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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



Lilium
A high elf from the southern continent. Holds a grudge against humanity.



Soliel
A girl raised by Acer and Airena.

Soleil



Acer
A free and unfettered high elf with a lifespan of one thousand years. His curiosity for this world is insatiable.

Acer



Airena
Organizer of the elven caravan. She has become Acer's partner.

Airena



Golden Dragon
The true dragon Acer met beneath the Ancient Gold Empire. Guardian of the northern continent.

Golden Dragon

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In order to help the elves of the west-central region, Acer worked together with their younger leaders to build the nation of Shiyou. Once the country's workings were on track, he headed farther west toward his real goal: reuniting with Win.

After hearing the story of their failed attempt to bring down the High Priestess, Acer learned she was in fact a Soul Eater, and by working together with Win, they were able to kill her.

Saying goodbye to Win, Acer boarded the now mature Heero to return to the East, and en route he learned of the system of the End at work in this world, a considerable shock to him.

He spent a few years visiting the kingdom of the dwarves, and Oswald asked him to consider becoming their king. Though conflicted, he ultimately refused.

Afterward, Acer flew to the world above the clouds with Airena. After learning the truth about the giants, the two of them found the White Lake. With her lifelong dream fulfilled, Airena asked for one more request—to stay at his side from then on. And thus, the two became partners.

STORY

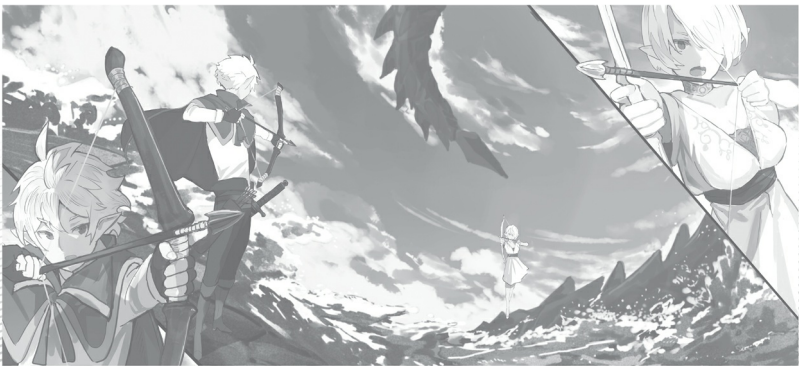




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Chapter 1 — The Sudden End of the World

Airena and I returned from the world of the giants above the clouds...and then forty-two years passed.

I was living in the Vilestorika Republic, where I took up residence in a mansion in Saurotay. Why Saurotay of all places, and why a mansion of all things? Well, let's just say a lot happened in the past forty-two years. Going into detail about it would take forever, but to give a broad summary, I was working together with the elven caravan to help Airena with a sudden huge increase in her workload. I guess I should also mention that I'm the reason she had so much extra work.

As I might have mentioned before, the caravan had been doing well servicing the east-central region of the continent, but expanding their influence to the west-central and Far West regions was beyond their means. For example, if they wanted to operate in the West, they didn't just need boats; they also needed to hire people to sail them, which would require enough profit to afford paying those people. In order to make that money, they needed to sell more goods to more people, which meant a greater need for management and transportation of their goods, as well as people to manage accounting. All of which meant hiring even *more* people.

So it was decided: the elven caravan would expand massively. Airena had been running the caravan well from the start, so it had already acquired a considerable amount of wealth, and I had connections all over the continent, opening plenty of trade opportunities. But we didn't have the personnel to buy and crew a ship ourselves. So instead we absorbed a human-run trading company, along with its ships, crews, managers, transporters, and accountants.

Vilestorika's strength lay in its commerce, particularly the vast profits it earned from trade with the southern continent. However, the southern continent had now been conquered by a single empire which forbade trade with foreign nations. There had been rumors of something along those lines happening in the past, but I was quite shocked to hear that the entire continent

had been united under one power. Of course, Vilestorika still engaged in trade with the eastern and western regions of our own continent, so this change wasn't enough to doom them, but many companies and their families suddenly found themselves lacking trading partners and needing to find business elsewhere.

Ah, by the way, the families in question were those making up the Republic's parliament. One particular family in these dire straits was familiar to me: the Toritrine family. Yes, I was currently staying in a mansion because the elven caravan had absorbed the Toritrine family's trading company.

It wasn't that the caravan had hostile intentions toward them, but the Toritrine family had neither the money nor the connections to escape their current situation. Seeing that we possessed both, they had chosen to sell themselves to us. True merchants at heart, their goal was to draw out whatever profit they could find.

Naturally, this arrangement had become hugely controversial within Vilestorika. Though it was only one seat, the elven caravan had nevertheless secured a position in the parliament. In other words, if the caravan so wished, it could exert political influence over Vilestorika. It went without saying that the Republic felt threatened by this possibility. Of course, a single seat in parliament wasn't enough to have a huge influence on the politics of the nation, but now that a precedent had been set, there was nothing stopping other outsiders from seeking similar influence.

For example, there were large families who also ran manufacturing businesses in Vilestorika. What would happen if the dwarves—a race with a deep connection to the elven caravan—set their sights on those businesses? It was unlikely, considering the personalities of most dwarves, but if they set their minds to it, it was definitely possible.

That said, the takeover of the Toritrine family was all very much legal and above board. You could even say that the takeover had been a saving grace for the Republic, as it had saved a great number of people from unemployment. For the politicians of Vilestorika who lauded the virtues of sincerity and honesty in trade, complaining about our actions after how much we had helped them was over the line.

So while they had accepted the entrance of the elven caravan into the parliament, they immediately began amending laws to prevent outsiders from taking other seats and to protect the great families of the Republic from hostile takeovers.

It was a wise decision, in my opinion. They didn't try to force the issue to their benefit, instead accepting their loss and then acting to prevent such a failure from ever happening again. It couldn't have been an easy choice to make, but it spoke of the bravery and pride of their lawmakers. Losing their opportunity to trade with the southern continent had been a colossal blow, but the fact that they could still exercise wise judgment like this made it clear they weren't headed for collapse. After all, now that the elven caravan had a stake in the Republic, they were obligated to work for its benefit as well.

At any rate, this all led to a massive expansion of the elven caravan, and gaining free rein over the Toritrine family's properties in Saurotay. Of course, I also spent time helping the elven caravan in Vilestorika's capital of Vitsa, and sometimes traveled by ship to other regions. There were no small number of problems born from merging a human trading company into an elven caravan either. Having competent allies who couldn't work together or had entirely different visions for the future could be more detrimental than having enemies.

The war in the West had been settled, with Win's Federation army proving superior in the end, and reconciliation with the humans living there complete. The Quoramite religion had been wiped out, the huge monster populations were being cut back little by little, and the elves had begun moving back to their old homes in the forests.

Besides that, Aiha's efforts at building a new dojo had succeeded, giving rise to the third Yosogi dojo, and they were starting to gather a considerable amount of fame. All of the dojos had gone through a full generation of leaders twice now, but each one had been excellent swordsmen. Sparring with them was a precious joy for me when I got the chance to visit. However, as you probably already guessed, Touki, Souha, Kairi, and even Aiha had all long since passed away. Human lifespans were really starting to feel too short.

Speaking of which, Oswald was still alive, but I imagined he didn't have much time left. I was planning on visiting him again in the near future. He might not

be happy about being seen in a state where he was too weak to swing a hammer anymore, but I still wanted to see him with my own eyes.

In all that, I hadn't changed much myself in the past forty-two years. I'd continued to live following my whims. But one day, something happened that changed everything. Something that blew away the peace in my life, something that threatened to bring it all to an end.



That morning, while I was in the back garden doing my daily training, I felt the world begin to shake. It wasn't an actual earthquake, though. Earthquakes were exceedingly rare here—provided a high elf wasn't asking the spirits to make one for them—and even when they did occur, I could pick up the signs well in advance. An actual earthquake would have been significantly less disturbing.

This was different. It was like a massive being had risen from the earth in the East, the shock waves of its emergence reaching even here. Great wingbeats shook the air. A voice called out across the continent, inaudible to most, but nonetheless calling clearly...for me.

"The golden dragon..." I murmured. The dragon was on its way to see me.

What could have possibly awakened a true dragon? I had absolutely no idea, but there was really only one possibility. Whatever had happened, it threatened to be the end of the world.

However, the golden dragon wasn't immediately laying waste to the world. He was coming to see me first. In other words, there was still hope of stopping the End from coming. According to Heero, the End brought about by an increase in the distorting power, necessitating the destruction of the world and its entire population of monsters—in other words, the true need for the End to come again—was still a long way off. It was possible that I could put it off this time by talking things through with the dragon like before.

However, the fact that he was already awake meant stopping him might only be possible with force. As the strongest of the ancient races, there was absolutely no way I could beat a true dragon. However, if I gave everything I had, I might be able to deliver a few injuries in exchange for my life.

As a high elf, once my body expired, I would become an immortal spirit of nature. Compared to others, death was not such a somber affair for me. Of course, the idea of dying was still scary, and I didn't even want to think of the possibility of losing the life I had now. But there was no way of knowing what effect a dragon's flames would have on my soul that had yet to mature into a spirit of nature. After all, even the gods—born directly from the Creator's hand, even if they weren't technically one of the ancient races—feared the dragons.

Something deep in my chest had grown cold, enough to send shivers through me. But no matter how scared I was, there was no way I could stand by and watch the world and the people I loved be reduced to ash. No matter how scared I was, no matter how I trembled, there was still something I could do, still something I *should* do.

I wasted no time in getting myself together and borrowing a small ship to head out to sea. Confronting the golden dragon within Saurotay would be too dangerous. Of course, if it did turn into a fight, this much distance wouldn't make a difference. This was a dragon capable of incinerating the entire continent, if not the world. Just the side effects of our battle would probably wipe Saurotay off the map.

So unfortunately, I was not getting away from the city to protect it, but rather to go somewhere it would be easier to fight. If I wanted to draw on the power of the spirits as much as possible, it would be easier to do so over the open ocean than in the middle of a city. Though there were no fire or earth spirits here, I would be able to draw a great deal of power out of the strong water and wind spirits that inhabited it. With the entire ocean backing me, surely I could hurt even a true dragon.

I just hoped that conjecture wasn't *entirely* wishful thinking.

At long last, I saw the enormous dragon approaching from the east.

He was much larger than he had been when I saw him underground in the Ancient Gold Empire, but the aura about him was exactly the same. There was no doubt in my mind that this was a true dragon, the friend I had spent seven years speaking with every day.

It seemed he had already noticed me...well, of course he did, since he had flown all the way here specifically looking for me. I waited for him as he descended, though his size made it hard to tell exactly how far away he was. The wind from his wingbeats churned the sea below us. My boat would have capsized instantly without the wind and water spirits protecting it.

But, yeah, this was more fitting. Though I still felt like I was on the verge of openly trembling, now that he was right in front of me, I could steel myself and be ready to fight back if needed.

“Long time no see, golden dragon,” I called out, greeting him before he could say anything. Luckily there was no tremor in my voice. It seemed I could be pretty brave when the situation called for it.

“From my perspective, it feels as though we last spoke only yesterday. But if it has been a long time for you, I am sure that is the case, friend.”

The dragon’s voice was gentle and calm, just as I remembered it. But I knew full well that if he decided it was time to carry out his duty, he could maintain that gentle demeanor even as he burned the world to ash. He was truly kind, but when it came to protecting this world, he wouldn’t let emotion stand in his way.

“Friend, though it has felt like no time has passed since our last meeting, I must ask you nonetheless. Is this world still a wonderful place? Is it still a place of value?”

So our last meeting had changed from “just the day before” to “no time having passed at all,” had it? I supposed for a true dragon, the eighty years that had passed since our last meeting were nothing.

So if it felt to him like no time had passed at all, what was so pressing that he needed to come all the way here to ask me that? Even if I didn’t understand what made the question necessary, the answer was easy enough.

“Of course. This world is still very precious to me. I’m out here because if you

were thinking of burning it down, I would have to try and stop you.”

The sea began to churn again, but not from the wing beats of the dragon. This time it was the spirits, responding to the unrest in my heart, growing steadily more belligerent. As always, the spirits in the sea were quite daring. Many people thought of water spirits as being kind and gentle, but they possessed incredible destructive power. Water was responsible for great disasters like tidal waves and floods, after all.

However, I couldn't let myself be carried away by those aggressive tendencies. If I tried too hard to suppress the fear I was feeling, I could end up drawing out the opposite emotion. If those exultant feelings were mixed with the aggressive tendencies of the water spirits, they could easily sweep me along without my realizing it, driving me into a state of panic. Though that was a bit better than cowering in terror, there was no way I could stand against a true dragon in a state like that.

I still had control over myself. I needed to remain calm, willing to fight, but not overwhelmed by strong emotion as I faced the golden dragon.

“You would fight a true dragon? Do you understand what that would mean for you, friend?”

The dragon's gentle question was far more intimidating than any kind of violent threat. But nothing he said would change my mind. Win had finally managed to bring an end to the war in the West. Airena was even now heading to the West to help the elves there return to their ordinary lives. Oswald was nearing the end of his life, but he would come to that end surrounded by children and grandchildren.

The system of the End was no doubt necessary to protect the world. It was a decision reached by all of the ancient races coming together. I had no objection to it in principle. There was no way they would have made that choice if there had been another way.

But even so, as long as I was still a high elf, as long as I had people I loved here, I wouldn't let the world be destroyed. That might have been no more than

greed on my part, but I wouldn't budge. I was just a damned elf after all. My personal feelings meant more to me than the logic of the ancient races.

"Of course," I replied, eyes locked on his, ready to fight back with everything I had if fire came for me at that moment.

But rather than fire, the dragon bowed his head.

"Very well. Then I shall act in aid of your will. As the golden dragon of the north, I shall deny the request of the ebon dragon of the south. The continent under my protection has not reached its End. There is no need for me to destroy the world my friend loves so."

He nodded.

Ah. It seemed the circumstances drawing the golden dragon from his slumber were a bit more complicated than I had expected.



According to the golden dragon's story, he had been awakened at the request of the ebon dragon, the true dragon inhabiting the continent to the south. Apparently the human empire that had conquered the continent had killed a great number of high elves. One of the surviving high elves had awakened the ebon dragon to burn the southern continent to the ground.

But that wasn't where the story ended.

"In the past, the demons were exterminated because of the harm they caused to the high elves. As such, I believe humans should be exterminated in the same way."

So the high elf in question had decided. I imagined that this high elf had spoken with the ebon dragon and so learned about the system of the End.

I couldn't tell just from the dragon's story whether that demand had come from a desire for revenge, or if the high elf actually believed humanity to be a great threat. But in any case, the ebon dragon seemed to agree, and so had contacted the golden dragon and the giants. It requested the giants dispose of

the humans that they were protecting above the clouds, and that the golden dragon initiate the End in the northern continent.

However, the giants objected to the ebon dragon's request. There was one anomaly they just couldn't get past, one that I was sure anyone who heard this story would immediately catch.

How on earth had humans managed to harm high elves, and in great numbers no less? Watching both the north and south from their place in the clouds, the giants knew the answer to that. So the giants pointed out the error in the dragon's request, or perhaps more accurately the high elf's request.

While it was true that the empire that ruled the southern continent was mostly made up of humans, it wasn't ruled by one. The emperor of this human empire was none other than another high elf who had left the sacred ground of his home behind, one with memories of a past life like I had.

That reminded me of my visit to the giants.

"A high elf leaving the forest casts unbelievable ripples across the surface of the world. We all take a great interest in watching those stories play out. Thus, we've been watching your journeys from the very beginning."

The giants said our *journeys*.

I had been confused about that back then, since I didn't know of any other high elves who had left the Forest Depths, but now I knew he must have been referring to one from the southern continent. I had no doubt that they were paying closer attention to him than they had been to me.

Using his power and long lifespan to take control of a human kingdom, he named himself emperor and expanded his influence, arming his military with shrapnel-laden explosives, guns, and cannons. Their incredible military strength allowed them to conquer the continent with ease. It also might have explained why they had cut off all trade with foreign nations. They hadn't wanted their firearms technology to leak to the outside world.

In that case, it was quite likely the emperor was planning on eventually attacking the northern continent. Or maybe in his madness, he never cared to leave the southern continent. In any case, he had decided to bring the power of

his empire to bear against the sacred ground he came from. I could only imagine what conflict had existed between the emperor and the high elves of his home, but the emperor won in the end.

In short, the giants claimed that it had actually been a war between high elves. To be honest, I agreed with them. Even with guns and cannons, humans wouldn't be able to seriously harm high elves on their own if those high elves acted with any sort of caution. I was pretty confident I could face a human army armed with firearms on my own. The high elves had lost their war because they had looked down on their enemy for being humans, but also because those humans had been led by a high elf.

For example, if the high elves asked the spirits to protect them from the guns of the humans, the emperor could ask the spirits to not get involved. Though this was all wild conjecture on my part, I doubted it was far from the truth. That was likely the cause of so many casualties among the high elves. I imagined they had never expected themselves to be injured at all.

The ones I really felt bad for in this case were the spirits. While they were confused by the request to not get involved, huge numbers of high elves were dying right in front of them.

Did the emperor really hate this world that much? He had been incinerated by the very flames he'd ultimately caused, but apparently never ascended to spirithood. Perhaps that had been his goal from the start. Hating the idea of being bound to this world for eternity, perhaps he brought about such violence in the hope of waking the dragons, the only ones who could threaten the immortality of his soul. But I still had no idea how he came to learn of the dragons or the End.

Though the giants refused the ebon dragon's request, the ultimate fate of the humans under their protection fell to the golden dragon. If the golden dragon agreed with the ebon dragon, the giants alone would have no hope of protecting them. If the guardians of the world both rejected the humans, there would be no place in the world they could return to. However, the golden dragon refused the ebon dragon's request after hearing my answer. Though really, I suspected it was a conclusion he had already come to beforehand.

But the story still wasn't over. The ebon dragon's objective—or rather, the objective of the high elf who awakened him—was still to wipe out humanity. Would they give up just because their request had been refused? This high elf had already succeeded in getting the ebon dragon to destroy the southern continent. With such power at their fingertips, there was a real possibility of them taking drastic measures.

It seemed the golden dragon foresaw the same possibility, which was why he offered to help me. In other words, we had all but declared war on the ebon dragon and the high elf riding it here.



I was riding on the golden dragon's back, heading south. We obviously couldn't afford to fight the ebon dragon anywhere near the northern continent itself. Though really, if two true dragons fought each other without holding back, never mind the continent, the whole world would likely be destroyed.

However, the dragons' role was to protect this world. I couldn't imagine they'd go far enough that they would risk destroying it. Even if the ebon dragon was intent on destroying the northern continent, I was still confident in that assertion.

So in order to prevent putting the world at risk, the real fight would likely be between me and the other high elf. The high elf who saw their comrades cut down around them, awakened the ebon dragon, and brought about the destruction of the entire southern continent. I couldn't underestimate them, knowing the battles they had already come through.

But even so, the thought of fighting another high elf was downright relaxing compared to the thought of fighting a true dragon. No matter how experienced they were, I was sure it was at least *possible* for me to do more than just injure them slightly.

On that note, I was quite glad that Airena was out on business while all of this was happening. If she had been around, she definitely would have demanded that I take her with me, but making an elf fight a high elf was just cruel. I had no doubt she would still take my side, but it would doubtlessly hurt her. Dealing with a high elf who had overstepped their bounds was best done by myself.

“Just to be sure, the other true dragons aren’t going to intervene, are they?” I asked the golden dragon about my greatest fear.

Back during my stay in the Ancient Gold Empire, the golden dragon had told me there were four true dragons in all. If the other two decided to get involved, all of our plans would be for nothing.

“Of course not, friend. The northern continent is under my protection. Defending it falls well within my role. The other two dragons will not be hostile to us.”

But the golden dragon guaranteed me that wouldn’t be an issue. That was a relief. If the other dragons weren’t getting involved, all I had to do was deal with the ebon dragon and the high elf who had awakened it. As I sighed in relief, the dragon under me spoke again.

“Even so, friend, please do not think ill of the ebon dragon either. He is only carrying out what he sees as his duty in the extermination of humanity. It is a fact that the humans were killing high elves on the southern continent.”

Basically “don’t hold a grudge against the guy we’re about to fight.”

“Had the two of us not met, I might have acceded to the ebon dragon’s request and burned the northern continent. That is the kind of creature we are. If you come to hate the ebon dragon, you will have to hate all four of us.”

The true dragons felt it was their role to burn the world down, and so to that end were planning to wipe out humanity.

I see. I couldn’t help but smile at that. There was no way I’d hate them for that. Of course, if they tried it, I would fight back, however futile that would be. But that wasn’t because I hated them or thought they were evil. I understood that they were doing what they could to protect the world in the best way they knew how. I just loved the world enough that I would do everything I could to

protect it too.

The worst I thought of the dragons was that riding on one wasn't nearly as comfortable as riding on Heero's back. Every time he flapped his wings, the muscles on his back rippled, shaking me. I could still feel the wind so I was okay, but without that, I would be dealing with motion sickness way worse than riding in a carriage. Of course, I would never bring that up with the golden dragon, not after he had agreed to be my ally and take me south like this. In short, this was the extent of my complaints against them.

"Don't worry, as much as I love you for coming all the way here to help me, that doesn't mean I hate the ebon dragon for standing against us. We just have differing perspectives right now."

I would really like to get a chance to sit down and talk with the ebon dragon someday, and the other two true dragons for that matter. This clearly wasn't the time for that, but I had every intention of winning this fight and surviving, so I might have the chance in the future.

But there was one more question nagging at me.

"Actually, there was one more thing I wanted to ask. Maybe it's weird coming from me, but why do you feel like you need to wipe out races that kill high elves?"

Long ago, the End had been brought about because of the demons, and this time it was because of a human empire that had invented firearms. As dangerous as those were, if the high elves were careful or really put their mind to fighting and training themselves, they could certainly deal with these enemies on their own.

It made sense to some extent that the spirits would care so much about the high elves, but why did the giants, phoenixes, and dragons? I couldn't help but be confused by that. If we wanted to, we had more than enough power to protect ourselves. Really, we had way more power than we needed. If we prepared thoroughly for battle, neither demons nor humans with guns stood any chance against us.

I had never fought a demon personally, but from what I had learned from the giants, they weren't even as powerful as the mystics. I didn't feel like there was

much need for the dragons to get involved. I was happy that the other ancient races liked us, but it felt like they were doting on us too much.

The dragon smirked in response. I couldn't see his face from atop his back, and I doubted I'd understand a dragon's expressions anyway, but I could still somehow feel his smile.

"I agree with you, friend. However, it could be said that the high elves are the leading actors of this world. In that sense, their destruction is the same as the world's destruction."

That response didn't sit well with me. According to him, the high elves were the sole creations who had been given limited physical bodies that allowed them to have lives beyond a specific role in the world. In other words, we were the only *people* the Creator had fashioned himself.

To take that logic to its extreme, one could say that as long as there were still high elves and spirits, the world would continue developing in the way the Creator wished. The giants recorded everything, the phoenixes offered transport, and the dragons offered protection, but the world wouldn't stop if any of them ceased to exist. But with the high elves gone, the spirits would lose their guiding force, and the world would stop changing. That wasn't just about high elves giving the spirits orders. It would also mean no more spirits would be born that had experience living as mortals.

Of course, that wouldn't be an imminent apocalypse, as there were more sources of spirits than just the deaths of high elves. But there would be no more change. The spirits would do no more than circulate nature's power, gradually losing all sense of self. The spirits were immortal, but if they lost the will to react to the world around them, they'd be no more than a well of untapped power. If all the spirits became like that, the world would likely return to its previous state as untamed chaos.

To give a simple example on a much smaller scale, boiling water would eventually grow cold if its source of heat was taken away. In that example, the boiling water was our world, the heat was stimulation of the spirits, and the

cold water would be the primordial chaos from which our world was fashioned.

“That is how we feel. Thus, the weak, fragile high elves still in their material bodies are that much more dear to us, that much more deserving of protection,”

The golden dragon spat nonsense. Okay, it was a telepathic message, so he wasn't actually spitting anything, but it really was nonsense.

The world he was speaking of was one that had passed away long, long ago. The high elves weren't the only ones providing stimulation for the spirits now. It might have seemed like a poor imitation from the golden dragon's perspective, but elves were also capable of speaking with the spirits. It was quite a long time ago, but Airena had once confronted a water spirit that referred to her as a “beloved child.” There was a girl raised in the grasslands of the Far East who was so loved by the wind spirits that they had come begging me to protect her. The spirits of flame that were treated with respect in the forges of blacksmiths all over the world would occasionally lend their strength to help those blacksmiths with their work. The spirits of the earth took such a liking to sculptures carved by human hands that they decided to inhabit them permanently.

Not everything was for the better, of course. Pollution from mining had driven one water spirit into a rage. The cloak of fog created by the demons over the Mountains of Mist seemed to sap the energy from the wind spirits. But whether for good or ill, the people who filled this world had a huge influence on the spirits. Even if the high elves were wiped out, there was no way the world would return to its primordial state.

I knew that, but I had also spent seven years explaining it to the golden dragon. Perhaps he was just reciting what the ancient races as a whole thought rather than his expressing own personal feelings. But even in that case, their understanding of the world was so outdated it was practically nonsense. No doubt he understood I would feel that way, judging by his wry smile earlier.

The high elves wouldn't be wiped out so easily, and our world was not as

fragile as they all believed. But as the ones tasked with burning that world down, perhaps the dragons felt differently.

“A lot has happened since we last talked. Once we’re done with this incident, I’ll tell you all about it.”

Even so, as someone he called a friend, I wanted to help the golden dragon understand.



Though there was no shortage of things I’d like to talk to him about, I felt like now wasn’t the time for casual conversation, so I rode on the back of the golden dragon the rest of the way in silence. After a considerable amount of time, the dragon suddenly opened his mouth wide.

“Friend, hold tight. An attack comes. I shall intercept.”

I dropped as close to his back as possible, but considering he was just covered in scales, there wasn’t really anything for me to grab onto. With a roar, a beam of golden light erupted from the dragon’s mouth, shooting off to the horizon where it collided against a similar beam of black light. The two exploded on contact, splitting the sea below and shaking the sky above. Yeah...if this was the kind of power they had, an all-out fight between two dragons would definitely be the end of the world.

But I didn’t have time to gape in shock at the display before me. I called on the water spirits to soften the shock waves of the explosion before they reached the continent. Though the dragons were powerful, this kind of small—okay, maybe a better word would be delicate—work was my specialty. Besides that, if the other side was willing to attack us entirely unprovoked, they must have been really raring to go.

However, the fact that this bloodthirst was likely coming from the high elf rather than the ebon dragon would work to my advantage. The golden and ebon dragons were both true dragons, and both were limited by having a passenger with them. The speed with which they could travel was similarly limited. That meant that if the ebon dragon had no desire to fight and simply

fled in circles, it would be quite difficult for us to catch up. If he then reached the northern continent and began laying waste to it, things would be quite problematic, to say the least.

That's what I would do in their position. If my objective was to destroy the continent, and my opponent's was to protect it, I would have an advantage if I brought the fight there and forced them to defend it. So why weren't the ebon dragon and his high elf doing that?

Perhaps it was just anger. The high elf believed their actions were just, so they might have been angry at the golden dragon and me for standing in their way. They might have wished to strike us down so they could continue on to the continent and wipe out humanity. There was also the possibility that they just weren't the type to think of anything other than fighting their problems head-on. Alternatively, the ebon dragon might have understood that the world would be destroyed if two true dragons fought, and so brought his charge here to have the two high elves settle things between themselves instead.

All of these seemed possible, but whichever it was, it worked out in my favor. If they were going to face us directly, we could pin them down and turn this into a battle between high elves. In general, a battle between high elves wouldn't involve the spirits, so it might not look too grand for a fight that would decide the fate of the world, but I was happy to resolve it with as little collateral damage as possible.

Even if I was fighting to protect the northern continent, I wasn't planning on killing any of the high elves from the southern continent. Neither did I plan on chastising them for having their continent burned down.

Of course, I had plenty of thoughts and feelings on the matter. The emperor of the southern empire being a high elf with memories of their past life hit a bit close to home. If things had been just a bit different, I might have ended up the same way he did. For example, if the other high elves had treated me as an outsider because of my memories. If there hadn't been someone like Salix around who understood me. If I had headed west instead of east on the day I left the Forest Depths. If the first person I met hadn't been Rodna. If I never met Airena, Oswald, Kaeha, Nonna, Kawshman, or any of the friends I'd come to love...this world might not have become so precious to me.

I wished I could have talked to this high elf with memories of his past life. Despite everything, I still wanted to come to an understanding with him. We could talk about our previous lives or our current ones. About stupid things, and hardships we've faced. Maybe even just talk through our fists. Whatever it was, I wished I could talk things through with him. But that chance was now gone forever, and he had taken the entire southern continent down with him.

Rather than this ridiculous fight over the open ocean, I wanted to help out with rebuilding the southern continent. I could definitely lend a helping hand...and though I'd definitely get an earful about it, I was sure Airena and the elven caravan would help too. After all, the business the elven caravan had absorbed in Vilestorika was one that originally made its money from trading with the southern continent.

I really wanted to finish this stupid fight as soon as possible. Even as members of the ancient races with tremendous lifespans, we high elves still couldn't change the past. So I wanted to focus my efforts on changing the future, to make it at least a little brighter.



After showing himself, the ebon dragon exchanged breath attacks with the golden dragon a few times. Neither of them were willing to make a dogfight out of the encounter, most likely due to their passengers. But even if they were being considerate of us, the clash of powers still made an awful lot of work for me in deadening the shock waves before they reached the continent.

I was really, really glad we were above empty ocean. If there were an island nearby, I probably wouldn't be able to stop it from being blown to pieces. I didn't even want to think of the damage this could have wrought over the mainland. In truth, I'd have liked to do something about the shock waves traveling through the air as well, but it was all I could do to manage the ones in the water. Preventing a tidal wave from forming was the limit of my ability.

I really had the best and worst luck today. Being able to watch two of the strongest beings in the world duke it out was quite the learning experience, but seeing such a hellish sight was enough to break a person.

However, the fight didn't last long. Even in their conflict, neither of the true

dragons wanted to destroy the world. They soon became entangled in more of a melee, sinking fangs into each other and dropping out of the sky. Both dragons were so focused on neutralizing their opponent's strength that neither of them had the ability to maintain flight.

They crashed into the sea, forming something of an island. In other words, the stage had been set for me and the other high elf to settle things for real.

Standing on the land made of golden scales, I looked across to the person standing on the land made from black scales. It seemed the one who had awakened the ebon dragon was a woman. Her hair was cut short, unlike the favored long hair of the high elves. It spoke of the hardships she had faced. The path leading to the dragon's awakening had certainly not been easy.

"I am Acer, known as the child of the maple, a high elf from the northern continent. I am here to stop you, my southern kin." But neither her being a woman nor the hardships she had faced in reaching this point changed what I had to do. I was here to protect the people and the world that I loved.

"I am Liliun, known as the lily flower, one of the few high elves remaining from the southern continent. Kin from the north, I can only tell you that you are unaware of the wickedness of the creatures known as humans. There can be no peace for us while they still live."

Ah, I see.

I accidentally snorted a laugh at her words. Of course, from her perspective, humans would look cruel and wicked. It was true they had that side to them, and Liliun had probably had few chances to see any other side. But thinking that peace could only come from exterminating them all was laughable.

"What is so funny, Acer of the north?!" Apparently she wasn't fond of my response.

I guess I couldn't blame her. No matter how you sliced it, it looked like I was making fun of her. But I couldn't help it.

"Even setting aside your fear of humans, what's funny is you relying on a dragon to do your dirty work. If you're going to exterminate them, do it

yourself.”

I honestly felt embarrassed by her actions. It wasn't that I couldn't understand where she was coming from. Despite the fact they should have won without effort, they had lost their war with the southern empire, and so she had desperately sought out the ebon dragon and used its power to destroy the southern continent. It wasn't Liliium's fault that they had lost the war, at least not entirely. All of the high elves had to have let down their guard, and there was also the issue of the emperor.

I wouldn't argue that the ebon dragon had been necessary to turn the tides. It was simply conjecture on my part that the high elves could fight back and win on their own. But still relying on the dragon's power to destroy everything after the battle had been won was shameful. Especially after seeing the short fight between the golden and ebon dragons, I knew true dragons were just too strong. It wasn't the kind of power that should be used.

I had to assume Liliium had been quite shocked to discover the extent of their power for herself. Maybe she had grown drunk on the power she had obtained. In fact, I was certain that was exactly what had happened. After all, here she was, demanding that the ebon dragon wield its power again, all to erase the fear in her heart along with all of humanity.

“You've lived your whole life in peace in the north! What would you know about me?!” Liliium roared, making no attempt at hiding her rage.

The high elves of the southern continent were likely not so different from the high elves of the north. In that case, for her to be so open about her anger despite the high elf custom of keeping one's emotions tightly under control meant she must have understood just how shameful her actions were.

“I do understand, at least a little bit. But I can't say I care to understand any better. Because either way, I'm still going to stop you.”

At my response, her anger focused into a more personal hatred as she lifted her bow and nocked an arrow. Like I'd mentioned, the spirits wouldn't intervene in a battle between high elves. They hated the thought of hurting a high elf, so even if it was another high elf asking them to do so, they wouldn't move without an exceptionally good reason.

I drew my own bow in turn, and we released our arrows at the same time.



Our arrows soared past each other, barely grazing their targets. We hadn't missed on purpose, nor were we unskilled archers. But it was easy enough to guess where we were aiming based on our stances, so both of us had moved out of the way as we fired our own arrows. That level of mastery was to be expected among high elves. Our first exchange had only been something of a greeting.

But it seemed Liliun might have been quite a bit younger than I realized. Up until I left the Forest Depths at a hundred fifty years old, I was probably the best at archery among the young high elves. My memories of my past life had led to the high elf lifestyle feeling exceptionally boring to me, so I had used archery practice as a way to kill time. But ever since leaving the Forest Depths, I had only really used my bow for hunting and fighting monsters. I didn't have much opportunity to do the kind of difficult target practice I used to do in the Forest Depths.

I wouldn't say that my skills had dulled over time, but they certainly hadn't gotten much better either. If the other high elves continued practicing archery while I was absorbed in blacksmithing, swordsmanship, magic, sculpting, traveling, and learning about other people, I would almost certainly be outdone by at least half of them by this point.

However, our exchange right now had shown that Liliun was at about the same level, or maybe a bit lower. So if she wasn't just uniquely bad at using a bow, there was a good chance she was significantly younger than I was.

If the two of us continued shooting arrows like this, more focused on avoiding the opponent's than landing our own, then unless one of us made a huge mistake, we'd both run out of arrows before accomplishing anything.

I also had magic and a sword, and I could even fight well with my bare hands. If we both ran out of arrows, that would probably decide the fight then and there. If that was how things ended, we could probably resolve this without seriously injuring each other.

As much as I was determined to protect the northern continent, I had no

desire to kill Liliu. Once I could make her admit defeat, I could spend as much time as I had to convince her to give up her cause. I doubted my words could change her hatred for humanity, but I could at least get her to give up on revenge. After all, she had already gotten it. The emperor of the southern empire, and all the humans that followed him, had died in the flames.

Entertaining such naive thoughts, I noticed a whirlwind of air forming around me as I reached for another arrow. I managed to throw myself to the ground moments before the air around me exploded. As I protected my face from the blast with my arms, spheres of water lifted into the air and fired at me like bullets.

This was the work of the spirits. I ran from them, not even having the time to be confused. Luckily my cloak had dragon scales sewn into it, so it was far sturdier than any metal armor. Even getting hit by a few of the aquatic projectiles wouldn't be enough to do me in.

But that wasn't the real problem. Why were the spirits attacking a high elf like me? Since the day I was born, they had always been my most trusted allies, my closest friends. Even if I was fighting another high elf, why would they attack me? The shock of it all left my thoughts in disarray.

I could see a number of wind and water spirits around Liliu. They all glared at me with the same hatred.

Something was wrong. Very, very wrong. That was totally impossible. Even if I reluctantly gave in and assumed the spirits had a reason for siding with Liliu, there was zero chance they would look at me with *hatred*. In other words, they couldn't really be spirits in the first place.

Ah, so that was it. I did have one idea as to what these things could be. What was the closest thing to a spirit without truly being one? A high elf. Once a high elf shed their mortal body, they became a spirit. In short, the "spirits" hovering around Liliu right now were what remained of the high elves slain by the human empire. No doubt they had been the ones to lead her safely to the ebon dragon's resting place. In fact, it very well might have been them that urged her to have the southern continent destroyed in the first place. If that was the case, it would be more appropriate to call them vengeful ghosts than spirits of

nature.

Once I had figured out that these weren't proper spirits attacking me, I felt much calmer. In that case, I couldn't blame them. If they had died in battle, it was only natural they would seek revenge on humans and hate me for standing in their way.

But of course, me calming down didn't change the situation. I knew the power these hateful spirits wielded better than anyone. I was the one who had banked on those spirits being able to deal a significant blow to the golden dragon if things had come to that, after all. I knew full well just how much trouble I was in.

So I couldn't really explain why learning that these spirits weren't the friends I had known all my life filled my heart with relief. While I ran around evading the spheres of water, I ended up dropping my bow, but that didn't matter. I reached for my belt, and the magic sword that hung there.

This was the source of my confidence.



I had practiced swordsmanship longer than any human could ever hope to. Recently—and by that, I mean within the last ten years or so—I had noticed something.

My swordsmanship was Kaeha's swordsmanship. I was walking down the path she had opened for me, chasing after the mastery she had achieved. And at the risk of sounding conceited, once Kaeha had surrendered the dojo to Shizuki, she had focused all her efforts on developing a style of swordsmanship for me specifically. So in another way of putting it, her style was created for my sake.

The swordsmanship she had shown me in her last days, even the ultimate technique that felt like it could cut anything in the world, had all been developed specifically so she could teach it to me. Even when she couldn't get out of bed anymore, she refined that technique to the absolute limit, thinking that I might need it someday.

So what was that ultimate swordsmanship meant for? Thinking back on Kaeha's life, there were hints scattered throughout. Occasionally, she'd act as if

she had some perception of the spirits. For example, she could guess when I was about to return, as if she had received a message from the wind spirits. That hadn't been the case on our first meeting, but it started happening after I taught her about the spirits and talked to them in front of her. Though she couldn't see or hear them, maybe she had found some other way to perceive them.

But even though I had taken the spirits for granted as allies, Kaeha had no reason to think that. No matter how much I struggled, I could never reach the pinnacle Kaeha had achieved in swordsmanship. Thinking about it now, that was to be expected. I hadn't even considered the idea of trying to attack the spirits themselves.

Yes, Kaeha's final technique had been one to use against the spirits, or at least the natural phenomena they created—to counter an opponent beyond human senses, even while knowing that someone like me with such a deep connection to the spirits may never need it. That was why it had felt like that last slash could truly have cut anything.

Now, standing before me were distortions of spirits, the lingering ghosts of slain high elves possessed by hatred. There was no way Kaeha could have predicted something like this would ever happen...but I was sure that now, after all this time, I could reproduce that last performance she had shown me.

Lilium's face twisted into a mocking sneer as I drew my sword. She must have seen my actions as the last desperate struggle of a dying man. I supposed that's how it *would* look to a high elf who had never even touched a sword. But the expression on her face was honestly quite ugly on her. It was almost painful to see her looking at me like that.

She had said before that she was also called the lily flower. Lilies were poisonous, but as I saw that venomous look, I couldn't help but wonder if that hatred really belonged to her, or if it came from the spirits around her.

At any rate, what I had to do wouldn't change. Honestly, I didn't have the composure to take Lilium's situation into consideration.

“Ei, Dah, Pitus Roh, Fos!”

Enunciating clearly, I brought my magic to bear as a ball of flames. It was the exploding fireball spell, a sphere of flame that would detonate on impact, one of the most powerful attack magics I knew.

As I fired it, I felt the wind shift. The fallen high elves were moving to protect Liliu. But even with their intervention, the smoke from the explosion blinded both of us. A whirlwind quickly whipped up to blow away the smoke, but I was already closing the distance. Liliu jumped backward, calling on her dead companions to fire countless projectiles of wind and water at me.

But that was all within my expectations.

“Zuu, Vokle, Da, Pah, Veek!”

My next incantation was already prepared, creating a magical barrier in front of me that deflected the spray of tiny projectiles. In response, Liliu gathered the wind and water into a single large mass, attempting to smash through my shield and take me out along with it.

The power of magic couldn't compare with that of the spirits. I had been told that countless times before I started learning magic. Fighting against a high elf made that all the more obvious. The blast easily smashed through my barrier...but even this was according to plan. It was exactly the opening I had been waiting for.

The huge projectiles each bore the spirit of one of the deceased high elves from the south. Each of them glared at me with unbridled hatred, determined to crush the impudent high elf standing in the way of their revenge.

But those gazes meant nothing to me anymore. If they weren't the spirits I knew as friends, I had no qualms about raising my sword against them.



In fact, finally being able to try this technique for myself had filled me with joy and anticipation.

I swung my magic sword. The movement was already deeply ingrained into my muscles. I had attempted the same thing countless times in the past. What I had lacked was not the physical motion, but the understanding and intent behind it. Just like when I had started practicing swordsmanship, when I had pursued beauty with no care for strength.

Thinking back on it, that had always been my greatest failing in swordsmanship. Though it had taken me quite a while to get here, the time I had sunk into practicing swordsmanship over all these years would never betray me. Kaeha was already present in my constant imitation of her technique.

“This is the end of the road. Where Kaeha Yosogi’s life of swordsmanship finds fulfillment.”

Those words repeated in my mind. As the image of her resurfaced, my arms and body followed her exact motions. My sword sliced through the wind, the water, and the two fallen high elves that inhabited them.

A high elf’s soul was immortal. Now that they had become spirits, there was no killing them. Even so, there was a very clear impact from my sword biting into something. Their glares changed from hatred to shock and fear. And as I turned to face them, they fled.

At least for now, they had found an emotion more powerful than their hatred, and that was enough for me. I didn’t know where they had gone, but I was sure they would eventually mix together with the other spirits to support the flow of nature.



After all these decades of chasing her, my fingertips had finally brushed against Kaeha’s back. However, I didn’t have the time to enjoy that accomplishment. As crude as it was, I was still locked in a fight over the fate of the northern continent. Seeing the results of my slash, both Lilium and the dead high elves around her began to panic in a way that was almost comical.

But we were still far from being on equal footing. I had a weapon I could use

to fight back, but it was hardly enough to guarantee victory. The fallen mystics I had fought before, the vampire Rayhon and the soul eater Orie, the Quoramite High Priestess...they had their mystic arts, a weapon capable of harming high elves and the spirits. Even so, I had seen victory in the end and taken their lives.

As an enemy of the dead high elves who followed Liliun, there was a vanishingly small chance I'd survive this encounter. But even so, if I risked my life and kept up the attack, I could likely bring Liliun down with me. Victory for her meant defeating me and burning down the northern continent, but all I had to do was stop her. In other words, if we both died here together, it was a victory for me.

Of course, I had no desire to die, but I had already come to terms with that possibility when I resolved myself to fight the golden dragon. If I could save the northern continent from destruction and thus save the lives of all the people I loved living there, the price of my remaining lifespan as a high elf seemed cheap. On top of that, since this fight wasn't against a true dragon, I would still ascend to spirithood.

I had no reason to be obsessed with revenge like the dead high elves. Airena would no doubt be furious with me, but at least she could still see the spirits. Even if I died here, I could still spend the rest of her life with her.

The only thing that made me hesitate was the idea of having to kill Liliun. She had survived so much, and the high elves of the southern continent had lost so many. The idea of taking her life pained me greatly.

Maybe everything destroyed by the dragon's flames to the south was an object of hatred for her, but I held no such grudge. If I had been stronger, if I had perfected the technique Kaeha had left behind for me already, I might have been able to casually scatter Liliun's spirits, and would have no need to kill her.

But of course, lamenting my weakness now wouldn't make me any stronger. As I gave a self-deprecating smile, taking another stance and preparing myself to take Liliun's life in earnest, I heard a whisper on the wind.

"That is not true, child of the maple. We have heard the lamentations of your heart, and we have arrived in time to aid you in your struggle."

Just like Kaeha's voice from earlier, it sounded like an actual voice in my ears,

not just my imagination. I couldn't imagine why I'd hear that voice now of all times, but when I turned around...sure enough, there he was. It was Salix, the high elf elder who should have been far away in the Great Pulha Woodlands on the northern continent.

And it wasn't just him. There were four others, all high elves I recognized...elders I had struggled so hard to get along with. Yes, the same ones I had been told had ascended to spirithood before my last return to the Forest Depths.

Which meant... Ahh. It seemed Salix had also made the change.

"Child of the maple, there is no need for you to wound your heart so. You never listened to our warnings, following your heart carelessly out of the Forest Depths and into the world."

The elders called me careless yet again. Even without emotion in their voices as spirits, their nagging was no different than it had been in life. But for some reason, those voices calmed my heart.

"However, that is also what we found endearing about you. You might have always followed only your heart, but your nature was benign, and so your heart always led you to doing good."

The elder that had always spoken at painful length kept it short this time, looking down at me with a kind gaze. Though even so, it still felt like they were talking in circles.

"We are the ones who taught you the spirits would not interfere in a battle between high elves. But if those of the southern continent will lend their comrades strength, we have no reason not to do the same."

The most knowledgeable of the elders said, declaring as much to Lilium and the deceased high elves around her.

The last of the five had been quite taciturn in life, and seemed to remain so now, only nodding in agreement to the words of the others.

I was totally speechless. I would never have expected these people—or, I suppose, these spirits—to suddenly appear at my side. When I last visited the Forest Depths, I had been told that all of the elders cared for me in their own

way. But even so, I never expected them to show up and help me in a time like this, to still treat me as one of their comrades in their speeches. The shock, the joy I felt mixed together into a powerful wave of emotions threatening to overwhelm me.

Salix looked down at me with a mischievous smile. *“Acer, child of the maple. Child born from my own child. In human terms, my grandson. We have already become spirits, and so have come to your aid, but we are not the only spirits that long to help you.”*

Salix lifted his hands. Suddenly, countless spirits appeared in the air around us.



Not just wind and water spirits either. There were even fire and earth spirits, those that should have had no way of manifesting here, in numbers beyond counting. In particular, there were a huge number of fire spirits...and each and every one of them felt somehow familiar.

Among the stronger water spirits was the one I had met in the spring in northern Ludoria. Why would she be here, so far away from the waters she called home? There were also the wind spirits that pushed me along on my journey, the fire spirits that danced in my campfires, and the earth spirits that encouraged me with each step I took. The wind spirits that soared over the grasslands, the water spirits from the wells I had dug, the earth spirits that had come to rest in the sculptures I had made...and the fire spirits of the furnaces I had worked.

Why were they all here, so far from their homes? *How* were they here?

“Spirits do not leave the medium they inhabit...but that does not mean they cannot leave. You will understand when you become one yourself. Your friendship with them has brought them here, no matter the difficulty they faced in coming, thanks to the power of the dragon beneath your feet.” Before I could even put my question into words, the spirit that had once been Salix gave me an answer.

Ah, I suppose that made sense. Right now we were standing on the bodies of two true dragons, keeping each other suppressed. In other words, they were giving off a tremendous amount of power here.

In the beginning, this world had been no more than a swirl of chaotic energy. The Creator took that energy and gave it consciousness, creating the spirits that came to create the land, the sea, and the sky. In other words, the Creator didn't create these things on his own. It had been the spirits, creating environments they wished to inhabit themselves. The spirits didn't exist because of these environments; the environments existed because of the spirits. The presence of the earth spirits created soil on the bodies of the struggling dragons, and the presence of fire spirits set the air around us alight, all by consuming the “fuel” given off by the two dragons.

Lilium and her deceased companions stood in shock, unable to move at what

must have felt like some sort of sick joke. She wouldn't have the same reinforcements I did. The southern continent she came from had been destroyed. They had been the ones to destroy it. But once they began rebuilding the southern continent, they'd likely see the exact same thing again. No doubt the spirits there were waiting with bated breath for that moment to arrive.

Once she realized that, there was only one thing Lilium could do. High elves were a race that lived in close proximity to the spirits. The result of this battle had already been decided. It would take only a word from me for this entire new environment to turn against her, ending this fight in an instant.

But that wasn't what I wanted. I was happy for the spirits to stay out of a battle between high elves. I knew the elders behind me didn't want to actually fight their comrades from the south. The spirits of the north didn't want to hurt Lilium. They had simply created an opportunity where she could be defeated without having to kill her. As an aside, I was also happy to resolve things without giving up my remaining life as a high elf.

Thanks to the help of the elders and the other spirits, I wouldn't have to do something I didn't want to. In turn, I didn't want to force them to do something they didn't want to do either. The result of this battle had always been something to be decided by Lilium and myself. Just like the golden dragon was keeping the ebon dragon suppressed, the elders and the spirits would keep the fallen high elves of the south suppressed. I wouldn't ask anything more of them.



With the spirits now out of the picture, I turned to face Lilium again. But that only brought an expression of shame and anger to her face.

"And now you make fun of me?!" Apparently, opting for a fair fight, rather than using my overwhelming advantage to crush her, didn't sit well with her.

I guess I couldn't blame her for that. She was the one who brought the spirits into this...okay, I didn't want to actually acknowledge them as spirits, so I should say she was the one who brought the dead high elves into this. She never wanted this to be "fair" to begin with. But even after all that, even after having that advantage turned back against her, I was challenging her on equal

footing. It was no wonder my actions upset her. It was like saying I could easily beat her even without the spirits.

Practically speaking, her archery was good, but not enough to kill me. And I had swordsmanship and magic on my side. Besides that, with how much time I had spent practicing swordsmanship and blacksmithing, I could confidently say I was the physically strongest high elf in the world should it come down to fists.

What Liliu didn't realize was that I wasn't the one making light of her. It was her own desire for revenge at any cost that insulted her. Her inflated pride was the source of her shame. It had nothing to do with me.

So I gave no reply, and stomped on the earth to test the newly formed ground beneath my feet. The hard scales of the dragons had been decent enough footing, but proper soil was much better. I had already managed to reach Kaeha's legacy with my fingertips, but now I bet I could get my whole hand there. That was how it felt.

Ah, but doing that would end up killing Liliu. I guess I'd have to hold off on that for a while. As that thought brought a smile to my face, I knocked one of Liliu's arrows out of the air with my sword. She lacked any sense of composure now. Arrows fired in such a rage were easy enough to read. Though it was a powerful enough shot, deflecting it with my sword was a lot easier than cutting a wind or water spirit.

I walked slowly forward, continuing to deflect the incoming arrows with my sword. There was no need to rush this fight to a conclusion, and I wasn't going to underestimate her. She almost certainly still had a trick up her sleeve. Otherwise, she wouldn't still be trying to fight. She would have given up on her plan to destroy the northern continent. But she was still trying to defeat me, to get the ebon dragon to continue north.

It was possible she was just being driven by pure emotion, no longer thinking rationally. But it still felt like she was hiding something that gave her enough confidence—or hatred—to keep fighting. For example, the fallen high elves might have taught her some secret technique that she'd mastered on her quest to awaken the ebon dragon...or maybe she had taken one of those deadly weapons that had ended so many high elf lives.

As I drew closer, Liliu tossed her bow aside and threw something at me, charging toward me after it. It was a sealed glass bottle containing some sort of liquid. Was it acid? Poison? I couldn't tell what the bottle contained, but the fact that whatever dangerous substance it likely contained hadn't leaked at all despite her travels and our fighting was quite a surprise. An airtight bottle like that must have been developed by the civilization of the southern continent, drawn from the knowledge of the emperor with his memories of a past life.

Even so, no matter how sealed the container was, it was still glass and would break if hit with a strong impact. So instead of slashing at it, I caught the bottle with the tip of my sword and threw it to the side, diverting its trajectory without breaking it. It had definitely been a good move on Liliu's part, but if that had been her trump card, she would have opened the bottle and just thrown its contents at me. Throwing the whole bottle had likely been a distraction, and my suspicions were confirmed when the charging Liliu drew a handgun from a fold in her clothes.

As I thought: she was, in fact, carrying that symbol of hatred—or maybe even death and fear—that had killed her comrades. But it wasn't any ordinary gun. This was a remarkably ornamented revolver. The bullets it fired were by way of a firing hammer, thus allowing it to fire multiple rounds in quick succession. It didn't seem like something that would be carried by an ordinary soldier. But more importantly, if the southern continent had developed the technology for revolvers, they also probably had the technology to create firing pins. In other words, they had sufficiently advanced technology to ignite gunpowder through physical impact. The guns and cannons used by the southern empire must have been quite powerful. Even if the actual method used to launch the bullets was entirely different from my understanding of it, there was no doubt they were highly developed weapons.

But that made little difference to me. No matter how advanced the firearm, if it wasn't your first experience with them and you didn't let your guard down, no high elf would be overwhelmed by them. No matter how strong your weapon was, no matter how well-armed your army, it would never compare to the power of nature.

That was why I tried to lure her into using that firearm. Compared to slicing

the wind or water inhabited by spirits, deflecting bullets with a sword wasn't all that challenging. Even if I failed, my cloak made with scales from the golden dragon would be sturdy enough to block a bullet. So unfortunately for her, I was feeling pretty safe.

Despite being sliced in two, the bullet lost no momentum, each half deflecting off harmlessly to the side. As my sword was reinforced by magic, the bullet barely left a mark on it. In other words, guns weren't all that impressive for this world. Of course, they were simple to use and could be quite deadly, but there were plenty of ways to overcome them. Honestly, I was more impressed that the bullet had managed to leave a mark on the sword at all.

I pressed forward without slowing, closing the distance between us and delivering a slash to the weapon in her hands. As the source of all her hatred, the symbol of the terrible power that took so many of her comrades' lives was so easily destroyed in front of her, Lilium's eyes went wide in shock. With one smooth motion, I brought my sword to her throat.

This was the true conclusion of our battle.

The northern continent was spared, the southern continent would be restored, and the few humans kept safe in the world above the clouds would be returned to their old homes afterward. Of course, there was still the issue of how the humans in the southern continent would be treated.

As I withdrew my sword from her throat and she collapsed exhausted to her knees, a thought occurred to me. That revolver might have belonged to the emperor himself, the high elf who united the southern continent using his memories of a past life.

In that case, why would Lilium have been carrying it? Had she stolen it from him? Had he given it to her? If he gave it to her, maybe it wasn't that she had survived the battle, but that she had been spared. Unlike the other high elves. So while the other surviving high elves fled, she went alone to awaken the ebon dragon, driven onward by the hatred of the deceased high elves, and her own anger and guilt. For some reason, that was what came to mind. Of course, it was too late now for any of that to matter.

The greater the strife, the greater the difficulty in cleaning up afterward. The

next step would be to return the two dragons to their continents, let them go back to sleep, and then begin rebuilding the ruined southern continent. That was of course the role of Liliun and the other ancient races inhabiting the south.

For me, once I had returned to the north, I'd have to come up with an excuse to explain why I had suddenly disappeared. That felt like it was going to be quite a pain.

Chapter 2 — Execution

After the northern continent had been saved, the two dragons returned to their slumber. About another thirty years passed...making me three hundred twenty-eight years old. To be honest, keeping track of my age was starting to become a hassle. But I felt like if I stopped counting, my sense of time would grow even more vague, and I'd end up losing track of many more things.

Airena and I were living on an island off the southern coast of Vilestorika. You might think we were spending all our time fishing and watching the sunset while enjoying the sea breeze, but our lives weren't quite so relaxed. Okay, that was how I personally spent about half of my time, but Airena was still as busy as ever.

The island of Pantarheios had become a midway point for trade ships traveling the ocean, and so had developed rapidly over the past few decades. The elven caravan had expanded its operations out from the east-central region, making maritime trade on the northern continent grow significantly. After all, a ship was much faster and safer with an elf on board.

Being able to see spirits of the wind meant elves saw storms coming far sooner than humans could, and they could find the quickest sea routes with ease. On top of that, the greatest difficulty most ships faced at sea was access to fresh water, something that an elf could resolve handily by themselves. Though most elves lacked the physical strength expected of any human sailor, most captains went far out of their way to find some other role for them to fill so that they could have even one accompany them on their voyage.

Unfortunately, life so far from the trees of the forest was exceptionally stressful for an elf, so there were few who desired such positions. The few who did were managed by a certain trade organization known as the elven caravan. Becoming enemies with the caravan meant losing access to the power of the elves. As such, the caravan began to hold a tremendous amount of influence with the merchants and sailors of the northern continent.

Of course, this increased demand for elves meant we needed to work harder to protect them as workers. If some merchant attempted something like the West once had in enslaving elves to work on their ships, the caravan would spare no effort in crushing them.

Airena had relinquished her position as head of the caravan, but she was still deeply involved with it. Her expertise and connections as the one who had led the caravan since its inception were second to none. Most humans would lose a lot of their connections after a few decades, but as an elf who dealt often with other long-lived races, Airena's were still going strong. There were many elven forests that still held a deep trust in the caravan because of Airena specifically, and her name still carried a lot of weight when it came to dealings with the dwarves.

It seemed Airena still had no plan to retire from her duties either. That was because...after the environment in the southern continent was restored and the people living above the clouds were returned to the ground, I wanted the elven caravan to help them adapt to life there again. In order to make my wish come true, she wasn't willing to give up her authority over the caravan.

I really couldn't thank her enough.

Sitting on the beach with fishing rod in hand, I waited patiently for a bite. There were a lot of ships coming into harbor today, so the port was quite lively.

In order to accommodate the sailors, there were plenty of bars, brothels, cheap and expensive inns, as well as restaurants for merchants to meet in and corporate offices for accommodating their bigger deals.

As maritime trade expanded, Pantarheios was developed to serve as a rest stop for ships. It had originally been more or less uninhabited, inhabited primarily by trees that had developed a resistance to the strong sea winds, making it pretty convenient for development. There were no small number of elves on board ships who longed for the chance to spend some time with the trees. Being able to head from port right into a grove of trees was great for their mental health.

Ocean storms often threatened considerable damage to buildings under

construction or older, out-of-date facilities, but I guess with me around, that damage was kept to a minimum.

As the island developed, the elven caravan continued to grow. I could no longer tell what the caravan's future would look like. What I could say, though, was that I had taken quite a liking to my life on this island.

Though I wasn't having much luck today, the fish you could catch here tasted amazing. I could practice with my sword anywhere I wanted, and though there wasn't much need for weapons or armor here, there was plenty of work for a blacksmith in making tools and supplies for visiting ships. As for my sculpting, the earth spirits provided me with all the stone I needed, so I had begun working on something similar to the moai statues I remembered from my old life. Of course, no one from this world understood what they were, so they got an awful lot of funny looks. But the idea of someone discovering them in hundreds or thousands of years and stopping to puzzle over what they could possibly be was entertaining enough for me.

The greatest benefit to life on this island was quick access to information coming in from all across the continent. Drinking alcohol from across the world while listening to the rumors from the sailors who had brought it was always a fun, if sometimes melancholic, experience.



In the East, a large tribe from the grasslands had attempted to invade the Ancient Gold Empire, though were ultimately repelled. The name of that tribe was none other than the Balm, a tribe that worshipped wind and fire. Yes, it was the same tribe that had been on the verge of destruction during my visit there.

Hearing that story was both a happy surprise and a sad one. If the Balm tribe was so large now, Zelen must have done an incredible job after I left. The fact that they were renowned for worshipping both the wind and fire meant Juyal had likely been at her side. That thought made me really happy. However, it eventually leading to war was a bit vexing. Of course, it had been over a hundred years since I last had any contact with them, so there wasn't much I could have done about it.

In the West, the Federation had developed from a militaristic coalition into a proper and powerful multiracial state: the Empire of Sabal. One of the races participating in it were none other than the humans who had necessitated the formation of the Federation in the first place. In order to ensure racial cohesion, Win had elected to form the nation around an imperialist government where the emperor held absolute authority. Most likely...okay, almost certainly, Win's absolute authority was the only way humans could have been allowed into the empire. As always, it seemed he was walking a thorny path.

In the west-central region, most of the elves had returned to their homes in the forests, but a small number lingered behind in Shiyou and maintained their national presence. It continued to exist as a political entity for human kingdoms to treat with so that they might avoid conflict with the elves in the future. In the worst case, it could be a place for elves across the region to flee to if they needed safety. That was the decision reached by the elves living there.

Right now, Reas and Tyulei still served at the heart of Shiyou. They were elves of course, so they would live for quite a long time. Those long lives gave them a tremendous amount of time to build up experience. Reas continued to develop military tactics that allowed the numerically inferior elves to fight with maximum efficiency, while Tyulei was making a name for herself as a diplomat with an incredible reputation in the surrounding kingdoms. It seemed they were also finally starting to raise up their own successors. Even as the population in Shiyou declined, their influence continued to grow. It was quite interesting to see.

Finally, in the east-central region, the political landscape was changing greatly. As the place I was most familiar with, I understood the situation there in far more detail than I did in other places.

First of all, the Azueda Alliance no longer existed. Though the former Alliance had displayed a solid, united front when facing outside threats, conflict between the individual city-states was common in times of peace. Long ago, many voices had called for the unification of the Alliance's states after the formation and subsequent war brought by Zieden. After all this time, they had continued to advocate for the same thing, though not in quite the same way.

At some point, one city-state with a particularly powerful military decided

that as they were currently in a time of extended peace, it was time to unite the various states of the Alliance. Of course, it was an opinion that had been brought up countless times in the past, and each time they had found a reason to reject the idea. But at that time, the most unique of the city-states in Odine had backed the unification plan, and so the unifiers had begun using force to make dissenters comply. With both a strong military and magic on their side, few states could resist their sudden invasions. In no time at all, the entire area north of Lake Tsia had merged to form the new nation Azaley.

However, with Lake Tsia and its vast river network hindering Azaley's advance, the states south of the lake were able to mount a defense. Because fighting individually would only end with them being swallowed up one by one, the remaining free states unified into the Kingdom of South Azuetta.

Strangely enough, while all this was happening, rather than continue to harass the Alliance and take advantage of the conflict to attack Azaley from behind, Darottei instead launched an invasion on Zieden. At the same time, the southern portion of Zieden that had once been a part of the Duchy of Kirkoim rose in revolt, declaring independence. As a result, the northern half of Zieden was overrun by Darottei, and the southern half was consumed by the newly formed state of Folesta, wiping it off the map entirely.

The land that made up Folesta had been thoroughly ravaged by war in the past, so it had been a desperate effort to restore it to habitability. Hearing of that same place rising in rebellion and succeeding in taking half of Zieden's territory for themselves was impressive, but also gave rise to some conflicted feelings, considering the small role I had played in rebuilding that land. According to the stories I heard from the merchants, in place of the small village I had lived in there was now a large city.

Not satisfied with their conquest of Zieden, Darottei next turned its sights on Ludoria. The fact they turned their aggression on an ancient and well-established kingdom instead of the newly born Folesta meant there was probably some collaboration between them in their attacks on Zieden.

However, Ludoria's long history came with an attendant power, so together with aid from Vilestorika, they had no issues stopping Darottei's momentum dead in its tracks. Continuing an invasion from land that they were still

solidifying their control over wasn't a sustainable way of waging war. Instead, retaliatory action from Ludoria had shaved away a good portion of Darottei's gains in Zieden until eventually a ceasefire was declared.

Besides all that, though it had less to do with international conflict, there was another big change that happened in my eyes. With Ludoria descending into war and calling for skilled warriors, the many students of the Yosogi School who answered and achieved great feats in battle had earned them both land and a noble title within the kingdom. Considering the power they wielded, the kingdom was intent on making them a vital part of any war effort.

Of course, only the head dojo in the capital was granted these noble titles, with the other branch dojos maintaining a cooperative relationship with them, so the Yosogi School itself hadn't disappeared. Long, long ago, back when the Yosogi School still existed in Fusou, they had been employed by the small nation of Hakumei. Now that they had obtained a noble title and land in Ludoria, one could say they had finally reclaimed the glory of their ancestors.

However, my role as adviser to the Yosogi School did not extend to this new noble family. Maybe it was obvious, but even if I might have had a say in the succession of the headship for a dojo, I couldn't exactly do much when it came to succession in a noble house.

Leaving the dojo in the capital behind, the Yosogi family moved to their newly acquired land, bringing the grave of their ancestor and founder Kaeha along with them. It was obvious that Ludoria would look for more military strength in times of war, and the ascension of the Yosogi family into the ranks of the nobility was something to be celebrated. But at the same time...maybe it was just greed on my part, but I couldn't help but feel sad, like my connection to them had been severed in some way.



Sticking to it until almost sunset, I finally managed to hook something worthy of dinner. And so, with my fishing rod on my shoulders, I hurried back home. I had no problem seeing in the dark, so the sun setting wasn't much of an issue to me, but we had decided I'd be making dinner today, so there was a good chance Airena was already at home, waiting with an empty stomach.

Okay, I was “making dinner,” but it wasn’t going to be anything fancy. Airena had her work with the caravan, and I had my blacksmithing and plenty of other things to do, so we usually hired someone to take care of the house while we went into town to eat. But occasionally, both of us felt a desire to make something for each other. Of course, if we just wanted something delicious to eat, going out or hiring a professional was the best bet. I was pretty confident in my ability to cook meat, but I wasn’t anywhere near the level of a professional.

But sometimes the goal was just to enjoy the experience of making something for each other. If this had been a daily thing, we’d likely be crushed under the weight of our busy schedules, or it would become so normal as to just be exhausting.

“Oh, Acer! You were out fishing, huh? Catch anything?”

A number of people called out to me on my way back home. Ever since an incident where I ran out onto the sea to take care of a monster that had appeared near the island, I had become quite popular...though not nearly as popular as Airena, the one the elven caravan had appointed to manage Pantarheios. With the island under the caravan’s control, and Airena appointed to manage it, it was no exaggeration to say she was effectively the lord of this island. In truth, the elven caravan had hired private security to maintain order here, so Airena was also the final judge for any crimes committed.

“Just barely, but I did manage to get enough for dinner. I’m a bit sad I didn’t catch enough to share, though,” I replied with a laugh, earning a laugh and a clap on the shoulder in return.

This man was the father of one of the young soldiers employed by the caravan. They had moved their family from the war-stricken east-central region to find a more peaceful life here, helping out all over the island. He had originally been a mason, so the expansion of the stone paving around the port a few years back had mostly come from our efforts together. It had been a pretty rough time, so the experience left us feeling a bit like comrades in arms. Besides that, his wife also regularly cleaned our house and did laundry for us.

“I’ll be looking forward to next time, then,” he said with a wave, leaving me to resume my return journey. Well, if he expected something next time, I’d

definitely have to be a bit more successful.

I finally made it home, arriving at our house surrounded by a number of trees. Regardless of myself, it was a bit small for someone of Airena's standing, but it was our home. There was a forge and a workshop for my sculpting in separate buildings a small distance away. The elven caravan had insisted that we live in a proper mansion, but such a grandiose environment didn't really suit either of us.

Honestly speaking, this place was already too big for just the two of us. We sometimes had friends come to stay with us, so we hired people to help maintain the house. If it weren't for that, we could honestly make do with something half this size.

Of course, the elven caravan maintained a proper office on the island, so official guests of the caravan never came here. However, if we lived in a large mansion, we wouldn't be able to avoid having such official guests at our home, which would be quite a hassle.

I had made it back, but it seemed Airena wasn't home yet. I could cook the fish once she was back, so I'd work on the other parts of the meal for now. Starting a fire for cooking would be an ordeal in and of itself for others, but all I needed was a spark to invite the fire spirits to make something bigger for me.

We had some bread we'd already bought lying around. It was a flat, hard bread rather than the fluffy white stuff, but I was quite fond of it. One of the challenges of living on this island was the difficulty in obtaining fresh vegetables, so most vegetables we ate had to be pickled or salted for long-term preservation. However, leaving those salted vegetables to soak in a small amount of weak salt water leached some of the harsh saltiness out of them, making them easier to eat. Interestingly enough, if you used fresh water rather than salt water for the process, it would only draw salt from the outside of the vegetable. I then added some plants I had harvested from across the island, cleaned them up, and added a bit of cooking oil to make something of a salad.

I disposed of the fish's head, scales, and guts, leaving me with a three-layered piece consisting of meat, bone, and meat again. Using a knife I had made myself

to be particularly sharp, I sliced the remaining fish. Apparently if you dusted the fish with salt, waited for it to draw some of the moisture out, then wiped it down, it would reduce the smell somewhat. I didn't know how it worked, but if it made the food tastier, there was no reason not to do it. All that was left was to wait for Airena to get home and then start grilling it.

I'd called it cooking, but this was all it entailed. As I had said, if we were really interested in good food, we'd go out to eat or hire someone to come cook for us. But for whatever reason, the two of us quite enjoyed making a meal like this every once in a while.



Once Airena returned home, we ate and then enjoyed some wine she had been given as a gift. One of the best parts of living on Pantarheios was that, in addition to information, alcohol from all over the continent found its way here.

As we enjoyed ourselves, she suddenly spoke up. "By the way, Lord Acer, a letter arrived for you," she said, pulling out a letter addressed to me.

Wondering who it could be from, I checked the envelope. It was from one of the Yosogi dojos, the one founded by Aiha that taught the use of the katana. The last time I visited them had been during their last change in headship, which would have been about seven years ago. The current head of the Yosogi Katana Style had refined his swordsmanship to an incredible degree, making our sparring match remarkably fun. However, the current head was also quite young, so I doubted this was another issue of headship. Cutting open the envelope, I took a look over the letter.

By the way, the paper knife I used to cut it open was self-made as well. It was important that a paper knife not be too sharp. A really sharp blade threatened to damage the letter within, so you really wanted a knife that wouldn't cut. That was quite an interesting challenge, so I had taken to the task with gusto. I'd ended up decorating it so much that it almost looked like some kind of religious artifact.

Anyway, reading the letter brought a frown to my face. The letter was asking for my assistance as adviser to the Yosogi School. If this had come from any of the other dojos, I likely would have refused immediately. They needed to

resolve their problems themselves rather than rely on me.

But as I said, the head of the Katana Style dojo was incredibly talented. Any problem he faced should have been much quicker to resolve himself than to ask for my help...and yet the letter was in my hand. There had to be a reason for that.

“Shall I accompany you?” Airenna asked. Knowing it was from the Yosogi School, she had immediately guessed it would involve travel on my part.

But in the end, I shook my head. No matter how busy she was, if I asked her to accompany me, she’d find a way to make it happen. While that was something I was quite grateful for...

“No, things look like they’ll be pretty messy this time. I’ll just go hear them out, and if I don’t like it, I’ll come right back. Well, if I do like it...I’ll finish things right away and come back anyway.” I didn’t want to get her involved in this. After all, it seemed very likely I’d need to kill someone, and I didn’t want to make her see that. “More importantly though, why are you still calling me ‘lord’?” So instead I made a joke, trying to shake off the dark atmosphere encroaching on me.

Airenna’s response was only to give a small, vague smile and avert her eyes.

I took a ship to Vilestorika the next day, then borrowed a horse from the elven caravan to take me up to Ludoria. The map I had now showed plenty of new, unfamiliar names on it, and a good number of the ones I knew were gone. I had to wonder how much longer Ludoria and Vilestorika would stick around.

Keeping a pace controlled enough to avoid exhausting the horse, I arrived at the city of Perettoa in Ludoria two weeks after I’d received the letter. Situated in the southwest of Ludoria, it was the home of the Yosogi Katana Style dojo. I had come here as fast as I could—barring asking Heero for help—but there was still a good chance that whatever issue they were facing had already been resolved. I had taken two weeks to get here, but it had probably taken more than double that time for their letter to reach me. Though honestly, I would have been relieved if it all ended up being a pointless journey.

“It has been quite a while. I am sorry for having to ask you to come.”

Coming out to greet me was Minagi Yosogi, the current head of the Yosogi Katana Style dojo. He had been in his midtwenties when he took the headship seven years ago, so he was still quite young in the early half of his thirties, and held himself with a sense of perpetual readiness.

“Don’t worry about it. If it had been any of the others, their lack of confidence in their own abilities would have been grounds for disqualifying them as head. But I knew that wouldn’t be the case for you. You must have a good reason for calling me, right?” I was here to find out his reasons.

As I might have said before, Minagi was not just the best katana wielder in the Yosogi School, he was likely the best swordsman in any of the three dojos. Of course, that was excluding people like Win and me who had been training in swordsmanship for longer than humans could live. Even so, the strongest swordsman in the Yosogi School had pledged unwavering support to the dojo in the capital as their branch family when they had been granted their noble title. He had subordinated himself to someone he knew was weaker than him. I doubted he harbored no feelings about that as a swordsman.

But with the greatest swordsman in the school in Minagi submitting himself to the main dojo in the capital so quickly, the dojo in Vistcourt and the large number of smiths associated with the school were able to follow suit with little trouble. If Minagi hadn’t done so, there was a good chance a very bloody conflict would have erupted within the school. That was how much the noble title granted them by the Ludorian crown could have destabilized the Yosogi School.

But of course, that was all done and over with. Because of all that, I had agreed to come and hear Minagi out...trusting that even his request for me to cut down one of his students was for a good reason.



In answer to my questioning, though falteringly and with great emotion, Minagi explained his reasoning.

One of Minagi’s students—though really he had been a student since before Minagi took the headship—was a swordsman by the name of Kashu. Kashu had been one of the leading students in the school, and if he had been a member of

the Yosogi family, he likely would have been in the running for the headship seven years ago. Alternatively, if the other candidates were weak enough, he might have found himself married to a daughter of the Yosogi family and becoming head anyway. However, with an even more skilled swordsman in the shape of Minagi around, there had been no objections to the headship falling on his shoulders instead.

Well, all of this was part of the process of transferring headship I had participated in seven years ago, so I knew about half of it already. Back then, everyone had been ecstatic to have Minagi as the head of the school. I might have even met this student named Kashu, though my unfamiliarity with the name meant we hadn't been introduced and likely had never spoken.

However, though there had been no issues with Minagi's ascension, two events caused big changes in Kashu. One was the invasion of Ludoria by Darottei, and the other was the noble title being granted to the main family of the Yosogi School.

In defense of his homeland, Kashu had spared no effort in the war, leaving behind great accomplishments and returning alive, though wounded. Naturally, having been wounded in action in defense of the kingdom, Ludoria had presented him with high honors, but even greater honors had gone to someone else. Yes, the head dojo in the capital received the noble title.

There were no warriors from the dojo in the capital with feats on the same level as his. Whether that was actually true or not, it was what Kashu claimed. Even so, the dojo in the capital received the greatest honor from the kingdom. He couldn't accept that. Considering their accomplishments in the war and the strength of their dojo's head, he believed the Katana-style dojo should have received that honor instead.

But Minagi had been the first to acknowledge the dojo in the capital as the main branch, and the first to offer to support them as a branch family. Of course, that was all to prevent conflict from arising within the school, but Kashu saw it as a betrayal. As one of the highest-ranking students in the school, who had shed his own blood on the battlefield in defense of the kingdom, he felt like he had been stabbed in the back.

When he criticized Minagi's actions, other students in the school rebuked him, only to be cut down and murdered. Kashu then left the school, declaring his sword would "make things right."

Everyone had been left speechless by the sudden violence brought on by a loyal member of the dojo. Though perhaps his time on the battlefield, both killing others and being wounded himself, had twisted his mind.

Shortly after, a number of students in the Vistcourt dojo were found murdered, and not long after that, students of the main dojo began to fall. The victims had been killed with a single slash that cut deep into the core of the body, leaving a unique kind of wound. It was clear to everyone that the murders had been carried out with a katana. Suspicion immediately fell on the Yosogi Katana Style dojo. Well, since the perpetrator was actually one of them, these were accurate accusations.

But this left things in a very bad state. Minagi had avoided conflict within the school by submitting to the capital dojo first. If word got out that the Katana Style dojo was actually unsatisfied with that result, the conflict he had tried to avoid would spring back to life.

"Even if I were to go cut down Kashu myself, I doubt that would be enough to clear us of suspicion. Besides, Kashu likely intends to come for my head eventually too. I doubt he will show himself to me before he is ready for that final confrontation."

Ah. So that was why I had been called. Even if it put the Katana Style dojo at a disadvantage, it would stop the fighting between the dojos.

"Please find Kashu. Stop him, and then inflict whatever punishment you find suitable on the Katana Style dojo. That is the only way to stop a conflict between the dojos."

Of course, if I did as he asked in killing Kashu and punishing Minagi's dojo, the main branch and the Vistcourt dojo would have to accept my judgment. That definitely fell within the realm of the responsibilities of the school's adviser. On top of that, if I were to appear in person, Kashu wouldn't be able to ignore me. I had the authority to make decisions when it came to deciding the headship of each dojo. If he earned my approval or even managed to cut me down, no one

could ignore him. It wouldn't be a surprise for him to come to that conclusion after the violence he had wrought.

But there was one thing that caught me.

"I suppose so. If that's what you want me to do, Minagi, then as adviser I'll accept your request. But you're really intent on making things harder for yourself, aren't you?"

I felt he was quite similar to one of my old students in blacksmithing, Souha, the aunt of the founder of the Katana Style dojo, Aiha. *"Because I'm the older sister,"* she had said, pledging her life in support of her younger brother without hesitation. Minagi gave me the same feeling. In contrast, Aiha was an explosive enough person that she likely would have run off to deal with the problem herself at the first sign of trouble, determined to fulfill her responsibilities no matter how it would look to others.

Ah, I guess in that respect, he was quite different from Souha. If she had been in Minagi's situation, she might have asked for my help but then found another way to take responsibility. Though he was excellent as a swordsman, there was something about Minagi that seemed to still be a bit lacking. Having his talent discovered at such a young age, he had been raised to make the best use of it. He was a bit too dedicated to that purpose, a bit too serious, a bit too "perfect" and lacking in ambition.

There was a kind of strength behind Kaeha's stubbornness and Shizuki's desire to express his own style and expand the Yosogi dojo, one that wasn't present in Minagi. In short, he had reached "completion" while still wrapped up small. If he had just a little bit of something else, he might be able to break that shell and grow even more.

But that wasn't something I could give him. He would have to find that strength for himself. Anything I gave would only serve to make him smaller.

At any rate, I supposed it was time to do my job.

"Before I go, I have one last question. What kind of person do you believe Kashu is?" Asking on a whim, I found Minagi's answer quite satisfactory, and so left the Yosogi Katana Style dojo behind.

Now, how was I supposed to find this guy?



Leaving the city of Perettoa and its Katana Style dojo behind, I headed toward the newly created Yosogi territory in Ludoria.

Of course, there was no guarantee that Kashu would be there. In the time it took for Minagi's letter to reach me and for me to arrive in Ludoria, there had been more victims. It was even possible that more were falling prey to Kashu every day, and Minagi just wasn't aware of them yet. But it was probably obvious that there was no way I could have sniffed him out already when he could be anywhere in Ludoria.

If Kashu was targeting Yosogi swordsmen, he was most likely in the Yosogi territory, Vistcourt, Perettoa, or the capital. While a swordsman carrying a katana would stand out enough to inevitably be found, it wouldn't happen right away. So before I headed off to search for him, I had to inform the main branch and the Vistcourt dojo that I had taken on the case.

If they grew resentful of the Perettoa dojo, not knowing we were taking steps to resolve the situation already, things would get much worse. Actually, it was quite possible that Kashu wanted exactly that, slowly building up murders while he waited in hiding for the situation to deteriorate. After all, if he was as good a swordsman as Minagi claimed, he should have been capable of wreaking a lot more havoc than he had so far. To me, his slow pace made it look like he was watching to see how the Yosogi School would react.

In that case, if I stayed the hands of the main branch and Vistcourt dojos by telling them that I was getting involved, it would definitely attract Kashu's notice. Well, even if it didn't and I was just overthinking things, I still had to report to them.

I was starting to be glad that this was happening now of all times. It's not like I was happy for there to be a problem, but I guess you could say the timing of it all was a bit of a silver lining, because this was probably the last time I'd be able to exert any influence on the main branch of the Yosogi School. Now that they had become a noble family, there was no longer any reason for them to listen to anything I had to say. But I had been there when the current head was

chosen, so I had the chance to spar and otherwise interact with him when that happened. My words might still carry a bit of weight with him. Once the next head took over, or especially the one after that, that would no longer be the case.

It seemed the Yosogi School that Kaeha had left behind, that Shizuki and Mizuha had asked me to take care of, was finally starting to move on from me. From that perspective, I supposed I should have been celebrating their growth, happy for the new path they had started walking. But I still couldn't help but feel a little sad.

I guess I was just hopeless like that.

The Yosogi territory was located on the eastern edge of Ludoria, in land newly taken from Darottei. In other words, they were positioned to act as a shield for the kingdom should Darottei turn aggressive once more. It was easy to tell what Ludoria expected of the Yosogi School, just by looking at the land given to them.

That said, it was just as likely that Ludoria would be the aggressor in the next conflict between the two nations. Though currently exhausted by the previous war, once Darottei had consolidated its rule over the northern half of Zieden, their military strength would swell tremendously. That would make them a serious threat even to a kingdom like Ludoria.

It was only to be expected that many would believe Ludoria's best course of action was to attack before Darottei could settle into their new territory. In that case, the expectations of the Yosogi School would not be to act as a shield, but as the tip of the spear. In any case, it was clear their martial prowess was being called to duty.

As for the Yosogi territory itself, despite having changed rulers so recently, things seemed remarkably peaceful here. Though maybe I should have expected that. The swordsmen of the Yosogi School were exceptionally strong, so hunting down bandits was all in a day's work for them. Since the previous ruler of this land had been the violent and aggressive Darottei, their new Yosogi lords probably seemed more like liberators than conquerors.

Of course, the Yosogi family would face its fair share of difficulties as newly

appointed nobility, but I was a bit relieved to see that things looked relatively peaceful from the outside at least. To be quite honest, I felt the current head of the main branch of the Yosogi School was a bit lacking. While he definitely possessed the talent one would expect, he hadn't refined it particularly well. Maybe that was just a result of seeing him side by side with the remarkable skill Minagi showed.

However...the current head had shown he was exceptionally smart and an incredible judge of character, so when considering what value that could have to the school as a whole, I didn't object to him assuming the headship. Though I technically had the right to intervene, I had never actually objected to anyone who had been nominated to be the next head before.

But now that I saw how the Yosogi family's control of this new territory was playing out, I was starting to get the feeling that the head of the main branch might have been better suited to leading and ruling as a noble rather than leading a dojo as a swordsman.



The head of the main branch and the Vistcourt dojo both accepted my involvement in the case and my role in punishing the Katana Style dojo. They even accepted the specific punishment I proposed.

Of course, I doubted they were happy with everything I had to say. They were the ones who had lost students to these murders, after all. It was perfectly normal for the head of the dojo to seek revenge personally, and in many ways, it was expected of them. But even so, they left things in my hands.

Considering my role as adviser to the school, perhaps that was to be expected. Or maybe it was just because they understood that I was a much better swordsman than they were thanks to my many long decades of training. Or it could have just been out of respect for me as someone who had been connected to the Yosogi School for so long. In any case, I couldn't betray their expectations. I needed to resolve this situation quickly.

The heads of the dojos thus turned from trying to seek out the culprit, and instead focused their efforts on preventing any more victims from appearing. No matter how skilled Kashu was, if the Yosogi swordsmen stuck together and

acted as a group, he wouldn't be able to attack them easily. Among such hot-blooded warriors, it wouldn't be strange for many of them to ignore the warnings of the dojo heads or even proactively go out to seek revenge or make a name for themselves, but it seemed the dojo heads held a tight enough control over their students to keep that from happening.

The Yosogi students becoming harder to target, and my influence being the cause of that, finally drew Kashu's attention to me. As I traveled slowly from town to town in Ludoria, I began to feel someone watching me. Whether I was in town or on the road, I occasionally sensed someone's gaze. It seemed Kashu had noticed my invitation. But it seemed he was a bit hesitant to take the bait, he was still just observing me.

At the same time, I was very much observing him. Though I wasn't watching him physically, I was constantly keeping tabs on his movements to see how he intended to act, to test him. I wanted to know if Kashu still had any pride as a warrior, or if he was just a bloodthirsty animal. Otherwise, I would have attacked the moment I first noticed him.

Regardless of which was the case, I had no choice but to take Kashu's life. Without killing him, this incident wouldn't be resolved and the Perettoa dojo couldn't be punished. But I needed to know if I was going to have to fight him as a swordsman or hunt him down like an animal. There was no need to draw my sword against a wild animal.

If Kashu was willing to confront me directly, to name himself and challenge me, I would accept his challenge as adviser to the Yosogi School and engage him in swordsmanship. But if he was simply waiting to attack me when I least expected it, there was no need to go through such formalities. I wasn't exactly fond of the idea of making that kind of decision over someone else's life, but for a swordsman, the two end results were very, very different.

So I waited for Kashu to act. And he did, two weeks after I first felt him observing me.

"Greetings, adviser of the Yosogi School. My name is Kashu. I imagine you know what business I have with you already."

One afternoon, while I was walking down a rather empty highway, he showed himself. It seemed he hadn't fallen so far as to become a bloodthirsty animal who longed for nothing but fame and bloodshed. I responded to his greeting with a nod and a smile, prompting him to draw his sword and point it at me.

"I have no grudge against you, but I hear defeating you will give me the right to be dojo head. In order to prove myself worthy, I will be taking your life."

But the next thing he said revealed a rather serious misconception on his part. Beating me qualified someone to be head of the dojo? That was laughable at best. No dojo head had beaten me in decades. But I hadn't wanted to disgrace them in front of their students, so I had always done my sparring matches out of sight of others, and we never shared the results. Even for the dojo heads, the path of swordsmanship was a long one. Our sparring matches were my way of drilling that fact into them. Only half of my motivation was for the fun of it.

"I see. If you *can* kill me, it'll definitely prove you are stronger than the dojo heads. But in that case, I'd like to tell you one last thing while we're both still alive," I said as I drew my own sword—not my magic sword, but a simple Yosogi style straight sword. Not the kind used by the Katana Style dojo or the Vistcourt dojo, but the one I had learned to use from Kaeha herself. I suppose that was something I had to specify now.

For someone of Kashu's level, my magic sword would be a bit overkill. That said, I had forged this straight sword myself, so it was still on the level of a masterwork.

"Minagi told me that he considered you to be like a brother to him. He said that among all the students in the dojo, you were the only one who would face him as an equal, who could help him grow."

If he had known how it would make Kashu feel, it was very possible Minagi wouldn't have taken the stance he did with regard to the main branch. He had chosen to subordinate himself to them because of his love for the Peretoea dojo, to protect them from conflict. He had never thought that his actions would end up hurting those close to him.

But it was too late to regret it now. The alienation of Kashu was a sin the Peretoea dojo and Minagi himself would have to bear. The punishment for that

was obvious enough, both to Minagi and the other dojo heads. News of Minagi's punishment would reach him together with the news of Kashu's death.

Right now, we obviously wanted to avoid putting the dojo in a situation where it would have no leader. That would no doubt threaten the stability of the Yosogi School as a whole. So, that punishment would be delivered once Minagi had chosen the next dojo head. When that day came, Minagi and I would fight for real. That was the punishment for Minagi and the Perettoa dojo for this case.

No doubt somewhere deep in his heart, Minagi would resent me for cutting down someone he saw as his own brother. In order to get his revenge on me, he would refine his swordsmanship even further. Even while understanding that grudge was unfounded, and that he was just lashing out in anger, those feelings would serve to fuel his growth. If Minagi could grow from this experience, the entire Perettoa dojo would grow with him, strengthening the Yosogi School as a whole.

Of course, none of this had anything to do with Kashu. He was going to die here, so there was no need to tell him all that.

Kashu's expression turned hard, as if to say "so what? I can't turn back now."

I nodded to him, taking my stance. There was no need for us to talk any further.

He roared and charged at me, bringing his katana down on me in a savage slash...but not fast enough to outpace my own sword reaching for his neck.

With that, the Yosogi murder case had been fully resolved.



"Do you really intend to kill this Minagi, Lord Acer?" Airena said, in response to my emotional explanation of what had happened. Well, about half of it was more like grumbling. We were currently enjoying some rice wine that had arrived from the East.

It seemed she had seen right through my attempt to hide it. That made me quite happy, and improved my mood just a bit.

Yes, we had decided that as punishment for this case, once Minagi had

selected the next head for the Perettoa dojo, we would have a match with real blades. The main branch and Vistcourt dojos had decided that this meant I was planning on killing him, and Minagi understood it as me giving him a chance for revenge. But as Airena had pointed out, even if we fought with live blades, in the end it was up to me whether I killed him or not.

From the start, I was trying to turn Minagi's feelings against me. If it had all concluded with Kashu's death, Minagi's resentment would turn back on himself for being unable to see what was happening with Kashu or guide him toward the right path. Those feelings might well have led to the decline of the Perettoa dojo. So as adviser, I invited his sword to come for me instead, to help spur the dojo on to further growth, so that Minagi could pass down a refined, perfected version of his swordsmanship to his successor.

However...

"It's hard to say. If he gets good enough that I can't spare him without threatening my own life, I might have to." Even if it was up to me, that didn't mean things were guaranteed to go the way I wanted. If Minagi and I were to fight now, I could disable him without having to kill him. It would have been the same for the Minagi of yesterday, even if he trained for another twenty or thirty years.

But now that he had lost Kashu, I had no idea what kind of growth the next twenty years would bring to him. The Yosogi bloodline had a tremendous talent for swordsmanship, but it was personal feelings that brought them beyond their limits as swordsmen. The best example of that was Kaeha herself, reaching such a mastery of the sword as was seen in that last technique she left behind, despite having no more than ordinary human senses. You could also see the same thing in Yuzuriha Yosogi and her battle with the great oni. It was not hard to believe Minagi could far exceed my expectations in the same way.

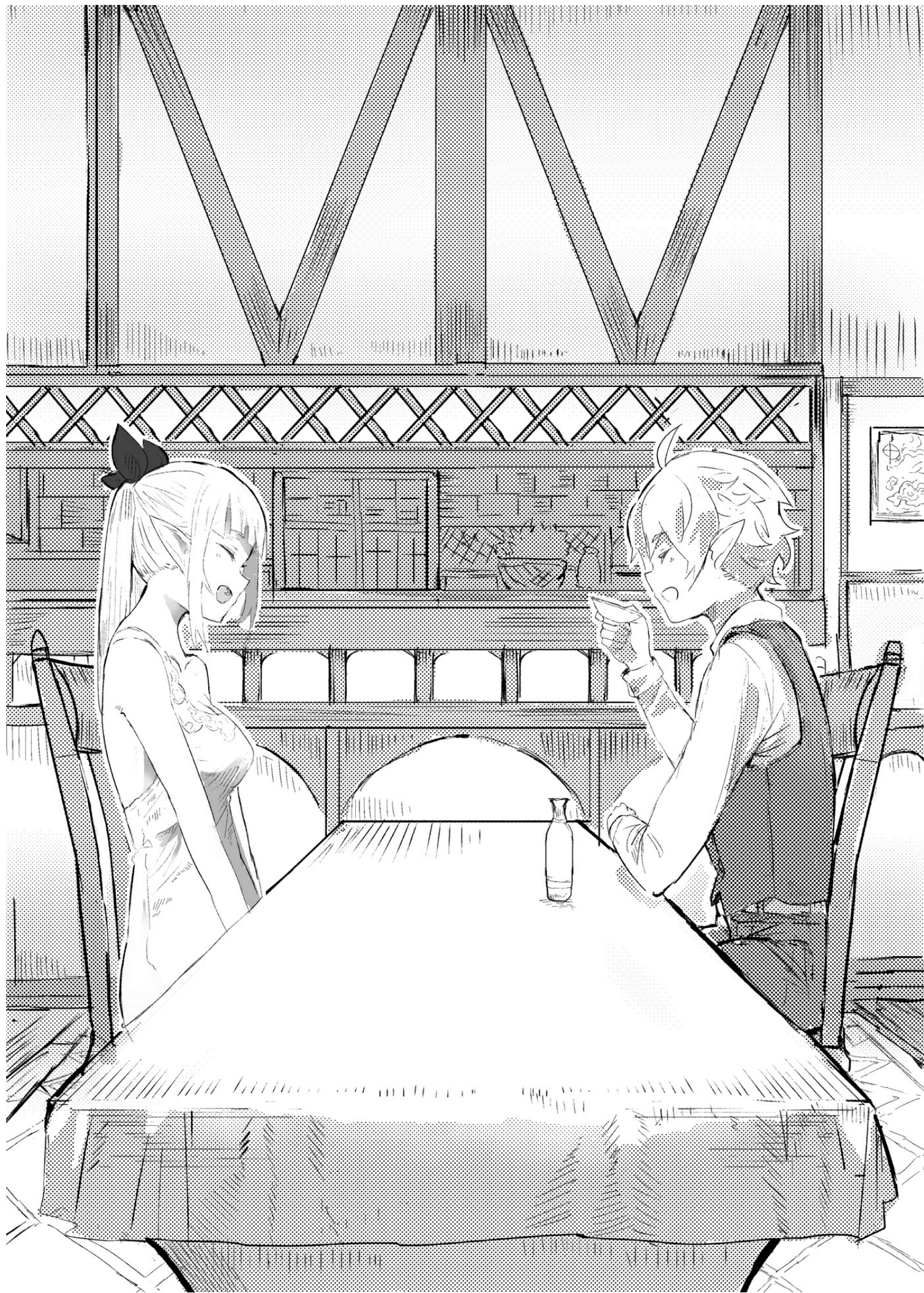
Of course, I had no desire to kill him if at all possible. But if I had to choose whether to take his life or give up mine, I wouldn't hesitate to kill him. It was a strange feeling. I wanted to see Minagi continue to grow, but not so much that I'd have to kill him. Maybe I was just being greedy.

"Whether I kill him or not, he definitely won't be killing me. I can promise you

that,” I said, taking another gulp of the rice wine, filling my mouth and nose with its pleasant aroma.

There was no way he’d kill me. That would end my time with Airena far earlier than I was ready to accept. I had managed to make it out of a fight that threatened the end of the world. I really didn’t want to have to face more battles like that, where I had to resolve myself to lose my life as a high elf, all that frequently.

“Is that so? Then I suppose I have nothing to add. Good work, Lord Acer,” she said with a smile as I took another drink with a nod.



So it seemed I'd have to work really hard at my training for these next twenty years. If Minagi far exceeded my expectations by some miracle, I needed to be good enough that he couldn't overtake me. I didn't want to die, and I didn't want to kill him either.

The Yosogi School would continue to change, just as it had when it moved across the world from Fusou to Ludoria. It had already grown tremendously, from being just Kaeha and myself to now having crowds of students and their own noble title. I was sure they'd continue to grow in ways I would never have foreseen.

The day when I lost my relationship might still come, and it would make me quite sad. As I had told Aiha, I saw all the members of the Yosogi family as Kaeha's children, so they were quite precious to me. The fact that I was willing to cut one of them down if they were strong enough to threaten my life was a weird feeling. If Minagi ended up becoming that strong, I'd probably feel a little bit happy too.

So even if the day came when I ended up cutting all ties with the Yosogi School, where that became the right course of action...I would no doubt continue to watch their progress. Even if it was just to watch, without getting involved at all, I'd never look away.

Chapter 3 — The Flower of the Sun Blooming in the West

As I had said a few times already, though I had the right to take part in the decision process behind who became the next head of each dojo of the Yosogi School, it was a right I rarely exercised. Of course, if I was asked who from a list of candidates seemed most suitable, I'd give my opinion on their swordsmanship, their judge of character, and their leadership abilities. I understood that was part of my job as adviser.

Choosing a new dojo head wasn't entirely a logical decision, it also included emotional elements. If a decision was made that left many members of the school unhappy without being able to air those feelings, it was my duty to vocalize those concerns.

But I didn't really like doing all that. I preferred to wait until the next dojo head had been selected, have a sparring match with them, check to make sure there were no serious issues, and then head home feeling relieved.

I preferred to live life following my whims. Considering my own lifestyle, I inevitably had to question whether I had the right to toy with someone's fate, to deny everything they had worked their whole life for. That said, if it was absolutely necessary, I would still fulfill my role.

And yet, despite feeling that way myself, I found myself receiving a request to manipulate someone's life just like that from far away. The request came in the year I turned three hundred fifty-one. In answer, I boarded a ship leaving Pantarheios and headed for the West. Yes, the request for help in making this decision had come from the current emperor of the largest nation in the Far West, the Sabal Empire: Win.

Win was now a hundred eighty-one years old. Half-elves generally lived for two to three hundred years. From my perspective, it wasn't that short a lifespan, so he still had plenty of time left. But even so, he was asking me to help in choosing his successor. Apparently he planned to abdicate the throne

while he still lived, giving him a chance to support the next emperor personally.

That was certainly the right choice. As a half-elf, he was unable to have children with the beastfolk who held the most power in the empire. His successor would have no blood relation to him, and therefore no natural claim to authority over the people. But with Win personally supporting the new emperor, as well as their successor if his lifespan allowed it, their rule would be more stable.

If Win had decided to hold on to the throne until his death, there was a good chance the empire would collapse the moment he was gone. It seemed he really was thinking of what was best for the empire, as he always had.

“What do you think, Airena?”

Handing her the letter, she read it over quickly before shaking her head. I was quite surprised. I’d expected her to jump at the opportunity to go with me.

“If little Win is calling you personally, he no doubt is hoping you’ll spoil him. I think it is best if I do not get in your way,” she said with a laugh.

So he was still just “little Win” to her, huh? I guess she still saw the emperor of the greatest nation in the Far West as the young boy she once knew. She *had* known him since even before I had adopted him, visiting the forest where he was born to check in on him numerous times, so maybe that was inevitable.

Ah, that was a good point. Though I was known as Win’s adopted father, if Airena got involved in the current situation too, it would feel like the elves were having an undue influence on the Empire. That would not be a great idea.

As I came to that realization, Airena nodded. It seemed she had come to the same conclusion. It was quite a pain having to be so considerate about meeting with someone we already knew, but this was the life Win had chosen. Though we could help him on that path, we didn’t want to be a hindrance.

“All right. I’ll look for some good souvenirs for you then.”

It seemed I’d be traveling to the Empire on my own. Even by ship, it was quite a lengthy journey, so traveling alone would be a bit lonely. Okay, there would be plenty of sailors on the ship, and I always had the spirits with me, so I was

never really alone, but we had been living together for so long now that this kind of separation made me start to feel lonely.

I almost considered asking Heero to give me a ride. That would get me there in no time flat. But riding a phoenix into the Empire of Sabal would cause quite a stir, so I would have to both take off and land somewhere quite distant and walk the rest of the way. If I was already going to be traveling that much, I might as well just take the normal route.

“I will look forward to it,” Airenna replied with a smile, oblivious to the thoughts spinning in my head.



The Empire of Sabal had been born from the ashes of the Mizunth Commonwealth, a human nation destroyed by the multiracial Federation. So just as the Mizunth Commonwealth before it, the Empire of Sabal occupied a full quarter of the Far West. However, since the land it occupied was in the prosperous southern half of the region and not the untamed northern wilds, it was a frontrunner for the most powerful nation on the continent.

The only other nation capable of competing with them was the Ancient Gold Empire, with its iron grip on the Far East. Of course, as a nation ruled by mystics, they were really an exception.

Having been born from the multiracial Federation, the Empire of Sabal replaced the monoracial Mizunth Commonwealth with a truly multiracial state. Beastfolk of all kinds, elves, dwarves, halflings, centaurs, antfolk, arachne...even humans. It was truly a diverse nation.

That said, about seventy percent of the population was human, with the remainder being mostly beastfolk. The other races were extremely rare by comparison. Most of the elves chose to stay in the large forests, and most of the dwarves stuck to their own kingdom hidden within the mountains to the northwest. The halflings and centaurs were very proactive about being involved with the Empire, but purely due to their numbers, they were extremely uncommon. The antfolk and arachne were even rarer, and only the most eccentric among them took part in the Empire's workings.

Many of the races in the Far West had been subjected to hardship thanks to

humanity. The grudge they bore was not so easy to give up, but without accepting humans as fellow citizens, the Empire didn't have the population to control the vast territory they owned. Keeping the Empire under rule couldn't have been an easy task.

The sheer numbers that the humans could provide were invaluable to their efforts, but if power was handed over to them, those numbers would swallow up the other races. And so, the emperor had to balance welcoming humans into the empire while not giving them so much power as to estrange the other races. Win had walked that tightrope for almost a hundred years now. Would his successor be able to do the same?

If not, that would spell the end of the Empire. No, it wouldn't just be that. A collapse of the Empire of Sabal could very well lead to war between humans and the other races beginning again in earnest.

After disembarking from the ship and stepping foot in the Empire of Sabal, I showed the officials there the knife engraved with the imperial seal that Win had sent along with his letter, immediately resulting in me being put on a carriage and sent to the capital.

I really didn't like carriages because of the motion sickness they caused me, especially these kinds of box-shaped ones, but there was no way they were going to let a personal guest of the emperor travel on foot. At the very least, this carriage was designed for nobility, so it was significantly less jostling than I was used to. While I still felt unwell while riding, it wasn't so bad that I couldn't bear it. So, like a piece of luggage, I was carried straight to the capital of the empire: the city of Mithril.

Now that I thought about it, I guess Win and Oswald's son had promised to work mithril together someday. Was this city at the core of the Empire a standin for that?

The carriage made its way down the main street to the palace, where I was finally freed from my turbulent prison. Honestly, I had really hoped I could walk through the empire myself and see what Win had accomplished with my own eyes. That was how I enjoyed traveling. That said, I understood the Empire's

position in not being able to let that happen, so I could forgive them this time.

At the end of all that traveling, I finally met a white-haired Win. By human standards, he would have been around his sixties, but his half-elf traits still made him look a little younger. At any rate, while elves and high elves didn't show age in their appearance at all, half-elves were not spared from that fate. If I went around telling people he was my adopted son, I doubted very many people would believe me. Even so, he was still my son. So, after looking around to make sure everyone else had left...

"Hey, long time no see. What's this really about, Win?" I immediately brought up the lie.

Okay, maybe calling it a lie was a bit excessive. The falsehood hadn't been an attempt to deceive me, but to maintain face as leader of the nation. He wasn't trying to hide anything from me, but from someone here in the Empire...or maybe even from everyone.

Win responded to my question with slight shock, but his troubled look seemed to be laced with a bit of happiness. I had always thought the letter had been suspicious.

I was an outsider when it came to the Empire. It was true enough that Win trusted me, but that wasn't the issue. I was too ignorant of the situation here, especially when it came to things like the disposition and balance of power among the beastfolk clans. Selecting a suitable leader was more than finding someone who was capable and of good character. The support and considerations of the varied factions throughout the nation and the present situation and environment were all just as vital. Even if Win was troubled with picking a successor, he had many more reliable people he could ask before turning to me.

There was a possibility he had been so worn down by his work that he had nowhere else to turn, but that notion was dispelled the moment I saw him. He was looking forward now just as much as before, a strong light still shining in his eyes. So the request for help in selecting a successor must have been a front. He must have had another request of me, something only I could do.

Just like Airena had said, he probably wanted me to spoil him. I could tell just

by looking at him. After all, he was my son.



“I really can’t hide anything from you, can I? But my letter was telling the truth. Once you’ve recovered from your journey, I want to talk to you about that too.”

Win acknowledged he had another secret matter he wanted to discuss, but didn’t tell me about it quite yet. It seemed he still couldn’t tell me anything at this point. Alternatively, maybe the issue of succession he was using as a front was somehow connected to the second issue.

I decided to let the current carry me for the time being. I didn’t know how long I’d be staying in the Empire, but I had no real reason to rush things. We could get to the real matter whenever he was ready. So I nodded, not pressing the issue.

“Looks like your swordsmanship has improved quite a bit since I last saw you, Acer.”

“And you’ve been away from the sword for too long. I bet I could beat you now.”

So we turned our conversation to more trivial matters. In truth, it had been quite a long time since we last met, so I was more than happy to spend time warming our relationship up again. And it seemed like he was enjoying the opportunity to have a casual conversation with me. After all, as emperor, he wouldn’t be able to dedicate all that much time to me, even if we were father and son.

An attendant eventually came to inform us that his visitation time was over, and so we said goodbye for now. I would spend some time in the palace recovering from my journey, and once the preparations were complete, I’d meet with the candidates Win had in mind for his succession. Even if it wasn’t the real issue he wanted help with, I had to admit I was a little curious as to what kind of people he had in mind to take up his mantle after him.

As the attendant guided me to my room in the palace, we were stopped by a group of three young beastfolk. Or rather, one young beastfolk, while the other

two tried desperately to stop him. Assuming he knew I was here as a guest of the emperor, he either had to be an idiot to stand in our way, or someone with quite a bit of authority here.

“Shut it. I’m just testing to see whether this guy’s got what it takes to dare to choose between us!”

As he shouted down the attendant guiding me, I was getting the impression it was a bit of both. In other words, he was an idiot, but still one of the candidates for Win’s succession. I mean, as one of the candidates, he might have had the authority to act the way he was, but coming to pick a fight with someone involved in deciding the succession would only put him at a disadvantage.

“Hey, you. You’re not even a dwarf. Just a spindly little elf. You realize it’s weird to judge a member of the powerful Tiger Clan, right?”

That said, I didn’t find his behavior particularly bothersome. It was honestly a bit cute, though I couldn’t say it made him look like emperor material. Talking down to elves regardless of the current emperor’s heritage didn’t speak of someone with a good brain. The fact he seemed to recognize the dwarves scored him a couple points in my book, though.

In short, he seemed like a simple, if cute, idiot. I couldn’t quite suppress a laugh at his behavior, something that seemed to irk him. Apparently he wasn’t fond of someone like me sitting as judge over him, and so he’d come to pick a fight.

In truth, I was quite tired after my long journey, especially since it had been spent locked up in a carriage, so I really wanted to rest...but if I wanted to do that, I could probably resolve things faster by going along with him.

“Okay then. Bring it on,” I beckoned him forward with a smile.

The beastfolk’s eyes went wide with shock. I doubted he ever expected an elf of all people to challenge him to a fistfight. Honestly speaking, when it came to physical strength, elves couldn’t even compare to beastfolk. My challenge was all it took for him to understand just how low my estimation of him was.

Rage quickly boiled up into a roar, and the beastfolk charged me in a blur. He was just as fast as the elite warriors of the Federation I had once fought

alongside. But that didn't save him from taking a fist to the face and finding himself suddenly sprawled on the floor.

His movements were quite good for someone so young. I was honestly impressed, but he still lacked practical experience. For someone like me, who had sparred with the various heads of the three Yosogi dojos, his movements were easy enough to read even if he wasn't using a sword. No matter how fast he was, if I could tell where he was going before he got there, all I had to do was swing appropriately.

With the beastfolk utterly confused by the result of his charge, I left him alone to gather his bearings and return to his feet. And when he attacked again, I flattened him again. Again and again, until his confidence and willpower were thoroughly broken and he couldn't so much as stand. And as he lay on the ground, unable to stand but still conscious, I spoke.

"I guess that's all for now. My name is Acer. I'd ask for yours, but I doubt you could answer me anyway. If you're not satisfied yet, we can have a go at this tomorrow too."

Leaving my name behind, I urged the chamberlain to take us away. The sound of our scuffle had drawn a number of observers but, perhaps in deference to the authority of the candidate for succession, no one had tried to intervene.

Now that I thought about it, the Tiger Clan were the strongest of the beastfolk clans in the Empire, weren't they? Anyway, I had caused a bit of a stir on my first day here, but I was sure Win would smooth things over for me. Really, since he had been the one to call me here, he was probably well aware that this kind of commotion would be inevitable.



I spent the next three days relaxing in the room given to me. On the fourth day, I was finally introduced to the candidates for succession. I was guided to a large room, dominated by a central circular table—a round table, if you will—where Win and three others were seated. As one of them was the young beastfolk I had encountered on my first day in the palace, these must have been the candidates. There wasn't any space at the table for me to sit down, so after thinking it over for a bit, I decided to take a position standing off to Win's side,

slightly behind him.

The young beastfolk had seemed to be sulking about something or other, but his eyes flashed with excitement as soon as he saw me. He almost jumped out of his chair...but after looking around, sat back down with a look of irritation. It seemed even *he* wasn't stupid enough to start something here. Though that brief instant where he had forgotten was enough proof of his stupidity for me. Even if his emotional, easy-to-read personality was kind of cute, if I had to say something positive about him, it'd be his determination to keep getting up after being knocked down over and over.

After looking over some documents prepared for me in my three days of rest, I learned that the guy's name was Tract Vols. He was the son of the current leader of the Tiger Clan, and the commander in chief of the Empire's army, Savist Vols. As the head of the strongest faction in the Empire as well as its army, Savist had a good bid for the throne. I supposed it was to be expected for his son to be one of the candidates.

The other beastfolk sitting next to Tract was from the Rabbit Clan: Fahda Fitch, child of the head of Internal Affairs, Romada Fitch. The Rabbit Clan was quite prolific in the empire, and as a tribe often tasked with agricultural duties, they took many positions in the internal ministries.

The last candidate was a large beastfolk of the Elephant Clan by the name of Barbarus Vidar, son of Gargarus Vidar, the head of Judicial Affairs.

After reading the documents they gave me and seeing the faces of the candidates for myself, I could get a good impression of what Win and the other leaders of the Empire were looking for.

For example, there was one member of the Fanged Tribe and two of the Horned Tribe among them. Though the Rabbit Clan didn't possess horns, their worship of the ancestral rabbit spirits placed a heavy emphasis on knowledge, and so they were treated as a member regardless. From that ratio, it was clear that Win and the other leaders wanted to put more emphasis on the internal development of the Empire than on its military. Alternatively, they might have been trying to reduce the influence the Fanged Tribe had won by their exploits in the Federation's war. In any case, no other nations in the West could hope to

stand against the Empire of Sabal, so it made sense to pour their efforts into internal development as opposed to warfare.

In that sense, as unfortunate for him as it was, that explained what Tract was doing here. Savist had many children besides Tract, so why had he picked this emotionally explosive son of his to become a candidate for the throne? No doubt it was because even though he was ill-suited to the position of emperor, he would be well-liked by the Fang Tribe who valued strength highly.

In simple terms, Win—and likely Savist too—believed that the Fanged Tribe and the Tiger Clan in particular held too much power, and so were planning to elect the next emperor from among the Horned Tribe to restore some balance between them. Win himself was also probably interested in reducing the disparity between the beastfolk and the other races as a whole, but it seemed like that goal was still a distance away, seeing as the three candidates were nonetheless beastfolk. In short, the next emperor had to be decided while Win was still in a position of authority, so that he could continue to bring the other races to accept the decision.

“The next emperor will be chosen by myself and Acer here. As you all know, he is my adopted father, and so I will tolerate no disrespect toward him. Understand, Tract?”

Tract flinched. Win’s voice held all the authority and majesty of an emperor. But really he was just saying he would let what happened a few days ago slide, so there wasn’t much to be afraid of.

Anyone who thought about it could tell Tract had been included in this selection as no more than a clown, so I was starting to feel bad for him. He looked down at the other races weaker than his own, lacked the intelligence to think through the situation he was in properly, and was far too driven by his feelings. But at the very least, he had faced me seriously. It would have been nice if he added some feints, or leveraged his mobility to attack me from multiple angles, but it was clear to me that there was no distortion in his personality. He was an idiot, but I actually kind of liked him.

“My name is Acer, as you’ve just heard. As you can tell from my race, I’m not

a citizen of Sabal, but I've been brought in because of my connections to it. We may not have much time together, but I hope to see your strength, knowledge, and anything else you have confidence in while we're here."

Perhaps because of that, when Win urged me to speak, I felt the need to add a bit at the end to cover for Tract's behavior. I had been quite tired when it happened and so just wanted to end things quickly, but if we were to have a repeat of that encounter, I really wouldn't mind giving him some pointers.

In response to my introduction, Win gave me a brief look of exasperation, and a faint sneer rose to the face of Fahda, the son of the head of Internal Affairs.



Win no doubt had recognized that I had taken a liking to Tract. Fahda, on the other hand, seemed to recognize Tract's role in this whole scheme. As such, he seemed to believe it was a given he would be next in line for the throne, and so turned his nose up at the thought of me picking the next emperor. In truth, my opinion here really wasn't worth much, and aside from one small fact, he was mostly correct. I could clearly see a bright intelligence in him.

However, he was mistaken on one thing. My initial impression was that the next emperor would not be him, but Barbarus. As I had said, I was sure Win and the other leaders of the Empire intended to focus their efforts inward in the future. But if they focused entirely on Internal Affairs, letting the interior ministries do whatever they pleased, the wealth disparity among the people of the Empire would grow immensely. No doubt that disparity would appear along racial divides as well. Whether the ultimate victors would be the humans with the largest population, or the beastfolk who held the greatest influence, I couldn't say for sure. But expanding wealth without consideration for the future would shake the Empire to its core. In order to keep that in check, the most important thing to focus on was keeping things balanced, and responding to changes in the situation as they occurred—something that fell in the realm of law.

On top of that, with how prolific the Rabbit Clan was, they had a reputation as philanderers, and Fahda himself was no exception. Sexual desire in the emperor wasn't something to be afraid of. Leaving behind plenty of heirs meant there would be numerous candidates for succession once he gave up the throne. That could lead to conflict in some cases, but it would be far less severe than if the emperor were to die with no heirs at all.

But that was for a normal country. As a half-elf, Win had built this country and was now passing it on to someone who shared no blood with him. In that case, was there any reason for future successors to be chosen from the emperor's bloodline? If not, the emperor having so many heirs could very well serve as an obstacle in the future.

So, unfortunately, Fahda was just another clown dancing along with Tract. And neither of them recognized it.

The actual next emperor, Barbarus, maintained his silence.



Hefting my wooden sword, I took a defensive stance. When they saw I was ready, the three beastfolk across from me split up, Tract rushing me head-on while his attendants came at me from my left and right.

It had been three months since I arrived in the Empire of Sabal. Rather than spending a lot of time on deciding the next emperor, it felt like I was mostly occupied with teaching Tract how to fight. What had happened on our first encounter played out a number of times after that, but as a result, he had for some reason taken a liking to me. It seemed that he—or rather, the majority of the Fanged Tribe—placed extreme value on strength.

The head of the Black Bear Clan had said that strength wasn't just a matter of muscle or skill, but also took into account the strength of one's heart and will. But for a young beastfolk like Tract, the strength displayed in fighting was easiest to understand. We started meeting more and more often, and eventually I began teaching him to fight.

Fending off three at once would be quite the challenge, so I dashed to the right, grabbing the arm of one of the attackers and wrenching it behind his back so I could use him as a shield. The other attendant hesitated, but Tract didn't so much as pause as he lunged for me, striking while avoiding the hostage. One of his best traits was that he never hesitated in any of his movements. Unfortunately, that meant he often made mistakes without realizing it. Trying to dodge around the hostage while attacking made him an easy target for my sword.

Even if coming to a stop was definitely the wrong play, just trying to force an attack through wasn't a good option either. His two attendants had joined us because he couldn't handle me on his own, but there was no point if they weren't going to coordinate. The best choice for him in this situation would have been to attack in a way to distract me or force my attention elsewhere in an attempt to free his captured partner.

Even without that, Tract himself being taken down was the loss condition for their party. Even if it meant abandoning their captured comrade, stepping back

and reassessing the situation was also a smart choice. Not that Tract was the kind of person who could abandon one of his subordinates.

That was another way Tract was unsuited to the role of emperor. The best he could aim for was to remain a warrior, someone who could earn the trust and favor of those immediately around him and fight to protect them. He might have been able to lead a small group, but a larger group where he might have to sacrifice the few to provide for the many was beyond him.

Aside from Tract, I was meeting with the other candidates once every ten days or so. My meetings with Fahda consisted of being invited to drink tea together with him, where we did little more than converse a little. It felt very much like he was meeting with me only out of obligation.

The last of the candidates—Barbarus, the one most likely to succeed—was less interested in talking about himself and more in finding out anything he could from me about other countries, the elven caravan, and so on. He wasn't especially talkative, but he was a great listener. So I told him about the many countries I had visited. He had a deep interest in their ruling structures, their unique systems of law, their methods for collecting taxes, and all things relating to law and statecraft. My previous notion that he was best suited for the throne wasn't exactly being challenged.

In particular, he was quite interested in learning about Fusou, another nation composed of multiple races, and the Ancient Gold Empire, the largest nation in the Far East. The situation of the humans, skyfolk, and merfolk uniting in their war against the oni sounded quite similar to that of the Federation.

But the Empire of Sabal no longer had any external enemies. Win was leading them as a former war hero, but how would the next emperor do the same? It seemed Win and the other leaders thought that the law would carry that burden, but I couldn't tell what Barbarus thought yet.

"You're really strong, Acer! If I become emperor, I'll make you a general. How does that sound? Want to join my side?"

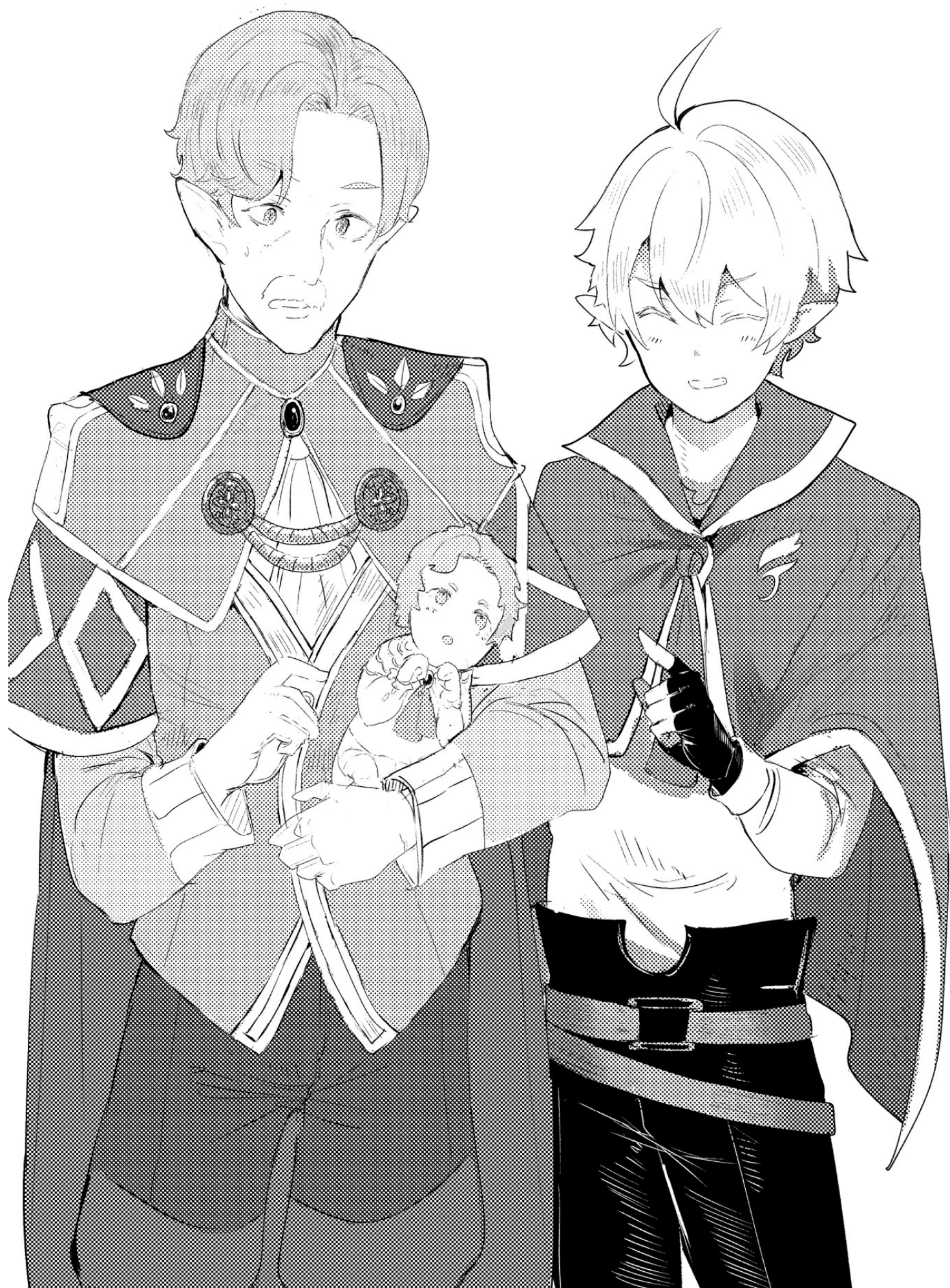
After being struck down by my wooden sword, Tract responded with a laugh and that proposal, just like the adorable idiot he was.

I also couldn't help but feel like he'd be an important person someday. Even if the throne was out of his reach, if he had the right guidance, he could be someone capable of saving countless people. And if he expanded the breadth of his experience beyond the narrow confines of the Tiger Clan and out into the wider world, he could grow even further. Win must have understood that, so I doubted he'd simply be discarded after his role in the selection process was finished.

The real problem was our second clown, Fahda. Unfortunately, I hadn't spent enough time with him to get a good grasp of what his future looked like. I could only hope that the next succession would be as bloodless as possible.



After half a year of this sham of selecting a new emperor, Win called for me. We met in the same room where we first reunited in the Empire. Compared to last time, the room was basically empty of people...but Win wasn't quite alone.



In his arms was a human baby, maybe one or two years old. It seemed inviting me here to participate in the selection of the next emperor had been a front to hide the existence of this child.

But a human, huh? Wait. There was no way, right? No, it definitely had to be. There was no doubt. I could see faint traces of Win's features on the baby's face, and the way they were looking around made it clear they were following the movements of the spirits. There was no way I could mistake that.

"Win...this is *your* kid, isn't it?" I couldn't keep the joy from my voice as I said that. I mean, this was Win's kid we were talking about. As a half-elf who had thrown his lot in with the beastfolk, I figured it was entirely impossible for him to have children.

"A-Acer, calm down. You're right, this is...my kid. So please calm down. I'm sure you understand, but this has to be a secret."

I could only imagine what my expression must have looked like. Win was instantly trying to suppress my reaction, even giving up his imperial persona in his panic to do so.

So, it was a secret, was it? I supposed that made sense. News of Win having a child with a human could very well destabilize the whole Empire. I could understand why he had brought me here with a cover story.

I immediately wanted to take the child in my arms, but deciding it was best to hear him out first, I took a few deep breaths and tried to calm down.

It was okay. Now that I had laid eyes on this child, they would be safe. Even if it made the whole Empire of Sabal my enemy, I would protect them.

"Don't worry, I'm calm now. But I'm also really happy. You can rest easy, Win. As long as I'm around, nothing will happen to them, so you can tell me what's going on." With a direct look, I asked him to explain the situation behind this child. And he did, at times looking quite grieved, but never once stopping.

Ever since becoming emperor, the greatest challenge Win had faced was maintaining a balance between the races and between the beastfolk clans. One of those efforts was for him to marry, even knowing he could have no children.

Gradually, as the proposals began to come in from people who were only interested in his long lifespan as a half-elf, he began running out of reasons to refuse.

In truth, since marriage with members of a race or clan would place their whole faction in support behind him, it was one of the better methods to secure his rule. So as obvious as it was, even if his marriages were entirely political, he couldn't treat his partner poorly. Even if his feelings didn't amount to romantic love, he still needed to show his partner the greatest respect, fulfill his role fittingly as husband, and take care of their needs. That was what would win him support from their race or clan.

One of those partners he ended up with was a human. As the most populous race of the Empire, securing their support was critical. Had Win given up, assuming he could never bear children? Or had he secretly hoped he could? In any case, one of his human consorts became pregnant with his child.

Naturally, this became a huge problem. Win had immediately secluded her in the palace under the pretense of illness, but it seemed he wasn't entirely capable of stopping the rumors from getting out. As if to make the lie true, the consort gradually grew weaker and weaker while in hiding, only to eventually pass away. Though Win didn't say it in so many words, it was most likely from poison.

However, despite the misfortune of her death, they managed to save their child. Up until her last breath, the child's mother had managed to keep them safe in her womb. But it was clear that whoever had attacked the mother would soon be after the child. In fact, the assassin's target had been the child from the start. So Win announced that the child had died with the mother...and had them spirited away to an elven forest within the Empire, the one just outside Clausula, in what had once been the Quoramite holy land.

Many of the races of the Empire respected Win because of his heroism in the war against humanity, but the elves were different. Yes, they still saw him and respected him as a hero, but more than that, they respected him for being raised by a high elf. And in those large forests, though they were technically within the borders of the Empire, it was hard to call the elves imperial citizens. As such, Win believed the only ones he could absolutely trust with the child's

life were the elves.

But it was obvious this was only a temporary solution at best. As much as the forest outside Clausula was elven territory, they were still within the Empire of Sabal. If it became known that there was a child who had inherited Win's blood, the risk of that child being wrapped up in some conspiracy or other was high.

So he decided to entrust the child to *my* care, before she grew old enough to become self-aware, even younger than Win had been when I first met him. Out of an abundance of caution, he had even prepared the excuse of the imperial selection to distract from the true cause of my visit.

I see, I see. I understand.

But there was something I still had to ask.

"I understand your situation, Win. But in the end...that's just *your* situation, and your country's. Is that really enough of an excuse to take this child away from her father?"

Maybe Win had forgotten, but I was quite selfish. I thought peace was important, and I didn't like killing people. But if it was for the sake of protecting someone I cared about, I wouldn't hesitate to destroy a kingdom or two. It went without saying that Win's child—my own grandchild—counted as one of those people. If it meant giving this child time with her father, I would gladly smash the greatest empire in the West to pieces.

Maybe I'd start by growing some mountains to split the Empire in three? One for the beastfolk, one for the humans, and one for the other races. If the mountains were rugged enough to prevent communication, the empire would quietly vanish in no time at all as the separated regions turned independent.

But Win shook his head.

"No, Acer. I didn't call you here to do something like that. And besides, though I never knew my birth mother or father, my childhood was happier than anyone else's." He looked straight at me, his voice heavy with emotion, fearless of any anger I might show. "I don't want her to grow up with an Acer that's filled with rage. I want the Acer who made me the happiest child in the world."

Okay, that just wasn't fair. How could I get angry after hearing that? As I gave a big sigh, he handed the child over to me. Though it was likely his first time seeing them in ages, though he no doubt wanted to hold them in his arms forever, he suppressed it all.

In that case, I guess I had no choice. I knew from long ago that Win had chosen a difficult path in life. The fact that he couldn't walk it along with his own child...was out of our hands.

So I'd have to take his place. I'd show this child the love that he wouldn't be allowed to. And it wouldn't just be me either. I'd have Airena with me as well.

"Win, whenever you want to meet again, once your role in the Empire is over, come and visit." I gently rocked the child in my arms, who in turn looked up at me in confusion, reaching a hand toward my face. I guess if they had the eyes to see the spirits, they would see the glow around me as well.

"Her name is Soleil. Please...take care of her," Win said, a sad smile on his face as he looked at the weight now gone from his arms.

Ah...so it was a girl.



A pair of wings lifted us into the sky. Soleil let out a small cry, one that sounded—at least to me—like one of excitement. Even though she wasn't even two years old, she already understood that flight was something special.

I had chosen to call Heero to take me back from the Empire of Sabal. Immediately after accepting Win's daughter, I left the palace behind. An elf carrying a child around would stand out tremendously, so I couldn't stay. Together with the help of the elves who had brought her back from the forest, I sneaked out of the capital. Once I had taken Soleil, Win planned to declare who the next emperor would be, so my role in the Empire was at an end. The entire selection process, whether it was Win's idea or that of all the leadership, had been entirely to serve as a cover to get Soleil to me.

The best way home would normally be to take a ship leaving the Far West. But even if I found a ship that would take me right away, it's not like it would leave immediately. Departure was a slow process that involved gathering water,

supplies, and merchandise for sale. If someone were to recognize that Soleil was waiting on a ship to leave the capital, I would have to stand guard twenty-four seven. And while I could protect myself without issue, keeping a baby safe at the same time was a risk I didn't want to take. There was also no telling what effect a long voyage would have on such a small baby. She'd probably stay healthy with the apuas I had, but it wasn't a sure thing.

In terms of risks, going over land was also obviously impossible. Though I likely wouldn't be pursued, the Mountains of Mist and the Valleys of Death blocking the west-central region from the Far West would have monsters many times stronger than any assassin. It would be no problem if I were alone, but it wasn't the kind of place to visit while carrying a small child.

In that case, the only option left was to go by air. No matter how much power or authority any pursuer had, once we were in the sky we'd be out of their reach.

After saying goodbye to the elves, I headed north and west until I found a place distant from any human settlements, then used magic to lift myself up in the air as Heero came to pick me up. Thankfully, little Soleil was happy to cling to me the whole time. Despite our hurried departure and journey through the sky, she looked around without a trace of fear before returning her gaze to my face with a bright smile. It really made me feel that she was Win's daughter.

When I first met Win, he had rarely shown any emotion, but he never complained about traveling. When we traveled by boat, the scenery passing us by had clearly captured his imagination. He had really been a strong kid.

I guess I was a grandpa now, huh? It was kind of funny. Back when Aiha had asked what her family was to me, I didn't really understand the feeling of being a grandparent, so I had said that Kaeha's kids, Shizuki and Mizuha's kids, and even Souha and Touki's kids all felt like my own children. But now, I really felt connected to Soleil as her grandfather.

I had told Airena I'd bring her back a souvenir, but I never would have imagined it would be my own granddaughter. I wondered how she'd respond. Would she be stunned and bewildered? Would she just laugh? Or was she waiting back home, fully expecting what was to come?

There was no way she should know that Soleil existed, but this was Airena we were talking about. I wouldn't be surprised if she had guessed something close to the truth just by reading his letter.

You seem to be enjoying yourself quite a bit. Or should I say, you look very happy, Heero's telepathic message accompanied a bright chirp.

Oh, I was happy, all right. More than words could describe.

The circumstances weighing on this little girl's shoulders were immense. I was sure Win wanted to raise her himself. I had plenty of thoughts about that too. If he had reached out to me when her mother first became pregnant, we might have been able to save her too. Whether it was poison, sickness, or assassins, I was confident I could have staved off all of them.

But it was too late to regret that now. Not even a high elf could rewind time. So tossing all those heavy circumstances by the wayside, there was no way I wouldn't be happy as I looked down at my granddaughter.

Maybe Win was tied down by countless obligations to his country, but I had no such fetters and would put none on her. All I could do was raise her with every drop of love I could muster.

Speaking of grandparents, I supposed my own in Salix had already become a spirit...but I hadn't known about our relationship until after his ascension. I knew him as someone who understood me well, but never as a grandfather.

How would my relationship with Soleil play out? While I was her grandfather, I also had to fill the role of a parent for her. I was sure there would be plenty of hardship on the road, but I knew it would never compare to the joy and happiness that would come along with it, and so I could barely contain my excitement at what the future held.



"Umm, I guess being a mother is fine, but please don't let her call me Grandma."

That was Airena's one stipulation when it came to raising Soleil.

Even when I brought Win's daughter—and thus my granddaughter—back from the Empire of Sabal, Airena didn't so much as bat an eye. In fact, she had increased the guard hired by the elven caravan to protect Pantarheios in anticipation of my return. It seemed she had a faint idea of what Win had wanted after all.

"Win wouldn't call for you unless it was something no one else could do. And even if I'd been wrong, strengthening the island's guard wouldn't be wasted."

And so when I did make my return, she took Soleil into her own arms with a bright smile. I thought I was pretty sharp when it came to intuition, but it seemed I still didn't compare to her. I guess her life overcoming all sorts of dangers as an adventurer, negotiating with foreign nations on behalf of the elves, and leading the elven caravan had equipped her with unparalleled skill in observation. Back when we had first met, I felt she wasn't nearly so competent. Then again, with how I had been back then, I really wasn't in a place to criticize her.

At any rate, seeing her welcome Soleil into our home had me breathing a sigh of relief. I knew she liked kids, so I didn't expect her to refuse, but the decision to raise someone as your own child was not a burden to be shouldered lightly. There wasn't anything I could have done about it, but the fact I had made the decision without discussing it with her first meant I had to resolve myself for some complaints on her part. In particular, because Soleil was human.

But seeing how happy she looked holding the little girl, I couldn't see any fear of the difference in their lifespans in her at all. She had once greatly feared the idea of the people she loved passing on before her, but it seemed she had grown to accept that future. Though of course, unless there was some incident large enough to threaten the whole world, I wouldn't be dying before her, so she never had to worry about being alone.

As much as Airena was very proactive in her acceptance of Soleil into our lives, we differed on how we wanted her to refer to us.

I wanted her to call me "Grandpa," but Airena felt that people might get some strange ideas if they heard her call me that when I looked so young.

When it came to two elves raising a human—okay, I was a high elf, but still—we would be standing out regardless, so I had argued there was no point in worrying about that. But if she called me “Grandpa,” there was a very real chance she’d call Airena “Grandma.” That was something she found rather difficult to handle.

It wasn’t an easy problem to solve. It wasn’t like I didn’t understand Airena’s position. After all, she had never had the experience of raising a child herself. I could understand her hesitation to skip past “Mother” and go right to “Grandmother.”

But I still saw Soleil as my granddaughter. She was Win’s daughter. Things might have been different if we’d had no previous connection, but having Win’s daughter call me “Dad” felt like I was wronging Win somehow.

That said, Win choosing his country over his daughter was wrong enough already, so maybe that’s just what he deserved. And when it came to the feelings of Win who wouldn’t be around to ever hear it, and the feelings of Airena who would be living with her every day, it was clear which was the priority.

But man, I really wanted her to call me Grandpa. I guess she could call me “Daddy” at first. As a human raised by two elves, she would inevitably come to understand we weren’t her birth parents. There was nothing we could do to hide that. I would love her as much as I could, and if she asked about her situation, I wouldn’t hide a thing from her. She could decide whether she wanted to call me “Dad” or “Grandpa” after that. Though it would be nice if she spared Airena from being called “Grandma.” But that all depended on how the relationship between the two of them played out.

Soleil wasn’t even two years old yet. Humans grew extremely quickly, but she was still small right now. What would the little girl smiling in Airena’s arms grow up to become? She had been born saddled with far too much, but none of that mattered anymore. Now that she was living with Airena and me, she was in the safest place in the world. With the two of us, we could conquer any enemy...if they weren’t a dragon or a giant, at least.

By myself, I could do little more than wield my powers as a high elf to destroy

those who threatened us, but with Airena at my side there were so many more possibilities. For example, even if Win's successor turned the entire Empire of Sabal against us. By myself, I would have no choice but to destroy the Empire, but with Airena at my side, conquering and ruling over it became a real possibility. So she could rest easy.

If Soleil decided she wanted to one day, she'd be able to meet Win. Regardless of the situation she had been born into, if she had the will, she could walk the road. That was easy enough for us.

But for now, we needed to set aside all this talk of the future. Right now, as I watched Airena and Soleil with a smile, I started drawing up plans to make a set of building blocks for her.

Chapter 4 — The Flower of the Sun Blooming in the East

This might have been extremely obvious, but when it came to raising children, the most important thing was spending time with them. A baby wouldn't understand their parents' circumstances. Leaving the home to work was necessary to provide food for the family, and that way of supporting one's family and children was a legitimate way of showing love.

But that kind of love was hard for a young child to understand. At that age, the whole world consisted of what was exactly in front of them. Understanding love that was expressed where they couldn't see it happening was too much for them.

I had heard a saying—I couldn't remember if it was from this life or my previous one—that said “kids will grow even without their parents.” While I couldn't say that was false, that reasoning would result in a child who never relied on their parents. While her birth parents weren't available to Soleil, Airena and I both wanted to be an important part of her life. Though considering Win's situation, it gave the saying a rather cynical ring.

All this was to say that both Airena and I were rather desperate to reduce our working hours to try and win Soleil's favor, wanting to spend as much time at home as possible. After all, this little girl was adorable.

Before Soleil lived with us, Airena and I arranged our schedules so that we'd end our work around the same time, and then spend as much time together as possible. But now, since I couldn't really take care of her while Airena was, and vice versa, we split our schedules to be working at different times. On top of that, since I had been gone for half a year already, I could get away with taking on as little blacksmithing work as I liked. Sculpting was just a hobby, and there were other small jobs around the harbor that I was asked to do, but now that I had a small child to think about, people were pretty understanding.

Back when I had raised Win, I felt like I had to show him his father was a

working man, but now I felt like that had just been vanity on my part. It wasn't wrong per se, but I wasn't nearly as gung-ho about it now as I had been then. In a few years, when Soleil had grown a bit and her world had expanded, she could learn from watching Airena and me working, but that didn't have to happen right away.

After all, Airena and I had saved up plenty of money already.

"Dada!" Soleil called to me as I walked the interior of the island, carrying her in my arms. It wasn't that big of an island, but with me living here, a huge number of spirits had gathered around it. Being able to see them despite being human, she never seemed to grow tired of watching them floating around us. In addition, that would help the spirits remember her, making this island even safer for her.

"That's right, I'm Dada. Though Grandpa would be fine too."

Airena's efforts had resulted in Soleil coming to see us as her parents. I supposed for a girl this young, that was kind of necessary. She couldn't quite say the words "Daddy" or "Mommy," so she was still lisping out "Dada" and "Mama," but it was still adorable. I couldn't really say it bothered me. Seriously, I mean it.

Our objective this day was the island's forest. Filled with plenty of small animals, it was actually kind of dangerous for a small child. But since she could see the spirits and was being raised by an elf and a high elf, it was a great place for her to play. As she tottered her way between the trees, they'd move their roots out of the way to avoid tripping her. And when she fell entirely of her own accord, they'd move together with the earth to support her.

With the leaves filtering out most of the sunlight and the strong breeze blowing between the branches, it was a peaceful and cool place. Someday I really hoped to show her a place with wind that didn't carry so much salt in it. Someday, when she felt this island was too small for her.

Sitting down on a root in the center of the forest, I let Soleil run off. Before long, I felt someone looking at me. I looked up to find I was being watched by an eagle. That was quite a rare sight. Why had an eagle come to this island, so

far from the mainland? Many birds migrated south to avoid the winter cold, but this was going quite a bit too far. It was a good thing it had found this island. If it hadn't, it probably would have flown until it exhausted itself, falling into the sea. Or maybe it had been enjoying a long journey, resting on the mast of a ship like it was a moving tree.

“Dada, Dada, bird!” Following my gaze, Soleil noticed the eagle, and immediately decided I needed to be informed of her incredible discovery. She really was adorable.

“Yep, that’s a bird all right. I think it’s an eagle.”

It was quite large, and a bird of prey, so it could very well carry off a human child if it wished...but it didn't seem like that would be an issue. Though the eagle clearly showed an interest in the two of us, it didn't express any hostility or intent to harm us.

In that case, I paid it no mind. Soleil was happy to see it, so we could live happily together here in the forest. With no predators that could really threaten it on the island, the eagle could very well grow to become the lord of this forest. Of course, that assumed it didn't threaten the lives of the people living nearby. It was most likely smart enough to understand that, so I felt we could be good neighbors. Of course, the decision wasn't up to me, but the governor of the island, Airena. The most I could do was tell her I didn't think it would be a problem.

“Bird, bird!”

The eagle and I watched Soleil for a while as she continued to call out to it.



A gentle music filled the air. Sound was made up of vibrations in the air, so those of us who could see the spirits could see the wind spirits dancing in time with those vibrations. Soleil reached out a hand, and the wind spirits danced around her fingers. Seeing that, Airena's eyes smiled as she played her flute, and her music grew even softer.

Apparently Airena had learned this during her travels with the elven caravan. I guess the caravan did all sorts of things, from picture shows to musical

performances to trade, and more.

After watching the two of them for a while, I returned my attention to the letter in front of me. It had been sent by Win. It was a report about what had happened in the Empire of Sabal after Soleil and I made our escape.

Though Win had abdicated the throne, he remained as an advisor for the new emperor, thus retaining a measure of influence. The new emperor was Barbarus Vidar from the Elephant Clan. He was gentle, intelligent, and a good listener. With a new emperor so focused on law, the Empire would no doubt see a measure of stability. They had been led by the charisma of a war hero, but from now on, it would be the rule of law that kept the Empire together. No doubt that had been the plan since before he was chosen.

I guess that was all fine. I had predicted as much, so I was hardly surprised. Really, I was more interested in what had become of those who failed to become emperor.

Tract Vols, the young man of the Tiger Clan I'd spent so much time with, had been disappointed in his failure, but it didn't take him long to recover and begin contributing to maintaining peace in the capital. Apparently he had been quite upset at my sudden disappearance, and so was determined to get his revenge by showing his true strength—and hiring me personally—the next time we met. In a way, I was glad he was as energetic as ever, but it felt like he had forgotten I was Win's father. As unfortunately normal as that was for him, I was a bit worried.

While Tract seemed like he'd survived the selection without issue, it looked like Fahda Fitch hadn't handled it quite as well. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say the one who had a problem was Fahda's father, Romada Fitch. I figured the decision to make Barbarus emperor hadn't been Win's alone, but one made with the support of all of the Empire's leadership...but apparently Romada hadn't been one of those consulted. He had been so convinced that his son would be the next emperor—or, maybe Win had been the one to convince him—so he had begun taking quite a few liberties behind the scenes.

Those "liberties" ranged from embezzlement to cruel behavior toward other

races, especially humans. As vital as the efforts of the Rabbit Clan were to the Empire's prosperity, Romada had gotten drunk on power and crossed the line. The most telling example of that was the murder of Soleil's mother.

Now that Romada's plan to make his son emperor had fallen through, the debt accrued by his selfish behavior had come due. That was something he had expected to be waved off once his son had the authority of the throne, but without that authority behind him, it was a debt far too massive for him to carry alone. As such, the punishment was spread to the entire Rabbit Clan. Many of the Rabbit Clan had been infuriated by this development, and so had risen up against Romada and killed him. It was effectively a lynching, but with how much power individual clans held in the Empire, such punishments weren't particularly out of place.

That was likely one of the reasons why they were putting such a heavy emphasis on the law by selecting Barbarus as emperor. In any case, I had no doubt that had Romada survived, Win would have still been waiting for the perfect moment, continuing to guide the Empire forward as he prepared to exact his own revenge. Though it would have killed him to leave Romada to run free for a time, he would have never given up that grudge.



Soleil had turned five, and while I would keep Airen's age a secret, I was now three hundred fifty-five years old.

At this stage, we felt it was important for Soleil to interact with many other people, so we had her start attending a school on the island. There were a surprising number of children on Pantarheios, though with the brothels maintained for visiting sailors, I supposed it wasn't entirely a surprise they would be a source of new life. So in order to take care of those children and teach them reading, writing, and math, there were a number of schools built on the island.

On the mainland, that role was mostly carried out by the church. But with how diverse the backgrounds of the people on Pantarheios were, the religions they followed were equally varied.

It wasn't that there were *no* churches on the island, but it was only natural that a parent would resist sending their child to learn at a church of an unfamiliar religion. So instead, the elven caravan had funded a number of schools on the island.

Even if the children were to follow in their parents' footsteps in becoming prostitutes or sailors, a basic level of education would greatly reduce the risk of them being cheated out of their wages. On top of that, the education would provide a road for them to begin working at trading corporations in hopes of becoming merchants, or to begin trading with the island garrison to become mercenaries or adventurers. Though it was quite rare, I occasionally helped with training in swordsmanship at the garrison when they requested it.

A significant portion of the private guard hired to protect the island had followed that path. They took their training here to the mainland to gain experience as mercenaries or adventurers, before returning to serve on the island again.

Of course, both Airena and I were capable of teaching Soleil not just the basics of reading and writing, but quite a bit more. I hadn't sent Win to the church to learn, so I had taught him all those things myself. But like I said, Soleil needed the experience of interacting with other people. In particular, she needed to make connections with other children her age.

Win had Shizuki and Mizuha. In the same way, I wanted Soleil to find someone she could call a friend. The eagle living in the island's forest often played with her, but she really needed human friends.

She wasn't particularly shy either. She would often greet the people who lived around us, and was quite fond of the people who came to help out around the house. If she had a chance to meet with people, I had no doubt she'd start building friendships in no time.

To that end, I started taking a little more blacksmithing work. I always wanted to spend my free time with Soleil, so for her sake, it was best if I kept myself a little busy. It seemed Airena had come to a similar conclusion, as she had started to expand her work as well, though she had already been working way harder than me.

So here I was, back at the forge. Though I said I wanted to take on more work, I had to keep things balanced. The island had need of metal implements, and those that weren't produced here were brought in by ship. So while I was cutting back on my work, more and more goods were being imported to make up for what we lacked.

Naturally, just because I decided to start working more on this day didn't mean that the imports would suddenly stop. Once they had brought the goods they had already planned on bringing, I'd ask them to start reducing the amount of metal imports and instead bring in other goods. The drop in imports wouldn't happen until the next shipment. If I suddenly increased the amount of work I did, it would be a bit of a pain for everyone else to adjust. I had given up much of my work for selfish reasons, so I needed to show some consideration in taking it back.

So for today, I'd just make something I was interested in. I hadn't made a weapon for a while...but weapons always had some level of danger to them. I was making something for fun, and I wanted to show it off to Soleil. But if Soleil took a liking to a weapon and started playing with it like a toy, that would put her in a lot of danger. And I could hardly show something off to her and then get mad at her for taking an interest in it. So for now, I'd put off the weapons. I mean, I could just *not* show it to her, but that would be no fun.

Armor would also be pretty cool, but it could still be dangerous if not handled properly. Maybe I'd make some kind of jewelry? Quite a few children were enraptured by the sight of anything that glittered, and sailors also liked to give stuff like that as gifts to their prostitutes. It felt like something I could easily turn into money.

So I decided that today would be some gold work. That said, it wasn't like I would be working with pure gold. Pure gold was very soft for a metal, so it was quite easily damaged and had difficulty keeping its shape. That wasn't an issue if you were just storing bars of gold for their value, but it was ill-suited for jewelry. However, it was possible to mix it with other metals to reinforce it without taking away from its shine. If you mixed too much, it would lose its signature color, so...I supposed the best ratio was about seven parts gold to

three parts silver or copper.

I prepared some gold bullion and hammered it to stretch it out, then curved it into a loop. I'd be making an armband. If I were to fix a jewel into it, it would look incredible, but I wanted to see how much beauty I could draw out of the gold itself this time. And it had been a while, so I figured I might as well make it a relic while I was at it. When I was making something just for myself, I tended to put as many of my skills into it as possible. That said, making it too magically powerful would be dangerous...so I settled on an effect that would make it glow when someone poured magic into it.

I hammered it into shape, polished and refined it, then began the very delicate process of engraving. Working on it a little bit at a time over a number of weeks, my passion project finally bore fruit that I was satisfied with and was welcomed with great excitement from Soleil. Airena felt it was a bit inappropriate to give a young child something so valuable to play with, but...okay, I guess that was a fair point.

Though time wouldn't stop for us, the precious time we spent together on the island continued to pass gently by.



One of the really interesting parts of raising a child is seeing them grow to be able to do new things. Yesterday they might not have been able to do something without help, but today you suddenly noticed they could handle it themselves. This pattern repeated over and over, slowly expanding Soleil's world outward.

One day, when she was six years old, she once again started to push those boundaries. I imagined it was something she had been interested in for a while. She had often watched my daily sword practice in the morning, after all. But that day, she had found a stick somewhere that was well suited to her size, then came by and started trying to copy my movements. As clumsy and awkward as her movements were, she was clearly trying quite hard.

I imagined it was all just a bit of whimsy on her part, curiosity born from seeing me do it over and over. She had happened to find a stick just the right size, so she got up a little earlier than usual and decided to try copying me, as if

looking to find out why I found it so fun.

So, how would I respond? I could tell her that this wasn't something she needed to worry about. As someone who could see the spirits, she would be more than capable of defending herself without a sword.

Or should I correct her mistakes and show her how to do it properly? I had been practicing with a sword for a long time, so I had quite a bit of experience teaching at this point. When it came to learning swordsmanship, those first steps were crucial for making sure you didn't develop any weird habits.

But she had just joined me out of curiosity. Would she really have fun if I turned it into a lesson? While I pondered this, I switched to the simplest, easiest to copy of the techniques I knew, repeating it slowly so she could see what I was doing. As she attempted to imitate me, she began to regard her weapon with a bit of confusion. She seemed a little unhappy that she couldn't replicate my movements properly.

In that case, I guess I'd teach her a bit. So I showed her the proper way to hold and carry a sword, all without having to say a word. Even if she was just using a stick, it would be a lot easier if she were holding it properly. I then gave another swing, and as she copied me, she gave a startled expression at how different it felt. It looked like she was enjoying herself.

Now, what next? If she wanted to continue, I could make a wooden sword that was the right size for her...but training in swordsmanship was fairly mundane. It wouldn't all be fun. It wouldn't be long before her hands started to get sore and blistered. Though really, she very well may grow tired of it before then. I was happy she had taken this initial interest in it, but I wasn't particularly confident I could make training in swordsmanship all that fun for her.

Now that I thought about it...why did Win end up picking up Yosogi swordsmanship?

I guess he had done so because everyone around him was doing the same thing. Kaeha, Shizuki, Mizuha, all the other students of the dojo...basically everyone around him practiced swordsmanship, the only exception being Kaeha's mother, Kuroha. So it only felt natural to him that he would start practicing with a sword as well.

But this place was different. The only one practicing with a sword here was me. Could I make an environment that made swordsmanship a natural part of life by myself?

Now that I had thought about it this much, I was really getting the urge to teach her properly. I just needed to prepare myself for the grief of her potentially giving up or getting bored.

“Soleil, if you keep swinging a stick around like that, you’ll hurt your hands. Should we make a proper wooden sword for you?”

She came to a stop, so I took the stick from her and looked over her hands. As I did, she jumped forward and wrapped me in a hug, apparently looking for some kind of praise. I answered by patting her on the head before lifting her up in my arms.

She had grown so much heavier in such a short time. Humans grew up so fast. It would only be a few years before she wouldn’t want me picking her up like this anymore. Really, it could be as soon as tomorrow. That was sad in a way, but I knew it was inevitable, and also the kind of growth that deserved celebration. I had been involved in the raising of quite a few children at this point.

“Father, my hands already hurt,” she said, voice a bit sad as she looked over her own palms.

Of course they did. She had been using a plain old stick, and hadn’t even been holding it properly at the start. It was only natural she had hurt herself. Though it still made me feel bad for her.

“I’m sure they do. When you start practicing with a sword, your hands will hurt. But once you get used to it, your hands will get stronger and it won’t hurt anymore. Or do you want to stop?”

I didn’t want to force her into anything. With the spirits on her side, she could easily defend herself without a sword. And even if she never learned a way to protect herself, she had plenty of paths in life she could take without issue.

But after a short pause to think, she shook her head. “I don’t want to keep going today, but I’ll practice with you tomorrow.”

And that was what she wanted. So her real goal was to practice with me. Ah, by the way, she had made a number of friends since she'd started going to school. She had plenty of people to play with, even aside from the eagle, and so she was spending less and less time with Airena and me.

So maybe she was trying to find a way to spend more time with me. It didn't have to be swordsmanship. In a way, I felt it would be better to spend that time teaching her to communicate with the spirits...but maybe I should leave that job to Airena. Since Soleil was a human, Airena might be better suited to teaching her.

I guess I'd leave that to her, then. After all, it was easy enough for her to join me for sword practice, but it might be a bit more challenging to find an excuse to spend time together with Airena.

To repeat myself yet again, humans grew up really fast. Soleil was learning, and her world was expanding. Today's world was bigger than yesterday's, and tomorrow's would be bigger still.



Soleil learned reading, writing, math, and common sense from school. She learned swordsmanship from me and Spirit Arts from Airena, growing bigger by the day.

In the year she turned seven, we received another letter from Win. Apparently one of the candidates for imperial selection, Fahda Fitch, was looking for me. He had likely discovered that the real reason I had visited the Empire back then was to take Soleil away.

Fahda's father had been the one who poisoned Soleil's mother. In other words, he had been close enough to her mother to be able to poison her. As such, he had probably guessed that her child had survived the poisoning. However, Romada's influence hadn't extended to the elven forest, and it certainly didn't extend to our house on Pantarheios.

But I doubted that Fahda was looking for me in an attempt to take Soleil's life. Romada had tried to kill her to prevent Win's child from having a claim on the throne. In other words, he thought that if Win had no children, the next emperor would be his own son. I imagined he had set plenty of plans like that in

motion.

But in the end, even without Soleil around, Fahda hadn't been able to take the throne, and Romada had been executed by the Rabbit Clan for his machinations. There was no point in Fahda targeting Soleil at this point.

Ah, I suppose he might have wanted to get revenge on Win and his family for his and his father's fall from grace. I guess that was reasonably likely. But my suspicion was that his true goal was to attempt a marriage between either himself or one of his children and Soleil. If he could accomplish that and prove Soleil's connection to Win, he would win a considerable amount of influence for himself.

The Empire of Sabal already had a new emperor, but Win was still a prominent figure. And unlike Win, since Soleil was mostly human, there was a reasonable chance she could produce children with a beastfolk. Fahda seemed to think that if he could secure access to Win's bloodline, he could get his children or grandchildren on the throne.

But even Fahda should have known that Soleil was still a small child. The idea of using someone so young as a tool to win fame for themselves was reprehensible. The rabbit beastfolk were exceptionally prolific in the Empire and greatly responsible for its prosperity, but I couldn't help but be put off by them.

In any case, even if Fahda found Soleil, Airena and I would be more than enough to protect her. Though really, as long as she was with the two of us, Fahda would be much better off if he never found her. I didn't like killing people, but Airena wouldn't show even a shred of mercy to someone who threatened the people she loved. Though she was gentle by nature, she had originally been an adventurer. And as the leader of the elven caravan, she also had no small amount of experience dispatching bandits.

So for Fahda's own sake, I hoped he never discovered this island.

Soleil gave a sharp whistle, prompting a flapping of wings from the forest as the familiar eagle came out to land on a branch near our house. Soleil nodded, tossing one of the fish she had just caught up to it. It seemed she wanted to

share her catch.

But really, the skill with which the eagle grabbed the fish out of the air was almost too impressive. Was it really just an eagle? It wasn't Heero in disguise, was it? No, I think I would have noticed if it was him. I guess that was impossible.

At any rate, as Soleil's friend, I didn't want to be too suspicious of him. Ever since she had been small, the two of them had gotten along splendidly. She had named him Shuu, and he always came flying out of the forest when she called him. Though she was still too small to support the weight of an eagle, she would one day have him perch on her arms, so I planned to make leather hand and shoulder coverings for her. No matter how much they got along, a raptor's talons were sharp enough to cause serious injury, even by accident. It was a bit difficult to get Soleil to take those kinds of things into account yet, so I needed to think ahead.

After downing the fish in a single gulp, Shuu gave a number of happy trills before leaping back into the air. It looked like that was it for today's encounter.

"See you tomorrow!" she called out to him.



After circling overhead a few times, Shuu made his way back to the forest.

The two of them often spent quite a long time with each other, but it wasn't especially rare for their exchanges to be this short either. There seemed to be some sort of connection between them that I, as an outsider, just couldn't grasp. There was something there that even a high elf versed in the secrets of the world couldn't infringe on.

I couldn't help but find the ever-present mysteries this world offered to be endlessly interesting. I might have met all of the ancient races and learned many secrets from them, and I might have fought to prevent the destruction of the world once...but I still only knew a small fraction of the world's mysteries.

That was why I was able to live so happily here.



"I'm...not your real daughter, am I?"

That question finally came up one autumn day when Soleil was twelve years old, making me three hundred sixty-two. She had sat restlessly for a while after finishing dinner, but finally worked up the courage to come out and ask.

So it had finally come. She was certainly old enough to be curious about it. Really, the question had come surprisingly late. It was a weird feeling.

The people around us seemed to understand that, as they had avoided saying anything. They had just watched quietly, waiting patiently for her to recognize the difference between us on her own. I was quite thankful for them.

"That's right. I mean, Airena and I aren't even the same race, so we couldn't have children even if we wanted to."

The fact that Airena and I were different races from Soleil was plainly obvious, but discovering that she had no blood connection to her "parents" would still be quite a shock to her. So in order to soften the blow, I threw another shocking fact into the mix. The fact that even Airena and I were different races would...well, actually, as someone who could see the spirits, maybe that wouldn't be so much of a shock.

"Yes, Lord Acer is a high elf and I am an elf, so we could not hope for children.

I suppose we don't need to, since we have you," Airenna replied with a smile, causing Soleil to look away bashfully. It seemed the revelation wasn't as much of a shock after all.

"I see. That's why Father glows, and why Mother treats him as such a famous person."

Yes, that right there! That was something that still bothered me a little bit. She *still* referred to me as *Lord Acer*. She had been doing it so long that I had basically given up on changing her. I figured that was probably why Soleil called us "Mother" and "Father" so formally rather than "Mom" and "Dad."

"Y-Yes, that's right. But no matter the difference in our races or what we call each other, we are still a family. Is there anything else you want to ask? I'm sure Lord Acer will tell you anything you wish to know." Airenna very obviously attempted to change the subject.

I mean, at this point, I wasn't about to try and get her to change the way she called me. Like I said, she had been doing it for so long that I had already given up.

"Then, who were... No, never mind. Why did you two end up taking care of me?" she asked, stopping herself before asking about her real parents. Unfortunately, the answer to both of those questions was inextricably linked. I would have to tell her about Win regardless.

"Let's see. It's a pretty long story. It begins about two hundred years ago, after all."

So I started with the story of my adopted son and Soleil's father, Win. I told her all about the tragedy between the humans and elves, about how I raised him in the human world. About how he left on a journey of his own, becoming a hero in the West in the war between humans and other races. And I told her about why he had to let her go.

Little by little, leaving nothing out.

The problem with such a long story was that the flood of information would weaken its emotional impact. Though I guess in some cases, that was a good

thing.

“I see. So I come from a really rich family,” she said after it was all finished. I suspected she hadn’t quite been able to take it all in yet.

One small correction I’d make was that she didn’t just come from a rich family; she was still a part of one. As such an important person to the elven caravan, she might have even had more financial power than Win himself during his time as emperor. It would be no exaggeration to say that the elven caravan, engaged in trade with all races on the northern continent, was the largest trade organization there. So Soleil was still plenty rich. There wasn’t much point in bringing that up now though, and I wasn’t particularly rich myself, so I kept that quiet.

“So, Father, you’re actually...Grandfather? Or should I still call you Father?”

Her next question made me laugh in spite of myself, despite knowing it was a serious question. Soleil, and even Airena, gave me a dirty look for that.

“Really, you can call me whatever you like. At first, I was really excited to have a granddaughter, but we figured it was important for you to have a father. Like Airena said, no matter what we call each other, we’re still a family.”

By now, this was all more or less trivial. What was most important was that Soleil had a chance to grow up healthy, that she could cry and get angry and laugh and become a happy adult. Soleil teared up a little at that, giving a small nod.

But...really, I wished we’d had this conversation before dinner. The truth had finally come out, so I had wanted to make it a real occasion to celebrate. Muttering that under my breath got me a laugh from Airena and another scowl from Soleil as she wiped at her eyes.

“Then tomorrow, let’s visit a restaurant at the harbor. There is a cook there from the East that has been quite popular recently,” Airena suggested, patting Soleil on the back.

Tomorrow? It was unfortunate we couldn’t do it today, but the difference wasn’t all that important. Tomorrow’s dinner with everyone would no doubt be fun and delicious.



In the winter of the year Soleil turned thirteen, when I was three hundred sixty-three, I felt a familiar presence approaching the island. I gave a deep sigh, stopping my work on my sculpture.

I had been making a sculpture of the golden dragon. Last year, after Soleil had learned we weren't her birth parents, she became quite eager to hear about stories of our journeys in the past. For those she showed a particular interest in, I made sculptures of the relevant people involved.

For example, the first I made for her was one of Win. Personally, I really wanted to make one of him as a child, but I had been angrily informed that it would defeat the purpose. I also made one of the now departed Oswald, my old master in blacksmithing and a friend of both mine and Airena's, and I made one of a Spirit Tree found in elven forests. Basically, anyone and anything that she had been curious about. Thinking I could put it in front of our house to ward off bad omens, the dragon statue was going to be quite large, and so had become a rather involved project.

I had really gotten into it today for some reason, so I was a bit annoyed at the interruption. After a long stretch, I grabbed my sword from where it sat on the edge of my workshop and headed outside. As I stepped out of the workshop, I saw the eagle Shuu sitting on a branch outside our house. At the sight of me, he squawked angrily as if to say I was too slow.

"Yeah, don't worry. It'll be some time before they make it to harbor. Really, you're not a normal eagle at all, are you?"

If it had come here to warn me of danger coming for Soleil, there was no way it was an ordinary bird. Was it some kind of monster? In any case, Shuu hadn't hurt anyone and was still quite friendly with Soleil, so I didn't let it bother me.

"Please keep an eye on her for me. She is...I guess you already know," I laughed as Shuu jumped back into the sky in the middle of me speaking.

Having graduated from school, she would now be at the office helping Airena with her work. We didn't know if she was setting her sights on becoming a merchant or an office worker, but there was no need for her to decide right away. Shuu often went to meet her as she got off work, riding home on her

shoulder, so he clearly knew where she'd be. To repeat myself yet again, this was definitely no ordinary bird.

With Shuu keeping an eye on Soleil, I could focus my attention on our uninvited guest: a certain Fahda Fitch who was even now approaching the island by ship. It would probably be another hour or so before he made it to port. I would easily make it there in time.

Having spent so long on Pantarheios, I was quite familiar with the spirits living in and around it, and so was always aware of any ships coming and going. I could easily sink any ship coming to the island long before it reached the shore. Of course, doing that would kill all the sailors on board, and I hadn't even confirmed that Fahda was after Soleil in the first place. Even if I was ninety-nine percent sure, there was still a faint chance I was wrong.

For example...yeah, he might have wanted me to help him get back into Win's good graces. It seemed unlikely, but I'd have to make sure before I treated him like an enemy. I didn't want to use Soleil as an excuse for senseless violence. I could hardly say I was protecting her if I did that.

I expected it would all be pointless, but I would at least meet with Fahda to see what he wanted.

After waiting for a time at the harbor, a ship sailed into view, dropping anchor some distance away. As a rest point for trade ships, Pantarheios was relatively open to visitors, but that didn't mean ships could come and go without restriction. In particular, pirate ships and military ships with large numbers of soldiers on board weren't permitted to dock. Pirates were barred for obvious reasons, but military ships were kept out as a self-defense measure to prevent access to those looking to attack the island. If any nation wanted this island for themselves, I couldn't say they wouldn't try to take it by force.

As such, ships looking to dock needed to wait offshore and wait for the harbor to send a ship out to meet with them. If they weren't a pirate or military vessel and didn't have some other history of dishonesty in trade, they would be granted docking access. And of course, ships that visited the island regularly had dedicated docking privileges, and could just sail into the harbor as soon as they

arrived.

Even if the ship was denied access to the harbor, they could still buy food, water, and supplies from the island. Withholding necessities to a ship in dire straits could very well lead to the death of its crew, and so would earn quite a bit of enmity all around. In the worst case, the spurned ship could grow desperate enough to attack the harbor in hopes of securing their survival.

I decided to board the small ship heading out for inspection. The inspectors going to check conditions for the ship's oarsmen and their escort were quite surprised to see me, but they didn't complain. Maybe I had mentioned it before, but the island of Pantarheios had been settled and developed by the elven caravan. That meant mostly everyone working at the harbor worked for the elven caravan, these men included. It was kind of an unwritten rule that anyone working for the caravan did what they could to avoid getting in my way. Well, even if they were humans, they did work for the *elven* caravan. I did what I could to take advantage of that unwritten rule as little as possible, though.

Even without hopping into their boat, I could have just walked over the water to get to the ship, but this gave me a chance to stop the ship from being allowed to dock. I had no idea what kind of preparations Fahda had made, but I had no intention of letting him set foot on the island. If he did, it would be in chains, and only long enough for us to secure a ship to send him back to the Empire of Sabal.



When I stepped off the small boat and onto the larger ship, I saw Fahda Fitch standing next to the captain. Though his face twisted in irritation for an instant at the sight of me, he quickly replaced it with an obviously forced smile. As usual, he had quite a bit of difficulty hiding his own feelings. If he had come all the way here in search of me, he could have at least been happy to see me. It had been more than ten years since the imperial selection, and that decade had etched itself into the once-young Fahda's face.

Taking a look around, I felt something off about the ship and its crew. It didn't seem to be from the Empire of Sabal. In the decades I had watched ships come and go from Pantarheios, I could say that for better or worse, ships from the

Empire carried themselves with quite a bit more pride. The self-confidence that came from being the largest nation in the Far West was clearly evident in the construction of their craft and in the way they carried themselves.

But I didn't feel any of that here. Though it was built in the same Western style...it was probably a ship from a different nation. Unable to get an Empire ship to carry him, Fahda had relied on another nation to bring him here.

It had probably been difficult for a beastfolk like him to get this kind of aid from another country. It was quite possible he was looking to secure Soleil not for his own status, but in order to sell her out.

However, the documents they submitted to the port authority falsely claimed they were from the Empire of Sabal. The inspector hesitated, looking to me to see how to proceed, so I nodded and stepped forward, signaling behind my back for them to slowly back away and be ready to disembark at a moment's notice.

"Long time no see, Fahda Fitch. What would someone who's important enough to be considered for the throne of the empire be doing all the way out here?" At my question, Fahda's eyes narrowed slightly, his face taking a faintly red hue. It seemed that I had made him a little angry.

Of course, my question had been sarcastic. Fahda was hardly a person of importance in the Empire. He couldn't even get them to send a single ship for him. And no doubt, the reason for that could be traced back to that imperial selection.

"I am here to take the imperial princess into custody. I would have protected her myself had you not *kidnapped* her."

I couldn't help but sigh. He still couldn't hide a single thing. He hadn't grown in the slightest.

But that wasn't all. Back during the selection, I had seen an intelligence in him that made him suited to the throne. Of course, he hadn't realized he was no more than a clown in the show, but that was because of Win's efforts to deceive him and his father.

But I didn't sense any of that intelligence from him now. In the past ten or so

years, Soleil had grown from an infant into a young woman, but Fahda seemed to have only declined. I found it extremely difficult to look at.

“As daughter of the emperor, it only makes sense that she lives in the Empire. We cannot allow you to hole her up on some tiny island like this. But because you are Lord Win’s foster father, we are willing to overlook this crime if you comply. Now, take us to her.”

It was really quite painful to see him like this. I’d had enough. His objective here was exactly as I had predicted, so there was no reason for me to play along with his charade any longer.

“Really? Even though this ship isn’t from the Empire? Even though you are the ones who killed her mother?” I clearly announced the truth for him and the sailors to hear.

When it came to deciding right from wrong, people could easily be carried away by pleasant and flowery language. Peace, equality, justice, the obvious correct path, forgiveness. By lining up words like that, anyone who didn’t fully understand the situation would naturally come to side with the speaker.

But that didn’t mean they were telling the truth. Even if they didn’t necessarily tell any lies, cutting up the truth and presenting it in fragments that suited your own purposes wasn’t much better.

He was right that I had taken Soleil out of the Empire of Sabal. But that was because Win had entrusted her to my care, fearing she would be targeted next after her mother was poisoned to death by Fahda’s father. He had really spun it in a way that was convenient for him.

I supposed it was possible that he actually believed what he was saying. There were some mysterious creatures out there who always latched on to the most convenient truth.

Of course, there was no way his foolishness would change my mind. His words had all been for the inspectors with me. If he could confuse them, while they might not take his side, he might at least prevent them from becoming his enemies. Because the inspectors behind me didn’t know the truth of the situation, they might have even been swayed by Fahda’s words.

But even if they didn't understand the situation in detail, they did know one thing: Soleil had been raised with love and care by Airena and me, and she was always smiling. No matter how pleasant Fahda's speech sounded, it couldn't compete with that self-evident truth.

"I don't know where this ship comes from, but since it is trying to pass itself off as a ship of the Empire, we will have to detain those responsible and hand them over to the Empire. Of course, that includes you, Fahda."

At my declaration, the ship's captain and crew clearly understood that there was no more deceiving us, and they reached for their cutlasses. They likely intended to kill me and the inspectors, then make a run for it, as the nation they were associated with had yet to be revealed. Alternatively, they might try to force their way into port and kidnap Soleil. If they were trying to capture the daughter of the former emperor, making an enemy of a tiny island like this wasn't much of a risk to them. Except...well, I didn't want to think they were that stupid, but they *had* been talked into coming all the way here by Fahda of all people.

At any rate, they weren't going to get their way. A single ship of people couldn't stand a chance against me, even if I was only a little irritated at most.

In response to my emotions, the waves in the sea grew more intense, and the ship began to rock.



Two years after detaining Fahda and sending him back to the Empire, another visitor came to the island of Pantarheios. This time, however, they had come from the East. It was an envoy from the Ancient Gold Empire, the Empire of Sabal's mirror on the eastern side of the continent.

Soleil was now about fourteen and a half, close to the day she'd be recognized as an adult. What kind of life would she choose for herself?

It had been nine years since I began teaching her swordsmanship. Her skill with a sword was fairly average, and it seemed that fighting monsters or other people was still a bit beyond her. Sword practice had been an unchanging part of our daily routine, so she had learned quite a bit. On the other hand, you could say that was *all* she had learned. That kind of slow and steady progress

was fine for someone with as long a lifespan as me, but a human like Soleil didn't have time for that.

I'd heard from Airena that she was quite skilled when it came to the Spirit Arts. But if she was asked to do anything beyond just protecting herself...well, it was still a little unclear if she had that level of ability. Even if she was skilled at calling on the spirits for help, if she couldn't properly envision them hurting or defeating her opponent, they wouldn't be able to manifest their abilities properly in a fight. The spirits would clearly pick up on any hesitation in her. At the very least, it would be difficult for her to call on the spirits to hurt someone.

Of course, I didn't think these were bad things. I taught her swordsmanship because she had taken an interest in it, but there was no need to press any sort of practical application out of it. Really, it had been valuable enough just as good exercise for her as she grew up.

The Spirit Arts were the same. By learning how to interact with the spirits, she had honed her own sensitivity to them. There was nothing more important than that. It didn't matter much if she could fight with them.

Though if she were to suddenly declare she wanted to be an adventurer, I would be against it. She didn't have the skill or the resolve to accomplish that. But that was a different conversation.

So if I had to answer what she was best at...I would say it was her connection with the eagle Shuu. Though it was limited to just him, she had a connection with that bird that was so strong it even surprised a high elf like me. Though Shuu would swing by to beg for handouts when he caught me fishing, he didn't really listen to anything I said. But I had never seen him refuse to do anything Soleil asked of him.

And while it wasn't like he called the place home, he quite regularly could be seen perched on the leather gloves and shoulder pads I had made for Soleil. If you asked anyone on the island about the girl with an eagle on her shoulder, they could point you to Soleil immediately.

But it was hard to say whether that was something that would influence her future path in life. It would be quite a valuable skill if she were to become a hunter or a scout, but I didn't think she had the aptitude for that. She thought

of Shuu as a dear friend. I couldn't imagine her taking him into any kind of dangerous situation.

So realistically speaking...I guess the thing that made the most sense was following in Airena's footsteps and taking a position in the elven caravan's office. That sounded like a good idea to me. Win might have left on a journey of self-discovery to strengthen himself, but Soleil didn't have to follow in his footsteps just because she was his daughter. If she were to fall in love and have children here on the island, things would just get more fun for Airena and me.

We could enjoy watching over her descendants for a long, long time.

But our visitor from the East quickly changed those prospects for the future.

It wasn't just Airena or I who noticed it. Even Soleil with her significantly weaker senses felt the approach of his ship instantly. To the three of us, it felt like an entire island was sailing toward us. In other words, the visitor was a practitioner of the Mystic Arts.

Judging from the size of their presence, they weren't on the same level as the mystics who ruled the Ancient Gold Empire, but they could easily have gone toe to toe with Rayhon or the Quoramite High Priestess.

That said, the distortion in the nature of those two was nowhere to be seen here, so it seemed this was a mystic apprentice—possibly even a high-level student—who had successfully managed to internalize nature's power.

As surprised as I was by the sudden, unannounced visit, there was only one reason I could think of for why a mystic would visit us here. To be more precise, rather than saying this was an envoy from the mystics, it was probably more accurate to say this was a messenger from someone far more powerful: the giants.

We had learned from our journey to the world above the clouds that the giants had been responsible for creating the mystics. The Mystic Arts were an attempt by mortals to replicate the techniques of the giants, and those who were successful were called mystics. It had been one of the many experiments of the giants to find a way to break the cycle of the End, but as only vanishingly few people displayed the talent to master the Mystic Arts, it was deemed to be

a failure. However, the remaining mystics maintained a relationship with the giants, and so became their agents here on the surface. In other words, the mystics had sent one of their students here to bring me a message from the giants.



As our visitors were envoys from the Ancient Gold Empire, it went without saying that the elven caravan would provide hospitality for them. The office here was accustomed to taking in such guests, and so had been turned into a large mansion. It really would be more accurate to call it a trading corporation than a simple office.

However, as a student of the mystics was clearly here to see me specifically, we received him as a personal guest at our own residence instead.

“True one, Lord Acer, I have heard of you from my master. I have come here from the Ancient Gold Empire with two matters to discuss.”

The visitor, calling himself Bailang Daoshi, handed over a bottle of alcohol in greeting before giving me a deep bow. Man, they really knew how to get to my heart. Apparently he had brought many more gifts, but those had been taken by the caravan office for us, compensation from the mystics for the matters they wanted to discuss.

But...two matters? That took me a bit by surprise.

Paying no mind to my confusion, Bailang Daoshi continued.

“The first, as you have likely guessed, is to deliver a message from the giant ones and ask for your cooperation. ‘The southern lands have been revitalized. Those taken above the clouds are being returned. Please assist them,’” he kept going with no mind for my reaction.

As expected, that was the first matter. It had been close to seventy years since the southern continent was reduced to ash by the true dragon. Though it was a bit irregular, the system of the End had nevertheless been put into motion. Though I had managed to prevent those flames from reaching the northern continent, there wasn’t anything I could do about the already destroyed southern one. Most of the people there had been killed in the

flames, but a small fraction had been taken above the clouds to be protected by the giants.

The phoenixes had returned to eggs, leaving their bodies to nourish the land and bring about new plant life, which would be guided in restoring the continent by the high elves. In other words, the giants were telling me that this process had come to completion, and that the people in their protection were now to be returned to the surface. Though really, if they had started working when they first sent the message, those people were likely already there. It took quite a while to get here from the Ancient Gold Empire.

So why did they feel the need to tell me? That was because I had already decided to help the southern continent's restoration. As a totally reborn land, there wouldn't be even a single monster living there now. The distorting power that created monsters came from the deaths of people; with no people left, there would be no such power. However, that didn't mean rebuilding a new civilization from the ashes of the old one would be an easy task. In particular, for humans and the other short-lived races, multiple generations had passed up in the world above the clouds. Many of their skills and technologies had probably been lost. As people began dying on the surface again, the distorting power would begin creating monsters again, so they would need help to reestablish a stable civilization before that started happening.

I suspected the giants had been involved in that process up until now, but their position as observers from so high above the world gave them a skewed sense of reality on the surface. So I had asked Airen to send the elven caravan south across the ocean once the environment there had been restored.

"If you're asking for cooperation, does that mean you're going too?"

Bailang Daoshi gave a deep nod. Ah, so he was to be the agent of the giants on the southern continent. That was hardly a bad thing for the people who would be living there. Having a powerful mystic—or at least one of their students—around to help would be a huge benefit.

"With your permission, I would like to accompany you on the ship south. However, that brings me to my master's second request..." As he said that, his gaze flickered over to Soleil.

What was that about? Did this second matter, coming from the mystics rather than the giants, have something to do with her? I casually rested my hand on the hilt of my sword, waiting for his next move. If he intended to harm her, it would be the end of him—even if it meant war with the Ancient Gold Empire.

“The holy eagle, servant of one of the sacred beasts of the true dragon, the great Firebird of the South, has acknowledged your talent. My master wishes to invite you to the Ancient Gold Empire for an apprenticeship.”

But what came next took me completely off guard. In my surprise, I turned to look at Soleil. Having absolutely no idea what he was talking about, she just stared back at him in open-mouthed shock.

What a day this was turning out to be.

After taking Bailang Daoshi to his room, Airen, Soleil, and I got together to discuss his offer. It was all so sudden, none of us had really had time for our feelings to settle yet.

“What should I do, Father?” Unable to stand the extended silence, Soleil was the first to speak.

I guess it made sense she would ask me. If I recalled correctly, I had talked to her about mystics and the Mystic Arts before. I had only mentioned them while telling her about my travels, though, so I doubted she had ever considered the possibility of becoming one herself. Even I never would have predicted a development like this.

But...hmm. As much as possible, I wanted her future to be her own decision. Of course, I would object to her choosing a dangerous or reckless path, but her feelings were the most important here. If she picked a path too perilous for her current abilities, we could work together to help her acquire the skills she’d need to survive on that path.

But this time, the question was so out of the blue and the circumstances were too special. Asking her to figure it all out by herself was too cruel. Even so, that didn’t change that the top priority was what she wanted. So I guess the best place for me to start was to confirm what that was. As difficult as that was going to be.

“It’s not about what you *should* do, it’s about what you *want* to do. Let’s think about that.”

Soleil nodded.

First of all, whether she decided to begin training as a mystic or not, she would only be able to live with Airena and me for another few years at most. We would soon be heading to the southern continent. Of course, being asked to go today didn’t mean we could set out tomorrow, but I doubted it would take three years to make the necessary preparations.

She was welcome to come with us. We didn’t know how many years we’d be spending in the South, so while it seemed temporary to Airena and me, a human like her would have to accept that it might be a permanent move.

Alternatively, she could choose to stay on the island, living in this house and working at the elven caravan’s office. Now that Fahda had been dealt with, her connection to Win shouldn’t pose much of a threat. If anything did happen, the people of the island and the elven caravan would protect her. We would be happier than words could describe to come back and find her with her children and grandchildren.

There was also the choice of going to the Empire of Sabal. She would be able to meet her true father, and would more than likely be able to live a life of luxury. Becoming empress wasn’t especially likely, but the chance of being the mother of the next emperor wasn’t so far-fetched.

If she instead chose to become a mystic, she’d be freed from the constraints of a human lifespan. She would see and learn all sorts of things, living longer than anyone could imagine. There were some who strayed from the path to become vampires and soul eaters, but I found it hard to believe Soleil would make that mistake. Though if she did, I would have no choice but to deal with her personally.

Lining up all the options side by side, they each had their pros and cons. None of them were perfect choices.

“But no matter which path you choose, there are a few things you need to consider. For example, what are you going to do with that eagle?”

Now that Bailang Daoshi had revealed Shuu's true identity, she could hardly treat the bird like she once had unless she chose to become a mystic. And no matter which path she chose, she'd still have to decide whether she wanted to go meet her birth father.

All decisions she'd have to make while Airena and I were still with her.



After quite a bit of deliberation, Soleil finally gave her answer. It had taken her three months.

Bailang Daoshi was living on the island, and had been moved to the caravan office.

Soleil and I had discussed the issue a number of times, and it seemed she had talked with Airena quite a bit as well. After all, she wouldn't have the chance to consult with people with such long lifespans all that often.

A different way of life wasn't necessarily a better one. She had been born burdened with considerable misfortune, but she still had the option of choosing an ordinary life. Such a life held no small amount of happiness. That was how even the common people could always press on toward tomorrow.

In contrast, having a different way of life from most others would make it more challenging to find that happiness. You would have to develop your own sense of values, and would have to evaluate your life by your own standards. A long life gave lots of time to experience suffering, and lots of time to grow bored and restless. Of course, there was lots of time to find joy as well.

Even so, she eventually chose to pursue the path of the mystic. It seemed that saying goodbye to her childhood friend Shuu was too much for her.

Meanwhile, Shuu himself paid no mind to his true identity being revealed, and still acted like an ordinary bird. I found that a little annoying. Once the thought of how delicious roast sacred eagle would taste crossed my mind, he set off in a panicked flight. Very clearly not an ordinary bird.

It also seemed Soleil had no intentions of meeting Win. Or at least, she didn't intend to seek him out. But if he came to the Ancient Gold Empire to find her, she said she wouldn't turn him away.

“I’ve only seen him in that stone statue you made. I know he was thinking of me when he left me with you and Mother. If he comes to meet me, I’ll be very happy. After all, since you raised me, that makes him like my brother, doesn’t it?” Soleil had said.

I didn’t think that was particularly accurate, but I suppose I couldn’t really argue. Whether she saw him as a father or a brother, as long as she still saw him as someone connected to her, that was good. If Win didn’t like it, he’d have to change her mind himself.

I was sure he felt like he had no right to meet with her at this point, but that wasn’t true. Even so, there was no point in me urging him to act either. He was an adult. He needed to make his own decisions.

I’d report Soleil’s decision to him in a letter, but I could only wonder what he’d do with that news.

A month after Soleil made her decision, it was finally the night before she set off. It was a bit of a solemn occasion for me. As I sat outside, looking up at the moon and enjoying some rice wine brought in from the East, Soleil came and sat down beside me.

“Tomorrow, huh?” she said, as if she were talking about someone else. It seemed it all didn’t quite feel real for her yet.

She had never left Pantarheios on her own before. Her work with the elven caravan had taught her the true size of the world, but it still must have been hard to grasp just how far away the Ancient Gold Empire was. She had seen the world from Heero’s back before, but that was an exception. Such a view was inspiring but overwhelming, and couldn’t really give the same understanding as actually traveling to a place.

“Should I go with you?” I asked, earning a laugh and a shake of her head.

I see. Guess she didn’t need me. It really felt like she was being pushed to leave the nest in quite a hurry. I knew human children grew up fast, but I had hoped her departure would be a bit gentler. I couldn’t help but hold that against the mystics.

“Mother said that as someone with a really long lifespan, you have to be ready to say goodbye to a lot of people. But she also said that you wouldn’t die before her, and that you’d stay with her even if you did. She feels safe, knowing that you’d never leave her alone.”

I must have looked pretty unhappy for Soleil to bring something up like that.

She was right. That was one of the reasons Airena wanted to stay with me. It was only one reason, but it meant a lot to her.

“But will *you* be okay on your own when Mother is gone?”

Her follow-up question had quite the sting to it, though. Would I be okay? Probably...yes.

There were many people in my life who had been very important to me, like Kaeha and Oswald. Even Win didn’t have all that much time left. Even so, I could still smile today and tomorrow. But I wouldn’t have to say goodbye to Airena for a few hundred years. Even for a high elf, that was quite a ways away. I couldn’t say with absolute certainty that I’d feel the same then as I did now.

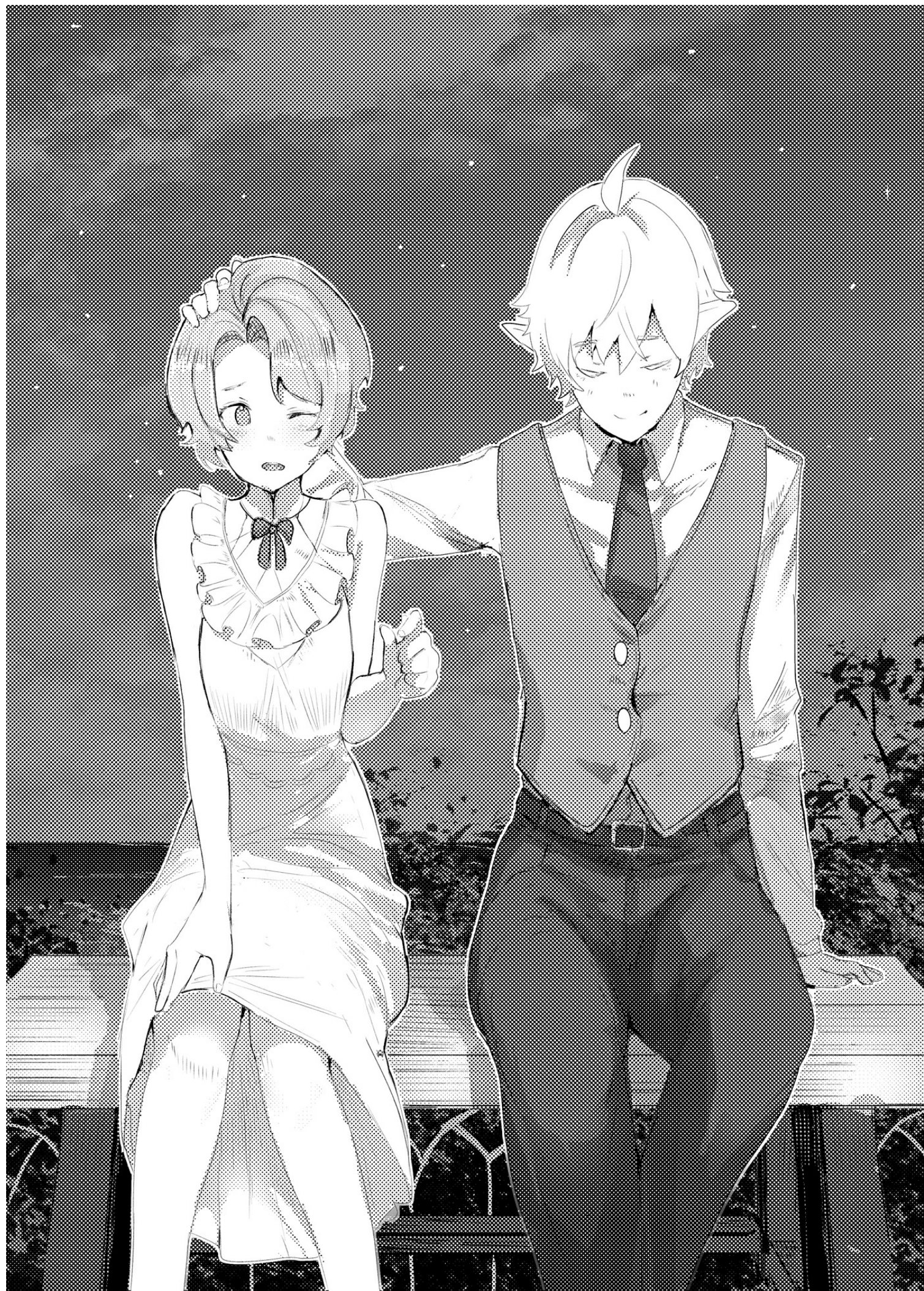
Of course, I’d never say any of that to Soleil, let alone to Airena herself.

“But if I become a mystic, that means you won’t ever be alone either.”

Her next words left me stunned. Man, what could I even say to that? So that’s what she had been thinking?

As a high elf, it was my fate to live a long life and eventually become a spirit. The only way I knew to avoid that was to commit a sin so grave it would rouse the dragons from their slumber to destroy me. There was no need to get someone like Soleil, who only had a human lifespan, wrapped up in an issue like that. At the very least, I had accepted that reality with a positive outlook.

“You dummy.” With no good response, I could only mutter that as I ruffled her hair.



She was such a kind little dummy.

Well, nothing I said now would change her mind. So I wouldn't say anything to make her doubt her choice. But I still couldn't help but think that it was a silly reason to become a mystic.

I pulled a letter out of my chest pocket and handed it over to her.

"What's this?" she asked, instantly moving to open it. I hurriedly had to stop her.

She really was a dummy. This wasn't a letter for her. If it were, I would have given it to her as she was getting on the boat. And that would be even more reason for her not to open it in front of me.

"It's a letter for the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire, asking them to treat you well. If anything happens, go to Wanggui Xuannu or Baimao Laojun for help. They'll definitely be good to you."

With that explanation, Soleil nodded and put the letter away. It really was just a letter asking for the mystics to take care of her for me, but I knew the mystics there were smart enough to read between the lines. If something were to happen to her, they knew I'd be coming to have a chat with the golden dragon.

"Don't try it with Longcui Dijun though. He's too shady. Zhang Shegong loves money, so with your experience working for the caravan, you two might get along. I've never met Huang Mu myself, but I hear she is great at inspiring people." As I heard myself prattle on, I couldn't help but feel like I was being overprotective. Soleil nodded along, patiently taking in all the information I could squeeze out of my memories of the Ancient Gold Empire. And the night dragged on.

The girl Airena and I had raised, our daughter and my granddaughter, Win's daughter and apparently little sister...as bizarre as our little family had been, she had been so precious to us. And now she was setting off to the Ancient Gold Empire.

Chapter 5 — Beyond the Sea

A month after Soleil left on her voyage to the Ancient Gold Empire, Airen and I took flight south across the sea. Obviously we weren't flying by our own power, but on Heero's back. We were on our way to the southern continent, whose natural environment had just recently been restored.

We were in the middle of preparing the elven caravan to support the continent's redevelopment. However, those preparations were running into a few problems. I couldn't really say things were going well.

For example, even among the elven leaders of the caravan, there were quite a few voices objecting to the plan in the first place. Lending support to the southern continent wasn't really merchant work. Though the gifts from the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire were some compensation, the caravan's involvement would still come at a considerable cost. Of course, once the southern continent developed to the point where its people could begin production of their own, they would be able to trade with the caravan and eventually turn a profit. But that was a distant future even from the perspective of an elf.

Another reason for objections was that those we'd be supporting weren't elves. It wasn't that they weren't willing to support elves anymore, but as a people who lived off the bounty of nature, now that the environment had been restored, the elves there would have no issue supporting themselves. That was just how elves lived, relying on the blessings of nature and walking in step with the spirits. In fact, with the freshness of the environment on the southern continent, the forests there might feel active in a way that made them more appealing than the forests of the North. On top of that, the seventy years it had taken to restore the southern continent's environment hadn't been long enough for even a single new generation of elves to be born.

So of all the people who needed help in the South, the elves weren't one of them. Some within the caravan, particularly those of the near and Far West, felt

that aiding the other races in rebuilding their civilizations would actually serve to threaten the elves living there. They had seen full well what human greed could do to those around them.

There was nothing to be gained for the caravan in the short term, and offering aid posed a risk of disrupting the livelihood of the South's elves in the long term. It was no surprise they'd be against offering the caravan's support.

There was a certain degree of logic to it. But I thought of things a little differently. Consider, for example, if we decided not to aid the southern continent, thus allowing the elves there to live in peace for a while. It still wouldn't be long before the human population grew large enough to threaten the elves. So my hope was to get the elves in the South involved too, creating a neighborly relationship between them and the surrounding cultures, as I had with Shiyu in the West.

I believed the only way to avoid the threat posed by humanity was to maintain a friendly relationship with them. The current status of the elven caravan—having a friendly relationship with others all over the northern continent, thus allowing them to suppress the threat posed by humans—was the ideal situation. Even if a group of humans chose to make enemies with the elves, other humans who profited from their relationship would side with the caravan. The more unified humans became, the bigger threat they posed.

A good example would be how much worse the situation was for elves in the Far West than it was in the west-central region. Rather than hiding themselves away in their forests, maintaining relationships with the surrounding humans could serve to drive a wedge between those human groups and prevent them from consolidating against them. I believed that was necessary for dealing with the human threat. Supporting the development of the southern continent was a perfect opportunity for the caravan to get involved in building that relationship up the way they wanted.

There would be loss and risk in the short term, but in the long term there was a great deal of profit and stability to be won. Airena supported my view, and so it gradually became the prevailing view within the caravan, but there were still some voices of dissent.

Beyond all that, there was also the problem of what supporting the southern continent would mean in concrete terms. With the natural environment having so recently been restored, what did its people lack? Our best guess was large amounts of metal implements and technical books.

Nature itself would be robust enough to provide food for a while, but simple things that were essential to the development of civilization—pots, pans, farming implements, stoves, and nails—didn't exist at all there. We also planned to give them books that documented fundamental agricultural techniques, and instructions on building things like water wheels.

Honestly, the best solution would be to bring individuals who possessed those skills themselves, but collecting such a group in the North would stand out a bit too much. I felt it was best to prevent knowledge of what had happened in the South from leaking out for the time being. There was always the risk that someone would see the undeveloped southern continent only as land to exploit. At the very least, I wanted to keep news of what had happened there quiet until there were organizations on the level of a country in the South.

Besides, traveling between the continents was no easy task. Anyone sent there would have to stay for a great deal of time. Elves might be different, but a skilled human worker would have to resolve themselves to a permanent migration. So at first, we were settling for books that described these techniques, and starting by laying the foundations of what were fundamental technologies in the North.

There wasn't much worry about literacy. After all, just like across the northern continent, all races used the same language and writing system. It was said that this language was one given by the Creator to the ancient races and the gods, and that the gods shared it with the races they created. But my personal belief was that literacy and mythology found a common ancestry in the people who had been living in the protection of the giants above the clouds. As such, the people of the South should have been able to understand a great deal of these technical books already.

Once their contents became common knowledge, we could start bringing in more complex technologies...though that would certainly involve finding skilled workers willing to migrate across the sea.

I could also take apprentices for blacksmithing and masonry myself. I wasn't a professional mason by any means, but I had experienced quite a bit of stone working in the development of Pantarheios, so I had some knowledge on the subject now. Of course, my specialty was in carving statues, but that wasn't exactly a critical skill for the people of the southern continent at this stage.

But these were all just guesses. There was a chance that the people of the South needed something entirely different than what we had guessed. So, while the caravan was making its preparations, Airena and I were heading there first to scout things out. We wanted to get a clearer grasp of their needs. Normally that would be entirely possible, but luckily we had Heero to make the journey possible.



With Heero's help, we could fly straight south to the southern continent...but that's not what we actually did. As living beings, Airena and I had certain physical needs—in particular, for food and sleep. Unfortunately, Heero's back wasn't particularly well suited as a place to fill those needs. In short, with such a long journey ahead of us, we needed to take breaks to eat and use the bathroom.

We had planned to take a ship when we were bringing the elven caravan's support, so one of the goals of this trip was to secure a sea route to the South. That said, Vilestorika once had trade ties with a number of nations on the southern continent.

Once the southern empire had unified the continent, though, they banned all trade with foreign nations. They were most likely worried about their weapons technology, like firearms and cannons, being leaked to the outside world. In the end, the empire had been destroyed by the true dragons for killing so many high elves, so that decision might have actually saved the North from meeting the same fate.

However, it didn't change the fact that it had been over a hundred years since the last ship had traveled between the continents. All the sailors who knew the routes had long since died, so there was no hope of learning from them. Old sea charts still existed, but there was no guarantee they were still reliable, or that

large monsters hadn't taken up residence along those routes.

The biggest loss was the dissolution of the contracts with the merfolk, a critical tool in navigating the open ocean. Of course, with a high elf like me on board, the spirits would warn us of any large monsters that had staked territory ahead of us before we encroached on it, and would give us the power to force our way through most trouble if we needed to. Unfortunately, there was only one of me, and if I had to constantly be on board ships, I could hardly spend time on the southern continent itself. There would likely be far more than one or two trips to bring goods south.

If at all possible, it would be nice if we could make contact with the merfolk on this trip and make new contracts with them. So as we headed south, we took the time to look over the scattered islands we encountered on our way.

"Ah, there's another one," Airenna said, pointing with one hand while she held a sea chart in the other.

It was one of the islands that had been used as a rest point for ships traveling between the continents in the past. Heero glided in a slow circle around the island while we inspected it.

It was significantly smaller than Pantarheios. There were some abandoned buildings and a ruined harbor, but despite the traces of once-human habitation, there were no signs of anyone currently living there. For an island of this size, it would be quite difficult for a population to survive without regular traffic. Maybe not entirely impossible, but there wouldn't be much value in doing so. Back when trade was still alive between the continents, it had been used as a place to restock on water for passing ships, but once that trade stopped, the place was abandoned.

"No good?" I asked, to which Airenna nodded.

While at sea, fresh water was a limited and valuable resource. While the trade relationship between the North and South had been alive, these stopover points were crucial. But now, the ships fielded by the elven caravan would each have at least one elf on board. As long as that was the case, the power of the water spirits in the ocean would be enough to provide virtually unlimited drinking water for the ship's crew. It was hard to say these rest points were

worth the effort of having people live here to maintain them.

Of course, there were other functions such rest points could serve, from keeping records of travel to offering a stopping place for ships to get repairs done after unexpected storms, but that didn't have to happen on this particular island. In that sense, this island was no good for us.

"I would make it a rather low priority for further investigation," Airenna said. Once we had set up facilities on an island nearby, the other smaller islands around it would eventually be investigated for their usefulness, but that was all a distant future.

Though it was small, there was still a possibility there were traces of contact with the merfolk on this island. If we could make contact with them again, we'd be able to learn the sea routes without having to investigate each of the islands ourselves.

That brought a sudden thought to mind.

"Hey, Heero. The golden dragon lives on the northern continent, while the ebon dragon lives on the southern one. So where do the last two dragons live? Are they sleeping in the sea, worshipped by the merfolk?"

If there was a kingdom of merfolk built around the existence of a dragon like the Ancient Gold Empire, we could just search them out. Though if we couldn't find any merfolk on this journey, we could always just go to Fusou and ask the merfolk there to connect us with those living out in the oceans.

After thinking over it for a short time, Heero responded.

I cannot say whether it is worshipped by the merfolk, but there is indeed a dragon in the sea. However, unlike those on land, the other two do not sleep. The pearl dragon of the sea and the abyssal dragon of the heavens are both quite active, he replied telepathically along with his tweeting.

That was rather surprising...and terrifying. It only took a single true dragon to burn a continent to the ground, and there were two already awake? But it seemed Heero caught my alarm at that news.

There is no need to be concerned. First of all, the distorting power that flows into the ocean and creates monsters there cannot be destroyed in its entirety as

it can be on land, so the pearl dragon is constantly destroying those monsters. One at a time, ever since the distorting power first came to this world, Heero continued, as if trying to console me.

Ah, I see. Since the ocean couldn't be reset in the same way the land could, the monsters there needed to be killed one by one. It made sense then that the pearl dragon would have to be constantly active.

But the distorting power was born from the deaths of the younger races, those fashioned by the gods like the humans, elves, and dwarves; as a high elf, it all felt quite distant to me. Maybe it wasn't my place to say so, but I felt quite bad for the pearl dragon. There was no other choice really, but being forced to constantly kill monsters to protect the world felt like a sad existence.

So...was the abyssal dragon doing the same thing? For Heero, who proclaimed himself master of the sky, to refer to a place as the "heavens" meant it must be quite a bit higher up. He was likely referring to something like space. I found it hard to believe monsters existed up there. There wouldn't be any mortals dying up there to create the distorting power that created monsters, nor any animals to be transformed by it in the first place.

Heero immediately confirmed that thought.

Precisely. You could say the abyssal dragon is the luckiest of the four. His role is no more than the protection of the world, standing guard so that none who would threaten the world may enter. Though all four were born for this purpose, it is the only one of the true dragons able to devote itself to that pursuit, Heero declared with a loud, energetic tweet.



We continued to search for merfolk on the scattered islands we encountered, occasionally stopping on some of them to rest. I had mentioned before that we had another plan if we failed to find any...but it wouldn't really be all that difficult. We had a phoenix on our side, so we could search a vast area in a very short time. The water spirits could tell us what was going on in the ocean below us, so as long as they hadn't been wiped out or moved somewhere entirely new in the past hundred years, finding them shouldn't have been all that challenging.

“Ah, there.”

I first noticed them on the evening of our eighth day traveling with Heero. We were heading toward a larger island we planned to investigate and make our stopping place for the night, when I noticed a number of beings that seemed like merfolk. Of course, the ones actually sensing them were the water spirits; I was just sharing their perception.

Naturally, as merfolk couldn't really operate on land, the response hadn't come from the surface of the island. There was a small mountain in the center of it, but underneath that mountain was a large cavern filled with water. That cavern was likely connected to the sea somewhere, allowing water to come and go. I felt the merfolk's presence in that cavern.

Airena turned at my mutterings, so I nodded and pointed in the island's direction. She then closed her eyes, focusing to try and pick up on the same signals, but it seemed we were still a bit far out for her. While Airena was head and shoulders above other elves when it came to working with the spirits, she still couldn't compare to the abilities of a high elf.

I reached out, taking a hold of her hand while she was still focusing. If the water spirits were too far away for her to commune with, she could use me as an intermediary to reach them. High elves were said to one day shed their bodies of flesh and become spirits. I understood that intuitively, thanks to my journeys around the world and my meetings with the other ancient races. I'd also had the high elf elders of my own home help me out before. So I was much closer to the spirits now than I had been at the start of my journey. Not just in a familiar, friendly sense, but also in the sense that I was closer to *being* a spirit.

I had also spent a great deal of time living with Airena now, so while it might be difficult, it would be possible for her to attune herself to me as she would to any other spirit. I could share the information the water spirits had provided me with her in the same way.

Though I had just tried on a whim, it wasn't long before she opened her eyes and nodded. “True, it does appear to be merfolk. But please, Lord Acer, don't surprise me like that.”



And she immediately scolded me. Yeah, I guess it would be a shock to have that happen all of a sudden. I guess I was in the wrong here. I should have at least warned her.

“Ah, sorry. The thought just occurred to me, so I felt like trying to see if it would work.”

My honest apology earned a smile from her as she shook her head. It seemed she wasn't actually all that upset. She knew full well that I had a bad habit of trying new ideas out as soon as they occurred to me.

“As long as you warn me ahead of time, I don't mind at all. However...it does concern me that you might end up turning directly into a spirit.”

Airena's hand squeezed mine. It didn't hurt, but it was enough to make me feel even more apologetic.

Elves understood that high elves became spirits, and respected them all the more for it. It wasn't a cause of concern among them. But in Airena's case, she needed me as a person, not as a spirit. Well, really, if I were to become a spirit I would still spend all my time at her side, so it wouldn't be a huge difference. But even so, I should probably be a bit more careful when it came to things that could make me feel less like a person around her.

As we arrived at our destination—an island labeled as “Visage” on our chart—we had Heero land at the top of the island's mountain. The idea was that landing somewhere so high up would make us less obvious to the merfolk than landing on the beach.

That said, it was quite possible they were already aware of our arrival. Back during my trip to Fusou, I met a merfolk named Mizuyo, who told me the “water got quite excited” around me. That was most likely their perception of the water spirits' reaction to a high elf's presence. The other merfolk I met in ports never seemed to pay me any special notice, so Mizuyo might have been the special one. However, it was hard to believe that she was the only one who could sense such things, so there was a decent possibility that the merfolk had already noticed the excitement of the water spirits. As such, I planned on going to meet them openly.

But before that...

“There are an awful lot of monsters here, huh?”

Visage seemed quite a bit more dangerous than I had first anticipated.



It was quite rare for monsters to appear on an island so far from the continent when no people lived there. This was just speculation on my part, but I suspected the distorting power created on the mainland was drawn into the sea by the natural power of that environment, part of which was magic. Otherwise, I couldn't explain why there were so many monsters in the sea itself but so few on the islands.

Of course, this island was apparently inhabited by merfolk, so the presence of monsters was to be expected...but if the merfolk lived in the water, shouldn't the distorting power stay there? Why were there so many monsters?

We looked down at the island from the mountaintop as the sun slowly sank toward the horizon. At this point, we likely only had time to meet with the merfolk or investigate the monster presence on the island, not both.

I was curious about the monsters...but the merfolk were our main goal, and it was best to focus our efforts on that first. Making our way down the mountain, we found a crevice leading to a cave that took us to the underground cavern.

Airena lit an old-fashioned torch, providing light for us as we continued. She had used this one back in her adventuring days, so it really was an antique. It was still usable today because of the careful care and maintenance she had given it over the years. I hadn't asked about it, but it seemed to be something of considerable sentimental value to her.

Aside from a few steep drop-offs, the cave sloped gently down into the mountain...and after a distance that had likely seen the sun entirely set outside, the ground started getting quite damp and the cave began showing stalactites. A bit more careful walking took us into a huge open space.

Before us was an enormous underground lake. It was one of the places where the merfolk lived. With only a small crevice connecting it to the sea outside, larger monsters couldn't make it inside, making it a safe haven for the merfolk.

Of course, as large as it was, it could hardly house all the merfolk in the area. They had most likely secured a number of similar places and spread out around the area. In that sense, it was kind of like a village.

It suddenly occurred to me that I should probably have taken a look at the merfolk city of Shin in Fusou while I had been there. Well, it was far too late for that now. A city in the ocean. How would such a thing be built? What kind of place would it be? I felt a bit frustrated that I had wasted a perfectly good opportunity to see that for myself.

A number of merfolk popped their heads out of the water to look at us. The flickering torchlight wasn't enough to illuminate the water itself, so it looked much like a number of disembodied heads had popped out of the darkness. But the merfolk didn't view us with any hostility, rather just shock and curiosity, so it didn't seem they were upset to have us here.

"How'd you folk get in here? Pretty sure there were no boats," a merfolk woman called out to us first. Though she appeared young enough, her voice carried the weight of years behind it. I supposed merfolk were another of the races that didn't age. She had probably been an adult even back when trade was active between the continents.

"I'm Acer, and this is Airena. Would you believe me if I told you we came here riding on the back of a large bird?" I replied with a bit of a joke after introducing us. I wasn't quite sure if it was best to tell them about Heero, but I couldn't think of any other way to explain how we were here without using a boat.

"Ah, I see. You two are...oh, just one of you. You're a true one, huh? I've heard of you people. Apparently the priestess of the Northeast met one of you some hundred years ago." It seemed the merfolk recognized us...or at least me, as Airena hurriedly shook her head in denial when they looked at her.

The priestess of the Northeast...would that be Mizuyo? A hundred years ago in the northern half of the Far East definitely lined up with our meeting. Apparently there was a high elf with memories of a past life traveling around the southern continent around the same time, but I'd heard nothing of him ever visiting the North. But that meant the merfolk here must have had a reasonably

close relationship with the merfolk of Fusou. Alternatively, maybe Mizuyo's role of priestess was just that important.

"Yeah, that was probably me. Is Mizuyo doing well?" I nodded as I asked. Carried along by nostalgic feelings, I couldn't stop myself. If I had stopped to think for a moment, I would have realized that my question was quite dangerous.

"Yes. Thanks to your blessing, she lived a happy life," the merfolk responded without hesitation. Speaking of her in the past tense carried a lot of meaning. I hadn't intended to pry that far, so the sudden revelation pricked at my heart a bit.

But as for my "blessing," I supposed she meant the mystic peach I had given her? If she said she lived happily because of that, then Mizuyo must have found what she was hoping for. If that was true...then I was relieved. So instead of wallowing in the shock of this discovery, I could press forward with a positive attitude to finish the work we had to do here.

"I'm glad to hear it. I'd like to talk about the reason we came here today, but before that, could I ask for your names?"



After apologizing for failing to introduce themselves, the merfolk woman told us her name was Barjit. Apparently it had been quite a long time since she had met someone she was unfamiliar with, so she had entirely forgotten that she needed to introduce herself. This island used to have visitors, but it had been over a hundred years since the last ship came, so I guess that was to be expected. Barjit was the leader of the three hundred or so merfolk living in Visage. In short, she was something like a village chief or elder.

As we discussed our purpose in coming to Visage, negotiations with her went surprisingly smoothly. The merfolk shared a very strong bond with each other, even with those living in a far-off place like Fusou. In other words, Mizuyo's gratitude toward me was mirrored by Barjit as well, so she was quite friendly and accommodating with us.

Of course, it wasn't like we were asking the merfolk to work for nothing either. And since there would be more than one or two voyages involved, we'd

be dealing with more merfolk than just the ones living here in Visage. Naturally we'd have to offer suitable compensation to them. But instead of asking for things they couldn't bring into the water with them...

"We had asked this of the sailors from some kingdom or other, but we want you to destroy the eggs of the monsters on the island for us."

Instead, they asked us to do a bit of an odd kind of monster extermination. Apparently there were a fair number of amphibious monsters living on the island who were a considerable threat to merfolk. Against monsters that lived only in the water, the merfolk could do something themselves to try and deal with them, and they could simply avoid the largest of them. But amphibious monsters could simply flee to land if the merfolk attacked them, and could continue to multiply in safety.

It seemed the monsters I had sensed here were those amphibious ones. So the merfolk were looking for help in dispatching those amphibious monsters they couldn't hunt themselves. In the past, visitors from other nations had helped the merfolk with exterminating those monsters, and once building up trust with them, began to employ the merfolk in guiding their ships. That made this quite easy.

Following in our predecessors' footsteps, Airena and I would start by touring around the island and wiping out some monsters. In the future, we would ensure any ships heading south would be equipped with combatants capable of assisting in the monster extermination. If sailors from the past could deal with these monsters before, they shouldn't be much of a threat. Alternatively, they might have been quite dangerous underwater but more vulnerable once caught on land. At any rate, once Airena and I had fought them for a while, we would know how strong they really were and be able to come up with tactics for handling them.

I wasn't normally a fan of killing monsters in large numbers like this with no plans to make use of the materials that could be harvested from them...but this wasn't really the time for me to be selfish. After all, this whole plan to support the southern continent's reconstruction was a huge bit of selfishness already.

That said, I'd at least see if we could harvest something to eat from them. I

was quite curious what kind of flavor these amphibious monsters would have. Especially their eggs.

Barjit greeted our acceptance of their proposal with no small amount of relief. Apparently these monsters were a very pressing threat to the merfolk living here. In fact, the break in trade between the continents might have harmed the merfolk more than any other party.

Unlike their landbound counterparts, the merfolk could not easily build walls or fences to create safe havens for themselves. Rather than the larger monsters whose movements could generally be predicted, smaller ones that specifically targeted noncombatant merfolk were the biggest threat. If a large monster shifted its territory, the merfolk living within would simply change their place of residence. The ability to do so was one of the strengths of the merfolk, a necessary one when creating safe dwellings for themselves was impossible. In contrast, if a monster on land was large enough to overcome a city's walls, there was no real answer but to let it trample through and destroy the city.

I suppose you could call this something of a cultural difference. As much as I felt bad for the merfolk suffering at the hands of the monsters here, I was really curious about that societal difference. But it seemed the merfolk in Fusou lived quite differently than those around them. For example, in Fusou there were tools and weapons designed to be used underwater, which merfolk would purchase with money earned from guiding ships. That was a big difference from the merfolk here, who didn't seek any monetary compensation for their work.

Of course it was the Fusou merfolk who were the outliers. Fusou was a place where the humans, merfolk, and skyfolk had learned to live in harmony to overcome the threat posed by the oni. It was all really interesting. It really made me want to give Fusou another visit. It had been quite a while since my last trip there, so there might have been some developments in the war with the oni since then. And above all, the food was incredible. I wanted Airen to try it.



While the thought of enormous eggs had a dreamlike appeal to them, I came to discover they were much harder to eat than I first imagined.

Having completed our task of culling the population of amphibious monsters, we were once again speeding south. Our work this time had really been more of a deposit than anything. There was no need for us to wipe out the entire monster population. After killing a few monsters, destroying some of their eggs, and bringing proof of our work back to the merfolk, they were happy to acknowledge our accomplishments. They then showed us on our maps where the other merfolk settlements were, allowing us to proceed with our search with much greater efficiency than just checking every island one by one.

As we traveled between the merfolk settlements and made contracts with them to deal with their local monster problems, we eventually crossed the halfway point between the continents, though I wasn't sure if it counted as the equator. I had met all five of the ancient races—the spirits, the giants, a phoenix, and two true dragons—and knew all sorts of secrets about the world, but there was still a lot I didn't know.

The fact that there was a horizon meant the world was probably round. And since I was told that the abyssal dragon was protecting the world from above the sky, there was probably an outer space to the world as well. That would be where the sun, moon, and stars were. But I didn't know if that outer space was really the same as the one I knew in my previous life. Not that I had ever been there in my previous life either.

I didn't really have a way to confirm either way, but that didn't bother me. I was alive now, in this world, and I loved it. I had probably said that many times in the past, but my feelings hadn't changed.

Looking up, I saw a large cloud bank drifting above us. That would be where the giants lived, a place we had visited before. Okay, I wasn't very good at identifying clouds, but I was pretty confident this time. We were already this close, so I considered paying them a visit. But on second thought, it wasn't really a place to go if we didn't have any business there.

If we wanted to learn something, we could almost certainly find any answer we were looking for there. The giants still watched over this world, storing up knowledge. So if I came into contact with their mental network again, I could probably even learn about things impossible for me to discover on my own, like the nature of outer space in this world. I could learn where the gods went,

where the Creator slept, the current condition of the southern continent, and the location of the pearl dragon. Any idle wondering I did would be met with an answer.

But there wasn't much fun in that. I didn't mind not knowing these things, because there was always something new out there for me to discover.

It went without saying that I wouldn't learn everything there was to know about this world while I was a high elf. After all, the world was still changing little by little. New things I had no knowledge of were popping up all over the place, and there was no way I could keep on top of all of them.

Cataloging all the secrets of the world seemed like a herculean task, one I was happy to leave to the giants. I could only imagine what this world would look like when the Creator finally woke.

Heero carried us ever southward. Though we were now in the southern half of the world, our objective was still the same. We were exterminating different monsters here, and I was quite surprised to find a particularly delicious specimen among them.

It looked like some sort of giant clumsy seal. It had quite thick skin, but the fatty meat underneath had a beautiful shine to it and an exquisite flavor. While Airena and I were decent enough at cooking, to be entirely honest, neither of us came close to the level of a real cook. The fact that it tasted so phenomenal with our meager talents had us wondering just how well a professional chef could use something like this.

Unfortunately, we couldn't let that curiosity derail us from our mission. Although, if Airena had recommended we head back home, I would have agreed in a heartbeat. I came to learn later that if I had brought it up, Airena would have also been on board.

Either way, once the sea route between the continents had been secured, we could always capture some of these monsters alive and bring them back to Pantarheios. It would cost a tremendous amount of resources and time, but it wasn't impossible.

That made me wonder: what did the merfolk eat? For now, we were just

making contracts with the merfolk and rushing to the next settlement, but once ships could come and go safely and things were running smoothly on the southern continent, maybe I would dip into the ocean and experience merfolk culture for myself.

With the water spirits' help, living underwater wouldn't be that much of a challenge. There was probably food delicious beyond my comprehension waiting there for me. Then again, if they couldn't even make a cooking fire underwater, I shouldn't get my hopes too high. Even so, I was sure that experience would sate my curiosity.

We continued ever southward, across what seemed to be an all but endless ocean. But eventually, we did reach its end. After traveling for four weeks on Heero's back, we finally caught sight of land far larger than any island we had seen. Peaceful, secure, solid ground. Maybe rather than secure, the better term would be open-minded.

The southern continent, having just recovered from the End, was overflowing with life.



Though we had finally made it to the southern continent, we didn't disembark from Heero quite yet. We didn't know anything about the geography of the place, and a continent was far too large for us to just walk around at random.

The letter from the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire detailed the locations where the giants had returned people to the continent. Our first order of business was to search out those places from the sky, and then make contact with the high elves here. It was one thing for ordinary elves to come here from across the ocean, but as a high elf, I really needed to make contact.

That said, considering our past encounters, I wasn't particularly excited at the thought of meeting them. I had won, and they had lost. I couldn't help but worry that my coming here to help restart civilization on the southern continent would be seen as me rubbing salt in the wound. Maybe I was just overthinking things, but it was a hard feeling to shake.

Of course, now that I had already come all the way here, I could hardly just say I wasn't into it and turn back. If nothing else, I'd get quite an earful from

Airena. But aside from my personal discomfort, like I had said, I had been the victor. I was here at the behest of the giants, so it seemed unlikely that the high elves here would reject my involvement.

I guess I had no choice but to go see them. When I lightly patted Heero on the back, he quickly guessed my thoughts and turned to take us toward the heart of the continent.

Just like in the North, the high elves had predictably made their home in the exact center of the land mass. The center of the continent would be the point where all its power flowed out from, where the phoenixes would discard their bodies and the high elves would carry new life outward. I could only imagine what it would look like so soon after it had all finished. I had no doubt it would be incredible. Seeing how thick and strong the power of nature was here in the South, it wasn't hard to imagine.

Of course, as one who had chosen to preserve the lives of the people I knew and their children over the resetting of the world, I had no right to witness such a rebirth. So no matter how wonderful it seemed, I couldn't grow envious of it. Taking one path meant not taking another. That was beyond obvious. Even a high elf couldn't be so selfish as to try and keep hold of the things he rejected himself.

Here on the southern continent, there was one high elf who had chosen to throw away everything in pursuit of his own destruction. It had been a foolish choice, one that had cost countless lives...but that just made me wish I could have talked to him before it all happened. I probably couldn't have changed his mind. I suspected there was nothing that could. But I feel like we could have enjoyed that conversation.

Below us stretched an endless sea of trees. In the very center of that great forest lay a high elf settlement. As Heero flew in slow circles above it, I sent a wind of greeting to the high elves below. Before long, they sent back a reply, so I instructed Heero to land in a clearing nearby.

I then got off Heero's back on my own. This was a conversation between high elves. I wasn't going to make Airena get involved. After all the time she had

spent with me, I doubted she'd be scared of other high elves, but I also knew she still wouldn't be able to act freely around them. I hadn't come here for a fight, but I didn't want to make her watch what could very well be an unpleasant encounter. And if the high elves here looked down on Airena for being an ordinary elf, I very well might be the one *starting* a fight. It was best to avoid the chance of trouble altogether.

However, the atmosphere in the high elf settlement was quite strange. I felt a number of questioning breezes come to look at me, so there were definitely high elves here...but the way they used the wind felt really amateurish. It was like they were all children.

“So it's you after all, child of the maple, kin from the North. You already defeated me once, Acer. What business do you have here now?” A single high elf appeared from between the trees, walking toward me. It was the lily flower, the high elf Liliun who I had stopped from destroying the northern continent in our last meeting. She made no effort to hide her displeasure at seeing me.



I had known she was here from the response I got, but it felt different to actually see her in person. Or maybe they didn't really have a choice but to send her. None of the questing winds that had come to check on me felt like they came from mature high elves.

"I just came to say hi, my southern kin, lily flower. Maybe you heard from the giants already, but I'm here to help the people of the southern continent get back on their feet," I replied as I watched the winds around me, earning a dismissive snort from Liliun. She really did show her feelings way more than an ordinary high elf. Maybe she was just too honest.

"But the environment here recovered much faster than I expected. I'm really surprised," I offered her some veiled praise along with an equally veiled question.

I wasn't flattering her by any means. Things really had recovered far faster than I had anticipated. I had expected the process to take hundreds of years, but it had been seventy at most. Most of the remaining high elves must have devoted themselves entirely to that mission.

"That's our role. Though thanks to that, I am the only adult left among the high elves here." But with a clear weariness in her voice, Liliun seemed to take no pride in that accomplishment.

Ah, so that's what it was after all. High elves were immortal, but that was an attribute of their souls, not their bodies. When they died, they became spirits that would persist until the end of the world itself.

But the "mortal" bodies they left behind were still special. Though they grew and matured, they never grew old. That couldn't be normal. Back on the northern continent, I learned that the high elf elders gave up their bodies to the place where the phoenix slept. The power in their bodies nourished the growing phoenix, supported the environment of the Forest Depths, and became fuel for the massive forest that grew around them. If a high elf were to die somewhere else and their body was left to the earth, a large forest would no doubt spring from their remains.

So in other words, it was most likely that the high elves of the South had given up their bodies to stimulate the growth of the southern continent. Even though

so few of them had survived the rampage of the old southern empire.

“They all left behind children and then passed away. I remained to care for them...which I suppose makes me the elder now.” She wasn’t whining or complaining, just sharing the truth. Even so, there was quite a heaviness behind her words.

I could understand why the high elves had made that choice. Whether it was fear or hatred, or possibly even both, the high elves here held strong negative feelings toward humanity, and those feelings would be incredibly difficult to let go of. But Lilium had overcome her fear, seeking out and awakening the ebon dragon, and her hatred had been broken when she lost to me. So the other high elves left things in her hands, giving up themselves so that their fear and hatred wouldn’t be inherited by their children.

To me, that was a coward’s way out, and it put far too much of a burden on Lilium herself...but I couldn’t exactly change their mind now. It might very well have been that the high elves who would have made the braver choice had all died in the war.

“So even if it doesn’t look like it, I am actually quite busy. If that is all you are here for, then do as you like. But please finish your work as soon as you can, and then leave this continent.”

With a wave of her hand, she scattered the winds gathered around us, as if chastising the children who had been peeking in on us out of curiosity. She certainly acted like the parent of the high elves, and carried herself like a high elf elder.

“Or do you intend to help us repopulate this land with high elves?” she asked, now that we were free from the children’s prying eyes and ears.



I couldn’t help but burst out laughing at her suggestion. She couldn’t have been even slightly serious. With all the other high elves having given up their bodies after leaving behind children, the only one I could possibly have children with here was Lilium herself, and I couldn’t imagine a worse outcome from her perspective than that.

“No, I think I’ll pass. I’m the type who likes to raise his own children. And besides, I still very much love the North I came from,” I replied as I chuckled, unable to help myself despite Liliu’s glare.

I knew it was true that there weren’t enough high elves here in the South. With the losses from their war with the human empire on top of the other adults giving themselves up to the earth, the population had taken a crippling blow. But even so, if the children here now grew up and continued to have children of their own, they could rebuild to their previous numbers well within a thousand years. Liliu didn’t have to force herself to have children with someone she hated.

“I see. Then as I said, please finish your business here and leave as quickly as possible. Actually...wait. We’ll probably never meet again, so there is one last thing I want to ask.” Liliu snorted dismissively again at my reply, but then stopped herself to ask me something.

What on earth could that be? As she had said, now that I had her permission to do what I wanted on the southern continent, I doubted we’d ever see each other again. But as I waited curiously, Liliu hesitated, a conflicted expression on her face as she chose her words carefully. So I waited patiently, not rushing her.

“You are...a little like *he* was. So please tell me. What could we have done to stop this all from happening? Why didn’t you end up like he did?”

I couldn’t help but nod at her question. I could fully understand why she’d ask something like that. I doubted she knew about me having memories of my past life, but she could still tell there was something similar between me and the old emperor. High elves had a sharp intuition like that.

That said, it was a rather difficult question. I never knew the emperor directly, a man who built an empire to wage war against his own home. So there wasn’t really much I could...actually, there was one thing that came to mind.

“I am sure he didn’t kill you because he didn’t *want* to kill you. If he had felt the same way about the other high elves as he had about you, I doubt any of this would have ever happened.”

That didn’t go just for high elves. If he had found more things to treasure in

life, he could have kept living with those treasures in his arms. But it would be easier for Liliu to understand if I kept this to the high elves. So that's what I told her.

Maybe it was just speculation on my part, but I suspected Liliu had been greatly influenced by that high elf. She was far too open about her emotions, and was strong enough in spirit to seek out and awaken the ebon dragon. And even when all the other high elves gave themselves up to the earth, she'd had a strong enough heart to stay behind and take care of their children.

To put it in a way I liked, she was a bit of a weirdo. That was why the other high elves left the fighting and all these other things to her. That was probably why the old emperor had wanted Liliu to survive. Again, that was speculation on my part, but if he was similar to me like she said, that was probably the reason.

I couldn't say I didn't understand his desire for self-destruction. If I had no love for this world, I might have held similar feelings. But it wasn't that he'd had nothing to love. If he had found more, if he had found something more important to him than himself, I doubted he would have ever brought about such a calamity.

Of course, it was far too late for that now, and bringing it up would be tasteless at best.

"I...see. I understand. Thank you, kin from the North. I am sorry for bothering you," she nodded, clearly stifling a pained expression. Though she didn't put it in words, I could tell she had figured most of it out on her own. The emperor must have been a pretty awful guy.

"Then let me ask you one question as well. What did the people of this forest...no, what did *you* call him?"

If we were never going to meet again, I wanted to ask her something as well. It didn't really matter to me what the high elves of this forest called him. High elves didn't have names, just labels to be referred to by. For someone with memories of a past life, those two would seem indistinguishable, but I imagined whatever Liliu called him would have been the name he chose for himself.

"Child of the soapberry, Sapindus. Well...I guess I called him Sapi."

Leaving a downcast Liliun behind, I returned to Heero and climbed up on his back. I had no right to try and console her. And of course, neither did Sapi, not that he existed anymore to try. The only ones who could offer her that kind of support would be those living together with her from now on.

The winds that Liliun had scattered before returned, as if worried about her, as if wrapping around her. No, it wasn't just the wind. I could see a number of small eyes peeking out from the shadows of the trees. My staying any longer would only be a hindrance to them. Once I left, those children would come out and return to Liliun's side.

"Thanks. I'll remember Sapi's name." Emphasizing that as his name, I patted Heero on the back. With one large flap, he lifted us off the forest floor and back into the sky.

I'd remember his name, as someone very similar to me. So it didn't matter if Liliun remembered him or forgot him. From now on, she would have to keep living in this world for as much time as she was allotted. It was up to her to decide what she chose to cherish on that path.

With a wish that things would look at least a little brighter for her, I left the high elf settlement of the South behind, likely never to return.



"Umm, Lord Acer. Are you sure that was okay?" Airenna asked, a rare bit of hesitancy in her voice.

But I didn't really know what she meant. Was what okay? I felt like our conversation...okay, it had been little more than a greeting out of formality, but I felt it had gone pretty well. Did I forget to tell her something? As much as I wracked my brain, I couldn't figure out the issue.

"I just know how much you love children..."

Ah. So that was it. No wonder she was so hesitant to bring it up. Apparently she had taken Liliun's nonsense seriously, and it was bothering her.

Of course, I loved kids. I was a bit disappointed I wouldn't be able to meet the high elf children living here. But even so, I had no desire at all to have children with her.

“Or do you intend to help us repopulate this land with high elves?”

Just from the way she said it, it was obvious she knew I’d refuse. Considering our one short encounter in the past, you could hardly expect us to have positive opinions of each other.

But even before all that, I wanted to spend my time with the people I loved, who I had chosen for myself. I wasn’t at all interested in holing myself up in a high elf village. I thought Airena would understand that...though maybe she did, and it was still just difficult for her to come to terms with.

In truth, I did feel that refusing to leave behind children of my own as a high elf was a minor failing on my part. But that was a natural result of the life I had chosen. I felt bad for my people in the Forest Depths, but I had already come to terms with that. But even if I had, Airena might have recognized the bitterness that came from that choice. Because she had spent more time with me than anyone else, she was quite sensitive to these things. Or maybe Airena herself harbored similar feelings.

“I’ve already raised two children,” I replied with a smile after some thought. Maybe for Airena, it would have been better if I had responded a bit more regretfully, but I wasn’t that kind of person. So instead I emphasized the experience in child rearing I already had. Though I had been a bit of a half-baked father for Win, and I was kind of straddling the line between father and grandfather when it came to Soleil, both of them grew up into splendid adults.

Of course, there was always the chance I’d end up taking on another child, but I was quite satisfied with the two successes I had already achieved.

“True.” Airena smiled faintly, not quite giving away whether she accepted that answer. Maybe she was just worried about me.

So I reached out, putting my hand on hers.

After that, we searched out the settlements of people who the giants had returned to the surface, but we watched their lives without making contact. They had all been returned to places that would be easiest for them to live. Humans were sent to flat lands lined by rivers, elves to the forests, dwarves to the mountains, and beastfolk to the grasslands.

Of those four, the elves and dwarves didn't seem like they'd need any help. As I had expected, the forests were bountiful enough to supply all the elves' needs and more, and they hadn't even gone through an entire generation in the care of the giants.

The dwarves had begun digging up their old kingdom, and were already well underway in reconstructing it. Being underground, their kingdom had maintained some of its old form despite the damage caused by the ebon dragon. As far as their blacksmithing, it appeared their secret technology that drew heat from the depths of the earth to use in their furnaces had survived the cataclysm, so the results of their metalworking would likely begin spreading across the southern continent in no time.

If I had to find something they needed, there was absolutely no alcohol production on the southern continent right now, and that was something the dwarves would definitely need. Ah, maybe the best option would be to import alcohol from the North, trade it to the dwarves for the results of their blacksmithing, and then distribute those metal implements among the humans and beastfolk.

The one thing that troubled me was how we were going to get the elves to come out of their forests and interact with the world around them. But that wasn't an issue I had to solve immediately, so we could discuss that back in the North.

Once we made it back home, the plans to support the southern continent would kick into high gear. Having rebuilt the contracts with the merfolk, the path between the two continents would be opened again. Apparently even with the aid of the merfolk, intercontinental voyages had been incredibly dangerous. Though having elves on board the ships would make those voyages safer, we could hardly say they'd be totally free of danger.

I would accompany the first voyage south myself. The success or failure of the entire operation would depend a lot on what difficulties showed themselves during that voyage.

I felt it was a good thing I had come to inspect the southern continent for myself beforehand. I had discovered a delicious new monster, and ignited a

new curiosity for merfolk culture. The environment in the South was wonderful, enough to get me quite excited, and I had managed to meet with Liliun and learn a bit more about her and Sapi, the high elf who had started all of this. And above all, traveling around and seeing new things together with Airena was really fun.

Our support of the South was only just beginning. The two of us would no doubt be very busy moving forward. But I would put everything I had into that work, so at the end when we turned back to look at all we had done, we could say we had enjoyed it, and that it had all been worth it.

Excerpt — Dripping Memories

Will-o'-the-Wisp

A flame hung burning in the empty air. In my previous life, it was a phenomenon known as a will-o'-the-wisp, or Saint Elmo's Fire. Some people thought they were the lost souls of the dead, and so feared them.

That was an idea common to this world too. They were believed to bring disaster or spirit one away to the land of the dead. And those were not baseless rumors either.

In reality, danger often lurked around those mysterious burning lights. At night, some might mistake the phenomenon for a distant campfire, and decide that if people were camped here, it must be a safe place. On top of that, it was safer to spend the night in a group rather than on your own. There was a chance the owners of that campfire might be willing to share it with you. That was a perfectly ordinary way of thinking.

But a will-o'-the-wisp was no guarantee that a place was safe. If it appeared over the sea, it might trick people into thinking the land extended farther than it did, leading them to fall into the water. Even over land, it could appear over deep swamps or cliff edges. People could lose sight of ordinary dangers when their attention was caught by that distant flickering light. And even if the light they saw was a real campfire, it could very well belong to bandits or the like, making their situation many times worse.

So, stories of those lights being souls of the dead or presenting a threat to the living were created to warn people against approaching them. That's what I assumed.

But as a high elf, I could see a bit better than ordinary people. Not just because I had better eyesight, but because there was more I could see. The will-o'-the-wisp I saw right now was home to a fire spirit. It looked like it was having a grand old time hovering in the air.

I understood why there was a fire hovering in empty space. The fire spirits taught me that this was a place where swamp gasses collected, and that natural forces could ignite those gases. Once you understood what they were, they weren't frightening in the least.

Now that I thought about it, ever since I had been reborn as a high elf and given the ability to see the spirits, I was very rarely ever afraid. Most people's fear came from the unknown, but there wasn't all that much unknown to me. I had experienced the greed and passions of people in the outside world firsthand, so I knew full well the fear of losing those precious to you, but I imagined most high elves who stayed in the Forest Depths lived their lives virtually free of fear.

In other words, high elves were weak to the unknown, weak to fear, and quick to break under pressure. That's how I felt about them. That wasn't such a bad thing, as they were capable of living in spite of those weaknesses. A genuinely unknown threat, like the demons or the humans with firearms, only presented itself to the high elves very rarely, tens of millennia apart from each other. I didn't think it made much sense to try and make them change their whole way of life for such a distant possibility.

Though...maybe the high elf tradition of learning archery was a vestige of the lesson learned from some long-forgotten experience like that. In that case, if I ever made my way back to the Forest Depths, maybe I'd teach the high elves there how to fight. Considering how dull life in the Forest Depths was, I didn't think it would be hard to catch their interest.

I watched the will-o'-the-wisp hover in the air, keeping my distance so I wouldn't fall into the swamp.

Though this wasn't actually a deceased soul, I knew that they were real. After all, I had died in my previous life and, as nothing more than a soul, made my way to this world to be reborn as a high elf. And by coincidence alone, I had acquired the indestructible nature of the high elf soul before my memories had entirely disappeared. When high elves died, those immortal souls became spirits of nature, something I had seen proof of for myself when I saw spirits of high elves I had known in life. And even if the souls of other beings weren't

immortal like ours, they still persisted after death to be reincarnated in another form.

The people I couldn't meet anymore were still out there in some form. Though it might be impossible for me to reunite with them while I was still a high elf, with an eternity ahead of me as a spirit, I may well come across them again someday. Even if they didn't recognize who I was...well, as a spirit, they probably wouldn't even be able to see me, but I would still try and search them out. Even if we couldn't talk, even if we couldn't connect with each other anymore, I would be so happy just to see them again.

Either the gathered gasses had been exhausted or the fire spirit had had its fun, as the will-o'-the-wisp finally faded and disappeared. The area around me grew slowly brighter, and a morning mist settled over the area.

A new day was dawning, one that seemed like it would be a bit chilly. My journey continued. And it would keep on going, until my time as a high elf came to an end.

Family Trip

When Soleil was twelve years old, on the night she learned she had no blood connection to Airena and me, I waited for her to go to bed before broaching the subject with Airena.

"Do you think you could work things out to get a week off?"

It was a pretty abrupt question on my part. Though she was no longer the leader of the elven caravan, she *was* in charge of the office on Pantarheios, making her the de facto lord of the island. In other words, she was still extremely busy.

But despite my impolite and abrupt request, Airena didn't even so much as furrow her brow. "I could hardly leave tomorrow, but if you can give me a few days I can get a couple weeks off, just in case," she replied smoothly and without hesitation.

She had likely figured out where I was going with this. I had told her in the past that once Soleil learned about our family situation, I wanted her to see a

bit more of the world. In other words, I wanted to go on a family trip.

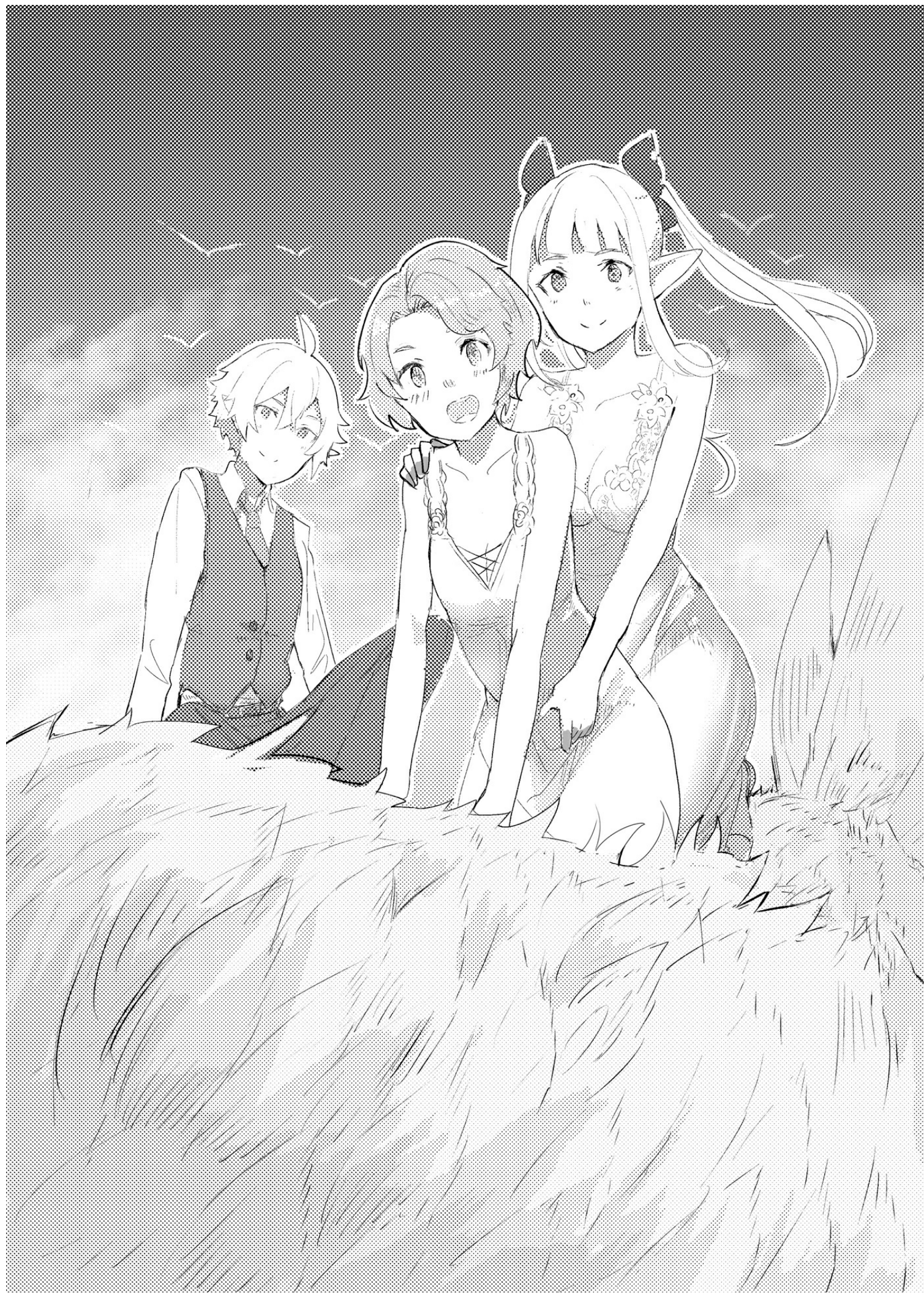
That said, it was a bit of a challenge to do so on an island in the middle of the ocean. There were plenty of boats coming and going, but the mainland wasn't exactly close by. The port in Vilestorika in the east-central region was the closest bit of land, but reaching just that would still take a day or two. If we wanted to go somewhere other than Vilestorika—or be really greedy and go somewhere other than the east-central region—never mind a week or two, we'd be talking months or years. Maybe I could manage, but Airena leaving the island for such a long time would have a profound impact on it.

“All right, thanks. I'll start getting ready then.”

However, I happened to have a good friend who could make that journey much, much shorter. Just like how Soleil had Shuu, I could show her I also had quite a large bird for a friend.

Four days later, after setting out with the help of the water spirits to an uninhabited island nearby, we found the enormous phoenix Heero waiting for us. We climbed on his back and set off as his massive wings effortlessly carried us through the sky. At first, Soleil was a bit taken aback by just how big he was, but...

“Wh-Whoaaaaa! Mother, look! We're flying! In the sky!” Once we lifted off, her eyes started to shine with excitement.



Airena had her arms tightly around Soleil, ensuring she didn't move too much. Though we knew Heero would never let any of us fall, it was still a bit unnerving to see Soleil moving around so excitedly. Airena was much more skilled at calling on the spirits for aid than Soleil was, so if worst came to worst, it seemed she planned to fall with her and get the wind spirits to save them both.

I couldn't help but feel like Airena had become quite motherly in the past decade or so. This wasn't actually Soleil's first time on Heero's back, but she'd been barely over a year old back then, so it was no surprise she didn't remember. This was also the first time I had ridden Heero since then.

To think this child has already grown so much. Humans grow quite fast, don't they? Heero chuckled, apparently remembering her as well.

As a phoenix, Heero would have been alive since the beginning of the world. His sense of time would be even more skewed than mine. Ten years might not be a flash, but he probably felt like a decade would pass in no time if you dozed off for a bit.

Heero accelerated, flapping his wings energetically. The clouds we normally watched from the ground were now below us. As expected of a phoenix, it took us only about an hour to arrive over the mainland.

We had made it to the east-central region. Seeing the capital of Vilestorika, the city of Vitsa, being larger in itself than our entire island of Pantarheios struck Soleil speechless. Though to be honest, regardless of size, Pantarheios had become such a critical trade hub that it was no less prosperous than Vitsa. If we had witnessed the city from the ground instead of from the air where we could see the entire thing at once, I imagine she wouldn't have been nearly as surprised. That said, Vilestorika had a history far longer than Pantarheios did, so the intertwining lives of its huge population might have still left quite an impact on her.

However, our current goal wasn't to look around the human kingdoms, so Heero carried us farther north and west. Our destination was a sea without water. Having grown up on an island in the middle of the ocean, I wanted to show her something totally different: the Great Pulha Woodlands.

Though there were trees on Pantarheios, it went without saying that their size

and number were incomparable to those of Pulha. On top of that, the power of nature in Pulha, or more accurately the amount of magic and its attendant distorting power, created many monsters. Even from our place in the sky, we could see some monsters larger than the trees making their way through the woodlands.

Having lived a life as an adventurer around the Great Pulha Woodlands, that sight was somewhat unnerving for Airenna, but as Soleil had no concept of how dangerous such creatures were, she was only shocked at its size. I did make sure to tell her that a monster that size could easily destroy a city or two, and quite possibly an entire country, if it ever decided to leave the forest.

There were similarly sized monsters living in the ocean too, and even some much larger. Ships that entered their territory rarely made it home to tell the tale. That was why sailors were so passionate about understanding the territories staked out by monsters, risking—and very often losing—their lives in the process of searching for safe routes across the sea. Pantarheios taught the children in school that they owed the island's great wealth now to the many sacrifices of sailors like that in the past. Soleil had been quite excited to tell us all about it at dinner the day she learned that.

Though Heero could probably handle it, flying forever would exhaust the other three of us, so we touched down in the forest for a meal and a rest. Most monsters would be smart enough to stay away when they sensed Heero, but anything braver would just end up as a nice meal for us. Looking up at the enormous trees of the Great Pulha Woodlands from below was a much different experience than looking down at them from the sky. And after seeing how large they were from the ground level, you could understand just how incredible they were when looking down at them from the sky later.

We continued heading west, and as we made it out of Pulha, the nations of the west-central region came into view. Though from the sky it didn't look all that much different from the east-central region, the way people thought and the foods they ate—basically, their culture—was quite different. But trying to explain all that would take forever, so I left that conversation for another time. If Soleil wanted to learn about all that, she could do so when she had grown up by visiting those places for herself.

We then passed over the west-central region and over the Mountains of Mist. I had crossed them on foot before, and it had been quite the challenge. But seeing them from the safety of Heero's back allowed me to appreciate the mysterious beauty of the mountains shrouded in fog...as long as I ignored the wind spirits and their distaste for the fog.

The Mountains of Mist and other dangerous regions served to separate the continent into its separate regions. In the same way Pulha divided the East from the West, the Mountains of Mist divided the west-central region from the Far West.

Yes, the Far West. The goal of this journey was to show Soleil the place where she had been born. After flying for a while, we finally arrived in the empire in competition for the largest nation on the continent, and its capital city of Mithril.

"That's the Empire of Sabal, Soleil. That's where you were born. The country made by Win, your birth father," I told her.

Soleil tensed up in Airena's arms at that. But even though I had brought her all the way here, I didn't intend to make her meet him. If they were going to be reunited, it could be when she was an adult, if they were both willing to make it happen. I just wanted to show her where she had come from, even if it was from a distance like this. I felt like even a sight like this would make a difference in the way she lived.

So without landing, Heero took us in circles over the city a few times before heading back east. It was time to start making our way back home. On our way back, we'd fly over the snowy mountains in the North...take a dip in the dwarven hot spring, and then start making our way back to Panterheios. Though the people I would have wanted to visit in the dwarven kingdom were no longer with us, the hot spring we had built there was still quite loved by the dwarves.

With where Pantarheios was situated in the South, even if people went swimming, they never really experienced dipping into a hot bath. Relaxing in a pool of hot water in a cold climate was a pleasure I really wanted Soleil to know.

The Great Elven Levee

At long last, the long-term project of supporting the reconstruction of the southern continent had started. Of course, there weren't enough hours in the day for me to tell you about all the individual projects I was involved in, but the one that left the greatest impression was flood control.

One of the larger rivers on the continent, on top of being fed by numerous sources of water and thus being quite large already, often rose to overflowing when large snowfalls occurred. As far as nature was concerned, there was nothing wrong with that. Muddy water flowing over earth cleaned and revitalized it, stimulating a renewal in the land.

But when people lived nearby, such flooding became a cause for grave concern. Obviously people couldn't live without water. It took less than a week for humans to die if they lost access to drinking water. It was possible to dig wells to draw water out from underground, but it required a tremendous amount of effort. That was why civilization first sprouted around rivers...or so I had learned in my previous life, probably at school, though I was sure the same principle applied in this world. It was certainly how civilization was being rebuilt here in the South, all while having their homes—and sometimes loved ones—swept away by the floods.

Even considering the tragedies it bore, that was the natural way for humans to live. They would struggle over and over to build strong walls of earth to fight back the rising waters, and when they finally won their battle against the floods, they would be able to develop their society in safety.

But we didn't come to the South to sit back and watch them struggle on their own. Why would we sit on our hands while the rich and abundant nature continued taking people's lives? Why had we brought all these resources and this workforce with us in the first place? Especially since I personally could do something about it myself.

Throughout the elven caravan, a great deal of debate had sprung up about the pros and cons of stopping the flooding. The obvious advantages were that the resources and efforts we were pouring into the communities in the south wouldn't be wiped out by flooding, allowing the south to grow much quicker.

The sooner the south rebuilt its civilization, the sooner our relationship could change from one of aid to one of trade, which was ultimately the reason the elven caravan was willing to go so deep in the red for this endeavor.

However, there was always a downside. The land around a large river that never flooded would become exceptionally valuable. Everyone would want to live there, to take it for themselves. Even if they didn't have the resources to do so now, or might hold back while the elven caravan was present and supporting them, it seemed unavoidable that it would lead to conflict within a few centuries.

But was that something to be avoided in the first place? Humans being in a situation where they had the resources to fight over the best land had to be better than the current situation of them struggling just for basic survival. What was the real difference between death by starvation, death by treatable illness, death by flooding, or death by war?

Even if we accepted that there was a meaningful difference between them, humans would always find a reason to fight, with or without this particular stretch of land. Though I had stopped Liliun's efforts to wipe out humanity, I would not deny how much of a threat they could pose.

I suppose that went for any of the races though. For example, even though the beastfolk of the Empire of Sabal looked down on humans, they often acted very much like them. It was hard to say any other race wouldn't act in the same way if they had the same numbers that humans did. But even with the threat they posed, humans and the other races all had a wonderful side to them, an immeasurable greatness. I doubted any member of the ancient races would have predicted a human, living only a handful of decades, could perfect her swordsmanship to the degree she could harm the spirits with it. I found all of that to be so precious.

In the end, the elven caravan decided it was best to stop the flooding. I gathered the elves in the area and walked down the banks of the river, raising the earth to keep the waters in. We also expanded the riverbeds to allow them to handle a greater flow of water. Though the scale of the levees we were creating was large, we didn't make them too solid. If people wanted to expand the waterways in the future, that would end up being a hindrance to them.

For now, we were just interested in securing the safety of the people living nearby in the short term. If the levees were to break, the people living here could gather earth themselves to repair them, or trade with any nearby elves to repair it for them.

While gathering the other elves to help was in part just to hide how much of an impact I was making on my own, I also hoped it would serve to foster a relationship between the elves and the humans living here.

As we walked, the banks of the river rose. The people living along the river saw it all happen, and would pass down this story along with the levees themselves.

The Great Elven Levees. That was the first legend to be carved into the newly reborn southern continent.

Side Stories — Fragments of Meeting

A Bitter Letter

Looking over the letter sent to me by Barbarus Vidar, the current emperor of the Empire of Sabal, I gave a heavy sigh. The letter spoke of Fahda Fitch deceptively claiming that his ship flew under the flag of the Empire, and causing an uproar abroad...and being executed as a result.

Honestly speaking, while it might have been relevant during the time he was a candidate for the throne, now that his own father had been executed by the Rabbit Clan for his crimes, there was really no need for the emperor himself to inform me of such a development.

So why had Barbarus felt a need to personally inform me of this event? That would be because the chaos Fahda had sown abroad was on the distant island of Pantarheios in the East, a trade hub for merchant ships. In other words, Barbarus knew a certain someone was living on that island.

Was this letter out of kindness to me? An attempt to prevent chaos from erupting in the Empire? It was quite possibly both. It was ample confirmation that I had made the right choice in choosing Barbarus for the throne, I thought as I held the letter out over a candle flame. Honestly, it was something I thought every time I looked over the Empire and saw it at peace.

As if in response to my intentions, the fire spirits happily took to the paper of the letter, reducing it to a cloud of ash in an instant.

Learning of Fahda's fate filled me with nothing but emptiness. I had made use of him for my scheme in the past, and so avoided killing him myself, but his fate had been the same in the end. Fahda's talent had been nothing compared to that of his father and my enemy, Romada Fitch. If Acer had ever met Romada, he likely would have immediately noticed how dangerous the man was and stopped him before anything could happen.

As greedy as he had been, Romada was even more acutely aware of any

danger to himself. I had found him disgusting, but nonetheless necessary for developing the Empire. More accurately, he had clearly shown that his talent had been indispensable. In truth, without Romada's influence, the Empire of Sabal could have turned quite warlike. There was a significant chance it would have begun various aggressive expansions against its neighbors.

So even after he killed my human consort—Soleil's mother—with poison, and even after he made attempts on Soleil's own life, I couldn't get rid of him that easily. I had no excuse, really. He had only been able to accomplish that much because I'd underestimated him.

But Romada's greatest failing was that he didn't realize his son lacked the same talent. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say he *pretended* not to notice. Even if he had recognized the limitations of his son's abilities, I would have expected him to make a gamble for the throne anyway, no matter how foolish or damaging it could be.

However, blinded by his dreams of becoming royalty, Romada had failed to see the trap laid for him. He loved his son. Ironically, that alone was why he had tried to take the life of my daughter.

I gave another long, heavy sigh. I should forget about him. It was all over now. There was no point holding a grudge anymore.

There was no doubt in my mind that Fahda had been causing trouble in Pantarheios because he had set his sights on my daughter, who was growing up in Acer's care. Acer had kept her safe, just as he'd promised. That was the one ray of light in this situation.

I knew firsthand just what kind of loving environment Acer would create for a child he was raising. While I was a kid, I felt unsatisfied with the way everything was just given to me, and so became a bit rebellious thanks to how distant Acer had felt from me...but as embarrassing as it was to think about now, even that was really a happy time. Even though we had no blood connection at all, I had the freedom to let loose my rebellious tendencies, and Acer still met them with a ceaseless outpouring of love. I never doubted him in the slightest. Though he could be a bit unpredictable at times, with Airena there to keep him reined in, I

knew I had nothing to worry about.

In only a few more years, Soleil would be an adult. What kind of life would she choose to live?

For me, I had wanted to become an incredible man like my father, so I had set off for the West, knowing full well what dangers were waiting for me there. Thinking back on it now, that had been little more than the recklessness of youth, but the road I ended up walking had definitely been a good one.

Of course, I had plenty of regrets. One was the situation with Soleil herself, though it was something I had chosen. Maybe rather than regret, it would be better characterized as a kind of lingering attachment.

I had gained so much, and lost plenty. And in my own way, I accomplished what I thought was something incredible. Though I couldn't say I was like Acer, I had given everything I had, accomplished everything I could, and built this Empire of Sabal. The people didn't starve, could live without fear of being enslaved, and could be proud of their homeland's strength. If I was given the chance to do everything again, I imagine I'd make all the same choices.

That said, as someone who had chosen to be an emperor over a father, I had no right to say anything or worry about her future. All I could do was quietly pray in this far-off land that the spirits would see to her happiness.

The Path She Now Chose

He was about fifty years older than me. As high elves, a difference of fifty years wasn't really all that much, but we weren't quite close enough to be called childhood friends. There was one thing that connected us though: we had the same father and mother.

Most high elves were raised by their community, not by their individual parents, so a blood connection like that was meaningless. But he was almost obsessed with that connection. He called me his younger sister, and was constantly trying to take care of me. I couldn't really say I disliked him. I had told Acer, that high elf from the North, that I called him "Sapi." But in truth, I called him "big brother Sapi," like he'd told me he wanted me to call him when

we were quite young.

He chose to leave the forest the day he turned one hundred fifty, when he was recognized as an adult. It was the day he was called by the elders and told to partner with someone. I knew, because I was one of the women they were considering.

I didn't know how things worked with the high elves in the North, but in the South, a high elf was partnered with the closest person to them in age of the opposite sex. But for him, though there were others closer to him in age, he was much closer emotionally to me. So the elders decided that the two of us were to be partnered.

Apparently being so closely related was an issue for other types of animals, but as high elves born from the hands of the Creator himself, that wasn't an issue for us. High elves had stayed within our one single community from the beginning, so it wasn't like we had particularly diverse bloodlines to choose from anyway. The elders had likely decided us being on such good terms overruled any issues of us being closely related.

Of course, I had no objections. I knew Sapi cherished me more than anyone, so I just assumed things would continue like that forever. It was easy to accept.

But that day, he fled the forest. He didn't tell anyone why, not even me. Was he unsatisfied with me as a partner? If so, why had he never shown any hint of that before?

Many people raised the idea of going out to look for him, and naturally I was one of them, but the elders strictly forbade it. If high elves started randomly getting involved in the outside world, the consequences could be dire for both of us. In my case, I wasn't even old enough to be considered an adult yet, so obviously I wouldn't be allowed to go. A high elf couldn't survive unwounded when experiencing the transience of the outside world. So they said it was best for him as well that we simply wait quietly for him to return, and accept him, wounds and all.

And yet, you know how it all ended.

What on earth happened outside the forest? That kind, serious boy returned with the apocalypse following close behind. Ah, it was likely that he was *too*

kind, too serious. The outside world must have hurt him tremendously to drive him to such extremes.

I was always so afraid, so full of hate for him...but now that I'd had some time to calm down, and now that I had talked a little with Acer, I understood. He had pointed his gun at me, but had not been able to fire it. He had thrown the gun to me instead, not to force me to continue suffering in life like he had, but simply because he didn't want to kill me. Really, that was a conclusion I should have been able to come to on my own.

Of course I still hated him for what he did. And I still disliked and feared the humans, the creatures who had brought about this entire disaster. I didn't regret my request to the ebon dragon in the least. With how many of the high elves had been killed among those capable of fighting back, it would be no surprise if the humans eventually wiped us out in our entirety.

The humans ruled almost the entire continent, so we had to live in hiding while we sought out the dragon. During that time, I saw the cruelty humans were capable of for myself countless times.

Yet...my desire to destroy them all made *me* worse, didn't it? That was likely why the others had left me behind to care for the children while they gave themselves up to the ashes to begin restoring life to the continent. I was not yet fit to become a spirit.

It was like they were saying that once I had raised new life on this continent, once I'd had a chance to watch over it with these children, once I had come to terms with my own feelings and actions, only then I could become a spirit and become one with nature.

He had exposed himself to that unique flame, different from the flames that had destroyed the world, because he hated the idea of becoming a spirit. Maybe that was his entire goal behind getting the humans to kill the other high elves. If he hated this world so much that he refused to become a spirit...then it was no wonder he would go to any lengths to make that happen.

But he didn't kill me. If he had found more people like me, people he couldn't kill, he wouldn't have committed such atrocities. He would have been able to accept life as a spirit.

There were probably countless things I could have done to make that happen. It was far too late for me to do anything for him now, but I still felt there was value in that realization.

I would live together with the children. I would raise these children who held no anger, fear, or hatred of humanity, so that they wouldn't turn out like I was or like he had been. Even if the children found me annoying and resented me for it, I'd make sure they had plenty of precious people in their lives to live peacefully alongside. Until the day came when they finally became spirits themselves.

Slowly but surely, I would walk down the path to spirithood that he had rejected.

That Damned Elf's Friend

"All right, I'll come again sometime," my friend had said as he departed...and I couldn't help but heave a sigh.

There'd be no next time. It was taking quite a bit out of me just to stay standing as I saw him off.

Dwarves could live for up to three hundred years, but smiths, miners, and soldiers had relatively shorter lifespans. Even the sturdy body of a dwarf took invisible damage over time by skipping meals and staying up through the night to work a blistering hot forge, or breathing in the dust kicked up by mining work. For the soldiers, most lost their lives in battles with monsters, but I guess those who didn't ended up living longer than most.

Even among blacksmiths, the dwarven kings tended to die relatively young, having spent more time in the forge than anyone to earn the throne in the first place. But the most significant difference was the secret treasure of the dwarves, the furnace that drew heat up from the depths of the earth. Experiencing that heat over and over clearly shaved off the later years of your life.

I didn't want him to know. If he had, he likely would have been even more hurt. I had taken the dwarven throne for no reason other than the promise the

two of us had made. The fact I had kept that promise was something I took a special pride in. Losing two or three decades off the end of my life was nothing next to that. So I didn't want him to feel bad about it. His worry for me would cast a shadow over that pride.

In the purest sense, I just wanted to be his friend. I didn't want to see him looking at me as I aged and died. I didn't want to see his eyes mixed with pity, sorrow, and resignation. I couldn't help him treating me like a senior citizen, and I supposed I couldn't complain too much that he kept telling me to take care of myself. But even so, I still wanted to be his friend, his equal.

I didn't want him to see my death. I was stubborn like that. If I collapsed, I doubted he'd leave the kingdom until I died. As his friend, I knew he wasn't the kind of guy who could leave in a situation like that. Though I didn't have the strength to swing a hammer anymore, I had been able to go out drinking with him, to tell stupid jokes and swing some fists around just like we always had. It had been a considerable trial for me, but great fun as well.

Even after I died, he'd probably keep living for another few hundred years. Ah, actually, he said high elves became spirits when they died, didn't he? If that was true, he'd carry on living forever. Either way, he still had a very long road ahead of him. There was no need for him to spend time weeping over my death. I wanted him to keep laughing with that stupid grin of his like the damned elf I always knew. I had plenty of family to cry for me here.

Looking back on it, I felt like I had lived a good life. I'd raised promising students, made great friends, become the king of the dwarves, gotten married, and been blessed with children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. There were plenty of things to be mad about in my time, but there was so much more joy. The alcohol was good, the blacksmithing was fun, and the kingdom continued to change little by little ever since I became king. I'd left my mark behind in many ways.

I suppose if I had to come up with one thing I regretted...it would be that I wasn't able to make him anything on his last visit here. I would have loved to make just one more thing for him. The fact I couldn't do that was frustrating.

I heard the last technique his master in swordsmanship left behind for him

had been a great boon to him. Maybe that was why I couldn't help but regret being unable to leave him something as meaningful.

But that was fine. It wouldn't be long before he could make something better than I could ever manage. I also regretted that I wouldn't live to see that day myself, but I was confident it would happen sooner or later.

So, goodbye. Goodbye Acer, my friend. Though I don't have much ground to stand on here, try to keep that reckless side of yours in check...and live a long, healthy life.

AGE

EVENTS

EVENTS
SO FAR0 ▶
YEARS

I was born into this world. I grabbed at a maple leaf soon after, so ended up being called the Child of the Maple, or Acer.

30 ▶
YEARS

I slowly started to become conscious of myself, and realized that I possessed memories of events from my previous life. This was probably when I really became who I am.

50 ▶
YEARS

I tried to copy the adults around me and pick up a bow, and ended up getting scolded for it. Later, they made a child-sized bow for me, which I played with almost daily.

80 ▶
YEARS

The elders taught me how to read and write. They passed down legends of the high elves to me, and taught me there was a world outside of the Forest Depths. This was when I realized this world also had humans.

120 ▶
YEARS

I became recognized as the most skilled archer among the young high elves. I wasn't particularly praised for it, nor did anyone seem frustrated to lose to me, but the event made me quite happy. I started to have strong feelings of being different from those around me.

150 ▶
YEARS

Having reached the age of adulthood for a high elf, I took the chance to leave the Forest Depths.

I ended up in the Kingdom of Ludoria, at a frontier city called Vistcourt. I met Rodna (Human, 28), Airenna (Elf, 140), Martena (Human, 20), and Clayas (Human, 20). My days became so densely packed with happenings that my previous years couldn't even compare.

The next day I became the apprentice of Oswald (Dwarf, 80) and began learning blacksmithing.

160 ▶
YEARS

Leaving Vistcourt behind, I reached the capital of Ludoria, Wolfir. I became an apprentice swordsman under Kaeha (Human, 16) and started my life at the dojo. The food made by her mother Kuroha (Human, 36) reminded me a little of my past life. Half a year later, I met with Clayas again, and Kaeha became an adventurer.

163 ▶
YEARS

Kaeha returned to the dojo and I learned of what was happening to the elves in Ludoria from Airenna. Leaving the dojo behind, I began work to free the enslaved elves. Half a year later, I brought about a massive earthquake in Ludoria's eastern region.

164 ▶
YEARS

I arrived at the port town of Saurotay in the Vilestorika Republic. A city guard introduced me to Grand (Human, 22) and his bar, where I also met the waitress Caleina (Human, 22) and got into a fight with the fisherman Dreeze (Human, 22). Caught up in the dispute between the merchants and fishermen, I spent a month there enjoying the seafood.

A few months later, I met Nonna (Human, 10) at an inn in Janpemon, a city in Travoya of the Azueda Alliance.



- 165▶
YEARS I arrived in Odine, the city of magic within the Azeuda Alliance. I met the mage Kawshman (Human, 25) and made a deal with him to teach him blacksmithing in exchange for him teaching me magic. Our goal was to make a real magic sword.
- 170▶
YEARS In Sviej, the capital city of Zaints, I met with Airena and took custody of Win (Half-Elf, 6), adopting him as my son. Looking for a place to raise him, I returned to Janpemon where I met a grown-up Nonna who was a great help during my stay there.
- 172▶
YEARS I returned to the Yosogi dojo in the city of Wolfir, reuniting with Kaeha and Kuroha and meeting Kaeha's children Shizuki (Human, 7) and Mizuha (Human, 7). The time I spent surrounded by children was peaceful and happy.
- 173▶
YEARS Taking Win and Shizuki with me, I visited Vistcourt again, meeting Rodna, Clayas, and Martena again. I experienced firsthand how quickly humans grow up, and how quickly they grew old.
- 180▶
YEARS Kuroha passed away (Age of death 56).
Perhaps due to her frail constitution, she passed away fairly young.
She had been a strict but kind woman. Her passing taught me how to face the many goodbyes I would have to say in the future.
- 182▶
YEARS I took Win to the kingdom of the dwarves where I was reunited with Oswald. My master in blacksmithing was a tremendous influence on my life.
- 187▶
YEARS Oswald was chosen as next in line for the dwarven throne. As a title granted to the most skilled smith among the dwarves, it was the natural result.
A few months later I headed to the Empire of Fodor, where I assassinated the vampire Rayhon and his thrall, the emperor.
- 188▶
YEARS I began working to establish a trade relationship between the kingdom of the dwarves and the elves. It felt like an entirely utopian goal, but I had many people around me who helped.
- 189▶
YEARS Airena visited the kingdom of the dwarves together with a group of elves. Among them, the minstrel Huratio (Elf, 221) and Rebees (Elf, 201) stood out the most. To my surprise, they soon became accepted by the dwarves.
- 193▶
YEARS I returned to the Yosogi dojo in Wolfir. I lived there together with Kaeha up until her last moments.
I also met Shizuki again, now head of the Yosogi School, and met his children Souha (Human, 6) and Touki (Human, 4) for the first time.
- 195▶
YEARS Heading to the city of Vistcourt, I visited the graves of Clayas (Age of death 65) and Martena (Age of death 65), where I met Airena again. She had lost two incredibly important people in her life, and I knew it wouldn't be long before I experienced the same thing.
- 196▶
YEARS Win left on his journey. Now that he was grown, I suspected he would follow a very different life from mine.
- 208▶
YEARS Kaeha passed away (Age of death 64).
She was a very important person to me.

- No amount of words I wrote here would be able to express how much. Leaving Ludoria, I headed to the Far East.
- 209 ▶
YEARS
- Passing through the Man-Eating Swamp and out onto the Great Grasslands, I met the Balm tribe, including Zelen (Human, 10) and Shuro (Human, 8). A little while later, I fought with the Dahlian tribe, where I captured the boy known as the Child of Fire, named Juyal (Human, 13). I then began teaching the three of them swordsmanship.
- 212 ▶
YEARS
- I freed Juyal, allowing him to return to the Dahlians. I felt it was awfully quick to let him go, but I knew he'd be okay.
- 214 ▶
YEARS
- Saying goodbye to the Balm tribe, I took my horse Sayr and crossed the Great Grassland. Half a year later, I arrived in the Ancient Gold Empire, the greatest nation of the East. In White River Province, I met Jizou (Earthfolk, 40), and the two of us launched an attack on the Merchant Association. The two of us then headed to Black Snow Province, where he introduced me to Wanggui Xuannu (Mystic, Age Unknown).
- 215 ▶
YEARS
- I learned the secrets of the Ancient Gold Empire from Longcui Dijun (Mystic, Age Unknown) and met the golden dragon. I spent a good deal of time in Ancient Gold Province talking with the golden dragon and interacting with the mystics. The golden dragon, an ancient friend of the high elves, turned out to be kind and gentle despite the role he bore.
- 223 ▶
YEARS
- Leaving the Ancient Gold Empire, I boarded a ship heading for Fusou. Traveling through Fusou, I ended up at the capital of Outo where I met Gonzou (Human, 71) and Mizuyo (Merfolk, Age Unknown). I was then introduced to the old swordsmith Sakuji (Human, 69), and we exchanged knowledge of blacksmithing techniques.
- 224 ▶
YEARS
- I saw the world from the top of the Fusou Tree. This marked the end of my journey east, so I began the trip back to Ludoria. On a ship from the Ancient Gold Empire to Mintar, I met with the ship captain Suin (Human, 34). Visiting Janpemon, I met Nonna's granddaughter Sheyne (Human, 30) and great-granddaughter Aina (Human, 8). Though the girl I knew was long gone, not everything in Janpemon had changed.
- 225 ▶
YEARS
- In Zieden's Ha Forest, I met 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 usage of the katana would take off in this region.

229 ▶
YEARS

Aiha took her monster-hunting exam. Though she was still a child, she was able to cut her own path into the future.

230 ▶
YEARS

At the Yosogi dojo in Vistcourt. I met with Mizuha for the last time before heading into the Great Pulha Woodlands. I knew I wouldn't see Shizuki or Mizuha again while they were still alive, but they had still given me so much. There was no way I would ever forget either of them.

Reaching the Forest Depths in the center of the Great Pulha Woodlands, I was reunited with Salix (High Elf, over 900) and learned of the location of the phoenix, in a place barred to all but the high elf elders. However, the phoenix was still an egg, so I tried my hand at hatching it.

233 ▶
YEARS

The phoenix hatched from its egg. Naturally what hatched was a baby, so it would take quite some time before I would be able to ride it to the world above the clouds. Leaving the Forest Depths, I headed for Sigclair. Passing through Giatica, Vilestorika, and Kirkoim, I ended up in Travoya where I visited Janpemon and met Sheyne and Aina again. I stayed there for half a year, making swords for Aina and her boyfriend Bireck.

234 ▶
YEARS

In the city of Marmaros in Sigclair, I made a dagger for the lord of the city, Myos Marmaros (Human, 42) and was granted an audience. He agreed to teach me to carve sculptures. I also met his son, Claytos Marmatos (Human, 14).

236 ▶
YEARS

Claytos Marmaros left to begin his first term of military service, wearing a suit of armor crafted by me and ordered by Myos. I prayed it would help him make a safe return.

A short time later, a series of murders occurred in Marmaros, which ended up being connected to a struggle for the acquisition of marble by the higher-ups in the church, so I left Marmaros.

237 ▶
YEARS

I reduced the cathedral under the authority of Archbishop Vischea to rubble, getting the help of the earth spirits in leaving behind an enormous and furious stone giant. The result only reminded me of how unskilled I was in sculpting. A few months later, I arrived in a developing village in south Zieden, where I decided to spend five years.

240 ▶
YEARS

I was visited by Aiha at the village and we had a sparring match. She had decided she was going to start a new Yosogi dojo which focused on use of the katana. Since it was still going to be affiliated with the Yosogi School, I was responsible as a consultant for them too.

Humans really grew up so fast. There was no telling what kind of flower the young would eventually bloom into.

242 ▶
YEARS

I began my journey to the West after hearing rumors of a disturbance there. Boarding a ship in Vilestorika, I reached the country of Jilchias in the west-central region. There, I met the lord of the port town of Tomhans, a man by the name of Grenda Welbs (Human, 45).

I arrived at Inelda, the kingdom of elves, and decided to help raise a representative who could lead them.

Looking for people who were up to the task, I met many young and exceptionally skilled elves, like Reas (185 years old) and Tyulei (170 years old).

Five months later, I separated Inelda from its neighbors by creating a river, and the nation of elves took the name Shiyou.

245►
YEARS

Tyulei's team of elves who were focused on agriculture effectively solved the food shortage in Shiyou. I had always felt that elves familiar with humans were reliable, but this may have been the first time I had been afraid of their potential.

248►
YEARS

The nation of Jilchias launched an attack on Kazarya, one of Shiyou's enemies. Kazarya fell a few months later, and Jilchias began making use of Shiyou's river for water freight.

250►
YEARS

One hundred years had passed since I first left the Forest Depths.

252►
YEARS

With my role in Shiyou finished, I left things in Reas and Tyulei's hands and headed west.

After a few months of traveling through the Labyrinth of Death in the Mountains of Mist, I arrived in the Far West region.

Within the Labyrinth, I discovered an enormous statue that seemed to have been left behind by the demons.

A few months later, with the help of the beastfolk of the bear and goat clans, I made my way to the city of Clausula, a meeting place for the Federation's many races, where I finally reunited with Win.

253►
YEARS

Together with Win, we took down the High Priestess of the Quoramites who was leading the religion that had overtaken the Far West. She had been a type of fallen mystic called a soul eater.

Afterward, Heero came to pick me up and took me back to the East. After taking over ten years to get there, returning in just a few days felt quite strange.

Without visiting the east-central region, I headed straight for the dwarven kingdom in the north, where I reunited with Oswald.

255►
YEARS

Oswald suggested I become the next king of the dwarves, but I declined. It was an enticing prospect, and I was happy to be a friend of the dwarves, but I couldn't be their leader. That was not my role there.

256►
YEARS

Airena arrived in the kingdom of the dwarves, and Heero took the two of us into the sky in search of the land of the giants.

We found an enormous structure built on a bank of clouds. Inside, we met the giant Cordes and learned a great deal about the nature of the world. Afterward, we found the White Lake Airena had been searching for, and decided to spend more time together.

262►
YEARS

The elven caravan absorbs the Toritrine family, a major house in the Republic of Vilestorika. Adding humans to their staff, the caravan rapidly exploded in size, and began supporting and trading with elves all over the continent.

288 ▶
YEARS

The war in the West came to an end. The multiracial Federation led by Win came out on top and managed to broker peace with the humans. Though some races left the Federation, the rest founded the Empire of Sabal, and Win took the throne as its first Emperor.

298 ▶
YEARS

Riding on the back of the golden dragon, I fought a high elf from the southern continent named Liliun, who was with the ebon dragon. The southern continent had been destroyed, but I managed to spare the northern continent from meeting the same fate.

301 ▶
YEARS

Oswald died (Age of death 231). I'm sure he was that same damned dwarf right up until the end.

323 ▶
YEARS

War broke out between Darottei, the nation responsible for destroying Zieden, and the Kingdom of Ludoria. Many Yosogi swordsmen participated in the fighting.

327 ▶
YEARS

Ludoria was victorious in their war against Darottei, and the Yosogi dojo in the capital was awarded with a noble title. One part of my role as Yosogi School advisor came to an end, though I believe that is something to be celebrated.

328 ▶
YEARS

At the request of Minagi Yosogi (Human, Age 31), the head of the Yosogi Katana-style Dojo, I cut down one of his high-level students, Kashu.

351 ▶
YEARS

At Win's request, I headed to the Empire of Sabal and met with the candidates for inheriting the throne. However, the selection process was only a cover; the next emperor had already been decided. In the shadow of the proceedings, Win entrusted his daughter Soleil (Human, Age 2) into my care.

365 ▶
YEARS

Soleil reached adulthood and chose her path in life. The decision she made was entirely unexpected, but I nonetheless prayed she'd find happiness in it.

366 ▶
YEARS

With the recovery of the southern continent well underway, I began investigating viable sea routes between the continents. The rebuilding of the southern continent would soon begin.

TO THE
FUTURE



Afterword

I think you probably know me by now, but this is rarutori.

Thank you for reading *Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored* Volume 7.

Seriously, I am extremely grateful that you've stayed with me for seven whole books. Isn't that incredible? Seven!

Anyways, it's getting quite cold, isn't it? As I'm writing this, it's starting to get cold, but it'll be *really* cold once the book actually comes out.

Winter has a lot of events though, doesn't it? It may not be the cause, but when the weather starts getting cold, it brings back a lot of sad and lonely memories. But I guess that's a part of life.

One great thing about winter is the food. The fresh rice in autumn is delicious! So then it follows, winter has hot pot! As such, I spend the winter season chowing down on meat. I suppose that's not really unique to winter, though. Dinner is going to be really good these days!

Anyway, let's get into looking back on volume six.

The first chapter in volume six was "The Kingdom of the Elves." It was primarily focused on the relationship between Acer and the elves. It also highlighted just how much Acer had relied on Airena up until now.

While there were quite a few times Acer moved the elves to action for his own purposes, the elves often turned to him when they needed help too. In the east-central region, whenever Acer needed something from the elves or the elves needed something from Acer, the request always ended up going through Airena.

But with no Airena in the West, Acer had to spend ten years working in Shiyou for himself. If Airena had been there, he likely would have picked up and left right after finishing the river that surrounded it.

The second chapter was “The Road Forward.” Of course, that was the path to meeting Win. That said, Win had traveled around the Mountains of Mist rather than through them. Acer doesn’t really know the meaning of “go around” though.

Just like back in his journey in volume three, where he experienced all sorts of different cultures, the same thing happened here. If you asked about the inspiration for those cultures, I guess I’d just broadly say “the West.”

The third chapter was “The Monstrous and the Truly Monstrous.”

The true monster, of course, was Acer himself. *The demon king had pushed the hero into a corner, so the hero’s foster father—an even greater demon king—came and crushed the threat.* Sounds pretty awful when you put it that way, doesn’t it? But similar to chapter one, Acer wasn’t there to solve every problem. In chapter one he helped the elves, and in chapter three he helped Win, but it was helping them accomplish something for themselves. Okay, he wielded his power pretty openly, but that was in part because of how bad the situation was, and in part because Acer doesn’t do well at holding back.

The fourth chapter was “King of the Dwarves.”

That is Oswald. I think that’s a good enough summary of the theme, but to put a few more words into it, I’d say it’s about Acer’s master and friend. But really, there’s no better way to express it than just “Oswald.” Or maybe “damned dwarf.”

The fifth chapter was “The World Seen from above the Clouds.” The whole chapter was about visiting the land of the giants, but to be quite honest, it was mostly all decoration compared to the important part that happened right at the end. A lot about the world was explained, as well as foreshadowing for events happening between the ancient races. But really, this story is about relationships between people, so the most important part of this chapter was Airen.

Airen and Acer’s relationship is complicated. They often find themselves relying on and supporting each other, and both know that the other has people precious to them that they will have a hard time letting go of. That isn’t something either of them can ignore, so building a new relationship on top of

that is quite a challenge. But by accepting all of that, they came to understand these things and took a big step forward. It was something made possible by the growth and maturity they'd seen after all they'd been through.

Okay, reminiscing about the previous volume has taken quite a bit of time, so let's get right into the alcohol talk. This time, I'd like to introduce something with a bit of a fantasy feeling to it called Elixir. There are actually a few kinds of alcohol with that name, but the one I'm talking about is Chartreuse.

This drink is a kind of herbal liqueur, and is even said to be a source of eternal youth. The method for making Chartreuse is a closely guarded secret held by the monks of the Grande Chartreuse Monastery. You might wonder why a monastery is making alcohol, but apparently places like that were often involved in alcohol production. Even in Japan, there were temples producing alcohol.

As a herbal liqueur, Chartreuse has a pretty distinct flavor. Some people say it smells a lot like medicine, and others find it difficult to take due to its strong alcohol content. Honestly speaking, it's not something I can recommend to everyone. In fact, if you aren't that accustomed to drinking alcohol, I would probably avoid it. But if you are well experienced and are looking for something a bit different, I think you should give it a try.

It is quite a strange flavor, but one that a lot of people find irresistible. I would count myself as one of those people. Or one of those birds, I suppose.

By the way, apparently there are over a hundred thirty herbs used to make it. The flavor is kind of sweet. There's also another kind of Chartreuse called Élixir Végétal, which is often taken with added sugar. I haven't tried it yet, but hopefully I'll get the chance someday.

So that is the "elixir," a secret medicine that grants immortality you can find even in the modern era. If it sounds interesting to you, please give it a try. Unless you aren't that used to alcohol. Then please don't.

Now then, as Acer has successfully avoided the End, the story will continue for a little bit longer. But I mean it: just a little bit. I hope you choose to stick with us to the end.

Afterword

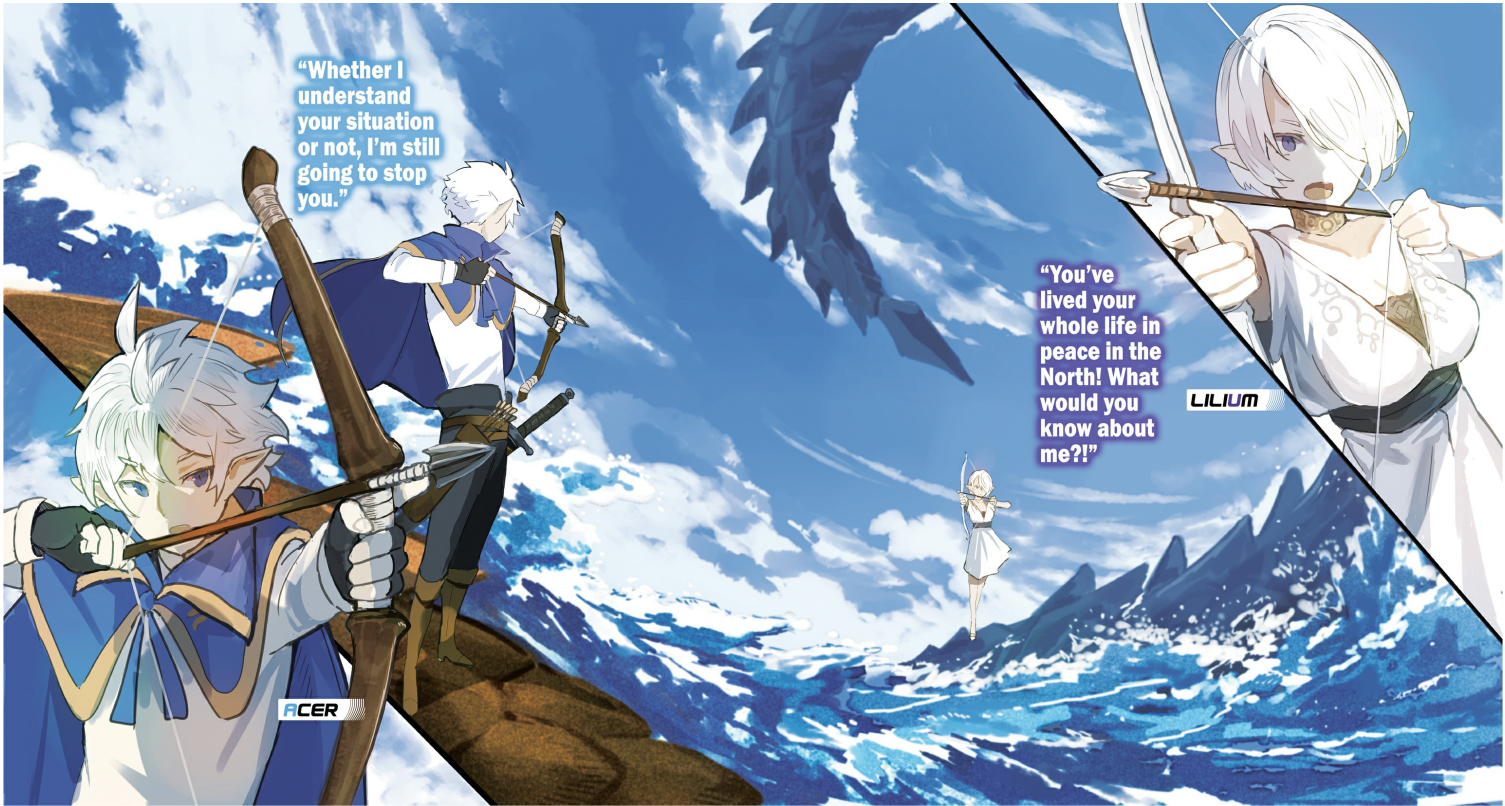
Congratulations on the release of volume seven of Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored!

Seeing Soleil reminded me of my brother, who has children too. Every time I meet them, I can't help but think how they grow up so fast. One time I met them, they couldn't even stand, but the next time they could. And the time after that, they were already talking. And now they're already asking me for toys, ha ha.

Next volume is going to be the last one, so please stick with us a little longer! Thank you for reading so far!

Circle



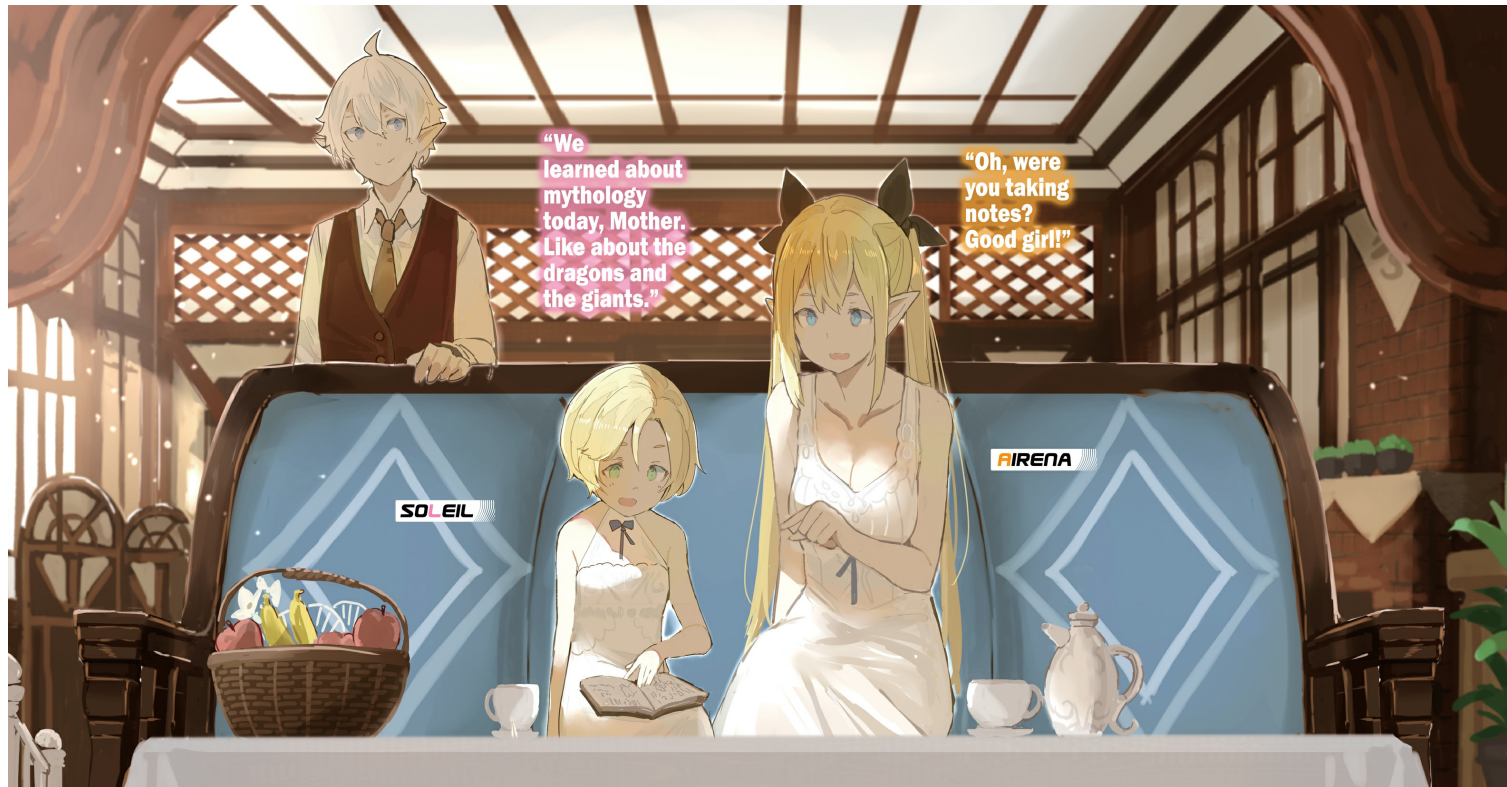


"Whether I understand your situation or not, I'm still going to stop you."

FCER

"You've lived your whole life in peace in the North! What would you know about me?!"

LILIUM







Bonus Short Story

Strife in the Morning, Once Again

When I first took Soleil into my care, she was already old enough not to cry in the middle of the night, and so generally slept through until morning without issue. However, as if to make up for it, those mornings were always quite lively.

At the sound of some quite energetic wailing, I stretched and dragged myself out of bed. Looking to my side, I saw Soleil being consoled by Airena, who she had slept with the night before. It seemed she had wet herself overnight.

Of course, neither Airena nor I were upset over a child her age having an accident like that. It was just a physiological reality, and we knew she wasn't doing it on purpose. It would help to limit what she drank at night and make sure she used the bathroom before going to sleep...but there wasn't much we could do beyond that. She'd simply grow out of it over time.

But an infant still saw it as a failure on their part, and one sufficient to bring them to tears. It reminded me of her father and the way he'd sobbed when he did the same thing. Though of course, that was quite a long time ago now. That was back when we were living with Nonna in Janpemon, wasn't it? It was actually kind of nostalgic. Though to be honest, Soleil's crying was much louder than Win's had been.

Not that that was a bad thing—in fact, it was the opposite. When I had first taken Win in, he cried in such a way it was clear he was holding something in. He didn't have much choice in the place he was born. I couldn't begin to express the joy I felt when he started crying normally after spending some time together. Even Nonna celebrated with me. With that history behind me, hearing Soleil crying at the top of her lungs left me happy. She wasn't holding anything back, despite being born with an even heavier weight on her shoulders.

Win must have done everything in his power for this girl, considering his

position. That was why she could scream like this with no hint of any restraint in her emotions. That was an incredibly precious thing.

However, I couldn't just sit around and enjoy her wailing. Airena was already looking over, her eyes pleading for help now that she saw me awake.

"Good morning, you two. I'll do something about this, so why don't you go get changed?" I pointed outside the room. Back when Win had wet the bed, we both got naked and then had the spirits clean our clothes, sheets, and bed for us. I guess that would have been fine if Soleil had slept in my bed, but I couldn't really ask Airena to do that.

"Sorry, Lord Acer. Thank you." Patting Soleil lightly on the back in an attempt to console her, Airena carried her from the room to get cleaned up. It seemed Soleil had calmed down a bit, as her sobbing was getting much quieter. For some reason, watching the two of them leave like that was kind of sweet.

I spun my fingers in the air, calling on the water spirits. Taking water from a pitcher beside Airena's bed, I lifted it into the air and wrapped it around her sheets, drawing Soleil's little mistake out of the fabric.

Before, I had made something like a washing machine out of the spirits, but I was much better now. I could draw the dirtiness directly out of the material. It really made me feel like I had grown up a bit.

After drawing the water back out of her bed and cleaning it, I pushed open a nearby window and sent it to the roots of a nearby tree. The sunlight and breeze streaming into the room through the open window felt quite pleasant. The wind carried away the leftover smell in the room. With the help of the wind spirits, I dried out the bed, mattress, and sheets. I had already drawn most of the water out of them, so it only took a few seconds. The finishing touch was to make the bed myself, by hand.

In just a few minutes, Soleil's little mistake had been erased. I couldn't even hear her crying anymore.

I stepped outside, wooden sword in hand, to begin my morning practice. This morning's little affair had been dealt with, but I was sure the next day would be

just as lively. And even if not, there were plenty of other days after that one. This kind of routine would be repeated over and over.

But as Soleil grew up, they would eventually happen less and less, until they finally stopped altogether. That was why I found these temporary bits of strife in the morning fun and precious.



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Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored: Volume 7

by rarutori

Translated by Nathan Macklem Edited by Austin Conrad

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