



SKELETON KNIGHT IN ANOTHER WORLD

WRITTEN BY Ennki Hakari
ILLUSTRATED BY KeG

V

SKELETON KNIGHT IN ANOTHER WORLD

– Gaikotsu Kishi-sama, Tadaima Isekai e Odekake-chuu –

- VOLUME 5 -

-AUTHOR-

Ennki Hakari

-ILLUSTRATOR-

KeG

[Seven Seas]



"You almost died!
Do you want to take
away the only family
I have left?!"

"I'm so, so sorry!"

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Ponta

Goemon

Arc

“All right, let's go!
You know the drill!”

“DIMENSIONAL
Step!”

Chiyome

Ariane





*“Holy flame,
heed my call.
Rise up, rain
down...”*

*“...and return
everything
back to the
dust from
whence we
came.”*

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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TRANSLATION: Jason Muell
ADAPTATION: Peter Adrian Behravesh
COVER DESIGN: KC Fabellon
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Kris Swanson, Stephanie Cohen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
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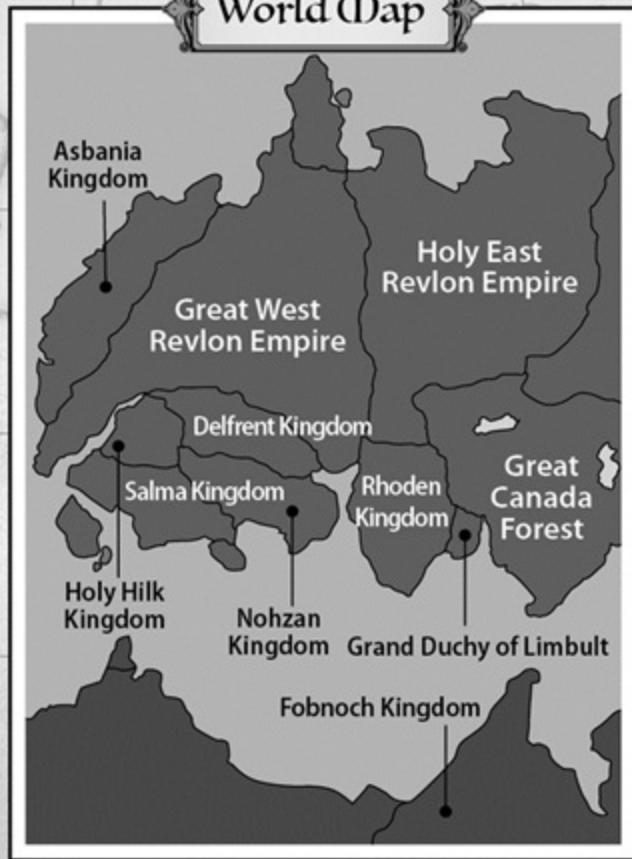
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World Map



Great West Revlon Empire

Holy East Revlon Empire

Delfrent Kingdom

Nohzan Kingdom

Rhoden Kingdom

Tagent

Kuwana Prairie

Fobnoch Kingdom

Khufu Mountains

Syla River

Khinray Mountains

Singareeka Plains

Fernandes

Sewana River

Dodgas River

Black Forest

Map

PROLOGUE

A vast continent lay off to the south, beyond the South Central Sea.

The expansive continent was largely unexplored by humankind, outside of the outcropping peninsulas the Revlon Empire had colonized along the western coast over six hundred years ago.

After the powerful empire split in two, the Great West Revlon Empire—the successor to the western half of the lands—and its nobility were graced with a multitude of rare spices and crops imported from its colonial towns, villages, and fields, which served as a beachhead to the southern continent.

The largest human settlement on the continent was a port town known as Tagent. At the center of Tagent was an exquisite-looking church with twin spires rising from the roof. Combined with the dormitories and various other buildings, this complex took up a great deal of the town's available land and served as the central Hilk church on the southern continent. Unlike the austere, white façades seen on churches in the northern continent, this building was constructed of red brick and white mortar, giving it a rather distinguished flair. Were it not for its height and expanse, it would have blended right in with the rest of the town.

The homes built on the church grounds were even more impressive than those of the local magistrate, the man tasked by the emperor himself to oversee the town. Within these grounds stood a three-story building constructed in the same unique, symmetrical style as the church. And inside this building, a boastful-looking man dropped into his chair, sending his large belly jiggling as he settled himself.

The man had been born with a rather imposing frame, and the layers of fat only added to his massive bulk. The sturdily-built chair creaked each time the man shifted his weight. His head was completely bald, with nary a hair sticking out of its slick surface, while his eyes sat widely apart atop puffy cheeks, giving him the appearance of a frog. He narrowed his eyes at the two men kneeling in front of him.

“...and thus, I and my men have been ordered by His Holiness to serve under you, Sir Charros, so that we may assist you in the performance of your duties. We will follow

your every command to enact his wishes." The man dressed in the robes of a Hilk priest smiled warmly up at the large man sitting in front of him, then bowed his head low. The man kneeling silently behind him, dressed all in black, bowed his head as well.

The plump frog-man was himself a pillar of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, one of the seven cardinals. His name was Cardinal Charros Acedia Industria, and he was the highest-ranking Hilk church official on the southern continent.

Charros fixed the black-clad man at the back of the room with a glare and spoke in harsh tones. "Fine, fine. Go ahead and perform your duties, or whatever you have to do, but just get those monsters you brought with you out of my home! It's going to start smelling something awful in here!" He waved his hand emphatically, gesturing for the two men to leave.

The man in black nodded almost imperceptibly, the long, black tail extending from his lower back rising as if to hide itself from view. The first man, however, showed no fear of the cardinal. He simply continued to smile as he once again bowed low.

Charros snorted, letting out a heavy sigh as he watched the two men leave.

"Gaah! And here I thought I'd finally gotten away from those annoying pests back in the capital. Isn't that why they gave me free reign in this idyllic little spot of land in the first place? I swear, if they ruin this for me and take all my beloved snacks away, I'll be livid! Besides, what could His Holiness be thinking? I was supposed to be here for the long run..."

Charros rested his arms on his large belly and propped his chin atop them.

Just then, something came to mind. He slapped his belly and looked up.

"That's it! We only have ten thousand troops here in the underground garrison, so maybe I can send these newcomers and their hundred or so men off on some errand to keep them bust."

A smile washed across Charros's face as he gave voice to his plan. "Not much they can do with a hundred men, anyway! Tagent probably isn't in any danger yet, and this would hardly be defying the instructions of His Holiness, right? I'm quite the genius, I am!"

He let out an unsettling sound somewhere between a snort and a laugh before sliding

out of his chair with an easy grace that belied his bulk. His stomach rippled as his feet hit the ground.

"I don't want it to look like the church had anything to do with the fall of Tagent, so it would be best to have just a small group of men with me."

Moments later, a servant found the man in priestly robes standing in front of the large clock built into the compound's chapel. The servant passed along the instructions he'd been given moments earlier by Cardinal Charros.

"His Holiness only sent us with a hundred or so men. Not only is there little we can do with a force of that size, but it will take us some time to produce results." Despite his concerns, the gentle smile never left the man's face. Rather, he seemed almost amused by the situation. "But I understand. First things first, I'll see if we can scrounge up any other resources."

The man in the priestly robes turned back and smiled at the beastman standing behind him.

"His Holiness has granted you a great deal of power, no? I expect you'll prove to be of great assistance."

The beastman in black took a knee and bowed his head.

Satisfied by this response, the robe-clad man smiled up at the large chapel that towered behind them.

"We mustn't drag our feet in the face of an order from His Holiness."

The man's dark laugh echoed eerily throughout the compound.

CHAPTER 1

OFF TO SEE THE WORLD

A massive forest stretched along the eastern coast of the northern continent, where the land met the South Central Sea. The elves inhabiting these forests had come to live here after fleeing persecution by the humans. Hidden within the trees was a village called Lalatoya.

This particular morning, the village was still enshrouded in mist, with few signs of life moving about. At the center of Lalatoya stood the home of the village elder, though it looked nothing like what one might normally imagine a home to be. The building consisted of a massive wooden pillar with expansive leaves sprouting out the top. Multiple windows had been carved along its outer perimeter, each one neatly fitted with a pane of glass. The entire house was made of a single, massive tree trunk and blended easily into the idyllic village scene that sprawled around it. It was like something out of a fairytale.

My eyes opened, and I sat up with a start. I'd been sleeping in a bed in one of the rooms of the elder's house.

I readjusted the traditional elven attire that I'd worn to bed in an effort to hide my skeletal frame, and glanced toward the mirror in the corner of the room. A skeleton with a blue flame—a soul, perhaps—flickering deep within its darkened eye sockets stared back at me.

Even though this was the same body I'd been in since I'd first appeared in this world, I still wasn't used to it, or entirely convinced that it was really me. I moved awkwardly on the bed as I watched the figure in the mirror copy my every move.

I reached for the waterskin next to my pillow and took a swig of the hot spring water—which was, of course, no longer hot at this point—downing it in one gulp.

A moment later, my body began to change.

The curse-nullifying effects of the water I'd taken from the spring at the base of the Lord Crown began transforming my body before my very eyes. The eerie-looking

skeleton in the mirror was replaced with an unshaven, brown-skinned man. He had long, black hair, deep red eyes, and appeared to be in his mid-thirties. His pointed ears made it obvious that he wasn't human.

I rolled my shoulders to loosen them up and get used to my fleshy body once again.

"Well, everything seems all right."

I slowly stood up in the dimly lit room.

The lump of fur snoring peacefully on the bed wagged its tail in response to the bed moving.

"Still sleeping, huh, Ponta?"

Ponta usually woke before me and spent mornings investigating the room, but it looked like I was the first out of bed today.

Standing at about sixty centimeters, Ponta had the face of a fox, but it also had a thin membrane that ran between its front and hind legs, giving it the appearance of a Japanese flying squirrel. It had been my faithful travel companion ever since I saved it from some poachers. Its back was a dark green, the color of grass, while the fur that ran along its belly and halfway down its tail was white.

I ran my hand through its soft, fluffy fur. This elicited a contented growl, though Ponta showed no signs of waking up.

I looked at the full set of gleaming silver armor that I wore to cover up my skeleton body and the large, two-handed sword next to it. I briefly considered changing into it before deciding to leave the room as-is.

In this world, people got up with the sun, so the village was mostly silent during predawn hours. The only sounds were the occasional bird call and my own footsteps as I padded along the wooden floors.

I made my way down to the second floor and looked in on the dining room, only to find it empty as well.

"Guess I woke up a bit too early."

I scratched the back of my head as I glanced at the still-cold furnace. Suddenly, I heard a voice call out from behind me.

"My, you're up awfully early today, Arc."

I turned toward the source of the voice. In front of me stood a young-looking dark elf—easily identifiable by her amethyst-colored skin, snow-white hair tied and draped over one shoulder, golden eyes, and pointed ears.

The woman had her arms crossed, propping up her bountiful chest, as she eyed me with a questioning gaze.

"Aah, Miss Glenys." The wife of Lalatoya's village elder, Glenys now acted as the head of the village in his absence.

"I'm still getting used to your new appearance, so I was taken aback to see a stranger wandering around my home." Glenys offered up a light chuckle. Under normal circumstances, a skeleton should have been a far more terrifying sight, but she was used to seeing me that way.

Glenys turned the conversation back to the subject at hand. "So, why are you up so early?"

"Ah, that. I was wondering about the matter we discussed earlier... about me boarding a merchant vessel from Landfrea down to the southern continent. Has word come back on if I can go? It's constantly on my mind. I woke up thinking about it..."

Glenys gave me a slightly exasperated look and shrugged. "You must know that we wouldn't hear back so soon, right? I just sent the request out yesterday. Why are you so interested in going to the southern continent, anyway?"

I averted my gaze in embarrassment, feeling like an elementary school student who'd woken up too early out of excitement for an upcoming field trip. Instead, I looked out the kitchen window. The morning sun had just started to peek through the trees and was now burning off the mist, bringing the surrounding village into view.

Another woman's voice interrupted my thoughts. I turned my gaze away from the scene outside and looked toward the source.

The woman rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she walked into the dining room was

the spitting image of Glenys. She let out a large yawn. “Good mor... who’s that? Arc, is that you? Wow, you’re up early today.” She was taken aback for a moment at the sight of my body before remembering who I was.

She had the same amethyst skin and golden eyes as her exasperated mother, Glenys, though she wore her snow-white hair straight down her back. Ariane Glenys Maple was a soldier of the city of Maple, the capital of the elven homeland here in the Great Canada Forest. She’d been an immense help to me ever since I arrived in this world.

I greeted the sleepy woman. “Good morning, Miss Ariane.”

Glenys clapped her hands together as if she’d just remembered something.

“It’ll be a while before we hear back on whether you have permission to board a ship departing from Landfrea, so why don’t you two train while I make breakfast?” She looked over toward Ariane and smiled.

I nodded in agreement and turned toward Ariane. “I would be honored to have you as a sparring partner.”

I was now in the body of the avatar I’d played back in the game, and had all of the skills and abilities that came with it. However, I lacked the ever-important fighting prowess and still moved clumsily in combat. Whenever I sparred against the immensely skilled Glenys, she was able to take me out in a matter of moments.

Put in racing terms, power and speed might help you break out of the pack, but it’s all for naught if you can’t turn. To be fair, there were very few people in this world who could fight at Glenys’s level. However, it was still in my best interest to learn how to fight properly.

Ariane ran her fingers through her mussy hair and let out a sigh. “Fine, fine. But I don’t want to work up a sweat or anything, so let’s just keep this simple, okay, Arc?”

She gestured toward me and walked out of the dining room. I turned to the kitchen and waved at Glenys, who was smiling ear to ear, before following after Ariane.

We exited out the back of the large tree house and into the yard. Ariane and I both armed ourselves with wooden training swords and faced off against each other.

As a soldier of Maple, Ariane’s skills in swordsmanship were way out of my league,

making me far from an ideal sparring partner for her. However, when I was pitted against a sword master like Glenys, the match always ended mere moments after it began. It was hardly what one could call a training session. I wasn't yet at a level where I could learn much through training with Glenys, so I would need to start with Ariane.

I readjusted my hold on the training sword, let out a yell, and swung it at Ariane. Without the massive armor weighing me down, I felt like I was able to move a lot faster than usual, though Ariane was still able to deftly dodge my blade and land a blow on me.

“Nng!”

I twisted with the blow and aimed another strike, but she met it with a parry before falling back.

She had no intention of letting an opportunity go to waste.

Ariane closed the distance and launched into a series of strikes, her movements nearly imperceptible.

“Gyaugh?!”

My body instinctively lurched backward in response.

I hadn't intended to dive so far backward, but when I readjusted my grip on the wooden sword and turned back toward Ariane, I saw that there was now three meters' distance between us.

Ariane frowned, the annoyance clear on her face. She let her blade drop slightly.

“C'mon, Arc. We can't spar if you're just going to run away that dramatically.”

“I'm sorry, I just kinda...” I tried to offer an apology, though I, too, was a bit surprised by my reaction.

I brought my sword back up, and Ariane came rushing toward me.

My body moved instinctively to meet Ariane's strikes with my own wooden blade, though I overdid it on the fourth strike and lost my balance, allowing her to land a blow on my side.

“Oof!”

Ariane looked perplexed as she fixed her eyes on me. “You’re usually able to move with more precision than this. Why are your movements so exaggerated today?”

I wasn’t intentionally doing anything different, though I did feel a bit stiffer than usual. We continued to spar for several more rounds, but it wasn’t until the effects of the hot spring’s waters wore off and I returned to my skeleton form that Ariane praised me for having better control over my movement.

She rested her wooden sword on her shoulder. “Well, you’ve turned back, and don’t seem to be on the top of your game anyway, so why don’t we call it a day?”

I shook my head. “Just one more round, Miss Ariane. Please?”

“Fine, fine.” Ariane opened up some distance between us and readied her blade.

Even though nothing had changed since the last bout, I felt confident this time. I looked down at the skeletal hand holding the wooden training sword.

“Incoming!”

I let out a yell as I closed the distance between us. Ariane coolly deflected the blow with the side of her blade before twisting it around to turn the tip of her sword toward me, trying to find an opening.

I calmly blocked her first strike and then another, deftly evading her while opening up some distance between us in an attempt to draw her in.

But Ariane knew what I was trying to do and didn’t fall for it. She grinned as we faced each other, blades locked. “Well, you’re definitely doing better.”

“Nnng...”

As we stood at a deadlock, I heard Glenys call out to us from the second-story window.

“Breakfast is ready!”

“Okaaaay!” Ariane responded.

I stretched out and watched Ariane head back into the house before swinging my wooden sword through the air a few more times, recreating the match in my head. I let out a sigh as I muttered to myself, “Well, that pretty much settles it...”

When the spring water turned me back to my elven form, it also brought my emotions back with it, making me much more sensitive to my opponents’ attacks and the pain they might cause. These emotions made me stiffer in my movements and more exaggerated in my attempts to defend myself.

Looking at it that way, it all made sense.

While I was in my skeleton form, my emotions were largely suppressed, and I was able to respond more thoughtfully to incoming attacks. As long as I remained a skeleton while in combat, I’d be able to deal with threats easily. But I’d also never grow that way.

If I intended to spend more time in my elven form, I would need to continue practicing. Otherwise, it was only a matter of time before I met my match.

“Hmph, this is all a lot harder than I thought it would be.”

My mutterings were drowned out by the sound of the wind rustling the leaves above.

Two days passed.

Without any other pressing duties, I spent the time using spring water to return to my elven form and practicing with Ariane. I trained with her in the mornings and afternoons, and used the remaining daylight hours to practice swordsmanship and help out in the fields, to get to know the village better.

Without any distractions like TV, games, or the internet, I spent a lot more time outdoors. All told, it led to a lot of rewarding experiences. Put another way, the days would have been pretty boring if I’d just sat around doing nothing all day.

That night, after I’d taken a bath and headed up to the second-floor dining room for dinner, Glenys told me that I’d finally gotten the go-ahead for my trip.

“I was just contacted by Landfrea Village. They’ve granted you permission, Arc.”

I rushed toward Glenys, excited to hear the news. “Ooh, really? When is the trading vessel leaving port?”

Glenys put her hand out for me to slow down. “Calm yourself, Arc. They have some terms to sort out, so it’s not like they’ll be leaving right away.”

Given that this was a trading vessel used by both the elves and the mountain people who inhabited their own kingdom on the southern continent, I’d figured there might be some conditions to be met, and possibly money to be paid, in order for me to join the voyage.

I regained my composure. “What do you mean by ‘terms’?”

“The village elder from Landfrea would like to speak with the two of you.”

Ariane was the first to reply. “Wait, me, too?”

Glenys nodded. “That’s right. The village elder said that he would like you to discuss the terms with his older brother directly.”

Ariane and I exchanged puzzled glances at this.

Glenys made it sound like Ariane and I had actually met this man at some point, though, judging by the look on Ariane’s face, she was just as confused as I was as to who he might be.

“I’m afraid I don’t know the village elder of Landfrea, nor do I know his brother,” Ariane said.

I was thinking about the elves I’d met outside the village when one face suddenly sprang to mind. Ariane seemed to have reached the same conclusion as me, and shot me a wide-eyed look. We spoke at the same time.

“Sir Carcy?!”

“Carcy?”

Carcy Held, the peculiar elf researcher we’d met back in Branbayna in the Rhoden Kingdom, spent his days living among the humans and conducting research on the monsters in the surrounding region. Glenys smiled broadly at our response. She

looked at me intently, as if prompting me to figure out what these terms might be.

"Hmm. I don't see any problem in meeting with him." I cast a sidelong glance toward Ariane, who seemed to agree.

Glenys smiled and clapped her hands together. "Glad to hear it. Ariane, I'd like you to accompany Arc on the journey. I've already obtained permission from the central council."

Ariane responded with an exasperated look. "Wait a minute. I'm supposed to be going to Fobnach!"

"Be that as it may, unfortunately, Arc still isn't an official member of any village. I used your grandfather's influence to convince the high elders to agree. So..."

Glenys looked over at me before leaning in and whispering something to Ariane. Ariane's face flushed a deep crimson, and her mother gave a sly smile. I felt bad about all the work Glenys had done to help me out with my admittedly selfish request, but at the moment, I was more curious about Ariane's strange expression.

"What is it, Ariane?"

Ariane glared at me before turning her attention back to her mother and letting out a groan.

"Kyii?" Ponta looked up curiously at Ariane from where it stood at her feet.

"It... it's nothing, okay? Fine, whatever, I'll go." She let out a heavy sigh of defeat.

Glenys continued to smile as she made her next suggestion. "Also, I was thinking you could invite Chiyome along on your trip. She's one of the mountain people, after all!" She looked just like a mom telling you to invite the neighbor kid to come out and play.

Thinking about it, though, it was only natural to invite Chiyome to a country ruled by people just like her. Chiyome was a cat girl and one of the mountain people—known disparagingly as "beast people" to the humans—who lived here on the northern continent. Her clan was devoted to freeing and protecting their comrades who'd been enslaved by humans. A man known as Hanzo had been brought to this world much like myself, and had founded this clan of ninja many generations ago.

Chiyome was one of the six most powerful fighters of the group known as the Jinshin clan. We'd grown close after working together several times, such as in her operation to free a group of slaves back in the capital of the Rhoden Kingdom.

"I agreed to join your village in order to secure a spot on the trading vessel, so what does that mean for Chiyome? Also, she has many duties to her clan, so I wonder how easily she could leave them to come on a voyage like this."

Glenys seemed oblivious to my concerns. "Well, the vessel's heading to the land ruled by Chiyome's people, no? Mountain people join the elves on trading vessels all the time, and even come into our towns. Besides, no matter how well-informed Chiyome and her clan might be when it comes to the lands of the northern continent, I think it would be good for her to get a look at the Great Fobnach Kingdom."

After mulling this over, I glanced at Ariane.

She returned my gaze. "With your teleportation abilities, we shouldn't have much difficulty traveling about. Besides, I don't see the harm in inviting our new friend."

"All right then, we'll make our way to Chiyome's hideout tomorrow."

"Kyii! Kyiii!"

With that matter settled, and our plans for the following day set, Ponta began to whimper as it nudged at its bowl, urging us to get on with dinner.

The following day, Ariane and I sparred again in the morning, ate breakfast, and then departed the village. Well, "depart" probably wasn't the right word for it. Since I was using my long-distance teleportation spell, Transport Gate, it would probably make more sense to say that we *disappeared* from the village.

The next moment, we were standing amidst the Calcut Mountains that spread along the northern lands of the Rhoden Kingdom, looking down from the high ground at a camp nestled in one of the valleys. This camp, built deep within the mountains where monsters roamed free, was one of the mountain people's hideaways, and also the home base of the Jinshin clan.

The village was surrounded by two walls—the outer one made of wooden stakes and

the inner one made of stone—to fend off any would-be intruders. It looked more like a fortress than a mountain village. The drawbridge at the gate was firmly shut. Two guards stood watch at either side of the entrance, their eyes scanning the surroundings for any movement.

Considering I'd already been in the village and remembered what it looked like, I could have easily used Transport Gate to teleport inside, but I figured it was better to be well-mannered, so Ariane and I decided to approach from the outside.

The mountain people were all physically strong, with enhanced hearing and vision. On top of that, my exquisite silver armor and black cloak made me stick out like a sore thumb. No sooner had I started approaching the village than the guards noticed me, and one of them ducked inside to make a report.

Ariane glanced up at me and muttered under her breath. "Well, that certainly didn't take long." My rather showy display seemed to have left quite the impression on the people of the village.

I waved to the remaining guard once we reached the village gate. Rather than arming himself, he nonchalantly greeted us.

"What's your business?"

"We would like to request an audience with Chiyome."

He opened up the gate and ushered us inside.

It looked like the villagers were already well into their morning tasks, with adults and children laughing and rushing about this way and that. The village seemed a lot more vibrant than the last time we'd been here. It was still taxed well beyond capacity of what it could support, but now that the news had spread that we'd found a new place to settle, the people we passed looked a lot more upbeat.

Out of the throng, a muscular cat person emerged. Standing around 180 centimeters tall, and with white cat ears growing out of his head, the man looked like something of a hermit due to his bushy eyebrows and long beard. However, his piercing gaze and ramrod-straight posture belied his true age.

"Arc, Ariane... what brings you all the way out here into the depths of our mountains?"

The cat man, the twenty-second descendant of Hanzo and the current master of the Jinshin clan, smiled and bowed his head slightly in our direction.

I bowed my head in return before cutting straight to the purpose of our visit. “We’re here to speak with Chiyome.”

As if on cue, a short cat girl appeared at Hanzo’s side and looked up at Ariane and me. “Arc! Ariane! What would you like to speak with me about?”

The young girl kept her black hair neatly trimmed and had azure eyes that seemed almost transparent. She looked just like a stereotypical ninja, dressed head to toe in black, gauntlets on her arms, shin guards on her legs, and a short sword at her waist.

“Oh! Hi, Chiyome.”

The ninja girl bowed almost imperceptibly at my greeting.

“Well, you see, we’re going to take an elven trading vessel down to the southern continent and Glenys thought it would be a good idea to invite you along. There’s a massive kingdom down there run by the mountain people, so we thought it would be a nice opportunity for you to take a look at it. What do you think?”

“The... the southern continent?” Chiyome’s azure eyes shimmered at my proposal. She turned to look at Hanzo.

Hanzo looked almost grandfatherly as his lips curled up into a gentle smile. “If it’s Sasuke you’re worried about, don’t. Tsubone will take care of everything.”

As if in response to this, a woman suddenly stepped forward. “That’s right. Just leave everything to me and go explore the world for a bit. While you’re at it, go ahead and take that buffoon Goemon with you.”

Though garbed in the same ninja attire as Chiyome, the woman’s slender legs were on full display, as was her ample bosom, propped up by her crossed arms. She cast a sidelong look at me with her almond-shaped eyes before shooting me a flirtatious grin.

“Oh, Tsubone. You’re back already?”

This woman—Tsubone, according to Hanzo—bowed lightly in our direction before stepping behind Chiyome, wrapping her arms around the small girl and rubbing her

cheek against Chiyome's head. Chiyome seemed to find this ticklish and tried to push the taller woman away. Judging by her long black hair, this new cat girl, Tsubone, looked as if she could be Chiyome's sister.

Hanzo finally spoke up. "What do you have to report, Tsubone?"

Tsubone looked down at the younger girl held tightly to her bosom. She shook her head. "Things are a little rough out in Nohzan from what I'm hearing, but I plan on heading there next. I'm sure it'll be good to get a look at the southern continent, but I'm going to be worried about my little Chiyome off on her own. If we send that big, stupid brute along, he should at be able to shield her, right?"

Tsubone was evidently trying to steer the conversation away from the dark subject matter and back toward the trip to the southern continent. Even though she spoke rather poorly of Goemon, it was clear from her tone that this was just friendly banter.

She must have had a lot of faith in him if she was willing to entrust him with Chiyome's safety.

Hanzo nodded. "I agree. This is a great opportunity for the young one to open her eyes to the world. Go off on this adventure and serve as an inspiration for the children of the village. After all, there's nothing greater than showing them that there are many routes for them to travel. Arc, I'm sorry to ask this of you, but I would like to have Goemon accompany you as well."

Goemon was currently off at the peninsula, building the new camp. I would have to use my teleportation magic to make my way over to him, though this would hardly be any trouble at all.

I nodded, then turned to look at Ariane. She nodded as well.

"I'll put in a good word with Mother. Besides, we both already know him, so I don't see it being much of a problem."

Hanzo seemed pleased with our response. He turned his gaze to Chiyome, as if to place emphasis on the fact that this was all her choice to make.

Chiyome nodded to Hanzo and then turned toward me and bowed her head low. "I would be honored to accompany you on the journey."

A smile broke out on Ariane's face. "It'll be good to have you along again, Chiyome."

It seemed like these two had formed quite the friendship over the seven days I was unconscious by the spring at the base of the Lord Crown. Chiyome, who rarely wavered from her usual cool demeanor, smiled back at Ariane, and her tail began to wag excitedly.

Even though this all left me feeling more than a bit excluded, I was glad to finally have our party settled so we could make our way to the southern continent.

"As soon as we pick up Goemon, the four of us can take off on our next adventure."

No sooner had I said this than Ponta suddenly started batting at my helmet from atop my head, making mewing sounds. Apparently, the cottontail fox was offended that it hadn't been counted as a member of our party.

"Sorry, sorry! And you, too, Ponta."

"Kyii!"

I petted the long, fluffy tail that swished about under my chin as my mind wandered toward what kind of world awaited us off in the vast continent to the south.

Early the next day, we teleported back to Chiyome's village to pick her up before teleporting to the construction site at the peninsula to explain the situation to Goemon. We then teleported with him back to Lalatoya.

Today was the day that we would finally head toward Landfrea, the elven village where the ship that would take us to the southern continent was currently docked. We had each finished our travel arrangements the evening before and were carrying all the supplies we would need on our backs, which didn't amount to much. Ariane, an elven soldier, was used to camping for multiple nights on end in the monster-infested woods of the Great Canada Forest, while the two ninjas, Chiyome and Goemon, were quite used to roaming freely throughout the entire northern continent.

Chiyome was wearing her usual ninja garb, while Goemon left his upper body bare, exposing his well-toned muscles for all to see, wearing nothing but twin gauntlets on his arms and the bag on his back. We looked like a band of traveling fighters. I hoped

this wouldn't cause any problems on our trip.

"Is everyone ready?"

"Yes."

"Ready."

"..."

"Kyiii!"

While Chiyome and I responded in the affirmative, Goemon simply nodded his head solemnly and flexed his massive pectoral muscles in reply. Ponta, who had been waiting impatiently at our feet, spun around in a circle and mewed.

"Well then, let's head to the village's teleportation shrine. Follow me."

With that, Ariane began leading the way toward one of the massive trees at the center of the village. Chiyome and Goemon followed after her in silence.

As I watched the three walk away, something occurred to me. "I know it's a little late to bring this up, Ariane, but is it okay to take Chiyome and Goemon to this elven shrine?"

The eleven teleportation shrine was supposed to be kept secret from all outsiders—especially humans. That said, Chiyome and Goemon already knew that I—ostensibly one of the elves—could use teleportation magic on my own, so it was probably a little too late to worry about this.

Ariane put her finger to her chin and tilted her head to the side. "We've already gotten permission to bring them. Besides, the Great Fobnach Kingdom also has teleportation shrines... or at least, that's what I've been told."

Chiyome, usually known for her cool demeanor, joined me in letting out a loud gasp of surprise at this news. "This teleportation shrine, does it work the same as Arc's ability? Do you mean to say that there are places in the elven villages, and even in the country ruled by our fellow comrades, that allow for this kind of travel?"

Chiyome put to words exactly what I'd been thinking. The humans up here on the

northern continent didn't have access to anything like these teleportation shrines. It would undoubtedly trigger a transportation revolution if they did. But instead, the shrines were kept secret from the humans. I'd thought they were strictly an elven secret, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"The teleportation shrines were an invention of our founding elder, Evanjulin. He created several in the Fobnach Kingdom once we opened up trade negotiations with them."

Apparently, the elves in the Great Canada Forest had been carrying out trade with the Great Fobnach Kingdom ever since it was first founded. As Ariane spoke, a question came to mind. "But we're traveling down to the southern continent by ship, aren't we? Are there no teleportation shrines connecting the continents?"

The look on Ariane's face was one of pure exasperation. "Sure, there were good relations and trade between our peoples from the very beginning, but at the end of the day, we are still separate countries. It'd be a horrible idea to have linked shrines where just about anyone could come and go as they please."

She was right. I scratched the back of my head in embarrassment to try to take some of the heat off of me. "I see your point."

No matter how good the relationship was between Canada and Fobnach, they were still independent kingdoms. If they did have any sort of facilities that allowed them to travel back and forth instantaneously, one of them could easily send an entire military force right into the other's backyard. Besides, since the teleportation shrines were a technology developed by the elves, it only made sense that their use and implementation would be more concentrated in Canada than Fobnach.

I looked at the shrine ahead of us. "So, will we be teleporting to Landfrea, then? I've never been in one of these shrines before. It's kind of exciting."

Lalatoya's shrine was built into a massive tree at the center of the village. A gentle stream running from north to south cut through the land behind it, reflecting the rays of the early morning sun. I could hear the sounds of burbling water and chirping birds flapping about as they searched for their morning meal. The massive foliage high above cast a dark shadow on the idyllic scene.

A simple wooden fence encircled the tree, though it looked like it had been placed

there to mark the edge of the shrine rather than provide any sort of protection. Much like the village elder's home, the shrine almost looked as if it were being consumed by the tree surrounding it.

Two elves stood watch at the entrance, armed with swords that hung from their waists. They focused their gaze on me as I approached.

Ariane introduced herself and spoke with them briefly. The two elves stepped to the side to make way for us, apparently already aware of our journey, and ushered us inside. Ariane bowed slightly and entered the shrine, followed by Chiyome, Goemon, myself, and the ever-present Ponta atop my head.

What the shrine lacked in diameter, compared to the village elder's house, it made up for in sheer vertical height. Thick pillars twisted up along the inner wall, creating a wide, open space inside.

At the center of the room was a raised circular platform illuminated by several crystal lamps. Complex magical runes had been engraved into its surface, the light emanating from them reflecting off the shrine's walls. It looked like a scene out of a work of fantasy.

While Chiyome and I were fixated on the teleportation pad, Ariane was busy speaking to a small elven man who'd come over to greet her. After they finished speaking, she made her way onto the glowing platform.

"Arc, Goemon... you, too, Chiyome. C'mon, it's time to go. Get up onto the teleportation pad."

We all nodded and quickly followed her up.

I couldn't help but feel like there was a slight difference in the way she'd called out to Goemon and me. While I mulled this over, we were engulfed in a bright flash of white light. I averted my eyes, suddenly feeling like I was floating. A moment later, the light faded. Once my eyes readjusted, I could see that our surroundings had changed.

The short elven man from earlier was nowhere to be seen. Instead, three elves stood in front of us along the outer perimeter of the room we now found ourselves in. It looked similar to the one we'd just left, albeit slightly larger.

A woman dressed in traditional elven robes offered a gentle smile to our party of four

(five, counting Ponta). She looked almost like a secretary. Standing on either side of her were two men who appeared to be guards, their weapons at the ready.

"We've been awaiting your arrival. I take it you're Ariane, from Lalatoya?"

Ariane nodded. "Yes, that is correct."

"I will take you to the elder," the woman responded in a quiet, curt tone of voice. She turned and began to lead the way.

The two guards gaped in amazement at my gleaming silver armor and massive sword, before turning their dumbfounded gaze to the muscle-bound Goemon. Their reaction was appropriate, all things considered. I was actually quite impressed that the secretary woman's ears had merely perked slightly when she first caught sight of me.

Once we'd followed the woman out of the shrine, it was clear that we were no longer in the pastoral plains of Lalatoya. Several large trees stood in a long row, all apparently serving as residences. We walked along a shadow-dappled path paved with bricks, passing many other elves. Here and there I also caught sight of other mountain people similar to Chiyome and Goemon.

I mumbled to myself. "This village is rather lively, isn't it?"

Ariane glanced back at me. "Landfrea serves as the gateway to Fobnach, and is one of the largest villages in Canada."

Our guide led us to a building. Or, more specifically, to a gate leading into a small complex consisting of several large trees. Construction in Lalatoya generally consisted of trees and buildings coming together in various amalgamations, but what I saw in front of me now was entirely different. These were much shorter than the other trees we'd seen in the village. The foundations of the buildings were made of solid, thick trunks intertwined and compressed together, almost like a fresco.

As soon as we stepped inside one of the buildings, I was again impressed by how completely different it looked from Ariane's home back in Lalatoya. Intricate symbols were carved all along the floor in an exquisite display of carpentry. The largely unadorned pillars, walls, and ceiling, along with the selection of decorative accessories that covered the room, reminded me more of the homes of human nobility than those of elves.

I assumed that we were now in the home of the village elder of Landfrea. Judging by the way Ariane was glancing around with the same look of wonder as Chiyome and myself, I figured this was her first time here. Goemon, on the other hand, simply stood by silently, looking straight ahead, uninterested in our surroundings.

Noticing our reaction, the secretary offered an explanation as she started up the stairs toward the second floor.

"In addition to Fobnach down to the south, we also deal in items from Saskatoon, which has a trade relationship with Limbult. There are probably a great deal of items you haven't seen before here in this village."

"Aaah, I see." I nodded along with her explanation as I continued to glance around the room.

The Grand Duchy of Limbult was located along the Rhoden Kingdom's border, and it was the only human country the elves of the Great Canada Forest traded with. This was the first time I'd heard the name Saskatoon. I assumed it was the name of a village that served as a point of trade with Limbult. Considering the sheer number of human items I saw around me, I could only imagine that there must be other means of shipping goods than just the teleportation pad here in Landfrea. Since this village served as a port for intercontinental trade, my first guess was that they were transporting goods by ship, but that would require Saskatoon also be located on the coast and have a port of its own.

I was starting to think the teleportation pads weren't a very efficient way of transporting large quantities of cargo. If they were, it would have made inter-village trade ridiculously simple, and human goods would undoubtedly be available in other villages. However, I hadn't seen anything like that in the days I'd spent walking around Lalatoya. Either the cost of teleportation was too high, or there were restrictions on its use.

The woman's voice interrupted my thoughts as she asked us to wait before disappearing into a nearby room. We found ourselves in a waiting room of sorts, though it was nowhere near as ornately decorated as the room we'd seen on the first floor. It was actually rather simple, consisting of a few round tables and several delicately carved chairs.

I set my bag down on one of the tables and pulled out my leather waterskin. This

caught Ariane's attention, and she fixed me with a suspicious look.

"Wait a minute, why are you taking a drink now, of all times?"

"Well, I was thinking that if I'm meeting a village elder, it would be rude for me to keep my helmet on." I took a straw out of my bag and stuck it into the waterskin's opening.

Ariane shook her head. "Ah, right. I forgot. I guess I've just gotten used to it. You're not going to suddenly change back in the middle of our meeting again, right?"

I slid the straw through the gap in my helmet and slowly began to drink. "I'm thankful that you've been so kind and accepting of my appearance, Ariane. But I collected this water fresh from the spring this morning, so its effect should last throughout the meeting."

I was impressed with my own cleverness, though the look on Ariane's face suggested she was unconvinced. Chiyome was also looking at me from the corner of the room, her translucent azure eyes visible through her narrowed lids. She seemed to be in agreement with Ariane.

Apparently, I hadn't really won them over.

I glanced toward Goemon in the hopes of finding an ally, but he was standing dead still in another corner, arms crossed and eyes closed, looking like a statue.

"Kyiii!"

Ponta dropped from the top of my head onto my shoulder and mewed, in an attempt to cheer me up. Feeling slightly better about myself, I gave it a pet.

A moment later, the secretary from earlier stuck her head around the corner and called out to us. "Elder Noran will see you now. Please, step inside."

We followed her through the doorway and into the room. As soon as we stepped across the threshold, I heard an elven man speak up.

"Please accept my apologies for calling you all the way here."

The man had long, green-tinged blond hair tied back in twin braids, one draped loosely over each shoulder. He was dressed in a traditional elven tunic. Though he

wore a gentle smile on his face, the look in his eyes—which were the same shade of green characteristic to all elves—bore a startling similarity to Carcy, whom we'd met back in Branbayna. It was easy to imagine that the two were brothers.

“I never imagined this would be how I’d learn of the whereabouts of my long-lost brother, whom I haven’t heard from since he left the village, all those years ago. The world truly is connected in mysterious ways.”

The secretary cleared her throat, prompting the man—whom I presumed to be the village elder—out of his nostalgic ramblings and back to his newly introduced guests.

“Ah, yes, my apologies. I am the elder of this village, Noran Held Landfrea, the younger brother of Carcy, whom I believe you met in that human town. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Noran gestured us toward a corner of the room where he had a space for receiving guests. The conversation quickly turned back to his older brother. Chiyome and Goemon had never actually met Carcy, so they simply sipped at their tea while Ariane and I discussed our encounter with him.

When Ariane reached the part of the story where we helped Carcy in his monster research by helping him capture a sandworm, Noran rolled his eyes and muttered to himself, though his smile was unmistakable.

“Sounds like Carcy...”

In this world, with its lack of communication devices, I could only imagine how hard it would be to keep in touch with people. Once you said your goodbyes, you might never see each other again. Noran must have been quite relieved to hear about the recent escapades of his long-lost brother.

After listening to our story, Noran stood and offered his thanks.

“Thank you for coming all the way out here. I’m glad to hear of my brother’s whereabouts, and that he’s doing well. We still might not be able to get in touch with him, given where he is, but this will certainly be good news for my father and mother.”

Noran bowed his head before turning the conversation back to the purpose of our visit.

"We plan to have all of the cargo loaded today, so your ship should be ready to depart first thing tomorrow morning. I've already prepared a place for you to stay here. Please make yourselves at home."

My shoulders slumped at the news. "Ah, I see... so, we're not leaving today."

Ariane pointed out the flaw in my logic. "You don't just come to the port on the day you're supposed to leave. You never know when plans will change."

"I guess you're right..." I wasn't completely convinced, but nodded in agreement anyway.

Thinking back on it, it must have been quite an immense undertaking just to get all the various methods of transportation running like clockwork back in my own world. It would have been a challenge even for the massive companies that ran everything in Japan, but it would be another story altogether out here, where sailboats and the like were so easily affected by the weather.

I supposed it made sense then, in this world, to arrive with several days to spare before departing on a journey. Since I usually traveled using my teleportation magic, I hadn't thought about this fact.

After leaving the elder's chambers, we followed the secretary woman to a series of rooms. Once I was alone in mine, I set down my bags and gazed out the window next to the wood-framed bed. The sun was still high in the sky, and I could see large groups of people milling about outside.

I figured it'd be a waste to have all this free time and just sit around doing nothing, so I laid down my sword and removed my leather money pouch from my bag. Stepping into the hall, I ran into Ariane and Chiyome, who were also leaving their room.

Ariane looked me over. "Going for a walk, Arc?"

"It's still early, and I was hoping to get a look at the boat we'll be boarding tomorrow. I thought maybe I'd find something interesting near the port."

Ariane shot me a skeptical look. "In that case, we'll join you. I don't like leaving you to your own devices."

She was looking at me as if I invited trouble wherever I went. I had no idea where she'd gotten that idea. No idea at all.

In all seriousness, it really would be convenient to have Ariane along, considering that she actually knew Landfrea. It'd do me no good to just wander around on my own. I agreed to her suggestion, and the four of us—Goemon decided to join as well—notified the house servant of our plans before making our way to the port.

Ariane led the way to Landfrea's port. Chiyome, Goemon, and I followed along behind her, taking in the sights. To a local, the three of us must have looked like a group of country bumpkins impressed at how developed Landfrea was.

The vast majority of its citizens lived in large tree apartments that stretched seven or even eight stories up into the air, one lined up after the next. These buildings looked just like stands of large trees from a distance, and it was only once you got close that you could tell that they were dwellings. Suspended walkways stretched between the trees, and people used them to travel back and forth.

Ponta sat atop my head and gazed straight up, taken by the whole scene around us, its tail swishing back and forth along the back of my helmet like a dust cloth.

"There sure are a lot of people. How many elves live in Landfrea?" There was a sense of wonder in Chiyome's voice.

Ariane glanced back and tilted her head to the side. "I'm not exactly sure. Maybe around thirty or forty thousand? There are always a lot of people coming and going here, so it might be higher."

Chiyome's eyes went wide. "I thought Lalatoya was pretty big, but this is something else entirely! I can't believe your people built a city this size right in the middle of the woods." She let out a sigh of amazement.

Chiyome's hideaway back in the Calcut mountain range was home to around a thousand people—nearly a thirtieth of the population that lived in this village. The capital of the Rhoden Kingdom was probably the only place I'd been to so far that was bigger than Landfrea.

After making our way past the cluster of apartment trees, we started seeing some of the familiar mushroom-shaped wooden houses that were common in Lalatoya. They were packed close together, and the area seemed full of life. Each of the buildings had goods laid out in front of it, suggesting they were all shops. Merchants stood nearby,

hawking their wares to the throngs of people wandering past.

The whole area had the vibe of a busy downtown shopping district. In addition to the exciting items for sale (which were probably imported from the south), the likes of which I'd never seen in human towns, the whole street was filled with the fragrance of sweet spices, carried along on the ocean breeze.

"Mmm, something sure smells good. They must use a lot of herbs and spices here!"

"Kyii!"

The overwhelming, almost biting scents tingled the senses and sent Ponta and me looking for the source.

Ariane explained. "A great deal of spices are imported through Fobnach, so the whole city has a rather unique scent to it."

Her explanation brought to mind the taste of the well-seasoned hamburger steak I'd eaten back in Lalatoya. I swallowed hard, and my mouth watered. I could feel Ponta shifting atop my helmet. The two of us were drawing so much attention to ourselves that an elven shop owner called out to us as we walked by.

"Hey there, sir! You, in the armor, with the two pretty girls! You wouldn't be hankering fer a fresh tomato, wouldya? Came in just the other day from down south."

The man looked young, like all elves did, and had the characteristic long ears and green-tinged blond hair, though he wore it cut short. I was a bit put off by an elf speaking like a salesman, but the sight of the fruit in his hand drew me in.

He held a ripe, red tomato. His shop had a whole pile of them.

"They're selling fresh tomatoes here near the port, too?" Before I could think, my feet had taken me straight to the elven merchant and his juicy wares. Back in Lalatoya, all they had were dried tomatoes, so I'd assumed that only processed goods made their way from the southern continent here to the Great Canada Forest. Unlike the large, round tomatoes I was used to back in my world, the fruit the elven merchant held was more oblong, and a bit on the small side.

Ariane peeked around me at the tomato seller. "If you can buy them here in Landfrea, then you don't really need to go all the way to Fobnach, right?"

I shook my head firmly in response. “I’ve come this far. It’d be a total waste to give up here. Besides, I was hoping to show Chiyome the country built by her fellow mountain people.”

Behind me, Chiyome and Goemon nodded in agreement. Ariane looked around and shrugged her shoulders.

I turned back to the tomato seller. “Excuse me, sir. I’d like to buy one of your tomatoes, to see how it tastes.”

“Huh? You want to... buy one? To taste it?”

The elven merchant eyed me suspiciously and repeated back my request. I couldn’t decipher the expression on the man’s face and cocked my head to the side in confusion. Ariane spoke up, seemingly having just remembered something.

“Ah, this tomato isn’t prepared yet, right?”

“That’s right. It’s cheaper to sell them in bulk before they’ve been processed.”

She nodded. “These tomatoes haven’t been processed yet and are still poisonous, which is why you can’t just buy one and eat it. Besides, they only use gold here for currency, and you can’t break that down into any smaller units, so it’d be quite expensive to buy just one for a whole gold piece.”

The whole market faded into distant background noise.

“What do you... Ariane, are you saying that tomatoes are poisonous?” My voice unintentionally rose an octave or so in surprise, and I quickly brought my hand up to my mouth.

The elven merchant was the first to respond. “Ohoho. I guess you’re not much of a cook, my armored friend. You really had me going! Tomatoes are poisonous in their raw form and need to be processed before eating. I guess poison is a bit of a strong word, but you’ll definitely be running to empty your bowels after eating one! Gahaha!”

The man let out a hearty laugh and rolled the tomato around in his hand.

Ariane offered a further explanation. “Tomatoes were known down in the south as the ‘diarrhea fruit,’ and were used as a laxative. However, the founder of the Great Fobnach

Kingdom apparently loved these fruits, which he called ‘tomatoes,’ so much that he’d eat them regardless of their side effects. Upon seeing this, the founding elder Evanjulin created a magical item that removed the poison from tomatoes and gifted it to the king of Fobnach. He was so overcome with gratitude that Canada and Fobnach formed a trade relationship. Or so the story goes.”

As I listened along, I turned my gaze back to the tomato in the merchant’s hand.

“‘Diarrhea fruit’? Huh... that certainly gets right to the point.” I shook my head and mumbled to myself, a bit taken aback by the fruit’s disgraceful name. If a tomato would give someone an upset stomach when eaten raw, I wondered what it would do to me. I’d never heard of a skeleton suffering from diarrhea, but I wasn’t exactly eager to find out if it was possible.

However, if the founder of Fobnach had referred to these laxative fruits as “tomatoes,” and had eaten them *despite* the side effects, that suggested he was from the same world as me. Given that Evanjulin, who’d built the Great Canada Forest over six hundred years ago, was also from my world, and had bonded with the ruler of Fobnach over tomatoes, it made sense that he would have wanted to make them edible.

From what I’d heard, the Great Fobnach Kingdom had been founded around five hundred years ago. For trade relations to have carried on between the north and south for such a long time, the two rulers must have been on pretty good terms.

“And how do you remove the poison from tomatoes?” I looked back at Ariane. These fruits in front of me were nothing more than eye candy.

“If I recall correctly, you soak them in water with an antidote crystal for an hour or two and then dry them out.”

Ariane didn’t exactly sound confident in her response, so I turned back to the shopkeeper for confirmation. He offered up a broad smile and nodded in agreement.

“Even if I can’t eat them raw, if I can get my hands on an antidote crystal, then I should be able to make my dream of eating a tomato come true. This is useful information.”

I walked on, past several more shops, my enthusiasm entirely curbed. I started to feel my stomach rumble—putting aside the fact that I didn’t technically have one—as the enticing scents of food prepared with southern spices found their way to my nose.

Though I was distracted by all the food, one particular non-food stall drew me in. The shop sold flawless paper of some sort—maybe parchment or even papyrus—in both scroll and bound book forms, and in all manner of sizes. What had caught my eye, though, were several pieces of art that hung from the sign board in front of the shop.

“Excuse me, sir, but could you tell me about the place that’s drawn here?” I pointed to one of the works of art in front of his stall, paying no mind to the man’s suspicious glance as he looked up at the armored figure in front of him.

The picture was an intricate sketch of a town that felt oddly familiar. There were other sketches throughout the stall depicting similar scenes, though in different places.

“Oh, that? That’s a picture of the capital of the Great Fobnach Kingdom. Those other sketches over there are of the port town of Plymouth, down on the southern continent,” the man replied cheerfully, probably viewing me as a potential customer.

Ariane, Chiyome, and Goemon were listening closely as they, too, were drawn in by the sketches that decorated the front of the stall. Considering how underdeveloped travel was in this world, pictures like these probably served as a form of entertainment, offering a glimpse of far-off lands and mysterious creatures.

“Has anything caught your eye?”

I nodded firmly, pointed at an item, and made my purchase.

Ariane waited to speak until we’d walked some distance away, a look of confusion on her face. “Why did you buy that, anyway? I was sure you were going to buy one of the sketches.”

As she said, I hadn’t bought any of the sketches on display at the stall. Instead, I’d purchased a pencil set and several pieces of paper, around the size of A4 sheets, that were bound together with twine.

I ran my hand along the thick bundle and thought back to the sketches we’d seen earlier.

“In order for me to use Transport Gate, I need to have a strong memory of the place I’m teleporting to. But there are limits to relying on memory alone. If I sketch out some locations on these sheets of paper, then it should help to jog my memory.”

Ariane nodded, sufficiently convinced. Still, she couldn’t resist a subtle jab. “Ah, I see.

You're right. It'd probably be good to memorize as many different locations as you can, just so you don't end up teleporting us to some random place by mistake."

Just as she finished speaking, we passed the last row of shops and arrived at what appeared to be the entrance to Landfrea's port. The entire village sat atop a hill overlooking a cerulean blue ocean that stretched as far as the eye could see. The port itself consisted of a cove where ships could dock, and steep stairs carved straight into the cliff face leading down to them. I could see a lot of people milling about the port, though few seemed to be using the stairs.

The stairs ended in front of a large cavern that led straight into the cliff. This was where all the storehouses and underground dock facilities that supported the port were located. It seemed like the facilities were broken into two levels: one above ground and one under.

Judging by the large number of people coming and going, I assumed that the storehouses located above ground must somehow be connected with those deep in the cavern below.

"It's like some sort of secret naval base."

The excitement I felt welling up inside was quickly dampened when I noticed a waist-high fence at the bottom of the stairs, suggesting that the port was closed to most people.

A little disappointed to discover this, I stuck my head over the fence to get a better look.

Ariane pointed toward one of the docked ships. "Only dock workers and the like are allowed to go beyond this point. But tomorrow we'll be boarding that ship over there, the *Rievbeta*."

The *Rievbeta* was a roughly hundred-meter-long sailing ship, far and away larger than any of the freshwater ships I'd come across thus far. Like human ships, it was largely unadorned, though it was quite beautiful in its simplicity. The canvas sails were neatly folded on the deck below three large masts, giving the whole ship a rather imposing feel.

The body of the ship was pale, making me wonder if perhaps it wasn't made of wood at all. It looked to be coated in a hard, glossy white skin. Sunlight reflected off its surface.

The *Rievbeta* almost looked like something out of the modern era, so I decided to ask Ariane about it.

"What's that ship made of?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't really know much about boats, but I remember hearing something about ships being made of dragon scales to increase their durability."

A ship made of dragon scales... It was like something ripped from the pages of a fantasy novel.

I didn't know too much about the defensive capabilities of dragon scales, but I figured they would turn an ordinary vessel into something like an old ironclad ship. I couldn't get a good look due to the distance, but the deck of the *Rievbeta* appeared to be lined with several cannon-like objects, making it more of a trading warship rather than a pure merchant vessel.

If I recalled correctly, in my own world, iron- and steel-decked ships had been designed in order to combat the use of explosive shells. I could only wonder at what had brought about such ships here. Judging by the way Ariane had spoken about the cannons on the ship we'd found docked in the underground lake, it didn't seem like humans had even invented normal cannons yet, let alone explosive shells. Which meant there must be some threat lurking out there in the ocean that necessitated all that armor.

Ariane tapped me on the shoulder, interrupting my thoughts. "We should head back. Besides, starting tomorrow, you'll be so close to the ship that you'll come to hate it."

I nodded and turned away from the docked vessel, deciding to put those thoughts aside and just trust myself to the winds of fate for the adventure that lay ahead.



CHAPTER 2

FOBNACH KINGDOM

Early the next morning, while the sky was still a shade of deep violet, the winds blowing along the surface of the ocean carried a light mist that blanketed the port at the foot of Landfrea.

A group of sailors—the crew of the docked *Rievbeta*—bustled about in the fog as they prepared the ship to depart.

Chiyome and I watched, excitement rising at the thought of our upcoming voyage, though the feeling apparently wasn't shared by our travel companions. Ariane and Ponta stifled yawns and tried rubbing the sleep from their eyes, while Goemon stood by stoically, arms crossed over his bare, muscle-bound chest as he silently gazed out at the ocean.

Chiyome looked back behind her at the masses of people moving about the dock facilities. Her voice betrayed her amazement. "I can't believe they have contraptions to move cargo between the ships and the buildings. That must be a huge help in transporting items between the upper and lower levels."

I looked in the direction she was facing. The thing she was talking about looked a lot like what we'd call an elevator or a lift back in my world. However, it wasn't mechanical in nature, but rather seemed to be powered by magic, giving the whole scene a rather fantastical feel.

"There sure are a lot of convenient devices in these elven villages." I nodded in agreement with Chiyome's assessment, but Ariane only offered up a disinterested response.

"Oh? Well, I guess I'm glad to hear that."

Her white hair flapped about in the sea breeze, and she shuddered slightly, holding her arms tight to her chest, though some amethyst-colored skin still managed to peek through. The port had been warm yesterday afternoon, but the early morning breeze left us feeling the chill.

A group of purple-skinned dark elf men whistled excitedly as they walked past the sleep-deprived Ariane. I hadn't seen any dark elves other than Ariane back in Lalatoya, though they were practically everywhere here on the dock. I supposed it made sense, since they were typically stronger than other elves. The mountain people milling about, likely from the southern continent, also boasted rather powerful frames.

A man called to us, stepping through the rough-and-tumble crew with a confident stride and a bright smile. I figured him to be a dark elf, though his skin was closer to a purple-hued ash than the delicate amethyst of Ariane's skin. I probably looked similar to him currently, given the dark skin of my elven form.

"So, you're the passengers the elder told me about, yah? I'm the captain of the *Rievbeta*. Why don't you come aboard? We're about to cast off any minute now, so feel free to find a place on deck, but just stay out of my crew's way."

The large man waved grandly toward the docked ship and, with the introductions now through, spun on his heel and made his way back toward it.

Before he reached the ship, however, he suddenly turned back around, as if he'd just remembered something. "I don't plan on watching you guys, but whatever you do, stay out of the ship's hold! If everything goes as planned, we'll be arriving in Plymouth by tomorrow morning. Later!"

This time, he truly *was* done with us, and didn't turn back again as he started yelling instructions to his crew.

Ariane stretched for a moment before starting after him, with Chiyome and Goemon following in a quick jog, their bags bouncing on their backs.

I stood there, fixed in place, my mind on the captain's warning.

Ariane looked back quizzically. "We're gonna leave you behind if you don't hurry up, Arc!"

"Is what he said true?"

Ariane cocked her head. "What he said about arriving tomorrow morning?"

I'd been looking forward to this voyage for a while, and was stunned to learn that it would only last one day. Upon hearing this, Ariane looked at Chiyome with a puzzled

expression.

"What's wrong with arriving so soon? Isn't it better to get the trip over with and not have to spend days floating on the bottomless sea? I don't get it, Chiyome."

Chiyome nodded. "Honestly, I'm glad to hear that we won't be spending too long on the ocean. Though I admit I was pretty surprised to hear the southern continent is so close."

Ariane looked up at the ship, a certain pride in her voice as she spoke. "The only reason we can make it to the southern continent in just one day's time is because we're traveling on the *Rievbeta*. The trip would take four days on a human ship."

I looked up at the *Rievbeta* as well. If what she said were true, it meant that this ship was four times faster than anything the humans could make.

Like chasing after a speeding comet...

While we were talking, a large bell aboard the *Rievbeta* began to ring. Ariane frantically threw her bag over her shoulder and began jogging toward the ship.

"Arc, that's the departure bell! If you don't hurry up, we'll be left behind!"

"Ah, right!"

"Kyiii!"

I adjusted my own bag and took off toward the ship. I couldn't find Goemon for a moment, until I discovered that he was already standing on the deck, looking down at us. Leave it to a ninja to sneak onto the ship while no one was looking.

Shortly after we boarded, the plank leading up to the deck was removed, and the crew began hurrying about their business. With one more loud clang from the ship's bell, the massive ship began slowly drifting away from the cove. We tried to stay out of the crew's way by moving to the front of the ship, where I could see the waves breaking against its bow down below.

I watched as the people still standing at the docks waved goodbye to the ship, then slowly turned my gaze upward. Something strange caught my eye.

"Hey, Ariane... the sails aren't even up. How are we moving?" I blurted out my observation in surprise, completely unsure what I was looking at.

Ariane leaned against the ship's railing, unfazed. "The *Rievbeta* is a magical ship. No wind blows down here in the harbor, so it has to move under the power of magic until it gets out into the open sea."

Chiyome was also taken in by the mysterious sight of a sailing vessel moving without wind. The look of surprise as she stared at the empty masts and the neatly folded sails was plain on her face.

This meant that the vessel had to have some sort of engine aboard, and the warning the captain had given us earlier was probably an attempt to keep us from entering the engine room. Considering that humans still didn't have access to magical ships or their technology, it only made sense to forbid any and all entry, in order to maintain the secrecy.

"Do you know what kind of system the ship uses to move, Ariane?" Out of pure curiosity, I figured I'd ask Ariane about the inner workings of the *Rievbeta*.

She leaned back against the railing and offered up a cool, disinterested response. "Nope. I'm not an engineer or anything, you know. I have no idea how these things work."

As Ariane gazed up at the sky, her large bosom bounced in sync with the waves that gently rocked the ship. I stared out of the corner of my eye and slowly scratched my chin.

She was right, of course. Someone without an engineering background would have a hard time describing how it works. I mean, most people know that cars have engines that make them move, but very few people can explain how they do it. If the ship did have some sort of engine on board, then I could easily believe that it was four times faster than what the humans were building.

It was unfortunate that our voyage would be over in just one day, but it wasn't the end of the world if I could get to this exciting new land all the sooner.

Or at least, so I told myself.

Just then, I felt a strong breeze come up from behind us and heard the calls of men

yelling to draw the sails. A bell began chiming as the three sails were slowly but surely drawn up their respective masts.

We had apparently broken out into the open sea and were now floating past several islets and rocks jutting up from the water. The boat slowly picked up speed and crashed through the oncoming waves as it skirted these obstacles.

A few moments later, however, the bell began sounding more frantically.

Ariane stood up from the railing and looked off toward the aft of the ship.

“Pirates...?”

She narrowed her golden eyes as her white hair billowed about in the strong sea breeze.

I looked in the same direction and could barely see the outlines of two boats pulling out from the far side of one of the islets.

“Are there really pirates out here?”

We were still pretty close to Landfrea’s port. I had to question the sanity of any pirate who would launch an attack this close to land.

The boats pursuing us were about half the size of the *Rievbeta*. What’s more, while the deck of the *Rievbeta* was reinforced with dragon scales, these ships looked like they were made completely out of wood, and they were far slower than us.

We quickly started pulling away from them, making their surprise arrival all for naught.

“I’ve heard that the humans operate under the guise of pirates in order to get their hands on elven ship technology. But it looks like we can probably just ignore them.” Ariane shrugged as it became apparent that they were no match for us.

The “pirate” ships were nothing compared to our vessel, though they were clearly a step above the kinds of ships pirates might usually command. They looked to be more in line with the countless ships I’d seen docked back in the port town of Lamburt.

Before I could dwell on it further, my thoughts were interrupted by two thunderous blasts that rocked the ship. I looked over and saw that two of the large cannons on the

deck had just fired on the pirates.

A loud whistling sound cut through the air. The next moment, a large splash erupted near one of the pirate ships.

The first shot missed, sending a pillar of water high into the air. The next shot, however, struck the ship's mast, smashing it in two. Even at a distance, I could hear the crew shouting aboard the injured vessel.

I remembered hearing once that naval combat was incredibly difficult, since the slightest wave could rock the ship and dramatically alter its aim. However, direct hits weren't necessary when you were using explosive rounds—they would destroy everything in their vicinity. In that respect, they were a lot like the Burst Spheres I'd seen in the Houvan uprising.

With one of the ships taken out of the fight, the other immediately reduced its speed to assist its companion. The *Rievbeta* began picking up speed again, leaving the two ships in its wake.

I was truly impressed at the sight. "Those human ships are no match for the likes of a mana cannon..."

"Well," Ariane replied, "they're generally meant for fending off monsters, not fighting off pirate ships."

"Oh?"

It wasn't until she said that that I realized there might be monsters in the ocean. I supposed it only made sense that things would be much the same on the water as they were on the plains and in the forests.

The early morning light reflected off the expansive blue sea, broken only by the occasional whitecap. I placed my hand right above my eyebrow and squinted my eyes, looking out at the endless ocean and sky, but couldn't see anything among the waves that looked like it could pose a threat to the *Rievbeta*.

Back on land, I'd run into grand dragons, massive stone frogs, and even a Dragon Lord. It stood to reason that similar monsters lived out here in the ocean.

While I was doing my best to enjoy the scenery, I decided to ask Ariane for more

information. "What kind of monsters require such powerful weaponry?"

Goemon's ears perked up at this, apparently intrigued as well. Whatever it was had to be enormous in order to necessitate those massive cannons.

Chiyome looked up from where she stood at the edge of the deck. "Probably the most well-known and dangerous monster out here in the South Central Sea is the kraken. I haven't actually seen it myself, but it's said to be so massive that it could swallow a ship whole. It has a large head, with countless tentacles stretching out from it... or so I hear."

Chiyome focused her azure eyes off into the distant waters, her arms resting on the ship's railing. She wasn't one to get easily excited, but judging by the way her tail was swishing back and forth, there was something about this seafaring voyage that made her more animated than usual.

While I gazed at the young cat girl, I tried conjuring up the mysterious kraken she'd just described.

"Larger than a whole ship, and a head connected to countless tentacles, huh?"

When I thought of a kraken, I imagined something like a giant squid, octopus, or mollusk. If one assumed that everything from the eyes of a squid up was its head, then I supposed it fit the description.

I shook my head to rid it of the image of a monster big enough to smash the *Rievbeta* in two. The thing would have to be at least a hundred meters long in order to be a match for this ship.

"I'm betting human ships without armaments like this don't stand a chance against a kraken."

I wasn't sure even cannons would be enough to properly fight back. In the case of humans, who didn't have such technology, their bell would pretty much be rung the moment they ran into the kraken... unless they had some sort of other long-range weapons.

Chiyome looked up from the water. "The story of the kraken really began spreading back during the military campaigns that preceded the Revlon Empire splitting in two. The empire sent out a great fleet to expand its lands on the southern continent. Every

single ship was wiped out by the kraken."

As Chiyome spoke, I recalled the story about how the Jinshin clan's founder, Hanzo, operated behind the scenes as the empire began falling apart. She'd mentioned this before our attack on the Etzat slave market, back in the capital of the Rhoden Kingdom.

It was partially thanks to Hanzo's string-pulling that the various factions had broken off over who would assume the imperial throne, leading to the empire eventually splitting into two.

After digging up this long-forgotten memory, I turned my attention back to Chiyome.

"You mentioned before that your founder, Hanzo, got caught up in some... activities, in an attempt to relieve his people of their role as imperial spies. Was the failed southern campaign the impetus for that?"

She nodded. "They actually sent two large fleets, but both met with complete disaster, causing the seated emperor to lose influence."

I had no idea how much these fleets might have cost, but even a single boat was hardly cheap. Losing two fleets on campaigns in foreign lands would have been more than enough to rob any ruler of their influence.

The kraken had been the tipping point that caused an entire empire to split in two.

And yet...

"That had to have been quite a streak of bad luck for the emperor."

Ariane shook her head firmly, finally breaking her silence. "The kraken saw the shadows of the ships on the sea floor and mistook them for a school of fish. If you take a fleet into the kraken's waters, it's only a matter of time until it's littering the ocean floor. That's why ships out here always travel alone."

"Huh. I see."

Ariane let out a dramatic sigh and shrugged her shoulders. But judging by the interested looks on Chiyome and Goemon's faces, this was all new to them. I decided to follow suit and nod along as well.

Given that our ship was far larger than anything the humans sailed, it struck me that we were a rather conspicuous target compared to most ships that made the voyage alone. I asked Ariane about this, but she simply cocked her head, then looked over the side of the ship at the water below.

"I don't know the specifics, but maybe this ship's too fast? Besides, the human vessels didn't have any weapons capable of fending off the kraken."

While Ariane was talking, a strong wind blew across the ship, whipping Ponta's tail into the air and sending my furry companion into a panic.

"Kyii! Kyiiii!"

As if on cue, the ship's bell began chiming.

An elf standing watch in the crow's nest atop the ship's highest mast started shouting, pointing toward something near the front of the ship.

A moment later, a man's voice boomed all around us, echoing through a metal tube installed throughout the ship. He issued a simple warning to the whole crew.

"The kraken has been sighted off the ship's bow! I repeat, the kraken has been sighted off the ship's bow!"

The man began issuing orders, and silence enveloped the ship as the crew moved to their stations with a cool confidence.

I looked where the man had been pointing and focused my eyes on the vast ocean that spread in every direction. I couldn't believe I was about to see the kraken that Chiyome had told me about only moments before.

However, all I could see was the unending ocean. I pushed myself up onto the ship's railing in order to get a better look, but I still couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. I decided to ask if Chiyome was having any better luck.

"I don't really see anything that looks like a kraken over here. How about you, Chiyome?"

She gave her head a firm shake, apparently also coming up empty. "Nope, nothing here, either."

Goemon cast a stern gaze across the waters, but also seemed to be coming up empty-handed.

The ship started taking evasive maneuvers, swerving through the waters like a snake and tilting drastically from side to side. Above us, I could hear the slapping of the sails as the wind buffeted them with incredible force.

I glanced across the ship and noticed that all of the elf crew members and passengers were staring starboard. The mountain people, all the other passengers, were frantically looking around in every direction. I wondered if maybe...

I turned my gaze toward Ariane, who shot back a brief smile and nod before returning her attention to the sea.

"Can you sense it, too, Arc? Whenever the kraken breaks through the surface, it summons up a gust of wind to serve as cover. At this distance, there's no way to spot it. Only elves are able to pierce its veil, thanks to our ability to see mana."

I once again looked starboard and squinted hard.

As an elf myself, *technically*, I could do the same, but it seemed like my ability to see mana was weaker than even that of dark elves, which was already inferior to other elves.

Maybe it was just too far off, but for some reason or other, all I could see was the endless blue sea.

"By blending into the scenery, you won't even know it's on you until it's too late..." I was stunned to silence as I realized just what kind of power the kraken had.

Chiyome made no effort to hide her surprise. "I didn't know the kraken could do that..."

The kraken must have had some sort of camouflage. I knew that squids, octopuses, and the like were able to change the colors of their bodies to blend into their surroundings, but the type of active camouflage at play here seemed like something entirely out of this world.

...Or maybe not. The fact that people who could see mana were able to see through the illusion implied that this was some sort of magical beast using a magical ability to pull this off.

"We don't know what brings the kraken up to the surface, but it's the elves' job to spot it as soon as they can, even when it's hiding in plain sight. This one's pretty big, almost like a mountain peeking out of the ocean." Ariane sounded rather proud of her people as she spoke, though her surprise was evident in how wide her eyes went as she estimated the size of the as-yet-unseen kraken.

A part of me was disappointed that I wasn't able to see this rather impressive spectacle unfolding before us. I let out a sigh and put my chin on the ship's railing, hoping we'd make it through this safely.

The other non-elven passengers moved uneasily about the ship, looks of disappointment on their faces as they returned below deck.

"Is the kraken not going to take up the chase?"

I stared blankly out at sea as I watched the deck slowly clear out of the corner of my eye.

Ariane stretched out her back and knocked on the ship's railing. "A kraken can't keep up with a ship this fast, at least... not one that's older than a youngling. And running into one of those is incredibly rare."

Before she'd even finished this sentence, Ponta began fidgeting atop my head. A moment later, the ship rocked violently, and the cottontail fox slid backward down my helmet.

"Kyiiiii!"

"What was that?"

I pushed Ponta back up and scanned our surroundings. Goemon was looking at the rear of the ship with a hard stare, evidently having picked up on a strange presence.

I heard a shout from the stern.

"Youngling kraken spotted portside!"

Everyone on the deck froze.

A moment later, I heard a loud, eerie screeching noise as the monster struck the ship.

It sounded almost like a cry of joy.

“Everyone, to the aft of the ship!”

“Anyone who isn’t at their station loses his share!”

“We’ve been waiting for this moment, kraken!”

The mountain people, who just moments before had been forlornly heading back down into the ship’s holds, were now scrambling back up to the deck, armed to the teeth and racing toward the aft of the ship.

The sight was almost beyond belief. They were running like the doors had just opened at a department store during a closeout sale.

The elven crew and passengers, however, looked on with more than a bit of confusion at the scene unfolding before them. A trait shared by these both species was that neither of them appeared to be overcome or surprised by the sudden monster attack at sea, something that, under normal circumstances, could be a tragedy in the making.

“It feels almost like a festival is about to start. I guess maybe we should join in too?” I spoke aloud, to no one in particular, as I drew my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg and took off toward the aft of the ship. Goemon followed closely after me, clanging his gauntlets together as he ran.

Once I arrived, I was confronted with a hellish scene. The mountain people were doing their best to attack what looked like a massive, ten-meter-tall squid. For what was supposedly a youngling kraken, it certainly seemed more than big enough to pose a threat. However, with all those heavily armed mountain people moving about, it looked like a field of flowers being trampled by a herd of cattle.



Still, it certainly deserved its reputation as a demon of the sea. I watched as it used its huge tentacles to slam the mountain people into the ship's deck. That didn't stop them, of course. The mountain people pulled themselves up, wiped the blood from their faces, and rushed back into the fray with their weapons raised. It was quite an inspirational sight.

One mountain person—a wolf perhaps—severed one of the kraken's thick tentacles and let out a piercing howl. I caught sight of another of the kraken's long tentacles coming in toward the wolf's back, but before I had time to react, a large figure brushed past me.

It was Goemon. Just before the tentacle could strike the wolf, Goemon caught her and yanked her down to the deck with one arm, the tentacle slicing audibly through the air over their heads mere moments later.

I closed in after Goemon and swung my sword in a clean, upward motion, cutting the tentacle in two. It slammed down hard on the ship's deck with a dull thud.

"Don't let your guard down!" I called out to the wolf, whose forehead was starting to turn red from where Goemon had slammed her into the ship's deck. I shook the water off my blade.

"Th-thanks for the save!"

Goemon caught my eye as he stood up. I could see a smile forming on his lips as we each threw out an arm, our fists connecting.

I heard a cheer and turned my gaze back toward the mountain people, who were already cheering as they closed in on the rapidly weakening kraken. I slid my sword back into my sheath.

"That was a lot easier than I expected."

The wolf we'd saved walked over to me, carrying with her the severed tentacle. She tossed the unwieldy appendage to me. "This is all yours! What will you do with it?"

Judging by everyone's cheers and how they were acting, I could only come to one conclusion. "You don't actually... eat it, do you?"

While the kraken might be considered a monster, it was, at the end of the day, a giant

squid. Cooking and eating it was the only real use I could think of.

Apparently, I was spot on.

"That's right! It's mighty tasty when it's fresh like this, maybe with just a sprinkle of salt. Or you could always roast it up and have it with some liquor. It's absolutely magnificent!"

"Kyii kyiiii!"

"..."

Ponta was quick to respond to the wolf's recommendations. Though Goemon responded in his usual, stoic manner, he seemed to be keenly eyeing the tentacle.

Ariane and Chiyome finally arrived just as the wolf was finishing up her long speech on the many ways to eat a kraken. I held the tentacle up in their direction and asked if they were interested, though their reactions were split.

Ariane, for her part, shook her head quickly and stepped away, while Goemon and Chiyome closed in toward me, the latter's tail wagging about excitedly.

I could feel Ponta smacking its paws against the top of my helmet, demanding attention.

"Fine, fine. Calm down, Ponta. I'll make sure you get your share."

"Kyiii!"

Now that the battle was won, the crew were busily spreading out, cutting up, and preparing their take of the kraken right on the deck of the ship. The once-massive ten-meter squid was now gone. In its place were large pieces of meat strung up by the ropes that held the *Rievbeta*'s sails in place. They looked almost like macabre flags fluttering in the wind.

After talking it over, Goemon, Chiyome, and I decided to roast it as the wolf had recommended. But before we could cook the meat, we'd need to let it dry. After washing away the blood with some sea water, I cut the flesh into thin slices to help it dry out easier. It was all a rather simple affair, but my mouth watered at the thought of our upcoming feast.

The very idea of roasting squid immediately brought to mind the taste of soy sauce and sake, but unfortunately, even the elves didn't have any good substitutes for those. Besides, it wasn't really the time or place to complain about the lack of creature comforts.

Ponta and Chiyome's tails swished back and forth in sync as they looked up at the drying kraken meat. It was a rather heartwarming sight.

After digging through my bag for a bit, I pulled out my waterskin, slid a straw through the opening, and took a sip of the water I'd again taken from the hot spring at the base of the Lord Crown that morning. I then pulled the drawing supplies I'd bought in Landfrea out of my bag. We still had some time until the kraken would be ready to cook.

I sat down on the deck, crossed my legs, and flipped the book open to the first page.

"All right, this helmet's getting in my way now..."

Speaking to no one in particular, I took off my helmet and set it down next to me. I then picked up my drawing implement—essentially a stick of charcoal sharpened into a primitive pencil—and began drawing.

After sketching the rough outlines, I started filling in the basic details. As I looked up at the still-life inspiration laid out before me, I absently wondered how long it had been since I'd sat down to draw like this.

Ponta and Chiyome were standing at the ship's railing, their tails wagging gently as they looked out across the sea, while Goemon stood at the front of the ship with his arms crossed tight across his chest, cutting an imposing figure as he glared ahead.

A gentle smile crept across my face as I sketched the scene in front of me. Ariane appeared at my side and looked down at my drawing.

"Wow, you drew that, Arc? You're pretty good!" The surprise was evident in her voice.

"You think? I'm just an amateur, really?"

I thought back to my previous life. When I was younger, I'd been pretty good at art; I'd even had some of my works put on display. One day, a girl in my class complimented my work, but frankly, I thought she'd done a better job overall than I had. In the end,

however, it was my picture that was put up on display. I felt really bad about that.

I wondered absently where that girl was now and what she was doing.

I averted my gaze as I got lost in these memories, prompting Ariane to look closer, her golden eyes wide as they bore into me.

“Arc, what’s wrong?”

It seemed that, while I was back in my elven body, I could feel homesickness and other emotions welling up inside me.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and took a nice, deep breath of ocean air. Then I turned my gaze back to Ariane’s large chest. I immediately felt better.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just worried you might have gotten a sunburn on your cleavage.”

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than Ariane’s fist came flying toward my face, her cheeks flushed.

“You don’t need to concern yourself with that!” She crossed her arms protectively over her chest and turned away.

Tears formed in the corners of my eyes from the strong blow she’d delivered to the bridge of my nose. I let out a deep sigh. Up above, the thinly sliced slabs of kraken meat wafted in the wind like flags. Despite all the downsides, I was starting to think that maybe there was some good to my change, since it allowed me to actually look forward to the upcoming meal of roasted kraken.

The sun slowly approached the horizon, bathing the sea around us in the deep scarlet shades of nightfall. The people who had hung their kraken meat to dry were now scrambling about the ship to prepare their meal.

It seemed as good a time as any for me to do that too. I untied the meat from the ship’s riggings and checked the texture. Thanks to the constant sea breeze that blew across the ship, the surface of the meat was nice and dry, while still maintaining a nice springiness to it, despite having shrunk a bit. Overall, it seemed to have come out well.

“Seems to have dried out quite nicely.” I held the meat under the light of the setting sun and nodded confidently.

Ariane spoke up, her face in a grimace. “You’re not really going to eat that, are you?”

I thought back on the massive sea monster we’d fought earlier that afternoon and let out a rueful laugh. Considering that Ariane’s hometown was much farther inland, I realized she probably wasn’t used to eating seafood.

To be fair, while I’d eaten roasted squid, kraken was new for me as well.

“I’ve never tried kraken before, so I figure I might as well give it a chance.”

I looked around the deck of the ship and discovered that a number of grills had been set up all over while I had been preoccupied. Skewered meat rested on the grates, roasting away. A few people carried out barrels of liquor from below deck and began setting them up. It was starting to feel like a proper party.

However, as I looked closer, I realized that the only people enjoying the feast of roasted kraken were the mountain people. There were no elves to be seen. I wondered if this was a cultural difference.

On one of the grills, I saw half a tentacle roasting away. Elsewhere, Chiyome and Goemon were helping the others untie their food from the rigging lines.

Could we really eat all this food? But first things first—I’d need to actually try it.

“Well, let’s give it a taste!”

“Kyiii!” Ponta let out an impatient mew from atop my head.

I made my way to one of the nearby grills that wasn’t being used and began spearing the kraken meat on skewers before laying it down to roast. The aroma was divine. Right around the time that the meat had worked up a nice char, Chiyome leaned in, her large tail wagging.

“Well, it certainly smells good.”

Goemon nodded.

Ariane seemed to be in agreement on the smell at least, though she furrowed her brow and stared intently at the meat as the flames licked it. Apparently, she still couldn’t get the thought about where it had come from out of her mind.

I took three of the cooked skewers and handed them to Chiyome and Goemon before removing the meat from the third and setting it down in front of Ponta.

Taking another, I turned my attention to Ariane, but she didn't seem in any hurry to try it. She shook her head for added emphasis.

"Sorry to eat in front of you, Ariane."

I took a bite and chewed at the roasted kraken, trying to get a feel for its flavor.

It honestly tasted a lot like roasted squid. I continued shoving more of the slightly charred, flavorful meat into my mouth as Chiyome and Goemon followed suit. The moment they did, both of their eyes lit up, their tails wagging about slightly. In a matter of moments, the skewers were picked clean.

Apparently, they liked it.

Chiyome was staring longingly at the remaining hunk of meat, so I put some more on skewers and placed it on the grill. Down at my feet, Ponta used its magic to summon up a burst of wind to blow across the steaming meat and cool it before testing the temperature with its tongue.

Chiyome watched intently as I worked, slowly roasting the second round of skewers.

"It'll be ready in just a moment," I said. "It tastes a lot better if you get the char just right."

Chiyome's ears went stiff, and she leaned back, shaking her head from side to side. The normally calm and collected young girl frowned and tried to make up an excuse, her face twisting into a frown.

"N-no, that's not what I meant. I-I was just going to ask you about something!"

I nodded, urging her to continue.

What she had to say took me by surprise.

"Would you be willing to sell me several cuts of kraken meat?"

There was a seriousness in her deep azure eyes and a slight flush to her cheeks that I usually didn't see, making her look a little more childish than usual. The image brought

a smile to my lips. Goemon stopped eating for a moment and looked over at his young ninja companion.

I responded with a gentle laugh. "Goemon and I did this together, so there's no need for me to sell you anything. Half of it is already yours anyway. It looks like you've really taken a liking to the roasted kraken, huh, Chiyome?"

Chiyome turned her gaze back to the roasting meat and brushed her cheek lightly. "I can't remember the last time I ate something so good. I figured that my brother would like it, too, so I was hoping to bring some back to him as a souvenir."

"Oh, you have a brother?" This took me by surprise. It was the first I'd heard of Chiyome having a family.

Ariane's ears also perked up.

Chiyome shook her head at this.

"Well, he's not a brother in the traditional sense. I'm talking about one of the six great ninja of our clan, the one known as Sasuke."

She frowned slightly and turned her gaze toward the sky, looking off to the west at the remnants of the setting sun. Goemon, having long since finished his roasted kraken, still had the skewer sticking out of his mouth as he listened intently to our conversation.

The name sounded familiar. Back in the hideaway, I faintly remembered hearing Chiyome talking with the twenty-second Hanzo about such a person. Something about how they weren't able to find him.

It was hard to see clearly in the fading light, but a look of sadness seemed to have clouded Chiyome's azure eyes. I stroked my chin, recalling the eagerness Chiyome had shown when she asked about Sasuke's whereabouts. I'd only happened to overhear the conversation and hadn't been given any other background information, so I figured it best to not pry and let the conversation trail off there.

"Well, we've got quite a lot of meat left, so we'll leave it somewhere safe once we hit the port."

Ariane still wasn't interested in eating anything, and I could only polish off so much food on my own. It'd be a pain to try and lug all this meat around with us as we traveled

the southern continent. Maybe I'd try to Transport Gate to bring the food back to Chiyome's village, as a test to see how far I could teleport. We'd still have quite a bit left over, even if I gave half to the village. For the rest, I was thinking of cutting it up really thin, drying it out, then frying it up. Fried kraken sounded pretty good to me.

Maybe I could even slip some to Ariane without her noticing.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, I could feel Ariane's gaze drilling into me, like an elbow to my gut. Ariane could read me like a book even when I was an expressionless skeleton, so there was little chance of getting away with devious thoughts in my elven form.

I tried to keep my cool and turned my attention back to the roasting skewer, checking on the grill marks. *Stay calm. Just gotta stay calm.*

The next morning, I woke up in my armor, lying on the hard bed in the small cabin we'd been provided below deck. A little furball moving around my face had woken me up. Apparently, the motion of the ship had knocked Ponta from my chest onto my face.

The fox yawned a few times, eliciting a smile from me as I picked it up by the scruff of the neck and tried to set it down next to me.

Ponta was fully awake now, though, and kicked its legs about in the air before curling up and clutching onto my arm.

“Kyii!”

“Huh, you up now?”

Ponta ran up my arm and onto my shoulder as I looked around the cabin.

Though illuminated by rays of sun that managed to make their way in through the small, circular port built into the wall, the cabin was rather spartan and dimly lit. Several bunks, reminiscent of coffins, ran along both sides of the cabin, with a narrow passageway running between them. This was where Ponta and I had spent the night, joined by our roommate Goemon, who'd slept in a sitting position with his back against the wall.

It wasn't clear to me if Goemon was sleeping, or meditating with his eyes closed in search of some sort of higher consciousness. It didn't seem to me like that position

would be very relaxing.

Not like I was one to talk, though. After all, I'd fallen asleep in my armor.

I decided to head up to the deck and see if I could get a sense for where we were. After adjusting my helmet, I stepped out through the doorway, careful to duck low so I didn't bump my head.

I walked down the hallway with both hands outstretched, fingers gliding along the walls as I moved to keep from falling over as the ship swayed from side to side. After making my way up to the deck, I was greeted by the sound of sails flapping in the vast, blue, early morning sky.

I turned to look toward the front of the ship, then off to the right, where I saw a large continent, still blanketed in the deep purple hues of dawn. The darkness kept me from getting a good look at the land that stretched out before us, but from what I could see, it was a rocky coastline made up of sheer cliffs. Definitely not a good place to dock a ship.

"Wow! So we've already made it to the southern continent?"

One of the mountain people heard me talking to myself and came on over to join me.

"Yer a weird one, wearing armor out on deck like that. This yer first time to Fobnach?" The cat man let out a lazy yawn and leaned heavily on the railing as he looked up at me, confused.

I nodded. "I'm interested in this country ruled by the mountain people that I've heard so much about, as well as the various spices, tomatoes, and other goods that grow down here."

The man looked back at me curiously. "What are mountain people? Us beast people are the ones who founded the Great Fobnach Kingdom."

It was now my turn to look confused.

"Oh? I thought that that the term 'beast people' was an insult used up in the north to refer to your people. Is that not so in the south?"

Chiyome had told me humans had coined the term "beast people," but the preferred

term, which they used for themselves, was “mountain people.” After I explained this to the cat man, a look of realization came over his face, and he nodded firmly.

“Ahhh, so that’s the term they use up in the north? Down in the south, Fobnach’s founder brought the many beast clans together to found our great country.”

I could sense a certain amount of pride in the man’s voice as he spoke, and no negative connotations to the term. Apparently, customs changed depending on the region, or in this case, continent.

“Besides, most of us down in the south have never even seen a human.”

“Oh, so most of the people living on the southern continent are... beast people like yourselves? No humans live down there?”

The man smiled wryly at this. “Off to the west, beyond the large plains, there are some lands ruled by the humans. However, their push into these lands contributed to the formation of Fobnach as we know it today.”

I saw no hostility in the man’s face as he talked about the humans. When I asked him about this, he laughed and shook his head.

“The humans built a large wall along the plains, which they never cross. Some brave souls of ours live and work beyond that wall, but if the humans were ever to come out and try to drive us off, the highly skilled warriors of Fobnach would put a quick end to them.”

The cat man’s chest puffed out with pride as he spoke.

With the humans separated from the north by the vast South Central Sea, it was clear that the southern continent belonged to the mountain people.

Personally, I felt it would make the most sense to just gather up all the mountain people in the hideaway village and bring them down here to the southern continent. However, as an outsider, that wasn’t my decision to make.

Judging from what I’d heard so far, the village I’d seen was just one of many, and the Jinshin clan was still busy rescuing their enslaved comrades, so they couldn’t leave the northern continent anytime soon. You can’t solve problems that have built up over generations in just one day.

I couldn't help but wonder how Chiyome and Goemon would tell the people back at their village what Fobnach, a country built by the mountain people, was like. At least, I assumed that was why they'd come along.

I felt a presence approach me from behind. I looked back and spotted Ariane coming toward me, trying to brush out her mussy hair as she moved. All eyes on deck turned toward Ariane's voluptuous body as she approached.

Ariane seemed to be unaware of the eyes on her as she stretched her body, loosening up her muscles after being confined to such narrow quarters. This only increased the intensity of the gazes directed her way.

"Good morning, Ariane."

Even though she seemed to ignore the looks she was getting from everyone else, without fail, she'd always lay into me if I looked at her that way. She had quite the bittersweet personality.

Though, honestly, I couldn't recall a time when she'd actually been sweet to me.

Ariane rubbed at her lower back and let out a sigh. "Morning, Arc. That bed was just awful to sleep in. I'm sore all over."

Just as I was about to reply, I noticed everyone around me turn their eyes away from Ariane and look straight ahead. Following their gaze, I spotted a town shining in the early morning sun off to the right.

Chiyome spoke up from beside me. I had no idea when she'd appeared, but there she was, her azure eyes—the color of the ocean—fixed on the town.

"Looks like we've arrived at Plymouth."

She squinted her eyes against the bright sunlight as the sea breeze blew her ears ever so slightly from side to side. There was no trace of the sadness I'd seen on her face last night.

Goemon lumbered up behind her. I let out a deep breath and looked back toward the sun-bleached town ahead.

I was finally going to set foot on the southern continent.

CHAPTER 2.5

CHIYOME & SASUKE

The magical elven ship, the *Rievbeta*, slid effortlessly through the sea all night as it made its way toward its destination.

Though larger than the sailing vessels humans usually manned, the inside of the ship placed little emphasis on living quarters, leaving nothing but small, cramped cabins barely big enough to accommodate the bunk beds stacked three high. However, many of the beds remained empty. Given how few women passengers there were—only a handful aside from Chiyome and Ariane—most of the beds were used for storing cargo.

Ariane was asleep, her brow furrowed as she tossed in the narrow bed, a thin blanket pulled over her. From time to time, she'd mumble some complaint about Arc in her sleep.

The cabin, quiet save for the soft sounds of its sleeping occupants, was dimly illuminated by the light of the moon shining through a porthole in the wall.

In front of the window sat a young girl with cat ears atop her head, gazing out at the dark ocean that moved about below them.

As she watched the dark waves splashing against the side of the ship, Chiyome thought back to her younger days, when she was still a trainee back in the village. One particular night, when she'd been deep in the forest, surrounded by rustling trees, came to mind.

She must have been around five years old at the time, and still going by her birth name, Mia. This was before she'd been granted the name Chiyome, one of the six great fighters of the Jinshin clan. She'd only recently joined the clan and was still a clumsy crybaby.

The village had been created for young members of the clan to train. This training involved the children staying out in the forest all night in order to help them get used to the darkness. Startled by the whispers of the trees and the howls of monsters off in

the distance, Chiyome curled up in a bush and tried to suppress the sounds of her breathing, tears streaming down her face as she prayed for the night to pass by quickly.

Even though adults supervised the training to make sure the children were safe, the young Chiyome—Mia—was absolutely terrified. It was a difficult night for her. But somehow, she made it through. As soon as morning came, she passed out from exhaustion.

In spite of all the hardship, Mia never swayed from her dream of becoming a ninja. A short time later, she was practicing throwing shuriken with several other children her age. Straw scarecrows had been stuck in the ground some distance away, serving as targets for the metal projectiles. Despite their young age, all of the children were hitting their targets with the heavy shuriken.

Mia pinched the shuriken between her fingers and threw it with all her might toward a scarecrow's upper torso. However, rather than flying straight ahead, it tumbled to the ground a short distance in front of her.

The other children broke out in laughter at the sight.

"Hahaha! Mia, you suck at this!"

"What are you aiming at anyway? You need to look straight ahead!"

Mia's eyes began to burn, and the shuriken embedded in the ground in front of her blurred, as everyone around her kept laughing.

"Nng... Waaaaaaah!"

The embarrassment grew too much for Mia to bear, and she began to cry at her own shortcomings.

Her parents had been enslaved by humans, and her father had died of exhaustion due to the sheer amount of work he'd been forced to perform. His body simply couldn't keep up. Her mother escaped with her, thanks to the efforts of the Jinshin clan, but the humans came after them. Before they could be captured, Mia's mother gave up her life to protect her.

This village was full of similar stories of those who'd suffered at the hands of humans, losing one or both parents. But it hadn't only been a desire for revenge that caused

Mia to seek out the Jinshin clan. She wanted to save others in the same situation she'd been in, and become a strong fighter so that she could protect herself in the future. She was certain that her mother would still be here had she been able to fight. It was Mia's inability to forgive herself for that loss that drove her.

Mia wiped away her tears, picked the fallen shuriken out of the ground, and threw it at the target again.

Again it came up short, this time bouncing off the ground and rolling away, sending the children into another fit of laughter.

Just then, three shuriken cut through the air and embedded themselves in a tight cluster in Mia's target. This display of skill put a quick end to the children's mockery.

A young boy walked silently toward the training ground, casting a cool glance around.

He looked to be around two or three years older than Mia, and he wore a gentle smile. Like Mia, he had black hair and was a member of the cat clan. The boy pulled three more shuriken out of his shirt and threw them.

Each one cut a different arc through the air, landing dead center in three different targets.

"Once you can do better than me, then and *only then* do you have the right to mock anyone else."

Rowe, the young boy who cheerfully offered up this challenge as he stood by Mia's side, was well known among the villagers for both his physical prowess and his impressive maturity, despite his young age. This was the first time Mia had met him in person.

"Watch me."

Rowe picked up Mia's shuriken from the ground and held it in front of her face before gracefully tossing it forward, landing it squarely in the center of his previous cluster.

Mia followed every motion the boy made, even as tears still streamed down her cheeks.

Rowe turned to Mia and shot her a smile. "Instead of throwing it *at* the target, think of

it like extending your arm *toward* the target.”

Mia wiped the tears from her eyes and nodded firmly before picking up another shuriken and throwing it straight ahead, doing the best she could to mimic the boy’s movements.

Unlike her previous attempts, this time she managed to hit the wooden pole that held the target in the ground. Mia looked back up at Rowe, the surprise apparent on her face. He offered a broad grin in return.

Rowe pulled several more shuriken out of his pocket and placed them in Mia’s hand before pointing toward the target.

“Well, looks like you just need to put your mind to it and it’s yours. Next time, place your fingers just a little bit higher.”

Mia nodded, and focused all of her attention on the target ahead.

The other kids, who’d been intently watching the exchange between Mia and Rowe, immediately began mimicking his style as they went back to throwing shuriken at their own targets.

Mia continued to practice throughout the rest of the day, and, by sunset, was able to hit the target every time, even if her accuracy could use some work. She let out a heavy sigh, barely able to hold her arm up anymore due to her exhausted muscles.

Rowe smiled at the young girl.

“Well, I think this is a good time to call it a day.”

Mia looked up at him quizzically. “Why did you help me like that?”

It was a simple question, straight from her heart. She couldn’t fathom why someone like Rowe, a child prodigy by nearly any measure, who was respected by adults and outpaced all his peers, would spend his time helping a screwup like herself.

“You and I come from similar backgrounds... We’re both orphans. So I guess I just wanted to help you out.” He offered her a gentle smile.

Mia shook her head. There were countless orphans in this village; that couldn’t be the

reason. Mia fixed her azure eyes on Rowe and asked again. “Why *me*?”

He smiled ruefully. She was much more stubborn than he’d expected. Actually, scratch that—it was precisely what he’d expected from her.

“You and I are one and the same. You weren’t invited to this village by a member of the clan, but rather came here of your own volition.”

What he said was all true. She’d come here on the very day she was rescued... the day her mother died.

She’d been covered in cuts and bruises, and her eyes had been swollen from crying. But in spite of that, she’d told the member of the Jinshin clan who rescued her that she wanted to join their ranks, her voice still trembling from crying.

“I... I wanna be one of you! I w-w-wanna protect people. Please, teach me!”

The young girl cried over her own weakness, and felt an anger welling up inside at her own powerlessness. She wiped away her tears, her body and spirit beaten nearly to a pulp, as she stared intently up at the adults dressed in ninja garb.

Rowe shrugged his shoulders. “We’re all apprentices here, Mia. But I’m going to make sure that you become stronger than anyone else. I promise. You’re still a bit on the clumsy side, so I’ll need to look after you for a bit. Do you have a problem with that?”

Mia gave her head a firm shake.

From that point on, Mia and Rowe spent all their time together.

Rowe was occasionally sent on assignments outside the village, but he always visited Mia first thing upon his return, to help her with her training. Under his close guidance, Mia quickly improved. She emulated everything about him, from the way he swung a sword, to how he carried himself, even down to how he spoke.

Together, Mia and Rowe drew a crowd no matter that they did.

Several years later, on a crisp morning, Rowe appeared in front of Mia as she was practicing her swordsmanship alone. He’d just returned from an assignment.

"I see you've added to your repertoire while I was away."

Mia jumped when Rowe spoke. She'd been so focused on her training that she hadn't noticed his stealthy approach. When she saw him, her face lit up.

"Welcome back, brother!"

She began to run toward him, then remembered herself and dropped to a knee, bowing her head low.

"E-excuse my impertinence. You've been granted the name of Sasuke and accepted into the fold as one of the great warriors of our clan. I apologize for my lack of respect."

Rowe—now known as Sasuke—let out a sigh at her sudden change in behavior. Then he offered a mischievous grin. He stretched out his hand and ruffled her hair.

"I'm back now, Mia."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

Her eyes scanned Rowe's face, the face of a man she loved like a brother.

Sasuke turned away from Mia and looked off into the distance. "Becoming one of the clan's six great warriors isn't purely a cause for celebration. Taking on this role means that the previous holder of the spirit crystal is no more..."

Mia bowed her head again. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

Sasuke turned his gaze back to his protégé and stroked the hair between her ears. He smiled at her gently, his eyes softening.

"Whoa, hey, I'm sorry, Mia. I shouldn't have been a downer like that. I was just thinking that if I'd been strong enough, then maybe the previous Sasuke would still be here." The current Sasuke wiped the sad look from his face and smiled again. Mia was at a loss for words, unsure of what to say. "Sorry, I know I'm not making a whole lot of sense." Sasuke scratched the back of his head and let out a sigh. He quickly tried to change the subject. "Hey, Mia, why don't I show you what I can do, now that I've pledged myself to a spirit?"

Sasuke opened his hand in front of Mia and closed his eyes as he focused.

A moment later, a light began to form in the center of his palm. It swarmed around his hand, then a sudden gust of wind blew all of the fallen leaves high into the air.

Mia's eyes went wide as she watched the mystical wind move.

This was a relatively simple ninja technique, common to cat people who possessed magical abilities, but Sasuke's method was entirely different.

Through training, most cat people were able to perform rather basic magical ninja techniques, but only a rare few could pull off techniques using the power of the spirits.

The power spirit crystals granted to the six great warriors were rare treasures that allowed their holders to become one with a spirit by making a pledge to it. This gave them the ability to summon forth the spirit and use magic more powerful than the spells wielded by even the best mages. The wind technique Sasuke had just performed made use of his spirit's power.

At a glance, a normal observer would be unable to tell if this were simple magic or the work of a spirit. However, when the power of a spirit was used, it let off a characteristic glow, a glow that represented the pledge its holder shared with the spirit.

Sasuke had been able to use magic-based wind techniques for many years, so the ability he'd just demonstrated shouldn't have fazed Mia, but he was taken aback by the look of amazement on her face.

He looked straight into Mia's deep azure eyes. "Mia... d-did you see the wind?"

Mia wasn't exactly sure what he was trying to say, so she responded with a brief nod, then cocked her head to the side in confusion.

"That's amazing! That means you have a strong affinity with spirits, too!"

Mia's ears twitched as she found herself mirroring Sasuke's excitement.

Sasuke took the surprised girl's hand and held it up to his eyes.

"Can you feel the spirit's breath, Mia?"

A soft glow began to form in her palm, and she could feel a gentle wind stroking her skin. Small sparks flew out of the center of the light, as if they were dancing. She could

feel a slight warmth spreading throughout her hand.

Sasuke finally let go and gazed intently into Mia's eyes.

She could tell what he was going to say next. She focused all her attention on her palm.

In the cool, damp forest, surrounded by the low-hanging mist of the early morning, Mia began to feel that same warmth return to her hand as a force ran gently through her, causing her ears to perk up.

A fine mist began to accumulate in her palm, growing larger with every breath she took. When it was the size of a small bubble, it began to shine under the light of the early morning sun, intensifying and dancing about in her palm.

Sasuke stared in astonishment at what was happening before him.

"This is amazing, Mia! You were able to call a spirit without a spirit crystal! I've never heard of anyone your age being able to pull something like this off. We need to report this to the village leaders... No, we need to report this to Master Hanzo himself!"

Mia smiled cheerfully at Sasuke's enthusiastic praise. "Does this mean I'll finally be able to help you?"

Sasuke paused at this, but quickly fixed a smile on his face so Mia wouldn't notice his hesitation. He nodded. "If you keep working on your power, you'll be a great asset to the village. But don't overdo it. Trying to influence the spirits is a lot harder than it seems."

Sasuke reached out and took Mia's hand again.

She was slightly confused at his sudden change in behavior, but she nodded eagerly.

"Got it!"

Soon, the news that Mia was also able to call forth spirits was the talk of the village.

Hanzo, the leader of the Jinshin clan, was all too aware of just how remarkable this turn of events was. He assigned the other five great warriors to train Mia whenever

Sasuke was unavailable.

Like a natural, Mia quickly picked up a knack for summoning the spirits, much to the surprise of the adults in the village. Her talent was undeniable.

Mia threw herself fully into practicing her abilities, even outside of her instruction time, in her effort to keep up with Sasuke, now one of the six great warriors of the clan.

However, this devotion led to a fatal lapse in judgment.

One day, Tsubone, another of the six great warriors, told Mia to take a break from training for the day and let her body rest.

Mia, however, was having none of it.

She had mastered the ability to use a spirit to carry out water-based techniques and was leaps and bounds ahead of her peers. But she hadn't yet been assigned to a squad. Instead, she'd been ordered to stay in the village and focus on her training.

While all her peers were out hunting monsters beyond the village limits, she was stuck, all alone, practicing.

According to Hanzo and the other villagers, Mia's ability to call forth spirits without the need for magical items made her a precious resource. They figured that she would only grow stronger if she had a spirit pledge crystal to call her own.

With that in mind, they simply couldn't risk sending her outside the village.

But Mia found this incredibly frustrating. She wanted to catch up to Sasuke and start being a useful member of the village as soon as possible. Still, she could understand where Hanzo and the other adults were coming from.

Mia decided to sneak out of the village in order to practice her water techniques alone.

Because of their spirit crystals, the six great warriors were a force to be reckoned with. In Mia's case, however, she didn't have a spirit dwelling within her. She needed both time and concentration in order to call forth a spirit, making her techniques largely ineffective in the face of an attacker.

Which was exactly the case with the large, growling monster she encountered almost

as soon as she'd left the village.

What the monsters roaming the wilds outside the village lacked in power, they made up for in large numbers. The monster Mia found herself facing wasn't much to speak of in terms of strength.

Up until now, she'd only run across goblins, which hardly counted as training.

The growling monster in front of her now was of a totally different variety, usually unseen in the forest. It was about three meters tall and had two long, curving tusks jutting from its lower jaw. On top of its head, it also had two dark purple horns. The monster was covered in black, mottled fur and had bloodred eyes.

Unlike normal beasts, monsters were imbued with mana and could call forth something akin to magic. The creature before Mia was wrapped in a dark mist that made it difficult to see where its body ended and the mist began.

Worse, the sun was already starting to set, turning the sky a deep crimson and bathing the forest in darkness.

Shadows cloaked the monster, making it almost impossible to see.

“Graaaaaaaol!!!”

The monster let out a hideous cry and charged, heading full tilt toward Mia. She twisted out of the way, feeling it graze her side, then pulled a shuriken from her pocket and hurled it at the monster's eye.

It missed its mark and hit one of the dark purple horns instead, the resulting clang echoing through the clearing.

Taking advantage of the distance between herself and the monster, Mia drew the short sword from her waist and held it at the ready.

She glared at her opponent, in the hopes of gaining enough time to summon forth a water spirit. The monster, however, had other plans, and rushed headlong toward the girl.

The monster was massive, a full five meters long if you counted its tail. Despite that, it was still able to move rather nimbly, though Mia had no time to dwell on this.

She was so focused on calling forth the spirit that she didn't respond to the oncoming threat until it was too late. Blood sprayed as a large gash opened in her right arm.

After ramming past Mia, the monster slammed head-on into a tree.

This didn't slow it for long, however. It quickly turned around for another headlong charge.

The dark-furred monster tore right through a tree the size of a young child, knocking it to the ground.

Mia flipped through the air and readied her blade, though her face contorted in pain with the effort. She wasn't able to lift the sword with her injured arm.

A look of what could have easily been happiness flashed in the monster's bloodred eyes.

A strong wind rustled through the trees as the dark mist expanded, enveloping the monster. With a powerful lunge, it tore off into the shadowy forest.

Mia was still staring after it when she suddenly sensed something behind her—the monster.

It had used the rustling leaves to cover its movement and was now bearing down on her again, fangs the lengths of her arms gnashing as it ran.

"No!"

"Body to wind, gale shuriken!"

Right at the last second, a voice called out, and a glowing gust of wind slammed straight into the monster.

"Gyraaaaagh!"

The monster was struck hard on its flank, a large gash appearing on the left side of its face as it tumbled to the ground. It had been moments away from tearing open Mia's throat.

She suddenly noticed a person in front of her.

"Mia, are you okay?"

"Sasuke!"

Sasuke, likely on his way back from a mission, stood before Mia with his sword drawn. It wasn't often that she saw him outfitted in full ninja garb, since he rarely wore it around the village.

After letting out a sigh of relief, Sasuke turned his attention back to the monster. "What's an umbra tigris doing out here in these woods?"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the dark mist surrounding the monster began to expand again. The creature slunk back into the forest, its bloodred eyes the last to fade away into the darkness.

They could still hear its heavy breathing as it continued stalking its prey. The umbra tigris wouldn't give up so easily.

The rustling trees calmed slightly, replaced by the sounds of insects. Sasuke looked around at the trees behind Mia, steel in his gaze.

"Can you use your water magic?"

Mia nodded.

"Good. I was just on my way back from a mission, and I don't have a lot of strength left. It's too dangerous for you to go back on your own, so we'll have to wait for it to come in for another strike. When it does, we'll make our move."

Mia nodded, sheathed her sword, and turned her back to Sasuke. She squinted into the forest and focused on her left hand, trying to summon a water spirit.

The monster was much more cautious now that it was injured. It carefully stalked through the dark trees, waiting for the wind to pick up again and mask the sound of its footsteps.

Mia swallowed hard. She could feel a tingling in the back of her throat.

"Hah?!"

“Wha?”

A powerful gust of wind swept through the forest in the blink of an eye, swirling from the blades of grass at their feet all the way up to the tops of the trees. The entire forest shuddered.

Mia could barely see anything in front of her. She focused on the sound of Sasuke’s voice.

“Body to wind, spiral tempest!”

A vortex of glowing air formed around Sasuke before shooting off toward the umbra tigris.

“Gyaaaaaugh!”

Bright red blood gushed from the monster as the wind cut deep into its flesh.

The gashes themselves weren’t very deep, so this technique only served to slow the creature. It didn’t look ready to retreat just yet.

Mia turned to face it head-on.

A small cone of water rested in the palm of her hand. She closed her fist, and the water launched forward, drilling deep into one of the countless cuts that marred the monster’s body.

“Body to water, bloodstream hell needle!”

The monster’s body started to inflate as pins of water stabbed out of its skin, giving it the appearance of a large porcupine.

The monster spasmed, water needles taking on a tinge of red as they filled with blood. The umbra tigris collapsed.

“We did it! I killed my first big monster, Sasuke!”

As Mia began to come down from the adrenaline high, she was overcome with a giddiness she could barely contain. She jumped up and down with joy. Sasuke walked over to her and solemnly raised his hand.

The dry crack of flesh hitting flesh reverberated throughout the forest. Mia brought her hand up to her cheek in astonishment.

The stinging sensation grew as her cheek burned red. She dropped to the ground and broke down into tears.

“Waaaaaaaah! Waaaaaaaugh!!!”

Fat tears rolled down Mia’s cheeks as she sobbed. Sasuke, tears welling up in the corners of his own eyes, leaned down to pull the young girl close.

“I thought you were going to die! Don’t you remember what Master Hanzo told you? Don’t ever go out into the woods alone! Do you want me to lose my family all over again?!?”

Mia continued to sob as she wrapped her arms tightly around Sasuke, his voice now coming out strangled as he fought back tears.

“I’m... I’m s-s-sorry!!!”

Sasuke ruffled Mia’s hair as he patted her head.

Now that the tense moment had passed, the two could hear their stomachs grumbling. Mia, her face still buried deep in Sasuke’s chest, let out a soft laugh. This brought a smile to Sasuke’s lips.

“I picked up some wheat while in town. Why don’t we head on back and have some soup?”

Mia nodded, though she still didn’t look up at him. “Okay...”

Sasuke pulled up one her ears, which had flattened against her head, and leaned in close to whisper. “But first, Master Hanzo is going to have a few words with you.”

Mia’s ears and tail stood at attention as she looked up at Sasuke, her eyes wet and puffy.

“Eek!”

Sasuke laughed and ran his hand through Mia’s hair.

Once they got close enough to hear the sounds of the other villagers, Mia's tail slumped back down.

CHAPTER 3

THE TIGER CLAN

Off in the distance, the sun began peeking up above the horizon, shining its light across the vast southern continent, and, of more interest to the ship's passengers, on the massive town that hugged the coastline.

Despite the incredible length of the ship we rode on, it felt small in comparison to the sprawling town that lay before us. It was bigger than any human town I'd seen thus far.

The village of Landfrea, where we'd left port just the day before, was pretty large in its own right, but the town of Plymouth was something else entirely.

The tree-trunk high rises that were a common sight in elven villages were nowhere to be seen, instead replaced by mammoth buildings that put even the Rhoden Kingdom to shame. Somehow, they managed to fit in naturally with the rolling hills the town sat on.

Chiyome let out a gasp of surprise at the sight, while Goemon stood at her side, arms crossed in silence.

Ariane let out a sigh, wonderment clear in her voice. "I'd heard of Plymouth's size before, but this is truly something to behold. It makes human towns look like little more than hamlets."

I nodded in agreement. "I bet they could fit 100,000 people into a city this size."

The closer the *Rievbeta* drew to Plymouth's port, the more ships we passed, hailing from both here and afar. The ships were all crewed by mountain people, suggesting that cargo was often transported by ship here.

The *Rievbeta* arrived at one of the slips at Plymouth's dock and several burly men came running up to pull the ship in.

The crew began the work of preparing the cargo to be lowered down while the captain

greeted the dock workers. We went back to our cabins and grabbed our bags before taking a wooden gangplank from the ship's deck down to the dock.

As we stepped off, we were met by several mountain people dressed in light armor and armed with spears—the port's guards—who subjected all passengers to an inspection before allowing them to enter the town.

Ariane handed over the letter of introduction she'd been given by Landfrea's elder. After a cursory inspection, we were allowed to enter Plymouth proper.

The town was buzzing with life. It was like nothing I'd ever seen.

The majority of the people we crossed paths with had some sort of beastly characteristics, including ears, tails, and more, though there were more than a few dark elves as well, like the ones we'd seen aboard the *Rievelta*.

Up ahead of us was a market filled with row upon row of shops and stalls stocked with all manner of products, which had probably just come off the boats. Customers rushed in to purchase their wares.

The crowd was dense, like what you'd find at a summer festival, though we still managed to draw more than our fair share of attention. Apparently, a man fully decked out in armor with a green-furred animal on his head tended to stand out.

Goemon, the one who'd normally stick out in a human town, managed to blend in easily with the crowd. His bare-chested figure looked identical to many of the people around us.

I served as the group's leading edge, pushing our way through the throngs of people.

"I can't believe how many people are here," Ariane said. "We'd better not lose sight of each other. If one of us got lost, it would be near impossible to find a way back to the group."

This was probably the first time she'd ever traveled so far from home, to say nothing of the massive crowds we had to fight through.

Even for me, someone used to congested cities, it was difficult to get back into the hang of pushing through such large masses of people.

Ah well, I'd get used to it.

We were surrounded by stalls filled to the brim with fragrant spices and all sorts of food, the likes of which I'd never seen. This, at least, helped me forget the bustle around us.

Ponta's tail whipped as it looked around excitedly at all the unique and interesting things the market had to offer.

I walked with my head on a constant pivot, inspecting all the interesting sights that lay before us. I overheard a conversation at one of the stalls and stopped to listen closer, looking for the source.

"No way! You've never charged that much before, Grandpa! What gives?"

The customer, a man who looked like a werewolf, was yelling at the old shop owner, a bear of some sort, while waving his hand toward one of the spices lining the counter.

The bear man raised an eyebrow at the ornery customer, looking more annoyed than anything, as he explained curtly. It looked as if he didn't really care whether or not the man bought anything.

"Whaddya want me to do about it? The tiger clans off to the west haven't been around as much as they used to. These are the last red nails I've got."

The customer muttered a few more objections as he shoved his money back into his pouch and stalked away.

Once the argument was over, I turned my attention to the source of the men's conflict. As soon as I caught sight of it, I made my way toward the stall.

"Hey, wait a minute, Arc! They're selling tomatoes over here!"

Ariane had apparently spotted the literal fruits of our labor, the item that had brought us down to the southern continent in the first place. As soon as she saw me heading off in the opposite direction, she began yelling after me.

I raised my hand to signal for her to be quiet and continued toward the stall.

Once I got close enough, I examined the "red nail" that had been the source of the

men's conflict. The talon-shaped object was about the size of an index finger. Its dry surface was a bright shade of red, and it was covered in wrinkles.

I'd seen this food... spice before.

I picked one of the red nails up. "Excuse me, sir. Is this spicy?"

The old shopkeeper was taken aback at the sudden appearance of a large armored figure before him. Gauging that I might be a customer, he slowly nodded.

"I, ah, yes. They aren't that popular, except for those who've got a taste for them, but they get their name from their spicy burn."

That was all the confirmation I needed.

This was almost certainly a chili pepper back in my world.

I couldn't believe how lucky I was to come here in search of tomatoes and stumble across a chili pepper while I was at it.

Whereas tomatoes were incredibly useful in the ingredient world, chili peppers were something of a catch-all spice.

Put the two together and you'd get... arrabbiata sauce maybe?

My head was now full of all sorts of Italian recipes as I started inspecting the other items carefully arranged on the counter.

Just then, Ariane appeared. She took one look at the red nail and cocked her head.

"Oh, you're going to buy that too?"

"Yep. I never imagined I'd find this here! I'd like to buy it if I can."

Ariane inquired about the price. She responded in much the same way the werewolf man had.

"Whoa! Just because you don't have many left doesn't mean you can charge that much for it!"

Ariane was nearly beside herself at the price the bear man had quoted. Chiyome nodded her support. As usual, Goemon simply stood by silently, gazing curiously at this red nail we were fussing over.

As for me, I didn't even give it a second thought. I pulled several gold coins from my wallet and tried to pay. Ariane stared on disapprovingly, the look in her eyes suggesting that she simply couldn't believe I'd be willingly pay such an absurd quoted price.

"What a rip-off."

The elven economy was focused more on bartering than on the exchange of money, which made her reaction seem a little strange to me. However, I wondered if she was more used to monetary transactions due to her technically being a citizen of Maple, the capital city of the Great Canada Forest. Why did women care so much about prices, anyway?

My mind started wandering toward the differences between men and women until the frowning shopkeeper opened his mouth and brought be back to reality.

"I told the guy before you... my already-limited stock isn't getting replaced, since the tiger clan hasn't shown their faces around these parts of late."

This was exactly what I'd heard earlier, but at least it explained why he wasn't interested in negotiating. Since the pepper was already dehydrated, that freed the shopkeeper from any concerns about it rotting. He could afford to wait until he got the price he wanted.

Ariane's face screwed up into a scowl, but she seemed to realize the position we were in.

What surprised me most, though, was that the usually quiet Goemon's eyes seemed to respond ever so slightly to this conversation. But that could have just been my imagination.

So long as Ariane showed such reticence toward the shopkeeper's asking price, it was going to be difficult for me to buy the red nail no matter how long we stood around.

I decided to change the subject. "Do you know of any other shops that deal in red nails?"

Of course, I didn't really think that the shopkeeper would introduce me to a rival. As expected, the man tensed up and shook his head firmly. "Like I told ya, the tiger clan to the west hasn't been around lately to bring in any more red nails, so no one's got any to sell. If you don't believe me, feel free to have a look around the market for yerself." The shopkeeper crossed his arms and let out a snort.

He seemed to be telling the truth. I turned my attention back to Ariane.

She nodded, as if something the man said had suddenly clicked. "Actually, I've never even seen them before, at least not back in Canada."

"By the way, do you know where I can find the tiger clan?" I gave a quick glance around the market, but couldn't identify anyone who bore any resemblance to a tiger.

Alas, my hopes of the shopkeeper telling me where I could find these people were dashed. He clamped his mouth shut and averted his gaze. It made sense, I supposed. After all, who would want to tell a potential customer how to cut out the middle man and do business with the producer directly?

There was no point in pressing the issue. Instead, I decided to put a little pressure on the shopkeeper, but Ariane butted in before I had the chance.

She sounded exasperated. "What do you even plan on doing with that, Arc? Didn't he just say that it's spicy enough to kill? You're always obsessed with the strangest things. First the kraken, now this..."

Before I had a chance to respond, Chiyome and Ponta beat me to the punch.

"The kraken was really good!"

"Kyiiii!"

Chiyome's voice was clear and firm as she locked her azure eyes on Ariane. The little green furball chimed in as well.



Even Goemon was nodding.

The conversation was entirely derailed at this point, so I decided to explain the ways this red nail could be used.

"I can make an incredibly delectable dish with just this and a tomato... I think. So that's why I'm hoping to find a steady, and hopefully affordable, supply."

Ariane furrowed her brow at this, but the shopkeeper was the first to get a word in.

"You're going to use the red nail in a dish?! I've heard stories of the tiger clan cooking them up in order to invigorate their fighting spirits, but I've never known anyone around these parts to do something crazy like that!"

The look of surprise on the shopkeeper's face was surpassed only by my own. "Then what are these red nails used for if not for cooking?"

Honestly, I couldn't think of any use that didn't involve eating them.

Ariane and Chiyome seemed interested in the answer as well, and turned their attention toward the shopkeeper.

"Around these parts, people mix them into a liquid and use it to keep away insects or deter monsters by spraying it into their eyes. I've also heard that you'll get stronger if you put slices of red nail up your nose."

I recalled that the capsaicin in chili peppers, the source of their heat, could keep food from rotting and drive away insects, though, the thing about stuffing it up your nose was new to me. Maybe it was some kind of ritual.

But at least that answered one question. Even if the members of the tiger clan used it in their dishes, the red nails still weren't considered a food elsewhere.

"Assuming only a small number of people have any interest in these red nails, then there's not really much of a reason to keep your supplier a secret. Besides, I'm sure I can just ask around if I want to try to set up a meeting with the tiger clan."

Something was off about the tiger clan not being around, but I figured if I played my cards right, I could turn this into an opportunity to purchase red nails directly from the source.

I looked around at other people milling about the market.

Finally, the bear man let out a heavy sigh and scratched the back of his head.

"Grr... Fine, have it your way. The tiger clan mostly comes here to sell monster hides, fangs, and the like. The majority of their kind make their home in an area known as the Kuwana Prairie, just beyond the Singareeka Plains. They're most frequently found coming and going through the Fobnach town of Fernandes, near the Dodgas river to the west."

The shopkeeper scowled as he gave up the name of the town where the tiger clan visited.

I knew practically nothing about the geography of the southern continent, so I turned to Ariane and inquired about where Fernandes was located. However, she simply shook her head, apparently just as clueless as myself.

The old man smiled and explained while Ariane silently returned his gaze.

"Fernandes is a ten-day journey from here on horseback, maybe twenty on foot. You really plan on going all the way there?"

It sounded like it wasn't close at all.

The shopkeeper's exuberant smile suggested that he believed we'd readily pay his price rather than make such a long journey. Besides, there were no assurances we'd even run into any members of the tiger clan out in Fernandes.

But he didn't know that I could cut our travel time considerably by using Dimensional Step.

It'd depend on how good my line of sight was, of course, but I figured it would take only about three days or so to get to Fernandes.

Ariane locked eyes with me before turning her gaze to the bag on my back.

"You still have those rune stones, right?"

I'd almost forgotten about the rune stones we'd picked up some time ago as we made our way through the underground cavern.

The cavern had a pretty distinct look to it, so I could use Transport Gate to go back there any time and pick up more, assuming the distance from the southern continent didn't cause any issues.

I nodded. "I have a few in my bag. I can give them to you if you need them." I wasn't quite sure what she was asking, so I just replied honestly.

Her lustrous lips curled into a smile. She was plotting something.

"Come with me, Arc. We've already come this far. It won't hurt to go a little farther."

Ariane turned and began heading away from the stall.

"H-hey!"

The shopkeeper called after her. I pulled a single gold coin out of my wallet and handed it to him, which quickly got him to quiet down.

"Excuse me, sir, but I really would like to buy that red nail of yours. Is this enough?"

Not only did I want to get a taste of it, but I figured I should compensate the man for his information.

The man looked back and forth between Ariane's shrinking figure and the coin in my hand before deciding that there was no use negotiating any further. He took the coin and examined the odd symbols on its surface with a skeptical eye, as if trying to check its authenticity. I quickly told him that this was a human currency used up in the northern continent. With that assurance, we managed to close the deal.

What I got in return was a small bag, no bigger than what you'd buy in a supermarket, filled with the so-called red nails. Apparently, the source of the man's hesitation was the thought of selling his entire supply at once.

Even considering that the man was likely charging me a fee for using foreign currency, a gold coin still seemed pretty expensive for what I was getting in return.

The experience reminded me of the old stories of spices being worth their weight in gold... literally.

I looked down at the small bag in my hand.

"This seems a little on the small side for a gold coin..."

Chiyome, Goemon, and I hurried after Ariane. Once we caught up, I called out to her.

"Where are we headed?"

She shot me a look, as if stunned at how dense I could be.

"Don't you remember? Before we even came here, I told you that there are teleportation shrines similar to those in our elven villages. Though, there aren't as many of course. Anyway, I don't know if we'll be able to teleport directly to this Fernandes place, but it's better than going by road."

Chiyome hit her hand into her fist.

I groaned. How could I have forgotten that? I'd even talked about it with her myself.

"Ahh, right. So, do you think the teleportation shrines are open to anyone?"

"I imagine we'll need permission from the village elder."

Thanks to Ariane's position as the daughter of a village elder, the process to obtain said permission would likely be perfunctory at best.

We made our way down the packed thoroughfare while my mind continued wandering.

Large buildings, the smallest of which were still three stories tall, flanked both sides of the road as mountain people and strange animals made their way in between, either on their own, or transporting goods.

Of particular note to me were the horse-drawn carts... if you could call them that. The animals hitched almost certainly weren't horses. In fact, their white fur and large, curved horns made them look more akin to mountain goats, with the exception that their faces were pitch black, as if their faces had been dipped in ink.

Unlike your typical mountain goat, these animals were as large as horses, and managed to pull the heavily laden carts they were hitched to with ease.

They were able to muster up quite a lot of horsepower... or was that goatpower?

Along the road, I noticed pairs of mountain people wearing matching outfits, all armed with swords dangling from their waists. Each one sat atop a large, two-meter-tall bird with two long legs. Guards, perhaps?

Thanks to their height advantage, they stood out easily, even in the crowded streets.

Near their midriffs, the birds seemed to be short on feathers, and instead had small arm-like appendages where the feathers folded in on themselves. Except for their white heads and yellow beaks, the rest of their bodies were covered in brown feathers, making them look a little like bald eagles.

“Well, those are certainly new to me.”

“Kyii!”

“That bird must be pretty fast. It’s as big as a horse!”

A bird-like horse? I wondered if it was even appropriate to call it a bird. Or maybe “horse” would be better. Even if you wrote it out using the kanji for bird, maybe you’d still read it as “horse”?

While I was busy rambling about this to Ponta and Chiyome, Ariane was up ahead asking a pedestrian for directions.

“Hurry up! The sun’s going to set soon!” Apparently done getting directions, Ariane called out to us to hurry up.

After walking for another hour or so, we found ourselves in front of a large open square in the middle of town. At the very center of was a tall, solemn-looking building surrounded by a castle wall, with several intricately decorated spires rising out of it.

It looked not unlike a mosque from my world.

Up ahead, I spotted some guards standing at attention in front of the entrance. A long line of people carrying bags extended out from it.

Ariane made her way toward the guards; the rest of us followed.

“I guess this is what teleportation shrines look like here.”

The word shrine didn't seem to do this building justice, considering its size. It looked more like a sanctuary.

As we got close to the newly dubbed teleportation sanctuary, one of the guards seemed to pay particular attention to Ariane before calling out to us.

"It's rare to see a dark elf around here. Looking to use the teleportation pad?"

Ariane nodded. "That's correct. We'd like to make our way to a town called Fernandes. Will this get us anywhere close?"

"Fernandes, off to the west? You can go straight there, but not today. We're only offering two more teleports, and those are going to Galapagos."

The man turned toward the long line of people having their bags checked and gestured with his chin.

As far as I could gather, the teleportation pads were used something like regularly scheduled airplane flights, with more frequent trips to more popular destinations and less frequent ones to more remote locations.

I was curious if the name Galapagos had anything to do with evolutionary theory...

"We're already at capacity today, but our announcement for Fernandes will be made tomorrow, next opening on the following day. If you're interested, you can sign up now. However, you'll have to pay half up front."

Ariane readily agreed, though I was pretty surprised when I heard the price. It certainly wasn't cheap.

As if that weren't bad enough, the price skyrocketed the more bags you planned on taking with you. This definitely wouldn't work as a replacement for freight transit. I felt like I was back in the early twentieth century, about to embark on an international trip.

"I heard that you can pay in rune stones. Is that true?"

"Ahh, in that case, you'll need to go to the counter over there to have the rune stones evaluated and settle your payment."

The man gestured toward a counter built into the wall and went back to his work.

Apparently, they would first evaluate your rune stones for quality at the counter, then adjust your teleportation fees accordingly. Fortunately for us, the rune stones we had were enough to cover the fees.

However, since the rune stones were applied to the full price of the trip, and we were supposed to only be paying half, we ended up dumping out all of our rune stones and having them exchanged for money.

Once that was done, we were given wooden tags to present when it was our time to use the teleportation pads. I guessed these were our tickets.

After putting the money and the tickets into my leather pouch, I turned back toward Ariane, Chiyome, and Goemon.

“Well, we should be set for our travel expenses for a while.”

Ariane crossed her arms, looking at the town beyond the open square as she put together a plan of action.

“The announcement for Fernandes will be tomorrow, and the opening the day after that, so I guess we’re stuck in town until then. We should probably find an inn.”

Something about the way Chiyome was shifting her weight looked off.

“What’s wrong, Chiyome?”

Her face lit up as she spoke. “Oh, uh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking about how I might finally have a chance to meet the fabled tiger clan. According to the stories I’ve heard, they’re all renowned for their bravery!”

She looked like a little kid about to meet her idol.

I glanced at the mammoth of a man standing next to her and his ripped, muscular body. Goemon looked more like a tiger than any other sort of cat. I wondered what he was feeling about all this.

I chuckled lightly. “Well, I hope we can make that happen for you, Chiyome. From what the shopkeeper said, they haven’t been around much lately. Personally, I’d just like the

chance to buy these red nails straight from the source!"

Ariane suddenly pointed a finger at my face. "Speaking of which, you bought red nails at that scam artist's booth earlier, didn't you? I don't get it! You said you were going to meet the tiger clan to find a supplier!"

She crossed her arms and scowled.

I figured she wouldn't notice the transaction, since she'd already started walking off, but apparently being perceptive to these things was an important part of being an effective soldier.

"I just wanted to grab a few to get a handle on the taste. Besides, we'll be here for a bit, so this will be a good chance for me to pick up some other ingredients and cook something up with these red nails."

Ariane and Chiyome gave me odd looks as I stood there with my fist clenched.

"Arc, you can cook?" Ariane wore an expression of utter disbelief.

Aside from the kraken, I hadn't really done anything resembling cooking since I'd arrived here. However, after years of living on my own, I could whip up a few dishes at least. In fact, I rather enjoyed cooking.

"Well, well, well. I guess I'll have to show you my mad kitchen skills!"

This would be the first time I'd cooked in quite a while. First, I figured I'd make arrabbiata with the red nail and some tomatoes.

I was sure that I'd seen garlic and onions—or at least foods that looked like them—back in the human towns, so I was pretty confident I could find them here too.

"Kyiii! Kyi!"

Ponta let out an excited cry and began swishing its tail around wildly, almost as if it could read my mind.

I'd definitely need to make an extra dish without the red nail in it. The spice would be too much for the little fox.

I made my way back to the market and picked up the ingredients I needed before arranging with the innkeeper to let me use part of their kitchen for the night. Even if I planned to stay in my own little corner, a man cooking in gleaming armor would no doubt draw attention, so I decided to drink some of the spring water from the Lord Crown to transform into my elven form. I also bought some proper clothes to really round out the look.

Much to Ponta's chagrin, it wasn't allowed to be in the kitchen while I was cooking, so it went back to the room to wait with Chiyome. Poor little Ponta looked crushed, but Chiyome was more than happy with the arrangement.

Ariane, for some reason or other, decided to stay in the kitchen with me. Maybe she wanted a cooking lesson? Meanwhile, Goemon decided he wanted to take a look around town.

Well, it was time to get started.

First things first, I needed to get the staples of the meal ready before I could start on my sauce. I threw some flour into a wooden bowl, followed by two eggs, some vegetable oil, and a pinch of salt. I folded the ingredients together with a wooden spatula until it started to form into a dough. Once fully mixed, I sprinkled some flour on the counter, dropped the dough on it, and began to knead with my hands. Thanks to my powerful muscles, this usually tedious task was pretty easy.

Once the dough was nice and springy, I threw it back into the bowl, placed a damp towel over the top, and put it in a warm place to rest. I figured it'd be ready to go in about fifteen to thirty minutes.

While I waited on the dough, I went upstairs to go check on Ponta. However, when I arrived, I found the fox fast asleep on Chiyome's lap. The young girl was also nodding off. It was actually pretty rare to see her in such a relaxed state.

Back in the kitchen, the dough was ready to go, so I took out a rolling pin and started spreading it out. Then I spread it out some more.

Once that was done, I rolled it into one long tube, which I proceeded to cut into centimeter-wide pieces. Leaving the cut end facing up, I took a pantry knife and held the blade tightly between my fingers as I finished off the final detail work. It took a bit of skill, but I was used to it.

The next step would require a bit of endurance. I began chopping the dough up into little rounds of pasta.

The noodle was called orecchiette, meaning “small ear” though, in my head it always sounded oddly similar to a phrase in Japanese meaning, “I’ll just go and disappear.” Aww, no need for that.

With the pasta out of the way, it was time to start making the arrabbiata. But first, I needed to boil some water to cook the pasta. I looked over toward the pot and found that Ariane had already done that for me. I decided to just be appreciative and say no more.

All right, now I could focus on the sauce.

I poured some vegetable oil into a fry pan, dropped in a few garlic cloves and a red nail—with the seeds removed of course—and began cooking them up. Leaving the seeds in really ratcheted up the heat. Once the ingredients in the pan had gained a nice color, I threw in some diced onion to soften them up over low heat. The onion added a nice, sweet aroma to the mix.

Finally, it was time to add the tomato, with the poison removed of course. I mashed it up and put it into the pan as well. The juices from the tomato danced around the hot pan as they turned to steam. The sauce slowly began coming together, so I turned my attention to the boiling pasta which was soft and springy. Perfect.

I took the squishy, ear-shaped pasta and poured it into the fry pan, stirring the sauce quickly as I incorporated the pasta.

After a quick taste, I decided it needed a little salt. Mmm, this was shaping up nicely.

When cooking by hearth, the only way to adjust the heat was by constantly keeping the fry pan elevated, modifying the distance from the flame. I felt like someone would have called me a cheater if I were to adjust the flame with a lever, or use an elevated kettle stand like they did in the old world.

While I was busy thinking about all that, the arrabbiata had come together quite nicely.

I poured the contents into a dish, drizzled some vegetable oil over the top, and finished it off with a sprinkling of a finely chopped herb that resembled parsley. It didn’t smell exactly like parsley, but I’d bought it at a green grocer, so I figured it ought to be okay.

Finally, my dish was finished: "Arrabbiata in Another World."

Ariane, who had been watching me the entire time, eyed the dish carefully. She'd been skeptical of using the red nail, but it seemed like watching it being prepared helped alleviate some of her concerns. Now she was staring at the food intently, looking as if she wanted to start eating any minute now.

"That's just... Wow..."

She tore her gaze away to look back at me.

"Well, we better eat up before it gets cold. Can you call Chiyome down?"

With a nod, Ariane hurried off toward the rooms.

I thanked the inn's chef for letting me use the kitchen. In response, the older man asked me to let him have a taste of the dish I'd made. I was more than happy to oblige. If he wound up liking it, then maybe demand for red nail would increase in Fobnach, making it easier for me to get my hands on it.

I made my way to the first floor, where we had a table reserved. Moments later, Ariane appeared with Ponta held tightly to her chest, followed shortly by Chiyome. Behind them was Goemon, who'd apparently come back some time earlier.

"Kyii!"

As soon as everyone sat down, Ponta mewed and began waving its tail about excitedly as it looked up at me.

"No need to get yourself all worked up, Ponta. I made some for you, too."

I set a dish with arrabbiata specially prepared for Ponta down in front of it.

I'd left the onion and red nail out of my furry companion's food, but judging by the way it ravenously lapped at the dish, I probably could have left the onion in.

After distributing plates to everyone else, I held my breath for the moment of truth.

Ariane was the first one to try the dish. The moment she slid the sauce-covered pasta past her lips, her eyes went wide, and she brought her hand to her mouth.

"It's... amazing! I can't believe that a buffoon like you could make this, Arc."

In spite of the personal attack, I was pleased. She began slurping up the pasta at a steady pace. I gathered that Ariane wasn't so good at cooking herself, but that was hardly a bad thing. It was more important for her to focus on her swordsmanship. Then again, her mother Glenys was excellent both on the battlefield and in the kitchen.

To be fair, there was a difference of quite a few years, not to mention experience, between mother and daughter, so it'd be an uphill climb for her to get there.

I felt a tingle run up my spine. I turned around to look for the source, but there was nothing. Just my imagination.

Both Chiyome and Goemon were also a bit taken aback at the intense sensation upon their first taste, but they, too, quickly began slurping it up.

"This is really good, Arc! It has a nice, spicy burn to it!"

Chiyome offered up her honest feedback, though Goemon apparently would have preferred something with a little more bite.

"Yes, with a little more spice, I think it would have quite the impact."

Impact? Just what was he hoping for the chili pepper to do?

After taking in their feedback, I finally tried my own dish.

This was the first time I'd cooked anything since coming here. Back in my world, I used to cook pretty much every day, so it felt good to get back into it.

The soft, delicate pasta was really good. The flour I'd used was for making bread, so the pasta was squishier than it normally should be, but it was still good, and the acidity of the tomato was a perfect match for the spiciness of the chili pepper.

I was pleased to find that the degree of heat from the red nail was similar to the chili peppers I was used to. Maybe a little spicier, if anything.

While I was preparing the dish, Ariane had looked at me like I was crazy when she saw me throw away the pepper's seeds. After paying so much money for them, it must have seemed like a waste. When she asked, I explained that the majority of the chili

pepper's spice was concentrated in the seeds and stringy innards, so putting them into a dish was risky.

To get my point across, I gave her some of the insides to taste. Her eyes immediately began tearing up, and she glared at me.

However, now that she'd had a chance to eat the arrabbiata, Ariane said she'd like to see the red nail become more common in Canada as well. All in all, it seemed like my dish had earned a passing mark.

The only thing I wanted to change was the cooking temperature. No matter how strong I was physically, it wasn't easy to hold a frying pan in the same place for a long period of time.

According to Ariane, the elves had a type of magical cooking device that would allow them to adjust the strength of a flame, like a stovetop. That would solve that problem. However, despite this item having been thought up quite a long time ago, it apparently still hadn't gained widespread use, due to the fact that it used powdered mana, a fuel source far more expensive than simple wood.

Even so, the idea of being able to adjust the heat of a flame was incredibly appealing to me. When I got back, I wanted to look into purchasing one of these cooking devices for the ruined shrine that would become my home.

Besides, if I were only using it for myself, I could easily teleport back to the underground cavern and pick up rune stones whenever I wanted. It'd probably be easier than chopping wood.

While I was busy calculating the costs of outfitting my future kitchen, Ariane interrupted my thoughts to discuss our next plan of action.

In two days' time, we'd be heading to Fernandes to find the tiger clan.

I wondered if I'd meet anyone that happened to bring some red nail with them.

Two days later, I found myself standing in a long line, looking at the backs of all the people in front of me.

We were in the yard in front of the entrance to the teleportation shrine, at the center of the port town of Plymouth.

It had been two days since we first came here, and now we were about to use the teleportation pad to transport us to Fernandes.

We handed over the wooden tags—our travel vouchers—and made our way up the stairs to have our bags inspected before boarding the teleportation pad.

I held my waterskin and helmet under my arm to prepare for the inspection, taking occasional sips of the magical spring water as we waited in line.

Between me, an elf fully outfitted in armor, the dark elf Ariane, Chiyome and Goemon, and the little spirit animal Ponta, we must have made quite a travel party. The other people in line were constantly glancing over at us.

Once our turn came up, we were asked a few simple questions then ushered inside the sanctuary.

Given the sanctuary's spires and complex design, I was surprised to find that the inner hall was relatively simple in construction, looking like a large box with domes sticking out of the ceiling.

The walls were all decorated with intricate mosaics of wildlife.

"This is pretty impressive."

The hall itself looked like a brilliant combination of technology and art. I felt like a tourist doing a bit of sightseeing.

In the center of the room were four obelisks. Each had a square platform that looked like an altar, with a set of stairs leading up to it.

Nicely dressed people stood on the altars with their bags, chatting away as they waited their turn to board the teleportation pads.

Considering the incredibly high cost to use the pads, I figured they were a luxury reserved for the affluent.

All eyes were on us as we made our way up the stairs toward the altar at the center of

the sanctuary hall. A bell rang, and everyone went quiet.

A staff member announced the next departure: "All passengers going to the border town of Fernandes, please make your way to the central teleportation pad. We will begin shortly."

People began murmuring among themselves as the bell gave one final ring, and a large rune on the floor of the altar lit up, filling the room with a harsh, bright light, causing me to squint. Just like with the teleportation pads in the elven villages, I felt like I was hovering in the air for a moment, then everything around me was consumed in light, and I found myself in a completely different location.

This new sanctuary was similar in size to the one we'd just been in, though the decorations were much simpler. Apparently, we'd teleported just fine.

Chiyome ran her gaze across the new room and muttered under her breath. "I know I've said it before, but traveling long distances in a matter of moments is nothing short of miraculous."

I had to agree.

"The only limitation is that the more people and objects you teleport, the more powdered mana you consume. Back in the villages, the teleportation pads are restricted to five people at once. In that regard, at least, Arc's teleportation magic is far more impressive." Ariane turned her gaze to my waterskin, which I had just refilled that morning. The exercise served as proof that I could use Transport Gate to teleport between continents.

The two continents were separated by a day's journey, or at least, a day's journey on an elven ship. I figured the distance was somewhere around several hundred kilometers. Being able to teleport across continents suggested that I possessed an immense amount of power. However, I could feel teleporting such a vast distance consume a lot more of my magic. Back in the game, it cost a fixed amount of magic to teleport between any two locations, but here, it seemed like the farther I teleported, the more of my magic it consumed. In that regard, my teleportation magic wasn't much different from the sanctuaries' teleportation pads.

"Well, at least it's going to be easier to move between the continents. No sense in worrying about the little things." I laughed at Ariane's comment, avoiding her gaze as

I joined the crowd heading down the stairs.

"Thanks for delivering that dried kraken meat to the village, Arc." When I was discussing my plans to teleport back, Chiyome had asked me to deliver her half of the meat to the hideaway village in the mountains.

I responded to her comment with a simple shake of my head. It was really no big deal.

Fortunately for me, Transport Gate made traveling between continents incredibly easy. The added trip between the elven village and Chiyome's home was no extra effort at all.

I hefted my bag over my shoulder. "It was nice to lighten our load a bit."

With that, we made our way through the sanctuary door, where we underwent another simple inspection before being sent off through the exit in the outer wall. Once outside, we were greeted by a large open square similar to the one we found in Plymouth.

However, the scene beyond the square was completely different from the city we'd left behind.

Unlike the bustling merchant town of Plymouth, where shopkeepers hawked their wares to a constant stream of customers in practically every direction, the buildings here were of a much simpler construction. Off in the distance, I could see a large wall surrounding the whole town. Given that Fernandes was a border town, I assumed the wall had been constructed against something on the other side.

I looked around. The streets were filled with all sorts of people, from everyday townsfolk, to ruffians getting up to trouble, to soldiers trying to keep the peace.

"I guess we should ask around and see where we might find the tiger clan." I pulled my helmet back onto my head, adjusted it, and glanced back at Ariane and Chiyome. They both nodded in agreement.

Chiyome held our furry companion close to her chest, its legs dangling in the air. Ponta sniffed about curiously as it tried to get a sense for this new town. This was likely due to the fact that Plymouth had been filled with the scent of the sea, whereas now we were much further inland.

I glanced around for someone to ask and approached a man running a stall in the town

square. He looked annoyed even before I had a chance to open my mouth.

"Excuse me, sir, I was wondering if you happened to know where we could find members of the tiger clan?"

I pulled a gold coin out of my leather pouch. The man's eyes lit up immediately.

"Ahh, the tiger clan, yah? Haven't really seen 'em around lately..."

"Oh, that's too bad."

This wasn't useful information, so I closed my fist around the coin and began turning away. A deep wrinkle formed in the man's forehead as he hurriedly continued on.

"Ah, wait, that's right! I remember hearing that the owner of the stable near the southern wall recently picked up one of the tiger clans' mounts."

"Is that so?"

We were looking for the tiger clan, not their horses. I readjusted my grip, letting some of the gold coin show through my fingers.

The man looked over at Ariane, standing guard nearby, and nodded to himself as if something had just fallen into place.

"I can't see your face with all your armor, but are you by any chance an elf, kind sir? If so, I suppose it makes sense that you wouldn't know about all this. You see, the tiger clan ride about on huge two-legged dragons known as driftpus. They receive their mounts the day they become adults and ride them for the rest of their lives. You can imagine how rare it is to lose one. It's a fate worse than death."

I was starting to get a better picture of the whole situation. "I see... So they would definitely come looking for a lost mount then?"

"That's right. I hear the stable owner has been dealing with tiger clan mounts rather frequently these days, so he may know more about their situation. Really, believe me!"

I nodded to the man and, with a flick of my finger, sent the coin flipping through the air into his hand.

I turned to Ariane. She seemed none too pleased.

"Don't you think you overpaid just a bit for that information?"

"We all value information differently. Besides, I'm willing to consider it a necessary expenditure."

She slumped her shoulders dramatically at this.

According to the man, the tiger clan hadn't been seen around these parts in some time. I still wasn't sure what the cause of all this was, but talking to the stable owner about it seemed like the best plan of action.

Worst case scenario, if I wasn't able to get in touch with the tiger clan here in town, then I could try to meet them in their own domain, off in the Kuwana Prairie.

"Well, I guess we're off to look for the stable near the southern wall?"

I shifted by bag and began heading toward our next objective.

Chiyome called out to me. "Uh, Arc? South is that way..."

"Kyii!"

Ariane shot me a cold stare.

I turned on my heel and began heading in the direction Chiyome had indicated.

Hey, anyone can get lost in a new town. It happens.

I was surprised to find that the wall didn't stretch all the way around the town. In the distance, I could see a gap to the northwest. I remembered hearing that Fernandes was built next to a river, so I could only assume the gap was where the wall butted up against it. This landmark made it easy to keep myself oriented.

After making our way through the dense crowds, and stopping at a few shops along the way, we found ourselves at the southern gate. Next to the gate lay several fields closed off by wooden fences. Inside these areas, I spotted several of the large bird-like

creatures as well as the horse-sized mountain goats I'd first seen back in Plymouth.

Hands on her hips, Ariane scanned the surrounding area. "Huh, so it looks like there are actually quite a few stables near the wall..."

Ponta mewed excitedly from where it dangled in Chiyome's arms. "Kyii!"

Chiyome gestured toward a large animal enclosed in a small yard. "I think that's the one we're looking for, no?"

I looked where she was pointing. Two large animals sat alone in the corner of a grazing field, segregated from all the other birds and mountain goats.

They looked like gigantic reptiles. More specifically, they looked incredibly similar to the illustrations of triceratops I remembered seeing in the dinosaur encyclopedias I'd read endlessly as a kid.

They were a little over four meters from snout to tail and were quite tall, even while lying on the ground. Their bodies were protected with a layer of reddish-brown scales, and they had two large, white horns rising out of the tops of their heads. Unlike their dinosaur counterparts, however, they each had a thick band of white hair that ran down the middle of their backs to the ends of their tails.

But the biggest difference between these massive creatures and the triceratops I was familiar with was that they had six legs.

In stark contrast with their rather intimidating appearance, these dinosaur-like lizards were just lazing about, calmly munching on grass. One let out a massive yawn before rolling over onto its back.

"Are those the mounts?"

I made my way toward the fenced-off yard.

These looked nothing like any animal I'd seen in Fobnach so far, so it seemed a fair guess that these strange creatures were the mounts ridden by the tiger clan.

An older man with long rabbit ears called out to us as we approached.

"Well, hello there! Are you looking to buy a mount? Excuse my ignorance, but you don't

happen to be guards from the capital, do you?"

Upon catching sight of my armor, the man bowed and took on a more polite tone of voice.

"We're from the Great Canada Forest, up on the northern continent. We're just browsing around."

Ariane looked a bit surprised at my self-introduction, but said nothing.

"You don't say! It's quite rare to see elves around these parts. If it's a mount you're looking for, I'd recommend the driorgle for their speed alone. How about it?"

The rabbit-eared man gestured toward several of the large, two-legged birds and shot me a sly smile.

Apparently, we'd found the owner of these stables.

I put my hand up to stop his sales pitch and turned the topic back to our objective: finding the tiger clan.

"I heard talk that there was a man out here selling tiger clan mounts, so I came looking for him. Do you know who I'm speaking of?"

"I believe I do. May I inquire what business you have with him?" The merchant eyed me with suspicion.

I shrugged my shoulders. "It's a personal matter. You see, I was hoping to get the tiger clan to sell me some of their red nails. According to a shopkeeper, there's a man out here who found some of their mounts and might know more about what's become of the tiger clan."

This was enough to satisfy the merchant's concerns. He smiled broadly and nodded.

"Is that all? Those red nails sure are useful for blinding beasts. I see, I see. Well, actually, I was the one who found those mounts, the driftpus, over there."

The man leaned back against the fence and turned his gaze toward the six-legged dinosaur creatures. He let out a sigh. Before I could say anything, he let out a dry laugh, deep wrinkles creasing his forehead.

"The driftpus are a sign of adulthood to the tiger clan. They're practically like a partner to them. I figured if I picked up the mounts and kept them safe, eventually their owners would come back. However, we haven't seen any members of the tiger clan in quite some time."

He paused to glance over at a driftpus that had wandered closer to us to graze. The man let out another long sigh.

"As I'm sure you can see, the driftpus love to graze, and they eat a lot of grass while they're at it. This has been quite a strain on my space, time, and food costs. On the other hand, it's not like I can just release them back into the wild after taking responsibility for them. If I did, it'd destroy the relationship I spent years building with the tiger clan."

The man's gaze was filled with sadness.

He was looking at me in search of a way out, of some sort of help or assistance. Unfortunately, I really didn't know what I could do.

But if what he said were true, that the tiger clan was no longer coming into town, then we'd have no choice but to head out to their lands instead.

"How many days would it take to travel from here to the Kuwana Prairie?"

The man's eyes glinted. "After crossing the Dodgas River at the edge of town, it's a ten-day journey through the Singareeka Plains. The Kuwana Prairie is on the other side of the Syla River that flows down from the Khinray mountain range. Such a journey would certainly be reckless on foot. Why don't you go by bandehaps? They've got great stamina, and I can get a few ready in no time."

The shrewd, rabbit-eared merchant gestured toward a small herd of large mountain goats beyond the fence and smiled.

We almost exclusively traveled by teleportation, so the idea of mounts struck me as entirely unnecessary. On the one hand, sitting atop a massive beast of burden with all my bags dangling off its sides would add a nice fantasy adventure feel to our whole endeavor. On the other, we really weren't here for the thrill of the adventure.

I glanced over at Ponta, in Chiyome's arms.

"Kyii?"

I turned back to the beasts of burden on the other side of the fence. It seemed incredibly unlikely that Ponta would ever enjoy a sudden growth spurt, allowing me to ride on its back as we traveled around the countryside.

The merchant continued his sales pitch. "I'm quite serious, sir. Trying to make your way through the plains on foot is foolish. They may be a beautiful sight to behold, but the plains are filled with countless meat-eating monsters, always on the lookout for prey. Beyond the benefit of the bandehaps' speed, they're especially useful at night. They come from the plains and are able to pick up the slightest hint of a monster lurking close. They serve as great lookouts."

He had a point. We'd probably be all right traversing the plains during daylight hours, but once night fell, I wouldn't be able to use my teleportation abilities, since there wouldn't be any light. Ariane, Chiyome, and Goemon might do all right on night watch, but I wasn't so sure of my ability to detect monsters lurking in the dark.

The merchant seemed to sense my doubt and went in for the hard sell. "If the Kuwana Prairie is your ultimate destination, how about taking the driftpus with you instead? As I'm sure you can tell, most monsters' claws and fangs are no match for their scales, and it might even prove useful for your negotiations with the tiger clan once you find them."

A shrewd smile graced the rabbit man's lips. Not only was he pushing his problem off onto us, but he was looking to make some money while he was at it.

To be fair, the man wasn't wrong. Plus, this was pretty normal behavior for a merchant. For a moment, I was reminded of that young human merchant and his somewhat uncertain smile, but I shook his image out of my head.

The man rubbed his hands together. "If you agree to take the driftpus, I'll give you a discount on any other mounts."

I cocked my head in confusion. "If we have these two driftpus over here, I don't think we'll need any other mounts. Each one could carry two of us with no problem."

Ariane nodded in agreement.

The man waved his arms and shook his head emphatically. "Well, I mean, you're right,

in the physical sense. But driftpus are very particular about who they let ride them. When someone other than a member of the tiger clan is working with them, we usually just pull them along by the reins."

He wiped some sweat from his brow and let out a sigh.

"How do the tiger clan get the driftpus to accept them as their master?" I asked.

Chiyome looked incredibly interested to hear the answer to my question and turned her gaze toward the older man.

"Well, it's actually quite simple. They face off against the driftpus in a show of strength."

I shot a look at the large reptilian creatures munching away on the grass.

That explained a lot. It'd be pretty much impossible for a normal person to win in a contest of strength against these massive beasts. There were only a small number of people I could think of who might accomplish such a feat: Goemon here, with his unmatched fighting prowess, as well as some of the bear people back in the hideaway village.

"In that case, I'd like to try my hand against one of the driftpus."

I dropped my bag to the ground and stretched my arms as I approached the fence.

The merchant looked on in utter disbelief. "No, that's crazy! They might look calm and docile now, but when they're challenged, they'll take a grown man out in a single blow! Even the powerhouses of the tiger clan sometimes lose."

The man turned his attention to Goemon, who was also eyeing one of the driftpus.

"That one over there, he might stand a chance at getting one of them to obey him."

Several bystanders had gathered, drawn in by all the ruckus the merchant was making. They watched me intently, to see what would happen next.

Goemon put his hand on the fence railing and hopped over it with ease. You generally wouldn't expect that type of grace from such a large, muscle-bound man. Instead of his usual blank expression, he wore a defiant grin as he made his way toward the one of the grazing driftpus.

Sensing that someone had entered their domain, the creature narrowed its yellow eyes and fixed this intruder with a glare.

"Hey, some idiot's going to challenge the driftpus!" one of the rubberneckers called out, drawing even more onlookers.

"That big brute? Is he a member of the tiger clan?"

"Nah, no way. I've never seen any of the tiger clan who are that color. He's one of the cat people, I think."

The onlookers gossiped among themselves over the exciting event about to unfold.

Goemon didn't seem to hear the voices as he walked straight toward the driftpus, a stern look in his eye.

The driftpus returned his gaze. It stretched out its six legs, raising its massive body covered in reddish-brown scales to its full height, which was about the same as Goemon's. From where I stood, it looked almost like a small dump truck.

The driftpus charged, its white mane fluttering in the wind as it turned its two horns straight toward Goemon.

Goemon smiled and stuck out the palm of his hand, beckoning the driftpus to come closer.

"C'mere. I'll show you what true strength is."

It was rare to hear Goemon speak, though the challenge was oddly fitting.

"Grweeeeeee!"

The driftpus let out an ear-splitting wail, almost as if it had understood Goemon's challenge, as it continued its mad dash toward him.

The crowd that had gathered let out gasps and cheers as they watched. Goemon, however, remained cool as ice.

He launched into a dash of his own, heading just to the right of the driftpus. His opponent picked up on his movement and adjusted its course.

Goemon's body began glowing faintly. I could barely follow his movements as he reached up to grab the driftpus's horns and dropped himself to the ground.

It looked almost comical as the massive driftpus flipped up and flew through the air before crashing to the ground and rolling straight into the fence, which creaked audibly on impact.

Everything went quiet for a moment. Then, suddenly, the crowd began cheering.

"I can't believe it! He tossed it through the air like it was nothing!"

"See? I told ya he must be from the tiger clan!"

The driftpus's eyes rolled in its head. It made no effort to try and get up. The fallen beast didn't appear to be harmed, so Goemon would likely be able to ride it without any problems. However, despite its massive size, carrying four people was still out of the question.

The rabbit-eared merchant ran over to make sure the driftpus was okay before turning back to yell at us.

"What do you think you're doing? The test of strength is a shoving match, not... hurling the driftpus through the air!"

Goemon shrugged. Chiyome started explaining, but just then, the other driftpus let out a loud snort and stood up.

It let out a menacing roar, shaking its head from side to side.

"Grweeeee!"

Apparently, it wasn't too pleased to see its partner tossed around.

Goemon turned to me and nodded his chin toward the raging driftpus.

I set my bag on the ground, handed Ponta to Ariane, and bounded over the fence.

Goemon and I bumped fists as we walked past each other. It was my turn to go.

I could hear the roar of the crowd as I approached the driftpus.

I cast my eyes around the enclosure. The land here wasn't quite flat, but rather marked by several small hills.

I was pretty sure that Goemon had used a ninja skill to throw his opponent around like that. Despite his large size, he was able to pull off some pretty intricate techniques.

Realizing that I was lost in thought, the driftpus took the opportunity to bring itself low to the ground and start a full-frontal charge toward me, its yellow eyes glinting in the sun.

"Grweeeeeeee!"

In a total rookie move, I hesitated over whether I should dodge left or right as the huge mass of muscle and bone came rushing in at high speed. That moment of hesitation cost me dearly as I found myself face to face with the oncoming horns.

A massive thud echoed across the plain, followed by the cheers of the crowd. I had managed to grab both horns and shove the beast's snout under my arm, stopping the driftpus in its tracks.

I ignored the crowd and smiled down at the driftpus as it tried to slowly push its way through me.

"Nnng... You're a strong one."



In the game, the Paladin class gave me far greater physical strength than any normal character. However, here in this world, there were people who could actually face off against beasts like the driftpus. This made me fully aware just how dangerous it was to rely on my strength alone.

That said, losing just wasn't an option.

I could feel my feet driving deep grooves into the ground as the driftpus slowly pushed me backward. Grabbing hold of its white mane, I dropped to the ground, pulling its head down with me.

“Grwaaaaaaeeeeeeeer!!!”

The driftpus shook its head violently from side to side in an effort to break my grip. I squeezed tight with both arms, but I could still feel myself being pushed back ever so slightly.

“Nnnng...”

I threw all my weight to one side. This knocked the driftpus off-balance, three of its legs waving about in the air. The crowd let out a collective gasp.

Not wanting to lose my hard-won gains, I twisted the driftpus's head by the horns, sending the scaled beast slamming into the ground with an explosion of dust.

“Whoa, no way! Did he really just take down a driftpus head-on like that?!”

“I can't believe it! Those guys must be demons!”

As the crowd cheered, Ariane sighed and slumped her shoulders on the other side of the fence.

All of a sudden, the crowd went quiet. The driftpus had gotten back up.

“Grwaaaaeee.”

It looked rather displeased, though it calmly dropped to its knees and lowered its head in front of me.

Apparently, it was willing to accept me as its rider.

I reached out to stroke the long strip of fur that covered its back. It was surprisingly soft compared to the surrounding scales. The driftpus narrowed its reptilian eyes and let out a low purr.

I moved around to its side and hopped up onto its back.

“Grweeeeeeee!”

With a loud screech, the driftpus stood back up.

From this height, I could see far into the distance.

I looked toward the fence and saw that the old man had finished checking on the fallen driftpus and was now looking at me, mouth agape.

I pushed my heels into the driftpus's side, and it began lumbering toward the merchant.

The fallen driftpus had regained consciousness and, after shaking its head from side to side, kneeled before Goemon.

I smiled down at the merchant. “We'll be taking these two with us. Do you happen to have any saddles?”

He forced a smile in return and offered up a terse nod.

It looked like we'd secured mounts to take us out to the Kuwana Prairie—the home of the tiger clan.

We left early the next morning, before the sun had even risen.

Despite the hour, there were already people moving about the dimly lit town, beginning their days. Whether they were humans, elves, or mountain people, it seemed everyone here was an early riser.

We'd managed to arrange for the rabbit-eared man to put saddles on the driftpus. Intricate markings had been stitched into the leather with colored thread, giving me some insight into the unique culture of the tiger clan.

After attaching the saddles and purchasing various other equipment and goods we'd need for our journey into the plains, we spent the night at an inn.

The merchant had been pretty excited about the prospect of selling us some other mounts to go with the driftpus, but unfortunately for him, the two beasts would be more than enough to carry the four of us, which meant he'd basically lost all of the money he'd spent on feed for the driftpus.

However, when I told him that we would explain everything he'd done when we returned the driftpus to the tiger clan, he thanked us profusely, with tears in his eyes.

This was assuming, of course, that I didn't forget.

We were now standing atop a bridge at the northwest corner of Fernandes. The Dodgas River running beneath us was quite wide, maybe two or three hundred meters across. Several small boats were docked at piers on the town's side of the river. I could see their crews moving about busily.

The river was clearly used as a waterway for transit.

I turned my gaze away from the town and off toward the bridge ahead of us. At the center was a large drawbridge, which was currently raised in the air, held tight by large, thick chains. This was to allow taller ships passage up and down the river.

Up ahead, a group of people waited for the drawbridge to be lowered. Most of them looked to be mercenaries, outfitted with light armor and weapons, though there was another group that appeared to be farmers, judging by the implements they carried. I could instantly feel all eyes on us.

Chiyome and Goemon, being cat people, could easily blend into the crowds here on the southern continent, but Ariane and I—one of us a dark elf and the other outfitted in gleaming armor and a billowing, pitch-black cloak—drew a lot of attention. The driftpus weighed down with our bags and other gear certainly didn't help things.

As we sat on our mounts, I tried my best not to do anything that would invite further attention. Of course, given that driftpus was usually only ridden by members of the tiger clan, and I was most certainly not one of them, it made sense that people would be so interested in the sight of me riding one.

Ponta, usually an ever-present fixture atop my head, had left its usual resting place to

play around in the white fur at the base of the driftpus's neck. It would occasionally rub its face excitedly in the fluffy mane, eliciting a large yawn from the reptilian mount. At least the driftpus didn't seem to mind.

However, Ponta's soft, cotton-like fur blended in perfectly with the mane, making it nearly invisible from a distance.

Speaking of which...

"You really like being high up, don't you?"

"Kyii?"

Ponta shot me a curious look, currently standing at around the same height as me.

Ariane, who'd been watching the exchange, teased us. "Haha! Maybe Ponta only likes you because you remind it of being back up in the trees."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Chiyome's shoulders shaking slightly in silent laughter.

Suddenly, the loud sound of metal on metal filled the air as the bridge began lowering. The two ends of the bridge connected with a heavy thud, and the ground shook beneath us. The crowd instantly began moving.

I nudged my heels into the driftpus's side, prompting it forward. Ponta immediately ran back up to assume its throne atop my helmet.

"Ponta, I just don't get you..."

"Kyii!"

I figured this behavior must be common to Ponta's species and let out a sigh. Ariane, who'd been watching the whole situation unfold, laughed. I offered her my hand, which she took and easily hopped up onto the driftpus' back behind me. Chiyome climbed aboard Goemon's driftpus.

Now that everyone was seated, I pulled on the reins and gave the driftpus the signal to start moving.

Despite its hulking frame, the driftpus was actually quite nimble on its six feet and quickly outpaced the crowd.

"Hey, don't you think you're going a bit fast, Arc?" Ariane clutched my back anxiously.

I'd stored my shield and other belongings in the saddle bags hanging from either side of the driftpus, so when Ariane pulled herself close, I could easily feel the shape of her pressing against me. Of course, this was all through my armor, so I couldn't feel her as much as I might have liked. How disappointing.

Ariane somehow managed to pick up on the perverse thoughts running through my mind. "Get your head out of the gutter, Arc."

"Whatever could you be talking about?"

I was starting to think that Ariane had some kind of sixth sense for this sort of thing, but decided to keep my eyes facing straight ahead while avoiding her accusatory gaze.

Past the town's wall, Fernandes was surrounded by a vast swath of rich farmlands. However, here on the other side of the river, there were only small, mostly unkempt fields.

Considering the stories we'd heard about all the monsters and other beasts that ran wild throughout the Singareeka Plains that lay ahead, I supposed it only made sense that they hadn't had much success developing the land.

I also remembered hearing that the humans ruled the lands beyond the plains, so the people of Fernandes probably put a great deal of emphasis on protecting the river.

As we moved along the road, I watched as groups of farmers slowly split off toward their respective fields.

After a short time, we found ourselves standing before a vast, endless plain that seemed to go on forever. There were scatterings of underbrush and stands of trees here and there. I wondered if this was where the monsters were lurking.

It all kind of reminded me of a savannah.

I mumbled to myself as I cast my gaze across the plain. "Hmm. I can't really spot anything resembling the Black Forest the merchant mentioned."

As the merchant had been preparing the driftpus for us and explaining the route we should take through the plain, he'd mentioned several areas to avoid. The Black Forest was one of them.

Apparently, it was a vast forest that ran along the southern border of the plains, cutting it in two. It was also known by other names, including the Magic Forest and the Death Forest. But by whatever name, it obviously wasn't a place we wanted to be.

Chiyome looked at me, her cat ears perked up at attention.

"Well, the plains are pretty big, so as long as we don't veer off to the south, maybe we won't even run into it."

"You're probably right. The biggest problem we're going to face is trying to keep our bearings."

I glanced back at Fernandes. We were still pretty close to the town, so it was easy to use as a landmark. However, once we found ourselves in the vast, open plains with no roads to travel by, I worried we'd easily lose track of the correct direction.

Somehow, I felt like I'd run into this same problem before.

While I was dealing with this sudden sense of *déjà vu*, I felt Ariane's fist jab into my side.

"Leave the directions up to Chiyome and me. You just keep pointing straight and steering."

I shrunk a bit in the saddle and readjusted my grip on the reins.

Much like with a horse, all I had to do was guide the driftpus, and it would easily adjust its speed whenever I prompted it to.

Goemon didn't seem to be having any problems, either.

I could feel my body lean back slightly and the ride get a little rougher as the driftpus picked up speed. The scenery began flying past us.

Sadly, I didn't have a speedometer, but I figured we must be going around normal driving speed.

While I was busy being impressed with the physical prowess of the animals here in this world, Ariane yelled into my ear. She sounded far more alarmed than I'd ever heard her.

"Ahh! S-slow down Arc, you're going way too fast! Eeeeeek!"

She was practically screaming in my ear as she huddled tightly against my back.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw that she was hanging on to me for dear life, her eyes closed tightly. There were tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

I pulled back a bit on the reins to slow the driftus down.

"It's not like you to yell out, Ariane. Are you uncomfortable riding on animals?"

"I'm just... I'm just not used to it is all! You remember where I live, don't you?"

Ariane shot me a glare, her breathing rough and her amethyst cheeks taking on a light shade of red.

When I thought back to her village and its surroundings, it all made sense. In the Great Canada Forest, where she and the other elves lived, traveling by horse was probably unheard of.

Even in the villages themselves, I didn't recall seeing any mounts.

It was probably fair to say that Ariane wasn't used to the whole riding experience.

"Could... Could you just hold back on the speed a bit until I'm more used to it?"

Hearing Ariane plead like that brought out my teasing side. "Hmm, I dunno. It's kinda funny hearing you cry like a little kid..."

The red-faced elven woman delivered several hard blows to my back before I could finish getting the words out of my mouth. *Fine, fine.*

I slowed the driftus down a bit and began using Dimensional Step wherever I could to gain some more ground. Unfortunately, the technique wasn't really all that useful while we were riding animals.

Whenever we teleported, it took a few seconds for the driftbus to get their bearings. They'd stop and look around a bit before starting off again at a slow trot.

If we were going to go through this stop-and-start routine every time we teleported, it seemed like a better idea to just let the driftbus keep speeding along. Besides, out here in such a wide-open plain, I'd be lucky to travel six, maybe seven kilometers at most with Dimensional Step, and that was only if I focused on the very edge of the horizon.

All of this, of course, was based on the assumption that this world was of similar size to the Earth.

The plains spread out around us, blank, endless, and generally featureless, in every direction. We continued our journey west as the sun slowly began falling, adding a deep scarlet hue to the sky and bathing the distant horizon in darkness.

I held my hand up to try and shield my eyes from the setting sun.

"I guess we should probably look for some place to set up camp."

"How about that tree over there?"

Chiyome was pointing toward a tall, solitary tree in the middle of the plains. I steered the driftbus toward it, and we all settled down for a quick dinner.

While I'd felt a degree of anxiety trying to camp among the trees in the darkened forest, being out here in the vast, open plains left me with a general sense of unease.

There were no breaks, no boundaries, no obstructions. This was quite different from the places I'd been thus far, and it left me feeling more than a bit lonely.

Ariane's eyes also darted around uneasily, which made sense, considering how much of her life she'd spent surrounded by trees. Chiyome and Goemon, on the other hand, moved with practiced ease as they got the camp ready. They must have done this countless times.

Ponta darted about the camp, looking at everything with great curiosity. Seeing its excitement brought an easy smile to Chiyome's face. She must have been around fourteen or fifteen, but seeing her act so tough out here in the middle of the plains made me more than a little sad—a sadness, no doubt, brought about by the privileged

life I'd led.

If I were still human and left on my own to survive the night out here in these empty plains, I knew I'd never make it. It was thanks to being a skeleton, and the inhibited emotions this afforded me, that I'd been able to make it as far as I had.

That being said, I still had no intention of staying this way forever.

And that was how I spent my first night on the plains: my mind fruitlessly wandering while I watched Ponta get in Chiyome's way as she diligently prepared our camp.

The next morning started off as many did nowadays: with Ariane and I training.

Unable to get ahold of anything like our usual wooden swords, we spent the morning armed with feeble branches and practiced our footwork instead. I had nowhere near the experience of Ariane and the others when it came to fighting, so I figured that learning how to move my body in combat would be of the greatest importance. I trained and trained until it was nearly reflexive.

With power and speed already on my side, all I needed was practice. I was slowly getting used to it under Ariane's tutelage, but was still nowhere near Glenys's level.

After finishing our morning practice, we ate a quick breakfast before continuing our journey west. Right around sunset on the second day, I could make out a mountain range running up from the south. Some of the peaks were capped in snow, indicating they must be pretty high up.

The mountain range didn't entirely bisect the plains however. Turning my gaze to the north, I could see where they ended.

"So, I guess this is the Khinray mountain range the merchant told us about. The Syla River should run from the base of the mountains off to the north, and on the other side of that will be the Kuwana Prairie."

"And that's where we'll meet the tiger clan." Goemon finished my sentence for me as he gazed ahead at the mountain range. Behind him, Chiyome nodded.

My mind ran wild as I thought about the tiger clan waiting for us on the other side of

the mountains. I cast my gaze to the south, where I spotted the forest.

There was something about it that seemed... odd. I shielded my eyes with my hand and squinted.

“What... is that?”

A gigantic tree poked up out of the forest, standing tall and proud.

We were too far away to tell how tall it was, but it was obviously completely out of scale with the trees around it. At a glance, I thought it might be as tall as Tokyo Tower. It looked a lot like the Lord Crown, actually, though it didn't have anywhere near the huge canopy that capped the Lord Crown, which gave it a rather lanky appearance.

But that wasn't what was so odd about it.

This mammoth, Tokyo Tower-sized tree was slowly moving south.

Every time the tree moved, little black specks flew out from the surrounding forest—probably birds, or some type of monster.

Ariane's stunned voice came out as a whisper. “Is that... a tridentinium?”

“What's a tridentinium?” I repeated the word.

Chiyome was the first to respond, her eyes also fixed on the massive tree moving in the distance. “A tridentinium is a creature.”

Ariane continued, “The humans consider them to be a type of monster, but in reality, there are several kinds of tridentinium. Some are inhabited by spirits, others consumed by death. Still others live by the power of rune stones. They're known collectively as tridentinium. However, I've never seen one that big before.”

She let out a surprised gasp as we watched the tridentinium slowly but surely make its journey south through the woods.

“I wonder if those woods are connected to the Black Forest we heard about.”

“Who knows? Best to avoid them either way. Tridentinium can be pretty ferocious.”

I squinted and focused my gaze on the lumbering juggernaut.

Ferocious or not, even being next to a thing that size could prove dangerous. One misstep and you're done for.

"You're right. Better we stay out of the forests unless we absolutely have to go in."

Steering clear of any place that had such outrageous animals living within it seemed like a great idea to me.

Chiyome turned her gaze away, ears still twitching. "Why don't we look for a place on the bank of the Syla River, where it comes out of the northern side of the mountain range? We can set up camp there."

I glanced back at Ariane, who nodded in agreement.

Well, it looked like we'd have to save the Kuwana Prairie for tomorrow.

Early the next morning, we crossed over the Syla River and into the Kuwana Prairie.

Under normal circumstances, crossing the wide river would be impossible, and you'd need to head upstream toward the Khinray mountain range. However, Dimensional Step took us to the opposite shore in the blink of an eye.

Or two blinks, really. We had to go back for the second driftpus.

The Kuwana Prairie, home of the tiger clan, looked a lot like the Singareeka plains we'd just left. After crossing the river, I could spot four gently sloping mountains ahead of us, seemingly placed at even intervals from south to north. Other than these, there was little else in the way of noteworthy landmarks.

So far, the trip was going along splendidly. We continued west, the sloping mountains an ever-present sight to our right. I was glad we hadn't run into any of the predatory creatures we'd heard so much about, though riding along day and night through vast, unending plains wasn't quite the adventure I'd had in mind.

Ariane was now used to the driftpus's speed and spent the time quietly watching the scenery pass by, only piping up occasionally to complain about her butt being sore and

wanting to take a break. Other than that, we didn't talk much.

It was Ponta, enjoying the breeze from atop my head, who notified us that our peaceful journey was about to end.

"Kyii!" The cottontail fox let out a mew of alarm as if it had just spotted something.

Ariane instantly responded. "Someone's coming."

Off to the right, two shadows were moving across the plains toward us. Judging by the plumes of dust behind them, they were approaching at a high rate of speed.

There was no way we could outrun them, even if we tried.

I pulled back on the reins to slow the driftpus down while keeping an eye on the shadowy figures. Ariane was the first to identify them.

"They're riding the same mounts as we are. Do you think maybe they could be part of the tiger clan?"

I brought the driftpus to a full stop.

Lacking Ariane's superb eyesight, I still couldn't quite make out the figures, but I was excited about the opportunity to finally meet the tiger clan. I'd been searching for them everywhere.

My excitement was quickly doused when I realized that the incoming figures were bearing down on us to attack. However, once they drew close, they slowed down a bit and took a more investigative posture. There was no doubt about it—they were members of the tiger clan, just as Ariane had said. Each of them rode their own driftpus and carried a spear. The weapons had decorations dangling from the ends of them.

It was hard to get a feel for how tall they were while seated atop their mounts, but they seemed to be even taller than Goemon. I figured they had to be around 250 centimeters. They were about as buff, if not more so, than Goemon too. However, their bodies were covered with black and orange fur, giving the impression of large tigers. Much like Goemon, the two men were bare from the waist up and showing off their impeccable muscles. They wore similar gauntlets as him as well.

Almost all of the cat people I'd seen were quite slender. These two tiger clan members, however, were both hulking masses of muscle. While most of the cat people had rounded ears poking out of their short, shoulder-length hair, these men had more of a beast-like appearance.

They brought their respective driftpus to a stop about five meters in front of us.

One of the men spoke in a loud, booming voice as he thrust his spear in my direction. "Where did you fiends get those mounts? Those saddles belong to the Ena, one of the six great clans of the prairie. Spare us your excuses! We'll strike you down where you stand!"

I glanced at Ariane, and Goemon glanced back at Chiyome.

Apparently, the saddles we'd picked up marked which clan owned them. These men probably suspected us of stealing the driftpus.

I raised my hands in a gesture of peace and tried to explain. "We come from the land of the elves in the Great Canada Forest, up on the northern continent. We've journeyed here into the prairie to meet with the tiger clan. A merchant in the town of Fernandes gave us these driftpus, and we've ridden them here to return them to you."

I decided to start there and see how they would respond.

The two men looked slightly perplexed and leaned in to whisper among themselves.

"We are soldiers of the ancient Whilee clan! What business do you have with us, fiends?" The man punctuated his words with another thrust of his spear in my direction. All eyes were on me.

I figured I had nothing to hide. "I found this peculiar spice known as a red nail back at a stall in Fernandes. I came out here in the hopes of acquiring some from you. Would you be willing to discuss this with me?"

The men looked back at me in disbelief.

Trying to explain in such simple terms amid the tense standoff that my only reason for being here was a desire to buy chili peppers probably came off as little more than a poorly thought-up excuse.

While the two were puzzling over how best to interpret my explanation, Goemon and Chiyome suddenly jerked their heads in another direction. They seemed to have picked up on something.

“Hm?”

“What’s that?”

The members of the tiger clan also noticed something was amiss and turned to face the same direction. Off in the distance, I spotted a thin plume of dust rising up into the sky, and it was getting closer. This figure seemed to be traveling alone, however. Another member of the tiger clan perhaps?

A look of concern washed over one of the men’s faces. He lifted his spear high into the air, as if to convey some sort of message.

The newcomer pulled up nearby and breathlessly delivered a message. “Two giants have appeared near the camp! Round up everyone you can and head back at once!”

“It can’t be!”

“Dammit!”

No sooner had the words left the man’s mouth than he immediately turned his mount around, tugged on the reins, and dashed off in another direction.

The remaining two men quickly glanced over at us before also turning their mounts to face in yet a different direction.

“You’re a fighter, aren’t you? If you want to meet the chieftain, then come with us!”

The men didn’t even wait for a response before snapping the reins and taking off at high speed. I stared at their backs as they grew smaller.

Ariane’s head popped out from behind me.

“What should we do, Arc? It seems like they want us to help them out of a pretty tough situation.”

I glanced over toward Goemon and Chiyome. They both nodded. The final call was up

to me.

"Well, we've come this far. We might as well see it through."

Goemon snapped his reins and sent his driftpus running off after the other two men. I followed close behind.

The messenger had reported that giants had appeared near the camp, but I still wasn't quite sure what that meant exactly. From a human's perspective, the tiger clan could easily be classified as giants in their own right. So a giant by their standards, especially one that elicited such a worried reaction, said a lot about the danger these creatures presented.

For a moment, I thought back to the mysterious creature, the tridentinum, that we'd seen off in the distance. But then I shook my head and focused on the task at hand. Against something that size, I wasn't sure we'd stand a chance. While I'd do my best to slay such a beast, it was more likely that I wouldn't walk away from that battle.

Ariane interrupted my meandering thoughts. "Seems like we've gotten ourselves wrapped up in someone else's problems again."

"Well, think about it. If we help them out, it should be easier to negotiate later. So maybe we should consider ourselves lucky."

But my cheery laugh was only met with sighs of exasperation.

Ponta wagged its tail calmly from its perch atop my head. Judging by my furry companion's composure, I could tell that we weren't in any real danger yet.

I lost track of time as we continued after the pair of driftpus leading the way ahead. There were no watches or any other method of actually measuring time, but I figured it'd been about half an hour or so. Despite the frantic dash, I was impressed to see that the driftpus weren't even tired.

Finally, I spotted a small camp ahead in the distance.

It was still pretty far off, and I had a hard time making out any detail with all the jostling from the driftpus's movements, but I could make out a small cluster of buildings that looked similar to the yurts used by Central Asian nomads.

A short distance away, among the hills just outside the camp, I could make out the figures of two giants. They struck an imposing sight, standing nearly three times as tall as the tiger clan members bearing down on them.

"So, those are giants?" Ariane peeked around me to get a look at what waited us up ahead. Even over the driftpus' thundering footfalls, I could hear the sound of her gulping.

"Kyii kyiii!" On the other end of the spectrum, Ponta began mewing loudly, hopping down from my helmet and wrapping itself around my neck.

The giants were nothing like what I'd imagined.

That is to say, they had no heads.

They weren't quite human, but they certainly were human-like. Or, more accurately, they looked a lot like headless gorillas. Though, I'd yet to see a gorilla in this world.

Standing at an impressive six meters tall, these behemoths had dark skin, stubby legs, and carried crudely fashioned stone axes. Every time they swung these axes into the ground, huge plumes of dirt erupted into the sky.

While they might have lacked proper heads, their faces—consisting of two eyes, a gaping mouth filled with yellow teeth, and no nose—emerged from their upper chests. They looked like villains you'd see in a kids' superhero show.

The name suddenly came to me. "Are these... dark giants?"

I watched as a dramatic fight between the tiger clan and the dark giants unfolded in front of me, each side gaining and losing ground. There was no way that all the members of the tiger clan would come out of this battle unscathed. Not with the strength the dark giants could bring to bear.

I saw one of them clutch a man's body in its fist, gnawing on his upper torso. My Revival spell would be of no use here, not with how much of the body was now missing. I spotted other injured combatants all around them too.

Sensing just how dire the position of their comrades was, the two soldiers ahead pushed their driftpus even harder, charging straight toward the dark giants. Once the men drew close, one of the giants turned toward the newcomers and let out a loud,

intimidating roar.

The driftpus were coming in way too fast for the giant to react in time, and they managed to score a direct hit on the side of its leg, twin horns striking its flesh. When I looked back, I was surprised to see that one of the driftpus' horns had snapped off. They'd looked pretty solid to me, which could only mean one thing: The dark giant had really tough skin.

Of course, the driftpus' charge wasn't all for naught—it was successful in knocking the giant back slightly. Though, judging by its movement, it didn't seem to be in much pain at all.

"Whoa... This one won't be easy!"

Chiyome was standing on the back of the saddle, holding on to Goemon's shoulders as he continued steering the driftpus, watching the battle unfold.

"I'm not able to use any of my more powerful magic with all these people around. But we definitely need to do something about these big lugs."

I yanked back on the driftpus's reins, hopped down from the saddle, and retrieved my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg and Holy Shield of Teutates from the saddle bags.

With my sword drawn and shield at the ready, I made a mad dash toward the dark giant.

Ariane, Chiyome, and Goemon each got their own weapons ready and followed closely behind me.

"First off, a little bit of protection! Holy Shield!"

As soon as I summoned this Paladin skill, a dim glow enveloped my shield, spreading out to cover my entire body.

I hadn't had the opportunity to use this defensive skill yet, so I wasn't too sure how effective it would be. However, I figured a little insurance couldn't hurt.

I zigged and zagged through the bodies of the tiger clan, my body glowing as I moved toward the front line. Once I got there, I found myself facing off against one of the dark giants alone.

“Time to try my skills out! Holy Ray Sword!”

I launched into another skill, swinging my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg straight up toward the sky. A bright light formed around the blade then shot off toward the giant, tearing the ground up in its wake.

The moment the wave of light crossed the dark giant’s foot, there was a thunderous roar followed by a bright spray of blood.

“Auuughraoooou!!!”

The scream that came out of the face embedded in the dark giant’s chest sounded almost human... but not quite. The hills reverberated with its cries.

Judging by the amount of blood, I initially assumed this to be a grave wound, but once I got a better look, I could see that it was only a mere cut.

At the very least, this creature wouldn’t make it through unscathed.

The dark giant fell back, in an attempt to protect its injured foot. However, I continued pressing the attack.

Suddenly, all eyes of the tiger clan were on me. Evidently, they were surprised to see a man fully decked out in gleaming armor join the fray, and I could hardly blame them.

“I won’t let there be any more casualties!”

I yelled loud enough to make sure those around me could hear before lunging in once more at the dark giant’s foot, this time coming in to strike directly. There was a loud *thunk* as the blade sank halfway into the giant’s flesh, followed by another spray of blood. Still, I was surprised that I wasn’t able to cut all the way through, even with my immense strength.

“Oouaaaraugh!!!”

The face in the giant’s chest contorted in pain as it screamed, lifting its foot in an attempt to guard itself from another blow.

Goemon came running up from behind me. “Muscle to stone, concussive fist!”

He punched down with his fist, now the color of dulled steel, straight into the dark giant's other foot. There was a loud, concussive burst followed by a creaking sound. A second later, the dark giant began to topple.

Next up was Chiyome. She dove off of Goemon's shoulders and launched herself toward the falling giant.

Two strings of water danced around her hands like writhing snakes.

"Body to water, aqua spear!"

The strings straightened into dual spears made of water. They launched straight toward their mark like giant arrows.

One of the spears stabbed into the dark giant's gaping mouth, while the other embedded itself deep in its eye.

The giant let out an unearthly howl as it slammed into the ground with an earth-shaking thud. Ariane joined us, her snow-white hair fluttering as she ran past me, sword in hand and flame encircling her blade.

"Holy flame, heed my call! Devour thine enemy and burn it to ash!"

A long chain of flame arced out of her sword in response.

Ariane ran straight up the dark giant's chest and buried her flaming sword deep in its unscathed eye.

The dark giant flailed about like a broken toy, its arms and legs twitching uncontrollably as smoke rose from its gaping mouth. The scent of charred meat filled the air.

It seemed like it was finally dead.

Unfortunately, there was another dark giant, which was now bringing its stone axe down toward Ariane as she pulled her sword out of her fallen foe.

A metallic clang so loud I thought my head would burst reverberated around us. I'd managed to catch the axe with my shield held above my head, though my legs felt like they'd buckle at any second.

I looked down at a wide-eyed Ariane. “Are you okay?”



She nodded, almost imperceptibly.

I let out a breath in relief and glared at the dark giant.

Even with my increased defense, I could still feel my arms tingling from the sheer power of the blow. Still, it was impressive that I was able to hold my own against it in the first place.

As soon as I felt the dark giant pull its axe away from the shield, I drew back.

Behind me, Chiyome threw several water shuriken at the giant's face in an attempt to keep it at bay. Fortunately, this seemed to annoy the behemoth, and it fell back a few steps.

One of the tiger clan warriors stepped away from his dumbfounded comrades and let out a roar as he lunged in, armed with a metal club.

"You dirty bastards! You won't drive us out of our prairie. These are the lands of our clan, the lands of the great hunters!"

The man brought his club on the giant's foot with a powerful swing, causing it to cry out.

As if on cue, the rest of the tiger clan warriors descended upon the giant. There must have been around thirty of them. They swarmed the dark giant's feet, knocking it onto its back. Then they turned their attention to its face, bashing it in until the creature stopped moving.

The valley was now home to two dark giant corpses.

The victorious members of the tiger clan let out a massive cheer. The man who'd implored his comrades to take up their arms approached us.

"Thank you for your assistance. I take it you're from the east? And... elves, it seems?"

I turned toward the man. I figured he was a representative of the tiger clan, so I quickly grabbed the waterskin from where it hung at my waist and gestured for Ariane to introduce herself first.

Ariane caught on right away. "My name is Ariane Glenys Maple, a citizen of the Great

Canada Forest on the northern continent. My comrades here are members of the Jinshin clan, also from the northern continent.”

Ariane handled the introductions while I took a swig of the spring water.

I couldn’t help but worry about how quickly things would get awkward if the water’s effect wore off while we were in the midst of discussions.

I took my helmet off, took my place at Ariane’s side, and made eye contact with her.

“And this here is my fellow elf...”

“Arc Lalatoya. I’m a new member to my village, but I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Kyii!”

Ponta peeked up from around my neck and let out a loud cry.

“And this is my travel companion, Ponta.”

“Kyii!”

The man nodded and lowered the gigantic club down from his shoulder, resting it on the ground with a heavy thud. He puffed out his chest and introduced himself.

“My name is Aene Wilhe, chieftain of the Whilee people, one of the six clans that roam these great plains. While I wish I could spend more time properly welcoming those who have come to our aid in our most dire hour, unfortunately, I must get my injured brethren back to our camp. I understand you have some business with us, but I ask for you to be patient while I tend to these matters.”

I nodded as I slid my helmet back over my head. “Chieftain Aene, my abilities may be of service. I can heal the wounded, if you like.”

A look of surprise washed over the man’s face. “Please, by all means. I’ll return to the village and have some of my people come here to assist you.”

The chieftain smiled broadly before hurrying back toward their camp. Once he was out of earshot, Ariane looked up at me with a skeptical eyebrow raised.

"For a moment there, you had me thinking you were actually a nice guy. But you're just trying to get in their good graces, aren't you?"

I let out a short laugh. "I got my chance to meet the tiger clan, didn't I? Having them be in my debt could definitely help in the red nail negotiations."

She shook her head. "I don't get it. You don't really care about money, but you're absolutely fixated on food."

"What's so bad about that? Besides, don't you think it's more in the elven spirit to favor the hunt for good food over the acquisition of wealth?"

Ariane screwed her face up. "One of these days, I'm going to need to ask some specific questions about how you view the elves..."

I'd already turned away from Ariane and had begun enthusiastically making my way toward the field of battle to provide aid to the wounded. I heard her mumble something from behind me; she sounded embarrassed.

"And... thanks, Arc. For helping me back there."

Her timid behavior somehow brought a smile to my lips. Back there... I assumed she was talking about using my shield to protect her from the dark giant.

"Oh, hmm?"

I rubbed at my chin and turned back, trying to lock eyes with her. However, Ariane kept jerking her head to the side and refused to meet my gaze. I ended up slowly walking circles around her.

I could suddenly feel eyes on both of us. Though neither said anything, Chiyome and Goemon's gazes carried with them an almost physical pressure. Giving in, I hurried away toward the battle field.

"Ah, right. I'll get on that healing."

After dealing with the fallout from the dark giant attack, we were invited to a corner of the Whilee camp, where the chieftain's hut was located.

The camp itself wasn't all that big, serving as the home to fewer than a hundred or so people.

Now that I was up close, I was able to confirm my original impression of the homes here looking like yurts. The buildings consisted of windowless, circular frames with a thick, white cloth pulled tight over them. Inside, they were illuminated by the same crystal lamps I'd seen back in the elven villages.

The interior walls were decorated with the bones, fangs, and other body parts of various animals, while the floors were covered with several intricately weaved rugs.

The entrances and ceilings were made for members of the tiger clan, all of whom were more or less Goemon's size, and felt rather large compared to the quarters I was used to in human towns. Even the room itself was quite spacious, giving me the impression of a hotel lobby.

With all of us here, however, the chieftain's home felt more than a tad cramped.

Aene sat in a chair facing the four of us, while several of his tiger clan warriors sat around the perimeter of the room, leaning in closely.

Everyone in the room was absolutely rippling with muscles, either just as large as Goemon, or even larger. It was quite an impressive display of physical prowess.

Chieftain Aene interrupted my thoughts and broke the silence.

"I can't thank you enough for your help, Arc. I see that Ariane here keeps herself surrounded by good subordinates."

Ariane tried clearing up the chieftain's misunderstanding. Apparently, he was under the impression that Ariane was our leader, and that I was one of her subordinates. It did make a degree of sense, considering she'd been the first to introduce herself.

"Ah, I see. So, you're travelers, you say? My apologies, Arc. All the same, I'd still like to express my gratitude."

After his brief apology, he offered up his thanks once again.

The soldiers around the room shuffled about a bit, uncomfortable looks appearing on their faces.

A hulking woman stepped from behind the chieftain's chair and shot a harsh look at the men sitting around the room.

"Are all of you going to just sulk around like babies because you needed someone to clean up after your little hunting expedition? If you think it's okay to mutter about someone else getting praise, then you've got another thing coming! I'll smack you right upside your stupid heads if you do that again."

Apparently, some of the warriors had reservations about the healing I'd done earlier.

The muscle-bound woman took up a position beside the chieftain and crossed her huge arms across her chest as she shot a death glare at the warriors lining the walls. She was massive, nearly as tall as Goemon. Compared to the other warriors in the room, she actually looked rather slim, but this was nothing more than a trick of the eye. Next to Ariane or Chiyome, she'd be absolutely huge.

Her skin, or what I could see of it through her tiger-striped fur, was the color of bronze, and she had a voluptuous chest that was nicely propped up by her crossed arms. Overall, she had a rather refined look about her.

All the other warriors in the room instantly went quiet and looked down at the ground.

The chieftain shrugged sheepishly and glanced over at the woman next to him.

"Apologies about that. This is my wife, Yugah."

Yugah offered up a charming grin. "Yugah Aene's the name. I'm sorry about that. You're our guests and all, but these guys here... they don't even warrant the title of warriors. Those giants have been whittling away at our clans. Even though we were able to get our people to safety, we'd sustained many casualties. I'd like to thank you on behalf of these worthless idiots here."

After healing the wounded on the battlefield, Chieftain Aene had brought us back to one of the houses in the camp, where I'd found even more injured people.

At his request, I'd used my healing magic on all of the people in the room. One thing that caught my eye, however, was that the majority of the wounded were women and children.

Apparently, they were the survivors of the initial attack.

I brushed off what I'd done. "It wasn't all selfless. We came here with our own reasons to speak to you and your people. If you'd like to return the favor, I'd be honored if you'd at least entertain my request."

Aene slammed his fist onto his knee and shot me a rather intense look. "That's right, you mentioned that before. You've come this far to meet us, so I'd like to help you as best I can."

The warriors lining the room murmured at this, but another sharp look from Yugah quickly silenced them.

It's not like I was looking for some sort of doctor's fee, so I figured I might as well get straight to the point. Upon hearing my request, Chieftain Aene, his wife, and all the other warriors in the room looked at me wide-eyed, and with more than a little suspicion. Ariane let out a slight sigh off to my left.

To my right, Ponta played with Chiyome's finger. Goemon was sitting on the ground, his eyes closed tight.

"So... you mean to tell me that you came all the way out here in search of the red nail? And even brought driftpus across the great plains to accomplish this?"

Aene burst out laughing. Then his shoulders slumped and he looked at the ground, his expression apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Arc. Unfortunately, my clan does not have any red nail to offer you. You see, it's grown by another, larger clan farther to the east. It's not all that popular among us, so those who wish to obtain it go and barter for themselves."

Aene let out a heavy sigh and rubbed the back of his head.

"In that case, could one of your people take me to the clan that harvests the red nail?"

A predatory look flashed across the chieftain's eyes. "The giants you helped us defeat come from a place known as the Black Forest, down south of here. They very rarely venture this far, but lately they've been showing up more and more often here in the prairie. We'd heard warnings from the clan off to the west about this, but we never imagined that the giants would actually come to us. I'd like to take a band of my warriors to go visit the Ena, one of the largest clans."

Though he didn't say it directly, I could tell what the chieftain was getting at—the drifters we'd ridden in on were from the Ena clan.

"Can we go with you? We can handle a giant or two if they come our way. I promise we won't slow you down."

The chieftain smiled and gave a firm nod. "Really? That'd be great! There are still giants roaming around out there, and we're a rather small clan, so I'll need to leave warriors behind to fend off any attacks."

So, we'd just be their backup, if needed. Basically... mercenaries.

This idea actually brought back fond memories.

I glanced around at Ariane, Chiyome, and Goemon to gauge their agreement. Chiyome and Goemon nodded silently, while Ariane affirmed my decision with a gaze.

Well, that settled it.

We'd spend the night with the Whilee clan in a tent they prepared for us then head off to the Ena clan's camp the next day. We would be accompanied by Chieftain Aene and ten of his strongest warriors.

Even given the sheer fighting prowess of the tiger clan, they would undoubtedly suffer casualties if they had to fend off a dark giant attack alone. Making matters worse, they could only afford to send so many people to the Ena camp.

However, now that we'd actually taken on a dark giant, I was pretty sure I had a feel for how they fought and felt assured that the next time we met it'd be much less of a one-sided battle.

The only issue was whether we'd be able to safely make it to the Ena clan's camp. I glanced over toward Ariane who was polishing the Sword of the King of Lions while deep in thought.

Chiyome sat at the dinner table, expressionless, while she ate a spice-laden cookie that had been prepared for our dinner. She looked like a chipmunk with it stuffed into her cheeks. Goemon had stepped out earlier, saying that he wanted to observe how the tiger clan warriors trained.

Having already finished its own dinner in record time, Ponta was sleeping on my lap, rocking back and forth like a ship adrift at sea.

It all felt like just another peaceful day. Everything seemed right with the world.

We left early the next morning while the sun was still barely cresting the horizon and made our way northwest toward the Ena camp.

Thanks to the incredible speed of the driftbus, the whole journey took less than two days, just as Chieftain Aene had said. The outlines of the camp came into view at the edge of the horizon around noon on the second day. Off in the distance, I could make out the distinctive shapes of the yurts.

According to Aene, over 400 members of the Ena clan lived in the camp. This was a bit of a surprise to me at first, considering it was the largest clan on the prairie. However, upon reflection, it made sense. After all, with dark giants and other monsters roaming the land, it wasn't easy to grow and spread your population. Only the strongest survived.

The tiger clan were nomadic. They survived by hunting, though I also spotted some domesticated animals near the homes. These goats—or something like that, but they lacked the distinctive horns of a mountain goat—were covered in long, white fur. Aene called them uumoh. Their long fur was used for weaving, and it was especially valuable in bartering. But with all the recent giant sightings, they'd been unable to bring much back to Fobnach in the east.

After filling us in on the Ena clan, Chieftain Aene led us into the camp.

No one took much notice of our sudden appearance. I got the sense that most of the people around here were already aware that Aene was the chieftain of the Whilee clan.

This wasn't true for all of us, of course. Ariane, a dark elf, and I, in my full suit of armor, stood out like sore thumbs, drawing all sorts of stares.

However, there was something else about the general vibe of the camp that caught my attention. Everyone seemed to be on edge. I wondered if it was just my imagination as I examined the faces of those who'd gathered outside to watch.

As we approached the center of the camp, Aene recognized someone and hopped off his driftbus, approaching the man with a large smile on his face.

"Houwe! How've you been? To think that the Ena chieftain himself would come out to meet us. How did you know?" Chieftain Aene greeted the large, tiger-like man standing in the clearing at the center of camp.

"I heard reports of your impending arrival. I see that you've brought quite an... eclectic group with you." As he spoke, Houwe looked over at me with great wonder in his eyes, as if he were sizing me up.

This man was by far one of the largest and strongest-looking members of the tiger clan I'd seen yet. He was just shy of three meters, standing about a head taller than Aene. His entire body was covered in bulging muscles, almost like a form of fleshy armor, and his skin was marked by countless scars. Houwe had clearly seen many battles in his day.

Goemon started glowing slightly as he summoned up his spirit magic, as if unconsciously challenging the hulking mass that stood before us. Aene, however, seemed to take no notice of the tense atmosphere and asked Houwe about the recent goings-on at their camp. Then he turned the conversation back to us.

"Two giants appeared near our camp a couple days ago."

Chieftain Houwe raised an eyebrow at this and nodded gravely. "So, they're starting to move farther east. Did you take any casualties?"

He cast a glance at the warriors behind Aene, apparently aware of what kind of fighting abilities they could bring to bear.

Aene told Houwe of the battle between his clan and the two giants, and how we showed up just in time to lend a hand.

Chieftain Houwe let out a loud, exasperated sigh, much like the warriors back in the Whilee camp had.

"I'm glad you were able to make use of this healer, but to accept the help of someone outside the clan on the field of battle..."

The disappointment was clear on Houwe's face. However, Aene simply laughed it off

and smiled.

"My men said the same thing, but Yugah put them all back in line."

Houwe seemed taken aback by this and averted his gaze. "I-I see. Well... uh... Please don't mention what I just said to her."

Seeing the powerful man in front of us go wide-eyed at the mere mention of Aene's wife brought to mind an image of the burly woman. She had quite an influence on people.

Sensing my gaze, Houwe cleared his throat and took on a serious look once more.

"Actually, the timing of your arrival couldn't be better. The other chieftains will all be gathering here so we can discuss the giant situation. Some of our camps have been laid to ruin at their hands, so we're putting together a plan to wipe them out."

Aene let out a heavy sigh. "I see... Given how far they've roamed, I thought that this might be a possibility, but—"

Before he could finish, Houwe interrupted him. He'd been staring at me for some time. "By the way, where did your new friends get these driftpus they're riding?"

Houwe's face was tense. I told him the same story I'd told Aene the day before.

"Ahh, I see. Two members of our clan went out on patrol and never returned. I suppose these are their mounts." Houwe let out a groan and closed his eyes for a moment. Then he looked back at me. "Arc, was it? These driftpus are invaluable to our warriors. Would you be willing to return them to us?"

I returned his gaze and raised a single finger in the air. "I have no problem returning these two mounts. However, I would like to make one request of you, as chieftain of the Ena clan."

Houwe's whole body perked up at this, as if a bolt of lightning had just run through him. "Hmm, how interesting. You plan to make a request of me, chieftain of the Ena, one of the six great clans of the prairie? What, pray tell, is it?"

A broad grin spread across his face as Chieftain Houwe shot me a steely glare. Right as I was about to discuss my terms, however, a loud ruckus broke out near the entrance

to the camp. Everyone turned to see the source of the noise.

An injured driftpus was crashing through the camp.

Houwe's eyes went wide. His voice boomed as he shouted out orders. "I want all women and children to get out of the way! Men, subdue that driftpus!"

As soon as the orders were given, several people—likely warriors—took off in a run after the driftpus as it frantically wound its way through the camp. Before they reached it, however, the driftpus slumped down, apparently exhausted, tossing its young rider to the ground.

Houwe made his way over, shoving onlookers out of the way as he tried getting closer.

Being outsiders, Ariane, Chiyome, Goemon, and I decided to stay back and watch as the events unfolded. Meanwhile, Ponta summoned up a gust of magical wind, sweeping it high into the sky, where it could get a better look at what was going on before drifting back down.

"Kyi, kyiii kyiii!"

Ponta offered up a report on what it had seen as soon as it landed atop my helmet, though, unfortunately, I couldn't understand a word of it.

Chieftain Houwe's voice boomed out from the crowd. "Someone get Bauh the healer here at once!"

Several people responded, stumbling over each other as they rushed off deeper into the camp. Presently, a hulking figure pushed their way roughly through the crowd toward the young person held tightly in Houwe's arms.

The rider's breathing was labored, and their left arm appeared to be cut quite deeply, judging by all the blood.

Aene nodded in my direction. I nodded back and immediately summoned one of my spells.

"Please excuse my interference. Heal!"

A warm, bright light formed around the injured person's left arm, then into the wound.

It was almost like watching a film in reverse as the bone mended itself together and the flesh closed over it. Then the light disappeared, and the wound was gone.

The crowd let out loud cries of surprise as the scene unfolded. No one was more surprised than Chieftain Houwe, though. His eyes were as wide as dinner plates as he looked back and forth between me and the young member of his clan. Slowly, the boy's eyes fluttered open.

"You're awake! What happened? Do you remember anything?"

The young boy was startled by the chieftain's voice and looked around, confused. He stood up slowly.

"Huh?!"

Apparently, even this was too much exertion, and he teetered about for a second before collapsing to the ground again.

"Though his injuries are healed, this spell cannot return the blood he's lost. He will need to rest for now."

The chieftain nodded and waved over two men standing nearby. He instructed them to bring the boy back to his house. However, right before they took him away, the boy's eyes fluttered open again, and he spoke to Houwe in an unsteady voice.

The boy's voice became weaker and harder to hear with each word he rasped out. The chieftain perked up his ears and leaned in close.

"Near... the camp... Giants. Thirty... maybe more... They're... I saw them at..."

Now well and fully spent, the young boy slumped back, his arms dangling limply at his sides. Houwe sent the two men off. His rage was readily apparent. His eyes flashed, and a vein in his forehead throbbed, making the man look almost like a demon.

"Call all the chieftains! I want any warriors not dedicated to camp defense to prepare themselves for the hunt!"

His voice boomed. The silence of the camp was shattered as the clan let out war cries and began preparing for battle. The children were quickly pushed indoors while the warriors' spouses helped them don their armor. The warriors cleaned their weapons

to prepare for the hunt.

Amid all this chaos, Houwe approached us. "I'm sorry, but..."

I put up a hand to stop him.

I wasn't exactly sure what the chieftain was going to say, but I figured it had something to do with the aftermath of the upcoming battle with the giants.

After all, the clans didn't seem too keen on asking outsiders for help.

Not only would my request be put aside until the giants were slain, but there was also the risk that the tiger clan could be wiped out by the incoming horde.

If that happened, I'd never get my hands on the red nail.

According to the boy, there were around thirty giants approaching.

Seeing as how the tiger clan, a group known for their fighting prowess, had struggled to defeat even two giants, it seemed all too likely that there would be massive casualties if they faced off against thirty. Was I supposed to stay here in the camp, despite all I could add to the fight? I had to say something.

As someone famous once said, "You'll never get what you don't ask for."

"Can we join in the hunt?"

If I ever wanted to get my hands on the red nail, I'd need to make sure that this battle ended in victory.

Chieftain Houwe looked me straight in the eye. After a moment of holding my gaze, a slow smile formed on his lips and he slapped my chest.

"Whatever it is you seek, I promise that I, chieftain of the Ena clan, will do what I can to repay you!"

With that, Houwe turned on his heel and went off to prepare himself for the upcoming fight.

Ariane, who'd been watching the negotiations, let out a heavy sigh. Before I could say

anything, she put a finger up to stop me.

"I'm going with you. I'll do even better than last time." Her lips curled into a smile as she gazed off to the west.

Apparently, she still couldn't shake off what had happened in the last battle.

I'd originally intended to join the tiger clan alone, but when I turned to look at Goemon, it was clear from the smile on his face that he also wanted to be in the fight. He looked ready to unleash death on his enemies.

Then I turned to Chiyome, who was standing silently at his side. She responded in her usual, simple manner.

"Same here."

It looked like the whole party was ready, blood pumping excitedly through their veins.

Being a skeleton, I didn't have a drop of blood in my body. But on the battlefield, I'd still look out for those who did, and make sure that none of it was spilled.

Less than an hour later, the tiger clan warriors had assembled for battle and were marching out of the Ena camp.

Aene and the other chieftains had offered their own warriors to join the emergency giant-hunting party, bringing the final count to around 150 warriors, all mounted on their own driftpus. The warriors formed a long trail heading toward the camp the boy had come from, the one recently destroyed by giants. The heavy footfalls of the driftpus caused the ground to rumble underneath us.

I followed the train of warriors ahead of me, but I had little clue which direction we were actually moving in at this point.

Off in the distance, I spotted several mountains rising from the horizon, but everywhere else I looked there was nothing but endless grass and rolling hills.

An hour or so after we left camp, Ariane started shifting around, muttering about how her back was sore. Something about the upcoming battle was making her anxious.

"You're going to fall off if you keep moving around like that, Ariane."

I glanced over my shoulder only to find Ariane's snow-white eyebrows raised, her voice imploring.

"Aaaarc, can't we take a break? I can't feel my butt anymore."

The jostling of the driftbus made Ariane's large chest bounce as we moved. She looked like she was almost at her limit. Fortunately, she didn't seem to notice where my eyes were focused.

Sadly, stopping wasn't an option. If we rested here in the middle of the prairie, we'd quickly be left behind and wouldn't know how to catch up to the group.

Besides, no one else seemed keen on taking a break.

The warriors around us seethed with anger and a desire to slaughter the giants that had attacked their comrades. They also seemed quite used to riding long distances and didn't show any of the discomfort or pre-battle jitters that Ariane was having.

I glanced over at Goemon to see how he was holding up. As expected, he was his usual, stoic self.

Chiyome was standing on the saddle behind him, steadying herself on the heaving mount by holding Goemon's shoulders. They looked a little like a circus act, though part of me wondered if this was Chiyome's way of combatting the same troubles that afflicted Ariane's rear.

The warriors of the tiger clan riding near us also seemed to take great interest in Chiyome.

Meanwhile, Ponta excitedly waved its cotton-like tail to and fro from above my head as it looked out at all the troops. It tapped the top of my helmet excitedly and mewed to get my attention.

"Kyiii! Kyi!"

I turned my gaze to the head of the column and spotted a camp sitting atop a small hill in front of us. A moment later, I noticed the outline of a giant lumbering along, gnawing away at the upper torso of a member of the tiger clan.

It let out an awful, unearthly shriek.

The warriors shouted out epithets as soon as they caught sight of their murdered comrade, their thirst for blood rising by the second.

“You bastards!”

The moment my eyes focused on it, the giant let out another cry that caused the ground beneath us to tremble.

“Ugraaaaaouuu! Graooooaaaawll!!!”

Despite its human appearance, the dark giant’s scream sounded less like words and more like a beast’s call. It raised its massive stone hammer and began running straight toward us.

Other dark giants wandering around the camp responded to the cry, raising their own weapons and rushing forward.

In total, I counted five giants coming toward us and five or so hanging back at the camp, searching for something. This was nowhere near the thirty giants the injured boy had spoken of.

The chieftains near the front also seemed to notice this discrepancy and began scanning our surroundings, looking for other giants.

However, as I looked out at the vast plains, I couldn’t spot any hills or other features large enough for twenty giants to hide behind.

Chieftain Houwe, the leader of this impromptu hunting party, directed the charge straight toward the oncoming giant by waving his weapon around in the air and pointing it straight ahead at our target. All of the warriors behind him let out a war cry and raised their own weapons in response.

“Hooaaaaaaaaah!!!”

One by one, the tiger clan warriors broke from formation to make passes at the dark giant’s legs, slashing as they flew by.

I heard a dull thud as each weapon found its mark. The dark giants returned the favor,

swinging their weapons with powerful arms, the earth erupting with each missed blow.

It wasn't long before the tiger clan began taking casualties. But all wasn't lost. One of the tiger clan warriors scored a critical blow on one of the dark giants' feet, causing it to lose its balance and fall to the ground.

The warriors wasted no time swarming the fallen giant, thrusting with their weapons. It seemed to me like they had the numbers to take on these five giants alone, so I decided to go after the remaining five back at the camp and use my magic to wipe them out.

I tugged my driftpus to a stop so I could begin casting my spell. Ariane let out a sigh of relief as she slipped out of the saddle. She scowled as she rubbed her tenderized backside. Apparently, it had taken more of a beating than I'd thought.

I turned my gaze toward Goemon and Chiyome, who'd realized what I was doing and were coming to join us.

I decided to use the same summon magic I'd used in the battle against the hydra. I had quite a few area-of-effect spells, but I worried that if I were to cast one on the camp, I'd risk wiping out any survivors hiding in the surrounding area.

But as I learned back in Leibnizche, there were no assurances once I unleashed a demon. This time, I figured the safer method was to use a demon that performed a more benign function: drawing the giants away from the camp. Or at least, that was my hope.

"I'm going to wipe out the giants at the camp. Ariane, I want you to wait here for me."

"Wait, what?"

I took off toward a small clearing and called forth my summoning spell.

A large, magical rune appeared on the ground in front of me and began glowing. I focused my mind on the demon I wanted to join me on the battlefield.

Back in the game, I only used a small selection of demons, neglecting many of the others I'd collected, so it took me a moment to recall its name.

“Hmm, I swear it was on the tip of my tongue...”

I was certain I had a lower-class demon with all sorts of skills for weakening and debuffing my enemies. The rune continued glowing patiently as I frantically searched my memory. Unfortunately, the only names that came to mind were those of high-level demons. I wracked my brain to no avail.

Ariane called out to me. “You aren’t actually thinking of calling forth another monster to fight these giants, are you?”

She sounded worried that the tiger camp would be a repeat of the Hilk church destruction back in Leibnizche. I might be a tad absent-minded, but I wouldn’t forget something that serious. But at this point, it would probably be easier to fight the rest of the giants one by one than stand around trying to come up with the right spell. In the midst of my doubts, I caught sight of a shadow flying past Ariane, coming straight toward me.

Ariane sensed the movement as well and spun around to face the oncoming figure, but she wasn’t fast enough. I shoved her out of the way just before she could be struck by its glowing blade.

The incoming attacker didn’t slow as it closed in on me, driving its blade straight through the gap between my chest armor and helmet, right into the cavity of my skull. I lost focus, and the summoning rune faded away.

Fortunately, Ponta had been absorbed in the unfolding battle and had been sitting atop my head, well out of harm’s way. If my little companion had been wrapped around my neck, as it usually was in combat, well... I don’t want to think about what might have happened.

Instead, startled by the sudden attack, Ponta summoned up a large gust of wind, flying high into the sky.

The wind ruffled the hood of the assassin’s heavy black cloak.

“Ooomph!”

“Hah?!”

Sensing my opening, since my opponent’s sword was still stuck in my helmet, I

summoned all my strength and swung my fist. But I only caught air as my opponent jumped deftly back.

“Arc!” Ariane called out to me, her face clouded with worry. I waved my hand to let her know I was okay.

Ariane looked incredulous at my dismissive gesture, but then a look of understanding washed over her face as she recalled that my armor was essentially empty. Her amethyst cheeks flushed in embarrassment at having screamed out my name like that.

To be fair, the blow would have been fatal if I were in my elven form. I wondered if my opponent realized that their sword had struck a hollow cavity.

My cloaked opponent came running back in, a sword extending from each hand and red eyes glowing brightly from deep within their hood.

“Whaugh!”

“Arc!”

Ariane tried standing up, but grimaced in pain. I must have pushed her a little too hard. After all that time in the saddle, she’d probably pulled a muscle in her lower back.

Maybe this was for the better though. Our opponent was clearly powerful, and facing off against them could put Ariane in danger.

Worse, I wasn’t even armed. My sword and shield were still on the driftpus, since I hadn’t expected I’d need them while summoning a magic spell. Even with the rest of the tiger clan fighting nearby, I had to admit that this was a novice mistake.

A loud metallic clang echoed around me as I felt a sword strike my armored gauntlet. They were fast, and easily managed to evade my feeble attempts to strike back. However, they still seemed to be unaware of the fact that there was nothing but a skeleton inside my suit of armor. Once again, they thrust a sword into a gap in my armor and hit nothing but air.

I saw another opening and threw my whole body behind a punch aimed straight at their face. The air whooshed around my fist as I came within a hair’s breadth of hitting my mark. But even though I missed, the wind caused my opponent to lose their balance temporarily.

I launched another punch, in the hopes of finishing them off, though once again my fist met nothing but air. They leaped high into the air, over my head, and landed behind me. I wasn't expecting to end up fighting the chef of the infamous straw hat pirates out here.

Both swords came straight for my neck, crossed at the hilts like a giant pair of scissors. Even though my armor was mostly empty, I wasn't eager to find out what would happen if the bones in my neck were severed. All I could do was let the fates decide which was stronger: my opponent's offensive abilities, or my bones.

Or so I thought. My opponent leaped high into the air and landed behind me again, trying to beat a hasty retreat. Suddenly, I heard a heavy clang.

"Arc, are you okay?"

Chiyome ran up to me. She'd just saved me from certain doom.

"Thanks, Chiyome."

I felt a cold sweat run down my back—even though I knew this was technically impossible—as I let out a sigh of relief. I rubbed my neck to make sure it was still connected to my body.

The would-be assassin lowered their swords and stood by silently, their dark cloak billowing in the wind. A large gash ran down it, likely caused by Chiyome's attack.

The assassin yanked away their hood, revealing a man with pointy, animal-like ears sprouting out of a head covered in black hair. His skin was a light shade of blue, and he had glowing red eyes.

With his tail hidden underneath his cloak, I couldn't quite tell his species, but judging by his ears alone, he appeared to be feline, like Chiyome and Goemon.

As soon as he revealed his face, Chiyome broke from her usual calm demeanor and let out a cry.

"S-Sasuke?!"

Judging by her trembling voice and the look of shock on her face, I was able to put two and two together. Sasuke was the name of one of the Jinshin clan's six great fighters,

and the man that Chiyome looked up to like an older brother.

Assuming this was the same Sasuke, that raised a lot of questions. What he was doing down here on this continent, and specifically all the way out in the prairie? And why was he trying to kill us?

Chiyome's face suggested that this man *was* the real Sasuke. And in case there was any doubt, Goemon's surprised expression confirmed it.

"What are you doing here, Sasuke? And why do you look like that?" Chiyome's voice was unsteady.

Sasuke's red eyes narrowed as he readied his dual blades. It was as if he hadn't even heard what Chiyome said.



“Fwauaaaaauuugh! Ngraaaaaww!”

Out of nowhere, the five dark giants lumbering around the camp broke into a mad dash, charging straight toward us. The tiger clan warriors finishing up the first batch of giants spread out at the sight of the newcomers, but it quickly became apparent that the giants were only interested in us.

Sasuke glanced at the oncoming giants then back at me. He jumped high into the air, did a somersault, and ran off. Chiyome took off after him.

“S-Sasuke, wait up! Just what’s going on here?”

But the older man was far too fast for Chiyome, and he quickly outpaced her.

Goemon came up behind Chiyome and wrapped his arms around her in a bear hug, putting an end to her pursuit.

“Get your hands off meeee, Goemon! Let! Me! Gooo!”

The young girl squirmed about to no avail. As Sasuke grew smaller and smaller in the distance, Goemon spoke to her in a low, steady voice.

“Look closely, little one. He’s not the man he used to be.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by that, not being a member of the Jinshin clan myself.

Chiyome, however, seemed to understand. She went silent, casting her gaze down at her feet. Though her expression didn’t give much away, I could tell that whatever happened, it was a big deal.

Ariane broke the silence. “Arc, over there!”

Off in the distance, I could see the dark giants, who only moments ago had been rushing toward us, fleeing in the direction Sasuke had gone, wailing as they ran. It was almost like he’d been... a decoy.

But it didn’t make sense. With all the tiger clan warriors around, why would they suddenly change direction and chase after Sasuke? Had they been looking for him all along?

“Just what’s going on here?”

But I could hardly hear my own question, as my voice was drowned out by the cries of the tiger clan outside the camp.

Judging from all the cheering, the last giant had finally fallen.

CHAPTER 4

THE FALL OF TAGENT

Before us stood the remains of what had once been a small tiger clan camp in the middle of the Kuwana Prairie.

The giants in the Black Forest off to the south were slowly making their way up north, laying waste to tiger clan camps as they went. Or at least, that's what I'd been told by the tiger clan warriors after they finished slaying the dark giants outside the camp.

They were currently searching the ruins in the hopes of finding survivors. But by the dark looks on their faces, it seemed as if prospects were grim. After all, it hadn't been a large camp to begin with, and it had been attacked by ten dark giants.

That made the boy who'd come to the Ena clan seeking help was the sole survivor of this tragedy.

The warriors had been in high spirits just moments ago, after killing the last of the giants, but that mood quickly soured as they came face to face with the fate of their comrades.

While I had access to magic spells that could revive the dead, they were of little use here, given that almost all the victims were either missing heads or were *just* heads—and even more of them were likely half-digested in the giants' stomachs. I'd already learned my lesson about trying to bring back people who were too far gone after attempting to revive soldiers slaughtered during a bandit raid.

The heavy silence and looks of mourning on Chiyome's and Goemon's faces made the whole situation feel as if we were at a wake. Neither Chiyome nor Goemon had said a word since Sasuke ran off. Sure, they were both usually reserved, but this was something else entirely.

Ariane seemed lost as to what she could possibly say and simply frowned as she watched the two of them. I called out to her, striving to keep my tone light.

“How’re your legs and back doing?”

Ariane's expression lightened a bit. She rubbed her lower back.

"They're much better now. Thanks, Arc."

Of course, her lower back was never really the problem to begin with, but it didn't seem appropriate for me to ask a woman about the trauma her backside had taken from riding in a saddle for so long.

More importantly, it hardly seemed like the time to be making jokes.

Besides, I was pretty sure that my recovery magic wouldn't have much of an effect on sore butts. Though, if it did, it'd be pretty handy to just cast a spell from time to time to make such long rides more bearable.

I spotted Chieftain Houwe of the Ena clan and five other warriors approaching us.

All of them were absolute pillars of fitness, their bodies rippling with muscles and adorned with various styles of battle dress, the likes of which were unseen on the rest of the warriors. I figured these were the six chieftains.

Despite standing right in front of me, Houwe's gaze was focused on Chiyome and Goemon as he spoke in a heavy tone.

"Arc, you said that these cat people accompanying you come from the northern continent, yes?"

I was a bit confused by his question, but nodded my head anyway.

"The rest of the giants lurking around the camp ran off after a cat person who suddenly showed up."

Even in the middle of an intense battle, a few people had apparently seen what was going on with us. Anger washed over Houwe's face.

"Why did the giants chase after this person? Did he bring them to our camp in the first place?!"

For a moment, I wasn't sure why he was asking me this. But the answer soon became clear.

Another man—one of the chieftains perhaps—leaned in close and began yelling at Chiyome.

“You can’t talk your way out of this! This little girl, she knows the bastard, doesn’t she?! One of my men saw her talking to him!”

Apparently, their exchange hadn’t gone unnoticed. Technically speaking, there hadn’t really been any sort of conversation *per se*. However, I doubted they were interested in such semantics.

Goemon stepped between Chiyome and the yelling chieftain, glaring at the other man. While the tiger clan chieftain had height on his side, the light emanating from Goemon’s body made him look the more powerful of the two.

Probably thinking that the glow came from the power of the spirits, the chieftain took a step back, but he still looked as angry as ever. Goemon, however, showed no fear. He glanced back at Chiyome again, then addressed the chieftains in a booming voice.

“That man used to be one of us, but no longer.”

Goemon’s words caused Chiyome’s shoulders to perk up, though her eyes still remained downcast.

“How can we believe a word you say? And why are outsiders joining us on the field of battle in the first place?!”

The nearby warriors all focused their piercing gazes on me. While I was the one who’d asked Chieftain Houwe to let us join him in combat, the hunting party had come together too quickly for him to explain to the others why he’d agreed. Aene, chieftain of the Whilee clan, knew the general story, but the majority of the people had no idea what had brought us all the way out here.

Goemon looked out across the warriors standing on front of him. “He is no longer the man I once knew. He is now one of the undead!”

This information surprised even me.

The chieftains were taken aback by this news and exchanged glances with one another, as if to confirm that their ears had not deceived them. Many of the other warriors standing by, however, didn’t appear to grasp what Goemon had said. This seemed

strange to me.

Ariane leaned forward to whisper in my ear. "Undead probably aren't common out here in the prairie, since they need mana to survive. Mana usually gathers in forests and valleys, so people living on the plains might never encounter the undead."

She had hardly reacted to Goemon's statement. But elves could see spirits and other types of energy otherwise invisible to humans. The moment Sasuke revealed himself, she was probably instantly aware that he was undead. After all, she could see the contamination of death, as she'd once called it. Indeed, the fact that Ariane hadn't seen the contamination of death around my skeleton body was what originally convinced her that I wasn't undead, merely cursed.

The mountain people apparently couldn't see this contamination, but they could smell the scent of death in the air. If not, I had no doubt they all would have written me off as an undead long ago, and we wouldn't be traveling the globe together.

"Kyii!"

Ponta seemed to pick up on my shift in mood and mewed to cheer me on. I reached up and patted its head in appreciation.

"You, too, buddy. You don't judge people by their appearance either."

I turned my attention back to the issue at hand.

For some reason, Sasuke, one of the six great fighters of the Jinshin clan, and Chiyome and Goemon's ally, was here on the southern continent... and was undead at that.

Though he'd been a bit on the pale side, honestly, Sasuke hadn't looked all that different from Chiyome to me. However, his status as undead was confirmed both by Ariane and Goemon.

"How can we be sure what you say is true?" One of the chieftains spoke up, eliciting nods of agreement from the others.

Only two men, Chieftain Aene of the Whilee clan and Chieftain Houwe of the Ena clan, looked at Goemon and me, as if searching for some sort of truth in Goemon's claim.

I tried defusing the situation. "There's much I don't know about Chiyome's

circumstances, but I do know that she's been searching for Sasuke for some time. It's pure coincidence that she and Goemon encountered their one-time comrade here. After all, I was the one who suggested traveling here in the first place."

"But how can we..."

One of the chieftains began objecting, but I started speaking again, cutting him off.

"Can we all just call it a day? Did you not hear the report that there were thirty giants out here? Because all I counted was ten... only five of which we actually killed! We might not know why the giants were chasing after that man, but I want you to ask yourselves, are there any other camps in that direction?"

The chieftains—indeed all the warriors around us—started murmuring among themselves. Apparently, there was a camp in the direction Sasuke had gone.

The warriors began crowding around the chieftains, many of them proposing they take off in pursuit of the giants.

Chieftain Houwe spoke up, putting an end to the roar of voices.

"We must pursue the giants and secure and protect all other camps!"

His declaration was followed by a round of cheers.

The warriors immediately mounted their driftpus. As I watched them, I saw out of the corner of my eye that Houwe was walking toward me.

"Show us what you're made of!" he said as he passed.

With that, he and the other chieftains mounted up as well.

I wasn't sure exactly what he was trying to convey, but the general message was clear. I'd started this whole endeavor figuring that I'd earn a few favors and the rest would be easy. But ultimately, I just kept getting myself into one mess after another.

"My apologies, Arc." Goemon bowed his head low.

"There's no need to apologize, Goemon. Besides, I don't mind going it alone from here."

It wouldn't be a problem if we were just facing some dark giants, but given that we'd likely also encounter Sasuke, things could get awkward.

Goemon shook his head and clenched his fists. "No. He is our problem, and we can't turn aside. Come, Chiyome."

I watched as he and Chiyome walked solemnly back to their mount.

There was something in Chiyome's expression that seemed odd, almost as if she'd seen a ghost.

I turned to Ariane. "About Sasuke... Is it common for the undead to be running around like that?"

Ariane furrowed her brow.

When I heard the word "undead," I imagined rotting corpses and skeletons—creatures far different from the skilled fighter Sasuke had shown himself to be. If anything, he was closer to how I imagined vampires. Though, I didn't know if they existed in this world. I certainly hadn't seen one.

The only undead I'd seen move about gracefully like that were the ghoul worms we'd encountered back in the cave near the Dragon Wonder. But their bodies hadn't even remotely resembled humans. There were also the man-spiders in the same cave—at least, I recalled Ariane calling them undead—but, just like the ghoul worms, they looked nothing like humans.

Sasuke, however, looked pretty much like any of the other cat people.

Elves were generally able to see the contamination of death that hung around a person, allowing them to identify whether or not someone was undead, but unfortunately, my sense of sight wasn't as strong as my elven brethren.

"It's the first time I've ever seen an undead retain its living form. Fa— The village elder may know more though."

I shook my head. We didn't have time to go back to the elven village, nor was it a productive use of our time to think about them.

"Well, right now we'd best head after the giants."

I made my way back to my grazing driftpus and hopped up on its back. Ariane made her way over more slowly, let out a heavy sigh, and climbed up behind me.

I waited for Houwe's signal before once again urging my driftpus into a fast clip across the prairie, following the rest of the mounted warriors.

It felt as if a dark, oppressive cloud surrounded us as we rode. The general mood was much more somber than it had been when we'd first left the Ena camp. The tiger clan warriors' feelings toward the giants were no different than before, and while there was still a bit of nervousness about hunting giants, that wasn't the source.

No, the dark mood was coming from up near the front—from Goemon and Chiyome, who sat quietly on the back of their driftpus, her head buried in his back. I couldn't see her expression.

I thought back to our voyage on the *Rievbeta*, when Chiyome had been excited about sending some of the roasted kraken to Sasuke. Now that I was a skeleton, it was hard for me to truly understand, or even sympathize with, the sheer pain that she must be in right now.

As soon as I turned back into an elf, however, I knew the emotions would come flooding in like a tidal wave. I wasn't confident I'd be able to think clearly when that happened.

Honestly, I didn't think too highly of myself in that regard.

While in the body of a skeleton, I was able to keep my emotions subdued almost as well as any seasoned soldier. But I was nowhere near the level of professionalism that Goemon and Chiyome displayed. She wasn't quite a seasoned warrior, but she also wasn't helpless by any stretch of the imagination.

I let out a long, deep breath and shook my head. Though not much of a thinker, my mind tended to wander. It'd be best to focus my mental energies on what lay ahead.

Besides, I had a sword to fell my enemies, a shield to protect my friends, and armor to protect myself. Overthinking things was a waste of time... or potentially worse. I could let myself, or someone else, get hurt.

Though... I'd need to be more careful about leaving my sword and shield behind in the future.

We continued for some time. I cast a recovery spell on Ariane's backside whenever she complained about it aching. Slowing down wasn't an option, so I figured magic was the best way to offer her some relief. Unfortunately, it almost certainly looked like I was rubbing her butt whenever I cast the spell.

In fact, the second time I cast it, the jostling of the beast beneath us actually did cause my hand to make contact, resulting in an immediate and merciless punch to the back of my head, sending my helmet spinning.

At least Ponta seemed to enjoy it.

The sun was on its downward trek, but still a long way from sunset. I figured it was around snack time. Up ahead, after we crossed over a gentle hill, the tiger clan camp came into view. It was small, consisting of fewer than ten of the yurt-like buildings.

I spotted several domesticated animals roaming around. Some people around the camp pointed toward us as we approached, their attention drawn by the thundering footfalls of the driftpus. The camp looked completely unharmed. In fact, it looked rather peaceful. By all accounts, the dark giants hadn't made their way out here.

The hunting party slowed to a crawl, and Chieftain Houwe jumped off his driftpus to speak with the people in the camp. I made to join him, in the hopes of learning what was going on here, but the conversation was over almost as soon as it started.

Houwe conferred with the warriors in the camp and nodded in the direction they were pointing. Then he shouted orders to his men.

"The giants passed by this camp on their way north! Change course!"

The hunting party adjusted its direction and left the camp behind.

The chieftains at the front of the formation drew their mounts close together as they discussed something. I couldn't tell what the problem was, but it wouldn't be long before I found out.

The hunting party found itself atop a small hill.

Well, that wasn't entirely accurate. The ground was no higher than the rest of the prairie, so the area ahead was actually something of a lowland. Thanks to our higher vantage point, I caught sight of the vast ocean spreading off to my right.

More noteworthy, though, was what I saw farther down the slope ahead—I spotted a large, humanmade construction spreading from the shore, as if marking some border. This construction looked a lot like the walls I'd seen surrounding towns and castles in this world, and its immense length reminded me of the Great Wall of China. I spied square gun ports built into the wall at regular intervals. It was clear that they were primarily for defensive purposes.

The ports themselves were quite large, suggesting there were perhaps cannons or fixed catapults on the other side.

Come to think of it, I recalled some of the mountain people on the *Rievbeta* saying that humans lived on the other side of a giant wall beyond the prairie. Maybe the humans owned the land here?

There were looks of shock and surprise on many of the faces around me. Had they never seen this wall before? Though, to be fair, it was quite an awe-inspiring sight to see something humanmade on this grand a scale.

I couldn't even imagine how much time, energy, and money must have been poured into building such a thing.

Houwe glowered at the massive wall. "Hmph. There's no way we could have missed the giants. But would they really come all the way down to the humans' peninsula?"

So, apparently, there was a peninsula on the other side of the wall. In that case, it meant that the wall must have been built in order to close it off from the mainland. But there was something about the wall that didn't seem quite right.

Large towers rose high above it, spread out at regular intervals. I supposed they could be lookout towers, or barracks for the soldiers stationed here... but I couldn't see any signs of life.

Anyone up there should have spotted a formation of 150 mounted warriors, and would almost certainly be worried about this. But no one stirred, or sounded any sort of alarm.

I looked over at Houwe. Deep wrinkles creased his forehead as he stroked his chin.

“I don’t see any movement. Is the wall usually... empty?”

The wrinkles grew deeper at my question. He turned back to me and narrowed his gaze.

“No... soldiers are always stationed here. They often let off harassing volleys of arrows the moment they catch sight of us.”

I glanced back at the wall, but all was still. So still, in fact, that I wondered if it had been abandoned.

A warrior rode in toward us, stopping right in front of Houwe. Apparently, he was a scout sent on ahead to see what he could learn.

“Chieftain Houwe!”

I could tell by the look on his face that his report contained urgent news. Houwe nodded for the man to continue.

“The wall’s been breached! There are signs of a great battle, and the corpses of several fallen giants.”

The other chieftains, and the surrounding warriors, immediately went into a panic.

“The wall was breached?! How far did they make it through?”

“I could see clear to the other side! I assume the giants made a concentrated attack against the wall.”

The warriors began frantically talking among themselves while the chieftains looked on in surprise.

I couldn’t be sure of the exact height, but the wall looked to be about ten meters tall from where I stood.

The dark giants themselves stood at about six meters or so, but considering that they were tough enough to resist even bladed weapons, I had little doubt they could barrel through a wall in a full-fledged attack.

The scout reported that he'd spotted several of their corpses, however, so that meant that the wall had at least held up against the behemoths' onslaught for some time.

"And they breached the wall? We've never even gotten close, despite our best efforts!"

"Maybe the giants intended to break into the human towns from the very start?"

The other chieftains were in a near panic at this point. Chieftain Houwe, however, was deep in thought, and gestured toward his scout.

"Prepare to follow this man to the hole in the wall!"

The warriors immediately moved in unison toward the wall.

It was a very short trip.

In the middle of the wall was a huge gap, nothing but a pile of rubble remaining. I could see straight through to the land on the other side.

I counted six dark giant corpses in front of the wall, each of them with an arrow as thick as a log piercing their face.

My best guess was that those arrows had been launched from ballistae built right into the wall.

The bodies of human soldiers also littered the country side; there were no survivors.

On the other side of the wall, I saw a figure running across the plain.

"What's that?" A voice cried out from among the hunting party.

The figure looked to be around twenty or so, and had a short tail and animal-shaped ears atop their head, one of which was torn. I couldn't tell the species at this distance, but they were definitely one of the mountain people. They were dressed in tattered clothes and had iron shackles and chains around their feet and neck.

Judging by the way the man was running for his life, I had a good idea of what was going on: He'd likely been enslaved by the humans. After hiding himself away while the giants crashed through the wall, he'd spotted the tiger clan's hunting party and come running to us to seek assistance.

Just when I thought I had it all figured out, an-ear shattering roar rose up from the wall itself as bricks began tumbling down. Out of the dust, a dark giant emerged. The man realized he'd misjudged the situation.

The giant's cry echoed across the prairie, stopping the man dead in his tracks.

Houwe shouted out a command. "Keep the giant away from that man! Kill it!"

The warriors let out a cry and charged their driftups downhill at top speed.

Unfortunately for me, the command came way too quickly for me to respond, and I was left standing alone atop the hill.

Though I'd originally assumed that they were going to make a headlong charge at their opponent, instead the rushing warriors gave it a wide birth, maintaining a consistent distance as they circled it.

This technique was definitely not something an amateur like me should try.

The giant let out another mighty roar as it noticed the thundering footfalls and dust cloud trails of the hunting party.

The young slave was now between the hunting party and the giant. While there was still some distance between him and certain doom, his comparatively small legs wouldn't carry him far. The giant's inky black eyes focused on its prey.

There was no way the tiger clan would make it in time. I had to do something to slow the giant.

"Fire Beretta!"

I focused all my power into my fist. A second later, a massive ball of fire formed in front of me, obscuring my vision. The warriors and chieftains who'd held back looked on in surprise, their eyes fixated on it.

The next moment, the fireball launched, whistling as it sailed through the air straight toward the giant. It flew over the heads of the hunting party and slammed straight into the giant's face, resulting in an impressive explosion.

"Hey, I got it! Didja see that, Ariane?"

"Wait, you weren't even aiming?"

I'd figured that a hit anywhere on the giant would be great, especially if I could slow it down a bit. That's why I'd decided to use one of my faster magic attacks and make the fireball as large as possible. Granted, the giant's face was a rather large target, but even so, I never thought I'd score a direct hit. The more power you put into a magic spell, the harder it became to control.

By the time the warriors reached their objective, the giant was lying on its back, stock still and thoroughly charred. Well, probably. Dark giants were covered in fur, so it was hard to tell.

I looked at the stunned chieftains and asked what we'd do about the young slave. This brought the men back to themselves, and they quickly hurried down the hill.

"E-everyone else was killed when the wall fell. I... I'm the only one left."

I used my recovery magic to cure the man's wounds as he responded to Chieftain Houwe's questions. He clenched his fists as he spoke.

The man was thin and malnourished, his clothes no more than rags.

"The nearest human town is Tagent, no? Are many of your kind being held there?"

The man replied with a firm nod.

The chieftains debated what their next step would be.

"What should we do? I have to admit, it's rather fortuitous to find the wall breached like this."

"If the giants are already going to be ravaging Tagent, why not join in the havoc?"

"We need to decide soon, or we'll lose whatever advantage we have."

"I don't know how big Tagent is, but if it's anything near the scale of Fernandes, it's probably too big for us to free everyone."

"So, you'd rather turn a blind eye?"

While the chieftains deliberated, the warriors chimed in with their own opinions. Then, all eyes focused on Houwe.

After a moment, Houwe dropped his arms to his side. There was a decisive look in his eye.

"We will depart at once for the human town of Tagent to liberate the beast people. We must not forget that humans have assaulted our camps and taken our own as slaves. We will slay any giants that get in our way! Warriors, keep an ear open for the call to withdraw!"

His speech was met with a roar of cheers. The hunting party split into seven platoons to sneak their way into Tagent.

As for my companions and I, we made our own eighth platoon.

It was time for the playoffs of the Giants vs. the Tigers.

I glanced up ahead at Goemon and Chiyome and thought about the troubles they faced. Well, we'd just have to deal with that when the time came.

The peninsula jutting out like a finger on the southern continent belonged to the Great West Revlon Empire.

The port town running along the eastern shore of the peninsula was the major hub for shipments leaving the continent for the empire, though it had grown over the years, and now rivaled some of the biggest cities in the north.

The Hilk church located at the center of the town was flanked by two massive towers that served as quarters to the priests and the temple knights, as well as the cardinal's private chambers.

The contrast of the red bricks and white stones used to construct the buildings gave

them a rather elegant appearance. The white stone pillars throughout the vast church grounds also helped it stand out from the sea of brick buildings that made up the rest of the town.

The cardinal's private chambers were located on the third floor of one of the buildings. This was where he made all the decisions about the church's direction.

A massive, colorful painting adorned one of the walls, a towering presence in the room. Not to be outdone, all of the furniture in the room was also ornate and fit for a king. A woven rug on the floor completed the look.

At the center sat a large bed, made specifically to order. The bedposts reached nearly to the ceiling. A curtain draped over them covered the bed in an intricately detailed cocoon of splendor.

Atop the bed lay a large, balding man with a jutting belly, drooping cheeks, and a face reminiscent of a frog. The man's name was Cardinal Charros Acedia Industria. As he did most days, he was currently stuffing his cheeks with fruits from a basket tucked under his arm.

"Ahh, what a wonderful day. Those little prats from the homeland haven't bothered me ever since I sent them off. Gyahaha! They must've just given up after they realized that a force of ghostly soldiers was nothing of note. I have to admit, I'm quite the brilliant little thinker. Yes, I am!"

Charros burst into a fit of laughter at this, his massive belly shaking and legs flailing about.

His eyes fixed on some of the fruit juice dripping from his hand as he yanked the curtain back.

"Well, I suppose I can't just idle my whole day away. There's work to be done after all. Still, nothing wrong with being a little self-indulgent, is there?"

He continued speaking to no one in particular as he rolled his rotund body across the bed.

The sound of someone banging on the door interrupted his reverie.

"Cardinal Charros, we have an emergency! Please, grant me an audience!"

The priest would normally wait for permission before entering the room, but he didn't even bother waiting for Charros to respond before bounding through the door, arms and legs flailing as he tripped over himself, landing face first on the floor.

This took Charros by surprise. Then, a scowl soured his face.

The prostrate priest didn't even bother looking up before he began speaking, the urgency clear in his unsteady voice.

"I have just received reports that twenty or so monsters have breached the border wall and are descending upon the town. They appear to be giants. The magistrate has requested the services of the church to fend off the attack."

After the priest finished his report, Charros gestured for him to bow lower, until his forehead brushed the floor. He hefted himself off the bed, his scowl deepening.

"But it's just twenty monsters, no? Why should I have to get my temple knights involved? The magistrate has 2,000 soldiers under his command, while my men number a mere 500!"

Charros walked over to the window, where he gazed out at the houses and cathedral before him. The towering wall surrounding the church grounds prevented him from seeing out into the town.

The priest, sensing what the other man was thinking, continued.

"Cardinal Charros, you can see out into the town from the church's towers. I believe you can truly understand the peril we face from up there. Please, come with me!"

"Harrumph. I know I said I should get out of bed today, but I'm really beginning to regret that. I wish you'd just stop pestering me."

The plump man's cheeks puffed out as he muttered to himself. Then he looked down at the prostrate priest and let out a dramatic sigh. With a heavy shrug, he waddled over toward the door, the priest's gaze following him the whole way. Cardinal Charros waved the man over.

"Well, come on now, take me to the tower! I rarely have occasion to be up there, you know, so it's not like I'd know the way!"

“R-right away!”

The priest smiled broadly, tripping over himself again as he made his way past the cardinal. He jogged ahead, like a dog leading its master. Charros somehow managed to keep up with him, in spite of his large girth.

The two made their way to one of the towers connected to the cathedral and began the long climb up the spiral staircase. It wasn’t long before Charros was breathing heavily and wiping sweat from his brow.

“Wh-who decided to build towers like this? Even if we needed them, I can’t see why we put stairs in here. What purpose do they even serve?”

His body jiggled as he complained, but he still jogged his way up the stairs at a steady clip. The man wasn’t quite the fat slob people mistook him for.

The lanky priest leading the way, on the other hand, was heaving for breath, and looked as if he might pass out at any second. He stuck his head out one of the open windows built into the side of the tower to catch his breath, the light of the setting sun shining brightly on his face and causing him to squint.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he was able to take in the sights of the town below.

What he saw took him by surprise. He jerked his head back to look at the cardinal, his voice shrill.

“Cardinal Ch-Charros! Come here, quickly! You can see the monsters!”

The tower itself was quite cramped, and his voice resounded off the walls like an echo chamber. Charros glared back at the priest and shoved his fingers into his ears.

“Fine, fine, I got it! You’ve no need to yell like that.”

Charros grumbled to himself as he moved his face closer to the window.

The window allowed only a narrow glimpse of the outside. Making matters worse, the overly excited priest was also trying to crowd his face in, further limiting the view.

Using his rotund body as a battering ram, Charros shoved the priest away from the window and looked outside. The rays from the setting sun caused him to squint as

well, but as his eyes adjusted to the light, he was able to make out fires burning near the wall surrounding the town, though far from the church itself.

He could also make out strange beasts towering above the brick houses off in the distance. With the sun at their backs, these figures appeared as headless shadows against the sky. One black, headless giant smashed the roof of a building in, reached inside, and started shoving something into a large hole at the center of its chest.

Charros watched wide-eyed as the giant munched away on a person as if it were a mere snack right in front of him.

From where he stood, Charros could see four of these figures. The screams of the townsfolk came to him faintly on the wind.

Charros stepped back, indentations from the window still marking his skin, and looked back at the priest.

“Waaaaugh!”

He screamed and stuck his head back out the window.

“What is that thing? Who would dare attack my town? Just what’s going on here?!”

He was near hysterical. Charros looked to the priest for answers, but all he could do was shake his head, desperately hoping the cardinal would know how to respond.

“Ah, yes, the temple knights! Go dispatch them at once!”

“Right away!”

The priest bowed. When he looked back up, he saw Charros running down the stairs.

“Where are you going, cardinal?”

Charros didn’t even bother to turn around.

“Reinforcements! I’m calling for reinforcements, so hurry up and—”

The rotund man slipped on the step and tumbled down the stairs for a ways before slamming into the wall and bouncing off it like a massive rubber ball. The force of the

blow took him over the railing and down the center of the tower.

The priest looked over the edge.

"Charros! Cardinal Charros!"

He was surprised to see Charros climb back to his feet and take off again in a hurried waddle. The man must've fallen at least four floors.

The priest's mind went blank with shock at what he'd just witnessed. Once he came back to his senses, he took off to fulfill his orders and summon the temple knights.

Charros went straight to the cathedral's basement.

At the bottom of the dimly lit stairs, he could make out the shape of a huge metal door, held fast by a peculiar lock with no keyhole.

The stone stairs were covered in thick layers of dust, rarely traveled by the church's inhabitants. The air around him was filled with a unique, almost spicy smell from what lurked on the other side.

Charros approached the massive door and put his hand on the keyless lock.

Magic formed around Charros's palm, and the thick shackle on the lock released with a satisfying thunk.

Charros placed his hands on the metal door and gave it a push, revealing a large, high-ceilinged room on the other side. Shelves lined the walls of the room, illuminated by the magical lantern Charros held in his hand as he moved deeper and deeper into the darkness.

Countless box-shaped coffins, all painted black, lined the shelves.

Charros was in the town's catacombs.

His eyes scanned the rows of coffins as he moved down the narrow passage, the echoes of his footsteps the only sound in the silence.

"Why do bad things always happen to little old me? Tagent is doooooomed!"

He stopped, as if something had just occurred to him.

"Did he have all this planned before coming here? But that would mean using them would violate the will of the pontiff. Hmm..."

He put both hands on his head as he mumbled to himself in the middle of the corpse-lined shelves.

Charros stood up straight, his mind set. He began moving quickly through the passage before stopping at an altar at the center of the catacombs, where he picked up a black box sitting on a platform.

"This is all awful, awful, awful! I'll put an end to them all—those black shadows, and the jerks that started this whole thing!"

Charros's right hand began glowing as magic flowed through it, spreading to the black box, which let off an eerie glow of its own.

Suddenly, the lids of the coffins all opened in unison, skeleton knights in dull armor slowly climbing out and grabbing their weapons as they rose. They moved almost like any live soldier would.

Charros looked around at the armored warriors and nodded. He held up the box and called out in a loud, clear voice:

"I order you to kill the dark giants! Don't leave any survivors!"

The knights moved in unison. Each of the churches throughout the town were connected to the vast catacombs via an underground passage.

The skeleton soldiers marched down the passageways, passed through the oft-overlooked doors, and stormed out into the town like a swarm of ants. The small squads of temple knights standing guard at each of the churches were immediately cut or beaten down.

The skeletons numbered around 10,000, a full third of Tagent's population. Slowly but surely, the town fell into chaos.



One man, dressed in the garb of a priest and sent from the Holy Kingdom itself, stood atop one of the town's brick buildings and watched the skeleton knights flow into the streets, the corners of his lips tugging upward into a grin.

His smile didn't last long, however, as he observed the citizens of the town getting pushed ever closer to the giants by the mobs of soldiers. His eyebrows knitted in consternation as he let out a sigh.

"If he wanted to kill the townsfolk, that would be one thing. But the giants too? This is in clear violation of the pontiff's wishes. Proof that I am far better suited to serve as cardinal."

The man chuckled to himself before pulling a round crystal out of his pocket. It emitted an eerie glow. He held it high in the air and smiled.

"Kill all of the living! This town will belong to the dead, the servants of the pontiff!"

The crystal's glow grew harsher as all of the skeleton soldiers ceased moving... but only for a second. The next moment, they began cutting down any humans who crossed their path.

It was like the gates of hell had opened up.

The elderly were the first to die, their bodies lining the streets. Next were the fathers trying to protect their children. Their heads were lopped off, landing in their children's arms. After that were the mothers, run clean through along with their children.

"Gyahahaha! That's it! You will be the vanguard of the pontiff's forces! Just the thought of marching down the roads with you behind me brings a tear to my... Wha?!"

The man sensed a presence behind him and turned around.

A younger man kneeled before him, looking up with bright red eyes under a head of black hair; cat ears sprouting from the top of his scalp.

"Ah, you're back. I see that you were successful in killing the giants' children and leading them here to town. Why don't you go out and draw in the giants still fussing with the wall over there?"

A smile broke out on the man's face as he indicated with his chin.

The young beast man—Sasuke, one of the six great fighters of the Jinshin clan—nodded before running off, darting from rooftop to rooftop.

The man watched as Sasuke disappeared into the distance, a smile gracing his face.

“He’s quite the impressive asset. After I am appointed cardinal, I may ask the pontiff to give him over to me.”

The man turned his gaze back to the hell unfolding before his eyes.

The tiger clan party, accompanied by me and the gang, stormed north on their driftpus toward the human town of Tagent. Every direction we looked, there were crops as far as the eye could see, almost as if the entire peninsula were one large farm. It was quite a shock.

Off in the distance lay a small village in the middle of a field. There was no defensive wall at its perimeter—a sight rarely seen in this world.

This tranquil scene was marred by massive footprints amid the fields. The trail of crushed crops pointed straight ahead. This was almost certainly the route the giants had taken.

The lone road running through the farmlands was jammed with people, all their worldly possessions on their backs. They stared in amazement at the massive mounts ridden by the tiger clan, some of them even waiting quietly for the hunting party to pass on before running off.

The humans made little fuss over the army of mountain people. Nor did they show much in the way of fear, suggesting that the town of Tagent was already under attack. They looked like refugees escaping a massive tragedy.

Chieftain Houwe and the other tiger clan warriors snorted at the humans in disdain before looking toward their objective ahead.

One of the warriors laughed, and the rest of his cohort was quick to join in.

“I’m surprised at how pathetic the humans living here are. Without that wall, they’re nothing.”

"And yet, for generations, that same wall kept us from even getting here." Houwe looked back over his shoulder and glared at the warriors, putting an end to their banter.

The sun hung low over the horizon, turning the sky a deep shade of burgundy. I could see the outline of Tagent off in the distance. The whole town was ablaze. Eerie cries of fear and anger filled the air.

Occasionally, I caught brief glimpses of dark giants popping up above the brick houses that filled the town before disappearing again.

Though nowhere near the scale of the wall at the entrance to the peninsula, there was a wall surrounding the town of Tagent.

Standing around the same height as the giants, it had been smashed wide open in several places. Citizens of the town, along with the occasional mountain person among them, poured out of these holes.

Houwe moved forward with his original plan and split his men into seven platoons to enter the town and save as many of the mountain people as they could.

"Everyone ready? Don't harm any humans... at least, not those who don't deserve it! We're here to rescue our comrades. Strike down anyone who gets in your way! And whatever you do, do not forget the way of the warrior! Now, goooo!"

With the chieftain's orders issued, platoon commanders took their men off into the town.

The town itself was rather large, and its roads relatively wide, but due to the sheer amount of space taken up by the massive drifters, the platoons also included dismounted troops to search houses and alleys.

Houwe's platoon waited at the town's perimeter, to keep an eye on the mounts left behind and to protect any of the escaping mountain people while they waited for the warriors to return.

I'd figured Houwe for the type to lead from the front line of a battle, but, considering most of the tiger clan wanted to fight in the front, his ability to stand back and watch things unfold was probably what had led him to become the leader of the largest clan on the prairie.

I gave my regards to Houwe before heading off to join the battle with Ariane, Goemon, and Chiyome. We'd be going in on foot to support any tiger clan platoons that ran into trouble and to wipe out any enemies that stood in our way.

These were not orders given to us by Houwe, but rather the job I gave us myself. Put simply, we were going to search the town for enemies then take them out. So pretty much what we always did.

"Well, let's get going. Ariane, Goemon, Chiyome... ready?" I looked back at each of them, one by one. "This is basically the same as when we freed the beast people from the slave market."

Ariane had her hand on the Sword of the King of Lions that hung from her waist, her golden eyes squinting as she looked at the town ahead.

"Hmph."

Goemon brought his metal gauntlets together with a loud clang before casting a glance over at Chiyome.

Chiyome nodded and let out a deep breath.

"I can't say that I'm totally okay, but I'll do whatever's needed of me."

"Kyii!"

Ponta offered its own cheerful mew from where it sat perched atop my head.

"I'm really sorry about all this. If I hadn't come here seeking that red nail we found back in Plymouth, we wouldn't even be here."

Goemon shook his head. "No need to apologize, Arc. Had we not come here, we would not have learned what happened to our lost brother. I owe you my gratitude."

"I... I see."

Chiyome's ears twitched at Goemon's comment. Assuming that Chiyome's friend had led the dark giants all the way here, it was highly likely that he was somewhere in town.

I wondered if that was what was on Chiyome's and Goemon's minds.

"Well then, let's get going! You know the drill!"

Everyone moved close to me and put their hands on my back and shoulders. It had become like second nature to all of us.

"Dimensional Step!"

An instant later, we found ourselves inside the town, on the other side of the shattered wall.

There were no signs of life coming from any of the buildings near the wall. The townspeople there had probably run as soon as the giants broke through.

I could hear the roar of fires blazing, their tendrils licking high into the sky all around us.

Amid the roar, I could also hear the sounds of fierce fighting and screams.

We made our way down the road using Dimensional Step.

Since much of this route was blocked by wreckage from the collapsed houses lining the road, the mounted warriors weren't able to head directly down the paths the giants had taken.

As Houwe had pointed out earlier, rescuing all of the enslaved mountain people was likely impossible, due to the sheer size of the town.

But even so, as one who was once a human myself, I couldn't just leave these murderous giants to their own devices. First off, I needed to find the dark giants in the first place. After that, I doubted anyone would mind if we killed them.

If the original report was correct, there were still around twenty left.

"Picking up anything? Goemon? Chiyome?"

I looked back at the two of them. They simply shook their heads.

Thanks to their ninja training, I was relying on their extraordinary senses to locate any

survivors, but it was clearly no easy task.

Back in the Rhoden capital, the Jinshin clan had already identified its target, so it was only a matter of carrying out the plan. Relatively simple by comparison. Out here in Tagent, however, we didn't have the benefit of any advance reconnaissance and had no idea where anything was located.

We'd need to find a lead that we could follow.

After several more teleports, we found ourselves standing before a large, open space.

In the middle of the square stood a decorative stone fountain. All of the surrounding houses were in flames.

Nearby, I found several humans who'd escaped here for safety.

Around the survivors stood a group of guards, dressed in light armor and armed with shields and spears, engaged in violent combat with another group of soldiers, dressed in full body armor made of dull metal.

"What's going on here? I thought the town was being attacked by giants!"

Ariane shook her head at this, puzzled at the sight unfolding before us.

I glanced back just in time to see one of the guards use his spear to score a direct hit on a soldier's helmet, knocking it right off his head. The helmet hit the ground with a loud clang and rolled.

However, the soldier didn't seem fazed in the slightest, and continued pressing in on the guards with his sword.

Now that the helmetless soldier's identity had been revealed, a cold chill ran up my spine.

Its face was that of a skeleton, not dissimilar from my own.

"Ariane, that's me! I wonder if all of the soldiers are just like me too?"

"They can't be! If they were all like you, then... well, they probably wouldn't have made it this far."

Ariane was always the wet blanket that dampened my enthusiasm.

"But still, something strange is going on here. Those soldiers are definitely undead."

Chiyome carefully inspected the soldiers, narrowing her eyes and giving the air a brief sniff.

This only made the whole situation even more confusing.

Why were there fully armored undead, and why were they wielding human weapons?

If there had been just a few of them, a simple explanation, like a dead soldier being buried with their armor and weapons, could easily explain it. But there were at least ten that I could see, and at least ten more were flooding out of the destroyed houses and making their way here.

"Now isn't the time. We need to help the guards. We can look for answers later!"

I pulled the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg off my back and lunged into the fray.

The humans took one look at me and, figuring I was one of the skeleton soldiers, readied their shields and spears.

I wasn't in a position to explain to them who I was. Besides, they weren't entirely wrong on the skeleton point.

I gave the human guards a wide berth and focused on the skeleton soldiers, swiping down with a heavy blow.

The air whistled as my sword flew through the air, cutting through armor like paper and sending fragments of metal and bone raining down onto the pavement.

The skeletons' armor were made of relatively light metal that put up little resistance. It might have been able to stand up to an average sword or spear, but in the face of the mythical-class Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, it was like they were wearing cardboard.

"I thought we'd be hunting giants, but here I am fighting my skeleton brethren..."

I complained to myself as I swung my sword once more, knocking back another soldier

with a loud clang, sending pieces of bone flying every which way. Its armor collapsed in a neat pile.

All twenty skeletons were reduced to literal bones faster than a ramen joint could get the bowl from their kitchen to your table.

"That about wraps things up here. Anyway, I have a few questions for you guys, if that's okay."

I slid the sword back into its sheath and looked at the guards and townsfolk. They all looked completely taken aback at what they'd just seen.

I took another step forward to try and speak with them, only to be met with fear, and several spears pointed my way.

"Arc, behind you!"

I glanced back to find Ariane running full tilt in my direction, sword drawn. It took me a second to realize what she was trying to tell me. I pulled my shield up with my left hand and swung my sword with my right to meet the incoming blow.

The newcomer did a flip through the air, bounding over my head, and landing in the middle of the human guards. He swung his blades with deadly precision, sending blood spraying every which way.

"Sasuke!" Chiyome called out his name.

I couldn't tell if he was actually responding to her or not, but Sasuke's expressionless face slowly turned toward me.

Before I could react, I heard a now-familiar cry from above and felt the ground tremble beneath my feet.

I used Dimensional Step to move out of the way.

The earth rumbled so tremendously that the surrounding buildings shook on their foundations. The spot where I'd been standing mere moments ago was now occupied by a six-meter-tall dark giant, its weapon raised high in the air.

That was close. One second too late, and I would've been as flat as a flower shoved

between the pages of a book.

The giant let out a furious cry before lifting up its immense stone axe and swinging it down toward Sasuke. The ninja, however, anticipated the strike and bounded up the wall of a building, disappearing onto the rooftops.

“W-wait up, Sasuke!”

Chiyome took off after him, running down a narrow alley before bounding onto the roofs herself, heading in the direction Sasuke had gone.

Goemon ran straight up the side of a building and followed suit, leaving clear outlines where his feet slammed into the wall. That technique must've been a sheer feat of strength.

Ariane watched them go, the worry clear on her face, before glancing toward me. She wasn't sure if she should stay with me or follow them.

“Ariane, you go after Chiyome and Goemon! Leave this big lug to me!”

She glanced up at the roof above her and, after a prompting nod from me, chased after the others.

It was now just me and the dark giant alone in the square.

The headless dark giant pulled its stone axe up from the earth and focused its large, inky black eyes on me. It was a rather disconcerting sight. The dark giant swung wide, and I pulled up my own weapon, light slowly building around the blade. I slammed it into the ground.

“Sword of Judgment!”

A rune appeared under the giant's feet. Out of the center rose a sword of light, piercing the giant's body from below. The sword tore up out of the giant's mouth before a loud metal clang resounded through the square as it shattered into a thousand pieces a second later.

As the shards of light clattered to the ground, the giant began shaking wildly.

“Well, your hide may be tough, but sensitive spots are all the same.”

I yanked my sword from the ground and started walking away when I suddenly spotted a young boy huddled in the ruins of a building.

I put my sword back in its sheath and approached him. He looked afraid as he clutched a piece of timber in his hands, pointing it in my direction. Behind the young boy, I could see a woman lying on the ground, her foot trapped under the rubble, blood flowing from her head.

The woman, probably the boy's mother, spoke weakly.

"Please... save yourself... Please..."

However, the young boy continued holding out the wood, tears rolling down his cheeks. "I'm not leaving you, Mama! I won't go without you!"

I felt bad that he believed I intended to do him harm, but I had no ill intentions for him or his mother. To be fair, though, I must have looked just like the other skeletons to them.

"Kyii! Kyiii!"

Ponta looked up from where it was wrapped around my neck like a scarf and tried telling them I wasn't some sort of strange monster. Unfortunately, it had little effect.

I remembered something I had stashed away at my waist and reached down to pull out my waterskin. After a quick swig, I was overcome by a massive headache as everything blurred in front of me.

I let out a deep breath as I tried to get ahold of myself.

A shudder passed through my body as the rush of built-up emotions washed over me. Maybe it was the up-close-and-personal battle with the giant that had taken such an emotional toll on me.

I took another deep breath and let it out slowly before turning my attention back to the boy and pulling my helmet off.

"You're... not a human, are you mister?" The young boy looked up at me with great curiosity.

"I'm an elf. Have you heard of them? We can use magic. Even magic that allows us to heal people."

The boy's face lit up as I pulled the helmet back on. "You... You can fix Mama?"

I nodded, and approached the woman behind him.

After casting a healing spell on the woman's head and making sure the bleeding had stopped, I began removing the bricks so I could examine her leg. It looked broken, and would probably need a more powerful spell.

"Are you sure you're an elf, mister? I heard that elves are cunning people who stole their powers from God."

I was taken aback by the boy's statement. Apparently, this is what the Hilk church was teaching its followers. "Are you saying you've never met a cunning human?"

The boy thought for a minute before shaking his head.

I'd be willing to bet someone specific had come to mind.

"Say, for example, there was a thief. If that thief were a human, would that make all humans thieves? Are you or your mother thieves? It's the same thing."

"Mama and I ain't no thieves!" the boy shot back angrily.

After finishing with my healing magic, I looked over the woman's leg and nodded. It should be all right now.

"Thank you so much," the woman said.

"Beyond the wall is relatively safe. Keep out of sight and make your way out of town."

The woman slowly stood on unsteady legs and bowed her head. I glanced down at the worried young boy and cast a healing spell on him as well.

"Keep her safe, boy."

The boy watched the magical glow fade with great interest and responded with a firm nod. He took his mother's hand and led her out of the square and down the road. A

few moments later, they were gone.

That had taken longer than I anticipated. I needed to get up onto the roofs and get my bearings.

Two dark shadows dashed across the rooftops of the buildings of Tagent.

Leading the way was a cat-eared man dressed all in black and wrapped in a dark cloak. His bright red eyes and pale complexion made him look like a ghost. A young cat girl dressed in similar black ninja garb followed a short distance behind him.

Her azure eyes were fixed on the man's back as she darted across the crumbling roof tiles, desperate to not lose sight of him.

The man she chased was someone she'd once considered a brother. They'd both lost their families. They'd lived and trained together. He'd doted on her like a sister, and she'd admired him as if he were her real brother.

One of the six great fighters of the Jinshin clan, Sasuke was also one of the youngest members to ever assume that role. However, the Sasuke she was pursuing was no longer the man she'd once known.

It was nothing short of a tragedy that she'd finally find the man she'd been looking for in a state like this, devoid of any life. He was undead, a man no longer of this world. Jealous of the living, he could do nothing but dispense death.

A corpse without a soul... or so they said.

But Chiyome had to believe that the man she'd once known was still inside. From getting yelled at by Master Hanzo to eating flour dumpling soup, they'd done everything together. She refused to believe that that man was gone.

"Wait up, Sasuke!"

Chiyome used her ninja skills to throw some water shuriken at Sasuke's feet, but he immediately responded with shuriken of his own, knocking them away.

Sasuke's split-second pause, however, was all the time another figure, a mammoth of

a man, needed to close in from the opposite side. He came in fast with a right hook, his arm looking like it was made entirely of metal.

“Goemon?!”

“Muscle to stone, concussive fist!”

Sasuke launched into the air and did a somersault right as Goemon’s fist came crashing down, taking him out of the massive man’s reach.

The roof exploded beneath Goemon’s fist as if it’d been hit by a bomb, throwing bricks and dust everywhere.

Chiyome yelled at him. “What’re you doing, Goemon?! What if you’d hit Sasuke?”

Goemon glared at Chiyome. “You know it as well as I do. Sasuke was one of us, but now he’s a member of the undead. Do you want to see him bring further disgrace to his name?”

The normally silent man’s voice boomed, his eyes wide.

Chiyome looked back and forth between Sasuke and Goemon.

Sasuke picked up on her hesitation. A moment later, he had both blades out from the sheaths at his back and was rushing in to strike.

Chiyome evaded the first slash and blocked the second with her own blade, but Sasuke caught her square in the stomach with a powerful kick, sending her flying backward and crashing onto another roof.

“Hyauuk!”

The young ninja spit blood from her mouth and lurched to her feet, but Sasuke was already closing in fast. All she could do was watch blankly.

Goemon appeared behind Sasuke, his body now fully engulfed in bronze as he tried running the other man through. However, Sasuke mostly managed to dodge the attack, catching only a glancing blow that threw him off balance. While still in mid-air, Sasuke pulled several metal shuriken out of his pocket and threw them.

Changing direction in mid-air was one of Sasuke's special techniques. It was almost unnatural how he pulled it off.

One of the shuriken missed Goemon and made its way straight toward Chiyome's chest.

"Instead of throwing it at the target, think of it like extending your arm toward the target."

These words echoed in Chiyome's head as she remembered the day when Sasuke had taught her how to properly throw a shuriken. He'd trained with her until late into the evening.

The image of young Sasuke sprang to mind as her eyes focused in on the man coolly dispensing death. The clang of metal on metal resounded in the air, and Sasuke's shuriken tumbled off the roof, down to the stone path below.

The shuriken had bounced off a woman's long blade, her white hair whipping in the wind.

"Step back, Chiyome! It's too dangerous. Goemon and I will take up the fight."

Ariane turned her gaze toward Sasuke, stepping between him and the young ninja girl.

Unfortunately, two dark giants chose that exact moment to make their presence known. They let out an awful shriek that echoed throughout the town.

"Greeeeeaaaaauuw!"

Both of the giants had their eyes fixed on Sasuke as they brought their massive stone axes down in his direction.

The roofs shook violently whenever the giants ran, making it difficult to move. The giants, however, paid this no mind, and swung their axes with reckless abandon into the surrounding buildings. They relentlessly crushed homes beneath their feet, causing a landslide of bricks all around them.

The giants lost their footing on the ruins, tumbling to the ground and taking Goemon—his body still encased in metal—down with them in the wave of destruction.

Ariane used her earth spirit magic to create a platform beneath her feet to escape the destruction, while Chiyome dove to a nearby roof just in time.

Sasuke, who, only moments before, had been fighting against the three of them, leaped high into the air, flipped around, and glanced down at the destruction with disinterest. After landing on another rooftop, he bounded off again to make his escape.

Before he could, however, several metal, star-shaped disks flew through the air and embedded themselves in his foot. Sasuke lost his concentration at the sudden pain and lost his balance, crashing hard into the roof and sending a cloud of dust high into the air.

“Chiyome...”

“Chiyome!”

Goemon and Ariane turned toward the person who'd thrown the shuriken, the surprise evident in their voices.

“Are you all right? You don't need to push yourself.”

Chiyome just shook her head, brushing off Ariane's concern. “I've got this. I'm Chiyome. When I accepted the role that came along with that name, I knew it would be my job to see my allies off. Ariane, can you hold the giants back?”

A stiff smile came to Chiyome's face as she glanced toward the two giants struggling to stand.

“No problem. Not only will I hold them back, I'll put them down while I'm at it!”

Ariane shot a confident grin toward Chiyome before bounding down the mountain of rubble. She practically glided, not getting caught even once as she drew her sword and held it high, her golden eyes locked straight ahead.

Her body began emitting a faint, scarlet glow as she quietly recited a chant.

“Holy flame, heed my call. Rise up, rain down, and return everything to the dust from whence it came.”

Multiple red balls began forming around Ariane as she chanted. They took off like

glimmering butterflies, dancing about, as if they had minds of their own. The flaming butterflies obeyed Ariane's command and fluttered toward the dark giants.

One of the dark giants let out an immense roar and swung its axe toward Ariane. The axe struck the pile of rubble below, sending pieces of debris flying everywhere and momentarily obscuring its vision in a massive cloud of dust.

The dark giant tried waving the cloud of dust away. Instead, however, its hand erupted into flames, looking like a giant torch.

"Grauuuuuw!"

It held its burning arm tight and fell into the pile of rubble, smashing more houses as it thrashed about.

Despite the giant's efforts to quench the flame, it only grew stronger as it burnt its way up the giant's arm.

Moments later, a pillar of fire burst out of the dark giant's mouth, eliciting an unearthly scream of agony. Its massive eyes went blank as the flames began eating them as well, burning butterflies floating out of the now-empty sockets.

The butterflies continued multiplying and returned to Ariane, who carefully orchestrated their movements with her sword, like a skilled conductor. They gathered below her, the red glow growing even more intense. Even her snow-white hair looked as if it were ablaze as it fluttered in the wind, reflecting the swarm of fiery butterflies. Whether the remaining giant was sentient enough to understand true fear was up for debate, but if it could, that had to be what it was feeling now.

The giant started reversing course on its stubby legs.

"Your fear of fire proves that you're nothing but an animal!"

A sadistic smile graced Ariane's face as she sent the swarm of butterflies after the fleeing giant.

While Ariane was busy creating hell on earth, Chiyome shuddered at the thought of how her companion must look when angry.

Ah, right. She'd told Ariane that she would stop Sasuke on her own.

The dark giant was now burnt to a crisp, filling the air with the unmistakable scent of charred meat. She could feel the unnatural heat wafting off the giant-turned-torch.

Chiyome took a deep breath and slowly let it out, trying to clear her senses. Suddenly, everything around her began feeling much more vivid. Goemon stood a short distance away, blocking Sasuke's escape route.

A loud clang broke the silence as Chiyome blocked a shuriken flying out of the dust cloud straight toward her. It was the shuriken she'd thrown at Sasuke.

A split second later, Sasuke came diving out of the shadows after the shuriken. Chiyome anticipated this and coolly deflected the first blow with her short sword before striking out with her own horizontal slash. She easily ducked out of the way of Sasuke's second thrust.

Sasuke parried Chiyome's strike with one of his own blades before bringing the other down toward her undefended torso, hoping to cleave her in two.



Right at that moment, two water shuriken flew straight toward Sasuke's feet from out of the rubble. He bounded into the air and twisted around, dodging one of them, but he wasn't quite nimble enough to avoid the second, which struck his already injured foot.

Undead were generally incapable of feeling pain, but that didn't mean they didn't suffer from the physical limitations imposed by an injury. Just as one couldn't grasp anything with a broken arm, it was impossible to move deftly on injured feet regardless of whether or not you felt pain. Though he didn't show that he was affected at all by the injury, in either his expression or movements, the impact on his endurance and stamina were clear.

Chiyome held up her short sword and locked eyes with Sasuke.

A feeling she couldn't quite put into words began welling up inside her. But no matter how much she knew that she couldn't afford to think about such things, her thoughts kept drifting back to them.

After shaking her head to clear her mind, Chiyome began performing several gestures with her hands.

"Body to water, liquid wolf fang!"

Water began pooling at her feet, forming into two mounds that slowly took the shape of wolves. However, these wolves were a fair bit smaller than the ones she'd used during the assault on the capital of the Rhoden Kingdom.

Sasuke pointed one of his swords and drew the other back in a well-practiced move that could strike down a foe in a single, powerful strike.

Chiyome unleashed her two aqua wolves on Sasuke, following close behind them while keeping an eye on Sasuke's movements.

The wolves dove toward Sasuke just as he swung.

Sasuke's initial blows went straight through the first aqua wolf, though his second attack blew it away.

Sasuke's swords began glowing as a gust of wind whipped around them, making his attacks all the more powerful.

Chiyome and the remaining aqua wolf flanked Sasuke on either side, and she pressed in on the attack.

The remaining aqua wolf dove at Sasuke's back, only barely missing as Sasuke ducked away and swung his sword toward the beast.

At the same moment, Chiyome closed in from the other side. Sasuke missed the wolf and launched another strike at Chiyome. She dodged, and let loose with another shuriken.

Sasuke avoided the shuriken this time by twisting his body out of the way. He thrust his sword up into the neck of the remaining aqua wolf as it dove in toward him.

Suddenly, he felt another wolf, this one smaller than the first two, bite down hard on his arm and thrash about.

Due to its small size, it was hardly able to inflict more than a flesh wound.

While Sasuke was distracted by the bite, Chiyome threw her short sword straight at his face. He deflected the blow, but she had anticipated that.

After all the time they'd spent training together on driving an enemy back, striking when they least expected it, and feinting, Sasuke could easily read Chiyome's intentions.

With the blade temporarily blocking Sasuke's view, Chiyome took the opportunity to close in on him and get within reach of his injured foot. Even she was stunned that she'd pulled it off.

All of their training had led them here, with her hand on his foot.

In that moment, Chiyome and Sasuke locked eyes—azure and red fixed on one another. Chiyome's lips trembled as she stroked the foot of the man who'd once called her his little sister.

His flesh was cold, as if blood had stopped flowing through it long ago. She gritted her teeth in determination.

"Body to water, bloodstream hell needle!"

A spike-shaped object formed in Chiyome's right hand and drove itself into the wound

in Sasuke's foot.

Sasuke's foot began deforming and bloating as countless spikes of water tore out of his body, making him resemble a giant porcupine.

The clear water took on a red tinge as it mixed with his blood. His body convulsed violently, then he collapsed, the spikes vanishing.

Sasuke lay unmoving on the ground, his eyes closed. Chiyome looked down at him in silence as tears welled in her eyes. A single teardrop found its way down her cheek and fell onto Sasuke's face.

"Sasuke... brother. Why didn't you use your ninja techniques and fight back?"

Under normal circumstances, Sasuke would have undoubtedly relied more heavily on his wind abilities. And yet, he'd only used the most basic of his techniques. Even his sky-walking technique had felt... half-hearted.

She never would have been able to beat the Sasuke she'd once known.

Chiyome caught a glimpse of movement under the fallen man's eyelids.

"It... wouldn't be right... to fight... against your sister... like that..."

His voice was a hoarse whisper, barely audible over the flames crackling around them. But Chiyome recognized it as the voice of her beloved brother.

An unrelenting stream of tears poured down Chiyome's cheeks.

"Sasuke! Hold on, I'm going to get Arc! He can heal you, I know it!"

As Chiyome stood up, however, she found her path blocked by Goemon. She shot a defiant glare up at him.

"Healing magic cannot bring back the dead. Say your goodbyes, Chiyome."

The young ninja let out a choked sob as she turned her gaze back toward Sasuke.

"Don't... cry, Mia. I'm glad that... it was... you who stopped me."

“Rowe... Rooooowe!!!”

Tears flowed freely down her face as she pulled her brother closer, ignoring the wounds covering his body, in an attempt to catch every word.

Sasuke’s face curved into a gentle smile at the feeling of her warmth. “Goemon, please watch after her.”

The large man closed his eyes and nodded solemnly.

Sasuke’s body drooped as the last remnants of energy left him. In a matter of moments, all trace of movement had ceased, as if he’d fallen into a deep, deep sleep. His body began turning into a fine dust.

“Watch... the church...”

“I don’t understand! Sasuke! What does that mean?!”

Chiyome looked down in desperation at the scattering remains of her brother. Alas, he offered no answers as his disintegrating body was carried away by a strong breeze.

Chiyome held tight to a red, diamond-shaped crystal as she watched the particles dance in the air. The gem in her hand was all that remained of him.

I looked around at the town of Tagent from my rooftop perch and let out a sigh.

“Where did you guys go? I can’t find anyone.”

Using Dimensional Step, I teleported around the town, looking for my friends. But so far, all that greeted me were the ever-present flames, slowly eating away at the town.

Whenever I ran across any skeleton soldiers, I destroyed them from the rooftops with a magical attack. But I quickly realized that there were quite a few of them. I must’ve destroyed at least a hundred already.

I also slayed another dark giant while I was at it.

Though not ideal against multiple opponents, Sword of Judgement was the perfect

attack for tearing through a single giant right at their weakest point. I tried not to think too hard about where I was stabbing them though.

Minimal effort, maximum effect.

“Kyii!” Ponta was trying to tell me something.

“Huh, what’s that, buddy?”

I glanced around, finally spotting a dark giant standing atop a roof.

Seeing that hulking mass atop a building was a sight to behold. I had no idea how the building was supporting its weight.

The vast majority of buildings in Tagent were around three stories tall, making it easy for the six-meter-tall giants to disappear in their shadows. Staring off at the sea of rooftops made it impossible to really see anything going on in town.

Another issue I faced was the shoddy construction of the roofs, and the fact that I was wearing a full suit of armor. On more than one occasion, I’d fallen into a building as the roof gave out beneath me. At the very least, I could always blame the damage on the giants, although it had probably been a poor idea on my part to climb up here in the first place.

I focused on a location behind the dark giant.

“Dimensional Step!”

In an instant, I was standing 300 meters away from where I’d been moments ago. I drew my sword as I stared at the giant’s back, preparing for a surprise attack.

“Sword of Judgment!”

A rune appeared under the giant, and a large sword of light appeared at the center, shooting straight up through the giant’s crotch and out its large, gaping mouth.

As soon as the sword splintered and disappeared, the giant’s colossal body tilted to the side, and tumbled off the roof, hitting the pavement below.

Looking down, I could still see signs of life as it struggled to breathe.

Hordes of skeleton soldiers flooded the narrow alley and approached the fallen giant, thrusting their weapons into its body.

"I've got no idea what they're doing here..."

The first time I'd seen them, the skeleton soldiers had been attacking the citizens and local guards.

I'd already figured that the dark giants were led here by Sasuke in order to lay siege to the town of Tagent. It made enough sense that he would put together a plan to lay waste to the humans. However, that still begged the question of why and how he'd disappeared, only to return undead.

Though, to be honest, a part of me didn't want to be suspicious of Chiyome's long-time ally.

Assuming that he'd led the giants here to destroy the town, and was also responsible for the skeleton soldiers, it didn't make sense that they would attack the giants.

Things don't always go as planned, though.

If you released a tiger and a wolf on the same prey, it's more likely than not that the tiger and wolf will end up fighting each other instead.

Even more confusing, though, was the fact that the skeleton soldiers simply walked past the townsfolk on occasion, without bothering to attack.

Perhaps some of them were human after all?

All of the soldiers I'd destroyed so far had attacked either humans or mountain people, though, so I didn't worry about destroying them. Still, I couldn't wrap my mind around what was going on in this town.

The giant ceased all movement after the skeleton soldiers' assault. With that task complete, they marched off in search of another target.

I kicked a roof tile down toward them. It hit the pavement below, shattering with a loud crash. But they only glanced at it before continuing on their way.

It didn't seem like there were any humans among them. Sure, they'd responded to the

sound, but they made no effort to identify where the tile had come from.

"This just keeps getting stranger and stranger."

Before I could give it more thought, I heard another giant's cry off in the distance.

It was already well into the evening, and the sun was hanging low in the sky.

The dark giant screeched again, this time followed by the desperate screams of humans.

Ponta turned in the direction of the sound, its tail wagging gently. I turned, too, trying to identify the source of the sound.

Up ahead, at the center of the town, I saw a massive building that looked nothing like the rest.

It was flanked on either side by towers that shot high into the sky. It had a rather unique construction to it, and looked remarkably similar to a building I'd seen back in Leibnizche, in the Holy East Revlon Empire.

I figured they were both churches of the Hilk religion.

The last time I'd seen a building like this was when I summoned forth a demon and pretty much reduced the church to rubble. Glancing around, I caught sight of several dark giants marching down the road, closing in on the church. At their feet, I saw little dots scattering out of their way—townsfolk running for their lives.

I turned my attention away for a moment to look up at the darkening sky. Once night fell, it would become infinitely more difficult for me to use my teleportation magic.

The original plan had been to slip into the town unnoticed among the chaos and free the enslaved mountain people, but I couldn't just leave the dark giants to run around freely, causing havoc.

Well, havoc had already been caused. But I didn't want to see it get any worse.

From where I stood, I counted seven dark giants assembling around the church.

I took a deep breath, drew the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg with my right hand and hefted the Holy Shield of Teutates with my left.

“Kyii!”

Sensing that it was time for battle again, Ponta dropped down from my head and wrapped itself around my neck like a scarf. I brushed its fluffy tail aside to keep it from obscuring my vision.

“Off we go.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding and used Dimensional Step to teleport me atop one of the buildings inside the church grounds. It gave me a good line of sight over the surrounding area.

The church was larger than any other building in town and immaculately decorated, though its design was still more reserved than the churches I’d seen back up on the northern continent. Probably the most unique feature was the large wall that enclosed the church grounds.

Back in my world, I couldn’t recall seeing any churches surrounded by walls, given that the whole point of a church was to be open to all. It seemed a bit odd to me. But this was a different world. Back before the town had exploded in size, the church might have been designed as an evacuation point in the event of a monster attack.

In front of me, I watched as people flooded through the church’s entrance.

Anyone who showed even a moment’s hesitation was snatched up and thrown into the mouth of one of the pursuing dark giants. I could hear the awful sounds as they crunched down.

Just watching the scene unfold was enough to make me sick to my stomach.

Unfortunately, even those who did make it past the church’s walls weren’t necessarily safe. The dark giants were already aggressively swinging their stone axes into the wall.

More crashes. More screams.

The dark giants lumbered through the hole they’d bashed in the wall and began screeching as they stomped on the people in the courtyard as if they were ants.

I couldn’t get a clear look from where I stood, but the screams I heard told the whole story.

My sword hand trembled. Was this... fear? Why?

I remembered what I'd done for the fallen woman earlier. I dropped my sword, took off my helmet, and touched my face.

It wasn't that of a cold, hard skull.

I let out a sigh as the tips of my fingers touched flesh.

Apparently, the effects of the spring water hadn't worn off yet. So this emotion causing me to pause in the face of giants was... real. The feelings of fear surfaced whenever I returned to my elven form, and that was causing my feet to betray me and keep me from moving forward.

I squeezed my fists several times, trying to force the fear down.

No matter how overpowered this body of flesh and blood might be, without the proper experience and training to prepare the soul, it was like a weapon left in cold storage. I laughed weakly.

"Kyii?"

Ponta looked up from my neck, concern clear on its face.

"It's okay, Ponta. This will be a good exercise for me. If I plan to face my foes as an elf, I'll need to prepare myself for combat."

Though I was speaking to Ponta, the words were more for me. I put my helmet back on, closed my eyes, and banged on my forehead several times with my fist.

"I'm ready."

I made a brief list of skills that could be useful in the upcoming battle, then retrieved the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg from the roof with an energetic yell.

For my first target, I picked one of the dark giants a little farther into the courtyard, away from the others. Getting the drop on your enemy was one of the essentials of combat. Now that I thought about it, the very first battle I'd gotten into, when I first appeared in this world, had also relied on the element of surprise.

It seemed a bit easy, considering all the power I could harbor, but I thought it best to build up my experience slowly.

I held my sword at the ready and focused on a spot behind the dark giant.

“Dimensional Step!”

In an instant, I was standing atop another roof, staring at the giant’s back. Holding my sword up, I readied my next attack.

Just then, I heard a man’s voice booming from within the church grounds.

“Now just wait a minute here! You leave my house alone, you hear me?!”

The voice shook the very ground beneath me and left me with a deep sense of unease. And yet, there was also something incredibly immature about it, which only contributed to how uncanny it sounded.

“You’ve got me real mad now! I’m going to rip you to shreds!”

The eerie, immature voice echoed around me. A massive explosion tore through the air as part of the church’s wall blew away.

The panicking masses, and even the dark giants that were munching on them, all looked over in surprise.

Amid the slowly dispersing cloud of dust stood a hideous, indescribable form that somehow managed to make the dark giants look cute by comparison.

The best description I could come up with was that it looked vaguely like a scorpion with the face of a caterpillar. Its massive body was pale white, and it was about ten meters long. It looked rather squishy. Countless human heads, tortured expressions on their faces, covered the body of the creature. I could faintly hear moans escaping their lips, as if they were still alive. The whole thing was supported by innumerable pale, white human legs running along its stomach like fine hairs. The legs caused the creature to undulate as it slid its body along.

The back of the creature was curled up like a shrimp. At the tip of the raised section was a body that looked like a cross between a frog and a man. This appeared to be the source of the voice I’d heard earlier. A large, fleshy mass grew out of the frogman’s

back with a multitude of long, multi-jointed arms sprouting out of it. Each of the hands carried a hatchet, club, mace, or some other weapon.

It was truly a creature of nightmare.

The disturbing scorpion-caterpillar launched its raised section toward a nearby dark giant, the innumerable arms descending on it with weapons drawn, but I knew the dark giant's stiff fur did a good job protecting it from being harmed by most normal weapons.

The giant pulled up its axe and tried fighting back, but it was only a few moments before it dropped to the ground from its injuries.

The large scorpion-like creature opened its immense mouth lined with hundreds of teeth. It looked like a giant alligator as it swooped in and swallowed the dark giant whole, a sickening squishing noise filling the air as its mouth closed.

Even given its immense size, I was amazed to see the scorpion-caterpillar swallow a dark giant whole. I could hardly believe my eyes.

I briefly considered the possibility that maybe there was someone else out there who could also summon demons and was trying to protect the townsfolk, but I knew in my heart that the world wasn't that kind.

After taking down the dark giant, the creature slithered toward some of the humans cowering in fear nearby. It opened its mouth again and chomped down on them.

I realized that this was no angel of the church, but yet another of the many indescribable monsters that inhabited this world.

The people quickly descended into panic, which was a pretty reasonable reaction.

I heard them scream and flee in terror as the bizarre creature called after them.

"Aww, but being like this makes me soooo hungry."

He sounded so casual as he spoke, inhaling people with his large mouth, like a whale might suck up krill. It was a scene of indiscriminate carnage.

After seeing their comrade taken down, the rest of the dark giants descended upon

the massive creature. However, the result was the same each time: They, along with the other humans running for their lives, just ended up as another snack in the creature's belly.

The faces howling in agony along the creature's body increased.

All I could do was watch as the large, pale creature wriggled forward on countless legs, its frog-human body gazing at the carnage in front of it.

"Kyiii..."

Ponta's worried cry brought me back to reality.

"Sorry about that, Ponta."

The scene only got worse as a swarm of skeleton soldiers swept in, chasing after the refugees who'd escaped to the church.

It didn't do me any good to try and make sense of the situation right now.

If the tiger clan ran across this creature, it wouldn't end well for them.

Fortunately, the creature still hadn't noticed me. I still had the element of surprise.

I began waving the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, its blade slowly taking on a light blue glow. With a smash, I brought the blade straight down into the ground.

"Sword of Judgment!"

The scorpion creature was looking in another direction, so I was sure everything was about to play out perfectly.

Despite putting in even more power than usual, in order to make sure I'd finish the thing off, as soon as the rune appeared underneath the creature, the faces that lined its body let out moans of agony, and it quickly skittered out of the way. The sword of light shot straight up into the air, totally missing its mark.

I was impressed at how fast a thing that size could move.

The frog-man looming over the creature seemed to be steering it around like some

living vehicle—a kind of demon go-kart.

I silently cursed as I readied myself for my next attack. Unfortunately, the creature had finally caught sight of me. That didn't take long.

The creature undulated as it moved, turning its massive body toward me.

“Who dares oppose me?! All right men, destroy him!”

His eerie voice rang in my ear like that of an impetuous child. The countless legs lining its belly trembled as the creature came toward me at full speed. Yep, I'd been found.

“Holy Shield!”

I took off in a sprint, shield at the ready as I called forth my defensive spell.

At nearly the same instant, the multi-armed creature descended upon me. I could hear its blows smashing against my glowing shield as I slashed out with my own sword, lopping off several of the incoming arms.

Fortunately, the pale flesh had nowhere near the defensive abilities of the giants, and my weapon easily cut through them.

“You jerk! You big, fat, stupid jeeeeeeeerk!”

The creature was clearly annoyed as it began throwing a fit. Deciding on another strategy, it rushed at me, trying to crush me.

I was able to dodge the attack with a quick teleport. The creature turned frantically from side to side, trying to see where I went.

Apparently, his view was fixed, and he could only look in the direction his body was facing.

In that case, I should be able to just attack it from behind, constantly moving out of its line of sight and attacking again.

I readied my sword once more and called forth another of my skills, this time a fast, short-range technique.

“Holy Ray Sword!”

I swung my glowing blade down, sending out a beam of light in a straight line toward the creature’s feet. It let out a loud, wailing cry.

The creature slumped to one side as it turned to face me. There was something rather nauseating about how it moved.

“You jerk! You bastard! You, you, you... I hate you!”

The frog-man attached to the back of the creature continued screaming a variety of epithets at me as it lunged in once more. I wasn’t really interested in fighting this thing face to face, though.

I dodged the attack and unleashed another Holy Ray Sword, but this time I was only able to lop off a few more legs as it deftly moved out of the way.

I glared back at the thing, silently hurling similar complaints back at it.

The massive creature seemed to grow in size, the faces lining its body bloating, their mouths going wide. In unison, they each vomited up a pale, amorphous mass around the size of a grown man.

These vomited lumps of muscle began twitching about in a grotesque manner before standing up under their own power. They looked like eels that had embedded themselves deep in the sea floor, wriggling about as they searched for food.

Numerous tendrils began growing out of the sides of these writhing creatures before they started crawling along like inchworms.

They squirmed about in bizarre fashion for a short time before bounding into the air like fleas, flying right toward me.

“Yeagh, ewww!”

I used my shield and sword to block and chop down the numerous masses of flesh that came flying at me.

Everywhere I looked, all I could see was more of these writhing creatures. I couldn’t get a fix on a location to teleport to.

None of the incoming enemies were particularly strong on their own. They posed little individual threat, but there were just so many of them... and they were disgusting to boot.

I wasn't making any progress, so I decided to use one of my Magus area-of-effect spells.

"Flame Viper!"

Flames began licking around my feet before turning into a column of fire surrounding me. A flaming snake rose up from the column and began torching the monsters.

At least they weren't resistant to fire, as far as I could tell.

My surroundings looked like a sci-fi movie, the landscape covered in the charred remains of alien larva.

Now that I was ready to get back into the fight with the creature itself, I discovered that it had its large, alligator-like mouth wide open, an ominous sound echoing out from deep inside. The wailing of the faces embedded in its skin increased in pitch.

"Veeveeeeveeveeveeeeeaaaaaaagh!!!"

The sound on its own was enough to make me feel uneasy, but the volume made it all the worse. My legs wobbled, then gave out on me entirely, sending me to my knees. Ponta slipped off my neck.

"Ngah, does he have debuff spells too?"

I used my sword like a cane to support myself, running through the litany of recovery spells I knew in an attempt to ward off the debuffing effects.

"Uncurse!"

"Anti-disease!"

They seemed to have at least some effect, since I felt my strength come back to me. Just to be on the safe side, I used the recovery spells on Ponta as well.

I let out a yell to focus myself and turned toward the creature, ready to face it head-on. Once I got a look at it, however, I immediately understood the purpose of its

debuffing attack.

New fleshy-looking objects were growing out of the creature's stomach. It looked like it was regenerating before my eyes and growing new legs.

Its regeneration wasn't fast by any means, but this whole situation didn't look good.

Back in the game, enemies that had regeneration abilities usually needed to be attacked by multiple people, all timing their attacks perfectly to prevent the monster from regenerating. Right now, it was only me.

I felt like I was fighting the boss all on my own.

Of course, the solution was simple: I needed to keep attacking the creature and not give it any time to regenerate.

While my mind ran over my options, he lunged again, attacking with his many arms.

I knew that I'd already lopped off quite a few arms at this point, but I didn't seem to be making any progress in reducing the number. This was bad. I might need to make a run for it and find a better place to make my stand.

I glanced around at my surroundings, desperately trying to come up with a plan. The square was now blanketed in darkness, which severely limited where I could teleport to.

I really didn't want to do this, but I didn't have many other choices. I teleported to the farthest place I could see. This would at least give me a little breathing room.

"I'm really sorry about this, Ponta, but I'll need you to fly around on your own for a bit!"

"Kyi? Kyiii!"

Ponta tilted its head inquisitively before sliding off my neck and onto my head. From there, it called up a gust of magical wind, spread the membranes between its legs, and took off into the air.

Good.

I watched Ponta for a moment before turning my attention back to the creature.

Next up, I needed to summon one of my demons—one I'd never used before.

"Come forth, Guardian of Time! Aion, I summon you!"

A large rune appeared on the ground beneath my feet and began glowing. It looked like the inner workings of a clock with intricate springs and cogs all moving together in unison.

The rune began warping, and a giant snake with the head of a lion appeared in the center of it.

The snake-lion coiled itself around my feet and moved up. To anyone watching, it must have looked like I was being attacked by a giant snake. But all was going as planned.

The lion head made it all the way up to my shoulder and flashed its fangs at me. Then it bit my neck. My armor flashed, taking on a snake-lion design as flames flickered out from the gaps.

This was one of the Summoner class's top-tier demons, Aion. Upon summoning forth Aion, it would lock the player's status for a full three minutes. It was a rather unique, though abnormal, skill.

It was a little hard to describe what locking a player's status actually meant, but in short, it basically meant that for three whole minutes, the player wouldn't take damage from attacks and wouldn't consume any magic. You were essentially invincible.

It wasn't without its downsides, however.

First off, you had to achieve a fairly high level in the Summoner class before you could learn it. Even then, despite all that hard work you put in, using this demon was actually pretty inconvenient for most Summoners.

You see, Summoners could only summon one demon at a time.

Sure, you could use as much magic as you wanted in this invincible state, but a Summoner primarily relied on demons for its attacks, which it couldn't use when their status locked.

Compounding that was the fact that it used a lot of magic to summon forth Aion, which made sense, considering its effect. Even adding in a mid-tier, magic-based class, it'd probably take more than three minutes before you were able to make up for all the magic you'd consumed to summon it.

Therefore, in order to properly make use of Aion's abilities, you'd need to have another high-level class, one that could unleash powerful offensive attacks, as either your main or secondary class.

Even though I was able to use any skill I'd ever learned here, back in the game, you were limited to skills belonging to either your main or secondary classes. With Summoner taking up one of those, and another dedicated to offensive capabilities, your player character would be heavily weighted on offense.

Basically, this demon was reserved for gaming addicts.

“All right, let’s wrap this up! Don’t leave a single ember left burning!”

I looked up to see the creature heading straight toward me, its countless legs wriggling along its stomach like little hairs. Pulling up my sword and shield, I readied myself for the attack. Though Aion prevented your health from dropping in the game, I actually wasn’t sure what kind of effect it would have in reality.

Being overconfident definitely wouldn’t do me any good, but I figured that, for now, I’d just ignore any incoming attacks and launch an assault of my own.

While several of the arms were able to strike direct blows on me with their weapons, I didn’t feel any pain other than the sensation of being knocked back. At the very least, the demon’s abilities seemed to be working.

However, I was unsure how much time was actually passing, so I wouldn’t be able to make use of the full three minutes. That would be a problem.

Even though I was able to nullify the impact of the creature’s attack, I was still no closer to my objective.

I needed to do everything I could to weaken the creature as much as possible before my time was up.

“Sacred Seal!”

Hot flashes of light sparked off my blade as I called forth one of my offensive Paladin skills. Forcing my way through its frenzied attack, I brought my sword down on the creature's torso.

A trail of light hung in the air as I swung my sword, the blade finding its target and chopping off a chunk of the creature's body.

“Oooooooooooww!!!”

This was the most powerful skill I had against the undead. Fortunately, it seemed to be quite effective. While the skill was active, even normal attacks would have the same effect, making it a rather useful technique as far as magical abilities were concerned.

I hadn't summoned Aion just for this, however. I had bigger plans.

The creature was drawing back now, in an attempt to protect itself, but I didn't let up.

“You're done for! Cross Advent!”

This was an area-of-effect spell from the Priest class. A bright circle of light appeared in the air above the creature before transforming into a giant, glowing cross. It looked almost like Jacob's Ladder, going all the way down to the creature's head.

“Oooowww!!!”

The creature began bubbling and evaporating where the light struck it, tendrils of smoke rising into the sky.

It leaped back as the pain grew too much to bear, landing on top of several giants and killing them instantly before crashing into the wall of the church, sending down a landslide of rubble.

But I wasn't about to let up the attack now.



I launched into another flurry of strikes against its body using Sacred Seal before calling forth another Cross Advent the moment the cooldown ran out and I could cast it again.

The snake-lion design on my armor began fading just as the creature's body started sizzling away and turning into an amorphous lump of pale flesh. It was an awful sight, like a bunch of human bodies mashed together.

"Kyii!"

"Hah! Looks like I did it!"

Ponta landed on my head to offer up words of encouragement. I turned my gaze away from the lump of flesh to survey my surroundings. The church had been pretty much destroyed in the battle.

At least this time it wasn't my fault. Or at least, that's what I told myself as I turned my gaze back to the mass of melting flesh.

Just what was that creature anyway?

Also, where were Ariane, Chiyome, and Goemon? Were they okay?

I turned around, leaving the wreckage of the church behind me as the survivors stared at the remains of the creature, dumbfounded.

The threat over here was pretty well pacified, so I figured it was time to meet up with the rest of the group.

I glanced up at the star-filled sky and sheathed my sword.

The fires still burning throughout Tagent were like streetlights as I walked along, my heart full of doubts about whether I'd actually be able to meet up with Ariane and the others.

"Hmm... maybe I should just head out of town and wait with Houwe? That might be easier."

"Kyi?"

Ponta responded to my rhetorical question with an inquisitive mew of its own, wagging its long, cottony tail excitedly as it spotted something that caught its interest.

“Kyii! Kyiiiiii!”

I caught sight of three figures heading toward me.

It was Ariane, Chiyome, and Goemon. I let out a sigh of relief. Now we could finally get out of this place.

I waved at Ariane as she crossed the open square toward me. “Ohh, Ariane! Did you have any trouble?”

Ariane simply let out a heavy sigh and shook her head.

As we closed the distance, I noticed that Chiyome’s eyes were cast down. She hadn’t said anything yet. Even her usually perky cat ears were lying flat atop her head.

Back when we’d first entered the town, she’d taken off after Sasuke. I leaned in and whispered to Ariane, “What happened with Sasuke?”

She only shook her head silently.

Chiyome’s ears twitched slightly, as if responding to what I’d just asked. She slowly opened her hand, revealing a glowing red diamond.

I’d seen something like it before. It was a pledge spirit crystal—a treasure cherished by the Jinshin clan, which allowed a person to become one with a spirit by pledging themselves to it, giving them the ability to use powerful techniques. Chiyome had one embedded within her as well.

Since Chiyome was holding it in her hand, that had to mean...

I locked eyes with Ariane. She nodded.

Chiyome spoke at last, in a hushed tone. “The last thing Sasuke told me was to watch out for the church... then he was gone.”

I looked back at Ariane and Goemon, but all they could do was shrug.

"Watch out for the church"? What did that mean?

I looked back over my shoulder at the church grounds where I'd battled the giant creature. Sasuke had called forth the undead and used giants to lay waste to the town. Did the church have something to do with all this?

But if that were the case, then why would the church stage the attack within its grounds? Though, to be fair, we couldn't assume that the church was acting as one.

I scratched my chin and frowned.

Back where I came from, every religion was made up of multiple denominations and factions, so it was entirely believable that there might be no central, solid consensus at the core of the Hilk. Could this be a case of in-fighting?

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts and unravel this tangled ball of yarn. But I wouldn't be able to find any answers right now, no matter how much I thought it over.

Without knowing what they were after in the first place, it was impossible to figure out the reasons behind their actions.

Besides, it was probably best for the elves and mountain people to stay away from the church in the first place, considering that their teachings insisted the elves were "usurpers" and the mountain people had been "cast out of humanity." There was more than enough reason to steer clear. All this meant was that we'd want to be a little more cautious in how we conducted ourselves going forward.

But for now, we should head out of town and make our way back to Chieftain Houwe.

I gazed up at the church. Flanked by the two towers, it resembled a tombstone against the night sky. I tore my gaze away to look back at the group.

EPILOGUE

On the northern continent, the Holy East Revlon Empire held domain over the land to the east.

The imperial capital of Habahren sat at the center of the empire, with numerous roads leading into and out of the city, stretching off to the farthest reaches of its domain. Power over all these lands was concentrated in Habahren.

A company of soldiers marched along one of the arteries that supported this great empire, heading off to the southwest. At their head rode a small number of cavalry, followed by rows and rows of infantry. Behind them was a long train of horse-drawn carts.

The massive formation of soldiers outfitted in identical armor was truly a grand sight to behold. At the center of the formation was a carriage pulled by four horses, a contingent of guards walking along with it.

The elegantly decorated black carriage carried the crest of the Valtiafelbe household—the imperial family that ruled over the Holy East Revlon Empire. However, it was occupied only by two of the emperor's chambermaids, with the emperor himself nowhere to be found.

At the front of the formation, a young man sat atop a beautiful black horse, leading the thirty-men cavalry. The man had a distinguished nose and untamed reddish-brown hair. He was dressed in a form-fitting military uniform, far grander than those of his fellow soldiers.

His name was Domitianus Revlon Valtiafelbe, and he was the young ruler of the Holy East Revlon Empire.

Riding off to Domitianus's side was a large, middle-aged man who leaned in close to the young emperor's ear. The man looked rather worried.

"Are you sure about this, sire? I understand that you're the ruler of these lands, but if there are any spies or assassins out there, you'd make a marvelous target at the head of this formation."

Domitianus laughed in response.

"As you said, this is my domain, so there's nothing to worry about. Besides, don't you think I'd be even harder to spot out here among the men than in that giant rolling box with my name stamped on the side? Kyahaha!"

"Why, I, well... I mean... Who can say?"

The man was temporarily at a loss for words as he thought over the possibilities.

Domitianus's shoulders slumped at the man's overly serious demeanor.

"It's boring sitting in that carriage. And even if something were to happen, I have all these men out here with me."

The young ruler shot a mischievous grin toward the older man.

"Of course, sire! We would all happily give our lives for you!"

All of the men riding along with the emperor offered up a salute. The middle-aged man reached out with his riding crop and gave the emperor's horse a few good strikes.

"Whoa, whoa, cut that out! Are you trying to tell the enemy where I am?"

Domitianus gave an awkward laugh, eliciting a bow of apology from the man.

The man looked back behind them at the massive formation of troops, filling the road to the brim.

"Counting our supplement troops, the army stands at around 20,000 strong. It's quite a sight to behold."

Domitianus grinned at this.

"With me here, we're going to take the fight all the way down to Tisheng and beyond. We'll send that old fart in the west running with his tail between his legs. His days are numbered."

Several of the men around them nodded in agreement with the young emperor's words.

"First, we'll need to summon Lieutenant General Keeling's Southern Imperial Army."

"Aaah, it's been quite some time since I've been on the front lines. I guess I'll at least bring Velmoas a gift for sitting back at the palace. The lieutenant general's head, maybe."

Domitianus broke out in a broad grin and waved his sword about for emphasis. Apparently, he intended to slay the lieutenant general himself.

The middle-aged man looked off toward the western sky, his mind full of the perils they were facing—most of which were ignored by the young ruler, filled with the courage of youth.

"But if they're able to link up with any other forces, even our army may not be enough."

"Hmph. We've leaked information about this expedition to Aspania as well, so they are almost certainly moving around behind the scenes, trying to look for a way to take advantage of it. In that case, the west won't be able to move any of their forces for some time."

With that, Emperor Domitianus narrowed his eyes at the road ahead and smiled.



The Hilk religion was the most popular religion among those who lived on the northern continent.

The country known as the Holy Hilk Kingdom, led by the pontiff, was the seat of the Hilk religion. It was bordered on three sides by the Delfrent Kingdom, the Nohzan Kingdom, and the Salma Kingdom. The rest of its border was defined by the Beek Sea, on the opposite side of which sat the Great West Revlon Empire.

The Hilk capital was located at the base of Mount Alsus, known for its mythril mines, which was a part of the Rutios mountain range. This range marked the rest of the border with the Great West Revlon Empire.

A huge clearing had been clawed out of the mountainside by hand, at the center of which was a huge building surrounded by an open-air corridor. The entrance was such a brilliant white that the sunlight reflecting off it nearly blinded those who approached the awe-inspiring compound.

This was the central Alsus church and home to Pontiff Thanatos Sylvius Hilk, the highest figure in the Hilk religion.

However, only a select few were ever allowed entry to the holy church.

The outside of the church was magnificently decorated, as if to tell all who set eyes upon it the power that the Hilk wielded. The grand design did not stop at the exterior, however, as the interior corridors and rooms were just as, if not even more, grand in their design.

The vaulted ceilings of the corridors stood around three times as tall as any normal building, and the floors were decorated with intricately woven carpets. All of the pieces of furniture filling the rooms were works of art in their own right, made by master artisans.

Off in one room sat at large, round table, around which sat six figures dressed in magnificent robes. They were in the midst of an important discussion.

“According to the reports, Cardinal Industria was killed at the hands of an unknown party down in the western empire’s colony of Tagent on the southern continent.”

The speaker, a man of around thirty years, with immaculately arranged black hair and the elaborate uniform of a clergyman, wore a warm smile on his face. His name was Cardinal Palurumo Avaritia Liberalitas.

After the pontiff himself, the cardinals were the highest-ranking officials in the Holy Hilk Kingdom. This man was known among his peers as Liberalitas.

However, he was not the only cardinal here.

A well-built, muscular man snorted at this.

“Hmph, Charros was always the weakest of the seven cardinals. What a disgrace to his rank to be killed off by some nobody. He always was a lazy sloth. Now that the seat of Industria has opened up, I say we ask the pontiff to assign the role to someone useful.”

Cardinal Marcos Invidia Humanitas stood around 190 centimeters tall and sported blond hair and an unkempt beard. His muscular body was barely confined by the elegant robes he wore, giving him less the appearance of a man of the cloth and more that of a military man.

However, he had clear bags under his eyes and wore a deep frown on his face.

Next to speak was the only woman sitting at the table, a smile gracing her face.

“Oh, so are you saying you doubt the pontiff’s choice in assignments? In that case, I suppose you don’t trust the pontiff’s judge of character?”

The woman—Cardinal Elin Luxuria Castitas—had long, blonde hair and a graceful face. However, her all-white attire, which left her gently swaying chest exposed for all to see, seemed completely unfitting in this place of reverence. A long slit ran up the side of her skirt, showing off the pale skin of her long legs, crossed delicately as she sat.

She shot an enchanting smile in Cardinal Humanitas’s direction. His eyes went wide, and he struggled for words.

“I... No, I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that Charros was rather unscrupulous and...”

The heavily built Cardinal Humanitas looked around frantically as he searched for

words. Noticing that Pontiff Thanatos was not in the room, he let out a large sigh of relief.

An old man with white hair slowly closed his eyes, deep ridges forming on his forehead as he spoke.

"Hmph. We have only been granted the role of cardinal by the grace of His Holiness. He makes no mistakes in his choices, though he is limited in his selection. It is simply a matter of fact that some of us do not live up to our roles."

The old man with arms crossed was Cardinal Augrent Iyla Patientia. A man in his early fifties, he sported a magnificent white mustache to match his head of white hair. Muscles larger than even the hulking Cardinal Humanitas bulged against his robes.

Cardinal Humanitas gritted his teeth, barely able to conceal his anger.

"What are you implying?! That I'm not fit to be a cardinal?!"

Cardinal Patientia kept his eyes closed as a cool smile formed on his lips.

"No one said anything of the sort. Perhaps you've simply come to that realization yourself?"

"Can you just cut it out? Your petty bickering will get us nowhere. Honestly, from where I sit, there's little difference between you two meatheads."

A tall, lanky man with black-rimmed glasses—Cardinal Baltord Spelia Humilitas—butted in to the squabbling in an attempt to end it. The man's head was completely shaved, and he looked the most priestly of all those in the room. There was, however, a strange vibe about the man. He cared little about anything that didn't specifically pique his interest.

He played with the dulled silver ring on his finger as he turned the conversation back to the person who'd killed Charros.

"I'm curious about this knight dressed in silver armor. Charros was a cardinal after all. I'm quite surprised to hear that someone out there could kill him."

The cheerful tone in Cardinal Humilitas's voice drew angry looks from the two bickering men.

“Like you’re one to talk!”

“Hmph!”

Cardinals Humanitas and Patientia skulked in their seats at being reproached by Cardinal Humilitas. Cardinal Castitas merely shrugged at this, the large mounds of flesh beneath her robe heaving as she sighed.

She turned her attention to the ring Cardinal Humilitas wore on his finger as she steered the conversation in a new direction.

“Where did you get that, if I may ask? You’ve been playing with it the whole time.”

She cast him a seductive glance—almost everything she did would cause men to do her bidding. However, Cardinal Humilitas paid little attention to this and responded with a cheerful smile.

“Oh, this? I made this back in the east empire. This item, an employ ring, can be used to control monsters.”

Upon hearing this, Cardinal Castitas recalled where Cardinal Humilitas was assigned.

“Ah, that’s right. You were sent to the Runeology Cloister in the Holy Revlon Empire.”

Cardinal Humilitas shrugged his shoulders dramatically and glanced admonishingly at the other members of the table.

“Everything’s going just fine for me. I really think we should limit these meetings to those who aren’t doing their jobs.”

The atmosphere in the room grew even more hostile, though he seemed to pay it no mind. His gaze stopped on one person.

“Are you just going to eat throughout this whole meeting?”

Cardinal Humilitas adjusted his glasses and shot a look at a small boy busily shoving food into his mouth. He hadn’t said anything so far.

Judging by appearance alone, one might guess that the young boy had perhaps stepped into the wrong room. But he was, in fact, one of the seven cardinals—Cardinal

Tismo Ghoula Temprantia.

The only response he offered to Cardinal Humilitas's question was a shrug before returning to eating.

The other cardinals sighed in response.

"It seems like you're all here." A low voice filled the room. All six cardinals stood up from their seats and immediately kneeled down.

"We are honored by your presence, Pontiff Thanatos."

It was as if the man had suddenly appeared in the room. He bowed to each of the cardinals before sitting down in the elaborate seat placed on a platform overlooking the table.

He was dressed in even more elaborate garb than those of his cardinals, and held in his hand the holy scepter, a highly decorated rod and sign of the pontiff's status.

Atop his head he wore a large hat on which the holy symbol of the Hilk was inscribed, a hat reserved for the pontiff himself. His face was covered with a veil that hung from the brim of the hat.

The veiled man who could bring six cardinals to their knees was none other than the head of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, Pontiff Thanatos Sylvius Hilk.

Pontiff Thanatos looked out over the assembled cardinals before speaking through his veil. No one had ever seen his face.

"I see that you're all here. As I'm sure you must already know, Charros, Cardinal Industria, has been killed by an unknown party after being sent to the southern continent."

He paused for a moment and looked at each of his cardinals one by one. They hung on his every word, and not a single person dared interrupt.

Satisfied, the pontiff continued.

"However, we should be happy that he did his job... at least to the best of his abilities. The west empire's colony of Tagent has suffered a great blow. Though it would have

been nice if the town had fallen entirely, that would have been a bit much to ask of him.”

A faint laugh could be heard from behind the veil.

The cardinals' eyes went wide at this. It was an incredibly rare occurrence for the pontiff to laugh in front of them.

Undeterred by his audience's surprise, the pontiff continued explaining his plans.

“Up until now, the war between the two empires has been leaning in favor of the east. I would like you to focus your efforts on our plans with Nohzan, Delfrent, and Salma. These are your orders.”

The cardinals nodded in unison.

“As you wish.”

The pontiff gave a satisfied nod, stood from his chair, and left the room.

He walked alone down the corridor. The only sounds accompanying him were those of his own footsteps. A faint laugh once again escaped his veil.

“Great things are about to be put into action. It’s been a long while. A truly long while.”

A bird sitting on the windowsill in the corridor watched the pontiff curiously before hopping out to ride the winds high above the mountain range.

Dark clouds filled the sky over the Rutios mountains.

AFTERWORD

This is Ennki Hakari, the author of *Skeleton Knight in Another World*. Thank you so much for picking up this book. I can't believe that the fifth volume of the Skeleton Knight's story is about to hit shelves, and it's all thanks to you, dear readers, who have faithfully supported the story thus far. Truly, thank you very much.

I never could have imagined that my work would be turned into a manga as well. Just imagining how Arc will spring to life on the page sends me into fits of giggles as I try to see it in my mind's eye. Ultimately, I've decided to wait and see it when all of you, dear readers, have a chance to get your hands on it as well.

Now, if you would be so kind as to recommend it to all your friends and... nope, never mind, nothing to see here.

This is a bit off-topic, but honestly, I can't remember the last time a close friend of mine recommended a novel or light novel. Manga, sure, but nothing else. I wonder if it's because manga are easy reading, making them easy to recommend too? Come to think of it, even I rarely recommend any of my favorite novels to people. I guess it's a little hard to do without knowing how the other person feels about reading in general.

So, now that *Skeleton Knight* is going to be a manga, you can easily recommend it to all your friends and... Oops, sorry. Forget about that.

Well, it looks like I'm about to run out of space.

As always, it's only thanks to the hard work of my editor, the talented illustrator KeG, my proofreader, and all the others who helped out that the *Skeleton Knight* was able to return to store shelves for Volume 5. Thank you, everyone. I hope you continue to support *Skeleton Knight in Another World*.

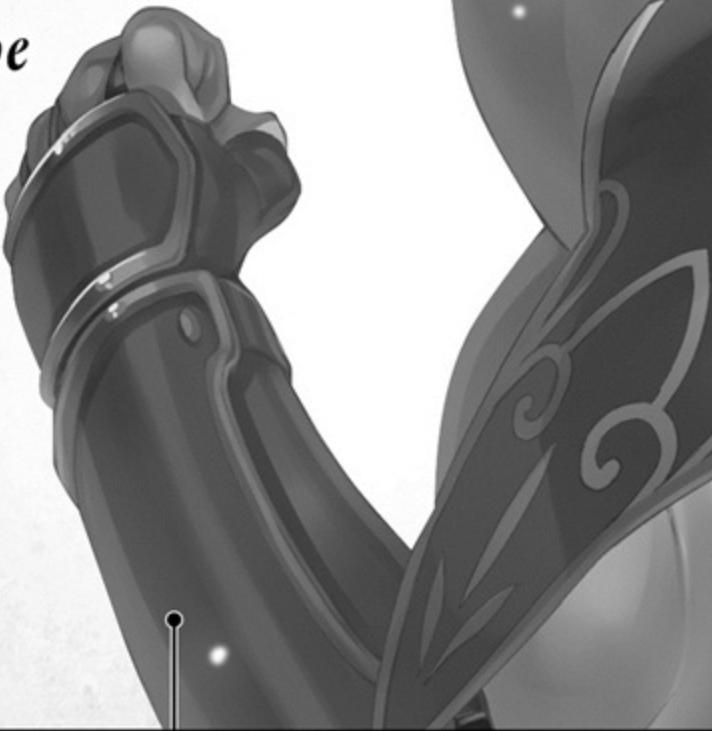
Well, that's about it for now. I look forward to seeing you again in the next book!

SEPTEMBER 2016—ENNKI HAKARI



Character profile

*Muscle
to stone,
concussive
fist!*



Goemon

MOUNTAIN PEOPLE; CAT SPECIES

Goemon joins Chiyome as one of the six great fighters in the service of Master Hanzo, the twenty-second leader of the secret group of spies known as the Jinshin clan. Peerless in matters of brute strength, Goemon even gives Arc a run for his money—and that's without using his explosive techniques. Though a man of few words, Goemon looks out for Chiyome like an older brother, and is trusted implicitly by his friends.



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PtFF by: traktorA7EN