



# SKELETON ON KNIGHT IN ANOTHER WORLD

WRITTEN BY Ennki Hakari  
ILLUSTRATED BY KeG

IV

# **SKELETON KNIGHT IN ANOTHER WORLD**

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

**- VOLUME 4 -**

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**[ Seven Seas ]**

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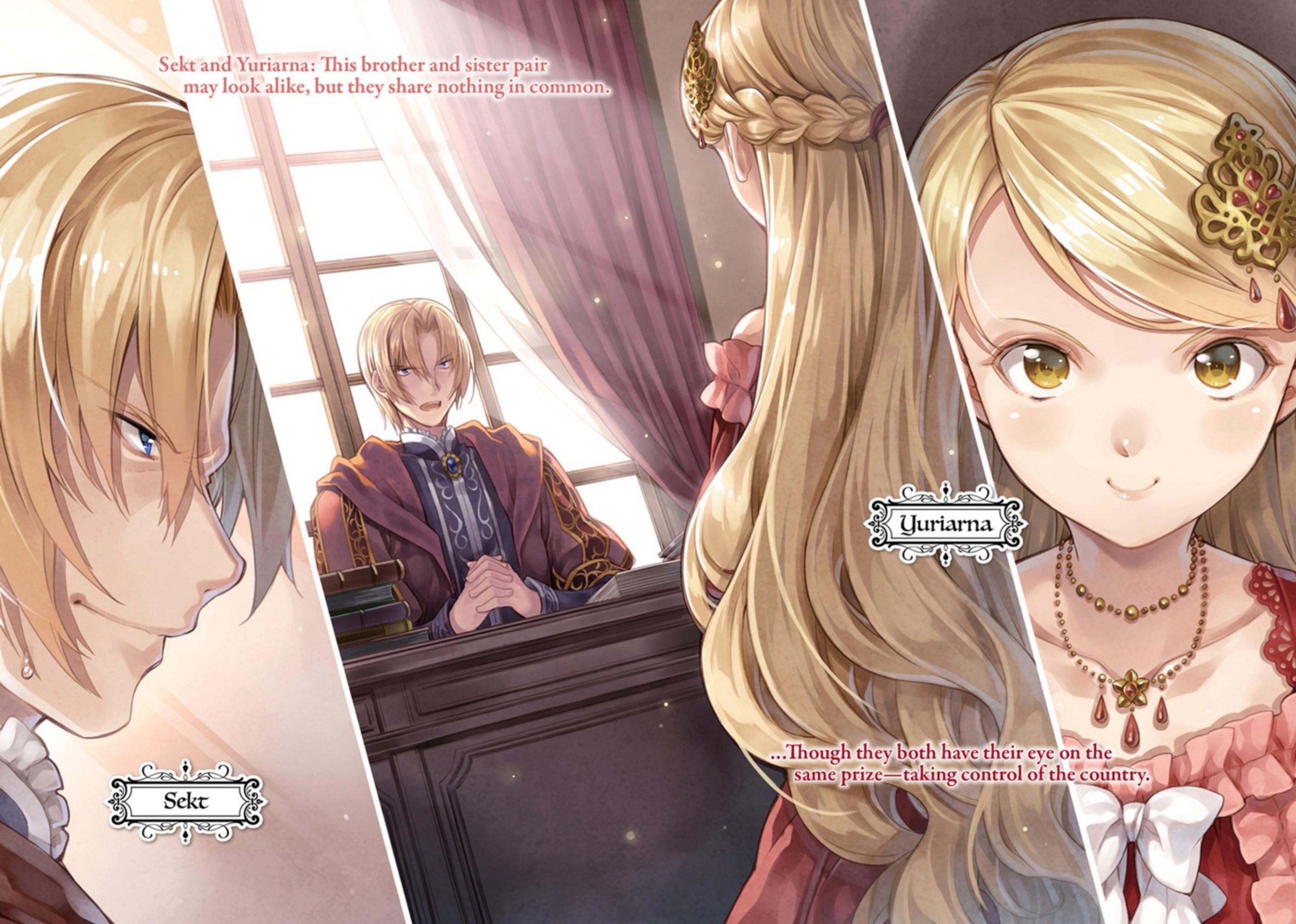


Chiyome

Ponta

Ariane

written by Ennki Hakari  
illustrated by KeG



Sekt and Yuriarna: This brother and sister pair may look alike, but they share nothing in common.

Sekt

Yuriarna

...Though they both have their eye on the same prize—taking control of the country.

**“You know, Ariane, it’d be a lot faster  
if you did it mouth-to-mouth.”**



**WHA?!**



**M-  
mouth-  
to-mouth?!**

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*written by*  
**Ennki Hakari**

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*Seven Seas Entertainment*

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Illustrations by KeG

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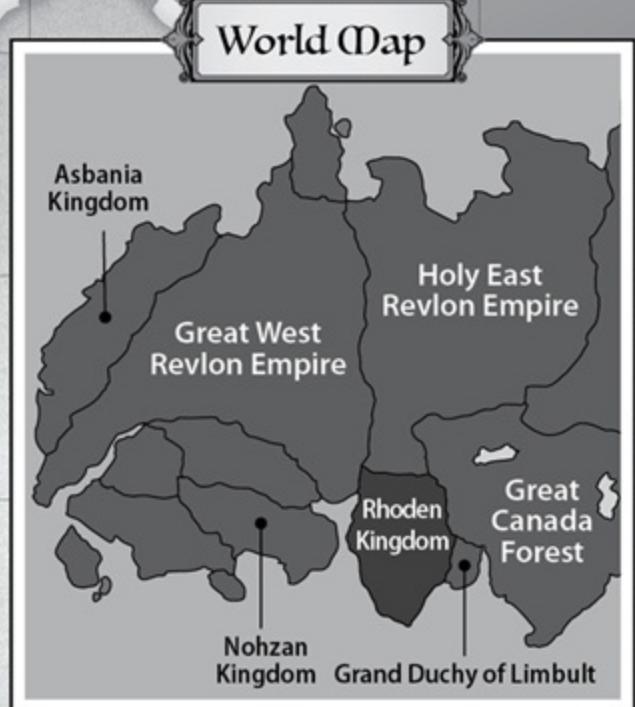
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## KINGDOM OF Rhoden

*Map*



# PROLOGUE

The Holy East Revlon Empire took up the eastern portion of what was once the Revlon Empire, consuming much of the northeast area of the northern continent. Habahren, this sprawling empire's capital, was right in the center. It was one of the largest cities on the entire northern continent, with a population of around 80,000—a massive circle in the middle of a vast plain, radiating out from Siguenza's impressive imperial palace.

Back in the days of the unified Revlon Empire, before the split between east and west, Siguenza had been built as a reinforced fortress. It was intended to support the empire's efforts to annex more land to the east, which explained its rather ugly appearance. It was, however, sturdily built, and looked rather imposing on the horizon.

The emperor who ruled this massive eastern empire was sitting in one of his studies, deep within the confines of the palace. A glimmering—though not overly glamorous—chandelier hung from the ceiling, illuminating the room beneath, the gloomy light befitting the emperor's work.

At the back of the room sat a large, well-polished desk, and a chair reserved for the emperor himself. The chair, like the rest of the room, was rather simple in design, although the intricate carvings etched into the wood betrayed its true value. A young man with deep-set gray eyes and a distinguished nose slouched in the chair, dressed in a well-tailored military uniform. He wore his untamed reddish-brown hair in a ponytail. The man's name was Domitianus Revlon Valtiafelbe, emperor of the Holy East Revlon Empire, and rival to the Great West Revlon Empire in their struggle over the northern continent.

The young emperor had fixed his scrutinizing gaze on the man directly across from him, who was reading from a report.

"A large group of monsters without employ rings went on a rampage in the western Karyu fort that held them. They descended upon the town like an avalanche, resulting in significant casualties. Just before the monsters' rampage got underway, the massive hydra Fumba captured earlier broke out of the fort and attacked the lord's castle, killing him instantly. Fumba hasn't been seen since, and rumors suggest that this may

have been an act of rebellion on his part."

In stark contrast to the gravity of this news, the man grinned as he looked up at the emperor. Domitianus furrowed his brow.

The man reading the report sported a large belly and a pathetic excuse for a mustache. His flashy clothes, even more ostentatious than those of the emperor himself, gave him the appearance of a well-to-do merchant. There was something altogether unlikable about him and his irritating grin.

The man's name was Velmoas du Lyzehl. He served as the lord chancellor and administrator of the Holy East Revlon Empire's political affairs.

Domitianus eyed Velmoas with suspicion as he mentally ran through the report he'd just heard. "A rebellion by Fumba? He's nothing but a drunk and a womanizer. What would he have to gain by standing against me?"

Velmoas' grin didn't falter. He simply shook his head slightly, as if to say, "How should I know?"

Although a vein bulged in the young emperor's forehead, Velmoas simply turned his gaze back to the report in his hand, and continued reading.

"It also says here that the rampaging hydra was killed by some... demon... that appeared out of nowhere. Witnesses described it as a half-human, half-monster covered in flames, resembling an old legend about a man sent to hell and consumed by fire. The townsfolk are rather shaken up about it."

Domitianus pounded his fist on his chair's armrest and fixed his lord chancellor with a steely glare. "That demon managed to tear apart my hydra?! Dammit! And we just made a special employ ring for it, too! Without Fumba, we'll never be able to capture anything that size again."

"Well, there's no sense in getting mad at me. It's not like I can do anything about it. Anyway, a Hilk church was destroyed in the battle, and the church officials are demanding money so they can rebuild it right away. Apparently, the locals are pretty upset by the idea of a demon from hell burning down their church."

Velmoas looked back up from his report. Anger was no longer apparent on the emperor's face; a sly grin replaced it. His expression clearly reflected his thoughts.

"Heh heh heh. So, that parasite religion that's been such a pain in the empire's ass was burned to ash by the fires of hell? The gods have a sense of humor, after all. What happened to the other monsters?"

"After the hydra died, the surviving soldiers conscripted some locals. They were somehow able to suppress the rest of the monsters roaming around town. Things are starting to settle down now, but it's only a matter of time until the townsfolk express their anger over this whole situation." Velmoas eyed the emperor curiously as he finished his report.

Domitianus's sinister grin only widened. "Let's drill it into the townsfolk that believing in Hilk did nothing to protect them, and that a cursed sinner destroyed the church itself. We can use that to breed resentment toward the church officials and decrease the number of believers in the area."

"Are you sure? The church will surely fight back against any plan to wrest control from them."

Domitianus snorted and leaned back in his chair. "This could be a great opportunity for us to rid ourselves of the mold growing in our great empire. All those scoundrels do is demand money under the table, in the form of alms, while preaching superficial platitudes of love and freedom. Luckily, the Karyu region borders our territory. The church officials probably think this will be a great opportunity to fill their coffers, but by the time they notice there's no money forthcoming, it'll be too late."

Velmoas wrote a note along the margin of his report and bowed his head deeply. "As you wish. I will carry out your orders at once."

"Continue the search for Fumba. Even if it turns out that he's dead, the Runeology Cloister has finished making their employ rings. We might not be able to capture any large monsters without him, but we can at least drum up an ogre battalion or something."

The emperor shifted in his chair and gazed out the window toward the Karyu region, a sly grin spreading across his face as he contemplated what the future might bring.

\*\*\*

Northwest of the northern continent lay the Great West Revlon Empire, the western half of what had once been the Revlon Empire. Vittelvarlay, the massive capital city, was located in the center of the vast domain. Tall buildings of beautifully polished

stone, broken up by expansive roads and parks, towered behind the city's massive wall. The capital had a festive atmosphere, and was filled with people in all manner of dress, walking, shopping, and chatting with each other.

At the capital's center sat the majestic Dyonburgh royal palace, so massive that it could be considered a small city in its own right. In one corner of the palace was a grand hall, where the people who controlled the Great West Revlon Empire's fate met. At the end of this intricately decorated hall, Emperor Gaulba Revlon Selziofebs sat on a throne which gave him a commanding view of the room.

Deep wrinkles creased Gaulba's forehead below his soft, delicately combed white hair, which matched the long beard growing from his chin. His eyes maintained a sharp intensity as he glared at the people below. Atop his head, he wore a gold circlet—the imperial crown—its surface studded with all manner of precious gems. The emperor, dressed in luxurious clothes befitting a man who ruled an entire empire, also wore a rather displeased expression on his face.

As palace steward, Salwis du Ohst—the handsome man at the emperor's side—was charged with assisting the emperor in his public and private affairs. The report he was currently reading had caused the emperor's ire.

"Tisheng has been invaded by our enemies to the east, and has likely already fallen. The enemy attacked with a company of monsters and humans. It's unlikely that the Southern Imperial Army soldiers remaining in the region will be sufficient to handle the threat."

After Salwis finished reading, the senators assembled in their seats erupted in a chorus of shouts, the noise slowly spreading throughout the chamber.

"What's this?! Tisheng was left shorthanded, for what? So the Southern Imperial Army could assist Wetrias? We must send Lieutenant General Keeling and the army back south at once!"

"First and foremost, I want to know what this army is all about! I've never heard of monsters and humans fighting together! Those bastards in the east must be nothing more than filthy swine!"

"That's hardly important right now! Tisheng is essentially cut off from the world by the deep forests surrounding the Siana mountain range. I want to know where this

attack came from! The routes running along Febient Marsh are barely large enough to accommodate merchants, let alone troops—and in such a short time, at that! How did they conceal their movements?”

“Tisheng was, without a doubt, shorthanded, so a smaller force would easily have overwhelmed them. I’m sure they were defeated before they even knew what was happening.”

As he listened to the senators bicker among themselves, Emperor Gaulba maintained an indignant expression before finally snorting in annoyance.

Salwis turned to the emperor, a look of concern on his face.

“The East hit us hard. But we can’t move our forces from the Southern Imperial Army, since they’re guarding the border with the Delfrent Kingdom. To make matters worse, Tisheng is surrounded by forest on three sides, allowing the enemy to dig in. We don’t even have enough troops stationed in the northwest to mount a rescue operation.”

Emperor Gaulba listened intently, chin resting on his fist. He furrowed his brow and let out a short sigh. “So, the monster invasion near Wetrias was a feint? They actually planned to chip away at our forces to the south, and move on the port of Bulgoh? But where did they even come from? As the senator said, it’s hard to believe they went through Febient Marsh. And we seeded the eastern Rhoden Kingdom border with cultivation rune stones to draw in monsters and close off the route. You don’t think they used the monsters we drew in, do you?”

“It’s a possibility. It’s also possible that the eastern forces made their way through the forests at the base of the Siana mountain range, although we haven’t had a chance to confirm that. However, if that’s the case, then they must have had assistance. We should put the city of Hartbahlk on notice, since it borders the forests to the east.”

The emperor groaned, the wrinkles in his forehead deepening. He turned his gaze back to the senators, still arguing among themselves. As the scene descended rapidly into disorder, he picked up the elegant royal scepter lying at his side and thumped it on the floor twice.

The crisp sound echoed throughout the chamber, immediately putting an end to the senators’ bickering. It plunged the room into a deafening silence, broken only by the rustling of the men’s robes.

Fixing the room with a steely glare, Emperor Gaulba rose from his throne slowly. “We can’t leave the east unchecked, or just give them the port of Bulgoh. We cannot cede any more land to these barbarians. So, we will dispatch Lieutenant General Keeling of the Southern Imperial Army back to Hartbahlk to recapture Tisheng. I want Hartbahlk’s soldiers to begin making preparations in advance of his arrival. We’ll task Lieutenant General Minzaya of the Northern Imperial Army with subduing the monsters in Wetrias and the border town of Februent. He will also hire mercenaries from the Soowin Kingdom to put pressure on Carrish on the other side of the bay. I want you to send orders to the Western Imperial Army to increase the watch on their western borders, and make sure that Asbania doesn’t mobilize. That is all!”

The emperor fixed the room with another glare before thumping his scepter again, eliciting a bow from all the senators. They made their way out with heads hung low, each to carry out their respective orders.

When the five consul members seated in front of the emperor finished recording their minutes, they also hurried out of the chamber.

Gaulba turned his gaze to Salwis. “Tell Lieutenant General Keeling that I want him to capture the monster soldiers. We need to understand their technology, and look into whether it’s something we can use ourselves.”

Salwis raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? I doubt the Hilk will be too pleased with the idea of employing filthy beasts. They’ll almost certainly come straight to me with their complaints.” In spite of the wry grin on his face, the tone of his voice and his dramatically slumped shoulders showed how Salwis felt about having this role thrust onto him.

Gaulba gave a light snort before dropping back onto his throne. “Hmph. Purity... filth... none of that matters if it protects the empire. Besides, all those annoying little priests are after is a bribe. Just throw some money at them and make them go away.”

“As you say, Your Excellency.” Salwis gave a sardonic grin before bowing deeply to the emperor.

No one could see the rage that washed over his contorted face as he bent down low.

# CHAPTER 1

## THOSE WHO SQUIRM FROM THE DEPTHS

Deep within the Great Canada Forest lay the elven village of Lalatoya.

A large, undulating outer wall separated the village from the mana-rich and monster-infested trees. The wall was made of large wooden pillars, each of which twisted and bent to close any gaps with its neighbor. Despite the wall's natural appearance, the regular placement of the pillars made it apparent that this was an artificial structure. The thirty-meter-tall living wall kept the tranquil village safe from the dangers of the forest beyond.

Inside the wall's perimeter were wooden houses interspersed among fields for growing crops and plains for grazing cattle. Each house was topped with a wooden deck, and a large roof that gave them the appearance of large mushrooms. The houses' walls were carved with intricate elven symbols. A quaint, lamp-lined stone path meandered between the fields and houses.

Beyond this pastoral scene, toward the village's center, the trees grew larger and larger—almost unnaturally so. Their massive trunks, far wider than even the widest giant sequoia, were topped with an impressive layer of foliage. These trees were, in fact, homes—a perfect blend of nature and artificial construction. Glass windows in their trunks reflected the sparse light that managed to break through the gaps in the thick foliage above. Birds called from among the gigantic branches, giving the whole scene a mystical feel.

Two figures, wooden staves in hand, stood before the village elder's treehouse while a pair of spectators watched. The tension in the air was thick.

One figure, a young-looking woman, had skin the color of amethyst, and snow-white hair tied back in a braid. Her beauty had a magical, almost bewitching quality. Her golden eyes—a color unseen among humans—stared ahead in silence, fixed on me. If I didn't know better, I might have said her guard was down. But her elongated ears twitched slightly with every movement I made. She kept a close eye on me, gauging what I would do next.

The woman standing at attention opposite me was Glenys Alna Lalatoya, the village elder's wife, and a dark elf—a rarity on this continent. She wore traditional garb covered in elven symbols.

I faced off against her—a two-meter-tall, armor-clad knight. That was the avatar of "Arc"—the game character I'd been playing as when I was suddenly transported to this mysterious world. The wind rustled my dark cloak and revealed glimpses of my silver armor's intricate white and azure designs. The armor was simply magnificent, like something worn by the knights of legend.

My cloak was as black as night, and was lined with what looked like glimmering stars, as if it had been ripped from the night sky. I was armed only with a wooden staff, having set aside my sword and shield for the moment.

Glenys and I stood approximately three meters apart, watching each other closely.

Even having attained the highest level possible in the game, I stood little chance against this woman, who'd been training for the past several hundred years.

Figuring it'd do me no good to continue standing there staring, I lunged toward Glenys, swinging my staff down. It sliced through the air at breakneck speed, thanks to my immense strength. But Glenys apparently read my movement well in advance, and deftly knocked my staff aside with her own.

I recovered and swung my staff back up, this time aiming to knock her off her feet. She evaded the attack easily, causing me to miss by a fair distance, and struck the back of my hand with her own staff.

The strike didn't hurt, thanks to the mythical-class Belenus Holy Armor that protected my body, but the loud, metallic clang caused me to cry out.

Glenys pointed her staff toward me and offered a piece of advice. "Don't move and then strike, Arc. You need to strike *as* you move."

I nodded and waved my staff back and forth a few times, trying to wrap my head around her instructions. "Understood, Miss Glenys."

However, considering that I'd never had any actual sword training in my life, I knew there was no way I could pick it up in a day.

Glenys deftly dodged my next few strikes and scored a blow on the back of my hand.

She furrowed her brow and let out a sigh. “All right, I want you to try to avoid my attacks this time.”

“Okay, I’ll—whoa!”

Before I could even get the words out of my mouth, Glenys was already lunging at me. My enhanced perception and high reaction speed barely enabled me to dodge. I readjusted my stance to aim my own staff at Glenys, but she continued her graceful dance, evading my blows even as she pressed the attack.

I fell back again and again, until I eventually found myself up against a tree. An instant later, Glenys landed blows on my hand, chest, and head. The clanging sounded an awful lot like a xylophone.

I came to my senses to find her standing in front of me, a gentle smile on her face. “I guess I win this round?”

I’d honestly thought I could put up a better fight, but that was quite clearly not the case.

“Hmph. Would you mind one more round, Miss Glenys?” I hoped to redeem myself at least slightly.

Glenys rested her staff on her shoulder. “Fine by me.”

Although I was glad to have another chance, it ended up being no different, since Glenys still landed multiple blows on my head.

I swung the staff a few more times, groaning to myself as I tried to figure out how to move more fluidly. Glenys and I were facing off in mock battle, using nearly harmless wooden staves. Sooner or later, however, I’d find myself in a far more dangerous situation, armed only with my sword. This talented ex-soldier was able to make quick work of me, in what amounted to little more than a warm-up for her.

Glenys didn’t sound even remotely winded as she offered her evaluation. “Your reaction speed is incredible, Arc, but it’s just too easy to read your movements. All you do is react. Also, since you’re not attacking based on the flow of battle, you’re easily fooled by feints. You might look the part of a knight, but you really don’t have the swordsmanship down.”

She'd built her skills over time, and could afford to toy around with me before coming in for the kill. Compared to her, what I was doing could hardly even be *called* swordsmanship. My technique was basically suicide strikes that relied on brute strength. If this had been a rock-paper-scissors match, I would have been constantly throwing out whichever hand beat her previous move. Once Glenys recognized that, it was easy to lure me into all manner of traps.

It reaffirmed my gut feeling that I needed to improve the flow of my movements, if for no other reason than to make the best use of my sword.

While I thought that over, a voice called out in my defense.

"There aren't a whole lot of people who can match Arc's superhuman abilities, Mom. No need to be so hard on him."

The woman, a dark elf like Glenys, walked up beside me. She wore a priest-like robe marked with arcane symbols over her amethyst-colored skin. Her snow-white hair, tied back in a ponytail, fluttered in the breeze as she fixed her golden eyes on me.

She was Ariane Glenys Maple, Glenys's daughter. Ariane was a soldier of Maple, the capital of the Great Canada Forest.

I first became acquainted with Ariane by sheer chance, when she hired me as a mercenary to help her rescue some fellow elves enslaved by humans. From there, we got to know each other better as we continued to work together. Now I found myself staying in an elven village—a place few humans were ever allowed to set foot in.

Glenys put her finger to her chin in thought. "I suppose you're right. Not many humans could keep up with Arc. But, you know, plenty of elves could run circles around him. Take your sister, for instance. Or even your grandfather."

There were quite a number of talented fighters in Ariane's family.

Ariane beckoned to me. "Arc, give me your staff."

I nodded and handed it over.

"Care to spar, mother?"

"It's been a while, hasn't it?"

The two women exchanged smiles before silently separating.

Even though they were mother and daughter, Glenys looked so young that they could easily have been mistaken for sisters. Due to their long lifespans—around four hundred years—it was incredibly difficult to tell an elf's age by appearance alone.

"Hyaaa!" Ariane yelled as she glided toward her mother, closing the distance in a flash.

Glenys drew back, almost imperceptibly, and swung her staff to catch Ariane's mid-swing, deflecting the blow. She then gracefully moved into her own strike, swinging low under Ariane's failed attack.

Using a move similar to her mother's, Ariane deftly dodged Glenys's subsequent attacks, trying to build distance between them while launching a series of kicks to keep her mother at bay. Glenys smiled at that, even as she jumped to avoid Ariane's counterattacks.

"Tsk, tsk. You take after your sister, with your overreliance on kicking."



This match was nothing like mine and Glenys's. The contenders moved nimbly, as if in a dance. It was captivating.

There was absolutely no way I'd ever be able to move around like that in my armor. I could only hope that, under Glenys's tutelage, I might one day fight at least somewhat as gracefully as she did.

My technique essentially relied on overwhelming force to destroy anything in my way. That worked all right on monsters and other non-humans, but it wasn't well-suited to opponents requiring a little more finesse.

I was thinking about asking Ariane to teach me the basics of swordsmanship, the next time we had a free moment, when the battle between her and Glenys finally reached its conclusion.

Ariane's staff spun through the air, landing in front of me with a dull thud. Looking up, I saw her with her hands on her knees, breathing heavily and drenched in sweat. She glowered at her mother, who wore a satisfied smile.

Even as a complete amateur, I could tell that Ariane was a skilled swordsman. The fact that Glenys could beat her so handily made me all the more impressed with the older elf's abilities.

“Absolutely astonished” might actually be a better way of putting it.

“My, my. You've certainly improved, but you still have a ways to go.”

“Gah! I couldn't even get a hit in!”

The figure standing beside me, who'd also watched the sparring match unfold, slowly raised her hand.

Glenys caught the movement out of the corner of her eye and looked over.

“Oh, Chiyome. Do you also want to spar?”

“Please, if you'd be so kind as to give me a chance,” the young girl replied in her usual formal manner as she stood, fixing her azure eyes on Glenys. Her short black hair rippled in the wind.

Chiyome was small in stature, and dressed in loose, black clothes for ease of movement. She wore gauntlets on her arms, shin guards on her legs, and a short sword at her waist. Two triangular ears poked out from her hair, and a long, black tail wrapped around her waist, giving away the fact that she was not quite human.

Chiyome was one of the mountain people, who hid constantly to avoid being enslaved by humans and used for manual labor. She was also a member of a militant group known as the Jinshin clan, which was devoted to rescuing enslaved mountain people. The clan was originally founded around six hundred years ago by a man who came to this world in a manner similar to how I ended up here. He brought this group of persecuted people together and trained them as ninjas. Chiyome was a member of her clan's highest class, consisting of the top six fighters.

Glenys waved Chiyome over.

"Of course."

Ariane and Chiyome changed places, and Chiyome faced Glenys. She didn't pick up a weapon, but instead clenched her gauntleted hands together. The two eyed each other in silence for several moments.

Unlike the previous bouts, this time Glenys made the first move. She launched a series of kicks, moving far more quickly than what I'd seen when Ariane attempted the same. Chiyome dropped low to the ground, dodging the blows before jumping back to her feet and delivering her own round of kicks. Glenys ducked out of range.

Thanks to her small form, Chiyome's movements were quick and nimble, making me wonder if there actually was some cat blood in her. It almost looked as if she were playing with Glenys.

However, even under Chiyome's onslaught, Glenys's ever-present smile never left her face.

The two moved in a blur as they traded blows. The tip of Glenys's staff finally struck the back of Chiyome's knee, distracting the young girl. Glenys laid into her until Chiyome eventually lost her balance and found Glenys's staff at her throat. Chiyome let out a low growl, but a moment later, she accepted her defeat.

"Well, I've been had."

Glenys withdrew her staff and clapped. “That was quite impressive, Chiyome. Your mastery of martial arts outshines even my own daughter’s. I worry that your attacks might be a bit weak due to your small frame, but you’re still growing, so I imagine that will sort itself out with time.”

Chiyome’s expression, which was usually flat whenever she spoke, lightened up a bit at Glenys’s evaluation. She quickly bowed her head to hide her smile.

“Th-thank you, ma’am.”

Glenys looked down tenderly at the young girl before turning her attention back to me, and bringing her hands together in a loud clap.

“Well! I think that’s enough morning exercise. How about we eat some breakfast and begin preparing for your trip?”

“Sounds great!”

“Understood.”

Ponta, who’d been busy playing around the perimeter of the house, picked up on the word “breakfast” and let out an excited cry as it came running.

“Kyii!”

Ponta was a cottontail fox: an animal about sixty centimeters long with the face of a fox and the body of a Japanese flying squirrel. It got its name from its dandelion-like tail, which it was currently wagging. The soft and fluffy fur on Ponta’s back was the color of grass, while its stomach and half its tail were pure white, giving the fox the appearance of a mountain of shaved ice covered in matcha syrup.

Ponta was a spirit creature, which meant that a spirit resided within it, allowing it to use magic.

According to Ariane and Chiyome, spirit creatures were typically incredibly cautious. Judging by how easily the mere mention of food drew Ponta in, however, I couldn’t help but think that it was somehow missing that instinct.

Ponta summoned a gust of magical wind, and caught the updraft with the membranes between its front and back legs. It flew high into the sky and glided toward the top of

my helmet—its usual spot. However, before it could successfully make its landing, Ariane reached up and grabbed Ponta right out of the air.

Ariane petted Ponta's head gingerly, speaking in an unnaturally sweet voice. "Hiya, Ponta! You want something to eat?"

Ponta looked back and forth between Ariane and myself before letting out an excited cry and burying its face in her ample bosom.

I guess the allure of food beat sitting on my head any day.

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On the second floor of the village elder's treehouse, we sat down at a large wooden table in the middle of a massive dining room with a built-in kitchen. Ariane and Chiyome sat on either side of me, while Ponta munched a bowl of food near my feet, its large cotton tail wagging happily. Ariane smiled warmly, scratching the top of Ponta's head.

I'd traded my armor for traditional elven robes, and I was practically smacking my nonexistent lips with excitement at the sight of the food in front of me. I noticed Chiyome staring at me with great interest. I slowly turned toward her as I took a bite of bread.

"What is it, Chiyome?"

A look of uncertainty washed across her face. "It's nothing. I mean... it's just that you look like an undead. It's so peculiar to sit here watching you eat like a normal person."

I supposed the sight of a living skeleton shoving bread into its mouth was rather peculiar.

Blue flame flickered behind my eye sockets, deep within my skull. Despite the fact that I lacked skin, muscles, and even organs, I was still able to taste things, and everything I ate and drank disappeared into my body somewhere. When I first came to this world, I unintentionally took the form of the avatar I'd been playing in the game. At the time, I wasn't using my human character, but a special avatar with a skeleton's body.

"Yeah, but Arc doesn't have the death contamination on him, like the undead do. You can see that, can't you, Chiyome?" Ariane continued patting Ponta, even as she butted in to defend me.

Chiyome sniffed lightly and tilted her head to the side.

"Mountain people can't see the 'death contamination,' as you call it, but you're right. He doesn't have that stench the undead are known for."

Ariane shot me a slightly incredulous look, then spoke past me, to Chiyome. "Besides, you won't find an undead that asks for a bath to wash away the sweat from its morning exercise. How do bones even sweat, anyway?"

Chiyome looked back up at me.

I looked down at my own body in an attempt to avoid their gazes.

Come to think of it, there really was no way for my body to sweat. I realized that taking a bath after exercising was nothing more than a habit I'd developed over the years. While I tried desperately to explain to Ariane just how refreshing the ritual felt, even though I was a skeleton, Glenys approached the table and promptly handed a piece of paper to Ariane.

I'd yet to see paper anywhere in the human towns, but apparently it was common in elven villages. This particular page was large and thick, with a map drawn on it.

"This map will give you a general sense of the route through the cave to the Lord Crown. I assume you already know the way to the cave, or at least, close enough."

Ariane nodded, looking the map over carefully.

Chiyome maintained her usual stoic look, although the ears atop her head twitched slightly as she glanced at the map.

The Lord Crown was the location of a mysterious tree, near which the Dragon Lord, the most powerful of dragons, lived. Over the generations, all manner of spirits had come to inhabit the tree, since the Dragon Lord's magic imbued it with mystical powers. The land near the Lord Crown was known to have peculiar effects, and according to Dillan—Lalatoya's village elder and Ariane's father—it contained a spring that could cure any curse.

The map Ariane held in her hand marked the route to that spring. Our journey there was my payment for helping to rescue captured elves. We planned to finish our preparations today, and head out tomorrow.

I couldn't be sure what effect the spring would have on my skeleton body, assuming it had an effect at all. But it was worth at least *trying* to do something about this curse, since the longer I had it, the more difficulties I'd encounter here.

Ariane studied the map with great interest, unable to contain her excitement.

"It's been a while since I went to the caverns. I'd never have imagined they were a shortcut to the other side of a mountain range."

"So, you've been in these caves before?" I asked.

Ariane nodded. "My sister brought me there on several occasions, back when I was still a soldier-in-training here in the village. We collected various rune stones to power the magical items we use here." Her eyes narrowed slightly, as if she suddenly remembered something, her gaze drilling into me. "If you plan to continue using our bath, Arc, you should probably pick up some rune stones while we're in the cave."

That was her roundabout way of asking me to pay for the energy consumed when I used their bath. Baths were still a luxury here, unlike the world I came from; heating bathwater required either firewood or rune stones. If I wanted to continue enjoying that luxury, I'd better stay on Ariane's good side. Once the curse was lifted, I'd finally be able to enjoy the feeling of warm water against my skin again, assuming everything went according to plan.

I clenched my fists in determination. "Right! I'll pay for my baths."

Ariane sighed loudly. "You really do love them, don't you...?"

I ignored her comment. Back in Japan, bathing frequently was pretty common, although it was rarer here.

The human towns and inns in this world didn't even have baths, just wet washcloths to wipe your body down. Once I saw that the elves built bathhouses, I felt a strong connection to them immediately, given my roots. I couldn't help but wonder if the Great Canada Forest's founding elder had been a Japanese man who was fond of Canada, or perhaps a Canadian fond of Japan.

I was all too aware of the desire for familiar environments, and the longing for things lost.

Glenys clapped to get our attention. “Well then, why don’t you go down to the basement, and pick out whatever you need for the trip tomorrow?”

Ariane and Chiyome stood up from their seats.

With breakfast finished, Ponta had begun grooming itself. The moment it noticed the women heading downstairs, however, it hurried after them as fast as its little legs could carry it.

The door leading to the basement was on the first floor, behind the massive, tree-like pillar standing in the building’s center. We followed a stairwell that spiraled down the inside of the pillar. Thanks to magical lamps placed at regular intervals, the staircase was far brighter than the dark, dank basements of the various human nobles’ estates we’d snuck into.

At the bottom of the stairs, we encountered a heavy wooden door, which opened into a narrow space lined with crowded shelves. If I’d still had a heart, it would have been racing with excitement. I felt as though we were on some sort of treasure hunt. Ariane was already digging through various items on the shelves.

“What exactly do we need for this trip, anyway?”

She turned to me and held something out. “Well, we’re heading into a cave, right?”

I looked down at the item she gave me. It was a handheld lamp. Inside the glass casing were several clear crystal pillars, and there was a small knob on the bottom. As soon as I turned the knob, the crystals flickered to life, casting a steady glow that reminded me of an electric lightbulb.

“Wow. That’s impressive.”

Not only was I amazed at the lamp’s ability to serve as a light source, but the detailing on it was remarkable in its own right. I was sure it could have sold for several hundred thousand yen in an interior design store back home.

“That’s a crystal lamp,” Chiyome said, while I busied myself playing with the shadows the lamplight created. “They’re made by elves, and prized for their strong light and sturdy build. Only a few wealthy humans own one.”

Thinking back on the dim oil lamps I’d seen throughout the human towns, I believed

her. A lamp like this, that put even electric lights to shame, would be far out of reach for common humans. Still, I could probably afford one. It might be a good idea to purchase one, in case—

“Hey, quit slacking off and give me a hand, will ya?”

I turned around to see Ariane’s cheeks puffed out. She shoved two more lamps and a bulging leather sack in my direction.

“Uh, I’m sorry,” I said, taking them from her.

I undid the drawstring holding the sack closed and looked inside. It was full of glimmering, purple sand.

“What’s this?”

Chiyome came up beside me. “Powdered mana. It’s made by crushing rune stones, and it’s in a lot of the elves’ magical items. It’s pretty powerful stuff, but you need to be highly skilled to use it safely, which is why they don’t put it in anything they sell to humans. Best-case scenario, humans would just break the item. Worst-case, they might cause a massive explosion.”

She made “powdered mana” sound like jet fuel.

In front of us, Ariane puffed out her plump chest, a look of pride gracing her face. It seemed she was pleased at Chiyome’s assessment of the elves’ exceptional skill.

I decided to play dumb. “What is it, Ariane?”

Ariane quickly wiped the look off her face, muttering something under her breath as she moved to a shelf farther back in the room.

I started rifling through nearby items and asking Chiyome about them. Before long, I spotted something familiar—a hemp bag filled with gold coins.

The bag was stuffed in the corner of a shelf, its contents gleaming dully. I picked up a coin and rubbed my thumb over the mark of the Rhoden Kingdom.

Ariane stopped what she was doing and looked over at me. “That’s part of the money you stole from the noble’s estate. Father said we should put some aside, in case you

find a use for it."

"In that case, I suppose we could put it toward the bath's fuel costs, couldn't we?" I blurted out what I thought was a great idea, but Ariane merely shrugged, looking exasperated.

"I don't get why you're so obsessed with baths. Besides, with your strength, you can get all the rune stones you need just by hunting monsters. Don't you have anything else to use the money on?"

I gave what she said some thought.

Of course, Ariane was right that I could get plenty of rune stones to fuel my baths from hunting monsters or digging in caves. There was no need to buy them. Using the money on magical items that would make my life easier instead might be the way to go.

Fortunately for me, I had plenty of elven connections, so once I finally had a place of my own, I could use the money to furnish it.

*Actually, scratch that.* First, I'd put the money toward building my own bathhouse.

Mind made up, I told Ariane my plan, eliciting the biggest sigh I'd heard from her yet. Given the love the elves and the Japanese clearly shared for bathing culture, I'd been hoping she'd understand me on that point.

The day wore on as we chatted among ourselves and prepared for tomorrow's journey to the spring.

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The next morning, we entered the mist-filled forest, with Ariane leading the way and Chiyome and me following close behind. Ponta sat atop my helmet while I carried the party's gear on my back.

What little light managed to break the dense leaf cover above cast an interesting pattern at our feet, illuminating a path through the trees, as if to invite us farther into the forest. Everything in this ominous, hazy wood looked the same to me, making it difficult to sense where we were going. However, Ariane marched ahead confidently, as if she were on some nature hike.

Once the magic-suppressing mist finally dissipated, we used my teleportation magic to advance through the woods. Just before noon, we arrived at the point where the Lydel and Librout rivers branched off—the same point we'd crossed on our previous journey through the forest. I used Dimensional Step to take us to the other side of the river.

I took a moment to look across the scene, observing the unique landscape where the large river split in two, in case I needed to teleport back here.

When I mentioned this idea to Ariane, she retorted that we could simply teleport straight to Lalatoya. I let out a low groan at my own stupidity. Ariane paid me no mind and marched back into the forest.

The trees on the opposite shore were no longer the huge, ancient ones that filled the Great Canada Forest. Here, we were greeted by dense clusters of more moderately sized trees and undergrowth. We pushed through the shrubbery, fighting off the occasional monster as we continued our journey, and teleporting whenever we got a clear line of sight.

As we made our way northwest, the ground slowly took on a steeper incline. We came upon a small footpath, which we followed up a tree-covered hill. A short time later, we caught sight of the setting sun through gaps in the foliage as the shadows lengthened and darkened.

"We'll stay here for the night," Ariane said.

She used her sword to chop off a low-hanging branch in front of her, revealing a clearing, then pointed with her sword.

I looked where she was pointing and saw three large trees towering over the ones around them. They were probably ten meters tall, and leaned toward each other, their branches overlapping and intertwined, forming a nest-like structure in the sky. A deck connected the three trees, resembling an observation platform sitting atop three support pillars.

"Wow, that's... Well... What is it?" I asked.

"Kyii!"

Ponta cried out in excitement and dove off my shoulder, catching a breeze to fly straight

up to the platform. I lost sight of it as soon as it landed on the deck.

"The elves built this outpost. Soldiers use places like this when we're hunting for monsters or on other errands."

It definitely looked like the kind of place where you could relax without having to worry about land-based creatures attacking. However, it also seemed like it would be quite a challenge for anyone without teleportation magic to reach—even more so if they were weighed down by equipment.

We'd each packed the items we'd need for our journey through the forest into simple rucksacks on our backs. I'd actually packed lightly, figuring I'd be able to use my teleportation magic. Even so, it was no small load. The average person would probably need a pulley to get their gear onto the platform.

Chiyome let out a low whistle as she looked at the elevated structure. "Wow. This is really impressive work. Did the elves build places like this throughout the forest?"

Ariane puffed out her chest and smiled broadly, apparently quite pleased by the compliment. However, the smile quickly disappeared, replaced instead with a slight frown.

"Up until recently, we had several small villages here on this side of the river. These outposts were made for the local soldiers. However, as the humans grew their slave trade, we had to abandon the villages."

Chiyome looked somber as she gazed at the elven woman, her face cloaked in shadow.

Ariane shook her head, offering Chiyome a gentle smile before making her way toward the large trees. She placed a hand on the thick ivy wrapped around the closest tree trunk.

"The sun's about to set. We should make camp." As Ariane spoke, she began climbing the tree, using the trunk's indentations and ivy growth as handholds. She hauled herself up with her bag still on her back.

Chiyome darted to the tree and climbed up after Ariane.

Actually, calling what they did "climbing" didn't do it justice.

I craned my neck and moved around until I found a place where I could teleport straight onto the platform using Dimensional Step. Sure, I was strong, but if I could avoid climbing a tree with massive armor on, I would.

On the platform, I found that the two women had already put down their gear and were making camp. Ponta ran around the perimeter, looking down at the forest below as if claiming territory.

Despite our added weight, the platform didn't show any sign of collapsing. A layer of grass underfoot gave us the delightful feeling of walking on a lawn. From below, the platform appeared to be made of interwoven branches. From where I stood now, however, it felt like a solid, flat surface.

At the platform's center was a stone firepit, carefully constructed to shield the surrounding wood from stray sparks.

I watched as Ariane and Chiyome placed twigs they'd gathered during their climb onto the stones.

"This place has a pretty unique look, Miss Ariane. It wouldn't be hard for me to remember it. We could spend the night in the village and teleport back here tomorrow."

"You're probably right. But all these outposts look alike. So, if we wind up using another one, it'll be hard for you to differentiate them."

"Hmm."

"Besides, we just finished setting up camp. We're going to be roughing it for the next few days, so we might as well get used to it. Have you camped before, Arc?"

"Well..."

I had, actually. However, I didn't see any of the creature comforts—like a propane burner, proper tent, or heavily insulated sleeping bag—that I had the last time I went camping. In that sense, this really was my first time roughing it. Getting used to living in the wilderness on our journey to the spring would be a good experience for me.

Also, as Ariane mentioned, if we wound up using similar outposts along the way, then it was totally possible—even likely—that I might mistake one for another and teleport us all the way back to the first.

I also risked teleporting us to some random outpost if I didn't have a clear, distinct memory of the one I wanted to reach. In that case, we'd be stuck wandering the woods for who knew how long.

From what I'd been told, people with a poor sense of direction had that problem because they didn't properly burn images of locations into their minds. However, I sensed that Ariane, with her ability to march through the forest without the slightest hint of hesitation, could have easily distinguished between each and every outpost if *she* had teleportation magic.

With all that in mind, I agreed with Ariane's assessment, and asked her and Chiyome how I could help. They just told me to stand back and watch.

With nothing useful to do, I picked Ponta up from the grass, put it in my lap, and wrapped my arms around my knees, patiently watching the two women work.

Ariane pulled a large, folded piece of canvas from her rucksack and hung it over a rope she'd tied between two of the large trees. She attached the canvas edges to the platform with small straps, resulting in a very familiar shape: a triangle tent.

The top of the canvas tent was dyed with an irregular green pattern—some sort of waterproofing, I assumed—and shone slightly, likely from being treated with oil.

Meanwhile, Chiyome dug through a bag Ariane handed her, and pulled out a small pot and various dried foods.

"Wow, they've even left food here?" she said, to no one in particular. "We usually don't prepare this well when we're out in the woods. The more you bring, the slower you travel."

"Food stores like this are pretty normal," Ariane said. "Elven soldiers spend a lot of time patrolling the forests and hunting monsters. With Arc's teleportation magic, we should make it to the Dragon Wonder's mouth tomorrow, so I figured we could pack light."

Ariane pulled out several pelts and spread them under the tent, then used spirit magic to ignite the twigs. She took the pot from Chiyome and placed it on the stones. After filling it with water from her skin, she tossed in dried food and other ingredients.

I sat to the side, rubbing Ponta's belly and watching the two women. "What's the

Dragon Wonder?"

"A massive canyon between the Karyu and Furyu Mountains. The cave entrance we're heading to is located in one of its walls."

"Huh. So, tomorrow, we'll enter the cave?"

Ariane shook her head. "At this pace, the earliest we'll make it to the Dragon Wonder is probably the afternoon. The cave itself is full of monsters, so I'd prefer to travel through it in one go. I think we'll need to spend a night camping out in front of the entrance."

She dropped a packet of spices into the pot and began stirring with a wooden spoon as we discussed tomorrow's plans. She then quickly tasted the soup and nodded. As darkness descended on the forest, it slowly plunged us into silence, save for the crackling flames. Steam rose from the boiling soup, carrying a sweet scent. Ponta rose from my lap and sniffed the air.

"Kyii!"

"Well, it looks about ready to eat."

Ariane pulled out three light metal mugs she'd brought and filled them with soup. Then Chiyome took sticks of bread from her own rucksack and passed them out.

I removed my helmet and accepted the offered mug and bread, delighted at the unexpected opportunity to eat a warm meal here in the wilderness.

Enticed by the smell, Ponta tried desperately to look inside my mug.

Ariane poured some soup into a shallow dish, setting it before Ponta. The cottontail fox wagged its tail excitedly and began to eat. Ariane smiled as Ponta used magic to waft a cooling breeze across the hot soup.

"We'll take shifts being on watch. Chiyome, you're first; then Arc; and finally me. Is everyone okay with that?" Ariane looked at us in turn.

"Fine with me."

"I have no complaints."

Ariane slowly wrapped herself in one of the pelts that lined the tent floor. "All right, I'm off to sleep, then. Arc, do you want this?" She offered me another pelt.

Wrapping myself up—armor and all—didn't seem as though it would do much. On the other hand, I was hesitant to sleep in the woods without my armor. In the end, I decided to do without the pelt. I lay down inside the tent for a quick nap before my turn to stand watch. Spending the evening in such close proximity to two women made it hard to relax, but, fortunately, the night passed quickly.

The next morning, I jolted awake suddenly. I jumped to my feet, grimacing at the ache that throbbed through my head.

"Hyaugh?!"

I looked around, the fog of sleep still hanging over my mind. I was surrounded by a dense forest that stretched in all directions, veiled with a thin layer of fog. Behind me, three large trees stretched into the sky.

"Arc?! Are you okay?"

"Kyiii!"

I tilted my head toward the sound of the voices. Ariane, Chiyome, and Ponta looked very worried as they gazed down from the platform between the trees. Slowly, I put together what had happened. I must have somehow rolled off the platform.

I remembered that, after finishing my turn on watch, I decided to lie down on the platform edge, rather than climb into the tent with Chiyome.

"Err, sorry about that. I'm fine."

"You sure? That's a pretty long fall."

Ariane began climbing down, worry evident on her face.

I tried to sound cool and collected while assuring her that everything was okay.

"What about your body? You aren't secretly an undead, are you?" She sounded more relieved as she approached.

Judging by the ache in my bones, I was pretty sure I wasn't undead. On the other hand, falling ten meters and ending up with only a little discomfort was no small feat. Thinking about it further, I felt rather pathetic; I'd suffered my first injury since coming to this world from falling out of a tree.

Just to be on the safe side, I cast a recovery spell on myself. "I guess I should sleep closer to the middle of the platform next time."

"Please do. I was hoping to start the day off without any major incidents."

I endured Ariane's gentle ribbing as I climbed back up. After a quick breakfast, we set off toward the Dragon Wonder. We made swift work of the monsters we ran across as we continued through the forest, collecting rune stones all the while. Shortly after noon, we arrived at our destination.

Once we broke out of the dense, dark forest, we found an impressive, unobstructed view all the way to the horizon. The earth in front of us split open, revealing a dense green foliage carpet at the bottom of a steep precipice, covered in a thick layer of mist. The vast canyon stretched to the north and south, bordered by the Furyu Mountains in the east and by the Karyu Mountains in the west.

The forested canyon floor was easily a thousand meters below. Getting down there would normally have been impossible. It truly looked as if a wound had been torn into the earth.

From time to time, gusts of wind blew along the steep canyon walls, giving rise to strong updrafts. Since Ponta was light, I was sure it could ride those updrafts high into the air if it wanted.

Chiyome and I murmured in amazement at the sight before us. I edged timidly closer to the precipice edge and glanced over.

"So, this is the Dragon Wonder? It's truly breathtaking. I can't even find words to describe it," I said.

"It really is impressive," Chiyome agreed. "There's no way I could climb down from here."

Even I wouldn't stand a chance, falling from this height—death was practically assured. The drop was at least a hundred times farther than my fall that morning.

Ariane urged us along, already walking away. “We’ll follow the canyon edge east, toward the cave. Be careful not to get too close to the edge. Wyverns sometimes shoot out of the canyon if they catch sight of you.”

I hurried after her.

We moved along, alternately walking and using Dimensional Step, for about an hour. Finally, we drifted away from the canyon and into the trees, where we stopped at another elven outpost.

The platform between these trees was a little lower—only seven or eight meters up. Putting aside this outpost’s proximity to the Dragon Wonder, it was almost identical to the one we left that morning. We’d stay the night in this outpost, then head into the cave first thing the next day.

On our second night camping in the wilderness, I decided to sleep in the middle of the platform to avoid repeating my fall.

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Early the next morning, we ate a quick breakfast and made our way to the Dragon Wonder while the sun was still low behind the Furyu Mountains. The eastern sky was an uneven blend of night and day behind the silhouetted peaks.

Down below, morning mist flowed across the treetops. It looked almost like a river running along the canyon floor, completely obscuring the blanket of green foliage I’d seen the previous day. Occasional updrafts that rippled through the mist’s surface provided only brief unobstructed glimpses of the forest below.

Practically clinging to the precipice walls, we made our way into the canyon along a rock-strewn path just wide enough for one person. Due to my armor’s massive pauldrons, I had to turn sideways and face the wall, crab-walking. Worried that the wind might blow Ponta away, Ariane held the fox tight against her chest.

After painstakingly hugging the wall the whole way down, while also trying to keep my Twilight Cloak from fluttering in the breeze, we finally made it to the cave entrance—about fifty meters from the clifftop. I peeked inside the large opening and was met with darkness so absolute that it seemed to pull me in.

Now standing on a slightly larger outcropping, I pulled back and exhaled deeply.

The cave was about five meters in diameter. Moss-covered stone shelves—what looked like stairs—led deeper inside, toward the canyon floor.

"All sorts of monsters live in here, so keep your guard up." Ariane pulled a crystal lamp from her rucksack and turned it on, its glow filling the cave.

Chiyome and I retrieved our own crystal lamps and lit them. The light grew brighter, illuminating the cave interior. Even then, it still wasn't enough to reach the cavern depths. The way forward was nothing but darkness.

With such limited visibility, Dimensional Step would be useless.

Ariane led the way into the cave, holding out her crystal lamp. Chiyome and I followed.

Aside from the occasional chilly breeze blowing from the cave floor, and ominous echoes deep within the cavern, the only sounds that broke the silence were our own footsteps.

In addition to the main path leading down into the cave, multiple smaller paths branched in various directions. Ariane ignored these and continued marching deeper into the darkness.

Looking backward, I could no longer see the entrance.

I raised my crystal lamp, glancing around. "You mentioned something about monsters living here, but I haven't seen any."

Just then, Ponta cried out worriedly from where it sat on Ariane's shoulder. Ariane instantly drew her sword.

"Bats!"

I followed Ariane's gaze and spotted a meter-tall bat hanging from the ceiling, stretching out its wings to an impressive two-meter span. The creature's ears resembled gills. Large fangs jutted from its mouth. It let out an eerie cry, and a dozen more bats dropped from the ceiling and flew toward us. They circled in lazy, irregular orbits, occasionally swooping as a group toward Ariane in front or Chiyome behind. I was stuck in the middle as my two companions faced off against the swarm.

"There are so many of them!"

“Kyuukiiii!”

One bat got too close, and Ariane struck it down with a single blow. Ponta, in a rare show of courage, summoned a blast of wind around Ariane, protecting her by obstructing the bats' flight paths. Ariane made quick work of any creature caught by the wind, chopping them cleanly in two. I wasn't sure what inspired Ponta to dive into the fray, but perhaps it had something to do with just how unintimidating the bats were.

“Body to water, liquid shuriken!”

At the back of the party, Chiyome hurled a shuriken of water into an oncoming bat, knocking it to the ground.

Completely ignored by the monsters, I chopped down several bats as they continued their assault on Ariane and Chiyome.

Given how randomly the bats moved, I wasn't completely confident in my ability to hit them with a magical attack. With my superior reflexes and eyesight, I should have been able to wipe out all of them. Large as my sword was, though, it wasn't quite long enough to reach the bats as they raced through the air.

Then I recalled a skill I'd used previously to put down a bandit.

“Wyvern Slash!”

I aimed at the bats flying above us and let loose an invisible attack. A second later, severed wings fell to the ground. It was a pretty effective mid-range attack skill, but it was also incredibly risky, since my allies couldn't see it. One wrong move, and they'd be doomed.

I continued to launch Wyvern Slash attacks one after another at the bats above, slowly reducing their numbers until the survivors decided to escape.

“Were those monsters? For some reason, they didn't really seem interested in me.”

I put my sword away and looked around. A dozen or so bat corpses were piled in a mound on the floor.

Ariane wiped her sword with a cloth. “No, they weren't monsters. Just normal animals.”

Those bats suck blood from their prey, which explains why they weren't interested in you, Arc. You probably didn't look too appetizing."

She shot me a mischievous grin.

Being a bone-dry skeleton covered in metal armor, I likely didn't come across as a food source to the bats. I wondered if they were able to tell that there was nothing inside me simply by using ultrasound.

I looked back at Chiyome, who crouched in front of a fallen bat, pulling its wing.

"You seem to have fared all right, Miss Chiyome."

"Yeah, I'm okay. Hey, do you think we can eat these things? I've eaten smaller ones before." Chiyome picked up a severed bat head and showed it to me, her head tilted to the side inquisitively.

I was pretty sure there were quite a few regions back on Earth where people ate bats. It seemed unlikely that the mountain people, who were constantly persecuted and enslaved, could carry out any large-scale farming or ranching. I imagined that they subsisted on a diet of whatever they could find.

With their long fangs, gill-like ears, and porcine faces, the bats could hardly be considered beautiful. I glanced at Ariane, who seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"I've never eaten one. They don't look like they'd taste very good." She shook her head. "Anyway, we better hurry up, or we won't make it out of here today."

Ariane lifted her crystal lamp and aimed it ahead.

"Right. Sorry about that." Chiyome set the bat's head back on the ground with a look of disappointment. Then she jogged after us.

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We continued into the cave, slaying our way through meter-long, ghostly millipedes that crept along the walls, slime creatures waiting in hollows for prey, and monsters that would have sent a chill down your spine just to hear about.

Under normal circumstances, seeing monsters emerge from the darkness at the edge

of our lamplight would certainly have made me scream. I was somehow able to keep my cool, though, thanks in part to being a skeleton myself.

A bizarre, oddly shaped monster floated toward us.

“What is that, Ariane?”

It hung in the air, like a balloon covered in eyes and tentacles, or the ghost of a jellyfish. I reached for my sword, ready to chop the bizarre creature in two, but Ariane placed a hand on my arm to stop me.

“That’s a spoyl. Don’t touch it. As long as you leave it alone, it’ll keep going. But if you attack, it’ll release a poisonous gas.”

From time to time, as it floated along, the spoyl shot out tendrils to snatch insects that flew too close. Its eyes darted about, inspecting its surroundings, as it feasted on the bugs. The whole scene felt rather fantastical, but an eerie tingle ran up my spine all the same. We carefully avoided the spoyl as it moved deeper into the cave.

Suddenly, Chiyome called out from behind me, alarm in her voice.

“Ariane, I’m picking up a rotten stench ahead. It smells like an undead.”

Ariane stopped and raised her lamp. Off in the darkness, far beyond our limited illumination, came a sound that was a mix of the wind blowing and something being dragged. Moments later, several human-shaped figures lurched out of the shadows.

“Zombies?”

Their ashen arms and legs jerked spastically as they lumbered toward us, eyes staring vacantly into space. Wriggling, worm-like tendrils covered their bodies. One zombie slowly wrenched its rotting corpse in two, splitting along the midriff as though it had been glued together, and spilling writhing tentacles from the opening. It looked like a sea anemone on the hunt.

“Wha...?! Those aren’t zombies, those are ghoul worms!” Ariane’s voice echoed through the cave. That drew the attention of the ghoul worms. They kicked off from the ground and flew through the air at us.

“They can fly?!”

These creatures had been carrying out their routines in the dark, just beyond the bubble of illumination cast by our crystal lamps. Now, revealed, they dove straight toward us. I placed my lamp on the ground and leaped back, drawing my sword.

Fighting in darkness restricted my movements to the area around my crystal lamp. Ariane and Chiyome, however, had great night vision. They could see just fine, even when they moved away from the light. That made me the ideal target for our enemies.

I met the advancing ghoul worms with a mighty swing of my sword, attempting to chop them in half as they flew out of the shadows. However, a spoyl also floated nearby, forcing me to pull my sword back before I struck it by accident.

My massive sword's ability to take out multiple opponents at once was great out in the open, but it wasn't suited to close quarters. Given the proximity of a monster I'd rather not drag into the fight, the blade was more a hindrance than a help. And I certainly wasn't at Ariane's skill level. She was able to strike at the ghoul worms while deftly avoiding the spoyl floating among them.

"Sword of Judgement!"

I decided to try the Paladin skill, which I'd used to fell a giant basilisk in a single strike, on one of the ghoul worms.

Light surrounded my blade, and it began to glow. As I swung it down, a magic circle formed beneath the ghoul worm. Then a blade of light sprang from the ground and shot toward the cave's ceiling. Unfortunately, the ghoul worm moved out of the way in time, and the light blade only grazed it.

It was too difficult to hit these human-sized enemies. Not only did they lack the giant basilisk's size, they were far too fast for the Sword of Judgement; they bounced around like giant grasshoppers.

After fending off several more attacks, I returned my sword to its sheath, picked up my crystal lamp, and made my way over to Ariane.

"I'm going to stop them in their tracks! Bring Whirlwind!"

Ariane cried out in surprise. "What're you doing, Arc?"

I called forth the wind elemental area-of-effect spell I'd learned from the Magus class.

A tornado formed around me, powerful blasts of wind shooting from my outstretched arms. One gust caught the spoyl, and threw it far into the cave's depths. The ghoul worms, however, were only knocked about a bit. They continued to close in on me.

I summoned another spell. "Rock Fang!"

Sharp, fang-like rocks jutted out of the ground, tearing open the earth and impaling several ghoul worms. The creatures' movements slowed considerably as they tried to pull their bodies free of the stones that speared them.

Ariane shouted at me, clearly alarmed. "Arc, you shouldn't use earth-based magic here! We could be..."

A loud rumbling drowned out the rest of her sentence as the cave floor began to shake beneath us.

The ground gave out under me, sending me tumbling down the massive hole that suddenly appeared.

"Wauuuuugh!"

The world spun as I picked up speed, rocketing through the narrow tunnel that had opened up in the earth. I felt like I was on a roller coaster.

"You shouldn't use earth magic in caves and other enclosed spaces! It can weaken the ground around you!"

I looked in the direction of the voice and saw Ariane and Chiyome sliding down behind me. Apparently, they'd been dragged into the ground as well. Ponta was safe and sound, clinging to Ariane.

I hadn't even considered that earth magic could have this kind of impact.

"I'm really sorry! Once we find somewhere we can stand, I'll teleport us out of here!"

Despite the beating it took, my crystal lamp continued to illuminate the darkness. I clutched it as tightly as I could. From time to time, rocks fell on my head as the cave walls continued to crumble. That actually hurt a bit. However, the rocks did nothing to slow my momentum as I slid ever deeper into the cave.

Finally, the darkness gave way to bright light as I flew into a vast, open chamber.

My tumbling slowed as the slope grew shallow, and I was able to stand at last.

“Look at that. It’s an underground lake! And is that a...?”

I turned, following Chiyome’s gaze, and discovered that crystal-clear water filled over half the chamber, forming a large, subterranean lake. The water itself appeared to glow, giving off a mystical, pale blue light.

Even more unbelievable, however, was the fact that a massive ship was anchored in the lake, just a short distance from the wall we slid down.

I glanced around, taking it all in. The chamber itself had to be at least a hundred meters tall. The rock surfaces around us gave off the same pale blue light as the water. The light seemed to come from brightly glowing crystals scattered about the room. The lake stretched into the distance and out of view; I spotted holes in the wall where water poured into the lake like waterfalls.

A simple wooden pier extended from the shore to the ship. The ship’s three masts made it look like a galleon, although oars lined its sides just above the waterline, like a galley. The fact that we found such a massive ship suggested that the subterranean lake was connected to a river, or even the ocean.

Ariane, however, seemed preoccupied. “I can’t believe it. This place is full of natural light crystals.”

“Kyii!” Ponta let out a cry as it looked around.

Chiyome walked up to me and fixed her gaze on the ship. “So, obviously, people have been coming here.”

“But why would someone build a pier underground?” I took note of the fact that there didn’t seem to be any signs of life around us.

Ariane picked a stone from the ground and showed it to me. “It could be for these.”

The stone emanated a gentle purple glow as it caught the crystal lamp’s light.

“Rune stones.”

Chiyome's eyes widened. "There are near-perfect rune stones just lying around all over the place. Finding this many natural light crystals explains why the cave is lit up."

I lifted my lamp and looked at the glowing pillars inside.

"Are these crystals the same kind that are in the lamps?"

"Those are artificial light crystals, made for use in magical items. Natural ones are extremely valuable. They aren't something you'd use in camping equipment."

The way Chiyome spoke gave the impression that the thing in my hand was some sort of knockoff, but according to her, any of the elves' magical items would be invaluable by human standards.

We were standing on a literal mountain of treasure.

I suddenly remembered that rune stones could also be used as fuel. "With all these crystals, I could probably run a bath year-round and still have some left over!"

Ariane laughed, exasperated. "Yes, well, with so much raw material here, I should probably talk to father first, and see what he thinks about putting together a group of soldiers to collect it all."

Chiyome's eyes were still fixed on the ship. "We'll also need to figure out who exactly is using this place."

The ship didn't appear to be some long-lost wreck. It was in good condition, and looked like it could depart at a moment's notice. However, there wasn't a single soul in sight. In fact, aside from the distant roar of water pouring from the falls and splashing into the lake below, I couldn't hear any signs of life in the cave.

"I suppose we should check out the ship first," I said.

Ariane and Chiyome nodded, as if they'd been thinking the same thing.

The shoddily constructed pier creaked under our combined weight. Once we reached the ship, we stopped and looked up.

The ship was about sixty meters long, including the bowsprit. It was probably thirty meters from the waterline to the mast tops, where the sails were neatly folded. A plank

extended from the ship to the pier for easy boarding.

From a distance, it looked like a simple wooden ship, but now that we were closer, it gave off an ominous vibe. The upper half was almost certainly wooden, but the lower half seemed to be embedded with massive bones of some sort.

Ariane looked stoic as she peered at the docked vessel. “It really doesn’t seem like anyone’s around.”

We climbed the plank and boarded the ship. On deck, we found a pair of double doors, which I assumed led down into the hold. At the deck’s highest point, I spotted a darkened metal lantern. There were six cannons as well, which struck me as a small number for a ship this size. Then I realized how interesting it was that cannons were even used in this world.

Ariane’s shocked tone interrupted my thoughts. “Are these mana cannons? What are they doing here?”

“What are mana cannons?” Chiyome looked at Ariane inquisitively.

“They’re a type of magical weapon capable of shooting large metal balls using the power of mana. Only the elves in the Great Canada Forest, and the Great Fobnach Kingdom down in the southern continent, should have access to them. I’ve never heard of humans having them.”

Ariane looked intently at the barrel of one cannon. Now that she mentioned it, I didn’t recall seeing cannons or similar weapons on the ships docked in Lamburt, back in the Rhoden Kingdom.

“So, this ship’s owner must be an elf, right?”

Ariane crossed her arms. “This definitely isn’t an elven ship.”

“Well, in that case, who does it...”

“Kyii! Kyiii!” Ponta cried in alarm.

Chiyome’s cat-like ears twitched. “Someone’s coming!”

The double doors on the deck opened wide, and a horde of armed skeletons, looking

not unlike me without my armor, poured out.

*“Whoa! More skeleton knights?!”*

The skeletons said nothing as they moved. The only sounds were their clattering footsteps on the deck, and the scrape of their swords and pickaxes.

“These are just undead. If they were like you, the whole country would be done for!” After Ariane got her little jab in, she drew her flame-covered sword and engaged the attackers. They didn’t seem all that skilled at fighting.

Chiyome deftly dodged the attacks, spinning and using centrifugal force to knock several skeletons off their feet.

I drew the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg from its sheath and swung the glowing azure blade through the already-dead attackers, cleaving bones as if they were twigs. For every skeleton I cut down, however, two more burst from the ship’s hold.

“The whole ship’s infested with the undead!” Chiyome shouted. “It’d probably be easier just to light the whole thing on fire!”

“You’re right,” Ariane said. “We can use magic to set it ablaze, and sink it once we’re...” She cut herself off mid-sentence.

A massive figure had appeared from inside the ship, knocking skeletons out of its way.

*“Roooooooooooooaaaaar!”*

Unlike the other undead swarming us, this monster was covered in blotchy skin, and looked a lot more human. It was quite a bit taller than me, standing around three meters. It wore armor on its massive upper bodies; it had two, connected at the waist, a human-like head atop each half. Its faces—if you could even call them that—glowered at us through five bloodshot eyeballs, and wore sinister smiles filled with rows of sharp fangs. The two bodies were identical, giving the creature a total of four arms, and it carried two swords and two shields. Its bottom half was spider-like, with eight large, black legs.

The human-spider hybrid skittered toward us as we continued to fend off the skeletons.

*“What is that?! It’s got the stench of death... Does that mean it’s undead, too?”* Judging

by the tone of Ariane's voice, she'd never seen anything like this before.

I glanced at Chiyome, but her reaction was the same. I couldn't recall ever seeing this creature in the game.

Its eyes focused on me as it opened its mouth to speak. "Kill... intruders! Kill... witnesses! Kill them all!"

"Did it just talk?"

"Apparently, it's on an entirely different level than those simple skeletons!"

The man-spider flexed its legs and leaped toward us. Ariane and Chiyome dove to avoid it.

I pulled the shield off my back and blocked the monster's massive swords; my shield reverberated from the strength of its blow. I returned the attack with my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, hoping to chop off one of the man-spider's torsos. However, it caught my strike with its shield. A sharp clang reverberated off the cave walls as metal struck metal.

"He blocked it?!" So far, I'd been able to take down most enemies with a single strike, so this was a bit of a surprise. However, I took advantage of the momentary lull to put distance between me and the monster.

"Stones of fire, heed my call! Slay my enemy!"

Ariane launched into a spirit magic-powered fire strike. However, the man-spider blocked that as well, causing the fire to dissipate in a cloud of mist.

"He has a mythril shield?!" Disbelief was plain on Ariane's face.

Thanks to mythril's magical properties, it was an incredibly valuable metal in this world. Setting aside the fact that this monster could speak, it seemed to be of low intellect, which suggested that someone must have given it the mythril shield along with the weapons and armor.

Here, as well as in the game, the low-intellect monsters I was familiar with were generally armed either with weapons they scavenged from humans, or simple ones they made from wood or stone. Weapons that required more sophistication, like those

made of steel, were practically unheard of.

It seemed pretty clear that someone behind the scenes was pulling the strings.

Taking advantage of our distraction, the monster thrust one of its long spider legs toward Ariane in a swift, powerful strike. She dove out of the way. The leg tore through several skeletons and into the ship's wooden deck, opening a large hole.

“Fire!”

I shot off a low-level magic attack as the man-spider stubbornly prepared to launch another assault on Ariane. Flames slammed into the ship’s deck and nearby skeletons. I closed in on the monster, but it pulled its shield up once again, causing the magic to dissipate into mist. Its speed and agility outclassed the skeletons greatly.

However, even though I couldn’t actually harm the monster, I successfully ignited the ship. The crackle of burning wood echoed around us as red and orange flames mingled with the cave’s peaceful pale blue glow.

“We should get onto solid ground! It’s too dangerous to keep fighting here!” Chiyome smashed through several skeletons and made her way down the plank to the pier.

Ariane looked to me.

I nodded. “I can handle this! Get Chiyome out of here!”

The man-spider let out another loud roar, its face a mask of rage. Its unsettling voice once again echoed throughout the cave as both heads spoke at once. “Meddlers must die!”

It brandished its swords.

Ariane and Chiyome were now safely on solid ground, still battling the horde of skeletons. I was free to take this monster down myself.

Most of my skills were fire-based, and affected large areas. It was a lot easier for me to fight alone, since I didn’t have to worry about hurting anyone else. Also, my next attack would be difficult to pull off with people fighting alongside me.

“Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg!”

This technique was basically an add-on in the game. It came with my mythical-class weapon. From what I'd experienced in this world, I figured it would be a pretty powerful attack.

A surge of purple electricity ran up the masterfully crafted sword as a blade of light grew outwards. It doubled my power, adding a holy effect to all my attacks, in addition to giving me a small chance of causing paralysis. It also expanded my sword's effective range. The increased range was little more than an extra perk in-game, but here in the real world, it changed everything.

As I swung the extended Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, the nearby skeletons literally disappeared before my eyes, thanks to the holy effect. I also chopped into the base of a nearby mast, causing it to topple.

This add-on was commonly referred to as "lightsaber mode."

The mast fell backward, crashing into the ship before hitting the lake with a splash and sending a massive plume of water into the air.

"Rooooooooooooaaaaaaar!"

The man-spider wailed.

I fixed it with a steely glare. "I'll show you the true power of the force!" That was the catchphrase of the Paladin—this weapon skill's class.

The monster lunged forward, bringing its swords down with all its strength. It might have been powerful, but its movements were rather unrefined. Compared to sparring with Glenys, this was like child's play. At the last second, I swung my lightning-covered sword to catch the attack on the downward swing, cutting straight through and severing one of the monster's torsos.

"Gyaaaaaaaugh!!!"

Its remaining head screamed with anguish. I launched a second strike, this time aiming at the point where the other human torso met the spider body. My lightning blade went straight through the monster's shield and the body behind it, stabbing into the ship deck.

Mythril usually negated magic's effects, but in this case, it only weakened my mythical-

class weapon's impact slightly.

"Nnngraaaaaaggh!" The severed monster let out a gurgling scream as it stumbled, its body bubbling and tearing apart.

I took a few steps backward as a massive blast rocked the ship. Large flames erupted in front of me, and I heard secondary explosions going off as well. Apparently, some sort of combustible material below deck had caught fire. The ship wouldn't remain afloat much longer.

I used Dimensional Step to teleport back to the pier. A cacophony of explosions continued behind me, blasting me with heat as I walked to shore. I felt as though I was in an action movie scene. It wasn't long before the pier decided it could no longer take the abuse. It emitted an awful creak as it began to break apart.

I looked back to see the pier largely blown away. Due to its relatively simple construction, it sank into the water at an alarming rate.

"Whooooooa!"

I raised the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg above my head and ran full tilt toward dry land. It wasn't an ideal running posture. With my blade still enhanced, I could very easily have cut off my own foot.



I somehow managed to make it to shore as the last of the pier fell into the water. My shoulders heaved as I looked for my two comrades, wondering if they'd been watching my comical run.

I didn't see them right away, so perhaps I'd been spared the embarrassment.

It struck me then that I could just have teleported straight to shore if I'd been thinking clearly. My unconscious desire to look cool as I walked away from the exploding ship set me up for failure.

The sound of swords clanging from behind a large rock brought me back to my senses.

"Huh. I guess a few pockets of resistance made it to shore?"

I took one last look at the burning wreckage as the ship slowly slipped below the water's surface. Then I tightened my grip on the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, which had returned to its normal form, and ran toward the noise.

I found Ariane and Chiyome fending off a horde of pickaxe-wielding skeletons and another man-spider. This man-spider had the same bizarre body as the last one, and wore identical armor, but was armed with four large pickaxes—one in each hand.

Apparently, the second one was lurking here on the shore the whole time, although it didn't seem to be faring well against Ariane and Chiyome. Since this man-spider lacked a mythril shield, Ariane was able to use fire spirit magic to great effect, causing the monster to slowly retreat.

Taking advantage of its blind spot, Chiyome flew up from behind, swinging her water-encased dagger. She lopped off one leg, then a second.

The man-spider screamed in agony as it tried to face Chiyome. Ariane took advantage of its distraction to sever both its human heads with her fire-engulfed blade. The strength instantly drained from the man-spider's body, and it slumped to the ground. Its body began to fizz and melt away, just like the other one.

The skeletons scattered. They had previously been attacking Ariane and Chiyome as a cohesive unit, but they suddenly seemed to have lost all focus, and simply attacked at random. The man-spider must have had some sort of control over them.

I slashed through the disorganized skeleton mob and called to the women. "Glad to

see you're safe, Ariane. I can't believe there were *two* of those things."

Ariane wiped blood from her sword and returned it to her sheath, dabbing at her brow. "As soon as we left the ship, skeletons came rushing out at us from the waterfalls."

Chiyome looked down at the rather hideous sight of the melting man-spider and ran her nail against her blade, testing its sharpness. "Those legs were tough. It'd be difficult for a normal blade to cut through them."

I looked at the remains of the skeletons around us. "It definitely seems like someone is pulling the strings behind all this."

A number of skeletons wielded no weapons at all, and instead wore baskets on their backs. On closer inspection, it appeared that they'd been collecting the rune stones Ariane showed me earlier.

"It looks like they were mining these." Chiyome frowned at the mounds of rune stones. "But what are they using them for? And why would they come all the way out here?"

Ariane furrowed her brow. "Elves have many uses for rune stones, but humans still haven't developed the technology to harness their power safely. The closest thing that comes to mind is the Burst Spheres they used during the uprising in Houvan."

"The ship's already in pieces at the bottom of the lake, and I don't see anyone else around, so I don't think we're going to find our answers here. We should probably start looking for a way out. What do you think, Ariane?"

The two women nodded in agreement.

"You're right. The elders can perform a more thorough investigation."

Chiyome's ears twitched as she listened intently to our surroundings. "Why don't we take a break, Miss Ariane? It doesn't look like there are any more threats in the area. Besides, Ponta seems pretty frazzled."

"Kyiii..."

The poor fox looked exhausted from clinging tightly to Ariane during the intense battle, and more than a little terrified at the sight of the undead and the man-spider. Ariane pulled Ponta from her neck and hugged it tightly to her chest.

We moved to the lake edge and sat down to discuss our next move.

"Well, I could use Transport Gate to teleport us back to the cave opening, and we could start making our way through again. I still have a good memory of what the entrance looked like, so it shouldn't be hard to get us out of here."

Ariane fed some dried beans to Ponta, trying to perk up our furry companion. She shook her head. "That won't work if we want to send a squad back here to investigate. We need to find a way up and out. We should camp here for the night. Aside from the undead we just fought, this chamber seems relatively safe."

Chiyome nodded. "You're right. It's probably dark out already. Fortunately for us, we've got light and water here."

I shrugged in agreement and took off my helmet, settling down for a quick break.

# CHAPTER 2

## OF SPRINGS AND CURSES

Shortly after noon the next day, we found ourselves facing a vast forest drenched in warm sunlight.

Behind us, the Furyu mountain range stretched from east to west like a massive wall of rock. Below was an endless sea of trees, looking almost like a green carpet butting up against the mountains. Beyond that, to the northwest, the Karyu and Hyoryu ranges created a near-complete ring of mountains around us.

After our brief rest, we were fortunate to find a route from the subterranean lake to the upper parts of the cave. We discovered a tunnel above one of the cavern's waterfalls, and we followed it for some time until it connected to the main path. However, it would have been impossible to reach the waterfall in the first place without my teleportation magic. Fortunately, the cavern was well-illuminated, thanks to the crystals scattered about, which gave me a clear view.

Now that our long journey through the dark cave was over, Ariane, Chiyome, and I stood side by side at the cave entrance halfway down the Furyu mountain range and took in the view.

"Well, I'm glad we got out of there before the sun started to set." Ariane sighed in relief and opened the map Glenys gave her back in the village. "We made it past the Furyu Mountains. The village will be pleased to hear this."

"Kyiii..."

"Where is the spring that we're looking for, Ariane?" Chiyome's cheeks had taken on a rosy hue. I was pretty sure it wasn't just from Ponta playing with the cat ears on her head.

Ariane looked back and forth between the scene before us and the map, then pointed toward an area up ahead. "It should be near that mountain's summit."

She indicated a rocky outcropping near a mountaintop jutting from the middle of the

forest. It wasn't far from where we stood, and didn't seem all that tall. However, a massive tree grew out of the mountaintop, its dense foliage casting the slopes beneath into shadow. Something about it gave off a very peculiar vibe.

I squinted. "That tree at the top... is that the Lord Crown? I don't see a dragon."

"Well, you can't see him from here. Anyway, if we *do* run into the Dragon Lord, neither of you do anything stupid, okay? Just leave it to me. That goes double for you, Arc!" Ariane tapped my chest plate.

I had no real desire to face off against a dragon, much less one of the most powerful dragons, so I simply nodded in response.

No paths led down the Furyu Mountains, so we descended by looking for areas where the slope was a bit less severe, eventually arriving at the trees and shrubs that lined the foothills.

From there, we headed east, making our way back above the forest. There, we once again caught sight of the mountain and its massive tree. Now that we were directly below the peak, the tree seemed even larger.

At the mountain's base was a large, grassy plain. Right at the edge of the tree line, I saw a large, bluish stone lying in the dark shadow cast by the tree high above. Immediately after, I noticed a structure near where the plain met the mountain. I could hardly believe my eyes.

From that far away, I couldn't be sure how large the structure was. Judging by the height of the nearby trees, though, I figured it was about ten meters tall.

Two large, gray stone pillars with two poles—one above the other, with a space between them—ran parallel to the ground. The sudden appearance of that very familiar archway made me swallow hard.

I managed to choke out a few words. "Is... is that a...?!"

"What is it? Hey, Arc!"

Without a second thought, I teleported to the structure. I didn't catch the end of what Ariane had started saying, but that wasn't important.

What stood in front of me was a torii—the entrance to a Shinto shrine.

Other than the green moss growing around the base of the two pillars, there were no notable decorations. However, it was undeniably a torii. I hadn't seen anything like that in any town I'd visited since coming here.

Now that I thought about it, though, Chiyome had wanted to accompany us on our journey because she was looking for the hideout of the Jinshin clan's founder, Hanzo. It was apparently located beyond the Furyu Mountains—where we were now. Assuming that Hanzo was either Japanese, or a person who knew about Japan, the torii might mark his hideout's location.

I looked ahead and found all the proof I needed. Beyond the archway, a stone stairway led up the mountainside. It certainly looked human-made. I decided that I should go back and let Chiyome know immediately. Right at that moment, however, the ground beneath me shook, and I fell to one knee.

"Wha—?!"

*Who dares set foot on my back? You have guts, little runt!*

A voice boomed inside my head. The world went black, and I could feel the rocks beneath me tremble, throwing me high into the air. Gravity soon took over, however, pulling me—and the heavy armor encasing my body—back to the ground.

As I fell, my eyes fixed on what I'd thought was a blue stone below. It had grown four wings. A long neck with an enormous, angular head rose from one end. The creature opened his large mouth and let out a loud roar, displaying rows of intimidating fangs. The air itself shook, and the birds in nearby trees took to the sky in unison.

I managed to twist my body around as I dropped, rolling as soon as I hit the ground. Even so, the impact hit me far harder than when I'd fallen at the elven outpost, sending me into a coughing fit.

"Nnngh! Gah... That hurt..."

I cast a recovery spell on myself before turning my attention to the thing that hurt me in the first place.

In front of me stood a huge dragon.

Blue-tinged scales covered his body completely, and four large wings protruded from his back. On top of his head were four long, black horns—two on each side. His neck, marked with a striped pattern, led down to four powerful-looking limbs supporting his body. From his snout to the tip of his long tail, the dragon had to be at least thirty meters long.

Despite his size, however, he was surprisingly agile. He stretched out nimbly, knocking trees over as he moved, opening up the grasslands even further. It was quite an intimidating sight.

Was this the Dragon Lord Ariane told me about?

The dragon's eyes narrowed as he glared at me, pupils vertical slits. He let out another loud roar. The soundwave knocked me backward, although I managed to remain standing. I shook my head to clear the ringing in my ears.

*So, you were able to take that, huh? Well, if you're here to challenge me, runt, a challenge is what you'll get.*

Once again, I heard a voice speaking in my head. The dragon's lip twisted upward slightly, baring his fangs.

He seemed to be smiling.

The voice came from the Dragon Lord himself, using some sort of telepathy to speak to me directly.

If I was facing an intelligent creature, you'd imagine we might start our conversation with introductions. Apparently, however, I'd inadvertently given the impression that I was here to challenge the Dragon Lord.

How was I supposed to know that what I thought was a rock was the Dragon Lord's back? I'd been too lost in excitement at seeing the torii to think straight.

From the Dragon Lord's point of view, it might have seemed that I'd stepped on him in a show of defiance. Honestly, however, I had no desire to face off against one of this world's strongest dragons.

"Please, wait! I have no desire to fight," I tried to explain.

*There will be no discussion! I will show you the folly of your actions!* The Dragon Lord's thoughts boomed through my head as his massive body moved.

He spun around, lashing his long tail like a whip.

For some reason, my mind was stuck on the fact that this was the first enemy I'd met who came out of the gate swinging, without discussion. I came to my senses an instant before the impact, grabbing the Holy Shield of Teutates off my back with my left hand, and taking the blow from the dragon's tail head-on.

The attack reverberated up my arm, causing untold damage, but I didn't have time to worry about that just then. The Dragon Lord repositioned himself and reared his head.

From where I stood below, I couldn't quite see what he was doing, but I caught a glimpse of green light growing around his mouth. A tingle ran up my spine.

Anyone who'd faced a dragon in-game would know immediately what attack he was preparing.

A moment later, the dragon opened his mouth wide, swung his head down, and let out a massive roar as he shot a glowing energy ball at me.

The air vibrated as the energy beam rushed toward me, obliterating the few remaining trees in its path and tearing a trench in the earth. I dodged to the side, but the shockwave still flung me helplessly through the air. I felt like a skipping stone as I bounced along the ground, my vision rapidly flipping between earth, sky, and earth again.

I hit something with a solid *smack*. Staggering to my feet, I tried to survey my surroundings, but the world was completely black.

“No... Did the dragon’s breath somehow inflict a Darkness status effect on me?”

My heart raced as I reached up to touch my face.

Then I realized what had happened.

"Oh, my helmet just got turned backward."

After readjusting my helmet, I shook my head to make sure it was on properly, then looked around.

The Dragon Lord's attack had carved a massive crater in the earth—a straight line through the plains that filled the air with dust. It had blown me far away from the torii, toward the mountain. The area was littered with uprooted trees. If the attack hit me directly, I probably wouldn't even have been there.

The title “Dragon Lord” clearly wasn’t just for show.

“I probably shouldn’t try to take this guy on alone. Heal!”

I wasn’t sure how much of my skeleton was damaged, so I used my Bishop-class healing spell. A warm, shimmering glow wrapped my body, then faded away, taking the pain with it and leaving me refreshed.

*Well, well, well. Not only did you manage to survive my first attack, you even survived a glancing blow from the second. That’s no small feat. Perhaps you are a worthy opponent.*

A stiff breeze whipped away the dust in the air, revealing the Dragon Lord in the distance. This far off, he looked small, but his ominous voice was no less clear in my head. He spread his four massive wings and took to the air, letting loose another thunderous roar.

Even if I tried to explain myself, I figured there was no way he could hear me from that distance. He was already coming in for an attack, so I didn’t see any way out.

I could have used Transport Gate to teleport away, but that would have meant leaving Ariane and Chiyome behind. Given the poor visibility afforded by the surrounding forest, my only option with Dimensional Step was the open plain, which wouldn’t help me escape the Dragon Lord.

I could use short-distance teleportation to evade his attacks, at least. Getting a flying dragon off my tail seemed like it would be challenging, though, if not flat-out impossible.

I resigned myself to my fate, looking at the Dragon Lord and summoning my sword skill.

“Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg!”

A surge of purple electricity ran up the blade as it doubled in size. There was no way I could hold back—not against an enemy like this.

The Dragon Lord floated lazily in the sky, wings flapping to keep himself steady, stirring dirt across the plain. In the game, he'd probably be classified as a wind-elemental dragon.

Compared to his massive wings, his body appeared rather small, his long tail curling underneath him. Still, this was a thirty-meter dragon. Even his limbs, which appeared tiny at this distance, could easily rip a human in two.

And then, of course, there was me. My sword might seem large when facing off against fellow humans, but it was little more than a toothpick to a dragon. The sword skill upgraded it to a skewer, at best.

In the game, the most effective attacks against wind-elemental enemies were earth-based. However, with the dragon flying around, I'd be hard-pressed to hit him with earth magic.

I recalled the time I tried to use my Rock Shot attack on a swarm of wyverns, and how easily they dodged. Although the Dragon Lord was a lot bigger than the wyverns, I had a hard time believing Rock Shot would do anything to him. The Meteor spell, from the Sorcerer class—one of the highest classes in its tier—might work. Unfortunately, I'd never used it before. Still, that kind of attack would certainly be useful against an airborne enemy.

Of course, this was all theoretical. I had no way of knowing if the Dragon Lord followed the same rules of elemental affinity and weakness as he would have in the game.

*Here I come, runt!*

The Dragon Lord howled and rushed at me, tearing up the forest below with a massive whirlwind.

*Hmm—another wind-based attack.* I held the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg close. “Dimensional Step!”

The attack destroyed the spot I'd stood in just moments before.

*Wha—?!*

I'd teleported directly beneath the Dragon Lord. He looked around frantically, trying to get a bead on me.

The force of the wind beneath him was incredibly strong, but I managed to keep my balance by hunching and lowering my center of gravity. I looked up, my eyes tracing the Dragon Lord's long tail to his massive body. Trying to attack him with my sword was out of the question. Even if I could somehow teleport into the air, the powerful wind would likely blow me away.

While I contemplated my next move, the dragon spotted me.

*When did you get there, runt?!*

His tail immediately lashed out at me, as if it had a mind of its own. It slammed into my sword with a hard, metallic clang—a sound I wouldn't have expected from dragon scales—and a spray of blood that covered my gleaming armor.

Evidently, even a dragon was no match for a mythical-class weapon.

*Nnngruuuuuuuuuu!*

The Dragon Lord's roar was somewhere between pain and rage. He flapped his wings, buffeting me with even more powerful winds. I lost my balance, and his long tail swung toward me once again.

*“Dimensional Step!”*

The world around me changed in a flash, and I was behind the Dragon Lord, in his blind spot. After swinging through the location where I'd just stood, his tail immediately flicked back toward me, although there was no way he could have seen where I was.

*“Whaugh?!”*

Making a split-second decision, I teleported a third time, moving farther from the Dragon Lord to give myself a better chance to observe him.

*So, you play the same tricks as Hanzo, little runt! I guess there are no more games with you, then!*

The Dragon Lord darted into the sky, flying high over the forest, then dove straight

toward me, hind legs outstretched and large, sharp claws extended. There was no way I'd be able to defend with only my sword against that speed—and such strength.

I teleported behind the Dragon Lord again. At the same time, I used earth-elemental magic in the spot where I'd stood.

“Rock Fang!”

The Dragon Lord slammed straight into the rocks that suddenly jutted from the earth. They shattered with a thunderous crash, sending a plume of dirt into the air. Pebbles rained everywhere. He flew through the dust cloud, spinning in midair as he climbed. Unfurling his wings, he sent out a powerful shockwave that instantly cleared the air. The ground below was a colossal hole.

“He really is the most powerful of the dragons.”

If I'd met him head-on, he'd have smashed me to smithereens.

*So, you plan to keep running, huh?! Next time you won't be so lucky!*

My only chance to incapacitate the Dragon Lord was to use my most powerful Paladin-class attack. However, it would take time to invoke. I'd need to build up to it.

I watched the Dragon Lord loop around above, waving my hands over the destroyed earth.

“Sutekh, god of storms, I summon you to subdue this infidel who lords over your skies!”

A large rune circle appeared in the dirt in front of me. I poured all my energy into it. It slowly transformed; wind whipped through the complex runes along its perimeter, growing into a massive tornado that threatened to uproot the surrounding trees.

The demons available to the Summoner class tended to be overpowered against humans and monsters, but I didn't imagine that would be the case with the Dragon Lord.

He rocketed toward me, sparing only a passing glance for the tornado, and not slowing in the slightest. As he closed in, his body began to glow. It seemed as though he was about to use his breath attack again—the magical equivalent of carpet bombing. A moment later, a bright flash burst from his mouth and sped toward the earth. The

ground trembled beneath my feet.

The flash collided with the tornado, dissipating as if it hit an invisible wall.

I'd pulled it off just in time.



A five-meter-tall, human-shaped demon rose from the tornado.

Unlike a normal human, he had squared-off ears, a long, thin face, and charcoal-gray skin. Oh, and four arms. He looked bizarre, almost like a six-limbed anteater. The demon wore simple armor marked with intricate symbols, and flashy jewelry that glinted in the sunlight. He was covered in rippling muscles and armed with a staff, a shield, and two scimitars. The tornado whipped around his legs silently, lifting him into the air.

Sutekh was a mid-tier demon who annihilated his enemies with powerful gusts of wind. I figured that, as another wind elemental, he'd be more than a match for the Dragon Lord.

Sutekh opened his golden eyes and glared at the Dragon Lord. Light and wind surrounded him.

*What is this embodiment of spirit energy? Is this... is this one of the spirit gods?!*

As he collided with the wind-shrouded Sutekh, the Dragon Lord's voice boomed through my head once again. A sonic boom erupted, followed by a massive blast of air. Sutekh met the Dragon Lord's claws with his scimitars, and a shower of sparks rained down, accompanied by an awful, metallic screech.

The two combatants broke apart for a moment before clashing again, sending out another burst of air that rattled my bones. They broke off a second time, each resorting to long-distance attacks to keep the other from getting too close.

Sutekh was clearly powerful enough to hold his own against the Dragon Lord. Unfortunately, even if they were a match for each other, I could only keep the demon here for so long. I needed to get the upper hand fast.

It was time for the ace up my sleeve.

The game's highest class, Paladin, had only four fighting skills: Executioner, Savior, Guardian, and Prophet. All the skills were incredibly powerful, almost on the level of weapons of mass destruction. However, not only were they mediocre when it came to normal combat, they took at least half a day to recharge. They also used incredible amounts of magic, so I'd probably only be able to get three attacks off.

I figured that Savior, an earth-elemental attack, would be most effective against the

Dragon Lord. It would also reach him high in the air.

Another gust of wind blasted me as I watched Sutekh and the Dragon Lord slam into each other.

Using Savior was a huge ordeal in-game, and I had no idea what it would actually do in real life. The battle between the demon and Dragon Lord was already devastating the environment. If I invoked Savior, the destruction would likely double. However, I was out of options.

I lifted my sword and focused my energy on opening a gate. Just then, a wolf made of water appeared below the grappling wind elementals and let out a thunderous howl.

Chiyome flew out of the forest, executing a beautiful midair flip and landing in front of me without a sound. She looked at the sky and shouted, “I implore you, Dragon Lord! Please, put an end to this fight!”

She must have run here in record time. Once again, I was impressed with her ninja prowess.

The Dragon Lord’s eyes narrowed. However, he didn’t stop fighting.

*Your body... Those clothes... Are you one of Hanzo’s followers?*

It suddenly occurred to me that, if the dragon had known Hanzo, he was at least six hundred years old.

Chiyome nodded, clearly taken aback by the Dragon Lord’s response. “I am Chiyome, one of the six top fighters of the Jinshin clan, founded on this very spot by Hanzo. I am honored to be in your presence.”

*I see that you have been entrusted with a spirit crystal, even at such a young age. Hanzo’s once-great clan has truly let its standards go.*

Surprise washed across Chiyome’s face as she looked up at the massive Dragon Lord, his voice still echoing in our minds.

Another familiar voice chimed in. “Dragon Lord, heed my words. This man is here with us. I am Ariane Glenys Maple, one of the elves living deep within the Great Canada Forest. Please allow me to apologize for this man’s rashness, and to explain why we

are here."

Ariane ran out of the forest, her white hair whipping in the wind kicked up by the Dragon Lord.

"Kyii!" Ponta, perched on her shoulder, let out an uncharacteristically cheerful cry, its tail wagging without the slightest hint of fear.

Ariane spoke in a much more formal and polite tone than I was used to. She glanced in my direction, her eyes shooting daggers, before kneeling.

At that moment, Sutekh faded away into mist. Apparently, he'd run out of time.

The Dragon Lord's desire to fight had evidently vanished as well. He landed on the ground, folding his massive wings.

I returned my sword to its sheath.

*Ah, the clan from the forest beyond the mountains. My name is Villiers Fim, and I accept your apology. Now, I would like to hear the rest of your story.*

The Dragon Lord snorted, blowing the dust from the area. He sat back on his haunches and listened quietly as Ariane explained all that we'd been through. After a moment of silence, he let out another snort.

*I see, I see. So, as a sign of appreciation to this armored man assisting on your travels, you are leading him to the spring to partake in its powers. Yes?*

Ariane nodded. "That is correct."

The Dragon Lord focused his reptilian eyes on me.

Ponta had hopped over to its usual place atop my helmet, and was now spinning in excited circles, wagging its tail. I couldn't help but sigh inwardly at how it picked the strangest times to be brave. As I reached up to scratch Ponta under the chin, it purred, rubbing its nose against my hand.

This scene caused Villiers Fim's eyes to narrow even further. He cleared his throat. *Hmph. Well, I suppose I'm not entirely blameless here, either, considering that I abandoned patrolling the treetops in favor of a nap in the grass. I apologize for jumping*

*to conclusions.*

I couldn't blame him for getting angry. Anyone would be upset if they woke up to a knight stepping on their back.

I bowed my head. "I apologize as well. I was too focused on the torii, and I transported myself here without regard for my surroundings."

Ariane spoke up again. "Villiers Fim, I would like your permission to partake in the power of the spring near the Lord Crown."

*As long as you don't plan to mess up my forest, you need not ask my permission for such things. Do as you please.*

Ariane smiled. "Thank you. In that case..."

Just as Ariane was about to stand up, Villiers Fim seemed to remember something. *Actually, wait! While my actions, admittedly, have been somewhat careless, you are not all blameless, either. If you truly are sorry, well...*

The Dragon Lord's long, swooping tail twitched slightly, like that of a small, nervous animal. The sight was hardly cute, however.

Ariane frowned. "Villiers Fim, what would you like us to do to show our sincerity?"

*Well, I... You see... Umm... Someone named Felfi Visrotte lives in your forest. Well, I believe so, at least. I would like you to request an audience on my behalf.* The Dragon Lord's front claws glowed as he brought them together slowly.

"Do you know this Felfi Visrotte, Ariane?" I asked.

Ariane hesitated, her gaze still fixed on the Dragon Lord. She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye and responded in a low voice. "Felfi Visrotte is a Guardian Dragon who lives within the Columbia Mountains at the center of the Great Canada Forest."

The name of the mountain range brought to mind the delightful scent of roasted Colombian coffee, but I had the feeling it probably referred to the Canadian Columbia Mountains, to go along with the "Canada" and "Maple" naming pattern.

I recalled Ariane mentioning Guardian Dragons before. Relatively few elves lived in

the forest's depths, but if powerful protectors like Villiers Fim lived with them, I could see how they kept the overwhelming number of humans at bay.

I took another look at our surroundings, awed by the sheer destruction. Humans wouldn't stand a chance against a Dragon Lord. Not in the slightest.

"Do you think we can fulfill Villiers Fim's request?" I asked.

Even as the daughter of the village elder, Ariane was still just a soldier. It seemed unlikely that she'd be able to make any promises.

"Kyi?"

For some reason, Ponta also seemed curious, and looked quizzically at Ariane.

Ariane put her hand to her chin. "I don't know if I can secure an audience for you, but my elder sister Eevin knows the Dragon Lord personally. So, at the very least, I can say that your message will be heard. How is that?"

Despite his reptilian features, excitement was clear on Villiers Fim's face. *I would be greatly honored if you would serve as an intermediary. But when you speak with Felfi Visrotte, please don't be too pushy about my wanting to meet. I'd hate to give a bad impression.* Villiers Fim looked like an overstimulated puppy as he bounced up and down, completely different from the Dragon Lord who'd just turned the plain into a wasteland.

"Well, with that settled, we'll be on our way to the Lord Crown."

Ariane offered thanks to the Dragon Lord and turned her attention to the mountain.

*I am usually in this area, so there's no rush on the reply.*

The Dragon Lord unfurled its wings and prepared to take off.

"Wait, Dragon Lord!" Chiyome said. "I have one question I would like to ask you! Will you spare me a moment of your time?"

Villiers Fim folded his wings and craned his neck to get a closer look at Chiyome.

*Ah, the little one from Hanzo's clan. What is it that you seek? I will answer, if I am able.*

"Did you know Hanzo? If so, do you know where his hideout is?"

I looked toward the torii.

*Aaah, that. He had already made his home here by the time I arrived. But you will find what you seek near the spring at the top of the mountain.*

Chiyome bowed her head. "Thank you."

Villiers Fim gave a warm nod before once again unfurling his wings and leaping into the air, soaring toward the Lord Crown.

"Well, it looks like you and I are heading to the same place, Chiyome."

"It seems so. I never thought it would work out so easily." Chiyome turned to me and smiled. "Now that we have the Dragon Lord's permission, we should make our way to the peak."

"Kyiii!" Ponta cried in excitement as it wagged its tail.

A short distance away, the gray torii stood stoically at the base of the mountain.

Ariane smiled at me, although there was no warmth in her expression. "That was a pretty awful thing you did back there, leaving us behind and acting all on your own, Arc."

There was something rather intimidating about her smile, accented by the vein bulging in her forehead. I took a few steps back. I could practically see the angry aura rising from behind her and closing in on me. I dropped to my knees and bowed my head.

"I-I'm really sorry, Ariane. I saw this structure, and just kind of got... caught up in the moment."

There was really no good way to explain myself. Sure, I might have gotten overly excited at the sight of the torii. Nevertheless, I had to acknowledge that running off on my own, in a place I knew nothing about, was dangerous. If this had been a movie, I would almost certainly be dead.

Ariane shrugged her shoulders, looking down at me with exasperation. "You're usually

pretty coolheaded, Arc. I swear, though, sometimes you act just like a child." She sighed.

At least it seemed as though Ariane was willing to let this go. In that way, she took after her mother, Glenys. Still, when she got angry, the look in her eyes was terrifying.

Chiyome butted in, cheeks flushed. "I admit, what you did back there was impressive, Arc. I'm amazed you could stand up to the Dragon Lord like that." She looked at me with pure admiration.

"Ah, um, yes," I mumbled, feeling embarrassed under her gaze. "Well, I was pretty much fighting at my limit."

I wasn't being modest, either. I'd barely held my own against the Dragon Lord. Not to brag or anything, but most of the skills at my disposal were on the level of weapons in an international arms race. So, the sight of me going toe-to-toe with someone even more powerful must have been nothing short of unbelievable.

"The Dragon Lord whom Villiers Fim mentioned, Ariane... is he equally powerful?"

Ariane scrunched her face into a frown. "I've heard that Felfi Visrotte is one of the strongest Dragon Lords, if not *the* strongest. But I think Villiers Fim might have another reason for wanting an audience."

"Oh? Do you think he's scheming something?"

Judging by how happy the Dragon Lord looked earlier, I had a hard time imagining that he was planning anything underhanded.

Ariane shook her head. "Felfi Visrotte... Well, you see, Felfi Visrotte is female."

Wanting an audience with Felfi Visrotte out of respect for the Dragon Lord's power was one thing. But the story changed when you added attraction into the mix, if that was what was going on.

"You mentioned that you'd ask your sister to pass along the request for an audience to Felfi Visrotte. Are you okay with that, Ariane?"

A man asking a third party to serve as an intermediary to introduce him to a woman was hardly rare. However, it was also hardly rare for the woman not to return his feelings, making the situation uncomfortable for all involved.

Ariane scowled. “I mean, I didn’t *promise* that it would happen, so it should be fine. Still, I’ll ask my sister to do her best to convince Felfi Visrotte.”

On the surface, the Dragon Lord was a truly intimidating force. Thinking back on his childlike excitement, though, I couldn’t help but see him as an average guy with an unrequited crush.

“Well, let’s put that aside for now and head up to the spring.” Ariane brought us back to the task at hand.

We passed through the towering gray torii and marched up the moss-covered steps built into the mountainside. They’d been constructed at an easy, shallow angle, although about half of the staircase had sunk into the earth after being neglected for so long. Densely forested tranquility stretched all around us, the only sounds rustling leaves and bird calls. We didn’t encounter any large monsters, as we had in the Furyu Mountains and Great Canada Forest. Honestly, this felt a lot like a weekend hike.

That was undoubtedly due to the Dragon Lord, who made his home on the mountain’s summit, at the Lord Crown. No monster would want to live so close to a fearsome predator.

In the branches above, I saw a family of squirrel-like creatures, watching with great interest as strange intruders—the three of us—walked by.

We chopped a path through the low-hanging branches and undergrowth, surprising several birds and other animals along the way. I could feel Ponta’s reaction through my helmet with every encounter.

We reached the outcropping at last. The trees gave way to gravel and waist-high shrubs, offering a clear view of our surroundings. In front of us towered the Lord Crown, its massive trunk almost like a wall, its countless branches stretching high into the sky, blanketing the mountain’s summit in its massive shadow. Looking up at the Lord Crown, I felt as if I might tumble backward down the slope.

“I never would have imagined a tree could grow so large.”

The trees back in the Great Canada Forest were massive in their own right, but this was on a completely different scale. The Lord Crown reminded me of a gigantic tree I saw in an anime once, wrapping itself around a certain castle in the sky.

Ariane and Chiyome gaped as well, taking in the Lord Crown's immense size.

Chiyome spoke in a murmur, squinting against the bright sunlight. "It's practically a mountain on top of the mountain."

"I've heard that there are more like it back in Canada, but I've never seen them." Ariane pulled her waterskin from her bag, took a swig, and sighed. She wiped the sweat from her amethyst brow with one arm. "Well, we're almost at the top. We'd better hurry up!"

With that, Ariane began making her way toward the summit. Chiyome and I followed.

The stone staircase ended abruptly at another, smaller torii, similar to the one at the mountain's base.

The outcropping was desolate, and mostly devoid of trees, although the area surrounding the torii was covered in thick foliage similar to what we'd left behind in the forest below. Only the minimal sunlight broke through the dense leaf cover.

"It looks like that's the way to go."

I stepped through the torii and looked around.

It appeared to have originally been built in a small depression near the mountain's summit, although the ground had flattened over the years as the undergrowth slowly took over. Fortunately, I could still see the occasional stone step peeking through the grass. Ahead, at the end of the path, sat a building that had fallen into ruin.

I couldn't get a sense of the building's original shape, since the wooden roof had collapsed. The moss-covered stone still stood firm, however, suggesting a design I was very familiar with.

"That looks like a shrine." Ariane took the words out of my mouth.

She was right. Between the torii and the design of the building, it looked almost exactly like a Shinto shrine.

A series of windows, placed at regular intervals, dotted the walls on either side of the shrine's entrance. This particular building differed from the Shinto designs I was familiar with, since it lacked a donation box or bells of any sort. The entrance stood

empty; the doors had long ago rotted.

"So, this is the shrine where Hanzo lived," Chiyome said. "It looks a lot like the house where our village elder lives now."

With the massive Lord Crown as its backdrop, the gentle mist floating in the air, and the silence that surrounded us, the shrine's ruins gave off an altogether mystical feeling.

Chiyome's nose and ears suddenly perked up. She spoke up in a low voice. "I'm catching the scent and sound of water. But there's something different about it."

"Kyii!" Ponta cried out in agreement.

Since I didn't even have a nose, I instead listened carefully and focused. Just as Chiyome said, I could hear water flowing. "Is that the spring?"

"It sounds like it's... that way."

Chiyome led Ariane and I past the shrine, down a stone path. We followed in silence. Behind the building, we met a most unexpected scene.

Warm water burbled from a rocky outcropping, steam roiling into the air. The water snaked down through a groove in the rock face, then accumulated in a stone-lined pool built into the ground below. Excess water poured over the sides of the pool, forming a small waterfall that ran down the cliff.

"Is that warm water?" Ariane's pointed ears perked up.

Chiyome seemed surprised as well. A look of excitement captured her face. "It's an outdoor bath, and a pretty large one, at that."

She was right—the bath was around the size of two twenty-five-meter pools placed side-by-side.

The stone basin resembled a large bath at an old-fashioned Japanese inn, although moss covered the rocks surrounding it, due to the moisture rising from the water. Trees and other plant life grew close around the perimeter.

"I guess even springs can be heated," I said. "But is this really the one we're looking for?"

Ariane dipped her hands into the water. "Seems like it."

"Kyii! Kyiiiiii!" Ponta, excited by the sight of the spring, hopped down from my head and ran to the bath's edge. It leaned over and lapped at the water, its nose and chin touching the surface. Satisfied, it sat back and batted at its wet fur with its paws, cleaning itself.

Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that the spring we were looking for would be a *hot* spring. This was quite fortuitous.

I took off my armored gauntlet and stuck my hand into the water.

I felt its warmth seep into my bones. A few moments later, I pulled my hand out to find it covered in flesh, just like the time I'd used Uncurse on myself. Unlike that time, however, I didn't feel any strange sensation.

"Whoa! It... it looks like it's working."

Chiyome and Ariane stared in disbelief at the fleshy hand at the end of my bony arm.

Ariane spoke in a low voice. "It really *can* bring your physical body back."

I'd forgotten that I hadn't actually shown them Uncurse's effects. This was the first time they'd seen my skin. Honestly, though, it kind of looked like a horror show.

A few moments later, the flesh on my hand faded like mist, leaving nothing but bone behind. The temporary effect was exactly what had happened before. Either even the hot spring wasn't strong enough to remove the curse permanently, or perhaps I needed to soak my entire body for the spring to have any lasting effect.

"I'm going to climb in. Maybe that will cure me."

I took off my helmet and set it down on a large rock next to the water, then piled my rucksack and the rest of my gear alongside. To be honest, at that moment, I just wanted to soak my bones in an outdoor bath, surrounded by a beautiful view. Whether or not the water cured me was of secondary importance.

As soon as I removed my upper armor, a chill ran through me.

"H-hey, don't just strip down in front of us!" Ariane objected loudly from behind me.

I turned to meet her gaze. Her purple ears flushed red.

"I never would've guessed you'd get excited over the sight of a skeleton."

Ariane's fist hit me in the rib. She didn't take to teasing all that well.

"C'mon, Chiyome. Let's go check out the building while Arc here soaks in his precious hot spring."

With that, Ariane stormed off toward the ruined shrine, gesturing for Chiyome to follow.

"See you later, Arc." Chiyome bowed her head and ran to catch up with Ariane.

I turned my attention back to the bath, rubbing my bruised rib. Ponta waited patiently, sitting on its haunches and wagging its tail as it looked at me.

"Oh, you want to join me, Ponta?"

Ponta gave a vigorous wag in response. "Kyii!"

I scratched under its chin.

Already feeling a bit better, I removed the rest of my armor and made my way to the edge of the water, standing there in all my skeletal glory.

I wondered for a moment about proper bathing etiquette, and whether I should wash myself off first. However, there were no buckets in sight, and no other people in this hidden mountain paradise to object.

There was only one thing left for me—and my animal companion—to do.

We shouted and dove in.

"Yeah!"

"Kyiiiiii!"

I hit the water with a tremendous splash, popping my head out a moment later, giving it a shake, and scrubbing my face. Having such a glamorous bath all to myself was

simply magnificent. Ponta doggy-paddled back and forth across the spring.

"Fwaah! I never would've guessed there was a hot spring on this mountain," I blurted out to no one in particular.

I looked down at my arm and saw muscle-bound flesh instead of bones. I ran my eyes over my entire body—it was much more muscular than it had been back in the real world. I cocked my head.

"Huh?"

I'd been a skeleton ever since arriving in this world, so there was really no reason for my muscles to have developed.

I wiped water from my eyes and looked down at my reflection. The ripples calmed, and the surface smoothed, revealing my face.

It wasn't my face in the real world.

I looked to be of Arab ancestry, with long, black hair, a stubbled chin, and an altogether roguish appearance. If I had to guess, I'd say I was in my mid-thirties.

However, the face looking back at me also had deep crimson eyes and long, pointy ears—both unusual in humans. I reached up and tugged one ear to make sure my eyes didn't deceive me.

"Is this...?"

I stared at my face for a long moment before I finally realized why it looked so familiar. It all came flooding back, like a sudden downpour washing through a muddy stream.

"Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!"

Immense pain tore through my head, a relentless storm of dark emotions: anger toward the bandits who'd roughed up those women, hatred for the slave traders, fear of the vicious monsters, regret and disgust at the human lives I'd taken, and homesickness.

Everything I'd experienced since arriving here came rushing forward at once. I could feel the raw weight of all the people I'd killed, and all the feelings I'd repressed, crushing

my heart.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaugh!”

I screamed over and over, although it did nothing to calm the storm.

My body shook uncontrollably, as if I were freezing, in spite of the fact that I stood in the middle of a hot spring. The pain coursing through my head became so overwhelming that I forgot everything else. I found myself at the edge of the bath, where I smashed my fist into the stone again and again until it cracked. The sudden pain and distress were so intense that I started splashing wildly, choking on the water that made it into my mouth, and fearing that I would drown. Somehow, I managed to haul myself out.

“Kyi! Kyiiiii!” Ponta, no doubt alarmed at my sudden change, came racing after me.

I looked at Ponta’s soft, fluffy tail, and then down at myself.

That’s when I caught sight of... it, hanging between my legs. It had to be at least one and a half times larger than what I’d had in the real world. For some reason, that stuck out to me.

I heard footsteps, followed by a familiar voice.

“Arc, are you oka—hey, who are you?!”

“Kyikyiii!”

The voice in the distance belonged to Ariane.

I tried to speak, but no words came. Instead, I let out a long, wailing groan, like a zombie that had crawled out of a graveyard.

Something licked my cheek vigorously, providing much-needed warmth to my frigid body. I could feel myself slipping away as I lost consciousness.



My world was consumed by darkness, and I felt nothing.

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Houvan was located in the Rhoden Kingdom, surrounded by the Telnassos Mountains to the west and Anetto Mountains to the east. The city was relatively prosperous, thanks to its role as a trading hub between the Rhoden Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Limbult to the southeast.

This domain's previous lord, Count Fulish du Houvan, had been executed by his own people in response to his constant tax hikes and tyrannical use of force. The uprising threw the town into chaos for a time, although that was quelled when the first prince dispatched the Royal Army to put an end to the bloodshed. Shortly after, the prince himself traveled to Houvan to ensure the people's safety and install a new government. He moved into what had been Count du Houvan's estate and handled the administration from there.

The castle was still in disrepair due to wanton destruction of the Count's estate during the uprising, so the prince currently lived in a secondary building. His quarters were shabby compared to the grand lifestyle he'd grown accustomed to in the royal palace.

Sekt Rondahl Karlon Rhoden Sahdiay, first prince of the Rhoden Kingdom, sat at his desk, skimming a ream of reports. He brushed his light brown hair out of his eyes and furrowed his brow as he read.

After suppressing the Houvan uprising, he'd kept busy with a never-ending stream of administrative duties. Through them all, however, his mind remained fixed on a single burning question, the cause of the weariness etched on his handsome face.

There was a knock at the door.

Sekt didn't bother lifting his eyes from the documents. "You may enter."

A muscular man dressed in a well-fitting military uniform, not unlike the uniform Sekt himself wore, opened the door and slipped in.

He bowed his head. "I apologize for the disturbance."

Cetrimon du Olsterio had brown hair and a brown mustache to match. He was a man of few words, which only added to his stern demeanor. Cetrimon was one of the lieutenant

generals sent along with the Royal Army to quell the Houvan uprising. He was also one of Sekt's staunchest supporters, working to ensure that the prince would ascend to the throne.

"I just received word from Lord Tiocera. Despite previous reports that Princess Yuriarna was killed, we're now hearing that her forces were seen in Tiocera."

Lieutenant General Cetrion spoke in a clear, almost casual, manner. However, as soon as he stopped speaking, Prince Sekt threw his papers onto the desk and glared at the older man.

"So, she really did survive." Sekt's voice was forced, the wrinkles in his brow deepening.

This was exactly what he'd feared.

Princess Yuriarna was the previous queen's daughter, and the other possible successor to the Rhoden Kingdom. She was supposed to have been killed by Prince Dakares—at least, that was Sekt's plan when he framed Dakares and had him assassinated.

Originally, Yuriarna had been his only target. However, it quickly became clear that Dakares planned to assassinate Sekt, which was how they'd found themselves here. Unfortunately, the group that Sekt sent to assassinate Yuriarna was attacked by monsters shortly afterward, and forced to flee. Sekt sent a second group to retrieve Yuriarna's body, but they'd been unable to find the corpse, her carriage, or several of her guards.

Kaecks Coraio du Brutios, son of Duke Brutios of the seven dukes, had been entrusted with the assassination. He confirmed Yuriarna's death with his own eyes, but Lieutenant General Cetrion's report said otherwise.

"I wanted to get rid of Yuriarna by pinning the blame on that buffoon Dakares, but instead, I advanced her standing. This is the worst and least likely of outcomes... yet it happened."

Sekt let out a self-deprecating laugh that turned into a heavy sigh.

He'd been given an heirloom necklace that his sister wore every day as proof that she was murdered. The fact that he had the necklace in his possession meant that, at least for a time, she'd been unconscious during the attack. Given the ferocity of the monsters that appeared shortly afterward, it seemed highly unlikely that Yuriarna

could have escaped death's clutches.

Even if she somehow got past the monsters, it should have been impossible for her to reach human civilization so quickly with the injuries she'd sustained. Yet according to the report, Yuriarna was alive and well—with no apparent injuries—and had just appeared in Tiocera, in the Rhoden Kingdom.

The whole situation was difficult to fathom.

"What shall we do, Prince Sekt?" Cetrion broke the silence, and Sekt's train of thought.

The prince took several deep breaths to steady himself. Although he was the one who sent Kaecks to attack Yuriarna, he hadn't caused her any harm directly. It was possible that she was unaware of Sekt's involvement. However, if she figured out that he was behind it, he'd have no choice but to try and assassinate her again, no matter the risk.

Sekt looked up. Cetrion was watching him intently.

"We can't afford to let our guard down. Can we have Yuriarna taken care of while she's still in Tiocera?" There was an edge to Sekt's words.

Cetrion shook his head. "Unfortunately, Yuriarna is accompanied not only by thirty of her own guards, but another two hundred men flying the Grand Duchy's flag."

"Dammit! Yuriarna's sister is butting in, too?"

Sekt chewed his lip. Yuriarna's sister had married Duke Ticient, ruler of the Grand Duchy of Limbult. The sisters were even closer now than when they'd lived together. "Furthermore, I've heard reports that around thirty elven soldiers are accompanying Princess Yuriarna."

"What?! *Elven* soldiers?" Sekt's face contorted in utter disbelief.

The elves lived in the Great Canada Forest, which stretched along the Rhoden Kingdom's eastern border. Their population was relatively small compared to the humans, but they lived long lives. Elven soldiers spent their time refining their fighting skills, particularly skills related to magic and swordsmanship. If thirty such soldiers protected Yuriarna, Sekt would need a sizable force to break through to her, which would draw considerable attention. A quick and simple assassination was out of the question.

*Unless...*

Sekt knitted his brow and crossed his arms. “Why are elves protecting Yuriarna?”

It was an obvious question. The Rhoden Kingdom had once been at war with the elves. Even today, relations were tense at best. Not only that, but the elves also escaped human oppression by hiding deep within the forest, refusing to trade with anyone but the Grand Duchy. It was practically unheard of to see elves in human domains.

Sekt couldn’t be sure why the elves would go out of their way to enter the Rhoden Kingdom and protect Yuriarna, but deep inside, he sensed that it wasn’t a good thing.

He looked back up at Cetrion, the hint of a grin tugging the corners of his lips. “Well, we’ve come this far. It’s not like we can just sit on our laurels and do nothing.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning we should go greet my sister with open arms, and congratulate her on escaping Dakares’s assassination plot.”

Sekt pounded his fist on his knee and looked out the window, a sly smile twisting his face.

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Two days later, Princess Yuriarna Merol Melissa Rhoden Olav and her forces entered Houvan, which was now safely under the control of Prince Sekt. She met her brother at an ancillary building in what had once been Lord Houvan’s castle. Her long, blond hair curled at the tips, accenting her snow-white skin. Her warm brown eyes were currently fixed on Prince Sekt, who stood across from her.

Yuriarna plucked up the edges of her skirt and offered a low curtsy. Her movements were those of a refined royal family member, hardly what one might expect of the average sixteen-year-old. Sekt’s eyebrows rose at the fluidity of her motion, surprised that she showed no sign of injury.

Yuriarna addressed him in a clear, curt tone. “It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other, dear brother.”

She was flanked by two men. One was Rendol du Frivtran, a young man with delicately

combed brown hair and an angular chin. As the son of Lieutenant General Carlton, one of the seven dukes and commander of the Third Royal Army, Rendol had been entrusted with protecting Princess Yuriarna on her journey to Limbult. Rendol, who should have been the first to leap in front of Yuriarna when the assassins struck, also didn't have a single injury on his body. In fact, it didn't even look as though he'd been in a fight.

At his side stood a large, brutish man, about two meters tall. A cloak marked with strange symbols covered his muscular body. The man had amethyst-colored skin, elongated ears, and short-cropped white hair. What appeared to be an old scar ran down the side of his face, giving him an intimidating appearance.

In the interest of security, everyone had surrendered their weapons. Judging by the way this man carried himself, however, his bare hands would be more than enough to take out all the humans around him.

Sekt tried to ignore the chill creeping up his spine, covering his discomfort with a warm smile. "Yuriarna, how great to see you! I was overjoyed to hear that you're alive and well. The look on Father's face was tragic when he heard the news of your death."

Yuriarna offered a gentle smile in return. "I thought I was done for when we were attacked. But, somehow, God smiled upon us and allowed us to get away unscathed."

"I was beyond surprised when I heard that Dakares was behind that vicious plot." Sekt frowned deeply, letting out a heavy sigh.

Yuriarna watched her brother quietly before responding. "I heard you were also hurt. Are you all right?"

"My arm was injured, but it's nothing serious. I thought I wouldn't stand a chance in a duel against Dakares, but apparently, it was God's will for me to survive as well." Sekt's tone was light, joking.

Yuriarna's eyebrows rose slightly. "During the announcement you made in the capital, about the uprising being Dakares's doing, you also said that I died. Why?" Her determined gaze bored into her brother, her low voice taking on strange power.

However, Sekt simply snorted, a look of anguish on his face as he let out another sigh. "Dakares had that heirloom necklace you received from your mother—the one you never take off. I assumed that meant you were no longer with us."

"But no one had seen my body?"

"No. The remains of a number of your guards, and a large group of bandits, were found at the spot where we believed you were attacked. You were nowhere to be found. However, there were signs of animals scavenging in the area."

Monsters ran rampant through the woods, and it was common enough for them to drag corpses back to their lairs. Many people had disappeared in such a way, and being royalty made no difference to a monster.

"But my carriage wasn't found either. Correct?" Yuriarna continued her line of questioning.

Sekt only frowned. "That's also true. I thought that you might still be alive. But at that time, we had no information on your whereabouts, and no reports that you were safe. Add to that the fact that the cowards here in Houvan staged their uprising right when the royal family was at its lowest... Well, I had to make rather hurried decisions to remind the people of our family's power. If I'd suggested you were alive, I'd have run the risk of your supporters stalling on sending troops to Houvan. That would not only have prolonged the uprising, but also placed a vital trade route in limbo. Power loathes a vacuum. Don't you agree?"

Yuriarna nodded, her face tense. "I suppose I would have done the same in your position."

Sekt appeared satisfied with that response, and brought his hands together, a wide smile on his face. "I'm so glad to hear that. Now, I have a question for you. How is it that all these Grand Duchy soldiers, as well as this dark elf, accompanied you?"

Yuriarna cleared her throat. "My sister Seriarna provided the soldiers from Limbult to ensure my safe return to the capital. The dark elf here is Sir Fangas Flan Maple, a high elder from the Great Canada Forest."

Sekt regarded the muscle-bound elf. A high elder was quite an important figure. For him to show his face in the Grand Duchy was one thing, but this was the first time a dark elf had appeared publicly in the Rhoden Kingdom for many long years.

Sekt's voice was barely above a whisper. "You can't possibly mean... a trade agreement?"

Yuriarna nodded. "High Elder Fangas is accompanying me to the capital so that we can discuss opening trade between our nations."

Until that time, the Grand Duchy had been the only human nation that traded with the elves. Since the humans prized magical items for both their quality and utility, Limbult had amassed a sizable fortune merely by serving as an intermediary between the elves and other humans.

If the Rhoden Kingdom also became a trade partner, that would destroy Limbult's monopoly and severely cut into their profits. The fact that Yuriarna was under Limbult's protection suggested that those details had already been worked out, however.

"What will be subject to trade?"

"First, we will make arrangements for cultivation rune stones."

Sekt swallowed hard. He tried to cover his sudden sense of dread with a cheerful response. "That will do wonders to help develop our country."

Cultivation rune stones had the power to increase a parcel of land's harvest if crushed and spread on the soil. However, only the elves knew the method for manufacturing them. Despite the humans' best efforts to reproduce cultivation rune stones, they'd come up empty-handed so far.

With all the monsters roaming the land, the ability to increase food production in the already-cramped human domains could quite literally change a country's fate. If the people got their hands on cultivation rune stones without going through the Grand Duchy, nobles throughout the Rhoden Kingdom would almost certainly swear allegiance to Yuriarna, all but assuring her the throne.

Sekt's shoulders slumped, his mind mulling this over.

Yuriarna looked at him quizzically.

"So, I assume you won't be here long?" Sekt asked, putting on another cheerful smile.  
"You must be in a hurry to get to the capital."

"We'll spend the evening here and depart for the capital at first light tomorrow morning."

"I see, I see. In that case, I'll make arrangements for you to stay in another empty building so that you can rest."

A glimmer of suspicion flickered across Yuriarna's face, but she quickly composed

herself. She thanked Sekt and left the room.

As soon as she was out of sight, Cetrion stepped from the shadows behind the prince. He spoke in a low voice. "What do you think?"

Sekt dropped heavily into his chair, placing his hands palms-up on the armrests and slouching. "If we let these trade conversations happen, I'm guessing at least eight percent of the nobles will support her succession."

"And?"

Sekt shook his head. "We'll have to concede this round to her. If I did anything to Yuriarna at this point, the whole trade discussion would go up in smoke. We need her plan to succeed, not only for the country's sake, but for the royal family's sake as well. I do find it a bit ironic, though, that we've become reliant on a species that barely reproduces in order to secure a sufficient food supply." An inscrutable smile spread across Sekt's face. "Besides, I already control Tiocera and Houvan, two major stopping points for trade with Limbult. I'm not exactly leaving everything on the table for my dear sister. I'll need to speak with Lord Tiocera, to make sure he doesn't get any funny ideas."

Cetrion nodded.

"Knowing Yuriarna, she'll almost certainly use the cultivation rune stones on barren land, which will undoubtedly sow discord among those with fertile land. Yuriarna is likely aware of that, but there are only so many rune stones to go around. It shouldn't be difficult for me to win over the nobility who feel neglected. Support may sway toward her temporarily, but the pendulum will assuredly come swinging back." The prince's smile grew even more ominous. "No need to worry. Haste makes waste, as Dakares learned. I plan on leaving the crown to my own son, and that starts with choosing the proper allies."

Sekt closed his eyes, his smile stretching ever wider.

# INTERMISSION

## ARIANE AND CHIYOME'S ADVENTURES IN BABYSITTING

Ariane and Chiyome inspected the remains of the hideout belonging to Hanzo, the Jinshin clan's founder. It was exactly where the Dragon Lord Villiers Fim told them it would be, but all that remained of the shrine were moss-covered stone walls. The wooden roof had rotted away long ago.

A soul-wrenching scream came from the direction of the hot spring, where the two women had left Arc. They looked around in surprise.

“What was that?!”

“Whoa!”

Ariane and Chiyome, both blessed with impeccable hearing, exchanged a look and nodded. Ariane drew her sword and took off at a run toward the outdoor bath.

“Arc, are you oka—”

When she got there, however, Ariane was surprised to see a strange man lying on the ground beside the water.

“Hey, who are you?!”

She'd expected to find a familiar skeleton, either bare to the bone or wearing gleaming silver armor. Instead, she found a muscular, unshaven man with brown skin and long black hair. Ponta licked the strange man's cheek furtively.

“Kyi! Kyiiii!”

Ariane's knowledge that spirit creatures rarely took to humans, and that Ponta had stayed behind with Arc, left one possibility as to this suspicious man's identity.

"Arc, is... is that you?"

Chiyome approached the man and looked him over, checking for injuries. "It's got to be him. Seems like the hot spring had an effect after all."

Arc, no longer a pile of bones, was now covered in powerful muscles. Although his new skin was warm to the touch, he shivered, his face pale.

Ariane moved up beside Chiyome to take a look at Arc herself. "What's going on? If the spring brought back his flesh, then why did he collapse?"

Seeing Arc—a guy who'd returned to his easygoing demeanor moments after facing a Dragon Lord—lying naked in the open air was unsettling.

The man stopped moving, his groans going silent.

"A-Arc...?" Ariane's lips trembled, her voice tense.

Chiyome put her fingers to his neck to check for a pulse. She pulled open his eyelids and examined his pupils. She lowered a catlike ear to his mouth and listened to his breathing.

"He's okay, Ariane. He just passed out."

Some of the tension left Ariane's shoulders. "Don't scare me like that, you jerk!" She shot Arc a steely glare, then turned back to Chiyome. "I wonder if the hot spring caused this. We both dipped our hands into it, but I didn't feel anything. What's going on here?"

Chiyome only shrugged. "I have no idea. Neither of us is cursed, so maybe that's why it didn't affect us."

Ariane frowned. "We should've asked Villiers Fim about the spring's effects when we had the chance."

"Well, we can't just leave Arc like this. We should take him somewhere he can rest."

Ariane agreed and hefted Arc onto her back.

Dark elves were strong—so strong, in fact, that Ariane had no problem carrying the

nearly two-meter-tall man, her feet stable beneath her as she walked. Her amethyst skin flushed, however, when she became aware of a certain body part dangling against her lower back.

"Why won't you wake up? I'm going to be real upset if you just passed out from heat exhaustion."

"Kyii?" Ponta hovered close to Ariane's feet, looking at Arc with a great deal of concern.

Chiyome led the way back to the shrine. "How about laying him down here, on the counter in the old kitchen?"

There was a hearth-shaped indentation on the kitchen counter, and a flat, polished stone next to it that looked like it was used for preparing food. Chiyome swept away fallen leaves and debris before Ariane set Arc down on top of the stone. Ponta leaped onto the counter and mewed, licking Arc's cheek again. That seemed to elicit a reaction from Arc; his eyebrow twitched, and his face tensed up.

The sight provided some small comfort to the women watching over him.

"Well, at least there aren't any obvious injuries."

Ariane gave Arc's still-naked body another look, although she only made it halfway through before her face flushed a deep crimson. She turned away.

Chiyome covered Arc with one of the pelts they'd been using as sleeping bags. "I'd hate for him to catch a cold, exposed to the elements like that."

Ariane nodding emphatically. "Y-yeah, you're right!" She looked back at Arc, her face concerned. "Wait, what's this?"

Ariane had assumed that the hot spring had lifted Arc's curse, and returned his original body, but the man in front of her wasn't human. Sure, he had black hair, beautiful brown skin, and a strong, handsome face covered with stubble. But his ears looked incredibly similar to elven ears.

Moreover, when Chiyome examined Arc, she'd discovered that he had crimson pupils—a color she'd never seen in a human *or* an elf—suggesting that he might be another species entirely.

"Do you think Arc might be an elf?" Ariane asked. "Humans don't have ears like these."

Chiyome looked down at Arc. "He's definitely not human. Between his magical abilities and sheer physical strength, he strikes me as having both elf and dark elf characteristics. Do you know any elves with black hair and red eyes?"

Ariane shook her head. "Elves have bright green hair and green eyes, while dark elves have amethyst skin and white hair. It's one or the other."

"Hmm. And mountain people have different eye colors, depending on our parents. We'll just have to wait and ask Arc directly."

Ariane looked deep into Chiyome's azure eyes, picking up on her unspoken question: what should they do next? She looked back down at the motionless Arc and sighed, turning to leave. "I guess we should start preparing the camp. There's nothing else we can do until Arc wakes up."

Chiyome nodded, then frowned. "Ariane, look!"

Ariane turned back. The flesh that had covered Arc's body began to vanish, returning to bone. "The spring's power must be fading!"

The two women looked at each other; but neither had any answers. They had no choice but to watch, helpless, as the transformation unfolded.

In a matter of moments, Arc's muscular body was gone, leaving only the familiar skeleton in its place.

"Is... is he alive?" Ariane reached out an uneasy hand, brushing the cold, hard surface of Arc's skull with her fingertips. All warmth had vanished.

Arc remained absolutely still, like a discarded corpse.

Ariane's voice wavered. "What should we do, Chiyome? He's not breathing. After all he's done for me, after he so patiently helped with all my requests... I never had a chance to return the favor!"

A tear ran down Ariane's purple cheek and dropped onto Arc's face.

"Calm down, Ariane. We don't even know for sure that Arc is dead. He never breathed

when he was alive, remember?"

Ariane wiped her eyes. "I don't know about that. He used to sigh from time to time, you know. He even ate food."

Chiyome turned to face Ariane. "Maybe we should ask someone who knows more about things of this nature."

Ariane immediately thought of a certain Dragon Lord they'd met earlier. "Villiers Fim?"

Dragon Lords lived much longer than even the elves. With that came great wisdom, accumulated over long years.

"Villiers Fim almost certainly knows the spring's effects. I'm going to ask" Ariane looked through the ruins of the ceiling at the Lord Crown towering above them. She called out in a loud, strained voice. "Do you know anything about this, Villiers Fim?"

The Dragon Lord had been napping at the Lord Crown's base until Ariane's shouting woke him. He begrudgingly made his way to the mountaintop and bent his neck to look down at Arc, lying motionless in the roofless ruin.

*Hmm... Villiers Fim narrowed his large, reptilian eyes. As far as I can tell, nothing is wrong with his soul. However, his spirit is deeply troubled, and incredibly weak. With some rest, he should be fine. You must wait for him to awaken... and try not to worry in the meantime.*

Ariane put her hands to her chest with a deep sigh of relief. "Do you know when he might wake up?"

*Villiers Fim shook his head, his long neck twisting from side to side. That, I do not know. The time it takes for one's disturbed spirit to settle depends greatly on individual disposition. Judging by what I see now, I would guess four to five days, perhaps. He looked back down at Arc. Something is very peculiar about this man. I had no idea that a skeleton lurked underneath all that armor.*

"Arc collapsed shortly after the spring gave him his human body back. Do you think it may have poisoned him somehow?"

Villiers Fim's large pupils shrank as he looked at Ariane, almost as if he saw straight through her thinly-veiled accusation. *Hmph. It was you who asked me for permission to*

*use the spring's power, no? I don't recall anyone asking me what its effects were. Large, reptilian fangs poked out of Villiers Fim's mouth as he smiled. However, regularly bathing in the spring would almost certainly do him some good, no?*

"How do we know we won't just repeat this whole ordeal if Arc gets back into the spring?"

Villiers Fim ignored Ariane's accusatory tone, letting out a raspy laugh. *He collapsed because the curse had never before been lifted from his body. He will be able to tell you more when he wakes, but from here on out, returning to his living form will not affect him spiritually as it did this time. However, if his soul is harmed, he truly will become a corpse.* The Dragon Lord's voice was barely above a growl as he gave this final warning.

Chiyome, who'd watched the conversation unfold, swallowed hard.

Villiers Fim raised his long neck and looked away, his face twisted and tense, his wings draping the abandoned shrine below in shadow. *His body simply returned to its previous form. The next time he enters the hot spring, he won't suffer such trauma.* He returned his gaze to Ariane. *Now, I would appreciate it if you fulfill your end of our bargain. If you need anything, I will be soaking until your friend awakens.*

Without another word, the Dragon Lord lifted his massive body and lumbered off toward the hot spring.

Ariane kept her head bowed as Villiers Fim walked away.

"Kyiii!" Ponta ran to Ariane, cocking its head to the side in an attempt to cheer her up.

"If what the Dragon Lord says is true, we'll spend at least a few days here."

"We're running low on supplies," Chiyome said. "We'll have to forage for food."

Ariane pulled one of the nearby rucksacks over. "All right. After we make sure that Arc's okay, we'll take turns foraging."

"Villiers Fim said that Arc would need to use the hot spring regularly to bring his body back," Chiyome added. "Should we try the spring's powers on Arc again before he wakes up?"

Ariane nodded, conviction in her eyes. "I think his body changed back once the spring water evaporated. If we pour the water over him where he's lying now, I think it'll have

the same effect.”

The two women brought their skins to the spring and filled them while Villiers Fim looked on, uninterested. They returned to the shrine, and Ariane poured a little water onto Arc’s hand.

Even though she expected it, Ariane was still surprised when, slowly but surely, skin formed around Arc’s fingertip. The flesh extended down to his palm, revealing more brown skin.

“Do you think this is okay?” Ariane asked.

“Looks like it.”

Ponta ran over and lapped at Arc’s damp finger, which quickly turned back to bone.

“Kyii?” Ponta looked quizzically at the skeletal finger.

Chiyome reached down and rubbed Ponta’s damp nose.

“Now we just need to take Arc’s pulse. We’ll pour water onto his arm and—huh?!” As Ariane tilted the leather waterskin, Ponta’s cotton tail swished and tickled her arm, causing her to accidentally douse Arc’s face.

For a moment, the room was silent, as Ariane and Chiyome gaped at Arc’s wet human head and dry skeleton body. Under normal circumstances, it would have been an odd sight, but it actually calmed them both.

However, Arc’s eyes remained shut.

Ariane, her heart filled with a mix of comfort and worry, sighed heavily.

“Well, he’s breathing at least. Why don’t you see if the shrine has any supplies we can use? I’ll go search for something to eat.”

“Got it.”

The two set off to complete their respective duties, leaving Ponta to watch over Arc.

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Thanks to the Dragon Lord, there were no large predators anywhere on the mountain, which meant there was no shortage of prey.

The animals barely took notice of Ariane as she entered the forest, continuing to munch grass as if she didn't exist.

Ariane tried using magic to shoot stones at rabbits and other small creatures, but they were just too minuscule for her to hit. All she managed was to send plumes of dirt into the air, scattering the animals.

"We'd be eating already if I could just get my hands on something large. I'm no good at hunting these tiny things. I guess I'll just collect plants." Ariane muttered to herself as she trudged through the trees, looking for anything she recognized from her monster-hunting expeditions in the Great Canada Forest.

In these woods, untrodden by either humans or elves, fruit and herbs were abundant. In no time, Ariane stuffed her hemp bag full of two or three days' worth of supplies.

"This should hold us over."

Ariane sighed in satisfaction and headed back to the peak.

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Chiyome, finished with her search of the shrine, stood in the kitchen using water-based spirit magic to entertain Ponta as it continued to watch over Arc. The fox wagged its tail excitedly as it chased a fluttering butterfly made entirely of water.

"I'm back. Did you find anything useful, Chiyome?"

Ariane's rucksack hit the ground with a thud as she let it drop from her shoulder. The water butterfly disappeared in an instant.

Chiyome reached into her sash and pulled out a diamond-shaped jewel that glimmered like a rainbow.

"I found one of the Jinshin clan's mystical treasures in a hidden chamber deep within the shrine."

"Wow, that's a pretty gem. Is it magical?" Ariane scrutinized the glittering jewel. Its

prismatic glow flickered slightly, as if it were running low on magical energy.

Chiyome nodded. "Figures that an elf would recognize a magical item. This is a pledge spirit crystal. Hanzo left them behind. If you summon the spirit that resides within, and make a pledge to it, you can unlock powerful ninja techniques."

Ariane understood. The mountain people were known for their physical strength, but compared to the elves, they were weak when it came to magic. However, pledge spirit crystals gave them the ability to use spirit magic.

"So, it's pretty similar to the magic elves use. I have to be honest, though... I've never heard of a pledge spirit crystal before."

"It's a well-kept secret among the Jinshin clan. Besides, only ten pledge spirit crystals exist. We don't even know how they were made, or where they come from."

Chiyome slid the pledge spirit crystal back into her sash, near her heart.

Ariane suddenly heard a stomach growling loudly. Her hands flew to her belly, to make sure it wasn't hers. She perked up her ears to listen, eyes fixed on Ponta. The spirit creature was the source of the noise.

"Well, I guess we should get dinner ready. I'm famished!"

"Kyi! Kyiiii!"

Ariane pulled provisions out of her pack.

Ponta wagged its tail fervently at the mention of dinner, eliciting smiles from the two women.

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The next morning, Ariane and Chiyome discussed how to care for Arc until he woke up. "The Dragon Lord said it should take about four or five days," Chiyome said. "I wonder if we need to give him water, though, to make sure he doesn't get dehydrated or anything."

Ariane glanced at the skeleton laid out on the kitchen counter. She cocked her head to the side as she thought it over. "Hmm. Even if he's in no shape to eat, he probably still

needs water to stay alive. Arc's always eating, but do you think it's possible for him to... to starve to death if he doesn't get enough food?"

Chiyome crossed her arms. She didn't have any answers. "I don't know, but we can't just leave him like this. We should treat him like any other sick person, and do what we can to promote speedy recovery."

"I agree. Let's start with water, to make sure he doesn't get weaker than he already is." Ariane hesitated. "How... how do we make him drink while he's still unconscious?"

"We'll just pour from the waterskin straight into his mouth."

Ariane followed Chiyome's suggestion. She brought her waterskin to Arc's mouth and tilted it, allowing a small trickle of water to pour past his jaw and into the empty cavity below, slowly filling the base of his skull.

"Well, he's definitely not drinking it." She looked over to see whether Chiyome had any other ideas.

"How about pouring water from the spring on him first?"

"Oh! That could work."

Ariane collected more hot spring water, returned to the shrine, and splashed it across Arc's face. Once he was covered in flesh again, she brought her skin to his lips and poured in some water, hoping he wouldn't choke. The liquid trickled down Arc's throat, agonizingly slow.

Unable to just stand by and watch, Chiyome butted in. "You know, Ariane, it's going to take forever to help him drink enough like that. It'd be a lot faster if you did it mouth-to-mouth."

"Wha...?" Ariane jerked her hand up in surprise and poured the remaining water all over Arc's face.

"Gyaugh?! Glurg!" Arc coughed reflexively.

"A-are you okay, Arc?" Ariane turned Arc's head to the side as he coughed up water.

Once Arc's throat was clear, his eyebrows furrowed, as if he were having a nightmare.

Ariane was glad that she hadn't accidentally drowned him while he was unconscious.

"Don't joke around like that, Chiyome!"

The tips of Ariane's ears burned, but Chiyome looked puzzled at her outburst.

"If it's an issue for you, I can do it instead. It doesn't bother me."

Ariane felt her entire face flush. "Th-that's ridiculous! I mean, the very idea..."

Chiyome shrugged. She told Ariane she was going to head into the woods to look for more food.

Once Ariane was alone, she let out a loud sigh, her shoulders slumping. She slapped the motionless Arc several times on the cheek with her open palm.

"C'mon, wake up already!"

Arc grimaced, groaning, and still looking as though he was lost in a nightmare. Ariane continued slapping him, yelling incoherently, until she ran out of energy.

# CHAPTER 3

## A FAVOR FOR THE MOUNTAIN PEOPLE

When I came to, I had absolutely no idea where I was.

I sat atop a rock in the middle of a forest, the ground a thick carpet of grass and leaves.

The sun was high in the sky—just past noon, maybe?—and the only sound was a gentle breeze rustling through the trees. The wind carried the scents of fresh grass and damp earth, the aromas mingling briefly before rushing away again.

I stood up and looked across the unfamiliar scene in front of me, trying to remember what brought me here. That's when I noticed my attire.

I was draped from head to toe in a pitch-black cloak, and wore gauntlets inscribed with ominous symbols. In one hand, I held a large staff that could only be described as sinister-looking. I was pretty much the textbook image of a Magus.

While I tried to come to grips with my appearance, my body suddenly began moving on its own.

A black flame appeared at the tip of my staff, shooting into the forest and reducing a nearby tree to a charred husk. The tree shattered as it hit the ground, filling the air with soot.

My hand raised the staff into the air, as if satisfied with the black flame's power. I heard a laugh—mine?—from somewhere far-off.

I used the black flame again and again, burning all the trees in the area before finally leaving the empty clearing and heading into the forest.

Everywhere I looked, I saw dense undergrowth and thick foliage. There was no path to lead me, yet I continued marching purposefully through the woods until I came upon a simple dirt road. The trees were trimmed on either side, giving me a clear view.

I raised my staff again and summoned a black ball of energy. It grew larger and larger

until it surrounded me. It only lasted for a second, however. Then the black sphere quickly shrank again and faded away. When it did, I found myself in a slightly different place.

Looking over my shoulder, I understood what had happened.

About ten meters back, I could see the trees and shrubs where I'd left the forest. The spot was marked by broken twigs and crushed-grass footprints.

Apparently, I'd used some sort of teleportation magic.

Seemingly satisfied with this method of transportation, I continued teleporting at a quick clip through the forest, following the road.

After some time, the trees grew sparser, and I got a clear look into the distance.

The road stretched beyond the forest, merging with a path that wound among a series of rolling hills. I looked up to find the sun on its downward journey, slightly lower in the sky. I turned onto this new, serpentine road and began teleporting along it, moving between the hills.

I soon encountered an extravagant carriage stopped on the side of the road. It seemed wholly out of place in this tranquil scene, and the sight of it filled me with dread.

Multiple arrows had been shot into the carriage—and the man sitting in the driver's seat. One of the four carriage horses had collapsed, likely due to the arrow in its neck. It bled everywhere, still hitched to the carriage.

Even more noteworthy, however, were the men fighting all around the carriage.

One side consisted of soldiers on horseback, wearing light armor and armed with swords and small bucklers marked with the same crest. Their backs faced the carriage as they fought. They were clearly guards in service to some important noble.

The other side were rough-looking men who shouted obscenities as they tried to surround the guards. There was no uniformity in their weapons or armor, suggesting they were bandits.

There were over twice as many bandits as guards, and the bandits seemed to be winning through sheer force. The situation was already beyond saving, the guards

dropping one by one. If I didn't intervene, the bandits would reach the carriage in a matter of minutes.

I readied my staff, and was quickly engulfed in a massive black ball.

A moment later, I stood about a hundred meters from the carriage and the battle. No one seemed to have noticed my presence.

I raised my staff again, calling forth a black flame and shooting a volley of fireballs toward the bandits. My aim was true, and each fireball struck its intended target, engulfing several men in flames and leaving nothing but ash and bone.

“Gyaaaaaaaaugh!!!”

I watched, thoroughly pleased with myself, as the remaining bandits—hot-blooded and aggressive only moments before—looked around wide-eyed and terrified as their comrades screamed in agony. The guards were also uncertain as to what was going on.

One bandit finally caught sight of me. He pointed in my direction. “That’s the one! That Mage over there!”

Several other bandits turned in response, raised their weapons, and charged toward me. However, nearly all of them fell to my flame attacks before they even got close, leaving nothing but a pile of blackened bones on the earth in front of me.

I approached the carriage, vaporizing the remaining bandits along the way.

The devastation and destruction I wrought were indescribable, yet for some reason had little impact on me.

One bandit called to a hulking man nearby. “We better get outta here, boss! That guy’s somethin’ else!” He shot me a quick glance before turning tail and running.

I caught the movement out of the corner of my eye and shot another black fireball. It hit the bandit square in the back, and quickly enveloped him, eliciting a bloodcurdling scream that lasted until his lungs burnt through. He silently writhed on the ground, crumbling to ash.

“Damn you, you evil mana-sucking son of a—”

The boss screamed all manner of obscenities in my direction, although his voice quaked with fear. Either out of anger at his own weakness, or possibly sheer desperation, he lifted his axe and threw it at me. It grazed my pitch-black cloak before hitting the ground behind me with a thud. My hood fell back, revealing my face for all to see.

Everything went silent for a moment as the survivors around me held their collective breath.

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As soon as my muscles tensed, everyone suddenly began moving again, like coiled springs finally releasing.

The bandits let out screeches of terror and scattered in fear, like children who'd spotted a spider. Meanwhile, the guards surrounding the carriage began issuing orders and firing arrows in my direction.

Several arrows struck my side—or would have, at least, if it weren't for my cloak. The garment stopped the arrows in their tracks, sending each one tumbling harmlessly to the ground with a hollow thunk.

Despite having saved the guards, this was how they repaid me.

"Why'd you do that?"

They met my question with blank, wide-eyed stares.

One guard—perhaps their captain—called to the others. "I want two men here with me to keep him from pursuing us. The rest of you, take the carriage and get out of here!"

Two guards drew their swords. Another released the dead horse from its harness, while a fourth hopped into the driver's seat.

No sooner did I step forward than the captain of the guards rode close and raised his sword. "Not one more step! You two, on his flanks!"

As the words left his mouth, the captain drove his spurs into his horse's sides and charged at me, sunlight glinting off his sword.

I teleported away, throwing the captain off balance. However, that left my back open to the two guards looping around the sides. I dodged one man's blows, and deflected the other's sword with my staff. I turned around just in time to find the captain's blade swinging down at me.

His sword caught my staff with a loud clang and sent a shower of sparks into the air.

"I'll kill you, hell spawn!"

The captain yelled epithets at me, a vein bulging in his forehead, as he tried to push his sword into me. His hateful face grew ever-closer to mine as he put all his weight behind his blade. Finally, I could see myself reflected in his pupils. The image was that of a hairless, skinless skeleton. Red flame flickered deep within its empty skull, behind its eye sockets.

I was caught off guard by my own appearance. I swung my staff, knocking the captain away, and brought a hand to my face. All I felt under my trembling fingertips was cold, hard bone—not a hint of the soft, warm sensation of flesh.

"Back to the ground with you, undead scum!"

Taking advantage of my momentary lapse in focus, the captain came charging back in with his sword.

"I'm done with you."

I'd grown annoyed by his presence. With a swing of my staff, I engulfed the man in a ball of black flame. Within moments, nothing was left of him but ash.

"You bastard!"

"For the captain!"

The two remaining men were enraged. They charged at me, swords lowered. I barely managed to get out of the way before reducing them to ashes as well. The crackle of fire echoed across the hills.

I looked around, feeling nothing in particular. The carriage was gone. I turned my gaze back toward the winding road; off in the distance, I saw it speeding away. I lost sight of it as it rounded a hill.

I sighed heavily and examined my staff.

Despite having just massacred numerous people, I didn't really feel *anything*, aside from an odd, indescribable emotion smoldering deep within my heart, which soon passed.

The next thing I knew, I was back at the crossroads, where the path I'd taken out of the forest met the main road.

The sun was at the horizon, the sky bathed in deep lavender as night fell. I sat on a nearby rock, looking up into the emptiness.

I'd come to terms with my appearance, and was trying to figure out my next steps, when suddenly, several lights appeared on the hillside. It took me a few moments to realize they were heading straight toward me.

By the time I understood what was going on, I faced a legion of over a hundred soldiers, their spear tips reflecting the setting sun's blood-red glow.

These men were outfitted with heavier, more extravagant armor than the guards I'd just encountered, and with capes that fluttered in the wind. The capes were probably white, but the setting sun bathed them in crimson, reminding me of Rome's armies.

A man wearing a suit of armor even more extravagant than the others urged his horse forward, raised his hand into the sky, and brought it down in a broad sweep. On his signal, the soldiers lowered their spears and charged. The air filled with the thunder of hooves, the ground shaking underneath me.

I had no time to teleport out of the situation.

I shot fireball after fireball at the oncoming army, but it was like throwing pebbles at a wave—there were simply too many soldiers. The ones I did hit—men and horses alike—stopped dead in their tracks, burnt to the bone.

Several men drew close and hurled their spears at me. They pierced straight through my cloak and scratched my bones with an awful scraping sound.

I turned my back on the oncoming army and ran away, all too aware of how near the horsemen were. More spears struck me from behind.

Had I been made of actual flesh and blood, I would certainly have been mortally wounded. However, I hardly even felt any pain.

I yanked a spear out and held it up, throwing it like a javelin at a knight who rode in front of me. It traveled clean through his horse and struck him, sending his body to the ground.

That still left a legion of soldiers rushing after me, spears extended.

"This sucks," I muttered to myself.

I stabbed my staff's tip into the earth. A shadow formed around my feet and slowly expanded, swallowing the corpses of the knight and horse I'd just killed. Blood and entrails poured from their wounds; then they were lifted into the air as if by marionette strings. The other dead knights, no more than scorched skeletons, picked up their spears and ran to meet the oncoming men who'd once been their comrades.

Even this horrifying sight wasn't enough to stop the wave of soldiers, although uncertainty and fear were evident in their faces.

The newly-revived skeleton soldiers, wrapped in shadowy tendrils, threw their spears into the ranks they'd once marched with. The spear points tore through stomachs and chests, spraying gore onto the battlefield. Screams of pure agony filled the air as weapons clanged, turning the once-tranquil hillside into a living hell. The scents of steel, rust, and blood mingled together.

When the last life was snuffed out, over a hundred mindless skeleton knights stood stock-still, their long shadows draped across the earth like grave markers. There were no voices, no cheers. The hillside was silent, save for the flutter of capes in the wind as the ghastly army stood at rigid attention.

Standing in the center, I adjusted my hood, covering my skull and the red flame that flickered within. I pulled my staff from the earth and raised it to the sky.

The skeletal soldiers formed ranks and began to march silently along the road, a silent procession of the dead.

The sun had sunk below the horizon, drenching the entire region in darkness. The only sound was the scratching of burnt bone on cobblestone.

After that, everything went fuzzy.

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When I opened my eyes, I saw foliage through the remains of a roof that had long ago fallen into ruin. Spots of sunlight made their way through the dense leaf cover, illuminating my resting body.

I felt as though I'd just woken from a bad dream, but I couldn't recall any details. I took a few deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling, hoping to expel the dark feeling from my chest.

Now that I was fully awake, the memory of what happened after I entered the hot spring came flooding back. I looked around, my head suddenly heavy, as if it were stuffed with cotton.

I lay on a stone countertop next to what had once been a hearth. It looked like this room had been a kitchen at some point. One of the pelts we'd used back when we were camping was draped over me like a blanket.

As far as I could tell, I was in the ruins of the shrine we found near the mountain's peak. The walls were mostly bare, what few decorations there once were having falling away long ago. Grass grew through gaps in the stone floor, making the boundary between indoors and outdoors rather vague. All the same, the building still appeared sturdy.

Also on the countertop, by my side, slept a small, grass-colored fur ball. I heard it snoring lightly as its cotton-like tail swayed back and forth. It opened its eyes and blinked a few times, perhaps startled by my movements, and looked up at me. Then it started mewing excitedly.

“Kyiiii! Kyiiiiiiii!!!”

Ponta hopped over to my face and gave it a few licks with its tiny tongue.

“Hey, hey! Cut it out! That tickles!”

I pulled the overly excited fox away and caught a glimpse of myself reflected in its pupils.

“Huh. I guess I changed back.”

The hot spring had returned me to flesh and blood, but now I was in my skeleton body again. I was just as naked as I’d been when I entered the hot spring in the first place—assuming, of course, that skeletons could be naked. There was really no shame in being naked as a skeleton. All the same, I wanted my suit of armor.

Casting my gaze around the room, I locked eyes with Ariane, who’d just entered. She gaped at the sight of me, and dropped some leafy greens as she rushed over, practically yelling in my face.

“Arc, you’re awake?!”

A tear glinted in the corner of her eye. I scratched the back of my skull in embarrassment. The way she was looking at me left me taken aback. They must have really been worried about me.

“Uh, y-yeah. I just woke up a few moments ago. How long was I unconscious?”

“Let’s see...” Ariane counted on her fingers. “This morning marks the seventh day since you passed out at the spring. We were just about to send Chiyome back to the village for help, or possibly ask the Dragon Lord to take us there himself.”

“I was out for seven days?!”

It seemed as though hardly even an hour had passed. I felt a little like Urashima Taro, from the fairytales I’d heard as a kid.

“Arc! You finally woke up!” Chiyome was dressed in her usual ninja garb. She carried a simple basket of fruit and herbs similar to the ones Ariane had dropped earlier. The cat ears on her head twitched.

“I’m sorry for worrying you so much,” I said.



Ariane crossed her arms. “You should be sorry! We had no idea whether your heart was even beating, considering that you’re a skeleton. For all we knew, you were dead!”

I couldn’t really argue with that. If they’d actually mistaken me for dead, though, they would have held a funeral and buried me.

“Thank you for waiting all this time. But how did you know I was alive? Personally, I would have given up after the second day.”

Ariane’s golden eyes wavered, and she looked away. “It’s... it’s no big deal. Don’t worry about it.”

I was confused by her reply, but I didn’t press her.

“Anyway...” Ariane continued. “Y’know how you’ve been saying you’re human this whole time, Arc? Well, when the spring lifted your curse, you definitely didn’t have a human body.”

The bizarre reflection I’d seen in the hot spring came surging back to me. The face in the water definitely hadn’t been mine from the real world. But it felt familiar all the same. It was the character I’d used in the game before switching to my skeleton avatar. I’d been playing as a dark elf, with long, pointed ears, brown skin, crimson eyes, and black hair. However, I looked nothing like this world’s dark elves.

Ariane stared at me, awaiting some sort of explanation.

I averted my gaze and scratched my chin, unsure how to respond. “I honestly thought I was human.”

I knew there was no way they’d believe me if I told them what was actually going on. So, I decided to leave it at that.

Ariane and Chiyome exchanged a glance and then shrugged in unison. I was grateful that they apparently weren’t going to pursue this further.

I looked down at my body and sighed.

Ariane’s eyes remained fixed on me as she muttered to Chiyome. “Judging by the ears alone, I would have said he was an elf, but I’ve never seen an elf like that.”

Here I was, a knight who was actually a skeleton... Who'd been cursed... Who was originally a dark elf, but the person inside that dark elf was actually a human gamer... It felt like when you buy something, only to find it wrapped in layer upon layer of packaging. I shook my head, trying to dispel the frustration welling up inside.

There were more important issues at hand.

"Why did I pass out in the hot spring?"

I remembered being overcome with emotion right before I lost consciousness. It was something I'd never felt before, like a tornado running rampant through my skull. That feeling had been amplified by the fact that I'd rarely felt any emotion since becoming a skeleton.

"It was likely a side effect of the curse." I was surprised to hear a vaguely familiar voice coming from above.

Ariane, Chiyome, and I turned. A man I'd never seen before stood atop a wall, looking down at us.

"Kyiii!" Ponta didn't seem the least bit alarmed by this newcomer. Rather, it was excited, mewing and wagging its massive tail.

The man hopped down, landing lightly on the ground. He stood with his hands on his hips, an imposing figure.

Ariane answered my unspoken question. "This is Villiers Fim, the Dragon Lord. He can take the form of a man when he chooses."

"Wow..."

I still had a lot of questions.

The person in front of me had two arms, and two legs, and definitely looked humanoid. He clearly wasn't the same thirty-meter Dragon Lord I'd fought. But I wasn't sure I could call him human, either. Blue-gray scales covered his skin, and he still had a dragon's head. Sharp, pointed teeth poked from his mouth, and horns stuck out of his head, stretching behind him. Small, neatly folded wings lay flat against his back. He was dressed from head to toe in armor the color of his scales, and I noticed a large tail extending from his lower back to the floor.

The Dragon Lord's most notable characteristic in human form, however, was his height. He was a giant, standing at least four meters tall.

I really wasn't sold on the idea of calling this a "human form," when "giant lizard-man" seemed just as fitting. However, I kept those thoughts to myself as I turned to face Villiers Fim.

I had more important things than his appearance to worry about, such as what was going on with my body. "What did you mean by 'side effect'?"

Villiers Fim fixed his reptilian eyes on me. "From what I can tell, your body is not originally from this world, and was brought here from another. The spring's power temporarily returned you to your true form. What you experienced was the emotional shock of that transition. Why your transformation was temporary, however, even I do not know."

His words echoed in my mind. "From another world..."

"Correct. But you must already know that. You are a Wanderer, no?"

I cocked my head to the side, not sure I understood what he had said.

"A Wanderer, as the word implies, is someone who comes here from... elsewhere. From time to time, even people of unknown species appear."

I glanced at Ariane and Chiyome. Judging from their faces, this was news to them as well.

Ariane spoke. "These... other places you speak of... are you referring to other continents?"

"I speak of other worlds. Hanzo, the man who made this mountaintop his home, was also a Wanderer."

Chiyome gasped. "Hanzo?!"

Villiers Fim's mouth curved in a crooked attempt at a smile, perhaps charmed by the pure innocence of Chiyome's reaction. "Wanderers are hardly rare. I've even heard that the humans who inhabit these lands are all descendants of Wanderers."

"That's certainly... interesting." I thought back to the human settlements I'd visited

since arriving.

There were actually very few humans here, compared to my world. However, compared to the elven villages' population, there were far more humans. Considering the humans' numbers, and how long it would take to clear forests, establish farmland, and build settlements, their ancestors must have arrived ages ago.

That meant that, in addition to myself, the Wanderers included the founder of Chiyome's clan and the Great Canada Forest's founding elder.

There might even have been others out there like me who suddenly found themselves in this world.

"Are Wanderers always people?"

"No, not always. All manner of things, including monsters, wind up wandering through here."

That meant that monsters could appear randomly in this world any time—a rather alarming thought.

While my mind ran wild with this new information's implications, Ariane spoke up again. "Sir Villiers Fim, I understand that you say Arc's body was from another world. Previously, you mentioned that the spring's power placed a great spiritual burden on Arc when he tried to reclaim his body from this... other world. But you also said that he must partake regularly in the power of the spring. If he enters it again, will the same thing happen?"

Ariane's question brought me back to the matter at hand. "I've been wondering about that, too." Ariane's eyes narrowed at me, nonplussed by my casual demeanor. I looked up intently at the giant dragon man, desperately trying to ignore Ariane's intense glare.

After basking in the hot spring near the Lord Crown—a spring said to have the power to lift any curse—

I not only returned to flesh and blood, but found my head overcome with such intense emotion that I felt as though it would split in two. Then I lost consciousness for six days. I might have gotten my body back temporarily, but I was now a simple skeleton once again. Even if I could reclaim my body by bathing in the spring, it wasn't worth

passing out for another seven days. The situation almost felt like dying of thirst in the middle of the ocean, unable to drink a drop of water.

Villiers Fim scratched his chin. “The place where your body is, and the world where you come from, are not exactly the same. However, this difference is not worth dwelling upon just yet. Unless I am mistaken, you also find yourself lacking strong emotion as a skeleton, yes?”

I thought back on everything I’d experienced since coming here. He was right. Every day since waking up in this world had been filled with one surprise after another, yet I’d never found myself particularly moved by sadness or joy.

To be sure, I considered the treatment of the elves and mountain people atrocious, and didn’t hesitate to offer assistance, but not out of righteous indignation.

I’d figured that my rather indifferent demeanor was the result of thinking that this world was all just a game, or possibly a dream, and that there were no real consequences to my actions.

“Now that I think about it, you’re right.”

“I believe that the emotions you should have been feeling were suppressed, and when you returned to your body, they came flooding back like a tidal wave. That nearly unbearable burden caused you to lose consciousness.”

That made a certain kind of sense, at least. But why?

“Why are you so familiar with this rather unique situation?” Thanks to their incredibly long lifespans, Dragon Lords were immensely wise. I hoped Villiers Fim would have a satisfactory answer.

The Dragon Lord’s reptilian mouth curved into a smile again. “Many people confuse Dragon Lords with the other dragons that inhabit these mountains. We are, in fact, a completely different species. You see, we are akin to spirits that have been granted living bodies.”

I couldn’t help but look over at Ponta, who was in the middle of a large yawn, apparently quite bored with this conversation.

“Kyii?”

Villiers Fim dismissed my implication with a flick of his hand. “Spirit creatures, as their name suggests, are created by a spirit and an animal coming together as one. We Dragon Lords have created our bodies here in this world of our own will. This humanoid form is just one example of our abilities. Though, of course, it’s quite a challenge for us Dragon Lords to constrict our spirits into such a small form.” He puffed his chest out in pride. “The relationship between your skeleton and flesh is not all that different from the relationship between our spirits and physical vessels.”

I was surprised to learn that Dragon Lords had a spiritual side. Sadly, I didn’t see myself reaching that level of enlightenment any time soon. Still, I could think of worse ways to exist than as a spirit living inside a skeleton.

“So, what it all boils down to is that I’m not only unable to enjoy this wonderful hot spring, but also, any of the water’s positive effects will be temporary at best.”

Ariane shook her head, as if she couldn’t believe I was going on about bathing again. This was a pretty big deal to me, though.

“Ah, but that’s not true at all,” Villers Fim explained. “If you don’t enter the spring regularly, and experience at least some emotional release, then you will never again be able to return to your true body. It’s nothing short of a miracle that you could return to your natural form at all.”

It felt as though a lightbulb switched on inside my mind as I finally realized what he was saying.

I’d lived in this world as a skeleton for less than a month, and all the emotion I’d experienced in that time had been building inside me. The shock of two months, or even a year, of accumulated emotion might be so severe that it destroyed me.

On the one hand, not having to experience emotion certainly made navigating this rather tragic world much easier. But that left me with a debt that I would always have to pay after the fact. It was a curse in every sense of the word.

I could never have imagined that the curse I decided to create for myself back in the game would affect me like this.

“I guess I’ll need to test the hot spring’s limits.”

I wasn’t just saying that because I wanted another soak in an exquisite bath—the best

I'd ever encountered. No, the hot spring's powers could greatly impact how I proceeded forward. More research was needed.

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I made my way out to the hot spring. Steaming water still poured endlessly from cracks in the stone, running down cooling rock channels before splashing into the bath itself. Excess water flowed over the sides and off the cliff. It was truly a sight to behold.

A four-meter-tall giant covered in blue-gray scales sat in the bath, his back against the stones.

Apparently, Villiers Fim enjoyed the hot spring in his human form. With each breath, tendrils of steam rose from the water's surface and spiraled away. Sitting in the bath and soaking, he looked truly relaxed, like the monkeys that frequented the famed Jigokudani hot spring.

Without opening his eyes, the Dragon Lord spoke. "Are you just going to keep standing there?"

I was lingering at the edge of the water, dipping my toe in and watching the flesh return before yanking it back. I lost count of how many times I repeated that. The shock of what had happened earlier made me pretty hesitant.

But I couldn't stand around like this forever. I made up my mind and fixed my eyes on the water's surface. This time, I'd only face the past seven days' emotions—days when I hadn't even been conscious. The burden would be infinitely smaller than last time.

"Here goes noooooothing!"

My skeletal frame dropped into the water with a sploosh.

I stayed underwater with my eyes firmly closed, my body tensing as I waited for shock to wash over me. When nothing happened, I poked my head above the surface and looked around.

I felt a tingling sensation throughout my body, starting deep within and slowly spreading, but none of the overwhelming emotion I'd felt last time. I relaxed in the warm water and let out a deep sigh.

“Haaaaah.”

I would definitely need to take a dip here on a regular basis.

As long as I could release my pent-up emotions before they had a chance to get out of hand, using the hot spring wouldn’t be such a big ordeal. I could bathe daily if I wanted, as I had in my old life. Maybe even twice a day.

I washed my face with a handful of warm water. Back in my flesh-and-blood body, at least for the moment, memories of my actions returned. From regret over having taken lives to the warm, fuzzy feeling of soaking in a bath, the feelings were all complicated, yet oddly comfortable at the same time.

I let the water soak into my skin while thinking about my next steps.

I’d achieved my goal of restoring my real body, even if it wasn’t the body I’d expected. I tugged gently at my elongated ears as I scrutinized the face that looked back at me from the water’s surface, testing out different expressions.

I wanted to see just how long the hot spring’s effects lasted.

I lifted myself out of the water and sat on the stone edge of the bath, leaving only my legs submerged.

My dark elf avatar, the one I’d used before switching to the skeleton, had quite a nice body—rippling muscles covered in beautiful brown skin. However, only a short time after leaving the water, my upper body became semi-transparent. A few moments after that, my bones showed as my skin faded away.

The parts of my legs that were still in the water retained their form, giving me the appearance of a skeleton wearing flesh socks—a pretty shocking sight for anyone who might pass by.

Apparently, after I left the water, it only took about ten minutes for my skeletal form to return.

I dropped back into the bath and started paddling, flesh reappearing on my body as I swam. I scooped up some water with my hands and drank it. It was flavorless, but slid easily down my throat, sending a pleasant warmth into my stomach.

I returned to the bath's stone edge and sat.

This time, I retained my body long after the ten-minute mark.

I looked over at the Dragon Lord, who sat a little farther off, occasionally splashing his long tail against the water's surface.

"Does this mean the curse has been completely lifted?"

Villiers Fim looked at me and shook his head. "I don't know the specifics, but from what I've seen of your curse, I don't believe you've returned to your true form yet. Just how did you become cursed, anyway?"

I was grateful that the way he posed this question made it sound rhetorical. I had no idea how to answer.

I'd already been a skeleton when I came to this world. The curse had traveled with me. If I wanted straight answers, I'd have to ask the gods themselves.

Thinking over the problem raised more philosophical issues, such as how and why I was alive at all.

"Villiers Fim," I said, "I would like your permission to make this abandoned shrine my own."

"Do as you please. This place was built by the cat clan leader Hanzo, anyway. As long as you don't get any funny ideas about taking over my home in the forest, I don't mind." The Dragon Lord closed his eyes, dunked his head under the water, and blew bubbles up to the surface.

"Thank you."

I climbed out of the hot spring and made my way to a small building behind the shrine, where I'd left my armor. Halfway through getting dressed, I stopped and looked down at myself.

"I guess I don't really need to put on my full armor."

I decided to wear only the bottom half, which would make it easier to monitor how long the hot spring's effects lasted. I flexed my upper body's well-toned muscles; I

could see my blood vessels pulse.

"I wish I could get a good look at my whole body."

I added a full-length mirror to the list of items I wanted to buy for the home I was already building in my head.

I made my way back to the shrine, where I assumed Ariane and Chiyome were waiting. I found them talking in the large, grass-covered space between the shrine and the building where I'd stored my armor.

"Ah, Ariane. Sorry for the wait."

Ariane turned, looking taken aback. "Arc, your... your curse was lifted? How are you feeling?"

"I don't seem to be having any problems. According to Villiers Fim, the effect is still temporary, but I drank some spring water to see how long it will last."

I struck a bodybuilder's pose, flexing the muscles in my upper body.

Ariane made a strange face. "Why are you posing like that?"

I flexed my pectorals as I responded. "I, uh, well, I'm just happy to finally have muscles, and I wanted to show them off. Is that strange?"

"Eww! Cut it out. You remind me of my grandpa. I'm embarrassed for both of us."

My shoulders slumped at Ariane's scathing critique. Just then, Ponta came gliding toward me on a gust of magical wind.

"Kyiii!"

The fox flew straight to the top of my head, its cotton tail tickling my face as it swished back and forth.

Ariane watched with curiosity. "It makes a lot more sense that a spirit creature like Ponta would be so fond of you, now that I know you're an elf. Hey, Arc, can you see this?"

She blew onto her hand and stretched it toward me. A faintly glowing ball of light, similar to the one that I saw while we were in Lamburt, sat in her open palm.

I squinted my eyes and focused. “It’s faint, but I see a glowing ball. Why?”

Ariane nodded, allowing the light to fade away. “Just as I thought. You can see spirits.”

*That faint ball of light was a spirit?* “But I couldn’t sense the stench of the undead, or see the mana that fills the Great Canada Forest.” I remembered hearing that elves could see the flow of mana—which apparently filled the Great Canada Forest—in addition to seeing spirits. Ariane might have been convinced, but I still had some questions.

“There are differences from one elf to the next. Judging by your appearance, I’d say that you’re similar to us dark elves.”

Ariane once told me that elves had a strong affinity for magic, while dark elves had superior physical prowess. Given how muscular I’d become, I found it hard to argue with her assessment. However, this body had only been designed to resemble a dark elf in the game world, so I still had doubts about whether I was actually a dark elf in *this* world.

Still, the fact that I could see the spirit, if only faintly, suggested that this body shared at least some characteristics with the elves. Ariane also once told me that the Great Canada Forest’s founding elder—ostensibly someone similar to me—could barely see spirits.

“We should return to the village and notify the elders that Arc—wait!” Ariane interrupted herself mid-sentence and hit her palm with her fist. “I forgot that Chiyome had something she wanted to discuss with you.”

Chiyome, who’d watched our conversation in silence, bowed her cat-eared head.

“Yes, Chiyome?”

“I’m sure you recall when you and Ariane helped me rescue my comrades in the capital, right? Well, the plan was actually much more successful than we expected. The Calcut Mountains’ refugee population has exploded. Unfortunately, there are a lot of monsters in the mountains as well, and fertile farmland is in short supply. We were already pushing the limits of what the village could support, but now...” Chiyome’s shoulders drooped, her tail moving slowly as she spoke. “The twenty-second elder

charged me with finding the founder's shrine so we can move everyone here."

While I certainly sympathized with Chiyome's plight, that was my exact plan. "I already asked permission from Villiers Fim to use this as my home. If I lived here, too, would that be all right with you?"

Ariane and Chiyome exchanged a surprised glance.

"That's fine, of course," Chiyome said. "I secured permission from Villiers Fim as well. We don't actually plan to move the villagers to the shrine. We're moving them east, to a location the Dragon Lord told me about, near a field and a large lake."

That made sense. The shrine would suit a handful of people, but it would probably be difficult for a whole village to survive here. From what I'd seen of the area when we emerged from the cave, the basin was surrounded by mountains, making it nearly impregnable. The place Chiyome described sounded ideal.

But something still nagged at me. Why hadn't Hanzo moved the mountain people here in the first place?

However, when I asked Chiyome, she simply shook her head. "I don't know why. Hanzo lived many generations ago. I suppose the twenty-second elder might know more, though."

I had my own suspicions about Hanzo's reasoning. While this location was practically impregnable, traveling here was a challenge. The journey required you to make your way through a monster-infested forest, then either climb the Furyu Mountains or enter the massive, pitch-black cave beneath them. Sure, the mountain people were known for physical prowess, but a mass migration like that would be perilous, resulting in countless deaths.

I suddenly understood what Chiyome was asking of me. "So, you'd like me to use teleportation magic to transport your people here safely. Is that right?"

Her ears perked up. "That's right! What do you think?"

Of course, my mind was already made up. "First, I'd like the opportunity to meet your elder. I don't mean to sound crass, but I want to negotiate to receive the shrine as payment for assisting with your move. Unfortunately, I can't budge on that, since it's essential for my cursed body." I offered Chiyome a smile, to show I had no ill will.

Chiyome regarded me with her usual cool expression, though her cheeks looked a little flushed. Her tail wagged behind her. "I understand. Thank you, Arc."

I turned back to Ariane. "And what about you? Do you want to return to Lalatoya? I feel bad for making you waste a week fretting over me."

Ariane shook her head. "The time wasn't wasted. Besides, Chiyome and I spoke while you were sleeping, and I promised her I'd visit her village."

I scratched the back of my head sheepishly. It seemed the two of them had gotten close while I was unconscious. I admit, I was a bit jealous.

Ponta used its large cotton tail to stroke the back of my head, making me feel less lonely.

"Thanks, Ponta. I'll get you a treat in a bit."

"Kyiiiiii!"

Just then, my arm's skin began to vanish, and I saw bone.

"Huh?"

Slowly but surely, my flesh faded away, returning me to my skeletal form. It had been a little under an hour since I drank the spring water.

Ariane looked just as surprised as I felt. "So, you turned back. I guess the effect doesn't last all that long, huh?"

She was right, although it was clear that drinking the water greatly extended its effects. Next time, I'd need to increase the amount I drank, and see how that affected my transformation.

Together, we began to plan our next steps.

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As the sun set, light blues fading to deep scarlets, the serene mountain peak took on the dwindling sunlight's colors. A gentle wind wound through the hole in the shrine roof. Carrying with it the sound of rustling leaves, it brushed the long grass that

pushed through the cracked stone floor and caressed my skin gently.

I opened my eyes and looked around, spinning my lower body and transferring the motion fluidly into my outstretched arm. I was summoning a weak wind-elemental spell from the Mage class.

“Wind Cutter!”

A large blade of air flew out in front of me, chopping down the grass in its path.

Even though this was a base-level spell, it was still quite powerful. It took a lot of practice, but I could now limit its strength enough to cut only the grass in the immediate area.

“Kyiii! Kyii!” Ponta mewed excitedly.

“All right, Ponta. You want to give it a shot?”

“Kyii!”

The cottontail fox took a step forward, narrowed its gaze, and focused its attention on a small sapling growing from a crack in the ground.

“Kyiii kyii...”

Ponta’s green fur brightened almost imperceptibly as fallen leaves fluttered around it.

“Kyiiiiii!”

Ponta sent a gust of wind flying toward the sapling, chopping it down.

“Wow! Good job! Looks like someone deserves a treat. How about some roasted beans?”

“Kyiiiiiiii kyii!”

“What kind of strange things are you teaching Ponta?” Ariane sounded unimpressed. I turned to find her glaring at me, eyebrows furrowed and arms crossed.

“Well, if I’m going to make this place home, I figured I should at least cut the wild grass. Ponta just started... imitating me.”

While I tried to explain myself, Ponta stared at me quizzically, wondering where its reward was.

"I guess cottontail foxes don't use many offensive spells against enemies, do they?"

Ariane shook her head. "I don't actually know a lot about cottontail foxes, but I definitely haven't heard of them using offensive magic."

"Huh. I guess Ponta will be the first. It certainly wouldn't hurt if it had the ability to defend itself."

"You're probably right." Ariane didn't sound too pleased. "Oh! Arc, you're starting to change back!"

"So, the amount of spring water I drink *does* alter how long the effect lasts."

This time, I drank a liter or so, and it lasted three hours. I watched as my brown skin faded like mist, leaving nothing but the bones underneath, then ran a hand over my ribs.

Ariane's shoulders slumped. "Hmm. It's still pretty brief."

She was right, but at least I had it better than that one super-sized hero from Nebula M78 who only got his body back for three minutes. However, I had a feeling that if I exercised or exerted myself, the effect would likely weaken. I hadn't gotten a clear answer out of Villiers Fim on the subject.

"Dinner's ready," Ariane said. "Chiyome cooked tonight."

"Kyii!" Ponta—who'd been staring at me impatiently, waiting for roasted beans—took off in search of Chiyome.

I watched the fox speed away. "So, tomorrow we'll set out for the Rhoden Kingdom and Chiyome's secret hideaway?"

Ariane nodded. "I'm interested to see where the mountain people are currently living."

I followed her toward the kitchen—or what was left of it—where Chiyome waited.

A fire in the old hearth dimly illuminated the room; a boiling stewpot filled the air with

the sounds of crackling wood and bubbling broth.

Chiyome's cat ears pricked up as she listened intently. She dipped the ladle into the liquid, giving it a stir. Ponta sat in front of an empty plate, tail wagging excitedly.

"I made a wild bird and herb stew," Chiyome explained. "It's filled with all sorts of nutrients. We often make it in my village, to help people who've been sick get back on their feet."

Chiyome ladled meat onto the not-so-patient Ponta's plate. The fox immediately fanned the still-piping food with spirit magic. It was a pretty impressive sight.

Chiyome had probably decided to make this revitalizing Jinshin clan dish because it would be my first meal since recovering from my blackout.

Of course, I hadn't actually been sick. The only way I'd survived for seven days without food or water was thanks to my body, or rather, lack thereof. I highly doubted that this world had anything like IVs, so being out for six days would practically be a death sentence due to dehydration alone.

"Well, thank you very much." I accepted the bowl Chiyome offered me and lifted it to my mouth.

The bird meat had a gamey flavor that permeated the whole stew, but it was tender and easy to chew, thanks to the dish's long boiling time. The mountain herbs had a slightly bitter taste, giving the dish an almost medicinal flavor. I didn't want to be ungrateful, but it felt as though the stew was missing something. I continued sipping, thinking how good it would taste with a bit of soy sauce, or maybe a rich bouillon.

"Do you like it, Arc?" Chiyome's face was a mask of concern.

I responded with a gentle laugh. "I was just lost in thought. It's delicious, and definitely seems healthy."

"Hey, Arc, you're changing back," Ariane said, pointing with her spoon.

"Huh? Oh. Whoa..."

I looked down. My dark elf body's brown flesh was slowly reappearing, covering the bones visible moments ago.

"Oh, sorry about that," Chiyome said, ears drooping. "I used spring water in the stew. In my village, we have limited salt and dried herbs for flavoring, so we often supplement them with spring water."

"It's fine!" I said. "Please, don't worry about it. Anyway, it sounds like it's hard to find salt in your village. How do you get it, then? And what do you plan to do once everyone moves here?"

Salt is essential to all living things. It can be produced near an ocean, of course, but this basin was surrounded by mountains. If the villagers were lucky, they might find a spot nearby where they could mine salt, but those weren't exactly common.

Chiyome and Ariane exchanged a glance.

"There's a small quarry near our village where we mine rock salt," Chiyome said. "We'll have to look for a new spot once we move here, though. For now, I've asked Ariane to talk with her father to see if we can trade with the elves."

"It seems like you two decided quite a bit while I was sleeping. So, have you accomplished what you came here to do, Chiyome?"

She nodded. "I had two objectives. One was to find Hanzo's shrine, and the other was to find the pledge spirit crystal hidden inside."

"Pledge spirit crystal?" I repeated the unfamiliar words, suddenly remembering that Villiers Fim had referred to Chiyome as "entrusted with a spirit crystal."

Chiyome set her bowl down and reached into her sash, pulling out a large, diamond-shaped gem. It gave off a prismatic glow in the flickering flames, the light growing stronger and weaker, almost like a heartbeat.

"This is one of our clan's mystical treasures, passed down by Hanzo himself from generation to generation. I explained this to Ariane earlier; bonding with these spirit crystals gives us our ninja abilities. You use the crystal to pledge yourself to a compatible spirit."

Chiyome's cheeks flushed, and she quickly hid the crystal away again.

I cleared my throat and brought my bowl up for another sip. "Huh. This world is full of all sorts of intriguing items."

Chiyome let out a sigh. “Oh... Then I guess you don’t know where this is from, Arc. I was hoping you might, since Hanzo was a Wanderer, like yourself.”

Ariane shot me a quizzical look. “Wait. Villiers Fim said that Hanzo was a Wanderer, but Hanzo was a human, wasn’t he? Arc is an elf.”

Judging by Ariane’s confused face, I assumed Chiyome had told her about my slip-up earlier, when I used the word “ninja”—a word known only to her people. I’d told Chiyome that it was a word we used back in my hometown.

Of course, at the time, I’d assumed I was a human, just like Hanzo.

I shrugged and mumbled a response. “I... I thought I *was* human, but apparently, even my memory is faulty.” It was the best explanation I could come up with.

Ariane looked at me skeptically.

I ignored Ariane and turned back to Chiyome. “Do you want to know the spirit crystals’ source because there aren’t many of them?”

Chiyome ran a finger over the spot where the spirit crystal rested in her sash. “Yes. Hanzo supposedly left the clan ten pledge spirit crystals. Only ten, no more. There are eight in the village. The one I found here makes nine. According to legend, the remaining crystal was lost long ago. If there were more, they would improve our village’s defensive capabilities a lot.”

I wondered whether Hanzo brought the spirit crystals from his own world, or crafted them here. Perhaps a skill from one of the crafting classes had created them.

“Once you’re bonded with a spirit crystal, I assume you can’t easily undo it, right?”

“I would die the moment I undid the bond,” Chiyome said. “These spirit crystals are passed down from generation to generation. Upon the previous owner’s death and cremation, the spirit crystal is taken from the ashes, and given to the person entitled to join the Jinshin clan’s top six fighters.”

Chiyome’s face, illuminated by the light of the silent flame, was no longer that of a young girl, but of a warrior who’d put her life on the line for her village and comrades.

I suddenly found myself lost for words, so I brought the bowl back up, gulped down

the remaining herbs, and let out a deep breath.

"Thank you for the meal, Chiyome."

Chiyome bowed her head.

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Early the next morning, as the sun was still barely cresting the horizon, we woke to find the shrine shrouded in mist, the forest still and silent.

After we said our goodbyes to the Dragon Lord, who was still lounging in the hot spring, I used Transport Gate to teleport us to an area near the Rhoden Kingdom's capital. That was the closest place I knew to the Jinshin clan's village. The dark, imposing forest vanished, and we found ourselves in the middle of a large, open field.

Off to the south, I saw the walls surrounding the city, and beyond that, the capital itself, illuminated by early morning light.

Ponta yawned lazily atop my helmet—probably still tired from waking at such an early hour—and nearly slipped off the side.

Behind us, to the north, were the Calcut Mountains, their peaks a sawblade against the sky. A massive forest sprawled at their base.

Chiyome's village, and the Jinshin clan's hidden base of operations, were located somewhere in those mountains. There was no road to speak of, so we let Chiyome lead the way. Thankfully, there were relatively few monsters in the area. The tradeoff was that there were plenty of bandits.

"Most of the area's bandit camps will be gone soon, though," Chiyome said.

She led us through the forest easily and confidently.

"You mean the Jinshin clan is pushing everyone out of their territory?" I asked.

Chiyome stopped and turned to face me. "What exactly do you think we ninja do?"

Her question confused me. "Rescue comrades abducted by the humans?"

The corners of Chiyome's mouth turned up slightly. "We certainly do that. But we also hunt bandits. Blades and other metal objects are invaluable in our village, which makes the bandit camps ideal hunting grounds."

Since the bandits probably didn't want their pillaging and looting to draw too much attention from local nobles, they set up camp outside town. That made it even easier for the Jinshin clan to attack them and steal their supplies.

Judging by the physical prowess Chiyome and Goemon displayed during our assault on the Etzat Market, your run-of-the-mill bandit wouldn't even stand a chance.

"If the Jinshin clan suddenly possesses stolen items, doesn't that draw suspicion from the capital?"

"That's what our informants are for. They make sure that any survivors returning to town claim that humans attacked them. We make it look like the bandits moved their base camp, wipe it out, and steal their supplies. That's why so few bandits raid from the area around the Calcut mountains."

Chiyome's tail wagged confidently. She turned and led us deeper into the forest.

Those mountain people were a lot more rugged than I'd given them credit for.

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About halfway up one of the mountains, after a short journey through dense forest, we finally reached a clearing. The soil underfoot gave way to rock, and I saw that the way ahead was riddled with deep gorges. Between them, a mountain stream snaked downwards.

Chiyome pointed toward a peak across from the overhang where we'd stopped. "Once we pass this gorge, we'll be in the Calcut Mountains proper. Humans rarely venture out here, due to the powerful monsters that make these mountains their home."

I nodded. From where we stood, I had a clear sightline to a treeless patch of ground on the other side. Traveling there would be relatively easy.

"So, you'd like me to teleport us over?"

Chiyome nodded. She and Ariane put their hands on my shoulders in a now-familiar

movement.

“Dimensional Step!”

An instant later, we found ourselves on the far side of the gorge. Looking backward, I could see the overhang where we’d just stood.

“The village is on the other side of this mountain. Let’s get going.” Chiyome was already several paces away.

This part of the Calcut mountain range was less a series of distinct mountains than an undulating mass of earth covered in dense foliage.

Just as Chiyome had warned before we teleported, we encountered much more dangerous monsters in this area, the likes of which we hadn’t seen on the gorge’s opposite side. They didn’t pose much of a threat to the three of us, of course, but any normal person would have been easy prey. Considering the sheer number of monsters we saw, it was difficult to believe that this place was suitable to live in.

Sure, the mountain people might not need to worry about humans infiltrating their domain, but simply surviving here seemed like a struggle—hardly what I’d call a peaceful existence. When I thought of the women and children we’d saved from the slave market and sent to this village, I got a little worried.

At one point, we killed a monster that Chiyome and Ariane called an “umbra tigris.” It was a massive, tiger-like creature with blood-red eyes, stiff purple horns, and a black-spotted pelt. It was about four meters long—five if you counted its tail—and the large fangs extending from its upper jaw gave it the appearance of a saber-toothed tiger. Felling an umbra tigris usually required several groups from Chiyome’s clan to work in unison.

Daytime encounters were practically unheard of, but we ran into that particular creature as we made our way through the dense underbrush. At night, it released a dark, mist-like gas to conceal its movements, but that only made it a larger target during the day.

When the umbra tigris came in to strike, we responded aggressively, ending the battle so quickly that your instant noodles would still be warm long after we finished.

“Are you okay, Arc? Isn’t it heavy?”

Chiyome had asked me to carry the umbra tigris back to her village. Apparently, the villagers would pulverize the monster's horns and mix them with steel to make incredibly sharp and durable blades. According to Chiyome, the dagger at her waist was one such weapon.

The umbra tigris's pelt also provided much-needed warmth up in the mountains, and its teeth were ground for use in medicines. If the villagers sold the pelt with the head attached, it would fetch a high price at the human markets, providing money for food, weapons, and other supplies.

"Honestly, it's nothing compared to the giant basilisk I took down." I laughed lightly and, to emphasize the point, hopped a few times with the umbra tigris still on my back.

Ariane, who trailed behind us with Ponta held firmly to her chest, butted in, her voice clearly annoyed. "You're something else, Arc. You remind me of my mother sometimes."

I laughed. "I'm not sure how comfortable I am with a compliment like that."

Ariane furrowed her forehead. Apparently, she hadn't meant it as a compliment.

As we reached another clearing, Chiyome stopped and pointed toward a mountain on the far side of a steep cliff. "My village is opposite this valley. At this pace, we should reach it just before sundown."

I hefted the umbra tigris. "I'm happy to keep going. Ariane?"

"Sounds good to me."

I teleported us across the valley.

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Just as the sun began to dip behind the mountains, we looked down on Chiyome's hidden village.

Wooden posts formed its outer perimeter; an inner wall of spiked stone served as the second line of defense against would-be attackers. Honestly, it looked more like a fortress than a village.

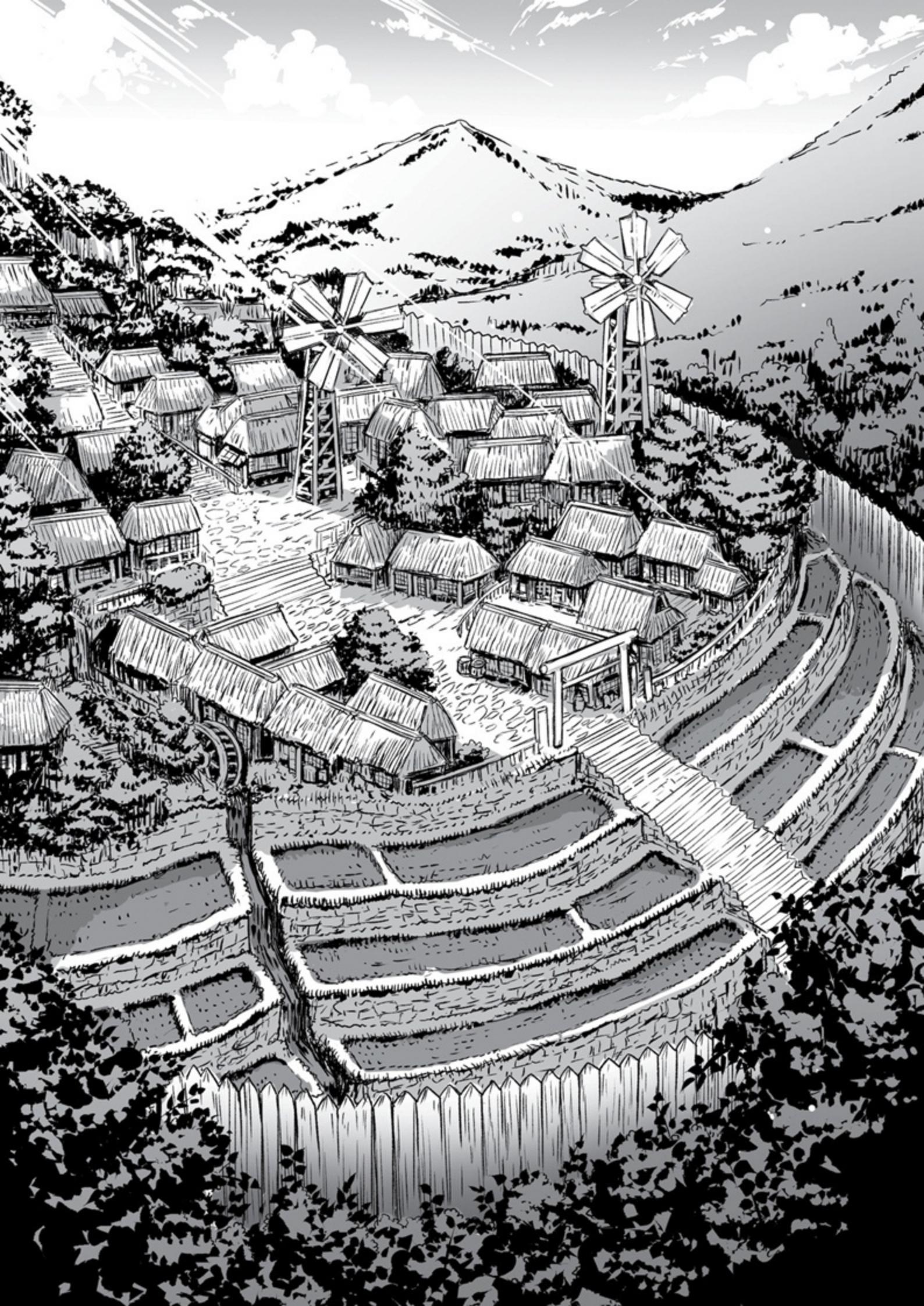
A hinged door, like a drawbridge—which I assumed to be the entrance—was shut tight

to prevent anyone from entering.

The buildings inside the village seemed to cling to the mountain's slopes. Beyond the walls, I saw homes and windmills huddled close together near the summit. Farther down, crop-filled fields supported by stone walls covered the mountainside.

It reminded me of Machu Picchu.

"I can't believe they've built a village on such a steep slope." Ariane's eyes took in the impressive sight.



The Calcut range was full of mountains and valleys, leaving little in the way of open plains. This peak must have been the flattest land Chiyome's people found in the area.

"Building a village this size so deep in the mountains is certainly praiseworthy, but I don't imagine it could support many people."

It seemed rather cramped compared to Lalatoya, Ariane's hometown.

Sadness washed across Chiyome's face, her azure eyes fixed on the village. "Ever since we rescued the enslaved from the capital, the population has grown to over a thousand."

"That's... that's quite a lot."

Back in my world, a thousand people wasn't much, but that population would severely overcrowd a small settlement like this. Ariane nodded in agreement with my shocked assessment as we looked down over the village.

Ponta let out a loud yawn, lazing in Ariane's arms and letting its large tail sweep back and forth slowly. It was good at noticing when food was around, but not much else. If we ran across a problem big enough to bother Ponta, that would truly be cause for concern.

After taking a look at the carefree Ponta, Chiyome broke into a broad smile. "Let's go meet the twenty-second elder, then."

I shifted the *umbra tigris*'s weight on my shoulders and followed her down the well-worn footpath into the village.

There were towers on either side of the entrance. The guards inside banged mallets on hanging wooden panels as soon as they noticed us—some kind of warning system, no doubt. The panels made a hollow sound that resonated throughout the village. Even from outside the walls, I could hear people murmuring inside.

After a few moments, the drawbridge door lowered, making a loud "thunk" as it hit the ground. The door was made of a double layer of thick logs. It must have been incredibly heavy.

"The sun's about to set," Chiyome said. "We should hurry up and get inside. More monsters will start appearing soon."

Ariane and I followed her through the entrance.

No sooner had we set foot in the village than the door rose behind us. At the same time, the door to the inner wall lowered. That door, too, closed as soon as we were through.

I followed Chiyome toward the village's tallest building, located in the center. I looked around, taking in as many sights as I could. A large crowd—mostly children—filled the streets, watching me with great interest. They represented a wide variety of species, various types of ears twitching with excitement as they pointed toward the *umbra tigris* over my shoulder.

Chiyome paid no attention. She stopped in front of the two-story building at the village center and motioned toward me.

"This is where Hanzo, the twenty-second elder of the Jinshin clan, lives."

The building looked almost exactly like the shrine near the hot spring, although this one was much smaller. Despite its compact size, a lot of love had clearly been put into its construction. Intricate engravings covered its walls.

The surrounding buildings were also well-built. It didn't seem as though the mountain people were doing all that badly for themselves here.

I followed Chiyome into the building, and found myself in a spacious entry hall, facing an elderly man with cat ears.

The man stood around 180 centimeters tall. Long white hair ran straight down his back. His thick, bushy eyebrows and long beard gave him the appearance of an old mountain hermit. His arms were crossed behind him, resting at his lower back.

The old man looked at me, raised a single bushy eyebrow, and turned his attention to Chiyome.

"Ah, Chiyome, you've returned. This man you bring with you, is he the one who comes from the same home as our great founder?"

"Yes. The armored one is Arc, and this is the dark elf Ariane."

Ariane and I bowed our heads.

"Kyiii!" Ponta introduced itself from Ariane's arms.

The old man smiled. "We are honored that you grace us with your presence. I am Hanzo, the twenty-second to hold the name, and to be granted charge of the Jinshin clan. I know how much you two have done for us, and I offer you humble thanks on behalf of our people. Am I correct in assuming that your presence means you have agreed to help us once again?"

I set the umbra tigris on the ground and straightened. "I, too, am honored to meet you. I have come here at Chiyome's request. I hear that your village finds itself in dire need. If there's anything I can do to assist you, I will do it."

I did my best to respond to Hanzo's formal greeting in kind, although the whole thing felt a bit like a period drama.

Ariane bowed her head toward Hanzo. "My full name is Ariane Glenys Maple. I am a soldier of the Great Canada Forest. I'm here as Chiyome's friend and Arc's travel companion." She smiled at Chiyome, who blushed in response.

What had she meant by "travel companion"?

Hanzo gestured at the umbra tigris. "And this monster next to you, Arc, may I ask what it is for?"

"We encountered it on our journey here," I said. "Chiyome told me how valuable it is, so I've brought it as an offering to the village."

The wrinkles in Hanzo's forehead deepened as he smiled broadly. "We appreciate it greatly, and humbly accept your gift."

Hanzo raised his right arm, and several people in ninja garb similar to Chiyome's silently stepped from the shadows and carried the massive umbra tigris out of the building.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Ariane tense up for a split second when the newcomers appeared. Apparently, even she could be rattled sometimes.

Hanzo smiled again. "You must be tired from your journey. I have already prepared rooms for you two, so please, settle in and rest your weary bodies. We can talk more later, over dinner."

Two cat-eared women appeared.

"These two will show you to your rooms. I will call you once dinner is ready."

Hanzo turned to leave. Chiyome jogged after him.

"Have you learned Sasuke's whereabouts?" She spoke in a low voice, but I still caught what she said.

I hadn't heard the name before, but I assumed Sasuke was another of the Jinshin clan's top fighters.

Hanzo simply shook his head.

"Sir Arc, I will take you to your room." A woman's voice interrupted my thoughts.

I looked at her. "Ah, yes. Thank you."

The women led us to the second floor, and down a hall to the two rooms prepared for Ariane and me.

Mine was relatively simple, lit during the daytime by sunlight shining through a slatted shutter on one wall. It contained a raised platform, about two meters square, covered in animal pelts. I assumed that was the bed.

Next to the platform was a gorgeous writing desk of elaborately carved wood, and a long, wooden chest for storing my things. Both looked well-made and built to last. An oil lamp, the room's sole source of illumination, hung on the wall by the door. Its dim light cast long shadows into the corners of the room, causing my imagination to run wild.

"It seems like a ghost could pop out at any minute," I mumbled.

"What're you talking about, Arc?" Ariane called from behind me. "You're practically a ghost yourself."

"Wah!" I cried in surprise.

When I turned to tell Ariane off for scaring me, a green furball suddenly latched onto my face, plunging me into darkness.

“Kyii!”

“Mmmph! I can’t see, Ponta.”

I grabbed the fox by the scruff of the neck and pulled it away. It dangled, looking completely content and wagging its tail back and forth. It was probably thinking about dinner, since it had heard that word earlier.

Ariane watched Ponta absently. “Chiyome’s village is better-established than I thought it would be. Are they really going to throw this all away and move on?”

She had a point. The village’s defenses seemed more than adequate to keep forest-dwelling monsters at bay.

“Maybe they’ll explain over dinner. I’ll use teleportation magic to help them move, if they want. But it’s not my place to tell them what to do.”

“I suppose you’re right. Speaking of dinner, what do you plan on doing about... that?” Ariane pointed at my helmet.

I’d worn my armor ever since we arrived here, even during my introduction to Hanzo. I had shown Chiyome my skeleton body back in Lalatoya, but I hadn’t yet mentioned—much less shown—it to anyone else. Ariane was probably asking how I planned to deal with that. I didn’t really have a good way out this time, though.

“Don’t worry. I brought this with me.”

I dug in my bag and showed Ariane a leather waterskin that I’d tucked inside.

She caught on immediately. “Aah. Got it.”

The skin was filled with enough spring water to provide about two hours back in my body. If I drank it before dinner, I wouldn’t frighten anyone.

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A short time later, the two women who took us to our rooms returned to let us know that dinner was ready. They led us back to the first floor, through a living room of sorts, and into a room with a raised wooden floor and a central hearth. A steaming pot hung above the fire, and the burble of boiling liquid filled the room.

The chamber reminded me of the old homes you'd find in a remote Japanese village. Nostalgia welled up inside me.

"Sit wherever you like, Arc," Hanzo said. The white-bearded elder sat in front of the pot, legs crossed. "You know, I never would have guessed you were an elf, since you come from the same place as our great founder."

I'd already taken off my helmet, revealing my dark elf face, temporarily restored thanks to the spring water's curse-lifting powers.

"Ah, yes... My memory is still quite fuzzy. I've only recently been able to recall some of the details. Honestly, I'm not entirely sure that your founder and I truly come from the same village."

I sat across from Hanzo, assuming his cross-legged posture, and set Ponta down next to me.

Ariane sat on my other side. She kept shifting and moving her legs, as if she wasn't used to sitting on the floor.

Hanzo watched patiently as she settled. "Now, about our request for help. I hear that you are a mercenary, Arc. Of course, we intend to pay you for your services. But Chiyome mentioned that you might have another request."

When Chiyome had approached me with her request, I agreed to take it on, so I was at a loss as to what sort of payment to ask for. I just wanted to help my friend, who was in trouble. I couldn't really think of anything I needed.

"As I'm sure you have seen, our village is far from prosperous. If it is acceptable to you, I would like to offer you several of our finest women. What do you think? Heh heh."

The old man raised a bushy eyebrow and gave me a suggestive smile. While that offer was tempting, I felt eyes drilling into me from the side. Replying to the offer, even jokingly, seemed like a poor choice.

Instead, I brought up my original request—the shrine. "I understand that this is a rather big favor to ask, but I would like permission to use the shrine your great founder built, near where you'll be moving. That would be sufficient payment for me." I mentioned that the Dragon Lord who watched over the region had already granted me permission.

Hanzo nodded. "After our great founder's death, the third Hanzo abandoned the shrine, and it fell into ruin. Chiyome already retrieved our clan's mystical treasure, so you are free to use the shrine as you see fit. Is there nothing else you wish to ask of us?"

I crossed my arms and thought it over.

Ponta looked up at me, cocking its head to imitate my posture. It wagged its tail, clearly impatient about the lack of dinner.

"From what I've seen already, your people are incredible at crafting," I said. "I would like your help returning the shrine to its former glory. Would that be possible?"

It would take a lot of work to restore the shrine. I could easily buy the materials from human towns, but I didn't feel remotely qualified to try repairing such a large building on my own.

Hanzo stroked his long, white beard. "We would gladly provide assistance. But is that all you want? I could find you a well-endowed young lady, you know...! Gyahaha." As Hanzo spoke, his gaze turned quickly toward Ariane. Then he looked back at me and ended with a lecherous laugh. I couldn't see for sure, but I was nearly certain that he was staring at Ariane's chest.

Was this perverted old man really the Jinshin clan's leader? I wouldn't have been surprised if he was suddenly revealed to be a body double.

I felt Ariane's death glare intensify, making the muscles in my neck tense up. This body was supposed to have the ability to bypass strong emotions, but Ariane's glare was something different entirely.

Ponta pawed my lap, begging for food. I petted it to try and calm it down.

"Thank you, Hanzo," I said. "That is incredibly generous."

Hanzo nodded. "We'll even lend you our best crafters. Chiyome!"

The cat-eared ninja girl glided into the room silently. She bowed once in the entrance before approaching.

Three others followed her, including a massive man around 230 centimeters tall, with

hair the color of a tabby cat. I recognized Goemon, one of the six great ninjas, who joined Chiyome in our attack on the Etzat Market. This time, he wore the same form-fitting ninja garb as Chiyome. He entered the room in silence, offering only imperceptible glances as greetings.

An even larger man followed Goemon. He must have been at least 270 centimeters tall; his head almost scraped the ceiling. He bowed several times as he entered. The muscles in the man's back bulged, as did his thick, muscular arms. His legs were short for his height, and two cute round ears sat on his head. Deep wrinkles creased his face, giving him a commanding presence.

Behind him followed a small, middle-aged man around 160 centimeters tall. The determination in his eyes made it clear that he was far from average. Faded scars covered his arms below rolled-up sleeves, and one long rabbit ear was torn off halfway down. As I watched, his brutal face developed a playful grin.

The four walked over to Hanzo and sat beside him, bowing to us. Ariane and I bowed back.

Hanzo gestured to the newcomers. "I believe you have both met Goemon, and of course you know Chiyome. This large man is Gowro, one of the bear people, and the chief of our village."

The large man bowed low, forehead touching the floor. He looked back up, speaking with a heavy accent.

"I am Gowro, a member of the bear people and village chief. I am immensely grateful and honored that you will help us." He bowed low again.

"Oh?" I said, a bit confused. "I thought Hanzo was chief."

Hanzo explained. "This village was built by the Jinshin clan, but we don't rule it. There are, in fact, multiple villages like this one across the continent."

Hanzo glanced at the short man with rabbit ears.

A menacing look returned to the man's face. "I am Pittah, one of the rabbit people. I serve as the village's military commander. I will lead the advance party to prepare the new location for everyone's arrival. I look forward to working with you, Arc." His voice was an intimidating growl. Ponta scooted backward slightly at the sound.

So, a walking, talking skeleton like myself was fine, but the Yakuza-esque Pittah was a no-go for Ponta. I wasn't sure how it decided where to draw the line, but clearly, spirit creatures weren't drawn to beast species unconditionally.

Pittah slumped at Ponta's rejection. It seemed he had a soft spot, despite being fierce-looking.

"What advance party, Pittah?" I asked.

Hanzo stroked his beard as he explained. "The Dragon Lord told Chiyome of a place that would be perfect for us: an open plain beside a large lake. However, I want an advance party to check it out personally. Once we examine the land, we would like you to teleport an engineering group to our new home. They can prepare the basic necessities for the rest of the village's arrival."

Traveling to the lake on foot would take quite a long time. While the advance party was busy examining the land, I would need to get a good feeling for the surroundings, so I could teleport the engineering group there. Since this new land didn't have walls to drive off monsters, like the village did, they would need to build temporary defensive structures, along with sleeping quarters.

"How many days do you believe it will take until the engineering group is ready to accept the first settlers?" I asked. "And how many groups do you plan to break the village into?"

I wanted to know the plan so I could prepare accordingly.

Hanzo arched an eyebrow. "It will be at least a month or two until we're ready to move the first settlers. After that, we plan to relocate about half the townspeople."

"Ah, I see," I said. "So, you won't be abandoning this village?"

Hanzo shook his head. "This village belongs to our people. The place we're moving to is safe from outside attack, but also incredibly difficult to reach. The third Hanzo abandoned the shrine because he couldn't assist his comrades while maintaining a base there."

Without the ability to use space-time ninjutsu, or some other teleportation magic, the only way in or out was through the monster-infested forests and cave.

The hulking warriors in front of me could probably make the journey, but there were also plenty of civilians and children in the village, who would undoubtedly suffer many casualties.

"I don't understand," I said. "Why do you wish to return to a place you abandoned?"

Hanzo shook his head. "Back in the days of the founding elder, our people settled in many villages. Whenever humans abducted our comrades, they were rescued and returned to their homes. But as the human population increased, it pushed the villages deeper into the woods and higher into the mountains, until we found ourselves where we are now, living only in places where humans dare not venture. Our numbers have dwindled greatly, as has travel between our villages."

Everyone sat in silence, eyes downcast, the only sounds the bubbling stew and crackling wood.

In such a small village, with no one entering or leaving, it would only be a matter of time until everyone was related.

The new location might be surrounded by mountains, but it also had a vast field. They could even increase the field's size by cutting down the surrounding trees. As they developed the land, they could bring settlers from other villages to diversify their population. At least, I assumed that was their plan.

According to Ariane, the mountain people had a massive country to themselves on the southern continent. Here in the north, however, the humans had crowded them into a corner.

"Should we send the advance party out first thing tomorrow, then?"

Hanzo bowed his head. "Yes, I would appreciate... Huh?!" He jerked backward to look at me, expression grim.

Until then, the conversation had gone smoothly, but the mood in the room had suddenly changed. I looked around, confused.

Hanzo wasn't the only one who looked alarmed. Gowro, Pittah, and even Chiyome stared at me, wearing surprised expressions. Only Goemon seemed unphased.

Ariane looked alarmed. "Arc, y-you're changing back!"

I ran my fingers across my face. The spring water had worn off much faster than I expected. I wondered if storing the water for a longer time weakened its effect.

“An undead?!”

The men on the other side of the hearth began to stand.

With a heavy sigh, I explained my body’s circumstances.

# CHAPTER 4

## BUILDING A VILLAGE ANEW

When we got up the next morning, the sky was still a deep shade of indigo.

At the Calcut Mountains' base, dense white mist swirled over the forest like a sea of clouds, giving the peaks the appearance of islands. The whole scene looked rather mystical.

Several tough-looking men and women, laden with equipment, had already gathered in the village square in front of Hanzo's home. A little farther away, other villagers watched.

I stood in the center of the group, dressed from head to toe in my armor. Atop my helmet, Ponta let out the occasional yawn. Ariane was next to me, in her usual form-fitting leather armor, her long white hair blowing in the chilly morning breeze. Chiyome—along with the village chief, Gowro, and the military commander, Pittah—stood stoically beside us, wearing her ninja garb.

Last night, in the middle of my long-winded attempt to explain my skeleton body to Hanzo and the others, Ponta got fed up from all the waiting and started to howl, so we'd moved on to dinner.

The stew consisted of greens from the Calcut Mountains, meat, and flour dumplings. It had a slightly peculiar taste, but I enjoyed it. The greens, meat juices, and salt provided most of the flavor, leaving me wanting just a little something extra.

Later that evening, Chiyome revealed that flour was incredibly rare in the village. They'd really gone all out for Ariane and me last night.

From the outside looking in, the village seemed to be doing all right, but the food situation told a grimmer story about their difficulties.

I could only hope that the villagers' new home would bring them the stability they were looking for.

I looked out at the people gathering in the village square. A hulking woman wielding an impressive-looking axe was speaking with Gowro. She was slightly shorter than the village chief, standing around 250 centimeters tall. She wore her reddish-brown hair short, and had two round ears on top of her head. Red-dyed leather armor covered her skin, suntanned the color of golden wheat. I guessed that she was also one of the bear people.

Gowro bowed his head in my direction and walked over, gesturing for the woman to come with him.

"Thank you for your assistance today, Arc," Gowro said. "This is my daughter, Rowze. She will be Pittah's second-in-command in the advance party."

She bowed her head and offered her hand. "Name's Rowze, just like Dad said. I'll make sure that old fart Pittah doesn't stab himself with his own weapon. I guess you'll be looking after us for a while, eh, Arc? Thanks."

"Pleased to meet you, Rowze."

She had an impressive grip. After we shook, she flashed me a warm, toothy grin.

I had to tilt my head back to look up at her, since she had a full fifty centimeters on me.

I'd thought I was a pretty impressive sight myself, but quite a few people in this village alone struck far more intimidating figures. The bear people were an extreme example —a species any human would be wise to fear.

Hanzo called to me from behind. "I entrust the safety of my people to you, Arc."

I turned to see the elder wearing a warm, grandfatherly grin. Pittah, the rabbit-eared man I met the previous evening, stood next to him, smiling as well. He wore leather armor with a dark, almost menacing sheen, and two scimitars strapped to his back.

"Kyiiiii..."

I felt Ponta recoil atop my helmet, clearly put off by the sight of Pittah. I reached up and scratched its chin to comfort it. There was just something about Pittah that Ponta really didn't care for.

Pittah again looked crushed.

The advance party consisted of ten people, including Ariane, Chiyome, and myself. Pittah was in charge, with Rowze as his second. The party also included Goemon, one of the Jinshin clan's top fighters. The other four members were village soldiers.

The party might have seemed small for such a journey. However, speed was of the essence. There was also a limit on the number of people I could teleport at once. I decided to think of us as something like a special operations team.

"First, we'll teleport to the base of the mountain, where the shrine is," I said. "Please circle around me, everyone."

The members of the advance party hefted their gear and moved toward me. I was now surrounded by large, muscular fighters who looked at least as strong as—if not stronger than—me. After I made sure that the villagers who came to see us off had stepped away, I looked to Hanzo.

"I will wait here for your fortuitous report," the elder said.

I nodded, then summoned my long-distance teleportation spell.

"Transport Gate!"

Bluish-white light spread underneath our feet, forming a rune on the ground. The world went black, and a moment later, everyone found themselves in completely new surroundings. The mountain people, aside from Chiyome, gasped in surprise as their village disappeared before their very eyes.

I'd teleported us to the torii at the mountain's base. Looking up, I saw the Lord Crown's massive outline poking out near the peak.

"Hmm. Well, it certainly smells different here than in the forests near Calcut." One of Pittah's long ears—the intact one—stood at attention as he listened intently, nose twitching as he sniffed the air.

Rowze hefted her massive battle axe, muttering to herself as she looked around. "It's one thing to hear it described to you, but it's something else to actually teleport like that."

One of the village soldiers—a young man with pointy ears—stood next to her, looking around in alarm. Rowze smacked him lightly on the back of the head.

He cried out in surprise. “Oww! Whaddya doin’, lady?”

“Don’t call me ‘lady,’ Gin. And quit being so jumpy. Act like a real soldier in an advance party. That cottontail fox over there is calmer than you.”

“Kyii?”

Rowze gave a hearty laugh as, atop my helmet, Ponta scratched its ear with one hind leg.

Standing around 190 centimeters tall, the soldier Rowze called Gin was hardly dainty or childish. Still, the taller, bulkier Rowze seemed to enjoy teasing him in a sisterly fashion.

Judging by Gin’s tail and ears, I figured he came from a dog or wolf species. His ears and tail drooped at Rowze’s rebuke, as though he were a scolded pet.

“Don’t let your guard down. This is unexplored territory. Check your gear one last time, everyone.” Pittah glared in Rowze and Gin’s direction as he gave his orders.

Silently, Chiyome came down from a tree she’d climbed when I wasn’t looking. She made her way toward us.

“Ah, Chiyome. Did you get your bearings?” Pittah asked.

Chiyome pointed into the forest. “It’s directly east of our location. Maybe a three-day trip.”

Pittah nodded. “From here on out, everything we do is for the fate of the village. I want you to give it your all!”

“Hoorah!” Rowze, Gin, and the other party members raised their weapons and gave a hearty cheer.

Pittah took a spot at the head of the party and headed in the direction Chiyome indicated, leading the way into the dense forest.

Ariane and I followed, with Chiyome and Goemon bringing up the rear. I felt as though we were survivalists testing our mettle against the land. Unlike human survivalists, however, this group consisted of species who lived in forests and mountains, and could maintain a nearly unthinkable pace.

In fact, I was probably the party's slowest member.

We moved at about the same speed I could manage when teleporting along a road. Even more impressively, the mountain people could smell monsters' presence. Therefore, they could adjust the route and avoid the creatures entirely, leading to a relatively conflict-free first day.

As night fell, we set up camp in the middle of a small clearing surrounded by massive trees. The party members put down their bags and began performing their assigned roles: preparing dinner, standing guard, and setting up tents.

Ariane and I were treated like guests, and weren't given anything to do. Even when I tried to help, Pittah told me it was unnecessary. I drew the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg and started chopping down wild grass to make the camp a little tidier.

A short time later, someone called to me. "Dinner's ready, Arc! Just what are you doing over there?"

I turned to find an exasperated Ariane with her hands on her hips. "I, umm, I wanted to clean up the area. I guess I got lost in thought."

Looking around at the well-manicured clearing, I felt pride well up within me.

"We're only going to be here for the night, you know. We don't need it to be pretty."

Of course I knew that. "Well, I didn't have anything else to do. Besides, what's so bad about sprucing up our camp?"

"I get it, but... really, Arc, the way you use your sword is all wrong."

Ariane's complaints continued as we returned to the group and sat for dinner, which was a stew of simple preserved food. Everyone, except those standing watch, slurped it down eagerly.

No sooner had I pulled off my helmet than I felt the advance party's eyes on me.

Although they had been told about my condition, it was entirely different to see it with their own eyes. They stared intently at the skull looking back at them.

If I'd been able to blush, I would have. But alas, my skull remained expressionless.

"Get back to eating, rubberneckers. We ain't got time for that." Pittah seemed to pick up on my discomfort. The party members went back to eating.

Like the elves, the mountain people had excellent vision, and their other senses were far more acute than humans'. I was touched by the fact that, in spite of all that, they still accepted me, a skeleton, as a member of their party.

I thanked Pittah, and began eating my own stew.

As I chewed the soft meat, I considered what I wanted to do once I helped the mountain people migrate. I could now lift my skeleton curse temporarily, but I had a dark elf's body. Perhaps it would be better to try to live among elves than humans.

*A human soul in the body of an elf...* I wondered if this was how bats felt, stuck somewhere between birds and mammals. Except, in my case, the whole notion of a soul also complicated things. Was my soul human? Or, now that my physical body had changed so completely, was my human identity nothing more than a collection of memories from my past life?

This was all getting rather philosophical.

Ariane nudged me with her elbow, a perplexed look on her face. "Hey, what're you thinking about?"

"Huh?" I realized I'd stopped eating. "Ah... Umm... Nothing important, really. I was just wondering what I want to do with my life after this."

Under Ariane's scrutinizing gaze, I lifted my bowl to my mouth.

Ignoring the problem of confirming my species, I decided that finding—and defining—a clear place of my own was a good idea.

I thought of Ariane's parents, Dillan and Glenys, and figured it would probably be a good idea to get their thoughts too. I took a sip of broth.

"At the very least," I said, "I'd like to avoid living like a bat. It's no fun spending your time in a cave and only moving under the cover of darkness."

I'd meant the comment for myself, but Ariane's ears perked up as she combed Ponta's fur. She turned a quizzical gaze in my direction.

I replied with a simple shake of my head, and turned my attention to the star-strewn sky. It looked like a glimmering ocean that could swallow me at any moment. I didn't know much about constellations, but the fact that I couldn't spot any of the ones I was familiar with left me with an odd, cold sensation.

Even so, I was happy in that moment. Happy to be living in this strange world, eating a warm meal, bantering with friends. I wasn't sure whether that positive outlook came from the fact that I was a skeleton incapable of feeling negative emotions to any strong degree, or if it was because I wasn't facing any real issues, like the ones I had back in my own world.

I watched a light streak across the sky, blinking out an instant later.

I wished that tomorrow would be just as good as today.

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On the third morning, low, cold mist still clung to the underbrush.

Our party moved at an easy pace through the dimly lit forest, winding between gaps in the trees.

"Kyiiiii..."

Ponta let out a mew mixed with a long, lazy yawn as it scratched the back of its neck with its hind leg.

The trees thinned, and we found ourselves standing on a hill overlooking a vast, grassy plain. I saw a large lake a little farther off.

Actually, if I hadn't known it was a lake, I might have called it an ocean due to its sheer size. Behind the lake, mist obscured the Furyu Mountains, giving the impression that the water stretched on forever.

The whole party stared in awed silence, the mountain people taking in the wonder of their new home.

Chiyome stepped up beside me, cat ears twitching slightly. "It's beautiful..."

Goemon nodded, striking an imposing figure.

"We should set our first village over there, where the land juts into the lake." Pittah pointed to a small, round peninsula connected to the shore by a narrow strip of land. It almost looked like an island. A small wall would be more than enough to ward off intruders.

"That area's shape will make it easy to defend, and difficult to attack," I said.

Pittah's menacing face twisted into a smile. "Indeed. It might not support many people, but it's a good place to start."

As we made our way through the vast field, I spotted a row of large boulders. No one else in the party, including Pittah, seemed to pay the boulders any mind, so I thought nothing of them. Just as we passed them, however, the earth shook and the boulders moved, a loud scraping filling the air.

We froze as a long, red tendril broke from the earth. It moved as if it had a mind of its own, lunging toward Rowze at the front of the group. Moving at a speed I would have thought impossible for someone so tall and massive, Rowze drew her battle axe and used it as a shield, deflecting the tendril.

"Nng!"

There was an awful crash at the moment of impact, like the sound of two semis colliding head-on. I felt the shockwave deep in my bones.

Rowze's anguished cry showed just how powerful the blow was. That, and the fact that its force drove her feet into the ground.

The tendril twisted back into the earth, pulling the battle axe—and Rowze—with it.

Looking closer, I noticed a stringy substance, almost like glue, connecting the tendril tip to Rowze's blade. It pulled her along, as though playing tug-of-war. She glared daggers at the bizarre, fungus-like tendril.

“Rowze!” I called.

Rowze cast a sidelong glance in my direction as she was slowly but surely dragged along the ground, her grip on her battle axe unyielding.

I teleported to her, drew my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, and slashed through the sticky, glossy tendril.

It was no match for my mystical blade. Blood sprayed from the gaping wound. The remainder of the tendril quickly vanished into the earth.

“Grwaaaawooooooooooooon!”

A hollow, bone-chilling cry filled the air. It was followed by a loud explosion that threw the boulders upwards. The ground beneath us trembled, sending up great plumes of dirt. The boulders slammed into the ground, the shockwaves knocking us backward.

Ariane came running over. “It’s a grand dragon!”

I readied my blade and looked up at the massive creature that now blocked our path.

It was at least fifteen meters long and around five meters tall, counting the boulders growing from its shell-covered back. Spines covered its tail completely, like a porcupine. The dragon’s thick, tree-trunk hind legs, capable of propelling it through the air, were neatly folded beneath it. Its front legs looked puny in comparison. I suddenly remembered Ariane saying that her leather armor was made from a grand dragon’s hide.

“So, this is a grand dragon,” one soldier said.

The creature sitting in front of me, its huge eyes darting as it took in the scene, looked quite different from the ones I’d faced in the game. The grand dragon let loose another eerie growl.

“Grwaaaawooooooooooooon!”

Ponta skittered backward and tumbled to my shoulders, wrapping itself around my neck. Its fur stood on end.

“It’s like a living, breathing Frog Rock from Hyogo!” I blurted out my first impression.

The rows of sharp fangs lining the dragon's mouth made it clear just how wrong my assessment was. However, despite its intimidating teeth, its oversized eyes gave it an adorable appearance.

The dragon's pupils narrowed slightly. A moment later, the ground beneath us trembled, and it was gone.

Well, not gone, exactly. Rather, the dragon had used its massive hind legs to throw itself high into the air, and was hurtling back down straight toward me.

Despite the attack's relative simplicity—and no matter how strong I was, or what armor I wore—I wasn't in any hurry to take this creature head-on.

"Ariane, over here! Dimensional Step!"

I grabbed Ariane's arm and teleported us away.

The grand dragon smashed the place where we'd just stood to pieces. Even this far away, I felt the ground tremble. Rocks and dirt filled the air as the monster continued to pummel the earth, obscuring my vision. Without a clear sightline, I couldn't use Dimensional Step.

I'd teleported us behind the grand dragon. It was, fortunately, preoccupied with the ground at its feet, clearly annoyed at missing its target. It hadn't spotted us yet. I looked around for the others as I weighed my options. Either I needed to use magic to clear the dust clouds, or close the distance and strike while I still had the element of surprise.

The outlines of three figures appeared in the haze: Rowze, Gin, and a soldier whose name I kept forgetting. The soldier struck the grand dragon's shell with some sort of blunt, mace-like object. However, the shell was far too strong. Despite the soldier's best efforts, he only scratched the surface.

The dragon let out an angry growl, swinging its body around to stomp out this new threat. It leaned over, tensing its powerful legs.

Rowze dove in from the dragon's blind spot, striking one of its hind legs with her massive battle axe. "Take this!"

The blade sank deep into the grand dragon's flesh, drenching Rowze with blood. She'd

avoided the main shell and struck at one of the joints, where its armor was weaker.

"Grwaaaaaaaaawooon!" The dragon roared in anguish, slumping to one side. Rowze ducked out of the way as its massive body hit the earth with a ground-shaking thud, sending more plumes of dirt into the air.

I spotted Pittah charging toward the dragon, scimitars at the ready. He jumped on top of the creature, hopping effortlessly between the boulders that lined its back. His twin swords glinted in the sunlight.

A devilish grin spread across Pittah's rabbit-like face as he reached his target and drove his blades straight into the grand dragon's eye.

"Grwaaaawooooooooooooon!"

The bloodcurdling scream made my ears ring. Pittah pulled his scimitars free and retreated.

The grand dragon lay on its side, kicking its legs and spinning in slow circles on the ground.

The destruction the mountain people had wrought on this massive fifteen-meter beast was impressive. It was like watching a tornado of death.

Two more figures approached. The first was Goemon, rushing toward the grand dragon at incredible speed. The second was Chiyome, running at a slight distance from Goemon to come in on the dragon's flank.

Goemon was unarmed, aside from the metal gauntlets on his fists. He struck them together with a loud clang, and his body began to glow, his deep voice echoing across the plain.

"Muscle to stone, exploding iron fist!"

Goemon's arms turned to metal from fist to shoulder, giving off a dull gleam. He launched an onslaught of punches into the grand dragon's stomach, timing each blow with the creature's movements as it thrashed on the ground. I could practically feel the punches in my own gut as the dull thud of each blow resonated in the air. When the dragon curled up and stopped moving, Chiyome took that as her opportunity to strike. She leaped into the air, straight toward the dragon's head.

“Body to water, aqua spear!”

Chiyome’s right hand glowed as water snaked around it, forming a spear. She twisted in midair and threw the spear with all her might at the beast’s remaining eye. It buried itself with a wet thud, spraying blood everywhere.



The dragon's limbs twitched. Then it stopped moving altogether, slumping to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut. It looked like a pile of rocks.

Chiyome yanked her spear free. Blood streamed from the grand dragon's eyes, staining the earth below a deep red.

Ariane and I returned our swords to our sheaths.

"They really did pick the best of the best for this party," I said. "We didn't even get a chance to fight."

Ariane nodded. "I'm still impressed that Rowze held her own against that thing's tongue. She definitely proved her strength."

Rowze caught us watching her and flexed her massive biceps, a big grin on her face.

Ariane was no weakling, but the sheer brute strength Rowze and the other bear people displayed was in a different category entirely. If it came down to arm wrestling with Rowze, I doubted I'd stand a chance.

"Clever, how it disguised itself to lure unsuspecting prey. I never would have figured those boulders were a dragon. Do you think there are more monsters in the area?" I looked across the rocky terrain, trying to imagine what other threats might lurk.

Ariane seemed to be doing the same thing. "Grand dragons mark off pretty wide territories, so it's not likely anything else is hiding in the rocks. They hunt in pairs occasionally, but since a second dragon never showed up, that also seems unlikely."

Pittah approached, adding, "I figure we'll be safe for a while, at least. Seems like a shame to leave the carcass behind, but for now, we should prioritize reaching our objective. Could you use anything from the grand dragon, Arc? You get first pick."

I looked at the grand dragon's body, then at the hide armor that protected Ariane.

Since I was outfitted with mythical-class Belenus Holy Armor, I didn't really *need* grand dragon armor. If I took its hide, I would probably just sell it for gold.

Suddenly aware of my gaze, Ariane shot me a glare and crossed her arms over her chest. Apparently, she misunderstood what I was staring at. *Well, she wasn't entirely wrong. But still...*

I turned my attention back to Pittah. “There’s nothing I really need from the grand dragon. Is its meat edible?”

Pittah’s eyes widened. He broke into a broad smile, although it didn’t wipe away the fiendish look that always graced his face.

“With a suit like that, I guess you don’t really need any other weapons or armor. The meat, well, it’s not all that good, but I suppose it’s edible. Are you sure you don’t need its rock humps?”

I cocked my head at the question. The rocky growths on the grand dragon’s back looked like boulders to me. The only use for them I could think of would be decorative rocks. *Perhaps I should make a Japanese-style garden next to the outdoor bath.*

“What are they for, Ariane?”

She shrugged. “We only use them as construction materials.”

I’d hoped for a more fantastical answer, but it was starting to look like they were basically just rocks.

When I decided it wouldn’t be worth the trouble of lugging them to the Lord Crown, especially since repairing the shrine took priority over building a garden, Chiyome appeared.

“They’re incredibly valuable to humans, you know. Nobles use them in their homes to show off their wealth. You’d probably make quite a bit of money if you sold them.”

Ariane looked surprised. “Oh? I had no idea.”

It sounded as though the boulders on the grand dragon’s back were similar to elephant tusks in my world.

“Hmm. In that case, I suppose I could sell them in town to offset the cost of repairing the shrine. I humbly accept your offer.”

Pittah smiled, offering his hand. “We’ll leave the dragon here for now. Nothing we can do until more of my soldiers arrive to help carry it, anyway.”

I shook Pittah’s hand. “Shall we collect our bags and get moving?”

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A short time later, a numerous mountain people milled about the narrow stretch of land leading to the peninsula, taking in the splendor of the scene.

There were about fifty or so villagers—the first group of settlers.

After the advance party reached the peninsula, I'd left them there, and used Transport Gate to return to the village. There, I gathered a small group of settlers and supplies, and teleported back. I repeated that process several times.

This first village would serve as a beachhead of sorts, so the group was comprised of the village's biggest, strongest warriors. What might otherwise have been a furry's paradise was filled with the overwhelming scent of animals and sweat.

I watched as men and women swung massive axes, felling trees to clear the land. Others busied themselves removing stumps, or preparing the simple accommodations where everyone would sleep that night. I felt like I was standing in the middle of a military camp.

"Is there anything I can do? I could at least help cut down trees."

I drew the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, walked past the workers, and started slashing at trees.

The mythical-class weapon was so sharp that cutting through even the thickest tree trunks felt like snapping twigs. I got into the swing of things, chopping down tree after tree.

"Whoa, look at that! He's cutting 'em like butter!"

I made my way through the dense forest as if I were mowing a lawn. Knowing that this would provide the mountain people with more land to live on made me feel better. I completely lost myself in what I was doing until a fist-sized rock smacked the back of my helmet.

I turned to see Ariane clutching Ponta tightly to her chest with one arm, her free hand pointing straight toward me. Shattered rock fragments littered the ground at my feet. I guessed that she'd used spirit magic to throw the rock at me.

I looked around and saw what I could only describe as the horrors of deforestation: felled trees covered an area the size of a soccer field.

"Just how much of the forest do you plan on chopping down, Arc?! They've got more than enough wood now! Besides, Chiyome's looking for you."

I slid my sword back into its sheath, stepping over the fallen trees carefully as I made my way to where Chiyome and Pittah stood talking.

Pittah offered me a warm smile. "Well, I didn't figure we'd be done clearing the land that quickly."

I mumbled something in response before addressing Chiyome. "You wanted to speak with me?"

Chiyome glanced at Pittah before turning to me. "Thanks to you, we cleared the area much faster than we expected. But it will still take us about a month to build the village."

She paused for a moment and looked up at me, trying to gauge my reaction. They would probably only construct the absolute minimum number of buildings necessary to get the village running. Even so, a month would be an incredibly fast turnaround, considering that all the work was manual labor.

"We've brought food over from the village, but they don't exactly have a lot of surplus, so we'll need to gather food here as well. If we assign people to the task, it will only delay construction on the village."

What Chiyome said made sense. The anxiety of living on unprotected land without any barriers to keep monsters at bay—all while building a town by hand—would certainly take its toll on the body. The settlers would need a lot of food to get their energy levels back up, but securing provisions for this many people would be an undertaking in its own right. If they split their labor force, it would take even longer to build the village.

I'd agreed to use Transport Gate to bring over the remaining settlers as soon as the village was finished. I had nothing to do in the meantime, however, and I certainly didn't want the construction schedule to get pushed back.

"Should I go look for food?"

Chiyome shook her head.

Pittah chimed in. "I think this would be a good time to collect the grand dragon we killed. I hoped you and Chiyome might take it to a human town and sell it for me."

"Aaah," I said. "You'd like me to buy food in town with the money?"

Pittah smiled broadly and gave a firm nod, happy that his unspoken request made it through to me. "I've already had some of the young folks prepare the dragon for transport."

"Understood," I said. "Happy to help."

Heading to a large town with a wide variety of shops would probably be best. The biggest town I could think of was the Rhoden Kingdom's capital, but considering the mass havoc Chiyome, Goemon, and I caused there during our rescue attempt, it seemed best to stay away for now.

We also probably needed to avoid the empire's Karyu area, where we'd laid waste to numerous churches and nobles.

That left the port town of Lamburt.

We *had* gotten involved in trouble surrounding a slave-trading ring with the neighboring kingdom, Nohzan. However, I'd built a relationship with Petros, the lord of Lamburt, so I wasn't worried. Worst-case scenario, I figured Petros could step in and convince someone to buy the dragon parts from us.

"How about we head to Lamburt, in the Rhoden Kingdom? It's probably our best bet."

Chiyome's long tail swished back and forth. "I agree."

It'd be good to have her along, since she'd know exactly what the mountain people needed.

Ariane, who was listening in silence, spoke up. "I'll be going, too. You need someone to watch Arc like a hawk. You never know what will happen if you leave him to his own devices." She arched an eyebrow at me.

Ariane and I had traveled everywhere together. I always figured I was the person she

trusted the most. Apparently, that was wishful thinking.

“Also, I want to talk to you about something once we go back to Lalatoya.”

Her gaze had some unspoken meaning, but I couldn’t catch what it was.

“Well,” I said. “We can stop there afterward. We need to tell Glenys about the spring.”

Several mountain people lumbered up to us, pulling a simple sled laden with grand dragon parts—rocks and stones, talons and fangs, and other assorted items.

Pittah slowly circled the sled, inspecting its contents and berating the workers.

“Tsk! Think ya packed enough on here? We’ll need more discerning workers to pick through this. There’s no way they could take all this into town. They’d break their backs!”

“Can I give it a try?”

I took the ropes from the men, wrapped them over my shoulders, and stepped forward to get a sense of the sled’s weight. I felt the ropes pull taut, but I already knew it would be no problem. The sled creaked a bit under the heavy load as I pulled it forward a few paces.

The men and women who’d dragged the sled over murmured excitedly.

I turned back to Pittah. “This should be fine. Will anyone else be accompanying Chiyome, Ariane, and I into town?”

Since the humans thought of mountain people as beasts, and frequently enslaved them, I preferred to avoid bringing any villagers with us.

“If you’re okay going alone, that’s probably best,” Pittah said.

“I don’t mind at all. A larger group would draw too much attention anyway.”

Pittah nodded and took a step back.

“Well then, we’ll be off,” I said.

With that, I summoned Transport Gate. A magical rune appeared at my feet, spreading to include Ariane and Chiyome.

Pittah and the other mountain people, having teleported back and forth several times at this point, were now familiar with the process. They stepped back from the circle of light.

The world around us went dark, and a moment later, our surroundings changed entirely.

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Directly beneath us, red-roofed buildings sprawled from the base of the gently sloping hill we stood on. The vast, blue ocean sparkled behind the hill. Unlike the peninsula we'd been located on mere moments before, the wind here carried a salty tang as it swept across the sea. Boats of all sizes dotted the water in the port below.

It was the same sight that greeted me the first time I arrived in Lamburt.

"You know, I kinda missed this place."

No sooner had I said those words than the sled I was pulling succumbed to gravity and started sliding down the hill. I quickly yanked the rope and planted my feet to keep it from coasting all the way to Lamburt.

We made our way toward the north gate, as we had done last time. The closer we got to town, the more stares we drew. Ariane pulled her charcoal-gray cloak's hood low over her face.

"Huh. It seems like we're attracting even more attention than usual."

"Kyiii..."

Despite Ariane's efforts to hide Ponta from view, its face peeked through a small gap in her cloak.

Chiyome pulled down her oversized hat to conceal her ears. "Everyone's interested in the fact that Arc is pulling that sled all on his own."

Too late, I realized that a man in full armor dragging a heavily laden sled like a mule

would naturally raise eyebrows. I was even more grateful that no mountain people had accompanied us.

We made our way past the line of people waiting to enter the town. Once we reached the inspection point, I handed the guards the copper travel pass with the Lambert seal that I'd received the last time I was there. Surprise washed across the guards' faces for a moment, but they quickly opened the massive gate to let us through.

At that point, I'd received travel passes embossed with the marks of two different noble families. As I looked at the long, snaking lines of people waiting to enter, I was glad I had them.

The atmosphere in town was much livelier than last time. The crowds in front of me parted as I dragged the sled along, which I'd now grown accustomed to.

Our best bet was probably to find the local merchants' guild office, someplace similar to where I'd sold the orc and fang boar meat in Luvierte. Lambert was a huge town to travel through, with both new and old districts. I didn't want to be dragging the sled through the streets forever, hoping to find a buyer.

I figured it would be best just to ask someone where the merchants' guild was, but any time I tried making eye contact, people immediately moved out of the way to avoid me.

I looked back to see Chiyome keeping a close eye on the sled. Ariane walked alongside it, her hand on her sword hilt.

It would have been difficult to draw more attention to our group than we already were.

And, of course, my appearance meant that merchants weren't exactly tripping over themselves to buy our wares.

As we looked for an individual brave enough to talk with our terrifying gang, I spotted a young man walking straight toward us with a shocked face.

"Sir Knight? I would never have imagined meeting you here, in a place like this!"

The young man was well-dressed and had messy brown hair. He looked to be somewhere in his twenties.

He spoke in a friendly tone, as if we'd met someplace before. I searched my memories, eliciting a rueful laugh from the young man.

"Apologies for the late introduction. My name is Lahki, and I work as a merchant. You sold me some weapons back in Diento, and I would like to thank you for your generosity."

I looked closely at the young man's face, and it all came back. "Oh, you're *that* merchant!"

Here, right in front of me, was the man I'd run into on the streets of Diento. I'd sold him the weapons I pilfered when we rescued the kidnapped elves. Just as before, he gave off the air of a warm, affable young man, wholly unlike the average merchant.

"Don't mention it. You were a great help to me as well! Anyway, as I said last time, I am but a humble wandering mercenary. No need to thank me so politely."

Despite what I'd said, Lahki once again bowed low. I supposed it was important for him, as a merchant, to be polite at all times.

I smacked a hand to my helmet. "I still haven't introduced myself! My name is Arc. These are my friends Chiyome and Ariane."

Lahki bowed in greeting before turning his gaze to the sled.

"Do you run a shop here, Lahki?"

Lahki scratched the back of his head and offered a weak smile. "Oh, no. I'm still... trying to see if any of my connections can help me open one here in town."

"Wow! It's pretty impressive to have your own shop at such a young age, no?"

Lahki shook his head. "Not exactly. I can't open a shop without a permit, and I haven't found a way to get one. I'm probably still years away from that dream, unfortunately."

I asked Lahki about the shop permits, and he explained in detail. To open a shop, you needed a permit from the lord. Permits were tied to specific plots of land, like a business registration and deed rolled into one.

With all the monsters running wild in this world, it was normal to erect walls around

towns. That made the land within the walls extremely limited, which also limited the number of shops.

Recently, several illegal slave traffickers had been shut down, and the permits for their shops would soon go on the market. Lahki hoped that his connections might help him get his hands on one.

The wheels in my head turned as I listened to his story. I had an idea.

I doubted I could walk into a guild office and sell our dragon parts with the same ease as bull boar meat. Not only would the guild office undoubtedly ask me where the items came from, but since there was a limited market for such goods, they would *need* to know to secure a buyer. That was far from ideal. However, if we could find someone willing to sell everything on our behalf...

Of course, that person would have to be trustworthy. Fortunately for me, the friendly young man standing in front of us certainly fit the bill. Besides, it would come in handy to have a human-fronted location where I could sell things in future.

"This is actually great timing. There's something I'd like to talk with you about, Lahki."

Lahki looked confused.

I laughed and pulled the sled up to give him a closer look.

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Two days later, after quickly returning to the construction site on the lake, we were back in Lamburt. This time, however, we skipped the town entirely, and headed down the road to the south gate.

I waited by the roadside on the town outskirts, watching the flow of people coming and going through Lamburt's gates. I kept my gaze on the road.

A familiar figure appeared, driving a cart drawn by four horses. He waved his hand. Next to him was a woman with fairly long chestnut hair, wearing leather armor. A mercenary, I assumed. In the back of the cart sat a man with blond hair cut close to his scalp. He had his hand on his sword hilt, and kept a watchful eye on their surroundings. Another mercenary. I figured they were both there to protect the cargo, but that seemed frivolous, considering how close we were to town.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Arc!"

Lahki steered his cart to the side of the road and offered a warm greeting. "As requested, I used the money from the grand dragon parts to buy a cart, and filled it with as much food as I could. Feel free to check it yourself."

I made my way to the back to do so. Thick, glossy fabric stretched over the top of the cart to protect its cargo from the rain. I lifted the fabric and peeked inside. Countless hemp bags stuffed with flour, dried beans, smoked meat, and more sent forth a delicious aroma. Ponta wagged its tail excitedly.

Ariane and Chiyome also glanced inside.

"It looks as though you got everything we asked for. Now, about your payment..."

I turned back to Lahki, but he quickly shook his head.

"No, no, I can't. Your initial help was more than enough. Since you let me sell those grand dragon parts, I was able to meet with the owners of some important shops. You've done more than enough to pay me back. Thank you!" Lahki smiled from ear to ear.

"Then, going forward, I would also like you to serve as my intermediary. It would only be proper to offer a retainer for your services."

I reached into my bag, pulling out a piece of parchment wrapped with beautiful, decorative ribbon, and handed it to Lahki.

Surprised at the sudden offer, Lahki fumbled as he reached out to take it. I gestured for him to read. He unrolled the parchment and looked it over, then immediately let out a hysterical scream, eliciting concerned glances from the mercenaries.

"This... Is this a Lambert shop permit?! B-but how?! Why? These aren't even on the market yet!"

Lahki's eyes, wide with surprise, hurriedly reread the parchment.



"I figured it would be convenient if you had a shop that I could visit now and then. Besides, I'll need lots of materials for a personal matter. I went to the lord of Lamburt, and, although he put up a bit of a fight, he eventually gave me this."

That elicited more surprise. "You're buddies—I mean, associates—with Marquis du Lamburt?" In Lahki's shocked state, he slipped up momentarily and lost his usual polite demeanor.

I laughed and turned to Ariane. She slowly pulled down her hood, letting her long, white hair blow freely in the breeze, and revealing her amethyst skin and pointed ears.

"I'm sure you've heard that the lord's wife is an elf. That led to our connection with him. Anyway, I look forward to working with you in the future." I pulled Ponta down from my head and took off my helmet.

Lahki's mouth hung wide open as he looked back and forth between Ariane—a typical dark elf—and me, a dark elf with brown skin and red eyes. His two mercenaries also gaped at us.

The young merchant finally choked out a question. "You're... you're *both* elves?"

I put my helmet back on. "We try to keep out of sight among humans, so we'd appreciate it if you kept this to yourself. It'll make working together a lot smoother, going forward."

Lahki nodded, promising not to discuss our secret with anyone else. His companions agreed.

As far as I could gather, those two were Lahki's close friends. I felt a little better knowing they weren't just run-of-the-mill mercenaries.

Besides, even if the truth slipped out, the three of us were almost certainly strong enough to deal with any ensuing problems.

After offering goodbyes to Lahki, who still looked shocked, we piled into the cart. Chiyome took the driver's seat, as though she'd been born for it.

When I first approached Lahki to buy a cart full of food, which I could also use to transport supplies when it came time to construct my home, I thought it was a pretty good idea. Still, I hadn't imagined it would go this well.

I felt Ariane glaring daggers at me from behind. She hated it when I was too pleased with myself. Even with my body completely covered, and despite my best efforts to keep the swagger out of my step, she'd picked up on it somehow.

As I suffered under the invisible power of Ariane's gaze, Chiyome snapped the reins and urged the four horses forward, taking us down the road until we were far enough from town. We turned into a field, so no one would see us teleport.

Although the cart was rather large, the driver's seat wasn't, so Ariane, Chiyome, and I had to cram in to fit. Ponta was probably the only one not feeling the crush.

Ariane sighed, annoyed. "I never imagined I'd have to meet with a human noble just to get another human's shop permit."

I'd asked Ariane to go through Toreasa, a fellow elf and the wife to Marquis du Lamburt, to get the permit. Since I previously pretended to be her bodyguard, it made more sense for her to do it.

She definitely wasn't pleased at having to ask a human for a favor, though.

Petros, for his part, felt that he still hadn't thanked us properly for our previous help. Despite what I said to Lahki, Petros had granted us the permit with an easy smile, so I figured it wasn't a big deal.

"I'm sorry, Ariane. But now that Lahki knows Chiyome, she can come here on her own without issues."

"I know," Ariane said. "By the way, Arc, you keep moving your head around. Are you okay?"

"Well, when I took my helmet off earlier to show my face, I couldn't get it back on right. My ears keep getting caught. I'm trying to find a comfortable position, but it's just not working."

Ariane sighed dramatically and shot me an exasperated look.

The helmet fit perfectly over my skeleton's skull, but felt a lot snugger over my dark elf head.

Chiyome tugged on the reins to slow the horses. "How about here?"

I stopped shaking my head long enough to look at our surroundings. We were far from the road, and no one was in sight.

"This should work. We'll deliver the cart and report to Hanzo. Then we'll take Ariane back to Lalatoya."

I summoned the Transport Gate. This time, I put a little more power into it, making sure the rune spread wide enough to include the whole cart.

A moment later, we found ourselves at the encampment next to the lake.

As soon as the workers recognized us, and spotted the food in the back of the cart, they cheered loudly and stopped what they were doing to come over.

An instant later, Pittah was on top of them, scolding and pushing them back.

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Chiyome and I returned to the hidden village to report to Hanzo and Gowro. We reached an agreement on rebuilding the shrine as payment for my assistance.

Once we finished that, I left Chiyome, and took Ariane and Ponta back to Lalatoya Village.

Glenys sat across from me at her dining room table, taking great interest in what I reported.

"Hmm, I see. So, you found the spring Dillan told you about, and it let you reclaim your physical body, but its effects are limited. I never doubted that you were human, but now that I see your true form, you do appear to be an elf."

Glenys looked at me with fascination, her angular ears twitching as she examined my own elven ears. Her golden eyes twinkled as a gentle smile graced her face.

"Since you're an elf, what do you think about taking our village name? Assuming you want to, of course." Glenys' head tilted cutely to the side. She looked no older than thirty, and yet was still Ariane's mother.

I looked back, puzzled, not exactly sure what she was suggesting.

Ariane jumped in. “Are you asking if Arc wants to join our village?!”

Only then did I understand what Glenys meant. At the end of each elf’s name was the village they belonged to. Taking a village’s name meant that you’d been accepted into it.

“Do you have a problem with Arc becoming one of us? I mean, the Dragon Lord himself said that Arc is a Wanderer, just like our founder.”

Ariane seemed lost for words. She turned her gaze back toward me, clearly conflicted. “If he were truly an elf, I’d have no objections. But wouldn’t it be better for this walking war machine to fight as a soldier for Maple than to live as a member of our village?” She spoke as if I wasn’t even there.

Her words stung, but thinking back on the mistakes I’d made across our misadventures, I couldn’t really deny her statement.

I buried my face in Ponta’s belly to make myself feel better, interrupting it mid-yawn as it lazed at the table. It started mewing and rolling around, apparently ticklish.

Now that I thought about it, my physical body resembled an elf, and I was able to see spirits. There wasn’t necessarily anything wrong with me belonging to an elven village. Honestly, it’d be nice to call someplace home, rather than constantly roaming the world as a skeleton.

“Oh? So, you’d prefer to keep him close to you in Maple, Ariane? And here I thought that your complaint was his species.”

“You’ve got it all wrong!” Ariane shot back. “I’m just saying that we should get the central council’s permission first. Besides, aren’t you serving in father’s place right now? You can’t make Arc a member of Lalatoya on your own, can you?”

“Two beautiful women, fighting over little old me.”

Since we were discussing what village I’d ultimately belong to, I figured I should join the conversation. However, as soon as I opened my mouth, Ariane simply reached out and shoved my head back into Ponta’s belly, putting a quick end to my involvement.

“You’re right,” Glenys said. “But I *can* welcome Arc as a provisional member of the village. Anyhow, you can’t take him to Maple like this, while he’s neither fully skeleton

nor fully elf, can you?"

"Arc Lalatoya, Pending Approval" didn't sound too bad to me.

Inviting an outsider into Maple, the Great Canada Forest's capital, was evidently no easy feat. Even if I were invited in, would I want to live so far from the shrine and hot spring? Distance wasn't really a factor, since I could just use teleportation magic, but I was still hesitant.

It would be kind of like the way some people in Japan chose to live in Kanagawa, Chiba, or Saitama, where it was easy to commute to Tokyo, but suited their lifestyle better than Tokyo proper. For me, it would be more like living in Suita, Moriguchi, or maybe even Sakai, instead of downtown Osaka. Someplace with a more relaxed, hometown atmosphere.

Lalatoya was also closer to human lands.

I had no way of knowing how far away Maple was, but going back to my example, I figured it had to be something like the distance between Osaka and Nose, or maybe Misaki, two towns on the prefecture's outskirts.

While I considered these things, the conversation drew to a close.

"I'll talk to your grandfather about bringing this before the central council. But for now, we'll stick to the idea of Arc joining our village. The final decision should be left up to him, anyway."

Glenys must have seen my uncertainty. "Well, there's no need to decide right now. Spend as much time in the village as you like while you make up your mind."

I told her I would think about it carefully.

Ariane huffed and shifted in her seat.

"Well, that's that, then!" Glenys said. "It's getting late, so why don't we eat dinner? We received a shipment of tomatoes from Landfrea today, so I made that soup you like so much."

I stood up so fast that I actually knocked my chair over. "Miss Glenys, this 'tomato' you speak of... is it by chance a red fruit?"

Glenys stared in stunned silence at my sudden question. She nodded.

“Do you have a tomato here with you?”

At my urging, Glenys made her way into the kitchen, and returned with a pot brimming with red soup. My eyes went wide.

After asking Glenys’s permission, I dipped a spoon into the pot and took a sip. The flavor’s sheer depth convinced me. Although it was slightly acidic, this was definitely the same tomato I was familiar with.

Ariane sighed, exasperated. “You barely remember anything about yourself, but you sure remember a lot about weird stuff like tomatoes.”

I was too absorbed in the possibilities this ingredient opened for me to even hear Ariane’s complaint. Tomatoes were like a jack-of-all-trades of the culinary world. Seaweed and bonito were cornerstones of Japanese cooking; tomatoes served a similar important role in western cooking, adding a deeper, more refined taste. If I got my hands on some tomatoes, they would really keep my menu exciting.

“You mentioned that these tomatoes came from Landfrea. If I went there, could I buy some?”

“They’re grown in Fobnach, on the southern continent, and imported. Some villages to the south also grow their own, but dried tomatoes are far more common.”

Chiyome had mentioned that the mountain people had their own country on the southern continent. I wasn’t quite sure what my Transport Gate ability’s range was, but if I could teleport between the southern continent and the hot spring, I’d be able to buy tomatoes from the source whenever I wanted.

Since the mountain people needed time to finish building their first village near the lake, I’d been told that they couldn’t yet send anyone to start rebuilding the shrine. I might as well use that time to prepare for when I finally had a place to put my feet up.

“I’d like to visit this southern continent. Is it possible to board a ship departing from Landfrea?”

Of life’s three main necessities—clothing, shelter, and food—I’d already secured two: my Belenus Holy Armor was more than sufficient clothing, and the shrine and nearby

hot spring would make excellent shelter.

The last necessity was food.

Glenys groaned slightly. "Weeeell, it's an elven boat, so it might be a bit of a challenge to get you on board if you don't belong to a village."

My mind was made up. "I hereby swear my loyalty to you, and beg the honor of calling myself Arc Lalatoya!"

Glenys clapped her hands and smiled. "That's great! I'm thrilled to have such a strong ally join our village."

Ariane simply looked annoyed.

For my part, there was absolutely no hesitation.

My beloved tomatoes grew on the southern continent.



# EPILOGUE

In the northern continent's northwest corner sprawled the Great West Revlon Empire. In the empire's southeastern part lay the Beek Sea, a narrow body of water that split the continent and fed into the south-central ocean. The Beek Sea also served as the border between the Great West Revlon Empire and the Holy Hilk Kingdom, from which the holy king ruled his subjects on the northern continent.

Beyond the bay, at the center of the Beek Sea, towered the treacherous Rutios Mountains, which served as the Holy Hilk Kingdom's northern border with the empire.

The Holy Hilk Kingdom was surrounded by three different countries to the west, east, and south. However, due to the church's influence, believers living abroad enabled the kingdom to maintain peace along its borders. It had yet to be invaded.

Mount Alsus, one of the Rutios mountain range's peaks, was an important mythril source. At the base of Mount Alsus was the city of Fehrbio Alsus, the holy capital and center of the Hilk religion. Having faced neither war nor any other threat for many years, the capital was considered something of a holy land.

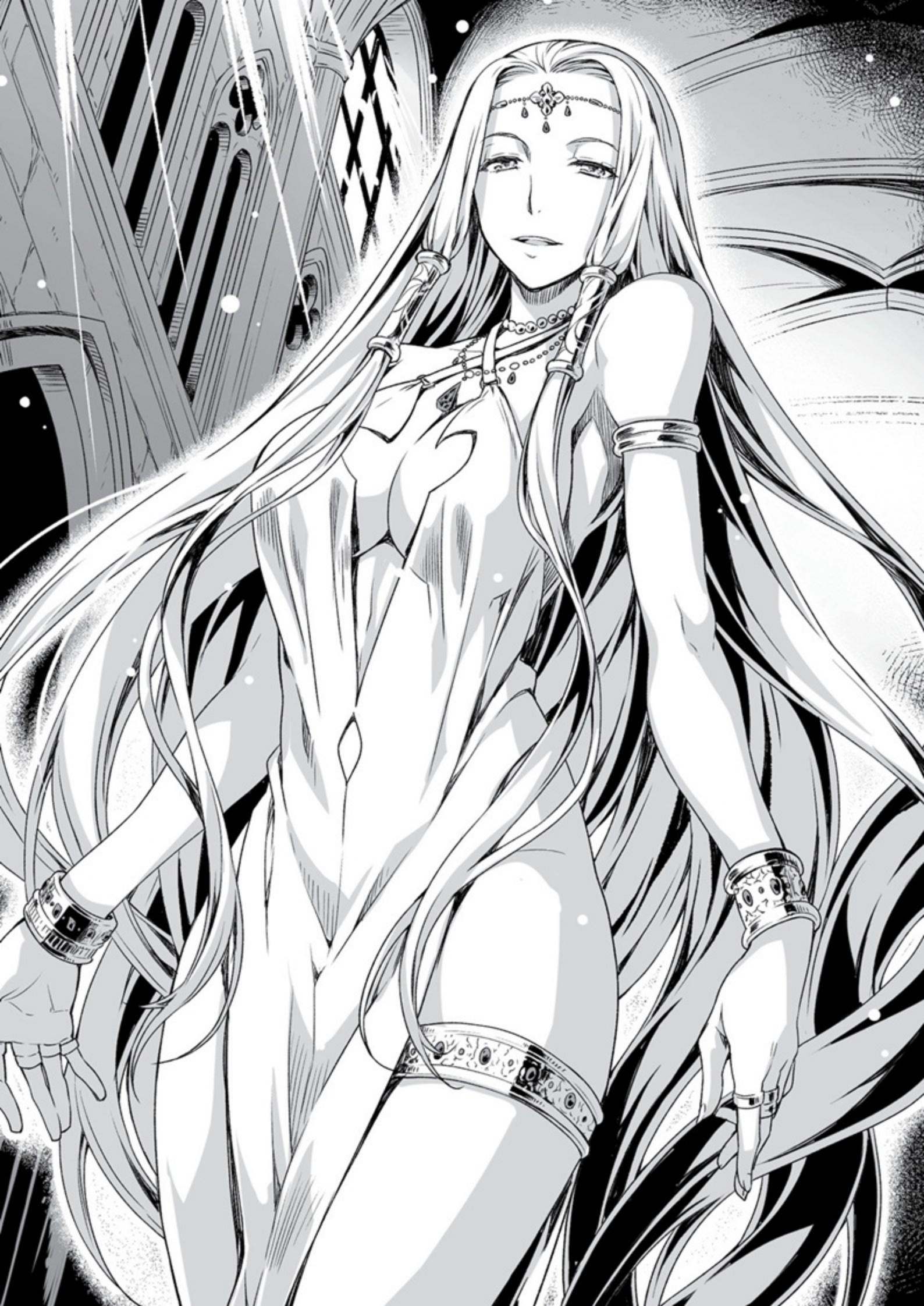
The holy king ostensibly ruled the capital, although that was a custom left over from before the Holy Hilk Kingdom's establishment. The royal family was royal in name only. The true power in the kingdom was the pontiff, who lived in a massive church halfway up Mount Alsus. The only way to reach the church was by climbing massive stone steps known as the Stairway of Faith.

A huge clearing had been hand-carved out of the mountainside. At its center was a grand building surrounded by an open-air corridor. The entrance was a white color so brilliant that the sunlight reflecting off it nearly blinded those who approached. Intricate engravings covered the building, earning it praise as a piece of art in its own right. The church was majestic enough to impress upon all who saw it the true power wielded by the pontiff.

However, only a select few were ever allowed entry.

A tall woman walked along the polished white stone floors, the click of her heels resonating through the halls, asserting her presence. She had long, blond hair and a

graceful face. Her white attire was completely inappropriate for this place of reverence; it exposed her gently swaying chest for all to see. A long slit ran up the side of her white dress, showing off her pale legs, and her jewelry screamed wealth as she moved lightly on her feet. At a glance, she could be mistaken for a dancing girl, or even a lady of the night. However, her rings, jewelry, and clothing were of a quality that such women would never in their lives have an opportunity to wear.



A man with immaculately arranged black hair, dressed in a clergyman's elaborate uniform, approached her. He wore a warm smile, although his face contorted as if he'd swallowed something unpleasant when he caught sight of the approaching woman.

The two stopped in one of the church's spacious corners. For a moment, they simply stared at each other.

The smiling man spoke first. "Aah, Cardinal Castitas, what a surprise to see you. And here I thought you were in the western empire in search of a man."

Despite this unfair remark, Cardinal Castitas shot the clergyman an enchanting smile and crossed her arms. Elin Luxuria, who went by the name Castitas, was one of the seven cardinals—second in power only to the pontiff himself.

Elin slid out her bright red tongue to moisten her plump lips, causing the man facing her—a fellow cardinal—to avert his eyes.

"Oh? And here *I* was on a job the pontiff assigned to me. I used the transportation stones to report on movements in the west." She fixed the clergyman with a derisive grin. "Besides, I could say the same for you, Cardinal Liberalitas. It's rare to see you all the way out here. Your only joy in life seems to be tormenting others. Or did you do something naughty and get called in?"

Palurumo Avaritia, known as Cardinal Liberalitas, stopped smiling. His face darkened, and he made no effort to conceal the disdain in his voice. "Hmph! I won't have you treating me like that imbecile Charros, who got himself sent off to the southern continent! I lost two specter warriors on a mission to collect rune stones, so I've come to beg the pontiff to supply me with more."

A flicker of surprise passed across Elin's face, although her smile quickly returned. She stepped toward Palurumo. "Oh? Just what kind of job did you send them on? Losing two specter warriors is quite the feat. Or are you just *pretending* to have lost them to bolster your forces?"

A vein bulged in Palurumo's forehead. "Why, you little... Are you accusing me of submitting a false report to the pontiff?!"

Before the volatile atmosphere could escalate further, a calm voice called out.

"That will be enough."

Elin and Palurumo jumped at the sound, immediately turning to the speaker. Dropping to their knees, they bowed their heads low in reverence.

The man approaching them was the Holy Hilk Kingdom's ruler, the pontiff himself.

"It is an honor to be in your presence, Pontiff Thanatos."

The pontiff glided silently along the floor. He wore even more elaborate garb than his cardinals, and held in his hand the holy scepter, the symbol of his status.

Atop his head he wore a tall miter, inscribed with the holy symbol of the Hilk. A white veil hung from the miter's brim, obscuring his face.

His full name was Pontiff Thanatos Sylvius Hilk, and he ruled the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

He spoke in a warm, friendly voice through the veil. "I do not doubt Palurumo's claims, and I will send for more warriors. Don't be so hard on him, Elin."

The two cardinals bowed their heads even lower.

"According to Elin's report," the pontiff continued, "the western empire has mobilized a massive number of troops to prepare for a war with the east, so the western border is exposed to attack. You two will need to work together to deal with that."

"Understood."

The pontiff turned his back on the two cardinals.

As he made his way down the hall, his footsteps echoed off the white stone floor, and he hummed cheerfully to himself.

A gust of wind off Mount Alsus blew through an open window and briefly pushed the pontiff's veil aside. Alas, no one was around to catch a glimpse of his face.

# SIDE STORY

## LAHKI'S MERCHANT DIARY, PART 4

Three figures stood on the side of a road to the suburbs surrounding Lambert, watching silently as a horse-drawn cart shrank into the distance.

A friendly looking, well-dressed young man with tousled brown hair—probably in his twenties—smiled warmly as he watched the cart disappear, waving with one hand and clutching a piece of parchment to his chest with the other.

A second young man stood at his side, barely able to contain his excitement. “I can’t believe it, Lahki, you got a shop permit! I’ve heard of luck, but this is a whole new level!”

This second man was a mercenary, dressed in leather armor and armed with a shield and modest sword. He wore his blond hair cropped close to his head. He stared at the parchment the first man—Lahki—held.

The shop permit fluttered as Lahki’s hand trembled. Lahki grinned ruefully. “I can’t believe it, either. It’s kinda funny, though. You seem more excited than I am, Behl.”

“No, no! I mean, shouldn’t you be excited about something like this? No one from our little town has ever owned their own shop before, y’know!”

“That’s right! You’d better hurry and tell your folks back in the village!” the woman next to Behl agreed. She wore her chestnut hair tied back in a ponytail. It was obvious at a glance that this woman, dressed in leather armor, was also a mercenary. Like Behl, she beamed at their friend’s sudden change in fortune.

Lahki thought long and hard about the places his travels had taken him, and about his parents back home, who’d agreed to let him pursue the life of a merchant.

“Thank you, Rea. You’re right, I really should tell them.”

Behl turned his gaze back to the cart and mumbled to himself. “I can’t believe that you’re going into business with elves.”

Lahki looked up from the shop permit and stared at the distant figures who'd made this all possible.

"Those two really were nothing like the elves I've heard about," Rea said.

It was the first time any of them had ever met an elf in real life.

One elf had been clad from head to toe in exquisitely decorated silver armor. When he took his helmet off, they saw that he had elongated ears, red eyes, black hair, and brown skin. The other elf had snow-white hair, golden eyes, and amethyst-colored skin. Her ears were slightly less pointed than the man's.

Apart from their ears, both were quite different from the elves in stories, who had green-tinged blond hair and bright green eyes.

The two mercenaries looked at Lahki, as if seeking some explanation. Lahki smiled nervously under their gaze, then clapped his hands together as if trying to recall something.

"I think... and this is just a theory... but I think that Ariane, the woman, was a dark elf. I've only heard rumors about them, of course. Apparently, though, they're a rare subspecies of elf. I don't know what Arc might be, but it's possible he's an even rarer subspecies."

"A dark elf, huh? Well, she was definitely easy on the eyes." A silly smile crept across Behl's face.

Rea shot him a death glare. "Cut that out! She's a fellow warrior in arms, y'know. I'll lop that filthy-minded head of yours right off if you keep it up."

Behl wrapped his arms around himself and slouched, pretending to shudder at Rea's threat. "Hey, I know! But a guy can't help it if a beautiful woman draws his attention."

Rea narrowed her eyes. "Yes, he can."

Behl cleared his throat nervously.

Lahki could only tilt his head to the side and return Rea's gaze as her eyes drilled into him. Behl, seemingly undisturbed by Rea glaring daggers at Lahki, continued to speak aloud to himself. "Speaking of which, the girl there was a real looker. Black hair, azure

eyes... Chiyome, was it? I wonder what her relationship with the elves is."

Lahki shrugged. "They mentioned that we'd meet with Chiyome much more often from here on out, since she'll come by to sell monster parts and purchase materials. But she definitely didn't seem like an elf."

Rea jammed her elbow lightly into Lahki's ribs in warning. "Listen, they've got some sort of relationship with the Lord of Lambert, y'know. So, don't go sticking your nose in places it doesn't belong, or your business'll be done for. A merchant should think about how to make the best of their connections."

Lahki laughed and scratched the back of his head. "Hahaha! You're right, Rea."

He looked down at the shop permit in his hand, issued by the Lord of Lambert. Any merchant was painfully aware of the sheer difficulty of obtaining the right to run a shop in a bustling port town.

Yet there he was, holding a piece of paper reserved for a limited few in this world. It was nothing short of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. That new reality was slowly starting to sink in.

"You're absolutely right. But first things first. We should check out the shop."

Rolling up the shop permit, and placing it carefully into his jacket pocket, Lahki turned back toward Lambert.

Behl and Rea led the way, serving as Lahki's bodyguards. They headed for the central administrative office in the old town district, near the lord's castle.

Lambert's administrative office was a three-story building detailed with elegant stonework. Its black roof stood in stark contrast to the mahogany roofs around it.

Lahki entered the building and headed straight for the counter, where a clerk stood at attention. He handed over his shop permit. A short time later, after finishing the name registration and other paperwork, he left the office.

Lahki stood in the street, rolling the key for his new building back and forth in his hand. Its heft brought a smile to his face.

Behl nudged Lahki with his elbow. "So, it's finally feeling real, huh? You've got your

very own shop, Lahki!"

Lahki dropped the key into his jacket pocket. "Now I need to start wrapping my head around the next steps."

"Hey," Rea said. "Is the shop located in the old town district, or the new one?"

Lahki laughed wryly as he recalled the number written on his shop permit. "It's in the new town district, near the south market. I mean, if I'd gotten a shop in the old district, I'd almost certainly have either turned it down or tried to trade it for a shop in the new area."

Rea cocked her head. "I thought merchants preferred to have their shops in the old town district."

As usual, Rea was right.

The town of Lambert consisted of two districts: the old town district and the new town district. The names, obviously, referred to when the areas had been built. The historic old town district had more ties to the nobility, and thus, closer connections with the merchant guild. But the merchant guild had slowly acquired power over time, making it all but impossible for a newcomer to break in.

"Before you can get a shop in the old town, you need to build your influence with the merchant guild in the new town. You can't just jump in and set up shop. Relations between shop owners are incredibly important, so if I ever plan to enter the old town district, I'll need to bide my time and build connections," Lahki sighed.

"Huh," Rea said. "I had no idea. I figured, once you got rich, you were allowed to live there. That all sounds like a huge hassle."

Behl looked as though he'd just remembered something. "If they have all those connections, how come only the merchants involved in the slave trading debacle went bankrupt? If the merchants were all so intertwined, you'd think that the whole group would've come tumbling down, no?"

A surprised look washed over Lahki's face.

"Hey, why're you looking at me like that?"

"I was just shocked by what an astute observation you made, Behl."

Behl's face darkened. "Hey, I'm always saying astute stuff!"

Lahki apologized, his expression once again serious. "The business closures in the old town district happened suddenly, and the reasons behind them are vague. It seems as though there are trust issues between the businesses in the old town district, the local nobility, and the lord."

Rea looked around furtively. "You think some trouble's brewing?"

Lahki shook his head. "No, not exactly. Rather, the reputation of the businesses in the new town district was pretty poor. Rumor had it they were involved in something despicable. The general consensus is that the lord's quick and decisive actions were for the best, while also giving the new town district a chance to ride the wave of criticism *against* the old town district."

Behl laughed. "Oh, I get it. So, the old town district is even more suspicious after having their dirty laundry aired?"

Lahki told his two companions what he had heard over the past few days concerning the situation. Behl laughed and nodded along, and Rea put her hand to Behl's head, as if to check for a fever. "What's wrong with you today, Behl? Did you eat something strange?"

Behl sighed in exasperation. "Just who do you think I am? Y'know, us mercenaries are good at sniffing out trouble."

Lahki clapped his hands loudly to break up the argument before it could begin. "All right, all right. Settle down, you two. I want to go to my shop and see the layout."

Behl and Rea stuck their tongues out at each other. They could argue over just about anything, and had since they were young.

"You two really are great friends, you know," Lahki said.

"Us? Pssh!"

"Hardly!"

Lahki shrugged in defeat.

\*\*\*

The three arrived at their destination late that afternoon.

The new town district's streets were packed, due in part to the fact that they were much narrower than the old town district's roads.

Horse-drawn carts pulled products brought in from surrounding towns, or recently unloaded at the port, through the streets. Customers and merchants alike milled about, hoping to sell, buy, or both.

Lahki turned onto a road at the corner of the market, leading away from the crowded thoroughfare. Two large shops with heavy foot traffic stood on either side of their destination. The small building was about two carts wide, and looked as if it had been placed there to fill a gap.

The entrance was firmly locked, but a staircase on one side led to the second-floor living quarters. That door was locked as well.

The first floor, where the shop was located, was made of stone, while the second and third floors were wooden. That design was common in the new town district.

Behl looked up at the shop, then to the buildings flanking it. "It's pretty small, doncha think?"

Rea nodded in agreement.

"Not at all," Lahki said. "This is more than big enough. What it lacks in space up front, it makes up for inside. Besides, a store's size isn't all that matters. The larger your storefront, the more you'll pay in taxes and upkeep. This is perfect for my needs."

"You mean taxes depend on the size of your storefront?" Behl asked.

Rea also looked surprised. "Wow, I had no idea."

"Not only that," Lahki said. "Taxes also differ depending on what materials the second and third floors are built from. For example, look at the shop next door, 'Doktor.' The second floor is stone, but the third is wood. That makes their tax rate higher than

mine."

"Even the building material affects taxes?" Behl looked at the sky and shook his head, giving up. "I'd be broke before I ever opened for business."

Lahki laughed, pulling the key out of his shirt pocket and slowly inserting it into the lock. It slid open with a heavy clunk. Lahki and Behl pushed on the doors, which creaked loudly as they swung inward. The interior was dim, illuminated only by what little light spilled through the entrance.

As Lahki said, what the shop lacked in width, it made up for in depth. A cart could easily have ridden straight through with room to spare. In the back were a courtyard, a stable, and even a well. Beyond those was a building with a fireplace—probably some sort of kitchen.

Rea and Behl voiced their amazement as they walked around.

"Whoa. It's a lot bigger than I thought it'd be!"

"Wahoo! Mind if I take a look around, Lahki?"

No sooner had Lahki smiled and nodded than the two immediately dashed off to explore.

Lahki decided to start an inspection of his own, and began looking around the shop. Just then, a voice called to him from behind.

"So, you're the new operator, I presume? You're rather young to be a shop owner!"

A well-dressed man around fifty years old, with white hair and a mustache, stood in the doorway. He was short but muscular, looking rather fit for a man of his age.

Lahki turned to face the older gentleman before bowing low and greeting him. "My name is Lahki. Pleased to meet you! I'll be running this shop from here on out, so I hope we form a good working relationship."

"Well, aren't you a well-mannered young man! My name is Doktor. I'm from the shop next door. I guess we'll see each other a lot now that we're neighbors, so we might as well get along, eh?"

Lahki's eyes went wide. "Are you Doktor's owner, then? I intended to stop by soon for a proper greeting."

Lahki had never met Doktor in person, but he'd recently bought some of the shop's wheat while gathering supplies on Arc's behalf.

Doktor waved his hand, dismissing Lahki's concern. "No worries. We met, didn't we? Feel free to stop by whenever for some tea. It'd do me good to befriend someone with connections to the Lord." He smiled warmly, stroking his beard.

"Wh-what makes you think I have some sort of connections?" Lahki blurted out.

The corners of Doktor's mouth nudged upward. "Well, the company that used to be here was involved in that whole controversy. Since the shop permit auction hasn't even occurred yet, you're either some sort of government official with permission to be here, or someone with the connections to get your hands on the permit. I figured I'd see if I could wring some information out of you, and sure enough, I got my answer."

Lahki gave Doktor a weak smile as he tried to explain himself. "No... I mean, it's not like I have any personal connections. One of my customers actually got involved on my behalf. I'm still a novice."

Doktor frowned. "You're the talk of the town right now, what with selling all those grand dragon parts, and using the money to buy a cartload of food. You really stood out, y'know."

"What?"

"Well, think about it. Not only did you bring invaluable materials to a big name here in new town, you also chose a company to buy from in this area. Of course, that worked in my favor. But I assure you, it didn't sit well with the scoundrels back in old town. They're pretty upset with you."

"B-but why? I mean, I didn't know anyone in the old town district who would help me! I had to work hard just to get help *here*, remember?" Lahki was practically shouting in exasperation.

Doktor offered a wide grin in return. "Gwahahaha! That's just because, after the closures, the miscreants in old town are trembling with fear about the new town's upcoming success. Having a runt like you come along with an extravagant deal, and completely

snub them, only served to irritate them further." Doktor thumped his hand heavily on Lahki's shoulder. "Don't you worry 'bout it. Dead wood all comes crashing down in the end, one way or another. Besides, that customer of yours with the connections you were talking about... I'm sure he didn't just secure you a permit out of the kindness of his own heart. You'll be paying that back, I'm sure."

Doktor turned to leave.

"If you've got any other amazing deals like that, send 'em my way. And if you have any questions, kid, be sure to stop by. I'll only charge you for my time!"

The older man walked out of the shop, whistling.

Lahki slowly unclenched his fists and let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"He's right," Lahki said to himself. "What matters most is what comes next."

He turned around to look at his shop. It might have been an empty shell, but in his mind's eye, he could already see the roaring success it would become.

# AFTERWORD

This is Ennki Hakari, author of *Skeleton Knight in Another World*. Thank you so much for picking up Volume 4 of this story.

It's thanks to you, the reader, that I successfully wrote... well, actually, that I *surpassed* the so-called "trilogy limit," and now see the fourth volume of my story make it to print. I truly appreciate it.

Given the publishing industry's struggle for profitability, it truly is the greatest honor for an author to see their story make it past three volumes.

I would also like to thank my manager, my illustrator KeG, my editor, and all the other people to whom I've caused untold amounts of trouble. Despite that, they gave their all in helping get Volume 4 to print.

I couldn't have done it without them.

Now for a quick update on my life.

I recently moved to a new place, and I decided that I wanted all new furniture while I was at it. So, I've been spending my time looking through furniture catalogs and interior design magazines.

Lately, I've been interested in wood furniture, but all the really well-made pieces are incredibly expensive and entirely out of my budget. Sofa prices, in particular, are through the roof. For a normal person like me, it honestly feels as if I've been dumped into some parallel world.

I guess you really need to live within your means, huh?

Anyway, back to the subject at hand. Arc got his body back in this story, although it was just for a short time. We've finally reached a turning point.

Now that we've come this far, I'd like to take the story to its end. After all, I've plotted it out.

I hope you continue to support *Skeleton Knight in Another World*.

Well, that's it for now. I look forward to seeing you again in the next book!

JUNE 2016—ENNKI HAKARI



## Character profile

*We have been  
blessed by  
the gods and  
shall proceed  
on the path of  
righteousness!*



Yuriarna Merol Melissa Rhoden Olav

HUMAN

As the second princess of the Rhoden Kingdom, she takes her duty seriously and thinks of her people first, despite her young age. Fearing the dangers posed by the dueling Revlon Empires and the Holy Hilk Kingdom, she strives to improve relations with the Nohzan Kingdom, the Grand Duchy of Limbult, and the elves.



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PtF by: traitorATZEN