

# 5

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

Enough with This Slow Life!  
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**BORED**



**Acer**  
A free and unfettered  
high elf with a one  
thousand-year lifespan.  
He has learned to face  
the flow of time.

Acer



**Salix**  
A high elf elder living  
in the Forest Depths.  
He is far from  
ordinary, possessing  
a formidable aura.

Salix

**Heero**  
A phoenix, reborn for  
the first time in tens of  
thousands of years? Still  
a baby, he looks like a  
dyed chick.

heero



**Myos**  
The count of  
Marmaros, a territory  
in Siglair. Well-versed  
in the arts, he is a  
famous sculptor.

myos

After meeting many people in the land of Fusou, learning of the roots of the Yosogi School, acquiring the knowledge needed to forge katana, and confirming the existence of the giants through the Fusou Tree, Acer began his voyage back home.

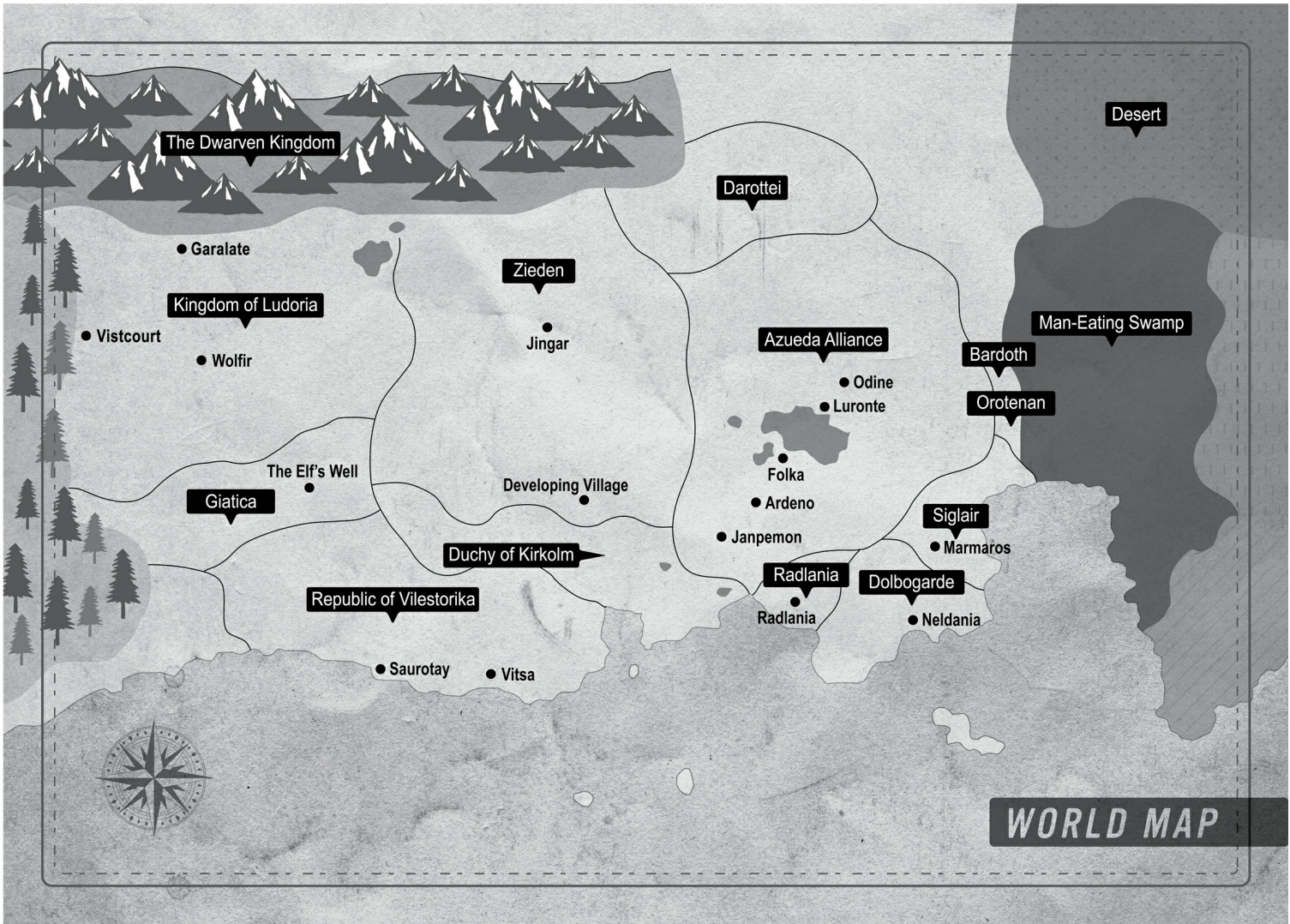
On his return, he learned that the newborn nation of Zieden had engulfed the region in war. Traveling through the changing nations he once knew, he encountered Aina, the great-granddaughter of his old friend Nonna. He discovered the legacy left behind by Kawshman's research into relics, and he saw many other ways in which the world had both changed and stayed the same.

In order to protect those he cared about, he reunited with Airena and worked to put an end to Zieden's war of conquest.

Finally returning to the Yosogi dojo, he now shares the knowledge he gained in Fusou with its members. And in order to find a clue to reaching the world of the giants, he has resolved himself to visit his old home in the Forest Depths once again.

# STORY







# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters & Story](#)

[World Map](#)

[Chapter 1 — What Was Inherited](#)

[Chapter 2 — The Forest Depths](#)

[Chapter 3 — Travel, and the Usual Whimsy](#)

[Chapter 4 — The City of Shining Stone](#)

[Chapter 5 — To Build Something New](#)

[Chapter 6 — Chaos in the West](#)

[Excerpt — Dripping Memories](#)

[Side Stories — Fragments of Meeting](#)

[Events So Far](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



# Chapter 1 — What Was Inherited

“I’m glad to see you back safely. I’d hoped to meet you again while I was still alive.”

Sitting in a room filled with Kaeha’s children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, the first person to speak was Shizuki, already old enough to have given up the headship of the school. Alongside him were the current head of the school, his son Touki, and my student in blacksmithing, his daughter Souha.

Beside Touki were his wife and two children, and beside Souha were her husband and three children. Touki’s spouse was someone I didn’t know, but Souha’s husband was one of the other students who had learned blacksmithing alongside her. Touki had a thirteen-year-old son and a ten-year-old daughter, while Souha’s kids were boys of seventeen and fifteen, and a girl of thirteen.

Outside of this room, Kaeha’s daughter Mizuha had apparently put down roots in Vistcourt, and her children had started another Yosogi School dojo there. It really felt like the family had grown a lot while I was gone.

This being my first time meeting with Kaeha’s great-grandchildren, they viewed me with a bit of suspicion. I guess that was to be expected. My relationship to the Yosogi School was pretty complicated. Though I was technically a student of the school, I was more experienced than both the current and previous heads, and as a blacksmith I was the school’s master. But as a high elf, I hardly looked older than they did, so their confusion was only natural. Souha’s kids in particular seemed unsure of how to treat me, having heard that I’d taught their mother.

Shizuki looked around the room. “I suppose there are plenty of you here who have only ever heard of Acer in stories. He is like a father to me,” he began.

Of course, there was no blood connection between us, and I even knew who his real father had been. But there was no way I wouldn’t be elated to hear him say that. As I fought desperately to maintain my composure, he continued.



“However, I’m not going to ask you to be so polite to him. If he bothers you, challenge him any time. He isn’t our guest; he’s family. I fully intend to challenge him myself.”

He made quite the surprising declaration. Come on, normally you’d say “make sure you mind your manners” or something, right? Though, I suppose now that I thought about it, I would much prefer if Kaeha’s great-grandchildren were more direct with me.

But a challenge from Shizuki? He had grown quite wrinkled in his old age, being over sixty years old, but he still seemed full of energy. As much of a relief as it was to see, it also piqued my curiosity. Just how good had he gotten after all these years? Of course, he had long since passed his prime, but he still wanted to spar with me. His technique must have been phenomenal compared to what it once was.

Yes, it was the same as how Kaeha had always sought to improve, even in her last moments. A match with Shizuki would be a good indicator of how closely I had approached her level of skill. Naturally, I would happily accept his challenge.

And not just from Shizuki either. I’d gladly spar with Touki, the current head of the school. Comparing my blacksmithing with Souha’s current work would no doubt be fun as well. However, the two of them had their own standing to think about, so a challenge like that would be a bit more complicated.

I would be more than happy to take challenges from the next generation too. The oldest of the children, Souha’s eldest son Kairi, was already champing at the bit to challenge me, judging by his intent stare. He seemed like quite the headstrong child. I wondered if that was in part due to awareness of his position as the oldest of the great-grandchildren. His mother Souha had been very aware of her role as Touki’s sister, to the point she took up blacksmithing to support him.

A smile finally broke through as I watched the nostalgic scene playing out before me. But as much as I was excited at the prospect of sparring or comparing our skills in blacksmithing, there was something I needed to share with them first.



Before they learned about who I was, through the sword or the hammer, there was someone else I wanted them to know about. A person I learned about in the Far East nation of Fusou. Though not their direct ancestor, she was a person of unparalleled importance to their history: Yuzuriha Yosogi.

The current students of the Yosogi School knew nothing about her. Had the story been lost in the difficulties of their journey from Fusou to Ludoria? Or, after having settled down here, had the long years worn that story out of their memory? Whichever the case, I couldn't imagine the founder of the Yosogi School would have wanted his older sister to be forgotten. So before anything else, I wanted to tell them about her.

"I would be more than happy to accept your challenges. Feel free any time. But first, there is a story I want to tell you. It's a little bit long, though."

Now that I thought about it, the stories I'd told to Kaeha had all been about myself, so I'd have to go back to her grave and tell her this tale too. As everyone looked at me, I began the story. The story of Yuzuriha Yosogi, the brave swordswoman who sacrificed her life in the war against the oni, in that distant land where the Fusou Tree grows.



The day after I told the story of Yuzuriha Yosogi, I sent a letter to Oswald. He had once been my master in blacksmithing, but now he was king of the dwarves.

Yuzuriha's story wasn't the only thing I had brought back from Fusou. With how difficult it was to obtain them in this part of the world, knowledge of the katana had been lost, so I also brought back the methods for forging them. Even if the old students of the Yosogi School had used katana in the past, they had no idea how to actually make them. As obvious as it is, the skills required to wield a sword are entirely different from those required to make one.

But now, the members and students of the Yosogi family had taken up blacksmithing. If I taught them how to make katana, they would have the option of using them again and be able to provide swords for themselves. If I had only brought the story of the katana to them, I imagined the current members of the Yosogi School would have rejected it. They had already



adopted the straight sword and developed their techniques around its peculiarities. Going back to the katana would only serve to reverse all that evolution.

Even in my own case, I had no intention of switching to a katana. After all, my goal was to pursue the mastery Kaeha had achieved, and her weapon had been a straight sword. I was sure Kaeha would be distraught to see me blindly devoting myself to her like that, so I had no doubt a day would come when I picked up a katana in search of further growth, but that wouldn't be for some time. For now, I would continue with my straight sword and continue trying to inch closer to Kaeha's legacy.

What weighed on me was the regret of the old Yosogi students, who had been forced to abandon the katana. After hearing the story of Yuzuriha, knowing why they had left their home and how much they suffered in transplanting themselves in Ludoria, I wanted to give them some context for it.

I think my feelings came across quite clearly to Shizuki and the other Yosogi School members. Rather than reject the idea outright, they asked for a chance to use the katana themselves first. They would all be more familiar with the straight sword by now, but maybe some of them would find that the katana suited them better.

However, I couldn't just hand over a bunch of swords. Even if I knew how to make them, I still needed the materials to do so. To be precise, the kind of steel used to make katana was somewhat different from what was commonly used here in the center of the continent. It wasn't that the different variety of steel was impossible to work with, but if you wanted to create a good piece, you had to be picky about the materials you used.

So I had sent a request for the dwarves to provide me with some steel produced from iron sand, the material needed to make proper katana. In exchange, I'd teach them how to use the iron sand and how to make katana themselves.

My letter would be carried by dwarven traders, but they didn't spend the whole year in Ludoria, so it would be some time before it reached its destination. Once they knew about the letter, though, I had no doubt they

would go to great lengths to deliver it as quickly as possible, and that a response would come almost immediately. When it came to blacksmithing, and techniques that were unknown even to the dwarves no less, there was no way they wouldn't get excited. Though my only logic for presuming that they didn't already have these techniques was the incomplete style of forging katana Oswald had shown me in the past.

I suspected it would take less than two months—only one, if I was lucky—for a response to arrive. For them to create the specialized forges needed to make the steel, gather the iron sand, and work through the trial-and-error process of developing steel from it...I predicted it would take about a year. I wouldn't be able to actually make any katana until that process was complete.

"This has really turned into a big affair, hasn't it? But it's just like you, isn't it, master?" said Souha, the current head of the forge here at the Yosogi School.

I tilted my head a bit as I looked over the Yosogi forge, which had been rebuilt much larger than it had been since my last visit. Was it really that big of a deal? Maybe it was a case of my own sensibilities being a bit off.

The dwarves were my close friends, so I wouldn't hesitate to ask them for help on any small thing, but that would look very strange to an ordinary blacksmith. I imagined most human smiths looked at the work of the dwarves with awe and admiration. The kingdom of the dwarves itself must have seemed like a mysterious and almost mystical place to them. Sending a request there to help make these swords made it look like a huge deal to someone like Souha.

"I guess so. But that's all in the future, so we don't have to worry about it yet."

As I answered her, I checked the blacksmithing tools that had been laid out for me, one by one. If we worked on preparations little by little, it wouldn't be such a big ordeal. It would require learning a few new techniques, but we were still working with fire and iron.

Souha nodded to my reply with a smile, but there was someone else there who seemed less satisfied. "If it's so far in the future, shouldn't you focus on preparing for your match with grandfather?" Kairi, Souha's eldest son, all but



spat at me. Souha immediately flushed in anger at her son's thorny attitude, but I waved her off.

I couldn't fault him for not taking a liking to me. As far as he was concerned, I was just a stranger who had shown up out of the blue. He clearly respected his mother very much, and seeing her treat me with so much deference would no doubt bother someone so young. But letting Souha scold him now wouldn't resolve those feelings. It would only drive their roots deeper. The hostility he showed would only be dispelled by time, and by my earning his approval.

"True enough. But you know, Shizuki and I have both been swordsmen for a very long time. Our match is to show how much we've learned over the years."

Having finished checking over the tools in the forge, I went to check the furnace next, extending a hand toward it. The flickering flames within were beautiful, giving off a strong and pleasant warmth. Just watching the fire burn set a fire in my heart as well. It felt like I was becoming one with the dancing fire spirits.

"Basically, we're too skilled for a few days of intense practice to make any difference in our performance. Instead, it's more important to rest and do the things we've been longing to do. We prepare our hearts and bodies thoroughly so that our skills can be expressed more clearly. In a way, I'm always preparing for our match."

I clenched my fingers together as if to take hold of the heat emanating from the furnace, and turned to face Kairi. As I met his gaze, I saw him falter slightly, taking barely half a step back. Yes, that was all. A weaker person would have been driven back by the pressure from my response, but Kairi stood his ground. The determination I had first seen in him seemed to be the real deal.

Seeing that in him made me happy, and I couldn't help but smile. That strength of will was critical, both for swordsmanship and blacksmithing. However, it seemed he had misread my smile, as he responded with a frustrated scowl.

Ah, that wasn't my intention at all. Dealing with him seemed like it would be a challenge. I would have to hope time would eventually bring us closer to a mutual understanding. Of course I wanted him to understand my feelings, but I

would need to learn about him as well.

For now, the best place to start would be to show each other our skills in blacksmithing. This craft was something the two of us already had in common.



With a wooden sword in hand, I faced off against Shizuki.

I was full of energy and in great shape. The weather was clear, though not too hot or cold. Normally, the dojo sported a healthy breeze, but there wasn't even a breath of wind inside now.

It had been quite some time since I had faced someone from the Yosogi School. I had plenty of chances to spar on my journey, but a match with a fellow swordsman from the Yosogi School felt special. I supposed the last time I'd had the chance was in my match against Win. Or maybe my duel with Juyal counted.

However, there was no doubt in my mind that Shizuki now was far stronger than either of those two had been. No matter how much he had aged, no matter how much his physical strength had waned, as I faced him like this, I couldn't help but see him as I did when he was ten years old.

Kaeha's son, one of a pair of twins. Ever since we'd first met, I thought Kaeha had done an excellent job with him. He had been educated well, responded clearly when called on, and while he hadn't yet truly grasped his future as the next head of the Yosogi School, he took his training very seriously. Considering his age, maybe he had been a bit *too* mature.

Thinking of it that way, his twin sister Mizuha had been the much more mischievous of the two. But behind it all had lurked the loneliness of having not known their father.

Shizuki slid into motion so quickly and smoothly that it was hard to say when he actually started moving. Before I knew it, he had closed the distance between us, his sword arcing toward me. A dry crack split the air as our swords clashed, and I barely managed to repel his strike. Or rather, the moment I realized Shizuki was moving, my body was already in motion to intercept him.

My years of experience had taught my body to react to the techniques of the Yosogi School, so perhaps it was better to say I had fended off his strike before I



knew it. On top of that, after having trained with long weapons, I was much more alert to movements coming at me from a greater distance away. It seemed like my efforts had borne fruit.

However, while I had been lucky enough this time, it wouldn't happen again. Knowing Shizuki, he would have no problem using the Yosogi School's techniques to pin me in, forcing me into a position where he could easily take the upper hand.

A murmur of admiration rippled through the audience at my successful defense. The spectators today were Shizuki's children and grandchildren, as well as the other students of the dojo. We hadn't made any big announcement about our sparring match, but a large crowd had gathered anyway. It proved just how much respect Shizuki had earned as the former head of the Yosogi School.

But leaving that aside for now, I was taken aback by the sheer gap in skill between the two of us. In terms of years spent training in swordsmanship, I was clearly the winner. However, I had no doubt Shizuki would win in a comparison as to what percentage of our lives had been spent on that training. On top of that, he had inherited both Kaeha's and Clayas's talents. I had expected him to be stronger than me, but this was worse than I had imagined. Even on my journey east, I had trained with the mystics in the Ancient Gold Empire, so I was sure I had improved significantly.

If I let things continue as they were, if I just waited for him to leverage the gap in our skill levels, he would crush me in an instant. That would be far too boring of a conclusion. Winning or losing wasn't so important for this particular match, but a one-sided blowout wouldn't let me show off the skill I had acquired, nor would I be able to see all of Shizuki's. That would be just too pathetic.

Shizuki had introduced me to his grandchildren as being like a father to him, and I was unbelievably happy to hear that. After the loneliness he had felt through his childhood, and after learning of and meeting his true father, he still felt that way about me. So I had to show off at least a little.

Holding my breath, I sharpened my will and stepped forward, unleashing a barrage of uninterrupted strikes. I moved two or three times as much as Shizuki

had, trying to overwhelm him with sheer quantity. However, though that quantity was important, the weight and accuracy of each individual strike was still critical. Shizuki would easily see through any half-hearted attack and counter it instantly. I still had to give it my all with every repeated strike.

This was another thing I had learned from Kaeha. Well, all of my swordsmanship had come from Kaeha, but this particular point was special to me, rather than something taught to the Yosogi School at large. Without preparation, from a broken posture, deliver a decisive and accurate strike. That was the style of swordsmanship Kaeha had created for my sake.

Thanks to that, I was able to continue delivering powerful blows even as my own combination of attacks threw me off-balance. I would strike, using the movement to correct my posture, and then flow directly into another attack that would break it, repeating over and over to continue the assault.

I could see Shizuki start to pale under the ceaseless barrage. Kaeha knew her son had found a perfect unity between heart, mind, and body. She had decided that with his talent, he didn't need any techniques like this. I felt it was quite ironic that those very techniques were now pressuring him.

But now, as I sparred with him even in his old age, I understood. He absolutely did not need these techniques. Though I should have been far superior to him in strength and stamina, he deflected each and every strike with unfailing precision. The attacks that came from odd angles and broken postures were turned aside just as easily as those coming at him from head-on.

Any half-baked swordsman...no, even any first-class swordsman would crumple under more than ten seconds of this storm. While I was an avalanche of skill, overwhelming and precise even as I broke apart and fell, he was the mountain, steady and unmoving in the face of it. No matter how intense the storm, it couldn't last forever, just as I couldn't keep holding my breath.

If I had reached Kaeha's level of mastery, not even Shizuki would have been able to weather this storm. I couldn't help but feel frustrated.

Shizuki found a gap in my assault. He delivered a swift and clean stab, stopping just shy of my throat. That marked the end of our duel.

Shizuki nodded, satisfied with my performance, pulling his sword away and



bowing. I likewise stepped back and bowed, though I couldn't hide my ragged breathing. For the first time in quite a while, I had been thoroughly defeated.

My destination still felt so far away. That feeling filled me with frustration...but at the same time, a mysterious kind of delight as well.



My days at the Yosogi School passed by peacefully. Only a month or so had passed since my return, but I had started to get along well with the new faces thanks to things like Shizuki directly challenging me to spar, Souha going out of her way to set me up in the forge, and the older students working hard to help me fit in. As Shizuki's family and the older students treated me as a close friend, the newer students—though hesitant at first—slowly began to follow their lead. I couldn't say it was the same as always, but it was a similar experience to my previous visits to the dojo.

However, as things calmed down and I began to blend in with the others, I noticed one person who stood out as a problem. They weren't one of the new students but instead were among Shizuki's grandchildren. The open hostility shown by Souha's eldest son Kairi was...actually not the culprit. Instead, it was the youngest of Shizuki's grandchildren, a girl named Aiha.

In sharp contrast to Kairi, from the very next day after I had met her, she came to me asking about my journey. She had very quickly become the first of Shizuki's grandchildren to take to me, but she was perhaps a bit too mischievous. She also had an insatiable curiosity and wasn't afraid of anything. She was a very dangerous kid to deal with.

For example, at this very moment when her dramatic entry smashed right through my idle reminiscence.

"Acer!" With a shout, Aiha fell from the sky, having jumped off a nearby roof.





Of course, I was always keenly aware of what was happening around me, and also had the spirits to inform me of what was going on, so I had been warned of her impending arrival.

I instantly reached out and caught her out of the air. “Come on, Aiha. I told you just a couple days ago, it’s too dangerous to jump off buildings like that,” I scolded the delighted girl as I gently lowered her to the ground. I’d been able to catch her since I’d known she was coming, but if she tried that with anyone else, she would be in a lot of danger. And her hapless victim could very well be seriously injured as well.

“Yeah, but while you’re here, I’ll only do it to you, so it’s okay!” She blew off my scolding, as carefree as always. I didn’t know how that made it okay, but I could at least tell that she had no intention of changing her ways for now.

This girl had become quite a problem for me. The problem was that I couldn’t properly chastise her about her attitude. I was quite happy that she had taken such a liking to me, but her recklessness left me a little worried.

I imagined her lack of ability to see the danger in her own actions was a result of her world being so small. She had grown up in this tiny world known as the dojo, and as the daughter of the head of the school, everyone around her had always been protective. It was hard for her to comprehend the idea that she could be seriously harmed.

On top of that, being born into the Yosogi School gave her the self-confidence of being a student of swordsmanship herself. Or perhaps she was so used to getting hurt that she was no longer afraid of it.

Naturally, she was scolded by those around her when she acted recklessly, but the dojo was still a special place. Even the adults practicing here commonly came out bruised, bleeding, or with broken bones. It was difficult for people like that to convince a young girl like Aiha that the dangers they faced were very different.

In that way, she was quite similar to her great-grandmother. When I’d first met Kaeha, she had been mired in considerable suffering, but her youth had been very similar to Aiha’s, like that of a sheltered princess. As she matured, it had come out as a reckless streak, and from time to time, you could see her

sensibilities didn't quite match those of the people around her. For example, despite having just met me, she had allowed me to live in her house almost without question. Of course, that was also connected to how broad-minded she was...

Ah, perhaps that was it. That was why I was so worried about Aiha's recklessness, but found it difficult to chastise her and shrink her world even further.

The best solution would be to expand her world, to have her learn of how dangerous it was for herself, and that danger could very well come for her, all while improving her own skill and learning how to protect herself from it. If at all possible, I wanted to make sure she made it through that process while I stayed at the dojo. After all, I was pretty worried about her.

"Acer! Tell me another story about Jizou!" she pestered me, pulling at my sleeve now that she was standing on her own feet. She often badgered me for more stories about my travels, and it seemed she had taken a particular liking to Jizou, an earthfolk I had met in the Ancient Gold Empire. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say she had taken a keen interest in his way of life, and in errants in general.

Fearless and reckless, inexperienced but quite skilled with a sword for her age, and with an innate goodness she was either born with or had been instilled in her by her environment...yes, she was exactly the kind of person who would become an errant.

However, this was Ludoria, not the Ancient Gold Empire. That way of life wouldn't work here. The closest thing to an errant in Ludoria was no doubt an adventurer.

Well, if she wanted to hear my stories, I wasn't about to deny her them. They would be a good chance to expand her view of the world, and to be honest, I had a lot of fun talking about my friends. So with some energetic gestures, I told her yet another story, which she listened to with rapt attention.

"Hey, Acer. I want to wield my sword for good, to help the weak!" Aiha said after hearing about Jizou again. It was exactly the kind of line you'd expect from an innocent and kindhearted child who knew nothing of the outside world.

I couldn't help but respond with a wry smile. "In that case, you'll have to get a lot stronger. As you are now, you wouldn't be able to beat any monster or evildoer."

I decided I'd have to talk to Shizuki and Touki.

Seeing she was a little unsatisfied by my response, I took her by the hand and invited her to train with me. It was time to teach her just how much she needed to learn.



In the evening, around when the bugs started to sing, I sat down in front of Kaeha's grave and closed my eyes. I didn't do this every day, but this was a good place for me to settle down and organize my thoughts.

I was a bit worried over the conversation I'd just had. After my conversation with Aiha, I had gone to discuss things with her father and grandfather, but neither of them thought to criticize me. They had both agreed that was just how Aiha had always been, and it having been drawn out by meeting me was only natural. In the end, they were the ones who had seen that part of her and allowed it to grow, so it would be unreasonable of them to blame me for her behavior.

"In many different ways, we've all been changed by your influence in our lives. Mizuha and I of course, but even Touki and Souha. It makes sense my grandkids would be the same. I wonder if it's something we inherited from my mother."

Though Shizuki's wrinkled face smiled as he said it, the word "curse" wormed its way into the back of my mind. I knew he didn't mean it that way, but the thought of a connection running through their bloodline felt a little like that to me. Though even if it was a curse, I would accept it gladly. Maybe I was just beyond saving.

"With her personality, I was sure she'd end up as an adventurer sooner or later. Maybe things would change if she falls in love with another student here...but I doubt it."

Unlike his father, Touki's smile was a bit more strained. Yeah, knowing her,



even if she had never heard about Jizou or the errants, she might well have picked a similar path. But now, if she continued going in this direction, she'd be in quite a bit of danger.

"Acer, I am hoping this will be a good opportunity for her to see the world as it is, as *she* is. Luckily for her, she'll have you at her side." The two of them bowed as one in their wordless request.

I responded in turn with a quiet nod.

If they had been strangers to me, that request would have been nothing more than shoving their responsibilities onto me. Maybe things would have been different if they were really pressed into a corner, but as they were now, Shizuki and Touki had lots of room to spare. The two of them would be more than capable of raising Aiha on their own. Even so, they wanted me to help raise her. It was something they could only ask of someone they thought of as family.

I felt very much the same way. What was really bothering me was what Shizuki asked of me next. In a way, it was a much bigger deal than the situation with Aiha.

"I'd also like to ask you for one more thing. I asked my mother about it when she was still alive, but she was opposed. Even so, I still feel I should ask this of you."

That was how he began. Back when Kaeha had been alive, she hadn't let him ask this of me, but now he could.

"Acer, I'd like you to become an official advisor to the Yosogi School. Not just to the dojo here in the capital, but also to the one in Vistcourt. Of course, we've already talked it over with Mizuha and the current head of the Vistcourt dojo."

They wanted me to continue, not as a simple student, but as someone who would watch over the school with an official post within it.

Until now, I had received special treatment in the dojo for being Kaeha's first student. Well, maybe that wasn't entirely true, but my position nevertheless had depended entirely on my relationship with Kaeha. That special treatment would continue for as long as Shizuki was alive, and probably for as long as Touki was alive too, since he'd been taught the same. But as the generations

passed, my title would lose its meaning. My reason to stay connected to the Yosogi School, and their reason for accepting me, would slowly start to fade.

Of course, that was inevitable. Though it was depressing to think about, I couldn't walk alongside the members of the Yosogi School forever. I was well aware of how different our life spans were. But even so, Shizuki was asking me to watch over the school for him.

The Yosogi School had grown and stabilized. It had taken on plenty of new students and even opened a second branch in another city. The ties binding the Yosogi School together were strong now, but those wouldn't last forever either. As the family grew, so would competition for the seat of the head. As more students enrolled, cliques would start to form. There was a distinct possibility of a rift forming between the capital dojo and the Vistcourt dojo. That was why Shizuki wanted to ask this of me now, to put me in a strong position within the school where I could address these problems as they came up.

I could understand why Kaeha had been against the idea. She likely wanted to avoid saddling me with this burden. She must have known that if she had asked, I would have gladly accepted it.

Before long, I realized that I was dreaming.

I was asleep, but fully aware that I was seeing a dream. Or perhaps it was more like an illusion created by my wishes and worries.

In the far future, I visited Wolfir and learned of the fall of the Yosogi School. Quite a bit of time had passed since I cut ties with the school, having lost all reason to associate with them. With only the faintest twinge of pain in my heart, I made to leave the capital behind.

But at that moment, I met someone. A young girl, who I could tell was totally inexperienced...and yet her swordsmanship had a clear beauty to it. I started to teach her, little by little, all of the swordsmanship that had been lost.

Ah, it was such a sweet temptation. Such a shameful wish. Even though the Yosogi School was right in front of me, offering a hand of friendship at this very moment, here I was, dreaming of their demise.

I opened my eyes. The sun had long since set, bathing the area around me in darkness. I reached out a hand, my fingers closing on cold, hard stone.

I took a deep, slow breath. It was like an invitation, or like a push on my back. She must have known from the very beginning exactly what I'd do.

“What a great responsibility.”

As I murmured to myself, I felt the air around me soften. It felt just like the times when I'd see her smile.

The moon hanging in the sky, behind a thin veil of broken clouds, was especially beautiful tonight.



The wood of the bow creaked as its string was drawn back. The arrow was aimed at a distant rabbit, whose ears were straining now that it had realized it wasn't alone. As far as I could tell, the arrow was released at the exact moment the rabbit darted away.

“Aw, come on! Why did you run?!”

As a result, the arrow thunked harmlessly into the earth as the rabbit escaped. Aiha scowled as she watched her arrow miss.

Of course, no matter how angry she got, the result wouldn't change. It was her own lack of skill that had made her miss in the first place. She had learned how to use a bow, but was still quite inexperienced with it. She definitely didn't have the skill to hunt wild animals with one. Even if the rabbit hadn't fled, I doubted the arrow would have hit its mark anyway.

“Getting hit by arrows hurts. If it knows you're aiming at it, it's not going to sit still and let you shoot it.”

Though still clearly unsatisfied, Aiha nodded at my explanation. We were in the middle of one of our regular outings. I was trying to teach her how to hunt in the forest, how to process animals she had hunted, and how to keep herself as safe as possible while camping outdoors. Basically, it was adventurer training.

She had said she wanted to wield her sword for good and to help the weak, so



becoming an adventurer seemed like the easiest way to get there. Shizuki, Touki, and even Aiha herself had agreed. Of course there were other options available to her, but they didn't quite get to what she was aiming for.

For example, if she were to inherit the dojo, her swordsmanship would be used almost exclusively for advancing the school. She could become a professional swordswoman, but then she would be working for the sake of the kingdom or whatever aristocrat hired her.

As an adventurer, she could at least choose which jobs she took, and decide on her own reasons for fighting. Once she learned about the world and what kind of creatures people really were, if she still wanted to help the weak, she could take exactly those kinds of jobs. Adventurers had their own obligations to deal with, but it was the kind of profession where you could win the freedom to choose your own path with your own strength.

I had never been an adventurer myself, but I'd met plenty of them through my friendship with Airen. I had looked after their equipment as a blacksmith, sat across from them at many a bar in my travels, and watched my own friends become adventurers and make a living for themselves. I knew all kinds, from the one-star adventurers who had barely started to the seven-star adventurers at the very pinnacle.

My experience with all of them taught me that the shortest route to Aiha's dream was to become an adventurer who could survive by her own strength. If she wanted to save others, she needed to be strong enough that she could afford to worry about people other than herself, and also have the freedom to act in their interests. Alternatively, once she had made it as an adventurer, she could travel to the Ancient Gold Empire. She would almost certainly be able to live as an errand there.

But if that was going to be the case, she'd need more than swordsmanship. An adventurer needed to be able to protect themselves from all kinds of danger. If she wanted the freedom to choose her jobs, she needed to be able to survive off the land so that money wouldn't be a problem for her, and be able to hunt monsters and other animals well enough to make a living off them. She would also need the resolve to be able to cut down a person if the need arose. She would need a wide range of skills, knowledge, and determination. Hunting

and dressing animals, as well as living outdoors in general, were the absolute basics necessary for such a lifestyle.

Hunting would get her used to taking a life, and would put her in situations dangerous enough for her to learn fear. She would learn how to hide and camouflage herself when facing danger head-on wasn't the best choice. Beyond that, if she were to get injured, I could teach her how to treat wounds and find medicinal herbs.

Little by little, she'd pick up the skills, knowledge, and resolve needed to survive. Even if she decided halfway through that she no longer wanted to be an adventurer, the experience she gained wouldn't be for nothing. Even if it was beyond my expectations, I was sure she'd find value in them no matter what life she chose.

However, if I left the hunting to Aiha today, we'd be eating a whole lot of nothing for dinner tonight. Going hungry because you failed to catch any food wasn't exactly a fun experience. Should I help with the hunt? Or maybe I should teach her about scavenging for edible plants?

While I took some time to weigh my options...

"Gah! Stop running!" Aiha shouted, as another one of her arrows missed the mark.

That was a bad sign. The more upset she got, the more she'd succumb to tunnel vision and make it easier for the wild animals to notice her presence. She wouldn't be able to hunt anything in that state. Beyond that, her angry voice and demeanor could draw the attention of monsters, shifting her role from predator to prey. Someday, she would need to learn to fight monsters, but I thought it was a bit early for that right now.

I patted her lightly on the head to try and stave off the frustration bubbling up in her. She grumbled about being treated like a child, but made no move to shake off my hand. Despite her complaints, she *was* a child, so I didn't think there was anything wrong with that.

Once she had calmed down a bit, I decided we'd continue the hunt while I taught her about looking for edible plants. Getting the chance to eat what you gathered for yourself was more fun anyway. Staying calm and keeping a broad

view of the situation would earn better results than barreling forward mindlessly.

There were countless things for me to teach her, and I wanted to make the learning process as fun as possible. That way, both of us could enjoy it.



Who was it who first said “alcohol is the water of life”?

Even as a lover of drinking, I thought that was an exaggeration. There were some people...or rather, a particular race who very much believed that alcohol was the water that connected lives together. Of course, I was talking about the dwarves.

“To comrades!”

“To brothers!”

In my hands was a mug of distilled liquor made in the kingdom of the dwarves. Seated around me was a band of dwarven traders, here to trade with Ludoria and the elven forests. Indeed, they were the same ones I had developed a deep friendship with during our travels north into the Empire of Fodor.

“Cheers!” With that, we struck our wooden mugs together.

The kind of liquor the dwarves loved rarely made its way into human lands. We had it now because the traders specifically brought some, in addition to their normal luggage, in hope of drinking it together with me. While I certainly remembered being accepted as comrades by the dwarves, I didn’t remember anything about becoming brothers, but I left that thought unsaid.

For the first time in quite a while, I enjoyed the burning sensation of dwarven liquor making its way to my stomach. There were very few foods or drinks as stimulating as this.

“You really don’t drink like an elf at all, do you? Just like always. Not that it isn’t fun drinking with them too, but you’re the only one who can keep up with us.” The dwarves clapped me on the shoulder as I let out a satisfied sigh. They were just as cheerful and friendly as I remembered.



According to them, their trade with the elves was going extremely well. The relationship was mostly built on business between this group and the elves of Mi Forest in Ludoria. The goods they exchanged there would be carried by the elven caravan to other elven settlements around the continent, all while trading with humans on their journey.

But recently, the demand for goods was outpacing the amount that the dwarven traders or the elven caravan could carry, so they were making plans to expand trade even further. For example, some elves from Mi Forest could go visit the dwarven kingdom, or more groups could travel between the forests aside from the elven caravan. That was great to see.

At the center of this trade relationship, Mi Forest had become quite a lively place, at least for an elven settlement. I kind of wanted to go and see it for myself, but that would have to wait.

Before that, I needed to deal with the shipment of special steel I had requested from the dwarves for making katana. It had been a full year since I sent my letter to the dwarven kingdom.

It seemed the situation on the continent had started to stabilize. Zieden's expansion had ground to a halt, with skirmishes between them and Vilestorika all but coming to an end. Resuming trade with the elven caravan had led to reform in the leadership that had called for expansion in the past, so the kingdom was now being led in a new direction.

Of course, things wouldn't simply go back to the way they were. The dead would never come back, and Zieden wasn't about to let go of the land they had taken from Kirkoim anytime soon. It would take a huge defeat in war to drive Zieden to that.

I didn't really understand the fun in soaking the land with blood and piling it with corpses just to change lines on the map a little. But once such a change was made, there was no undoing it. None of the other nations surrounding Zieden were willing to go to war to change the map. Neither Ludoria, Vilestorika, nor the Alliance. The Duchy of Kirkoim might have wanted to restore itself to its former state, but it couldn't act in opposition to Vilestorika

after submitting to its rule.

On top of that, through the elven caravan, negotiations between the different countries had begun. The conflict had moved from the battlefield to the political stage.

Having broken the unspoken trust between nations by declaring war, and then finding themselves unable to continue fighting, Zieden was in a very weak position internationally. There was no doubt the other nations would demand they take responsibility for their actions. As someone with no political experience at all, I had no idea what form it would take, be it monetary reparations, ceding of territory, or something else entirely. If they went too far, though, it would only stoke a new hatred in the people of Zieden. It could very well lead to the outbreak of another war. That said, these negotiations were all taking place with the elven caravan in the middle, so I was confident Airena could lead things in the right direction.

Speaking of which, with the threat of Zieden all but settled, the Alliance had been able to rally their forces and push Darottei back. It would take a good deal of time to resolve the situation entirely, but they had overcome a big obstacle in their path. However, the voices within the Alliance calling for the rebirth of the Azueda Empire wouldn't disappear.

As I said before, once a change was made, it would never be undone. The people whose lives had been threatened longed for a powerful nation to protect their interests. The situation in the center of the continent would continue to change, but I had no idea where it was leading.



The steel I had received from the dwarven kingdom was just what I was looking for, as expected of the dwarves. According to the dwarven traders, the request had been a chance for the dwarves to clear up a lingering regret from one of the old dwarven kings, so they had taken to the challenge with gusto.

No matter how high-quality the materials I received were, the first step was to evaluate them. Heating the steel just enough to give it that red glow, I hammered it into long, thin strips. Once I had done so, I dunked them in water to rapidly cool them. The harder steels would crack and shatter, while the softer

steels would hold their shape. But that wouldn't be enough. Once I retrieved them from the water, I took a small mallet to them, causing more to crack and break.

This was how you tested the steel made from iron sand. The broken, rigid steel would be used for the edge of the blades, forming the shell of the sword. The softer steel would become the core.

The other Yosogi smiths had been intently watching the whole process, so I explained what I was doing at each step. The head of the school's blacksmithing division, Souha, and a few of her high-level students were watching. Besides them, Kairi, Souha's son who had earned the qualifications to work in the forge, was also there.

I took the broken pieces of steel and started forging them. The sparks that flew off the steel were impurities being removed, causing the stacked pieces of steel to rapidly shrink. As I worked, I explained the techniques needed to prevent the high-quality steel from also being shed.

Of course, this wasn't a process you could complete in a day or two. I had the other smiths help where it was possible, but we still had to temper our expectations. Most of the work—basically, everything except for sharpening the blades—I had to do myself.

We were working on a prototype, something I had promised to send back to the kingdom of the dwarves. However, we still weren't even thinking about hilts or scabbards yet, so we'd just be sending the naked blade. Once that was done, I imagined dwarves would begin visiting to learn the forging process. Things were definitely going to be busy for a while.

Next would come fierce competition between the dwarves and the Yosogi smiths. With the birth of an entirely new kind of weapon in this area, the two would no doubt come into conflict. The dwarves wouldn't let anyone else beat them when it came to blacksmithing. So of course, when it came to making katana, the dwarves would doubtless stand at the top.

However, with the stories I had told and the thoughts of their ancestors behind them, the Yosogi students wouldn't give that ground up so easily. Rather, considering they were up against the dwarves, surrendering to them

would likely result in the entire budding blacksmithing branch of the Yosogi School withering.

I had left the production of the steel to the dwarves, so they were already one step ahead. However, the Yosogi smiths had the advantage of my presence, being able to learn directly from me. The terms of the contest didn't seem too bad.

In truth, once the Yosogi smiths learned how to produce katana, they would likely keep that knowledge to themselves, passing it on only through the school. Even if the dwarves learned how to produce katana, they would hardly ever use them, so that knowledge would also most likely be stored away too. After all, there was virtually no demand for katana in this part of the world.

Even so, the Yosogi smiths and the dwarves had their pride at stake. There was a good chance the sharpening of their skills in this contest, encouraged by the growth of their opponents, would lead to new discoveries. That would make me extremely happy.

Well, when it came to the fundamentals of blacksmithing, the dwarves would obviously win. Souha was quite skilled among the Yosogi smiths, but she still wasn't even at my level, and I was nowhere near as good as my master Oswald either. So when it came to a contest with the dwarves, the only hope for the Yosogi smiths was to passionately pursue the production of katana themselves, to stubbornly refuse to lose on this one front. I would do everything I could to encourage that passion.

In particular, training the next generation of smiths—Kairi foremost among them—would be critical. Dwarves had much longer life spans than humans, so they could devote much more time to improving. Souha was still quite active in her work, but it wouldn't be long before she started to flag. If Kairi couldn't inherit her skills and devotion, if the newer students weren't able to carry on the work the older students left behind...they'd already have lost.

Though I wouldn't go so far as to say they were bad, the current up-and-coming generation were clearly lacking a little bit of something. Until now, they had only compared themselves to the other smiths in the capital. And in that regard, they were easily able to stand among them as peers.



But from now on, they'd be comparing themselves to the dwarves. The resolve and devotion they would need going forward were incomparable to what they had shown before.

After finding a good place to stop, I took a look around the room, seeing the atmosphere around the enraptured Yosogi smiths begin to ease. Among them, Kairi looked especially serious, like he was desperately trying to gain something from me. I couldn't help but see traces of his mother in that expression, from when I had first taught her thirty years ago.

As pleasant as the nostalgia was, seeing such an expression on him was also encouraging to me. He was very serious, with a strong sense of responsibility, and he had already become quite trusted by those around him. He was also more than passionate when it came to blacksmithing.

He had been somewhat guarded against me when I first arrived here, but recently he had come to accept me to some degree. After my match with Shizuki, his attitude toward me had changed greatly. Apparently, no one else had been able to fend off Shizuki's first strike without having experienced it before, so seeing me do so had changed his opinion of me. Though Kairi had no aspirations to become a swordsman, being raised in the dojo had instilled in him a deep respect for the strong.

Of course, that had only been the starting point. Actually earning his trust had likely come from working together with him in the forge. The things we made told no lies, after all. At the very least, he now seemed to trust me enough to accept my teaching.



Things became quite busy with katana production, and the next two years passed by in a flash.

Of course, I didn't spend *all* my time in the forge. On my days off, I was still giving Aiha her outdoor training. In fact, she had turned thirteen about half a year ago. Her grandfather Shizuki and her father Touki, the current head of the school, had then allowed her to carry her own sword.

Perhaps out of curiosity for something new, or some other reason I didn't

know, Aiha had wanted a katana instead of the traditional Yosogi straight sword. So I forged one for her. The balance was quite different from the swords she was used to, so it would take some time for her to become familiar with it. But with the way she ecstatically took to practicing with it at all hours of the day, I figured she'd get accustomed to it sooner rather than later. Seeing the way she celebrated when getting a new weapon reminded me a lot of Kaeha.

Once she had gotten used to her new sword, there would be a lot of training—or perhaps I should say trials—available to her. Yes, now that she had a real sword, she would be faced with trials to prove she could fight animals, monsters, or possibly even other humans, with the intent to kill.

The katana was no different from other swords in that it was a tool designed to kill. The techniques designed to be used with it were no different. If she couldn't take the lives of monsters or people without hesitation, there was no way she could be an adventurer. Even if she didn't want to become an adventurer and chose to remain at the dojo, there was still the chance she'd need to take another's life someday. I was certain both Shizuki and Touki had been forced to make that decision before.

As terrible as it might sound, Aiha's wish to learn swordsmanship to save the weak meant learning swordsmanship with the intent to take other people's lives. She needed to fully understand that, to make the right decision about her future. It couldn't be something she chose on a whim due to some fleeting sense of admiration.

It wasn't impossible to accomplish her dream without killing anyone, but it would require an overwhelming level of strength, something on the same level as my connection to the spirits that could resolve any situation with brute force. With that kind of power behind me and the arrogant way I had led my life, I didn't have the right to tell Aiha how to live hers. But it was a lesson she needed to learn regardless, lest she lose her life rushing recklessly into a danger she wasn't prepared for.

My intent was to put trials before her that would require killing animals, then monsters, and finally other humans. Apparently there were already plans for her to undertake that last step with the other students of the Yosogi School under Touki. In short, she wasn't the only one in the school who needed that

experience.

After the war between Vilestorika and Zieden had ground to a halt, deserters and jobless mercenaries started flowing into Ludoria as bandits, so there was no shortage of enemies to use for practice. It was kind of ironic that the growth of these bandit groups was so useful for the school.

And so, my job was to train Aiha to the point where she could fight monsters that posed significant personal risk. In search of such prey, we were heading deeper into the forest than usual today. We kept ourselves hidden, using the whispers of the trees and the spirits to help us follow the monster's tracks.

This forest had an elven settlement at its center, so the most dangerous monsters would have already been dealt with. There wouldn't be any monsters strong enough to challenge her individually, so we were looking for some that traveled in groups. I could always cull their numbers to a level where she could handle them if necessary, but I was sure we'd find an appropriate group of monsters today.

However, I was starting to worry about what I would do when my role in teaching her was finished and she was able to hunt monsters on her own. The production of katana would still take quite a while, so there was no rush or anything, but I couldn't stay with the Yosogi School forever.

If I stayed at the dojo for much longer, I would likely witness Shizuki's death. The thought didn't especially bother me, as I had already said goodbye to so many humans in my time. I had already prepared myself for that possibility when I decided to come back to the dojo. Shizuki had been well on in years, so it wouldn't have been all that surprising if he had passed away before I'd made it back to the dojo in the first place.

But he had said I was like a father to him. As happy as that made me, was it really the parent's role to be present at the child's death? He would be laid to a peaceful rest, surrounded by his own children and grandchildren. I didn't think there was much need for me there.

My next destination would be the Forest Depths at the heart of the Great Pulha Woodlands, where I'd search for the phoenixes. While I wasn't exactly excited at the prospect, I had already made up my mind. After that, depending

on how my search went, I might follow Win west. There was also the option of visiting Oswald in the dwarven kingdom and showing off my ability to forge katana.

There were plenty of things I still wanted to do, and plenty more that I felt I had to do, but none that were urgent. If I kept thinking on and on into the future, I would just start to worry. Though being able to worry about the distant future rather than what was happening around you in the present felt like a sign of luxury.

Ah, but now I had lost the chance to worry about it, as we had stumbled upon the traces of a monster. And just as I had hoped, it appeared to be a small group of them.

I was worried about the future, but there was no helping that. For now, I'd have to focus on tracking these monsters. I'd have more than enough time to think things over later.



“What? Why won’t you come with me?” Aiha whined, on the day when she finally had to hunt monsters on her own. But there was no unease in her eyes; she was just playing with me.

So I shook my head, wordlessly pointing her toward the forest. It was good that she wasn’t nervous, but letting her guard down could trip her up just as easily.

Her task was to go into the forest, track down a group of monsters, kill them, then harvest their useful materials and bring them back. Finding traces of the monsters and tracking them down would likely take her a few days. By the time she fought them, she would be physically and mentally exhausted. And since it would be a group of monsters, she would be outnumbered from the start. While surrounded, she would have to take great care as to how she positioned herself in the fight.

She had clearly demonstrated the skills required to accomplish the task, but this test was to see whether she could express that same competence in extraordinary circumstances. Therefore, I wouldn’t be with her. Even if I didn’t participate in the fight, having a friendly face nearby would be a significant



emotional encouragement. This trial would test if she could do it alone.

Of course, I would also be in the forest, keeping a fair distance away to observe her. In the worst-case scenario, I'd step in to save her life. But of course, that would mean she had failed. I doubted Shizuki or Touki would let her become an adventurer after that. If she failed a task that she should have been more than prepared for, becoming an adventurer would just lead to an untimely death.

However, if—and this is a huge “if” —by a one in a million chance she was able to find *me* in the forest, despite me using the plants and the spirits to keep myself hidden, that would also count as a pass. If she could find a high elf who intended to remain hidden in the forest, she'd be far beyond first class as a scout. Honestly, it would cast doubts on whether she was actually human.

I supposed it wasn't entirely impossible if she possessed some sort of supernatural ability like a Divine Art to help her find people. If she had such a unique ability, then regardless of the results of the trial, it would be more important for her to follow her own desired path to make the best use of it.

That said, for all her athletic prowess and skill in swordsmanship for a girl her age, there were no signs of her hiding any kind of unique ability like that. This was a mostly pointless hypothetical.

About ten minutes after Aiha entered the forest, I followed her in. I could probably have started right away without her catching me, but I figured it was better to be careful.

Aiha was tracking monsters, while I was tracking her. With the help of the wind spirits and the trees, I was able to keep track of her movements and maintain a steady distance between us. To be honest, as someone who had only begun learning how to survive in the forest, and as a human no less, the pace she kept was agonizingly slow for me. The amount of ground I could cover in a day would take her several, if not even longer.

Still, I didn't say or do anything to help her. I only watched silently from a distance, as per my role. In a way, this was a trial for me as well.

The target for Aiha's hunt was a pack of large-fanged weasels. As their name

suggested, they were a monster born from weasels with uniquely large fangs, about the size of a large dog. They were quick, deadly with their large fangs, and surprisingly intelligent. They weren't all that strong as far as monsters went, but dealing with them as a group would be bothersome.

Also, even though they traveled in packs, it was usually only in groups of three. The exception was for reproduction and child-rearing, where they would come together in larger groups once every few years, staying together for about three months. In short, there was little need to worry about that happening.

As for why they traveled in groups of three, that had yet to be discovered. Two of them were typically coupled, while the third operated alongside them without interfering with their relationship. The leftover third weasel wasn't consistently a male or female either.

It was possible this third served as a protector for the pair's young, or would act as bait so that the two could escape from danger. At any rate, thinking so hard about monsters would only make them harder to hunt.

Both the weasels' large fangs and pelts were useful, with the teeth being especially valuable for their sturdiness and sharpness. Their meat was technically edible, but without spending time drying it out or pickling it in the juices of certain plants, the smell made it hard to eat. If you knew what you were doing it could taste fine, but it wasn't really something you hunted for.

In this case, I didn't expect her to bring any meat back with her. If she was successful, I didn't imagine she would carry much back but the teeth. I preferred to use as much of my prey as possible when I hunted, including the meat if it was edible, but I had no intention of forcing that principle on others. And besides, if I was going to hunt something, I'd pick something that tasted better.

Keeping everything I had taught her in mind, Aiha spent her first night in the forest safely, finding traces of the weasels on the second day. All in all, she was doing pretty well.

Being alone outdoors required a certain level of vigilance. You couldn't really fall asleep properly. Thus, the longer she spent in the forest, the more tired she

would become. If she could finish her job after only a single night, that would keep the strain on her body to a minimum. Finding the traces of her prey so quickly took a bit of luck, but being careful enough to notice them immediately was more than worthy of praise.

However, now that she had found tracks, she would need to be more careful as she began her pursuit. Having found traces of movement meant that she wasn't that far away from her target. The chances of them discovering her before she found them weren't all that low. She needed to be especially cautious from here on out, and she showed that she was clearly aware of this.

Shortly before sundown, she caught up with the weasels. She had found them without being discovered in turn. It should have been a great chance for her. After all, she had come equipped with a hunting bow as well as her sword. If she aimed well, she could take one of them out before the fight even started.

But she didn't take out her bow. Instead, she picked up a nearby rock and threw it toward them as she drew her sword, sacrificing her chance at a surprise attack.

I couldn't consider that a mistake, though. As she wasn't as experienced with a bow, rather than risk her prey panicking after she failed to hit a vital point, it was more advantageous to fight with her sword from the start. While normal animals might get scared and flee, she was confident that monsters like these would choose to turn and fight instead.

Standing in front of a large tree, she prevented the weasels from surrounding her. She had calmly analyzed the situation and made a smart choice, despite being only thirteen years old.

As she waited for the monsters to approach, there were no traces of the spoiled little girl I had seen before she entered the forest. I was finally starting to realize why Shizuki and Touki had been so sure of her. I could see nothing but a true swordswoman in her now.

The weasel closest to where the stone had landed dashed ahead of the others, lunging toward her. As it attacked, Aiha's katana lashed forward, taking it in the middle of the face, cleanly slicing the creature in two.

Seeing the gruesome death of their comrade, the remaining two weasels

changed their approach. They realized instantly that if they attacked one at a time, they'd meet the same fate. Therefore, their course of action was obvious. The two of them would attack her together, from the sides.

However, as she had backed up against a tree, they couldn't get behind her. That left only one avenue of approach: they'd have to attack from her right and left at exactly the same time. But that only meant that they'd take the exact approach that Aiha had anticipated.

She immediately leaped to the right, swinging her sword. Turning her back to the weasel on her left, she bolted straight toward the one on her right. Blood sprayed as her blade found its mark, but not all of it belonged to the weasel. The fangs of the left weasel slashed clear through the thick clothing she had worn in place of armor, finding flesh beneath.

However, the wound was shallow. Aiha's dash to the right had left her only barely in range of the left weasel's bite. With one more whirling slash, she delivered the final blow on the third weasel. Without dropping her guard for an instant, she took in the situation, confirming the three weasels were actually dead. She paid no mind to the fresh blood still leaking from her injury.

Maybe calling her first rate was going too far, but it was clear she had surpassed the level of a beginner adventurer.

After confirming that her prey wouldn't get back up, Aiha finally gave a heavy sigh and began attending to her injury. Cleaning the wound, she applied some herbs she must have picked up when she'd traveled through the forest and wrapped it with a bandage.

It took an awful lot of willpower for me to resist leaping out of the woods and healing her with magic. Including her ability to treat her own injuries, she had easily passed the trial we had set before her. I didn't want to spoil it at the last moment.

So I'd wait patiently for her to make it home.



"All right, this one looks pretty good."

Picking up the rather small katana...or more accurately, the wakizashi that

had just been forged, I examined it from every angle. It hadn't been sharpened yet, and still needed to be given a hilt and scabbard, so it wasn't technically finished. But this would be enough for today.

Half a year had passed since Aiha's test, and she was now fourteen years old. The last test before she became an adventurer hadn't actually happened yet, but that was only because Touki needed time to prepare it. Of course, teaching someone to kill other humans wasn't a task that could be taken lightly.

Just the other day, Touki had started recruiting students from the school to form a party that would drive out a group of bandits, so I doubted Aiha would have to wait much longer. Once she passed that final test, all that stood between her and the life of an adventurer was her fifteenth birthday, which would mark her first official step into adulthood. The wakizashi I was making was something of a preemptive celebration gift.

If she'd had another weapon in addition to her katana during her monster hunting test, she might have acted differently. The reason she hadn't charged the weasels herself back then was that she was afraid of losing her weapon if it were to get stuck in one of the monsters. If she had carried a second weapon, she might have made it through without being injured.

Would Aiha be happy to receive this? Unfortunately, I doubted I'd get a chance to see for myself. Once Touki had taken her off to dispatch the bandit group and I had finished the wakizashi, I planned to leave the capital behind. I would be heading west, first to visit Mizuha in Vistcourt and the dojo she had built there.

I felt I needed to at least say hello after taking on the role of advisor to the school. But above all, I knew Mizuha wouldn't have much time left. Shizuki was still quite energetic, but apparently she was spending more and more of her days bedridden. If I went now, though, I should be able to see her one last time.

After leaving Vistcourt, I would head to the Forest Depths in Pulha, the sacred ground of the high elves. I guess you could say I was heading home. I expected I'd get quite an earful from the elders if I showed my face there again, but if I wanted to meet a phoenix, I didn't have much choice. Besides, I had some good souvenirs for them, so I didn't think they would be *too* angry with me.



“Acer.”

As I finished cleaning up the forge and stepped outside, I was stopped by Aiha calling to me. She wore a rather serious expression, which surprised me.

“Is something wrong?”

In response to my question, she grabbed my sleeve and pulled me along behind her. What was going on? I was getting the feeling she was angry about something.

She pulled me along to a spot in the middle of the dojo, a cool spot of shade provided by the trees that had been planted there. It was close to where the former members of the Yosogi School, including Kaeha, now rested. After stopping there, she finally spoke.

“Acer, are you leaving soon?”

She was right, but how did she know? I had only told Shizuki and Touki, as well as Souha since she was in charge of the forge. I was a bit surprised.

“Why do you think so?” Denying it would be easy, but I didn’t want to lie to her. I guess the same went for Shizuki and Mizuha as well...really all of Kaeha’s descendants.

But it seemed she took my evasiveness as confirmation, seeing how her face fell as she looked away. “Kairi told me. He said you were wrapping things up, as if you wanted to make sure everything would be okay if you left.” Even so, she answered my question.

Ah, I see. So it was Kairi. I guess he had been able to guess that based on my behavior in the forge. I had started making preparations there to keep everything running smoothly, so there wouldn’t be a huge gap left by my disappearance. I supposed Shizuki, Touki, or Souha might have even confirmed it for him.

Well, this was a bit of an issue. I’d gotten quite used to saying goodbye, but I still had trouble dealing with others who were sad to say goodbye.

While I hesitated to come up with something to say...

“Hey, Acer...did you love Great-Grandmother?” she asked. She had looked away before, but now she turned to face me directly.

Again, this felt like it had come out of nowhere...but it was a much easier question for me to answer. I had already answered this for myself, and that answer wouldn't change for anything.

“Not quite. It's not that I *did* love her. I still do.” I could say that with confidence.

Aiha blinked in surprise. “Even though she died a long time ago? Even before I was born?” She was clearly quite shocked.

Ah, now I understood. For her, the time before she was born felt like forever ago. The difference in our perception of time brought a wry smile to my face. From her perspective, it might have looked like the past was dragging me down, but that wasn't true at all.

After all, someday even Aiha would be part of my past. There was nothing for me to do but hold that past close to my heart as I pressed forward.

“That's true, but she's still with me. Here,” I said, putting a hand to my heart, “and here,” then giving my sword a tap. Last, I showed her my open hands.

Yes, I still remembered Kaeha. And in the swordsmanship I had inherited from her, she was still with me. As a fellow member of the Yosogi School, I imagined Aiha would be able to understand that.

“Then...what are *we*? What am *I* to you, Acer?”

Yet another difficult question. Just as Shizuki had said I was like a father to him, I thought of him as something close to my own child. But that didn't mean I felt like Touki and Souha were like my grandchildren or great-grandchildren. Touki, Souha, and their kids all still felt more like Kaeha's children.

“You're all very important children to me. Whether you were just born, or all grown up, or old and wrinkled.”

I could see Aiha's eyes waver at that response. I didn't know exactly how she felt about me, nor was I going to ask. Whether it was admiration, respect, affection, or something deeper, I could still only see her as one of Kaeha's

children.

“Then...no matter where you go, if we’re family, make sure you send us letters. Once I become an adventurer, I’ll still come back and visit the dojo every once in a while to make sure you’re okay,” she managed to squeeze out.

Ah. So if we were family, she would continue to worry about me. In that case, I would happily oblige, in the same way Win was sending me letters to tell me he was still doing well. I would start sending letters to everyone here at the Yosogi School to let them know how I was doing, though I couldn’t say if we’d ever meet again.

Of course, I hoped we would, but I couldn’t guarantee that for any of them. Since leaving the Forest Depths, there were plenty of reunions I had hoped for but never managed to achieve. With my sense of time being so different from humans, there were plenty of instances where I had let those chances slip through my fingers without realizing it.

In particular, if Aiha was going to become an adventurer, there was always a chance she could meet an unexpected end. Even so, it was the path she had chosen, just as I had chosen mine. Entirely different, totally unrelated paths.

In the end, I clenched my fingers and held out my hand, saying goodbye to her with a fist bump just as I had to Jizou, whom she had admired so much in my stories.



## Chapter 2 — The Forest Depths

After leaving Wolfir and heading west, something on the road caught my eye. Close to Vistcourt, there were a number of stone statues lined up alongside the road. The statues were all life-sized, and appeared to be fashioned out of plain stone.

Many people used high-quality marble imported from Siglair, a country south of the Azueda Alliance, for carvings such as these, but it looked like the sculptor here had used local stone.

I was sure there was a small-scale quarry near Vistcourt. Most stone produced by such quarries was used for construction, but as far as construction materials went, stone was actually rather expensive. Even aside from the aforementioned marble being a real luxury, most people built their homes from wood and earth. The reason was pretty simple: quarrying and transporting stone was a huge amount of work. There was also the option of making bricks from earth...but bricks needed to be fired, which took time and fuel, so it was also relatively expensive.

Mortar and concrete made from ash glue were also fairly common construction materials. For example, you needed mortar to fill the gaps between layered bricks. Many of the buildings with more unique architecture in the larger cities I had visited had been constructed using concrete. It was well suited to making things like arches and domes, being an invaluable resource for producing buildings with that extra visual charm.

Anyway, that's a bit of a digression. It was hardly rare to see roadside statues fashioned after gods for travelers to pray to for safety. However, these statues weren't modeled after gods at all, but what seemed to be adventurers. Stopping to inspect them closely, I found a group of three engraved with the names Holy Sword Clayas, Martena the Sustainer, and Airena, Daughter of the Spirits. It seemed these were all famous adventurers from the Vistcourt area.

However...these three statues didn't look all that much like their originals.



They had probably been carved only based on stories of what they looked like. After all, it had been over thirty-five years since Clayas and Martena had died. I doubted anyone alive today had been around when they were still active as adventurers.

Ah, but this way, all those who came after them would still remember Clayas and Martena...though in a completely different way than I remembered them. Of course, even if they didn't look at all similar, their being remembered at all was still incredible. For example, among the people I had known from Vistcourt, I had been much closer to Rodna, but there was no way he'd be getting a statue in his memory.

But even so, the sight pricked at my heart somewhat. If they were going to be remembered, I'd rather it be as how they actually looked. If I talked to the sculptor and described their true appearance and what their faces had really been like, would he fix them?

No, that would be unbelievably rude. Even if they looked different from the figures in my memories, these statues had been carved in exquisite detail. The sculptor must have put an exhausting amount of work into each one. I couldn't just waltz in and tell him he got it wrong.

If I wanted them to be remembered properly—including Airena eventually—the only real option was for me to make statues of them myself. The images of those I had spent any amount of time with were thoroughly engraved in my memories, and I had always felt like that would be enough. And to be honest, I still felt that way.

But knowing that other people remembered them incorrectly somehow left me feeling unsettled. I was fully aware that it was just selfishness on my part, though.

Right then I had plans ahead of me. I would visit Mizuha in Vistcourt, look around the dojo she had built there, and then head into the Forest Depths in Pulha. If I put those off now, there was a good chance I'd never get around to them. So while I couldn't do it in the near future by any means, I considered taking some time later to find someone who I could officially become a disciple of so I could make sculptures like these.

And if I was going to go that far, there would be no need to stop with statues of Clayas and Martena. I could make some for Rodna, Nonna, and Kawshman too. Maybe in a smaller size, I could do all of Kaeha's family to line up around them. I could even add Juyal, Zelen, and Shuro.

There was no reason for me to restrict myself to just humans either. I could add the dwarf Oswald, the half-elf Win, and the other elves too. The earthfolk Jizou, the mystics, and even the golden dragon.

The thought of making statues of them all and putting them somewhere important to me was strangely appealing. Wherever I chose to place them...that would probably become my home.

Of course, if I asked the earth spirits, they could make such statues for me easily, but that would only reproduce the raw images in my head. At the very least, in the times that I had tried that, they failed to make something I could approve of. Similar to blacksmithing, the act of creation helped refine the image in your head, making something far better than the thing you pictured at the start.

Of course, the opposite was also possible, so I would have to become very good at it. I didn't want to just make a simple imitation of those people, but something that expressed who they truly were.

The thought of pursuing a whole new field of expertise for the first time in a while had my heart racing. I never expected to find a new objective for myself like this.

With a smile on my face, I bid goodbye to the lined-up statues. Vistcourt was just around the corner.



I received a surprisingly warm welcome upon my visit to the Yosogi dojo in Vistcourt. Honestly speaking, I expected that my walking in as a stranger claiming to be the school's advisor would be met with disdain, especially since I felt like I had basically no connection to the dojo here at all. Thinking it was too bizarre, I dug a little deeper, to find out that apparently Mizuha had told everyone at length how the dojo had been built on ground I had given them.

However, that wasn't actually correct. The one who had given Mizuha a stable position here in Vistcourt was really Mizuha herself, and all the effort she had invested into this place. If I had to find someone else to give credit to, then perhaps I could mention Kaeha, who had similarly worked as an adventurer here. Maybe her work preserving the safety of Vistcourt had left a lasting impression on its people. After all, Kaeha and Mizuha stood out quite a bit.

Besides that, being technically the daughter of Clayas meant Mizuha had probably received a fair amount of support from him as well. Considering Mizuha was the one to take over instructing new adventurers after he had retired, it wasn't hard to fill in the rest myself.

In comparison, all I had done for her was make a single magic sword and let her use my house. It was hardly as much of a big deal. Perhaps I had some influence due to my many acquaintances in Vistcourt, but saying I laid the groundwork for the school was surely an exaggeration.

But there was no point in denying Mizuha's claim. She must have said what she did for a reason. I imagined one of those reasons was to make my job as advisor to the school easier. Though that was surprising in its own right. How far ahead had she planned for me to take this role?

Once again, for the members of the Vistcourt dojo, I told the story I had learned of the Yosogi School's roots in Fusou. I also showed them the katana their ancestors had been forced to abandon, and offered to teach them how to forge them, just as I had for the dojo in the capital.

However, as happy as they were to hear the story, they decided they didn't need the katana. The Yosogi School swordsmanship taught here in Vistcourt was entirely for the use of adventurers. In their eyes, a weapon was an expendable tool used to fight monsters. The most important thing in selecting a weapon for them was the ease with which they could maintain, repair, and replace it. In that respect, never mind the katana of their past, they were even moving away from the straight sword the Yosogi School had traditionally used.

In other words, the Vistcourt dojo was going down an entirely different path from the one walked by those in the capital. It was really interesting to see. As

the weapon they used changed, so would their techniques. In fact, since they were more focused on fighting monsters than people, they had already started to shift away from antipersonnel tactics in favor of techniques that made use of brute strength for facing down monsters.

It wouldn't be long before the swordsmanship of the Vistcourt dojo was entirely different from that of the Wolfir dojo. That difference would no doubt create a huge gulf between the two. The fact they bore the same name yet practiced entirely different swordsmanship styles would make it difficult for them to accept each other.

But even so, there was no denying that both of their styles had evolved from the Yosogi School. At this point...well, with Mizuha's help, erasing those differences wouldn't be entirely impossible, but I had no intention of doing so. They had started from the same place and naturally diverged. If for some reason in the future, they rejoined, something new and incredible would be born.

The thought of being able to lead them to that future made me excited to fill my role as advisor.

When I said that, Mizuha nodded with a laugh.

"You really haven't changed at all, have you? Yes, if a new kind of swordsmanship is born from that, please make sure to see it yourself." After all, it was something she would never witness for herself.

For a short time, I spoke with Mizuha. Or rather, for most of the conversation, she spoke to me. Long ago, Kaeha had always wanted to hear stories about me, but Mizuha was bursting with stories of her own experiences that she wanted to share. Stories of her time as an adventurer, of meeting her husband, of becoming an instructor for other adventurers, of building the dojo here. Having her own children, how she raised them, of how she came to be a grandmother. It was like she saw me as a book, and she was determined to fill every last inch of my pages with her stories.

She had always been an energetic kid, sometimes even being more of a mood-setter than Shizuki. Though of course, the one she dragged along in her

wake was more often than not Win, so this felt like a very Mizuha-like way of saying goodbye.

She must have suffered quite a bit in her time. Signs of the troubles she faced seeped in from the edges of each of her stories. While Shizuki inherited the old dojo and worked to expand it, she had chosen to build something entirely new. Though in the end they had both ended up looking after their own dojos, Kaeha's twins had ended up following entirely different paths in life. Of course Shizuki no doubt had his own share of hardships, but I couldn't imagine they compared to what Mizuha had faced.

"I became an adventurer, and have lived such a long life since then, seeing all kinds of things in my time. But I never saw anything as mysterious and wonderful as that huge tree you showed me," Mizuha said in the midst of her recollections.

Ah, back when I had taken Shizuki alone to Vistcourt to meet Clayas, on our return she had complained quite loudly about being left behind. To make it up to her, I had taken her into the depths of a nearby forest to show her and Win a Spirit Tree, something normally only visible to elves.

"You live in a world where such amazing things are so common. I was really jealous of that. If I get to have another chance at life, I hope I'm born in that world too. It would have given me a little more time to spend with Win..."

With that, our conversation came to a close.

I made no effort to pry deeper into those feelings. Mizuha had found a husband, had children and grandchildren of her own, and was now surrounded by all kinds of people. From my outside perspective, it seemed like there was nothing to complain about. Win had grown up much slower than Shizuki and Mizuha, so it had felt like they were leaving him behind...but I couldn't imagine they had felt nothing as they outpaced him. It was entirely natural.

I had known Shizuki and Mizuha since they were quite small, but now they had both grown old enough that death was almost upon them. From their perspective, seeing me unchanged must have made me seem like a relic from their past.

Saying my final goodbyes, I left the city of Vistcourt behind and headed

toward the Great Pulha Woodlands, toward my own past. The home of me and the other high elves: the Forest Depths.



In my long journey, I had visited all sorts of dangerous places. For example, the volcanic region in the North, where monsters could disguise themselves as stone or swim through streams of magma. Or Black Snow Province in the Ancient Gold Empire, whose monsters were covered in rock, with even their flesh being mixed with gravel. There was almost no water, no greenery, and everything that lived there was constantly assailed by the rain of volcanic ash. There were also the wetlands dividing the eastern region of the continent from its center, called the Man-Eating Swamp by the humans living around it. Though it was full of water and greenery, it was also filled to the brim with monsters large and small.

But the Great Pulha Woodlands was known to be just as dangerous. In fact, you might even be able to say it was more so. The rich environment gave birth to just as many varieties of monsters as one could find in the Man-Eating Swamp. The density of trees in the deeper parts of the woodlands made it quite easy to get lost, and I don't think I need to explain what would happen to someone who lost their way in a place home to so many monsters.

As it was so abundant in plant life, finding food in the woodlands was rather easy, but a fair number of the plants were poisonous. If you came without sufficient knowledge, or were deceived by the many similar-looking plants, those poisons would quickly spell the end of you.

With so many monsters and a harsh environment, the Great Pulha Woodlands more than qualified to be called a dangerous habitat. As for the part of the woodlands near Vistcourt, its outskirts were frequented by smaller and weaker monsters. Because it was regularly visited by adventurers, it had been opened up to a degree.

Vistcourt itself was a city born from the gathering of adventurers who set their sights on the unique bounty of monsters and plant life found within Pulha. That said, there was no small number of adventurers who ventured into the woodlands, never to return. Whether they were devoured by monsters,



brushed up against toxic plant life, or just wandered a bit too far in their recklessness, the Great Pulha Woodlands swallowed people whole.

But despite how brutal the forest could be, it was no threat to me. If it had been, my first journey out of the Forest Depths would have likely ended with me in the belly of some monster.

Thinking back on it now, I had been quite lucky back then. I wasn't nearly as physically capable then as I was now, and my sense for danger was much duller. If the monsters I had met after leaving the barrier had been something large enough to reach up into the trees, rather than a pack of grand wolves, who knows what could have happened?

The trees and spirits warned me of approaching monsters, but that encounter had still caught me by surprise.

With those thoughts playing through my head, I slipped into the cover of some trees. They responded by bending their branches down to hide me behind their leaves as an enormous snake, large enough to swallow a cow whole, slithered past. Being a snake, the organ in its nose could detect prey by its body heat, but the cover of the trees perfectly blocked the heat I gave off.

I held my breath and waited patiently for the snake to pass. I wasn't the least bit nervous. Outside of Pulha, it was the kind of monster I would have tried to kill before it noticed me, but here in the dense woodlands, it was difficult to safely build a fire. It would be a challenge to make use of anything you could harvest from it.

However, the trees of those same woodlands offered me protection. With their help, virtually no monsters would be able to find me. So the obvious course of action was to let the snake pass. Ending our encounter without a life-or-death conflict was lucky for both of us. Snake meat was surprisingly delicious...but in this environment, hunting something like that wasn't really an option.

Once the snake had vanished from view and I could no longer hear it moving through the trees, I started walking again. There really were a lot of monsters here.

The deeper you went into the forest, the thicker the energy in the air grew. The fact I had found this level of power in the environment normal once made me want to laugh. Of course, I had lived inside the barrier, safe from any monsters that might threaten us. After traveling the world and learning all sorts of things, I could truly understand the size and depth of this place now.

An environment like this needed some sort of source for its power. I had guessed that the source of that power was a phoenix...but at this stage, I could only hope I was right. If I failed to find a phoenix here, I'd have to take Airena east to climb the Fusou Tree and begin the search anew. Well, I guess it didn't have to be the Fusou Tree. Any mountain large enough to reach above the clouds would do.

I hadn't tried it before, but I wondered if with the help of the wind and water spirits I could walk on clouds, similar to how I could walk on water. If we could ride the clouds and have the wind spirits carry us around, it seemed plausible we could find the clouds where the giants lived.

However, I had doubts as to how welcome we would be if that was how we found our way there. It was possible that being a member of another of the ancient races would earn enough respect for us to be welcomed on its own, but arriving on the back of a phoenix like in the myths would certainly make the best impression. If I was taking Airena with me, I wanted to be as careful as possible.

As I walked through the Great Pulha Woodlands, when I was still a few days out of the Forest Depths, I sent a message of greeting on the wind ahead of me. The outskirts of the Forest Depths were populated by elves, while the high elves made their home in the interior. I had intended my message to reach the high elves within as well, so I had made the message quite strong. In a way, it felt like knocking on the door of my estranged parents' house, so I couldn't say it was particularly pleasant, but I didn't have much of a choice.

What kind of response would I get? The elves on the outskirts would likely welcome me with open arms, but I had no idea how the high elves would react to someone who had suddenly left on his own. Would they be angry at me? Would they care at all? It was impossible to guess. I doubted it would be a particularly warm welcome, though even that would be unpleasant in its own

way.

At any rate, this was the place I was born. I couldn't help letting my mind race ahead of me. No matter how I was received, for now, all I could do was wait for their response.



Continuing through the Great Pulha Woodlands, I passed through the barrier and into the Forest Depths. The thickness of the air, the voice of the trees, the energy in the atmosphere...everything was entirely different from the outside.

Awaiting me on the inside were not the ordinary elves I had expected, but a single high elf. Being an ageless race, all high elves seemed rather young by appearance, but the way he carried himself made it clear he was no ordinary person.

I hadn't been able to tell back when I'd lived here, but now I could practically see the long years he had lived hanging from his shoulders. The only ones I had met in my journey with a presence similar to this were the mystics in the Ancient Gold Empire.

But now, as he laid eyes on me, his face was filled with concern. "Acer! Child of the Maple, what happened to your hair?" he said, more concerned for the state of my hair than with saying any words of greeting. His name was Salix, and he was far older than I was—somewhere over eight hundred if I recalled correctly. Ah, actually, I had been gone from the Forest Depths for almost a hundred years. Eighty years, to be precise. He was quite likely over nine hundred by now.

Salix was also known as Child of the Willow. When I had left the Forest Depths, he was the youngest of the five high elf elders, and had been quite popular among the other high elves. He had been the easiest of the elders for me to talk to.

"Ah, it was kind of in the way during my journey, so I cut it myself. It was my own choice, so don't worry. Long time no see, Salix, leader and Child of the Willow."

Even if he was the youngest of them, one of the high elf elders being sent to

greet me was a sign that I was being welcomed back. I hadn't expected a comment on the length of my hair before even saying hello...but it did remind me of how picky high elves were over their hair.

Salix gave a heavy sigh, something that honestly surprised me a little. The fact he had come to greet me, shown concern for me, and really showed any emotion at all was beyond my expectations. As far as I could remember, I had never seen the expression on his face change.

"Don't look so surprised," he said. "Even I would be concerned to see one of my people changed by a visit to the outside world. You hid your true nature far more than any of us did back when you lived here, didn't you?"

To me, saying that cutting my hair showed I had changed was quite an exaggeration, but that was how high elves saw the world. But more importantly, it seemed like he had seen through my attempts to fake it as a normal high elf back then. That was actually quite embarrassing. I smiled to try and hide it, earning another sigh from Salix.

"I'm glad I drove the others away. Seeing you like this would be too much for them. More and more people might start taking an interest in the outside world."

I couldn't help but agree with his assessment. So that explained why one of the elders had come in person; they didn't want the other high elves to see me like this. The old me would have been upset by this treatment, dismissing it as high elves being too boring.

But I could understand their reasoning now. High elves casually stepping out into the world would have a huge impact on it. Besides that, the high elves were already quite small in number. If they spread out even further, the chances of circumstances leading to their deaths became a concern, and the future of the race would come into question.

"Please do not misunderstand, Child of the Maple. I have no intention of scolding you for leaving the Forest Depths. I understand why you made the choice you did, and it wasn't one without precedent. Anyway, come with me."

However, those words were unexpected. I understood why the high elves lived in a way that discouraged interest in the outside world, but I had no idea

why they accepted me as an exception.

On top of that, he said there was a precedent? Was that supposed to be a joke? No, there was no way a high elf elder would joke like that, but it all seemed...far too convenient for me.

As he turned and walked away, I hurriedly made to follow. The Forest Depths was my birthplace. The high elves were my people. Even so, it seemed there were things about this place and the high elves that I didn't know. Quite possibly a lot of things...

"By the way, what about the other four elders? After being away for so long, I kind of want to say hello to them too. Look, I even brought souvenirs," I asked Salix as we walked, the thought suddenly occurring to me. I knew they'd definitely give me the scolding Salix had skipped, so I wasn't actually all too keen on meeting them, but I had prepared myself for it. If I was going to have to meet them anyway, I wanted to do it while my resolve was still strong.

But without even turning back to me, he answered. "Ah, they've all become spirits and gone out into the world. I am now the oldest among the elders. They had all been quite worried about you, so I wondered if they had gone to check on you. However, it doesn't sound like you've met," he said without so much as slowing down.

I see. I guess after a hundred years, it was to be expected. Even high elves eventually came to the end of their life span. However, death didn't mean the same thing for us as it did for others. After our lives as high elves, we still had our lives as spirits.

But those elders had become spirits? I found it difficult to imagine. I was split evenly between wishing I could see them in that state, and dreading the thought of being lectured by them even after their transformation.

"Yeah, if they saw me as I am now, they might have just given up with a sigh and left without a word."

I didn't know how time felt to the spirits. Maybe cutting my hair had been a mistake after all. It had been in the way while I was traveling, but maybe I should have just tied it up instead. I had also started carrying a sword around,

and taken to snacking on dried meats as I walked.

It was a bit surprising even to me, but hearing that the old elders had left for their lives as spirits left me feeling a little sad.

But in response to my words, he looked back at me and shook his head.

“It seems you’ve misunderstood us a little, Child of the Maple. But I suppose there is no helping that. It’s not like we explained anything to you.”

What did that mean? What had they failed to explain to me that caused me to misunderstand the late elders? As much as I wondered, he didn’t elaborate any further. For hours.

Yeah...this is exactly as he had always been. The high elves, and the elders in particular, would go quiet for hours at a time. They would say something vague and suggestive, then add nothing to clarify, only to start up the conversation again hours later as if they had suddenly remembered it. I had to wonder if the humans, dwarves, and other races outside the forests saw me in the same way.

Feeling a little irritated, I followed behind him until we made it to the base of a Spirit Tree. Of course, it didn’t compare to the Fusou Tree, but it was far larger than any other tree you’d see outside the Forest Depths.

“Hmm. I suppose this will do. No need to rush, Acer. You have made it back. I’m sure you have some business you are eager to see to, but surely you have some time to talk first?”

Taking a seat on one of the Spirit Tree’s roots, he beckoned me to join him. Considering their sense of time, hearing a high elf invite me to “take some time” to do anything made me wary...but to be honest, he was quite right. There was no reason for me to hurry.

Sitting down beside him, feeling the strength of the Spirit Tree under me, I felt my heart naturally start to calm. I had finally made it back home. There were a million things I wanted to ask, so relaxing here and talking for a while wasn’t a bad idea.

Though if it took years to get through it all, as it had with the golden dragon, that would be a problem in its own way.





“Ah, so you met a true dragon. That explains the aura about you.” Taking a bite of the mystic peach in his hands, Salix narrowed his eyes, ears twitching up and down.



He must have been in an incredibly good mood, as I had never seen such a childlike display of emotion from him before.

Eighty years had passed since I left the Forest Depths. Even though I shared only the key moments, it still took quite a while to tell the whole story. But Salix listened intently to every word, nodding, sighing, and interrupting with questions from time to time.

He really did seem to be in strangely good spirits. As a high elf, hearing about me apprenticing to a dwarf to learn blacksmithing or studying swordsmanship under a human must have been anything but pleasant.

“Yep. Then I went to an island nation in the East, where I climbed the Fusou Tree that reached up past the clouds. After eating some of its fruit, I had a dream about the giants. I also brought some of its seeds back.”

I suspected Salix would be planting the Fusou seeds here in the Forest Depths, of course alongside those from the Mystic Peaches. Without the help of a giant, I didn’t expect anything that grew from them would come close to the ridiculous size of the Fusou Tree, but in another century or two, I suspected we’d be given a new kind of Spirit Tree to eat from.

“I see...this is quite the gift. Thank you. If you’ve already encountered a dragon and a giant, I’m guessing you’re back here in search of a phoenix.”

I nodded. I was quite grateful the conversation was going so smoothly—far smoother than I had anticipated. And the fact Salix so easily guessed my intentions was further evidence that there actually was a phoenix here in the Forest Depths.

Feeling I was getting close to what I was searching for, I opened my mouth to begin convincing him, but he raised a hand to stop me. “The fact that you learned secrets possessed only by the elders by *leaving* the forest is rather amusing. Very well. I cannot say whether I can give you what you’re looking for, but I can at least let you meet the phoenix. Before that, though, there is something we must discuss,” he said with a quiet intensity. His previous happy demeanor seemed to all but evaporate, replaced by the most serious look I’d ever seen.

What was this about? It was really strange for a high elf to show so much emotion.

“First, an apology. The elders, myself included, were far more strict with you than any others. I can only imagine how difficult that must have been. I’m sorry,” Salix said, bowing slightly.

Wow. I was in shock. I was at a total loss for words.

“As for why...that is because we determined you must have had memories from before your life as a high elf. Though you never told us as much.”

But what he had said next rocked me to my core. My brain refused to understand.

Wait, wait, wait. There was no way. How? Why did they think that? Maybe my behavior *was* a little strange, but how would that lead them to the conclusion I had memories of a past life?

“I understand your surprise, Child of the Maple, but listen. Even with those memories, you are still one of us. High elves like you are not that strange. One is born every millennium or two among us.” Standing up from the root we were resting on, he put a hand on my head, like a parent trying to soothe their child. Not that high elves really had a concept of family.

But hold on, there was something there I couldn’t let go. There were other high elves like me in the past? Others who had been born with memories of past lives?

“You were taught that high elves possessed an indestructible soul, right? Many high elves acquire that immortal nature the moment they are born...but not all of them. Some acquire it the day they are born, while others do not until they reach the age of self-awareness,” Salix continued.

Ah, I was starting to see the picture. In other words, after dying in my previous life, I obtained the immortality of a high elf before those memories disappeared, causing them to be retained in this imperfect way. And apparently, though rare, it was something that happened occasionally with high elves.

“Yes, just like you, high elf children that acquire their immortal nature before

being born retain some memories of their past life. Memories from a different world, where they were proud beast kings, ordinary humans, or any other race.”

Salix’s words inspired an indescribable relief in me. While I had considered myself to have fully integrated into this world, there had always been the lingering doubt in the back of my mind that if anyone ever found out about my past memories, they’d treat me like some kind of outsider. Maybe that fear hadn’t manifested consciously, but it had always lingered somewhere in my heart. But now, Salix was telling me that having these memories was perfectly normal.

“The thing is, most high elf children born with memories of a past life end up leaving the Forest Depths someday. They often think in ways totally different from other high elves, and have expertise in entirely unusual fields. Their influence on those around them is incredibly strong. There were even cases where some brought others from the Forest Depths out with them.”

Ah. Back when I had first left the Forest Depths I would have considered that a good thing, but now I could understand feeling apprehensive about it. A group of high elves leaving the community when it was already so small would have a large impact on it, not to mention on the outside world. A single high elf could topple an entire nation on a whim. Though perhaps it wasn’t my place to say, an entire group of them wandering the world would be like a living natural disaster to the other races.

“Actually, the two high elves who gave birth to me had left the Forest Depths before, apparently returning when they became pregnant with me. So yes, I know a little about the concept of parenthood. Even now, I still think of the children I bore as my children, and I consider their own children to be my grandchildren,” Salix said almost proudly.

Was that why he was so much more approachable than the other elders? He must have been going out of his way to tell me all this to put me at ease.

“That was why I and the other elders tried to prevent you from thinking of leaving the forest at all, and especially to keep you from taking others with you. Those were the ideas we hoped to instill. Though of course, it seems our efforts

had the opposite effect. Before they became spirits, the elders regretted that immensely. They truly felt like they had wronged you.”

Ah. So that was why he said I misunderstood the elders, and why he felt the need to apologize.

But really, it was all too late to be bothered by this now. Even if they had treated me as Salix did now from the start, I would almost certainly have left the Forest Depths anyway.

After a long pause, he continued. “But the vast majority of high elves who leave the Forest Depths return eventually. No matter how deep the ties they weave with the people outside, once their lives come to an end, those ties end with them, they say. I don’t know anything about the outside world, but I believe the same thing. As stimulating as the outside world may be, it offers little more than that.”

There was an obvious concern in his eyes. Why was that? Did he feel a responsibility as an elder? Or was it just concern for a fellow high elf? Probably a bit of both, but it also seemed like there was something more personal underlying his worries.

“But not all of them came back. Did they meet with unfortunate circumstances and become spirits in the outside world? Or did they simply see fit to live the rest of their days outside the forest? I have no idea. But that is why I want to ask you.”

That was a good question. There were plenty of unthinkable dangers in the outside world. From the monsters populating the various dangerous habitats around the world, to creatures like vampires. A high elf acting alone could very well lose their life if they let their guard down. But I could also definitely understand why a high elf would choose to spend the rest of their life outside the Forest Depths.

“Have you considered coming back here to live in the Forest Depths?” Salix asked. “I think that would be the best course of action for you. And if that is your intention, I’ll bring you to meet the others. If you have no further plans to leave, I doubt your presence will inspire others to do so.”



I could somehow tell that Salix was really thinking of what was best for me. I couldn't imagine any other high elves wanting to leave the Forest Depths with me, but as an elder, I couldn't fault him for being wary of the possibility.

"Contact with the shorter-lived races doesn't offer much more than sentimentality, I imagine. But as immortals, we are different. Speaking of which, your return would be met with much rejoicing from the Violet. When you left, it was quite difficult for us to persuade her not to leave in search of you."

"The Violet" was a high elf who I had been particularly close with while I lived in the Forest Depths, going by the name Viola. But no matter how close we were, she was always calm and collected. I couldn't imagine her leaving the Forest Depths just to look for me. That would be totally unlike her. But even that aside, Salix was being quite talkative. Why was he so concerned about me?

Whatever the reason, my answer was clear from the start. It was a tempting offer, to be honest. I could see myself coming around to accept it someday...but not today.

I didn't agree at all that the outside world was good for no more than temporary excitement, that the ties we wove there would be reduced to nothing but fond memories, though there might have been times I had thought that way myself. Kaeha had left her swordsmanship with me, and every time I swung my sword, there she was. Shizuki and Mizuha had appointed me to be advisor to the Yosogi School, something that would tie me to the school long after their deaths.

"Thank you, Salix. I'm glad that this place is still my home. But there are still things I want to do in the outside world."

There was no hesitation in my answer. I wanted to find a phoenix, take Airenna to the world above the clouds, and visit the lands of the giants. I wanted to meet Win and spar again. I needed to go and see that damned dwarf again before he got too comfortable polishing that throne with his butt. There were plenty of other things I wanted to do, and plenty more I *needed* to do.

A sad shadow passed over Salix's face, but it seemed he understood my resolve. "Of course. You have seen much that I haven't, Child of the Maple. But there is one thing I want you to remember. Just like you said, this is your home.

You are welcome to return at any time. And I will be waiting for you, up until my very last day as a high elf.”



After parting ways with Salix, I headed to the heart of the Forest Depths. On the way, I snacked on an apua I had been given by a Spirit Tree. The texture, the juiciness, and the perfect balance of sweet and sour flavors all made for a nostalgic and reinvigorating experience.

As I walked, a soft breeze blew over me, like it was stroking my hair. Salix had told me where the phoenix was and given me permission to go see it, but had forbidden me from seeing the other high elves. And of course, he had forbidden the other high elves from looking for me as well. Even so, though they couldn't meet me directly, a number of high elves sent words on the wind asking after me. Whether that was actual concern or just plain curiosity, I couldn't be sure.

But at any rate, there were plenty of things here in the Forest Depths I hadn't been able to see back when I lived here. I had never guessed why the high elf elders had treated me the way they did, nor did I realize that my desperate efforts to blend in to high elf society had been seen through as just an act. In the end, having memories of my past life led to me thinking of myself as an adult while no more than a child, so I had decided I knew everything.

My arrogance had narrowed my vision considerably. How had I looked to the high elf elders, to the other older high elves back then? The more I thought about it, the more embarrassed I felt. So yeah, it was something I didn't want to dwell on.

The wind blew around my outstretched hand, as if trying to take hold of me. Ah, I recognized this feeling. This message was from Viola—also known as the Violet—my closest friend during my life in the Forest Depths. A nostalgic scent tugged at my nose.

Though they weren't as clear and strong as hers, I also recognized the messages from a few others. Among them were those of my parents. With the way high elves raised their children as a community, there hadn't been a special bond between us, but it seemed they were concerned for me all the same. That discovery left me smiling in spite of myself.

“I’m doing great. No need to worry about me.”

Something like this still counted as talking to myself, so it wasn’t violating Salix’s demand to avoid contact with the other high elves. Okay, I guess that was a pretty flimsy excuse, but I figured he’d let something like this slide.

Reaching the heart of the Forest Depths would take me a few days on foot, but I’d want for nothing on my journey. The barrier kept monsters out, so whenever I grew tired, I could sleep soundly on a nice solid branch or curl up against some roots. The springs I found from time to time were all bright and clear, so I could drink and bathe without worry. The weather was neither too hot nor too cold, and hunger was but a distant memory amid the forest’s blessings.

I imagined this was exactly how many people would envision paradise. To say I had grown tired of this place and left made me seem thoroughly spoiled. But even so, my heart yearned for the outside. My experience beyond the forest had taught me just how wonderful a place the Forest Depths was, but even so, that longing was unyielding.

And so I reached the heart of the Forest Depths, a place only the high elf elders visited. The trees had woven together a complex barrier of leaves, clearly dividing it from the rest of the forest. From here on, the other high elves wouldn’t be able to reach me. No doubt because I had been given permission by Salix, the intertwined branches moved aside to create an entrance for me as I approached.

That was all the proof I needed. The presence I could feel from beyond that doorway was immense. But of course, there was no stopping now. In my journey across the world, I had encountered all sorts of incredibly powerful beings.

After taking a deep breath and making sure I had a smile on my face, I stepped inside. It was time to meet a phoenix.



The interior was quite a bizarre place. The entire area, even above me, was covered in a layer of thickly intertwined leaves and branches. They completely

blocked all vision from the outside, and yet there was still plenty of light. Besides that, it also felt much warmer here. Maybe “hotter” was a more appropriate description. But all of that was dwarfed by the overwhelming presence of a single, enormous egg in the center. If there were three people my size here, we might just barely be able to join hands and form a circle around it.

I had to say this was a little...okay, it was quite unexpected. Salix had said that he would give me permission to meet the phoenix, but wasn't sure if I would find what I was looking for. I had taken that to mean there was some sort of trial I'd have to pass to actually meet it.

High elves were one of the few immortal races, but physically speaking, we weren't all that special. What set us apart was our indestructible souls. It only made sense that phoenixes were similar physically, reverting from adulthood back into an egg before hatching as a chick and growing to maturity again. That cycle must have been how they maintained their immortality. Okay, I had no idea if that was actually how it worked, but I couldn't think of any other way.

But this was going to be a problem. There was no doubt that this egg belonged to a phoenix, but never mind taking us above the clouds, I couldn't even talk with it in this state. One could say the phoenix was in a state of hibernation.

But something was still bothering me. Salix had said he didn't know whether I would get what I was looking for. That meant that, even knowing the phoenix's current state, he still thought it was possible. Though high elves could be quite clever in the way they talked around things they wanted to avoid, they virtually never lied. As a race, there was no need for them to do so.

In other words, even in this state, there was some way for me to converse with the phoenix. So the trial awaiting me was about discovering that method, and whether I could actualize it. What a roundabout way of doing things. That said, it did make me really feel like I had made it home, to the point I almost burst out laughing.

Now it was time to think. I sat on the ground and took a careful look around.

A bit of calm observation revealed a few things. First of all, it was far warmer

here than in the rest of the Forest Depths. Being used to the heat of a forge, I still found it manageable, but it would actually be rather hard on an ordinary high elf.

The source of the heat didn't seem to be the egg itself. I could feel the heat coming up from the ground I was sitting on. In that case, this heat was probably meant to keep the egg itself warm.

But if that was true, that raised another question. No one could enter this place but the high elf elders and those they gave permission to. Put another way, there was a small group of high elves permitted to enter this place. Therefore, wouldn't that mean there was some *need* for the high elves to enter this place? What would that be? Why would the high elves need to come to a place like this, one that would be so unpleasant for them?

The obvious answer was to meet with the phoenix, or to take care of it. But the phoenix was currently no more than an egg. It didn't seem like there was much to be gained from conversing with it. And how exactly did one take care of an egg?

My mind was drawing a blank. I decided to leave that thought for now and move on to the next one.

Another thing I noticed, though it was difficult to tell with how powerful the presence filling the air was, was that power didn't seem to be emanating from the egg either. While there was no doubt this egg was itself the phoenix, the powerful feeling I got came from the same source as this heat, from the ground below me.

Of course, it wasn't just the presence of the ground itself. It seemed like there was something *in* the ground giving off heat to warm the egg, and that the egg was feeding off of it. That power was similar to mana, and actually pretty close to the energy I had felt in the chamber where the golden dragon slept. Though of course, it wasn't quite that powerful.

Even so, that seemed to imply I had misunderstood something. I had assumed that the Forest Depths and the Great Pulha Woodlands in general had been supported by the power of the phoenix itself, in the same way the Ancient Gold Empire's elven forest and other unique environments had been born from the

presence of the sleeping golden dragon. If the egg here was also just feeding on that power, then where was that power coming from? Where was the Great Pulha Woodlands drawing its strength from?

The answer had to be the ground here. If I wanted to maintain my hypothesis, I'd have to say that the ground itself was the phoenix...but maybe that wasn't so wrong. Though it might have sounded stupid, maybe the answer really was that simple. Most likely, the land here gave birth to the phoenix's egg, and also served as a place for the phoenix's mortal body to return to at the end of its life. The place had been created to be an environment where its egg and its future self could safely grow.

If that was the case, I could start to guess why the high elf elders needed to visit this place. When a high elf reached the end of their life, they discarded their flesh and became spirits. Even so, the high elf's body remained an ageless thing. This might have been no more than my imagination running wild, but perhaps it wasn't that our souls transformed into spirits, but that once our souls had fully matured so as to become one, there was no longer any need for us to cling to our body.

So what was left to be done with the leftover ageless, immortal, and yet lifeless body? When elves died, their bodies were buried beneath trees to feed them and prevent the remains from turning into monsters. In that case, high elf bodies were also likely used to feed something or other.

In short, those high elf bodies were likely buried here along with the phoenixes, their power supporting the egg, the Forest Depths, and Pulha at large. That would explain why only the elders were permitted to come here, as they were the closest to casting off their flesh.

It reminded me of something I'd heard long ago from one of the elders, one who was no longer with us. He had said that no matter where a high elf was laid to rest, if they carried the seed of a Spirit Tree with them, a forest would grow above their grave. Back then I had still been filled with a pride born from the memories of my past life, so I had assumed it was just idle chatter from an old foggy who thought too much of the high elves as a race. But thinking about it again, he might have been telling the truth.



It was quite possible that the few Spirit Trees dotting the world had grown from the bodies of high elves who had traveled to restore life to the world after it had been reduced to ash. In that case, I had things backward. It wasn't that large forests had a Spirit Tree at their center, but that places with the Spirit Tree inevitably grew a large forest around them.

If that was the case, I could understand how Spirit Trees across the world ended up growing different kinds of fruit. But if that was true, what did it mean when a Spirit Tree didn't grow enough to produce fruit? And what about the trees that grew Mystic Peaches and the Fusou Tree? I had assumed they were Spirit Trees as well.

At any rate, while I hadn't seen through all of the mysteries yet, I had a good idea of what I needed to do. And no, it wasn't to follow along with the elders and bury myself here. Standing up and wiping the dirt off the back of my pants, I stepped closer to the egg and placed a hand on it.

Just as I thought, I could feel something pulling at me from the shell. It was a very similar sensation to having mana drawn out of me by Fairy's Silver. But the egg wasn't just drawing out mana. It was taking something larger, of which mana was only a small part. Perhaps you could call it the energy of life itself.

Of course, even if I let the egg drain me until I was a dried-out husk, it wouldn't be nearly enough...but I didn't intend on feeding it myself. Stepping back for a moment, I searched through my bag. If I gathered a large number of apuas, I felt like I could sit here and eat them while feeding the egg. However, I had another idea before I resorted to such a brute-force approach.

Pulling a fragment of a dragon scale out from my bag, I pressed my hand up against the egg again. I then began to rub the scale fragment across my mithril armband. Yes, it was a piece of one of the scales the golden dragon had given me. When the dragon's scales came into contact with mithril, it generated a similar power to the one given off by the dragon itself.

I didn't really understand whether that was a reaction of the dragon scale to the mithril, or if the mithril was just hard enough to shave off pieces of the scale which released its energy into the air. After all, I hadn't the faintest clue as to anything that could match a dragon scale in hardness besides mithril. Any way

to draw this power from the scales was more than enough.

Using my hand as a conduit, a tremendous amount of energy poured out of the scale and into the egg. Though it had been silent before, I could now feel a pulsing coming from within, as if something inside was starting to awaken. And the emotion it came with...was it joy? It was like a baby bird celebrating the return of its mother with food. It was pretty exciting to witness.

However, it didn't seem like the amount of power I could provide was enough to make it hatch quite yet. I guess I'd have to take my time. In the worst-case scenario, I might have to spend a few years feeding the egg.

This seemed to be the best option I had to accelerate the hatching of the egg. At the very least, it was much better than sitting around and doing nothing.



Almost three years had passed since I started feeding energy to the phoenix egg. It was honestly getting quite hard for me. Of course, the challenge came from having nothing to do, day after day. I got bored quite quickly.

I only had to walk around for a little bit to find a tree willing to share its fruit with me, but of course, a life of eating nothing but fruit grew old in no time. I was able to practice my swordsmanship every day, but that was with a wooden sword I carved out of a branch. I couldn't actually draw my real sword here. Doing so would probably be too much of a shock to any high elf who happened to come by and take a look at what I was doing. The exultant response of the egg every time I fed it was cute, but it hardly made for good conversation. I had recently started talking to myself a lot, using the egg as something to bounce ideas off of.

To sum it all up, my desire to leave the Forest Depths was growing stronger by the minute. I didn't think there was anything wrong with a life of leisure, but I wasn't cut out for it.

I couldn't say I remembered exactly when I had transformed into a dwarf...but a life without blacksmithing, booze, and meat was hardly a life at all. I couldn't just sustain my body; I needed those things as sustenance for my heart.

If it was going to take much longer, I probably would have been better off

leaving the Forest Depths and just returning to check on the egg from time to time. Honestly, I was reaching my limit.

But when I finally decided that this day would be my last here, a large crack resounded from the egg. Come on, that's hardly fair. The timing was just too perfect, like it had read my mind and wanted to make me feel bad about trying to leave. Maybe even though it was an egg, it could still understand me and had been quietly listening in to all of my ramblings.

Though feeling a bit annoyed, after three years of effort finally starting to bear fruit, I couldn't just leave the Forest Depths now. Over those three years, I had gone through a number of my dragon scales. But I still had no idea what I wanted to do with them, so using them here didn't particularly bother me. Actually, I was sort of hoping I would end up going through all of them so I didn't have to carry them around anymore, but that would have taken decades.

So I spared no effort in scrubbing this particular piece of dragon scale against my mithril armband. The egg drew heavily from the power flowing through my hand, the small crack quickly widening. I felt I was reaching the end of this, as even the sensation of power flowing out of my hand was starting to feel nice. The sensation had been hot and painful at first, but I had long grown used to it.

Cracks resounded one after another from the egg, and I could feel obvious signs of something inside trying to push its way out. However, as obvious as it was, an egg this large must have had something huge inside it. There was likely no more need for my assistance, and above all I was afraid of getting caught up in the phoenix's efforts to break out of its prison, so I quickly jumped back.

Through the cracks in the egg I could see a brilliant scarlet color, perhaps the color of the phoenix itself or its feathers. Having retreated to a safe distance, I watched as the creature inside freed itself: a large, bright red chick. As big as it was, it had a chunk of eggshell lying on its head like a hat, so it still looked quite adorable. For a moment, the thought of dyed baby chicks rose in the back of my mind, but I didn't let it out of my mouth. I doubted the bird would understand anyway.

The freshly hatched chick looked directly at me, slowly waddling in my direction. Being larger than I was, I had to say it was quite the imposing

creature, but I didn't feel afraid or in danger at all. Rather, I was too busy thinking of how adorable it looked.

Was that because of the traditional relationship between the high elves and the phoenixes, or because I had spent so long pouring energy into its egg? Maybe it was a bit of both. At any rate, when I reached a hand out toward the bird, it in turn stretched its head out, nuzzling up to me.

I had to admit, the sensation was quite a shock. Though it had just hatched, it was already this fluffy. The thought of wrapping myself up in it and falling asleep...no, with how warm the bird was, I definitely wouldn't be able to sleep.

"Good morning, phoenix."

The chick tweeted back at my greeting. However, I could sense its thoughts quite clearly through my hand.

*Please call me Heero. I have long been called that, due to my color. I am not the only phoenix in this world, so as the one who hatched me, if you wish to refer to me specifically, I would like you to call me that.*

It seemed to like me quite a bit, but I had to wonder if beyond the connection between high elves and phoenixes, it had imprinted on me somewhat.

Well, I supposed after being an egg it would be a chick. That was beyond obvious, but even if it might have been large enough to manage, I couldn't imagine riding the back of a chick like this and asking it to fly. Rather, I figured if I asked now, it would make him sad that he couldn't grant my wish, so I avoided bringing it up.

"You're really quite soft to the touch, aren't you, Heero? Are you going to stay this fluffy when you grow up?" So I brought up something entirely different, surrendering my body to his fluffiness, making a lighthearted joke to try and hide my disappointment.

*I will change as I grow older, but I can guarantee you my adult form will feel just as pleasant to the touch as I am now. Please wait for a little while. When I am larger, I will definitely grant your desire.*

It seemed Heero saw right through me, as those thoughts came back.

Ah, now that I thought about it, I had asked the egg to take me above the clouds, hadn't I? I guess he really had been listening to me that whole time.

"Thank you. I'm looking forward to it," I replied, fully enjoying his warmth.

I had to wonder what "a little while" meant to a phoenix. Would it be ten or twenty years? More than a hundred? I suspected it would be quite a long "little while," but I could wait. Heero knew how long high elves lived for, and he had worded it that way for me. Even a normal elf like Airena still had multiple centuries ahead of her. We had plenty of time to wait.

After spending a bit more time with Heero, I'd talk with Salix about seeing him taken care of and leave the Forest Depths. Until he grew large enough to carry us on his back to the world above the clouds, I'd go enjoy what the outside world had to offer.

I would likely come back every now and then to check on him...and I imagined I would be much less hesitant to do so than I had been this time.

After all, this place was, without a doubt, my home.

## Chapter 3 — Travel, and the Usual Whimsy

After saying goodbye to the baby phoenix and my old home in the Forest Depths, I found myself walking through Pulha again. However, I was not heading east toward Vistcourt at the edge of the forest. After much thought, I had instead decided to point myself southeast.

If I headed back to Ludoria, I was sure I'd naturally be drawn back to the capital, and it would probably be a few years before I could pry myself away from it. The Yosogi dojo was just too comfortable for me. Each visit ran the risk of my putting down more permanent roots there.

Not that that was an especially bad thing. I had people there who called me family, so I knew I could enjoy a quiet, peaceful life. But though I had spent only three short years in the Forest Depths, the experience had left me craving something new. I wasn't interested in settling down, but in seeing and doing something fresh.

One option had been to head in the opposite direction, exiting Pulha to the west. As I mentioned before, the land on the western side of the Great Pulha Woodlands wasn't technically the western region of the continent. Pulha was positioned more or less in the center of the continent, so the land on both sides of it was still part of the central region. Though they were part of the same region, the eastern and western sides of Pulha were thoroughly disconnected by the forest, making travel between them require a detour north around the harsh mountainous region or south to travel by sea.

The western side of the forest was a chaotic place, a mixture and clashing of the cultures of the far west and the east-central region I was familiar with. For example, the Western religion that taught humans were the superior race, and the east-central religion that worshipped the harvest god and taught that all races were equal fought viciously to claim as many adherents as possible. Some countries adopted the Western faith as their state religion and suppressed all others, while even their neighbors might worship the harvest god, meaning the

beliefs of the people could change drastically over even a short distance. Add to that the balance of power between nations and their individual intentions, and the landscape of the west-central region quickly became a complicated mess.

There was no doubt in my mind that if I headed there, I would experience something new. However, that wasn't quite what I was looking for. While I did want a fresh experience, I wasn't interested in seeing people at war.

Naturally, people fought each other here in the east-central region as well. Just seven or eight years ago, the region had been engulfed in a huge war started by Zieden. The scars of that conflict could still be seen in the growth of brigand and monster populations. But the impetus driving the war in the east-central region had been put down, and progress was being made to clear out the monsters and bandits, so the region was settling into peace. If I wanted to learn something new, the east-central region would provide a calmer atmosphere for me to do so.

Yes, my goal was to learn a new skill. Specifically, I was hoping to learn how to sculpt with stone.

By heading southeast, I would emerge from Pulha into Giatica. Once the poor country of Paulogia, it was now a vassal state of Vilestorika. Continuing southeast would take me to Vilestorika, from which the road east would take me through the shrunken Duchy of Kirkoim to the nation of Radlania. Through Radlania, the heart of the harvest god religion, I would reach Dolbogarde which I had once visited before. And even farther east lay Siglair.

Siglair sat on the edge of the Man-Eating Swamp, boasted a strong military, and was famed for its high-quality marble. My goal was to reach Siglair and find a skilled sculptor to apprentice under. The art of carving sculptures was something I could almost certainly learn in the capital of Ludoria, or even in Vistcourt. But with Siglair being so famed for its marble, there should have been a large number of highly skilled sculptors there. If I was going to learn, I would prefer to learn from someone who was really great, someone really stubborn and fun to work with.

So I was heading to Siglair. It was reasonably distant, but still in the east-central region. After my journey to the Far Eastern end of the continent, it felt



like little more than giving my legs a good stretch. I also had the option to take a ship from Vilestorika to Dolbogarde, which would greatly speed up the journey.

Of course, considering the expected length of my journey and the time it would take to learn this new skill, I would never see Shizuki or Mizuha again. Well, honestly, there was a good chance they were already gone. But we had said our final goodbyes. I would no doubt find myself at the Yosogi dojo again someday, but as of right now, I had no lingering regrets.

After a few weeks or perhaps a month of walking, I emerged from the Great Pulha Woodlands into the nation of Giatica. It had been three years since I tasted the air outside the forest, but for some reason it felt like much longer. How much had the place changed since my last visit? It must have been more than just the name.



I had only been passing through Paulogia when I had last visited, so I didn't get a strong impression of the place other than that it seemed to be a poor country. The land was infertile and the water was filthy, so while it was possible to live there, you couldn't really eat or drink your fill. It would be a life that left you very little room to breathe. If I remembered correctly, the region was best known for ceramics and porcelain made from clay dredged out of the river beds. Few people traveled through the country, and few goods were shipped along its roads, leaving said roads in a state of wild disrepair. Though since I hadn't been following the roads as I traveled, that didn't mean much to me.

However, the first and biggest surprise upon entering Giatica was the volume of traffic traveling down its roads. Of course, this meant that the roads were now being properly maintained as well. It appeared that their affiliation with Vilestorika had reversed their fortunes somewhat. It was also possible that Zieden's movements had been another gust of wind in their sails.

With Kirkoim under attack by Zieden, Ludoria's only way to trade with other nations was to go through Giatica. Becoming a trade corridor between two economic powerhouses in Ludoria and Vilestorika, a certain degree of wealth had fallen on Giatica as well. It was no wonder they had started to prosper. It really went to show just how much Paulogia had been leaving on the table by

constantly fighting with Vilestorika.

However, now that Zieden had relented in its expansion, Ludoria's trade routes outside of Giatica had opened up once again. The shift to Ludoria engaging in more trade with the Azueda Alliance by way of Zieden would gradually start to impact Giatica as well.

Things had completely changed since their time as allies. While developing trade between Ludoria and Giatica couldn't have been an easy task, maintaining it now would be much more difficult. There was value in developing a trade relationship, but it was harder to measure the benefits of maintaining it now. Beyond that, when comparing the current state of affairs to the previous boom of new development, they would start to feel dissatisfied.

Assuaging that growing discontent while continuing the development of their nation wasn't going to be simple, and it was made all the more difficult by Giatica being geographically located between its suzerain state of Vilestorika and the equally large kingdom of Ludoria. The whims of their neighbors would pull Giatica in many directions. These times would no doubt put Giatica's leadership to the test.

But even so...

"Hey, come on, he's an elf! Do you really think we can take him?"

"Idiot, he's out traveling alone. There's gotta be some reason he's been separated from the rest. Now's our chance."

"It's a shame he's a man, but he should still go for a good price out west."

"All right, buddy. No funny moves. Hand over your weapon, and don't even think of using your weird elf powers either. We wouldn't want to have to poke you full of holes, now would we?"

*Now what do I do?*

I found myself sighing inwardly as, around sundown, a group of men leaped out of a covered wagon as it passed me by and surrounded me, spears at the ready. As the trade routes grew more prosperous, the number of bandits would naturally grow alongside them. However, surviving to keep on with their

banditry was not especially easy.

Judging by their attire, they likely traveled around under the guise of being mercenaries, only revealing their true colors when they encountered either individuals or small, undefended groups they could prey on. But if they were smart enough to come up with a scheme like that, surely they should be smart enough to find proper work. Ah, there was also the possibility they actually were mercenaries, and that the end of the war between Zieden and Vilestorika had left them unemployed, leading them to a life of banditry. If that was so, I supposed they'd be relatively skilled with their weapons. It seemed like they saw me as too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Maybe the thought of how they'd use all the money I'd fetch for them was filling their heads, as their guard was quite lax. Though really, I wasn't one to talk. Normally I'd recognize such a suspicious carriage long before it ever got close to me, but my excitement at finally being outside the forest seemed to have dulled my sense of danger. I was too busy thinking of the bread, soup, meat, and fish I'd get to eat when I made it to a human settlement to worry about the dangers around me. Of course, compared to the Great Pulha Woodlands, the outside world was many times safer, so that likely played a part as well.

Honestly speaking, it put me in a bad mood. I was this close to a hot, elaborate meal being made for me, and these guys were in my way. If I asked the spirits for help, they could clean them up in a blink of an eye, but I wasn't confident I'd be able to exercise much restraint in my current state of mind. As my friends, the spirits were quite sensitive to my emotions, and especially after my recent meeting with the phoenix, I felt closer to them than ever. I wasn't sure I could use the spirits without killing the men surrounding me.

So instead, I walked right toward the spears pointed at me. The mercenaries froze for a moment, shocked to see me move in a way that would clearly end in me getting impaled.

The rest was easy. I reached forward and grabbed the shaft of a spear, twisting and pushing it toward its owner before yanking back hard. The bandit stumbled, allowing me to easily tear the spear from his grip and kick him away before brandishing my new weapon to knock away the others beside him.

“What the— You... Guh!” As another started to shout in surprise and anger, I planted the butt of my spear in his throat, cutting off his cry and dropping him to the ground.

What a slow reaction. If he had time to talk, he should have used it to run or fight back.

I didn’t focus much on using spears, but during my time in the Far East, the mystic Wanggui Xuannu had taught me how to fight with polearms. Though I wasn’t nearly as skilled with a spear as I was with a sword, I was more than capable of dealing with some dropout mercenaries turned bandits.

It would be an exaggeration to say I ended it in the blink of an eye, but I dispatched the entire group in short order nonetheless. I gave a heavy sigh, realizing the annoying part was just about to begin.

I couldn’t just leave them sprawled out on the road like this. I’d have to bring them to the closest city to be apprehended. No doubt the guards there would demand an explanation of me, and worst of all, I’d need to find a way to carry all of these men with me to get there in the first place.

I could save myself a lot of trouble by killing them instead, but I wasn’t a fan of taking lives if I couldn’t eat them or harvest some other usual material from them. And they were clearly not strong enough for me to recognize them as enemies. Luckily for me, they had come with a wagon, so I could load them up on that to carry them to town. I got motion sick riding in carriages and such, but it wasn’t quite as bad if I was the one driving.

If there had been no wagon handy, I likely would have had to bury them in the ground up to their necks and leave them here. I wasn’t quite sure which of us were the lucky ones in this situation.



In the end, after arriving in a small inn town outside the city and handing over the bandits to the guards, it was well into the night before I could find an inn for myself. As an apology for the extended interrogation I suffered after turning in the bandits, the city offered to pay for my room. On top of the reward for wrangling the bandits, it ended up being a considerable show of gratitude on their part.

Being so late at night, the innkeeper could only offer me an apology alongside some leftover rye bread, vegetable soup, and a single strip of bacon. Well, it wasn't the inn's fault it had taken me so long to get here. And after hearing an explanation from the guards, they were letting me stay anyway, so I was nothing if not thankful for their hospitality.

I brought a spoonful of soup to my mouth. The vegetables had been well boiled into it; the flavor they added to the soup had the perfect amount of salt, making it quite good even reheated.

Above all, it paired perfectly with the sour, hard rye bread. Softening the bread in the soup, I then slowly chewed it, thoroughly enjoying the softly expanding flavor.

Of course, the bacon was also quite good. The saltiness made me long for some alcohol, but that was a bit too much luxury to ask for.

After all my time in Pulha, this small meal of hard bread, soup, and bacon was a feast. After cleaning up the rest of the food and taking a soak in a tub of warm water, I headed up to the room they had set aside for me. Despite my slender appearance, I had quite the appetite, so the amount of food provided for me barely constituted a small meal. But for my first time in a human settlement after so long, it was a much better experience than something more luxurious would have been. Something fancier would have been too much of a shock to my tongue and to my heart.

Ah, now that I thought about it, I had previously visited Vilestorika in search of seafood, hadn't I? Thinking back on it, my past self really did come across as a glutton, traveling so far for something new to eat. But it had been a lot of fun.

Would I be able to enjoy this journey just as much? Just as Giatica had undergone such huge changes, I imagined Vilestorika wasn't what it once was either. But the same went for me. Since then, I had traveled on many large ships and caught huge fish of my own to eat.

There was no way to recreate the joyful experience of eating seafood for the first time in this life. That much was obvious. But even so, my expectations were high.

I had a feeling that Vilestorika would have something fresh to show the new

me.

Sleeping in a bed for the first time in a while had me sleep in longer than intended, but I wasn't planning on staying in this town much longer. After a rather late breakfast, I gave my thanks to the innkeeper and headed back to the road, cutting a straight line south to Vilestorika and the ocean.

Even on foot, it only took a week to cross Giatica and make it into Vilestorika. There was no line drawn on the ground denoting the border between nations, so with the way I often traveled through fields and forests, I occasionally found myself in a new country without realizing it. The borders themselves were also rather vague in many cases. Villages along the border had a tendency to switch affiliations, and sometimes residents of both countries considered those villages to be foreign.

As cultures grew more advanced, not even necessarily to the point of those in my previous life, borders became more distinct, and moving from country to country became much more work. But this world hadn't developed to that point yet. Or if it had, those civilizations had been lost to the flames of the true dragons.

Back when I had left the phoenix in Salix's care, he mentioned something.

"To think I would actually see a phoenix with my own eyes while still a high elf! Acer, this is incredible! The phoenixes are the ones who carry us above the clouds to safety when the dragons burn the world." He had seemed quite surprised.

According to him, once the dragons were done with their work, the phoenixes returned the high elves to the ground, laid eggs, and then turned to ash. From those ashes were born the trees and animals that the high elves cultivated, to form an enormous forest. That meant that, though I didn't know how many thousands or tens of thousands of years ago it had happened, there had once been a point where the phoenix had needed to return to being an egg.

If that was true, the dragons had likely burned down the world at least once. The fact that the phoenix had been reborn meant there was a good chance the world was preparing for that event to happen once again. I couldn't help but

think of such scary things, though maybe it was all just me thinking too much.

If by some chance the world was heading in this direction because of my actions, I would do everything in my power to stop it. Even if I had become a spirit by then.

Getting back on topic, as relations between nations devolved, they began building fortresses and stationing troops along their borders, making the distinction clearer. Alternatively, those traveling the roads might find inspection stations at the border, where they turned aside unwanted visitors or contraband goods, or imposed taxes on those moving between nations.

As a vassal state of Vilestorika, Giatica's relationship with its southern neighbor was quite good. Though there were some inspection stations, it only took a bit of simple paperwork to get through them. After traveling for a short while, the unmistakable scent of salt came to me on the wind as I crossed the border and stepped into the republic.

Though it was so faint that I could only barely detect it when I focused my senses, I could make out the wind blowing in from the sea. The port town of Saurotay was not far off.



It had been about seventy years since my last visit to Saurotay. Most of the cities I visited after being away for a long time had changed a little, but remained mostly the same. Wolfir, Vistcourt, Janpemon, and even Odine still had a familiar cityscape when I finally returned to them.

But upon my arrival in Saurotay, I was greeted by an entirely new city. First of all, it was huge compared to my previous visit, at least double in size.

The docks that had been a source of conflict between traders and fishermen had been completely converted into a trade port. The port had expanded greatly, the harbor's floor had been dug much deeper, and numerous trading ships were tied up as cargo was moved on and off. The fishermen had been desperate to preserve their rights to the docks back then, but there was no sight of them now.

I supposed that was to be expected. If the city of Saurotay had decided to expand its trade, it wouldn't put up with fishermen using prime dock space for long.

But that wasn't to say that the fishermen had been driven out of the city. If anything in Saurotay remained unchanged, it was that the seafood market was still flourishing. Apparently a new, significantly improved fishing pier had been built some distance from the original port, and now the city had expanded to surround it.

In other words, the city had grown so much because of its choice to embrace both the traders and the fishermen. They had decided that neither group could be cut off and instead worked to accommodate them both. No doubt that development had been spearheaded by the Pasteli family championing the fishermen, and the Toritrine family organizing the merchants.

While the Saurotay of today was almost totally unrecognizable to me, that also meant there were still some faint traces of the old city remaining. One of those last lingering vestiges of the old city, and my strongest memory of this place, stood before me now. Judging by the structure being slightly different from the one I remembered, it had probably been rebuilt at least once since my last visit, but the smells and sounds coming out of it—the scent of fresh seafood being cooked, and the energetic shouts of sailors and fishermen deep into their drinks—was the same as always.

The salt-rusted hinges of the swinging doors squeaked noisily as I pushed my way through into the bar. For some reason I couldn't quite put my finger on, the sound made me want to laugh.

"Welcome! Have a seat anywhere you like. Wait...an elf?" A middle-aged woman greeted me as I stepped inside, but then stopped to stare at me with a puzzled expression. It seemed she was the new waitress here, though she was a bit old to also serve the same role of showgirl that Caleina had.

I gave her a nod and found an empty seat. Though the people and even the furniture had changed completely, there were still traces of the old bar left behind. For example, the atmosphere, the smell of cooking...and that old painting.



Placed high on the wall and kept in a decorative frame was a picture which, honestly speaking, wasn't all that good. My eye for art was pretty poor, but I could still tell the picture wasn't that well done because the people it depicted were ones that I knew. Well, perhaps that was underselling it. After all, I suspected one of the people in that picture was me. I was standing alongside Dreeze, Caleina, and Grand.

Had Grand painted it himself? Caleina seemed pretty dexterous, so I imagined if she had drawn it, it would have turned out better. But I couldn't even begin to imagine the sight of Dreeze holding a paintbrush.

"Please get me four of your recommended dishes and something to drink. Oh, if you serve tenleg or eightleg, I'd like some of that."

After hearing my order, the waitress looked between me and the painting, but in the end nodded silently and returned to the kitchen. It seemed the painting was bad enough that she didn't recognize me in it.

That didn't bother me though. It had been so long since I'd last come to Saurotay, after all. And though it was far too late, I just remembered I had failed to keep my promise to return to Saurotay so Caleina could show me around the city. But I had been able to see such a nostalgic sight as this, so I was fully satisfied.

As expected, the food that came out tasted a bit different than I remembered, but it was still fantastic and had a bit of a nostalgic flavor. I could clearly tell this was something made by improving upon Grand's cooking.

After having my fill of food and drink, I left the bar behind. The whole time, the waitress looked like she was on the verge of asking me something, but I didn't press her on it.

I left the city behind and I headed east. I considered taking a ship from Saurotay, but in the end decided walking was best. There was little that wouldn't change, but I wanted to see as much as I could.

By the way, I heard an interesting story while I was in Saurotay. Vilestorika was the only nation in the east-central region that engaged in trade with other continents. Due to having a good relationship with the merfolk living around an

island to the south, they were able to enlist their aid in trading with the continent to the far south. But right now, a powerful nation was in the process of toppling its rivals in that far southern land. This new power was refusing to trade with Vilestorika.

They could still engage in trade with the other nations on the southern continent for the time being, but if this newly rising nation's conquest continued, it would no doubt have a significant impact on Vilestorika's trade. Though they still traded with the western and eastern regions of our own continent, Vilestorika's greatest strength was its economic relationship with those overseas. That was what gave the republic the strength it needed to stand toe-to-toe with nations like Ludoria and Zieden despite being geographically so much smaller.

I had to wonder how they would compensate for that loss if that were to happen. I could only hope these southern winds weren't carrying a storm with them.



Heading east from Vilestorika, I entered the Duchy of Kirkoim. The northern half of Kirkoim was still under occupation by Zieden, and the southern half submitted to Vilestorika's rule to preserve what was left, making them the greatest victim of the previous conflict. Though Zieden had put a stop to its aggression, that was due to the threat of the elves—or more specifically, me. They hadn't lost the war on the battlefield by any stretch.

Though forced to accept concessions such as changing leadership and paying reparations to Ludoria, Vilestorika, and the Azueda Alliance to prevent retaliatory action, Zieden still had a firm grip on its newly conquered territory. The bloodshed to conquer the northern half of Kirkoim had already changed that land.

Of course, Kirkoim would still be outraged by these results and would never accept them, but that was the fate of those who lost in war. Even if Kirkoim were to somehow reclaim its lost territory, they didn't have the strength to restore the now desolate landscape and protect it. If they couldn't reclaim their lost territory without the help of Vilestorika, there wasn't much point in doing it

at all.

So the larger nations had decided, prioritizing ending the conflict and leading them to accept reparations over a return of lost territory. There was nothing Kirkoim could do about it.

While blame for the aggression certainly could be placed at Zieden's feet, it was also true that Kirkoim had failed to protect their territory. They were equally responsible for lacking the strength to retake and restore it. The frustration of this outcome would no doubt light a spark in the hearts of Kirkoim's people, but there was no telling whether that spark would grow into a blazing fire or sputter out.

From this story, one might assume that the people of Kirkoim lived in the midst of tragedy, but that wasn't actually the case. It was true that the war had turned the northern half of Kirkoim into somewhat of a wasteland, but the southern half had been quick to entreat Vilestorika for help, which swiftly and effectively stopped Zieden's advance before it reached the southern part of the Duchy. In addition, the war had cut off all other routes from Ludoria to the Azueda Alliance, forcing all trade to go through Giatica, Vilestorika, and then Kirkoim. From a trade perspective, Kirkoim had actually grown.

In fact, now that they were a vassal state of Vilestorika, the republic had spared no expense to support them. From my perspective as I walked the highways, there seemed to be much more activity on the roads and in the inn towns.

Security was still a bit of a concern, though. The destruction of the northern half of the country had led to a growth in monster populations which now threatened the south. With the war ending, mercenaries and deserters had banded together to form bandit groups, similar to the one I encountered in Giatica. I had seen more than one group of mounted soldiers patrolling the roadways in order to keep them away.

But that wouldn't last forever. Zieden's military had withdrawn to its own borders, where they were focused on culling monsters. As long as a new war didn't break out, the situation would continue to gradually reach a state of calm.

According to a letter I had received from Airena, the reason Zieden's old leadership had pushed so hard for war was due to the fall of Paulogia and the creation of Giatica. In the past, Paulogia had been in conflict with Vilestorika, receiving support in the form of food from Ludoria. Basically, there had been a tension maintained between Ludoria and Vilestorika. But once Paulogia fell and Giatica was born as a vassal state to Vilestorika, the situation changed drastically.

The reason for the conflict between Ludoria and Vilestorika had vanished along with Paulogia. The old leaders of Zieden, or more accurately the old leaders of Zaints and Jidael, had feared that those large nations could turn their sights on them at any moment. That had led to Zaints and Jidael rushing a merger and urging Darottei to join them in waging war.

As the road to resisting the surrounding larger nations had been laid out in front of them, the old leadership of Zieden rushed headlong down it, knowing full well how much blood would be spilled as a result. From my perspective, it sounded like exceptionally foolish reasoning. But in the end, it was all a result of them trying to do what was best for their country. I couldn't condone what they had done, and I had actively worked to stop them, but I had to acknowledge the feelings that had led to it.

My route through Kirkoim turned slightly north. The road directly east would take me to Radlania, the heart of the harvest god religion, but I wished to take a slight detour. Since I was already this close, I wanted to drop in to visit the Duchy of Travoya, the city of Janpemon. I had caused a bit of trouble in Odine on my last visit there, but the Alliance was made up of a collection of small, independent nations. Maybe things were different around Odine, but I couldn't imagine they would be on the lookout for me all the way down in Janpemon.

On my last visit, Nonna's great-granddaughter Aina had only been eight years old. She must have grown up considerably since then. That thought kept my steps light and energetic as I walked down the road.

Moment by moment, human children became adults, grew old, and passed away. Countries were the same, changing little by little as their people did.

Salix had said that the bonds I forged outside the Forest Depths were meaningless. He had said their lives were too short to offer anything but sentimental feelings. I could both agree and disagree with that. But even so, I had decided to live my life with these people, to forge those bonds anyway.

Despite the cruel passage of time, as faint as it was, I felt as though something more substantial would be left in my hands. No...whatever that was, I knew I had already collected a fair number of them.



The Duchy of Travoya, a member of the Azueda Alliance, where the city of Janpemon resided. How many times had I visited this city?

I had never stayed here all that long. My longest stay must have been about a year and a half, but as my wanderings continued, my feet always seemed to draw me back to this city. I guess that showed just how much of an impact it had made on me.

The harvest season was quite some time away yet. I wouldn't be able to see the stone ship in the golden sea, but seeing the fields still green was meaningful in and of itself. Just as with my last visit, there was a large fortress sitting in the distance, but perhaps now that the war had settled down, it didn't feel quite as imposing. Or perhaps, with the wear of time showing on its walls, it was starting to feel more and more like a natural part of the scenery.

Upon entering the city, I headed straight for the inn. I wasn't sure what to do about the blacksmithing guild. I hadn't been in a forge for quite some time now, so I was getting a strong urge to take up my hammer again, but I would be able to borrow a forge during my stay in Siglair anyway. Being on the edge of the Man-Eating Swamp, Siglair had a powerful military presence. There was no doubt they'd have a high demand for smiths.

And if I wasn't planning on doing any blacksmithing here, I likely wouldn't be in Janpemon for long. If I was to see how big Aina had grown, deliver some flowers to Nonna's grave, and then enjoy some good food at the inn, I didn't think I'd be here more than three or four days. I was only here as a bit of a diversion from my main travels, so that felt about right.

When I opened the door to the inn, the smell of a hearty stew wafted over

me. My mouth was already starting to water as I stepped inside. Back on my first visit to Janpemon all those years ago, the reason I had picked this inn was the irresistible aroma of dinner coming from inside. The inn hadn't been anywhere near as impressive back then, so the smell hadn't been contained indoors.

"Welcome... Oh, Mr. Acer? My! It *is* you! It's been quite a while, Mr. Acer!" I was greeted by the voice of Sheyne, Nonna's granddaughter and Aina's mother. Muttering my name quietly in shock as she saw me, she repeated it again with an excited smile. The joy with which she welcomed me left me feeling a little embarrassed.

"Yeah, it has. I'd like a room for three days to start, and something to eat. The smell of your cooking makes me feel hungrier by the minute."

Sheyne responded with a cheerful nod and immediately took me up to a room on the second floor. It was the same room as the one I had stayed in last time. Was that a coincidence, or had she remembered? Either way, being back in a familiar room made me a little happy.

"I am quite surprised you're visiting again. That girl is going to be so happy to see you. It was ages before she stopped talking about you after your last visit."

That couldn't be anyone but Aina. Hearing her mentioned so casually was a bit of a relief. I mean, I hadn't seen her around anywhere, so needless worries had started creeping into the back of my mind. Even without considering their short life spans, humans could still fall at any time to sickness. In particular, children could be taken shockingly quickly. On top of that, Janpemon was relatively close to the front lines between Vilestorika and Zieden.

"Really? I didn't see her on my way in, so I was wondering where she went. She must be so big now."

Sheyne nodded along. For a high elf like me, human children grew up frighteningly quickly, but as Aina's mother, it seemed Sheyne felt the same way.

"Today she's off at the training hall practicing her swordsmanship again. Actually, now that I think about it, she said it was your influence that led her to start practicing in the first place, didn't she?"

Once I had the key to my room and put down my belongings, the next step was to fill the aching void in my belly. The idle conversation as we walked down the stairs back to the dining hall gave me a surprising sense of peace.

But she was practicing with a sword, was she? Now that I thought about it, I supposed I had ended up carving a wooden practice sword for her and teaching her the basics on my last visit. I never expected her to take up swordsmanship in earnest, so I was quite pleasantly surprised to hear that.

Back when the inn had been smaller, even the innkeeper's children were crucial employees for the family business, so they wouldn't have had time to do anything like learning swordsmanship. But now that it had grown so much, the inn could employ many more people. As they grew more prosperous, they gained more time to spend studying other things.

If one asked whether the daughter of an innkeeper had any need for swordsmanship, the answer was most likely no. But apparently the fact her interest in swordsmanship had grown from my influence on her had led to Sheyne looking favorably on her daughter's pursuits.

I couldn't help but start to wonder just how skilled she had become, but that question could wait until I actually met her. Of course, it was unreasonable to think she would visit the training hall every day, so I doubted she'd be on the same level as someone like Aiha, who had grown up in the Yosogi dojo.

Now that I thought about it, the two actually had surprisingly similar names. And after a bit of counting, it seemed like they were both probably seventeen. I had to wonder if the two would become friends if they ever had a chance to meet.

These idle thoughts occupied my mind as I dug into a meal of soft bread, stew, and venison steak. Just as I finished up the food in front of me, I heard Aina come in through the back door of the kitchen.



Though the inn was much more impressive now than it had been on my first visit, there was one thing that hadn't changed since the time of Nonna and her parents: the incredible food. As I wiped up the last bits of stew and sauce left after my steak with a piece of bread, I heard a voice come in from the back

room.

“Wait, Mr. Acer is here? *That* Acer?! Are you serious?!”

She wasn't speaking especially loudly, but it wasn't the kind of lively voice you'd expect to hear in the high-class establishment the inn had become. With my sharper-than-average ears, I could hear her quite clearly. The inn was built quite well, so I imagined it took that special kind of hearing to catch what she said. From the energy in her voice, it sounded like Aina had grown up into a bit of a tomboy. The fact the inn had maintained its calm, relaxed atmosphere was a bit of a relief.

“What should I do? Bireck said he was coming over for dinner tonight... Hey, why are you laughing?!” It seemed she was talking to Sheyne, but I couldn't hear her mother's voice at all. Either way, it was good to see they were still on good terms.

“Yeah, I'll say hi...but I don't smell, do I? Are you sure? No, I'm going to go get changed first.”

Pretending I hadn't heard anything, I decided to spend a few more minutes enjoying the dining hall. I brought my wooden mug to my lips, taking a drink of wine that must have been from Ardeno. A balance of sour and sweet followed by a pleasant bitterness filled my mouth as the aroma of grapes wafted up to my nose. I relaxed, thoroughly enjoying the depth of the wine's flavor. While I waited, Sheyne brought out a plate of cheese for me, which made the wine even better.

Though Ardeno was already famous for its fruit, they were also well-known for turning that fruit into alcohol. With the Duchy of Travoya being so focused on the cultivation of grains, they of course produced their own drink from it in the form of a wheat beer, but they made very little of it for how much wheat they actually harvested. The grains grown around Janpemon were mostly wheat used for food production or exported to meet the voracious demands of their trade partners. The wealth generated from their wheat exports allowed them to import things like this fruit wine from their neighbors, and in no small amount either.

The Azueda Alliance as a whole was quite large, but Travoya was anything



but. It would be a struggle for the small Duchy to achieve any sort of self-sufficiency. They were well aware that gathering wealth through exports without buying anything back in turn would earn them nothing but enmity from their neighbors. The export of food from Travoya wasn't just a means to make money, but also a diplomatic tool to stabilize its political position.

As I pondered these somewhat complicated issues while enjoying my wine, I couldn't help but feel like I had grown a bit smarter. Of course there was no way sitting here drinking wine actually made me any smarter, but the feeling made the experience more enjoyable regardless.

A young man stepped into the dining room, rubbing his stomach. From his outfit, he seemed to be a city guard. He seemed quite familiar with the place, as he wasted no time in finding a seat. Ah, I supposed he was just here for dinner, not to stay the night.

Coming out to greet the new arrival, Sheyne's eyes narrowed slightly as she saw him. "Welcome, Bireck. What'll it be today? Ah, if you're looking for her, she's just getting changed, so she should be out in a bit." It sounded like the two were quite familiar with each other.

Ah, I see. I see, I see, I see.

I had heard this name just a few moments ago, hadn't I? Judging by Sheyne's reaction to him, did that make this man Aina's boyfriend? Now that was interesting.

Taking another sip of wine, I covertly looked the man over. I imagined Sheyne could plainly see the amused look that must have played over my face, but I didn't mind. He was a bit taller than average, with a fearless, strong-willed look to him. Judging by the way Sheyne spoke with him, he must have been fairly personable.

Above all, him being a city guard was a huge mark in his favor. I had a soft spot for that profession, personally. Of course there were always exceptions, like those who encouraged bribery, but I had nothing but respect for people who took up arms to defend the people of their city, keeping vigilant watch both inside and outside their walls. In particular, I felt that gate guards served

as the face of their city.

I was impressed. It seemed Aina had found quite a good guy. And this wine was excellent too.

Bireck noticed me sitting across the room, but as much as he was clearly surprised to see an unfamiliar elf, there was no reason for him to pry into the background of a guest at the inn.

Finally, the doors to the back room swung open. “Mr. Acer, it’s been so long! Do you remember me? I’m Aina!”

Having finished changing, a cheery girl—though at this age it was more appropriate to call her a woman—came all but running up to my side, bowing her head deeply. Yeah, she had really grown up. The sight somehow inspired both happy and sad feelings in me.



“Yeah, long time no see. You were so much smaller last time we met.”

After all, that eight-year-old girl was now seventeen. She had practically doubled in size.

However, as pleasant a reunion as it was, I imagined her boyfriend wasn’t all too happy to have his girlfriend approach another guy right in front of him. Glancing over to Sheyne, she caught my hint and nodded.

“This looks like a good chance to introduce you two. Bireck, this is Mr. Acer. He was a great help to my grandmother, and has come back to visit for the first time in years.”

And that was how the two of us were introduced.



The next day, Aina and Bireck took me to see their training hall. According to our conversation the day before, this was where the two had met. Aina had started attending two years after our first meeting, when she was ten years old.

For those two years, she had practiced on her own using the child-sized wooden sword I had carved for her. Her parents had thought that if left to her own devices, she’d eventually get bored of swinging a sword around by herself, but she continued practicing every day on the inn’s roof. All by herself, a little bit every day. Even when circumstances prevented her from practicing, she would be back up there the very next day.

They didn’t know what had made her so dedicated to swordsmanship, but after seeing her single-minded determination—or perhaps her stubbornness—they decided to have her learn swordsmanship properly. They had been warned by adventurers staying at the inn that if she was left to practice by herself, she would have no one to compare herself to, and might end up developing a false sense of confidence in her abilities.

I knew a number of swordswomen, but in general women who took up arms were somewhat uncommon in this world. That made Aina stand out quite a bit in Janpemon’s training hall. That, together with her earnest dedication, earned her no small amount of affection from the others, particularly the older members. And once she grew, that attention started coming from the younger

members, with much more romantic intentions. Among all of them, the one who caught Aina's eye was Bireck, passionate and skilled in swordsmanship but not conceited in his superiority, serious but kind. It was hard not to smile as she recounted the tale.

As for why she had taken up the sword in the first place, she said it was because she couldn't get the image of a certain elf practicing with his sword out of her mind. If that elf were ever to reappear, Bireck had hoped to determine just how skilled he was for himself. Did that come from his heart as a swordsman, or just a kind of youthful jealousy? At any rate, he had challenged me to a sparring match, so we were heading to the training hall. I was honestly quite excited.

I was happy to hear that Aina had remembered my daily training and kept at it herself for so long. I had never expected her to take swordsmanship so seriously. Bireck's attitude toward me was very direct and honest, something I appreciated as well. Of course, it went without saying that the swordsmanship Aina learned had no connection to the Yosogi School. But she didn't have any complaints with it, so it seemed she had found a style that suited her well, or perhaps one that suited her life here in Janpemon. And that was wonderful.

We arrived at the training hall: an open dirt clearing, with a shed for holding training weapons and tools to maintain the yard. Coming from the Yosogi dojo, it was quite a different sight. On top of that, while I was told this was a training ground for swordsmen, about half of the people training here were actually using spears.

Apparently they taught a considerable breadth of martial skills here beyond swordsmanship. I imagined the funds used to maintain the training ground were provided by Janpemon, which in effect meant they came from Travoya's government.

As Aina and Bireck discussed things with their instructor, I took a casual look around. I had been feeling a bit tense up until now. This wasn't a dojo, but as it was a place where people from a different school learned swordsmanship, there was always the chance I was stepping onto hostile territory.

However, that fear turned out to have been groundless. This place didn't really have the atmosphere of a school for swordsmanship. It was more like a sports field reserved for the residents of the city. Of course, that wasn't an insult to the people who passionately trained here. It was just that the place wasn't quite as exclusive as I had imagined.

The students practicing swordsmanship seemed to be following two broad styles. As a member of the Yosogi School, I had a bit of knowledge about the Four Great Schools in the capital of Ludoria, as well as the swordsmanship schools in the surrounding countries.

Judging from the size and shape of their practice swords and the way they moved, it seemed they were teaching the Imperial Azuedan School of Swordsmanship. It was a school that had been widely practiced in the area, even before the many small nations that made up the Alliance were formed. As its name suggested, it had been the school officially endorsed by the Azueda Empire. This was the style of swordsmanship taught to the knights and soldiers of the old empire.

So why, you might ask, did I see two styles of swordsmanship when only the Imperial Azuedan School of Swordsmanship was being taught? That was because the Imperial School emphasized being able to switch between "light" and "heavy" styles at the right times.

The light style revolved around using rapid movements to disorient your opponent, relying on numerous sharp strikes to finish them off. The heavy style involved planting yourself heavily, defending against the opponent's attacks and retaliating with a single overwhelming strike. Both styles used the same, relatively easy-to-handle short sword, so the ideal swordsman would be able to master both, switching between them as necessary to meet the demands of any given situation or to further confuse their opponent. That was the ideal of the Imperial Azuedan style.

Yes, the ideal. It might seem obvious, but the requirements to utilize these two styles of swordsmanship were themselves quite different. The swordsman's height, weight, muscle strength, personality, and many other factors all tended to make them more suited to a single one. In fact, the majority of swordsmen in the Imperial Azuedan School focused on only one style. There were practically

none who could freely switch between the two.

As I dug through my old knowledge of schools of swordsmanship, Aina and Bireck came around with a man who seemed to be an instructor. Though he greeted me with a gentle and pleasant smile, he had an aura about him that reminded me of the other swordsmen I had known.



My intention had originally been to leave Janpemon fairly quickly, so I had only paid for my room for three days, but I ended up extending my stay. In the end, I changed my mind, deciding to do some blacksmithing after all. I wasn't interested in taking work from the city or anything; this was entirely a personal project. I wanted to make swords for Aina and her boyfriend. I had accepted his challenge the day before so I could get a grasp on his quirks in swordsmanship.

There wasn't much to say about the actual match. After Bireck, challengers popped up one after another until I had faced basically everyone at the training ground, Aina and their instructor included. In fact, I faced them all multiple times, though none as many times as Aina and Bireck. Even up against Aina and her boyfriend, as a swordsman of the Yosogi School, I held nothing back. Regardless of how the match might end, showing anything but my best would be an insult to my master Kaeha. The only mercy I showed them was in stopping short of anything that might injure them.

I had now been training in swordsmanship for longer than an entire human life span. If one hadn't spent their life training, or wasn't some kind of genius with a sword, they couldn't hope to be my equal. My defeat at Shizuki's hands a few years earlier had been because he was both. He had been a true genius, who layered decades of training on top of that latent talent. While I could feel their earnest passion for swordsmanship by exchanging blows with Aina and Bireck, that passion wasn't nearly enough to cover the gap in years between us.

Anyway, thanks to those many, many sparring matches, I had learned a bit about the intricacies of the Imperial Azuedan School of Swordsmanship, and how Aina and Bireck moved as they fought. It was more than enough to make swords for them. After all, an ordinary blacksmith wouldn't consider fighting their client to learn more about them in the first place.



And so, I ended up back at the ever-memorable Janpemon blacksmithing guild. Though I wasn't interested in taking on any work for them, if I was going to borrow someone's forge, I couldn't see myself going anywhere else.

The person manning the front desk this time was entirely unfamiliar to me, but it seemed they knew who I was, as while they were disappointed I wouldn't be taking on any work for them, they were quite happy to lend me the forge. When I asked about the woman who had been working here on my last visit, I learned she had gotten married and quit her job at the guild. That said, as she had married a blacksmith, she still showed up every once in a while to pick up ore, fuel, or jobs. I suppose it had been nine years since my last visit, so it wasn't especially surprising.

That was why I decided to make a weapon for both Aina and Bireck. If these two were to end up getting married in the future, I would likely never see it myself. That was at least what happened with her great-grandmother Nonna. The first time I had met Nonna, she was just a child. The next time, she had been about Aina's age now...and by my third visit, she had already passed away. There was no telling whether the same would happen with Aina, so I wanted to do what I could, while I could.

Stepping into the forge here for the first time in nine years, as old as it felt, it had still been kept quite clean. I checked on the tools, the iron and copper prepared to be used as materials, and the charcoal for fuel, then gave a satisfied nod.

It had been a while since I'd forged anything, so I'd start with something to shake off the rust on my skills. If it turned out well, I'd give it to the blacksmithing guild. I was going to be making a short sword designed to be used with the Imperial Azuedan School of Swordsmanship, so it definitely wouldn't go to waste.

However, when I got to the serious part—the swords for Aina and Bireck—they wouldn't be plain short swords. My intention was to make a pair of “married swords,” two blades that made up a single weapon, which I had learned about from Wanggui Xuannu. Despite the name, married swords didn't actually have any connection to the wielders being a couple, but since they both practiced the same type of swordsmanship and there was a possibility they



would get married, those were what I wanted to make for them. I didn't know what their lives would hold for them in the future, but if they stuck with their training, good weapons would serve them well in whatever came.

But that would have to wait until I was back in shape. I'd start by making five or ten short swords. If that wasn't enough, I'd do twenty, thirty, or even more. My visit to Janpemon was supposed to be a detour, but this was an absolutely necessary diversion for me, so I would spend whatever time it took.

As I lit the forge and took hold of my tools, the smell of fire and iron immediately made my heart leap. Man, it really had been a long time. As always, the fire spirits in this forge happily welcomed me back. I was only making these swords as practice, but I'd still give each of them the care and attention they deserved, making sure to enjoy the whole process. Working in a forge was extremely fun for me.

Half a year later, I presented Aina and Bireck with the two swords that were one, then started on my journey once again.

In the end, I made seventeen swords. In some ways it felt like I got carried away with how much fun it was to make them. Ten of them were good enough to be used, so I gave five to the blacksmithing guild and five to the training ground where Aina and Bireck were learning swordsmanship. I didn't know who would end up with them in the end, but I hoped they'd be as happy to receive them as Aina and Bireck were to receive theirs.

The sky was a deep blue. The wind was blowing toward the east, and this time I'd be doing likewise. Though I would have to cut south first, I would then head east into Radlania, the heart and sacred ground of the harvest god religion. After that, I would cross the merchant nation of Dolbogarde and finally reach Siglair at the end.

My journey wasn't quite over yet.



Leaving Janpemon behind, it took a few days of walking to make it out of the Alliance and into Radlania. That said, the religious center of Radlania—and thus the east-central region of the continent—was the holy city at Radlania's heart,

while I traveled along its northern reaches.

As I took my time with my journey, I came to a small village. My route was pretty random when I traveled. Sometimes I'd follow the roads, and other times I'd trek through fields and forests. But usually, when I saw a settlement, I'd go visit. Of course, there were some situations where that wasn't appropriate, but a chance to sleep at an inn also meant a chance to eat a hot meal. On top of that, seeing how different people lived different lives was a secret pleasure of mine.

On this day, I encountered something that was probably perfectly ordinary, yet to me was incredibly rare. The old church building in the village was covered in garlands while young children pranced about, scattering flowers from baskets that they carried. Everyone was smiling around tables of food and drink, shouting out blessings. Maybe because it was such a small village, everyone was involved, and since I had happened to stumble upon the festivities, they invited me to join them.

Yes, today was a young couple's wedding ceremony. It was very much a cause for celebration. But it wasn't just one couple getting married. Two couples were at the center of everyone's attention, being showered with blessings from all around. Apparently in order to throw an even bigger celebration, the two couples had arranged for their ceremonies to be held on the same day. Or perhaps similar to something like the harvest festival, there was a designated day every year when weddings were held.

The marriage of two young people was like a holiday for the village, and a precious diversion from daily life. Though as someone with no connection to this village at all, accepting the invitation to join in was just a chance to enjoy some food and drink in exchange for giving some blessings of my own. I had to wonder if the slices of meat pie, the roast chicken, and the wine had been imported from outside the village just for this occasion.

Looking around, everyone seemed to be having a great time. Of course, that went doubly so for the two couples being wed. There was something about the whole occasion that made me want to do something for them. If I had arrived even a day earlier, I could have gone out into the forest and hunted a boar or a deer to add to the feast.

Despite being on the edges of Radlania, the people here were all very devout in their faith. Naturally, the wedding ceremony was led by a priest with many a scripture reading, but even the celebrating villagers often replied by shouting their thanks to the harvest god when seeing an exciting amount of food laid out before them, or after taking an especially satisfying mouthful of wine. How many times had I heard someone say “May the land bless you” and “Give thanks to the land” today?

As a high elf, I couldn't really sympathize with their desire to worship a god, but I found their devotion admirable. To be clear, I don't mean to say I had anything against the gods. Put simply, from a human perspective, the gods were incredible beings as their creators, but high elves had no such relationship with them. Rather, since we high elves were made by the same Creator as the gods, they were more like younger brothers and sisters who had wandered off in shame after making a mess of the world. While having the power to create entire races of people was certainly incredible, rather than objects of worship, we saw them more as equals. It was much like how I viewed humans, the beings they created.

Of course, saying that out loud would only earn animosity from the people around me, so it was an opinion I kept to myself. Even in my past life, I don't remember being anywhere near as pious as the people living here.

By the way, in comparison to other beings like the dragons, phoenixes, and spirits, the gods felt much more distant for some reason. That was quite strange to me. I wondered if that was related to the fact that gods were treated as separate from the five ancient races that had been created alongside them.

Anyway, putting aside the talk of gods and ancient races, the ceremony was peaceful and pleasant. If Huratio or Piune from the elven caravan had been here, their songs and dances would have livened things up even more. And Rebees could probably have whipped up a portrait of the two couples in no time. But I didn't have the unique skills that they had. What could I do for them?

As I pondered that issue, I noticed moisture carried in by the wind. Though I had been distracted by the celebrations and so failed to notice, it seemed rain

was close at hand. At this rate, it would come before the ceremony was complete.

Of course, that was something completely natural, so there was no helping it. But for people as devout as these, they might take it as a sign that their god hadn't blessed this day of union for them. Weather was clearly within the domain of the god of the harvest, after all.

Ah. But if by some chance the harvest god *did* offer blessings for these people, this day was no doubt blessed. After all, by sheer coincidence, I had stumbled upon this village on the day of their ceremony, and been greeted with a warm welcome. The people of this village would no doubt see that coincidence as a blessing from their god.

So I had found what I could give to these couples. I whispered a quiet request to the spirits of the wind and water that would soon bring rain on this place, asking them to delay the rain a little longer. Of course, it would be a problem if the rain never came, but I hoped they could put it off until tomorrow.

As far as my memories of my past life told me, weddings were supposed to be on sunny days. Bright and clear weather had even become a metaphor for the good and auspicious. A blue sky made any celebration that much better. So my gift to these two couples would be that blue sky.

Of course, I wouldn't tell them I was responsible or anything. When the rain fell tomorrow, no doubt they'd celebrate the rain coming a day late as being a blessing from their god. But that was for the best. That would make them much happier than to hear that it was because of a high elf who happened to be around that day.

With those thoughts in mind, I suspected the rain would feel quite pleasant as I traveled through it the next day.



Leaving northern Radlania behind, I made my way into Dolbogarde, the second-largest economic powerhouse of the east-central region. I had visited the country before, but I had only really experienced a single port town. This time, I was passing through the northern part, so I wouldn't be visiting the same place again.

As much of a profit Dolbogarde made by trading with the Far East, that didn't mean they neglected the opportunities available here in the east-central region. It had an extensive road system to carry the goods brought in by ships near and far, numerous inn towns dotted the countryside, and their water transport network made great use of the country's natural rivers. The coastal region of Dolbogarde might have been more developed, but the northern region didn't fall behind its neighbors in other nations in the least.

Traveling through Dolbogarde, I continued on my way straight east. I was getting close to the destination of my current trip.

As a nation built on commerce, the merchants of Dolbogarde were all quick to listen when it came to rumors floating about. In particular, I had a lot of opportunities in towns along the rivers to meet merchants coming off of ships to trade or rest. Of course, they weren't just lounging around doing nothing, but thanks to my uniqueness as an elf, I was able to glean a little bit of information on Siglair. Though it got me a lot of curious looks, I had to admit being an elf—or more precisely a high elf, though they didn't know that—came quite in handy.

Though it wasn't about Siglair in particular, the overall consensus seemed to be that the situation in the east-central region of the continent was on the rise. As one might expect, it was because the war with Zieden had ended. The threat of suddenly being drawn into war had dissipated, Zieden had opened its borders making trade much smoother, and the slump in spending caused by the conflict had broken.

Of course, during wartime, the military expended any resources they could get their hands on, but only a few merchants were able to capitalize on that. Taxes gathered from the citizenry were all spent on the war effort, rather than going to improve the lives of the people. Yes, just like Zieden had been nine years ago. Conscription had made things all that much worse.

But now that the war had ended, and enough time had passed to let things settle down, nations were beginning to relax their guard again. Well, there was still the conflict between Darottei and the northern part of the Azueda Alliance, but that conflict was much older than the war with Zieden. So compared to my last visit to this region, the merchants were much more bright and cheerful.

Of course, not everything had been resolved, and it wasn't realistic to expect they ever would be. No matter how much you worked to make a perfect solution, there would always be someone left discontent, some ember left smoldering. But time paid no heed to those people, pushing the world ever forward. Though of course there were some problems that outlived their generations, rooting themselves deeply enough to persist through time.

As I walked down the road, a carriage passed alongside me. The carriage was heavily laden with bags that seemed to contain flour. If it was taking this road, the carriage might well have come from Janpemon just like I had. It was a bit of a stretch to make that assumption after traveling through two countries, but it was fun to think that might be the case.

Looking at the horses pulling the carriage, I couldn't help but think of Sayr. They didn't look all that similar to him, but the calm, relaxed looks on their faces were exactly the same ones Sayr made when I rode him. I hoped he was doing well. Actually, now that I thought about it, enough time had passed that he probably had passed away by now. Though, considering where he lived, and considering the mystics had taken care of him, there was another possibility...

A journey on foot only put my feet to work, so my head was free to think of all sorts of things and look back on the way I had come. Ah, perhaps the fact that my head had nothing else to do was what made me so sensitive to the new scenes I encountered during my journey. That was why I liked traveling so much: the combination of these gentle, quiet times and the stimulation of new experiences.

What would be waiting for me at my destination, in the nation of Siglair? Would I be able to find a skilled craftsman to apprentice under? I didn't even know how long I would be spending there yet, but I was looking forward to it.

Crossing the border from Dolbogarde into Siglair, I headed to the city of Marmaros, famed for its production of marble. As I said before, my journey was nearing its end.

## Chapter 4 — The City of Shining Stone

The city of Marmaros was situated in the southwestern region of Siglair. So while Siglair itself was on the edge of the Man-Eating Swamp, as far as cities in Siglair were concerned, it was relatively far from danger. It went without saying that a city constantly in fear of monster attacks wouldn't have the composure to develop a quarrying industry.

On my journey toward Siglair, I gathered a decent amount of information on famous sculptors from merchants I passed by. However, most of the commonly known sculptors were deeply, and generationally involved with the church, meaning they only really made works of their god and recognized saints. There was nothing particularly wrong with that, but that kind of ceremonial, religious expression was a bit different from the skill I was looking to cultivate. Besides, I doubted a sculptor with strong connections to the church would be willing to teach a complete stranger, let alone one who didn't hold their god in very high esteem.

But that was all the more reason for me to go to Marmaros. Among all the names of sculptors I heard, one stood out as different from the rest: Count Myos Marmaros, the lord of the city.

Though I was visiting Siglair to learn a new skill, or I suppose you could say for artistic pursuits, in truth it was a warrior nation. Being on the edge of the Man-Eating Swamp, their primary focus was cutting down the monsters that poured out of it. To that end, they put a great deal of effort into maintaining their military, and even received support from neighboring countries. Though it produced its fair share of famous sculptors, there was also a great deal of popularity for those soldiers, knights, and adventurers who made a name for themselves on the front lines.

It wasn't as though other professions were belittled, but the idea that everyone else served to support those fighting on the front lines had firmly rooted itself in the minds of Siglair's people. It wasn't limited to just the people

in Siglair either. As they stood on the front lines, bearing the full brunt of the Man-Eating Swamp's wrath, their neighbor Dolbogarde spared no effort in supporting them from the rear.

At least, that was the opinion of the people of Siglair. I supposed it wasn't that strange the people here would think that, considering the sacrifices they had suffered in keeping the Man-Eating Swamp in check. But as an outsider, I felt their thinking was a bit biased.

That bias was even stronger among the nobility of Siglair, who had to show a strong face to the public at all times. But among those nobles, Count Marmaros was famous not as a warrior, but as a sculptor. Paying no mind to the scorn his less militaristic pursuits earned him, he was a man who loved art, and was very invested in producing it with his own hands. There was no doubt in my mind he was a free spirit at heart, and probably more than a bit eccentric.

Though he personally saw to the management of his city, he had delegated the military affairs to someone else, and even refused to wear a sword, claiming it was "too boorish." Instead, he spent his efforts gathering valuable works of art when he wasn't producing them himself. In particular, he was famous as a sculptor for incorporating many elements of other art forms in his sculpting, boldly ignoring the traditional style endorsed by the church.

I didn't know whether it was even possible to apprentice under him, but after hearing all this, I couldn't help but be interested in him. Considering the church taught that marble was a gift from the harvest god and so collected it for special use, the fact Count Marmaros could ignore them and use it for personal projects could only be attributed to his status as count. In other words, if I wanted to use marble myself, his help would be invaluable.

Well...with the help of the earth spirits, I could find a yet undiscovered vein of marble and extract it myself quite easily. The problem would be finding a way to transport it somewhere useful.

I arrived in Marmaros, the city famous for its shining marble.

The city itself was built on the industry of quarrying, processing, and selling that marble. In simple terms, it was an extremely wealthy place. As a town



famous for quarrying marble, you might imagine it would be filled with the laborers who worked those quarries, but apparently they lived in smaller villages built closer to the quarry site.

Visually speaking, the city was unique for its strictly organized layout and well-maintained roads. These were for the sake of easing the transport of wagons carrying large amounts of marble, both from the quarry into worksites in the city and from the city out to buyers abroad. There were also separate streets maintained for carriages and pedestrians, reducing the risk of carriages running over people as they worked.

The gate leading into the city was enormous. The inspection wasn't particularly strict, and though I got some odd looks for being an elf, I was able to enter the city without any trouble. While the thought of heavy carriage traffic might lead one to envision dusty and dirty streets, they were actually kept impeccably clean, giving the city a pleasantly open impression. The ruler of the city had no doubt paid close attention to every small detail here.

On top of that, while not absolutely everywhere, there were a considerable number of marble statues situated throughout the city. For example, a park I walked through contained a finely carved statue of an enormous wolf, standing in perfect harmony with the surrounding grass and trees as it watched over the people passing by. The cold hardness of the stone suited the aloof pride of the creature...but at the same time, you could feel a real warmth from its fur and its eyes.

As I rested on a bench in the park, I heard from an old man sitting there that it had been carved by the hand of Count Marmaros himself. The proud affection that man showed for his leader expressed quite clearly to me that, while he might have been looked down on for his obsession with art, Count Marmaros was quite popular among the people of his city.



Until now, I had expended every effort to avoid getting involved with human nobility, but I had now taken an interest in Count Marmaros. However, just because I was interested in him didn't mean he was interested in me. He might be curious about me just because I was an elf, but I didn't think that would get

me very far.

If Rebees or Huratio were here, they could likely use their artistic talents to gain a foothold with him. But I had no skill for painting, nor was I particularly good at singing. My only option was to appeal to him with my own talents. Those would likely be slightly different from the Count's interests, but even so...or rather, *because* of that, I wanted to get his attention using them. As a man who thought swords were too boorish for him to wear, I wanted to make one so wonderful he couldn't bear to be without it. A sword that wasn't just decoration, but was also practical, making it even more beautiful.

Luckily for me, there was a blacksmithing guild of considerable size in this city to meet the large demand for tools needed to extract and work with marble. While they were quite shocked to see my master blacksmith's license, I didn't have much difficulty in getting access to a forge.

So, what kind of sword would I be making? Lighting the furnace, picking up my tools, basking in the scent of iron, I gave it some thought.

For a sword that was both beautiful and practical, the first thing that came to mind was a katana. It was an elegant weapon that was effectively nonexistent in this part of the world, so I was sure Count Marmaros would take an interest in it. But in the end, I shot that idea down. Here in Siglair, there was no way I could get my hands on the iron sand needed to make the steel for one. Of course I could make a reasonably good katana using ordinary steel, but I couldn't bring myself to knowingly make that compromise. Such a sword might have been able to catch the Count's interest based on its uniqueness alone, but I doubted it would capture his heart as an artist.

The next option would be the one I was most familiar with: the straight sword used by the Yosogi School. However, I was just as hesitant to commit to that idea. While it would be the highest quality weapon I was capable of producing, using a straight sword was reasonably difficult. The same went for the katana, but for someone like Count Marmaros who didn't even carry a sword, it wouldn't be a practical weapon for him. No matter how good the piece was, if its owner couldn't use it, I couldn't present it with pride.

In that case, even if it was something he couldn't use as a proper sword, some

variety of dagger that could be used as a throwing weapon in a pinch might be appropriate. I could make something that was quite decorative and beautiful, but still with a strong enough impact that it would serve to deflect accusations of the Count being solely obsessed with art.

The requirements for this piece were becoming kind of strict...but I had an idea: a kind of dagger called a cinquedea. Rather large as far as daggers went, the fullers engraved on its wide blade would enhance its decorative elements. Its sturdiness made it good for stabbing and capable of repelling enemy strikes, allowing it to have a strong impact both artistically and as a weapon for self-defense. Beyond adding fullers, the width of the blade had lots of room to add all sorts of decorative engravings...which also made it a viable shape for an artifact. I had no idea whether Count Marmaros had any talent for magic, but even if he couldn't use it, it would make the weapon more fun.

If I put my all into it, adding a hilt, guard, pommel, and sheath to tie it all together, I was sure I could capture the Count's heart. No one in the center of the continent, the east of the continent, even in the Far East island of Fusou had been able to resist the charm of my work, be they human or mystic or dwarf. That was because my teacher had been a dwarf skilled enough to win the dwarven throne. If I worked as I always did, expending every effort that no piece I made would bring shame to his name, there was no one my work couldn't speak to.

Luckily, I had already shaken the rust from my blacksmithing skills during my stay in Janpemon. As if it had already been decided beforehand, the design for the weapon sprung unbidden to my mind. Even if it would need a bit of adjusting for the end product, I was sure that design was born naturally from my desire to learn the art of sculpting and my impression of Marmaros itself.

The inside of the furnace flickered brightly, equal to the fire that had been set in my heart. As I called out to them, the fire spirits inside the forge began an ecstatic dance. Despite having come to Marmaros with the intent of learning to create sculptures, the first thing I was going to do was start blacksmithing. I had to admit, it was very much like me.

This was no prediction, no premonition. I was absolutely certain. I might be making more than one dagger here. I might even find myself starting from

scratch three or four times. But I knew that when it was done, if I offered no compromise, what I ended up with would be a masterpiece.

The bright red steel sang happily as I brought down my hammer. Sparks danced as even my own heart was refined and sharpened.



Long ago, when I'd first approached Oswald and asked him to teach me blacksmithing, I just walked into his shop and said, "Please!" Thinking back on it, that was a pretty ridiculous way of going about it. I'm honestly impressed that it actually worked. I suppose it goes to show that my master had a big heart.

I guess I approached my late master in swordsmanship Kaeha much the same way. At least for magic, it had started from Kawshman approaching me, asking me to teach him blacksmithing. I had thought our meeting was some sort of fate, and ran down that path without a second thought.

But as I was now, I found acting like that was a bit beyond me. Above all, as a member of the nobility, trying to meet Count Marmaros without an appointment would just get me arrested. So instead, I sent the completed cinquedea to him through the blacksmithing guild, asking to be granted an audience. Yes, unlike past me, I had now learned how to follow the proper procedures.

Three days after I had handed over the dagger, I was invited to Count Marmaros's manor. It seemed the weapon had caught his interest after all. Honestly, I was a bit relieved. I was more than confident in the piece, of course, but there was still a chance he would receive it poorly.

Making my way to the Count's estate, I found a large mansion. It had a very calm aura about it, more tasteful than luxurious. But instead of the mansion itself, I was guided to another building on the estate, which looked to be more like a workshop. This was just a guess on my part, but I supposed the Count had elected to meet me in his free time rather than in his official working hours.

While the mansion was certainly where he lived, it was also his workplace. This workshop, however, was his own private space where he could pour his heart into his art. The fact he was willing to invite me here during his very limited free time was proof that my cinquedea had struck a chord with him.

When I stepped into the workshop, I saw a man in work clothes taking a chisel and hammer to a partially completed statue. He seemed to be a bit past forty years old. Seeing him absorbed in his work, even his common work clothes didn't diminish his aura of refinement.

My guide hesitated on whether to call out to his master or not, but I waved him off and took a seat on a nearby chair. While it was certainly the guide's job to announce that a visitor had arrived, this wasn't an aristocrat's manor. This was a private workshop. Though we practiced in different fields, we were both craftsmen. I didn't want to interrupt him while he was hard at work. But above all, being able to see him at work already was fantastic, even if my lack of experience meant I didn't understand most of what was happening.

That said, there was always the risk of the Count getting angry at his servant for not introducing me, so I wouldn't force him to stay quiet if he didn't want to. After seeing that I wasn't bothered, the servant quickly took his leave, giving a polite bow before exiting. Ah, it seemed the man in front of me was as eccentric as I anticipated, enough so that even his servants were loath to interrupt him in his free time.

Sharp clicks resounded from the statue as the Count's chisel slowly stripped stone away. It felt more like he was peeling material away rather than carving into the stone. One by one, he carefully stripped off the layers of stone, as if the true form of the statue was already lying underneath, waiting to be revealed.

After I'd waited for a while, Count Marmaros finally stopped and breathed a heavy sigh. He had either found a good place to take a break, lost his concentration, or both. With no experience in carving statues of my own, I had no way of knowing. At last, he turned to face me.

"Hey, sorry for making you wait like that. Actually, no. *Thank you* for waiting. I was in a great spot there. You're the elf who sent me that Shooting Star Dagger, right?"

The smile that lit his face was a mixture of surprise, respect, and interest. A pleasant, carefree expression.

But a Shooting Star Dagger, huh? I guess that's how he saw it. The grooves in the cinquedea I had made for him glowed when you ran mana through it. The

light started at the source of the mana—the base of the blade—before extending up to the tip, so it seemed the Count had interpreted it as a shooting star. It was a very poetic way of looking at it, and I couldn't say I disliked it.

But it wasn't quite right to say it simply shone. The flow and strength of the mana used to illuminate the dagger would make that light flicker and waver. If used properly, it could be a great distraction against an opponent. The wavering light also served to conceal the true length of the blade, thus making it hard to judge its range. Any warrior would immediately have picked up on these things the moment they saw the dagger, but Count Marmaros was only judging it on its artistic merits. It seemed the rumors about him were true.

I had worried that making the dagger into a relic might have come across as a bit tasteless, but it seemed he had taken a liking to it. I doubted the Count himself had much magical prowess, so there must have been a mage in his employ who could illuminate the weapon for him. Anyway, the fact that he had received the cinquedea positively, even with it being a relic, made me happy.

And after seeing the Count's work, knowing his reputation, meeting him in person, and above all watching him work, my mind was made up.

"I'm happy to hear you like it so much. I was pretty proud of that cinquedea, so I'm glad to hear it. I came here today to ask you to take me on as your apprentice."

Since I was speaking with a noble, I was sure to be polite but still made sure to get right to the point. The Count's eyes immediately went wide with shock. I couldn't tell if that was because of my behavior or because of what I said, but at least one of them seemed to be quite unexpected. But this was really the best way for me to do things.

"I want to leave behind an accurate image of my friends who have passed away. Though I still have them in my memories, seeing statues of them that don't resemble how they actually looked made me worry about everyone forgetting the truth. I was sad that they were being remembered incorrectly."

Giving him no time to respond, I threw all my thoughts and feelings at him. I wasn't interested in bargaining or negotiating, I just wanted to appeal to his heart.

“I’ve seen your work around this city, like the wolf that somehow expresses a cold, lonely pride while still having the warmth of life to it. I wanted to leave images of my friends that were the same way. So I was hoping to learn your skills.”

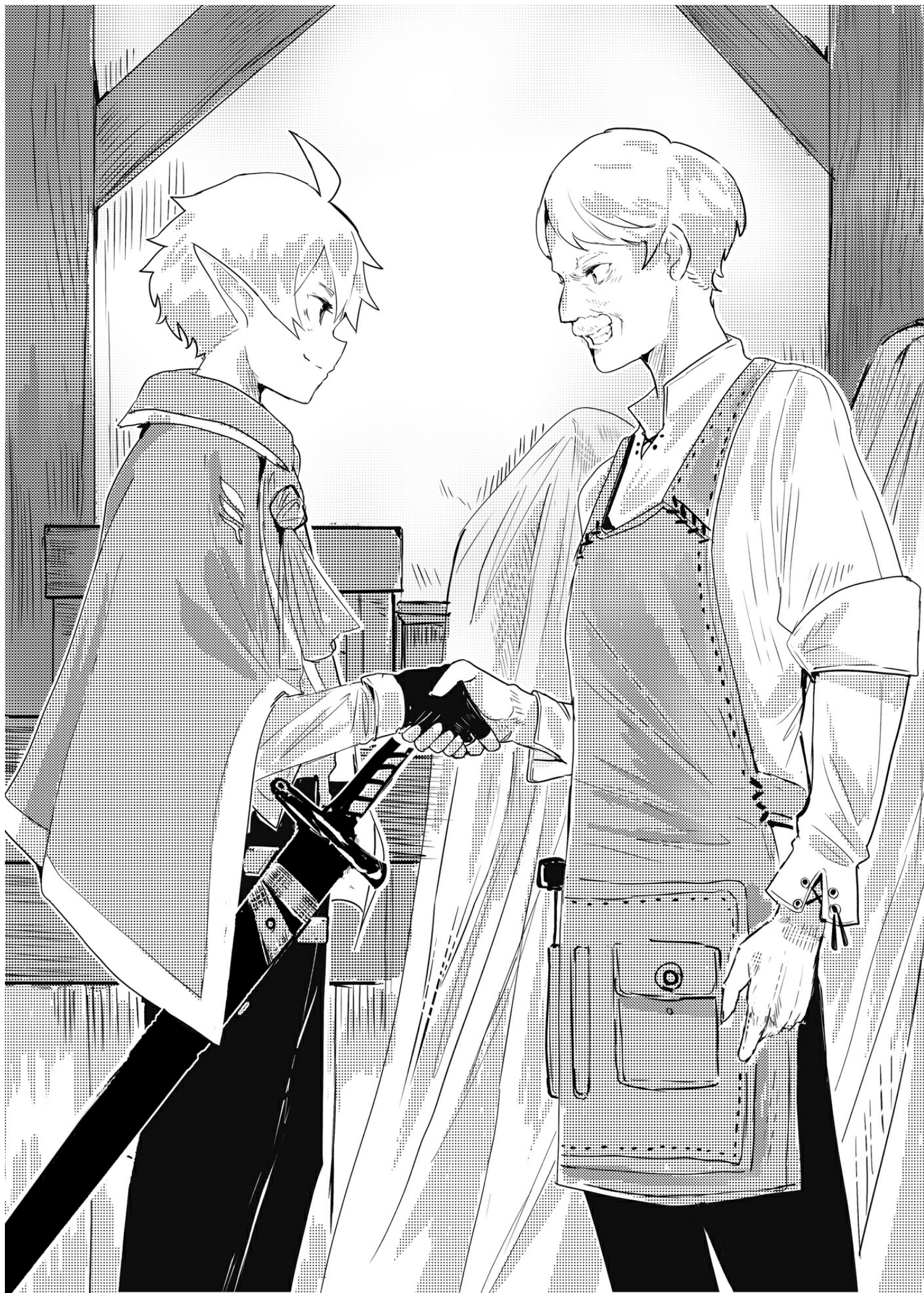
Keeping eye contact, I poured my fervent feelings into my gaze and into my speech. A normal person wouldn’t be able to bear that pressure so easily, but Count Marmaros didn’t so much as step back an inch.

“As you know, I am in charge of running this city. In the little time I have outside of my duties, I entertain myself by making these sculptures. I understand your feelings, but I don’t have the time to teach an apprentice.”

And he shook his head. Yeah, that was the normal response you would expect. Any lord who neglected his duties to his people would never be loved by them as much as that one old man I had met. And if he took time away from his sculpting, the statues that had struck me in the first place would never have existed. I really couldn’t blame him for his answer.

“But that dagger is really an incredible piece. I have never been so moved by a weapon before. The next time I make a statue involving a weapon, I won’t be able to make it a mere accessory.” But still, he smiled at me as he spoke, the same carefree smile he had shown when he first saw me. “So, Mr. Elf. I don’t have the time to look after a student, but if you can make more weapons that will move me so, I believe that will be a benefit to me. With that as your tuition fee, I am willing to teach you. Not as a master and student, but as two artists working together.”

And so, after exchanging names, we made a contract and shook hands. His firm, leathery grip was nothing like the accusations he had of being an artist who neglected all things physical.





Count Myos Marmaros—though from now on, he was Professor Myos to me—was the ruler of a city famous for the production of marble. There were many things only he could decide, so there was plenty of work for him to do. For example, which merchant families would be given how much marble?

There was more to it than just keeping up relations with the merchants themselves, though. The clients those merchants would be bringing the marble to were also an important part of the equation. Of course, the largest customer was Radlania, due to the significance marble had for the religion of the harvest god. Branches of the church existed in other countries too, and Marmaros's recognition by the church was part of what made demand for its marble so high in the first place. Naturally, everyone wanted as much Marmaros marble as they could get their hands on, so any appearance of preferential treatment in exporting it would generate no small amount of irritation in their neighbors.

On top of that, Marmaros wasn't the only source of marble in Siglair, so balancing their exports with those from other cities also had to be taken into consideration. Despite their sterling reputation and the incredible demand for their marble, there was nothing close to a monopoly here. That sense of balance was something the leaders of Marmaros were trying to maintain.

In order to support Professor Myos in managing the city, Viscount Balestra Kyant had created a group of retainers to serve under him. With their help, Myos was able to finish the work only he could do and spend the rest of his time on his art. Myos's fame as a sculptor also made many of their negotiations move quite smoothly, a fact his retainers took full advantage of.

Professor Myos had four children: three sons and one daughter. His daughter was married to Viscount Kyant. His eldest son was working with the viscount to learn the skills necessary to succeed his father, while his second son managed one of the villages housing laborers closer to the quarry. The youngest son had shown less interest in leadership, instead opting for the warrior lifestyle that was much more popular here in Siglair.

But even with the work of his retainers and his children, there was still plenty of work that only Myos could do as the Count, which took up his mornings. Some afternoons were spent meeting with his retainers or performing

inspections on the city or the quarry, so his artistic pursuits were limited to four afternoons a week. In other words, that was the time my classes would be held.

My lessons took the form of observing his work while he explained what he was doing. Honestly speaking, it was far too little time to actually teach someone a new skill. But according to him...

“You are already a seasoned craftsman, likely far better than myself. Just look at this dagger you made. So once you have the knowledge of the skills, you just need to learn how to put it into practice yourself. I’ll prepare some stone for you. I am quite interested to see what you will create from it.”

Though he laughed while saying it, I couldn’t take it so lightly. This was very different from the experiences I’d had with my previous masters, and would be far more difficult. Ah, rather than my old teachers, it was closer to the relationship I’d had with Old Saku, the man who taught me how to make katana during my stay in Fusou.

Since I wasn’t his apprentice, I didn’t stay in the Count’s manor; instead, I commuted there from an inn in the city. In order to cover that expense, I spent the time I wasn’t learning sculpting on taking blacksmithing work, as well as creating works to inspire the Count as a fee for my lessons.

Both working and learning made my days quite hectic. However, knowing that someone much busier than I was taking time off to teach me, my own busyness gave me a better appreciation for the sacrifice he was making for my sake. After watching for quite some time, I finally got a chance to try my hand at shaping the stone myself.

Naturally, things like how to use the tools and how best to apply pressure to them weren’t things you could pick up just by watching someone work, so Professor Myos continued explaining things to me as I worked. It really did feel like he was more of a professor than a master.

Speaking of tools, I had made the ones I was using myself. Depending on how much stone you wanted to shave off and what shape you wished to carve it into, not only the chisel’s size and tip would change, but the hammer you used would also be different. On top of a large number of chisels and hammers, I also needed tools to smooth the stone that remained after taking off larger chunks.

To know the right tool for each job, you needed knowledge, experience, and a sensitivity for the stone you were working with.

In truth, even without these tools, I could manipulate the shape of the stone fairly well just by asking the earth spirits for help. When it came to splitting apart large chunks of stone, I just had to point with my finger where I wanted it to break. That would probably...okay, it would *definitely* be many times easier than learning to carve it by hand, but I refused to. If I relied on the spirits at this stage, I wouldn't learn anything.

As my hands worked to cut, carve, and polish the stone, the image in my head was similarly refined. While I had a picture in my head of what the finished product would look like from the start, I could definitely feel my work with the stone improving that image.

In the end, my sensitivity to the stone I was working with was something born from the spirits from the start, so I couldn't ignore that. Even stone had ways it did or did not want to be broken. Having the whispers of the earth spirits to teach me these things was an undeniable advantage.

To sum it up in simple terms, my days were busy but fulfilling. That hectic life was helping me to grow as a person as well, a growth I could feel in the passing days.



Three months had passed since I started learning the art of sculpting from Professor Myos.

“So you're the elf spending so much time with Dad, huh?”

One afternoon while heading to the workshop, a boy, likely still a young teenager, called out to me. He wore a sword at his hip and had a clear wariness in his eyes, but it did nothing to detract from his refined manner. He also looked quite a bit like Myos. From his speech and his appearance, I had to guess he was Myos's third son...Claytos, if I recalled correctly.

Claytos Marmaros—unlike his two older brothers, he had rejected the path of rulership and instead chosen to seek fame as a warrior. From what I had heard, he couldn't stand his family being looked down on for being so obsessed with

the arts, and so had decided to take up arms himself. Combined with the usual teenage rebellion, his relationship with his father had become a little rocky.

It wasn't surprising that Claytos would be suspicious of a complete stranger popping up out of nowhere and suddenly getting close to his father. That in and of itself was fine, but now he was standing before me, openly hostile. That wasn't good.

It didn't bother me that he was getting in the way of me approaching the workshop, even though I had been invited. The problem was that he was hoping to be a warrior, and yet was here showing open hostility to a stranger whose strength he didn't know. That was far too reckless.

For other reasons, I had been given permission to bring my sword with me today, so it was hanging at my hip. In general, you could get a rough sense of someone's skill with a weapon by the way they carried themselves while armed.

Of course, there was no way I'd draw my sword and cut down the professor's son. I wasn't the kind of person to get upset over a child being hostile toward me in the first place. However, the fact that Claytos had yet to understand that he was alive only due to the forbearance of others spoke of his ineptitude.

So, what would I do about it? There were plenty of ways I could put him in his place without getting violent. For example, I could exert enough pressure on him that he would realize challenging me was too reckless. But that ran the risk of threatening his desire to be a warrior altogether. I didn't want to go that far.

As far as I had seen, Claytos and his father didn't get along all that well. But even so, out of concern for his father—or perhaps for the Marmaros family as a whole—he had come out to size me up. If he was hoping to be a warrior, he couldn't stand for someone coming and making a mockery of his family. That was an attitude I felt was worthy of praise. I didn't want to break his will.

So how could I get him to accept my presence here? I *did* happen to have my sword with me today, so maybe I'd use that.

"Young man, I am on my way to show your father a piece of my work. You should come along too. There's certainly no harm in it, and if you think I'm suspicious, you'll be better able to keep an eye on me that way, right?" I suggested with a smile.

Yes, today was another day for me to pay for my lessons. Professor Myos had no love for weapons; I knew that full well. It was enough to cause him trouble in dealing with his own son, who had chosen the life of a warrior. If Professor Myos and his son had been on better terms, I imagined Claytos would have come to find me much sooner.

But that was all the more reason I wanted to show Professor Myos the most beautiful swordsmanship that I could. Yes, the Yosogi-style swordsmanship that Kaeha had taught me. If he could see the artistic merit in the cinquedea I had forged for him, I had no doubt he could see the beauty in this too.

Today I'd be cutting a large boulder that I had brought to the workshop, hoping it would be of some use. It had been far too big to do anything with, so my intention today was to slice it into more manageable quarters. After that, I'd give a demonstration of my Yosogi School swordsmanship.

Claytos seemed to hesitate in response to my smile, but when I started walking again he dutifully followed after me. I was looking forward to seeing the different reactions to my swordsmanship from father and son. Of course, I didn't expect something as simple as a demonstration from me could mend their relationship, but I would be very happy if I could serve to at least begin filling in the gulf between them.

As Professor Myos greeted me at the entrance of his workshop, he seemed quite surprised to see Claytos, but didn't say anything. I could tell Claytos wasn't too impressed with that treatment, but I didn't say anything either. Interpersonal relationships were a complicated affair. The words of a stranger wouldn't amount to much.

But I *was* determined to steal their attention away with my swordsmanship. My movements, and the flash of my blade separating the boulder into four, cut apart the tense atmosphere. The blade of the Yosogi School could cut through almost anything, aside from perhaps love itself.



One day, half a year after I started learning under Professor Myos, he suddenly stopped in the middle of working on a statue.

"I noticed you're always whispering when you touch the stone. Does that

mean there are spirits in it? If so, there's something I'd like to ask them."

Well. That question put me in quite a spot. First of all, the question of whether there were earth spirits inhabiting the pieces of stone we worked with didn't have a particularly clear answer.

Of course the spirits *could* inhabit stone, but that was only because it was still physically connected to the earth below. If it was completely cut off from the ground, would the spirits stay? I supposed some of the more eccentric spirits might become independent and take up residence in a statue they took particular interest in. For example, the statue of the wolf I had seen in the park had been quite popular among the spirits.

There were some powerful spirits that would split off from the rest to inhabit particularly large and impressive mountains, though they were still connected to the earth, so I supposed that was similar to this. On top of that, I wasn't sure the spirits could understand a question from a human well enough to provide a satisfying answer.

Long, long ago, I had met a spirit inhabiting a spring of water in Ludoria that had developed a relationship with the people who worshipped it. Spirits like that who had developed a strong sense of self would be one thing, but I doubted any of the earth spirits in this area were that capable.

I spoke with the spirits regularly, but the actual words were just a means to start the dialogue or endear myself to them. The important part of our communication was empathizing with each other and forming a shared image of something. For example, I might ask where the brittle or fragile parts of a stone block were. What that literally entailed was me wondering about the brittle parts of the stone, a feeling the earth spirits would pick up on. I would then pick up a vague feeling about where the stone was fragile from them. It was an exchange built on abstract feelings.

There were cases I supposed where I had a very clear desire that I expressed to them in words, but using words exclusively to communicate with them would be quite difficult. For example, the fire spirits that had spent a great deal of time in the forge would clearly respond to my vocal cues. Conversely, there were the wind spirits in the Great Grasslands that had specifically called out to

me.

In short, as your relationship with the spirits grew deeper, and depending on the individual nature of the spirit you were talking with, all these methods of communication together made up a single conversation. Explaining all that in a way Professor Myos could understand would be quite difficult. I mean, even I had to rely on intuition to navigate those conversations. I couldn't say I had a firm logical grasp on them myself.

But there was one thing I could infer: spirits with a strong sense of individuality often broke off and isolated themselves from the others around them. The water spirits living in the sea were powerful, but they didn't have the same individuality that the spirit living in the spring did. The fire spirits living in my furnace were relatively quite weak, but they had much stronger personalities than those living in a magma flow.

But even then, some spirits that remained in the flow of nature still expressed quite a bit of individuality...so I guess the conclusion was that you couldn't classify them so easily. Even the fire spirits in my campfires at night occasionally displayed a unique personality, acting totally different from other fire spirits. That's what spirits, and indeed nature, was like. I imagined I wouldn't understand them fully until I finished my life as a high elf and joined their ranks.

"I don't mind asking for you, but I can't guarantee that I'll be able to give you an accurate answer. The spirits teach me by sharing their feelings, so all I can do is interpret those as best I can."

Though my answer was a bit noncommittal, Myos nonetheless nodded happily. Any interpretation I gave would also be clouded by my own bias, but if he was happy despite that, then I guess it was fine.

"I want to know how the spirits feel about humans like us carving stone out of nature and fashioning it into statues and buildings. The church teaches that marble is a gift from the harvest god, but that leaves no room for the spirits, does it?"

Ah, that was a very fitting question for someone like him. My professor in sculpting was quite the sensitive man. I didn't mean that he was weak in that way, though. As Count Marmaros, no matter how the spirits felt about his work,

he would continue extracting stone from the ground, and he would use every last bit of his authority to ensure that the work continued unobstructed. At the same time, he was an artist, and so was quite perceptive with minor details like these.

But when it came to making statues or building homes out of stone, there was only one answer I could give.

“It doesn’t really matter to them one way or the other.”

I couldn’t say the same about all spirits, but the spirits that lived here couldn’t care less. They didn’t see much difference between a human carving stone and a river cutting through a mountain. From a human perspective, these were entirely different things, but from earth spirits’ point of view, there wasn’t much difference.

On top of that, as long as creatures lived, they would pollute the domains of the spirits. For example, bathing in a river would leave dirt and sweat behind in the water. The water spirits living there naturally wouldn’t be very happy to have their water soiled like that, but even that contamination was sometimes food for tiny animals that lived in the river, which were in turn food for the fish. In the end, it helped life grow. When the fish in the river died, their bodies would pollute the river just the same. But those dead fish would serve as food for other fish, or those other tiny animals, making the river more bountiful. So as long as the pollution was kept to a reasonable extent, the spirits weren’t particularly bothered by it. Well...perhaps there were *some* spirits that would get angry. But the wind spirits had no issues forgiving me for all the charcoal I burned and the smoke I polluted the air with.

The trees were the same. They didn’t like being cut down, but humans still needed wood to build their homes and make fires. Humans were just as much a part of the world as the trees were, so as long as they didn’t go overboard, the trees tolerated their behavior as something necessary. Grass was alive, but there were plenty of animals that survived by eating it, just as there were animals that survived by eating those herbivores.

These were all natural processes. From nature’s perspective, there wasn’t much difference between a human cutting down a tree to build a house and a



predator hunting other animals for food. Both were necessary for the preservation of life. After all, without shelter from the wind and rain, humans would grow sick and die.

“The melancholic feeling you get from looking at a quarry after the stone is extracted is an entirely human feeling. If you asked the spirits about it, they’d just be confused. They wouldn’t blame you for anything, nor would they forgive you.”

I suspected this wasn’t the answer Professor Myos was looking for. He was probably hoping to be condemned, to affirm some natural feelings of guilt. It was a bit annoying at times, but humans had a tendency to think of themselves as being particularly special, and to think they had a huge impact on the natural world. Well, in cases like mining operations polluting the water, they weren’t completely wrong, but it was still an opinion rooted in arrogance.

“Ah, but as far as I could see, they seem to really like the wolf statue in the park. It must have struck a chord with them.”

As much as it might have sounded like a feeble attempt at consolation, it was very much the truth. The spirits that hung around the statue were all earth spirits, so it might have looked like they were just sitting around nearby by chance. But being earth spirits, they wouldn’t have gotten close if they didn’t like it. Not all the statues he made were received so well, but there were certainly a few that the spirits took to. How he felt about that, and indeed whether he believed what I was telling him or not, was all up to him.

“I see,” he muttered after a long pause, returning to his work. I didn’t know how he took my answer, but I had a feeling I’d be able to tell once the statue was completed.



“Let’s spar, master!”

In response to the energetic young voice, I accepted the wooden sword he offered me and took up a ready stance.

Ever since the day I split that boulder, Professor Myos’s third son Claytos had started calling me “master.” Apparently I had left a lasting impression on him,

as he had asked me to teach him on the spot.

Of course, I refused just as quickly. I was busy enough with blacksmithing work, creating works as my payment to Myos, and learning sculpting. And besides, Claytos had already been learning another school of swordsmanship. Trying to learn the Yosogi style at the same time would conflict with what he was already being taught, hindering his growth more than it would help it. It would also be an insult to his current teacher.

However, Professor Myos was taking time out of his own busy life to teach me. I was really in his debt. Turning down his son's request because I was too busy felt like exceptional ungratefulness. So instead, I agreed that every time I visited the workshop, I'd also spar with Claytos one time. That would be the toll I had to pay to get into the workshop. Claytos had been quite shocked at my use of the word, but Professor Myos had found it quite amusing.

Ten months later, after I had been learning under Myos for a bit more than a year, it seemed the relationship between father and son was starting to improve. Professor Myos would occasionally stop what we were doing to ask how his son's swordsmanship was progressing, and Claytos's view of his father seemed to be gradually changing. Of course, there was no way that this would resolve all of the problems between them, but...how should I put it? Both of them seemed sensitive in much the same way. Like father, like son, I suppose.

As Claytos attacked, I swept his sword aside with my own. He was growing up quickly. The height and muscle mass he had recently put on made the weight of his strikes incomparable to what it was ten months ago. But he was still immature, relying on brute force rather than technique. With his strike turned aside, Claytos's posture broke, allowing me to easily tap him on the chest with the point of my sword. The jab was strong enough to make him jump, but not enough to leave any lingering pain.

"That's it for today. As you are now, you will probably have no problems killing someone weaker than you, but anyone stronger would kill you just as easily. But really, your strikes are getting quite strong."

Claytos bit his lip in a frustrated grimace, but bowed his head nonetheless.

As always, I walked past him and into the workshop.

These contests wouldn't continue forever. The next time the call for military service came to the Marmaros family, Claytos had declared he would answer it. Up until now, Professor Myos had refused to let him on account of his age, but Claytos was getting quite close to adulthood. And when the call came for a representative of the Marmaros household to be sent to the front lines, it would be ideal if that representative came from the family.

Claytos was no longer a child, had no interest in ruling as his father did, and wished to answer the call himself. As Count Marmaros, Myos could do little but allow him to go. All kinds of monsters emerged from the Man-Eating Swamp. There was no telling what would happen on the front lines, and no shortage of nobles who had gone there never to return home. Though I felt that way personally, I was only Professor Myos's student. It wasn't my place to share my opinion on how he should deal with his son.

So like always, I faced the stone, spoke with it, and with the occasional advice and guidance from Myos, the statue within slowly began to take shape. I was making a statue of a dwarf. Yes, my model was my master in blacksmithing and the current king of the dwarves, Oswald. Reproducing the braids that dwarves tied their hair into was quite delicate and complex work, taking a great deal of time. Without the spirits' help in finding the softer and harder parts of the stone, I would have broken off the end here any number of times.

The thin, barely perceptible layers I carved off of the stone were so small as to barely feel like I was making any progress, but the work felt meaningful, and I enjoyed it. I thought I was quite well suited to this kind of plain, hands-on work. However, I was still very much an amateur, so I couldn't express everything from my mind in stone quite yet, which was a bit aggravating.

When I eventually reached a good stopping point, I stepped away from the statue. At the same time, Professor Myos took a break, coming over to look at my work.

"You said you learned your blacksmithing from a dwarf, didn't you?"

In Ludoria and the surrounding nations, you could occasionally see some smiths that had left the kingdom of the dwarves, but they were virtually nonexistent all the way down here in Siglair. Having apparently never seen a

dwarf himself, Professor Myos was quite interested in the statue I was working on.

On that note, apparently, I was also the first elf he had ever met. Though, as an avid participant in the fine arts, he owned a number of paintings by the elven painter Rebees. I thought it would be quite fun if the two got to meet one day. But that aside, it didn't seem his interest today was in the dwarves specifically.

As I nodded, he followed up with another question. "Acer, as a blacksmith, I'd like to ask you...could you make a set of armor for me? Of course, I know you have other work. I don't need it immediately. But I suspect I will have need of it within the year."

Ah, so *that's* what this was about. Of course, I had no intention of turning him down in the slightest.

"This is different from your usual lesson fees. I'll pay for this one with money. I don't need it to be a work of art. I just want it to protect my son...Claytos's life. Could I ask that of you?" This was a request, not from Count Marmaros, not from Professor Myos, but from a father worried about his son.

But that would be quite a difficult task. Monsters obviously didn't care one way or another about art, so there was no need to make the armor that elaborate. Against humans, there was always the possibility of capturing enemies and ransoming them back to their families, so decorated and flamboyant armor had a purpose there, but monsters never took prisoners. Against them, gaudy armor would only serve to put him in more danger.

In that case, you might think plain, unassuming armor would be best, but that wasn't the case either. As the representative of the Marmaros family, Claytos would be leading other soldiers. His armor would need to reflect the dignity of his position. He couldn't appear less impressive than the other nobles, much less the common soldiers. If he came across as less than the leaders of other units, cooperation with those other units would obviously suffer, but even the soldiers of his own unit would underestimate him. And all these problems would be magnified by Claytos being so young.

On top of all that, the armor still needed to have solid defenses, without being too heavy to move or fight in. Even if he wore steel plates that could

protect him from teeth and claws, the overwhelming physical strength of the monsters would be more than enough to crush him inside them. So while being able to defend against their teeth and claws, it needed to be light enough that he could rush forward or retreat easily as the need arose.

A dignity that fit the Marmaros family, but not overly decorated, easy to move in, and strong enough to protect his life. The job sounded incredibly difficult...and incredibly worthwhile. I had no reason to refuse it. Completing a big job like this would fund my time here in Marmaros for quite a while, and above all, I was happy to do anything I could to help Claytos return home safe and sound.



A year after I received the order for a set of armor from Professor Myos—so a little more than two years since I started learning sculpting—Claytos departed for the front lines as a representative for Count Marmaros. He led the Count's soldiers, wearing a brand-new suit of armor.

At his father's request, I had crafted a suit of scale armor for him. Scale armor normally consisted of a cloth or leather undercoat with scalelike plates of metal fastened to it with string or rivets, but this armor actually used the scales of a rather powerful monster. The scales were underlaid with a layer of metal, so they could be fastened to the armor in the same way as metal plates. The leather that made up the undercoat was also made from the hide of the same monster.

As a result, though the armor was decently heavy, it looked quite impressive, was fairly easy to move in, and above all was extremely resilient. It had taken ages to process and work with each of the individual scales, but without that effort, those scales would have injured anyone who touched the armor. On top of that, using both scales and leather from monsters made the armor horrendously expensive, but it would undoubtedly protect anyone who wore it.

Of course, no matter how good the armor, it couldn't guarantee Claytos's safety. The absolute best way to ensure his safety would be for me to go along with him, but I had no interest in doing so; nor would anyone have asked that of me. If it was only a single time, it would be one thing, but the call for someone

from the Marmaros family to come to the front lines would return every few years. And if Claytos wanted to make a name for himself as a warrior, he needed to get stronger by himself.

At any rate, he'd have a veteran aide at his side, so he should be fine if he wasn't overly reckless. The two years we had spent sparring had considerably blunted his self-confidence, so he should have had a good grasp on his limits.

There was nothing more I could do for him. Having received payment for the armor, all that was left for me was to wait for Claytos to come back from the front lines as a greater man than when he left.

However, it might have actually been a stroke of good fortune that Claytos was sent to his military post at that time. A few months after his departure, an air of unease settled over the city of Marmaros.

It had all started with the discovery of the corpse of a man in the middle of the city square. As much as the people of Siglair were aware of the ever-present danger of the Man-Eating Swamp at their border, a body being found in the city would stir up no small commotion. There was an immediate explosion of rumors and wild speculation. It didn't help that Marmaros was an otherwise affluent and safe city. Another body turned up the next week, a woman left in the same city square. There was no connection between the two victims, so rumors of a serial killer hiding somewhere in the city abounded, and the whole city went on high alert...but I knew a bit more than the public.

The two victims seemed unconnected on the surface, but they were actually both undercover operatives for the Marmaros family. Though they did other work in the city as a cover, behind the scenes they worked to gather and manipulate information, investigate illicit activity within the city, and dig out foreign spies. They had important roles in protecting the city from large-scale trouble.

Of course, I knew all this because they had investigated me in the past. For about half a year after I had given Professor Myos the cinquedea I made, I could always feel them watching me. Naturally, they had gone to great pains to hide their surveillance, but I was pretty sensitive to people watching me, and

ordinary humans had no way of hiding their activities from the spirits. So while they spied on me, I asked the wind spirits to eavesdrop on them, allowing me to learn their affiliation.

While Professor Myos had come to trust me relatively quickly, his retainers—Viscount Balestra Kyant in particular—had become especially suspicious of me as soon as they saw the cinquedea I'd made. Well, a total stranger showing up and asking the Count to teach him to make sculptures *was* more than a little suspicious, so I understood his feelings. I didn't let their surveillance bother me.

However, the fact that the two agents had been killed in the exact same way was a problem. They had slash wounds on their body, their necks were broken, and then their bodies had been dumped in the public square. It was as if the killer was trying to make a statement.

Who was that message for? I doubted it was for the people of Marmaros. While the common citizens would no doubt be quite disturbed by the display, there wasn't anything they could really do about it. Then again, maybe spreading fear among the populace *was* one of the culprit's goals. Seeing his faithful people cowering under the shadow of fear would no doubt hurt Professor Myos tremendously.

It was a threat. Someone was trying to force Count Marmaros into accepting their demands. Unfortunately, that threat was going to be getting in my way as well.



One day, as I was commuting to the workshop in the Marmaros estate as usual, the guard at the entrance to the estate stopped me. I had been coming here for two years, so we were quite familiar with each other and had spoken on numerous occasions. His face looked quite apologetic.

"The Count has decided he has nothing more to teach you, and so has commanded that you leave the city immediately."

Ah. So that's how it was. I could understand Professor Myos saying something like that. If this incident was an attempt to threaten the Count, it would hardly end with the deaths of two of his agents. There was a good chance the next victim would be someone close to the Count...for example, a traveling elf who

visited the Count's estate often.

That was why Professor Myos was trying to get me out of the city as soon as possible without even taking the time to meet me first. It was a bit infuriating. Of course, I wasn't angry at Myos. He was just trying to protect me.

But with me gone, the next victim would end up being someone even closer to him. It could be one of his retainers, or maybe even a member of his family. Well, I figured it would be a while before they were willing to make an attempt on the life of any nobility, but I couldn't say that for sure.

Even so, Professor Myos insisted that I leave the city as soon as possible. Just thinking how he must have felt in this situation, there was no way I wouldn't be furious. I was angry not with Professor Myos, but with the culprit who had forced him into this position.

If this was all an attempt to threaten Count Marmaros into accepting some demand, there would need to be some evidence pointing toward it. Otherwise, no matter how much they threatened him, there would be no way to know what they actually wanted. Professor Myos would no doubt know exactly who the culprit was, and exactly what they were after.

Though I felt a little guilty for doing so, I had taken the liberty of listening in on his and the viscount's conversation about the topic, so I now knew as well. So when the guard stopped me, my reply was instant.

"Okay, I understand. But I'd like you to give a message to the Professor for me: 'Once this is all resolved, let's meet again.'" After giving the guard that message, I left.

It wouldn't have been especially difficult to force my way through. Even the guard knew full well that he wouldn't be able to stop me, and had probably been ordered not to hurt me no matter what. But that approach would cause problems for the guard himself, and I knew him too well to subject him to that.

There was no helping it. I would have to say goodbye to the satisfying life of learning I had found here. Since I'd had a bit of knowledge of carving and engraving from my blacksmithing career, and the ability to speak with the earth spirits to learn about the stone I was working with, I had picked up the skills of a sculptor fairly quickly. I couldn't call myself an expert by any stretch, but I had



the knowledge and the foundation needed to improve on my own. The one thing I still lacked, that I wanted to pick up from Professor Myos, was his skill in expression. But that would have to be something I learned on my own now.

That was why I could accept having to leave the city. But there was one small thing I wanted to clean up before I left.

The church, a place for believers who worshipped the harvest god, was based in the holy city in Radlania. The harvest god religion was peaceful, giving thanks to the earth for the blessings it offered, and taught cooperation with the other races that lived off that land with them. Actually, the priests of the harvest god were typically calm and good-hearted people. One notable example was the priest I had met shortly after I left my life in the forest: a member of the adventuring party White Lake, Martena.

However, as obvious as it might be, what was typical was not absolute. In particular, with a large number of believers and thus a large amount of authority gathered in Radlania, keeping everything running prim and proper on the surface often involved vicious power struggles behind the scenes.

I had no particular esteem for the church, so if I were to put them roughly in order of importance, the head of the church was the pope. Beneath him were the archbishops, then the bishops, then the priests. There were three archbishops serving the pope in the holy city, plus an additional one in each country to help spread the religion. The bishops served under them, while the priests' role was to teach the common people.

Of course there was more complexity to it, like the archbishops in the holy city being the only ones who could become the next pope, or differing ranks among priests based on seniority, or special status given to those who could use Divine Arts. What was important here was that the next pope was selected from the three archbishops serving in the holy city, and voted on by all archbishops currently serving in the church.

In short, it was a political battle. Any political struggle came with its share of gift giving, and the current incident in Marmaros seemed to be involved. As a treasure given to the world by the harvest god, marble was the most suitable

gift for someone from the church. On top of that, a cathedral built from marble more effectively conveyed the authority of their god, and thus also strengthened the authority of the archbishop stationed there and Radlania in general.

In short, Count Marmaros already had a strong relationship with one of the archbishops and so sent them a great deal of marble, but now another faction was trying to intervene and take those exports for themselves. This faction had employed the skills of an expert assassin, likely a user of the Divine Arts, to do the convincing for them.

The head of this faction was, as expected, an archbishop from the holy city: a man named Vischea. He was the mastermind behind the killings happening in Marmaros.



Using magic to float up in the sky, I looked down at the city of Marmaros at night. A number of guards were patrolling the city, marked by the lights of their flickering torches. After two murders, they were on high alert against a third. Seeing the city enveloped in darkness from up here, it almost felt like it was cowering in fear.

Even if Count Marmaros gave in to the demands, the killings probably wouldn't stop right away. Once the merchants associated with Archbishop Vischea began getting more marble, the murders would probably continue for a little while. That would serve to obscure the connections between the deal and the killings, as well as further dampen any thoughts the Count might have of fighting back.

However, if the next victim was a member of Count Marmaros's family, or one of his important retainers, it would only push him further into a corner, forcing him to start fighting back. It was really dirty work.

No matter how vigilant the guards were, the darkness of the night lay thick over the city. There were any number of places the culprit could remain hidden. Drawing back my bow, I loosed two arrows in quick succession. The arrows cut through the night, striking a pair of rings soaring through the air.

Of course it wasn't a toy ring like one children might play with, but a chakram

—a bladed ring used for assassinations in the southern countries of the Far East. Those chakrams had been heading to take the life of another one of the agents protecting Marmaros from the shadows, until my arrows nailed them to the ground. Even within the darkness, where the patrolling guards couldn't see anything, there was no escaping the sand and dust carried by the night breeze.

Weakening my flight spell, I settled down on the ground by the collapsed agent. No further attacks came. The attacker must have been on guard after their attack was suddenly thwarted. That was surprisingly cautious for a serial killer, but I supposed it was to be expected for an assassin.

Landing in a park in the city, I found the agent. It was the old man who had told me about Professor Myos when I first saw the wolf statue.

“Y-You are...”

The assassin wasn't the only one surprised to see me descending from the sky.

I hadn't checked beforehand who the victim was this time, but now that I saw it was someone I knew, I was quite glad I had chosen to intervene.

“Hey, long time no see. A lot has happened since we first met. Sorry, but would you mind if I handled this guy?”

After numerous assassinations, Marmaros's agents were still operating independently. There must have been a reason for that. If the agents gathered together in groups and protected themselves, there were two options for the assassin. They could either try to take on the entire group at once, or find new prey. There was no reason the assassin had to kill agents working for Marmaros. If they became too difficult prey, the assassin could start aiming for the Count's retainers, and with their forces all gathered together, the agents would be less able to protect the assassin's new target.

So instead, the agents made themselves easier targets, and this old man had made himself seem like particularly easy pickings among them. He was likely trying to protect the younger agents from meeting this same fate. If he was killed, it would probably buy a week of safety for the others.

But now that I was here, that was no longer necessary. I would end the incidents in Marmaros today, and have the archbishop behind them pay for ending my days of study.

Of course, I doubted the archbishop even knew I existed, but that wouldn't stop retribution from coming for him. It was time for him to learn about cause and effect. As a clergyman, that was something he should have been well aware of already.

The old man hesitated for a moment, but with no other options, he quickly nodded and began treating his injured leg. As expected of someone protecting this city for many years, he was quick to make a decision. So I put my worries about the old man's well-being aside. I turned my attention forward, glaring at the assassin hiding in the shadow of the buildings around him, to show him that his attempt at stealth was meaningless.

Quickly realizing there was no escape, the assassin attacked. Two more chakrams flew through the air, as if some force was pulling them toward me. I twisted out of the way to dodge them, but they curved back around to pursue me. They would probably continue until they hit me.

It seemed this was the Divine Art the assassin possessed. He could manipulate the chakrams with his mind, attacking his target while keeping himself perfectly hidden. It was certainly a power well suited to assassination, but I already had a good guess as to the true nature of that ability.

At any rate, continuing to run would just lead to those chakrams eventually catching up to and killing me. There was no guarantee the assassin could only control two at a time either. So I reached for my sword, ready to cut them out of the air.



But instead of swinging my sword, I dropped low and jumped through the gap between the chakrams. The cloak I was wearing—or more accurately, the inner lining of this cloak—was made from dragon scales. Small, lightweight throwing weapons would never be able to pierce it.

I lunged for the figure hiding in the shadows. For a moment, I felt a pressure, like someone grabbing hold of my neck, but I dashed through it. As much as the

pair of chakrams were weapons meant to bring down the assassin's prey, they were also a distraction. The pressure I felt around my neck was the assassin's true weapon.

Both previous victims had their bodies torn up, but also had their necks broken. That wasn't just a means to make their deaths look more brutal. The pressure I had felt was the invisible hand of the assassin trying to break my neck.

The control of the chakrams through the air was similar, like an invisible, extendable arm. In other words, the assassin's Divine Art was telekinesis. It was the same one used by my old friend that had passed away long ago, Martena, so I knew full well what its weaknesses were.

I had likened the power to an invisible hand before, but that wasn't actually how telekinesis worked. The power worked by forcing distant objects to move as the user wished. That might not sound too different, but it was far more convenient than an invisible appendage that one had to move to manipulate objects. All it took was a strong focus and mental image to create the change you wanted.

Unlike something simple like pushing a person or object, breaking someone's neck would require applying strong pressure in two places and from two directions simultaneously. The mental image necessary to create that effect would be rather complex, making it a reasonably difficult application of their power. So if I continued barreling forward and closing the distance between us, the sudden change in our relative positions would make their job all that much harder.

The assassin wasn't wearing the stereotypical all-black getup of his profession, but instead looked like a middle-aged man in the clothes of a traveling priest. The pair of swords on his hip didn't really match his outfit, though.

In order to end the fight as quickly as possible, I swung my sword for the first time to take off his arm. As brutal a method as it was, the pain of such a grievous injury would make it all but impossible for him to focus on his telekinesis.

Or so I had thought. Instead, the assassin drew his own sword, barely managing to deflect mine in time. He retaliated with a swift slash of his own, far quicker than I would have expected from someone suddenly cornered while crouching down in hiding.

I managed to dodge around the attack, but I was still quite startled. With the magic in my sword reinforcing its strength and durability, a slash backed by the techniques of the Yosogi School should have cut through one or two swords of ordinary steel without even slowing down. The swordsmanship Kaeha had left behind for me suited my particular magic sword extremely well.

But even so, the assassin had deflected my blade. As far as I could tell, his was an ordinary steel sword. It had certainly taken significant damage where my blade struck it, but it hadn't broken. As a blacksmith, there was no doubting my appraisal of his weapon, which meant the answer to this mystery must have lain in the assassin's skills.

Having recognized the threat of my sword, the assassin made no effort to deflect my second strike. Dodging sideways, he came back with a strike where I wouldn't be able to parry it. He already had both swords drawn.

*Is this a joke?*

I couldn't help but think that. In order to fight on equal footing with me, he would have had to train with the sword for just as long as I had, or have been born a genius. Assuming his appearance told the truth, that he was only human and not a species that lived longer, that only left the latter. Being born as both a genius in swordsmanship *and* with a Divine Art felt incredibly unfair.

In the opening created by my shock, the assassin brought his chakrams back into the fight. This was getting pretty dangerous. At this rate, I might just lose. He was only using his telekinesis to control the chakrams for now, but once he had a grip on my movements, he would eventually be able to steal my weapon or break my neck.

This was all extremely unexpected. The fact this experience was inspiring nostalgic feelings in me spoke to my own hopelessness too. It felt like I was fighting Martena and Claya at the same time. Martena could use her Divine Arts for healing as well as telekinesis, and Claya used a two-handed sword, but

those were small differences. For some strange reason, I was starting to feel happy.

A while ago, I had thought about this. When they were at full strength, I figured White Lake might have been able to take me down. This reminded me of that. But the assassin here was missing something.

With a large wave of my hand, the pursuing chakrams were blown away by a violent gust of wind. No, he didn't have something to make up for the absence of Airena. White Lake might have been able to defeat me, but it would have taken all three of them working together.

Elves and high elves weren't equals by any means, but Airena was an expert spirit caller. Even if the spirits would eventually side with me, both of us giving conflicting commands would no doubt confuse them. Using that opening, Martena's telekinesis could break my guard, allowing Clayas to attack. That might have been enough to kill me.

But the assassin in front of me had no way to call on the spirits. He had no way to defend himself from them either. The gust of wind continued, throwing the chakrams off course before wrapping around the assassin and hurling him up into the air. A downburst of air slammed him back into the ground, before the wind dispersed in all directions.

He had landed just in front of the wolf statue. I hadn't held back much in the attack, but it seemed the assassin wasn't quite dead. He was unconscious at least, and even when he came to, he would likely be unable to move for quite some time. He wouldn't be able to focus to use his telekinesis either.

There was no need to fight any further. I didn't want to kill anyone with my sword that I couldn't beat without the power of the spirits. Even if I spared him now, the old man I had saved would call for help and have him detained.

So my next course of action would be to leave Marmaros and Siglair behind, heading for the holy city in Radlania.

I would deliver a bit of ill fortune to the source of all this unrest.

Three months later, the great cathedral under Archbishop Vischea's authority

was reduced to a heap of rubble. Remaining at the scene of the crime was an enormous stone giant, fists raised as if it had pounded the cathedral to dust itself.

Rumors quickly spread. Archbishop Vischea had earned the wrath of the harvest god, and so a giant of stone had appeared to demolish his cathedral. There was no other explanation how the cathedral could be destroyed in a single night, nor how a stone giant could suddenly appear out of nowhere. Or so the rumors went.

But I was sure if Professor Myos saw that stone giant, he would criticize it for being too half-hearted. A sculpture made by one's own hand could be refined constantly, but one created by giving the earth spirits a rough image to replicate would create a shoddy result like this. But even so, though I could create mountains years ago, I never would have been able to create a statue like this.

At any rate, Archbishop Vischea had his authority stripped from him, and he lost his place in the church. I couldn't care less what happened to him after that. Someone using their standing to trample on others should have their authority taken away. That was just retribution. What happened next would be decided by Archbishop Vischea's own actions up until then.

Therefore, my involvement in this case was over. It did leave one last lingering question, though. Where would I go next?



## Chapter 5 — To Build Something New

About a year had passed since I left Marmaros and Siglair. I was now living in south Zieden—what was once Kirkoim—in a newly founded village, helping to restore the countryside. I had been led there by a chance encounter after leaving Radlania. Unable to decide on a destination, I had been hunting in a nearby forest, where I saved a group of children who were being attacked by monsters.

As much as they were trying to rebuild southern Zieden, the damage caused by the war had left no small number of monsters in its wake. Even so, these children still had nothing to eat, and so were searching the forests for any food they could come across. At this time of year, the forests would be overflowing with fruit, so even humans could easily find something to fill their bellies. Trips to the forest were likely a daily routine for those kids. Naturally, their parents had forbidden them from going into the forest, so they had probably started by finding fruit on the outskirts. But even if it had been a coincidence, that discovery held an allure the children couldn't resist. Little by little, they found themselves going deeper and deeper into the woods in search of food.

If the parents had been paying closer attention, they might have noticed what was happening, but even they were in a desperate struggle to survive. It was no wonder they missed something the children were intentionally keeping hidden.

But why were they so poor? Why was life so difficult for them? It was because they were new arrivals here in south Zieden, tasked with rebuilding the devastated countryside. From children of farmers whose elder siblings inherited the land of their parents, to soldiers whose homes had been destroyed in the war, to prostitutes who had aged out of their profession, all kinds of people from other countries and even northern Zieden had gathered together in the hope of developing a new village. They faced extreme poverty and unfamiliar work in hopes of putting down roots here.

But regardless of their circumstances, the monsters living in the forest would

offer them no quarter. From their perspective, the children entering the forest were invaders in their territory, and easy prey to boot. If I hadn't happened to be in the area, there wouldn't be a scrap of those children left to take home to their parents.

When I brought the children home safely, the adults dug deep to find a reward for me from their already feeble stores. Even if they had taken their eyes off them, their children were still their treasure, and their future. Even if the situation in the village calmed down, without children, they would eventually disappear.

Their gratitude for saving the children was boundless, but I wasn't an adventurer. I didn't hunt monsters for profit. The reward they offered was filled to the brim with their thankfulness, but if I accepted it, it would be like hunting monsters for money. I had killed the monsters because I wanted to save the children. Putting both of their lives on the scales, I had chosen to prioritize the lives of the children. I didn't want to muddy the waters around my motivation by adding rewards into the mix. Above all, it just wasn't my style to accept such a gift, though that was something the villagers found difficult to accept.

So instead of taking a material reward, I asked them for a favor: to let me stay in their village for a time. My actions in Radlania would no doubt make me stand out for a time, so it would help to have a place where I could stay under the radar until things cooled off. I was also still in the middle of learning sculpting, so a calm place where I could continue my practice would help. There probably wasn't anyone in Radlania who could tie me to what had happened there, but I figured it was best to be safe. As for practicing sculpting, I supposed it didn't have to be here, but it was faster to stay here than go all the way back to Ludoria.

While baffled at the request of an elf asking to stay in a newly founded human village, as thanks for having saved their children, they gladly welcomed me to stay.



Bang! Bang! Bang!

My hammer struck the steel in a steady rhythm, with significant but

controlled strength. No matter what the circumstances of my being here, no matter that I was only going to be staying temporarily, I still needed to work to earn my keep in a village like this. I wasn't interested in staying here as their guest.

After thinking about what I could contribute to this fledgling village, nothing seemed more appropriate than my blacksmithing. That said, there wasn't much of a need for swords, spears, or armor in a village like this. I couldn't say there was *no* need, but farming implements to work the hard earth were much more important than weapons for fighting monsters. Kitchenware like pots and knives were also in high demand. Ah, and of course, the ever-important nails, hinges, and other metal fixtures necessary for construction were equally important. I was actually pretty confident in my ability to make nails.

The people of the village didn't need their tools to be exceptionally high-quality. A knife that cut was all they could ask for, and if it was sturdy, all the better. Ornamentation on their farming implements would be interesting at first, but they would soon be lost to the dirt and grime of heavy work.

For someone who had worked as a blacksmith in a large city, especially one who entered blacksmithing competitions, working in a small village like this would feel terribly boring. But for some reason, I found the work of making farming implements, kitchenware, and nails—all things critical for daily life—to be quite a bit of fun. It was reminiscent of when I'd first started out as a blacksmith.

Though I had recently brought back the knowledge of forging katana from the Far East and made an elaborate dagger for a noble, the first thing I ever made and sold as a blacksmith was a nail. As the foremost blacksmith in our city, people hadn't been comfortable asking my master Oswald for such basic necessities, so instead they came to me. I remembered how elated I had been to see the nails I had made being used to build up the town around me.

Was there anyone left who remembered Oswald and I as we were then? I couldn't think of anyone but Airena. Oswald had become the king of the dwarves, but now I was here making nails, and fixing pots and kettles. Would he laugh if he saw me now? Would he praise me? Actually, he very well might be jealous, wishing he could get elbow-deep in work like this again. That was the

kind of guy Oswald was.

“Acer, let’s go into the forest!”

After I’d had a relaxing morning in the forge, a group of children came to see me in the afternoon. Though they had been thoroughly scolded for sneaking away to the forest where they had been attacked, the fact of the matter was they had been driven by a lack of food in the village. I had been living here for about half a year now, but the food situation hadn’t improved all that much. Perhaps it was obvious, but the quality of life in a newly founded village wouldn’t improve that quickly.

So the children were permitted to go into the forest, on the condition that I accompany them. But this time, it wasn’t to find food for themselves. They were going for the sake of the village, looking for wild fruit, edible plants, and tubers that they could bring back to supplement the village’s food supply. If they could explore the forest safely, it would be an invaluable resource to the village.

With my arrival in the village, the children were tasked with that work. Originally, the children already helped out with the work at home, but having a unique role in providing food for the village felt much more special to them. They were quite excited to forage in the woods for the sake of the others.

While making sure no harm came to the children, I also harvested any medicinal herbs that would be useful for the village, and kept an eye out for signs of deer and boar. If the populations of these animals started to grow, they could threaten the fields and orchards built near the village. Thus, any village living on the edge of a forest needed to hunt proactively. Well, really, my main interest was in the meat they could offer us, and that went the same for both the children and adults of the village. Of course, while I was with the children, my priority was keeping them safe, but if I got a good lead on them, it would make my solo hunting trips later that much smoother.

Another important part of our trips into the forest was getting a handle on the movements of local monsters. In this area, red wolves were particularly common. The war in this region likely provided plenty of dead bodies for them to feed on, allowing their population to expand rapidly. In other words, they

had acquired a taste for human flesh, and so had begun hunting humans. In order to improve the safety of the region, soldiers had been regularly patrolling and wiping out packs of monsters, but the survivors that had been left were the particularly sly ones.

The whole reason I was in this village at all was because children had been attacked by red wolves, so they were something we needed to be particularly cautious about. Of course, no matter how clever the red wolves were, while they were in the forest, there was no way they could escape the gaze of a high elf.

I brought my troupe of children back to the village before the sun crept too close to the horizon. The forest had plentiful blessings to share with those who asked, but if you got too comfortable there and let your guard down, its fangs could be equally dangerous. The children would be safe while I was with them, but I wouldn't be around forever. Therefore, I only let them forage for a limited amount of time each day. These children had already experienced the dangers the forest could offer, so they were quite understanding.

Of course, once I left, someone else in the village would need to take up the role of hunter to keep animals away from the village's orchards and crops and to provide meat for the village. I had no issue teaching them how to move around in the forest. But that was a conversation for a later time. For now, the rest of the day was to be spent on my hobbies.

After taking the children back home and enjoying a meal provided by the women of the village, I returned to the home I had been given here, and took up my hammer and chisel. Remembering each lesson Professor Myos had taught me one by one, I stripped stone off of the block one layer at a time.

I still loved blacksmithing, and my time out in the forest was pleasant, but the most fun I was having these days was right here. That was because I could really feel myself improving as I practiced. I had plenty of work to do throughout the day, so unfortunately I couldn't totally immerse myself in learning. But seeing my work slowly progressing every day was good in its own way.

So this was my current hobby. Even as the sun set, my eyes were better in the

dark than humans, so together with the aid of the spirits I had no problem continuing my work. So until I started falling asleep, I'd keep chipping away at the stone block. I'd then wipe myself down with some water and a cloth and head to bed. Between my blacksmithing, foraging trips, and sculpting, every day in the village was busy, but life in this still-developing village was quite fulfilling.



After spending a year living in this village, I came to the conclusion that what they lacked most here was people. It wasn't that the population was too low; rather, they didn't have enough people with the necessary skills to properly develop a village.

For example, there were no professional carpenters, so the villagers built all of their structures, including their own homes, on their own. This led to cold drafts in the buildings at night, and above all, left the buildings unstable. You might be able to write off the homes being that way as unavoidable, but even the protective fences built around the village lacked any sort of sturdiness.

To put it another way, the villagers were in poverty because they lacked people with professional skills. That was only to be expected. Anyone with those sorts of skills had countless avenues open to them in life. There was no reason for them to come to a newly founded village like this.

So the people here had no choice but to do everything themselves, eventually delegating work to those who had more talent for it, giving them time to build up the experience and knowledge to improve their craft. The next generation would inherit those skills, and the village would slowly build up its own lineage of skilled workers.

As convoluted as it might seem, this method would gradually lead to an improvement in their way of life. The slow accumulation of skills and facilities in the village was an important asset for its future.

However, this particular village had the good fortune of a professional like me stumbling into their midst by chance, though maybe it was a bit conceited for me to say that myself. After all, not only was I a capable smith, but I was also able to build my own forge. With my arrival, the villagers no longer had to worry about how they'd maintain their tools, and the nails I made for them

made it possible for them to start filling their homes with furniture. On top of that, the surplus of metal goods we produced gave us room to trade with other villages in similar situations.

Their good fortune wouldn't last forever though. I very much planned to leave this village behind someday and continue my journey. I had told the villagers that much when I'd first arrived. So I was more than ready when they asked me to leave behind some of my skills for them.

"Acer, please teach us blacksmithing!" As a representative of the village, a young man bowed his head to me.

I couldn't really refuse. I knew these people well enough that I wanted them to live happily, even after I was gone. I wanted to do everything I could for them, so I could move on without any regrets.

"Looks like life is going to get busy," I mumbled, patting the young man on the shoulder.

Yes, things would be busy for a while. On top of my daily work, I would have to start making time to teach.

Also, I realized something. The young man who had come to me wasn't the only one who would want me to teach him. Every morning, a number of children grabbed sticks and branches of the right size and joined me in my morning sword practice. I imagined it wouldn't be long before they asked me to teach them for real. Once that happened, a number of the adults would probably want to join in as well.

I had ended up teaching swordsmanship and blacksmithing in the middle of an otherwise relaxing life plenty of times before. This time, however, life was already busy with the development of the village. Even so, there was plenty of knowledge I could leave behind for those who wanted to learn. It seemed my hands were going to be quite full.

But I was able to live life so happily because others had given their time to teach me. Oswald had taught me blacksmithing, Kaeha had taught me swordsmanship, and there was also magic, horsemanship, and sculpting. All of that influenced how I lived my life and how I taught others. So I would do everything in my power to share what I had learned as well. No matter how

busy it would make me, sharing what I had learned with others would no doubt lead to even further growth for me.

I would only spend so much time in this village. I couldn't teach the people here absolutely everything I knew. But even so, I wanted to share everything I could with the people who had let me live among them.



Little by little, I began teaching the people of the village. About half a year later, something strange happened.

With my daytime work and teaching complete, I was spending my evening working on my sculpting like always. However, I couldn't really spend a lot of time on it now. I was confident in my stamina, but even I was starting to flag as my days grew so full. I needed to make sure I got a good amount of rest every night.

This was probably the busiest I would be here. It wouldn't be long before the young guy I was teaching blacksmithing would know enough to start helping me out with simple work. Once the kids I was teaching swordsmanship had picked up the basic moves and learned a bit of control, they'd be able to spar on their own as well. Of course, I would still have to supervise, but it would make my burden a little lighter.

I planned to take on more students after that. Apparently we were getting requests from another nearby village for me to teach them blacksmithing. I was told they had someone teaching carpentry there, so they were looking for an exchange. That would be a huge benefit to both of our villages.

I would accept their offer once I had a bit more time on my hands. Half of the reason was for the sake of the village, but half was for the guy I was already teaching. When I left this village behind, he would likely take over as the village's blacksmith. When that happened, he would inevitably have to take on students of his own at some point. They might be his own children, but it didn't matter much who it was. Having experience teaching and looking after a junior in blacksmithing would be invaluable for him when that day came. Having someone learn from him to push him forward would also be a good influence. No one wanted to see someone who started learning after they did surpass



them.

I would take on new students, so I would probably be busy here for another year or two at least. But that was fine for now. I would have plenty of time to relax in the future. If I spent all my days in empty leisure, I'd grow tired of it. If I spent all my days hard at work, I'd grow exhausted. I could enjoy both by taking them in moderation.

But while I was thinking over these things, chipping away at my stone block, I felt something prick at the edge of my consciousness. It was really similar to the way the spirits would speak to me, but it definitely didn't come from them. The spirits were lingering around me, the same as always...actually wait, weren't they getting kind of excited?

When I focused on the sensation to try and find its source, my attention was immediately drawn to my bag in the corner of the room. That realization immediately made my blood run cold. The only thing close to the spirits that was in my bag were the golden dragon's scales. It was almost impossible to fathom, but had something happened to him?

If the golden dragon were to awaken and go on a rampage, not even the enormous Ancient Gold Empire would last more than a night. And long before we heard news of their fall, the dragon's breath would blanket the whole continent in fire. However, this calling seemed a bit too gentle for that, so I wanted to think it wasn't anything so serious.

Almost panicking, I quickly rifled through my bag, but the sensation wasn't coming from the fragments of dragon scales. After thinking about it for a moment, that wouldn't have made sense anyway. I had more dragon scales worked into my cloak than were left in my bag. If the dragon was calling out to me, I would have felt it from my cloak before I felt it from my bag, or at least both at the same time.

So what was the source of this feeling? It did seem to be a fragment of something. It was thick and hard, but not gold, nor a scale. Since when did I have something like this? With that thought, I pulled the fragment of material from my bag and inspected it closely. It appeared to be a piece of eggshell. With

the size and shape of this fragment, it must have been an incredibly large egg too.

*Ah, now I remember.*

There was only one thing I could think of that would be born from an egg this size. It was a fragment of Heero's egg, the phoenix born at the heart of the sacred ground in the middle of the Great Pulha Woodlands. I now remembered that enormous baby chick had said something like, "If you're going to carry around a dragon's scales, you should carry a piece of my eggshell with you too." I didn't really follow his logic, but at any rate, he had used his beak to skillfully snap off a good-sized fragment of his shell and stuffed it into my bag.

With that realization, the sensation I was getting from the shell started to feel somewhat familiar. It was like the voice coming from the phoenix egg, the one longing for more power to be poured into it when I'd waited for it to hatch.

I was clearly exhausted from my day's work, as my first response to seeing even the piece of eggshell wanting that same treatment was to laugh. What would happen if I gave more energy to this little piece of eggshell? Of course, exhausted as I was, I wasn't about to give it my own energy. So instead, I reached into my bag and pulled out a piece of dragon scale.



As I rubbed the dragon scales against my mithril armband, the energy released from them coursed through my arm and into the eggshell. I guess it had been about five years since I saw the phoenix hatch. Going back to the activity I had spent years doing, day in and day out, felt a bit nostalgic.

Once it had finished absorbing the energy, the shell went through a dramatic change. The milk-white eggshell turned into a vibrant crimson. The solid, hard shell changed in shape and texture. Before long, I was looking at a tiny chick. It was small enough to fit in my palm, and in fact that was where it was sitting.

*It has been a long time, high elf who hatched me.* As the baby bird cheeped, its thoughts flowed clearly into my mind. It felt like I was being pranked somehow.

"Yeah, long time no see. I assume you're Heero?" It seemed the chick sitting

on my palm was in fact the crimson phoenix that should have been living in the Forest Depths.

As I gave him a quizzical look, trying to figure out what was going on, the little chick puffed up proudly. *Now that some time has passed since my birth, I am capable of many more things.*

All right, then. I didn't understand the logic at all, but it seemed Heero had some way of communicating with me here while still in the Forest Depths. Considering the distance between us at the moment, that was actually rather impressive. Even with the help of the wind spirits, I wouldn't be able to send a message that far. As expected of one of the ancient races, born from the hands of the Creator itself.

I suppose the high elves were the same, but...I kind of got the feeling that the high elves were a bit lacking in comparison to the other ancient races. First of all, aside from lacking physical bodies, the spirits were effectively perfect beings. As forces of nature given will, opposing them meant opposing the world itself.

Compared to them, high elves were basically spirits given flesh. Or put another way, spirits shackled by flesh. Though the spirits would lend their power to high elves, we couldn't wield the power of nature in the same way they could. I had never met a giant, so I couldn't say for sure, but I had a feeling they were physically more powerful than us.

As far as I could tell, my guess was that the phoenixes could manipulate the power of life itself—the most obvious application being their cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Their bodies served as nourishment for the birth of a great forest, which then raised the phoenix's egg to start life anew. Judging by the feel, look, and even smell of the tiny chick sitting on my hand now, this little Heero was very much alive. So while staying in the heart of the Forest Depths, Heero had managed to birth a new tiny version of himself all the way out here. The dragon had created guardians to watch over his slumber, so I imagined the phoenixes could do something similar. It didn't seem particularly energy efficient, though.

And of course, at the top of the hierarchy were the true dragons themselves. As creatures, they had the ultimate physical form. At the same time, they

possessed the same ability as the spirits to influence nature, and the same ability as the phoenixes to control life. It almost felt like the other four ancient races had been born from a trial-and-error process that had all led to the perfect beings that were the dragons.

Of course, none of this was to say I envied the other races. As I was, I was only barely able to enjoy all the abundant experiences this world had to offer. If I were as powerful as a dragon, simply moving threatened to destroy the world around me. I would probably end up spending my entire life asleep, just like the golden dragon did now. No matter how powerful I was, no matter how long I could maintain my sense of self, I wouldn't be able to bear a life where the only times I awoke were to destroy the world. Even Heero, chirping happily as I stroked him with a finger, could only appear in the human world in a form like this.



As weak as we were, even shackled by mortal flesh, I felt incredibly blessed to be a high elf.

“So Heero, what brings you all the way out here?” As therapeutic as sitting and relaxing here with the tiny Heero was, my curiosity eventually got the better of me.

With a surprised shake, Heero seemed to shrink back. *I became able to come see you, so I wished to do so.*

Ah, okay. I see. He didn't have any particular business; he just wanted to come see me. That made sense.

I was a bit surprised to see him in such a cute form, but that was a good enough answer for me. After consoling him with some more stroking, telling him that was perfectly fine, I gave a big yawn. As expected, I was quite tired. It was about time to clean myself up and get rested for a new day. I hadn't made much progress on my sculpting today, but it had still been a good night.

Maybe I'd make a sculpture of Heero someday too. If I was going to make it life-sized, it wouldn't be able to fit in my house...but maybe I could get some space on the outskirts of the village to make it. After seeing him for the first time in so long, that was what I started to think about.

After wiping myself down and getting changed, I put the tiny Heero on my pillow beside me and lay down for the night. Despite being so small, the warmth he gave off was no different from normal. The pleasant sensation quickly took me away to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up to find Heero gone. Instead, lying on my pillow was a little piece of eggshell. Picking it up and inspecting it carefully, there was no doubt it was just a piece of eggshell, leaving me confused all over again. I really didn't understand how he did what he did. But the eggshell still had a little warmth to it, so I was at least sure my experience the night before hadn't been some sort of hallucination.

In that case, I was sure I'd see him again whenever he wanted to see me. With that thought, I put the piece of eggshell back into my bag, careful not to lose it. I wouldn't forget that I had it with me anymore.



Exactly two years after I had started living in this village, the villagers held a party to celebrate the anniversary of my arrival. All that really entailed was the food being a bit fancier and the village being a bit rowdier than usual, but I was more than happy to accept their feelings. The fact they wanted to celebrate such a thing was a sign that they really had welcomed me as one of their own.

Besides that, the fact that the village had grown enough to have the resources to afford even a small celebration like this was a cause for celebration in and of itself. This time last year, a party like this would have been unthinkable. Unfortunately, there wouldn't be any alcohol served at the party today. As much as the village had a bit of extra room when it came to food, that didn't mean they had the funds to import alcohol right away. Even if everyone started working on their own homemade drinks using fruit or grains, it would be a while before they produced anything drinkable. But if things kept going the way they were, I had no doubts there'd be plenty of drinks to go around at next year's celebration. I was really looking forward to that.

The main dish was meat pies made with rabbits or birds that had been trapped near the village. There were grains and vegetables cultivated within the village, as well as wild plants and fruit to accompany them. Since my arrival in the village, we also had the option of deer and boar that I had hunted, but because I was the guest of honor for this particular party, I hadn't been included in the preparations. Okay, I was still supervising the children as they gathered wild plants and fruit for the party, but that was different.

So as modest as the feast set before us was, the occasion elevated it all to a whole new level. The pies were wrapped in the joy of the village people as much as they were in crusts. Everyone was cheerful, eating, singing, and making merry. Even without alcohol, the party was quite energetic.

And so, I decided to avoid staying up late that night and go to bed early. There were a lot of married couples in this village. Some of them had moved to the village as a couple with children already, but many others had gotten married specifically with the intent of moving out here. Now that the village had reasonable access to food, and with the high energy from today's party...well, you could guess where that would lead. We might just have a few more people

joining us for the celebration next year. I loved kids, so I was ecstatic at the thought of that.

But there was one small thing nagging at me. Even if they had fully accepted me as one of their own, I still lived in a different flow of time from all of them. While they were born, grew up, and eventually died, I would still be here. It really made me feel like an outsider, like I was no more than an observer here. Of course, my intentions from the start were to leave the village eventually and continue my travels, so that probably played a part in it as well.

I wouldn't say that I disliked this feeling, though. I had always lived my life that way, and I had no plans to change. If I ever grew tired of it, I could just return to my home in the Forest Depths. I was fully aware of just how blessed I was.

But days of celebration like this often made me look back and get lost in thought. When I thought back on all the precious, happy memories I had made in my travels, they always came with an air of loneliness. But when I looked ahead, like to this same day next year, I always saw all the new things waiting for me to enjoy.

It was getting pretty close to the one-hundred-year anniversary of my leaving the Forest Depths behind. I could only wonder where I'd be when that day came.



A bit more than three years after I arrived in the village, a visitor arrived. They weren't here to see the village though, but to see me specifically. The children of the village brought them to see me in the morning, while I was working at the forge in my house.

"Oh, it's really you. It's really Acer... Ha ha, of course you're blacksmithing."

The moment she saw me, she started to tear up and laugh. The young guys who were my students in blacksmithing turned to watch us, eyes brimming with curiosity. It was pretty bold of them to look away from their work while they were swinging their hammers...but I'd let it slide for now.

Honestly, this wasn't the time to be worrying about them. Not with this girl in



front of me.

“Hey, long time no see. You’ve really grown up...or I should say, you’ve really grown quite beautiful, Aiha.”

Yes, it was Aiha, a girl I hadn’t met since I left the Yosogi dojo ten years ago. I didn’t need to flatter her at all. She had grown up into quite the beauty.

The Aiha I knew would have jumped on me at first sight, but now she greeted me with a calm smile. And as much as I was overjoyed to see her, I couldn’t help but see the mastery with which she carried herself. It seemed she had grown tremendously, both as a woman and as a swordswoman.

So I couldn’t help but wonder: why on earth was she all the way out here? As I had promised her, I was occasionally sending letters back to the Yosogi Dojo to confirm I was still doing well. I remembered telling them about my stay in Siglair learning in Marmaros, and that I had moved to southern Zieden, but I had never given any specific details on the location of this village. Tracking me down to a small, remote village like this would have been a daunting task, even for someone who had dedicated their life to being an adventurer as Aiha had.

But at any rate...

“No need to stand around here and talk. Would you like to come in?” I invited her in to hear what she had to say. No matter what business she had with me, nothing would change the fact that I was glad to see her. So first, I needed to provide a warm welcome.

Understanding the situation, my students quickly put away their work and called it a day, while I made sure to individually thank each of the kids who had brought Aiha here before sending them on their way. Once they had all gone, I brought her inside.

“They’re a great bunch of kids. It’s a great village too, to be honest. Is this where you’ve chosen to live?” Aiha asked, taking a seat while I got something out for us to drink. I didn’t have any tea to serve, but I could at least get her some hot water. Ah, after so long since our last meeting, we were going to start with the hard questions, were we? I guess she had never been one to go easy on me.

“I guess so, for now at least. That’s why I’m trying to improve it as best I can. But I still plan on leaving in a few years.” So just like before, I answered as honestly as I could, not trying to sugarcoat it in any way. Though I couldn’t say I was confident this really answered the question she was asking.

Either way, she nodded. “So not even this village can tie you down, huh?” she murmured. Her voice carried both an air of disappointment and relief to it.

After getting drinks for both of us, I put one in front of her and started blowing to cool off my own. Her saying it couldn’t “tie me down” actually stung a little bit. I didn’t travel around because there was something wrong with the places I visited, or because they lacked charm in some way.

But if you asked why, I’d have a bit of difficulty coming up with an answer. Maybe I was just a wanderer by nature, or maybe it was too scary to live alongside people who experienced time in such a different way. Maybe I was just being distracted by the loneliness of meeting and saying goodbye to so many people, but maybe I just really wanted to see as much of this world as I could. I doubted there was any one answer that summed up all my feelings. There were both positive and negative reasons all swirling around inside me, creating feelings I couldn’t quite understand myself.

Her drink still a little hot, Aiha took a sip before speaking again. “Acer, I came here to spar with you. I wanted to cross swords with you like my grandfather did.” Though she looked straight at me as she said it, she couldn’t hide the nerves in her expression.

To be quite honest, I didn’t really understand what she was thinking. If she wanted to spar with me like her grandfather did, that was probably because she wanted to see me and show me something of herself. But was that a good enough reason to track me down to some no-name village in the wilderness of southern Zieden? Would she gain anything from a match with me that could make up for all the work it had taken to find me? No, really it was that I didn’t have the confidence that I could give her anything to make up for it.

Even so, there was no way I would refuse her. I had lived alongside her, watching her grow up little by little. Now that she was an adult, she had come all the way here just to find me. She likely had something she wanted to show

me, something she wanted to prove for herself.

“Sounds good to me. Let’s do it.” So, downing my glass of now acceptably cool water in one go, I accepted her challenge.



As I stood across from her, seeing the way she held her sword, I couldn’t help but feel Aiha had been really blessed with talent as a swordswoman. She wasn’t holding any old wooden sword, but a wooden katana she had brought with her. The wooden swords used by the Yosogi School for practice were single-edged like a katana, so the two were quite similar, but there were still some slight differences between them. With that in mind, Aiha had brought her own practice weapon in her travels across the world to find me. That went to show just how important this match was to her.

Though the Yosogi style of swordsmanship originally used a katana, they had given it up in favor of the straight swords they could find in Ludoria when they arrived and found the local smiths unable to make their traditional weapons. Not only had they stopped developing their techniques with the katana, many of the finer details of their use had been lost. It had only been fourteen years since I brought the knowledge of forging katana back to the Yosogi School. Their study of the katana should have still been in the stage of rediscovering those old techniques, barely starting in the development of anything new.

Even so, as she held her sword up in a guard near her face, I could feel a tremendous pressure coming from its tip. Though it wasn’t enough to overwhelm me, it would still be difficult for me to attack. The problem wasn’t just her guard either. There were minute changes all throughout her stance that made it difficult for me to gauge how she would move.

Of course, we couldn’t just stare at each other forever, though the thought didn’t bother me especially, Aiha said she wanted to have a match with me like her grandfather did, that she wanted me to see the swordswoman she had become. In that case, it was my job to draw out every little change, every little discovery she had made. The most important thing was to enjoy this match to the fullest.

We were having our match in a clearing in the village, the place we regularly

used for sword practice. It wouldn't be long before the other villagers noticed what we were doing and started gathering to watch. Above all, Aiha's presence here would draw attention from them. It wasn't like having an audience was a problem, but the more people gathered around, the harder it would be to focus on what we were doing. Before that happened, I wanted to give Aiha a match where I could invest all of my concentration on her.

How had that innocent, reckless little girl grown up? I wanted to see that for myself. So I took a deep breath, focused, and stepped forward. Aiha's lips twitched into a smile as she moved to intercept.



My match with Aiha probably lasted quite a while. I say probably, because I was so wrapped up in it I lost all track of time. By the time we had reached the end of the match, a large crowd of villagers had gathered around us, so we must have been going for quite a while.

In the end, she had been cornered by my sword. Although she was a genius, she would need a bit more time to catch up to my decades of experience. It felt like she'd be there in another ten years or so.

Despite having lost the match, the little bit of frustration she must have felt was greatly overshadowed by joy.

"You really are strong, Acer," she laughed.

I didn't know what she was hoping to gain from sparring with me, nor what she actually took from the match. But if she was satisfied, then I was happy too. I also felt like our match had opened my eyes in a way. I wanted to keep going, to hold on to this feeling a little bit longer.

"Someday, I'm going to open my own dojo. I'm going to teach others the Yosogi Katana Style myself," Aiha declared, looking me in the eye. Yeah, that wasn't a surprise. After all she had shown me today, I didn't think she'd have any trouble achieving that. "So as advisor to the Yosogi School, make sure you keep an eye on my dojo too, okay?"

The fun of our match and the joy of our reunion left me laughing as she said that. Ah, so that was it. That's what she was after. I was the advisor of the Yosogi School, so if Aiha was going to start another Yosogi dojo, I'd have to watch over them as well.

"I guess I'll have to learn to use a katana at least well enough to seem like I belong there, then," I replied, earning a laugh and a nod from Aiha as well.

After that, Aiha stayed at the village for another three months, teaching me the basics of using a katana. Her presence led to an uptick in villagers interested in swordsmanship, and she ended up cleaning out the entire red wolf population in the area. But, well, those weren't such big affairs.



Almost four years after I arrived here, the village was starting to grow stable enough that I no longer considered it one that was “developing.”

The elven caravan paid us a visit. Though as much as it was a caravan of elves, it wasn't Airená's group. The caravan had grown large enough to split up, now divided into four or five groups that traveled around the east-central region of the continent. The caravan had grown quite impressive for something that started from an idle idea of Rebees and Huratio, and the desire to start trading with the dwarves.

The caravan was visiting to deliver three things I had ordered. The first were seedlings of a medicinal plant that grew close to the Great Pulha Woodlands, where the power of nature was particularly dense. It wasn't something you could normally grow here, but it seemed that Heero's badgering for me to repeatedly provide energy for him from the dragon scales was having an effect on the ground here. If I kept at it for too long, it ran the risk of drawing very dangerous monsters to the area. I thought it was about time to put a stop to it, but the current state of the environment might have been enough to cultivate these plants here, which would become a valuable resource in the region.

Second were two casks of strong liquor imported from the kingdom of the dwarves. I'd ordered them partly because I was really longing to drink some after so long, but also so that the next time we had a party in the village, I could break them out for everyone to enjoy.

The final item, and the thing I wanted most, was information about the situation across the central and western regions of the continent. We were in the central region of the continent, on the east side of the Great Pulha Woodlands, but there were also nations on the western side of the forest, and the whole western region of the continent beyond them. Having spent the past four years helping to develop this village, I had been effectively cut off from all news of what was happening in the world. I had invited the elven caravan to visit in hopes they would share that knowledge with me. I would soon be leaving the village behind, so I needed to decide where I'd be going next.

Of course, I wasn't planning on leaving the moment they told me what I wanted to know. I needed someone to take over the forge here for me, and I wanted to leave a gift behind for the students learning from me from other

villages. It would probably take me about a year to get it all arranged. So I wanted to pick a firm date I would leave, and start making preparations for that day.

After speaking with the elven caravan, after four years of living here, on the third anniversary celebration of my arrival, while everyone was enjoying some dwarven liquor I declared my intention to leave in another year. Everyone was saddened by the news, and more than a few men challenged me to a drinking competition. Naturally, they were all flat on the ground in no time.

The medicinal plants the caravan brought took root in the village without issue. Once they had grown in number, they'd be a real treasure for the region. Though the number of bandits and monsters in the region had dropped sharply in recent years, they would never be entirely eradicated. Hopefully these herbs would help save the lives of the injured from now on. However, there was no guarantee these plants would survive in this environment forever, so I warned the village chief not to grow too reliant on them. Once I left this place and no longer had to answer Heero's calls, there was a chance the land would go back to the way it was. I hoped the powerful influence we had here would remain, but nothing lasted forever. Except for the spirits, the phoenixes, and the dragons.

The seasons turned, and the days flew by. I made simple but sturdy swords for the children to whom I was teaching swordsmanship. I left a huge, life-sized carving of Heero in one of the village's clearings, which quickly became a place for children to play. I sent the blacksmithing students from the other villages home with a brand-new set of tools and swords to protect themselves. I could hardly consider them to be fully-fledged blacksmiths, but at the very least they now had the skills necessary to maintain the kitchenware and farming implements of their village. All that was left for them was to keep building experience in preparation for when they passed it down to the next generation. If they chose to start forging weapons someday, they'd have the swords I gifted them as examples to work from.

I left the forge I had made in this village to the student I had here. I couldn't call him professional yet either, but he was serious and passionate about



blacksmithing, so it wouldn't be long before he became a cornerstone of the village. My time teaching him had brought back so many memories of when I'd started out learning blacksmithing. Seeing how hard he worked so as not to fall behind the students from other villages was a great experience for me.

The children's expeditions into the forest came to an end, replaced by actual hunters doing the rounds. It was hard to say for certain that the children would never be left so hungry as to be forced to rely on the forest to meet their needs, but at the very least it would be much rarer now. There was no need for me to watch over them anymore.

That last year of preparing for my departure was over before I knew it.

"I see. So you really are leaving," the village chief said, seeing me with my gathered belongings. Though I had no intention of giving in, it was really hard to shake the desire to stay.

"I was thinking it was about time I headed west."

That would be my next destination. But I didn't mean to the neighboring country of Vilestorika, nor to Giatika beyond it. I wanted to go see how Win was doing with my own eyes.

If I was going to take a ship to get there, I'd need to stop by in Vilestorika, but the people in the West captured and enslaved any nonhumans they found. I couldn't just waltz into one of their cities. If I was going to take a ship, it would have to be covertly.

However, after my last experience with sailing, I knew full well how sailors took to stowaways on their ships. The idea of becoming one myself was kind of off-putting. Aside from the obvious issue of stowaways not paying for their passage, they also became an unpredicted tax on the food and water carried by the ship. Their stores were built with precise calculations of how long they'd be at sea. If a stowaway managed to stay on board for multiple weeks before being discovered, it was quite possible the ship would run out of supplies before reaching the next harbor. In that situation, they'd be forced to reroute to a closer harbor, and in some cases it could even put the lives of the crew in danger.

Naturally, sailors absolutely hated stowaways, and showed little mercy to them when they were discovered. Of course, in my case, I could always ask the water spirits for water and sustain myself with apuas, so I'd be no burden on the crew. Even so, I still disliked the idea.

As far as other routes, I could cut through the Pulha Highway as Win had, go through the Great Pulha Woodlands, or pass through the dwarven kingdom and head west through the Empire of Fodor. As much as the Great Pulha Woodlands divided the continent in two, it was no obstacle to me. However, whether I could take that route west or not was an entirely different issue than whether I would enjoy it.

From what I gleaned from Win's letters and the other stories I had heard, there was an extremely high chance I wouldn't like what I saw there. If that was true, then taking a ship and skipping all the legwork really would be the best option. It was a bit of a dilemma. While I had pondered over my route plenty of times in the past, this might have been the first time I was deliberately trying to avoid a bad experience.

At any rate, nothing changed that kept me from leaving the village behind and heading west.

"Thanks to you, we were able to make it through the most difficult part of building this village. It's not just me; everyone in this village is extremely grateful."

I shook my head with a laugh at the chief's exaggeration. It was true that I had helped the village a little, but really it was only a little. That wasn't just humility, that's how I actually felt. Though I certainly helped with my blacksmithing and with teaching the young, that was no replacement for the hard work the villagers had done in building a life here.

"I'll come back to visit again someday."

When that day came, I was sure the village would be much larger...and there might be very few faces left that I remembered.

But now wasn't the time to get all solemn. Though I hadn't decided my route yet, I headed west. For the first time in quite a while, I was setting out on another great journey.

## Chapter 6 — Chaos in the West

Though my destination was decided, I was having a hard time choosing a route to get there. Traveling without a clear route in mind, I inevitably ended up in Vilestorika. I hadn't made up my mind to take a ship yet, but the ports that harbored them would also bring information in from abroad. It was the best place to learn about the west-central and far west regions of the continent, as well as the best way to get there without going through Pulha. And above all, it was fairly close to southern Zieden. Learning about my destination and enjoying some fantastic seafood would be just the thing I needed to make up my mind. I wasn't exactly good at laying out plans before taking action, after all.

I leisurely strolled down the road, as if following the clouds as the wind carried them ahead of me. It had been about twenty years since Zieden's war had come to an end. The number of bandits and monsters in the area had dropped drastically, making it much safer than it had once been. Of course, the unfortunate truth was that neither would ever be wiped out entirely, but that was nothing unique to this area. Even Ludoria, which had enjoyed many decades of peace, had its share of highwaymen and monsters. That was why regional governments put efforts into securing their roads, and why traveling merchants hired adventurers as bodyguards.

Actually, if bandits and monsters did disappear entirely, local governments would probably abandon security measures they had taken, and the now unemployed adventurers might well turn to banditry themselves. In short, no matter how negative their influence was on the world, they were still an inextricable part of it. In the same way that—regardless of right and wrong, good or evil—if there was no one to play the role of villain, there could be no stories of heroes rising up to defeat them.

Though I had low expectations for what I'd find in the West, it was likely there were similar elements making up their situation. As smart as it might have been to avoid dealing with all of it, I felt that passing judgment without seeing their situation for myself was a bit unlike me.

Staying in roadside inns along the way, I eventually reached the capital of Vilestorika, the city of Vitsa. While it could be called a merchant city, despite Vilestorika making its great wealth off of maritime trade, the capital wasn't actually situated on the coast. Instead, it was positioned two days north of the republic's largest port, probably for defensive reasons. However, the travel infrastructure between the port and the capital was so well-developed that, even with a bit of distance between them, you could effectively consider the port to be a part of the capital.

On top of that, being separated from the water meant the city could focus its efforts on distributing the cargo that had come in from abroad through land-based merchants, rather than having to devote resources to managing the harbor, making it easier for those merchants to come and go.

Along my route to Vitsa, I had passed by a number of large carriages coming from the capital, and had been overtaken by plenty heading toward it. As I did the rounds of the city, visiting a number of shops and trading drinks with more than a few merchants, I learned some interesting bits of information.

The first was that in the west-central region, the elves had invaded and toppled a kingdom, driving the humans out of their borders and forbidding them from entering. The second was that merchants trading with the Far West didn't actually visit its countries. Instead, they stopped at a large island nation off their southern coast and did trade there. The last thing I picked up was that the Far West was embroiled in a war between the humans and a federation of nonhuman races centered around the beastfolk, and that war was starting to lean in the federation's favor.

About that first point. As the religion of the Far West spread in the west-central region, the human kingdoms began taking elves as slaves. As a result, the elves started to abandon the smaller forests and gather in the larger ones, where they would be better able to defend themselves.

However, that wasn't enough to put an end to human greed. The human kingdoms began burning the forests to force the elves out into the open, and so they responded by taking up arms themselves. Recently, they had given up their

principle of fighting only in self-defense. They retaliated by toppling a human kingdom and driving all of the humans from its borders.

It kind of felt like the worst possible result. The elves had gathered in the larger forests because of the protective barriers that could be provided by the Spirit Trees there. Of course, elves loved the forests they inhabited, so giving up their homes would have required a considerable amount of resolve. In other words, the human efforts at hunting down elves had been intense enough to force their hand.

An unfortunate result of this kind of development was that leaving the smaller forests would allow monsters to take up residency there. They would grow in number and spill out to attack the surrounding countryside, threatening the human kingdoms as well. This increased feeling of insecurity led to humans clinging ever tighter to their religion, allowing the Far West's supremacist ideology to seize even greater control. What followed was the humans becoming more assertive in their attacks against the nonhuman races—elves included of course—creating something of a vicious cycle.

Actually, their aggression wasn't only pointed at the nonhuman races. The adherents of the Western religion just as fervently attacked the believers of the harvest god religion, who preached equality between all races.

It felt like things had developed in the worst possible way. It reminded me of the incident of nobles taking elves as slaves in Ludoria, and how things might have gone differently. My earlier conjecture that the Ludorian nobility had received the knowledge of how to enslave the elves from Western missionaries seemed to be right on the money.

People were free to believe in whatever they wanted...but the truth was the Western religion was proving to be quite a thorn in my side.

The whole situation had led to the elves mounting a counteroffensive. Something had driven them beyond the desire to protect themselves and their forests, and into toppling a human kingdom and exiling its residents. What could that have been? It would probably be best if I visited that kingdom and investigated for myself.

Next was the revelation that trade with the West didn't go through their

actual countries, but through an island nation off the coast. After thinking about it, I supposed that should have been obvious. The beliefs of the Western religion that held humans as superior to all other races were irreconcilable with those of the eastern harvest god religion. It was no wonder that ships from Vilestorika and Dolbogarde wouldn't be permitted to enter ports in the Far West. But even if they couldn't accept each other, the huge differences between them conversely created great room for profit to be made by trade between them.

The island nation to the south of the western region served as a neutral third party to mediate between them, allowing them to trade indirectly with each other. Basically, even if I were to travel to the West by stowing away on a merchant ship, I would only make it to that island nation, and not to the actual western region of the continent. Of course, there would be further trips between the island and the West, but finding such a ship and choosing one on which I could stow away in an unfamiliar place would be a considerable hassle.

Lastly was the issue of the war...something that Win was likely deeply involved in.



I traveled two days south from Vitsa, arriving in Vilestorika's largest port, where I boarded a ship heading west. Unlike my first predictions though, I wasn't stowing away. I wasn't heading to the Far West, nor to the island nation that mediated trade with them, but instead to a country in the west-central region.

The nation in question was Jilchias, a place that adhered to the harvest god religion and so was relatively safe for me to travel through without hiding myself. I was heading here instead of directly to the Far West...or rather, to the island nation off the coast of the Far West, because I was interested in visiting the kingdom conquered by the elves. Of course, I had no place to start offering advice to a group of elves that had been pressed into taking up arms and engaging in such a conquest, but the war in the Far West involved a federation of nonhuman races, including elves. Learning about the situation of the elves in the west-central region might come in handy for me in the future. And if they needed my help, as long as it wasn't against my own moral code, I would be

able to lend them a hand.

Between Jilchias and the elven nation was another country by the name of Kazarya, which adhered to the Far West's religion. Kazarya was hostile to both Jilchias and the elves...but I could probably pass through without much difficulty if I avoided visiting any human settlements. I would have to be a bit more cautious than usual, though, as they were on guard against elves specifically.

My journey on the sea wasn't that bad. The ship was much more spacious than the one that had brought me back from the Far East, and there was much less swaying. I didn't know if that was because the merchant ships of Vilestorika were built that much better for the sake of trading with other continents, or if the ocean here was simply calmer. At any rate, there was no significant trouble, and I was able to make it to the port town of Tomhans in Jilchias without issue.

The sailors warned me to be careful and to return to the eastern region as soon as possible again and again, but I was planning on doing the exact opposite. My intention was to cut through the nation of Kazarya, one that had wholeheartedly embraced the Western religion, and visit the kingdom conquered by the elves, a source of no small amount of turmoil in the region. After that, I'd be heading even farther west until I reached the Far West.

When I disembarked, I was greeted by countless stares. That was normal enough, but this time instead of curiosity, the overwhelming impression I got was one of shock. Paying no mind to the extra attention, I walked around the stalls lining the waterfront. I had heard plenty about the west-central region, but seeing the differences between this place and the East with my own eyes would be the easiest way for me to understand, and experiencing the food was the easiest place to start.

However, most of the food being sold was grilled fish and shellfish, making it virtually indistinguishable from the fare found in Vilestorika. There was a smattering of fruit to be found as well, but that went for any port town. As for the flavor of the seafood...aside from salt, there was another kind of sour flavoring used to enhance the flavor. Pressing the stall owners for info, I discovered it was sourced from a kind of citrus, much like lemon. In short, the food was quite good.

As I wandered the city enjoying the food, I was stopped by a group of three guards.

“My apologies. As you might recognize from our appearance Sir Elf, we are city guards. Could we have a moment of your time?”

Now what did they want? I had already passed through the procedures for disembarking, and hadn't done anything but experience the local seafood yet. I hadn't done anything that would lead to me getting arrested. If I was in Kazarya I could imagine them arresting me in an attempt to enslave me, but this was Jilchias, a country that adhered to the harvest god religion. Besides, I didn't feel any kind of greed or malice from the guards.

Well, okay. I didn't know what the situation was, so the fastest way to learn would be to hear them out. In the worst-case scenario, there were only three of them, so I could probably escape without causing too much trouble for the surrounding area. Actually, it might serve as a good starting point for my journey here in the West.

“I don't mind, but what for? As you can see, I'm quite busy sampling the local delicacies,” I joked a bit, hoping that would help relieve some of the tension in the guards.

The three men shared a surprised look, but seemed to relax a little. “The lord of Tomhans wishes to speak with you. We swear in the name of the harvest god that no harm will come to you, so would you be willing to come with us?” their leader said.

Yeah, it seemed this was going to be a big jumping-off point.

Normally, I did everything I could to avoid getting involved with the human nobility...but I guess it was a bit late to be saying that after my time with Professor Myos. And the problems set before me right now were on the level of nations. Learning about the ruling class, and their disposition and view of the world might serve me well.

The elves here in the west-central region had chosen to abandon all of the smaller forests, so they probably had no understanding of human kingdoms being divided into two greater categories. Elves didn't really have much interest in human affairs to begin with, so they probably viewed all humans as their



enemies. Thus, getting to meet with the ruling class of a nation that wasn't hostile to the elves would likely be meaningful in the future. Getting such an experience so quickly after arriving in Jilchias was actually a bit of good luck.

If Airena had been here, I wouldn't have had to bother with political stuff like this. But the fact of the matter was that I couldn't rely on her now. So after hurriedly finishing the bit of shellfish in my hand and discarding the shell in the stand's waste basket, I urged the guards to lead me onward.

It was a shame I couldn't take my time to enjoy the wonderful flavor of the food, but I made sure to remember the location of this particular stall. I was sure I'd be back to try it again before I left this city.



One of the three guards ran ahead to report, while the other two led me to a large mansion overlooking the harbor. Looking back gave a sweeping view of the entire harbor, together with a pleasant sea breeze. That alone was enough to give me a good impression of the lord of Tomhans.

Maybe I was getting ahead of myself, but this sign of his interests and taste spoke well of his judgment. Of course, even the greatest artist could still be evil, and the most unrefined of men could be good. So while it spoke well of his ability to tell the good from the bad, it would admittedly only be a small part of his character. I had gotten that impression from observing Professor Myos—Count Myos Marmaros—and the nobles surrounding him.

Judging by the way the city had developed outward without descending into chaos, and the incredible view his mansion commanded, I guessed that the lord of Tomhans was quite good at what he did. That said, it was just as likely that credit was due to his predecessors, so it couldn't take me very far.

In this particular case, however, it seemed to be right on the money, as we arrived at the mansion to find the lord of Tomhans himself waiting at the entrance to greet us. Coming to greet a common citizen, or at least another human, would serve to undermine the dignity of their position, so most nobility sat alone in their chambers, waiting for guests to come to them.

When waiting for an elf, though, that was undeniably the wrong choice. For elves, and indeed likely other races that didn't understand human politics,

coming in person to greet the guest you invited to your manor was natural etiquette. The fact he understood that, at the very least, he couldn't treat me as any other human guest showed that he wasn't incompetent.

"Ah, Sir Elf, my apologies for calling you here. I am the lord of Tomhans, Grenda Welbs. In this land, I am called the Count of the Sea. Might I ask how you are called?"

Quite politely but without being overly self-deprecating, the man introduced himself. He appeared to be in his forties or fifties...and was likely a Count. He had shared his rank not as a title, but as a way he was referred to, probably to express that he stood as a representative for the people to someone like an elf who wouldn't understand the structure of the nobility in a human kingdom. Of course, I understood the court ranks well enough, so he could have just used his title.

On top of that, I of course had to sign my name when doing the paperwork to allow entry into the city, so there was no reason he wouldn't know it. But for him to avoid using my name and instead ask how I was called showed he knew a fair bit about elven culture.

As I had probably mentioned before, spirits didn't have individual names, so neither did high elves. However, being physically incarnate entities meant we needed some way to refer to each other for ease of daily life, so we still had ways to address ourselves. In the same way we referred to spirits as "one present in the winds reaching the highest heavens," or "one living in this purest spring," we had ways to refer to ourselves that didn't use our names.

For example, the high elf elders referred to me as "Child of the Maple," while the others called me Acer. You might ask how that was any different from having a name, and I couldn't say I disagreed with you, but that was the kind of minute details high elves cared a lot about.

Seeing that behavior among the high elves, the ordinary elves adopted a similar custom. Many elves, upon leaving the forest for the first time, found being asked for their names to be rather unpleasant. Putting aside whether he knew anything about high elves, he at least knew of that custom among elves, so had asked for "how I was called" rather than for my name. It was pretty

unthinkable that an elf that arrived by ship would be so unfamiliar with the outside world...but in a way, that made his consideration all that much more meaningful.

“Count Welbs, is it? I have been living in the human world for quite a while now, so you don’t need to be so careful with me. Though I’m quite grateful for your consideration, and would ask you treat other elves with that same respect.”

Of course, Grenda’s behavior left a good impression on me. I was starting to get a good idea of what he wanted to talk to me about. I had no intentions of showing deference to someone just because they were a human noble, but his behavior had proved he was at least worthy of respect.

“Please, call me Grenda. I cannot ask a guest from the forests to defer to human titles.”

I didn’t know whether that was satisfaction that his consideration had landed well with me, or some other emotion. But at any rate, he invited me inside in short order.

To be brief, I suspected he had two pieces of business with me. The first would be to warn me about the dangers of traveling in the West as an elf, or in a sense, to offer me protection. As the nations which adhered to the Western religion sought to enslave those of other races, there were those in countries beside them that would see us as an opportunity to make money. It would be a lot of work, but if they could capture one of us and bring us all the way to one of those nations, there was considerable gain to be had.

Therefore, Grenda had likely invited me here to give me that warning and assign a bodyguard to me for my time in Jilchias. It was no doubt an attempt to prevent relations between the humans and the elves from degrading even further.

The second thing he wanted was likely just to learn about the way elves thought. He was at a loss with how to approach the elves of the west-central region, and how humanity might start improving their relationship with them. In hopes of discovering a clue to that end, he had invited me to visit with him. Even if I were from a foreign land, I would know how the elves thought, so after

learning about the situation here in the west-central region, I might be able to provide some insight for him.

In other words, though not entirely, his reason for meeting with me lined up somewhat with my reason for visiting the region in the first place.



Though it was just my personal opinion, the chances of relations between the humans and elves in the west-central region being repaired were slim at best. The elves left their forests behind, and those forests became breeding grounds for monsters over time. It only made sense that the humans who had no ill will toward the elves wanted them to return.

However, from the perspective of the elves, it was the humans who had driven them out of their homeland. Whether humans were a monolith or not, it was their problem now. The elves didn't care, and saw all humans as enemies.

Of course, any elf that actually had human relationships would recognize there were some good and some evil, but while they spent their time trying to decide who it was safe to trust, their people were still in danger of being enslaved. It was safest to just distance themselves from all humans.

In other words, the elves had no desire to distinguish between humans that were hostile to them and humans that were friendly to them. If the humans wanted to repair relations, they would need to find a way to make them understand that difference.

For example, if they were to free all of the elven slaves, return them to their homes, and leave the corpses of their captors at the edge of the forest for all to see, they could probably come to something of an understanding with them. On the other hand, it would take something on that enormous scale to start making amends.

But no matter how you looked at it, that wasn't a realistic solution. There wasn't a way you could free all of the elven slaves except by wiping out every single kingdom that adhered to the Western religion. If that was an option, the situation in the west-central region would never have been this chaotic. So from my perspective, it seemed unlikely the elves would ever return to their old homes.

Grenda seemed quite dismayed to hear my conclusion, but it seemed to be one he had reached on his own. He accepted my explanation that without doing something about the Western religion, there wasn't much they could do to mend relations.

I didn't mention it of course, but as a high elf, I could probably convince them to return home. But doing that would be the same as saying I would wage war against the religion of the West, destroy their kingdoms, and guarantee the safety of the elves. I would also have to help in driving the growing monster populations out of those forests, so I would lose any hope of being able to head to the Far West.

And above all, I had no reason to get so deeply involved with the situation here. If it was a situation where the monster populations were threatening to overrun whole kingdoms or even the entire region, I might not be able to ignore it, but the situation was nowhere near that bad yet. Until then, it would be best for humans to work to solve the problems that they had caused.

As small as it was, Grenda explained that there were at least faint hopes of that happening. The influence of the Western religion in the area had started to wane recently. Apparently the creation of the federation of nonhuman races in the Far West had put enough pressure on the humans that they no longer had the resources to spend here in the west-central region. It wasn't yet enough to upset the power balance in the region, but if the disturbance in the Far West grew stronger or continued for an extended period, there were chances of big changes coming.

I had to say, I was quite surprised to hear all this. I had known the nonhuman races had formed a federation to present a united front against the human kingdoms, but I hadn't expected their actions to have ramifications all the way to the west-central region. Thinking about it now, perhaps it should have been obvious that would happen. I guess I had just overlooked it.

I suspected Win was likely involved with the federation. Just how much had he grown? Of course, even if Win wasn't entirely responsible for the changes that were happening, he had really surprised me with what he had accomplished. Looking at the situation myself, I couldn't see any way out but brute force.

Ah, maybe this was a bit more than shock. I was moved. He had thoroughly exceeded all of my expectations. It made me so happy I was starting to shake. So rather than thinking like there was nothing I could do here, I needed to act in accordance with the fact that something was already being done. I couldn't embarrass Win, not after all he had accomplished on his own. I needed to be able to meet him without shame.

Grenda inevitably offered to assign me an escort, but I politely refused. Instead, I asked him to give me a letter. I wanted something to bring to the elves in the west-central region, from a representative of Jilchias. Once the situation in the region had been resolved and the humans had worked out their own problems, it would hopefully serve to open a chance at mending relations for them.

It might have no value now, but it was a move I chose to take in hopes that it might be useful in the future. The elves wouldn't be able to ignore a letter I delivered to them. There was a reasonable enough chance this future never came to pass, but in order to make it even a little more likely, I would be heading in their direction. I would visit them, then head farther west to meet up with Win.

Despite everything the situation entailed, once I had made up my mind, my heart filled with excitement.



I spent that night at Grenda's mansion, planning to leave Tomhans the next day.

For dinner, he treated me to a local delicacy: an enormous lobster. Split right down the middle, the grilled lobster was seasoned with salt and lemon sauce, greatly enhancing its flavor. The salt wasn't the regular rock salt I was used to, but sea salt produced at small villages around the city, while the lemons had of course been grown in Jilchias.

In other words, this region had the technology needed to draw salt out of the ocean. I imagined Jilchias was one of the more affluent nations in the west-central region. Blessed by the sea and a stable climate, they had industries like sea salt production and lemon farming to supplement their foreign trade. Even

amid the chaos of the region, they still had the ability to put on feasts to show off their local specialties.

But it would be a mistake to judge the west-central region based on what I was seeing here. War and growing monster populations would drive no small number of countries to the brink of poverty. It was no surprise that people living in those countries might consider selling people of other races off as slaves, even those living in countries that adhered to the harvest god religion. The fact the elves made no distinctions between humans and pulled out of all their forests was no doubt because they couldn't come to an understanding, even with the "good" ones.

In order to help smooth out my travels, Grenda gave me a travel permit and letters of introduction to the other lords of Jilchias. That would at least serve to give me some protection, making it less likely for people to attack me lest they provoke the wrath of the nobility. However, these documents would also make it easier for Grenda to track my movements.

I had told him I was planning on visiting the kingdom of the elves, but I hadn't told him what route I would take. If he knew that I was planning on cutting straight through Kazarya—a nation that fully embraced the supremacist Western religion and hated elves—he no doubt would have used force to try and stop me. I had only told him I would avoid dangerous places and find some way there. On hearing that, he explained to me the layout of Jilchias and told me what nations were relatively safe for an elf to travel through, so he must have assumed I meant I would be avoiding nations hostile to nonhumans.

Unfortunately, regardless of their religious affiliation, the threat posed by the nations of the west-central region was more or less the same across the board. No matter where I went, there was a reasonable chance I'd be attacked, and no matter who it was attacking me, I'd have little difficulty shaking them off. So when I said I would be avoiding dangerous places, I was really saying I wouldn't be visiting any human settlements. In that case, cutting straight through Kazarya was the fastest route.

Right now, having learned what I had of the situation in the region, I had decided it was best to avoid human cities even here in Jilchias.

“If I’m going to be attacked anyway, it would be easier to deal with monsters than people,” I muttered, loosing an arrow to find its mark in the forehead of a human-sized flying squirrel that was lunging for me. With its brain destroyed, the monster continued gliding through the air, crashing into the trees before falling to the ground.

As expected, the forests were overrun with monsters now that the elves had left them behind. It felt like this one had been on the edge of the tree line, waiting to attack the moment I stepped off the road. And that was here in Jilchias, a country that had the resources to spend on defending itself. I suppose the fact they were able to keep their cities and villages secure despite the huge numbers of monsters in the forests around them was a sign of just how well-off they were.

The “wings” of the flying squirrel were quite useful. The thick membrane was soft but sturdy, capable of letting the enormous monster glide through the air. It wasn’t some incredible material that would stop any blade or something like that, but that actually made it easier to work with.

Before the scent of blood brought other monsters to investigate, I quickly processed the giant squirrel’s body, taking its pelt and one of its rear legs for food before leaving the scene, heading deeper into the forest. I felt bad for putting Grenda’s efforts at helping me to waste by giving me a travel permit, but it was better in the end if he considered elves to be untraceable.

With the help of the trees, I kept a distance from the monsters of the forest, occasionally hunting them for food, and made my way north. When I left the forest behind, I cut across fields and over rivers, avoiding roads and human settlements altogether.

A few weeks of travel brought me out of Jilchias and into Kazarya. It would normally be impossible to tell when I crossed the border if I wasn’t using the roads, but the two nations had greatly fortified their borders against each other. Besides that, after entering Kazarya, I also began running into monsters out in the open, not just in the forests. Kazarya was most likely one of those countries that wasn’t able to properly defend its roads and remote villages.

The situation was similar to the one in Zieden during its war of expansion but



was made much worse by the lack of elves to keep the forests under control. The countryside wasn't much safer here than it was in the Great Pulha Woodlands or the Man-Eating Swamp. Even so, the country still stood strong enough to fight with Jilchias and the elves. I suppose that just went to show how strong humans could be.

With their belief in the Western religion, they were able to divert their attention from their own suffering. If they could fight and steal from others, their own suffering would be eased for a time, driving them further into the arms of their church. As foolish as it appeared, perhaps it looked like the right thing to do from their perspective. After all, with how short human life spans were, they would likely die before the ramifications of those choices were made manifest.

It was the exact opposite of the humans I loved, who taught and learned, built and grew...but it was an undeniable side of them as well. Though taken aback by the huge number of monsters, I nevertheless continued through Kazarya.



Passing north through Kazarya, I finally found myself in the kingdom conquered by the elves. Apparently it was called Inelda. A good seventy percent of the kingdom was covered by forests, and surprisingly, it seemed that elves and humans had lived together here in the past. Someone from back then had been the one to teach Grenda about elven customs.

But as the Western religion grew in power in the region and large numbers of elves moved to Inelda's large forests, the situation within the borders changed as well. It wasn't that the people of Inelda changed, but that the neighboring countries began to attack them in hopes of taking elven slaves for themselves.

Being so densely forested, Inelda was a great place for elves to live, but there was little land for humans to grow there. If they could clear the forests and build farmland things might have changed, but considering their relationship with the elves, that wasn't an option available to them.

In short, Inelda was a small country with a low population and little national power. They were entirely unable to fend off the attacks from their larger neighbors. Apparently they had lasted as long as they had because the elves

aided them in their defense. With the human soldiers fortifying the open areas and elves fighting as guerrillas in the forests, the natural landscape became a fortified stronghold.

The Ineldans fought tooth and nail to keep the foreign armies out, but raids after elven slaves continued unabated, a ceaseless war that eventually drove the kingdom to its knees. They could no longer fight, but they also refused to sell their elven neighbors. With that declaration, the humans came to an agreement with the elves. They would leave Inelda behind, heading to nearby nations that worshipped the harvest god and were not hostile to the elves. They had given up the fight, but they wouldn't force the elves to try and protect them.

The elves' war of self-defense dramatically changed. Drawing enemy armies into the open, now uninhabited land left behind by Inelda's humans, they unleashed a ceaseless barrage of ambushes and night assaults. They wiped out any force that entered their territory, so thoroughly that no maps could even be made of the region.

It was true that the elves had taken over the kingdom, and that the old kingdom of Inelda had fallen, but Grenda explained to me that the rumors I heard east of Pulha weren't quite accurate. That was why he still held out hope that there was room to repair relations between the elves and the humans. While they had no shortage of greedy enemies, the elves also had humans who fought alongside them.

Therefore, my impression that the elves in the west-central region would see all humans as enemies was mistaken. Out here in a land completely unknown to me, the elves had formed close bonds with the humans around them. That was incredible, something I never would have imagined.

Even so, while the Western religion still held power in the region, there was little hope of relations improving.

Now then.

After entering Inelda, I sent a wind of greeting to a group of elven scouts watching for enemy incursions, who gathered to greet me.

“Incredible. An actual high elf has come here!”

The group surrounded me, falling to their knees and pressing their faces to the ground. Some even started crying. I roughly counted thirty in their group. If somewhere so far from their main force had so many people, there must have been a huge number of elves in this kingdom.

But as expected, they acted just like elves did everywhere, a fact I greeted with a wry smile. They were so suffocatingly formal, something I would have found quite irritating in the past. Even now, their extreme formality, their bowing, and the way they almost seemed to be praying to me felt like nothing more than a nuisance. But when I considered what suffering the people here had experienced, and the fact they had no knowledge of my personal preference in this regard, I felt it was best to let them do as they wished.

That said, it would be difficult to get anywhere if they didn't stand up.

“I am called Acer. In my home in the Forest Depths, I am known as the Child of the Maple. I would like to speak with your elders. Might I ask for permission to enter your forest and meet with them?” Puffing out my chest, I mustered what dignity I could and called out to them. Instead of waiting for them to have their fill of bowing and scraping, I figured it would be faster to try putting my authority as a high elf to use to move things along.

Looking around, one elf seemed to resolve himself and return to his feet.

“Shining one, there is no forest in this world that would reject you. As insolent as it might be to propose, please allow me to guide you to our settlement.”

The elf, introducing himself as Reas, spoke in a smooth and composed manner. It was difficult to tell an elf's age based on their appearance, but he didn't appear to be all that old. Maybe he was something like a young leader among the elven warriors?

I nodded and reached out to offer a handshake. But Reas misunderstood the gesture, as he instead took my hand in his, kneeling and pressing it to his forehead.

Uh...all right. I guess that's what I should have expected. Yeah. It wasn't what I was hoping for, but it was a bit nostalgic. Thinking back, Airen had done the

same thing when I tried to shake her hand when we first met.

This time, my smile was more genuine, a reaction which seemed to confuse Reas a little. But at my urging he rose to his feet.

I was here in Inelda, the kingdom of the elves. What could I hope to accomplish here, and what *should* I hope to?



Back when we moved all the elves out of Ludoria, we had to move about eight thousand people. That many elves lived in a single kingdom, though it was a rather large one. Even if it didn't account for all the elves in the west-central region, the forest in Inelda was the largest there, so it had the largest population of them...which was about thirty thousand. If I remembered correctly, the kingdom of the dwarves had a population of forty or fifty thousand, so it was no exaggeration to call this a kingdom of elves at this point.

But of course, gathering enough people together to build a kingdom would lead to problems of a larger scale. For example, any forest would struggle to sustain that many people on its bounty alone, no matter how massive it was. It would also be difficult to find someone capable of keeping thirty thousand elves under control. For a small village with a few dozen to a few hundred people, the problems one faced were mostly interpersonal issues. But once you got to the range of tens of thousands of people living together, you started having to deal with arguments between larger groups.

Human society had developed a number of ways to face this challenge, from a system of laws, to social hierarchies, to religions that taught people the same value systems. Though elves weren't as confrontational, the obstacles they would now face—posting warriors to defend their borders, working the land to supply food, and distributing that food fairly—would all be causes for dissatisfaction.

I imagined the reason so many elves had managed to come together and survived as a society was because the elves who lived together with the Ineldans had some understanding of how human society worked. Inspired by social rules the humans that preceded them had put in place, they had managed to establish rules to prevent much of the chaos that could have

ensued.

But simple imitation wouldn't be able to resolve all the issues they would face. Little by little, unrest would grow in the population. For now, those negative feelings were aimed at the threat of human armies on their borders, but if that threat were to draw back, there was no telling what would happen.

Defense was also an issue. Thanks to the aid of the spirits, elves were stronger than human soldiers on an individual level. But things changed drastically when it came to large-scale warfare. Human soldiers formed together into units that fought as one beneath the rule of a single captain. These units then worked together to form armies, acting in coordination under the orders of a commander.

The elves weren't able to accomplish the same thing. Or rather, to be more accurate, they didn't have the skills or the knowledge to put those ideas into practice. They had no education in tactics, no concept of military communication, and none of them had training as soldiers. Fighting in ranks was entirely beyond them.

Their time fighting alongside the soldiers of Inelda had taught them the strength an army could muster. They were able to hold their own for now by employing guerrilla tactics in the complex layout of their territory, but there was no guarantee how long that would work. If the elves wanted to band together and form an army, they'd need training to learn how to follow orders with absolute, unconditional loyalty, and a person to hold those reins.

Actually, the existence of a person like that would go a long way in solving basically every problem they faced by choosing to inhabit Inelda. That no doubt was why the elders brought this up when we talked.

"Shining high elf, your arrival is the greatest possible fortune for us. Please, give us guidance. Become a king for us, as would be said by the humans."

I couldn't fault them for that idea. It was a desperate wish, one born from being worn down by the excessive growth of their people.

But it wasn't the right answer. It wasn't just that I didn't like the idea personally. Ah, well, I suppose for the elves, it might have been okay. It wasn't just the elders; all the elves in Inelda looked at me with eyes full of expectation.

If I was willing to stand at the top and pass down orders, they would likely obediently obey, and most of the problems they faced could be solved. That was just the kind of people elves were.

In truth, solving the issues of communal living, food distribution, defense...I could probably do all of that. But when I thought about the greater future, I couldn't accept their request so easily. If I became their king, they would have no problem surviving until the situation in the region changed. If the Western religion was eventually driven out, would they go back to their forests? I couldn't imagine they would. Not only would they be quite reluctant to leave the elven kingdom behind, but it would probably draw in even more elves from beyond Inelda's borders. Elves would disappear in the west-central region except for within the borders of Inelda itself, further damaging the relationship between them and the humans. My presence would build a closed world for them, one which would satisfy them but also make their problems worse. And after all the success they had building relationships with the former Ineldans too.

So in the face of the elders' request, I went quiet and looked to the sky. I needed a plan. Something that would answer the expectations of the elves, help them, improve relations between them and the humans, and allow me to continue on my journey.



Who was it that had said "giving up was the key to life"? It was probably someone from my past life...but I couldn't quite remember. According to that person, though the phrase might have sounded quite pessimistic on the surface, that wasn't its true meaning.

"Giving up" meant "looking at things objectively." The phrase was really about being able to accept reality as it was. By abandoning your personal obsessions, giving up, and looking at things from an objective standpoint, you could revise your goals and expectations and find the path to accomplishing them. In short, it was trying to teach you how to solve problems in life.

It goes without saying, but you can't have everything you want in life. If you want to gain something, you need to pay the appropriate price for it. If you

want food, you need to spend money. If not money, you need to spend time and energy growing or hunting that food yourself. You could steal it from someone else, but that simply meant you were paying by sacrificing your conscience and security.

Saving the elves, improving relations between them and the humans, and continuing my journey...there was no solution I could find that would accomplish all three of these goals. So instead, I needed to look at the situation objectively, revise my goals, and consider the price I would have to pay to follow that path.

I couldn't abandon the elves. That would mean giving up on myself.

If at all possible, I wanted the relations between humans and elves to improve. I liked seeing people of different races getting along. Ever since leaving Pulha, I was always happy to see that, whether it was between humans, elves, half-elves, dwarves, earthfolk, skyfolk, merfolk, or any other race.

I wanted to continue my journey. But...as a high elf, my incredibly long life span made time the easiest resource to sacrifice. It wouldn't mean totally abandoning my plan to meet Win in the Far West, but putting that reunion off seemed like the inevitable cost of what I wanted to accomplish here.

Ten years. I decided I would spend ten years in Inelda.

Unfortunately, here in the west-central region, I didn't have Airena to take my place and do the work for me. So over the next ten years, I would make someone like her right here. Instead of ruling the elves as a king, I would raise one of their own to be recognized by them, to protect and guide them until they could return to their forests.

Though I didn't have a full grasp on the situation here yet, I knew of a few issues that needed to be resolved to make Inelda a true kingdom of elves.

One was governance. They needed to create a ruling structure that the elves could all accept, even if begrudgingly.

One was defense. How would they protect themselves from the human armies targeting them?

One was food. With so many elves, the forest's natural bounty couldn't

support them.

One was diplomacy. If the elves were going to build a kingdom for themselves, even if they were to avoid communicating with nations that adhered to the Western religion, they would still need to make connections with the others.

In all honesty, ten years didn't feel like it would be enough...but now that I had made up my mind, there was nothing left to do but figure it out. I didn't need to do everything myself, nor should I. I would borrow the strength of the elves. In other words, I would lead them toward solving their problems by themselves.

After making that decision, I returned my gaze to the ground, to the elves gathered around me. They were all waiting with fervent expectation. But my answer wouldn't be what they were hoping for.

"If you want to leave your forests and build a kingdom, you are free to do so. If you feel it is necessary to protect yourselves, I have no reason to oppose you. But as a high elf, I cannot serve as your king. I am in the middle of a journey. There are places I must go."

I gave them a strong rejection. It didn't bother me that the elves all but worshipped the high elves, but if they thought we had any obligation to lead them, they were sorely mistaken.

However, I knew they were struggling with everything they had to survive, and that it wasn't enough. That was why they were looking to me. I couldn't just ignore their cry for help.

"But long ago, when I first emerged from the forest into the human world, it was an elf who helped me find my place. She said that because of the bond between our people, she was willing to help me. And she did, for ten years after that."

Technically that wasn't entirely accurate. Airena had done so much more for me than could be contained in those ten years. But still. I don't know where the idea of ten years came from, but that was about how long I had lived in Vistcourt with Airena's help.



“Though she was not an elf of this land, she was still one of your people. So for the sake of the bond between our people, I’ll give you ten years of my time and power, so that many of you will be able to return to your homes in the forest someday.”



Using my authority and power as a high elf, my knowledge gained from living in the human world, and the memories I had from my past life, I would spend ten years here to create a foundation that would allow the elves to live a stable life. I would raise a representative to lead them who would be able to tie the elves together. Afterward, they would surely become a great help to me here in the west-central region, just as Airena had been in the east.

It would mean putting my journey on hold for a time...but the idea of taking a small diversion to build a country was so over the top, I couldn't help but find it intriguing.

Part of me still wanted to leave and go see Win as soon as possible, but who would Win rather meet: an Acer who had abandoned the elves here, or an Acer who had stopped to help them build a new way of life? The decision wasn't hard when I thought of it like that.

Even if it was only to be a short-lived nation, built to survive just long enough for the situation in the west-central region to change, I would put my all into laying its foundations.

## Excerpt — Dripping Memories

### The Elf's Well and the Water Spirit

Clean water flowed freely outward, watering the land to allow crops to grow. That was what I remembered, but seeing how it had changed gave me a bit of a shock. I suppose I had heard rumors of the change before I had arrived, though.

Long ago, the people here only had access to water that was so muddy, they couldn't even drink it without waiting for the dirt to settle to the bottom and ladling out the clear water on the surface. That struggling village in Paulogia was now one of the most prosperous in Giatica.

But when I actually laid eyes on it, it had changed so much more than I had expected. It had grown to the point where I couldn't call it a village anymore. It was definitely a city now. But they still called themselves "the *Village* of the Elf's Well." I had rather mixed feelings about that. They had probably called it that ever since I first dug the well for them.

When I stepped into the village, I was welcomed with open arms, and no small number of people calling out to greet me. Of course, my last visit had been decades ago, long enough that the babies of the people I had met back then had already grown old and died, so none of them recognized me. But they remembered the story of a traveling elf coming and building the well for them, so they were always overjoyed to have elven visitors.

Of course, traveling elves weren't especially common. It was quite a rare experience for them. But put another way, as rare as it was, it was still an experience they occasionally had. No matter the warm welcome they'd receive, there were very few elves who would take enough of an interest in a village like this to visit. Instead, they'd be drawn in by the source of the village's water, the well I had dug, and the water spirit that inhabited it.

That well, which had grown to the point of being a neatly kept pond, was

home to a spirit that had even shown itself to humans. Well, putting it that way might lead to misunderstandings. It wasn't that the spirits hid themselves from other creatures, be they human or not. However, aside from the elves, high elves, and those few who were naturally in tune with the spirits, most people lacked the ability to see them. So for the water spirit here to have shown itself to humans, meant it had gone out of its way to make itself visible.

While most people couldn't see the spirits themselves, they could still see the phenomena those spirits created. They could obviously see things such as earth, fire, and water. Wind was more of a challenge, but if bound into a whirlwind instead of just a directed gust, people could recognize it as the wind having "form." In other words, the spirit had used water to create a body for itself, using that to show itself to the people here.

That was pretty odd behavior for a spirit. First of all, only spirits with a lot of experience dealing with people would even consider making a body that resembled a person. Even then, only those with an exceptionally strong bond with the people around them would decide to do so. I didn't know very many examples of it happening in the past.

That meant this pond must have been quite treasured by the people that lived here. From the start, when I built this well, I had asked the spirit to give water to the people here, but I had never asked it to stay. If the people hadn't respected the source of their water, the spirit would have no doubt found somewhere else to call home. But they had treated the spirit's waters with respect, and so earned its favor. That led to the well becoming even more prosperous, growing into a small pond, and providing even more water for the land.

Standing before the pond, the water spirit grew quite excited, forming its liquid body again and telling me about the decades it had spent watching over this village.





There were many more people here than there used to be. The children rarely cried because they were hungry anymore. Many people had children, and many “fell asleep” peacefully. Even now, everyone was smiling. They seemed really happy today in particular. The water spirit, quite happy to see me, gave me a handful of water to drink.

The little girl who had given me water that had already settled clear of mud so long ago was no longer here. I had promised her we’d meet again if she was a good girl, but I hadn’t kept it.

The transformation of this country from Paulogia into Giatica was doing much good for the people here, but not every change had been for the better. Even this village had likely met its fair share of trouble after growing so much more prosperous. Or rather, no matter how prosperous they were, ill fortune would find its way to them. Even if the water spirit stayed with them, they wouldn’t be happy forever. There would inevitably come a day when the Village of the Elf’s Well would cease to be. Even the water spirit living in the north of Ludoria, near the city of Garalate, had its faithful people stolen from it.

But even so, I prayed that the good relationship between the water spirit in this pond and the people in the village beside it would continue for a long time. Even if they had to say goodbye someday, the happiness they had right now was invaluable.

# Side Stories — Fragments of Meeting

## The End of First Love

According to my family, I used to be a real grandpa's girl. They said I used to follow him around like a baby duckling. But why wouldn't I? My world back then was only as big as the dojo, and the greatest person there was my grandfather. My father took the title of head of the Yosogi School shortly after I was born, but grandfather was still the best swordsman there. I followed him around because I wanted to learn as much from him as possible. I think that came from my instincts as a swordswoman. Since I followed him around all the time, he taught me a lot, after all.

So when that man appeared in our lives, it totally changed the way I saw the world. It was literally the first time I had seen someone who was treated as higher than my grandfather. And he wasn't human either. He was an elf. Grandfather had said this new guy was like a father to him, but that wasn't enough to sate my curiosity. I immediately started asking around about him.

The older members of the dojo all knew him, and they told me all sorts of funny stories about him. They said he was the oldest student of the Yosogi School. It was said that the Yosogi School, which was now in the running for the greatest of the Four Great Schools in the capital, was once on the edge of extinction, but this elf used his own money to save and rebuild it. It was said that when the students of the Yosogi School started blacksmithing, he was the one who taught them. Every person I asked had a different story to tell. It was hard to believe they were all talking about the same person. But there was one thing that everyone agreed on: he was a very important person to my grandfather's mother, the head of the Yosogi School two generations ago. In other words, he was someone special to my great-grandmother.

So I didn't quite understand. Why did grandfather say he was "like a father" to him, and not say he was his father? I was just a kid back then, so I couldn't understand. It wasn't until long, long after that Grandfather told me that it was



very difficult for humans and elves to have children together, and that he was special even for an elf. No matter how much he might have wanted it, it was probably impossible for the two of them to have had children together.

At any rate, when I was a child, he looked like a man wrapped up in a hundred mysteries, so I naturally started following him around, just like I used to follow my grandfather. I must have felt really comfortable being at his side. As the daughter of the head of the school, the other students were very careful around me, but he didn't treat me like that.

On top of that, he had traveled far and wide beyond the tiny world I knew, so every story he told me was new and exciting. Of all the stories he told, the one that caught my interest most was of the errant he met in the empire in the East. The story of a person who lived in a powerful country, but spurned laws and authorities, cutting out a life for himself only by his own personal sense of chivalry, was deeply inspiring to me.

Of course, part of that admiration came from how good he was at telling stories, and part of it came from me still being a child. If I were to hear those stories now, I probably would have thought of errants as no more than ruffians. But those stories had a great influence on my values as a child, an influence that likely survived even today. After all, even though I could write them off as simple hoodlums, thinking back on those stories still got me excited.

However, the man who told me those stories had a much stronger influence on me than the stories themselves. For three and a half years, between the ages of ten and fourteen, I spent more time with him than anyone else. He taught me so much. For example, he taught me how to track animals in the forest, how to hunt them, how to handle their carcasses, and how to start a fire to cook them. As a child, I knew nothing more than how to swing a sword, but he was endlessly patient in teaching me every little thing.

That was why I gave up the sword that encompassed all I had known until then and took up a katana instead. In the end, the katana suited me better, but I had first made the choice because I knew he would make a katana for me himself. I knew that because he had been the one to bring back the techniques needed to forge katana from the Far East. That's how much my life revolved around him at that time.

What could I do to make him stay forever? It felt like everything I had done, all the skills I had learned and all the time I had spent practicing with my katana were all aimed at that end.

But even so, the day came when he left us behind. My cousin Kairi, seven years older than I was, told me it was coming. Kairi was a blacksmith, so he noticed that the elf was finishing up all his blacksmithing work, getting ready to pass on the torch and leave the forge behind. Since I was always spending time with him, Kairi told me right away. He warned me to make sure I didn't have any regrets.

Knowing that he was about to leave made me realize that my feelings for him had been love. I imagine it had been obvious to everyone around me, but back then I hadn't been able to recognize it for myself. But in the end, I couldn't think of anything I could say that would make him stay.

With a parting fist bump, he left on his way, the same way he said goodbye to his errant friend. Grandfather laughed, saying that was always how it was when he left. He said they would probably never meet again, but that he would return sooner or later. As far as Grandfather knew, the only one who could tie him down was Great-Grandmother.

Yes, he himself had said he saw everyone at the Yosogi School as children. That was probably because of the relationship he'd had with my great-grandmother. That was why, for the first time, I took an interest in her, a woman who had died long before I was born. I was envious of course, but more than that, I wondered how she could have captured Acer's heart.

Of course, the clue to that mystery could be found in my own household. Reading through the journals she left behind, I was quite shocked, but the answer made sense. Though we had been born in the same house, my great-grandmother's life had been much harsher, yet she had lived much stronger. More so than I could even imagine. The one thing I could understand, the one thing I could really empathize with, was her feelings for Acer.

"My mother had a wonderful, happy life," My grandfather told me when he learned that I had been looking into Great-Grandmother. That was when he

told me that Acer couldn't hope to have children with a human. That story of their love helped me mature a little bit.

How many years had passed since then? I became an adventurer, and a rather well-known one at that. In Ludoria and the surrounding area, Aiha the Katana User became famous as one competing for the title of the most skilled swordsman among all adventurers. That said, I didn't feel like I was anywhere close to where Acer and my grandfather were on the day they had their match.

I gained my seven stars as an adventurer, and all the experience it took to get me there. I wasn't a naive child anymore. I was a responsible adult now. So I figured it was about time I put my first love to rest.

Apparently, Acer was living in a newly developing village. He stood out a lot, so all I had to do was ask if anyone in the surrounding villages had seen an elf, and the rumors would come pouring in. I doubted any other elf in the world practiced blacksmithing.

I couldn't live a life like great-grandmother did, nor was I going to try. But like her, I wanted to leave a piece of me behind in Acer's heart through my swordsmanship. Even if it was just a tiny fragment, I knew that piece of me would never fade.

## Every Time I Saw It

It was incredible. My common senses had no other word to describe it.

It looked like countless layers of wood layered around each other in a spiral, the work so fine and delicate as to take my breath away every time I saw it. That delicacy, that fragility, was nothing I could show to the public though, so it remained here in my manor. Those layers, like belts wound around the stone, looked to flow like water. Just seeing them made me want to trace them with my fingers.

But I couldn't really understand *what* I was seeing. The statue was mysterious and wonderful, pulling at my heart but never telling me why. The elf who had carved this, someone I had taught myself, had said it was a statue of the wind

coming down out of the sky to play.

Of course I knew what wind was. There was plenty of it carrying the dust away from the quarries here in Marmaros. I knew well of the wind that made the grasses sway and carried the scent of salt inland from the sea.

But as a plain, ordinary human, I had never seen the wind like this. Just how did that elf see the world we lived in? Every time I saw this statue, it made me wonder the same thing. He had blown into this town like a sudden breeze, stayed for a brief time, and when he left, he had blown away the problems I faced like a raging gale. That was the kind of person Acer was.

Before I met him, I had seen one of his artworks. Or rather, I should say that in order to meet *me*, he had presented it to me as a gift. Well, no matter. The circumstances leading to our meeting weren't as important as that piece itself.

Marmaros was well-known for the production of marble, and it was fairly common for people to send me gifts in hopes of earning some privilege in determining where those exports went. But with my deep affection for art, the majority of those gifts came in the form of paintings and handiworks. As a man who never so much as carried a sword, I had not once been given a weapon.

Even so, his gift for me had been a dagger he had made himself. If it had been a merchant presenting me this dagger, I likely would have lost interest immediately and handed it off to someone else. But as much as our fields of expertise differed, a blacksmith was still a craftsman. They made weapons for war, but also tools to make life easier. In particular, here in Marmaros, they often made tools that helped us extract marble from the ground. I deeply respected the profession, and so chose to look over the piece for myself.

The moment I laid eyes on it, my breath caught. It was just too beautiful. It was certainly a weapon—I had seen weapons drowned in lavish ornamentation in an attempt to mask their brutish nature—but this was entirely different.

First of all, even with no knowledge of weaponry, it was impossible to miss the dreadful aura it had. There was no doubt in my mind it was a piece of rare mastery. Even so, it was beautiful. The complex engravings and fullers on the blade couldn't have been simple decoration. The written letter that had been

passed to me along with the dagger explained that the blade would light up if filled with mana, but why would a blacksmith have any connection to magic?

Confused but mysteriously intrigued, I called for one of my retainers who I knew to be knowledgeable in magic. When he took the dagger in his hands, I found myself at a loss for words yet again. The blade certainly did shine. I didn't understand how it worked, but I didn't much care. What mattered to me was the image of it, the sight of watching that light course up the fullers of the blade. That sight, like a shooting star arcing across the steel, set my body to trembling. This dagger was undoubtedly a weapon, and yet at the same time a piece of art.

My retainer was quite impressed with the dagger's properties, and when it was shown to another who was personally skilled, he praised it as being a remarkably practical piece. My closest confidant, Balestra, believed that carrying such a weapon on my person would put to rest the petty accusations of my obsession with the arts at the cost of all else, and recommended I reward the blacksmith who made it.

Of course, I very much intended to do so. After receiving a gift of this magnitude, my honor as a member of the nobility demanded I reward him in suitable fashion. But at the same time, the artist inside me forced me to wait. With the skill this blacksmith clearly possessed, any noble would be more than happy to reward him and employ him in whatever manner he asked. There was no reason for him to have come to me specifically. As prosperous as Marmaros was thanks to our marble, I was far from the greatest of nobles in Siglair. If he was after a reward, if he was looking for employment, there were many better places he could have gone.

So why had he given me this dagger? Why had he made a dagger like this in the first place, one that seemed so tailor-made to capture my heart? There was only one reason I could think of. If I was wrong, it would be exceptionally embarrassing, but it was the answer I hoped for: that this blacksmith hadn't hoped to meet me as an aristocrat, but as an artist.

So I decided to meet with him not as Count Marmaros, but as Myos the artist. Though uneasy at the thought I could be mistaken, I took those insecure feelings to the block of stone before me.

And when the blacksmith arrived—an elf by the name of Acer—he asked to become my student. Honestly, I was happy to hear that, but in the end I had to refuse him. There were any number of reasons, but above all, taking him on as an official student would draw him into all sorts of trouble due to my position in the nobility. If I were to take on students, the other nobles would demand that I begin putting on exhibitions.

So, I agreed to teach him, but only in exchange for his services. Rather than the deep bond between master and student, we wove a business contract, in hopes that he wouldn't be seen as a person important to me personally. Looking back on it now, I realize that my consideration for Acer's well-being was entirely meaningless. No matter where it came from, he would always shake off any malice pointed at him with a smile. I am not quite sure how best to put it into words, but...he was certainly an incredible, magnificent person.

I learned from my time with him that he was also a master swordsman. I watched him slice a boulder in half right before my eyes, so there was no doubting that. Ah, and even beyond its strength, his swordsmanship was also beautiful.

But that wasn't what made him incredible. After a little more than two years in Marmaros, he cast aside the malice aimed at me like sweeping salt from a table. The fact it came from one of the leaders of the largest religious organization in the center of the continent, one who was vying for the title of pope, hadn't fazed him in the least.

I didn't know exactly the details of what Acer had done, but the one threatening me was stripped of his standing and disappeared. There was no evidence Acer was responsible for that, but I understood. I had seen him work from up close for more than two years, so there was no doubt in my mind that the giant statue that had signaled the end of the one threatening me was one of his works.

He clearly possessed a power that far outstripped what mankind was capable of, and that power had saved me. As a noble, I was deeply grateful, but at the

same time, I was even more sure that I couldn't associate with him any longer. As the lord of this area, I couldn't help but try to think of ways that power could be put to use for ourselves.

My greatest frustration was, as an artist, being unable to see his work up close anymore. I had no doubt he'd continue making phenomenal pieces like this playful wind. He had said he wanted to learn sculpting so he could make statues of his friends...but I knew with his playful, enthusiastic personality, he couldn't stop the feelings welling up inside him that demanded he create, whether as a craftsman or as an artist. He would definitely continue to make mysterious and wonderful works of art. The fact I didn't have the senses to see them, that I didn't have the eyes to see the world the way he did, was endlessly frustrating.

In the end, I personally hoped I'd get to meet Acer again someday. If he were to visit again someday, when I had stepped down as the lord of Marmaros...I would break out the best tea money could buy so we could talk. I wanted to get a chance to really express how I felt about the beauty he had shown me, free from the fetters of my position.

## **Upon the Throne**

No matter who you were, it was quite difficult to live entirely alone. Even if you could survive, your quality of life would be the bare minimum. If you were alone, you would have to build your own dwelling, hunt or grow your own food, collect fuel for making fires, and cook all by yourself. If you couldn't make pots, pans, or knives by yourself, the best you could do was weave leaves together or cook things by putting them on sticks. You would also have to find a way to deal with your waste and protect yourself from outside threats. Without incredible necessity and passion, taking care of all that yourself was impossible. On top of that, if you were to come down sick or get injured somehow, that could very easily mark the end of your life.

Because of all this, people lived in groups. They divided the work among themselves to form an efficient way of life. But for people to live in groups, they needed someone to lead them, to tie the group together. Without such a figure,

conflict among them would eventually lead to the breakdown of the group.

As that group grew larger, even to the size of a nation, that didn't change. I had heard of nations that were led by groups themselves, a collection of individuals who consulted with each other, but the principle was the same. A group as large as a nation needed something to unite them. In many cases, that leader was known as a "king." Even this kingdom of dwarves, built secretly underground in the depths of the mountains, had a king.

And as things would have it, the current king happened to be me.

"Here are the reports for today, Your Majesty."

That said, the king of the dwarves didn't exactly run things here. Most of the work was carried out by ministers, like the one reporting to me now. My job was mainly to oversee them and ensure they were faithfully fulfilling their duties. The fact that the king these days was selected by merit of their blacksmithing skill meant that most kings didn't have much in the way of political acumen.

The primary role of the king was to serve as a representative of the skill of the dwarves in blacksmithing, and to maintain that high level of quality. That alone was enough to earn the respect of the people, and to command obedience from the ministers serving under him. In short, he served as a figurehead and as a counterbalance to the ministers.

In the long history of the dwarves, there were examples of kings who had turned into tyrants, as well as ministers who had fallen into corruption. But the people of the kingdom came to notice that disorder within the political structure showed itself even in the works the king produced, so the kingdom had managed to survive until this day. The current lineup of ministers were all honest and capable men, though, so my only concern was making sure my skills as a blacksmith didn't grow rusty.

"We should start expanding our stores of emergency provisions. If war reignites in the human kingdoms, our imports from Ludoria could very well be restricted."

The minister bowed respectfully to my instruction. The war sparked by the



newly born human kingdom of Zieden seemed to be reaching a conclusion, but there was no room to relax. In fact, the fact that Zieden was starting to settle down might be the trigger that drove another large nation to make a move. Even if the threat of that war reaching here deep in the mountains was effectively zero, it could very easily affect the trade for food we had established with human kingdoms.

A blockage in the food supply meant a blockage in the alcohol supply. For the dwarves, who loved drinking as much as blacksmithing, attitudes would turn dark in a snap if their access to it was cut off, especially after the range of drinks available had so recently broadened thanks to trade with the elves.

“On that note, Your Majesty, a letter has arrived from Ludoria, addressed to you.”

Despite my frown, the minister passed the letter to me without hesitation. The fact it was addressed to me personally and not to the kingdom meant it could only come from one person, and it didn't take me long to find his name written on the envelope. I couldn't help but feel something of anticipation at seeing it, so I wasted no time slicing the envelope open and perusing its contents.

It had been a long time since something inspired joy in me as much as this letter did. I bet I had a big stupid grin on my face as I read it. Hopefully, my long beard was doing something to hide it.



“You seem quite pleased, Your Majesty. I suppose you are happy to hear from your apprentice again after so long.”

Unfortunately, it didn't seem that was the case, as the minister's teasing voice interrupted me.

I replied with a snort. “You think so? Give it a read. That damn elf has done it again.”

I passed the letter back to the minister. Though a bit hesitant to take a personal letter addressed to someone else, he nevertheless read it over and soon was nodding in agreement.

“Katana, is it? I am reminded of ‘King Gravend's Despair.’ To think our past debts would come to be settled by an elf.” A mix of wonder and frustration tinged the minister's voice.

But there was one thing he had mistaken. “That elf is a citizen of our kingdom. That means he is clearing our past debt as our representative. And at any rate, he's my apprentice.”

No matter his race, Acer was an ally of the dwarves. He was my apprentice, and would forever be my friend.

“King Gravend's Despair” was the story of a dwarven king, generations before I took the throne. While he was still working in a human kingdom, he was famed as the greatest blacksmith in the land. As business began to slow down, he was approached by a group hailing from a distant kingdom. They were all tattered and worn down, yet treated their weapons as the most precious treasure. Those weapons, their katana, were as their own souls, they claimed.

Though he knew nothing else about them, Gravend accepted these travelers as his guests. They wished to cultivate their techniques, to spread their roots and pass down their legacy in this kingdom. Therefore, they wanted him to make more of their weapons, to make more katana for them. Their techniques were predicated on the use of these specific weapons.

But no matter how he tried, Gravend could not reverse engineer the production of those swords. Upon admitting that it was impossible, the

travelers were distraught, all but mourning...but they soon made up their mind. In order to survive in this new land, they would let go of their katana, they told him.

Their katana would eventually wear away, no matter how carefully they used them. One by one, those swords would chip and break, eventually to be lost. If they couldn't use their techniques without katana, then the loss of the weapons would make their techniques useless. It would be impossible to pass on their legacy like that. So, with the wails of a grieving parent, they let go of the swords that they had called their own souls.

Because of Gravend's lack of knowledge, these swordsmen who had treasured each blade as an irreplaceable part of themselves were forced to abandon them. I didn't know exactly how Gravend had felt at that time, but he ended up using every scrap of his wealth to purchase those katana and bring them back to the land of the dwarves, in hopes that the method of producing them, or at least a hint toward it, would be found there.

But even as he successfully took the throne, he despaired, as the methods he sought were unknown even to the king. As king, and the most skilled blacksmith among the dwarves, he devoted himself to the study of the katana he brought back, hoping to reinvent the method for producing them. Even if he could make something that looked similar, even though he succeeded at making something that cut better, in the end, he passed away without ever being able to produce a true katana of his own.

That was the story of Gravend's despair passed down among the dwarves.

"He is requesting we produce the materials needed in exchange for knowledge of how to produce katana and those materials. How shall we respond, Your Majesty?"

Though the minister phrased it like a question, there was no doubt how I'd respond. Gravend's Despair was well-known among the dwarves. If I ordered everyone in the kingdom to cooperate to this end, I wouldn't receive a single word of complaint.

"We will have to begin construction of the facilities needed to process this

iron sand. Also, we'll need to select smiths to go learn these methods."

Producing new facilities would be no issue. There was no kingdom in the world that poured more resources into blacksmithing. If the dwarves were serious, they would produce the special steel Acer was asking for in no time, if not something of even higher quality.

The bigger issue was selecting smiths to go learn from him. Of course I wanted to go myself, but that was only a selfish desire. The journey to Ludoria through the mountains would take weeks. Considering the time of a round trip, plus the time spent staying in Ludoria, I would be away from the dwarven kingdom for an extensive period of time. On top of that, as king, entering Ludoria would require discussions with the royalty there. It would all end up putting unnecessary stress and difficulty on Acer and the dojo where he stayed.

All in all, taking the throne was turning out to be quite a hassle. As much as becoming king closed off many paths to me, I didn't regret what I had done in the least...but that title weighed heavy on my shoulders.

"A wise decision, Your Majesty." The look of the minister bowing to me was somehow more irritating than normal. He must have guessed at my thoughts.

But even so, I had no doubt that the drinks tonight would be especially good.

## **Willow, Maple, and Violet**

I took long, deep breaths while sitting cross-legged on the grass. Plants filled the air with their energy, which animals took in by breathing to light the fire of life inside themselves. One day I would become a spirit, and so this whole process would be unnecessary, but while still shackled by this flesh I had plenty to learn.

Most creatures didn't know the meaning behind breathing. They didn't understand why they would starve and die if they stopped eating. But their instincts drove them to breathe, drove them to eat plants, drove them to hunt other animals for food and so fill their bellies.

Us high elves were different. Why had the high elves been gifted with a thousand-year life span? Why were we blessed with the aid of the spirits,

freeing us from the suffering of most other creatures? It was all so we could learn. We learned the meaning of breathing through breathing. We learned the meaning of eating through eating. We had physical bodies so we could learn how physical bodies functioned. It wasn't something that was taught to us, but something we learned through dialogue within ourselves, a process that took place over a thousand years.

The spirits had no understanding of what it meant to have a physical body, so it was likely decided that new spirits with this understanding were necessary. Animals were a part of nature as well.

Of course, these were all just my own thoughts. You might find other high elves that disagreed. For example, one of the elders, one who had ascended to spirithood well before me, said he had spent his life counting. He often drew numbers or codes into the dirt, then would smile in satisfaction as he looked over them. No one else could figure out what exactly he had learned, though.

Many high elves did things their own way, spending their lives learning something of their own, all for the day when they would become spirits. Some were more eccentric about that process, but they followed their own path, as did we all.

Sensing a somewhat rough temper approaching, I opened my eyes. Walking toward me was a high elf woman, with a rather displeased look on her face. Of course, I doubted she had intended for me to see that emotion so clearly in her, but the time I'd had to learn was many times greater than hers, so I could see through the emotions of high elves quite well.

"Hello, Violet Flower. You seem unhappy."

My rebuke brought her to a halt with a quiet gasp, before she bashfully took a seat in front of me. The expression of feelings, particularly of anger or hatred, was discouraged among the high elves. Spirits could pick up on the strong feelings of high elves, and would respond to them in kind.

And though he made it seem like he didn't care to hide his feelings, that boy who had left the forest must have learned by now he had to pay close attention to how he expressed his feelings for more than just the spirits. Emotions were a

method of communication among those like humans and dwarves. Having grown up and left the Forest Depths, I felt no need to chastise him for that now.

The high elf in front of me now, the one we called Viola, seemed a bit unsettled, like she was trying to pick her words carefully. "Please tell me why I am not allowed to meet with Acer," she said, finally making up her mind.

Ah, as expected, she wasn't all too happy with that decision, and so had come to ask me about it. But of course, the reason was quite simple.

"The Child of the Maple hasn't come to return home to the Forest Depths. He is simply stopping by because he has business in the sacred ground. Meeting him now would do no good for the other high elves."

He would be too much stimulus for the high elves as he was, so I had forbidden the others from meeting with him.

"But I am the closest of the high elves to him in age. We will likely be paired one day. Isn't it strange that I shouldn't be allowed to meet with him?" But the woman in front of me showed no sign of backing down. It was almost like she was trying to argue me down...without realizing that was all the more reason I didn't want them to meet.

"True. If neither of you chose other partners, the fact you are so close in age means you would likely be coupled. But he chose the outside world, not you. Thus, you are free to choose someone else." Though it might have sounded a little cold, I was only speaking the truth.

I could understand her being unhappy, but nothing good would come of her meeting the Child of the Maple now.

If she decided to violate the rule I set and meet with him regardless, that would be fine. Even if that ended up with her choosing to leave the forest and travel together with him, I was sure things would work out. If she valued him more than the rules of the high elves or the dictates of the elders, there was nothing I could say to stop her. If that was the path of learning she was to take, she would go with a silent blessing from me.

But that wasn't the case. She was here because she wanted my permission,

which meant she already understood to some degree that I was correct. She was only here to vent feelings she couldn't keep suppressed any longer.

In that case, she wouldn't be able to keep up with him on his journey. After all, in less than a century, his travels had brought him to meet a true dragon, and discover what slept in the sacred ground—a fact only the elders knew. If the phoenix were to awaken for him, he would eventually head to the world above the clouds to meet the giants.

The true dragons existed to reduce the world to ash, and the phoenixes to revive those ashes into a new world. But the greatest mystery of all was the giants, looking down on that world from the sky.

I was sure that someday, that boy would meet all the beings we knew of only in legends. That was the path set before him. It would not be an easy path to walk, though. A high elf with no knowledge of the outside world traveling together with him would only make things more difficult.

He might not object to the burden of carrying her along with him, but if the Violet Flower were to go out into the world, that truth would wound her greatly. She would be desperate to become of value, cling tightly to the pride and power she had as a high elf, and cause great harm to those around her. She would offer nothing but pain to the world.

It wasn't for the Child of the Maple's sake, but for the Violet Flower's sake that I forbade them from meeting, knowing full well what kind of dissatisfaction and resentment it might earn me.

The Child of the Maple was born from my daughter. He was the child of my child, so in human terms, that made him my grandson. As high elf children were raised by the entire community, that connection between us was quite thin, but thanks to the upbringing of my bizarre parents, I had a strange fixation on bloodlines.

So I couldn't help but imagine the extreme difficulty of the path that boy had chosen. I couldn't help but think of how much easier life would be for him if he stayed here. Even so, he had told me that he had chosen the outside world over us, that there was something there he still wanted to accomplish. If the Violet



Flower was to go with him, to wound and destroy the world around her, it would no doubt sadden him. I guess in a way, forbidding them from meeting was for his sake as well.

However, the Violet Flower was still in the midst of her learning. I didn't know how she felt, what she thought, or how she would respond to this situation. Would she accept my reply and give up, or write off my words as worthless and take matters into her own hands?

I didn't know, so it seemed best to keep an eye on her for a time.

No matter which path they chose, that boy and the Violet Flower were both my precious comrades. I would always be thinking about how I could keep them safe on their journeys.

## AGE

## EVENTS

EVENTS  
SO FAR0  
YEARS

I was born into this world. I grabbed at a maple leaf soon after, and 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 picked up a bow, but 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), Airena (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 from Airenia of what was happening to the elves in Ludoria. 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. It was the natural result, as the title was granted to the most skilled smith among the dwarves. 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've written here would be able to express how important she was. Leaving Ludoria, I headed to the Far East.
- 209►  
YEARS
- Passing through the Man-Eating Swamp and out to 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 the elf 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 use 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 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 by 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 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 Hearing rumors of a disturbance in the west, I began my journey there. Boarding a ship in Vilestorika, I reached the country of Jilchias in the west-central region, where 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.



# Afterword

Hello, this is Rarutori.

Thank you for picking up volume five of *Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored*. Volume one was released last April, which means this series has been out in the world for over a year now. Though the past year has felt like a dream, I intend to keep working hard on it, so thanks for sticking with me.

Let's get right into the themes of volume four, shall we? The previous volume covered Acer's arrival at his destination and his journey back home. The first chapter carried on the story from volume three, paying close attention to the many different cultures he experienced. It was quite Japanese, don't you think? Though the culture of this new land was nostalgic of Acer's past life, he had already become a fully-fledged resident of this new world. I would be quite happy if you were able to see that through the story.

The second chapter covered his return voyage. I really like ships in games and stories. Particularly in games, the moment you get your hands on one, the whole world feels like it opens up to you. There's a real sense of freedom. That freedom comes with its attendant dangers, though...which is what I was trying to express here.

This is a bit of a tangent, but apparently access to fresh water was quite challenging for long voyages, so instead sailors often drank alcohol which wouldn't go bad. Yes, I'm veering into talk about alcohol again.

The most common drink people might link with the Age of Discovery would be rum. It's the drink you picture pirates drinking, right? One *sake* bar I visit often has a single type of rum they keep in stock known as "Kraken Rum." It's a kind of rum with a number of spices mixed into it, with a sweet smell like vanilla. Rum is pretty strong stuff, so I would only recommend it to people who are pretty confident in their drinking. It's the kind of thing that'll make you

addicted in an instant. That's what happened to me.

You might wonder what I'm doing drinking rum at a *sake* bar, but that's just how delicious this stuff is. Actually, the place serves a lot of smoked foods alongside its *sake*, so has a lot of whiskey on the menu as well. So maybe it's not that strange.

Speaking of which, the other day I saw someone propose to a rather good-looking waitress at the bar. Okay, I guess that's not quite correct. I heard the story of it happening, and since the guy in question was there at the time, they were kind enough to do a reenactment of the scene for me. It was a great time making fun of (congratulating) them. Drinks offered in toast to someone's happiness always taste that much better.

Okay, getting back on track, chapter three and four had the same theme. They were about traveling through the places that had changed throughout the passage of time, to find the things that had stayed the same. Enough time had gone by for the people Acer had known to pass away. He was now ready to accept many of the things he couldn't bear to see when he had left for his journey in volume three. I hope that was how it came across.

That brings an end to the discussion of volume four. Hopefully I'll be able to go over the themes of this volume in volume six.

So, let's talk a bit about alcohol some more. Just recently, I've learned to drink hot *sake*! I couldn't really stomach it before. As much as I like *sake*, I only ever drank the stuff cold. Even the smell of the hot stuff would have me gagging. But recently at an *oden* shop I quite like, I started to feel like the *oden* would go really well with hot *sake*. Having the right drink served alongside your food is very important. I really enjoyed drinking the soup alongside the *sake* there. To dilute the soup, of course. Not the drink.

Just as with going to the bar, every time I find a new place to drink and find new drinks to enjoy, I feel like my world expands. Acer met a number of people here in volume five. Though it's not quite the same as finding a new bar, his world has also started to expand significantly.

I hope you stick with us to explore the wide new world he is discovering.



## Afterword

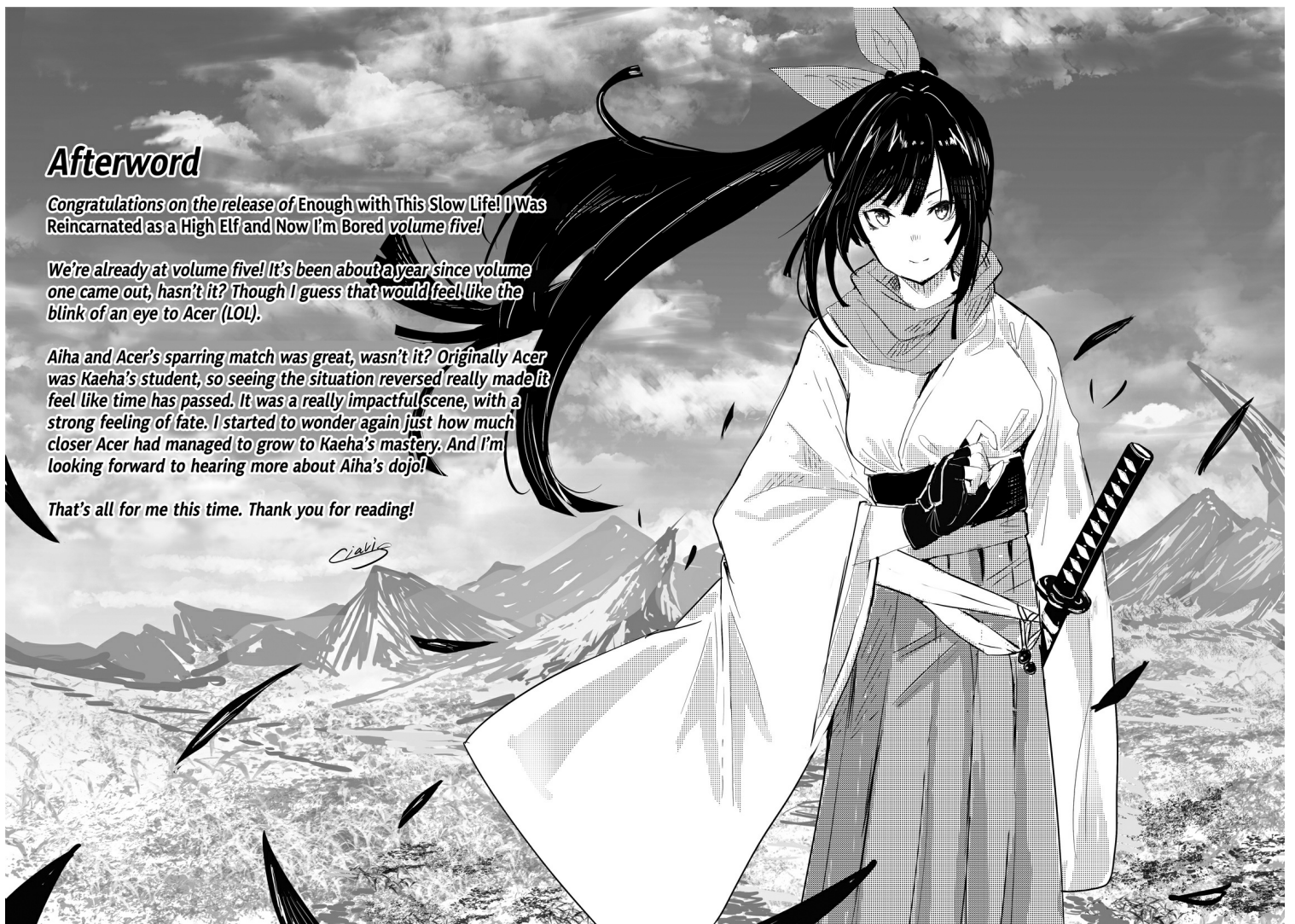
*Congratulations on the release of Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored volume five!*

*We're already at volume five! It's been about a year since volume one came out, hasn't it? Though I guess that would feel like the blink of an eye to Acer (LOL).*

*Aiha and Acer's sparring match was great, wasn't it? Originally Acer was Kaeha's student, so seeing the situation reversed really made it feel like time has passed. It was a really impactful scene, with a strong feeling of fate. I started to wonder again just how much closer Acer had managed to grow to Kaeha's mastery. And I'm looking forward to hearing more about Aiha's dojo!*

*That's all for me this time. Thank you for reading!*

*ciabie*











"To think I would actually see a phoenix with my own eyes. Acer, this is incredible."

**SALIX**

"You're really quite soft to the touch, aren't you Heero?"

**ACER**

"I can guarantee you my adult form will feel just as pleasant to the touch."



MYOS

Sharp clicks resounded from the statue as the Count's chisel slowly stripped stone away. It felt more like he was peeling material away rather than carving into the stone. One by one, he carefully stripped off the layers of stone, as if the true form of the statue was already lying underneath, waiting to be revealed.





SURPRISE,  
IT'S A  
POP  
QUIZ!

HOW  
MANY  
YEARS  
PASSED  
BETWEEN  
ME LEAVING  
THE FOREST  
DEPTHS AND  
ME ARRIVING  
IN INELDA?

First  
Edition  
Bonus

Bonus Side Story  
**The Secret Hidden in the Pie**

Please read it after finishing *Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored* volume five.



THAT'S  
RIGHT!  
NINETY-  
TWO  
YEARS!

The correct  
answer is...

92 years!!



I TOLD  
YOU NOT  
TO GIVE  
THOSE  
AWAY SO  
EASILY...

SHP...

Ah!

LORD  
ACER...

FOR  
READING TO  
THE END AND  
GUESSING  
THE RIGHT  
ANSWER,  
YOU WIN  
THIS  
APUA...

# Bonus Short Story

## The Secret Hidden in the Pie

*“Didn’t I tell you?!”*

Not having Airena around was making me feel so lonely, I could almost hear her voice.

Ever since leaving my home in the Forest Depths ninety-two years ago, I had met a large number of elves. If you counted the ones I saw but never spoke to, that number was in the thousands. But the only one among them who was willing to scold me was Airena. The first elf I’d ever met, she’d always been quite the strange one, yet undeniably competent. The word “hero” was no exaggeration.

Here in Inelda, the number of elves I would encounter was likely to be in the tens of thousands, and I would speak with a good portion of them, be they children or adults. Would there be anyone like Airena among them? I really hoped there would be. It would be a big help. But at the same time, I kind of wanted her to remain unique, even if that would make things more difficult for me.

For the elves here, who had been driven from their homes in the forest and forced to bid farewell to the humans who had shared Inelda with them, the stories of my journey were great entertainment. If the elven caravan had been with me, they could have made things all that much more exciting with their songs, dances, and art. But it wasn’t that easy to invite the elven caravan to the West, where elves were in perpetual danger.

So I wanted to do what I could myself to make the elves here happy. What *could* I do, though?

Ah, apuas would no doubt earn me smiles all around. Inelda was covered in forests, with plenty of large spirit trees that could create protective barriers for

the inhabitants and also produce apuas. But just because their trees bore apuas didn't mean the elves had easy access to them. Even before they were forced to flee from their homes in the forests, apuas were only eaten on extremely special occasions, like the day one was first acknowledged as an adult. For the elves here, apuas were significant.

But of course, I couldn't carry enough apuas around with me to feed this many elves anyway. I had restocked my supply of them when I went back to the Forest Depths to meet the phoenix, but it still wasn't nearly enough for everyone. So instead, I decided to make pies just for the elves I was meeting today. But rather than apuas, I would use something close, another favorite of the elves: apples.

Luckily I had easy access to the materials I would need. The forest had plenty of apples growing naturally in it, and the few farms left behind by the Ineldans to the care of the elves could produce some flour and butter to handle the rest. Of course, I couldn't hope to make enough to feed all the elves in Inelda, and food shortages were one of the first problems we needed to fix, but I didn't need to overthink things for now. With the materials in hand, I needed only the tools and a chef.

I would make them myself, of course. Yes, I knew how to bake pies. I had picked it up quite a while ago, in fact. Rain had forced me to stay in a town on Lake Tsia in the Azueda Alliance, and I had spent my time there working at a bar as a waiter.

Why would a waiter need to know how to bake pies, you ask? Well, the sailors who drank there were always looking for meat and fish pies to go with their drinks. With their bottomless stomachs, it wasn't uncommon for the waitstaff to get roped into helping with the cooking just to keep up.

And if I could make a meat pie or a fish pie, I could make an apple pie. Probably. I think. Right? Okay, I had never done it before, but I *did* have a recipe. With all my traveling, a surprising amount of information had been stuffed into my head. I never knew when it was going to pop out and make itself useful.



With the help of the earth spirits, I made a temporary oven for baking the pies, and the other elves helped me gather sticks from the forest to use as fuel. With flour, butter, and water, I made the dough. The elves brought me some honey as well, so I boiled the sliced apples together with it to bring out their sweetness. Putting the sliced apples onto the dough...and secretly adding a single slice of apua to each one, I closed up the pies and started baking. The fire spirits in the oven told me the exact moment the pies were done.

Once they were done, I cut them up and passed them out to the elves waiting around me. The hot and delicious smell followed me everywhere as I went.

The majority of the elves had never seen anything like pie before, so they looked over the dessert with quite a bit of curiosity...but the aroma started pulling at their appetites in no time. They could easily tell it was made from apples, one of the favorite foods of elves. Tentatively at first, they each bit into their pie. The flavor and lingering warmth brought first looks of shock, followed by many an excited cry.

I took a slice for myself and...yeah, it had turned out fairly well. For my first ever apple pie, I think I did a good job. Though, it didn't even come close to the apple pies I had tasted in my travels, like back in Janpemon. It really was a reminder that I was a customer more than a cook.

Even so, the elves were overjoyed at the pies I had made for them. I couldn't have been happier myself. Of course, the elves here weren't all the elves in Inelda. Making a small handful of them happy for a few moments wouldn't solve any of their problems. The joy they felt would only be temporary. But by piling up these temporary moments of joy, I hoped to make a long-lasting happiness for them.

I would work to resolve the problems here in Inelda together with the elves. I would spend ten years here, careful not to make them too reliant on me, but certain to help them put their problems behind them.

But today, the story ended with the finishing of the apple pies. I would save the stories of the Ineldan's problems for next time.

In ten years, I would leave Inelda behind and head west to meet Win. After that, when I returned to the east, maybe I'd make an apple pie for Airena too. I'd sneak in a slice of apua for her, just like I had for the elves today.

Would she notice? Would she scold me if she did? I couldn't wait to see her reaction.



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Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored: Volume 5

by rarutori

Translated by Nathan Macklem Edited by Austin Conrad

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