

Enough with This Slow Life!  
I WAS REINCARNATED AS A  
**HIGH ELF**  
AND NOW I'M  
**BORED**

2

story by  
**rarutori**  
illust. by  
**ciavis**





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# CHARACTERS



### Kaeha's Mother (Kuroha)

Once suffered from tuberculosis, but recovered with Acer's help.



### Kawshman

Acer's master in magic and rival. Researching the production of relics.



### Nonna

Daughter of the owner of an inn in Janpemon.



### Acer

A whimsical high elf with a thousand-year life span. In addition to Spirit Arts and archery, he is also proficient in blacksmithing, swordsmanship, and magic.



### Airena

A seven-star adventurer. Acting as the representative of the elves.



### Oswald

Acer's master in blacksmithing. He returned to the land of the dwarves, aiming to become king.



### Kaeha

Acer's master in swordsmanship. Working hard to rebuild the Yosogi School.

Acer was reincarnated as a high elf, a race straight out of fairy tales who can live for a thousand years. One hundred and twenty years after becoming self-aware, he grew tired of his monotonous life in the forest and ventured into the outside world.

On his journey, he pressured the dwarf Oswald and the swordswoman Kaeha into teaching him their trades, exchanged his knowledge of blacksmithing for instruction in magic with Kawshman, and created his own magic sword. He enjoyed the seafood of the port town Saurotay, and indulged in the heavily wheat-based cuisine of Janpemon. His journey continued for years, led by his curiosity alone.

Now, after receiving word from the adventurer Airena, he heads to meet a half-elf child, born from a human father and captive elven mother in the incident in Ludoria years ago. He has no experience raising children, but has plenty of love to give to the young child he hopes will become his closest friend. His heart swelling with anticipation, he meets the young half-elf for the first time.

Acer's new journey into parenthood is about to begin!

# STORY







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# Chapter 1 — High, Half, and the City of Wheat

Let me take a minute to explain the geography of this world. That being said, I'm not an expert in that field, so I can only talk about the area around the Kingdom of Ludoria.

Just east of the Great Pulha Woodlands where I first emerged stood Ludoria itself, a fairly large nation compared to those on its borders. It had monsters which could be hunted for resources in the woodlands on its west edge, a wealth of mineral resources in its northern mountainous region, and a fertile eastern region producing an abundance of food. It was a diverse and stable nation, both culturally and economically.

In recent years, a number of the kingdom's noble families had been deposed, leaving the royal family's power and influence with less competition. So while the country looked strong from the outside, the loss of much of its ruling class, combined with the growing monster populations within its borders, meant the kingdom's future was anything but clear.

Paulogia lay directly to the south, a region I'd guess was about half the size of Ludoria. I didn't know much about it, but I could assume their porcelain and ceramics were famous across the world. They were on good terms with Ludoria, as much of their food was imported from their larger northern neighbor, but I couldn't say the same about their relations with the Vilestorika Republic on the continent's southern edge.

To the east of Paulogia was the Duchy of Kirkoim, making it southeast of Ludoria and northeast of Vilestorika. To be honest, I passed through it quite quickly on my journey, so I didn't learn much about it. Kirkoim was on good terms with Ludoria, Paulogia, and Vilestorika, allowing free passage for people and goods between them. It also occasionally acted as a mediator between Paulogia and Vilestorika. Heading northeast from there would take you to the Azueda Alliance, where Odine was located.

But north of Kirkoim were two nations further separating the Alliance from



Ludoria: Zyntes and Jidael. In the past, these nations had been at war with both Ludoria and the Alliance, but by this point, all conflict had ceased, and the area was largely peaceful. These good relations were likely due to the birth of another power to the northeast, Darottei. Situated directly north of the Alliance, this warmongering newcomer provided a common enemy that demanded all of their attention.

In summary, to the west of Ludoria were the Great Pulha Woodlands, to its south were Paulogia and Kirkoim, and to its east were Zyntes and Jidael. As for the North, that region was occupied mostly by mountains. It was too dangerous a location for people to go...and apparently a small nation of dwarves lay at its heart.

Beyond the northern mountains was the Empire of Fodor, which maintained a hostile relationship with Ludoria. The precarious mountain range between them had kept the conflict from escalating into a full-blown war, but they still built fortresses in those mountains to keep an eye on each other, and small skirmishes were common.

Anyway, that was quite a long explanation. My point is that when the elves left Ludoria, they moved to the forests in Paulogia, Kirkoim, Zyntes, and Jidael.

On my journey to pick up the half-elf child, I met up with my friend Airena in Sviej, the capital of Zyntes. She was an elf, so although it had been years since our last meeting, she looked more or less the same as the first day we met.

“It has been a while, Lord Acer. I suppose this is much like the last time we met,” she said with a laugh as she stepped into my room at the inn, in surprisingly good spirits.

It seemed talks with Ludoria were progressing well. According to her, while the royal family had seized the holdings of the nobles they had executed in their bid for power, managing the people of their territory had become quite an ordeal. The citizenry of the eastern reaches of Ludoria were in constant fear of another earthquake. Similarly, they were terrified of the elves, whose demand for an apology from the kingdom had yet to be met. After ignoring the elves for years, people began fleeing the area, afraid that the anger of the elves would



bring an even greater disaster than the one they had already experienced.

On top of that, with the elves having abandoned the nearby forests, the number of monsters emerging from them began to increase. Anxiety among the citizenry continued to grow, and crop yields dropped across the region.

A hit to the breadbasket of Ludoria wasn't just a local issue, though. For example, this would also impact the amount of food that could be exported to Paulogia. Prices of food within the kingdom would rise, general unrest would spread, and food exports would start to decline.

And all of this had happened after the royal family took direct control of the area. Their attempt to blame the executed nobles for the current state of affairs hadn't been enough to silence the demands for a solution.

No matter how strong Ludoria was as a nation—or rather, because of its strength as a nation—unrest among its people immediately piqued the interest of its neighbors. So in an attempt to keep this situation under control while they still could, they came to the table to negotiate with Airena and the elves. In all likelihood, the current king would bow to the demands for an apology within the next few years, and then step down from his position. The current crown prince was still too young to ascend the throne, so he would probably lead with the assistance of the current king's younger brother, the archduke. Resolving the unrest within Ludoria would then be up to those two and their skills, but it would at least resolve their conflict with the elves.

Once the apology had been made, some elves would start to return to their homelands and cull the monsters. I had an odd feeling I would be called upon at that point. Of course, not all elves would forgive the humans even after an apology, and the humans' fear of the elves wouldn't be so easily dispelled. But that wasn't an issue anyone was responsible for solving. That was the end of things, as far as I was concerned. The gulf between them would only be filled by time.



"Maybe it's a bit early to be saying this, but good work, Airena. I doubt anyone else could have achieved the same results."

About six years had passed since I had caused the earthquake in Ludoria.



From the perspective of an elf or high elf, barely any time had passed at all. I couldn't begin to imagine what it had taken to bring the negotiations to this point. It must have been very different from the carefree years I had spent in that time. Even up against an entire nation, Airena wouldn't take empty lip service. I imagined she had found herself in danger more than once.

As far as I was concerned, the actions of Ludoria's royal family couldn't be less interesting. The people I cared about were the citizens of Vistcourt, and Kaeha and her mother in the capital. As long as those lives weren't threatened, I couldn't care less about who sat on the throne. I really admired Airena for being able to stand up and work hard to resolve this situation, knowing she may have felt the same way.

"No, it was nothing. I was just following your example, Lord Acer, following my whims. I couldn't stand to let the nation where Clayas, Martena, and their child live fall to ruin." The mischievous smile she gave when she said that was the most charming side of her I had ever seen.

Of course, there were still plenty of problems. The forests the elves used to call home would need to be reclaimed from monsters. And of course, they would need to be repopulated. Convincing the elves to return to their old homelands, after just settling into new lives, would be backbreaking work.

But I was confident Airena would get it done. Persisting through any hardship and using every resource at hand to see their convictions through were the marks of what humans called a hero. Well, she was an elf, but I already saw her that way. There was no need to worry.

Setting that tangent aside, it was time to move on to the main subject. I started by trying to break from the solemn atmosphere we had created.

"By the way, Airena. I've been really looking forward to meeting this kid," I said, clapping my hands together. I was actually really excited about this. The burden a half-elf was born with would no doubt be heavy, but there was no reason for me to be gloomy about it. I had no experience raising children, but I had spent quite a bit of time thinking about the endeavor. So while I didn't think I'd be fit to be called a parent, if I was called upon to be their friend and

guardian, I had more than enough love to give.

But as if to try and dampen my enthusiasm, a sad expression rose on Airená's face. "Yes, he is here with me. Right now he is taking a nap in my room. I left the window open, so the wind spirits should inform us if he awakes."

Hearing that, I forced myself back into my seat. I see, he was napping. I'd feel bad for bothering him while he was trying to sleep.

But besides that, it seemed Airená had gotten quite a bit more comfortable with asking the spirits for help. It was one thing to call on them to attack something or create wind or water for you, but asking them to carry about a specific task once certain conditions had been met was surprisingly challenging. But she had said the spirits would inform her if the child awoke like it was nothing. Even among elves, she was likely among the greatest of spirit callers.

"But I have to ask you one more time, Lord Acer. Are you really okay with this?" she asked. "I do not doubt your love for the child. My concern is that his shorter life span as a half-elf will be a source of grief for you."

So she was concerned about what would happen when the child's life came to an end long before my own. Or perhaps she was just projecting her own feelings on me. After all, she had also chosen to part ways with Clayas, knowing she would far outlive him. But while I wouldn't say her concern was unwarranted, it wasn't especially necessary.

Of course, just as she feared, in a few hundred years when the half-elf died, I would certainly be crushed. But that would be the case whether I was a high elf or not. It wasn't something to worry about before even meeting someone.

"It's possible I could die tomorrow. I'm pretty sure I won't, but I can't say it's impossible. So I don't think it's worth worrying about something so far into the future. And if we're talking about life span, you'll die long before I do too. If I was worried about it, I wouldn't be able to have friendships with *anyone*. I don't want to live like that."

The only exceptions were other high elves and the spirits. Maybe that was why most high elves didn't open their hearts to anyone but their own kind. If so, that was a very lonely way to live.



In my previous life, one of my friends had said, “No matter how right we think we are in the moment, people are the kind of creatures to look back on their past choices and be baffled. The only thing regret is useful for is prompting self-reflection, so it’s far more important to live now without regrets.” The memory was so old, I couldn’t even remember what kind of person he had been, but those words had stuck with me. I wasn’t a human anymore, but I still wanted to make sure I lived without regrets.

Airena looked at me in surprise. I doubted she had given much consideration to the difference in our life spans before now. As obvious as it was, the fact she was a long-lived elf herself meant it probably never occurred to her. As someone who was going to die long before I would, she couldn’t share in that grief with me.

With Airena at a loss for words, a long silence stretched between us. I wasn’t sure how to say it, but that wasn’t what was important to me. Just because I’d live longer didn’t mean I wouldn’t associate with them. That went for humans like Kaeha, dwarves like Master Damned Dwarf, the half-elf child, and of course, Airena herself. Not even if it meant I would outlive them all and become a spirit of nature myself one day.

I just wanted to live to the best of my ability, taking a path with no regrets.



After finishing my conversation with Airena, and waiting some time for the half-elf child to wake up, I headed to their room.

Unfortunately, the atmosphere between Airena and I had been left a little awkward, but I imagined that would fix itself over time. Though I knew it was selfish of me, I figured that no matter what I did or thought, she would come to understand and accept it eventually, so I wasn’t especially worried.

I opened the door with a creak, revealing a child that looked to be about three years old by human standards, staring back at me with sleepy eyes. He must have thought I was suspicious from the start, but I couldn’t help it. Seeing such an adorable child staring up at me was like a lightning bolt to my heart. The impact made me want to crumple on the spot, but I forced my legs to move forward instead of buckle. Stepping up beside the bed, I groaned, holding a

hand to my chest.

Airena had already given me a brief description of him. Yes, him. I finally knew this child, beautiful and adorable as he was, was a boy. Kids are really something else.

But more importantly, he didn't have a name yet. Growing up among elves so far, he hadn't been especially concerned with getting one, but it was around this time that the community would come up with something to call him. The fact he didn't have one yet meant he hadn't been accepted as a part of the community. Was that because of the circumstances of his birth? Or was it because I said I'd adopt him?

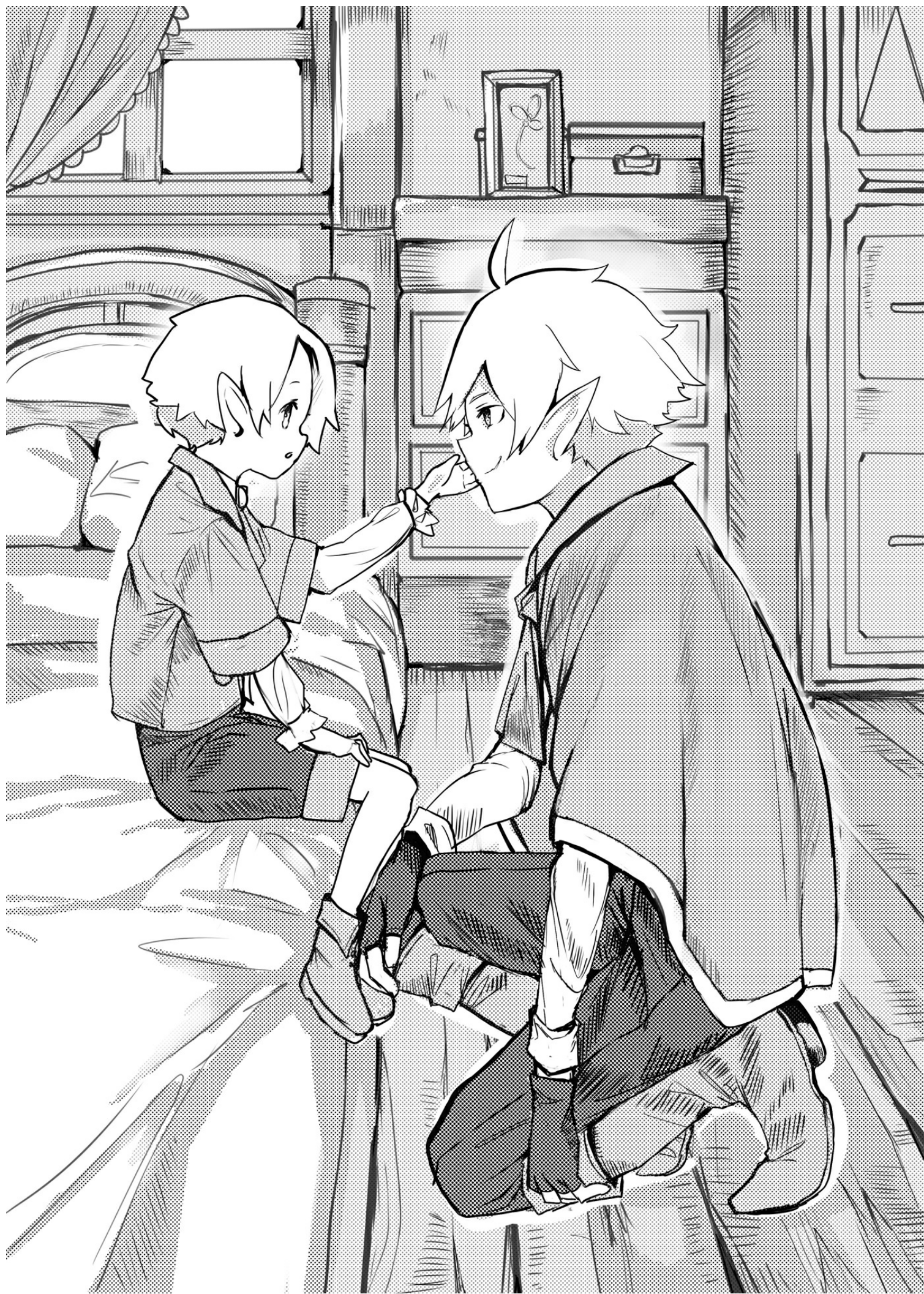
Considering I was still living on the road, I thought he would be better served by living in a community until he was old enough to survive a life like mine, but maybe that was a mistake. Maybe I should have headed to his hometown right away and spent a few years looking after him there.

But now wasn't the time for regrets or self-reflection. I'd do that later, not in front of him.

I crouched down in front of the bed to drop to the boy's level. He seriously was adorable. Would I really be okay? I could already feel myself becoming overprotective. As I drew closer, the boy stared intently at my face.

"Wow, you're glowing. It's so pretty..." Those were his first words to me.





*I'm not glowing, I'm normal!*

My instinct was to protest immediately, but I didn't want to scare him, so I managed to hold it back. It seemed the boy was born with good eyes. The glow he saw in me was the natural immortality of a high elf's soul. That was why most elves recognized me as a high elf immediately and dropped to their knees when we first met. In other words, he could see things no ordinary human could. He would be able to see the spirits.

That was a very auspicious start. It wouldn't really change anything between us if he couldn't...after all, I was already practically falling in love here. But if he could borrow the powers of the spirits, they would be a huge boon to him for life in human society. And most importantly, he would always be able to see these friends at his side. That was fantastic news.

The boy reached out timidly to touch my face, so I responded in kind. Someone watching from the outside might have been confused as to what we were doing, but I was having fun, and it seemed he was too. It was a perfect win-win situation. Which reminded me.

"You were born in winter, right?" Surprised at my sudden words, the boy's hand stopped. Well, I suppose he wouldn't know either way. But from what Airena had told me, he had been born in winter. "So from today on, your name is Win. I'm Acer. They also called me 'child of the maple.' From today on, I'll be your friend and guardian. Is that okay?"

Heart pounding, I gave him a name, gave him mine, and asked that question. Of course, regardless of how he responded, it had already been decided that I would be taking care of him. But I really wanted him to be okay with it too.

I doubted he understood what I really meant, but he was able to figure out that I wanted something, so he gave a small nod, his tiny fingers moving across my cheek again.

Man, I was over the moon. I was so glad I came to meet him. I was so glad I agreed to look after him. Above all, I was so glad he was born. Even if no one else would say it, that was a fact I could declare with pride.

A breeze blew in through the cracked open window, swirling around the



room. Rather than trying to confer a blessing or any such thing, it was more that the spirits of the wind had noticed I was celebrating inside and had come to celebrate with me.

Win's eyes went wide as he watched the spectacle in front of him. Whether it was for Win's sake, who still couldn't see the spirits very well, or because they were too excited to do otherwise, the wind spirits had come and made themselves very apparent.

And so our first meeting passed—a gentle, calm, and joyful occasion.



First contact between Win and I had gone splendidly, but there was a rather significant problem now rearing its head. I hadn't given even a moment's thought as to what we would do next.

In my defense, I had been so excited to meet Win, the thought had never occurred to me. And even if I thought of it, I was in no state to come up with anything. But if I just kept traveling around with no plan, it would only become a burden for him. That was too irresponsible, even for me. I couldn't bear to put him through that.

If Airena figured out that I had no idea what I was going to do next... I could stand the lecture, but there was a real possibility she'd demand to take care of me again. It wasn't like I couldn't support both Win and myself with blacksmithing, but as an elite adventurer, Airena's wealth was literally orders of magnitude beyond mine. Once Win got a bit older, being able to cut loose and play with him would be quite fun...but once you sank into the swamp of being coddled like that, it was difficult to break free. I was worried Win would end up growing into the kind of useless man who would never work. Even imagining that possibility put a huge weight on my heart.

As such, regardless of how much or how little, I would definitely have to work. While I worked, I would need someone else to take care of Win, like a housekeeper. But I couldn't hire just anyone. If I was going to leave my precious Win with someone for even a moment, I needed to trust them from the bottom of my heart.

The first people that came to mind were Kaeha and her mother, but at this

stage, thinking of heading back to Ludoria was a little premature. At the very least, I would have to wait patiently until Airena's negotiations had earned an apology from the crown. But even if it was just my selfish perception, Kaeha's mother felt like the closest thing to family for me. I really wanted Win to meet her someday...

Once that apology did come, going back to Ludoria to encourage the other elves to return to the kingdom wasn't such a bad plan. And Kaeha's Yosogi dojo would leave nothing wanting as far as security went.

The next person I thought of was Caleina, a woman I met in Saurotay. While personally I liked her and found her quite reliable, I couldn't really see myself leaving a child in the care of a spy.

There was also Kawshman, my student in blacksmithing and teacher in magic, but he had clearly said that he didn't like children. Even if he took a liking to Win, I got the feeling he would be a bad influence on him. Kawshman was quite capable as a teacher of magic, but he was more of a rival than a friend to me, and there were plenty of things I didn't want Win learning from him. I could practically hear Kawshman saying, "You're in no position to talk," but my point still stood.

Besides them...oh, right. If it wasn't for too long, there was someone who might work. She had still been a child when we last met, but five or six years had passed since then, so she should have been old enough for me to rely on by now. The girl I met in Janpemon, the city in the Duchy of Travoya. Her name was Nonna, right?

The stone ship floating in a sea of golden wheat. Yeah, I wanted Win to get a chance to see that too. Janpemon was a prosperous city, the food was delicious, and the people were kind. I still had the letter from Travoya's blacksmithing guild, so if it was only a year or two until returning to Ludoria was an option, staying in Janpemon seemed like a good idea.

Okay, it was decided. This was the perfect plan.

Making a sling out of cloth to hold Win to my chest, I left the capital of Zyntes behind, heading back for the Azueda Alliance. Win was old enough to walk on



his own, but still too young to have the stamina for walking between cities. Carrying him in my arms the whole way would be exhausting, so the sling would give me the extra support I needed.

Airena was returning to Ludoria to continue negotiations, so we parted ways at the inn in Sviej. The next time we met would likely be when the situation in Ludoria had changed, and I was able to return to Ludoria's capital.

"I am quite surprised. I never expected you to have thought so far ahead, Lord Acer. Ah, no, I don't mean that in a bad way. It is just that since you have the power to handle anything, you seem like the kind of person to decide how to deal with each situation as it comes..."

This was her response when I told her about my plan. She must have been quite worried about me to say something rude so casually, but I supposed that all stemmed from my past mistakes. How should I put it? It felt like something was urging me to do some self-reflection.

At any rate, the path in front of me was bright, leading into a shining, colorful world.

"Look, Win. There's a huge bird in the sky up there." I pointed up at the massive bird above us. Though it was quite far away, the fact it was large enough for us to see clearly meant it was almost certainly a monster. But that didn't matter to us. Seeing the creature soaring through the open air, Win was awe-struck. His open-mouthed wonder was adorable, and made me happy too.

The world was huge and full of things that would surprise us. And now, we were off to go find them. I would teach him about all kinds of things he hadn't learned in the forest, and we would learn even more together.

I had no doubt it would be fun for both of us.



Passing through Zyntes and Jidael into the Alliance, we took a boat down the river to Lake Tsia. After a short rest in the town of Folka, we took another boat south and west, bringing us close to Travoya. As a path I had already taken once, it went fairly smoothly. Unlike when I walked, the scenery changed rather rapidly, and it kept Win's rapt attention the entire journey.

Once we disembarked, it was only a short walk to Janpemon. Unfortunately, unlike my last visit, the wheat wasn't in season, but the huge fields still had a grandeur to them.

We had left on our journey immediately after meeting, so Win and I still didn't understand each other very well. My only impression of him was that he was a child, without much else to say. He seemed fond of me, and gave clear and honest reactions to his surroundings, but the fact he had yet to show much individuality was starting to concern me.

To put it another way, he was *too* well-behaved. That wasn't a bad thing per se, but if it was instilled in him by his upbringing rather than part of his natural character, it wasn't really something to be celebrated. Thinking about it seriously, such a small child being so restrained was rather sad.

Of course, our relationship had only just started, and we had way more time to spend together compared to humans, so there was no reason to rush things. We could take our time getting to know each other. We didn't really have any other choice.

Naturally it having been five or six years since my last visit, the guard at the gates had changed, but entry into the city went much smoother than last time. When I showed my master blacksmith's license and the letter of recommendation from the Travoya blacksmithing guild, I was immediately granted entry to the city.

Apparently, the sword I had made for them was still kept on display at the blacksmithing guild, and would be brought out for exhibitions at festivals. Even the gate guard had seen it. It was hard for me not to feel embarrassed hearing all that. Of course I was proud of the sword too, and it was much better to hear this story than that it was being used for some other crude purpose, but it still felt a little awkward.

After a big welcome from the gate guard, we made our way into the city. The city hadn't changed much in the years I had been gone, so I followed the map in my memory to the inn. But while the layout of the city hadn't changed, its people certainly had.

“Welcome! Are you here to stay the night? Or just for dinner...oh, an elf—wait, Mr. Acer?!”

The moment I stepped into the inn, I was greeted by the shocked voice of a girl that wasn't quite so young anymore. It was Nonna, one or two sizes...okay, significantly bigger, and looking quite a bit more mature than the small girl in my memories. She was still of the age that you would think to call her cute rather than beautiful, though.

It seemed that she remembered me after all. Patting Win's back to help soothe him after he was taken off guard by Nonna's sudden shouting, I gave her a smile and a nod.

“Long time no see. You've gotten quite big, haven't you? I'll be staying, but I'm hungry too, so dinner as well. For me and this little guy.”

The shock on her face grew even deeper as, still totally flustered, she led us up to the second floor. She brought me to the same room I stayed in on my last visit. The cost of the room was the same as before at fifty copper a night, but the meals had gone up a bit. Breakfast was now ten copper, and dinner fifteen. But if the food was as good as it was when I was here last time, it was still a great deal.

“Uh, welcome back, Mr. Acer. Is, umm, is this your son?” she stammered out while handing over the key for the room. It was kind of nostalgic to see her tripping over her words again. Last time it had been about whether I was an elf or not, wasn't it?

“Yeah. It's a bit complicated, but he's my kid now. Well, he's adopted, but I guess you can still say he's my son. Win, can you say hello to Miss Nonna?” Seeing him nod, I lowered him down to the floor. Once standing on his own feet, he looked up at her.

“I'm...Win,” he said quietly before stepping back, half hiding behind my legs. It really is impossible to express in words how adorable he looked. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who felt that way.

“Nice to meet you, Win! While you're staying here, feel free to ask me for anything!” Nonna immediately replied.



Perfect. That would make it a lot easier to ask her to help watch him while I worked. I doubted that's what she meant at all, but now that she had opened the door...

"Oh, that's right. I came to Janpemon because I was looking for someone to look after Win while I was doing my blacksmithing work. But not just anyone. I needed someone I could trust, and I thought of you." This seemed like a good opportunity, so I hit her with the question right away while resting a hand on Win's head. Though she hadn't said it to me, she *had* said "anything," so it would be hard for her to decline now... Well, if she said she was too busy with work, I would have to give up and find someone else, though. "Of course, I'm more than happy to pay you for the trouble, if you don't mind looking after him, since I'm planning to stay here for a year or two."

But it didn't look like I needed to worry about her refusing. I don't know whether it was because I had told her I found her reliable and trustworthy, or if it was because of how cute Win was, or if it was just excitement at the promise of a reward, but Nonna seemed ecstatic.

She clapped her hands to her cheeks. "I'm happy to hear you remember me like that, Mr. Acer! Ah, I'll have to ask my mom first, but I'll definitely make her agree! Let's have fun waiting for Mr. Acer to come back from work, okay, Win?" she answered with a bright smile.

I sighed in relief at her confident reply. Win still seemed at a bit of a loss, but I supposed that was to be expected at his age. He was bewildered by everything happening around him, but he'd get used to it soon enough. And I'd be here to help him adapt to his new environment too.

The sudden relief made my hunger much harder to ignore. Having grown up in the forest, Win didn't show much of a proactive appetite, so I was really excited to see how he'd respond to the food here. After all, it was good enough to satisfy even me, and Nonna promised she'd get us something good for a kid his age.

Patting Win on the head again, I went into our room to set down our belongings. My heart was positively dancing in my chest in anticipation of the life ahead of us.



Even if Nonna agreed to watch Win for me, that didn't mean I could just waltz off and start working on my blacksmithing. After treating us with kindness and offering a delicious meal, the boy's impression of her wasn't bad. In fact, it was very, very good. Watching him timidly bring the wooden spoon to his mouth, then seeing his eyes sparkle at the shock of the new flavor, was a delight. But that didn't mean he was fully comfortable around her. For at least the first month, I would need to stay with him to help build their relationship. Besides, I'd be crushed if he got so attached to Nonna that he didn't even notice me coming and going.

That day, Nonna was taking us on a tour of the city. Well, as much as we called it a tour, it was really just an excuse to enjoy some sweets we hadn't had for a long time. Nonna recommended a shop that made fruit tarts using produce from Ardeno, a city in the neighboring country of the same name. She insisted that I just had to try them, as well as Win. But once we left Janpemon, we wouldn't be able to indulge in these kinds of luxuries anymore, so we couldn't make it a habit.

Now that I thought back on it, there was that one farmer I saved in Ardeno... His name was Adjilte, right? The apple pie his wife had made for me was incredible. I would love to taste it again, but I didn't know if they'd even remember me.

Holding hands with Win, I walked to keep pace with his little legs. I noticed we were attracting attention from all around us. At first it was simple curiosity, but the majority of those looks quickly turned into friendly, welcoming smiles. At least for now, there was nothing hostile in them. I hadn't paid it much mind while traveling alone, but now that Win was with me, I was far more grateful for the safety of this city than its prosperity. Though perhaps it was that prosperity, a life where people didn't have to worry if they could put food on the table every night, which gave them the opportunity to coexist peacefully.

As I walked around town in admiration of this realization, and a little bit thankful for it, I noticed a man staring at me in shock. I felt like I remembered him from somewhere, deep in the recesses of my memory... Ah, right. He was a member of Travoya's blacksmithing guild. I had met plenty of them while

working here, so I didn't have a strong impression of anyone in particular. But unlike Nonna, he had already been an adult when we last met, so he was a bit easier to recognize.

I nodded in greeting, earning a pleased smile from him... But perhaps out of deference to Win and Nonna walking with me, he didn't approach, only returning a nod of his own. I was grateful for his consideration, but his reaction made me suspect the guild would have work for me soon.

Of course, that was great news for me. The fact that he remembered me...or at least remembered my work, and was happy to see me back, made me happy as well. I hadn't done any work in this city for five or six years, which was a significant length of time for humans. And besides, I had only worked here for a few weeks. But putting that aside, I had just decided to wait a while so I could spend time with Win. If they approached me with work, I'd have to decline. Even if it was a little painful...or extremely painful, I still had my priorities.

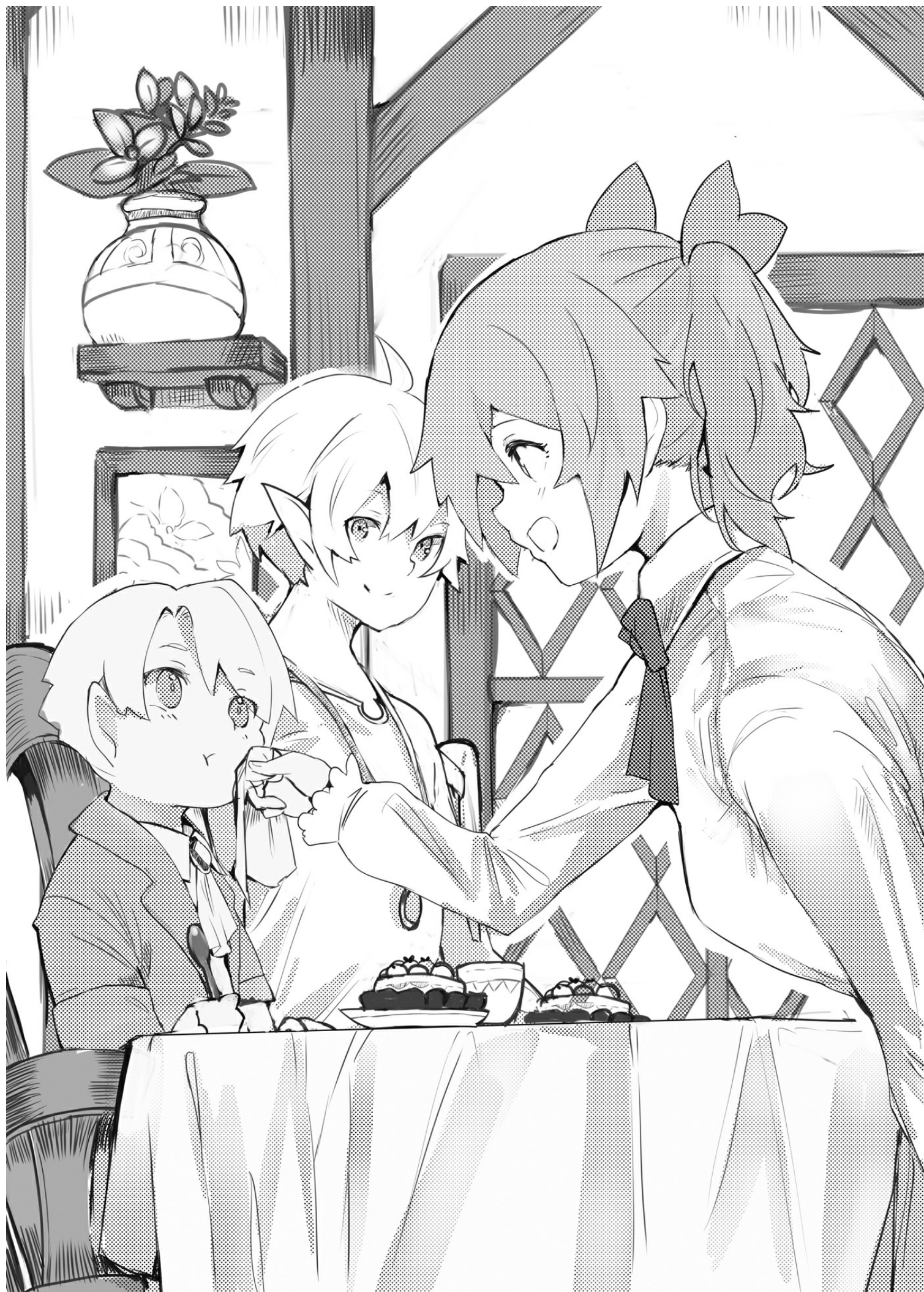
Around the time Win started to get tired of walking and slow down, we arrived at the tart shop. Though surprised to see Win and me, the staff seemed familiar enough with Nonna, who easily secured us a table. Judging by the smoothness of that interaction, it seemed Nonna was a regular here.

As we sat down and began on our tarts, the conversation turned to what I had done after leaving Janpemon on my last visit. I told her how I had gone through Ardeno, taken a boat across Lake Tsia, and eventually made it to Odine. One particular detail caught her interest...

"So elves like apples, huh? If we start serving dishes with apples, will we get more elves to visit...?"

...The fact that elves were fond of apples. She nodded as if in acknowledgment of something before wiping some leftover tart from Win's face.





The conversation was still beyond what Win could keep up with, but nevertheless, he seemed to enjoy the pleasant atmosphere between the two of us.

“Yeah, though I think these raspberry tarts are equally good. I guess elves just like fruit in general. Though really, I’ll eat anything. Grains, meat, fish, vegetables, you name it.”

Janpemon had the greatest variety of grain-based dishes I had seen anywhere in my travels. Meat was basically everywhere, so it was hard to pick a favorite among them. My favorite seafood couldn’t be found anywhere but Vilestorika though, since it sat on the coast. The Alliance had plenty of fish to go around thanks to Lake Tsia and the rivers sprouting from it, but the difference between freshwater fish and true seafood was huge. Each area had different native vegetables, so it was pretty hard to compare them. But the ones that came out of Pulha were extremely good, so maybe Vistcourt in Ludoria would rank higher. Though maybe it would be more accurate to call those wild plants than crop vegetables.

At Win’s age, long journeys on foot would be a struggle. Once he was a bit older, I wanted to take him on a journey around the world to sample all the food it had to offer. Of course, there was technically the option of going right at this moment by taking a carriage... But on the off chance we were attacked by bandits or monsters, I didn’t want to add my motion sickness into the mix. Oh, maybe I could just get a horse for Win to ride, and lead it on foot?

I was quite enamored with the idea of traveling. Though I wouldn’t force it on him, I really hoped Win would like it as much as I did. I wanted to see all sorts of places together with him. Unlike me, he didn’t have all the time in the world.



That first month passed in the blink of an eye. Win grew quite close to Nonna in the carefree time we spent together, so I finally bit the bullet and made my way to the blacksmithing guild. If I wanted to maintain that peaceful lifestyle for us, I’d have to start making money.

“Welcome! I suppose our meeting the other day doesn’t really count, so it’s been six years. I’m glad you decided to pay us a visit.”

The man I had met in passing on the street that day greeted me. As expected, he was quite happy and even relieved to see me. Had I taken so long to show up that he thought I'd already left the city?

"Long time no see. I hope you don't mind that I took some time to let the child with me get accustomed to his new environment. Do you have work for me?"

The man nodded. He explained three jobs and told me to pick whichever one best suited my circumstances. I really appreciated how quickly he brought me back in.

The first job was maintenance on the city guard's equipment, as well as replenishing anything they were short on. Of course, I wouldn't be expected to handle everything myself, so I'd be paid based on the amount and quality of my work.

The second was training the smiths in town. Apparently the example sword I had produced for the guild on my last visit had been a good influence on them. As embarrassing as it was for me to talk about, once those blacksmiths had heard I was back in town, a number of them began asking me to give them special instruction. The guild itself was responsible for keeping them from flooding my front door with requests. In exchange, even if I wouldn't take any apprentices, the guild wanted me to give them some sort of training.

The third was to attend an audience with the lord of the city, the Duke of Travoya. After seeing the sword I had made for the guild and hearing that it had been forged by an elf, it seemed the duke had taken quite an interest in me.

Out of these three options, there was really only one that I could reasonably take.

First of all, an audience with the duke was out of the question. Though I doubted I could do so forever, I wanted to avoid dealing with nobility for as long as possible. It may have been an honor for the people of this land, but for a traveling high elf like myself, such a relationship would be a needless shackle on my future.

The second option wasn't great either. Teaching blacksmithing to a single passionate apprentice was one thing, but I had no interest at all in instructing a



group. I had no desire to sell the skills Master Damned Dwarf had given me, especially in such a piecemeal fashion for mere profit.

“Then I’ll take the first job. I can work pretty fast, so being paid by the order is fine with me.”

The staff member responded with a bit of a strained smile. It seemed that even though the guild would have preferred I take either of the other two, he already knew I would only choose the first.

“Yes. With your skills, I imagine you’ll be able to earn plenty. However, if you refuse both of the other jobs, we may not be able to stop others from coming to you individually...” he explained hesitantly. In essence, he was saying that the guild wouldn’t be able to intervene if the duke sent someone, or if a blacksmith personally asked to apprentice under me.

That was... Well, I guess it made sense. I was plenty grateful for the month of peace they had given me. If I had to deal with visitors rudely interrupting my time together with Win, I wouldn’t have been happy.

“If anything happens, I’ll deal with it. Ah, but I’m not super familiar with the situation in Janpemon. Would you mind if I consulted with you?”

“Not at all,” the staff member smiled.

It wasn’t like any of the visitors were guaranteed to be bad people, so there was no point worrying about it now. If we were just speculating about what *might* happen, there’d be no end to it. Even if the duke sent a messenger, they were just as likely to be polite, interesting, and have a good sense of humor as they were to be heavy-handed and oppressive. If someone came asking to be my apprentice, there was always a chance I could take an interest in their passion. It was important to try and predict what could go wrong and make preparations for that, but it was just as important not to get obsessed with planning for every possibility.

“You are welcome to use the forge here as you did before. I am quite honored to be able to work alongside a smith of your caliber again, Mr. Acer.”

After a firm handshake, the man led me to the familiar forge. Nonna had grown quite a bit, and the staff here had certainly grown older, but the forge

looked just as it did the day I last saw it. With a happy, nostalgic feeling in my heart, I ignited the furnace and awoke the sleeping fire spirits.



As one would expect, taking on work for the blacksmithing guild meant I would have less time to spend with Win. But that wasn't necessarily all bad. For example, thinking about returning home to find Win waiting for me somehow helped me focus on my work during the day. Repairing the fittings on armor, sewing up what was damaged, reinforcing it, polishing it, oiling it...until suddenly, the sun was setting. I would then head back to the inn, where Win would come out to meet me. It made me really, really happy.

Alternatively, I'd take a hammer to damaged weapons to beat them back into shape, or melt the worst cases down to recast them. I made new pieces, both cast and forged, and when I ran out of materials or fuel, I'd order more from the guild. Six days passed by in no time at all.

On the seventh day, I'd go walking around town with Win. Seeing how much he looked forward to my days off made them even more fun, and the way he expressed it was super cute.

There were plenty of other good influences around him as well. Spending all day with Nonna, who had grown up in Janpemon, he quickly became acquainted with all sorts of people around town. It was important for him to meet with other children around his level of development, though they weren't the same age. Children his size, some slightly bigger, some slightly smaller. He was slowly learning that he needed to approach all of them differently.

In short, yeah, his world was starting to expand. It was something I never could have given him if it was just the two of us. Though really it hadn't been that much time since we had first met, so even the relationship between the two of us was still under construction.

I had metal to hammer, a furnace to keep fresh with the use of a bellows, and a gathering of fire spirits I had to always check on. I listened to what Win did that day, and told him about mine. I continued my sword practice, performing the same number of swings every day, and if I had spare time, I studied my rituals... Ah, as much as there was never enough time in the day, it was a busy

but gentle life.

Of course, not everything went well. Sometimes Win would be sent home crying by the other kids in the neighborhood, and sometimes I would get bothered by people demanding I take them on as an apprentice. When Win was a bit older...maybe around ten in human terms, I'd teach him how to fight with his hands so he could deal with other kids picking fights with him, but he was far too young for that now.

As for the prospective apprentices, none of them were really interested in learning from me. All they wanted was the fame of being able to claim they had learned under an elf, so I politely asked them to leave. In a very dwarven way.

It was one thing to deal with rowdy fishermen or blacksmiths, but a fistfight wasn't the best way to resolve each and every encounter. So when I did eventually teach Win how to fight, it would be after I had taught him to tell the difference between fighting as a form of communication and senseless violence. When that day did come, I could make some gloves for us out of the greedboar leather. But there was a big difference between a brawl and real combat where your own life is at stake.

Once the situation in Ludoria calmed down, if we went to live at Kaeha's dojo, Win would almost certainly pick up swordsmanship to some degree. I wanted him to experience some other things before it took over his life. Archery would be far too much for him at this point, though. His short limbs and weak build wouldn't be able to handle the strain of a bow.

I could teach him magic, or at least how to manipulate his internal mana, but without the proper knowledge to back it, that could lead to incredible danger. If I was going to teach him magic at all, it would have to wait until he could read and write, and until he had enough experience in life to develop a more resilient spirit. Even using Fairy's Silver to check his aptitude for magic ran the risk of teaching him how to manipulate his mana on his own, so I had no plan of doing so while he was still a child.

That left very few things I could teach Win at this point, but there was one obvious one: what the rest of the world called Spirit Arts.



On one of my days off, I took Win up to the top of a hill near Janpemon. It was like a mini hiking trip. Nonna looked like she really wanted to come, but as much as I'd have loved to invite her, today it had to be just the two of us. It would have been fine if we were actually just going hiking, but someone with such a strong, cheerful personality would distract him from taking notice of the subtle, faint presence of the spirits.

Climbing all the way to the top of the hill was a bit much for Win, so once he had his fill of walking, I carried him the rest of the way. As if the weather was trying to help out, we were blessed with a gentle sunlight and pleasant breeze at the top. Looking down from our vantage, we could see Janpemon and the surrounding area at a glance.

"Man, what a view."

Still holding Win, I sat down on the grass. With an environment like this, the rest would be easy. Even the spirits, especially the wind spirits that always hung around Win, were restlessly waiting for us to give them something to do.

Calling it something fancy like Spirit Arts felt like kind of an exaggeration to me, since really it was just asking the spirits for help. There wasn't much of an art to it. There were a number of other elements that came into play, like the skill to properly visualize what you wanted to accomplish, the ability to sympathize and empathize with the spirits, and the control to prevent more damage than you intended, but all of that could be saved for much later.

The fundamentals were understanding the heart of the spirits and of nature, deepening your bond with them, asking them for help, and being thankful afterwards. I guess explaining that to a child would be a challenge. Basically, if you got along well with the spirits, they would be willing to do small things for you. They actually enjoyed being relied on.

"All you have to do is ask them for something, but that might be tough for you right now, huh?"

I murmured, looking down at Win in my arms.

He responded properly to anything said to him, and would get quite happy.

He had even started growing attached to people and things. But he was still struggling to act on his own will. That was part of why I wanted to teach him how to work with the spirits. It was important to be able to want something, to seek something for yourself, and not just take what's given to you.

At any rate, the best place to start was with something he was interested in. I reached into the bag on my back, pulling out some of the many leaves we had collected on our walk up here.

*"Spirits of the wind."*

At my words, a gust of wind picked up the leaves, sending them dancing through the air. I had grown quite used to seeing spectacles like this, but for Win, it was like something out of a fairy tale. Still in my arms, he reached out for one of the fluttering leaves, eyes glittering, but the wind spirit pulled the leaf away from him with a cackle as it danced through the air. When I opened my bag again, the wind gathered all the leaves together and sucked them inside.

Win looked up at me, blinking in surprise.

"Now why don't you try? Don't worry, just ask them how you want the wind to blow. You can just say 'blow.' Yeah, it's fine. The spirits want to play with you too."

Clearly nervous, Win reached into my bag and pulled out a few leaves. And until the sun set that night, the wind on top of that hill never stopped blowing.



"Now that I think about it, are you not going to send Win to church?"

About a year had passed since we came to Janpemon.

I had to admit to being a little confused by Nonna's question. I mean, sure, it's not like I didn't understand why she'd ask, but...it felt like Nonna had forgotten we were planning on leaving the city soon.

Seeing my confusion, Nonna gave a quiet gasp before adopting a sad expression, clearly remembering something. It seemed she actually had forgotten. I had clearly made her upset, even if it wasn't my intention. Though, to be honest, the fact she was sad about our departure coming closer showed

just how much she'd enjoyed our time together. I was really grateful for that. But she had been taking it for granted, so much so that she forgot it would eventually come to an end.

"Hmm. Church, huh? Teaching him to read and write would be great, and it would also be a good chance for him to interact with other kids." Feeling my conscience pricked, I pretended I hadn't caught her expression and continued the conversation. However, I didn't really like the idea of Win going to church. That wasn't at all because we'd eventually be leaving Janpemon, though.

I hadn't had much interaction with them, but the church in this world played a huge and varied role in the lives of the people, far more extensively than any single institution I'd known during my previous life as a human. When a child was first born, the parents would take them to the church before even registering their name with the government, seeking to have the child acknowledged by the god worshiped there. In the case of smaller villages that didn't have proper governmental offices, the church took on the responsibility of keeping a register of the townsfolk, which they would then send up to the lord of the region. Marriages were held in the church, requiring the acknowledgment of the gods to be official. And at the end of one's life, the funeral and burial occurred at the church as well.

But that wasn't all. They also taught children literacy and mathematics, managed orphanages, and provided food for those unable to support themselves. Of course, it was also a place of faith, where they worshiped their god. The role of the church in society was very wide in scope, and so it was very important to the community.

Schools, academies, and other educational institutions existed in some countries and regions, but they didn't teach basic things like reading, writing, and math. They were more specialized institutions, teaching advanced subjects like warcraft, magic, and politics. For example, though I never attended them, there were the three academies of magic in Odine.

But that aside, there were really three reasons I didn't want to send Win to church.

The first was that no matter what other roles it served, the church was fundamentally a religious institution. The primary religion of this area was one that worshiped a god of the harvest. This was the religion for which my acquaintance Martena was a priest. Their teachings were remarkably gentle, claiming all people were equal as children of the earth, and called their adherents to live a life of gratitude.

I had heard that the lands to the west of Pulha were dominated by a religion that claimed humans were the highest form of life in the world. I felt lucky I had ended up in a land that hadn't been influenced by such a belief system.

So if Win decided he wanted to become a disciple of this god of the harvest, I wouldn't really have a problem with it. But I didn't want to introduce him to a group that would teach their beliefs as indisputable facts while he was still so young and impressionable. Even if the harvest god taught that all people of all races were equal, it was still a religion that treated humans as the baseline for their value system.

The gratitude from those who worked the earth for their food and those who lived in the forests was naturally quite different. For example, those who worked the earth through farming and believed in the harvest god would treat any crop they grew as a blessing or gift from the earth itself. But for those who lived in the forests, the plants and animals born from the earth were no different. Even if both groups clearly obtained their food from the earth, there was a subtle difference in the way they viewed things.

It wasn't really an issue of who was right or wrong, though. I didn't even think those from the West, who claimed humans were inherently superior, were necessarily in the wrong. From what I had heard, it was a land populated by large and powerful groups of people with animal characteristics, known as beastfolk. Human settlements were always under considerable threat from them. In order to unite the humans living there to provide an organized front against the beastfolk, they had created a system of belief that taught they were superior, bolstering their confidence and morale. Also, according to the mythology of this world, there used to be beings known as "demons." So while the beliefs of those western people were inconvenient for me, I wouldn't claim they were inherently wrong.



...But that's besides the point. As someone who would be a friend of the spirits, I wanted Win to come up with his own view of the world, rather than be influenced by the opinions of others. If he grew up and then decided to devote himself to the harvest god's teachings, I would have no objections at all.

Setting that long explanation of my first reason aside, the second reason was the existence of the Divine Arts.

Divine Arts, also known as Psychic Arts, involved brutal training to refine one's mind and spirit, turning one's faith into a force that could bring about miracles. Simply speaking, it was like being psychic. While teaching children literacy and math, the churches also tested them for aptitude with the Divine Arts, sending anyone who showed promise off to their headquarters for training. Families of such children were rewarded very handsomely financially, and in order to prepare them for a life of leading the church, the children were given an excellent education in addition to training their powers.

But I didn't really care about the money, and I didn't want to risk even the possibility of Win and I being separated. So I didn't want him attending church. That wasn't something I could really share with others, though.

The final reason was the difference in life spans between Win and the other children. Or more specifically, the difference in the rate he would grow. For example, when I was a child, it took me ten years to achieve the same level of growth as a human child would accomplish in one year. As a half-elf, the difference wouldn't be quite so extreme in Win's case, but he would still grow two or three times slower than the other children.

To put it simply, if he grew up surrounded by human children, all of them would leave him behind. That was a problem Win would inevitably have to face someday, whether I liked it or not. As a half-elf, time would be different for him than for humans, elves, and especially for high elves like myself. But there was a proper time to confront him with that problem.

At the very least, I didn't want it to be a problem he had to confront thanks to the innocent, but no less cruel, curiosity of the other children around him who didn't understand his situation.

But I was unsure how to express my feelings to Nonna. I was sure she understood that his life span was different from those around him, and that elves and humans held different religious beliefs. But I couldn't expect her to understand how time flowed differently for us, or the subtler differences in our worldviews. What was obvious to her wasn't at all obvious to me. I imagined it would be different for Win as well.

The easiest solution would be to avoid the question altogether. If I told her it was because we were travelers, because we were of a different race, or because I didn't like the idea, I suspect she would have been understanding enough not to pry any further. And in a short time, we'd be leaving Janpemon anyway. But the fact remained that our life in Janpemon had only been made possible by her support. I couldn't brush her off so easily.

"...I'm not sure I can put it into words very well, but I can try my best. It's kind of a long story, though. I'm an elf...well, a high elf, and Win is a half-elf. The length of our lives is different from that of humans, and I don't just mean our life spans."

So I didn't. Sitting her down, I started explaining from the beginning. First, I guess I'd have to start with the fact I wasn't just an elf like she thought.



The work of a parent, or guardian, or whatever you wanted to call it, was extraordinarily difficult. I felt like it would be considerably easier to escort someone on foot through the Great Pulha Woodlands than raise a child. It entailed so much more than just protecting their life. You had to understand their thoughts and feelings, treat them with proper respect, give them the things they needed, know what limits to impose... Just keeping them alive was only the beginning. I had proudly declared I would take care of Win myself, but I doubted I would have been able to actually keep him happy without the help of Nonna and her parents who owned the inn.

When I lived in Vistcourt, there were quite a few families who lived near Oswald's forge where I worked. The parents I had met there all raised children like it was the obvious thing to do, but now I understood there was nothing

obvious about it. Though I'm sure there were plenty of exceptions out there, the parents I saw all gave everything they had to raise their children properly. Providing food for yourself was easy enough, but providing for your children, while also teaching them what they needed to sustain themselves one day, was incredibly challenging.

It occurred to me that I had learned a lot while living in the Forest Depths, and though not necessarily from parents, I was raised by the high elf community as a whole. Maybe leaving them all behind without even a word of thanks was childish of me.

Sitting in my arms, Win turned to look up at me, sensing something change in my demeanor. Hmm. Self-reflection was all well and good, but it shouldn't be done in a way that upsets your children. After patting Win on the head, I laid out some copper and silver coins on the table in front of us.

"Okay, how much money is this in copper?"

At my question, Win started counting off his fingers.

A single silver coin was worth one hundred copper coins. Ten silver coins made up a small gold, and ten small golds made a large gold, so the gap between copper and silver was particularly challenging. But for most people, small and large golds were rarely used, so calculating between silvers and coppers was absolutely necessary for daily life.

Though Win looked about three or four in human terms, he was actually seven years old now. Compared to a seven-year-old human, he would come across as mentally underdeveloped, but he was a bit above a three or four-year-old. The problem I had given him was difficult, but if I explained it properly, he was smart enough to figure it out.

Though it wouldn't be while we were in Janpemon, I would someday give him a small allowance, so he would need to learn how to use money. You could use money to get the things you wanted, but the money disappears when you use it, and it's not easy to get more. By giving him a small amount to work with, he'd have to learn how to meet his desires with limited resources.

In order to do that, and to avoid being cheated by others, he'd need to know basic math. That said, rather than worrying about addition, subtraction,

multiplication, and division, we were only working on counting right now.

“Two silvers?” Win looked up at me for confirmation, and I nodded.

“That’s right. One silver is worth a hundred coppers. So if there’s two silvers...” I prompted him. I didn’t care too much if he couldn’t find the answer on his own, I could lead him to the answer for now. As long as he didn’t give up thinking, if I patiently kept repeating these problems with him, he’d start to figure them out on his own.

After my conversation with Nonna about sending Win to church, she began teaching him to read and write during the day. Realizing we would leave one day, she had wanted to do something for him. So while I left that to her, at night we would focus on learning numbers.

I really couldn’t overstate how thankful I was to Nonna. At this point, Win probably didn’t understand what the point of all this learning was. That was almost always the case with children this young. But even with me, Nonna, and the other adults all taking care of him, he had a great appetite for learning. In whatever form it took, Win’s expression as he counted the coins spoke volumes about how happy it made him.

Though the circumstances of his birth were a bit complicated, there was nothing we could do about that now. All I could do was give him my everything, and try to fill in what had been lacking in the years before we met. Enough to wash away everything he had missed.

“Hundred eight!” Win declared, looking up at me proudly.

*Uh, where did that second silver go?*

Apparently while counting the coppers, he had forgotten there were actually two silver coins. Well, at least he remembered that a silver was a hundred coppers. But seeing his proud little face, I couldn’t help but pat him on the head.

Oh well. I’d point out his mistake and we’d try again. I wouldn’t get upset with him for making a mistake, as that would hurt his desire to learn.

I thought back to long, long ago, before I had been born in this world to the parents that had raised me as a human... The memories were quite vague, but I



remembered them being extremely patient. Even when it felt like I was making no progress at all, they explained it to me over and over. They would exaggeratedly praise me whenever I made the smallest amount of progress, enjoying the process with me and always smiling.

I wanted to do the same. The peaceful days Win and I spent together were invaluable to me.



“Acer...” Win pressed a tear-stained face into my shoulder as I carried him. Unable to think of anything I could say to comfort him, I settled for rubbing his back. If we turned around, we’d be faced with the wheat fields of Janpemon. But I could only keep walking forward, heading for the Kingdom of Ludoria.

About a year and a half after we settled down in Janpemon, a letter arrived from Airen, informing me that we could finally return to Ludoria. Of course, my maintenance work for the city guard had long since come to an end by that point. In recent days, I had been making farming tools like hoes and sickles, as well as military equipment for the defense of North Zaile. I hadn’t finished everything I needed to do, but I had completed every job assigned to me, so I could leave without regrets.

But that was only in reference to my blacksmithing work. After a year and a half of building up relationships there, and after how close he had grown to Nonna, there was no way Win would feel the same way. Especially since he had recently started to express himself more proactively. The day I told him we were going to start making plans to leave, he instantly refused and started bawling.

Ah, that was definitely a sign of his growth. In a way, I was quite happy to see it, as proof that we had provided a good environment for him here. But no matter how much either of us wanted to stay, our future course had already been decided.

Of course, leaving Win here and going back by myself wasn’t an option. On several occasions I had investigated the option of staying in Janpemon longer, but came up with the same answer every time. The Kingdom of Ludoria

absolutely needed help with curbing the growing monster populations. Airena would no doubt demand as little of my help as possible, but the fact she asked for me at all meant it was a problem too big to handle herself.

In other words, if I didn't act now, people would die. I couldn't just turn a blind eye to the suffering of Ludoria's people so I could have a happy life here with Win, nor did I want to. For example, if Airena herself was seriously injured or killed, I'd never be able to forgive myself. I imagine Win would feel the same way.

I could have left Win in Nonna's care and headed back to Ludoria alone, but there was no way she had the power to protect him from the ill intent of anyone who came after him for being a half-elf. Janpemon was a peaceful city inhabited by good people, but it was visited by many travelers. The looks he drew stopped at curiosity because there was an armed adult elf always at his side. If anything ever happened to him, I would hear of it from the spirits of the wind and come running.

So my only choice was to take Win with me and leave. There was no other way.

Even if we didn't travel around much after reaching Ludoria, Win would have to say goodbye to his friends many times in his life. I wanted him to learn that such goodbyes weren't an occasion to mourn, but to look forward to being reunited. When he realized how different he was from the people around him, I wanted him to be surrounded by those who understood him, by my friends.

Those were all part of it too, but the number one reason was for Win's own safety.

I had said everything I could to try and console Win as he sobbed. I told him I would stop working so we could stay together, that this wasn't goodbye forever, that there were plenty of new friends waiting to meet him, that I would always be together with him, and so on.

It really felt like a contest of endurance. Seeing his tears broke my heart, but at the same time made him look adorable, so the damage kind of canceled itself out. Actually, it ended up being mostly a positive, being able to see him express

himself so clearly.

In other words, there was no way I'd lose.

After quite a while, he finally grew tired of crying and accepted my promise that someday, the two of us would definitely come back here. But that would probably not be until after he came to terms with how different time would be for him than everyone else.

The next day, the two of us went out of town to a nearby river to pick up stones. Of course, these weren't just normal rocks. We talked there with the spirits of the water and the earth, looking for jewels that had been polished as they were brought down the river from far away. Basically, it was a treasure hunt. There had been reports of people finding crystals, garnets, and jade around the river there. Actually finding something like that was extremely rare, but seeing the young Win searching so desperately, the spirits couldn't help but want to lend a hand.

By sunset, Win had uncovered a beautiful piece of garnet. I then took it to the blacksmithing guild—along with Win, who normally was never allowed inside—and worked it into a pendant with some gold and silver. We were making a present for Nonna, to thank her for the time she spent together with us.

We headed back to the inn, where Win stretched as best he could to put the pendant around her neck while she crouched down on the floor. Try as she might, the poor girl just couldn't hold it back any longer. She burst into tears, naturally prompting Win to do the same. Her parents, and even the other guests at the inn joined in, creating a scene where everyone was crying but me.

I mean, everyone else losing it made me feel calmer, for some reason. It's not like I didn't feel anything, but I was very used to saying goodbye to people.

The day we would leave finally came, and while Win bravely managed to hold it together until the moment we left, as he watched Janpemon shrink into the distance behind us, he finally gave in and started crying again. But that was fine, I thought. He could cry it all out, and when he was too tired to continue, he could sleep. He could cry as many times as he wanted. I would always be right at his side, and those tears would always return.

He would find many more opportunities to cry in the future. He would experience even greater joy, sometimes anger, and all sorts of other things as he grew up. So without a word, to the sound of Win's sobs, I walked the long road back to Ludoria.

## Chapter 2 — The Curse No Sword Can Cut

Lowering Win and our luggage to the ground, I pulled out my bow and quickly strung it. Win looked up at me in confusion, so I gave him a smile before firing an arrow up into the air. Putting the bow down to rest on my bag, I held out both hands open in front of me. A bird soon fell into them, my arrow punched through its neck.

*Dinnertime.*

The sun was already setting, and the next city was still quite far away. We'd have to spend the night camping, so this was the fastest way to get us something to eat. Win looked up at me with sparkling eyes. There was no trick in what I had done, but to him it must have looked like magic. I was pretty good with a bow, and I was glad to see Win take an interest in it, but he wouldn't be able to start learning archery until he was a bit older. Besides, there was important work for him to do right now.

"Okay, Win. Let's pluck the feathers off this bird. If we want dinner to taste good, we'll have to work fast."

After removing its head and holding it upside down to drain the blood, we began plucking feathers. That was the first step to turning a bird into food. Of course, being only as developed as a human four-year-old, Win's attempt at help would serve to slow the process down more than anything else. But a life of being carried, eating, and sleeping, broken only intermittently by small stretches of walking, would be no good for his growth. In some way, no matter how small, I wanted him to feel like he was making a difference. So putting the bird between us, we got to work stripping it of feathers together.

After a simple meal of grilled poultry with a bit of salt for seasoning, I sat Win on my lap and we watched the fire spirit spinning around in our campfire. What was it that made this spirit twirl like that? It was pretty odd behavior, even for a fire spirit.



Spirits were greatly influenced by their environment, but also had their own unique characteristics. For example, among those who lived in furnaces, some would love making the fire as hot and energetic as possible, while others preferred to raise the temperature slowly. Some of that would come from the construction of the furnace they lived in, but the rest of their behavior was down to their individual natures.

With a full belly and a warm fire, Win was starting to get sleepy. Tonight's meal was clearly a step down from what we'd enjoyed in Janpemon. We couldn't make anything too elaborate out in the field, and I was a rather mediocre cook to begin with, so it only made sense our meal would fall short of the professional cooking he was used to.

But even so, he ate quite a bit. Maybe the journey so far had left him especially hungry, or maybe he had really enjoyed helping to prepare the food. Either way, he had eaten plenty and was now feeling sleepy. It was a natural reaction, one that was good for his growth.

Pulling a cloak out from our bag, I spread it over him like a blanket. At this time of year, the nights had started growing quite chilly. At that moment, I noticed something. Ah, the spirit in the fire was all worked up because it was trying to make it hotter. It was doing its best to keep us warm.

A gust of wind into the fire sent the spirit spinning even faster. This was really a kind spirit. Somehow, realizing that made the fire feel warmer, so I threw some extra wood on the campfire. The spirit stopped its spinning to give me a little bow of thanks, then got right back to it.

We had left Janpemon behind, making it out of the Alliance and into Kirkoim. The fastest way back to Ludoria would have been to take a ship up the river and travel through Zyntes and Jidael. Traveling by boat was a lot faster than by foot, and the path was considerably shorter than this one.

You might wonder why I had chosen to take such a roundabout route back into the country. That was because the shorter, direct way would have brought us in from the East. The eastern reaches of Ludoria was the site of the earthquake that the elves—or more specifically, that I—had caused. The people

there still feared us, so I didn't want to bring Win to a place like that.

On the other hand, Kirkoim maintained a good relationship with Ludoria, and many travelers entered the kingdom through it. We couldn't avoid standing out due to being elves, but at least there was still a much lower chance of running into trouble.

Going so far out of my way to avoid trouble felt kind of out of character for me, but considering the warm little bundle in my arms right now, I was fine with it.

The relationships we formed with others were no doubt shackles on us. It restricted our freedom and weighed us down, but that didn't mean they were something to be hated. I knew that when the shackle was released and I was free once more, I'd greet that day with a heavy heart. But I would also experience a freedom greater than I had ever known before. I was terrified of that future, but also excited for it. Either way, for those of us who lived so long...because of our long life spans, we could cherish the time spent being held down by this baggage.

Keeping an eye open on our surroundings, I started to doze off. Before I knew it, the sky had already begun brightening up again. The campfire had gone out, and I wondered if I'd ever find that strange, spinning fire spirit again someday.

Before Win had an accident, I made sure to wake him up and take him to the bathroom. I then let him sleep a little more, making plans to reach the next city that day.



Wolfir, the capital of Ludoria, was a prosperous city where people and goods from all over the kingdom gathered. It hadn't seemed to change at all since the first day I had visited. The gazes of the people around us were a little different though, the usual curiosity and awe mixed here and there with hostility. Feeling Win squeeze tighter to me, I rubbed his back to try and soothe him as we walked.

Surprisingly enough, when I showed my blacksmith license at the gate, they had let me into the city quite easily. Maybe they had kept some records of me since my last visit.

“Oh! It’s that freeloader elf! So you’re back, huh?” As I walked the road leading to the dojo, I was accosted by a happy, familiar voice. Turning to look, I saw...uh, if I recalled correctly, a man who ran a store I’d frequented back when I lived here. He had gone completely bald since the last time I saw him, so he looked very different from what I remembered, but I was confident in my guess.

“Ah, are you the butcher?” My question gave the impression I wasn’t confident at all, but the butcher responded with a broad smile and a hearty laugh, so I must have been right.

“Yes sir. You made a cleaver for me once. It’s been quite a long time, hasn’t it? Well, I heard there was all sorts of stuff going on. Ah, you’re heading to Kaeha’s, right? Hold on a sec... Here, take this with you.”

The butcher ran back into his shop, then came out with a huge side of pork.

*Okay, come on, that’s way too much.*

There was no way I could carry that as I was now. I set Win down, using one hand to carry the meat and the other to hold his hand. Yeah, it was super heavy. But I guess that just showed how happy he was to see me again. I thought it was a bit too much, but I had never imagined someone would react like this before I even made it to the dojo.

“Thank you. I’ll probably be staying in the capital for a while, so I can make a fresh new cleaver for you if you’d like.” I couldn’t help but smile. Kindness from others never failed to improve my mood.

“Fantastic. I’ll look forward to it, mister elf. And if you ever need some meat, come on down to my place, kid! I’ve got the best in the city!”

Win nodded eagerly, a little bewildered at first by the butcher’s appearance, bright personality, and especially the promise of meat.

With Win’s hand in my right and a colossal side of pork in my left, I struggled my way up the steps to the dojo. I could hear lively shouting coming from inside, giving the place quite a different atmosphere than it had on my last visit. It seemed Kaeha had managed to rebuild the Yosogi school after all.

As I made to step through the front gate, the men—who I supposed were

Kaeha's students—stopped what they were doing.

“Who are you? This is the Yosogi School dojo. It's not open to the public...wait, an elf?” Realizing I was an elf, the students stared at me in shock.

I picked out one of the more reserved-looking students and pushed the side of meat on them. Seriously, it was so heavy, I was just trying to get rid of it. Win was heavy, but I could deal with that. As much as I liked pork, I didn't *love* it. The student accepted the gift with a bewildered expression, confirming I had made a good choice.

Looking around at the one, two, three...eight students surrounding me, I pondered what to do. I had walked inside just like in old times, but it only made sense that the students would see me as an outsider and stop me. Seeing the once-abandoned dojo being properly guarded like this made me feel a little proud.

“Not open to the public, huh? Hmm. I feel like I'm still a member, though.” As I spoke, I looked deeper in to see a dignified-looking woman walking up from the back of the dojo. The majestic air she carried herself with almost made her unrecognizable, but there was no doubt in my mind this was a slightly older Kaeha. The one thing that surprised me most about her, though...

“Yes, he is most certainly a member. I told you all of him before, did I not? About my very first student, who rebuilt the dojo with me and then left on a journey?”

At Kaeha's side were two children. At her right was a boy and to her left a girl, both looking to be seven or eight years old. There was no mistaking the traces of Kaeha's features in their faces. The two of them looked at me with nervous gazes, on guard, but also filled with anticipation.

“I guess it hasn't quite been ten years yet, but welcome back, Acer. This is...”

As she looked to Win, I nodded. She knew the situation of the elves and the nobles from back when I lived here with her.

“Thanks, I'm back. Yeah, this is my adopted son, Win. He's a kid from that incident.”

She had been able to guess his circumstances at a glance.





Her face had shown understanding since the moment she saw him.

“I see. How very like you. Please feel free to take your old room for the both of you. And make sure you say hello to my mother,” Kaeha replied with a warm smile.

The students standing around us were clearly surprised to see her relax. Were they actually afraid of her? I couldn’t help but be curious, but whatever. That wasn’t something for me to talk about the moment I was back. Giving my thanks to the students around me, I picked Win back up, who had become shy from meeting so many new people, and headed back to a familiar house.

I really wanted to take a peek at the forge to see what kind of shape it was in, but I could put that off for now. First, I had to go tell Kaeha’s mother that I was back, introduce Win to everyone, and help him get accustomed to living here. I had all the time in the world to work on blacksmithing after I had done all that. But I was getting the itch to make another magic sword.

*I wonder if anyone here would be able to use it?*

After I had left Odine, I realized that to use a magic sword all you needed was the *potential* for magic, not necessarily the skill to use it. Basically, you didn’t need to be a full-fledged mage, and didn’t require extensive knowledge of rituals. Back when we had been making our first swords, we were so obsessed with the thought of making them that Kawshman and I hadn’t even considered what we’d do with them. Now, enough time had passed that he had likely come to the same conclusion I had. It was quite possible that in the future, there would be magic swordsmen and blacksmiths making magic swords who weren’t mages themselves.

Ah, well, hmm. That was all for the future. For now, I would enjoy being reunited with old friends.

In Kaeha’s household, whenever there was cause for celebration, they’d break out the rice for dinner. As something that had to be imported, it was quite a rare luxury here, so I was really excited to see how Win would react to it.



Swinging the doors wide open, I stepped into the forge. It had been almost nine years since I'd left the dojo behind, but someone had clearly been keeping the place clean. I couldn't see so much as a speck of dust.

*This forge is fantastic, huh?*

In my travels, I had made use of all sorts of forges, but they had all been borrowed. This was the only one that was built just for me. Stepping into my own domain was enough to both relax and excite me.

Part of me thought it was odd to go back to blacksmithing first thing after returning to the dojo, but unlike the last time, Kaeha had plenty of other students to worry about. I couldn't ask her to drop what she was doing with them and start teaching me out of nowhere. Earning the hostility and jealousy of her students was one thing, but I didn't want to interfere with their training either. And especially if those negative feelings became directed towards Win, we wouldn't be able to stay here for long. I was already getting special treatment by being allowed to live at the dojo with her, so asking for anything more would no doubt rouse discontent among her students.

So I would wait patiently to start training in the sword again, joining as any beginner would and earning my spot among her students like everyone else. Yeah, even though Kaeha watched me the whole time with a terrifying look in her eyes.

Putting that aside, Win managed to integrate into the family well. Kaeha's mother especially took him under her wing. When I had first introduced him to her, she said, "You really are hopeless, aren't you?" I'm still not quite sure what she meant by that.

As for Kaeha's two kids, they were twins. The boy's name was Shizuki, and the girl was Mizuha. Both of them were happy to help with Win. Apparently Kaeha had introduced him to them as a new little brother, so the two had taken to the role of being older siblings with gusto. In truth, they were probably around the same age, and Win might have even been a bit older, but there was no need to poke that bear.

Someday I would have to do something to properly show my gratitude to Kaeha and her family.

The first job I took upon myself after returning to the dojo was to fix up Kaeha's sword. That wasn't to try and smooth things over with an angry Kaeha or anything, it was just what I wanted to do. After all, this sword had stayed by her side when I couldn't. It had kept her company long before we met too, but after I had reforged it for her the first time, it had been with her for her three years as an adventurer, and then the following nine years while I was away. It had been her companion in my place, so I felt obligated to care for it.

Not to mention, she had used it so much, it was starting to fall apart. It looked like she had been maintaining it properly, so I wasn't sure how it got to this state...ah, maybe it just wasn't sturdy enough to keep up with Kaeha? Now she must have been holding back, trying to take the sword's weakness into consideration.

That must have been frustrating for the sword. I mean, that's how I felt. But there was no use complaining about it now. I had learned a lot more than blacksmithing since then, and my skill at making swords had improved plenty as well. I should be capable of making a sword that could keep up with her by now.

Since the furnace hadn't been used in so long, I kept a careful eye on it while I slowly raised the heat. As I did, I glanced back at the entrance to the forge. A small figure was peeking inside through the door. Mizuha was currently off playing with Win, so it must have been Shizuki. It made sense he would be curious what was going on here. The forge had never been used since he was born, and now some elf had shown up and started using it. However, a forge was too dangerous a place for a child who wasn't even ten years old.

Now that I thought about it, who was their father? I hadn't noticed anyone like that at the house, and none of the students seemed like they had such a close relationship with Kaeha either. I was quite certain Kaeha was their mother, but it wasn't really a question I felt was appropriate to spring on them out of mere curiosity, so I set the issue aside for now.

As the forge heated up, I got to work. I would remake the sword with the same balance and weight, improving only its sturdiness and sharpness.

Basically, I was just improving the quality. Of course, that was the most difficult way to remake something.

I also wanted to show off what I had learned in the time I was away. For example, the fact that I could make magic swords. But that would be making a sword for my own satisfaction, not for her. There was no point to that.

Basking in the heat of the furnace, listening to the song of the hammer on metal, I immersed myself in my work. In order to give the sword the proper care, love, and admiration that it was due, I poured my whole soul into what I was doing. The sound of hammer on steel filled my ears, the forge, and the whole dojo.



In the morning, I would get Win up to eat breakfast together with Kaeha's family, then after a bit of light warming up, join the other students in training with wooden swords. At noon I would eat lunch, take Win back from Shizuki and Mizuha for about an hour, then head to the forge and start working. I'd eat dinner in the evening, have a bath with Win, then we'd laze around in our room together for a while. I honestly felt like the best part about living here was having a bathtub. Of course I helped with Kaeha's mother when asked, and the kids had taken an interest in me for some reason, so they occasionally came by to chat.

That's basically how life went while living at the dojo, until one day I received a request from one of the other students.

"It's fine, we heard all about you before. I know you're trying to be considerate of us, but don't you think it's about time you approached Master Kaeha?"

Apparently seeing the anger in her eyes when she looked at me, the other students had started growing fearful of her. Yeah, fixing up her sword only seemed to improve her mood for about three days. When I remade her sword last time, she had been bubbling with excitement for a month. It really felt like she'd grown up. Seeing her happily swinging the refurbished sword around for those three days had been quite a shock to her students, though.

But I supposed in the end this was my own fault. She was getting upset with

me because I had yet to ask her to teach me. For some reason, her angry glares amused me, so I had intentionally kept putting it off. If it hadn't been for the other students saying something, I might have held out for a whole year.

As a high elf, I couldn't help but feel like there was little difference between eight, nine, or ten years. That was an incredibly dangerous way of looking at things, though. If I kept to that philosophy, the lives of my human friends would slip away before I realized it. That's what the experiences of my past life had taught me. But the other students had not just accepted me; they'd treated me quite well as a newcomer. There was no need to be hesitant about approaching her now.

Once again, Kaeha was staring intently at me, waiting for me to speak.

"Master Kaeha, would you give me some pointers? I feel like it's been a while." After taking a couple deep breaths, I finally managed to ask her.

Her angry gaze lingered for a while, but it seemed she had figured out that it didn't bother me. She let out a heavy sigh.

"At long last. Okay, Acer. Put away that wooden sword and let me see you use your normal one."

And her gaze finally softened.

Now, my "normal" sword was the one engraved with Kawshman's designs. It was much lighter and thinner than an ordinary sword, so it took quite a bit of practice to figure out how to use it. It was certainly a unique piece. To be honest, I wasn't really confident I had grasped the best way to use it yet, so I was still hesitant to show it off to others. But if Kaeha was telling me to use it, then who was I to refuse? I couldn't help but feel nervous, though. I wasn't really one to feel such pressure, so it was a refreshingly new sensation.

Drawing the magic sword, I poured mana into it and took my stance. The blade was thin enough that even swinging in the empty air would risk bending and warping it, so just to be safe, I activated the magic to reinforce its durability and sharpness.

The rituals engraved into the blade began to glow faintly. At the same time, I

filled it with my energy. Of course, this energy was nothing like mana. I was channeling my feelings, my drive, my resolve. It went without saying that I couldn't use the sword properly without them, but I also had to be careful not to overdo it.

Just as I had done countless times before, I stepped forward with a straight, horizontal slash. I then changed my stance with a second step, following it up with a vertical slash, making a cross-shaped cut. But that wasn't the end. The next step came with an upwards diagonal slash, and as my feet came to a stop, I swung again in a reverse diagonal cut downward. I then took three steps back to my starting position, returning to a standing posture and returning my sword to its sheath.

*Okay, that felt like it went well.*

After a slow exhale, I finally relaxed. Looking around, I noticed the other students staring at me in wonder, but the most important person, Kaeha, wore a frown. Had I done something wrong? She noticed me tilting my head uneasily, and nodded in response.

"I have plenty of questions about that bizarre sword, but first I suppose you want my assessment. First of all, you've clearly still been practicing during your journey, haven't you? You seem much more capable than when I last saw you. I have to say, I'm quite proud of you," Kaeha said, an undercurrent of something beneath her voice.

What was that? She was praising me, but I was more afraid than happy. Well, okay, hearing she was proud of me *did* make me happy.

"But Acer... You never actually cut anything during your journey, did you? What was the point of all your training? You look more like you are trying to learn swordsmanship for some artistic reason, rather than to fight. Just like I was before. Or even more baffling, it's like you aren't doing it with the intent of getting stronger."

Kaeha's pointed criticism left me speechless. I had sliced apart those cutlasses once, but that's not what she was talking about. And it wasn't like she was finding fault with me. She was just pointing out my failing, as if she found it mysterious herself. Why, after I had helped her conquer this weakness in



herself, was I now embodying it?

After just seeing a few swings of my sword, she had seen right through my swordsmanship. I was honored that she could understand me so thoroughly, but her sharp insight also left me feeling somewhat embarrassed and afraid.

“I know that this is part of what is good about you, Acer, but...you have no future as a swordsman like that. Let me put it another way. No matter how skilled you get following that path, you will never get any stronger. Your failing is a lack of fighting spirit.”

That was why her criticism struck me so deeply.



I yawned, looking up at the sky. My thoughts were mostly of Win, who I had left behind at the dojo, but my mind was also stuck on what Kaeha had told me yesterday.

Well, I could count on Kaeha’s mother to take care of Win, and Kaeha herself, her kids, and even the other students were always looking out for him. He was definitely safe there. But as for my own failings...she had said I lacked a fighting spirit, but I had no idea how I would fix that.

“Are you feeling all right, Lord Acer?” Airenna asked from up ahead of me, sitting at the reins. She knew I didn’t handle carriages well, so she must have been concerned about my condition for this ride.

That said, we weren’t riding a carriage at all. The two of us were sitting on the back of a horse, and a huge one at that. It was large enough to carry both of us without effort. The powerful animal’s name was Kyron, I had been told.

“Honestly, the breeze is so pleasant I’m starting to feel sleepy. Though riding like this is a bit embarrassing.”

With no experience riding horseback myself, Airenna was at the reins, with me sitting behind her. It wasn’t an especially flattering scene for me. Kyron was very well-behaved, so with a bit of practice I would probably be able to ride him okay, but we didn’t have time for that.

Airenna chuckled. “Truth be told, I am quite enjoying this. But please endure it

a little longer. Unfortunately, we do not have the time to waste walking.”

As Airena said, though Kyron was not at a full gallop, he was running at a good clip down the road. At this speed, we’d reach the northern reaches of Ludoria, and the mountains that lay beyond them, in about a week.

Airena had been requested to aid the kingdom in a moment of dire need, to stymie the invading forces of the Empire of Fodor. Normally, there would be no reason for any elf to get involved in a war between humans, much less a high elf like myself. However, due to the current situation in Ludoria and the abdication of its current ruler, the kingdom’s strength had taken a significant blow. Though it was the kingdom’s own fault, a good portion of that came about from the actions of the elves. If it led to the loss of the northern part of the kingdom to Fodor, or even the entire collapse of Ludoria, all of our negotiations would have been for nothing. And to be completely honest, the elves preferred to be neighbors with people who understood their situation rather than total strangers.

So as a tremendous favor to Ludoria, the elves would help in turning back the invading empire. In the end, I would be the one doing all the work, but as Airena was bearing the full burden of acting as the representative for all elves in Ludoria, I had no intention of complaining. She never called on me except when it was absolutely necessary, and there was no one else who could take her role.

Considering the situation, there was no way I could bring Win with me. Though it wasn’t like he was at my side every hour of the day, I had grown quite used to seeing the little guy around. Having him gone left me feeling a little lonely.

While we were tasked with stopping an invading army, I had no intentions of wiping them out or slaughtering them. That was why we were in such a hurry, trying to reach the border before their army could make it into the kingdom. Bloodshed was a very real possibility, though. It was one thing to see a fistfight, but I didn’t want Win to witness people dying, nor did I want him to see me in the act of killing.

All that said, things were lining up pretty well this time, so I figured we’d be

able to handle it.

Thanks to Kyron's efforts, we managed to reach the mountains north of the familiar city of Garalate in a few days. In general, the mountains were too harsh to realistically travel through, but people had cut a small pass through them, creating a road just wide enough for a single carriage. However, with travel between Ludoria and Fodor becoming possible, both sides immediately built fortresses in the freshly opened space, and minor skirmishes between the two sides were common.

It was really a stupid situation. It was like they had built the road just so they could fight each other. I doubted the people who had built it had any such intentions, so I didn't think such a path was necessary anymore. It would put a lot of their hard work to waste, but to be honest, I didn't care since it wasn't my own. As narrow as the road was, people were trying to force armies through it. That road alone had the two kingdoms salivating over the riches of the other.

So I would seal it off. If the only route between the two kingdoms was gone, then it would be like they didn't exist to each other.

Having left Airena and the horse Kyron behind, I headed into the mountains alone to where I could find the border between the countries, a place where the fortresses built by both sides were visible.

*"Spirits of earth, who find their home in these magnificent mountains. Awake and listen to my voice."*

I put my hand to the ground and called out to the spirits living here, often sleepy due to their unchanging environment. To these spirits, the pass between the mountains was like an open mouth. My request was for them to slowly, very slowly, close it.

For an ordinary elf, the spirits might not even wake up to listen to any requests, but I was a high elf. The awakened spirits shook the mountains of their home, slowly closing the road between the two kingdoms as I had requested.

Thrown into chaos by what seemed like a sudden natural disaster, the soldiers manning both fortresses fled back to their home countries. The man-made pass

continued to close, crushing the two fortresses between them, but it didn't stop there. The mountains on either side continued to move until they had fused into one. The road that had been painstakingly carved through the mountains would never be used again.

Of course, another road could be built somewhere else in the mountain range, but that would take a tremendous amount of time and effort. At the very least, Ludoria would have plenty of time to recover from its current plight before they needed to worry about an invasion from Fodor.

I doubted the leaders of Ludoria had expected their own fortress to be destroyed in the process, nor for the path to Fodor to be permanently closed, so I doubted they would turn to the elves for help again unless they were desperate.

Satisfied with my display of power, everything had been resolved on my end. I was sure Airen would handle any necessary cleanup.

I did have one lingering question in the back of my mind, though. If I had a stronger fighting spirit, would I have found an answer like this? Or would I have gone straight for the Fodorian soldiers? Thinking of it in that light, I felt like that would have been taking things too far. If it was absolutely necessary, I would attempt to minimize the casualties, but I wouldn't hesitate to act. Otherwise, perhaps I was fine where I was.

If I couldn't make any further progress without a fighting spirit, with no desire to use my sword in actual combat, then maybe it was fine if I stopped where I was. I had begun on this path because I had fallen in love with the beauty of Kaeha's swordsmanship. That was all. I didn't need anything more than that. And really, I had already achieved half of that dream.

I finally understood: I had no motivation to become stronger. The skill I had obtained in swordsmanship came because it looked fun. It was fine if I never became a true master. As arrogant as it sounded, I felt like I was plenty strong already. Until the day I had a reason to wield a sword in battle, until something gave me a real reason to fight, I doubted I'd ever be a real swordsman.



About a year had passed since I returned to the dojo. Today I was swinging

my hammer in the forge as usual. I had already finished reforging the swords for all of Kaeha's students in the Yosogi School, so I was now taking on work for the local blacksmithing guild.

Right then, I was working on a piece for the annual competition to make a sword to present to the king. Such was my afternoon, at least. I still spent the morning training with the other students. Though I wasn't a true swordsman, and knew I wouldn't ever become one, it didn't change how much I liked Kaeha's swordsmanship, so I was still one of her students.

Of course, I had explained my feelings to Kaeha. Though it was a difficult thing to admit as her student, there was no way I could keep it a secret from her either. After hearing what I had to say, Kaeha closed her eyes and sat in silence for a while, as if chewing on what I had said.

"Perhaps it is my failing as your teacher...but that sounds very much like you, Acer. My only regret is that I won't be able to see you become a master in my lifetime. After all, like you said, you are already far too strong," she said, opening her eyes with a faint smile.

There was so much emotion in that look, I couldn't hope to read all of it. I couldn't help but feel frustrated with myself for having brought such an expression to her face, though I knew there was nothing I could do about it.

"Hmm. No good, is it?" I frowned, looking at the sword I had made. It seemed I had gotten too distracted by other thoughts while I was working, so even though there were no obvious flaws with the weapon, it felt off somehow. Maybe I was just in a bad mood? After mulling over it for a bit, I decided to try again.

I obviously couldn't submit something to the contest if I wasn't fully invested in it, but I also didn't like the idea of selling it somewhere else. There was probably nothing wrong with its construction, but my doubts had worked their way into the blade. I had no faith that someone could entrust their life to such a weapon.

After a long sigh, I began cleaning up my workspace. It was a bit early to call it a day yet, but I wouldn't be able to make anything good in my current state of

mind.

I needed some way to clear my head. Of course, putting my whole heart and soul into making something I was excited about often did the trick. For example, making magic swords, or maces and shields, or full sets of plate armor. But that wasn't quite the solution I was looking for right now.

Yeah, what I needed was to see Win. I wanted to go somewhere with him. But where? Going all the way to Vilestorika for some seafood was a bit too far. I could head up north to visit the spirit living in the spring near Garalate...but if she took too much of a liking to him, I felt like it might be a challenge to get him back from her. She was pretty quick to feel lonely.

While I puzzled over the problem in my head, I finished cleaning up the forge and headed outside, where I was stopped by a young boy. It was Shizuki, one of Kaeha's kids.

"Mister Acer, I would like to ask a favor. Could you please take me to Vistcourt? Please!" Before even taking the time to look me in the eye, he dropped his head in a bow.

*...Huh? Why Vistcourt?*

I had no idea where this was coming from, but it didn't sound like a terrible idea. Vistcourt wasn't all that far away, and most of all, it was a place full of memories for me. I'd love to show it to Win. Adding another member to our traveling party wouldn't be much trouble. And with how well Shizuki and his twin sister Mizuha treated Win, he deserved that much from me.

"Uhh, I don't particularly mind, but it'll be a pretty long journey. It's ten days by carriage going one way, but we'll be walking. It'll be pretty tough if you aren't used to traveling. Are you sure you're up for it?" I asked him, trying to sound a little threatening, but Shizuki nodded back without the slightest hesitation.

In that case...sure, why not? Bringing Mizuha along as the only girl with a group of guys would be a problem, but Shizuki was a boy, so I didn't have to worry about that.



“Then go get permission from Master Kaeha or your grandmother. Otherwise it’ll look like I kidnapped you.”

In reality, even if we left without a word of warning, I figured they trusted me enough not to doubt my intentions, but they would still be worried. I was half joking when I said that, but Shizuki nodded seriously.

“Grandmother will definitely be okay with it if you’re with me, so it should be fine. I’ll ask her later.”

*Uhh...?*

That was a little strange. It sounded like he didn’t think *Kaeha* would give him permission to go.

Maybe I was overthinking it. As long as he got permission, there would be no issues. So without worrying too much over it, I began making plans to take Win and Shizuki to my old home in Vistcourt.



Using one arm to hold Win and the other hand to hold Shizuki’s, I walked down the long road heading for Vistcourt.

Though he was still a little small to handle a journey like this on foot, Win was starting to get quite heavy. He slept well, ate well, and played well, and just recently had begun to join Shizuki and Mizuha in sword training. Slowly and steadily, Win was growing. Compared to humans, you’d have to emphasize the “slow” half of that, but from my perspective, he was growing quite quickly. Realizing it wouldn’t be long before I couldn’t carry him like this anymore, I started to feel a little sad.

As Shizuki was not yet ten years old, we had to travel rather slowly to accommodate him, but he was still doing his best to keep going on his own. In truth, though I had warned him of the difficulty of the journey, I had accepted the possibility of having to carry him on my back while holding Win in my arms. I was very happy to see him prove my expectations wrong.

As for Win, though you’d have to preface it by saying “for his age,” he had gotten quite used to living on the road with the way I pulled him around everywhere I went. So the journey to Vistcourt went much more smoothly than

I had expected.

I didn't know how the conversation had gone between Shizuki, Kaeha, and her mother. I was certainly curious about it, but it didn't seem like a conversation Kaeha would have wanted me to hear, so I had kept my curiosity to myself, taking Win back to our room to call it an early night. Kaeha seemed rather upset with me the next day, so I imagined she was against the idea of Shizuki joining us but ultimately lost to her mother.

The journey to Vistcourt took us a few weeks, replenishing our food by hunting birds and occasionally stopping in villages along the way. When Vistcourt finally came into view, Shizuki began to cheer. I suspected it was a reflexive reaction more than a conscious one. From my perspective we hadn't come that far, but to Shizuki this was all a grand adventure. I imagined this was the first time in his life he had been away from his family for so long, and the first time he had gone so far on his own strength.

Win looked at the excited Shizuki in surprise. Unfortunately, understanding the sense of accomplishment Shizuki was feeling was still a bit beyond him. But someday, Win would make a long journey like this one on his own feet, or perhaps overcome some other great trouble, and feel the same kind of joy. Until that day, I'd like to carry him a little bit longer. Feeling my arms tighten around him, Win looked from Shizuki to me, confused.

As we approached the gate to the city, I was disappointed to see young guards I didn't recognize, but getting into the city was easy enough. Actually, my citizenship in Vistcourt was still active, so we basically had a free pass to get in. How long had it been since I'd left? Fifteen years? In a way, it felt like just the other day, but thinking back on all I had experienced since then, it also felt like the distant past. At the very least, enough time had passed for the guard to change to someone I didn't recognize. I had been so impressed with these gates when I first saw them, but now after all the traveling I had done, they didn't feel quite so huge.

Giving my thanks to the guards, the three of us headed into the city, where I was immediately hit by a wave of nostalgia. Though the people certainly looked different, the cityscape hadn't changed one bit. It looked exactly the same as it

did the first time I was here, on my first day in human civilization. The sudden feeling of homesickness had me trembling.

On that day, I had walked through these gates with Airena, Clayas, and Martena, three people I had met moments before. My original intention had been to split off from them as soon as possible, but after realizing I had no real understanding of money in this world, Airena had grown quite worried and decided to look after me. It was supposed to be for a short while, but I seem to remember her paying for my room for almost a year... I then met Master Damned Dwarf, learned blacksmithing, and spent ten years living in the city.

I was brought back to my senses by the feeling of Win's hand on my face. Without me realizing it, there were now tears streaming down my face, prompting a look of concern from him.

"Oh, uh, don't worry. It's just a bit of nostalgia..."

I was feeling far more emotional than I had expected. I was rarely like this, so it just proved to me how special Vistcourt was as the starting point for my life in this world. As I wiped the tears off my face with my sleeve, I heard someone calling out to me.

"Hey! Acer!!!" From down the street, I saw two men running at me with ragged breaths.

One was the young gate guard who had just let us through. The other was older, wearing armor that seemed quite a bit more decorative than practical...Rodna. Now that I thought about it, when I had shown my identification to enter the city, one of the guards had run off. Apparently he had gone to tell Rodna.

"Yo, Rodna. This really brings me back. I was just reminiscing about my first time in Vistcourt," I laughed as I put out a hand to stop Rodna from wrapping me in a big hug. I was glad to be welcomed back, but I didn't need the painful experience of having all his armor being pressed into me. And of course, I didn't want Win squished between us.

"You said it. I didn't think I'd live long enough to see you again. When one of my men told me you were here, I ran as fast as I could. I'm glad I got here in

time,” Rodna said, a little embarrassed, before looking to Win in my arms and Shizuki at my side with a wide smile.

When I had met Rodna, he was just an ordinary guard, and when I had left he was in charge of the city guard. I didn’t know what his job was now, but it seemed after fifteen years he was still on active duty.

But...he had grown quite old. When he said he was worried he’d never see me again, it didn’t sound the least bit like a joke. If I had waited another ten years to come back, there was a good chance he would have been right.

“But hey, I’m glad I get the chance to say this again. Welcome to Vistcourt, Acer. And you boys too!” Just like my first day here, he clapped me on the shoulder and gave me a warm welcome.



After my reunion with Rodna, we headed to Clayas and Martena’s house...or mansion, I suppose. I had no intention of staying with them, but I had left them the key to my house in Vistcourt. It would hurt to leave my house entirely abandoned while I was traveling. Beyond my feelings though, if wild animals sneaked in and started living there, they’d cause problems for others in the neighborhood.

So to secure a place to sleep for the night, I’d have to get my key back from Clayas and do some cleaning. I had gotten lost in conversation with Rodna, so if I didn’t hurry, it would already be nightfall by the time we got there. If I wasn’t fast, I wouldn’t have enough time to clean out a room for us to sleep. Never mind me, both Win and Shizuki were likely exhausted, so I wanted to give them a comfortable night’s rest.

We quickly made our way through the city. In front of the huge doors to their mansion, I knocked four times and waited. In short order, the door swung open, revealing a servant that, while surprised to see an elf, nonetheless asked me for my business. They were quite young, so I didn’t know them, but as they led me inside, a familiar person came out to greet me. She was an elegant woman, having achieved success as an adventurer and then retired to raise her children, who were now old enough to be living on their own. It was Martena.

“It has been so long, Acer. Welcome to our home. ...Oh my. Who are these

two?” Her joyful greeting was accented by the tears forming at the corners of her eyes. Those eyes then went wide as she noticed the two children with me, though she seemed far more surprised to see Shizuki than Win.

For some reason, that made me feel a little uneasy. Maybe my past self would have gotten fixated on that and started asking for an explanation, but with how tired I was from the journey here, and with how much cleaning I knew waited for me later that night, I ignored it for now.

“This is Win. You probably heard about him from Airena, but he’s my adopted son. This boy is Shizuki, the son of the person I am staying with in the capital. Ah, as for why I’m here, could I get the key to my place back?”

This time Martena looked in surprise at Win, finally nodding as if accepting something. Win was quite used to garnering such attention, at least while I was with him, so it didn’t seem to bother him much. Shizuki, on the other hand, was squeezing tightly on the hem of my shirt.

“Of course, I will get your key right away, but please, stay here for the night. My husband will be home shortly, and I’m sure the children are quite tired. I’ll send some people to clean up your house tomorrow,” she suggested with a smile.

I supposed I didn’t have a reason to turn her down. There was one small thing weighing on my mind...but even so, staying here for the night seemed like the best option.

Later that night, Win, Shizuki, and I ate dinner together with Clayas and Martena, then took a bath in something similar to a sauna. When we entered the room prepared for us, Win and Shizuki both dropped onto the bed and passed out immediately, the exhaustion of our journey catching up to them all at once.

As such, with my recent growth in the realm of being able to understand other people, I put my brain to work. Honestly speaking, it was something I didn’t really want to think about. Before dinner, when Clayas had made it home, the person Clayas had been most surprised to see was not me or Win, but Shizuki. He hid it well, but I had been expecting it, so I managed to notice

the small change in his demeanor.

On top of that, Shizuki himself had an obvious interest in Clayas. That had been much easier to see. Clayas and Martena's own children had taken the same path as their parents, becoming adventurers. They were all on missions now, so they weren't in Vistcourt. I had hoped to meet them, but it didn't seem things would work out that way.

...So while it was just a guess, I suspected Shizuki and Mizuha's father was Clayas. That's what I saw in Clayas, Shizuki, and even Martena's behavior.

But I had no idea how that would have come about. I knew Kaeha and Clayas were acquainted, and that Kaeha respected him, but I didn't see any feelings like that between them. Of course, I wasn't around for the three years they spent together in Vistcourt, nor for the years after I left the capital, so it wasn't impossible.

But Clayas already had a family at that point, and I couldn't see Kaeha being the type of person to sow chaos in another's family like that... It was starting to make me feel uneasy.

Beyond that, when had Shizuki—and I assumed Mizuha as well—learned Clayas was their father? I wasn't sure about that. It must have been relatively recently, maybe a revelation sparked by my return to the dojo. Thinking back on it now, the curiosity those two had held in me felt less like interest in me for being an elf, and more like they were trying to learn something about me. And when they realized the mysterious first student of the Yosogi School who had rebuilt the dojo and then left wasn't their father, they pressed their mother and grandmother for the truth. If that was the case...had I accidentally been responsible for bringing discord to their family?

I gently stroked Shizuki's face as he slept. He looked very much like his mother. Why had he wanted me to take him to Vistcourt so badly? What did Kaeha think about that, and how had she felt when she saw us off? I didn't understand any of it. But as I looked to the sleeping Win beside him, I felt that was okay.

In truth, as important as one's parents were, in an extreme sense, their identity didn't really matter. Just like how, with the love I had for Win, his birth



parents didn't matter to him. Kaeha and her mother clearly loved Shizuki and Mizuha with all their hearts. What more did they need? I didn't know anything about their situation, but even if I did, I would take Kaeha's side in the end, and do what I could to protect her kids.

*Okay, time for bed.*

I sneaked my way into bed between the two sleeping boys. Neither of them seemed happy to have me move them out of the way, but I didn't let that stop me. I wanted to sleep between them. No matter what their situations were, right now, at this moment, in this place, they were my kids.



"I, Shizuki, son of the head of the Yosogi School Kaeha, challenge you, Sir Clayas, Holy Sword and greatest swordsman in all of Ludoria!"

The next day, while enjoying a peaceful breakfast together, Shizuki shattered the atmosphere.

Wait, did Clayas really have such a fancy title?

While I was reasonably shocked myself, Win also stared gaping, his breakfast beginning to fall out of his mouth. Thankfully, at my request, a wind spirit nearby was able to catch the little bit of sausage and return it to his plate.

It seemed that was why Shizuki wanted to come to Vistcourt so badly.

But really, "Holy Sword"? That title sounded more fitting for some ancient old man who had devoted his whole life to swordsmanship. Clayas was certainly the most skilled swordsman I knew, but he wasn't that detached from the world. Rather than devoting everything to the sword, he was the type to use everything in reach to survive at all costs, an impression strongly reinforced by what I knew of him as an adventurer.

Honestly, I didn't think the title fit him very well. Either way, I managed to keep my thoughts to myself, given the situation. In any other circumstance, I likely would have been pointing and laughing.

Clearly troubled by the challenge, Clayas looked to me, then to Martena, before realizing neither of us would be stepping in to help. Finally he looked at

Shizuki straight on. Whatever emotion was in Shizuki's gaze, Clayas was the only one who could see it.

"...Fine. But you are obviously not fully grown. You're too young to call yourself a swordsman. If you want a match with wooden swords, then we'll have one after breakfast." After a long silence, Clayas finally surrendered.

Shizuki seemed rather unhappy with his response, but he knew Clayas was right, and so he was willing to concede to his conditions. With a nod, he returned to his seat. I doubted he tasted much of the food he put down after that.

I felt it was kind of a waste. The sausage was quite good, and the soup was fantastic.

After some short exercises to help their breakfast settle, Clayas and Shizuki faced each other with wooden swords. My first thought on seeing this scene was how much older Clayas looked. Maybe part of it was consideration for his opponent being a child, but Clayas wielded a one-handed straight sword. Normally he used an enormous two-handed behemoth of a weapon like it weighed nothing at all.

He was about twenty when we first met, so he must have been halfway through his forties by now. Judging by his physique and his movements, he still had all the muscle he needed to wield his old sword, but one like this was easier to stop at the last second if needed. In other words, he was well past the prime of his life. Of course, being older meant he had more time to spend training and refining his skill, so I couldn't say age had made him weaker yet.

I wasn't especially worried about Shizuki. The result of the match was obvious from the start, and it was clear Shizuki hadn't challenged Clayas thinking he could win. Maybe he didn't realize it himself, but he likely just wanted to exchange blows as a way of connecting with the man that was likely his father. It was sort of like a clumsy way of trying to earn Clayas's affection. Not even I was dense enough to get in the way of that with unnecessary worrying.

The only small regret I had was that if this was Shizuki's goal all along, we should have just used a carriage and brought Mizuha with us. Then again, I

didn't know if I could handle all three of them by myself while traveling.

“Yaaaaaaah!!!”

Shizuki went all out from the start, his first strike much more powerful than one would expect from a child his age. He was clearly a genius of the sword. Even raised in a dojo, even with the same effort Shizuki himself put into training, no ordinary child could reach that level.

But just like any other blow, Clayas turned aside that exceptional strike with ease. Being extraordinary didn't make him a match for Clayas's own genius, on top of his decades of training and experience in countless battles.

He was really treating Shizuki like the child he was. Knocking aside each of Shizuki's strikes, he returned with strikes of his own to punish each of Shizuki's openings. When Shizuki tightened his guard and became more careful, Clayas stepped in to overwhelm him with force and break him down.

Yeah, he was teaching him in the same way you would teach a child. Above all, it was important that they enjoyed the process.

Win watched the two fight with rapt attention. I could only imagine what was going through his head. It wouldn't be too long before Win and I would be able to play like this. Okay, maybe it would be. For now, I wanted him to stay as the cute little bundle in my arms for a while longer.

While watching them, the Japanese proverb “It's easier to bear a child than to worry about it” suddenly came to mind. If I remembered correctly, it was supposed to mean that no matter how much you might worry before doing something, when you actually did it, it often ended up surprisingly doable. The match between Shizuki and Clayas sounded like a perfect example of that to me. I didn't know what Kaeha, her mother, Clayas, and Martena were thinking, or what actions led them to this bizarre situation. But none of those involved, including Shizuki and Mizuha, were bad people. So rather than worry about what was going on between them, I just needed to respond to what they needed from me. The tangled knots of their relationships might yet be sorted out.

To avoid overthinking things, watching the two practice ended up being a

good experience for me. Shizuki knew he was completely helpless, yet struggled to find a way to overcome Clayas, his fighting spirit and desire to grow stronger not wavering in the least. That was most likely the thing I lacked the most.

On top of that, Clayas's small efforts were able to draw that fighting spirit out of Shizuki. Was that because of the relationship between them? Or just something Clayas acquired from his years teaching adventurers? I was a little curious, but not even I was brainless enough to get between them.

The match lasted until Shizuki finally collapsed from exhaustion, and then repeated a number of times while we were in Vistcourt. But naturally, our stay couldn't last forever. After two weeks, we began our journey back to the capital.

While indulging in my nostalgia, I took Win and Shizuki to look briefly into the Great Pulha Woodlands, which was just the refreshing experience I needed. I met up with my fellow students under Oswald, who made me promise to win the next blacksmithing competition.

Once I made it back to the capital...yeah, I was confident I could focus on making something fantastic without any further distractions.



With our vacation in Vistcourt finished, we returned to the capital where we found an irate Mizuha.

"It's not fair! Why did Shizuki get to go by himself?!" she sulked, stealing Win from me and refusing to give him back.

Hey now, I didn't say you *couldn't* come. I didn't think I was being unfair at all. But of course, once a child her age got emotional, there was no reasoning with them. So in order to rescue the kidnapped Win, I made a promise to Mizuha. Once I had finished the sword I was making for the competition, I would take her somewhere. Of course, I couldn't take her very far. The best I could probably do was bring her and Win to a forest near the capital.

During the entirety of my exchange with Mizuha, Win just stared at me lifelessly like a bereaved doll, his eyes begging for help while knowing there was no use fighting back.

Mizuha wasn't particularly satisfied with my attempt at an apology, but she did understand it was the greatest concession I could make for her. She still didn't give Win back to me, but reluctantly agreed to wait until after I had finished making the sword.

I ended up finishing the piece in two weeks, my work going so smoothly as though I had never been in a slump at all. That was no doubt thanks in some way to the pressure of one small girl pushing me from behind the entire time.

Jumping ahead a little, my sword ended up getting first place in the competition. As young as Mizuha was, I could already see so much of Kaeha in her daughter.

One day, I brought Win and Mizuha to the largest forest around the capital.

Due to the departure of elves from the kingdom, the forests of Ludoria had become overrun with monsters. Airena had started leading a group of elven adventurers in driving them out. She called on my help occasionally, when they encountered a monster that was exceptionally dangerous, or an extraordinarily large group. But thanks to being so close to the capital, the monsters in this particular forest had been dealt with relatively quickly. As long as the two children stayed close to me, they weren't in any real danger.

Holding a wooden practice sword in one hand and Win's in the other, Mizuha led our expedition from a few steps ahead. It seemed odd that she was so adamant I take her out somewhere, but I could sort of understand how she felt. Like Shizuki, she was taught a level of discipline appropriate for the child of the head of a dojo, and so rarely expressed her own desires. While she loved playing the older sister to Win and occasionally got into fights with Shizuki, she was always polite and reserved around adults.

But even so, she was still a child. I knew Kaeha and her mother loved the twins with all their hearts. There was no doubt about that, and I was sure Shizuki and Mizuha understood it as well. But as great as that love was, the two of them still felt the need to have a father figure in their lives.

In Shizuki's case, that desire showed itself in a rebellious streak, which led to him challenging Clayas. It ended up being a positive experience overall, but it

really showed how Shizuki approached the problems he faced.

Mizuha expressed herself in a simpler way. In her case, she just wanted to be spoiled, though not in a sort of clingy or sappy way. She just wanted someone who would let her act selfishly, someone she could show off to for praise and recognition. I was worried carrying something like that into adulthood could easily lead to her getting mixed up with the wrong guy, so if it helped dispel those feelings even a little, I didn't mind indulging her.

"Mister Acer! Look at that! What is it?"

I looked to where Mizuha pointed. Realizing the two kids were heading straight for it, I dashed forward and grabbed them.

*Jeez, don't scare me like that.*

Mizuha had found a large hole in the earth, about fifty centimeters across. It was left brazenly in the open, with no efforts to conceal it at all...meaning it was probably the nest of a snake-like monster. It wouldn't have any special powers, nor would it be venomous. All it could boast was a large and physically strong body, making it fairly weak as far as monsters went. Even a group of novice adventurers could hunt them if they knew what they were doing. But never mind Win, even a child of Mizuha's age would be swallowed in a single gulp.

I suggested that we avoid disturbing the creature.

"Huh? It's a monster though, right? Shouldn't we kill it?" Mizuha asked, confused. I had to say, she was pretty gutsy. Instead of being scared, her first instinct regarding a nearby monster was to fight it. A future of adventuring was certainly a possibility for her. In that case, a little bit of experience with fighting monsters would be good, but...

"We could, but in that case we'd be eating snake for lunch. I don't want to kill it just for the sake of killing it."

She was still a little too young for that. I'd rather she didn't go on about fighting monsters until she was strong enough to actually do it herself. Having been raised in the capital all her life, the thought of eating a snake had likely never occurred to her, especially judging by how visibly she paled at the suggestion. For the record, Win had eaten snake plenty of times on our travels,



and it hadn't tasted bad in the least, so he was completely unfazed. In fact, he may have even been interested, since it had been quite a while since we had last eaten something like that. But after seeing how Mizuha reacted, he knew to keep the thought to himself and just tugged on her hand.

"R-Right. It's not like we're here to hunt monsters anyway. Let's leave it alone. Got it, Win? Don't wake it up!" Mizuha pulled Win away from the nest, thoroughly convinced. Careful not to disturb the snake, we made our way deeper into the forest.

Our destination was still quite far away, so we didn't have time to waste here.



Out of consideration for us, the trees pulled their roots back a little to create a smoother path. While it was totally unnecessary, I was thankful for their kindness towards the two children. So with a speed that would have surprised even a veteran hunter, we made our way through the forest. But despite our good pace, the sun would already set by the time we reached our destination.

In the heart of the forest was a settlement of elves. Its residents had yet to move back to Ludoria. This was the destination of our trip, but it was too far from the city for a simple day trip, so we'd planned to stay the night here.

Even though it was just for a single night, neither Kaeha nor her mother were pleased at all with the thought of Mizuha camping out overnight. But they had permitted our little excursion of one night and two days—a bit too long to be called a hiking trip and a bit too short to be called a journey—after I had sworn up and down I'd bring her home safe and sound. I had managed to build up enough trust with the two of them to accept the promise I'd made. I figured another significant part in their decision was their understanding of how taking Shizuki alone to Vistcourt was unfair to Mizuha.

So, as reluctant as they were, in the end they gave her permission to go. I doubted they'd ever let her do something like this again, and I wouldn't ask them to. But right now, there was something I wanted Win and Mizuha to see here in the depths of the forest. Something they'd never get a chance to see again. Once even a small number of the elves had returned to the forest, neither a human like Mizuha nor a half-elf like Win would be allowed this far. So

this was the only opportunity we had.

As we continued through the forest, the trees finally parted to reveal the elven village.

“Whoa...!” Seeing such majesty painted red by the setting sun, Mizuha gasped before giving a sigh of wonder. It was a Spirit Tree, a mysterious tree growing at the center of the forest. As tall as a mountain, only one could grow in any forest. It was like a manifestation of the life of the forest itself, and filled the earth around it with power. What was even more mysterious was that Spirit Trees only showed themselves to those who could see the spirits. Since Win and I were with her, the tree would be willing to show itself to Mizuha, but if she were to come back to this exact spot the next day on her own, she wouldn’t see anything here at all.

It was likely the village Win had been born in also had a tree like this, so he may have seen one before. I had doubts as to whether he was self-aware enough to have memories of that time, so this was a good chance for him to see one again. Unfortunately, though I could guess as much from the size of the forest, this particular Spirit Tree wasn’t all that big. It was of course many times larger than any other tree in the area, but in a larger forest, a Spirit Tree could grow to at least twice this size. The trees that became truly massive were able to condense the life energy that flowed through them down, growing what we knew as apuas.

But where I grew up in the Forest Depths, trees big enough to grow apuas were a dime a dozen, so I didn’t feel much wonder in them. I had only heard the rule that each forest had a single Spirit Tree after leaving my home in Pulha.

“Look, Acer!” Win shouted, pointing at something. On one branch of the Spirit Tree, a single flower was blooming.

Ah, it looked like the tree was welcoming us. It had been quite a while since the elves that lived here had departed. I wondered if the tree had been feeling lonely. That was the first thought that occurred to me. If so, then I’d have to ask it to wait just a little longer. According to Airena, the number of elves who were planning on returning to Ludoria was far greater than I had anticipated.

I had to warn Mizuha against picking the flower off the tree. Win shot me sad, hungry looks as she pulled him around, so I quickly caught a wild rabbit and began cooking it with some mushrooms I had picked. The three of us sat around a campfire while we enjoyed our meal. In no time at all, the sun set on our noisy little evening and night fell.

“Thank you for taking me out, Mister Acer! Today was tons of fun! Maybe I’d make a good adventurer!” Mizuha thanked me, a bright smile filling her face as she tore into her meal.

*I wonder about that.*

She was already quite brave. She trained every day with a sword, to the point she could spar with the adults at the dojo. She still had a healthy sense of wonder, and had no qualms about leaving the city behind. She certainly seemed well suited to an adventuring lifestyle.

“Hmm, that’s hard to say. You might be an incredible adventurer like your mother, but you could just as easily die. But if you really want to be an adventurer, maybe we should have eaten that snake after all.”

I kept my true thoughts to myself, and settled for teasing her a bit. With the snake brought up again, she immediately found herself at a loss for words, until Win’s laughter provoked her into pulling at his cheeks.

Well, she was still young. While Mizuha and Shizuki were both mature for their age, they still weren’t even ten years old. They were nowhere close to being adults. They had plenty of time to choose their own path in life. Though that time would pass in the blink of an eye to someone like me, it wouldn’t feel like that to them at all.

But if Mizuha did decide on becoming an adventurer, I’d like to make some equipment for her, just like I had for her mother. And if she needed it, I could let her use my home in Vistcourt too. I had heard Astre was now a veteran working to organize the other adventurers, so I still had some strings I could pull to help her out.



Kaeha, Shizuki, Mizuha, even Win, and the other Yosogi students all wore the same sunken expressions. Kaeha's mother had always been fairly frail, but her health had taken a turn for the worse, leaving her bedridden.

Eight years had passed since I returned to the dojo. The biggest change in those eight years had been in Shizuki and Mizuha. They had grown quite a bit, slowly taking the steps from childhood into adulthood. Once they turned fifteen, I had gifted each of them a sword as a coming-of-age present. Both of them possessed the talent for manipulating mana, so I had made magic swords to keep them safe.

Win had also grown, but not quite half as much as the twins. He had eventually come to learn that time flowed differently for him...and as expected, it had been a rough experience. He had learned reading and writing, and about the world around him, and so he inevitably learned he was different from his beloved older siblings. He had thrown himself into training in swordsmanship, desperately trying to keep up with the twins in at least that, and started rebelling and pulling away from me.

It was quite painful watching him go through that experience from so close, and having him try to distance himself from me. But thanks to being surrounded by good people on all sides, he had calmed down quite a bit since then.

In particular, Shizuki and Mizuha had made great efforts to be a part of his life. Despite their differences, they accepted him as family and never failed to stand at his side. When Win forced himself to overdo it in training, the two of them were always with him. The two of them always had a carefree smile for him. They proved to me that bringing Win to the dojo had been the right choice.

I had also managed to keep a hold on first place in the annual sword-making competition. Unfortunately, I couldn't say that it was because of my skills improving. The dwarven smith who had kept a stranglehold on the competition prior had returned to dwarven lands, leaving the spot to me. I couldn't help but sense that there was definitely something happening among the dwarves.

After Kaeha's mother had collapsed, I tried making some medicine from fresh

herbs in the forest. I mixed it together with what little of the apuas I had left, but it didn't seem to do her much good. It seemed she wasn't sick; she was just...getting to that age. Humans already had short life spans, but it felt like she had reached the end of hers faster than most, likely due to her weak constitution.

One day, she had sent everyone else away and called me to her room. She had always been a delicate woman, but her cheeks had sunken even farther, leaving her looking sickly and frail. Even so, the strength in her eyes hadn't diminished at all as she looked straight at me.

"I'd like to share my complaints with you," she said.

Despite that proclamation, she proceeded to reminisce about the past, when I had first come to the dojo...or rather, when I had first come to the ruins that had once been a dojo.

She had lost everyone she could rely on, and as her whole life fell apart around her, she grew sick. She was terrified that she would soon die, leaving behind a lone daughter who was far too young to be on her own. She was furious at herself for forcing the burden of her care on that daughter.

But one day, in the midst of that torment, they were visited by a stranger. Of course, they were on guard against him at first. Even if he was an elf, he was a man barging into the lives of two women.

But that stranger integrated into their lives in no time, and single-handedly began putting the broken pieces of their life back together. He cured her of her sickness, put the threat of the Rodran Greatsword School to rest, gave up a considerable sum of money to rebuild the dojo...and above all, gave her daughter the opportunity to grow into a true swordswoman. And for all that, he asked for nothing in return but to be a student at their school, content with just the chance to swing a sword.

"You were like a ray of light, piercing through the darkness that hung over our future. That is no exaggeration at all."

She had built me up in her speech so much...so I was starting to fear what would come next. Back then, and I suppose even now, all I had done was follow my whims. Though of course, even those whims had tended to help the people

around me.

“But the day you left...it was like a curse on my daughter.”

Her gaze was suddenly like a knife stabbing into me. There was no humor in her words. She meant it wholeheartedly. I had put a curse on Kaeha.

Once she had gotten that out, she stopped to give a heavy sigh, like everything she had been keeping pent up for so long was about to come out.

“I know you had no intention of doing such a thing. But raising children, teaching students, protecting the dojo, devoting oneself to a life of swordsmanship...none of these are easy responsibilities.” Her words wrapped around me like chains, gentle and quiet as they were. “But she thought she needed to carry them all. No, I should say she decided to carry them, no matter what the cost would be. All for the sake of the day she would meet you again.”

It felt like the room was on fire. Kaeha had devoted herself to the Yosogi School, using her fame as an adventurer to gather students. Naturally, she would have no time to seek out a life partner.

“So she sought not a companion, but rather children. She had asked the greatest swordsman in the land, and his wife, for children of her own.”

Her words finally answered the question lingering in the back of my mind these past eight years. How had she ended up with Clayas’s children? Why hadn’t Clayas and Martena turned her down? It was too absurd for me to understand.

“Yes, that is the curse you put on my daughter. And I imagine that man and his wife bore a similar curse as well. They saw that curse on her, and feared who she would approach next if they were to turn her down. Until she had those twins and calmed down, she was quite reckless and obstinate.”

I didn’t understand. What had I done to Kaeha? How had I turned her life into such a mess?

Kaeha’s mother smiled as she saw my face. How could she make a face like that, while telling me a story like this?

“You don’t understand? You really are hopeless, aren’t you? That curse was love. An immutable love that wouldn’t fade no matter how much time passed. My daughter fell in love with you.”

*...Love?*

I must have worn a stupid look on my face. After all that, I never expected this was where the conversation had been going.

“I am sure she didn’t want you to know, but I can’t rest without letting you know. The day you decided to give up being a swordsman, she had returned a weeping mess,” she continued, the almost callous words a sharp contrast to the gentle smile on her face, even though this was supposed to be her airing her complaints with me.

“Yes, there was a time I hated you for it. I was angry with my obstinate, foolish daughter too. But now, I don’t feel that way. Not for your innocent whimsy. After all, my daughter gave birth to two children she loves dearly, and has raised them into a pair of wonderful grandchildren. You returned far sooner than I had ever expected, and brought happiness back into our lives. And you brought that adorable little boy with you.” She reached out to take hold of my trembling hand.

I was starting to understand a little. The curse on that other couple was most likely Airena. She was the only one I could think of, a person for whom time moved differently, who was deeply involved with Clayas and Martena.

I could guess at the relationship between those three. After all, there was a time Airena had lived together with them. Terrified of falling in love with someone who would inevitably die long before her, Airena had distanced herself from them. That had likely wounded Martena as much as Clayas. I suspected she was also the one who convinced Clayas to grant Kaeha’s request.

I couldn’t imagine him ever deciding to betray Martena like that, no matter what the situation. Their relationship wasn’t simply that of a man and a woman, but of two people who had entrusted their lives to each other on the battlefield. Clayas never would have betrayed her, nor Airena who had also been with them in life-or-death struggles. But that may have been why Martena told him to do it.

Love, for someone whose time flows so differently. Did Martena feel sympathy for Kaeha, or was it empathy? Or was she trying to make up for the past? It was far too complex a situation for me to hope to untangle.

But the most shocking thing to me was that after hearing Kaeha had loved me, as bewildered as I was...I was happy. Yes, even now, after hearing how much suffering it had caused her. I didn't know how long it took for me to recover from that realization and calm back down.

After watching that whole process, Kaeha's mother continued.

"My daughter had no husband, and my grandchildren had no father. But in exchange, you were here for them. That was no small thing," she continued gently. I knew she must have had so much more she wanted to say. There was no way she'd be satisfied with leaving it at that. But she kept it to herself, only telling me the truth that she felt I needed to know.

So I listened, taking in her feelings bit by bit.

"I know what kind of free spirit you are, and how time is different for you. I won't ask you to stay with my daughter forever. That would be like capturing a wild bird...no, like trying to trap the wind in a cage. But I want you to at least understand how she feels. Okay?"

She squeezed my hand as she finished telling her story.





Five days after that conversation, Kaeha's mother passed away. Everyone in the Yosogi School cried together...and yes, even I shed some tears. For both Win and I, it was the first time someone close to us had died.

Kaeha's mother, Kuroha. I had never called her name a single time, but I knew it was one I'd never forget.



Two more years passed. We all grieved, but worked hard as if to try and forget the pain. We had lost someone important to us, but there hadn't been a huge change in our daily lives, so time eventually put our loss behind us.

Win had become quite clingy to me for a while, but then as if to compensate, he started growing a little more distant. "Seriously, you can be clingy if you want to!" I wanted to say. But of course, that was natural for a kid growing up.

He was also struggling with the realization that everyone around him would be dying long before he did. He was particularly close with Mizuha, but the gap in time between them was only getting wider. Shizuki and Mizuha were basically adults making decisions as to how they would spend the rest of their lives, and would soon begin looking for life partners.

As I began thinking how a trip somewhere would serve us well, I received a letter from Oswald, Master Damned Dwarf.

"I need a good assistant. Please come if you're free."

That was more or less the gist. The current king of the dwarves was getting to an age where he was ready to step down, so the blacksmiths were all in fierce competition.

Skill in blacksmithing was prized above all else among the dwarves. It earned respect from peers, social standing, and anything else one could hope to acquire. Yes, even the throne itself.

But it wasn't the only determining factor in the competition between smiths. The quality of one's forge, especially of the furnace, played a big role, and the connections to secure good materials were critical. Having skilled assistants and students also had no small impact on a smith's work.

Even so, a request from Master Damned Dwarf to come and be his assistant was totally unexpected. I was obviously happy to hear it, but also worried. Sure, asking for me personally was a glowing endorsement of my abilities, and one that left me unreasonably ecstatic.

But from what I knew of his personality, he wouldn't come to me unless he was desperate and had no other options. If he couldn't do it alone, I would have expected Oswald to honestly accept he didn't have what it took to be king, and devote himself further to self-improvement. The fact he wasn't doing that...maybe it was pretentious, but I wondered if it could have been because of his promise to me.

That thought sent a wave of many emotions through me. Master Damned Dwarf had been pushed into a corner, and was so desperate he needed my help. That meant there were smiths in dwarven lands skilled enough to push him into a corner. And he was still fighting for the sake of the promise he had made.

I was thrilled, impatient, intrigued...it was hard to put it into words, but at any rate, to keep myself from immediately jumping out of my room and running to his side, I pounded my fist on the floor and took deep breaths.

Right. Yeah. He didn't say he needed me right away. The decision to crown the next king of the dwarves wouldn't be decided by one or two contests.

So first, I needed to ask Win. I was going to go to the land of the dwarves, but what would he do? He was still a child, and so he still needed my support as his guardian. But Kaeha, the twins, and the students of the Yosogi School were already like family to him. If he decided he wanted to stay, I could leave him in their care. It felt somewhat like I was being transferred overseas.

The dwarves inhabited the mountainous region to the north, a region harsh enough that people couldn't really visit, but it wasn't actually all that far away. The dwarves managed to get in and out to trade with the human kingdoms, so if I really tried, I could probably make it back to visit at least once a year.

Win frowned, stopping to think over the question for a while. He mumbled to himself for about five minutes before coming up with an answer.

"I want to go with you. I'm worried what you'll do if I'm not around..."

He then wrapped me in a big hug. His answer filled me with joy, and I hugged him back just as fiercely.

But, hold on a second. I was the guardian, here, right? Why was he getting worried about *me*? Sure, I let my whims lead me around by the nose when I was on my own, but I thought I had calmed down quite a bit since we had met.

Hmm. Well, whatever. If he was coming with me, I didn't care about the rest.

Dwarves and half-elves had similar life spans, so he might find a real long-term friend there. For that to happen, I'd need to teach him how to communicate with his fists. Dwarves were great people, but very frank and direct, and they loved to butt heads. That came both in the form of physical confrontations and verbal debates. If their interlocutor refused to stand up to them and instead retreated, dwarves tended to pull away from them as well.

In short, I would need to teach Win how to fight. Making some gloves using the greedboar leather I had acquired, we got down to learning how to punch properly. The next three months passed in no time at all.

But before we left, there was one more person I needed to talk to. No, not *needed* to talk to. One more person I *wanted* to talk to. I wanted her to understand my feelings, agree with my decision to go, and be there to see me off. So the night before we left, I went to Kaeha's room and spoke to her directly.

"Is this goodbye forever?" she asked, after hearing my intentions.

Ah, I suppose that might be how it looked. At this point I had given up on ever being a proper swordsman. Win had grown to the equivalent of an eight or nine-year-old in human terms, old enough to handle life on the road if we prepared thoroughly and took our time. Basically, we didn't need a safe place to raise him as much anymore. In that sense, there wasn't really any reason for me to come back here.

But that assumed I didn't have any feelings on the matter.

Maybe it's strange for me to say this about myself, but rather than being free-spirited, I'd say I was more self-centered. I did what I wanted, ate what I

wanted, and followed my whims everywhere. Above all, I went where I wanted to go.

“No, I’ll be back. Time flows very differently for me, but I want to be around in the end for you.”

This place, Kaeha’s side, is somewhere I wanted to be. That was my answer to her feelings. Words could be fleeting and hollow, but actions didn’t lie. I might wander around near and far, but as long as this place still existed, I would always find my way back to it. Though it had taken me far too long to realize that myself.

And besides that, I knew that not even death meant goodbye forever. After all, I was here in this world because I had died and been reincarnated. We may end up in different worlds, and we may have no memories of our past lives... The chance of us actually meeting again may have been astronomically low, but it definitely wasn’t zero.

I would live for a long time, and then keep living as a spirit after that. So in the far-off future, there was always the chance for a miracle. Even if it would crush me, I would be there to take care of her when she was old, so that I would never forget her.

“...I see. Yes, I suppose so. Then it’s a promise. I’ll spend my last days at your side. So I’ll look forward to your return.”

Despite all the years that had passed since we first met, the smile on her face then was more beautiful than any I had ever seen on her.

## Chapter 3 — My Master and His Master

Mountains stretched as far as the eye could see in each and every direction. As you might have expected, I was also standing near the tip of one such mountain. It was truly a remarkable sight to behold.

“You’re keepin’ up pretty good, Elf. I thought you lot were supposed to be weak and frail.” The dwarf I had hired in Ludoria to guide us seemed impressed. He was carrying all of our belongings, as my back was entirely occupied by a small contraption rigged to give Win somewhere to ride. As the dwarf had said, most elves would be run ragged by a trip over the mountains like this.

“Maybe. But Win here is a lot lighter than any ore, and the mountains are much cooler than my forge.” Normally, the howling mountain winds would be freezing, but the wind spirits had taken care to protect us from anything stronger than a gentle breeze. Besides, between my training in swordsmanship and blacksmithing, I was physically much stronger than any ordinary elf.

“Ha, guess so. Good to hear, though. We got lots more mountain climbing to do. Not that I’d leave one of Oswald’s guests behind. But seriously, your kid’s really living like royalty, ain’t he?” Snorting a laugh, our guide picked up the pace.

Like he said, Win was sleeping soundly as I carried him. Considering how uneven and unstable the path was, I would have expected most children to be scared of riding on someone’s back like this. But Win had been excited about the amazing views, laughed along with the wind spirits as he spoke with them, and then eventually grew bored and decided to take a nap. He certainly had the brashness to act like he was living the high life. Though in a sense, you could say that it was an expression of his trust in me, so I wasn’t particularly upset.

When I had decided to visit the land of the dwarves, I tried to find a dwarven guide first. If I were heading to an elven settlement, I was confident I could find it even if it was my first time stepping foot in their forest. But without any

precise information as to the location of the dwarves, there was no way I could find it among the huge expanse of mountains, especially considering it was likely hidden underground.

So using my connections in the blacksmithing guild, I managed to get in contact with a dwarven trader that often made the trip between Ludoria and the land of the dwarves. Under normal circumstances, humans wouldn't be granted entry into the dwarven kingdom, never mind an elf. But there were two ways we could earn that permission. The first was to be granted it by someone important within the kingdom. The second was to appeal to dwarven culture's reverence for blacksmithing by acquiring a master blacksmith's license, a proof of recognition from the blacksmithing guild of a large nation, or specifically the dwarves that worked there.

As a smith skilled enough to be aiming for the throne of the dwarven kingdom, Oswald was clearly important enough that the letter he had sent me was sufficient to grant me entry. So with the addition of my own master blacksmith's license, I had sufficient credentials to get Win and me into dwarven lands. But if you really thought about it, both had technically come from Oswald. It was kind of funny that it looked like Master Damned Dwarf had seen this all coming. He had probably only done so just in case, though.

Of course, just because I had legal permission to enter the kingdom didn't mean any dwarven guide would actually be willing to take an elf with him. While I personally liked dwarves, there was a natural animosity between dwarves and elves. But even if the dwarves I met didn't like me, I had nothing against them, so I didn't let it bother me.

Having proof of permission to enter dwarven lands served as a good starting point to talk with them. Once I got that chance, working with them became a lot easier. Dragging my prospective guide to a bar, I provided him with a steady stream of alcohol while I shared my feelings. About how much Master Damned Dwarf had done for me, how much I owed him, and how badly I wanted to repay him. About how happy I was to receive this letter. I piled the stories on as heavily as the empty tankards, and finally got him to give in.

"Ah, fine. I get it. I can drink plenty more, but I'm stuffed full by your gabbin'. I'll take you if you promise to let me drink in peace for a bit. Never seen an elf

make the journey, though. It's on you to keep up."

That night, Win had seemed quite upset with me coming home stinking of alcohol, but in the end it was mission accomplished.

Even with a guide, the road was a brutal one. The narrow winding road was dangerous enough, but there were plenty of cliffs we had to scale to keep moving forward. Though I was already used to traveling, it would have been an impossible journey for me to make while carrying Win on my back if it weren't for the spirits of the earth kindly building footholds.

It was quite interesting to watch the short, muscular dwarven guide nimbly make his way up the cliffs and down the narrow roads. The gap between his appearance and his dexterity was certainly amusing. He was also quite kind to us, especially going out of his way to account for Win. But if I pointed that out, he'd probably get angry or embarrassed.

Thanks to our guide's efforts, Win and I were able to stay in good health during the two weeks we spent traversing the mountains to reach the dwarven kingdom.



Though the dwarven lands were called a kingdom, it wasn't a collection of multiple settlements. It was a single enormous underground cavern, gouged out of the rock and built up with stone. The closest comparison in human terms would be a city-state.

Unlike human nations, the dwarven kingdom didn't have a name. The population was far smaller overall, and they lived in a much more limited area, so there wasn't any need for one. It was pretty much impossible for multiple dwarven nations to exist in close proximity.

For example, far to the east, well beyond the Azueda Alliance, there was another range of mountains that housed a nation of dwarves. But as far as the dwarves here were concerned, that was the eastern country, and this was the dwarven country. From the other perspective, of course, this was the Western nation.



The majority of dwarves in this area lived in the dwarven kingdom, but there were exceptions. Criminals that had been exiled, blacksmiths living in human lands to train their skills, those who took a liking to combat and left to become adventurers...and the weird ones that took an interest in the outside world and left just to travel. As such, there was a mind-boggling number of dwarves living in this one underground cavern. I had heard the population was forty or fifty thousand.

As a guard led Win and me through the kingdom, we still attracted hundreds of stares out of those tens of thousands. Their looks spoke volumes. Every single one of them seemed to ask why a pair of elves were in dwarven lands at all, showing a clear disapproval of our presence.

I felt bad for Win. The pressure must have been getting to him, judging by how tightly he squeezed my hand as we walked. But in contrast, I was enjoying myself. As I imagined how I'd turn that hostility into favor, I couldn't see the process or result being anything but fun. And knowing dwarves as I did, it wouldn't take long at all for the first opportunity to do so to present itself.

"Hold it!!! What is an elf doing in our country?! How dare you step foot here?!"

*See?*

With no concern for the guard leading us, the dwarf stepped up to block our path. Dwarven men all had thick beards, so it was hard to tell their age apart, but judging by his behavior, this one couldn't have been too old.

"They're guests. Move it!"

"No way! Not for an elf!"

An argument immediately broke out between our escort and the angry dwarf. The others around us clearly shared the harasser's opinion. I liked dwarves so much exactly because of the way they spoke their mind at times like this. If they had been humans, many of them would have kept their distance, hurling rocks at us from afar. But dwarves didn't act like that. They'd walk right up to your face to complain.

So ignoring my special status as a guest, I resolved myself to meet these dwarves head-on. After patting Win on the head, I let go of his hand and pulled on my pair of greedboar leather gloves, clapping my fists together in front of me. I couldn't back down a single step in front of Win.

"My name is Acer, called here by my master! If you don't like that," I stepped forward, raising my voice and pointing a finger at the dwarf blocking our path. "I'll just force my way through!" I shouted as loud as I could. I probably had a huge, stupid grin on my face. This was all too much fun for me.

"So you got guts! Then bring it on!" His face flushing a deep red, the yet unnamed dwarf stomped up to me, rolling his shoulders. Either convinced he couldn't do anything to stop it, or out of consideration for my own declaration, our escort stepped back and gave us room.

"He's calling you out, Granda! Maybe I should take your place!"

"He's got guts for an elf! You better not lose, Granda!"

The crowd around us started getting rowdy, and in the chaos I learned my opponent's name. Apparently he was called Granda. Now that I looked closer, he had quite the pair of arms. How many hits could I take from him? I couldn't wait to find out.

"Suck this, rooty!"

With a roar, Granda swung a fist at me. Determined to not get overwhelmed, I stepped forward, leveraging my height over him to counter with a swift right straight to his face. If we swung at the same time, my greater reach and speed meant my fist should have struck first. If that first strike could hit hard enough, my opponent's punch would be greatly weakened or stopped entirely.

And that's exactly how it happened. I did find it amusing he would compare me to a root, though. If a normal elf was as skinny as a burdock root, then I was more like a carrot. Against a dwarf, whose arms were more comparable to a daikon or turnip, I had more than a fighting chance.

The crowd around us fell silent. Not a single one of them could have expected a punch from an elf to send a dwarf flying. Really though, Granda was more responsible for that than I was. Attempting to floor me with a single blow, he

had let himself get carried away, swinging up at my face with full force. He was completely unprepared for my punch, so the unexpected counterattack sent him soaring.

If this had been a fight to the death, I would have had ample room to follow up and finish him off. But this wasn't war, it was a fistfight. My follow-up wouldn't be with hands or weapons, but with words.

"What's wrong, dwarf? That's not all you've got, is it? My master was way stronger than you! I don't know about your punches yet, but at least my master's face hurt my hand more when I punched it. Come on, get up! You're a dwarf, aren't you?!"

If he was a dwarf, I needed him to be a bit sturdier than that. It was no fun if the fight ended after a single blow. He hadn't even gotten a good shot in yet.

Granda stumbled back to his feet, apparently quite shaken. "Don't write me off that easy! We've barely even started!" Perhaps to try and act like he was unfazed, or maybe unconsciously, a smile had risen to his face.

So I dropped my guard, beckoning him to come at me. Naturally, I couldn't relax for a moment. With arms like that, a single hit would KO me if I wasn't careful. But this was a fistfight. There was no point if he didn't get to hit me back. I braced myself, determined to at least stay conscious no matter what attack came, a resolve quickly tested as I let Granda's fist sink into my stomach.

Of course, I immediately regretted it.



"I can't believe you, Acer. You must have known you could have called for me at the border, or at least mentioned my name so they'd let you through." Oswald stuck a bandage to my face as he gave an exasperated sigh. I hadn't seen my master in blacksmithing in twenty-some-odd years. From my perspective, we had been apart for quite some time, but with how ambiguous his age already was from his appearance, it didn't look to me like he had changed all that much. Of course, as usual, he had seen right through me.

"I get what you were doing. Now instead of everyone whispering about me bringing an elf into the country, they're all spreading rumors of some strange elf

getting in a fight with a miner named Granda.” Though he quietly tended to my wounds, I was starting to think he was actually a little upset.

For the record, Win was currently off being taken care of by Master Damned Dwarf’s wife. Since dwarven women virtually never left the country, few people knew anything about what they looked like. Naturally, I hadn’t seen one before coming here either, but I now knew they just looked like short humans, not a hair of a beard on their face. Seeing the thickly bearded Oswald paired with someone who looked like a young girl...I had to blame my memories of my past life for my mind immediately turning to thoughts of how criminal it looked.

“I get that you didn’t want to make it public that you were my guest because you thought it would hurt my standing. And I’m grateful for that,” Master Damned Dwarf said, thumping me on the chest with his fist. In contrast to his words, his fist clearly expressed his anger. It hurt. A lot. Even more than when I got punched by Granda. Way, way more.

“But Acer. I called you here with all that in mind. I picked you because you’re more important than my reputation. Don’t look down on me so much, you damned elf. Do you think I’m so pathetic I can’t look after a single one of my students?”

Yeah...that’s right. He was proud like that. It had been so long since we had last met, I had kind of forgotten. I had mistakenly assumed he would calm down now that he was back in dwarven lands. I had read too much into things, forgetting he wouldn’t care in the least about any hit his reputation might take for having me here.

“Yeah. Sorry. It’s been so long...I forgot how much I can rely on you.”

So I honestly apologized. Seeing that, Oswald’s expression softened a little. When he pounded me on the chest again, it was with a small smile.



Ow. What did I do this time?

“Good. But that aside, good work. You’re probably the first elf ever to win in a fight against a dwarven miner. That’s impressive, even for a high elf. As your friend, I gotta say I’m proud of you.” He laughed, clapping me on the shoulder. That third bout of pain was so nostalgic and pleasant, it had me laughing too.

Invited back to Oswald’s home, I was shown to a residence so enormous the word “mansion” seemed insufficient, together with a fantastic forge. It was a physical representation of just how honored blacksmiths were in this country.

After leaving Vistcourt, Oswald had immediately returned here and gotten married. He already had four children, two boys, and two girls. Around the age of twenty, when they were a little less developed than a ten-year-old human, dwarven boys already began growing their beards, so his eldest son had quite a beard on him already. In Win’s eyes, he looked much like an adult, so he was quite surprised to learn that they were roughly the same age.

In contrast, the dwarven children couldn’t see the half-elf Win as looking like anything but a girl, so the eldest decided to prove Win’s manhood in the most dwarven way: with a fistfight.

I couldn’t imagine Win had much chance of winning. On top of the difference in muscle mass between a dwarf and a half-elf, Oswald’s son was still a few years older. The gap in development between those extra few years was still significant, even for a dwarf and a half-elf.

But the goal of their fight wasn’t to decide a winner. It was important to let Win show his fangs, to rise up against someone when they did something he didn’t like. If he could do that, then Oswald’s eldest son, and hopefully the rest of his children, would recognize him as an equal.

So I watched with anticipation, keeping a close eye on them but not intervening. I did make sure he had his gloves on before the fight, though. I had taught him how to fight before coming here, and unlike when I had first met him, Win had grown quite bold, not hesitating to stand his ground when he had made up his mind. So I was sure he’d be fine. What I *hadn’t* expected was his first fight in the dwarven kingdom to be for something so adorable, rather than

born from racial animosity.

As Master Damned Dwarf watched the fight alongside me, I had to guess that this lack of hostility was something he had worked hard to instill in his children. At the same time, Oswald's wife was preparing more bandages identical to the ones stuck to my face. The only question was whether Win would be the only one sporting them, or if Oswald's son would have a matching set.

Even Oswald's wife didn't show any resentment towards us. My happiness at the acceptance from Oswald's family, together with the striking image of Win preparing to fight, made me excited for the future.



To clarify, Oswald hadn't invited me to visit the dwarven kingdom just so that we could rekindle our friendship. I was here to help him in his struggle for the throne. But what could drive someone as skilled and renowned as Oswald to ask me for help? When I heard the reason...I couldn't help but smile at the trick fate was playing on me.

There were a number of skilled smiths in competition for the throne, but the current front-runner was a dwarf by the name of Rajudor. Yes, *that* Rajudor. The one who had taught magic to my own master in magic, my student in blacksmithing, and my rival, Kawshman Feedel.

However, according to Oswald, among those struggling for the throne, Rajudor's skill in blacksmithing was among the lowest. So how had he managed to pull so far ahead of everyone else? The reason lay with mithril, the rarest and most valuable of metals to the dwarven people.

Mithril was a symbol of kingship to them. That was because mithril was a metal only the king could use. It required a tremendous amount of heat to forge, which in turn demanded extremely specialized equipment. There was only one forge capable of working with it in the dwarven kingdom, which was reserved for the king.

Though it was unclear how they had managed it, that forge somehow managed to pull heat from the true flame hidden deep in the earth, and was a treasure of the dwarven people. Maybe that was where the elven myth of dwarves stealing a fragment of the perfect flame from nature and trapping it in

a forge came from.

Magma? Mantle? I wasn't educated enough on the matter to say for sure, but I could at least see why the elves thought that what they had done was dangerous. However, in this current struggle for succession, Rajudor had produced goods made of mithril without using that unique forge, catapulting him straight into the lead despite being far behind in other qualities. Even if he lacked the skill, his ability to use mithril made up for it alone.

In addition, since returning from human lands, apparently Rajudor had gathered as many people as he could find with an aptitude for magic and taken them on as students to continue his work creating relics. Most dwarves recognized the usefulness of such relics, but since so few people could actually make use of them, they still saw his focus on them as an eccentricity. But if Rajudor were to take the throne, it was quite possible those few dwarves with the talent necessary to use magic would begin to form something of an upper class.

The dwarves that still clung to traditional ways had gathered together to find some way to prevent Rajudor from taking the throne. In short, they began an extensive period of trial and error, attempting to work mithril themselves without using the king's forge. I thought that trying to match Rajudor's accomplishments themselves rather than bring him down directly was a very dwarven approach.

But if you asked whether Master Damned Dwarf was part of that traditionalist faction...

"Nah. Even if only a few people can use them, those relics are some interesting stuff. I have nothin' against them at all. But still, I can't give up the throne to him. I have my own reasons for aiming for it."

Because of his different stance, he had ended up taking a neutral position, though in the end that meant he was facing both factions as enemies. Of course, there were other skilled smiths that were neutral in the debate, but they were each independently aiming for the throne as well.

Based on what I had been told here, I had some ideas of how Kawshman's



master in magic had managed to obtain the level of heat necessary to work with mithril. It was probably an eighty or ninety percent chance—okay, almost certain—that he had worked rituals into his furnace and turned the entire thing into a relic.

But as you might expect, operating a relic the size of a furnace would take a tremendous amount of mana. And while it was being used, that flow of mana would have to be constant. There was no way a single mage could provide that much mana, so it was no wonder he had been searching out disciples. In short, ever since he had returned to dwarven lands, or perhaps even since his days in Odine teaching Kawshman magic, he had already been aiming for the throne.

If he had been doing research on how to work with mithril since back then, he would be a powerful adversary. Any disadvantage he had in his skill in blacksmithing would be compensated for by his mastery of magic.

Personally, he struck me as a thrilling character. That said, this time he was my opponent, a rival.

“So you were wondering if I could help improve the output of your furnace so that you could work mithril yourself, huh?” He had likely tried plenty of solutions on his own already, and had come to me for help as a last resort.

My master seemed to have an awful lot of faith in me. Judging by his explanation, the use of mithril was extremely important to the dwarves. Asking an elf for help in this would have earned a lot more pushback than relying on magic.

“Yeah, I want to show the others what we can do if we join hands with the elves. And just how good my friend and student is,” he said, his expression entirely serious.

When we parted ways in Vistcourt, he had made a promise to me.

*“I’ll become the best smith there, take the throne for myself, and invite you elves to come play.”*

In order to keep his promise, he was aiming for the throne. He was going to use the battle for succession as a chance to show just how much could be done by working together with elves in the most treasured art of blacksmithing.

That sounded good to me. I wanted a chance to tell Kawshman, “Your master is amazing, but mine is even better.”

Rajudor had found a new weapon in his time in human lands: the knowledge of magic. But Master Damned Dwarf had found something very different: this damned elf, and a mission. Which would come out on top when they clashed? I imagined that question that would be answered with a crown.



Though what I had to do now was clear, that didn’t mean I could accomplish it in a single day. If we were going to improve the furnace to a point it could produce such high temperatures, we’d need to first rebuild it to withstand them.

Rajudor’s furnace likely included rituals designed both to increase the level of heat and the forge’s resistance to it. But my curiosity led me elsewhere. The king’s forge was capable of extracting the heat of the true flame from the earth, but what was *it* made of? If it was truly drawing that heat out from depths of the earth, it would need something that could take heat better than even mithril could. It would also need to withstand incredible pressures, and would have to be extraordinarily large and long. A forge capable of meeting those parameters far exceeded my imagination.

Still, it seemed Oswald had some ideas about heat-resistant materials that could be used, so I’d have to leave that to him. What I needed to do first was create an environment here in the dwarven kingdom where Win and I could live comfortably. In concrete terms, that meant going out shopping with Oswald’s wife to help her carry things home, and later responding to the miner Granda’s invitation to go out drinking as an apology for our first encounter.

Since the dwarven kingdom was in such a remote location, I had expected the food to be awful, but that wasn’t the case at all. Their staple was a kind of potato that could grow without access to sunlight, and the sides were liverworts similarly comfortable growing underground. But I had to say, these potatoes and liverworts were exceptionally tasty.

The main dishes were typically goat meat from livestock kept above ground, or meat from monsters who tried to prey on said livestock. And of course, when

it came to dwarves, alcohol was invaluable. The drink of choice was made from potatoes, then distilled to make it stronger. In addition to these, there were some luxury items imported from human lands, so despite being an entirely foreign place, I had no issues with the food.

However, in order to live comfortably here, the number one thing I needed to prove was that my skill in blacksmithing could match even the expectations of the dwarves. If I holed myself up in Oswald's forge and made something, they would no doubt suspect that Oswald himself had played a significant role in its creation. Then again, maybe dwarves wouldn't bother entertaining something so conspiratorial, but I decided to use a different forge just in case.

Luckily, being in the dwarven kingdom, there were plenty of forges to go around, including those specifically for apprentices to practice their craft. Of course, as they were intended for beginners, the materials available at these forges weren't the best. But after swapping a few beers with Granda, I was able to get my hands on some better iron. According to him, that was part of his apology.

Among the dwarves, Granda was particularly proud of his strength, and was known for being particularly short-tempered. But once he recognized someone as a friend, he was quite open-minded and generous. As obvious as it sounded, there was no such thing as a person with only negative qualities. Or a dwarf, I suppose. Unfortunately, I supposed the opposite was also true.

At any rate, I was finally back in a forge. I had already decided what I wanted to make. At the time, Win was touring around with Oswald's kids. Now that he was away from Kaeha's dojo, and far from his familiar home in Ludoria's capital, I wanted to make him a sword.

As a half-elf, his growth was slower than that of a human, but he had spent a good deal of time training in swordsmanship. I wanted to make a sword just for him, both for training and for self-defense. Even as a half-elf, Win was at the stage in his life where he would experience a lot of growth. It would only be a few years before this sword would be too short and too light to be useful for him. When that day came, I'd reforge it to fit him better. I thought the idea of the sword growing alongside him sounded wonderful.

Having so many eyes on me was kind of irritating. “Why is an elf in a place like this?” I could feel their doubts and suspicions through their looks. But not a single one of them interfered with my work. I imagined that was a result of my very public fight with Granda the day before.

Fine, they could look all they wanted. I was already used to standing out, and it didn’t bother me to be tested like this. I’d earn the respect of every dwarf here...and then follow them all to the bar. That was my immediate objective.

As I worked on my preparations, I peeked into the furnace. Good, it looked like the fire spirits here were still happy to see me. I idly wondered if I might be the closest to the fire spirits among all elves and high elves. I found it unlikely...but there were definitely no other high elves that worked with them as closely. That meant they helped me more than any other high elf, at least. In that sense, Oswald’s idea of calling me for help had been the right choice.

The furnace steadily heated up. Apparently the spirits here were rather impatient and intense. They kind of reminded me of Granda. That thought brought a smile to my face.

My preparations complete, I began my work, with a large crowd of dwarves serving as an audience behind me. It wasn’t just the students, though. Plenty of their teachers had stopped to join the spectators. This may have been a forge for beginners, but that didn’t mean I would get away unscathed if I made a miserable showing of my skills. I could feel that threat in their looks, instilling an exciting sense of urgency in me.

This was a competition between me and the dwarves. Look all you want. Acknowledge my skills.

The sound of the hammer striking iron was as pleasant as always.



It was hard to tell since we were underground most of the time, but I think about a year passed since we had moved into the dwarven kingdom. On my days off, I would take Win outside of dwarven lands to experience some sunlight, but it seemed the dwarves didn’t mind spending their whole lives underground. I guess I had to chalk that up as just a racial difference between us. Ah, and by this point we had become familiar enough with the people that

we could come and go through the border without paperwork.

I had quickly been driven out of the forge, until the dwarves realized I wasn't a beginner at all. The people I met there liked to joke, "You'll live a long time, so maybe you can aim to be the next dwarven king!" Of course, a job like being king would require me to be stuck in one place for an extended period of time, so it was out of the question. But I was happy to be acknowledged by them.

Win also began attending school with the other dwarven children. Apparently they taught things like dwarven history and how their society was structured, as well as the fundamentals of blacksmithing and discerning different metals...but I couldn't imagine what he learned there would be much use outside of these dwarven lands. But maybe he had realized what Oswald and I were trying to accomplish, as he tried his best to integrate himself into dwarven society.

Of course, even if they aged at roughly the same pace, and even if my actions here were starting to loosen the tension between elves and dwarves, there were still plenty of dwarven children who resented him. Oswald's children all took Win's side, but he was still fairly isolated. But after observing the dwarven kingdom for some time, knowing what would face him there, Win decided by himself that he wanted to attend school with them. Neither I nor anyone in Oswald's family could deny him that. He had picked his own battle.

When had he grown so brave and bold? Had his desperate attempts at trying to keep up with Shizuki and Mizuha forced him to mature more quickly? As young and adorable as he still was, the day he became an independent man didn't seem that far off.

Not everything had gone smoothly, though. Our search for materials to build a furnace capable of withstanding extreme temperatures had yet to bear fruit. The reason for that was simple: Oswald was not the only smith trying to find a way to work mithril. Many other smiths were aiming for the same thing, and the ensuing scramble for the materials had caused the supply to dry up.

Normally, a smith as renowned as Oswald would have priority access to such resources, but since he was operating independently, the conflict between the pro-magic and traditionalist factions left his personal influence ineffective. And if we put everything into getting those resources at the cost of having any

mithril to actually work with, it would all be for nothing.

So over the past year, and likely since even before I had arrived, Oswald had been slowly collecting what he needed. But he was still struggling to secure the last piece.

We didn't really have any other choice. If Oswald's personal influence was insufficient, I'd have to step up. The last thing he needed was the skin of a lava frog, a monster that made its home near the mouths of active volcanoes. Its skin was perfectly insulated against heat, protecting its supple flesh and organs from even the most extreme temperatures. Somehow, their skin was able to allow the secretion of oils while still offering enough protection to swim through magma. I didn't understand the logic at all, but there was no point trying to figure out the biology of monsters.

Basically, if we could line the inside of the furnace with lava frog skin, it would be able to withstand the temperatures necessary to melt down mithril. So after convincing a reluctant Oswald, I left the dwarven kingdom behind and headed for a range of active volcanoes to the north.

He knew full well how little I was interested in playing the role of adventurer, so he was quite apologetic about the whole ordeal. But as Master Damned Dwarf's student, it was only natural that this damned elf's objective would be the same. I had no problem with doing a bit of hunting. I wasn't just killing them for the sake of killing them either. Hunting them to make use of their skin was perfectly acceptable to me. Oh, and of course as frogs, their meat would be edible, so I would do what I could to make use of that as well.

A trip to the volcanic region to the north would take more than a week. It was the first time in quite a while I would be going somewhere alone. It made me feel a little lonely, but I couldn't take Win to somewhere as dangerous as an active volcano.

With no companions to travel with, I was quite lazy when it came to food. I relied on eating preserved meats while I walked, and drank water straight from the bottle. With only my own belongings on my back, my pack was quite light, and since I didn't have to account for children, I could move quite quickly. But it

felt like I was missing something.

Climbing over the mountains, sometimes transforming the terrain a bit to make it easier to walk on, I kept moving as long as the sun was out.

A trip that would take even the robust dwarves a week took me only five days.

Sure, it was possible I had been rushing, but when you considered the difference in the length of our strides, maybe that was to be expected.



Upon reflection, this was probably the first time in either this life or my previous one that I had seen lava in person. I had a rough idea of what it looked like from games and manga in my previous life, but at this time it had come to life right before my eyes. I was sure that making one careless move in this brutal hellscape, or even just getting a little unlucky despite taking the utmost caution, would spell the end of me.

But as a high elf sensitive to the spirits, I couldn't help but feel excited. What a powerful environment! The power of fire and earth was startlingly intense here, like wind in a storm, or water in the ocean. But there was more to it than just raw strength. Though it may have been a weird way to put it, there was a youthful energy to its wildness.

As I stared in wonder, the wind spirits whispered a rebuke in my ear. They warned me of toxic gasses spewing into the air from deep underground. Yeah, this place was quite dangerous. It was honestly scary. Of course, with the help of the wind spirits, any lingering buildup of these toxic gasses could be dispersed, but their warning had nonetheless brought me back to reality.

I couldn't afford to forget just how dangerous this place was. No matter how strong the power of earth and fire was, that didn't make *me* any more powerful. If I let myself get carried away by that false sense of security, I could easily make a fatal mistake. Putting a hand to my chest, I took a few deep breaths. Once I had calmed down somewhat, I headed towards the mouth of the volcano.

Like in Pulha, it seemed places where nature was strong, especially the power

of earth, tended to produce large numbers of monsters. It made me wonder what the monsters ate to survive up here.

For example, out of the corner of my eye I could see what appeared to be a large boulder, significantly bigger than all the others in the area. It didn't look out of the ordinary aside from its size, but it was actually a large lizard camouflaged as a rock. If I had carelessly stepped too close, it would have taken a huge bite out of me. There were a number of birds circling in the sky above me as well, potentially targeting me specifically. They were also monsters.

The spirits of the earth informed me when there were camouflaged monsters nearby, so they weren't especially difficult to avoid, and the flying monsters could be stopped by the wind spirits, so they couldn't approach me either. Even so, it was a scary place to be. I couldn't think of any other place I had been that I needed so much help from the spirits just to walk safely.

But with their aid, I finally found my way to a river of lava, within which was a half-submerged frog large enough to swallow a human whole. The lava frog I was after was happily croaking away, relaxing with its eyes closed.

Having yet to notice me, it would have been easy to take the frog by surprise, but I couldn't kill it as it was now. Even if I managed to do so, it would just sink into the lava where I wouldn't be able to retrieve it. Also, it was far too large for me to carry out of here, so I would need to skin and butcher it wherever I killed it. In that case, the only real option seemed to be using myself as bait to lure it into a place where I could process the body easily.

So I pulled out my bow, removed the arrowhead from one of my arrows, and aimed it at the frog. My target was the head. I obviously wouldn't miss, but I didn't want a direct hit either. Instead, I fired it to glance across its head, neither damaging its skin nor risking seriously injuring the monster.

The sensation of the arrow striking it shocked the frog into high alert.

*Perfect.*

As I had hoped, it wasn't too stupid to realize it was being attacked. The lava frog turned to see me just as I was nocking another arrow, this time with a proper arrowhead.



Once it stepped out of the river of lava, I would fire a single shot aimed at its heart. Some frogs could survive for a brief time after their brain was destroyed, so if I wanted to finish it off with the least damage to its skin possible, aiming for the heart was best. As I drew my arrow back, it was almost like I could see through the frog to the pulsing core of life hidden in its chest.

But, it didn't walk out of the lava towards me. Instead, it sank farther in, then leaped a huge distance into the air. This was a perfect situation for the phrase "I couldn't believe my eyes."

Jumping into a forward somersault, I dropped to the ground to avoid the falling frog.

*"Spirits of—"*

I immediately called on the earth spirits for help. Though I couldn't finish my sentence, the spirits understood immediately what I needed, creating a wall of stone between me and the monster. Not a moment later, the frog's tongue lashed out, smashing the stone wall to pieces. If the spirits had been even a breath slower, that tongue would have ripped me apart.

But more importantly, what was with that jump? It had soared through the air like some kind of enormous flea. This was why monsters were so scary. You really could never afford to underestimate them.

Taking a deep breath to still my trembling hands, I slowly got back to my feet. The battle was already over. Using the short time the earth spirits had bought me by creating that wall, I had fired an arrow from my position sprawled on the ground, managing to hit my target perfectly despite my absurd posture. The frog's thick layer of fat was no obstacle to the grand wolf fang arrowhead, allowing the arrow to penetrate straight through to its heart.

The lava frog collapsed motionless to the ground.



When I tried cooking a bit of meat from the lava frog's thigh, it ended up being surprisingly delicious. It had an appealing but not overwhelming flavor, like chicken. Though if you asked me whether it was worth eating considering the effort it took to hunt, I'm not sure how I'd answer.

But that aside, having successfully hunted some lava frog skin, I returned to the dwarven kingdom. Oswald greeted me with a complex mixture of relief, joy, and shock.

“I figured you’d be fine, but you sure came back quick. Those things take a fair number of dwarven soldiers to take down, and even then it’s a hard fight. But this is a huge step forward. Thank you.”

I had earned his thanks. As difficult as it was to bring down an unpredictable and dangerous monster like a lava frog, if it got me praise from my master in blacksmithing, I felt like it was all worth it.

A few weeks later, thanks to the lava frog skin I had brought back, we managed to finish the long-awaited furnace.

“Right. Let’s get started then,” Oswald said as he ignited the newly built furnace. Meanwhile, I asked the fire spirits in his old forge to move into the new one. While new spirits would surely come once we began making use of the new furnace, I didn’t want to waste the relationship we had built up with these ones.

Blacksmiths liked to say that each craftsman had a different level of compatibility with each forge, but really that compatibility was with the spirits who lived in it. For example, although he couldn’t see or sense the fire spirits in his forge at all, Oswald recognized that the fire in the furnace had a mood of its own, and so always approached it with sincere respect. After twenty years of observing his behavior, the spirits in his forge had taken quite a liking to him, so they had a good relationship. Throwing all of that away just because he had built a new furnace felt like both a waste and a tragedy.

But with someone like me around who could explain the situation to them, the fire spirits nodded and moved into a piece of burning charcoal at my request, which we then carried into the new furnace. We then kept that new furnace burning merrily to help the spirits make themselves at home.

It would probably take about three days for them to settle into the new furnace. So of course, for that whole time, Oswald and I had to take turns keeping it burning. We used charcoal at first, but changed to a different kind of

fuel partway through. Oswald told me it was a secret fuel used by the dwarves. It looked like a kind of rock to me, so my guess is it was some form of coke. There was a chance it was something that only existed in this world, but in the end it didn't matter much to me. The details all seemed pointless when faced with the heat that fuel produced.

The forge wasn't just hot. It was practically the definition of heat.

I had worked as a blacksmith for quite some time now, so I thought I was well accustomed to the temperatures that a forge would generate, but this was even hotter than I could handle. But the furnace bore the heat no problem, and the fire spirits were happy. Without batting an eye, Master Damned Dwarf kept working the bellows, filling the furnace with fresh oxygen.

*Come on, it's already so hot.* For the first time in a while, I cursed him for being a damned dwarf from the bottom of my heart. It wasn't fair that dwarves could handle heat like this.

But we weren't done yet. Asking the fire spirits for help, we brought the temperature even higher. Without some sort of plan, it wouldn't be strange for heat like this to kill me. After saying a word to Oswald, I stepped out of the forge and poured some water on my head, then asked the wind spirits to help keep me cool.

*Please spin around me, keeping the heat from the furnace away from my body.*

If I could drop my body temperature a little bit, I should be able to handle the rest.

Three days later, when the fire spirits were settled in the new furnace, we finally began preparations to work on mithril.

Oswald brought a lump of metal that looked like it had already been refined. Apparently unlike most metals, which appeared in nature as ore that needed to be refined and extracted, mithril could be found naturally in this metallic state. The details were a closely guarded secret of the dwarves, so at the very least until Oswald was king, there was no chance of other races learning about it. Knowing any more might even put my life in danger.

That said, I could take some guesses as to where it came from. Since it was very similar in form to Fairy's Silver, I imagined monsters had some role to play in its creation. As a metal that could only be obtained and used in the dwarven kingdom, this would likely be my only interaction with the stuff, so I didn't need to know much more.

Mithril was an incredibly strong metal, and was a symbol of the immutable and indestructible. When exposed to extreme heat, it would soften for a short time, allowing it to be reshaped with a hammer, but once it cooled and regained its hardness, it would require even greater heat than before to soften again. Each time it was heated and cooled, it would become harder, stronger, and more difficult to shape.

In order to properly make something out of mithril, you needed a way to reach that extreme level of heat, a way to properly control the heat at varying levels, and the skill to work the metal quickly and efficiently.

My job was to manage the temperature of the furnace and constantly keep an eye on the fire spirits. The focus it required left me no room to exchange so much as a word with Oswald as he worked. There was a limit to the heat the furnace could produce, so I needed to bring the temperature up in stages, giving Oswald as much time as possible to work the mithril. But it was clear from the start that it wouldn't be enough, so once the furnace reached the limit of its own output, I would reach out to the fire spirits and force the heat to rise even higher.

How long did I keep that up? Once you started working mithril, you couldn't stop until you were finished, so there was no chance to rest.

"This is the last stretch! Give me as much as you can!" Oswald threw the mithril back in the furnace one last time, so I turned to the fire spirits once again.

*Please, burn as hot as you can.*

*Draw as much heat into the mithril as you can.*

Understanding that this work was important to us, the fire spirits went all out. The furnace burned with an incredible intensity, and as I had asked, all of its

heat poured into the metal. For a moment, the mithril sword shone a brilliant white. Oswald quickly withdrew the weapon from the furnace, giving the blade its final grind and polish. The sword was complete.

The two of us gave a massive sigh. It was like all the tension over us had been cut.

“Ah, we did it. It’s finally done,” Oswald said, unable to suppress his laughter. I could see the joy of what we had done—making something out of a metal so precious to the dwarves with our own hands—start to sink in. Fighting my fatigue, I brought my eyes up to behold what we had wrought: a phenomenal piece of craftsmanship.

Oswald, my master in blacksmithing, was truly incredible. I couldn’t even feel frustrated at the gap in skill between us. If the use of mithril hadn’t come up in the battle for succession, there was no doubt in my mind he would have taken the throne single-handedly. But despite his unbelievable skill, I was still able to help him. That made me so happy, I couldn’t keep from smiling.

“I feel like this deserves a toast with the best drink we can get our hands on. Your treat, of course,” I joked with a laugh. Right now, Win and I were totally dependent on Oswald for our daily necessities, so I could hardly call it a treat.

Oswald nodded. “That doesn’t sound bad. But if it’s a toast, we should do it here. It’s rude to eat and drink in the forge, but if it’s a toast, it’ll be fine. Because we have one more partner in there, don’t we?”

The two of us turned to look at the furnace, then burst into a fit of laughter. The fire spirits poked out of the forge to watch, confused but entertained by our strange behavior.



Surprising no one, once Oswald submitted the mithril sword to a competition, he easily took first place. He was the better smith from the start, so now that he was able to produce goods made from mithril, it was only natural that he would overtake Rajudor. That single competition more or less guaranteed the throne for him.

But that didn’t mean we were satisfied to rest on our laurels. In order to earn

the respect of all the dwarves, or rather to force them to respect us by our sheer skill, we'd sow even more chaos at the next competition. We would make something out of ordinary steel to silence the traditionalist anti-magic faction, while at the same time I would prepare some rituals for Oswald to work into the weapon to create a magic sword, challenging Rajudor on his home turf. We would show the whole kingdom just what the two of us could accomplish when we worked together.

Of course, no matter how much we overwhelmed the competition, it was foolish to think this would mend the divide between elves and dwarves, but it was an important step on the road to reconciliation. After all, Win and I had been fully accepted into dwarven society, and if Oswald managed to become king, things would take another concrete step forward.

For example, the elves could start exporting fruit from the forests into human kingdoms, where they could be processed into alcohol and sent to the dwarves. Elves didn't use metal tools, but the dwarves were equally skilled at processing monster teeth and claws, so they could make knives and other trinkets from them. The elves wouldn't be able to ignore an incredible piece of craftsmanship in front of them.

Neither the dwarves nor the elves had any intention of changing themselves, but I was excited to see how they would. I was sure Oswald felt the same way. And above all, a world where people of different races could interact freely would make Win's life easier as well.

Time raced on, and before I knew it, five years had passed. In the heart of his growth spurt, Win no longer looked all that small compared to the dwarves around us. His new height helped improve his swordsmanship, to the point that he had started to take one out of every ten matches against me. Unlike me, Win was filled with the desire to fight, get stronger, and be victorious. His rapid growth was blinding.

Apparently, his time at the dwarven school had inspired a curiosity in blacksmithing in him as well, so he had asked Oswald to take him on as an apprentice. When Oswald asked why Win hadn't asked me to teach him...

"If Acer teaches me, I'll never be his equal. I'll never be able to beat him. So I

want to learn from you, Uncle Oswald.”

That was his answer.

As for why he was so fixated on being my equal or beating me, I didn't really know. It seemed Oswald did understand his feelings though, as he agreed to take Win on as an apprentice. And so Win and I became students together...though I guess we were already students together when we were at the dojo. In that case, I guess it wasn't that big of a change.

Little by little, Win was starting to take more time for himself and spend less time with me, but I was sure that was healthy for a boy his age. Naturally it made me start to feel lonely, but I couldn't deny the joy I felt in watching him grow into a reliable and independent man. And it wasn't as though he disliked me. He was just reaching a more independent age.

But as if it had been lying in wait, preparing to strike when we were most vulnerable, we were met with bad news. A dwarf that had traveled north for trade brought the news back to Oswald, who shared it with me.

“It looks like the Empire of Fodor is making preparations to invade Ludoria.”

I could hardly believe my own ears. I had personally sealed the route between Ludoria and Fodor. Afraid of the same thing happening again, never mind the route I had sealed, there hadn't been any attempts to open any more paths in the mountains. While it was one thing for sturdy dwarves to traverse the mountains, it was another story when it came to humans, let alone those carrying heavy gear and provisions as would be in an army.

“Are you sure this isn't some kind of mistake?” Naturally that was my first assumption, but Oswald shook his head with a frown.

“Weapons and provisions are being poured into the cities on the southern edge of the empire, along with the fortress at the road you closed. The only southern neighbors Fodor has are the dwarven kingdom and Ludoria.”

Food and weapon prices in the empire had started to spike, along with military recruitment and training exercises. It looked very much like the beginnings of war, but there were no signs of hostility between Fodor and its

neighbors.

In that case...had they found a way to get their army across the mountains? It was hard to believe, but I could have said the same for the idea of someone closing the path through the mountains in the first place.

We couldn't afford to rule out anything. For example, what if they had a high elf like me with them? Or perhaps the Fodorians had learned that an elf was responsible for sealing the route between the two kingdoms, and so had conscripted elves of their own? I could even see the possibility that the Fodorian army had dispatched elves to try and open the path, and then be punished for failing to do so.

The climate in the North was quite cold, so I had heard there were few elves who lived there, but there were some. As small as the chance may have been, I couldn't say with certainty that there were no elves involved.

If the empire had actually found a way through the mountains, then with the previous route still closed off, Ludoria would be taken by surprise. That wasn't a possibility I relished. Not while Kaeha and her family still lived there. If Fodor could use a surprise attack to establish a bridgehead in the northern reaches of Ludoria, a long and protracted war would ensue. It went without saying, but Kaeha's family would have their daily life upended. I wanted Kaeha's last moments to be spent peacefully together with me. I couldn't let some war threaten that.

"Are you going?" Oswald asked me, concern written plain on his face.

I nodded. As long as it wasn't impossible, I needed to know. I had made up my mind to head to Fodor. It was already more or less decided that Oswald would be the next king, so there should have been no problem with me leaving the dwarven kingdom at this point.

"I see. Leave Win to me. He's my student now, after all."

I nodded again. There was no way I could bring Win to a place that dangerous.

"I plan on being back within the year," I informed him.

I couldn't say I was happy about this. Neither about leaving Win for a whole



year, nor about heading into a place where war was brewing. But if Win was truly important to me, I couldn't stand idly by while his family—the people at Kaeha's dojo—was being threatened. No matter how much I hated war, it wasn't going to stop for my sake. If I really wanted peace, if I wanted to protect those important to me, I needed to do more than just pray.

After quickly finishing my preparations to leave, I joined a group of traders heading north that same day, and left the now-familiar kingdom of dwarves behind.

## Chapter 4 — A Bloodthirsty Creature in the City of Snow

The path from Ludoria up into the dwarven kingdom was harsh, but getting from the dwarven kingdom into Fodor was even harder. Even the dwarves I was traveling with cut a wide swathe to avoid going through the monster-infested volcanic region.

“Look at that, Mr. Acer. That’s the biggest mountain around here. We call it the Dragon’s Peak. Legend says a dragon lives there, though I’ve never had the guts to look for it. Neither did my grandfather, nor his grandfather.” One of the dwarves traveling with me, all sorts of trade goods on his back, laughed heartily as he pointed at a distant volcano.

Looking at where he was pointing, I could see where the legend came from. It definitely had the majesty of a place a dragon would live. But...dragons, huh? The word brought back memories of a song I had heard from the high elf elders, back before I was a hundred years old.

If I recalled correctly, it went something like...

*In this world, five are truly eternal.*

*The spirit of nature, our friends who support the world.*

*The true dragon, deep in slumber, awaiting the end times.*

*The true giant, looking down on creation from above the clouds.*

*The immortal bird, the symbol of rebirth, who returns to life as a baby the moment it dies.*

*And the true elf, our people, eternal creatures destined to become spirits ourselves.*

It was something like that. In short, it was a poem to make the high elves feel

special. I had thought it was just a fairy tale, but after learning about the secrets of working mithril in the dwarven kingdom and their treasured royal forge, I was starting to change my mind.

A similar fairy tale told of the dwarves stealing a fragment of fire from nature and trapping it in a forge. Even if the story wasn't entirely true, I had learned of the forge that served as its foundation. In that case, there was a chance that true dragons, true giants, and the phoenixes were real in some form as well.

At the very least, I knew spirits and high elves were real. Among the myths passed down by humans in this world, those five races had been created even before the gods, which meant they all existed in fairy tales.

However, the song taught by the high elves didn't end there.

*Three others reached for eternity with mortal bodies.*

I was pretty sure that's how the next part started, but the rest was a vague memory at best. I remembered one of those races was the demons, but the elders' stories were so long and complicated, I barely listened to half of them. But at the very least, I could confidently say that if we were attacked by a dragon here, nothing they could have told me would save us, so I guess it didn't really matter.

"A dragon, huh? I'd love to check the mountain out up close, but we'd be in trouble if we got attacked up here." As I thought out loud, the dwarf at my side nodded heartily. The thought of there being a dragon nearby had quite a romantic feel to it, but with the ever-present threat of falling from the mountains, there was no room for us to take unnecessary risks.

The trip from the dwarven kingdom to the Empire of Fodor took about three weeks. It was longer than the trip to Ludoria thanks to having to avoid the volcanic region. The dwarves apparently made this trip many times a year, scaling the cliffs with their heavy luggage like they were nothing. On their way back, they'd be carrying casks of alcohol bigger than their bodies. I thought of myself as somewhat of a seasoned traveler, but I felt that was beyond me.

Once my escort had shown me the way into the empire, I intended to split off from them. Elves and dwarves working together would attract far too much

attention. Even if I wore a hood to disguise myself as a human, I'd still look too suspicious. They told me where they would be staying so I could meet up with them once I'd sneaked into the city, but even then I'd have to be careful to keep our interaction secret.

As producers of weapons, the dwarves were loyal to neither Ludoria nor Fodor. They had been willing to work with me out of a desire for information. After all, if the two human nations went to war, they wouldn't be in a position to continue trading with them. So while I was happy to accept their help, I needed to avoid casting suspicion on them as much as possible.

My first objective was to investigate. I would look into whether the rumors of an impending invasion of Ludoria were true, and the details of the plan if they were. And if that method seemed likely to take Ludoria by surprise, or if elves seemed to be involved in some way, I'd need to find a way to put a stop to it. Though really, I was hoping that this was all some sort of misunderstanding, that we were worrying over nothing, and that all my efforts here were unnecessary.

If they had no particular strategy, just throwing a huge number of soldiers through the mountains and hoping for the best, I wouldn't need to get any more involved than letting Airena know what was happening. I'd then grab some souvenirs for Win, Oswald, and his family, and head right back home.

But as we approached Fodor, I began to feel a strange sense of unease. It was something I was used to feeling before something bad happened. I began to doubt that what awaited me in Fodor would be resolved easily. I wouldn't be able to ignore it. I'd have to get involved and try to stop it.

"Hey, Mr. Acer. We caught ourselves a rock lizard, so we're gonna be eating early. We'll take care of getting it butchered, so start up a fire for us."

While lost in thought, the dwarf's shout brought me back to the present. Apparently the vanguard of traders, with comparatively lighter loads so they could scout out the path ahead of us, had encountered and brought down a monster.

I nodded, hurrying to follow. Finding fuel in a rocky place like this would

normally be quite difficult, but being a mage, as long as I had mana to work with, the fire wouldn't go out. The dwarven traders became far, far too excited about me being able to use magic to make fire. A hot meal on a brutal journey like this one was very much a luxury. No matter what skill it was, having my abilities come in handy made me feel happy too.

This journey would continue for a while yet. I could worry about what I was going to do in Fodor once I got there. No matter what hardship awaited me, I was convinced I could see it through.



Before we knew it, the road through the mountains had adopted a layer of snow. Stepping into the borders of the Empire of Fodor was like stepping into another world. The cold north wind was blocked by the range of mountains, never reaching Ludoria. Instead, it collected here, darkening the sky and covering the land in snow.

In short, it was really cold. I didn't pay too much attention to the seasons, but I supposed it was winter.

As unfazed by the winter chill as they were by the heat of a forge, the dwarven traders had already parted ways with me. I luckily had the spirits for friends, so I wasn't especially lonely, but the cold that the spirits in the wind and snow brought to me didn't leave me in much of a mood to play. It wasn't as though I hated them or anything, but I just didn't feel like it.

The dwarves headed straight for the city, but I couldn't enter so boldly, so I headed to a nearby forest instead. I would spend a few days hiding there, and then sneak into the city under the cover of night. I would then make contact with the dwarves at their home base inside, hiding in the safe house they had prepared for me. Maybe I could live on the road in a place as warm as Ludoria, but the cold of Fodor made that impossible here.

Walking over the snow, I headed to the forest. Despite the softness of the snow under me, my feet didn't sink through it, nor did I leave any footprints behind. Of course I didn't have any special technique that let me walk over snow like that; it was all thanks to the spirits in the snow. That was why, even with the cold they brought, I couldn't bring myself to hate them. And above all,

the silvery world I was walking through was one of the most beautiful sights I had come across in this world.

Finally reaching the forest, the protective enclosure of the trees kept much of the cold at bay. I had brought preserved food for this trip, and even in this cold I was sure I could find something to eat in the forest. I may not have been able to find any fruit, but there were probably still potato-like plants sleeping under the snow. Even if it was a place I had never seen, as long as it was a forest, a high elf like me would have no problems surviving.

Three days later, under the cover of darkness, I approached the closest city, a place named Coltoria.

*“Veening, Fos, Nuruth, Un, Zam.”*

Careful not to let my shivering affect my voice, my precise incantation activated a levitation spell. Lifting myself carefully above the city walls, I made it inside without having to pass through the gates. I wore a hood to cover my face, so even if I was spotted and pinned as an intruder, I wouldn't be recognized as an elf.

Quietly and stealthily, I avoided the people in the city as I made my way through Coltoria's streets. I didn't have any magic that would help me stay hidden, but with my experience trying to be stealthy while hunting in the forest, and with the help of the wind spirits informing me of when I was at risk of encountering someone else, I was able to plot an unseen route through the city. Something about the night air felt different...and exhilarating. It was like I was playing a game.

Sneaking through the city, I found where the dwarves who had already made their way inside were staying. The lights were already out, but after checking the windows, I found one with a piece of cloth stuck in it. That was a sign from the dwarves, inviting me inside. So, using my floating spell again, I lifted myself up to the window and pushed it open.

As we had discussed beforehand, the window was unlocked. I floated inside, taking a deep breath of warm air. But I didn't have time to enjoy the relief from the cold.

Though the dwarves were staying here, this place was owned by their human trading partners. They were on friendly terms with the dwarves, but that didn't mean they had absolute trust in them, so they hadn't been informed about me.

Without a word, a dwarf seated in the room nodded to me, poured himself a drink and downed it. In short, he was acting as if he was just drinking, like he hadn't seen me at all. Likewise I remained silent as I grabbed the bag set out on the table. After a brief check of the contents, I stepped back out the window.

Inside the bag were a key and a map leading to the safe house that it opened, as well as notes about what they had found out over the past few days. Once I made it to the safe house and reviewed their information, I would finally be able to rest for the night.

The safe house was a large estate that wasn't currently in use. It was owned by a dwarf, but the owner had returned to the dwarven kingdom for the succession battle. In other words, he was a smith of some renown. I had spoken to him a number of times at the contests that were being held, so I was well acquainted with him, ensuring no suspicion would fall on the dwarven traders were I to be noticed coming and going.

The estate was regularly inspected and resupplied by the dwarves, but those responsible were already in on the plan. It seemed a small amount of food, water, and wine had already been brought in, a polite show of hospitality. While it was true that the dwarves were also looking to gather information about what was going on in Fodor, I suspected they hadn't thought that far ahead... My guess is that they had just accepted me as one of them and were willing to help me out.

That was all the more reason for me to work hard to repay their kindness. If I couldn't do that, I would feel ashamed, both as their friend and as Oswald's.

But anyway, that was all for tomorrow. Entering the empty building and putting down my things, I partook in some of the food that had been left for me, took a quiet bath, and then found a bed to sleep in. I had been sleeping on the hard ground since leaving the dwarven kingdom, so my first experience in a soft bed in weeks had me falling asleep in no time.



The dwarven traders could investigate what was going on in Fodor by observing fluctuations in the price of goods and listening to rumors from other merchants. But I stood out so much in a human city. What could I do to gather information discreetly? My options lay not with numbers or rumors, but with something more direct: the words of the leaders of Fodor's army and government. In short, I'd be spying.

Of course, I had no convenient spells or techniques for sneaking into a lord's manor or military facility to eavesdrop. But I did have some close friends who did, who were always faithfully at my side.

"Another cold day, huh? Winter seems especially bad this year."

"The price of wheat and potatoes have gone up again. What is going on?"

"My brother left to go to the capital. I wonder if he was able to join the army..."

Distant voices found their way to my ears. Despite the cold weather outside, I opened a window in the estate I was staying in, just a bit to avoid drawing attention, and focused on the many voices.

I think it was obvious, but just because elves had large, pointed ears didn't mean we could overhear a whole city's worth of conversations. These voices were being carried to me by the wind spirits from across all of Coltoria.

First, I listened to a large area. I had a rough sketch of the town's layout from the dwarves, so by listening in all over the place, I could get an idea of what happened in each part of the city. I picked random sections of town, only stopping to focus in on a particular conversation if I heard something of interest.

It was technically possible for the wind spirits to bring the voices of the whole town to me at once, but that would drive me crazy in no time, so I wasn't about to try it. The spirits were extremely skilled at this, but my brain lacked the processing power to handle that much information. The best I could manage was listening to ten at a time, making rough decisions as to what was safe to ignore and what deserved more attention.

"The person in charge of investigating the robbery on the east side of town



is...”

“Just what is the emperor thinking...?”

“Trying to get our hands on supplies isn’t going well...”

Among the voices I listened to, the most important to me were those from the military garrison and the lord’s manor. Beyond that, talk of large-scale movements in Fodor among the large merchant groups was useful.

Of course, this wasn’t the perfect way to gather intelligence. Unlike in the heat of summer, the harsh cold of winter had many people shut up indoors, preventing the wind spirits from reaching them. But they did their best, sneaking in through cracks and vents in walls, through attics, and through chimneys to get to the people inside.

The spirits were the ones doing the heavy lifting here, but keeping them in check and keeping myself in tune with them was a considerable amount of work for me as well. At the same time, I recorded important conversations I heard and marked on my map where they had been collected from, collecting intelligence while refining my methods.

Little by little, patiently, carefully.

After about three weeks of this, I had gained a broad view of what the empire was up to. Together with the information gathered by the dwarven traders, the intelligence I had collected left no room for doubt: Fodor was planning an invasion of Ludoria.

Food, weapons, and other supplies and materials necessary for an invasion were slowly flowing into Coltoria. The fact they were carrying such large amounts of materials in through the winter snow meant they likely intended to move once the snow melted. As far as how they planned on getting through the mountains...besides the fact it was being left to one individual, it was still unclear.

Speaking in terms of moving an entire army, the fact that not only the common rank and file were unaware of the plan, but even the local lord responsible for gathering supplies for the invasion, was unbelievable. If they

had some way through the mountains, they would still need to plan how to use it and make preparations to put that plan into action. The number of personnel, supplies, and provisions needed to support them and carve a path through the mountains would have a huge impact on their invasion strategy.

But even so, they were continuing preparations for the invasion with no knowledge of how they were going to do it. The emperor of Fodor had left everything to a single man who had suggested the invasion in the first place, and invested in him all the authority necessary to carry out the invasion.

Even though the emperor hadn't shared any information regarding how the invasion was going to take place, any questioning of his decision was treated as treason. One general had fought back against the emperor, not wanting to waste the lives of his soldiers on an invasion with no plan, and was executed for his disobedience. Neither his long record of loyalty to the empire nor the deep trust he had earned from the emperor personally had been enough to protect him.

What was going on in Fodor? In order to figure that out, I would need to investigate the one who had come up with the secret invasion plan: a man by the name of Rayhon.

Rayhon wasn't a citizen of Fodor. He had wandered into the empire a number of years ago, and the emperor had taken enough of a liking to him to employ him. In a surprisingly short amount of time, he had begun acquiring political power within the empire and started intervening in affairs of the state.

Naturally there was plenty of opposition to Rayhon's rise within the empire, and many attempts had been made on his life. But each and every assassination had failed, and those responsible quickly lost the emperor's faith or died in mysterious circumstances themselves. On top of all that, and while I had to stress that this was no more than a rumor, there was gossip about him being a "slave eater."

The Empire of Fodor had not outlawed the practice of slavery. Poor villages sometimes sold people into slavery, and prisoners of war were also pressed into service. Rayhon apparently bought a tremendous number of slaves, many of which seemed to disappear shortly after entering his service. He was clearly

hiring far too many just to serve in his own mansion, and most of them vanished shortly after being purchased.

Many people began to speculate that he was eating them. Such rumors were likely born out of jealousy for one who had earned favor with the emperor, or out of fear towards outsiders. But putting aside whether he was actually eating them, this figure cloaked in mystery must have been considerably hated by those around him for rumors like that to spread.

It didn't seem likely that I'd learn the truth without meeting this Rayhon for myself. I did have some ideas of what could be going on, though. For example, it was likely the emperor was being controlled as his puppet. Whether that was due to some special ability or magic was unclear. Even from knowledge of my past life, I had known plenty of stories of suspicious individuals who worked their way to the sides of powerful people and controlled them from the shadows. There was no magic or spirits in my previous life, yet such levels of manipulation were still possible. Words alone were enough to take control of a person, never mind the possibility of drugs.

But in this case, considering the mysterious deaths of Rayhon's adversaries and his secret plan to open a path to Ludoria, it was natural to assume he possessed some sort of supernatural power. Brainwashing the emperor, murdering his political adversaries in secret, and having the ability to open a path through the mountains.

The wide range of powers he was demonstrating pointed me naturally to magic, but the empire had its own mages. There was no way they would fail to notice if the emperor was being affected by magic. And while using it for covert assassinations was one thing, cutting a path through the mountains for an army was well beyond the scope of what magic could realistically accomplish.

Of course, I only knew a tiny fraction of what the world of magic had to offer. Rayhon could be an incredible mage who knew magic I couldn't even begin to imagine, so it was still technically possible.

In the same way, the Divine Arts were a real possibility. The Divine Arts, or Psychic Arts, used a powerful intellect or faith to bring about miracles,

effectively manifesting as psychic abilities. Considering that abilities such as reading minds and transmitting thoughts to others was in its realm of telepathy, brainwashing didn't seem especially far-fetched. In addition, a powerful kind of psychokinesis would make killing his political adversaries simple enough. But it was hard to imagine it could move mountains.

I couldn't really come to a conclusion. At the very least, this Rayhon seemed like a particularly dangerous individual. I could at least take solace in the fact this was far better than my previous fear that they had captured a large number of elves and were using their Spirit Arts to try and force their way through the mountains.

If the source of all this was Rayhon, getting rid of him should cause things to calm down. In short, it could end things with the minimum possible sacrifices.

The rumors that Rayhon was a cannibal did bring another possibility of his true identity to mind...but I didn't want to seriously consider it. That would really be the worst outcome I could imagine.



Another week later, after spending four weeks gathering information in Coltoria, I learned something interesting. It appeared that a faction in the empire was beginning to take action to remove Rayhon from power against the emperor's wishes. Of course, this was all happening in secret.

After General Faud Shurizen was executed for opposing the plan to invade Ludoria, a portion of the military began gathering around his eldest son, Rubeum Shurizen, together with the support of a number of nobles. Their objective was to eliminate Rayhon, and remove his corrupting influence from the empire.

Well, from my perspective, an empire built on invading its neighbors and permitting slavery was already rotten to the core, so there wasn't much that could be done to save it. But for all I knew, the harsh environment of the empire meant they couldn't survive without the labor of enslaved foreigners or expanding into the warmer southern region.

Distinction and discrimination were often born from a societal need. Being a foreigner here myself, I had no way of knowing their circumstances, and so had

no right to judge them. But if they were going to attack the country where my friends lived and enslave them, I would show no mercy as their enemy.

So while I couldn't align myself politically with anyone in Fodor, the internal powers of the empire turning against Rayhon was convenient for me. For example, if I ended up having to take Rayhon out myself, as long as I avoided leaving any evidence behind, suspicion would immediately fall on that faction. They were also useful as a source of information. Because they were more active in the capital, I could glean much more information about what was going on there from them than I could from the lord of Coltoria.

The faction opposing Rayhon had come to the city itself to get involved with the collection and transportation of supplies for the war, in hopes of getting closer to Rayhon. By keeping an eye on them, I was likely to find an opportunity to reach him myself.

However, plotting to harm someone while sitting here eavesdropping on the city left me feeling somewhat...disturbed. The dwarves were kind enough to take care of my needs, but I couldn't interact with them freely. I could see people living their lives around me and hear every word they said, but I couldn't join in. I understood that I had no other choice, but combined with the frigid climate, I was starting to feel quite disheartened.

What was Win doing now? Was he focused on learning blacksmithing? I knew there was no need to worry with Master Damned Dwarf teaching him, but I couldn't help but wonder. What about Kaeha, her family, and her students? Well, I was sure they were doing well.

Once upon a time, I'd thought I didn't need any more companionship than the spirits who were always at my side, but ever since leaving the Forest Depths, I had started getting quite lonely. Even though I couldn't go anywhere and didn't have enough free time to get bored, I was starting to feel the weight of having no one else around.

But aside from my complaints, not everything I gained from my spying was as convenient for me. For example, I'd learned that the dwarves had lost contact with their friends living north of the capital. To be more precise, there were

three dwarven smiths living in the capital, four living in cities north of the capital, and two working in the empire's blacksmithing guild who had gone missing.

If they had been ordinary people, nine going missing in such a large country wouldn't have been anything particularly special. But with so few dwarves in Fodor, it wouldn't be a surprise if the blacksmithing guild had gone into an uproar at their disappearance. And yet, no investigation had taken place.

Every single one of the dwarves that had disappeared had been invited to an audience with the emperor, and subsequently vanished. Despite the imperial castle being heavily guarded and full of servants, no one had seen the dwarves ever leave the audience chamber.

There was no doubt the emperor was directly involved in their disappearance. The blacksmithing guild had no way to oppose him, and so they couldn't even begin to investigate.

Upon learning of this, the other dwarves had decided to split into two groups. One group headed back to the dwarven kingdom to report what was happening, while the other planned to descend on the capital to confront the emperor. The dwarves were far from a foolish race, but their impulsive nature wouldn't let them sit idly by while their friends were in trouble. I could understand why they had made that decision.

But gathering in the capital was very much the wrong choice. From their conversations, I learned that Rayhon had been hired by the elderly emperor to reclaim his youth. The ritual required killing huge numbers of slaves and members of nonhuman races.

Of course, relying solely on the viewpoint of the dwarves who were clearly opposed to Rayhon was dangerous. But with Rayhon's arrival, the emperor had regained a sense of youthful vigor, and shortly after had begun to show Rayhon extraordinary favor. From what I had learned, it seemed like a plausible conclusion to reach, and may have even had some truth to it.

It seemed my theory of a worst-case scenario may have been correct.

The other day, I had managed to recall the second half of the high elf elders' song.

*“There were three who reached for immortality with mortal bodies.*

*The demon, the remains of flesh consumed by mana.*

*The fairy, who through discarding the self to become the whole, has forgotten the meaning of death.*

*And the mystic, the foolish sage who became one with nature, seeking to become a spirit while he yet lived.”*

In the same way that monsters were animals transformed from exposure to mana, demons were people who had infused their bodies with mana to seek a higher form of life. Humans, beastfolk, dwarves, and elves could all become demons, all of them known by the same name once transformed. Widely considered a danger to others, they were said to have been completely wiped out. But there was no guarantee that some of them hadn't survived somewhere in the world.

Fairies were small people with wings like butterflies, whose entire race consisted of a single being. Though they reproduced like any other race, their physical bodies were merely tools or appendages for the hive mind, one consciousness controlling them all. Any particular fairy dying made no particular difference, so in a way they had achieved immortality. But they weren't well suited to fighting with their tiny bodies. Instead, they abducted children of other races, assimilated them into the hive mind, and then raised them as soldiers. To be especially clear, they were exceptionally malicious pests.

The last were the mystics...one of which was most likely Rayhon himself.



That said, I couldn't claim Rayhon was a proper mystic. The mystics were those who were born with mortal bodies but sought immortality. They internalized the power of nature, sublimating it into a part of themselves in an attempt to become one with nature themselves. In simple terms, they were trying to attain immortality by transforming into something akin to a spirit of nature during their own lifetime. Their abilities to influence nature were no

more than a means to that end. So while mystics weren't spirits, they were very close.

But beyond being able to influence and internalize the power of nature, sublimating it into a part of yourself was a long and excruciating process, requiring a rare and specific talent. Even those who had successfully survived the training in the Mystic Arts often failed that last crucial step, most exhausting their life spans in the process.

But a heretical teaching had surfaced among the practitioners of the Mystic Arts. The power of nature was distant and foreign to them, so sublimating it took a tremendous amount of time. In that case, wouldn't it be faster to obtain immortality by taking the power of others' lives? Naturally, such a method didn't bring them any closer to the spirits, but it was enough to set them free from the inevitability of a limited life span.

These heretic mystics could be divided into two general categories: soul eaters, who stole life force from their victims through sexual intercourse, and vampires, who did so by devouring their victims' flesh and blood.

Far more skilled at manipulating life force than ordinary mystics, those who stored up a large amount of it were apparently capable of sharing it with others. Of course, there was always risk involved in sharing life force with other people like that. If one received it from a soul eater or a vampire for too long, their body would change to become dependent on them for survival. If they lost access to their benefactor, starvation and thirst would drive them to madness, creating a monster that attacked anyone and everyone around them. But with no way to take the life force of their own victims, these monsters devoured flesh in vain, never capable of satisfying their hunger. These creatures came to be called ghouls.

In short, it seemed Rayhon was one of the heretical mystics—likely a vampire—currently supplying the king with life force. The dwarves may have become victims because the emperor had at first resisted the idea of stealing life from other humans.

I had never expected the songs of the elders in the Forest Depths to ever prove useful to me out in the world. I had only thought of them as moldy old



fossils before, but maybe I should have taken them more seriously. When it came to ancient secrets, I doubted anything in the human world could compare to the knowledge of the high elves.

If Rayhon was skilled in the Mystic Arts, he would have no problems opening a path through the mountains to Ludoria. If he was a vampire, his motivation was clear. A war would produce a tremendous number of victims, providing plenty of life force for him to consume. There was no greater desire for a vampire.

And his intended victims included the people of Ludoria, like Kaeha and her family. I couldn't say that the thought made me very happy.

I had hoped we were just worrying over nothing, that we had been overthinking things, but circumstances had ended up playing out to the point where I was confident I had identified Rayhon's true nature. I couldn't afford to sit back and talk euphemistically about "dealing with him" anymore. I needed to change my way of thinking. He wasn't just someone who needed to be killed. I would kill him. I would eliminate anyone who posed a threat to the people I loved, with extreme prejudice.

...Seriously, I was feeling quite disturbed.

The next day, I left the safe house in Coltoria, following the dwarves from a distance as they made their way to the capital. In the end, nothing I could do would stop them from going. I had even warned them about Rayhon's true identity and how going to the capital now was asking to be killed.

"You know, Acer. We may be traders, but carrying stuff around isn't all we do. We are also the connection between our homeland and our comrades in the human world. That's our job."

If there was even the smallest possibility that their friends were alive, they wouldn't turn tail and run. And if their friends were dead, they would bring their belongings back home to their loved ones.

"But if we start causing a ruckus in the capital, that should make your job easier, no?"

...I could hardly deny that now, could I?

Twelve dwarves had come to Coltoria to trade, three of which had returned

to the dwarven kingdom to report on what was happening. The remaining nine headed to the capital.

It would take about two weeks to reach the capital on foot. I would stay with them while camping, after making sure no one could see us, but on the road I would keep my distance. When they passed through cities and towns, I would take the snowy roads around them.

Normally the snow would make traveling around at this time of year difficult, but a small request to the spirits in the falling and settled snow was enough to keep it from slowing me down. Though it should have been a dangerous, slow season to be traveling, we made it to the capital of Gudaria in the expected two weeks. The dwarves were able to walk right into the city, but I would wait for nightfall to sneak in...and immediately begin my hunt for Rayhon.

Even with the dwarves making a fuss in town, I doubted they would get an audience and be eaten so soon, but that didn't mean I had time to waste.



Sneaking through the streets of the capital, I made sure to avoid the attention of the people passing by, especially the guards. I wore the hood of my cloak low to hide my eyes, just as any suspicious person would.

The dwarves had given me a rough map of the capital and the location of Rayhon's estate before leaving Coltoria...but it didn't seem like I would need either. The moment I stepped into the capital, I could feel his presence.

Snow fell gently on the city of Gudaria, its cityscape the same dark, ashen gray as the sky above. Well, part of that was because it was nighttime, but I'd had the same impression of the city when I saw it from afar during the day.

But I barely noticed it, as a thick miasma wafted towards me from the direction of Rayhon's residence, overwhelming me with a powerful, nauseating sense of foreboding. There was nothing human about this aura. It was a difficult sensation to put into words, but if I had to try, it was like a pungent stench.

I had seen a river polluted by mining before. If that pollution had been left unchecked and allowed to grow worse, I imagined it may have ended up similar. It was just that bizarre. A rotten, mad feeling. To put it another way, the source

of this aura—Rayhon, I presumed—gave off the same miasma as widespread pollution in nature. On top of the scent of death that hung around him, my conjecture that he was a fallen mystic seemed ever more likely.

After all, I had never witnessed someone with a presence on par with nature itself besides the spirits, or maybe other high elves. But a high elf would never leak such an aura unless they were exceptionally angry.

My body started to tremble, but not from fear. I was shaking from the amount of effort it took to restrain myself—to keep myself from immediately asking the spirits to crush the source of this pollution.

Ideas raced through my head of the largest amount of damage I could inflict. If there was enough water in the air for it to be snowing, I could gather it higher up in the air with wind to create large chunks of ice. Raining countless boulders of ice on the city would easily deal with a person like this. But if I did that, many people who had nothing to do with Rayhon would get caught in the cross fire. And more importantly, my dwarven friends staying at an inn in the city would meet the same fate. There was no way I could do that.

The whole exercise did make me wonder when I had become so violent. Had my time hiding in Fodor left my heart in that much chaos? Or was this anger a response to the threat Rayhon posed to Kaeha and her family? Or perhaps, the unnatural presence itself was drawing this out of me. It may have just been that as a high elf and a close friend of the spirits, I couldn't forgive someone who had once aimed to become a spirit themselves but had fallen so far as to become a twisted vampire.

I climbed up a wall and traversed the rooftops to take a shortcut through the city. This would be much faster than trying to puzzle my way through unfamiliar streets.

I couldn't help but find it ironic how I was only recognizing the importance of the knowledge the high elves possessed now that I had left them behind. Beyond that, the more I interacted with humans, the more I realized the differences between them and myself. I was feeling less and less human. Those thoughts had crept up on me every so often for the last decade or so. Maybe it was a sign of my personal growth.

Leaving the dense cluster of buildings that made up the city proper, I came to an area filled with nothing but large mansions: a clear noble's district. Despite being a foreigner, Rayhon's residence was among the best of those here. It was no wonder the rest of the nobility despised him.

The noble district had far more guards on patrol and was considerably better lit, making stealth significantly more difficult than in the rest of the city. With the aid of the wind spirits informing me of the guards' positions, I managed to reach my destination: the source of the disgusting aura that filled the capital. Rayhon's residence.

There were no lights inside. I couldn't be so optimistic as to assume he was asleep, though. The source of this pollution had probably never even considered hiding himself. It was the same as how powerful monsters acted like they were invincible. Alternatively, after consuming so many other lives, perhaps a vampire's being was so distorted that concealing its presence was impossible.

The overwhelming presence of the vampire made it impossible to sense any humans in the area. Then again, while it was hard to believe a mansion this large wouldn't have any servants inside, I couldn't imagine any humans being able to remain sane within this miasma. Ordinary humans may not have had the sharp senses needed to detect Rayhon's unnatural aura, but that didn't mean they'd be unaffected by it.

I jumped over the fence and entered Rayhon's estate, climbing up the mansion's walls to reach the roof. For a moment, I considered incinerating the whole building, but there was a chance others were inside. I doubted the missing dwarves were still alive, but there was a possibility of freshly purchased slaves being imprisoned within. Though my thinking was becoming more extreme, I still wasn't willing to get innocent people killed.

I strung my bow, readied an arrow, and dropped down to the second-floor balcony. Without so much as a pause to breathe, I kicked in the door and fired at the thing sitting inside.



A person's body was too small to contain the amount of life force he had absorbed. His body warped and swelled before rupturing, leaking its contents in an endless geyser, thus requiring him to consume ever more life force or face death. This excess consumption led to his body swelling further, transforming him into a disgusting monstrosity.

...Or rather, I wish that was what had happened. The fact that he still looked human was somehow more unnerving than if he had taken on a more obviously disgusting appearance. I suppose I had already known this before meeting him, but now that he was actually in front of me, the disgust I felt made it difficult to look at him. This was one of the few times I regretted the supernatural senses that came with being a high elf.

"You— —quite— —lent— —."

The creature made some sort of noise. I imagined he was trying to speak to me, but my revulsion dominated my mind to the point I couldn't recognize the sound as speech. And I didn't really care what he had to say either.

The bigger problem right now was that my arrow had failed to pierce his heart. It had punched through his clothes, but stopped at his skin. That would be understandable if it was just a wooden arrow, but the arrowhead had been made from a grand wolf's fang, and was capable of flying through the tough hides of monsters like they were wet paper. I didn't know how he had stopped the arrow, but it made clear just how much of a monstrosity he was.

*"Spirits of the wind."*

All that meant was that I would have to change my strategy. I opened a path for the wind to blow. Compressing as much air as possible, I unleashed it at him, intending to obliterate Rayhon and the entire mansion behind him.

"By— —Ver— Spi— —."

But Rayhon cut a sign in the air with his hand, causing the gathered wind to disperse harmlessly. The spirits had definitely done exactly as I asked them. Had their efforts been nullified? The unbelievable sight gave me pause.

Yes, just for a brief moment. But in the blink of an eye, Rayhon lunged towards me, jabbing a hand towards my gut with fingers outstretched. I

desperately spun to avoid him, his fingers shredding my flank as they glanced across. My posture broken by the desperate evasion, I was wide open for Rayhon's following kick to send me flying.

I soared out the door and off the balcony. I would have slammed into the ground if the earth spirits hadn't turned it into soft sand to cushion my fall. Even if I had landed well, a fall like that would have left me seriously injured at best. I was extremely lucky that my beloved bow, which I had used to block Rayhon's kick at the last second, was crafted from the wood of a Spirit Tree. Had it been made from any less resilient material, his foot would have smashed through it and killed me.

Even so, I felt pathetic. I rose to my feet, ignoring the pain. I had known that a practitioner of the Mystic Arts would be able to interfere with the spirits' powers, but my overwhelming disgust towards him had made me forget. I had been so shaken, my attack was miserable.

Another problem was my own weakness. The spirits whose power I was borrowing were quite strong, and I felt I was pretty good at using it. I was also quite good with a bow, and decent with a sword and magic. But even with all that, I didn't have the skill to work those abilities together into a coherent fighting style. I was little different from a thug who lost the moment his strength didn't immediately win the fight. Though I had to say, scuffles with thugs like that were my favorite kind of battles. But it didn't seem that would be enough to kill a vampire.

I had no other choice. I absolutely had to kill the vampire here, before the commotion we had caused brought the guards running. There was one thing I wanted to make clear, though. I wasn't here killing a vampire because I was some sort of hero. Neither was I acting as a representative of the high elves.

I didn't think people struggling to extend their life spans were evil, nor was there anything wrong with it. Even if it meant consuming others and living off of their sacrifices, that was no different than the way we lived off of eating other animals. At the very least, someone with a long life span like a high elf couldn't easily dismiss their efforts.

But my personal feelings wouldn't permit him to live. As long as he was alive, he was a threat to the people I loved. So I would kill him.

I couldn't get my motivations wrong. I couldn't look down on him as a disgusting, pitiable creature. I had to recognize him as a powerful foe, and find a way to overcome him despite that.

I may not have been all that impressive on my own, but my many masters were all incredible, so I was sure I could find a way with all they had taught me.

I took a deep breath and looked up at Rayhon, watching me from the balcony.

"—singly tough—. Howe—so weak to challenge me, you must be quite a fool, forest dweller. Tremble in fear and wail in regret as I consume you."

Though no less unpleasant, I was finally starting to process the sounds he made as speech. Maybe the blood loss from the wound in my side was helping to cool my head.

But anyway, what he was saying sounded pretty cliché, didn't it? Wasn't he embarrassed to talk like that? Though really, the fact that I was in a situation where someone who talked like that could look down on me was all the more embarrassing.

I smiled. I couldn't help but find this situation and my own weakness to be comical. Perhaps he thought I was mocking him, as my smile seemed to upset Rayhon. His face twisted with anger, and before I knew it he had closed the distance between us, his fist swinging towards me.

Just as before, he was terrifyingly fast. But fast as he was, I was ready for it this time.

"*Earth!*" As I jumped backwards to avoid his punch, countless stone spears shot up from the earth towards Rayhon.

"*By the Verse of Wood—*" Rayhon once again cut a symbol in the air with his fingers, uttering an incantation like before. As I expected, he nullified the attack.

My Spirit Arts wouldn't be fast enough if I verbalized them. I swung my hand down, signaling to the wind spirits. Understanding my intention, they

compressed the air above Rayhon into bullets and fired them down towards him.

Pelting Rayhon with stone spears and wind bullets from above and below, I continued swinging my hand. I didn't care if he nullified the attacks. Rather than a single enormous attack to blow him away, I wanted a barrage of smaller ones, enough to nail him in place.

Rayhon had called me a forest dweller, meaning he probably saw me as an ordinary elf. Unfortunately for him, he was quite mistaken. Maybe he hadn't understood the scope of my previous attack because he had nullified it so quickly. I was a high elf, far better at utilizing the power of the spirits.

As the endless barrage of attacks had him pinned, I dove into the mansion, kicking through a window. Against an opponent who was so fast, I needed to restrict the angles from which he could attack me.

*"Ei, Dah, Pitus, Roh, Fos!"*

My next words were not to call on the spirits, but to unleash a magical attack. The mana I released took the form of a fireball, launching itself from my open palm. The exploding fireball struck Rayhon dead on, engulfing him in a huge explosion. There was enough power in that explosion to easily kill a fair number of ordinary people.

But of course, Rayhon was anything but ordinary. I was certain he'd survive the attack. Rayhon leaped out of the inferno and lunged towards me, claws on both hands glittering in the night. Apparently the attack had hurt somewhat, as his face was flushed with rage.

But by the time he had started his own attack, I had already thoroughly predicted his movements and stood ready to receive him.

*"Your failing is a lack of fighting spirit." Kaeha's words echoed in the back of my mind. "But if you find that fighting spirit, if you let it fill your heart, your body, and your skill, there is nothing you can't cut. I can guarantee you that."*

Resolved to take my opponent's life, mana flowed into my sword as I executed a standard form of the Yosogi School. One horizontal slash, one vertical slash, and the fight was over.



Rayhon most likely had full confidence that his body was too resilient to lose to a sword. I didn't know how he did it, but even a grand wolf fang arrowhead had failed to penetrate his skin. So he must have intended to ignore my sword, blocking it with his body and forcing his way through to strike me.

But I was just as confident in the sword Kawshman and I had forged, not to mention the blacksmithing skills Oswald had given me. I was still inexperienced when it came to using a sword in real combat, but my admiration of Kaeha's skill had led to even her recognizing my ability.

She had guaranteed there was nothing I couldn't cut. Even if that was just a figure of speech, I trusted her fully. My sword flashed, its edge propelled by my intent to kill. No matter how resilient the opponent, there was no way it would fail to cut him.



Rayhon fell writhing to the ground, neatly divided in four.

I remembered legends of vampires from my previous life, where they could come back from the dead even if burned to ash, but the vampires of this world were different. They had no weakness to sunlight, no problem crossing running water, and couldn't care less about garlic or crosses. In exchange, they actually died when you killed them. That said, even while he was cut into four, he might have been able to sustain himself if he gathered enough life force, but I had no intention of letting him do so.

Rayhon desperately mouthed something at me, but after being cut in half vertically, no voice could come out of his throat. But I could more or less tell what he wanted. He was probably begging for his life, trying to make a deal with me, or maybe just cursing me in his last moments.

The hot, stinging pain in my side reminded me of my own injuries. I really wasn't cut out for this kind of stuff. That was all the more reason I needed to get stronger.

If I continued my life out in the human world, I imagined this wouldn't be the last time I came across a monster like this. I didn't know if that would be in decades or centuries...but there was no guarantee I would have as easy a time then as I did now.

Pouring more magic into my sword, I relentlessly stabbed it into Rayhon's soon-to-be corpse. Again, and again, and again.



I made sure to flee the scene before any guards arrived, and returned to the dwarves to get my wounds treated. Being the sturdy people that they were, their "treatment" was incredibly rough. I have to admit I gave at least one pathetic yelp as they scrubbed my wounds with particularly high-proof alcohol. Their methods hurt more than the actual injuries Rayhon had given me.

According to the dwarves, my wounds had already begun to fester, perhaps because of the dark nature of Rayhon's claws. They needed to be rough to scrape off the rotting bits of flesh. Okay, the pain was unexpected, but I couldn't really complain if that's what it took. Once they had finished basic first

aid, I then used some magic to help accelerate the healing process. Looking back on it now, I'd relied on magic quite a bit through this whole incident.

Despite the assassination of a major power inside the empire, the investigation into Rayhon's death was a relatively small affair. That was maybe in part due to how much Rayhon was hated by the military and nobility, but primarily it had been overshadowed by other happenings.

As far as everyone knew, the emperor had fallen into ill health and so abdicated the throne to the crown prince. But whispers from the castle brought to me by the wind spirits told a considerably more gruesome tale: the illness was actually the emperor transforming into a ghoul. Having lost Rayhon, his only source of life force, the emperor had gone completely mad and killed a few dozen servants, officials, and nobles within the castle in a vain attempt to slake his new thirst.

No matter his transformation, they were hesitant to simply slay their old emperor, and so a considerable number of lives had been lost in subduing him. The former emperor had then been imprisoned within a tower in the palace, but of course that could never be made public. It would become enough of a scandal to sow distrust among the ruling class of the empire, or even begin fracturing the empire altogether.

That said, even if they had made a public cover story for the emperor's abdication, there were just too many victims. It would be impossible to keep the truth under wraps for very long. The new emperor would definitely have his hands full.

But none of that made any difference to me.

Though the new emperor blamed everything on Rayhon, he still recognized the loss the dwarves had suffered, and offered a formal apology. Fodor's strength over its neighbors was no doubt in part derived from the trade they kept with the dwarven kingdom, and the incredible weapons and armors the dwarves living within those lands produced. The new emperor had been desperate to keep Fodor's relationship with the dwarves from collapsing.

But that didn't change the deep rage the dwarves felt towards the loss of their comrades. It seemed inevitable that relations between the dwarven

kingdom and Fodor would deteriorate. But the dwarven kingdom needed Fodor as a trading partner just as much, so I doubted they would burn that bridge entirely.

Anyway, it was a problem for the heads of state to worry about. For example, Oswald, once he had become king.

For my time in the empire, there was only one last job I had to do, once the dwarven traders left the capital. I would then head back to Coltoria to reunite with them, and we would return to the dwarven kingdom together. By then, the snow would have already started to melt.

If I ever had the chance to visit Fodor again, I would like to avoid sneaking around like this, and walk in with my head held high. The time I had spent in the empire had been anything but fun. I had only enjoyed playing the spy for the first few days at most.

In the dead of night, two days after the dwarves had left the capital, I used my floating magic to lift myself into the sky above the city. Higher, higher, even above the tower that held the former emperor. The air above the capital was frigid. Looking down on the city from above sent a shudder through me. It looked like a giant monster of black stone, swallowing the people whole. I realized I would probably get a very different impression if I did this during the day, but I doubted I'd ever get that chance. Tiny specks of red light floated around the city, likely the torches of guards. I'd need to finish my work before any of them decided to look up.

Pulling out my bow, I nocked an arrow, and stopped the wind around me so it wouldn't throw off my aim. My target was in a distant tower, behind its iron-barred window. Building a window that couldn't be closed in a country this cold sounded insane to me, but considering the purpose of the room, that was likely intentional.

The room holding the former emperor was a prison for nobles who couldn't be executed directly. Leaving it open to the elements let Fodor's harsh climate perform the deed in their stead. Left alone in there, they would eventually die of starvation or exposure. But that only worked for humans. The ghoul would

be driven mad by hunger and thirst, but he would still live for a long, long time.

Eventually, someone would assume he was long dead, and come open the door to check on him. That would give the ghoul a chance to escape and go right back to killing. Knowing this inevitability, it wasn't my style to leave it alone.

Even with my superior eyesight, I couldn't see through the darkness into the interior of the tower. But my senses as a high elf could easily perceive the distant scent of corruption and the twisted nature of the creature imprisoned within.

I drew back my bow, then took a slow breath before releasing. My arrow slipped past the bars of the prison, bringing a cold refusal to the once-emperor's desperate wish to remain youthful and to live just a little longer.

## Chapter 5 — Elves and Dwarves

Creation. The beginning of the world.

Was the Creator born of this world, or had they come here from somewhere beyond? Even the myths didn't seem to know. With no other observers, only the Creator themselves had witnessed what happened back then.

In order to ensure their incredible power circulated evenly throughout the environment, the Creator first gave birth to the spirits to help give nature its form. Once a suitable environment had been created, in order to assist the spirits in adapting to the ever-changing world, the Creator made a people who could communicate with them: the true elves.

Delighted by these tiny people walking about the earth, the Creator then made the true giants, a much larger people who lived above the clouds. In order to connect the two, they then created the phoenixes. And to protect the world, the Creator finally gave birth to the true dragons.

After seeing all that they had done, the Creator was satisfied. They could think of nothing else the world would need, nor anything else they wished to add. Deciding that even they were unnecessary for the further development of this world, the Creator gave birth to a pantheon of gods to rule over its continued growth, and then retired to sleep.

The new gods began by creating the elves, modeled after the true elves. Next, they made the dwarves to contrast them. Then they made the humans, who were weaker than the previous two races but excelled in adaptability and potential. Then came the beastfolk, a humanlike race supplemented with animal traits to make up for their weakness.

Unlike the Creator, the gods were many in number, and so each created a race that suited their own tastes. These included the halflings who ran across the fields, the skyfolk who soared into the skies, and the merfolk who swam through the oceans.

However, with so many gods trying to develop the world in their own ways, these different opinions eventually came into conflict. Some wished for the world to change slowly, others for it to change rapidly, and still more wished for it not to change at all. Some tried to change the world to suit their own beloved people, while others did so out of a hatred for their creations.

The conflict grew ever more intense. The young gods were new to war, and so they did not know how to hold back. Each and every one of them, from the ferocious to the tranquil, became tangled in the battle.

But after a time, the gods began to notice something. The war among themselves was hurting the world and their children who lived there. A number of races had already been erased by their war, and many others were brought frighteningly close. On top of that, the battles between the gods had filled the world with mana, giving birth to monsters. If the scale of their conflict continued to grow, they would soon earn the wrath of the true dragons, the protectors of the world.

So the gods made a pact, forbidding each other from excessive interference in the world. They decided to instead live in a new divine realm which they built together. Now, it was believed the gods rarely ever directly influenced our world. But every once in a while, a miracle that could only be attributed to the gods did happen.

Being such an old story, it was hard to tell how much truth there was in it, but that was a rough summary of the creation myth told in this world. It was common enough knowledge to even have a board game based on it. There were a lot of smaller details and variations in the story depending on where it was being told, but that was a matter for another time.

According to the myths, considering the circumstances of their creation, the elves were actually closer to the dwarves than they were to us high elves. But I'm sure they'd be furious if you tried to tell them that. But high elves were another one of those ancient races that only seemed to exist in fairy tales, so there were plenty of people who didn't believe they were actually real at all.

When I returned to dwarven lands after the incident in Fodor, my exploits



were rewarded with citizenship in the dwarven kingdom. Not just for me, but for Win as well. Though the dwarven people had accepted me before, it was only ever as a guest. This had made it official. I had only really acted according to my own selfish desires while in Fodor, but I was happy to hear that the dwarves had considered my actions a great boon to them.

All kinds of people came together to celebrate. Oswald's family, Granda and the traders, other smiths I had come to know, the owner and staff of the bar I had frequented, and many other local dwarves who I had known of only as disembodied names all threw a huge party. It ended up turning into something like a big festival.

In truth, this was the first time citizenship had been granted to someone who wasn't a dwarf, so it was actually a rather impressive achievement. And since the current king had recognized Oswald as his heir, a lot of the performance was likely meant to accommodate us as Oswald's students.

But no matter the intentions of the current king, Win and I receiving citizenship was incredibly important. If we had been granted that citizenship only after Oswald had become king, many may have thought he was just giving us special treatment as his students. But because this happened while the current king still reigned, it was like the king was making a statement encouraging dwarves to deepen their relations with other races. In short, my fantasy of elves and dwarves engaging in trade with each other had taken a concrete step forward.

Of course, interactions between different races wouldn't always be a good thing. It would take a lot of time, there would inevitably be problems, and it was a distinct possibility that the animosity between the two peoples would only grow worse. But even so, I was excited at the prospect of them coming together.

Also, though I couldn't say this was a happy development at all, the damaged relations between the dwarven kingdom and the Empire of Fodor had caused a sharp decrease in the number of weapon exports and alcohol imports. So naturally, in order to make up that deficit, trade with Ludoria was sure to expand. That gave an opportunity for alcohol made from the fruit of elven forests to make its way into the system, to be drunk as-is or distilled further

down. The elves could trade their fruit, or even the finished alcohol, to the dwarves in exchange for weapons and tools made from the fangs and claws of monsters.

I was still on the fence about having humans act as an intermediary in these trades. While having a third party to act as a cushion between the two would certainly help things run smoothly, elves were generally strangers to money. There was a significant risk of the humans giving in to their greed and exploiting them. If the elves grew displeased with their treatment, and blamed it on the dwarves...things would get rather annoying.

I had sent a letter to Airena explaining the situation and my feelings, but I would need to talk to her in person sooner rather than later. This was a selfish goal on my part, but she would probably understand.



Eighteen years had passed since the day I first met Win. Though he was twenty-four years old, he only appeared to be about twelve by human standards. Looking back on it, it felt to me like he was growing fairly quickly for a half-elf.

Compared to a life in the forest, he had a varied, healthy diet, and between his swordsmanship and blacksmithing lacked nothing in physical activity, so maybe those factors had accelerated his growth.

He hadn't been studying blacksmithing for very long, but according to Oswald, his passion for the craft made him a quick study, and he had a good sense for it as well. He was particularly skilled at getting the fire spirits to help him manage the furnace.

I was a bit sad that I hadn't heard that story from Win himself. He didn't have to tell me about everything that went wrong or every time he was scolded, but it would be nice to hear from him when things were going well. Oswald had told me it was only natural for Win not to tell me these kinds of things, and I should just watch quietly to let him grow. So I avoided prying too much.

It was a little frustrating that Oswald seemed to know Win better than I did. I mean, these days it felt like I didn't understand Win at all... Okay, maybe that wasn't true. If I stopped to really think about it, I could understand his feelings.

But it made me sad, so it was a practice I tried to avoid.

Win was steadily growing more independent, which naturally meant he was growing more distant from me. Little by little, he was getting ready to enter the world of adults. When I was a hundred and fifty years old, about fifteen for a human, I had considered myself an adult and left my home in the Forest Depths behind without a word. The difference in the rate high elves and half-elves matured was huge. If Win was twelve in human terms, it wouldn't be too long before he was an adult.

All that said, we did still spend time together. Part of that was for meals, but mostly it was for sword practice. Both of us had learned our swordsmanship from Kaeha, so we still trained together even in the dwarven kingdom. While practicing our forms, having two sets of eyes made it a lot easier to spot mistakes, and as long as we used wooden swords, we could spar with each other as well.

After the incident in Fodor, my attitude towards sparring had changed a bit. Before, I had only thought of sparring as a way to compare our skills. How could I maintain my refined technique in a situation calling for different kinds of movement? Because of that, I hadn't put much thought into anything but my own results. Of course, as a contest, I also had to defend myself from my opponent's attacks, but I lacked the proper attitude for it.

But now, I could enjoy the exchange of techniques much more and take a much deeper interest in what my opponent was doing. My new desire to grow stronger meant I was more focused on my opponent's behavior, learning when I needed to lean in and overpower them. And that wasn't just while I was sparring with Win either. Sometimes dwarven soldiers would come spar with us as well.

In all honesty, I'd love to bring this feeling back to the Yosogi dojo and learn from Kaeha all over again, but that wouldn't be possible for some time yet. I still planned to stay in the dwarven kingdom until Win had learned all he needed to from Oswald.

I got a bit off track there, but the amount of time Win and I spent sparring in our training had increased.

“Hiyah!!!”

The air shook with an electrified energy as Win shouted, his powerful swing forcing me once again to deflect with my own blade. But Win didn't stop there. I wasn't quite sure which word described it best... Overwhelming? Reckless? Dauntless? Either way, Win's vigorous assault meant to cut me down with brute force. There was an incredible strength behind his blows.

It seemed he had learned something from the dwarven soldiers, and now made it his own. The dwarven fighting style involved leveraging one's weight and physical strength to deliver a single devastating blow, but that was a difficult thing for elves like us to emulate. Our specialties, and those of the Yosogi School, were sharpness and speed.

Win had learned to put power and energy behind his attacks, and if the weight of his attacks wasn't sufficient, he'd make up for it with quantity. And you couldn't underestimate him for being a child. He had already spent over ten years practicing the Yosogi style of swordsmanship. Though he had to make minor adjustments along the way as his arms and legs continued to grow, he still had plenty of experience.

So I stood my ground, blocking his attacks without retreating a single step. Retreat would have made knocking aside his attacks much easier, but even giving up a single step would embolden Win's assault just as much, which would inevitably lead to my defeat.

I was taken aback again by how much he had grown. I really couldn't treat him like a child anymore. I imagined Win had the makings of a swordsman far better than I would ever become.

But that was all the more reason why I needed to step forward. As incessant as his rain of blows was, it wasn't without its openings. Just as the waves had to recede before they could hit the shore again, Win needed to pull back his sword to deliver another strike. I slipped into that briefest of openings, swinging my sword forward.

I didn't want to deny Win's growth at all, but...I wanted him to stay like this for a little longer. I knew I couldn't stop him from leaving the nest, but I wanted at least another few years with him.

My forward motion lent enough strength to my swing to break Win's posture, allowing me to easily take the match from him. After our sparring was complete, I couldn't help but notice the frustration in his expression as we exchanged finishing bows. I responded to that feeling with a mix of relief and apology.

Ah, why did relationships have to be so complicated? But I was sure someday I'd look back fondly on all these things I worried over now.



About a year had passed since the incident in Fodor. Thanks to the dwarven traders, I had been able to exchange letters with Airena a few times. As I had hoped, or maybe I should say "as always," she spared no effort to accommodate my request for cooperation, which was a considerable boost to my confidence. However, even with her help, there were a number of hurdles yet to overcome when it came to establishing a trade relationship between the elves and the dwarves.

For example, neither Airena nor I had the authority to make the elves do anything. As a high elf, the elves would likely do anything I asked of them, but that didn't mean I could give them orders. They had accepted our plan to vacate the forests in Ludoria back then because it had been for their own sake. But this was nothing more than my own dream. The elves had no reason to swallow their inherited hatred of the dwarves and obey my wishes. If my words alone were enough to erase that level of animosity, I'd have used it a long time ago when it came to their attitudes towards half-elves.

Airena was in a similar position. She had been recognized as the representative of the elves to the Kingdom of Ludoria, so when it came to trade between elves and humans, she would be able to make smaller-scale decisions on her own. She had enough accomplishments under her belt that I doubted many would complain about that. But if the discussion turned to trading with dwarves, it would far exceed her station, and I doubted they would listen to her.

There was technically a way to turn my influence over the elves into real power. I could replace Airena as representative of the elves, taking

responsibility for mediating between them and other races. I could then use my influence as a high elf to expand my own powers until eventually I had all of the elves in Ludoria under my control. Then, no one would be able to refuse what I commanded of them. Effectively, I would be setting myself up as king of the elves.

Of course, I was wholeheartedly against that plan. The idea of being served and ruling over people had no appeal to me at all. Being served like that meant I would only see one side of people—specifically the tops of their heads I suppose—a thought I absolutely hated. When I met new people, I wanted to face them head-on. If it was someone I liked, I wanted to be able to watch them from the side, or from behind as well. Airena had ended up taking the position as representative of the elves specifically because I wanted to avoid having people serve me. Of course, there was also the fact that she was better positioned to negotiate with Ludoria than I was.

As I spent the days mulling over these problems, I eventually received a letter from Airena containing some rather interesting news. In order to help with her duties, as well as prepare a successor for her eventual retirement, Airena had collected a few elves around her. Some were fellow adventurers, while others were eccentrics who had chosen a life away from the forest. She asked if she could bring the entire group to the dwarven kingdom for a visit.

Her intention was to evaluate the kingdom with her own eyes instead of relying on hearsay from me alone, and to demonstrate that there were other elves with goodwill towards the dwarves.

I see, I see. Elven adventurers would be very interested in weapons and armor made by dwarves. They'd also be better prepared to handle the assertive, combative personalities of the dwarves. If they could develop even a small-scale friendship, that could serve as the catalyst to broaden relations between elves and the dwarves in the future. As the number of individuals interacting between races increased, the exchanges would start to have a greater influence on those around them. If that range of influence could be expanded, even if it wasn't all elves everywhere, a number of the forests could be convinced to form regular trade relationships with the dwarves.

But there was one more thing I had read from between the lines in Airena's letter. It seemed she was making plans to leave Ludoria behind. The two most important people to her in Ludoria, Clayas and Martena, were getting quite old. I didn't know whether it would be another ten years or twenty, but they wouldn't be around all that much longer. I couldn't tell whether she intended to take care of them in their last days or try to avoid spending time with them at all, but in either case I doubted she'd stay in Ludoria once they were gone. That was why she was preparing a successor, furnishing them with the experience they'd need to take over her position when that day came. This was probably a part of that plan.

In that case, I'd have to start making preparations for her arrival myself. I was also looking forward to seeing the kind of people she had picked to take over for her. Naturally I was a bit uneasy at the thought of introducing a group of elves to the dwarves, but if Airena was determined to do it, then I had no reason not to trust her.

After all, if I couldn't trust Airena, who had gone so far and done so much for me, who *could* I trust? If I hadn't met Airena on that first day outside Vistcourt, my life would have gone in a completely different direction. At the very least, I certainly wouldn't be the person I am now. So believing in Airena wasn't all that different from believing in myself.

It seemed like she intended to bring a group of five. Airena herself would be the sixth, so I would need to get Oswald's permission for each of them to enter the kingdom. I'd then need to start laying the groundwork for their welcome party.

I'd be busy for a while. This was the first time the dwarven kingdom would ever welcome such a large group of elves into their lands. I was sure they'd all be surprised. Of course, everything I had been doing in the dwarven kingdom was already unprecedented, so maybe this was all just an extension of that.



Once the visit had been decided, a very busy two months of preparations ensued. However, things often came up where details and scheduling needed a response from Airena, so there were some unexpected times with nothing at all

to do. This was exactly one of those times. I felt like I was in a rush, but until I heard from the elves, I couldn't do anything.

While I sat there with far too much time on my hands, I was struck by a new impulse: I'd really like to stretch my legs in the bath. No, that wasn't a good word for it. I wanted something much bigger, like a hot spring.

"Why? We've already got a bath at the house." Oswald didn't understand what I was asking for at all.

The dwarves were a surprisingly hygienic people, and so took frequent baths, but their form of bathing came as something like a sauna, using the excess of heat and fuel their society created. They didn't have things like bathtubs. It was totally different from my current longings.

I did have to admit that their saunas were a rather pleasant experience as well, though.

Totally confused about what I was asking for, I asked him if he had ever heard of areas near the volcanoes where hot water gushed out of the earth. If you could find a hot spring anywhere, I imagined it would be somewhere near a volcano.

"Ah, now that you mention it, one of the captains did mention something like that. He said there were pools of hot water that monsters would use to drink and bathe... Wait, you aren't seriously planning on bathing with monsters, are you?" Oswald said, staring at me as if he were watching the sanity leak out of my ears.

*No, of course not! Absolutely not! I wouldn't do anything that crazy. Who do you think I am?*

I was just looking for an example of a place where hot water gushes out of the earth. With that, I could use the help of earth and water spirits to dig a new spring somewhere else. The water there was probably pretty hot, so if we used that and then reinforced the area to prevent monsters from getting in, the soldiers could use it as a rest spot.

I also felt like it would be a good opportunity to take the visiting elves to a hot spring. The power of earth and fire was so young and energetic there, I wanted



anyone who could feel the spirits to experience it themselves.

Yeah, I'd bring Win with me to dig the hot spring. At his age, he wouldn't have much difficulty traveling through the mountains anymore. And more importantly, I'd love to have him with me.

But when I brought it up, Oswald responded with words I never would have imagined.

"I see. Maybe I'll go too."

Wait, what was he saying? There was no way I could bring someone who had been selected as the next king of the dwarves to somewhere as dangerous as the volcanoes.

"If you're eager to bring the kid along, that means you're confident it's safe, right? And you're going to be taking the elves there as well, right? In that case, I want to see it too," he laughed.

I guess he was right, but...I was starting to feel like my simple desire to build a hot spring was about to turn into something much grander.

A week later, as expected, it had turned into an enormous affair.

If Oswald was going, then naturally a military escort would be coming with us. And if the hot spring was going to be used as a rest spot for the soldiers, then it was worth having them along as well to help decide the location, beyond just for defense.

That meant the trip would be even safer, so Oswald decided to bring his family along, and since we were going to build something anyway, we might as well take architects and carpenters with us too. Even Granda the miner decided to tag along, though he didn't actually have anything to do.

Plenty of other people asked to come along, certainly more than we could reasonably accommodate. What on earth had them so excited about this? Acting in such a large group would deter smaller, less threatening monsters from bothering us, but it would also run the risk of attracting the attention of much larger ones.

“This is the result of all your work. You can call it your personal virtue you’ve cultivated with the dwarves,” Oswald said as I was desperately trying to prepare everything for the trip. He had a great smile on his face, but I could sense mischief in it too. “Everyone knows you’re strong, that you fight alongside us as friends, and that you’re always showing us interesting stuff we’ve never thought of before. So naturally they want to come along and see what you’re doing.”

It sounded so nice when he put it like that, but you can’t fool me, you damned dwarf. I know this only became a big deal because of you.

But in the end, I supposed it was fine. After picking through the hopefuls, we had a group of about fifty. It was many more than I had expected, so I was determined to build a great hot spring with all the resources we had.

I wanted to find a spot on the outskirts of the volcanic region so that the dwarves could easily travel to and make use of it. Oh right, and with Oswald’s wife and daughter along, we’d have women with us for the first time, and would need to split the bath into a men’s and women’s side. I wasn’t bold enough to suggest a mixed bath just because it would be easier to build and maintain.

It all ended up being a much bigger deal than I expected, but I still found it strangely exciting.



To be honest, Win’s ability to use the spirits in combat was a little lacking. Maybe he just didn’t like the idea of making his friends fight for him. Or maybe he was more interested in fighting by himself. I guess it was also always a possibility that I had just taught him poorly. But that didn’t mean that Win was poor at Spirit Arts in general.

“Win?”

At my request, he nodded in understanding. He then turned around to the dwarven soldiers behind us.

“About five minutes ahead, there are some moderately sized monsters disguised as rocks. We’ll leave it to you.”



Yes, that was what he had found through his connection to the spirits. When it came to using the spirits outside of directly attacking, he may have been more skilled than even your average adult elf.

This expedition to create a hot spring ended up being a much larger scale affair than I had anticipated, so naturally opportunities arose for Win to show what he could do. Of course, he came in handy while we were on the move, but when we arrived at the volcanic region, we'd need to find a spot with a spring, dig it out, and start drawing water if it was hot enough. We'd also need to create a tub for the water, as well as a runoff to drain any excess. We'd need to build a roof and walls, divide the bath into a men's and women's section, and set up defenses to keep out wandering monsters.

As you might expect, I was the only one who'd be able to find and dig out the spring itself. The building could be left to the dwarven carpenters, but it would take more than a day to finish all the work involved, so we'd also need someone to hunt for food. It would be impossible to keep the dwarves all in one place while that happened, so keeping an eye open for monsters would be more than I could handle alone.

So to make sure everyone was absolutely safe, I would have Win keep watch in the places I couldn't see myself. His scouting while we were on our way to the volcanic region was practice for that. Though both of us were checking for enemies, I left reporting our findings to him. That would inspire confidence in his abilities among the dwarves, and help reinforce Win's own confidence in himself.

In all honesty, I had hoped to take a leisurely stroll through the volcanic region with Win at my side, casually avoiding all of the monsters around us. But things never quite work out the way you intend, do they? In the end, this would be a good experience for him, and I could tell he was also working hard despite being nervous, so I guess it was fine.

Once we reached the outskirts of the volcanic region, we found a number of promising spots for the hot spring. We asked the dwarves which would be the easiest to defend and easiest to use. Once a spot had been decided, I had the

earth spirits open a hole in the ground. A geyser of hot water immediately gushed up from the earth, earning a cheer from the dwarves.

I then consulted with the water spirits to make sure the water was free of dangerous toxins. They assured me it was safe not only for bathing, but for drinking too. Dipping your hands in it left them a little slippery, so it seemed the water had a bit of alkalinity to it.

Since it was still too hot to bathe in, we began moving the water from the natural spring to somewhere else. I noticed the water had started turning white and murky, and consulted the water spirits again about my worries. They assured me it was only a reaction from the water being exposed to the air, and it was still harmless.

I then asked the earth spirits to carve out a rough pit for us, after which the dwarves refined it to make a good natural tub. Once the hot water was added, we had made a perfect open-air bath. Well actually, having an open-air bath here where monsters were so common was a huge security risk, but I was still happy to see it.

Since this was entirely new to the dwarves, we spent the rest of the day taking turns between standing guard and enjoying the bath. It was an entirely different sensation than what you could experience in a sauna, so Win and the dwarves thoroughly enjoyed it. Just maybe, this would plant the seeds of a bathtub culture in dwarven society.

The next day, the dwarven soldiers set out on an extended hunting expedition, accompanied by Win. Honestly, I was a little...okay, extremely worried, but I knew being overprotective of him here would hurt his pride and hinder his growth. So I swallowed my fears and saw them off with a smile, making sure to keep my white-knuckled anxiety behind my back. I had to help with keeping watch over the work site and building up the walls around the hot spring, so I couldn't go with them. It seemed Oswald had understood my apprehension, as although he didn't say anything, he gave me a hearty clap on the back.

That evening, Win and the dwarven soldiers returned carrying the bodies of a number of monsters. As I went out to welcome them back with no small

amount of relief, the soldiers showered me with praise for Win. “Your kid is a warrior you can be proud of,” “He did everything in his power to help, but never took a single step beyond his limits.” Things like that.

Win seemed a little embarrassed, but that didn’t stop him from proudly telling me all about how he had helped them during the hunt. Hearing the story from him was unbelievably fun for me.

Our days of enjoying the bath, eating roasted meat, and then getting back to building flew by, and the hot spring and rest point were finished before we knew it. The defensive structure the dwarves had built to protect the spot made it feel more like a fortress than a bathhouse, though. Apparently they had decided to make this a permanent garrison, rather than use it as an occasional rest stop. It seemed some of the dwarves had liked it enough to volunteer for the new position. It was also possible they saw this as a likely new tourist spot for the dwarves back home.

It would be great if the elves Airena brought with her would take as much of a liking to the place...but I guessed it would be my job to provide a good enough welcome that they would.



About two months later, a guide brought the elven visitors into the dwarven kingdom. Despite Oswald and I being the ones who arranged to get permission for them to enter the country and hire a guide to bring them in, I was still a little shocked to see elves in the dwarven kingdom.

In contrast, the other dwarves didn’t seem to react to them at all, as if they were used to seeing elves around all the time. Well, I suppose in a sense they were, having seen Win and me rather frequently. To the dwarves, there was no distinction between elves, half-elves, and high elves. They had grown well accustomed to seeing people like us.

That made me feel bad for the visiting elves, who practically radiated anxiety. While it might be a stretch to call this enemy territory for them, they had come expecting hostility, where anything could happen to them.

But among all the nervous elves, Airena stood unfazed at the head, leading

them towards us. “It has been quite some time, Oswald and Lord Acer. And to all of the dwarves, thank you for having us for this short visit. We look forward to meeting you all.” She gave an elegant bow to us and the dwarves who had come to greet them. It was clear from her behavior that she was well accustomed to meetings like this.

But I supposed that made sense. As the representative of the elves, she had often negotiated single-handedly with literal nations. There was no telling how many dangerous situations she had walked into in the past. From her perspective, the other party consisting of people who weren’t openly hostile to her probably made this an easy task.

“Yeah, guess it’s been about thirty years, huh? You still using that kukri I sold you? Bring it by later, I’ll fix it up for you. But let’s not talk out in the street. I’ll show you to my place. I’m sure you and Acer have lots to talk about.” Oswald greeted her back with a friendly handshake. He must have been trying to ease the tension in the elves behind her.

Airena’s party consisted of herself, three men, and two women. I had met a few of them back when I’d lived in the capital. My relationship with them hadn’t gone much beyond giving advice about equipment, but it was still nice to see some people I recognized again. And when I waved at them with a smile, they even waved back at me.

The dwarven kingdom was a massive underground cavern, carved out of the earth and then reinforced with stone. However, unlike the impression one might have from hearing such a description, their society was actually quite refined and culturally advanced. They had perfected their water and sewer systems, and even given great thought to ventilation, creating a gentle breeze throughout the city that made it hardly feel like one was underground. Sunlight didn’t reach the majority of the kingdom, so instead they had cultivated a kind of luminous moss to light the streets. The large stone structures floating in a sea of lights gave the kingdom a really fantastical atmosphere.

I had been pretty moved by the sight when I first saw it, and I could tell by the shocked looks on the faces of the elves that they felt the same way. Even the eternally dignified Airena was staring in open-mouthed wonder.



Elvish prejudice considered the dwarves to be a savage, uncivilized people, but it only took one look at their kingdom to dispel that delusion. In reality, if one could set their preconceived notions aside, it would be obvious that such an uncivilized people would never become famous as world-renowned craftsmen.

As frank and impulsive as they were, they lacked the shallow, superficial nature that those traits suggested. They lacked nothing in prudence, excelled in perseverance, and had an incredible aesthetic sense. No matter how practical the dwarven kingdom's construction was, it was inevitably going to be beautiful. That said, locating themselves in the middle of a closed-off mountain range left them somewhat lacking in convenience.

After leading the elves to Oswald's house—or rather, his mansion—we made proper introductions. Among the five people Airena had brought with her, two of the men and one of the women were adventurers, all of which I recognized. The last two were elves who followed rather unexpected lifestyles.

The first was a man by the name of Huratio, who lived as a wandering minstrel, traveling around Ludoria and its neighboring countries. He had visited the Vilestorika Republic and the Azueda Alliance numerous times, so I felt like we'd have a lot to talk about.

The other was a woman by the name of Rebees. She was apparently a rather famous painter, often commissioned by royalty and nobility to make portraits, though her real specialty lay in painting landscapes. She was clearly dying to paint the scenery she had seen of the dwarven kingdom, as throughout her whole introduction she was totally incapable of hiding her restlessness.

It seemed Airena had brought some awfully strange people with her. Though to be honest, I had never even considered the possibility of such interesting people among the elves. How would they interpret dwarven society? How would they understand it, and how would they share what they had seen with others on their return? I was starting to look forward to finding out.

As much as Rebees was itching to get started on her art, for now, the elves were given rooms in Oswald's mansion to rest after their journey. They would



then meet with the current king on the following day. I had met him a couple of times, including when he had granted me citizenship in the dwarven kingdom, so I knew he was a jolly old guy, at least on the surface. I wasn't especially worried.



The elves fit into dwarven society surprisingly well. So well that it was almost frustrating.

The first to break the ice was the minstrel, Huratio. The moment he had been set loose, he immediately visited a bar and stole the hearts of the drunks there with songs lively enough to make it a party. He did some research into dwarven legends as well, turning them into songs to play for his inebriated audience. His quick rise in popularity came as no surprise.

Next was Rebees. Though she spent the majority of her time lost in her painting, if you managed to catch her at a free moment, she happily obliged requests for portraits. This made her quite popular among the young, curious dwarves. Once she got along with the children, she immediately earned the favor of the adults, specifically the grandparents and even older generations.

With life spans significantly longer than humans, it was rather common for elderly dwarves to have great-grandchildren. There was no small number of dwarves who were overjoyed with Rebees's work, putting her paintings of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren into picture frames of their own creation.

The three elven adventurers had no more trouble fitting in than the other two. Between doing small jobs around the city for the people and going out hunting with the dwarven soldiers, they had begun building up relationships in their own way.

While I imagined there were likely still some holdouts among the dwarves who held on to their hatred of the elves, I personally hadn't come across a single one. Right here, right now, the racial gulf between the elves and the dwarves didn't exist. I couldn't have asked for anything more.

And as for the elves' leader, Airena...

“As far as trade goes, the elder of the Mi Forest elves told me they owe a great debt to you, Lord Acer. Hearing that this was what you wished, he volunteered to begin producing alcohol and trading with the dwarves.”

She brought far better news than I could have hoped for. I had never imagined someone would step up to start trading with the dwarves so quickly. I was curious about what he meant by saying he owed me a great debt, though. Mi Forest was in the eastern region of Ludoria, one of the villages populated by the elven slaves we had freed. It was also the village where Win was born. What had made the elder there feel so indebted to me?

The bulk of the work in setting free the elven slaves had been done by Airena and the other adventurers, I had only given them a tiny bit of help. If it was about taking care of Win, I had volunteered happily for that job. I highly doubted it would come to it, but if they asked for him back, they'd get a resounding “no,” even if he would be old enough to live on his own soon.

But Airena noticed my uneasy thoughts immediately. “Don't worry, the elder has no ulterior motive. Back then, if it wasn't for your help, a real war may have broken out between the elves and the humans. There is no telling how many people would have died. There are more than a few elves who feel indebted to you for saving them from that,” she explained with a small smile.

Many of the freed elves lived in Mi Forest, so they had felt the events back then especially keenly. When she put it like that, I guess I could understand. I had plenty of experiences that felt small to me, yet were huge, life-changing events to others. Not all of them were pleasant memories, but they were all important to me.

“Then I guess I better make sure things go well enough that they don't regret it,” I said, earning a nod from Airena.

The elves would be more interested in weapons and tools made from the bones, teeth, and claws of monsters than anything made of metal. I decided to put together a good sampling of what they could expect to send back with Airena. If this was going to be a long-term partnership, I couldn't expect Oswald to make everything they asked for, and there would be no point if I made them.

I would need to find a skilled craftsman who was willing to put his whole

heart and soul into making something, knowing it would be sent to the elven forests. Dwarves took great pride in their metalworking, so being asked to make weapons and tools without any metal whatsoever had a good chance of frustrating them. Rather than having a single specialist, it would be preferable to have the work rotate through a number of smiths.

“I have to say, even watching things move along in small steps like this is quite fun, isn’t it?” Airena said with a bright smile.

I nodded heartily in agreement. This was extremely fun for me. My dream of having dwarves and elves interacting with each other had been a distant, far-off thing, but thanks to everyone’s help it was already starting to manifest. It felt like we were making real, tangible progress.

After handing off some materials to a craftsman to make the samples, I would take the elves to the hot spring. If we spent a good amount of time relaxing there, most of the work should be done by the time we got back. I would then send the samples off to the elven forests, and they could start working out the particulars of the trade deal.

The dwarven kingdom and the elven forests were still quite distant, both physically and figuratively. But if there were people on both sides willing to work towards the same end, someday that gap could be crossed.



*The hearty people of the earth, digging deep in the ground and forging metal.  
The gentle people of the forest, who love the trees around them.*

*Since ages long past, the two have hated each other. But the people of the earth knew nothing of the people of the forest, and the people of the forest knew nothing of the people of the earth. They hated each other, despite never knowing each other. They both loved to drink, and they both loved their comrades, but they didn’t know it.*

*But now we stand in the same place, and are learning what we share in common. The two who hated each other now acknowledge each other as friends and gather around the drink.*

*Nobody knows if this friendship will last forever. We might grow to hate each*

*other again someday. But that is all the more reason why right now, we vow to cherish this time together.*

“To our new friends, who traveled from distant lands, over the mountains to meet us! Cheers!” As Huratio’s song came to an end, Oswald raised his goblet in a toast. The rest of the dwarves followed suit, smiling as they drained their cups.

We had held plenty of parties to welcome the elven visitors. You might think one party would be enough, but the dwarves would take any excuse to throw another. However, the endless partying ended up becoming a grueling trial for the elves.

“Come on! Drink, drink!” One after another, dwarves came by to fill my goblet. Of course, none of the other elves were spared either. Sharing alcohol was one of the greatest acts of hospitality among the dwarves.

But the drinks being served here were powerful stuff, the kind the dwarves liked best. I had spent years living here, and so had grown used to the intensity of the alcohol and the pace at which I could drink it, but it was far too much for the other elves. And while the dwarves were more considerate of the women, they showed no mercy at all for the men. Though they had all been given assigned seats for the party, they had long since been pulled all over the place by their hosts. The two men who worked as adventurers had lost to their drinks in no time at all, and were currently flat on the ground among a crowd of rowdy dwarves. I couldn’t help feeling bad for them, and decided to go save them when I saw a chance.

However, there was one among the elven men who had managed to avoid disaster: Huratio, who had been singing earlier. Using excuses about needing a clear head and a healthy throat to keep singing, he had managed to rebuff the advances of the dwarven drunks. His lyre was like a shield against their attacks.

He was really an interesting guy. I imagined he had seen more of the world than even the adventurers he was traveling with. And I didn’t mean that just because of his skill in avoiding alcohol. I had managed to talk with him a little before. I couldn’t believe how fun it was to reminisce over the sights we had

both seen.

Keeping a casual eye on the goings-on around me, I grabbed a plate of food from one of the dwarven serving women and took a bite of one of the thinly sliced meats on it. It was fairly salty, but not enough to overpower the flavor of the meat. I took a drink to wash the lingering flavor from my mouth, which then left me longing for more of that salty taste. But I knew if I got carried away I'd be drunk in no time, so I made sure to pace myself.



Another elf appeared and sat across from me at the table.

“You handle your liquor quite well, Lord Acer! Shall I pour you some more?” she offered brightly, but I shook my head. As accustomed as I was to dwarven drinking habits, I knew I had my limits. I was already pushing it with what the dwarves were forcing on me. It wouldn’t be strange for fistfights to start breaking out at any time, so I needed to be lucid enough to rescue the collapsed elves from the melee. I needed to keep my wits about me for a bit longer.

“I’ve been living here for a while, so I’ve just got a lot of experience. Both at how to drink, and how to turn them down.”

Rebees replied with an impressed hum. She seemed to be in a great mood, and judging by how flushed her face was, she was quite drunk. The dwarves had put out some imported alcohol in addition to their usual highly distilled drinks, and it seemed she had dipped into them.

“You look like you’re having a lot of fun. Did you finish the painting you were working on?” I doubted she was just happy because of the alcohol.

She answered with a big nod. “That’s right! Listen, Lord Acer! I’m really, really glad I came to see the dwarven kingdom!” As she leaned forward across the table, I pushed her back into her seat. She was really quite drunk today.

I guess she was really happy with her painting. Tomorrow...well, tomorrow she’d be dead to the world thanks to how much she was drinking now, so I’d have to wait for the day after to have her show it to me.

Rebees saying she was glad she came here was a little bit different...actually, very, very different from the others saying the same thing. Compared to someone like Huratio, she was much less capable of traveling around. You might think a painter would be someone who traveled the world in search of new sights to paint, but she didn’t have that freedom. If she didn’t have someone who recognized her talents and was willing to pay for her work, she couldn’t survive as a painter.

In Ludoria, and its neighbors like Zyntes, Jidael, and Kirkoim, she was quite famous and could sell her paintings to the nobility and merchant class. But if she traveled much farther, it would suddenly become much more difficult for

her to earn a living. On top of that, most of her customers commissioned her to paint portraits, especially to send to prospective marriage partners, rather than the landscapes she really wanted to paint. Her ideal may have been traveling the world and creating paintings of everything she saw, but her reality wasn't so kind.

She could have taken a second job as an adventurer. That would certainly get her traveling enough to see the sights she wanted to paint. With the aid of the spirits, she would be far from helpless. But Rebees herself wasn't particularly well suited to combat, and spurned fighting for any reason beyond self-defense.

Yeah, I could understand how she felt. I wasn't especially bad at fighting, but I could very much sympathize with her lack of desire to spend her time doing anything other than what she loved. As such, the chance to travel to a foreign, unknown land and paint what she saw was an incredible blessing to her.

As I listened to her happily chat away, I continued working on the food and drink in front of me. "Also, I was talking to Huratio earlier. He said he wanted to get a group of elves together and travel around the world as a caravan. Then I'd be able to go all sorts of places! He said living together and helping each other would be fun."

Huratio's plan was still barely a plan, really more at the stage of being a distant dream. But it was an achievable one. After all, anyone would have laughed off the idea of elves and dwarves getting along, and yet here we were. If that's really what they wanted to do, there was no reason they couldn't make it happen.

"What about you, Lord Acer?! I can teach you to paint, and Huratio said he wanted to sing with you! We could travel all over the place selling stuff!"

Rebees's invitation was an extremely tempting one. If I had been given the chance on the day I stepped out of the Forest Depths, I probably would have accepted without a second thought. But right now, I had to shake my head.

"Not right now. I've still got some things to do...or I should say, things I *want* to do."

My life was solidly booked for the near future, but what about after that? I knew that my selfish nature meant I wouldn't be able to stick with other people



for long periods of time. Humans with their short life spans were one thing, but I doubted I could bear living for centuries with the same people.

Beyond that, I suspected the elves would go quite far out of their way to accommodate my selfishness. That would make me more of a hindrance to them than anything. If they did start a caravan, it would be best for both of us if I only traveled with them occasionally.

Before long, Rebees was snoring, flat on the table in front of me. Beyond her, things were starting to get pretty rowdy. I guessed it was about time to retrieve the unconscious elves and evacuate them somewhere safe. Looking around, I met gazes with Airena, who had been surveying the room in a similar manner. I suspected she was thinking exactly the same thing I was. So, leaving Rebees to her, I cut through the boisterous crowd to go collect the collapsed elven men.



Three years had passed since the elves visited the dwarven kingdom, making it just over five years since I'd returned from Fodor. So in total, it had been a little under eleven years since I first arrived in the dwarven kingdom.

Though only on a small scale, trade between the elves and dwarves had begun. The production of weapons and tools from materials harvested from monsters was being led by a smith named Garave, a dwarf that used to live in Ludoria. I had heard of him before coming to the dwarven kingdom, and apparently he knew of me as well. Yes, he was that incredible smith that kept the first-place prize in Ludoria's smithing competition away from me for so many years.

Garave had volunteered himself to take the position, and many others had gathered around him to help. Even Rajudor, Kawshman's master, had taken an interest. He believed there would be more elves than dwarves who could make use of his relics. There was no indication that the elves had any need for relics, but seeing things develop in a direction I hadn't anticipated had piqued my interest as well. I was really hoping to see him succeed.

I had talked about Rajudor quite a bit with Kawshman, so I had a bit of a grasp on his character. At first he seemed like a rather determined individual with the

way he prepared so thoroughly in aiming for the kingship, but I came to learn he was just the type who liked testing their own limits. I suspected he saw this situation as yet another challenge.

Trade between the dwarven kingdom and the Mi Forest elves was being led by the dwarves who used to supervise trade with Fodor, the same ones who I had traveled with on my trip to the empire. They said it was because they were bored after trade with Fodor decreased, but considering the grueling journeys they had to take through the mountains to connect the dwarven kingdom to the outside world, I couldn't believe that they had that much time on their hands. But once they heard I was trying to set up trade relations between the elves and the dwarves, they had taken the task upon themselves like it was the obvious thing to do.

Also, the alcohol they brought back from Mi wasn't just stuff made from fruit. They were also exporting a drink made from honey diluted with water, then mixed with alcohol...in other words, mead. I had given both of them a try, and I had to say they had both been made exquisitely. Even the dwarves, who could be quite obsessed with the strength of their drinks, felt like it was too much of a waste to distill these ones down any further.

Oswald had been chosen as the next king, and trade between elves and dwarves had been realized. You could say all the goals I had in coming to the dwarven kingdom had been accomplished. Not to mention, I had also thoroughly enjoyed the hot spring we had built.

Win's initial training in blacksmithing had come to an end, reaching the point in his career where he just needed to start refining his skills by producing in quantity and begin taking on real customers. So he had agreed it was time for us to leave the dwarves and return to Ludoria. We had no regrets to leave behind in the dwarven kingdom.

I had thoroughly enjoyed my time living here, and I was sure Win had too. But I had a promise to keep. I had promised Kaeha I'd take care of her in her final days.

Of course, there was still some time before she was that old, probably more than ten years. But to put it another way, that was all the time she had left. She

might live twenty more years if she was lucky, but thirty wasn't realistic. So I would return to the dojo, and spend those last ten or twenty years together with her.

I had thought there was a chance Win would choose to stay behind in the dwarven kingdom, but apparently he had his own intentions. Before long, Win would be a fully-fledged adult. When that happened, I wouldn't be able to stop him from doing anything.

I was really starting to get upset with how fast Win's and Kaeha's lives were passing by. Even though back in the Forest Depths, I had been so frustrated by how slow the high elves lived.

On the day we left, Oswald gave Win and me each a bracelet. At first glance they looked to be made of silver, but upon closer inspection, their peculiar gleam and hardness couldn't be anything but mithril. With no memory of helping him make them, and the fact that it was illegal to take mithril out of dwarven lands, I couldn't hide my shock at the present.

"Don't worry about it. I did all the paperwork, and I borrowed the king's forge to make 'em. There's nothing shady about these. This way, no matter how far you go, any dwarf you meet will recognize you as our friend," he declared with a snort, looking just a little proud of himself.

Man...I was left totally speechless.

"But I didn't do anything...not like Acer did. I can't...I can't take something like this." While I was at a loss for words, Win spoke in a quivering voice. But Oswald, Master Damned Dwarf replied by pounding a fist to Win's chest. I had to admit I was a little jealous.

"Idiot. You've more than earned your place as my student. You're a citizen of our kingdom, and one of my comrades. You don't need to compare yourself to this damned elf," Oswald said as Win's face crumpled from the pain, or maybe from some other emotion. But wait, why was he calling me out as a damned elf in this situation?

He continued. "Yeah, I'd get why you'd compare yourself to him, as your foster father. I won't say much more in front of him, but I get how you feel. But

I recognized you as my student, and that has nothing to do with that damned elf. This is your proof of that.”

I had no idea what Oswald was talking about, but I at least understood this wasn't the time for me to butt in. Right now, he was telling Win something I never could, sharing with him something I would never understand. It was kind of complicated, and a little frustrating, but I managed to keep quiet.

“Listen, Win. You're not just some baggage that your dad carries around. We all know that. So come back and visit any time you like. But you better not let your skills get rusty, got it?” Oswald kept going, speaking slowly and purposefully, to which Win nodded back without a word. Oswald then gave an amused smile.

Well, as long as they both were happy, it was fine. As much as Oswald's words were for Win, I imagined there was also something in there meant for me, about what I lacked. I'd take my time to think over it.

I was well aware that I didn't understand Win all that well. I never thought Win was simple baggage I carried around, but what mattered was how *he* felt.

“You've been a great help too, Acer. Next time we meet, I'll probably be polishing the throne with my butt. I'm sure I'll look like a stooge, so feel free to come by if you need a laugh. See you.” With those last words from Oswald, we left the dwarven kingdom behind.

I had first carried Win here on my back, and now he was leaving on his own two feet. The view of the mountains around us was no less magnificent than it had been back then.

# Excerpt: Dripping Memories

## The Child and Flour

I was walking down a road through Kirkoim with Win in my arms, a few days after our tearful departure from Janpemon. Young as he was, Win's sadness came in waves. He wasn't always upset, but he would occasionally remember and it would all start over again. At the same time, he was young enough to be constantly distracted by things we came across in our journey. From the clouds in the sky, to the flowers growing by the side of the road, to the carriages that passed us by, there was no shortage of things to steal his attention away from his grief.

"Acer!"

He must have found something else to catch his interest. Still in my arms, he leaned forward and called my name. I shifted my grip so I wouldn't drop him, and followed his gaze to see him pointing at two cows.

"Horses! So big!"

His excitement was adorable, but unfortunately he was wrong. Did horses and cows really look that similar?

"No, not quite. Those are cows, Win. They're different from horses...though, I guess they do have similar jobs."

Horses were used to carry people or cargo, pull carriages, and sometimes work farm equipment. But there were cows that were used for the same tasks. While I couldn't say I'd ever heard the term "cattle-drawn carriage," but the concept certainly existed. And of course, cattle were important for farming.

So...what exactly was the difference between a cow and a horse? Cows were butchered for their meat once they were no longer useful for labor, but so were horses. *Uh oh. I'm not so sure anymore. We drink cow's milk...can you drink horse milk?*

“They’re close, but they’re a bit different. Cows are fatter and have shorter necks. And look, they have horns, don’t they?”

Win nodded excitedly along with my half-hearted explanation. I decided to stop there for a moment so he could watch the cows. It was important to foster curiosity in children, after all. If no one answered the questions their curiosity bore, eventually that curiosity would die. In its place, resignation would start to grow. When I first met Win, he never would have asked such innocent questions. I was really happy to see the influence our year and a half in Janpemon had made on him.

“Why are the cows going in circles?”

The questions didn’t stop. This one was a bit more difficult than the others. I knew the answer, but it was a struggle to think of a way to express it in a way Win could understand.

“Hmm. That’s their job. Look, see how they’re connected to that pole? If you look closely, you can see the pole is spinning a big millstone in the middle.”

Two cows were being led in a circle, spinning a large pole which caused the millstone in the center of their enclosure to turn. If you threw threshed grain onto the millstone, that movement would grind it down into flour. In short, they were using the cows to make flour.

In this area of the world, including Ludoria and the Azueda Alliance, bread was often the symbol of food as a whole. A nation’s strength was in no small part defined by how much grain it could produce. In a sense, larger countries were more powerful because they had more territory for agriculture. The more they could harvest, the greater their population would grow, and the more soldiers they could mobilize in times of conflict.

But grain couldn’t become bread on its own, of course. It first needed to be threshed, then ground into flour. Flour production was critical work, and the rights involved generated no small amount of conflict.

“There was a river near Janpemon, so they had a water wheel to grind the grain for them. You saw the water wheel, right Win?”

It wasn’t the case in Janpemon, but there were some areas where farmers

had to pay the local lord for the privilege of using the water wheel to grind their grain. The lord would then require taxes to be paid in flour, rather than grain, forcing the farmers to pay for the water wheel so they could meet their tax obligations. Basically, they were being double-taxed.

The farmers weren't happy to be so handily exploited, though. They would often mix the bags of flour with grain husks and heads, effectively adding garbage to meet their quotas. If they were found out, they at least had grounds to make excuses for the "mistake," and all in all it was the better option. Others turned to mixing the flour with similarly colored sand, which was much harder to identify. Once mixed, it was extremely time-consuming to separate them, causing the quality of the flour and the bread made from it to drop drastically.

Stories like that were a bit much for Win at his age, but eventually he'd need to know about what life was like in these areas. I wanted him to meet as many kind, good people as possible. But at the same time, he needed to know that people's lives were riddled with lies and falsehoods, and that dishonesty was often born from their circumstances. This was a good example to demonstrate that.

When I first ate bread made from that mixed flour, I had thought it was some sort of prank, but now I had to accept it with a faint sense of resignation. No one in this situation was particularly in the wrong. The lords needed money to cover the costs of managing and maintaining the water wheels, while the farmers were doing everything they could to survive with what they had. Maybe the most accurate way of putting it was that everyone was in the wrong to some degree.

Of course, not all of the flour had garbage mixed in with it. There were some merchants who wouldn't deal in the mixed flours, and bakers who had a real passion for making good bread. One of the reasons the food in Janpemon was so excellent was because the lord of the city—or king, I suppose, as Janpemon was a city-state—was very strict on managing the quality of the flour produced there, and he didn't charge the farmers anything to use the water wheel. And so, grain-based baking had developed spectacularly in the city.

Knowing the bad made it possible to appreciate the good. If you just took whatever came to you, you wouldn't really understand how great it was. I

wanted Win to grow up into the kind of person who could appreciate how fantastic his experience in Janpemon had been... But to be honest, I was happy that he was taking his time growing up. I wanted him to stay as this cute little boy for as long as possible.

“Good work, cows!”

As Win waved goodbye to the cows, the farmers working alongside them smiled. With a small nod to them, I turned back to the road.

## **The Solitude of the Strong**

It was a gruesome scene to behold. The heads of monsters lay scattered across the ground, torn to pieces. They were a kind of flightless bird which used their strong legs and sharp beaks to hunt in packs. They were a little bit taller than a person, and fairly heavy. Unless you were a fairly experienced adventurer, chances were slim that you'd walk away from these things with your life.

And yet their heads lay scattered on the ground, their bodies devoured. There was no doubt the culprit was another, far stronger breed of monster. Fallen trees were ample evidence of the carnage it had wreaked here.

“Looks a lot bigger than I was told.”

Putting on a pair of gloves, I inspected some of the fur left behind on the fallen trees. It was white...no, silver. It was stiff and supple. I wrapped some of the fur around a branch of a fallen tree and I pulled on it. The branch snapped in two easily. If I had touched it with my bare hands, my fingers probably would have met the same fate. It was quite terrifying stuff.

If whatever creature this came from was covered in such fur, normal weapons likely wouldn't work on it. I could understand why the elves had asked for my help in dealing with this. It hadn't even been ten years since the elves left Ludoria, so I was quite surprised to see monsters of this caliber already.

Had it come here from somewhere else? Maybe from Pulha? It was hard to believe such a powerful monster made it all the way here without being noticed by or attacking anyone, but it was equally difficult to believe that it had grown



naturally in such a short time.

At any rate, if we didn't get rid of the monster, the elves wouldn't be able to return safely to this forest. It needed to be hunted down.

A group of elven adventurers culling monsters in the forest were the first to see it. They had been confused as to why a forest of this size had so few monsters in it, until the answer suddenly appeared in front of them: a huge ape, covered in silver fur. To satisfy its hunger, it had hunted down other monsters, ripped them apart, and devoured them. The number of monsters in the forest had been kept low by the feeding habits of this ape monster.

It was an irregularity among monsters, too large and powerful to merely be called the king of the forest, and too violent and destructive for the forest to survive its presence. The elves had wisely judged they were outmatched and immediately retreated, sneaking back to their companions to share what they had learned. After discussing that information among themselves, they had decided to leave dealing with the creature to me.

To be honest, I felt that if all the elven adventurers worked together, they stood a reasonable chance of defeating the ape. But even so, there would inevitably be numerous losses on the adventurers' side. The elves seemed to be refraining from asking for my help unless it was absolutely necessary, but at least Airen understood that I would be unhappy if their bizarre sense of restraint caused lives to be lost unnecessarily.

I was then walking through the trees of a forest in western Ludoria, hunting said giant ape. Finding it wouldn't be especially challenging; it had no intention of hiding itself, and left traces of its work all throughout the forest. It was probably quite proud of its strength.

Normally, even if one was powerful, they would still need to hide themselves to hunt, but this particular creature seemed so far above the others in this forest that it didn't even feel the need to do that. Such an arrogant creature would doubtlessly turn to attacking human settlements if it couldn't find enough food in the forest. Or maybe it was more accurate to say we were lucky it hadn't started doing so already.

As far as living things, humans as a species were far more difficult to deal with

than other monsters, but the ape wouldn't understand that at all. It would simply see them as easy prey. And once it got a taste for human flesh, it would continue preying on them until it was exterminated. But thanks to my interference, that was a tragedy that would never happen.

"Okay, let's get this over with then," I muttered to myself, sensing the powerful creature's presence nearby.

As if in answer, a terrible cry split the air. I was a little surprised. However, it didn't seem like the ape had noticed me. It was just in the middle of a hunt.

In short, this was my perfect chance. Anyone would lower their guard while eating, sleeping, or relieving themselves. All the more so for someone who thought so highly of their own strength. The creature probably couldn't even fathom the concept of someone hunting for it.

Taking my bow in hand, I nocked an arrow and continued cautiously forward. The roots of the trees withdrew from in front of me to create a smooth path, while the leaves closed in to hide me from view.

When I arrived at the scene, I saw the giant ape downing a mouthful of meat torn from a large lizard that it was holding down. The lizard was still alive, desperately struggling in the ape's grip. But with the difference in their strength and size, the best the lizard could manage was to slap at the ape's feet with its tail.

The battle between monsters was gruesome, and honestly quite difficult to watch. With the difference in strength between them, there was no reason for the ape to eat the lizard alive. It should have easily been able to kill it, and would have had an easier time eating if it did. The only reason to treat the lizard like that was to enjoy its suffering.

Monsters weren't quite as intelligent as people, but they understood far more than regular animals. That intelligence often manifested as cruelty. But with that distraction, the ape was even less aware of its surroundings than I had anticipated. Ironically, the monster's intelligence made it act quite a bit more foolish than an ordinary animal would. Just as occasionally happened with people.

Without a sound, I drew back my arrow. I didn't need to quiet my heart or

focus or anything like that. There was no way I could miss a target that had left itself so open. I released my arrow, and it found a new home in the giant ape's eye.

The wounded monster reeled back, unleashing an ear-splitting howl. A pitiful scream, from someone so arrogant they never expected to feel pain themselves. But the weakling in question, the partially eaten lizard, had no strength left. Even when it was freed from the ape's clutches, it made no effort to flee.

Even with a grand wolf fang arrowhead, my arrow hadn't managed to penetrate the ape's brain. The monster's very size was proving to be a nuisance.

Huddled up from the sudden pain, the giant ape was still vulnerable. I could easily fire another arrow to take its remaining eye, blinding it. But if I did that, there was a good chance it would panic and charge off randomly. It would be no less of a threat while blind, and a desperate, terrified rampage through the forest would do no small amount of damage. I needed to avoid having it thrash around like that. I needed it not to feel fear, but anger.

Emerging from the cover of the trees, I stepped in front of the giant ape. Seeing that the sudden attack had come from such a tiny, insignificant creature, the ape's fear immediately turned to rage. Its howling turned from a pained cry into a bloodthirsty roar. If it was a bit smarter, it might have stopped to wonder how someone so tiny had managed to hurt it, and why I wasn't hiding or fleeing, but evidently that was beyond the limits of its intelligence.

The ape flexed its legs, preparing to leap towards me. But the moment it kicked off...

*"Spirits of earth."*

The spirits opened a hole in the ground underneath it. The ape's feet cut through open air, dropping it into the hole. The monster's weapons—its strength and size—were useless without ground to support its weight. As large as the hole was, it was only as deep as the ape's chest. Once the thought occurred to it, it would easily be able to climb out. A normal monster would have been dropped all the way down, but this one was just far too big.

But this was more than enough. Before the surprised ape could climb its way

out, I stomped my feet, signaling the spirits to close the hole around it. The earth closed back in, swallowing the giant ape whole. It was certainly a powerful creature, but not nearly powerful enough to fight the earth. With its body up to its chest buried, arms included, it wouldn't be able to free itself so easily.

All that was left was to decide how to finish it off. However, unlike the arrogant ape, I took no joy in watching my prey suffer. As it struggled desperately against its earthen prison, I stepped around behind it and drew my sword, pouring mana into it. I would put an end to its life without causing unnecessary suffering. A single slash decapitated the creature, ending everything.

With a body this big, there was nothing I could do about the creature's remains by myself. I would have to leave it to the other elves. I didn't expect its meat to be edible, and its pelt was a bit too large to be useful, so we'd probably just send a small portion of it back to the capital.

The giant ape was undoubtedly a powerful creature. But that strength led it straight to pride. In its pride, its arrogance, its conceit, it had lost sight of its own footing and fallen into my trap. Being physically strong and being actually powerful were two completely different things.

And in all honesty, I may not have been all that different. As a high elf, I wielded incredible power. If I allowed it to go to my head, becoming arrogant and conceited in my strength, I'd probably meet the same fate.

Luckily, though I couldn't say there were a huge number of them, I did have people who could show me my weaknesses. Kaeha, Oswald, and even Win watching me from behind. So maybe the true cause of this ape's defeat was not its arrogance, but the solitude born of its incredible strength.

## Ash Steel

"Now that you're officially a citizen of the dwarven kingdom, there's more I can teach you."

One day, Oswald called me into the forge. I nodded, but I couldn't see Win. I

thought that was strange, as he was just as much one of Oswald's students, and had also been given citizenship.

Oswald noticed my hesitation. "This is something only taught to the best smiths among the dwarves. It's a bit early for him yet. I might not be able to teach him when the time comes, so you'll have to when he's ready."

I nodded again. I had no idea what he was going to teach me, but if I needed to pass this on to Win someday, I'd have to focus. Not like I ever *didn't* focus when it came to learning blacksmithing.

"That's enough for introductions. Today I'm going to teach you how to forge ashteel."

*Ashteel?* I tilted my head in confusion at the unfamiliar word, but I could ask questions later. For now, I needed to burn the skills Oswald was demonstrating into my mind. It would be more difficult for him to teach if he had to constantly stop to answer my questions.

But watching him work left me feeling perplexed, like I was watching him do something very wrong. He started by pulling out some kind of bone and heating it in the forge. It burned to the point of being essentially ash, and yet still held its shape...meaning it was highly unlikely to be any normal bone. Had it come from a monster?

Oswald retrieved the ash-like bone, smashed it into pieces with a hammer, and then used something like a mortar and pestle to grind it down further. It looked more like the work of a pharmacist than a blacksmith. It was so out of character for him, I almost laughed. But he was seriously teaching me something new here, so I remained attentive.

The real work started after that. Oswald mixed the powdered ash into some molten iron. Normally, that would just ruin the iron. Sure, you could mix different metals to produce useful alloys, but there was no way it would work with ash.

So was "ashteel" supposed to be something like "ash steel"? I kept my questions to myself, watching his work closely. Pouring the molten iron mixture into a mold, it cooled into an unnaturally white ingot.

“And there’s the ashteel. Or so I’d like to say, but not quite.” With a laugh, Oswald lightly tapped the snow-white ingot with his hammer. Unlike normal iron, it gave off a high-pitched ring. It was kind of hard to put the sound into words. It was like it had no echo.

“This stuff is pretty hard, but also brittle. It’s basically useless. But you probably guessed that when you saw me mix that much garbage into the metal.”

Despite saying that, he continued to make a number of ingots the same way. Over and over, he forged ingots that he himself said were useless. He then placed the white ingots into a barrel, and of all things, began pouring mud on top of them. I had absolutely no idea what he was trying to accomplish.

“But if you let the ingots sleep in the dirt for a bit, that useless ash melds with the iron and starts becoming useful.” Oswald sealed the barrel, then carried it into the storage room. He took another barrel out and brought it back to the forge. “It takes a few years, or a few decades. This one has been sitting for about ten years.”

He popped open the barrel and pulled out a muddy ingot. But even after washing off the mud, the ingot wasn’t the same pure white. It was now a dark gray, a much calmer, metallic color.

“This is real ashteel. It’s lost that brittle hardness, and is now extremely flexible. See, it’s become quite resilient and elastic.”

He then struck the ingot with his hammer. It was a different sound than the pure white ingots from before, but also different from normal steel. It was actually rather quiet...like the metal was absorbing the sound? It had lost its hardness and become flexible instead. Yeah, I could definitely see how that would be useful.

“By the way, the longer you let it rest, the more it changes. It’s like keeping alcohol in a barrel. A very dwarven secret, no?”

It seemed the ash steel had turned out quite well, judging by Oswald’s happy laugh. But there were no doubt failed examples too. You could seal one of these barrels for ten years, and you had no idea whether it would succeed or fail until you opened it. That was a pretty romantic idea, wasn’t it?

“Things that seem useless at first glance can have their uses if you give them time. With the way you’re always traveling around, you might not have much chance to make stuff like this.”

Yeah, with the way I lived on the road, I wouldn’t be able to wait for the time it would take to make ash steel. By the time the ingots Oswald had sealed up today were done, I would probably be long gone from the dwarven kingdom.

“But remember how to make this. ‘The longer you let ashteel and alcohol rest, the better they’ll turn out. But there’s a limit to how much you can bear to wait.’ That’s how it’s taught to dwarven smiths, but for someone with as long a life span as you, this may yet come in handy.”

I nodded for the third time. It was really a very dwarven way of putting it. I would live a long time, so someday, somewhere, those words might come in handy.

But, for now, I had waited long enough. It was time to start asking questions, and I had a ton of them.

The bone he made ash from probably came from a monster, but which monsters could I take bones from for this? What would happen if you mixed that ash with something other than iron? And above all, was ashteel really just “ash steel”?

Someday I’d need to teach all of this to Win, so I had to make sure to learn as much as I could now.

# Side Stories — Fragments of Meeting

## Footprints of a High Elf

As I sat, being shaken to and fro by the carriage, I found myself a little surprised. The last time I was here, which honestly was a very long time ago, the roads were much rougher, and so the carriage had shaken me up quite a bit more. It was hard to believe that a country as poor as Paulogia had suddenly found the money needed to properly maintain its roads.

“We’re almost there, Mr. Minstrel. I’m sure everyone will be super excited to meet you. It’s the village with the Elf’s Well after all!” The friendly driver of the carriage called back happily.

The Elf’s Well. When I first heard of it, I was certain it was a fake, but it was starting to look more and more realistic. I smiled back at the driver, feeling this would end up being good material for a song.

Paulogia was sandwiched between the expansive and flourishing Ludoria, and the coastal merchant nation of Vilestorika. Despite being surrounded by such wealth, Paulogia itself was rather poor.

If you asked me, that was a problem with the people of Paulogia themselves. You could claim water was scarce and the land wasn’t very fertile, but that came down to a habit of misuse. Paulogia had its forests, within which lived many animals. So even if humans couldn’t use them easily, the land clearly had plenty of blessings to offer.

The pottery Paulogia was famous for was made by mixing clay with water, then baking it. Or, at least, so I assumed. I didn’t actually know that much about it. But that meant there was water, and there were enough trees to serve as fuel for the ovens. Either a small group of people had monopolized those resources, or it was a large group of people who didn’t know how to manage those resources well, driving the nation to destitution.



There were a lot of political issues as well. The fact they were sandwiched between two wealthy nations meant they should have naturally been benefiting from travel between them. But Paulogia was envious of Vilestorika's seaborne commerce, and so attempted to steal it by force, consequently cutting themselves off from that source of wealth. They used what meager wealth they had to purchase military equipment from Ludoria for their attacks, further crippling themselves.

It was a foolish story, but by pocketing the wealth coming in from Ludoria and plundering what they could from Vilestorika, the leaders of the country had managed to enrich themselves. That's why Paulogia would never change, why it would always be poor.

And yet, I had heard rumors of a single wealthy village springing up in Paulogia. It had once been terribly poor and dry, but one day they gained a well that provided them with an abundant supply of water, allowing the village to finally begin growing. That well was called the Elf's Well.

At the border of the village, I parted ways with the carriage driver, paying him the fare and a bit of a tip. I had money to spare, so I felt it was better to be generous. Elves like me stood out wherever we went, so if a small tip could improve the people's impression of us, that generosity would come back around to reward me in the end. Though if I was too lavish with my gifts, I would only attract the attention of the greedy.

The human world was really an irritating place to live, but that's what made it interesting.

I felt the presence of a powerful water spirit within the village, on par with one that had its own spring and worshippers. Could it have been living in the rumored Elf's Well? There was no way such a powerful spirit would come to live in a random well in a random village. But as impossible as it was, I had one small clue.

One particular high elf, a rather strange fellow who had left the Forest Depths in the Great Pulha Woodlands. Despite his exalted status, he lived together with humans, and though it was decades ago now, he was said to have undertaken a

huge amount of work to help the elves resettle in other forests when there had been conflict between them and the humans.

Unfortunately, I had yet to meet him, but I was hoping I'd get the chance someday. Apparently he was currently living in dwarven lands, of all places. That alone was enough to explain how bizarre he was. Elves and dwarves mixed like oil and water. He was truly unbelievable.

If he had visited this place once, I could see him making a well...or more accurately, an abundant spring of water for the people here. And once that spring was built, a powerful water spirit may have moved in, came to be worshiped by the people living around it, and so began to protect them in turn.

With a spirit this powerful on their side, it was no wonder the village had become so prosperous. They had nothing to fear from floods or storms, and had an endless supply of water to grow crops. I imagined drinking the water here even drove out many diseases these people faced.

Ah, there was so much work to be done here. I didn't get such good material for a song very often. But if I turned what had happened here into a song and it spread—or rather, if even rumors of that high elf's hand in this rise to prosperity spread—it could cause problems for him. Or even worse, people might start believing that even normal elves could work such miracles, and it would cause problems for all of us. Even the footsteps he left behind had the power to cause such an uproar. What an interesting guy!

My job, then, was to overwrite the rumors coming out of this place, making an entirely new song that the humans would take to and begin to spread. Now, what kind of song would I write? First I would have to hear the story from the villagers themselves, then I'd need to see the well housing the water spirit myself... Ah, I was looking forward to this. As an elf, I'd live a long time, so I couldn't say something so grand as this being the greatest work of my life, but it would certainly be one of the greatest deeds ever done by Huratio the minstrel.

"Mooooom! There's an elf! There's an elf! The elf from the story is really back!" A child noticed me approaching and ran off, calling for the adults.

Putting my work face on—a bright, friendly smile—I took my lyre in hand and

made my way into the village.

## A Letter from Afar

*What am I doing with my life?*

That thought had started occurring to me lately. From an outsider's perspective, my life looked very much in order. I'd never gotten married or had kids, but I'd had my fun. And besides, when I was surrounded by all my students, I never felt like I was missing much.

I had money, and I had fame. My wealth came from deep connections with the military, so it wasn't an exaggeration to say it far outclassed that of the other archmages. Apparently my name, Kawshman Feedel, was well-known by all the young mages in Odine, for belonging to the most energetic archmage around. That earned quite some displeasure among the "elites," but none of them were interested in pursuing a real vendetta against me, so it never amounted to much more than some petty harassment from time to time.

In short, I was unmistakably a successful archmage...or rather, I was supposed to be. So why did life feel so hollow? I knew it was a luxurious problem to have, and the answer wasn't that difficult to find.

It was because I was always comparing myself to the life I'd had with my incredible friend from twenty years ago. He was an elf, a swordsman, a blacksmith, and a mage. He had dragged me into all sorts of things, and I had returned the favor. When we were working on our magic swords together, everything we did was fun, and I could pursue it all with a real passion.

Looking at myself now, I realized I probably hadn't stepped into a forge in over half a year. Or maybe it had been a full year already. What would Acer say...what would the past me say if he saw where I was now?

Of course, I had plenty of excuses for my current situation.

We were incredibly naive back then. We had thought that relics weren't popular because it was easier to just use magic yourself, but that was obviously not the only reason. The most difficult part was inscribing the rituals precisely onto the relics, and keeping them in good enough condition to continue

functioning. In other words, without a craftsman of incredible skill, it wasn't feasible to create relics.

In order to acquire that level of skill, an ordinary person would have to devote years or even decades of their life to training. Learning magic in parallel to such a demanding life of study just wasn't realistic. Back then, Acer and I were able to produce our magic swords so quickly because we were both already experts in our fields and could share our knowledge. We had no idea at the time how lucky we were. I hadn't realized it until after he left.

After becoming an archmage, I didn't have enough time for anything. It only took a few months for me to give up on teaching craftsmanship to my students. First of all, I had no time to teach them. But they also didn't have the time to study anything besides magic, and—as frustrating and infuriating as it was—they just didn't really have a passion for it.

So instead, I began hiring non-mage craftsmen to make the relics, leaving mages to inspect the engraved rituals for accuracy. Keeping the whole process running smoothly was a full-time job for me. I had to teach the rituals to my students, while inspecting all of the craftsmen's work to make sure it was done accurately. I had to arrange paying everyone well over market price, while constantly sifting through ancient documents to find more rituals to fulfill the military's requests.

Both mages and craftsmen were extremely proud people, so I frequently had to step in to settle disputes between them—sometimes even with my fists—all in an effort to keep production running smoothly. No small number of idiots had popped up to get in my way as well. They were probably jealous of my success, but my money, muscle, and connections were enough to silence them. Every minute spent dealing with those pests was a minute wasted. And now I was here. At first, in order to show the craftsmen what I needed and provide samples for them, I had been involved in making the prototypes myself...but that barely happened anymore.

Ironically, I was only able to worry about what my life had become because my schedule had opened up a bit. I could look at all I had accomplished and be satisfied, but I still had the voice of my past self nagging me in the back of my head.

*Is this what you really wanted?*

I had been running around for so long, once I had time to think, I was overcome by this sense of emptiness. But as soon as I became busy again, I'd forget it all. It would probably never come up again, so I allowed myself to enjoy some good drink tonight while I had the chance.

But that was when it arrived.

"Master Feedel, do you have a moment? A letter has come for you from outside the kingdom. It seems to be from dwarven lands."

I felt my heart leap in my chest. Careful not to let my feelings show on my face, I took the letter from my student and checked the name. Rajudor, my master who had taught me magic when I was young, had no reason to send me letters... And sure enough, the letter wasn't from him at all. The name on the back of the envelope was far more surprising.

"Acer?"

It was from the elf I had just been reminiscing about. I hastily tore open the envelope and read over the letter. Shock, joy, sadness, anger, and heartache all melded together into a storm of emotions as my eyes scanned the page.

He was doing well. He had gone to the dwarven kingdom, reunited with his old master, and defeated Rajudor in the competition for the throne. He had even used the magic I taught him to make magic swords, which he showed to Rajudor as well.

Those were the kinds of absurd stories he had written about. But he wasn't the type to lie. There was no doubt in my mind that the contents of this letter were true, but my head was somewhere else entirely.

The tears just wouldn't stop. I was so happy to hear about what he had accomplished. I was sad that my master had lost to him. I was frustrated that I hadn't been able to help at all.

But there was another piece of paper in the envelope. Apparently Rajudor had heard about me from Acer, and sent a letter of his own. He had written about his admiration for the rituals he saw engraved on Acer's sword, and for

the ones he knew must have been on mine as well, which I still kept as my personal treasure. He had nothing but the greatest praise for my ability to continue his research alone, and for being able to reach the point of making those magic swords.

It was all so...frustrating.

Even back when he had been in Odine teaching me, my master always had his eyes on the dwarven throne. And yet, my old friend Acer had managed to overcome him. I looked downright disappointing in comparison to both of them. I was so proud of my own little piece of success, but looking back on the past left me almost grieving. It was pathetic.

But there was no way I could throw away everything I had worked for to return to the life of a craftsman. That would be denying so many of my efforts and accomplishments.

The path I walked was different from Acer's and from my master's. They had an abundance of time, but I didn't. That was why I didn't try to become a master of both magic and blacksmithing to create relics on my own.

That made the system I had developed for dividing the labor so much more meaningful. It was an achievement I could take pride in, and a worthy goal for my pursuit.

My customers would be those soldiers who had the talent for using magic lying dormant within them. My plans for raising magic sword users were moving smoothly as well. Rather than teaching them how to use magic, the plan was to teach them only how to manipulate their mana, thus allowing them to use magic swords.

The military wanted to monopolize that teaching for themselves, but I intended to spread it to the adventurers as well. I wanted to help those people who wandered the world helping others, like Acer. Not that he was an official adventurer.

I decided to write a response to Acer and my master. I would proudly share with them all that I had accomplished. Though I wasn't able to make things with my own hands anymore, I had my sights set on producing ever greater relics. That was the one thing I bet the two of them could never do.

Without regret, without slowing down, I'd keep walking this path. Even if it was a different road than theirs. Just like that day over two decades ago, when Acer had reignited my master's forge, the letter he wrote had lit a fire anew in my heart.

## **The Past beyond the Steam**

"Wow, this is amazing, Airena! Look at this! The rocks in the bath have been polished so smooth!" Rebees said as she attempted to leap into the bath Lord Acer had called a "hot spring." I quickly grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Wait, Rebees. You have to wash yourself first before you go in. Lord Acer said that's the proper manners, remember?"

Honestly speaking, I didn't think we had to be quite so strict about it with a bath this large, but most warnings he gave us had their merits. Sometimes he acted incredibly childish, but you could see the laughter in his eyes when he did, so it was easy to tell when he wasn't being serious. This time, if we ignored his instructions to clean ourselves properly before going into the bath, he would certainly be quite upset with us. I had known him long enough to know that about him.

"Oh, that's right. But Lord Acer doesn't seem like the kind of guy to care so much about the little details." It seemed Rebees had let his warning slip her mind in her excitement for new experiences. But with my reminder, she obediently sat down beside me and began washing herself with a bucket and ladle.

As she said, Lord Acer had a way of being pretty understanding, so I could see why she saw him that way. But it wasn't that he didn't care about the details, it was just that the details he cared about were quite different than for us elves. That was why he was able to live among dwarves and work as a blacksmith. The only reason we were able to visit the land of the dwarves and have any sort of friendly reception was because of the groundwork he laid. There was no way a people as stubborn as the dwarves would recognize his skill in craftsmanship if he had no eye for detail. So really, Lord Acer was someone who was very, very concerned with small details.

“If Lord Acer was really like that, we wouldn’t be here now, would we?”

After we were clean, I poked a foot into the bath. It was a bit hotter than I expected, but not unbearably so. Slowly and carefully, I lowered my whole body into the water and stretched my legs. Little by little, I could feel the tension leaving my muscles as the heat of the water soaked into my body. Ah, this sensation was...

“Wow, this is incredible. I’ve used the saunas plenty of times, but it’s nothing like this,” Rebees said, her voice practically trembling as she dipped into the water beside me. She must have felt the same way I did.

It was difficult to put the unfamiliar sensation into words, but it was undeniably pleasant. Unlike a sauna or sitting in a small bathtub, being able to submerge yourself fully in the water and stretch your legs gave an unparalleled sense of release.

Though it had felt almost too hot to my feet, once my whole body was in the water and I started to relax, the temperature felt perfect. Hmm. Maybe “perfect” wasn’t the right word. It might be better to say that the temperature being too hot felt pleasant in its own right.

“This bath...a hot spring, he called it? Lord Acer was the one who asked the dwarves to build it, right? Are all high elves full of crazy ideas like him?” Rebees asked as she stretched in the water.

I didn’t think that was the case. I didn’t know any other high elves, but I was pretty certain that Lord Acer was special. He had seemed unique ever since the day we met.





My first meeting with Lord Acer was back in Ludoria, outside the gates to the city of Vistcourt. He had wanted to enter the human city, but was in a bind thanks to having no identification or money.

Honestly speaking, I had paled at my first sight of him. I could tell at a glance he was a high elf. Just like the elders in my forest home had said, he was wrapped in light.

As a high elf, there was no way human rules or laws would make sense to him. If the gate guard denied him entry, there was nothing stopping him from attacking the city in anger. And of course, as a high elf, he could easily win against the full force of Vistcourt.

As one of the ancient beings born directly from the Creator's will, he was on a different level than the rest of us who had been born from the whims of the lesser gods. Rather than seeing them as fellow people, many elves regarded high elves as simply spirits of nature who took physical bodies. Such a being had the power to wage war against an entire nation.

As an elf, it made little difference to me if the city earned his displeasure, but that wasn't the case for the two humans at my side, Martena and Clayas. They might very well have tried to defend the city from him, and would certainly have died in the process. That was something I couldn't accept. Not as a member of their party, nor as their friend, nor as a woman in general. At that time, and even now, losing those two was my greatest fear by far.

So in a panic, I had left my bewildered party members behind and immediately attempted to mediate between the high elf and the gate guard. Luckily for all of us, Lord Acer was a rather gentle individual, so while being barred from entering the city was a problem for him, he wasn't particularly upset about it. Though, now that I look back on it, it was almost like he was enjoying the whole ordeal.

But for me, it had taken everything to keep my panic from showing as I negotiated with the gate guard, trying to get Lord Acer into the city without provoking him. I felt like a fool whenever I thought back on that time. After all, it was just Lord Acer. He was no threat at all.

It didn't take long for me to get a grasp on his character. Or rather, I'd had

that understanding forced upon me. Part of that was due to his alarmingly naive optimism, but the biggest surprise came when two days after his arrival, he had become the apprentice of a dwarf. Seeing him man the front desk of a dwarven blacksmith's shop, I paled even more than when I had seen him in front of the city gate. A *high elf* was working for a *dwarf*. It was totally impossible.

But once I had become acquainted with Lord Acer, I quickly learned that nothing was impossible. He was absurd. Totally unprecedented. However, that was only because we saw the world from a different perspective. In reality, he was actually quite thoughtful and prudent. Once he had decided on an objective, he was calm and calculating in taking every measure to accomplish it.

Without him, a large, violent conflict would no doubt have broken out between the elves and the Kingdom of Ludoria. No matter who won, far too much blood would have been shed, leaving nothing but hatred between us in the end. But as painful as it was, Lord Acer's plan had kept that conflict to a minimum. I had been responsible for the negotiations, but his groundwork had made it all possible in the first place. And after that, he had even given Win a future...something totally unprecedented for a half-elf.

This was just more of the same. No one but Lord Acer would have ever thought of initiating trade between elves and dwarves. Even if they had, who could have ever made it happen?

And yet, so much of what he did came from whimsy and impulse. He could be so childish, I just couldn't bear to leave him to his own devices. What a mysterious individual!

Maybe that mystery was part of why helping him achieve his goals was so much fun. I imagined the dwarves had been just as thrilled when they finished building this hot spring at his request. I couldn't help but feel a little jealous. I doubted anyone but Lord Acer could inspire that in me.

"There's no telling what will happen next when he's around. I'm sure you'll experience that yourself soon, Rebees."

He had taught me so much I had never known. He had shown me so many things I had never seen. He had proved that our hatred of the dwarves was

meaningless. He had pointed out all the misconceptions and misunderstandings I'd had about the spirits. I couldn't imagine any other high elf taking the time to reveal all these things to an ordinary elf like me.

While Rebees and I may have been strange for elves, Lord Acer was most definitely strange for a high elf.

"Now that you mention it, he did say we'd go visit the volcanic region after spending a few days here. That sounds like it's going to be fun."

I responded to Rebees's rosy grin with a smile of my own. Lord Acer had said the volcanic region was interesting, overflowing with the power of earth and fire. That made sense to me. Even this hot spring was an example of that incredible power leaking out.

But many of the things Lord Acer found to be "interesting" were quite dangerous for the rest of us. He was the kind of person to nonchalantly dive headfirst into danger. I and the other elven adventurers were one thing, but was it a place someone like Rebees, who had no combat experience at all, could enjoy? I doubted she'd have the time to sit down and paint in leisure like she was hoping. With Lord Acer traveling alongside us, our safety was more or less guaranteed, but it could still be quite a frightening experience.

And there was no telling what absurd thing he might innocently bring upon us. For example, he seemed determined to cut my hair as thanks for me taking care of his. Honestly, I was running out of ways to turn him down. While he seemed intrigued by how much I enjoyed cutting his hair, I couldn't help but see a hint of mischief in his smile whenever he brought it up. If that villainous streak of his surfaced again, I vowed in my heart that I'd do everything in my power to protect Rebees from it. Though he didn't have a shred of malice in his body, I couldn't expect the necessary level of delicacy from him when it came to these kinds of things.

Ah, maybe in that way, I could see why someone would say that Lord Acer didn't pay much attention to details. From the bottom of my heart, I was grateful that Win hadn't taken after his foster father in *that* regard.

The tiny, adorable half-elf boy had grown up into a fine young man. He hadn't wasted any effort to accommodate Rebees and me on our journey through the

mountains to the hot spring. Looking at his father, I couldn't even begin to imagine where Win had learned to be so considerate.

As I puzzled over that thought quietly, I could hear the sound of the men fooling around as they made their way into the separate bath. Of course, the noisiest of the bunch was their leader, Lord Acer himself. I had been thoroughly enjoying my quiet relaxation, but I was a little envious of how much fun it sounded like they were having.

Of course, I'd die before joining them.

## **That Distant Figure**

My foster father, Acer, was incredible. Everyone who met him inevitably said that, and I felt the same way. He was skilled with the sword and in magic, could shoot a bird out of flight with his bow without looking, was on par with the dwarven masters when it came to blacksmithing, and was loved by the spirits more than anyone else as a high elf. If Acer thought to ask, the spirits would gladly whip up a storm, tear apart the earth, or create a sea of flames for him. From the stories I had heard from the minstrel, there was nothing the old legendary heroes could do that he couldn't.

And yet he wasn't arrogant at all, rather he got along well with everyone he met. He even got along with dwarves, who had hated elves forever. Ten years ago, when we had first come to the dwarven kingdom, a group of them had surrounded us brimming with bloodlust. But he had stepped forward fearlessly, challenging their leader to a fistfight, and even beating the miner Granda. And he had done so without blocking his opponent's punches.

With a single word to the spirits, or simply by drawing his sword, he could have passed through the conflict without so much as a scratch. Instead, he had fought bare-handed, on equal terms with the dwarf. Although, as a high elf, his body wasn't particularly strong or muscular. A fistfight with a dwarf left him at a considerable disadvantage.

But looking back on it now, Acer had always been like that, since the day we first met. Even when I was a toddler, from the moment Acer took over as my guardian, he treated me like an equal.

That made things all the more difficult for me. No doubt the children of those legendary heroes felt the same way. No matter what they did, they were always compared to their parents and judged by that standard. The greater the hero, the more their children suffered.

But there was no way I could compare to Acer. He was far greater than any hero in any story, so no one would compare the two of us. And really, that made sense. After all, we weren't related by blood. He was a high elf, a being who earned the respect of all elves just by his very nature, and I was a half-elf who would have been killed immediately after being born if he hadn't stepped in to save me. The elves who had told me that probably didn't have any ill intentions. I'm sure they just wanted me to understand how lucky I was, and how kind my father was.

But I had known that since long ago. Acer really loved me. If anything were to happen to me, he would spare nothing to save me. He could be reckless and impulsive, totally oblivious to other people's feelings, careless even when he did understand them, constantly got drunk and passed out on the floor, wasted his money on all sorts of stupid things, and was way too overprotective...but none of that mattered.

I was grateful. But what could I ever do to repay him? How could I pay back the totally undeserved love he poured on me?

If I asked him, I'm sure he would say I didn't owe him anything, but that couldn't be true. Someone had once said that trying to overcome your father was a sign of filial piety. I could see the logic in that. If you thought about it as the relationship between a master and student—the student taking on the master's skills, refining them, and eventually surpassing them to take on students of their own—I could definitely see that as a kind of loyalty.

But could I even get close to Acer? He seemed so far away, and was only getting more distant. No, I *had* to overtake him somehow. It didn't matter in what. If I didn't, I'd be nothing more than a burden he always had to drag around with him. If I wanted to be proud to call myself his son, I needed to reach him somehow, even if it was only with a single fingertip.

Uncle Oswald, or rather, my master in blacksmithing Master Oswald had said, “You have talent. Whether you were born with it, or it was something you learned growing up, you have the talent to listen to what people have to say with an open mind and take it to heart.”

If that was true, I was really glad to hear it. I didn’t know my birth parents, so if that talent was something I had been taught, it was something Acer had given me. Thinking about the circumstances of my birth, I couldn’t imagine such a trait coming from my birth parents, nor did I want to. The only thing I was thankful to receive from my elven mother was a pair of eyes capable of seeing the spirits. As for the man who had kidnapped her, the human noble that had been my birth father, well...I hoped I got nothing from him at all.

Aside from the circumstances of my birth, I had to say I was blessed. I couldn’t remember her name anymore, but when I was really little, I had a kind and beautiful older sister to take care of me. I remembered the delicious food we ate in that city too.

When I was a little older, we moved to live in the Yosogi dojo, which had been incredibly welcoming. The head of the school Kaeha, Granny Kuroha, Shizuki, Mizuha, and even the other students of the school all treated me like a member of their own family. Sword practice was hard, Shizuki teased me sometimes, and Mizuha always treated me like a kid, but I loved them all. As a half-elf, I couldn’t help standing out in a human city like the capital. But whenever I got into trouble, Shizuki and Mizuha were always there to help me.

The same was true in the dwarven kingdom. Uncle Oswald and his family treated us like family too. In particular, though my first meeting with his oldest son Walden had ended in a fistfight, he had become my closest friend.

I had gone to a dwarven school, graduated, and now had many friends. I met many other blacksmiths in training, and sometimes my friends among the dwarven soldiers taught me how to fight.

There was no way I could see my life as anything other than blessed. But the one who had put it all together was, beyond a doubt, Acer. It was hardly an exaggeration to say that my life started the day we first met.

He had introduced me to the wonderful girl in the town with delicious food,

he'd had Kaeha's dojo take me in, and I had been able to enter the dwarven kingdom because he was friends with Oswald.

Making friends among the dwarves had been a result of my own hard work, but Acer was the one who taught me how to interact with them, and he had made gloves to protect my hands from getting hurt while I did.

Each blessing came from Acer. Meeting him was truly the best thing that ever happened to me. But I couldn't let that spoil me. If I spent my whole life under his protection, I'd never grow up. I wouldn't be able to get any closer to that distant figure.

He was so far away, so frustratingly distant, so far beyond where I could ever go. All I could do was run blindly, with no idea how I'd ever close that gap. I wanted to grow up as soon as I could, to put Acer's overprotective nature at ease.

And someday, definitely, I would find a way I could stand alongside him. After all, even if we weren't related by blood, I still wanted to proudly declare that I was his son.



## Side Story — Thirty Minutes in the Morning

One morning, I was awoken by a small sense of discomfort to find Win sobbing beside me. Unsure of what was happening, I sat up and noticed I felt...strangely cold.

Wait, was this...? Ah. He had wet the bed. As my surprise turned to understanding, I found myself smiling. I felt bad for Win as he was crying, but he just looked so adorable.

In human terms, he was still only three years old, so this was completely normal. Elves and high elves had an exceptionally long childhood, so these kinds of difficulties were often sorted out before they were even old enough to be aware of their surroundings. However, with Win being half human, he had reached that level of development much faster than any elf or high elf.

The fact that I hadn't seen many of these kinds of mistakes from him, as if he was trying to not cause me trouble, left me feeling a little sad. But if our time surrounded by delicious food and kind people here in Janpemon was leading to Win letting down his guard a little, then this accident was more of a cause for happiness than anything.

"It's okay, Win. It's not a big deal." As I consoled the still sobbing Win, I took stock of the damages. It looked like both Win's and my night clothes were goners. The bed itself would probably need cleaning too.

"Can you lend a hand, water spirits?"

A small request to the spirit in the pitcher of water beside our bed gave us a full tub of water. After soaking a cloth in the water and wringing it out, we got Win's clothes off him and wiped him down. I then did the same for myself, leaving the two of us standing naked together.

After opening a window to get some fresh air into the room, I got to work dealing with the dirty clothes and bed. This was an inn, so for a little bit of money, I could have Nonna take care of our laundry for us. After all, that's what

we normally did, and it was a good source of money for the inn itself. But I had a feeling Win wouldn't want Nonna to find out about him wetting the bed.

Win was still small in a lot of ways, but he was still a boy. Well, I had confirmed that anew a moment ago, so there was no doubting it.

"Water spirits, could you help again? You too, wind spirits."

First, I held up our clothes and called to the spirits. Water swirled up into the air, picking the clothes up out of my hands, where they were then enclosed in a sphere of wind to prevent the water from splashing out. In short, I had made a...wait, what was it called again? Ah, right. Using the power of the spirits, I had made a washing machine. Nothing like detergent had been invented in this world yet, but the small air bubbles and flow of water inside did a decent enough job of cleaning the clothes. Besides that, the water could then be purified over and over, keeping it clean and useful.

It was a really handy little technique, but considering the complicated imagery and precise instructions needed to accomplish it, I suspected I was the only one in the world who could really pull it off at this point.

All that was left for us now was to sit patiently in the nude, waiting for the washing to be done. Of course, we had other clothes we could change into, but for some reason it felt more fun this way. I was holding Win in my arms in an effort to console him. Maybe because he was still so young, his body was really warm.

Before long, the laundry was done. The next step was to have the wind draw the water out of the fabric. Drain and dry. After retrieving the freshly cleaned and dried clothing, I helped Win get dressed.

The whole time, his eyes were wide with surprise. The process I had used to clean the clothes was pretty complex and involved, so even if he'd seen it all right in front of him, he probably didn't understand what had happened.

Well, that was to be expected. Someday I'd teach him how to interact with the spirits, but there was no need to rush. As long as he recognized it as something mysterious and wonderful, that was enough. Just like me, the world around him was full of mysterious friends who could lend him a hand.

Experiences like this would no doubt lead him to that happy discovery.

The sheets for the bed were much bigger than our clothes, so I'd have to clean them separately. If we were outside, I could whip up something large enough to do them all at once, but this room was too cramped. But for just Win and I, this size of room was perfect.

It took about thirty minutes to get all the laundry done. We still had a little bit of time before Nonna would come to announce breakfast was ready. Win and I were both wide awake now, so we decided to talk while we waited for her.

I had been woken up with a bit of a surprise, but spending the morning like this wasn't bad at all.

# Afterword

This is rarutori.

Thank you once again for picking up *Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored*.

That's two volumes now, huh? For those of you who read this in Naro, it's quite exciting to get to that seventh chapter. For those who have only read the novel edition, I think you can guess what I'm talking about after reading chapter two of this volume.

If I can ask for anything more, it would be that you keep with us until the end of the story.

So, back in volume one I talked about alcohol a bit. Unfortunately, as I write this, we are still in the middle of a state of emergency, so I can't go out and drink at all. I never would have imagined back when I was writing that first afterword that things would actually get worse. So this time I'll talk about some interesting stuff I picked up from the liquor store.

I tried something from a brewery called Miyoshikiku in Tokushima, called "Limited One Unfiltered Sake Togai Yamadanishiki."

Regarding the flavor, I'd say it's quite sweet. Not like, "Oh, this is a little sweet, isn't it?" It's definitely a "Whoa, that's *really* sweet." But it still tastes very much like sake, so I would hesitate to recommend it to someone who doesn't have much experience with alcohol.

I picked this particular drink because the person printed on the label was quite attractive. Seriously, the people at these breweries do fantastic work with their label art. If you're at all interested, please do take a look.

So anyways, I was immediately intrigued after a single look at the bottle, and I am quite fond of sweet drinks, so I was satisfied with my purchase. I tested out a number of snacks to pair with it, and personally I found pickled cabbage to be

a great option. I ended up emptying the whole 720-milliliter bottle in less than an hour. Yes, I then immediately passed out.

The price was pretty reasonable in my opinion, so I definitely enjoyed the experience. I know not everyone is fond of sweet alcohols, but I am, and especially for this particular drink.

Speaking of art, ciavis once again has provided some fantastic illustrations for this volume. Thank you so much! In all seriousness, these illustrations leave me practically trembling with happiness. The world I had drawn in my head, made up of nothing but words, feels like it's slowly growing more colorful.

Speaking of which, another event expanding that world is the start of the manga. It's being published on Earth Star Comics' website, so if you haven't seen it yet, please do go take a look. Kou Narita has drawn a beautifully expressive Acer to welcome you. Compared to the novel, which is written from a first-person perspective, the view of the world in the manga looks considerably different. It's really interesting to see.

It looks like I still have some room to write, so I'll talk about this book for a bit longer.

So generally, when you want to write a book in chapters, you have a theme you're following. In volume one, the theme of chapter one was meeting a new world, the symbolic representation of which was Master Damned Dwarf.

The theme of chapter two was Acer's desire to learn, putting more emphasis on what he was acquiring than in the previous chapter. The third chapter was seeing Acer set loose by the sea, the fourth was about traveling, and the fifth was about creating something. I'd be really happy if you looked through volume two and tried to find the themes I was aiming for in each chapter.

Hopefully I'll be able to continue my discussion of my favorite drinks and chapter themes in the next volume.

I really want to go out drinking again soon!

Ah, finally, this book is probably coming out in summer, so I'd like to

recommend you try peeling an orange and freezing it, then putting the frozen orange into a glass. Then pour your sake into the glass. The orange should give it a faint sweetness, and make quite a good-looking beverage. I've never done it myself, but once it gets warmer, I'm going to give it a try. Whoever thought of it must have been a genius.

## Afterword

Congratulations on the release of "Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored"!

This volume seemed to have a strong theme of "family." In particular, that scene in the dojo where a certain truth was unveiled... I felt it very strongly, especially since I quite like Kaeha as a character. Normally I prefer comedies and day-dramas, but that scene was heart-wrenching!

This volume reinforced the idea that a family means something different to everyone, and so each of us have a different understanding of what a normal family looks like. How did you feel when you read it?

That's all for me this time. Thank you for reading!







In Kaeha's household, whenever there was cause for celebration, they'd break out the rice for dinner. As something that had to be imported, it was quite a rare luxury here, so I was really excited to see how Win would react to it.

MIZUHA

"HEH  
HEH  
HEH"

KAEHA'S MOTHER

"Maybe a  
spoon would  
be easier for  
you, Win."

"That must  
be a really  
long time!"

SHIZUKI

"This is  
how you  
hold them.  
Here, try it."

"HUH?"

WIN

KAEHA

"It's been so  
long since I've  
eaten a meal  
like this. It's  
great."

ACER



The elven visitors had truly arrived in the dwarven kingdom. Even though I knew they were coming, I could hardly believe my eyes seeing elves here of all places.

"Yeah, guess it's been about thirty years, huh? You still using that kukri I sold you? Bring it by later, I'll fix it up for you."

OSWALD

REBEES

AIRENA

HURATIO

"It has been quite some time, Mr. Oswald and Lord Acer. Thank you for having us for this short visit. We look forward to meeting you all."

## Bonus Short Story

### Children with Children, and an Immature Adult

“Come and get me!”

Mizuha taunted Win as he chased her, goading him into running faster. Was this some game of tag? The rules were a little bit different, but if you caught the person you were chasing, they had to start chasing you, so it seemed close enough.

Though they were around the same age, the amount of physical development a human child underwent in that time was quite different from that of a half-elf. Now, Shizuki and Mizuha acted like older siblings to Win. That was a fresh experience for him, so he had ended up getting very attached to the two.

Shizuki and Mizuha may have been the children of the Yosogi School’s master, but that didn’t mean they spent every waking minute practicing swordsmanship. They also learned reading and writing, math, and about how society worked. And of course, they had free time to spend playing outdoors like any other kids their age. They sometimes left the dojo to explore the capital, but lately they had spent most of their time playing around the house. I suspected Shizuki and Mizuha had started to realize the attitude some people in the city had toward Win as a half-elf. Win wasn’t in any real danger since he had the wind spirits protecting him, but I was still thankful for their consideration.

My only complaint was that they wouldn’t let *me* join their games. When we had first come to the dojo and Win wasn’t quite as comfortable around them, they had asked me to play with them. Perhaps I had taken the game too seriously though, as afterwards they began to pull away from me. They were Kaeha’s children, so I figured they would get angry if I went easy on them, but apparently I had gone too far in the other direction. The fact that Win wouldn’t take my side in the issue was also somewhat depressing.

But that aside, watching the kids running around, laughing, and enjoying



themselves never got old. A long time ago, back when I was in Vistcourt, the kids in the neighborhood had been quite energetic. And now, those lively children included Win. I couldn't be happier.

Both for Win and for myself, this was an incredibly precious time in our lives. Children didn't stay young for very long, after all. Parents always talked about how fast their children grew up. Even human parents felt that way, so for a high elf like myself, their childhood passed in the blink of an eye.

But while the other kids grew up so fast, Win was being left behind. They developed at different speeds, and had different life spans. With elf blood in his veins, that fate was inevitable. There was nothing I could do to spare him from that. Even Win's life span and my own were incredibly far apart. That was why I wished from the bottom of my heart that this time would become a precious memory for him.

Running full tilt after Mizuha, Win tripped and fell, but before he could even hit the ground, Shizuki swooped in and grabbed him. I could only attribute his incredible reflexes to the Yosogi School's training. Even as a child, he was so agile and precise.

"Careful, Win. You'll get hurt if you fall like that," Shizuki gave an obvious warning, but Win nodded deeply, as if receiving sage advice. His misplaced seriousness made me smile in spite of myself. Shizuki then looked at me with an unhappy expression. "Why are you always watching us, Mr. Acer? Do you have nothing else to do?"

No, actually, I didn't. I had no blacksmithing work to do today. Kaeha was busy, so I didn't want to add to her stress by spending too much time practicing with my sword. And the weather was so good, it'd be a waste to lose myself in books about magic. If Win had been free, I would have played with him, but Shizuki and Mizuha had already claimed him, so...I was exceptionally bored! I nodded over and over, happy he had guessed my situation, which only earned an exasperated sigh from the boy.

But it was too late for him. He had called out to me. Now that he'd acknowledged my presence, he couldn't ignore me anymore. He and Mizuha were too kind for that.

Normal adults wouldn't be so desperate to have children recognize them like this. But I was different. I wanted to play with them.

"Acer..." Win called my name in a pitiful voice, smacking at my knees.



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Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored: Volume 2

by rarutori

Translated by Nathan Macklem Edited by Austin Conrad

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