving people special treatment all the time.

Elves tended to think of high elves as objective and impartial, but I was nothing like that. In fact, the other members of the ancient races I had met were basically all just as biased. For example, Heero clearly gave me special

treatment compared to any other high elf because I had hatched him. Though the children of the demons should have been wiped out, the giants nevertheless secreted them away to Fusou, something I could only attribute to a personal affection for them. Though the true dragons acted as if they had no attachment to the people of this world, when the southern continent was destroyed and the northern continent was being threatened, the golden dragon went out of its way to help me protect it, doubtless because of the time we had spent in conversation before.

And I knew full well that the spirits treasured people they had relationships with above everything. Long ago, elves and dwarves had been at odds because the dwarves had “stolen” fire from a previously perfect nature. That’s how the old story went, but I had to wonder if the truth was just that the fire spirits chose to ally with the dwarves when the elves and dwarves had come into conflict. Elves lived in the forest, using fire as little as possible, while dwarves made fire a core part of their lives. Even if an elf asked the fire spirits to attack a dwarf, I could easily see the spirits refusing to comply.

Of course, that was all speculation on my part. I didn’t know everything about this world, and there were even things like the dwarven king’s forge drawing heat up from the depths of the earth that far surpassed my understanding.

In any case, I didn’t think personal interests or special treatment were bad things. Of course they didn’t *sound* very good, so it wasn’t something I would proudly declare in public or anything. At the very least, I planned to “selfishly” keep Badwin safe until he chose to leave Pantarheios.



This world had a number of supernatural powers, what I would have called “magic” in my past life.

For example, the Spirit Arts borrowed the power of the spirits of nature. You might wonder how it was an “art” if you were just borrowing the spirits’ powers, but communicating with the spirits required a strong imagination and an ability to harmonize your feelings with theirs—all things that were quite difficult to explain in words—so it definitely deserved to be included.

Beyond that were Magic, the Mystic Arts, and the Divine Arts.

I guess Magic would be the easiest to understand as an “art.” It was the art of manipulating a kind of energy known as “mana” into producing a desired phenomenon. Mana was only one of many energies that occurred in nature, but among them all it was particularly quick to react and easy to manipulate, and had been used by the gods quite extensively in their creation of the younger races. Magic nowadays was a far cry from what the gods used, but knowledge of what rituals stimulated mana to create which phenomena had been recorded and collected over time, making the art a vast collection of knowledge. I figured that was probably the closest to what one would think of as a magical “art.”

The Mystic Arts was a simplification and organization of the power used by the giants, which they taught to people. Using it required a very rare talent, and those who learned it stepped beyond the limits of their own race and became mystics. It was a bit different from a simple set of techniques.

Finally, the Divine Arts, said to be miracles brought out by intense spiritual training or a strong faith, were really more like super powers. That said, it wasn't like training and faith would have no effect on those powers, so the common understanding wasn't entirely false. But as the various religious organizations of the world sought out children with the necessary talents for it, they had to know it was more of a slogan than anything.

By the way, as far as I knew—and by that I mean as far as the records of the giants showed—the Divine Arts were something unique to the younger races created by the gods. Obviously for the giants, phoenixes, and dragons, who didn't reproduce or grow in number, the Divine Arts never manifested, but neither were there any spirits or high elves with an aptitude for them. When it came to the high elves, there were so few of them in the first place that it could have just been a coincidence that none had been born yet, but it seemed very likely that this power was unique to the younger races.

After all, the giants, phoenixes, true dragons, and spirits, as well as the high elves by relying on the spirits' powers, could all do things quite similar to the Divine Arts already. There didn't seem much need to find another way to do things that they could already do.

The Divine Arts could manifest in all kinds of different ways. For example, I

had known three practitioners in my time: Martena, Juyal, and Badwin. Martena could use healing and telekinesis, Juyal had pyrokinesis, and Badwin had teleportation. There were some people like Martena who could use multiple Divine Arts, but they had to be fairly rare. Looking back on it now, it was kind of a mystery why Martena had chosen to become an adventurer in the first place.

Not all of the Divine Arts were treated with equal respect either. Healing was considered by most to be the greatest of them. Well, since it was the Church that managed practitioners of the Divine Arts, I supposed it made sense they'd put a special emphasis on it.

The problem right now was that teleportation came in a solid second place behind it. In truth, Magic could also handle some measure of healing, so the Divine Art wasn't especially unique in that regard. As I just said, most of its reputation came from being specially emphasized by the Church. So for teleportation, which was in second place without any of that special treatment, it had to be exceptionally rare and exceptionally prized. Badwin was now twelve years old, and the efforts of the various religious organizations to take him for themselves hadn't so much as slowed.

As an aside, powers easily turned to violent ends like telekinesis and pyrokinesis were viewed rather poorly in comparison to things like healing and teleportation. I had faced an assassin from the Church before who used telekinesis, but if he had been able to use healing as well, there was no way he would have found himself in that occupation.

But even more poorly regarded than these deadly powers were the sympathetic powers the Church kept hidden: telepathic powers like reading people's minds or sending silent messages. I suspected if the Divine Arts were really like superpowers, telepathy had to be one of them. There were also likely those who could see the past or the future. But no organization publicly admitted to having members capable of such things. Not that they made much information on the Divine Arts public in the first place.

Badwin would soon be graduating from school on the island. After that, he apparently planned to learn how to fight at the caravan guards' training ground.

He seemed to understand now that his power was one others would want to take for themselves.

He had first asked me to teach him swordsmanship, but I refused. There was already a Yosogi Katana-style Dojo on Pantarheios, so if he wanted to learn, he could go there. I wasn't about to interfere by teaching Yosogi swordsmanship to people on the island behind the dojo's back.

Okay, I *did* teach Soleil a little bit, but she was family. Whether you wanted to call me her father or grandfather, it was perfectly normal to teach your own children and grandchildren your skills.

In exchange for refusing to teach him, I promised Badwin that when he turned fifteen, I'd make him any weapon he liked. Though he considered going to the Yosogi dojo for a while, he ultimately decided to train with the caravan guard. He apparently thought that if he worked hard there, he could end up being hired by the caravan. It seemed he hoped to work in protecting the island at least until his sister Manon was fifteen. Thanks to the love with which he had been raised, he had a strong affection for his family.

That said, he couldn't entirely quench his curiosity for the outside world, so he was also entertaining thoughts of becoming a messenger for the caravan.

In any case, it was his life. He was free to do with it what he liked, and as someone who was involved in raising him, I wanted him to use that freedom. Besides, if he was planning on working for the caravan, it might assuage some of those who were opposed to protecting him in Pantarheios.

I gave a heavy sigh. Maybe it was about time I dealt with those people targeting him a bit more permanently.



Another two years passed, Badwin turning fourteen and me turning six hundred and twenty.

"Lord Acer, a reply from Pope Cauzel of Radlania has arrived. He has accepted your request. They will no longer interfere with the individual in question, and will assist the elven caravan in training users of the Divine Arts going forward."

The answer I was waiting for finally arrived. And it was the best answer I could

have hoped for too. I had worried they might grumble a bit over it, but it seemed things went well.

The ones targeting Badwin so incessantly had been the Church of the harvest god religion, now the largest religious organization on the northern continent. Of course, it wasn't like the *whole* Church was targeting him. Just as I'd learned some time ago in the incident over marble exports with my teacher in sculpting, Professor Myos, the Church of the harvest god religion was anything but a monolith. In particular, now that their chief rival in the Teachings of Quoram was gone, the Church had spread to control all of the west-central region as well, and so naturally began to splinter internally into various factions.

The one targeting Badwin was Archbishop Shinsek's faction, one of the three overseeing the west-central region. To be perfectly honest, I didn't care all that much about the inner workings of the Church, so I won't go into details about their factional warfare. Put simply, he was kind of a big shot.

I had no idea what the Archbishop planned to do with Badwin. Did he have a particular purpose in mind, or did he just not like the idea of a powerful user of the Divine Arts being outside of the Church's control? In any case, he had spent the past few years working behind the scenes, careful to hide any signs of his involvement, so I decided to get rid of him.

However, this time I didn't work so boldly as I had in deposing Archbishop Vischua before. This was a problem within the Church, so I wanted the Church to solve it. To that end, I had set my sights on the most influential person in the Church: Pope Cauzel.

Of course, I'd hardly expected the pope to comply if I just asked politely for the Church to stop messing with Badwin. Even Pope Cauzel himself would want to have such a powerful Divine Arts user as Badwin under the Church's control. In order to get him to comply with my wishes, I would need to give him a present that would overjoy him. I had prepared two such presents, the first from the elven caravan, the second from myself.

From the elven caravan, they promised to lend their support to Pope Cauzel's faction within the Church. Though the pope was the most influential individual in the Church, he still had plenty of enemies. Having the assistance of a



powerful corporation like the elven caravan in removing or restraining those enemies was an undeniably appealing offer.

As for the second gift, it was a crown I had made for him. By the way, I had credited its creation to a famed blacksmith, acknowledged by all the dwarves as someone on par with their king. It was a bit of an exaggeration...but that was how the dwarves in the east-central region treated me, so it was only partially untrue. I had spared no effort in making it, so any dwarf that saw it would no doubt be impressed.

On top of that, within the gold making up the ground were ground-up pieces of one of the golden dragon's scales. Maybe because of that, it held a mysterious dignity, one that drew the attention of anyone who saw it.

As war continued to rage in the east-central region, whispers were starting to abound that the Church had failed to quell them because its influence was waning. If the Church couldn't even keep solid control of its own homeland, then factions in their more distant territories like the west-central region might consider independence.

This crown, however, held the potential to put all claims of the Church's flagging influence to rest. If worn by someone like the pope, anyone would acknowledge their strength the moment they laid eyes on it.

Honestly speaking, I debated with myself for quite a while about whether to include the dragon scale in it, but when it came down to it, it was a small price to pay to secure Badwin's future. Besides, bolstering the influence of the Church could also serve to help stabilize the east-central region.

Anyway, with those two gifts in hand, Pope Cauzel had apparently been only too happy to accept all of our demands. I had no idea which of the two had really caught him, but either way Badwin was no longer going to be targeted by the Church, and the elven caravan would now be able to train and hire practitioners of the Divine Arts. Though even if the Church had refused on that last point, they could have always approached the beastfolk in the Far West instead.

"Umm, Lord Acer, may I ask a question?" Airena asked as I went to open a

bottle of nice wine in celebration of my success. I obviously wouldn't refuse a question from Airena, and frankly I had a good idea of what she wanted to ask. "Why didn't you use your power against the Church like you did last time?" she asked after I nodded.

I had to imagine she could guess the answer already, but it gave us something to talk about over the wine. This was a good way for her to check her answers, as it were.

"Two reasons, I guess. The first was that if the influence of the Church continued to wane, the conflicts in the East would get worse," I replied, pouring two glasses of wine. The glasses had been brought from the West, and so were quite expensive. Normally I preferred to take my drinks in plain wooden mugs so I could be as rough with them as I liked, but the glasses felt more fitting for this occasion.

As an organization involved in quelling conflict, a loss of influence for the Church would likely mean an increase in the number of wars. Humans were always in conflict with each other, so there was no big surprise in that. But if my personal actions caused wars to flare up or grow worse, those lives would weigh heavily on my conscience. Back when I had attacked the Church before, the wars in the east-central region had come to an end. But now things weren't so peaceful. That was one reason.

"The other reason would be...I was doing it for Badwin's future. I didn't want to spill blood in the process. Or maybe, I was afraid that using force here could limit his future options," I said with a smile, taking a sip of wine. Airena replied with a similar expression as she drank.

Violence didn't seem appropriate for securing Badwin's future. That was the second reason. On top of that, there was always the slight possibility that Badwin would grow to be quite devout and want to be associated with the Church in the future. If I came out against the Church in force for his sake, his standing with them would inevitably be much worse.

I was probably just thinking about it too hard. I doubted Badwin had any intentions of associating with the Church at all, but if there was even the slightest possibility of it happening, I didn't want to close off that future from

him. That was why I had made the crown. Besides, the work done to buy Badwin's future had been honestly pretty fun, and felt very much worth the effort.

In another year, Badwin would reach adulthood. I guess I'd have to do something to celebrate...oh, right, I promised to make a weapon for him. That would probably be good enough.

Though we had grown quite involved with him, Badwin was still just a neighbor, just a kid from the area. Once he was an adult, there'd be no reason to work so hard taking care of him.

As I enjoyed my glass of wine, I couldn't help but feel quite satisfied with how everything was ending.



The longer one lived, the more people they came into contact with. There were many more meetings with new people, and many more goodbyes. Assuming, of course, it wasn't a life spent hidden away, like my people in the Forest Depths who had cut themselves off from the outside world entirely.

I had probably met more people than most in this world, though I could hardly claim to be at the top. The mystics had lived longer than I had, and the caravan had ingrained itself far deeper into human civilization.

But all in all, I could still say I had met a tremendous number of people. Though now that I thought about it, since I had made friends with a true dragon, a phoenix, giants, and countless spirits, I had probably encountered more *races* of people than anyone else.

Anyway, among all those people, some lingered far more prominently in my memory than others. Some because we had much deeper relationships, others because they had been incredibly unique, and others because they had taught me something.

Kaeha was an example of someone who fit all three. I had been exceptionally close to her, so had quite an emotional attachment, and she was very powerfully unique. And I didn't mean that in a negative sense at all. I had yet to meet a human anywhere close to as exceptional as she was. On top of that, the

swordsmanship she taught me was still an inextricable part of my life.

But this story wasn't about Kaeha. I didn't have as deep a relationship with this person, having only spent a few years with him as he taught me sculpting. Yes, I was talking about Professor Myos, Count Myos Marmaros.

Thinking back on it now, he had been quite a unique guy too. Though he had the boldness to rule a city as a politician, he also possessed the fine sensibilities of an artist. Sometimes kind, sometimes quite difficult to please, he was excellent at maintaining public relations but lacked a bit when it came to personal relationships. I remembered he had trouble dealing with his own son. His position, hobbies, and interests often ran in conflict with each other, giving him no small amount of grief. But that all led to him becoming an artist famed for his work, and he had left a lasting impression on me. We had really only spent a few years together—less than three in total—but I was still feeling his influence in my life.

In the year I turned six hundred and thirty-two, I heard news that the Marmaros family had fallen to ruin. One of the works he had made and been unable to part with, kept in his personal collection until now, had made its way to auction.

"I thought this might catch your interest," Airena said, giving me the news that had come in through the elven caravan.

Though I could hardly call it good news, the fact of the matter was it had been close to four hundred years since I learned under him. That was easily more than ten human generations ago, so the collapse of the family didn't come as much of a surprise. It was actually impressive it had taken that long, especially considering they had held their title in Siglair, a nation that no longer even existed.

Back when the Azueda Alliance had split into Azaley and South Azuetta, the nations of Siglair and Dolbogarde merged with the city-states of Bardoth and Ortenon to create the nation of Shegarda. The merger was both a response to the birth of two powerful new nations on their borders, but also to help keep the threat of the Man-Eating Swamp on their opposite border in check.

But of course, that was also three hundred years ago. As the nation itself

changed, the way they treated their nobility gradually shifted as well.

I was pretty uninformed when it came to matters of statecraft, so I couldn't say I understood the situation that well, but apparently the special privileges afforded to the nobility in Siglair had been an obstacle to the merchants of Dobolgarde. On top of that, since the stretch of border that needed protecting had been fairly small before, the nobility had guarded the front lines with their own personal forces. With the addition of Bardoth and Ortenon into the territory though, the border became much too long for the nobility to keep up with on their own.

So as a result of the country growing and becoming more "rational," the nobility of Siglair gradually lost their role along with their titles and land. However, despite all these losses, many noble families were able to leverage their stockpiled wealth and connections to maintain a level of celebrity in their homelands. As renowned stonemasons, the Marmaros family had strong connections with both the nobility of foreign nations and the church in Radlania, and so had remained quite famous.

But nothing lasted forever. Stockpiled resources were exhausted, and connections faded over time. Professor Myos's descendants had protected his works as he had requested, but as their failing fortunes forced them to give up the Marmaros family mansion, they had difficulty in finding a new place to keep them. So, though it pained them to betray their ancestor's wishes, with no other place to put his works, they reluctantly decided to auction them off.

Yeah, I couldn't really blame them. Actually, just like with the house itself, the fact they had managed to protect his works for so long was impressive.

"I've arranged for passage on a ship for you leaving tomorrow," Airenna said after taking one look at my face. I hadn't even said anything yet.

But it seemed she didn't plan on coming with me. Was she just that busy? Or was she trying to give me space to immerse myself in my sentimental feelings? I never would have thought of her as being in the way, but if that was the decision she'd made, I'd honor it.

The next day, after some brief preparations for travel, I boarded a ship heading to Neldania in Shegarda.



Honestly speaking, if all I cared about was joining the auction, I had no need to be in such a hurry. When auctions with pieces of this caliber were held, news would be sent out early to allow interested buyers from afar to gather in time. Of course, works of this caliber didn't make it to auction all that frequently, but the works of Myos Marmaros—particularly those of his later life—were viewed with that much prestige. Though this was Professor Myos we were talking about. It was hardly a surprise.

So why had Airena arranged for such a quick journey? Because before the sculptures made their way to the auction venue in Neldania, I wanted to see them again in their home at the Marmaros family estate. I couldn't even begin to explain how Airena knew all that without me saying a word.

Would I be able to guess *her* feelings that precisely? I had my doubts. I could tell a lot by her expression, but I don't think I could predict her thoughts as far in advance. Maybe I was just really easy to read. At any rate, I still couldn't compare to her.

On a horse provided to me by the elven caravan, I set off from Neldania to the Marmaros territory...which I suppose no longer existed. So the city of Marmaros. The highway was much larger than it had been when I last walked it. With Dolbogarde and Siglair becoming one nation quite some time ago, their road network had been thoroughly bolstered.

As an important trade route for the shipping of marble, the road network had always been solid, but Siglair and Dolbogarde had still been separate nations. While they maintained the road between them quite well, they were still quite limited, not to mention the border itself. As much as roads were critical for business, they were also important for national defense.

For example, a well-maintained network of roads allowed soldiers to travel quickly from the interior of the country to its borders. On the other hand, they also allowed an invading nation to quickly travel between important cities as they attacked. It wasn't just an issue of being easy to walk on; the roads were also used for the transport of provisions and material resources. So when relations between two nations soured, it was common for them to close down

and destroy the roads that connected each other, impeding carriages and wagons.

When it came to the Marmaros family losing its title, land, and eventually collapsing...I obviously had plenty of thoughts on the matter. I didn't really care about the rest of the nobility in Siglair, especially since I didn't know much of anything about them, but the Marmaros territory had been run well, and the Marmaros family had been loved by its subjects. The fact that place no longer existed was a bit saddening. But even so, seeing this greatly expanded highway, I was forced to admit that the merger of nations had brought its own blessings to the people living here.

For someone who lived as long as I did, change was an ever-present cause of sorrow. But with no regard for those sentimental feelings, those with short lives lived to the utmost, striving to change and move things forward as best they could in the time they had. As sad as it made me, I couldn't help but also find it admirable.

Either because the roads were built so well or the horse I was given was so good, I made it from Neldania to Marmaros in just over a week.

The horse was quite smart, did exactly as it was told, and was cute too, so it was probably a really good animal. Unfortunately, my perception of horses was a bit skewed by my first ever being Sayr, so I could only really say "probably." Besides him, I also spent a lot of time riding on Heero's back, though that was a whole different kind of riding.

Anyway, considering how sudden all of this was, I had to thank the caravan for providing such a great horse. I had to admit, I was surprised at how well it turned out. The elven caravan even had a branch in Marmaros where I could return the horse.

On another note...I had to admit, I was impressed that despite hundreds of years of quarrying, there was still marble to be mined from the area. Was the deposit that rich? Had they carefully calculated how much to extract over time to preserve its value? Did they just not have enough manpower to fully extract the resources here? Regardless of the reasons, the marble extracted from

Marmaros was still just as prized as it had been on my first visit.

After reluctantly surrendering my wonderful ride back to the elven caravan, I walked through the streets of the city. As expected, it had changed quite a bit. The city itself was larger, and possessed many more tall buildings. One thing I noticed was that the disparity in wealth seemed much more stark. Every once in a while, I noticed those who were clearly impoverished, watching me with wild eyes.

As a city grew, so did its blind spots, causing safety and security to dip. Considering how lively it had once been, it felt like I was somewhere completely different.

I passed through a park, where I found a statue so weathered that it was almost impossible to make out its original form. There was no old man here to explain the statue to me this time. But just like before, I could see the earth spirits lingering around it. As much as I had understood in my head that this was the same city I once visited, that discovery finally made my heart accept that it was the same place. With that behind me, I set off for the Marmaros family estate.

Now, what could I say to get a look at the piece he had left behind? I couldn't just announce that I was his student. Especially since I technically *hadn't* been a proper student of his. And besides, if it became widespread knowledge that a student of the famous Professor Myos had been an elf who was still alive today, things would get annoying for me very quickly.

I could probably get access if I went through the caravan. They'd gained that much trust and power in the world...but it still probably wouldn't be enough to get me in. Also, I didn't want to give the owners the potentially false impression that the elven caravan itself was interested in the auction. I hadn't come here with anything but my own personal money. Though to be honest, after hundreds of years of blacksmithing I had managed to store up quite a bit of wealth, so even though they were masterpieces by Professor Myos himself, I could probably afford one or two. It was easy for me to think I was living off of Airena's money, but I really was working for myself too. It's just that it couldn't compare to the vast wealth of her and the elven caravan.



I guess to start, I'd go and talk to them myself. If I told them I was an old friend of Professor Myos and was considering joining the auction, I might be lucky enough to get in. I was an elf—really, a high elf—but in any case, someone quite long-lived, so they very likely would buy my story. If they turned me away, I could always ask the caravan for help later.

It was the first time I had given in to such spontaneity in a long while. It added a real spring to my step.



“Ah, could you be...? Heh, I suppose that makes sense. Please, come in.”

During my visit to the Marmaros estate, I was greeted by an old woman. Judging by her refined demeanor, she was likely a descendant of Professor Myos.

The mansion itself was rather empty, meaning they had likely let go of the majority, if not all of their servants already. As such, the owner of the mansion itself had come to answer the door. It seemed their preparations for giving up the mansion were quite far along.

But I was caught off guard by how friendly she was toward me, despite never having met me before. I had only introduced myself; I hadn't even mentioned *why* I was here yet, but she happily invited me in like I was an old friend who had come to visit. I wondered if their family had kept up a tradition of being kind to elves.

Looking around, I breathed a deep sigh. In truth, I hadn't been in the mansion all that often. Back when I was learning from Professor Myos I was almost always in the workshop, so I didn't have much reason to visit the mansion proper. So I found it a bit difficult to relax here. This mansion, being made ready to be sold off, just had a sad atmosphere I couldn't ignore.

“My apologies. Things would be a bit more lively if my sons were here, but they are in Neldania at the moment. It's a shame; they would have been overjoyed to meet you”

After leading me to a reception room, the old lady poured me some tea and introduced herself as Kanya Marmaros.

Apparently they had decided to move to Neldania once they had given up the mansion here. As such, her children were currently getting their new home ready and preparing for the auction. In other words, the Marmaros family was losing its fame in this place...or perhaps they were escaping, not allowing that fame to chain them to this land. So if I decided to join the auction, Kanya's sons would probably be the last people of the Marmaros line I ever met.

To be honest though, it was already kind of a miracle that there were descendants of Professor Myos here to welcome me four hundred years after my time here.

"You're here because you want to see the works left behind by Myos Marmaros, right?" Kanya asked as I sipped the tea. It was really good. I wasn't that knowledgeable about tea, but I could tell this wasn't any cheap stuff.

Kanya was really giving me a heartfelt welcome here. I could tell she was very happy to see me...but I still didn't know why. The only connection I could see between us was that I had been friends with a distant ancestor of hers.

Had Professor Myos left stories about me? Had he told them an elf named Acer might visit someday? No, I had already heard of one command he had left behind. He had told his family not to get rid of the sculpture he had made, the very one that was going to auction. I didn't imagine he was the kind of person to leave behind a long list of instructions for his descendants.

So was that command related to me somehow? In that case, would they be upset at my visit now that they intended to get rid of that statue? Well, in any case, I'd probably know once I saw it.

"Yes. It's been four hundred years now, so I came to see what works he left behind."

Kanya rose from her seat with a delighted smile, then gave me a deep bow.

"Then please come with me. I will introduce you to the guardian that has watched over our family for four hundred years. It must be fate that you are here now."

Wait, hold on. Is that what was happening? That was a little...okay, extremely embarrassing.

As I followed Kanya to the room where they kept Myos's work, I desperately hoped I was wrong. Though if I was wrong, the fact I was getting so worked up about it now would be embarrassing too.

Kanya removed the large cloth covering the work, revealing exactly what I had been afraid of. It was a sculpture of an elf...or rather, a high elf, wielding a hammer and chisel. It had been carved with such precision that anyone would be able to tell at a glance that it represented me. The fine work made the stone seem like it held all the warmth and softness of flesh.

It was accompanied by another sculpture, one I had made back when I was still learning here. The two were placed to appear as if the sculpture of me were carving the sculpture I had made.

I had to imagine my face was bright red at this. It was so embarrassing I thought I might tear up. Professor Myos had given explicit instructions to never let go of *this*: a sculpture of me. It was so embarrassing, and such an honor. I was so happy...and at the same time, so sad.

Around the waist of the sculpture of me was a real leather belt holding a sheathed dagger. Kanya removed the belt and handed it to me.

"Myos Marmaros instructed that we return this to you. The most beautiful dagger in the world, for the craftsman and student he respected so much."

I drew the dagger from its sheath. I could clearly tell it had been well maintained over the past four hundred years. Though it showed its age, it was clearly the cinquedea I had made to break the ice with Professor Myos on our first visit. When I ran a little magic through, light coursed down the body of the blade. Apparently Kanya hadn't known about that function, as she stared at the spectacle with open-mouthed shock. If I remembered correctly, I believe that after seeing that light, Professor Myos had called this the Shooting Star Dagger.

I spent a good deal of time talking with Kanya after that. For example, about how the armor I had made for Myos's son Claytos was still being kept and maintained here. About how when she was little, Kanya's parents had told her that this sculpture represented the guardian spirit of the Marmaros family, and so she had recognized me the moment she laid eyes on me.

“If you wish to keep this statue for yourself, we will cancel the auction. I’m sure my sons will understand.”

Despite the kind offer, I had to shake my head. As embarrassing as it was for a sculpture of myself to be put up for auction, I had made plenty of sculptures of other people too, including Myos himself. So I guess it served me right.

And if this statue, which had been carefully guarded by the Marmaros family for four hundred years, could turn a profit that would help them move on with their lives, I couldn’t ask for anything more.



I had a feeling the elven caravan would want to get involved once they learned that the sculpture being auctioned off was of me.

“The Shooting Star Dagger was something I made as a gift for Professor Myos. You don’t have to give it back to me. In fact, if you keep it, it might protect you in the future,” I said, returning the dagger to Kanya.

If they were letting go of their guardian spirit, they’d need something else to protect them. If they ended up hurting for money in the future, they could sell the dagger too. As long as they kept it in good condition until that time, I was sure it would accrue a tremendous value.

I had already been given more than enough. Four hundred years of thoughts and feelings, guarded so preciously in the form of this dagger and this sculpture, had finally made it to me. I didn’t need anything else.

After taking some time to walk around a bit, I decided it was time to start my journey back to Pantarheios.

I said goodbye to Kanya, then stepped back out into the sand-laden wind of Marmaros city with a heavy sigh. There was no need to get involved in the auction anymore. I wasn’t about to watch people throw money at a statue of myself.

That left me with plenty of time and leftover money. Maybe I’d take the chance to explore the nation of Shegarda a bit. I bet there was plenty of good drink to be had here.

# Epilogue

Maybe because of my memories of my past life, which were quite faded at this point but still very much there, it was common sense to me that anything that was born would eventually die. Of course, that was obvious to everyone.

The gods had fashioned the elves in the image of the high elves, and the other younger races had been modeled after them. Though they were incomplete replicas, as living creatures, their way of being was correct.

Really, the boasting of the ancient races about being immortal and indestructible was a bit conceited. High elves eventually passed away as living creatures and became spirits, but even the spirits, giants, phoenixes, and dragons couldn't have been truly eternal.

And that wasn't just limited to the ancient races. This entire world wouldn't last forever. Even without the true dragons destroying everything, eventually all things in the world would pass away. At the end of time, even the spirits, giants, phoenixes, and dragons wouldn't be around any longer. I didn't remember how many billions of years stars lasted for, but even the galaxy, even the universe itself had a finite lifespan.

In other words, all things eventually came to an end. Including, for example, the time I would spend together with Airena. So there was nothing I could do but accept that inevitability with grace.

The younger races had all kinds of people, but the elves were somewhat unique among them. In short, they basically didn't age. Among all the younger races, the only ones that shared that attribute I knew of were the elves and the merfolk. Of course, that wasn't counting the mystics who acquired that ability artificially.

Elves probably maintained that trait because they were modeled after the high elves, while the merfolk probably inherited it in an attempt to build a new branch off of humanity that grew closer to the elves.



The order in which the gods created the younger races was first the elves, modeled after the high elves; then the dwarves, designed to be their opposite in every respect; and humanity third, lacking the power of the previous two but instead possessing incredible potential.

Up until that point, the gods had worked together in their creations, but they then began to create races independently of each other to suit their own whims. I suspected that from the start, humanity had been created as a base for the gods to create the races they were actually interested in making. The god that created the merfolk likely wanted to create a race as long-lived as the elves, and so tried to take humanity back in that direction.

As such, the merfolk didn't age and had quite long lifespans. In that case, considering the attributes they shared, I started to wonder if the earthfolk had been designed in an attempt to bring humanity closer to the dwarves. They both lived longer than humans, but not as long as elves or merfolk, and though it wasn't always easy to tell, they definitely aged in appearance over time. Elves lived for about seven hundred years, while merfolk about five hundred. In contrast, both dwarves and earthfolk had to push quite hard to reach three hundred.

Anyway, that all aside, what I wanted to talk about was the elves and the merfolk and their agelessness. For other races, aging bodies made it harder for them to move, and were more susceptible to illness, eventually weakening them until they died. But since elves and merfolk didn't age, they had a different way of approaching death.

Merfolk, for example, would one day just have their bodies break apart. Though the person in question would see it coming to some degree, to others it would seem quite sudden. It wasn't like they turned into bubbles and vanished, but it was still a kind of transience that was a little frightening. And apparently if they died by some other means, such as being killed by people or monsters or succumbing to illness, they did leave their bodies behind. My theory was that while the merfolk body didn't age, it still had a limit to how long it could sustain itself.

So what about the elves, then? As elves grew older, they began to sleep longer and longer. When they began spending more than half of their time



asleep, it was a sign that the end was coming. Other races also tended to sleep more when they were reaching the end of their lives, but it was different in this case.

Death among other races was a problem of the body. Even merfolk died because their physical flesh reached its limit and broke down. But for elves, it was a collapse of the soul. That said, it wasn't like their soul was worn out and disappeared...at least, I didn't think so. That would be far too sad, and I knew from personal experience that people could reincarnate after they died.

Most likely it was because after such a long life, the amount of information carried by the soul exhausted it, causing it to long for rest until the person finally died. Alternatively, perhaps digesting all that information required more time for the soul to grow.

For that reason, elves began to sleep more and more, gradually losing the ability to maintain consciousness for extended periods of time. Eventually, they passed away, falling into a sleep they would never wake from.

In the year I turned seven hundred and thirty-four, Airena began sleeping quite a bit more than usual. She was ten years younger than me, making her seven hundred and twenty-four. She had lived for quite a long time even for an elf, and had even joked about maybe being able to become a spirit if she tried hard enough.

But of course, there was no such convenient miracle waiting for us. And besides, Airena had no desire to live past the time allotted for her in the first place.



As Airena's death drew closer, I didn't try to avoid noticing it. Instead, there was something I needed to ask her.

"Where do you want to sleep, Airena?"

In other words, where did she want to spend her last moments?

Most elves never left the forest they were born in, and so they would spend the last moments of their life sitting under their favorite tree. As they stayed asleep for longer periods of time, they remained in that special place for when

they were still able to wake. They'd pass on peacefully and finally be buried right there. But Airena had left her forest hundreds of years ago, and was now fully involved in human society. So I needed to ask her where she planned to spend her final moments.

For example, if she wanted to go to the White Lake, I could put her on Heero's back and take her up there. If she wanted to be buried in the forest where she was born, I could carry her there. Rather than avoid thinking about her impending death, I wanted to do what I could to figure out and grant her final wishes.

Well, that's what I had intended, but Airena just shook her head.

"This place is fine. A bed is more comfortable than the ground. And besides, it's more relaxing to spend time with you here."

So she said.

I found myself chuckling at how un-elflike that was. She was certainly right that beds were more comfortable than the ground, but that was a pretty blunt way of putting it for an elf, and it was certainly true that staying here would be more relaxing than taking her all over the world.

"For my burial, I'd like you to choose a tree in the woods here. I've spent so long on this island, I've really fallen in love with it."

She didn't want to be buried in the forest, but on this island, in our little grove of trees. That was also very unorthodox for an elf...but at the same time, I felt it was very in character for her.

Yeah, I also quite liked this island. I had spent just as long living on this island as she had. Okay, I guess you could subtract the journeys I still went on, but this island had very much been my home base for as long as it had been hers. If this was where Airena wanted to sleep, then I had no reason to deny her. Rather, the way it showed how much she treasured our time together made me quite happy.

If this place was fine, then all that remained was for us to enjoy her remaining time together. We had already lived for quite a long time, so there wasn't really anything left we felt a need to accomplish. So we spent our time in trivial

conversation, eating whatever we liked, treasuring every moment we still had together.

“What would you like to be in your next life?” I asked her jokingly one time when I caught her awake.

We had actually already had the conversation about me having memories of my past life. Back when we went to support the southern continent, she had asked why it had been destroyed in the first place. I had explained about Sapi and myself, high elves with memories of our past lives. Though I had kept it a closely guarded secret for so long, Salix had told me that cases like ours surfaced every now and then.

Once I learned I wasn't some sole outlier in this world, I felt much more free to share. That said, it still took quite a bit of guts for me to bring it up with her. But she had taken the news completely in her stride, nodding as if that only made sense. If I recalled correctly, her response had just been “So *that's* why you're so strange.” Man, that took me back.

Airena had feared that due to her long life, her friends would all pass away and leave her behind, so my guess was that she might choose to be human. Humans had short but very dense lives, finding love that consumed them like fire, leaving behind children, and then dying. I figured that was probably her ideal.

“Well...if I can be extremely greedy, as improper as it is for me to say so...I think I'd like to be a high elf if I get another life.”

But instead, she gave exactly the answer I would expect from an ordinary elf. Although, as she said, a normal elf would probably never say that, as they would find it bordering on blasphemous. But her answer, holding the same admiration for high elves that any other elf might have, definitely took me by surprise.

“If I become a high elf, I can make you do all sorts of things for me once you become a spirit, right? That sounds like a lot of fun.”

But of course, Airena was still Airena.

That answer made me laugh. Maybe she was right. I had asked her to do so many things for me during our lives this time around. There were some cases where our roles were reversed, but I asked many, many more favors of her than she had of me. Yeah, if she became a high elf, I supposed I might end up doing a lot of work for her. That would be really interesting.

And it wasn't hard to believe an elf as incredible as Airena might be reincarnated as a high elf either. Of course, the chance was astronomically low, but we could still entertain the thought as long as it wasn't zero.

"That does sound like fun," I said, still struggling through my laughter as Airena nodded with a smile. That really would be great.

"Then I guess I better start thinking about what I'll ask you to do for me," she said as she closed her eyes, going back to sleep.

Little by little, more and more of her day was taken up by sleep. But we weren't afraid. She woke again another few times, before eventually falling into one last sleep and passing away. There were no deeply emotional conversations between us, no tears. Just one last day we spent together as I finally saw her off.

As she had requested, I buried her among the trees on the island, asking them to watch over her for me.



After Airena's death, all of Pantarheios fell into a state of mourning. Unlike the two of us, who had been given so much time to prepare for her passing, the rest of the island's people were hit much harder. So much so that they decided to change the name of the island to Airena in her honor. They all understood just how much she had done to develop this place.

I spent the next six months making a bronze statue of Airena, then put it in the island's central square. Yes, this one was made of bronze instead of stone. Considering the sea winds of Pantarheios—I suppose I should call it Airena Island now—bronze was much better suited to the environment. So after making a number of practice attempts in stone, once I was satisfied with the end product, I created one out of bronze.

I then left the island behind for good. As you might expect, the island held too many memories for me to bear. Even the island's name was now Airená. If I stayed there, I'd end up spending the rest of my life just reminiscing. That wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, but I doubted Airená would have wanted me to live that way.

The people of the island were rather sad to see me go. They even promised to leave my house and workshop as they were...but in a generation or two, I wouldn't be surprised if someone eventually rebuilt them or took them over. I was happy enough with that.

I had a little bit more time before my life as a high elf came to an end and I became a spirit. How would I spend those last days? I had met so many people who were precious to me, and had watched them all pass away.

Though they had all been very different, each lived their life to the fullest. It felt like my memories of them were pushing me forward, urging me onward. I had a tremendously long lifespan, but just like them, I wanted to use that time as best I could. At least, while I was still the same high elf who had lived alongside them.

And so, the little time I had left began to pass. It was about two hundred years, I suppose.

I was back in the Forest Depths. I'd hop on Heero's back and travel around every once in a while, but I hadn't taken any journeys on foot for some time. Aside from my magic sword, my favorite among all my works, I hid everything I made and all my gathered wealth in caches across the world, then drew up treasure maps leading to them. I thought that would be much more fun than just leaving it all here in the Forest Depths.

It wouldn't be long before I became a spirit. I could feel my soul growing restless, straining against the cage that was my body. Though it would have been all too fitting for me to pass away on the road, leaving my body behind like that would be a problem. There was no telling what a vampire or soul eater would do if they found it, and a great forest would spring from it if it was just left where it was. Either way, that would be a huge problem for the people

around.

For example, what if I slipped out of my body while drinking at a bar? That was exactly the kind of silly mistake I'd make, but I would probably end up being buried in the town's graveyard. Within a decade, the whole town would be swallowed up by forest. That was the sort of thing I was worried about.

So in order to ensure my body was properly interred in the high elves' sacred ground, I elected to spend my remaining time in the Forest Depths. But being as I was, I couldn't just sit on my hands doing nothing. So every few months, I'd head out into the wider Great Pulha Woodlands with my sword to hunt monsters for a week or two.

Of course, I wasn't just going around slaughtering monsters. Though that might have helped to delay the End of the world, I still couldn't stomach the thought of killing monsters just for the sake of killing them. Even if the monsters were so large I could never eat all of them, I made sure to only hunt those that I could eat at least some of.

However, when the young high elves saw me hunting without the help of the spirits and using just a sword, several of them begged me to take them along or to teach them swordsmanship.

Yeah, that was probably exactly the kind of negative influence Salix had been afraid of. Unfortunately, I had embraced my role as a bad influence already, so I was happy to let them come along, and I taught some swordsmanship to any who asked. I couldn't say what kind of results I expected from them, considering they were learning it as a way to kill time or out of curiosity rather than from any desire to actually use it...but that was kind of what brought *me* to swordsmanship in the first place, so I could hardly look down on them for it.

The young high elves who had learned to eat meat might continue hunting monsters on their own after I had passed on. Hopefully, that would serve to delay the End a little bit. If they ended up going further and taking an interest in the world outside Pulha...well, that would be a pretty big deal. But any high elves who chose to leave the forest would doubtlessly find the experience tremendously valuable.

The fact I thought that was a good thing probably cemented my legacy as a

terrible high elf.



“Child of the maple, this is the newest of our people.”

One day, a high elf woman approached me, handing me a small baby. Though she spoke as if it were unrelated to her, she was probably the child’s mother. But of course, high elves didn’t really have a concept of “parents.”

All high elves saw each baby as a precious new member of our society, so everyone in the settlement—really everyone in the entire race—felt obligated to care for them. There were so few of us that such a thing was actually possible. The affection born from having a blood relation to the child mixed heavily with the affection a high elf held toward all children, and quickly became impossible to distinguish.

Though high elves very much loved their own children, they had no less love for the children of others. That was how they saw all of them.

After all that preamble, the truth was that this high elf woman in front of me was the daughter of my younger brother, who was two hundred and some years my junior. Apparently, back when I had returned to the Forest Depths in search of a phoenix—or I guess more precisely, after finding Heero and setting out into the world again—my mother and father had borne another child.

Had they been lamenting my departure as a decrease in the high elf population? Had they just been lonely after I had left the forest? Anyway, especially considering high elves didn’t really have a concept of blood relationships, I wasn’t about to act like an older brother toward someone I’d never met before. But the fact that his daughter had a child of her own now still made me really happy.

It seemed like quite the bright little one too. Though it probably couldn’t see all that well yet, its eyes darted around, trying to take in as much of the world as it could. It was like it was trying to figure out what situation it had found itself in.

When I looked closely, I could tell that the child’s soul had already taken on the immortality of a high elf. That immortality was what made high elves

unique. It allowed us to become spirits after our time as high elves came to an end.

However, the time at which high elves obtained that indestructible nature was different for each one. Some were born with it, while others didn't acquire it until they were already self-aware. But every one or two thousand years, a high elf was born who had attained that nature from *before* their birth. Obtaining immortality in that unborn state, before the memories of their past life had faded away, caused those traces to remain.

That was exactly what had happened to me.

In other words, this child was that one in every few millennia, holding memories of a past life. Of course, there was no guarantee that this child's memories came from the same world as mine. And really, in the end, whether the child had memories like that or not wasn't especially important.

This child would live for a thousand years as a high elf, then become a spirit and continue to live forever. As far as I knew, there was only one way to escape that destiny. So regardless of any memories they may have had, the things they would experience, the sights they would see, the foods they would eat, and the time they would spend in this world would make their past life seem like it had finished in the blink of an eye.

There was just one thing that was important.

"Maybe you don't understand what I'm saying now, and by the time you're old enough to understand, I probably won't be a high elf anymore," I murmured gently, stroking the child's face with a finger. But even if it didn't understand me, I wanted to tell it something. "I don't know what kind of life you lived before this one, or what kind of world you came from. Maybe someday...no, *definitely* someday, you will come to compare yourself here to your previous self, and this world to your previous one."

The baby was so young, it still couldn't even take a hold of my finger. But even so, I could tell it turned its attention to me.

"That's okay. Compare all you want. But no matter what you think, don't write off this world so easily. Because no matter how much effort you put into seeing the world, you'll never see more than a tiny sliver of it."





With memories of a past life, it was inevitable they'd compare their current life to their past one. I was exactly the same. But there was nothing wrong with that. The problem would be if they took what they saw of this world, the tiny fragment of it that they experienced, as its entirety. If they decided they had seen all the world had to offer, they would inevitably miss out on something incredible.

"So take your time, enjoy the world around you little by little. You'll find all sorts of wonderful things. This world is a fantastic place, so I think you'll learn to love it."

It may take a long time before they did so, but people like us had all the time in the world. To experience it without hurrying, patiently, with an open mind.

"The more love you pour into this world, the more it'll give back to you. So congratulations. I know this life has all kinds of happiness waiting for you."

I knew because I had been granted so much happiness in the many, many years I had been alive. Not everything had been fun. There were plenty of lonely and sorrowful times to be had, but even after all that, I loved this world.

I had no idea whether the child in my arms understood any of what I was trying to tell them, but as I looked down at them, I could only hope that they'd find just as much happiness as I had.



The high elf sacred ground was as strange a place as ever. Trees and plants wove together to entirely seal it off from the rest of the forest. Yet for some reason, it was still filled with light and was quite warm. Actually, it was kind of hot.

I found a comfortable spot and sat down. A thought then suddenly occurred to me: I'd never be standing up on my own two legs again, would I? There was an expression about being "rooted to the spot," but it honestly felt like I had literally put down roots and never wanted to move again.

Normally, only the high elf elders were allowed in this place. That said, normal high elves would end up becoming elders shortly before they turned into spirits. However, as I had spent the majority of my life outside the Forest Depths, I was

an exception. Among all the high elves close to spirithood, I was the only one who wasn't considered an elder. That said, I was still afforded plenty of respect because of my age, and young high elves often came to me asking questions about the outside world.

Since I wasn't an elder, I normally wouldn't be allowed in this place, but I was an exception in that regard too. That was because this place belonged to Heero, and Heero had invited me in. Having reached his full size as a phoenix, Heero couldn't fit in this little place any longer, but he still felt a strong connection to it because he was born here.

*So, that time has finally come.*

As I closed my eyes, I heard Heero's voice clearly in my head. He sounded a little sad.

"Yeah. This body is feeling really restrictive now. I wouldn't be surprised if I slipped out of it at any moment. It's not like I'm going to disappear, but it still feels weird that I'm about to die as a high elf."

I had no fear of death. All I felt was a growing sense and understanding of my impending transformation. It was similar in sensation to a child growing and finding that their old clothes didn't fit anymore. Except in this case, it was my body.

*Yes, death for us is in nothing more than appearance. I have experienced it many times myself, so I can assure you there is nothing to be afraid of.* It seemed he was trying to comfort me.

Well, yeah. I could say I wasn't afraid of dying, but I had enjoyed my time as a high elf enough that putting it behind me was still a sad experience. I suddenly realized that once I became a spirit, I wouldn't be able to ride on Heero's back ever again. Perhaps that was why Heero's voice was tinged with sadness.

"Thank you. You helped me out so much by carrying me around all the time. I really enjoyed flying with you."

This wasn't exactly goodbye, but there was still something being lost. But that was no different than how the rest of my life had been. Though I was sad, I wasn't afraid. I just had to accept the change and move on.

*I also enjoyed our time together. Should you become a spirit of the wind, let us fly again together. I feel like that would be what suits you best.*

Heero's answer brought a grin to my face. Unfortunately, I had decided what kind of spirit I wanted to be a long, long time ago. Though Heero's suggestion was a great one, my wishes lay elsewhere.

I held my beloved magic sword tight. Now that I thought about it, no one had spent more time with me than this sword. Though I had remade the scabbard a number of times, I had repaired and maintained this same sword the entire time. It really was like a part of me now.

As such, it would be resting here together with me. Without my magic to strengthen it, it would become no more than a too-thin sword, brittle and fragile. It would quickly weather away and be reclaimed by the sacred ground.

I wanted to become a sword. Well, maybe that wasn't quite right. Maybe that was jumping ahead too far. When I became a spirit, I wanted to inhabit some metal deep in the earth. Once I attuned myself to it and really became one with it, I hoped someone would draw it out of the ground and make a sword from it. Even if the smith was inexperienced, I'd give him some quiet guidance. Even if he couldn't hear me, I'd do everything I could to guide him until he could make me into a true masterpiece.

I'd then come into the care of a swordsman somewhere, and travel the world together with them. If that swordsman ended up being an amateur, I'd teach them too. They didn't need to be a master or anything, but I didn't want them to be killed that easily. And as time passed, as I was handed from person to person, I might come across one who resonated well with me, someone who could hear my voice. I'd no doubt have a lot of fun then.

In other words, even after becoming a spirit, I wanted to live together with other people. It was quite the greedy wish, but hey, I was a pretty greedy person.

I had been "that damned elf" up until now, but what was I going to call myself going forward? "That damned spirit" didn't really roll off the tongue in the same way, and it felt kind of rude to the other spirits. Maybe instead of calling myself a spirit, I'd just call myself a magic sword. The idea of a magic sword with its

own personality felt really appropriate, didn't it? I was having so much fun just thinking about it all.

Even in my last moments as a high elf, I was able to have so much fun. I really had been blessed. And from now on, I'd need to keep seeking out those blessings.

*Yes, true enough. Among all the high elves I have known, you are most certainly the strangest by a wide margin. I can very much say I have enjoyed my time with you far greater than with any other. So if you manage to become a sword and your wielder finds themselves before me, I shall permit them to ride on my back too.*

I nodded in response to Heero's words, then gave a long, heavy sigh. It was about time. I could feel myself spreading, in a way my body couldn't contain anymore. My time as a high elf was over.

But even so, the numerous experiences I had accumulated over the past thousand years would survive eternally with me. They were like my shining treasure. After being reincarnated as a high elf, I had lived for an extremely fun thousand years.

Hopefully we'd get to meet again someday.

# Excerpt — Dripping Memories

## Remembrance of Him

Just outside a forest in Blue Sea Province, I slipped off the back of the horse that had carried me this far and patted him on the neck. As I did, the “mystic horse” as it was called here—one of Sayr’s descendants—nuzzled up to my face.

As adorable as he was, I wasn’t here to play with horses today. Soleil had told me that all of the mystic horses were really smart, so you could leave them anywhere and they wouldn’t walk away with any old stranger that came along. But honestly speaking, all of Sayr’s descendants had warmed up to me immediately after we met, so I wasn’t entirely sure I believed her. Regardless, it would be kind of difficult to take him any farther. So I patted him one more time before steeling myself and walking into the forest.

I knew exactly where I was going. Even though I’d never been here before, the trees and the spirits happily guided me. I walked in a straight line toward my destination.

I was alone today. Airena had said she wanted to come here before we returned to Pantarheios, but she also said I should visit by myself first. It felt like she was overthinking this.

After I walked for almost an hour, I arrived at an open clearing. Arrayed in its center was a collection of stones. Apparently this was a place where Win had met Soleil on his visits to the Ancient Gold Empire, and ultimately was the place where he died. In other words, the stones gathered here were his grave.

That said, his body wasn’t actually buried here. After relinquishing all of his duties in the Empire of Sabal, he had moved to the Ancient Gold Empire to spend the last little bit of his life. But he was still the former emperor of the greatest empire in the West. After he passed away, magic was used to preserve

his body, and he was sent back to Sabal for a massive funeral. All that remained of him here in the East was a single lock of his hair.

But for me, Win's real grave was here, not in the West. Win had chosen to spend his final days here, coming so that he could see Soleil. Because of that, this felt like the most appropriate place to remember him. That said, for the people of the Empire of Sabal who loved him so much, the grave they had made for him in the West was an equally good spot.

"Hey, Win. You've picked a good spot."

I took a seat in front of his grave and looked around. Of course, there was no one here to hear my words. I was really just talking to the memory of Win lingering in my heart.

Win's feelings as he came to this land must have been incredibly complex. Long ago, he and his companions had felled a fallen mystic, a soul eater calling herself the High Priestess. And yet, his own daughter was now walking the path of the mystic, meaning there was a chance she'd become the very same thing.

What had he talked about with her? I had no idea, and I wasn't about to ask Soleil about it. But if the two of them had come to an understanding, I was happy to hear it.

This really was a great spot. That wasn't flattery at all; it was deep in the forest, but the sunlight was strong and it wasn't too quiet. If you listened carefully, you could hear the singing of birds, or the rustling of leaves in the wind.

Maybe that was why I could remember Win so easily here. The little Win who looked up at me with a smile. The little Win who couldn't share anything of his own thoughts or feelings. The little Win who, after finally starting to come out of his shell, cried and cried as we left Janpemon behind. The little Win who had been so hurt at the realization that Kaeha's children were growing up, leaving him behind.

The Win who went to school together with the dwarven children. The Win who immersed himself in swordsmanship and blacksmithing, trying to compete with me. The Win standing across from me, wooden sword at the ready.

The Win that had grown up when I was reunited with him in the West, already being well down the difficult path he had chosen. The heartbroken Win, handing Soleil over to me after he had become emperor.

The memories kept flooding out, taking the form of tears as they poured down my face.

In the end, how well had I been able to understand him? Honestly, I wasn't sure that it was very much. I knew a lot *about* him, but I wasn't sure I could say I really understood him.

But once, Win had told me that when he was young, he was happier than any other kid. Hearing that had made me happier than anything else could have. So I was satisfied.

As an adult, Win's life had been complex enough that you couldn't simply call it "fortunate" or "unfortunate." In his final moments, had he found satisfaction? I hoped that he had. I couldn't say I understood the life Win had chosen to lead, but I did know that many people had been saved thanks to him. So I hoped he had been saved in the end too. No, even before all that, I hoped he had been happy.

Even long after my time as a high elf came to an end, I would never forget my incredibly hardworking son.

## **The Bad High Elf of the Forest Depths**

I calmed my breathing, sword at the ready. My opponent had already spotted me and was charging, heedless of the plants and small trees in its path, intent on crushing me underfoot.

That opponent was a boar monster. Compared to the greedboar I had once hunted with my bow, it was about double the size, its weight really incomparable. The way it stormed through the dense forest showed it was far stronger too. I would have expected nothing less from the enormous monsters of Pulha.

That said, being bigger and faster certainly made it stronger, but I still had



plenty of ways to deal with it. I could strike it down directly with my sword, but that wasn't the brightest plan. That would leave me absolutely drenched in its blood. Getting cleaned up after would take ages.

I could use the spirits to create a wall to stop its charge, but that felt like going overboard. As big and fast as it was, it was only a single monster. I didn't need to rely on the spirits unless I was fighting a large pack of monsters, or something like a dragon. Such tactics likely wouldn't even protect me in those cases, let alone defeat the opponent, but my sword should be enough for enemies like this. I only wanted to rely on my spirit friends for what I couldn't accomplish on my own. For example, producing water to clean and cool the boar meat once I had brought it down.

The tree in front of me snapped in two as the boar closed the distance between us. I was getting into a good range now. I leaped to the side, delivering a quick slash behind me.

The most important part was timing it correctly. If I was too fast, the boar would have enough time to turn and trample me. If I was too slow, I would just be run over before making my escape. So with timing that must have made the boar feel like I had just suddenly vanished into thin air, I dodged the charge and attacked.

I more or less knew where I needed to strike. In the past, I would have consulted the spirits to determine the boar's weaknesses, but with all the experience I now had under my belt—or perhaps because of how long I had spent with the spirits—I could more or less sense those weaknesses for myself, the conduits of life flowing through the creature's massive body.

I watched the enormous monster sail past me, blood spraying from its neck. All that was left was to wait for it to stop, then slope the ground beneath it to allow the blood to flow out more easily. It was a bit rough, but it would work.

When I checked my sword, I didn't find a single speck of blood or flesh on it. Yeah, that had been a pretty good slash. Feeling quite satisfied, I settled down and waited for the boar to stop moving. You could never underestimate monsters. Even when fatally wounded, if you let down your guard, they could very easily do a lot of damage.

But as long as I kept a careful watch, I'd have quite the luxurious feast waiting for me.

When it came to looking for food, finding a boar monster was like hitting the jackpot. Deer and snakes were pretty good too—even better as monsters—but boars usually gave the safest, most reliable, and most satisfying meat. Birds, rabbits, and badgers weren't bad either, but it was pretty rare to see large monsters of them.

So I cheerfully set myself to dressing the boar carcass in front of me. Of course, it was far too big, so there was no way I could eat the whole thing myself. The vast majority of its meat would either be buried and returned to the forest, or left as food for other monsters. But as the one who brought it down, I had the special privilege of claiming the best parts for myself.

First was the heart, the back sirloin with its delicious fattiness, and on the opposite side fillets made from the belly. Well, even just the heart was already far too much for a single person to eat on their own. Even so, I decided to take a portion from the legs as well. If I smoked it, I could enjoy meat whenever I wanted, even here in the Forest Depths.

As I began the work of dressing the animal, I noticed someone approaching. They were heading in a straight line for me, so it seemed they already knew I was here.

"Ah, child of the maple. Were you out hunting with that sword again?" the young high elf said. Okay, high elves didn't show their age in the least, but this guy was actually young, having just made it to adulthood. His name...I guess putting it like that would annoy him, but we called him the child of the larch, Ralix. Unlike the other high elves, it seemed he was intrigued and excited by my behavior of taking down monsters with a sword to eat for myself, as well as the flavor of the meat I had let him try a number of times.

"Yep. I like swords a lot, and monsters need to be brought down one way or another. Though it's also true that part of it is just me wanting to eat. You want some?"

Ralix nodded without the slightest hesitation. He had been quite reluctant at

first, but little by little...okay, very, very quickly, he had stepped off the path of becoming a proper high elf and succumbed to my influence. It was exactly as the high elf elder Salix had predicted.

But being the terrible high elf that I was, that didn't bother me. For the small amount of time I had left for me as a high elf, I would likely be living my ordinary selfish life, hunting monsters, and sometimes even leaving the Forest Depths to trade their hides for things like spices and alcohol. If other high elves took an interest in what I was doing, I was happy to teach them a little.

Killing monsters would also help to delay the End, and it was best if the high elves knew at least a little of fighting. Learning how to dress and cook meat, how to use a sword, and how to make contact with the elven caravan in the outside world would all be very helpful. If they wanted to learn, I was more than happy to teach. I would start with what they had a personal interest in, then slowly spread my influence throughout high elf society with what time I had left. That said, I wasn't about to try and force them to do anything they didn't want to.

Anyway, all that aside, the current predicament was how I was going to cook this meat. Just a simple roast? Would I wrap it in leaves and bake it? Or maybe since I had someone to share with, I'd do something like a hot pot.

## Side Stories — Fragments of Meeting

### The Long-Eared God

When I was about twelve years old, our village was cursed.

People's hands and feet began to turn black, like they had been burned. They would go numb and start twitching uncontrollably. The victims often screamed in agony, or went mad with hallucinations and lost all control.

At first, we thought it was some kind of sickness, so we gave the victims herbs from the forest, and even hired a mage working as an adventurer to help treat them. But the situation didn't change, and the number of victims only continued to grow. The mage we'd hired claimed it was the result of a curse, and fled the village in fear of falling victim themselves.

A curse. Once that word had been uttered, the atmosphere in the village became terrifying. With a curse this strong, whoever put it on us must have been extremely powerful, like a god or something.

But why had something as big as a god taken issue with our little village? Had someone offended them? Who? Who had brought this curse on us?

Everyone became desperate to find out who was responsible. No one wanted to suffer a maddeningly painful, slow death. Even beyond themselves, they didn't want to see that happen to their family members. At least if this was all someone's fault, they might be able to find a way to resolve the situation. It was a faint hope, but it was at least something to cling to.

So everyone went crazy. No one could bring themselves to abandon the cursed village and move somewhere else, as it meant abandoning the fields we had cultivated, the livestock we had raised, and the wealth we had accumulated. There was no way anyone could make that choice. Even if they could muster the resolve to leave everything they had here behind, who on earth would accept refugees from a cursed village?

The first person to fall under suspicion was Uncle Torm next door. He was the first person in the village whose hands and feet turned black. People started to believe that he had fallen to the curse first because he had done something to bring it on us in the first place.

I didn't believe that, though. He was a big guy and ate a lot, but he was also extremely kind. Whenever anyone in the village needed help, he was always first in line to lend a hand. He would laugh, saying that since he ate more than anyone else, he needed to work harder to make up for it. I couldn't imagine someone like that doing something terrible enough to bring a curse on our whole village.

But I couldn't think of any way to argue back against the other villagers. Trying to cover for him would mean throwing someone else in the path of their suspicions. On top of that, Torm had thrashed around violently from the pain of the curse, accidentally hurting several of the adults who had tried to hold him down.

Uncle Torm eventually vanished, and no one said what happened. But as the first victim of the curse, his situation had already been very bad. His hands and feet had fallen off, so he probably wouldn't have lived much longer in the first place.

However, even with Uncle Torm gone, the curse didn't relent. And so the hunt began for the next most likely culprit. It didn't seem to matter if that person had the curse or not, so the next targets soon became anyone the village didn't like. One person would suggest it wouldn't be strange if so-and-so caused it all, the next would agree that they seemed like the kind of person to do it, and before you knew it, everyone had accepted that they were the cause.

Those next targets began to flee the village of their own accord. Was that actually true? I didn't know. All I knew was this insane village was a terrifying place to be.

After the sick and the hated, next came the useless. People said I was pretty smart among the village children, so I was probably safe for a while...no, actually, that risked bringing them to me faster. As soon as someone considered that I might be smart enough to have come up with whatever earned a curse

like this, everyone would immediately accept it as truth.

Would my turn come, or would the whole village collapse into ruin first?

But at that time, *he* appeared. Though I was the first to notice him, I didn't think he was a person at that time. The way he crouched down to stare closely at the wheat in our fields made him look like he was up to no good. But never mind that, I didn't even perceive him as a person since he was so beautiful. It was like he wasn't human.

"Excuse me, sir, what are you doing?" I called out to him.

There were plenty of beautiful things I had seen before. For example, clouds sailing by in a bright blue sky. Grain in the glow of sunset. Pure white snow falling from an ash gray sky. Yes, his beauty reminded me of things like that. It was very different from the kind of beauty you'd see in humans. It didn't even occur to me to be wary of him.

"Ah, you're a kid from this village? How do I put it... I'm on a bit of a diversion. I was planning on heading east, but I can't really ignore this."

It was then that I noticed, as he turned to speak to me, that he had long, pointed ears. So he wasn't human after all. I think I remembered someone saying that the beautiful people with long ears were called "elves."

But if he was heading east, was he an adventurer or something? East of here were the countries that fought those scary monsters coming out of the Man-Eating Swamp. I couldn't really imagine someone this beautiful fighting monsters like that.

He smiled at my confused look. "Could you take me to the boss of your village? I'm sure you guys are in trouble, but don't worry. I can help," he said.

That left me even more confused. It was true that the village was in trouble, but why would he know? Why would he want to get involved?

If he had been full of confidence, I would probably have doubted him, and honestly would have been afraid. But he didn't come off that way. It was like what he said was natural and obvious. Like he was saying "don't worry, it's nothing."

For some strange reason, it made me remember my grandpa, though he wasn't around anymore. Long ago, people had been saying that a storm was coming to the village. I was really afraid, but grandpa told me everything was fine. Not out of confidence, but just like it was an obvious fact. In the end, that storm never came. Right now, this person reminded me a lot of him.

Actually, now that I thought about it, I heard that elves looked young for their entire lives. Maybe this guy was actually super old. He didn't look that way at all, but the thought made a lot of sense to me.

At the same time, I felt a huge relief wash over me, and I couldn't stop the tears from pouring out. I didn't want to stand out as we walked through the village, so I did my best to keep from openly crying, but I really felt like everything was now going to be okay.

But even after I took him to the village, the people didn't believe in him immediately. After all, he said that the curse on our village was caused by a sickness in our grain. He said that if we didn't burn all the grain in our storehouses and fields, the whole village would be wiped out. He also said the curse could spread to other villages nearby.

I immediately accepted his words. After all, that would explain why a glutton like Uncle Torm had grown sick first. Even with his big body, since he ate so much more than the others, he was the first one to show symptoms. It made a lot more sense than thinking someone in the village had angered a god somewhere.

But the people of the village just got angry, saying they'd never burn all their food. And of course, that was the natural response. Who would choose to destroy their food supply with no evidence, consigning themselves to starvation? Beyond that, if the cause of the curse wasn't a curse at all, but a sickness in the grain, then what had all their actions before now been for? They couldn't face the reality of what they had done.

Everyone picked up tools and sticks and tried to drive the elf out of the village. Without thinking, I found myself standing in the way of them. I mean, this was definitely the last chance we had of saving the village. If we didn't

believe him, if we just avoided looking at the harsh reality, nothing would change.

But the villagers didn't stop. So the elf looked at me and smiled.

"You're very smart, and very brave. But not everyone is as strong as you are. Take a step back. Like I said, everything will be okay." Without a hint of fear, he stuck his hand into his bag and pulled out a shiny object.

It was...a coin. But not just any coin. It was a large gold coin, big enough to fill his hand. It was the first time I...no, definitely the first time anyone in the village had seen a large gold coin. Not even the village chief had them.

The impressive shine of the coin immediately brought the villagers to a halt. Never mind the food in our storehouses and fields, if you sold all of it together and sold every person in the village into slavery, you still wouldn't get that much money. If the elf had shown a reasonable amount of money for our grain, the people of the village likely would have kept charging and just stolen it from him. But they were so overwhelmed by the sheer value of that one coin, their violent thoughts were immediately blown away. Everyone stared at that glittering coin, paralyzed.

"Don't worry. You can use this to buy food to make up for the lost grain. A caravan with food will be visiting in the near future."

There was no way a caravan would visit a cursed village like ours, but no one could bring themselves to doubt him anymore. If this elf said so, that caravan would definitely come, and they would definitely have food to sell. All he had done was show them money, but it was enough to make everyone understand. This elf, who so casually pulled out a coin worth more than the value of our entire village, belonged to a different world than we did.

Yes, this elf was much bigger than whoever could deign to place a curse on this village. In other words, *he* was definitely a god.

After people started eating food brought in by the caravans, most recovered from the sickness. There were a few who were already too far gone, but even so, the village had been saved.



But I couldn't stand staying in the village anymore. So I asked one of the caravan merchants to take me on as an apprentice. Though everyone had calmed down now that they were saved, the madness that had gripped them before stayed fresh in my mind.

Normally, a twelve-year-old girl would be no more than a burden to a merchant traveling between villages, but because the elf asked them to, they agreed to take me on.

I learned then that they were part of what was called the elven caravan. Some time later, I was talking to one of my bosses, an elf, about what happened in the village.

"You're right. That man is very much like the gods that humans worship. Though he won't like it if you talk about him like that."

That had all but confirmed my suspicions. He was definitely some kind of god. Not the kind that lived up in the sky, but the kind that was willing to walk on the ground and visit people like us.

I didn't know if he had some kind of special power, but even without such a thing, he could easily save the people around him. He was a little different from the other elves—a long-eared god.

## **The Flower Raised by the Sun**

"Ah, jeez! I can't stand that evil turtle hag!" Unable to hold it in a second longer, I screamed at the top of my lungs as I stood in the middle of the forest.

Once the lid was off, furious, incoherent rambling poured out unabated as I occasionally took mouthfuls of peach liquor. It had a smoky, sweet aroma to it, but not in an unpleasant way. I felt it slowly soak its way through my whole body, gradually calming me down.

I gave a huge sigh. My father had always told me alcohol was something you were supposed to have fun drinking. Though sometimes it could serve to console your heart, it was something you were supposed to enjoy the flavor, smell, and history of as you partook, he'd say with a beet-red face. I was too young to drink back then, so my mother had been quite angry with him for

telling me stuff like that.

Remembering my family helped calm me down even more as I took another mouthful of liquor. This stuff was too good to waste on being angry. Not to mention it was also the most expensive alcohol in the world. It had been made from mystic peaches, after all.

I knew the darn turtle hag—more commonly known as Wanggui Xuannu—hadn't said what she did out of malice. She was trying to make me angry on purpose, but it was for the sake of my training. I had already been taught that part of becoming a mystic was facing the negative emotions like anger and hatred locked deep in your heart, facing your own immaturities head-on and overcoming them. This training would help me avoid being lured off the correct path and into becoming a fallen mystic.

But even so, she made me furious.

“Your greatest misfortune was being adopted by that man. With such a bright light at your side from such a young age, no other man will be able to compare. Your eyes have been blinded from staring at a sun you can never reach,” she had said.

Sure, more than half of that was praise for my father, but I couldn't forgive anyone saying that my being raised by him on Pantarheios was misfortune.



Just remembering her words was starting to make me angry all over again. Being raised by my father and mother made me the happiest girl in the world. I wanted to say that she knew nothing about him...and the fact that I couldn't was even more frustrating. She must have seen a different side of him, one that I didn't know, a part of him that wasn't suited to raising children.

Apparently he had been the first one to suggest making alcohol from mystic peaches too. Everyone else treated the fruit with such reverence, I was sure he was the only one in the world who could have suggested such a thing.

My father really loved drinking. Mother would drink a little to keep him company, but my father was definitely an unabashed drunkard. I had started drinking when I came to this country and became old enough to do so because of how much fun it looked like he was having.

I spent a while indulging in the peach liquor, then dumped all the grossness in my heart out along with the contents of my stomach.

I leaned back against a tree. As I did, almost as if it had been planned, my childhood friend flapped down to land beside me: Shuu, a really impressive eagle.

Alcohol could get people really worked up, but it also had a way of making them more honest. Deep in my heart, something told me that the reason I was so angry with Wanggui Xuannu was because she was right. I found myself unable to deny it.

First of all, if I never had my weaknesses pointed out to me, I could never move forward.

My father was amazing. That was a given. Of course, so was my mother. Actually, in terms of wealth, influence, and resourcefulness, as head of the elven caravan, she was much more impressive. My real father, not my adopted one, was apparently a great emperor. He was just a gentle old man when I'd met him though, so I couldn't really see that in him.

I was here because I had received so much love growing up. That was why not just my life on Pantarheios, but even my life right now was so happy. The love I

had received neither faded nor disappeared.

And my father had made me a promise. If I were to someday stray from the path and become a fallen mystic, he'd come and cut me down himself. That one promise told me just how my parents had felt when they sent me here.

So I decided I would always walk the right path, becoming a true mystic that my father could be proud of. I vowed to tell Wanggui Xuannu exactly that next time we had training together. There wasn't even the slightest bit of misfortune in that. I didn't need her concern. There was no way I'd ever become a fallen mystic. Not as long as I had that precious promise.

As far as falling in love, if I was going to live forever as a mystic, there was always a chance it could happen someday. Mother had even once told me in secret that when she first met my father, she had actually been in love with someone else, and apparently so had he. She had been too embarrassed to tell me about how they eventually ended up becoming a couple though.

I stretched out a hand, stroking Shuu's back with my fingers. The alcohol had set right in, leaving me feeling really comfortable. The sunlight was warm, and the spirits in the breeze were kind and gentle. Yeah, I really was happy.

I gave another heavy sigh. I was sure my breath reeked of alcohol by now. I closed my eyes.

"What a hopeless girl. Your father would be appalled at your manners. Oh, except your father was exactly the same way, wasn't he? Well, whatever. Take it easy for a while. Sorry for what I said."

Without a word in response to that mysterious voice, I let my consciousness go.

## **Before That Gentle Rest**

The endless sound of waves. The sound of sea birds following ships as they came into port. The sound of people coming and going in the streets. The scratching of a pen racing across paper. Not a single one of these was a sound I could hear in my home in the forest. Even the scent of the breeze was entirely

different. And of course, the ways the spirits expressed themselves was also new.

From an elf's view of time, my end was coming quite soon. I could feel that I would start sleeping more and more as the days went on. All the experiences I had accumulated through my life were too much for my mortal soul, and I could feel it was getting close to its breaking point. I would gradually be awake less and less, until eventually I would never wake and my breathing would stop.

I wasn't especially scared. Elves had very gentle deaths, and we had a tremendous amount of time to prepare ourselves for them. My body would return to the earth, and according to Lord Acer, my soul would be sent somewhere else and reincarnated. Though with all the weight my soul now carried, I had to imagine most of it would spill over and be lost before making it into a new life.

Though I guess there was no sense worrying about that. That was the natural order of things. In fact, if it didn't happen that way, my soul wouldn't be able to go anywhere. The real me—my memories—is probably what would be left behind.

But even if my memories disappeared, Lord Acer's memories would last forever. That was enough for me to say I was happy with my life.

A thought suddenly occurred to me. What would have happened if I hadn't met Lord Acer in front of the gates of Vistcourt on that day? Or even beyond that, what if I hadn't asked him to help save the elves on that day in the Yosogi Dojo? It was something I had thought about over the past few centuries over and over and over...and over and over, hundreds, thousands, an uncountable number of times.

My meeting with Lord Acer, my request of him, had entirely changed the course of his life, hadn't it? Lord Acer didn't like being put on a pedestal, and so generally kept his distance from the elves. If I hadn't met him, he may have lived his entire life without interacting with them. If I hadn't made that request of him at the dojo, he may have chosen to continue living there, and found a very different kind of happiness for himself.



Or so I thought for one or two hundred years. But that was just conceit on my part. After spending so long at his side, I knew that even without my request, even with the way he distanced himself from the elves, he would have likely found out about what was happening in his own way and made up some excuse to get involved. He was hopeless like that.

Otherwise, he never would have gone to such lengths to help the southern continent. He had no personal connection there, had nothing to gain from going, but just because he knew about the situation, he decided to go and help. He had ended up roping me and the whole elven caravan into it, making it a huge affair, but even if we had refused to help, I knew he would have gone on his own. Even without any clear reason, I could practically hear his excuses. “I just want to.” “It sounds fun.” “I just feel like I should.” That was just the kind of person he was, and I didn’t intend to criticize him for it.

That’s why I thought it was incredible that he had spent hundreds of years together with me. There was no room to doubt the feelings he had for me. Regardless of the fact he was a high elf, he had given me the joy of a life spent together with him.

I had lived a long life, so a lot had happened. Despite being an elf, love had burned and broken me. There were days when the loneliness made me just want to end it all. Days where I lamented the fact I had been born as an elf.

But now, I could look back at those days fondly. I was an elf. I couldn’t become anything else, and I no longer wanted to. The time I spent with Lord Acer was gentle and relaxed, more so even than the time I spent in the forest. And, though it was for a very short time, I got to experience raising a child.

Someday I would begin falling into a long sleep, and when that day came I could give myself up to it, satisfied with the life I had led. I was an elf, so I would be leaving Lord Acer behind when I passed. Of course, I was a bit worried...but I figured he’d be okay. I knew he would mourn me, and even grow quite lonely, but I also knew that wouldn’t be enough to stop him.

He would spend the rest of his days before becoming a spirit...no, even after becoming a spirit, he would continue to live life dragged along by his each and every whim. Having spent more time with him than any other person, I knew

that better than anyone else, and so had more faith in him than anyone else. When it came to knowing about Lord Acer, I knew I wouldn't lose to anyone in the world.

So that's why I only worried a little. If I didn't worry at all, he'd probably sulk a bit, so I'd have to give him just a bit.





## Report

From Cordes, to my twelve companions.

Confirming that the observation target, the high elf known as Acer, has ascended to spirithood. Together with the end of the other high elf Sapindus much earlier, this marks a breaking point in my observations.

These two high elves, born on the same day on different continents, likely had very similar memories to each other. In addition, they left the sacred ground of their forest to enter the human world on the same day. However, the results they reached were quite different. Acer gently influenced great change in the northern continent over time, while Sapindus's actions were enough to trigger the End. The former ascended, becoming a spirit, while the latter disappeared, leaving this world permanently.

In analyzing their stark contrast, I have concluded that Acer was the one who brought about greater change in this world. Of course, Sapindus triggering the End on the southern continent was the greatest recorded impact on the world caused by any high elf before him. But Acer preventing the End from spreading to the northern continent equates an equally massive influence.

The remainder of this report will review the influences Acer brought to this world. Sapindus's case regarding the End will be dealt with in its own report.

Acer was a high elf of the northern continent. Judging by his understanding of Sapindus's actions, he likely inherited memories of a life in a highly advanced civilization, but perhaps his affinity for this world was too great, as he did not seem to put much of that knowledge to use.

After leaving the forest, his first significant action was to enter a city and apprentice under a dwarven blacksmith. It is possible that this experience gave him an appreciation for this world's technology, one that prevented him from forming an obsessive attachment to the things of his past life, unlike Sapindus.

Ten years later, he began learning swordsmanship from a human, then eventually magic from another. It is unclear what motivated him to learn these

techniques despite the tremendous power he already wielded. However, these teachings ultimately allowed him to strike even the spirits with his sword, so it is possible this was his goal from the beginning. Details about the Yosogi style of swordsmanship—an art capable of harming the spirits, carrying the possibility for the children of the gods to harm us—as well as proposed experiments in that regard, will be included in a separate report.

Treating primarily with humans, elves, and dwarves, Acer traveled across the northern continent, slowly amassing knowledge. Though there seems to be little consistency in his actions to initiate trade between the divided races of the elves and the dwarves and his adoption of a human and elf crossbreed, it is thought they were all in the name of stimulating productivity. As a result, through the impact of the corporation organized by the elves for the sake of trade, Acer's influence on the world has been tremendous.

Regarding the crossbreed, an interesting discovery was made. Due to their lack of reproductive strength, we have not invested time in experimenting with such people, but the child born to a human and half-elf displayed the requisite nature to become a mystic. It is unclear whether the hybridization itself is the cause, or if it is a result of the influence of two successive generations being raised by a high elf. Further study into the nature of crossbreeds is warranted.

Returning to the subject of Acer, throughout his travels, he met a true dragon, found a phoenix, and appeared in front of the giants as well. According to my memories, it seems this is the first time a single high elf has encountered each of the ancient races in its lifetime without those meetings being connected to the End.

These experiences no doubt led Acer to a deeper understanding of the spirits, and drew him close to his nature and power as a true one. However, after these events, he rarely made use of that power. It seems Acer's nature as a high elf is aligned more toward creation than destruction. That is likely what led to his adoption of sculpting techniques from the humans in addition to his blacksmithing, swordsmanship, and magic. However, it also seems he had a strong fondness for conflict which did not threaten life, in the form of minor fights.

It is my belief that the gentle way he chose to live is close to *our* ideal, though

there is likely a great difference between the importance he places on each small connection and the wider scope through which we view the world.

Acer's time as a high elf granted me much in the way of discovery and excitement. I consider myself lucky to have been on observation duty at that time.

The next high elf due for observation has been born on the northern continent. It is my recommendation that Kyunei take the role of observer. Though there is still some time left in my term, I will begin resting, to awake again and observe Acer's actions once he returns to action as a spirit. Though we have not yet put much effort into studying the spirits, it is difficult to believe that a high elf with as much influence on the world as Acer will quietly become one with nature as other high elves do.

Though perhaps this is not a conclusion reached through logic, I am convinced that observation of his actions will be necessary. It is my belief that his story has not yet come to an end.

## After Story — A Possible Future

The hyuuhi leaped off the back of one of its companions and jumped toward me, claws bared. It was a kind of monkey monster, a bit smaller than an adult human man but physically much stronger, and always traveled in packs. It was quite an annoying monster to deal with.

But the one thing that really made hyuuhi stand out above other monsters was that they were almost as intelligent as people. For example, if a hyuuhi pack killed an adventurer, they would take their equipment and begin using it for themselves. They were smart enough to realize that an adventurer's weapons were stronger than their own teeth and claws.

They also understood that they weren't all that strong as far as monsters went, so unless you intruded on their territory, they rarely went out of their way to attack you. They had no mercy for intruders, but they almost never left their own territory. They were smart and cowardly creatures. But now, this hyuuhi pack had left its forest and was making its way to a human settlement.

I took a large step back and swung my sword upward, striking the hyuuhi out of midair. With the creature's downward momentum, if I didn't dodge while I attacked, its claws would easily rip me apart. That same momentum easily split the creature in two as it drove it into my razor-sharp sword. Even in the grips of death, I could see a kind of panic in its eyes as it fell to its fate...a real terror.

These hyuuhi weren't being driven out of their forest by starvation. They were simply running from something, and unluckily for them, the direction they chose happened to be the same direction as a human settlement.

I quickly withdrew my blade and delivered another downward slash. The hyuuhi that had been used as a stepping stool by the previous one was already charging, but my next slash split the creature's skull as it attacked. No matter how powerful a monster was, it couldn't move anymore if you destroyed its brain.

But when it came down to it, my ability to bring down the hyuuhi in a single

strike came more from the strength of my weapon than my own personal skill. Mana flowed through the blade, giving it a faint glow as it strengthened its cutting edge and durability. It was a magic sword, a weapon capable of executing magic by pouring mana into it. Of course, I had no idea how to use magic at all, so it wasn't my mana flowing through it.

But I didn't have the time to mull over that now. I remained focused and kept slashing, slashing, slashing. One by one, I brought down the pack of monsters, constantly retreating, never stepping forward.

When fighting monsters, especially in numbers like this, getting into point-blank range was extremely dangerous. Monsters were physically much stronger than humans. Never mind teeth and claws, they could deliver fatal wounds just by running into you. Being a half-elf, I was slightly more fragile than an ordinary human, so that made them even more dangerous to me.

So I kept them at a distance, always making sure to have the entire pack in view. Though they had me vastly outnumbered, it only took one blow from this sword to take each down.

But even so...yeah, I knew that no matter how I was able to manage the hyuuhi pack, *they* weren't the real problem.

An earsplitting roar echoed throughout the forest. The moment they heard it, the surviving hyuuhi immediately peeled off in every direction.

The pack had insisted on sticking together as a single unit against me as a lone opponent. If one of them were slowed down, the others weren't willing to abandon them and press on. That was what had enabled me to handle them on my own. But the instant they heard that roar, they forgot everything and fled in a blind panic.

My being here at all may have been a misstep on my part. Right now, my mission was to investigate why monsters were flooding out of the forest. Taking down the monsters themselves was technically outside of my job description. The fact that the adventurer's guild had posted a mission to investigate meant they were probably pretty sure there was something going on here. But despite how good the reward was, it was an exceptionally dangerous mission, and so most adventurers weren't willing to touch it.

By the time I accepted the mission, the situation had already gotten quite bad. Never mind investigating, at the point I arrived, the only options left were to take down all of the emerging monsters or completely abandon the village that had posted the request.

I doubt anyone would have blamed me if I had taken the latter path. Or rather, anyone who *would* have blamed me would have been killed by the monsters. But I hated that idea. It wasn't all that uncommon for monsters to kill people in this day and age, and I had even heard rumors of far-off kingdoms being entirely destroyed by them. But I couldn't stand the thought of my choice, my giving up, leading to so many people dying.

If I were better at borrowing the power of the spirits, I might have been able to buy some time for the villagers to escape. Unfortunately, there was only one spirit who was willing to lend me help.

I felt the ground rumbling beneath me. Snapping trees as it went, a bear emerged from the forest. Of course, it was no normal bear. If it stood on its hind legs it would be taller than the trees, and both of its heads had bloodshot eyes and drooling muzzles. It also had eight limbs.

Maybe calling it *a* bear was a bit incorrect. It was more like a monster made by fusing two bears together. There was no doubt that the hyuuhi had fled the forest in fear of this creature. And in pursuit of them, or perhaps drawn here by our battle, the monstrous bear had come after them.

The nihi, also known as the two-headed tyrant, was incredibly powerful and prone to rampage. It could easily flatten a city or two in its frenzy. Taking it down would require an entire army, or at least a party of the highest-level adventurers. I'd have no chance against such a beast...normally.

If I were alone, my only choices in this situation would be to let the nihi eat me, or kill myself in hopes of avoiding a more painful death. But like I said before, I happened to have a single spirit who was willing to lend me a hand.



"Can you help, Acer?" I called out to my sword. It wasn't that I had lost my mind to fear. The spirit in question lived in this sword.

In response, a transparent, person-shaped figure floated out of the sword.

*See? This is exactly why I'm always telling you to be careful with what missions you take on.*

Without a care for the rampaging nihi before us, he immediately began to scold me.

Yeah, sure, I knew that. I knew something like this was possible, but I was also sure Acer would help me out if something like this were to happen.

"What else was I supposed to do? If I ignored it, tons of people would die."

That kind of thinking was a fatal weakness for an adventurer, but even so, I couldn't just let those people die. If you wanted to call that naivety, I suppose I couldn't argue.

*I guess I shouldn't complain too much. I like that kind side of you, Shani. The fact a monster like this could appear so close to a human settlement is unsettling... But I'm here, so it should be fine.*

But despite his previous scolding, the spirit's voice was kind and gentle.

That spirit's name was Acer, though I couldn't tell if he was actually a spirit of nature. Spirits normally didn't have names, and why would a spirit of *nature* inhabit a man-made object like a sword?

But one thing I did know for sure was that Acer was my ally.

*Okay, I'll take over for a bit.*

At that, I gave up control of my body. Even in front of the rampaging two-headed tyrant, I didn't feel an ounce of fear.

I relaxed my muscles. Wind wrapped around my body and earth clung to my joints. Without a thought from me, my body snapped into a combat stance, sword at the ready.

The wind and earth were moving my body for me. Even so, there wasn't a hint of awkwardness or clumsiness to those movements. Less like a puppet moving on its strings, it was more like Acer had taken over control of my body.

This was a really strange thing too. Wind spirits could control wind. Earth



spirits could control earth. That was normal enough, but why could he move wind and earth together? I had never heard of a spirit with more than one attribute before. I had thought it was weird, so I asked him before.

*I am very weak for a spirit, so the other spirits help me out a lot,* he had answered with a laugh. I didn't get it at all.

The nihi's dual heads roared, seemingly understanding our willingness to fight. Though it was enormous compared to us, the nihi very clearly recognized me—or more accurately Acer using my body—as a threat.

My knees bent before springing me up into the air as the monster barrelled forward, swinging an arm the size of a tree trunk at me. With the spirits, I could have flown into the air without any kind of preparatory movement, but Acer never did things that way. That was something that would be impossible for me. He never used the spirits to attack either. He only ever did things that I could replicate with my own body. The only exception was him activating the magic sword for me. With no ability to manipulate mana, I couldn't activate the sword myself, so Acer always kept it active for me. In other words, this was all his attempt at teaching me.

With one clean slash, one of the nihi's arms came off.



Acer's attack hadn't been all that strong or fast, but it had been crisp and precise. The enemy was providing the speed and force needed, so he just made use of that. There was no need to supply it ourselves. That was honestly kind of ridiculous though.

*The most important thing when fighting is spacing. Even against a huge enemy like this, that doesn't change. What range does your sword cut best at? What range is good for your opponent? What range is difficult for them to deal with, or makes it impossible for them to attack at all? That's the first thing we need to get a handle on.*

My body kicked off the ground, gliding across the earth as it slid behind the nihi. Though it had a tremendous field of view thanks to its two heads, Acer made ample use of its huge body to find a blind spot. In other words, this point-blank range was the weakness that Acer was talking about.

But this really was exceptionally dangerous. While I was in the nihi's blind spot, I also was too close to see everything that it was doing. If it did something unpredictable, I'd be thrown away like a pebble in a windstorm, and I wouldn't fare nearly as well.

As I mentioned before, monsters were much stronger than humans, and behemoths like this were stronger still. Even so, Acer dodged around the flailing nihi's attacks as if he could see every single one, even artfully dodging around chunks of earth and stone kicked up into the air when it struck the ground. Meanwhile, his sword slowly but surely bit into the nihi with each swing, gradually chipping away at its life. Its hind legs likely wouldn't be much use to it anymore.

*The key to dodging is to feel the attack. Where is the enemy looking? What are they paying attention to? What are they thinking, what do they want, and how will they move? Also, what is around them? You don't want to look at all this, you want to feel it. People like us can do that.*

I could only sigh inwardly at the nonsense he was spouting. He was using "we" and "us" like I was a spirit too, but I obviously wasn't.

That said, with Acer controlling my movements, it was true I could sense a lot more than usual. Probably because it couldn't see me, the nihi thrashed its

arms angrily. Though only a little bit, I could get a small sense of where those strikes would land before they went there. Though I had to guess about half of that was me feeling how Acer was moving my body in preparation of each attack.

Either way, as faint as it was, I was feeling something. More than speed, precise and careful movement was the key, while keeping an understanding of the opponent and your surroundings. In other words, just keep making the right choice even when you can't see. It would be nice if it was just that easy, but it was also kind of hard to complain when he was showing me that my body was fully capable of fighting like that.

Reduced from a powerful threat to an object for practicing swordsmanship, it wasn't long before the nihi was brought down. When I took back control of my body, I dropped to the ground in relief.

Though Acer could deal with a monster capable of destroying entire cities without a care in the world, I couldn't always rely on him to fight for me. In fact, he really only ever helped me this much against opponents I had no chance of beating on my own. But even so, Shani Pyule's magic sword—inhabited by the spirit Acer—was no doubt the strongest sword in the world.

I sighed, beginning the work of coming up with an excuse for how I managed to single-handedly bring down a monster so much stronger than myself. If people overestimated my actual strength, it wouldn't take long for their expectations to strangle me. Dealing with the aftermath would no doubt be a hassle, but in the end, the village had been saved. I was quite happy with that result.



The moon hung in the sky, quietly watching over a city wrapped in darkness. It was a time of quiet rest for the people below—a quiet suddenly shattered by the panicked clanging of a bell. It was an alarm meant to warn the sleeping residents of an impending monster attack.

The creature emerged from the darkness, illuminated by the flickering watch fires dotting the city's wall. It came alone, but the alarm warned of the greatest possible danger.

It was a hydra. The flickering lights on the walls were reflected in eighteen eyes born by nine snakelike heads, each the size of a large tree. As with the nihi the day before, such monsters posed an exceptional threat by their size alone. It gave them unparalleled strength and the ability to shrug off attacks with their thick and heavy skin, hide, or scales. Naturally, they had a tremendous impact on the environment around them. The city's great walls, capable of holding out almost any other monster, were little more than a small hill for monsters of this size to climb over.

On top of that, the hydra could spit a powerful acidic venom and had unbelievable regenerative capabilities. The nihi was capable of destroying a city or two on its own, but something like a hydra could bring down entire nations.

Even so, while the defenders taking to the walls looked up at the creature with fear in their eyes, there was no despair. Because this city, the fortress city of Bowgen, existed precisely to defend against threats like these. The outer wall the hydra now climbed was not the only defense the city had. Behind it were three more, designed in an intricate maze to surround and entrap attacking monsters.

Morale high, the defenders turned their crossbows and ballistae against the invader, glittering bolt points taking aim.

It had been about fifty years since the situation here in what was called the east-central region had grown so bad. It began with the fall of the nation of Radroiza. Apparently before that time, the people in the east-central region had been so free and prosperous they even had time to make war against each other. It was almost impossible to believe, seeing things as they were now.

But Radroiza had been destroyed not by people but by monsters. It was often said that conflict and bloodshed attracted monsters, but the people of that time foolishly ignored that threat, continuing their wars heedless of the growing monster populations in the lands they had laid waste to, only for those monsters to swallow Radroiza itself. The destruction didn't stop there either. Multiple neighbors of Radroiza that had once warred with it were brought down by large monsters emerging from the ruins.

Ever since, the area around Radroiza and its neighbors had been deemed dangerous territory. Fortress cities like Bowgen sprung up around it to contain the threat, pushing back the large monsters that attempted to leave the area while struggling to take back the land for themselves. No one had the strength to take up arms against their fellow man anymore. It was an era of people warring with monsters.

“Couldn’t we put an end to all this if you taught everyone swordsmanship?” I asked as the thought occurred to me. As a half-elf, I would live a lot longer than a normal human, but I was still just over thirty years old. I didn’t know a world other than this one, but I could at least understand that this was an era overflowing with strife and tragedy.

Acer’s transparent form slipped out of the sword, crossing his arms with a frown. *Hmm...while I might be able to take on a hydra like that, I don’t think it would be that easy to teach everyone swordsmanship. And besides, it would take about three hundred years...okay, probably not that long. But I think it would take more than a hundred years of devoted training for a talented swordsman to get to that level.*

A hundred years? Yeah, that was a bit much. I might be able to manage it with a half-elf’s lifespan, but humans were the most populous people in this region, and they couldn’t live nearly that long.

*That said, a really gifted swordsman could do it faster, so it’s not like it would be entirely pointless. But rather than teaching swordsmanship, I think it’d be more efficient to spend the effort on making more of those,* he said, pointing to the arrayed crossbows and ballistas as they unleashed their salvo.

Though something as small as a crossbow bolt couldn’t make it through the hydra’s scales, the sheer number of them falling on it like rain were just meant to catch the creature’s attention. As its movements slowed, the enormous bolts fired by the ballistae punched through the scales into the creature’s necks.

But that wasn’t all. After burrowing their way in, the ballista bolts exploded in a burst of flame, obliterating one of the hydra’s necks halfway down its body.

The bolts fired by the ballistae weren’t simple arrows; they were relics designed specifically for fighting monsters of this size, known as Flame Lances.

They made use of the vast amounts of mana flowing through large monsters to trigger their effects. With that kind of power, a barrage of Flame Lances would be more than enough to take down a hydra.

Each one was prohibitively expensive and took a huge amount of time to make...but compared to spending a hundred years training swordsmen, it seemed way more realistic and efficient.

*That's the strength of people, especially humans. The accumulation of knowledge, technology, and resources,* Acer declared proudly, something like a hint of nostalgia to his voice.

What kind of spirit looked on a superweapon like those relics with nostalgia? As always, Acer was beyond my understanding. I guess since he lived in a relic sword, maybe he just had an affection for things like that? I really couldn't be sure, but at the very least, what he said made sense on its own. Humanity's greatest strengths were its numbers and productivity.

The barrage of Flame Lances overcame the hydra's regenerative abilities, leaving it a tattered mess. But the attack didn't relent, with ballistae continuing to pelt the ailing beast as it collapsed.

The horde of monsters that poured from dangerous territories like this seemed never-ending, but it would take a considerable amount of time before a monster of this size would appear again. By culling the numbers of those huge monsters at defensive fortresses like this, their populations would eventually be weakened enough that the army could press into the territory and build new fortresses deeper in. They'd then arm those fortresses to defend against future attacks like this one. By repeating this process over and over, they'd eventually wipe the monsters out entirely. It was entirely possible that the territory could be reclaimed.

*However, there are quite a few weaknesses to them, so I can't imagine they'll be enough to solve everything,* Acer added, to which I nodded.

Flame Lances were powerful, but their supply was limited and could only be used in specific ways. That was as much as I knew about them, but I wondered if Acer saw something else wrong with them.

The fortresses were large enough to draw the attention of most monsters

leaving the territory, but it couldn't stop all of them. Many ignored the fortresses and continued on to terrorize the people living behind them. And like the nihi a few days before, there were also rare cases of even large monsters, or large groups of monsters, appearing outside of dangerous regions like this one. For threats like that, soldiers and adventurers were still necessary, people with the power to fight themselves without walls or powerful weapons.

Though it seemed I wouldn't need to get involved today, there was still plenty of fighting to be done. I was sure there would be plenty of times when I'd need to rely on Acer's help in the future.

But someday, if this era was going to come to an end, I wanted to see it happen for myself. With my long lifespan as a half-elf, I was sure that was possible.



A horse-drawn carriage rattled beside me on the road.

One of the most important jobs for adventurers was guarding merchants as they traveled from town to town. Many caravans hired mercenaries with that speciality since they were so reliable, but that higher security often came at a frightening price. So occasionally, those who didn't belong to large and affluent corporations would hire adventurers to fill the gaps in their rosters. While they had to pay their escorts for the time spent in towns selling goods as well, they only had to pay the temporarily hired adventurers for the time spent traveling between towns.

One might argue that they should then hire *only* adventurers, but that was a pretty risky move. There was always the danger that adventurers might see the wealth of their employers and decide they were more suited to a life of banditry. Of course, there were very few adventurers like that, and they weren't all that strong. Anyone capable of taking on monsters properly could make more than enough money to support themselves, so there was no need to endanger themselves by making enemies of people too. Those with real strength knew that anyone who disturbed the order of society would be hunted down and killed with the same prejudice as monsters.

There were apparently some who committed great crimes specifically to fight



strong enemies hunting them down, but those were exceptions among exceptions. The vast majority of adventurers weren't stupid enough to attack a caravan, nor were they so interested in fighting other people that they'd turn to crime. Fighting monsters was easier, both practically and morally.

Adventurers were thought of as being quite rough individuals, that was the standard way of thinking among them. Though never mind smaller villages, even people living in cities might not have had the choice of fighting for themselves in the first place.

The sun above me lent a bright warmth to the area around us. The sky was blue, the clouds drifted by slowly...it was really a peaceful atmosphere. And for me, with at least half the blood of an elf, I could see the spirits within that scenery, the wills and forces underlying it all. Though unfortunately, unlike actual elves, I could only see them. I couldn't make use of them at all.

That was something that had always made me feel a bit inferior. Not being able to use the power of the spirits was a given due to my human half, but in that case, I probably would have been better off if I couldn't see them at all. That way I could just consider myself mostly human.

That's how I thought when I was a child, but I had changed my mind recently. Because unlike then, I now had...a spirit? At least, someone calling himself one, watching over me. I ran my fingers down the length of my sheath.

*What's wrong, Shani?*

And as I did, the self-proclaimed spirit himself emerged.

If I hadn't been able to see the spirits, I probably wouldn't have been able to see him either. So now, I was thankful for these eyes. Though I couldn't say I had entirely shaken that sense of inferiority, I had come to accept myself even with that weakness.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to call you out. I was just wondering what exactly you were, and my hand moved on its own," I apologized in a whisper. Others couldn't hear Acer's voice, but they could still very much hear mine. If they heard me talking to myself, the other guards would likely get suspicious.

*What do you mean? I told you, I'm a spirit. Man, the weather is wonderful today, isn't it? The sun feels great,* Acer said, stretching his arms above his head.

The sun feels great, does it? Being mostly transparent, half of that sunlight was streaming right through him down to the ground, but apparently it still felt good to him. I really had to wonder just what he was.

"I've never heard of a spirit that lived in a sword before. And besides, the spirits don't listen to anything I say."

Ah, maybe that came out wrong. It probably sounded like I was sulking about it now. Though meeting Acer had made me grateful for my eyes and helped me accept who I was, it didn't entirely shake that sense of inferiority, and that often changed the way I thought about things. Like, for example, if I had been better able to use the spirits, maybe my relationship with my elven father would have turned out differently.

*Hmm? Well, I guess the other spirits aren't as talkative as I am, but it's not like they're ignoring you. Ah, your father was a member of the elven caravan, wasn't he?* Acer said as if suddenly realizing something.

It was true, my father was a member of the elven caravan, the oldest and largest trade corporation on the northern continent. But what did that have to do with anything? And for the record, I always felt that calling such a massive corporation a "caravan" sounded snide.

Seeing my confusion, Acer gave a troubled smile. It was also true that I didn't have the best relationship with my father. Occasionally, when I'd happen upon an office belonging to the elven caravan, they'd have a letter for me from him, but we hadn't met face-to-face in years. The last time I actually saw him... I guess it would have been when he gave me this sword after hearing that I was interested in becoming an adventurer.



*Elves normally raise their children communally. So to be really reductive, elves that leave the forest rarely know how to raise their kids, what they're supposed to teach them, or even how to act around them. In the first place, it's pretty hard for elves to have children with other races.*

Judging by his expression, it seemed Acer was a bit unimpressed with my father too. Was he trying to say that I couldn't use the Spirit Arts because my father hadn't taught me well? Though on that note, he hadn't really taught me at all.

*Elven children learn how to interact with the spirits by seeing everyone in the community around them doing it. They respect them, befriend them, and call on their help when in trouble. Without those experiences, if you try to just use the spirits like they're tools, they obviously won't respond to you.*

Acer said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world, but I could only stare in shock. I had always thought the Spirit Arts were just a kind of magic that used the spirits.

Acer's point was like a punch in the gut. As he said, I had just been trying to use the spirits. I hadn't thought about the spirits themselves. I didn't understand anything about them, and was shamelessly trying to turn them to my purposes.

No wonder they ignored me. No wonder they hated me. It wasn't that they just disliked me; I had *made* them dislike me.

The shock of that realization almost brought me to a halt. It was all I could do to keep from dropping to my knees. I was still technically on duty right now. Though things seemed pretty safe right now, I couldn't do anything that would make the others worry.

*Anyway, it's not something you need to worry about. No one would be angry at a child for making mistakes out of ignorance. And besides, you already know how to deal with the spirits properly, don't you?* Acer laughed, putting a hand to his chest.

He was saying I just needed to deal with the other spirits the same way I dealt with him? He was being so kind. Well, if the other spirits were like that, then

maybe they'd forgive me if I honestly apologized to them. Well, even if they didn't, I still wanted to. As long as that apology wouldn't offend them further.

*And just to be clear, your father doesn't have any ill will toward you or anything. He learned all this naturally by watching those around him, so it never would have occurred to him that this was something he would have had to teach you himself.*

I kind of understood that. While I had my own feelings about that, he had his own false assumptions, just like I did about the spirits. Even being a half-elf, he probably assumed I was just like any other elf and so was at a loss when I didn't measure up. People could only gauge the world with their own knowledge and experience. Just as I didn't understand my father very well, I was probably quite the mystery in his eyes as well.

*Your father really does care about you. He just doesn't know how to express that properly. That's why he gave me to you.*

Yeah, at least that was certain. Even if I didn't know exactly what Acer was, I could tell that this sword was something way too good for someone like me. Judging by the way my father had talked about it, it didn't seem to be something he'd owned himself, so he probably went through a lot of trouble to get it for me. Why would he do that? I guess I couldn't think of a reason other than that he loved his daughter.

The next time I visited an office for the elven caravan, there might be a letter from him waiting for me. No doubt it would be to warn me that this region was dangerous and I should go somewhere else, but maybe I should write him a reply once in a while. I didn't really know what I'd say, but I could at least tell him about my current situation. What I'd been doing, how I'd been living...some small part of me wanted him to know.



*So you've never heard of a spirit living in a sword, huh? I guess you're right. There probably aren't any others in this world. But it wasn't like I picked a sword and just moved in.*

*At first, I had found some metal deep in the earth to sleep in, waiting for the day it would be dug up and turned into something. Sleeping in the depths of the*

*earth and being part of nature's flow was quite pleasant. That was probably the ideal slow life.*

*But after about twelve hundred years, I got a bit bored of that. No matter how long I waited, no one ever dug me up. I had no choice but to go back to the surface on my own. So, pushing aside the stone and earth around me, I formed a statue ride around in.*

*But a stone statue walking into a human city would probably be mistaken for a monster and attacked on sight, so instead I headed to an elven forest. Elves could see me as a spirit, so while they'd probably be surprised, they shouldn't have been scared of me. However, the metal I'd chosen had been deep under a mountain, so it was actually quite a trek to the forest.*

*After waiting there for a while, the elven caravan finally came to visit, and I got them to carry me to the dwarven kingdom. If I was going to be made into something, leaving it to the dwarves was definitely the best bet.*

*But there was a new problem: my metal had ended up changing a bit. It was similar to how water in a spring inhabited by a water spirit would be clean and clear, and would invigorate anyone who drank it. I wasn't a particularly powerful spirit—in fact I was actually quite weak—but maybe it was because I had such a strong sense of individuality?*

*Whatever the reason, after seeing the metal I inhabited, the dwarves conferred with the elves and decided to call it "spirit ore." They then agreed to make me into a sword. However, choosing the smith turned out to be quite the struggle too. Any blacksmith would have killed to experiment with a never-before-seen metal.*

*In the end, they decided to hold a massive competition across the kingdom, rewarding the winner with permission to forge the spirit ore into a sword. By the way, the winner of that competition went on to become the next king of the dwarves. In dwarven tradition, only the greatest smith in the kingdom can earn the throne.*

*He was a really good smith too, probably the third best I've ever known. On top of that, he ravenously devoured any knowledge he could get his hands on when it came to blacksmithing techniques, and fulfilled every tiny detail of my*

*requests flawlessly. I had so much fun working together with a skilled blacksmith who put everything he had into forging a new body for me. Although, it had seemed like a rough time for the elf who was interpreting for us.*

*For quite some time after that...about a hundred years I'd say, I helped out the elven caravan. They had paid a huge sum of money to get me forged, apparently. Though they said they didn't mind, I wouldn't have been able to rest easy until I paid back that debt. But even that was only until I found a wielder I really liked. And that's what brought me to you.*

*My interest had first been piqued by an elf asking me to watch over his daughter for him, but now I can say I fully recognize you as my wielder.*

*Apparently one of the mystic apprentices from the east—though she was probably a fully-fledged mystic by now—had offered any amount of money to the caravan in exchange for me. But that'd probably just land me on a shelf for the rest of my life, wouldn't it? A sword needs to be used.*

*So I can say I'm pretty satisfied with my current situation.*



Acer went on and on with his story. Honestly, none of it sounded very believable, but since Acer was the one saying it, I found myself believing a good eighty percent.

But saying that the dwarven king had put his full heart and soul into crafting him? That had to be an exaggeration. If that were true, he'd be on the same level as a national treasure of a great empire, kept locked away in a storehouse for eternity. Maybe even more important than that. If I believed that, I wouldn't be able to so casually draw my sword ever again. And besides, why was the dwarven king only the *third* best smith? It was weird that he wasn't number one.

But I didn't think all of that was just him trying to convince me of how good a sword he was. It was a really roundabout way of expressing how much effort my father and the elven caravan had gone through to get this sword to me.



Even though I was a half-elf, he still cared about me. Though, honestly speaking, I was happier to hear that he recognized me as a worthy wielder of him than any of that other stuff. I didn't really think I was skilled enough in swordsmanship to deserve a sword like this one. But even so, he had recognized me. That meant I had to get good enough to earn that recognition someday.

If Acer was the strongest sword in the world, I'd have to become the strongest swordswoman. Maybe that was aiming my sights a bit too high, but that's just how impressive this sword was. Acer was the one teaching my swordsmanship too, so I certainly wasn't lacking anything there. If I stayed passionate and kept working at it, I was sure I'd get there someday.

Even here in the east-central region where monsters were running rampant, with the self-proclaimed spirit Acer at her side, the adventures of Shani Pyule had a long, long way to go.



In the morning, I heard something tapping against the wooden window of my room at the inn. I pulled myself out of bed with a yawn, opening the window to see a small bird flap its way into the room. Its feathers were red, in fact a brilliant scarlet. It was honestly quite the beautiful specimen.

Without a hint of hesitation, the bird flew across the room to land on the hilt of my sword leaning up against my bed. It was like it was claiming that spot for itself. It then began to chirp in all manners of tones, like it was talking to the sword.

At the same time, the sword, or more accurately the self-proclaimed spirit inhabiting it, seemed to be responding somehow. It seemed Acer and this bird were having something of a conversation. Though I couldn't hear Acer's voice, as the wielder of the sword and as someone with elven blood and the ability to see the spirits, I could at least figure out that much.

I had to imagine this wasn't any ordinary bird, in the same way Acer wasn't any ordinary sword. Though honestly speaking, I had no idea what that would mean. I had seen it a few times in the past. In different cities, from different windows, it would occasionally pop up at inns I stayed at to talk to Acer.



Was it some kind of monster? Most monsters were violent and attacked people on sight, but there were also more peaceful monsters out there. And if this wasn't an ordinary bird, I couldn't think of anything else it might be. But I still got the feeling that I was wrong, that it wasn't that simple. Something told me this bird was something far greater, far more mysterious. Though on the surface, it really did just look like a particularly pretty little bird.

From my belongings, I pulled out a wooden dish and some biscuits I had bought for food on the road. I broke one of the biscuits into little pieces so that the bird could have a snack when it was done with its conversation.

I didn't ask about who this bird was. Of course I was curious, and Acer would probably tell me if I asked, but it looked like the two of them were having so much fun. I really didn't want to interfere with their little moment.

There were plenty of mysteries in the world. The biggest of them all in my estimation was Acer himself...but even that wasn't something I felt desperate to understand. As a spirit, he had lived longer than I could even imagine. From the way he acted, he seemed to have met tons of people in that time. I was probably no more than a drop in that ocean.

But that was good enough for me. I didn't need to know everything, nor did I need to be the most important person in his life. Right now, Acer was mine, and I could wield him. He was willing to lend me his strength. There was nothing more important than that, and nothing more I'd ask for. That's how I felt right now.

Before, I might have been a lot more worried about the things I didn't know...but I felt I had matured a little since then.

After I finished breaking up the biscuit, the bird hopped off of Acer's hilt and over to the table in the middle of the room, stopping in front of the plate and giving me a quizzical look. It wouldn't even eat without asking permission first. This smart little bird respected me that much.

"Please, go ahead."

At my invitation, the bird immediately began pecking at the bits of broken biscuit. For some reason, it looked really elegant and refined in the way it did

so. But that was all the more reason I felt the need to look away. It would probably feel uncomfortable to have someone stare at it while it ate. Some ordinary bird wouldn't care, but I got the feeling this scarlet little guy was a bit more shy than that.

It was about time I got something for breakfast as well. After washing my face and tidying up my hair, I took Acer from his resting spot and fastened him to my hip. Before I realized it, the small wooden plate was empty and the little bird had vanished. As if in exchange, a single brilliant feather lay on the table in front of it. It was like it was trying to pay for its breakfast. I picked up the feather, twirling it two or three times in my fingers before sliding it into my pocket.

Just like every day, I was about to step into a world where people warred against monsters. But right now, I was enjoying a peaceful morning. Even if I'd be soaked in monster blood by noon, I always made sure to treasure these quiet moments.

My partner, the self-proclaimed spirit Acer that inhabited my sword, had taught me that.



## AGE

## EVENTS

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.



- 229 ▶  
YEARS Aiha took her monster-hunting exam. Though she was still a child, she was able to cut her own path into the future.
- 230 ▶  
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.  
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, 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 Siglair. 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 Siglair, I made a dagger for the lord of the city, Myos Marmaros (Human, 42) and was granted an audience. He agreed to teach me how 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 crafted by me and ordered by Myos. 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 in leaving 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.  
Humans really grew up so fast. There was no telling what kind of flower the young would eventually bloom into.
- 242 ▶  
YEARS 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 (Elf, 185 years old) and Tyulei (Elf, 170 years old).  
Five months later, I separated Inelda from its neighbors by creating a river, and the nation of elves took the name Shiyoun.



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's 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 the demons seemed to have left behind.

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.

262►  
YEARS

The elven caravan absorbs the Toritrine family, a major house in the Republic of Vilestorika. Adding humans to their staff, the caravan rapidly exploded in size and began supporting and trading with elves all over the continent.

288►  
YEARS

The war in the West came to an end. The multiracial Federation led by Win came out on top and managed to broker peace with the humans.

Though some races left the Federation, the rest founded the Empire of Sabal, and Win took the throne as its first Emperor.

298►  
YEARS

Riding on the back of the golden dragon, I fought a high elf from the southern continent named Lilium, who was with the ebon dragon. The southern continent had been destroyed, but I managed to spare the northern continent from meeting the same fate.

301►  
YEARS

Oswald died (Age of death 231). I'm sure he was the same damned dwarf right up until the end.



- 323 ▶  
YEARS War broke out between Darottei, the nation responsible for destroying Zieden, and the Kingdom of Ludoria. Many Yosogi swordsmen participated in the fighting.
- 327 ▶  
YEARS Ludoria was victorious in their war against Darottei, and the Yosogi dojo in the capital was awarded a noble title. One part of my role as Yosogi School advisor came to an end, though I believe that was something to be celebrated.
- 328 ▶  
YEARS At the request of Minagi Yosogi (Human, Age 31), the head of the Yosogi Katana-style Dojo, I cut down one of his high-level students, Kashu.
- 351 ▶  
YEARS At Win's request, I headed to the Empire of Sabal and met with the candidates for inheriting the throne. However, the selection process was only a cover; the next emperor had already been decided. In the shadow of the proceedings, Win entrusted his daughter Soleil (Human, Age 2) into my care.
- 365 ▶  
YEARS Soleil reached adulthood and chose her path in life. The decision she made was entirely unexpected, but I nonetheless prayed she'd find happiness in it.
- 366 ▶  
YEARS With the recovery of the southern continent well underway, I began investigating viable sea routes between the continents. The rebuilding of the southern continent would soon begin.
- 494 ▶  
YEARS Having decided that the southern continent's reconstruction had reached a good stage, our life spent traveling between the continents came to an end, and we returned to our peaceful life on Pantarheios.
- 500 ▶  
YEARS Understanding the current situation in the east-central region, I went to meet with Makatsu Yosogi. However, he refused my assistance, deciding to abandon the Yosogi name and continue supporting the city of Vistcourt. Even without me, the world continues to change. It always had, and it always would.
- 532 ▶  
YEARS At the request of Kaylel, the head of the elven caravan, I sat in on a meeting with Zhang Shegong, one of the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire. They agreed to limit the elven caravan's growth in an effort to prevent the long-lived races from gathering too much wealth and crushing innovation among the others.
- 550 ▶  
YEARS I visited Oswald's grave again. Standing in front of his grave marker, I decided what I wanted to do in the future. Even though he was long gone from this world, that damned dwarf still seemed to be guiding me forward.
- 606 ▶  
YEARS I was hired to babysit the child Badwin on Pantarheios, who had been born with the Divine Art of teleportation. As dangerous as his power was, he was still my neighbor, so I decided to make sure he didn't hurt himself.
- 620 ▶  
YEARS Negotiations with Pope Cauzel of Radlania went well. With no more interference from the Church, Badwin should be able to choose his own future now. Considering what we gained, the price paid wasn't all that much.
- 632 ▶  
YEARS The Marmaros family lost its noble title. Hearing they were auctioning off Professor Myos's last piece, I headed back to the nostalgic Marmaros territory. Much to my embarrassment, I learned that this final work he'd left behind was a statue of me. Of course I didn't buy it, but I felt like four hundred years of that family's feelings toward me had finally been delivered.



734  
YEARS

Airena passed away. (Age of death 724)

She was a bizarre elf right up until the end, and she passed away loved by everyone. Of course, I loved her too.

Pantarheios changed its name to Airena Island, and I stopped keeping track of time so precisely. I no longer had anyone in my life who I needed to do so for. Even so, I would spend the remainder of my life as a high elf following my whims like always.

1000  
YEARS

Probably a thousand years. Definitely something close to that.

Having returned to the Forest Depths, I headed to the sacred ground at its heart, shed my physical body, and became a spirit. The thousand years I had been given to live in this world had been tremendously fun.

TO THE  
FUTURE



## Afterword

Thank you once again. This is Rarutori. This has been the eighth and final volume of “Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I’m Bored.”

The final one! I was able to finish the series without incident. The afterword is going to be a bit long this time, so let’s start with the alcohol talk.

Last time I talked about a real fantasy-esque drink called Elixir, and this time I’m going to stick to that theme. As this is the final volume, I want to bring up one of Japan’s fantasy-inspired drinks.

There are plenty of examples in mythology of monsters that get drunk on alcohol and end up being defeated for it, aren’t there? For example, Shuten Douji, the oni of Mount Ooe who was beheaded after falling asleep from drinking the oni-slaying *sake*. But even more famous than him has to be the *Yamata no Orochi*, the eight-headed serpent.

In a certain place, Susanoo no Mikoto meets the beautiful maiden Kushinadahime, who was to be given as a sacrifice to the eight-headed serpent. The serpent had appeared every year to devour one of Kushinadahime’s sisters, and this year it was her turn. Susanoo no Mikoto promised that if he could have Kushinadahime as his wife, he would slay the serpent, and actually managed to pull it off. He did so by making the serpent drink, and when it fell asleep in a drunk stupor, he sliced it apart with his sword.

Strangely enough, while cutting apart the snake, he found one of its tails extremely hard, so much so that it damaged his sword. Investigating further, he found an incredible sword inside the beast. It was the *Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi*, also known as *Kusanagi*, and became one of Japan’s three sacred treasures.

But the really incredible thing here—okay, the sword was incredible enough, but aside from that—was that there was a *sake* strong enough to put a beast

like the eight-headed serpent to sleep. That drink was known as *Yashiori no Sake*...and its name was even borrowed in the Shin Godzilla movie as the name of the operation to defeat him.

So today I'd like to introduce this *Yashiori no Sake* to you. Yes, the very same legendary drink. Actually, you can buy a recreation of it today. The version I tried was Yashiori Purple made by the Kokki Sake brand. They have a number of Yashiori drinks; Purple is only one of them.

It is really, really sweet. It's very different from anything I've drank before, so it's hard to express what it's like, but Kokki Sake's homepage describes it as "a flavor and aroma like heavily refined caramel." I think that describes it quite nicely. Drinking it is a fresh experience in a number of ways, so if you get the chance, please give it a shot. Maybe you'll find out why the eight-headed serpent was so taken with it he drank himself to sleep.

Maybe it had a bit of a sweet tooth?

So that's Yashiori, one of Japan's fantasy drinks.

Okay, now that that's out of the way, let's take a look back at volume seven. Though I guess since this is the last volume, we should take a look at volume eight too. So please make sure you read the full story before reading any further here.

The first chapter of volume seven was "The Sudden End of the World." It really sounds like the kind of chapter that belongs in the final book, doesn't it? Another high elf with memories of a past life like Acer brings about a tremendous disaster. I had actually planned to write an episode like this from the beginning. There were hints throughout the story of strange happenings on the southern continent, and the giants mentioned that multiple high elves had left the forest, so I think there were plenty of hints.

Despite his memories of a past life, Acer came to love the world he found himself in and recognize himself as a natural part of it...but that was because he was lucky enough to meet the right people. If he hadn't been so lucky, if he had instead met with tragedy after tragedy, how would his life have unfolded?

The second chapter was "Execution." It was a story of Acer in his role as

advisor to the Yosogi School. At the same time, it showed how the world slowly changed around him. Compared to his time traveling about the continent, Acer's way of interacting with the world after settling down on Pantarheios had changed a bit. Back then, he was changing little by little, but having Airen at his side made that change much more intense.

Chapter three was "The Flower of the Sun Blooming in the West." It was a tale of intrigue in the Empire of Sabal Win had built up in the West...or, at least, that was how it looked on the surface. It was really just a prologue to chapter four.

Chapter Four was "The Flower of the Sun Blooming in the East." It was the story of Win's daughter, Soleil. What I wanted to show here was how Acer's behavior around children had changed across the course of his life. He acted one way in raising Win, but with Soleil he was entirely different. The difference really just came from the long time he had to mature as a person between the two.

Chapter five was "Beyond the Sea." It was the story of Acer and Airen heading to the southern continent. While Acer traveled alone in chapters two and three, he had Airen with him this time. As such, he clearly acted a bit different from normal.

That was volume seven, so now let's talk about volume eight.

Chapter one was "A Journey That Gained Nothing, Gave Nothing, Yet Left Something Behind." I think the theme is described pretty accurately in that title. Acer travels across a changed world, but he doesn't really do much. Even without his involvement, the world continues to move. Though it might be obvious, it is something that's easy to forget, and so it's good to have a reminder now and then.

Chapter two was "The Person Best with Money." Everyone who showed up in this story was one of the long-lived races, so it told a story with a very different view of the world from the perspective of ordinary people. It was also about the reunion with Soleil.

Chapter three was "The Flow of Time and Good Drink." My goal in this chapter was to express the movement of time. I guess that's true for every chapter though. This time, it was to show how time flowed as we approached



the end.

Chapter four was the epilogue, the end of the story. I had wanted to write an ending like this ever since I started on this series. I was never sure I'd be able to make it all the way there, but in the end, I managed to do it. It was the end of Acer's time as Acer. But he was still that damned elf. I recommend you take off the paper cover and have a look inside.

So that brings us to the end of *Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored*. Thanks to my editor Mr. Satou, the artist Ciavis, the manga artist Kou Narita, and all of you readers, we were able to make it to the end of this high elf's thousand years. I can hardly express how happy that makes me. Thank you so much. Looking back, it all seems to have happened in a flash, didn't it?

This humble author will continue writing, so if fate would have it, maybe we'll meet again someday. I sure hope so.

And of course, you will still be able to watch over Acer's exploits as the manga continues, so please give it a read.

To repeat myself one final time, thank you for coming on this journey with me.

## Afterword

*Congratulations on the release of the final volume of Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored!*

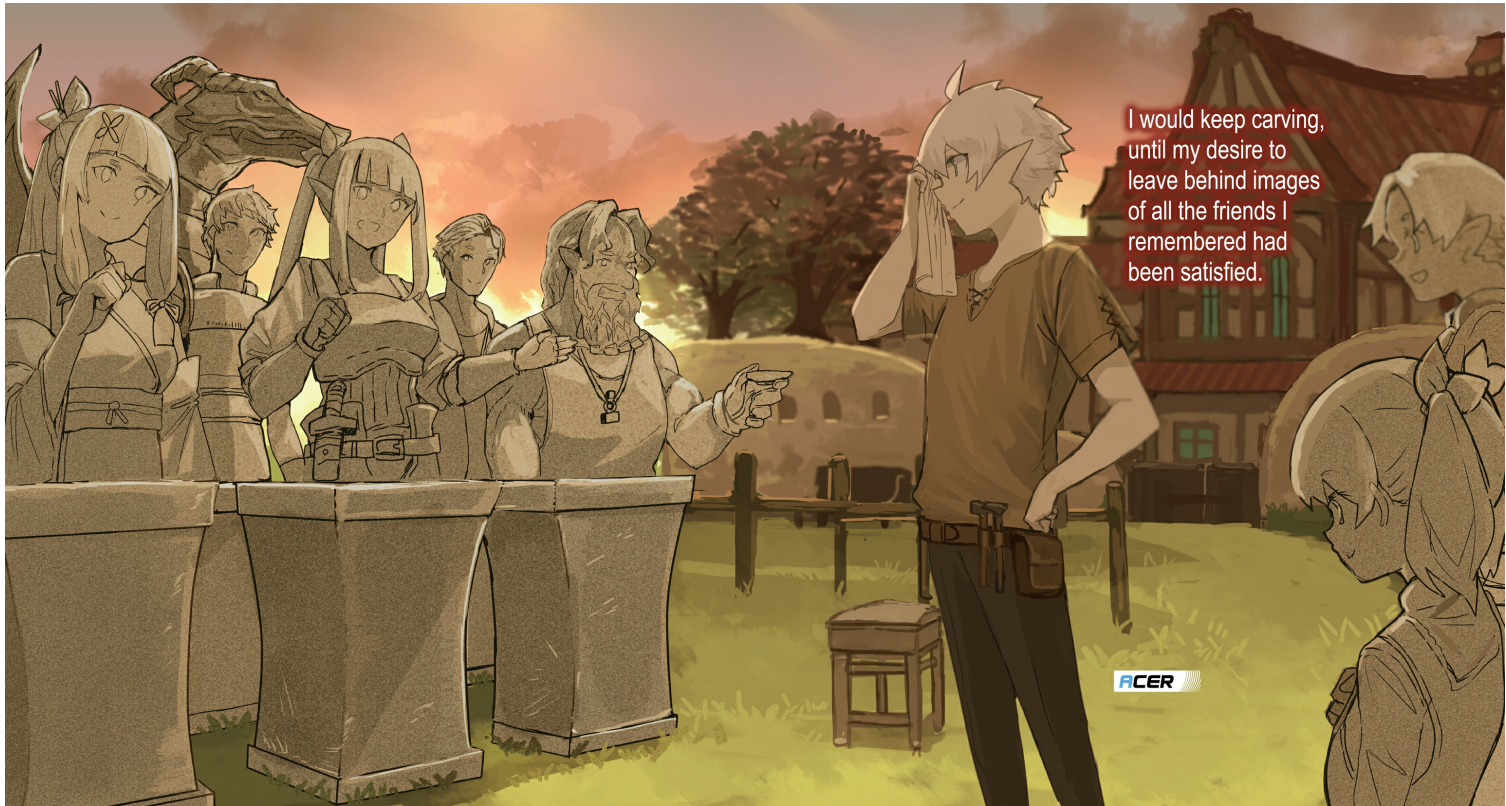
*As this is the final volume, let me first say...thank you for reading until the very end, even including my afterword! I guess it's been two years since volume one was released. So much has happened in that time, it felt like it was over in a flash. That had been my first time in charge of illustrations for a novel, so I had been quite nervous at the time. It was my first time drawing in black and white, so I am embarrassed to admit that was when I learned the meaning of the word "tone" for the first time. But that experience led to me meeting many new people, and I feel like it really expanded my world.*

*So this is goodbye. To everyone who read this far, and to everyone involved in the publication of this series...*

*Thank you!!!*

*cravis*

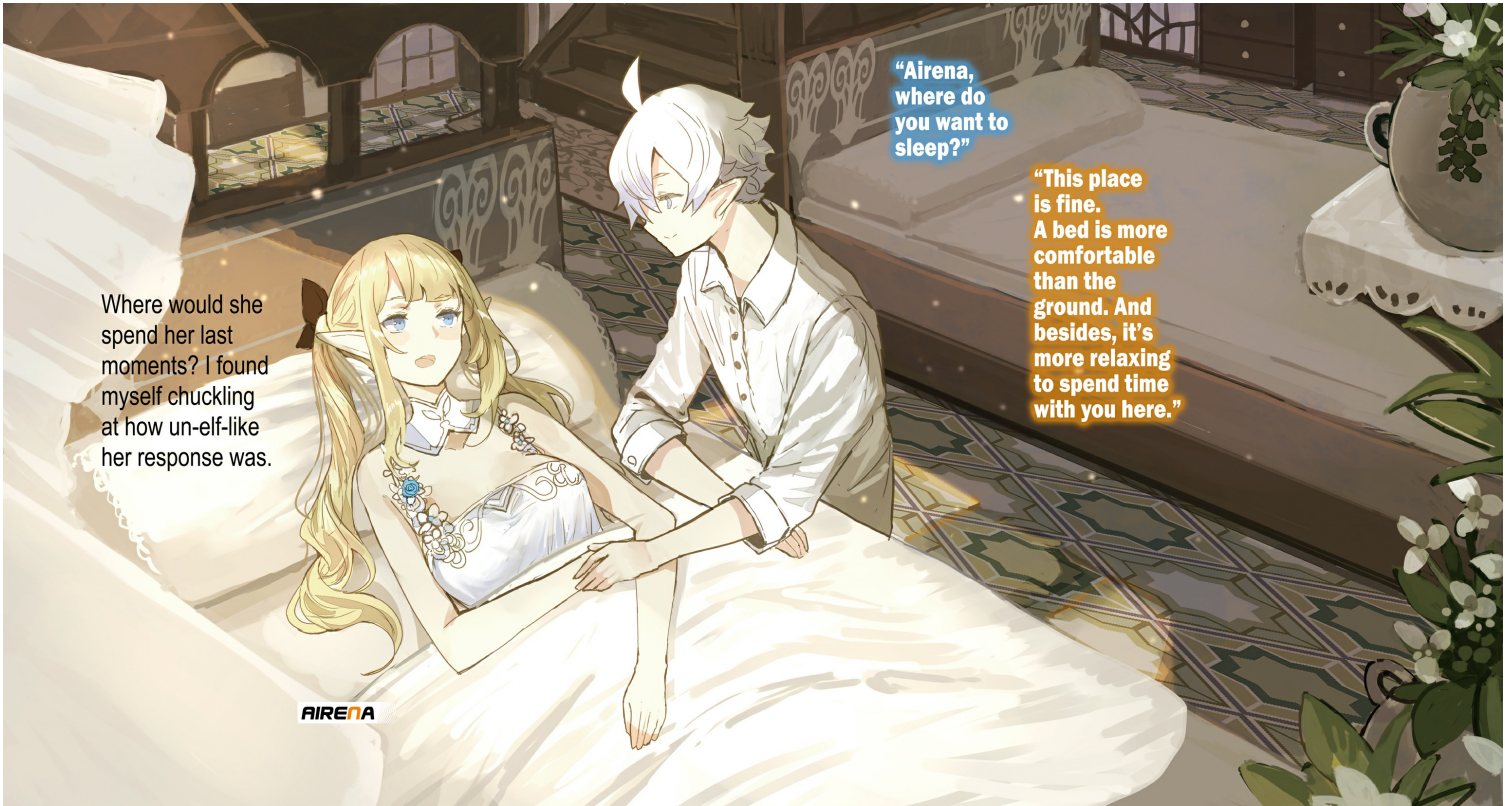




I would keep carving,  
until my desire to  
leave behind images  
of all the friends I  
remembered had  
been satisfied.

ACER





Where would she spend her last moments? I found myself chuckling at how un-elf-like her response was.

AIRENA

"Airena, where do you want to sleep?"

"This place is fine. A bed is more comfortable than the ground. And besides, it's more relaxing to spend time with you here."









# Bonus Short Story

## Shedding

This is a story that happened some decades after I returned to the Forest Depths. Even after all that time, I still wasn't the type to sit around in the forest doing nothing, so I regularly wandered outside the barrier and visited human cities to restock on seasonings when I ran out.

One day while walking through the Great Pulha Woodlands, just as I was thinking of hunting some monsters, I discovered something interesting. There were a number of water sources in Pulha that flowed into each other to form a river, before flowing out together to reach the sea. At one such watering hole, I found a crab—so large it would have taken both arms to hold—attempting to shed its shell. It was far too large for a crab living in a river, so it must have been some kind of monster, but it was also rather small for that. In order to avoid scaring the crab and interrupting its work, I hid in the shadow of a nearby tree and watched.

It had a pair of vicious pincers. While they might not have been big enough to take off a whole limb, they could certainly sever a person's fingers with ease. But though the tough shell it was trying to remove seemed solid, the new shell beneath appeared mostly transparent and had not quite finished growing in.

Crab, huh? Crab certainly tasted good. And a crab that had just finished molting could be eaten together with its shell. Though the effort of molting would leave the crab rather lean, being able to eat the shell around it more than made up for that loss. It was quite a bit larger than a usual crab, so its shell would probably be a lot tougher... Could you just fry it in oil like usual? That's what was going through my mind as I watched.

Though there were no olives growing in the Great Pulha Woodlands, there were similar fruits that could be squeezed for oil. If I asked the trees, they could point me in the right direction in no time. Plus, I had been to a human town

recently, so I still had a good stockpile of salt and spices.

In other words, there was no reason for me *not* to take this crab. In fact, the whole point of my being out here was to look for a monster I could hunt and eat. It seemed I'd be eating crab for dinner that night. After making up my mind, I continued hiding behind the tree, waiting for the right moment. The time to strike would be right after it finished molting. If I attacked too early, it would still be partially covered in its old, hard shell.

The wait was no issue for me at all. I was fairly close to turning into a spirit, but by human standards I still had plenty of time left. Taking a time-out to watch a crab do its work was fine once in a while.

That said, this crab was making quite slow progress, slow enough that it was starting to bother me. I wasn't an expert on crabs or anything, but I felt like they normally shed their shells much more smoothly. I couldn't help but wonder if it had run into a snag somewhere.

But even though it was trying so hard, its fate was to be eaten as soon as it was done. That felt a little mean. Well, of course, no animal *wanted* to be hunted, but I had killed and eaten countless animals in my life, so it was a bit late for me to worry about how they felt. After almost a thousand years of life, when I was so close to becoming a spirit, I could still harbor those kinds of feelings. It didn't seem like something I'd shed in my own transition.

But then I noticed something else: I wasn't the only one watching hungrily as this crab went about its work.

A large snake had set its sights on the crab, slithering toward it. The crab hadn't noticed the snake yet, nor would it have been able to do much if it had, considering its half-molted state. Either way, their difference in size meant there was little the crab could do to defend itself.

I found myself clicking my tongue. My choices were a bit limited now. Would I watch quietly, or save the crab from its fate? Even if they were monsters, I was being forced to choose who lived and died.

But, oh well. As much as I had really been looking forward to eating that crab, I kicked off the ground and leaped into the air, coming down with my sword to detach the snake's head from its body before it even noticed me. The headless

snake continued to squirm for a little, but that wouldn't last long.

Naturally, the crab noticed this commotion, and began tottering away from me even in its half-molted state. At this point, I didn't mind if it got away. Now that I had killed one of the monsters, my meal had been decided. A snake this size would last for several days. I wouldn't have room left to add any crab to the mix. Of course, I could forget the snake and go for the crab anyway, but I didn't like doing things that way.

That was one lucky crab. Now that I had decided to spare it, I was hoping it would finish molting safely and live a long life. Even if it was a monster, it was small enough that I didn't think it would be a problem to let it live. I wouldn't let it escape if we ever crossed paths again, so it had better pick a place far away to live where I wouldn't find it.

This crab molted, snakes shed, and I too would eventually leave my flesh and become a spirit. I felt a strange kinship with these creatures. With a wry smile, I began the familiar process of stripping the meat from the snake's carcass.



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Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored: Volume 8

by rarutori

Translated by Nathan Macklem Edited by Austin Conrad

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