SKELETON KNIGHT IN ANOTHER WORLD
VI
WRITTEN BY Ennki Hakari
ILLUSTRATED BY KeG

SKELETON KNIGHT IN ANOTHER WORLD

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

- VOLUME 6 -

-AUTHOR-

Ennki Hakari

-ILLUSTRATOR-

KeG

[Seven Seas]

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Ponta
Arc
Ariane
Chiyome
I pushed the door open—that's right, I didn't even bother to knock.

"No way..."
Riel
It's only through sheer force of will that we will overcome these foes!
"HOLY THUNDER SWORD OF Caladbolg!"
Niena

"Four Flame Rondo!"

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KINGDOM OF
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World Map

Asbania Kingdom

Holy East Revlon Empire

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Map

PROLOGUE

The Nohzan Kingdom was located on the northern continent, separated from the Rhoden Kingdom by the bay of Bordeaux to the east. The two countries enjoyed an amicable relationship and regularly engaged in trade.

Nohzan was surrounded by three other kingdoms: the Delfrent Kingdom to the north, the Salma Kingdom to the south, and the Holy Hilk Kingdom to the west. Over the generations, these kingdoms were constantly uniting, breaking apart, and uniting once more. Their borders were constantly in flux.

Saureah, the capital of the Nohzan Kingdom, was located at the center of the country, among the highlands looking over the relatively flat plains that dominated its landscape. Atop the hill sat a large castle with a town spreading out from its base, followed by two formidable walls to keep out any invaders.

The castle itself bore little in the way of decorative touches, focusing on defensive capabilities rather than aesthetics. It looked more like a military fortress than a castle. However, the royal crests and other accoutrements decorating the halls of the castle would quickly rid the casual observer of this belief. The difference between the stark exterior and beautiful inner halls was like night and day.

Early morning light glinted off the dew accumulating on the carefully manicured lawns of the castle grounds, the only outward source of beauty that hinted at the splendor within.

A young girl, around ten or so, could be seen on the other side of a large window overlooking the garden. Her skin was fair, the color of fine porcelain, and her curly, shoulder-length blonde hair splayed about on the bed where she lay. The canopied bed was massive, despite her small figure, betraying the luxury in which this girl lived.

The day had started with the clanging of distant bells—first with one in a far corner of the town, followed by more and more throughout the streets, until the sound finally reached the castle. This was quite the departure from the girl's usual morning routine. She scowled at the loud racket that had interrupted her sleep and glanced drowsily around her room.

“Hyaaaaah. I wonder what they’re going on about?”

She propped herself up on an elbow, rubbed the sleep from her eyes with the palm of her hand, and let out a loud, bellowing yawn. If not for her fragile appearance, the sound could easily have been mistaken for one that a man three times her age might make.

After battling with her mussy hair for a bit, trying in vain to bring it to order, she rolled off the bed and made her way to the window to take a look outside. All she could see, however, was the courtyard beyond—there was no clue as to the source of the bells. She gazed across the entire courtyard before sleepily reaching up toward the handle built into the window’s frame.

Right at that moment, a figure came running into the room and called out her name.

“Princess Riel! Excuse my sudden intrusion.”

The young girl—Princess Riel—turned to face the familiar figure and cocked her head in confusion at the woman’s panicked expression.

“What’s all the fuss, Niena? I woke up on time today, I’ll have you know.” Riel clenched her jaw and fought back another yawn.

The brown-skinned, black-eyed woman with long, black hair tied back in a waist-length braid was Niena du Avroah, the daughter of Viscount Avroah. She was dressed in the garb of the royal knights and wore a gleaming sword at her waist. Though a member of the upper crust of Nohzan society, Niena was also a knight and the personal bodyguard of Riel Nohzan Saureah, the young girl before her.

Riel was the third child and youngest daughter of King Asparuh Nohzan Saureah. Ever since the loss of her mother, she had become the king’s pride and joy.

“The castle is under attack! Hurry up and change! I’m taking you to the cellars!”

“What?! Are you sure?” Riel’s eyes went wide in surprise. “Wait a moment. I’ll be ready in a flash. Nmph.”

She tried to toss off her nightgown, only to get it caught around her neck. Riel flapped her arms about wildly in an attempt to free herself. Niena stood dutifully by until the young princess asked for help.

“Could you give me a hand, Niena?”

Niena dropped to a knee and bowed her head.

“Certainly, Your Highness.”

Dressing the princess in one of her many elegant gowns was usually the job of her many servants, so it was more than a bit of a struggle for the inexperienced guard to help Riel into her clothes, but eventually she got the girl into a simple dress.

Riel hurried out of her room and into the hall, where she found a man waiting for her.

“Oh, Zahar’s here, too? We need to go get Papa.”

The young man responded with a curt nod before falling in line with Niena behind the princess.

Zahar Bakharov was around twenty years old and a hulk of a man, towering at an impressive 190 centimeters tall. He wore his light brown hair cropped short and exuded an air of toughness. Though also one of Princess Riel’s bodyguards, like Niena, Zahar had risen up from the ranks of the commoners to assume this role, unlike Niena.

The young girl paid no mind to her two bodyguards as she marched purposefully down the halls toward her father’s study, where he could usually be found. Inside the study she found King Asparuh Nohzan Saureah, along with the other key leaders of the Nohzan Kingdom: Riel’s two older brothers, Prince Terva and Prince Seyval, the prime minister, who oversaw all civil matters in the country, and the generals who managed the kingdom’s military affairs.

The room was filled with an uncomfortable silence, as evidenced by the tense expressions worn by the room’s occupants as they stared down at a map spread out over a large table. Riel spotted multiple wooden tokens placed at various points across the map. Riel didn’t know what to make of the intense look on her father’s face. She was craning her neck to get a better look at the map when a man ran into the room to deliver a report.

“Your Majesty! Large bands of invaders are charging from the forests at the base of the Sobir Mountains, and the numbers piling up at the outer reaches of the capital only continue to increase! They don’t seem to be organized, so we can’t get a clear count, but there are at least several tens of thousands! I’ve never seen so many people at

once!"

Several people in the room groaned, the looks of surprise on their faces betraying how dumbfounded they were at this report.

The king spoke up over the other voices to address the messenger.

"Where do the invaders hail from? Only the empire could muster a force of that size, but we don't share a border. Has one of the neighboring kingdoms fallen as well?"

The young king fixed his stern gaze on the messenger. All eyes focused on the man, awaiting his response. Even Riel's bodyguards swallowed hard as they waited.

His response, however, took everyone by surprise.

"There's nothing to indicate where these invaders hail from. In fact, they aren't even human! Though outfitted in metal armor, they're all undead! Even their commander is undead!"

"Are you mad?! I've never heard of such a vast army of undead, much less one that was fully armed!" The general was absolutely beside himself.

The messenger averted his gaze. "Unfortunately, what I say is true, sir. The expeditionary forces that engaged with the enemy have reported that all they found under the armor of the soldiers they slayed were corpses. The invaders swarmed from the plains and descended upon the capital at daybreak."

The others in the room swallowed hard at this.

"What's more, not only are there undead humans, we've spotted other freakish creatures as well. There was even one report of a massive human-spider creature that struck down an entire squad all on its own!"

The clanging bells in the distance were the only sounds that interrupted the heavy silence enveloping the room. Everyone present struggled to wrap their minds around what they'd just heard, even if they didn't understand the true ramifications.

King Asparuh, lord of the entire Nohzan Kingdom, finally broke the silence. He turned to look at each and every person in the room.

“I, too, have seen the oncoming menace with my own eyes from the lookout. Whether human or otherwise, this doesn’t change the fact that our capital is in grave danger.”

The lookout was a tall tower within the castle that gave a commanding view of the surrounding area. It was built to allow anyone to survey all of Saureah. There was always a guard keeping watch, though Riel would occasionally go there to play and look out at the lands surrounding the castle.

“How many men do we have at our disposal?” The king turned his attention to the general.

The other man sputtered for a moment, as if caught off guard. “I, um, well! Counting the resident knights and those serving as castle guards, around 4,000 or so. If we hire mercenaries, we can probably add another thousand to that.”

After looking around to make sure everyone in the room understood what the general had just said, the king nodded gravely. “Fortunately for us, they attacked early in the morning, before we had a chance to open the gates for the day, so we’ll essentially be holding out while under siege, as we’ve done before. Even so, facing several tens of thousands of enemies is no mean feat with what little might we have to bear.”

The king looked up from the map, glanced at his two sons, then turned his gaze on Riel.

“The invaders are coming from the forests at the base of the Sobir Mountains to the southwest, meaning that the capital is not surrounded… at least, not yet. There isn’t enough time to get all of the citizens out. Terva, Seyval, I want you to depart from the east gate. One of you will head north and the other east to summon supplemental forces to come to our aid.”

The princes nodded firmly as they accepted their orders.

Riel looked up at her two much older brothers as she took a step toward her father, feeling the full responsibility of being a member of the royal family. She awaited his orders.

Both brothers glanced at her before turning back to their father inquisitively, as if to ask what should be done with her.

A gentle smile graced the king’s lips as he looked at Riel. “As for you, Riel, I want you

to head south and ask for reinforcements from Count Dimo. His soldiers are known for their bravery."

The other adults in the room exchanged knowing looks.

"Leave it to me, Papa! I, Riel Nohzan Saureah, will fulfill my duties and save our country from this menace!" Riel puffed out her chest and clenched her fist as she spoke, eliciting a smile from the king.

He turned to his beloved daughter's bodyguards and fixed them with a stern look. "Zahar, Niena… please look after Riel."

They both nodded firmly, seemingly understanding the weight of their duty.

Though the true meaning of Riel's assignment was lost on the young princess, everyone else in the room understood that the king was ordering her away for safety.

Count Dimo's domain had once been located along the southern border of the Nohzan Kingdom. But, due to the Salma Kingdom pushing its borders forward nearly seventy years ago, the count now found himself isolated from the Nohzan Kingdom proper.

Despite being surrounded by a foreign nation, it was a relatively easy journey. Without any sort of clear national borders marking the monster-infested lands, the borders themselves were generally defined by which group the local nobility chose to side with. It would be no great difficulty for a small party to travel through the Salma Kingdom on their way to Count Dimo, though it would be next to impossible for any large force to make the trip back across the kingdom in support of the capital's defense.

The only way to fight against this kind of massive undead horde would be to bring in a large number of reinforcements. However, the more reinforcements that were brought the slower they would be to come, and the foot soldiers would almost certainly draw attention to themselves as they marched across a foreign land. It would take at least five days by ship to travel from the nearby Clyde Bay down the Morba River to the capital. Even if the count mustered his forces immediately, it would likely be too late.

The king was sending Riel on a mission that could not be completed. However, no one dared point this out. The two princes were grown men, and would fulfill their duties as members of the royal family. Even if Riel felt the same, she was still a young girl of eleven. She was also the apple of the king's eye, ever since the loss of his wife—a fact everyone in the room was keenly aware of.

There was also the fact that, in the absolute worst-case scenario, the royal line would live on through her.

"We don't have long. You three better hurry along now. We'll draw the undead to the west gate to buy you some time. General, I leave the armies to you!"

As soon as the king finished speaking, everyone began hurrying about their business. The king turned to face toward the west, the lines on his face deepening.

He let out a desperate sigh. “And to think this would happen on the very day the cardinal is paying us a visit. Perhaps I should speak with Liberalitas. Perhaps the Holy Hilk Kingdom could spare some templars.”

The prime minister leaned in and spoke in a hushed tone. “Your Majesty, you don’t think that this army of undead could have anything to do with Hades, do you?”

The king’s frown deepened as he turned toward his advisor. “Hades? That’s nothing but a myth passed down by long-dead poets.”

“I’m afraid not, Your Highness. Though it may be denied, this very same thing occurred around a hundred or so years ago in the empire.”

The prime minister’s words left the king temporarily speechless. Though a hundred years might not seem long, in a world where average lifespans were generally quite short, this meant the event had occurred around three generations ago.

The myth of Hades was known to nearly everyone in the land. He’d simply appeared one day without warning and, together with his armies of the dead, destroyed town and village alike, growing his army as he went, until he’d nearly conquered the entire country. With their backs against the wall, the empire had thrown whatever forces they had left at Hades and managed to topple his army.

The story was a well-known myth, often used by adults to scare their children straight. It almost always ended with the same line: “And Hades will rise from the bowels of hell to collect all the bad little boys and girls.”

“According to rumor, the empire requested the aid of the Holy Hilk Kingdom to defeat Hades. Apparently, he was somehow vulnerable against their forces.”

The king let out a heavy sigh and shook his head in despair.

“I don’t suppose we have time to debate this. Not with the very survival of our kingdom on the line.”

***

Deep inside the castle in the capital city of Saureah, the clamor both inside and outside the city walls could be faintly heard. Compared to some of the more spartan quarters that filled the castle, the room reserved for foreign dignitaries was a clear step above the rest. The room offered its occupant a view of the eastern side of the capital.

The black-haired man in this room smiled as he looked out the large window and down at the scene unfolding below, where citizens ran frantically about. He was dressed in elaborate robes—far more decorative than those of a simple priest—and wore a warm smile on his face, an expression that quickly changed to a grimace as he watched the east gate open. Three plumes of dust erupted, taking off in different directions.

"Hmm. Well, it doesn't look like they're escaping the capital. Perhaps sending messengers out for reinforcements?"

The man's name was Cardinal Palurumo Avaritia Liberalitas, one of the seven cardinals that served directly under the pontiff—the Holy King of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, and head of the dominant religion on the northern continent. The cardinal was in this elaborate room in the Nohzan Kingdom to visit various Hilk churches throughout the lands.

The chaos playing out down below, caused by the procession of the undead, was his doing, a task performed at the behest of the pontiff as part of his plan to invade their neighboring countries.

By setting up an army beyond the capital city and placing himself at the center of the whole ordeal, there was no way anyone would be able to guess his true motive.

"Heh heh, maybe we should send out some soldiers to take care of the messengers? Either way, I rather enjoy watching the country fall to ruin around me, its people hoping all the while for reinforcements to come and save the day. It's quite exhilarating!"

His disturbed smile reflected off the glass.

Underneath his kind exterior, Cardinal Liberalitas was a truly twisted man—some would even say emotionally disturbed—who loved to watch the weak suffer.

"Even if they're able to muster up reinforcements, they won't stand a chance against 100,000 undead. I can't wait to see their faces as they lose all hope!"

After his little outburst, Cardinal Liberalitas pulled himself together and brought the warm, easy smile back to his face. He stroked his chin and raised an eyebrow as his expression clouded over with concern.

“The undead are usually far stronger at night, but also more difficult to control. Worse, the more of them there are, the harder that becomes.”

He let out a snort.

“Well, after I finish up with this matter, perhaps I’ll have a talk with His Holiness about it.”

Turning his gaze back down, he caught sight of the hordes of undead swarming around the east gate. A smile returned to his face.

“But first, I think I’ll enjoy my front row seat in watching the country fall.”

Moments later, Cardinal Palurumo was summoned for an audience with the king.

CHAPTER 1
BACK TO THE SEA!

The early morning light shone down upon me through the trees, the flitter of wind rustling through the leaves resounding loudly in the otherwise silent mountain.

The Lord Crown, towering menacingly out of the top of the mountain's peak, seemed to defy all natural law with its sheer immensity. It looked like a mountain in its own right, stretching high above the treetops like a massive umbrella.

Faint rays of light made their way through the dense coverage, creating small spots that illuminated my work.

The mountaintop shrine's stone walls were still largely intact, but the wooden roof had long since rotted away, leaving the building exposed.

The faint light that cascaded down into the roofless shrine reflected brilliantly off my armor.

I was dressed from head to toe in silvery armor accented with intricate white and blue designs. On my back I wore a black cape that glittered faintly, looking almost as if it were ripped straight from the night sky. Though my armor was truly magnificent—the stuff you only heard about in legends—my current weapons were… well, not the mythical sword and shield you might expect.

No, I was holding a wooden-handled spatula, its metal head covered in thick gray sludge—mortar for the bricks I was laying.

I slathered an even layer of mortar on the current row of bricks and neatly laid a new row atop it, making sure there were no gaps.

"Welp, that should be about it."

I took a step back and surveyed my handiwork. The large brick semi-circle stretching out from the kitchen wall would serve as my oven.

I'd been able to acquire a cooktop-like magical item from the elven villages, but I still needed something to bake bread here, so I'd decided I would make my own oven.

I didn't really have the option of calling a bricklayer all the way out to the middle of nowhere, so I decided to gather up all the materials and give it a shot on my own. Honestly, I was pretty impressed at what I'd pulled off.

Using my connections with the merchant Lahki from the town of Lamburt, I was able to acquire most of the materials I needed cheaply.

With my oven complete, I needn't limit myself to just bread—I could even make pizza if I wanted.

After going on an adventure to the southern continent just to get some tomatoes, it'd be a waste not to.

I wiped off the last of the excess mortar with a damp cloth and then gave them a quick wipe down.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, Ponta came running up between my legs.

"Kyii!"

Standing at about sixty centimeters—half of which was its long, cotton-like tail—Ponta had the face of a fox, but the thin membranes running between its front and hind legs gave it the appearance of a Japanese flying squirrel. It was a spirit creature, one of many here that could use magic.

Its back was a dark green, the color of grass, and acted like a form of camouflage that allowed it to easily blend in to the shrubs and trees.

I set the spatula down and gave Ponta's head a rub.

"Hey, Ponta. Where've you been?"

Ponta enthusiastically rubbed its head against the palm of my hand as a low purr thrummed in its throat.

I scratched its cheeks and watched its billowy white tail wag back and forth. Suddenly, Ponta's ears perked up, and it let out a startled cry.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

I looked in the direction Ponta was facing. Beyond the window, a large beast was peering into the kitchen.

Well, “beast” wasn’t the best way to describe it. It was more like a giant lizard.

Standing a little over four meters from snout to tail, the creature was protected with a layer of reddish-brown scales. Two large, white horns rose out of the top of its head. It was held up by six thick, muscular legs, and a dense mane of white hair ran down the middle of its back to the end of its tail.

The beast swung its head from side to side, light reflecting off its white beard as it let out a high-pitched screech that seemed almost humorous considering its appearance.

“Grweeeeeeee!”

It snorted in annoyance as it pressed its head against the window, unable to get all the way through due to its horns.

“Oh, off playing with Shiden, were you?”

I slowly approached the window, then reached through and rubbed Shiden’s muscular neck. It blinked its reptilian eyes several times.

It looked like it had gotten used to life here.

This beast, known as a driftpus, was originally from the southern continent, where it had served as a mount for the nomadic people known as the tiger clan.

Since I’d helped the tiger clan through a number of hardships, one of their leaders had gifted me this driftpus as a sign of our friendship.

Given all the work involved with looking after an animal as large as a car, I’d been hoping to leave it behind. But the chieftain had insisted, saying it was a token of their gratitude.

Seeing as I was a representative of the elves, by virtue of having taken on their village name, it didn’t seem wise to needlessly refuse their offer, especially considering the harm it could do to our relationship.

Or at least, that's what I told myself.

The driftpus would undoubtedly draw attention to itself on the northern continent, but fortunately, that wasn't a problem here at the mountain shrine, where we were far from any form of civilization. The nearest village was on the other side of the forest, where the mountain people were building a new home.

Besides, Shiden was far stronger than a horse in terms of lifting capacity, and would be a far better substitute to travel by foot on future journeys.

Best of all, though, was the fact that I'd secured preferential trading rights for chili peppers from the chieftain of the Ena clan, the largest among all the tiger clans and the only ones who grew the fruit they called "red nail."

I figured I could use them to make spicy pepper sauce and tomato chili.

"What's it been… ten days since we got back? Half a month?"

Thinking of the peppers brought to mind the end of my adventure down on the southern continent.

***

"Nngraaaaaaaaoooooooowl!"

The darkened town shook with the death cry of the beast. The massive creature lay discarded in the middle of the road, staring vacantly up at the sky. Its cry could be felt reverberating through the ground nearby.

Heavy clouds blocked much of the moon's light. On any other night this would have left the town in complete darkness, but the flames running rampant through the buildings cast an eerie glow over the town.

One of the causes of these fires, not to mention the chaos that had descended upon the town, was now lying in a pool of its own blood, its life slowly pouring out into the streets.

It was a giant, humanoid figure around six meters tall, covered in matted black fur.

Unlike a human, however, it had no head. Instead, it sported two large, black eyes in

the middle of its chest and a gash full of yellow teeth beneath, which served as the creature's mouth. Its arms were rather long compared to the rest of its body, making it look almost like a headless gorilla.

These creatures, which I'd dubbed "dark giants," resided in the Black Forest, a massive sprawl of trees that ran along the southern part of the continent, largely uncharted.

To these forest-dwellers, humans were little more than a source of food.

When the giants first attacked, they'd thrown humans into their gaping mouths and gobbled them whole as they went on their destructive rampage.

We were in Tagent, the only human colony of the Revlon Empire, built on a peninsula jutting from the west coast of the southern continent.

Not only was the town under attack by a group of dark giants from the south, but it was also overrun by an army of undead soldiers that had come out of nowhere. In the midst of all this, fighters from the tiger clan had come to rescue their comrades who'd been taken as slaves. It was pure chaos.

"I'm about done here. How about you, Ariane?"

I wiped the blood off my sword, and it returned to its usual soft, azure glow. The mythical-class Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg was truly unmatched.

The two women behind me returned my gaze.

One of the women was tall, voluptuous, and sported hair as white as snow tied back in a ponytail that accented her amethyst skin. She was dressed in crude leather armor and a robe marked with intricately detailed runes.

This was the dark elf, Ariane, my friend and travel companion.

I caught a glimpse of her pointed ears as she turned to face me. She shook the blood off her thin sword, its hilt decorated with the head of a lion. The flames running up and down the blade traced an arc through the darkness.

"I should probably do something about the spirit magic."

She let out a heavy sigh, and a moment later, the flames disappeared from her blade.

Behind her, the remains of a burning giant tumbled to the ground, like a massive tree in the midst of a forest fire.

It made no sound as it fell, its throat probably burnt through, though it twitched for some time before all movement ceased.

The thick skin and matted hair that covered the giants' bodies were hard to pierce, even with the sharpest of blades, but Ariane's fire-based spirit magic made short work of them.

"Well, that takes care of the fodder."

A girl stepped out of the darkness and passed the collapsed body of the giant. It was hard to reconcile what she was saying with just how small she was.

The girl, Chiyome, was dressed entirely in black garb and wore a dark headband with a metal buckle on her forehead. Cat ears poked out of her short black hair, and a long tail stretched out from her lower back, swaying gently behind her.

She belonged to a group of ninja founded by a human named Hanzo, who'd been brought to this world much like I had. He'd brought together the persecuted cat people in what would come to be known as the Jinshin clan. Despite her young age, Chiyome was one of their six great fighters.

She'd bonded with a spirit using one of the clan's cherished pledge spirit crystals, which allowed her to use magic much like a spirit would, in the form of ninjutsu.

The usual clarity in Chiyome's azure eyes had been replaced by a thick, brooding darkness. Something told me this wasn't due to the darkness enveloping the town.

As far as I knew, they'd caught up with Sasuke—a man Chiyome looked up to like an older brother—but he'd been turned undead and had ended up fighting her.

She'd freed him of his immortality.

I could only imagine what she was feeling right now. Ariane was also concerned, the worry clear on her face as she watched the dejected girl, Chiyome's cat ears drooping low atop her head.

Out of nowhere, a soldier wielding a sword appeared out of the darkness.

“Chiyome!!!”

The soldier didn’t scream, or even make a sound, as he swung his sword in Chiyome’s direction. She sensed the attack well in advance, however, and quickly sidestepped the slash.

She drew the dagger from her waist and, with a flash of light, slashed straight through the soldier’s neck, sending his body to the ground like a discarded doll.

The metal helmet toppled off his head and clinked down the cobblestone road, a skull clattering out of it.

This was one of the many undead soldiers now flooding the streets of Tagent.

Its body continued writhing on the ground until Chiyome walked over to the skull and crushed it beneath her foot. The body immediately ceased all movement.

Near-silence enveloped us, the only sound that of the giant’s crackling body burning.

While looking about, deciding where to go next, Ponta poked its head up from where it was wrapped around my neck and mewed.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

As if on cue, we began hearing people’s voices echoing off in the distance.

The cries of those fighting back could be faintly heard among the awful medley of townsfolk running for their lives.

Apparently, the demise of some of the dark giants had given at least some of the people the will to fight back. Either that, or these were the yells of the tiger clan warriors freeing their enslaved comrades.

In either case, something was happening.

“We’ll find Goemon and then head to the outskirts, where Chieftain Houwe is waiting. I think the humans are finally starting to get things under control here.”

Along the way, we ran into Goemon, who’d joined up with several members of the tiger clan. They were leading a group of ten or so mountain people out of the town.

The tiger clan stood out easily from the rest of the mountain people—not only because of their round ears and gold-and-black fur, but also because they stood at over two meters tall. Though Goemon was a member of the same clan as Chiyome, he struck an imposing figure even next to these fearsome warriors.

Goemon was leading the pack through the town, taking out the countless undead that got in their way. None of them stood a chance against this group of warriors, and they hardly even slowed the group down as it made its hasty retreat.

Upon making it to a large hole in the town's defensive wall, broken during the dark giants' invasion, we met up with the other fighters as they prepared to leave.

Other than the mountain people, there were also a large number of townsfolk gathered at this spot in a desperate attempt to flee the dark giants and undead soldiers. They were clearly surprised, afraid even, at the sight of the muscle-bound tiger clan. Many moved to stay out of sight.

After clearing out of Tagent and making it to the other side of the wall, we found a large group of mountain people who'd already been liberated from the city, patiently waiting for the warriors to return.

It was hard to get a sense of how many there were in the darkness, but I'd guess there were nearly a thousand people or so gathered.

At the front of this group stood one of the most muscular members of the tiger clan that I'd ever seen. He looked as if he were standing watch over the gates of hell as he glared at the city of Tagent spread before him, arms crossed and legs firmly planted on the ground.

The nearly three-meter-tall man's lips curled into a smile as he noticed us.

"Looks like we were able to free quite a few of our comrades. You even helped the humans out, I hear?"

The man was Chieftain Houwe, head of the Ena clan—the largest of all the tiger clans.

As I stood under his intense gaze, I simply shrugged nonchalantly and hefted my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg off my shoulder, stabbing it into the ground in front of me.

“All I did was lend a hand to those I saw suffering at the hands of a monster. Whether beast person or human, there is little difference to me.”

Chieftain Houwe smirked at this, amused by my response. “Such an interesting thing to hear coming from an elf. You’re a strange one.”

With that, Chieftain Houwe turned on his heel and shouted back at the group of warriors and newly liberated mountain people.

“The last of us has returned! Now, let’s get out of here before they have a chance to mount a counterattack! We’ll head east to Fobnach, the land of the beast people… the land of freedom!”

This elicited a thunderous cheer from the gathered crowd.

The tiger clan warriors began mounting their driftpus in order to surround and protect all the mountain people on foot.

The scene reminded me of a shepherd dog rounding up and leading a herd of sheep.

The group of over a thousand moved together like one massive living creature.

Goemon and I mounted our own driftpus that we’d been lent by the tiger clan. Chiyome and Ariane climbed up behind us.

Despite their initial excitement at being freed, by the time the sun rose, the group was clearly exhausted. Mountain people were stronger than normal humans, but even their strength had its limits.

When we made it to the large wall that separated the peninsula from the mainland, the group came to a halt. Though there were still concerns over the humans mounting a counterattack, we decided to take a break here. All we could do was hope that there were no more powerful forces back in Tagent.

“Well, this is no good. At this speed, I don’t know if we’ll be able to cross the prairie, much less make it Fobnach.”

Deep wrinkles spread across Chieftain Houwe’s forehead as he called several other important figures together into a huddle.

We hadn't even planned to come all the way out here to Tagent in the first place.

Upon discovering that one of the tiger clan's settlements on the Kuwana Prairie had been destroyed by dark giants, we'd taken off to rid the plains of this menace. Along the way, we'd come across a hole ripped through the massive wall that separated the human colony from the mainland, and quickly put together the liberation plan.

Had there only been a hundred or so slaves, we could have mounted them up together with the other warriors. But with the thousand or so standing here, it simply wasn't possible.

The Great Fobnach Kingdom, a country founded by the mountain people, was located on the far side of two vast plains. We'd need ample water and food to make such a journey. And it would be reckless to try and take the recently liberated slaves across such harsh terrain.

The most practical plan would be to cross the wall into the mainland and then split into groups to travel to different tiger clan settlements. Once recuperated, the individual parties could make the trip east.

Depending on the group's speed, it would take at least several days to travel across the plains. Factoring in multiple trips back and forth, it would take well over a month to move a thousand people to Fobnach.

I was listening to the huddled conversation when I suddenly felt someone's eyes on me. I turned on my mount to catch Ariane's gaze. I could tell she'd already figured out what I was going to suggest.

"What is it, Ariane?" I asked casually.

Ariane just shrugged and averted her gaze, stroking Ponta's back. "It's nothing. Do whatever you want. After all, you're the one who'll be doing all the work."

She pouted and buried her face in Ponta's stomach.

"Kyii!"

Ponta was more than happy to have someone to play with. It wagged its legs around in the air.

After staring at them for another moment, I hopped off my mount and made my way toward the huddle.

***

Several hours later, I'd successfully transported the one thousand former slaves and the tiger clan warriors just outside Fernandes, a town in the Great Fobnach Kingdom that bordered the plains.

The former slaves cheered at the sight of the town, while the warriors looked on in surprise before turning to me.

I ignored their unspoken questions and focused my attention on the massive figure approaching me. Chieftain Houwe's face lit up with excitement.

"I'd heard that elves were renowned for their magic, but this is far more than I ever imagined possible! I never expected to find someone who could use such legendary magic!"

This magic he referred to was teleportation magic, which was said to have been used by the elves' founding elder and creator of the Great Canada Forest, Evanjulin.

Using my Transport Gate ability, I'd teleported the former slaves and tiger clan warriors from the border wall to a spot right between the Dodgas River and the wall outside Fernandes.

There was no way I could do the whole group at once, though, so I had to make several trips back and forth.

Though I normally wouldn't have been able to teleport to the middle of a prairie where there weren't any notable landmarks, the hole the giants had made in the border wall served as a good point of reference.

It was difficult to convince the skeptical tiger clan leaders of my plan… until I grabbed a nearby warrior and used Transport Gate to teleport her to the town and back. It was a bit rash, but it worked.

"It's been quite a journey, but it's thanks to you that we were able to see this through, Arc. I really appreciate it, and I want you to have this as a token of my appreciation."

Chieftain Houwe reached down and untied a bag hanging from his saddle before handing it over to me. He gestured for me to look inside.

It was filled with peppers the color of rubies.

Though this was the reason why I'd sought out the tiger clan settlements in the first place, I hadn't even mentioned it to him yet. I gave Chieftain Houwe a puzzled look. He laughed.

"Aene told me everything. This is all I have on hand, but I'll be sure to get more together the next time you visit. Also, as a token of our gratitude, I want you to keep that driftpus. Think of it as a gift from everyone in the tiger clan."

I hesitated for a second, the words slowly registering as I looked down at this "token of gratitude" beneath me.

The driftpus seemed to understand what was being said and cast its narrow, reptilian eyes up at me. It gave a loud snort, as if to ask what my problem was.

All I could do was shake my head. "Thank you. I graciously accept."

Now I needed to figure out what to name it.

***

I rubbed Shiden's massive neck and shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts.

"Well, it looks like you've gotten used to the forest well enough. But I should still take you out to the plains once in a while to run around."

The driftpus was actually pretty intelligent as far as mounts went, and was quite capable of finding its own food and a place to rest for the night.

When I first brought it here, I'd given it a wash at the nearby hot spring. It seemed to like the experience, and I would occasionally find it bathing all by itself.

However, whenever Dragon Lord Villiers Fim, who lived on the massive Lord Crown that towered over us, would come down to the shrine, Shiden would run off into the forest to hide.

To be fair, that was a perfectly normal reaction for most animals. It was uncommon to come across a creature like Ponta, who would just gleefully play under the Dragon Lord's eye as he lazed in the hot spring.

Shiden, however, had spent most of its life living out on the expansive plains. I could only imagine how restricting it must feel here in the confined space of a mountaintop forest.

The new village being built on the bank of the lake off to the east was still under construction, but given all the space they had, I thought it might be a good idea to build a road to there from the shrine sometime.

I could feel the presence of someone coming up behind me.

I looked back and caught a glimpse of skin the color of amethyst. A figure was drying its snow-white hair with a long towel. It was Ariane, apparently having just gotten out of the hot spring behind the shrine.

From time to time, Ariane would join me when I came here to work on my shrine and take a dip in the spring. It seemed she'd taken quite a liking to it. She wasn't wearing her usual travel attire at the moment, but rather traditional elven garb stitched with all sorts of intricate designs. She was an absolute beauty fresh out of the bath like this.

She looked intently at the stove and mumbled to herself. "Oh, did you finish? I never would have figured you to be so good with your hands, Arc."

As she leaned over and looked down at my most recent creation, Ariane's robes started giving in to gravity, her ample bosom pressing against the fabric, drawing it down. My gaze fixed on her figure.

Ponta, seeing an opening, charged forward and dove straight for her chest.

"P-P-Ponta!!! Stop it! That tickles! Hahaha!"

I was jealous beyond words. My mind wandered pleasantly as I watched the playful interaction between dark elf and spirit creature.

Eventually, Ariane pulled Ponta into an embrace and looked up at me.

“Hey, Arc, it’s almost noon. Maybe we should be heading back to the village.”

I looked up. The sun was already high in the sky. I’d really lost track of time while laying those bricks.

“I’m pretty much finished here. Let’s head back.”

After putting all my tools away, I followed Ariane and Ponta out to the yard in front of the shrine before summoning Transport Gate to take us to Lalatoya. A large magical rune of light appeared at our feet as we said our goodbyes.

“You’re in charge of the shrine, Shiden!”

“Kyiii!”

Shiden hefted its large body up, snorting and shaking its beard in acknowledgement. This had become a tradition we repeated every time we left.

Ponta wagged its large tail one last time to its friend before the magical light enveloped us.

An instant later, the world around us had changed completely. We were now in the Great Canada Forest, a massive forest that sprawled across the southeastern part of the northern continent. The elves, long persecuted by the humans, had escaped into the woods and built their own empire among the trees, separated from humans by the natural barriers and myriad monsters the forest contained.

In the depths of the forest lay multiple villages, surrounded by walls of trees created using elven magic. They were a sight to behold, like something out of a fairytale. There were houses that looked like giant mushrooms and larger buildings that had been carved out of the trees themselves, a perfect combination of natural and artificial construction.

We were currently standing in front of Ariane’s tree house in Lalatoya—the village overseen by her father, where I had been taken in as a citizen.

The tree in front of us was far thinner than the Lord Crown we’d left behind on the mountain moments ago, but it was still large enough for people to live comfortably

inside. Looking up, I could see the dense cover of foliage casting its shade down upon us.

Ariane walked in without any hesitation, and I followed behind her.

Upon entering, we found ourselves in a large, spacious hallway flanked on either side by stairs leading up to a second floor that opened into a large dining room. There, we came upon a woman who was a dead ringer for Ariane. She seemed surprised to see us.

"Oh, you're back already? When I heard that you were making something, I figured I wouldn't see you for the rest of the day."

Glenys, Ariane's mother, smiled over at us. While her husband was out of the village on business, Glenys Alna Lalatoya was acting head of the village. Judging by appearance alone, she looked no older than her daughter Ariane. However, this was a byproduct of the elves' long lifespans. I had no idea how old she truly was.

Of course, bringing up the topic of age with her would immediately end with a blow straight to my head. After all, she'd trained Ariane in the art of swordsmanship and had sparred with me many times over. I wouldn't stand a chance at even defending myself.

So, naturally, I just smiled. "My apologies, Glenys. I kind of got absorbed in the task at hand."

I'd originally planned to get the oven ready before noon, and had prepared the ingredients I needed to cook, even going so far as to volunteer to make lunch myself. I promptly made my way to the back of the dining room and into the kitchen, still fully adorned in my armor.

While the humans in this world cooked with firewood, the elves had all sorts of magical implements to help them out, vastly improving their standard of living. Though there was a typical wood-burning stove here in the kitchen, there was also a device that acted similarly to a gas cooktop. However, the elves generally preferred to use the wood version, on account of the fact that the other option used rune stones as fuel.

Ariane peeked into the kitchen. "So, what exactly are these early morning preparations you were talking about?"

Her gaze was fixed on the two large, ceramic jars sitting in front of me. Both of these vessels were filled with water—dried tomatoes soaking in one and dried mushrooms in the other.

"I figured I'd try a new dish today." As I spoke, I slowly began pouring out the rehydrated tomatoes and mushrooms.

I planned on trying to make soy sauce. Normally, I'd need to ferment soybeans and malted rice and then follow a long series of convoluted steps, closely monitoring the heat along the way. It was an all-day undertaking, far beyond the skills of a mere amateur.

However, I could use chemistry to replace some of the necessary elements. That was why I'd started soaking the dried tomatoes and mushrooms last night. I would have preferred to use a yellow morel in place of the kinoko mushrooms available here, but I hadn't found any yet. Glenys was kind enough to get the most fragrant mushrooms she could find for me, which looked rather similar to eryngii.

I poured the two jars, liquid and all, into a cooking pot and began finely chopping a chicken breast. I put some of the chopped meat to the side and poured the rest into the pot, then turned up the heat. Once it reached a boil, I used a cloth to strain it.

Now I had my soup stock.

I gave the stock a whiff and tasted it. It was actually pretty good. Ariane, however, remained unconvinced, her eyes narrowed and nose scrunched up as she watched.

"Just what are you making anyway? It smells pretty rank…"

I could only shrug. These were all familiar smells to Japanese people, things we'd grown up with. But to anyone else, I could imagine it might smell like wet laundry. It all came down to what you were used to.

Welp, it was about time to start making my improvised soy sauce.

If you broke it down to its very basics, soy sauce was essentially a combination of amino acids and sugar. At least, that was the logic I was following in my attempt. I had more than enough amino acids, so I took out the minced chicken I'd boiled, put it into a bowl, poured some Great Canada Forest maple syrup over it, and started mixing. I then put everything into a pot over high heat to cook until the sugars began

caramelizing, giving the meat a nice brown color. I added some salt and alcohol to the mix and lowered the flame.

“That looks about right.”

I ran my finger along the bottom of the pot, coating it in the dark brown liquid, and gave it a taste.

While it wasn’t exactly spot-on, it was a pretty good substitute for soy sauce. The only alcohol I’d been able to get my hands on was a fruity white wine, which added more of a Western flavor to it than I’d planned. This was probably what imitation soy sauce tasted like at “Japanese-inspired” restaurants in the West.

The name was a bit of a misnomer, though, considering there was no soy in it.

Ariane watched me intently—Ponta clutched tightly, as her ever-present companion—before venturing in close enough to cautiously sniff my concoction.

“What do you think? Still put off by the smell?”

She tilted her head to the side as she carefully considered her response. “Well, it definitely smells better than before. Almost… like flowers.”

At least she wasn’t flat-out turning it down. All I could hope was that the teriyaki chicken would go over well.

Next, I started preparing a thick sauce to steep the chicken in. Up to this point, Glenys had been quietly watching the whole process, but she suddenly stood up, as if she’d remembered something, and left the room. After some time, she walked back, this time accompanied by a familiar figure.

“Elder Dillan, you’re finally back?”

The man behind Glenys smiled faintly and waved when he spotted Ariane and me standing in the kitchen. “Well, hello, Arc, Ariane. I just got back a few moments ago. It’s quite a long journey from the Rhoden capital. However, I return with good news.”

Dillan Tahg Lalatoya was Ariane’s father and Lalatoya’s village elder. He was a thin man with long, green-tinged blond hair and elongated pointed ears, a look generally shared among all the elves here in the forest.

He shot us a knowing smile before turning his gaze to his side. “I also brought a guest. She was interested in seeing you two.”

A young girl stepped out from his shadow.

“Chiyome? What are you doing here?” Ariane beat me to the punch, immediately recognizing the figure.

The black-haired cat girl bowed her head in greeting, her long tail swaying ever so slightly behind her. “It’s been quite some time, hasn’t it?”

There was a certain cheerfulness to the way her tail wagged back and forth. It was the best way to gauge how she was feeling, since her expression usually remained blank.

We hadn’t seen her since our last adventure. After finishing our mission, I’d teleported her and Goemon to the hidden village that served as home to the Jinshin clan, off in the Calcut Mountains. While we were down on the southern continent, Chiyome had run into her long-lost mentor and surrogate big brother, Sasuke, but he’d been killed and raised as one of the undead. He wound up attacking her, and she was forced to end his life.

She’d returned to her village to make her report.

“Are you okay, Chiyome?” I was at a total loss for what to say to her, so I decided to keep it vague. It’d only been a couple weeks since I’d last seen her, but the mountain people must’ve held a funeral in that time. I couldn’t even imagine the trauma Chiyome must have suffered, killing a man she’d looked up to like a brother.

Chiyome looked back at me with her clear, azure eyes and nodded. “I’m fine. After we parted, I told Master Hanzo what happened, and then we held a funeral.”

Her tail drooped, and her gaze fell to the floor. Ariane’s brow furrowed as she watched with great concern.

“Oh, Chiyome…”

“After that, I decided that I’d retrace Sasuke’s footsteps in the hopes of understanding what he was trying to tell me with his dying words.”

She paused before looking back up at me.

Though I hadn't heard his final words myself, according to Chiyome, the last thing Sasuke had said before he died was, "Be careful of the Hilk," or something to that effect. From that, we deduced that the Holy Hilk Kingdom had been responsible for turning Sasuke undead.

Even more noteworthy, however, was the fact that he hadn't been anything like a typical undead, a fact that Chiyome, Ariane, and Goemon all agreed on. Generally, undead sprang forth of their own accord when spirits in mana-rich regions infested the bodies of the dead. This meant that in order for a corpse to become undead, it would need to be in a mana-rich area for a substantial period time, which in turn meant that most undead were already in an advanced state of decomposition when they rose.

Sasuke, on the other hand, had looked nothing like that. He looked like a perfectly normal living person. The only thing that had suggested he was undead was the stench of death Chiyome was able to pick up on him with her superior sense of smell and the "contamination" that Ariane and other elves could see hanging over him.

In fact, this ability to sense the undead was what had brought both women to the conclusion that the skeleton body beneath my army *wasn't*, in fact, undead. It had helped bring us together. If they both concluded that Sasuke was undead, then I was sold.

But the fact that Sasuke had become one of the undead in such an unnatural way, and had a very specific objective, left me with a bad taste in my mouth regarding the inner workings of the church.

That, and Sasuke's parting words, made it Chiyome's duty as a member of the Jinshin clan to solve this mystery.

"However, I ran into a problem while I was doing some undercover research into the church. I know that Sasuke passed through the Febient Marsh along the Rhoden Kingdom's northwest border and into the Delfrent Kingdom, but I lost his trail after that."

She exchanged looks with Ariane and me.

"Whenever one of us is carrying out our duties, we usually stop by one of the 'plants' we have along the way, but they all seem to have disappeared."

These “plants” she referred to were probably some sort of information network that she and her fellow ninjas used. Without them, they would be greatly hampered in their ability to gather information.

“These plants… I’m guessing they’re comrades of yours that provide a place to hide out, yeah? And you haven’t been able to figure out where they went?”

Chiyome nodded. “The Holy Hilk Kingdom has pushed its religion hard in its three neighboring countries, so living there was pretty much out of the question for the mountain people… and even the elves. If discovered, we’d likely either be killed or enslaved, so we didn’t have many plants there to begin with. But still, they all seem to have just… vanished.”

She clenched her fists, anger twisting across her face.

Dillan continued on where Chiyome had left off. “Chiyome approached me as I was returning from the Rhoden capital to ask for your help once more, Arc. Her information network and ability to infiltrate places undetected are quite impressive. I felt a chill run up my spine when I first spotted her standing in my room in the castle!”

The older man’s casual way of speaking helped break the tension that had been slowly building.

“Hmm… So we’re off to the Holy Hilk Kingdom next?”

Chiyome’s eyes went wide at my response. “You mean you’ll help? We haven’t even discussed payment or anything…” Her voice trailed off as she gazed up at me.

Unlike the other times when I’d helped her out, this time we wouldn’t be involved in any sort of great endeavor, like liberating her enslaved comrades. Rather, this was a far more personal affair for her, one involving the man she’d thought of as a brother.

But I was also intrigued by Sasuke’s parting words. I chuckled as I replied, “Actually, I’m also interested in this matter. If I can be of some assistance to you, then I’m more than happy to help out.”

Chiyome bowed her head down low, her cat ears fluttering rapidly.

The Hilk church used its teachings to promote persecution of the elves and mountain people. Not only that, but Sasuke becoming undead seemed to have something to do

with the Holy King's teachings. If so, then the Holy Hilk Kingdom was likely responsible for the undead soldiers as well.

This wasn't the first time we'd seen the undead controlled as a single group with a unified purpose. After passing through the Furyu Mountains and entering the cave in the side of the Dragon Wonder, we'd discovered a massive cavern full of skeletons and four-legged man-spiders.

That group had been down there with a clear purpose. There was something going on behind the scenes, and I wanted to know what it was. Maybe I was just overly curious?

While I was lost in my own thoughts, Ariane also volunteered to join Chiyome's cause.

"I'm going too! I'd worry if I sent you off alone with Arc, and it's not like I can turn my back on a friend." Ariane puffed out her chest at this.

Out of nowhere, a random question popped into my mind. "Hey, Ariane, aren't you a soldier of the capital city of Maple? Is it okay for you to be spending all your time in Lalatoya like this?"

"Huh? I mean, uh, well…" Ariane stuttered, suddenly at a loss for words.

Glenys smiled widely and stepped up behind Ariane, pulling her into a tight embrace. "Have you not told him yet?"

Ariane faintly muttered an objection to her mother's rather ambiguous statement. I tilted my head to the side in confusion.

"Little Arin here changed her village recently, and her name with it. That makes her a Lalatoya, just like you, Arc."

The younger woman pushed her mother off, her ears turning a faint pink.

"Huh, so I guess that makes us members of the same village."

Ariane averted her gaze. "Don't make too much of it. I just wanted to keep an eye on you until you officially become a member. Stop overthinking things."

Dillan, who'd been quietly watching this exchange, spoke up. "Is that so? I guess that means Glenys offered for you to take on the name of Lalatoya, Arc?"

“Yes, Glenys recently asked me to join the village. But we were waiting for your formal approval.”

Dillan smiled broadly. “I see, I see. That’s good. Well, I think you would be a great benefit to our village if you would be so kind as to join us. Besides, it would probably be best for you to be around people who understand your rather unique situation.”

He cast a smile toward his daughter.

Apparently, there would be no problem with me officially becoming a member of Lalatoya Village.

“Oh, right… there’s one more thing I wanted to discuss. If you’re going to the Holy Hilk Kingdom with Chiyome, I was hoping we could accompany you to the Salma Kingdom along the southern coast.”

“Us…?” Glenys spoke up suddenly. “You mean you’re leaving the village again?”

The annoyance was clear in her voice. Dillan responded quickly, frowning.

“No, well, I mean, you see… the capital received an urgent request for assistance from the village of Drant, so I need to speak to the village elder there. I couldn’t turn down a request from the high elders. I’m sorry, Glenys.”

Glenys sighed. “Fine, whatever. I’ll just have to lodge a complaint with Father, since he’s a member of the high elders.”

Dillan’s shoulders slumped.

Ariane stepped in and broke up her parents’ spat. “What was this request for assistance from Drant about? They’re fiercely independent, so I can’t imagine they would come to us for help.”

Having only recently become a member of the village, I really didn’t understand much of the inner workings, so I decided to just listen.

“I only realized it myself when I was on my way back and had spoken with Chiyome,” Dillan said, “but it seems that Drant was attacked by the undead, led by some of the man-spiders you told me about.”

Ariane and I exchanged a look.

“They attacked Drant?”

“There were at least three of them, accompanied by countless undead soldiers outfitted in armor. They appeared in the Ruanne Forest without any warning, leading to mass casualties. Tomorrow, we’ll be departing from Landfrea with a party of all available healers and soldiers.”

“Tomorrow?” I asked. “That’s a pretty short notice. I can do some healing, so maybe I should join you?”

Dillan turned down my offer with a quick shake of his head. “I appreciate it, but the people of Drant wouldn’t look too kindly on bringing foreigners into the village. Both of you dark elves would stand out, to say nothing of Chiyome.”

Dillan offered a weak smile as his shoulders slumped.

Apparently, not all elves were open-minded.

Thinking about it a little more, though, it made sense. After all, I was only accepted here in Lalatoya because of Ariane and her father. If my actions were to cause them any sort of issues, I’d be kicked out in an instant.

Something else also struck me as strange…

“You said that we’d be departing by ship from Landfrea to help out those in the Ruanne Forest. Does that mean that the village isn’t here in the Great Canada Forest?”

“That’s correct. Ruanne, where Drant is located, lies off to the west, separate from the Great Canada Forest, along the South Central Sea.”

“Hunh. I’d figured the vast majority of elves moved to the Great Canada Forest under the guidance of the founding elder. Is that not the case?” The words were out of my mouth before I had a chance to think about what I was saying.

Ariane shook her head and rubbed her temples.

“The people of Drant turned down the founding elder’s invitation, choosing instead to live on their own. Little has changed in their thinking in the intervening years. They’ve

always been a people known for their fighting prowess."

Judging by her body language, there was something about the situation that she found unpleasant. She didn't seem to think too highly of Drant.

"No matter how much they might dislike outsiders, those man-spiders must have inflicted heavy casualties in order to push them to seek help. Are you sure these are the same creatures we fought before?"

While the man-spiders we faced back in the cave were pretty fearsome, and more than a match for a normal person, they were still no match for the likes of Ariane, a soldier of Maple, and Chiyome, one of the Jinshin clan's six great fighters. Something didn't seem right.

Then again, these two were hardly the norm.

Dillan wore an odd expression on his face, but he said nothing.

Finally, Glenys spoke up. "Their fighting legacy is a thing of the past, you know. Not only do we simply have better soldiers here, but we've got more of them too. Plus, they don't even allow their women to become soldiers. And their treatment of dark elves is just awful."

She scowled as she spoke, Ariane nodding along emphatically. Evidently, neither mother nor daughter had a high opinion of Drant.

Glenys was right—the quality of fighters wasn't everything. Numbers played an important role as well. Keeping women out of the ranks only reduced these numbers further.

Viewed charitably, keeping women off the battlefield could be seen as special treatment. But it seemed like an incredible waste in light of Glenys and Ariane's skills. They'd give any man a run for his money.

Besides, without knowing more about Drant itself, it was hard to say what the motivation behind this exclusion might be.

Chiyome spoke up next. "I hear their magical technology isn't anywhere near the level of the stuff you guys have here."

“Well…”

“I mean…”

“Right?”

Ariane, Dillan, and Glenys exchanged awkward glances at this. I got the sense that there was something deeper going on here. Certainly, the sheer number of elves living in the Great Canada Forest was a factor, but it clearly wasn’t everything.

Guuuuuuuuurrrrrrrgggggglllllle!

Suddenly, the sound of a grumbling stomach interrupted the silence. All eyes turned to the source of the noise.

Ariane’s cheeks flushed, and she quickly put her hands over her stomach, worried that it was her.

“Kyiiiiiiii!”

However, a moment later, we all witnessed Ponta stumble out from between Ariane’s legs, its large cotton-like tail swaying weakly in the air as it made its way over and mewed pathetically. So, that’s where the sound had come from.

“It looks like we got a little too caught up in conversation. I’ve already prepared some meat, so how about I throw together some lunch for us? We can talk about the details later.”

I moved the soy-sauce-drenched chicken breast over to the oven. After receiving a round of nods, I finished getting lunch ready.

The sauce caramelized nicely on the meat as it hung over the fire, filling the whole room with an amazing fragrance. I, for one, felt great.

Ponta weaved through my feet over and over, tracing a lazy circle around me while occasionally standing up on its hind legs to look at the food.

As the fire worked its magic, the not-so-soy sauce started smelling just like the real thing.

I gazed impatiently into the fire, my stomach longing for the taste of freshly grilled teriyaki chicken. Deep down, I could feel my stomach starting to growl aggressively… never mind the fact that skeletons didn't actually have stomachs.

INTERMISSION
ELIN LUXURIA CASTITAS

Vittelvarlay, the capital of the Great West Revlon Empire, was located smack-dab in the middle of its territory, which ran along the northwestern reaches of the northern continent.

Long before the empire had split in two, back in the days of a unified Revlon Empire, Vittelvarlay had served as the massive capital city. Much of its ancient glamor still remained.

Towering buildings of beautifully polished stone, broken up by expansive roads and parks, sat behind the city's massive wall. The city gave off a festive atmosphere, filled with people in all manner of dress simply passing through or stopping by to chat with one another.

At the center of the capital sat the majestic Dyonburgh royal palace, so large that it could be considered a small city in its own right. A long carriage was currently departing from it.

This elegantly decorated carriage—clearly belonging to nobility—was being drawn by two muscular horses at a slow, even pace through the streets.

The young man riding inside let out a dramatic sigh as he stared out the window, his head perched on his fist. He'd traveled this same route between the palace and his estate countless times by now.

The young man had perfectly groomed hair and a handsome face to match. However, a look of exhaustion still managed to seep into his troubled smile. Even so, he was no doubt popular with the women. Everything about the man, from the clothes he wore to the gestures he made, was well rehearsed from being under the constant scrutiny of the imperial nobility.

The man sitting in this carriage was Salwis du Ohst, mayor of the palace and assistant to Emperor Gaulba Revlon Selziofebs in both his public and private affairs.

The very fact that such a young man was chosen to be ever-present at the emperor's side and provide him with council spoke volumes about his skills, not to mention the trust he'd earned.

Though he'd been provided a room in the palace to help him perform his duties, Salwis had secured permission from the emperor to take breaks from palace life to return to his manor.

According to the reports he'd received, depending on how things played out, there was a very real possibility that the emperor would be overthrown. While he certainly was the most powerful figure within the empire, the title of emperor was anything but permanent. Emperor Gaulba was already quite old, and the infighting over who would be his successor was beginning to heat up. If anything were to threaten the emperor's power, this would change in a heartbeat.

After all, it was well known that a fight over succession had led to the empire splitting in the first place.

Salwis let out another heavy sigh. He let his eyes fall closed as he slumped back into his seat.

A short time later, the carriage pulled up to a large manor off the main road. It passed through what could have easily been mistaken for a park before stopping in front of the entrance.

The driver opened the door, and Salwis stepped out into the open air. He was greeted by his manservant, who'd been patiently waiting at the entrance.

"Good evening, Master Salwis. You have impeccable timing. Ms. Liz has come to meet with you. She's waiting inside."

The exhaustion on Salwis's face immediately melted away at this. "Oh, that's great news! Imagine that, Liz coming to see me! It's been some time since I've seen her. I best not keep her waiting."

Leaving his bags for his servants to tend to, Salwis hurried into the manor. Considering that he spent the vast majority of his time in the palace, this manor really served as more of a showpiece than anything else, but it had recently taken on the additional use of serving as a place for him to meet with others in secret.

Salwis usually limited his staff to the skeleton crew necessary to keep the mansion running, leaving the building nearly empty compared to those around it.

The elaborately decorated chambers were silent and devoid of life. His hollow steps echoing through the faintly chill air made the whole building feel like it had already been abandoned.

He sped out, worrying about what kind of inconveniences this building might be causing his guests. He certainly earned more than enough to fully staff this mansion without even breaking a sweat, but given what he generally used this building for, it was preferable to have fewer eyes around. Or at least, that was what he told himself as he reached his destination.

He pulled the door open and stepped into a small room—surprisingly small, considering the size of the massive manor. The room was lit by a fashionable chandelier that cast its glow over the tan and amber furniture. A large table sat in the middle of the room with a buttery-soft leather sofa nearly encircling one side of it.

On the sofa sat a lithe woman with long, blonde hair that practically glowed. She had a refined beauty to her, though her eyes carried a deep, unmistakable sadness. She was dressed in a simple white dress that seemed to intentionally defy the overly elaborate gowns preferred by other noble women. If Salwis hadn't known better, he might have thought she was in the wrong place.

Her body, however, more than made up for the elegance her dress lacked. The cloth was barely able to contain her feminine curves.

"Ah, Liz! I hope you weren't waiting long?"

The woman looked up from her book. A gentle smile graced her lips. She possessed a pure, childlike innocence that contrasted with her sensual figure. Salwis's heart rate sped up.

“Not at all! I just sat down, in fact. Anyway, I’m glad you were kind enough to meet with me again.” Liz lowered her gaze as she spoke in a tranquil tone. Her glowing locks fell over the pale skin of her exposed collar bones, drawing his gaze. Her smile grew broader as she saw where his eyes were fixed.

“C-come to think of it, you haven’t been around lately. Have you been busy?” Salwis’s voice jumped an octave as he hurriedly tried changing the subject, sensing that the woman across from him was all too aware of the power she had over him.

Liz giggled. “Not particularly, no. However, I did make a pilgrimage to Fehrbio Alsus.”

Salwis let out a sigh of relief. He rubbed his chin as he spoke to himself. “Ah, right. Hilk deacons are required to accompany priests on their pilgrimages to the holy capital.”

It’d been some time since Salwis had heard from Liz, and he’d become concerned for her safety. He’d used all the connections at his disposal to try and find her, but he ultimately came up empty-handed.

It turned out there were multiple deacons named Liz, but none of them had been the one Salwis was looking for. The people he’d sent out to look for her had even gone so far as to suggest she wasn’t even a deacon at all.

Now, why would she have cause to lie about something like that? he wondered. Perhaps it had something to do with his role as mayor of the palace, and his connections to the emperor. Perhaps she was just pretending to be a deacon while in actuality being of much lower status within the Hilk church.

The emperor of the Great West Revlon Empire had a rather low opinion of the Hilk, so perhaps she was worried about how it might look if a relationship between a high-level member of the church and a high-ranking official such as himself came to light.

However, judging by the gentle smile she wore, he decided it probably wasn’t a big deal.

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Salwis had first met Liz about half a year ago.

The air was chilly, snow still coating the ground, as his carriage passed a woman walking along the side of the road dressed in a simple robe. There was an exquisite,

almost unnatural beauty about her that immediately drew Salwis in. Before he even realized what he was doing, he'd already stopped his carriage and was calling out to her.

She claimed that she'd ventured out into the affluent suburbs to deliver something to a priest who'd come to pray at one of the manors, but she'd gotten lost along the way. Salwis invited her into his carriage and brought her to her destination. Ever since, they'd met a few times for the occasional dinner or tea.

Liz claimed to be a deacon at one of the churches in the capital, but over the course of their meetings, she'd said little else about herself, aside from her name. Salwis could tell she wasn't a commoner, but whenever he asked about her past, a look of deep insecurity washed over her face. He never pressed her, though he had ideas about why her reaction was always so extreme.

Perhaps she was the daughter of a noble who'd fallen from grace, or had been excommunicated from her family after a fight over inheritance. Stories like these were anything but rare.

Yet despite that, she didn't show even a hint of bitterness. She simply responded to his questions with a gentle smile, saying little unless prompted. The mystery surrounding her enchanted him more with each meeting, until Salwis had fully fallen under her spell.

For her part, she seemed to at least tolerate him, and would take time away from the church in order to visit him.

These were the humble beginnings of their romance.

***

Salwis laughed out loud. Something wasn't quite right.

"I see you're no stranger to telling jokes of your own, Liz. For a moment, I almost believed you. It would take at least half a month to get to the holy capital from here. Though it feels like forever since I saw you last, not even ten days have passed."

He laughed again and sat down next to her. Liz stared back at him, meeting his gaze.

"I am a devout Hilk servant. My heart is always in the holy capital."

Long lashes framed moist eyes as she looked up at Salwis. Her cheeks colored, pale skin flushing as she edged closer to him. There was something almost teasing in her gaze.

“In that case, I must find a way to call you back to me.”

He pressed his lips to hers. She leaned in closer, her eyelids fluttering shut. They kissed deeply. When they finally broke apart, their breathing was ragged.

The air around them was tinged with the fragrant perfume of Liz’s sweat as it traced its way down her neck.

No longer able to resist her sweet scent and pure features, Salwis picked Liz up and dropped her down onto the large, soft bed before climbing atop her, their lips locking once again as he slowly undressed her.

Unlike the layers of clothing preferred among most noble women, Liz wore the simple clothes of a commoner. She was completely naked in a matter of moments. Her golden hair splayed out behind her like a fan, her pink flesh totally exposed to Salwis’s gaze. He yanked roughly at his own clothes.

The two slumped together in a warm, naked embrace.

They locked lips again, then Salwis whispered into her ear as he stroked her cheek. “You truly are a beauty, Liz.”

This made her smile. Liz took his hands in hers and drew them up to her large chest. His fingers pressed into the soft flesh, eliciting moans of encouragement from her. Lost in his own excitement, he brought his head down to capture one of the taut, pink nubs with his lips. Liz smiled down at Salwis as he suckled with the fervor of a hungry infant.

Salwis, now at the edge of his ability to restrain himself, positioned his hips in front of Liz and pressed in, enjoying the warmth she had to offer.

Just when he was at the point of exhaustion, her lips reinvigorated him once again.

The two repeated this process until they both collapsed in a heap of warm contentment. Liz wrapped her arms around Salwis and stroked his hair.

“Feeling better?” She pressed her lips against his forehead, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Hmm?” Salwis looked up at her blankly.

“You looked exhausted.”

He nodded and burrowed his head into her chest. “It’s been one hassle after another lately. We just received a report that Tagent, an imperial colony down on the southern continent, was attacked by giants and undead soldiers. They practically wiped the entire town off the map.”

Liz nodded. “I see…”

“The report came to us quickly, but the colony’s still on a completely different continent. Even if we mustered our forces immediately—not that we *could* put together an adequate force so quickly—it would be weeks before we arrived.”

He let out a heavy sigh and opened his eyes to look out the window.

“So, you won’t do anything for them?” Liz asked.

Salwis buried his face deep into her bosom, taking in her sweet scent.

“The western imperial army is the closest force that could be mobilized, but the Aspania Kingdom recently mobilized *their* forces along the border, so they’re out. The northern and southern imperial armies are still dealing with the bastards to the east and obviously can’t go anywhere. Worse, the town of Tisheng down along the southern border has been taken by the eastern empire. If news of how thinly we’re spread got out, the emperor could find himself overthrown.”

And if that happened, then what? The fight over succession would come to the forefront, and all the nobility in the capital would be called to take sides, leaving a wide opening for the Aspania Kingdom or the Holy East Revlon Empire to exploit.

It had only recently become evident that the Great West Revlon Empire would no longer be able to rely on any support from the Rhoden Kingdom. Their own battles over succession had just recently settled, but unfortunately, the western empire had rallied behind Prince Sekt, who was no longer in the running.

In fact, it was looking like Princess Yuriarna would be the next ruler of the Rhoden Kingdom. The princess had been saying all along that she planned to distance herself from the dueling empires, so it seemed incredibly unlikely that she would come to their aid now.

If worse came to worst, the Great West Revlon Empire could find itself completely wiped off the map.

Salwis shook his head, trying to drive such heavy thoughts from his mind. “I’m sorry, Liz. The current emperor has such a poor understanding of the church. Be that as it may, however, I cannot allow him to fall.”

He wrapped his arms around her while she continued stroking his head, a gentle smile coming to her lips. “There’s no need to apologize, Salwis. God certainly understands that you and I would give ourselves up for Him. But your day has not yet come.”

“I need to lie low and bide my time.”

Salwis found himself lulled to sleep by Liz’s soft and gentle voice. He looked back up at her smiling face before finally drifting off.

As he dozed on top of her, Liz’s smile contorted into a sneer.

“The fat and happy hunter has now become the prey.”

Her words went unheard as Salwis dozed peacefully on her lap.

***

Early the next morning, before the sun had even risen high enough to burn off the mist that hung over the capital, a lone figure walked through the haze, like an apparition. Birdsong echoed in the distance.

The young man clenched his jaw, fighting back a yawn. He was a guard who’d just finished a long night shift and was walking back to his home.

Usually, the town would be full of life at this hour, as merchants and other tradespeople prepared for the day, but the long, hanging mist seemed to have kept everyone indoors. The only sounds accompanying the young man were the echoes of his own footsteps on the cobblestone street.

He hunched his shoulders and rubbed at his neck, trying to work some warmth into his skin.

“Pretty cold this mornin’…” he muttered to himself and picked up the pace, trying to ward off the loneliness of this desolate town.

Out of nowhere, someone appeared from the mist right in front of him. The young man jumped back at the sight of the shadowy figure, barely able to contain a shout of surprise. The shadowy figure took on more detail, and a beautiful woman emerged from the mist.

The woman looked like a goddess to the young guard’s eyes, her skin so pale she seemed almost one with the mist. Her golden hair swayed in the breeze. Her simple clothes barely covered her voluptuous body, every step sending a ripple through her chest that drew the guard’s gaze like a fish to bait.

The goddess shot him a gentle smile. He was so focused on her figure that he failed to notice the ominous glow around her. His legs drew him closer and closer as her eyes remained locked on his.

“What brings you out here so early, sir?”

Her gentle face and soft features immediately removed any lingering suspicion the man might have harbored. The corners of his mouth raised, and he scratched the back of his head as he responded.

“W-well, I just finished up on fire watch, and I’m heading home, m’lady.”

A strange look flitted across her face, akin to that of a hunter watching its prey.

“Oh, you’re a guard? You must’ve had such a long night. I think a little relaxation is in order, no? Teehee.”

The faintest hints of a bewitching grin could be seen beneath her mask of innocence. She grabbed the hem of her dress and tugged it up, revealing long, pale legs. The man swallowed hard. He dug through his coin purse before hanging his head in disappointment.

“I’d… I’d love to, but I really don’t have much money on me…” He could only offer up a hollow, self-deprecating laugh as he looked apologetically at the woman in front of

him.

However, she showed no sign of disappointment, or even surprise. Instead, she gave him yet another calming smile and shook her head.

“Oh, but you misunderstand. I simply wanted to offer a little reward to those who work so tirelessly to keep us safe.”

She traced her long, slender fingers under the man’s chin and giggled lightly before turning on her heel and starting to walk away. She looked back over her shoulder.

All he could do was follow her into the morning mist.

Though he’d originally been somewhat suspicious of the woman’s behavior, he’d made up his mind now, and he followed firmly after her along the cobblestones. After taking him along a circuitous route through the capital, the woman halted in front of a small, unassuming church in the middle of a cluster of houses.

“Huh. I never knew there was a church here.”

In the course of his duties, the man had traveled much of the capital and was better informed about its layout than the average citizen. However, he was now in an unfamiliar district. Most of the churches in the capital boasted gorgeous designs, feasts for the eyes. This simple, unassuming building was nothing like what he was used to. It stood at a mere two stories, dwarfed by all the three- and four-story apartment buildings surrounding it.

It didn’t even have a bell tower. At first glance, most people probably wouldn’t guess that it was a church. The marks on the entrance, however, were clearly those of the Hilk.

While the guard was busy inspecting the building, the woman walked around the side. As soon as he noticed she was missing, he took off in a jog after her.

They entered the church through an entrance in the back and descended a flight of stairs into the basement. Judging by how easily she moved through the building, the young man assumed that she must have some sort of connection to it.

At the bottom of the stairs, they continued down a musty, mold-filled hallway to a door, on the other side of which was a glorious room lit with magical torches and filled with

all manner of furnishings and art.

At the center of the room sat a massive bed, absolutely nothing like the simple pallet the man slept on in his own home.

She stopped in front of the bed, turned, and immediately shed her clothes, exposing her pale flesh, large bosom, and long legs leading up to curvy hips. The guard couldn't take his eyes off her—this woman who looked so perfect that she must've been carved out of stone.

"You're not just going to leave me here, are you?"

The naked woman shot a charming smile in the guard's direction. He moved toward her on unsteady legs. As soon as he caught the sweet scent coming off her body, his own body began moving of its own accord as he pushed her onto the bed.

The inviting smile never left her face, even as the man's eyes went bloodshot and his breathing grew heavier and heavier. She reached up and started undoing the man's shirt.

He yanked his clothing off aggressively, almost tearing it in the process, and mounted her. The man's mind went completely blank as he lost himself in pure pleasure, his body wracked with spasms.

"Nnnnngraaaaaaw!!!"

His scream echoed through the room as he continued thrusting away. Drool ran from the side of his mouth, splattering on the woman's perfect body.

A gentle laugh escaped her lips as the man continued on with his animalistic ritual; Her eyes went completely black, and a harsh, red glow shone from the sockets. Her mouth twisted and tore apart, and a long, snake-like tongue shot out. It crawled up the man and began licking his face.

"Aaaaaaugh!"

The man let out a scream but found that his body would no longer respond. He writhed, desperately trying to escape as he watched the woman transform into a monster.

“Kyahahahahahaha!”

Her maniacal laughter filled the underground room. Despite multiple attempts to get away, the man felt his body weakening. His eyes sank back into his face and his skin lost its luster as his muscles and fat withered. In a matter of seconds, he dropped down onto the bed, looking like a dried-out mummy.

The woman pulled the now-dry stump out from her between her legs, kicked the corpse to the ground, and sat back on the bed.

“Aaah, that little snack took some of the edge off.” She laughed to herself. “It’d be a waste if I don’t eat as many men as I can before this city is wiped off the map.”

Still naked, she rolled over to look down at the discarded remains of the man next to the bed. Her face had returned to that of an innocent beauty, not a trace of the monster to be seen.

CHAPTER 2
NOHZAN—A KINGDOM IN PERIL

At the southernmost end of the Great Canada Forest lay a massive elven port town that bordered the South Central Sea. This town was where the majority of trade with the Great Fobnach Kingdom—the land of the mountain people on the southern continent—took place. It was far larger than the village of Lalatoya, my new home.

The town bustled not only with elves, but mountain people from the southern continent who'd come to trade their wares.

It also brimmed with trees that had been converted into large apartment buildings—far more than in Lalatoya—many of which were connected with aerial bridges full of townspeople. The town looked both mystical and futuristic at the same time, the way it combined nature and technology. The brick-and-mortar storefronts built into the bases of the trees provided the town with a unique beauty that was accented by the stream of elves and mountain people moving back and forth along the roads.

Standing tall in my silvery armor and pitch-black cloak, with my sword and shield at my back and Ponta riding atop my helmet, I led our party through the crowd. We left a trail of hushed whispers and suspicious gazes behind us as we walked. Having experienced this the last time I was here, I didn't pay it much mind.

"I didn't figure I'd be back in Landfrea so soon."

"Kyii!" Apparently, Ponta shared my sentiment.

Trailing behind me was our usual party: my self-proclaimed supervisor, Ariane, and our chief information gatherer, Chiyome. Behind them was Dillan, Lalatoya's village elder. He'd come with us to prepare a rescue force to head to Drant. The rescue force consisted of around twenty healers and soldiers. They were waiting for us at the port.

Once we made it through the tall tree buildings, we started seeing more and more mushroom-shaped buildings—the commercial district. The road was lined with stalls covered with goods from the Great Fobnach Kingdom. Hawkers called out to all who passed by to come look at their wares. It was truly a sight to behold.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

Ponta’s head moved on a constant pivot as it inspected all the food brought up from the southern continent, mewing at the unique smells.

Ariane laughed lightly. “Sorry, Ponta, but we’ve got to head straight to the port. No detours, okay?”

Ponta’s large, bushy tail drooped down my back. The cottontail fox was clearly disappointed to hear this.

I pulled a large leather pouch from my waist and held it up for Ponta to see. “Don’t worry, buddy. I brought some snacks for the boat.”

Ponta immediately brightened up and began wagging its tail around. Chiyome’s nose twitched as she watched our interaction. Her ears perked up, and her eyes widened with delight.

It was rare to see her show any expression on her face; her tail usually did most of the talking. Apparently, she recognized what was in the bag.

“Hey, Arc, that smells a lot like that teriyaki chicken dish you made before.”

She’d hit the nail on the head. I’d used the remaining imitation soy sauce to make a kind of grilled and skewered yakitori chicken. I usually preferred the dish salted, but since I had some leftover sauce, I used that to baste the skewered chicken before grilling it.

Still, putting food dripping with sauce into a leather bag was a bit of a strange idea.

In case the sauce was too strong for Ponta, I’d also brought some dried berries as a backup. I was shaking the bag to check its contents when something suddenly struck me.

“How long will this trip take?”

Dillan looked a bit uncomfortable at this question. “It should take about four days. Unfortunately, I don’t handle the seas all that well…”

It had taken us a single day to make it down to the southern continent on our previous

trip, which meant this journey would be four times as long. It still wasn't all that long in light of the distance we'd be traveling, but I imagined the prospect of a four-day voyage aboard a ship wouldn't be appealing for someone prone to seasickness.

I glanced over toward Chiyome and noticed a conspicuous absence—the large, muscle-bound cat man who'd joined us on our last adventure.

"Did you decide to not invite Goemon along?"

Chiyome looked back up from the bag in my hand, her expression once again going blank.

"Goemon is continuing his investigation into Sasuke's travels in the Delfrent Kingdom. Besides, this request was a personal one. Regardless of whether or not you agreed to help me, I'd already planned to make my way to the Holy Hilk Kingdom, one way or another."

A fire burned in Chiyome's eyes, the determination in her voice clear.

She was trying to figure out what had happened to someone she'd not only loved dearly, but also someone who's life she'd taken. It was easy to understand why she was so intent on discovering how he'd met his fate.

In fact, she probably wouldn't be able to forgive herself if she didn't uncover the truth.

"So, we might run into Goemon along the way, then?"

"It's possible, I suppose. Including its three neighboring countries, the Holy Hilk Kingdom is far larger than the Rhoden Kingdom. But since Goemon isn't working out of any kind of base of operations, I doubt he'll be able to catch up with us."

As we left the commercial district, Chiyome's gaze turned to the vast sea that spread out in front of us. It was nothing but water clear to the horizon. She looked uncertain.

Ariane also looked worried as she watched Chiyome. The young girl's cat ears lay flat against her head.

I glanced back at my pouch, remembering Chiyome munching away happily on the chicken teriyaki I'd made yesterday.

“What is this, Arc? I’ve never tasted anything like it before. It’s really good!” Her azure eyes had been wide as she ravenously consumed the sauce-covered chicken.

Ariane had also looked pleasantly surprised as she popped some of the meat into her mouth. “I didn’t care for the smell while you were making it, but it smells *amazing* now that you’ve grilled it up.”

The two had nothing but praise for my imitation soy sauce.

“Well, this is quite a unique flavor.” Glenys smacked her lips in satisfaction.

“I used something called soy sauce to add some flavor. I think there’s still room for improvement, but it came out pretty good for a first try.”

It tasted more like a Western-style sauce than I’d planned, but I was still happy with how it had turned out. Maybe it would even spread among the elves as a new flavor.

After Chiyome polished off her first skewer, she held her hands out for seconds, which she gobbled up just as quickly. She turned her attention back to me.

“Hey, Arc, I’d love to introduce this to the people in my village. Would you mind teaching me how to make it?”

I nodded eagerly. “Of course not! I’d love to see more people enjoy this.”

Chiyome’s cat ears flitted about excitedly.

There was a certain happiness only seeing people enjoy a dish you prepared could bring. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d made food for someone, but I’d been fortunate enough to do so several times since coming to this world.

It was funny… the fewer people there were in the world, the closer you ended up becoming. It was a complete reversal from the modern world I’d come from.

I let out a light chuckle as I thought about last night’s dinner. I felt as though the food I’d made helped reduce the burden that weighed on Chiyome’s heart, if only for a moment.

Chiyome was one of my few friends in this mysterious world—or at least I considered her to be one. I had no idea how she felt about me. I was fortunate enough to be stronger than the average person, so I was often able to help Chiyome out. I didn’t mean this in an arrogant way—it was a simple fact. Still, I didn’t want people to evaluate me purely on the strength I could bring to bear. In fact, I was all too aware that I lacked the experience to make the most of my powers. That was why I’d decided to double down on my sword training with Glenys after returning from the southern continent.

I clenched my fist and looked out at the horizon.

Ariane called out to us. “Hurry up, you two! The boat’s already at the dock.”

I turned to find Dillan approaching one of the buildings near the port. Chiyome and I hurried after him as he disappeared inside.

This building, part of the port facilities, had a magic lift that could lower you through a large tunnel in the earth down to the dock. We stepped out to find numerous ships berthed in an underground cavern.

Dillan made his way toward one of the vessels. Though by no means tiny compared to the ships around it, this ship was much smaller than the *Rievbelta*. It was maybe about half the size of the hundred-meter vessel we'd ridden on our previous trip. This new ship sported two large masts and boasted a sleek hull made of a white metallic material. Several portholes for cannons lined the side of the vessel, reminding me of the *Rievbelta*.

A crew of burly dark elves rushed in and out of the vessel, getting it ready for departure. A small army of around twenty more elves, marked by their green-tinged blond hair and pointed ears, stood on the shore. They snapped to attention as soon as they spotted Dillan. This was the rescue force that would support Drant. I recognized one of the faces in the crowd immediately—it was Danka.

I remembered that scowling face and wrinkled forehead from back when I'd joined Ariane in her attempt to rescue the elves who'd been enslaved in Diento.

Ariane shot a glance in his direction—a simple greeting. Once Danka caught sight of me, however, the wrinkles in his forehead deepened. He averted his gaze, looking back at Dillan.

He'd never really trusted me, so his reaction made sense.

Dillan, oblivious to that exchange, stood in front of the formation and began speaking.

"We've been instructed by the council of high elders to head west to the village of Drant, off in the Ruanne Forest. I'm sure you've already been briefed, but we're responding to a request for assistance. However, there are many out there who will not welcome our presence. Do not argue with anyone in Drant. If you have any issues, come speak with me personally."

Dillan paused and looked at each and every person assembled before him. He was met with a mixture of nods and frowns. Apparently, these elves weren't too keen about heading off to Drant. I could feel pinpricks on the back of my neck—or I would have, if I had skin—from the overall mood.

I looked at Ariane. "It seems like the people aren't too fond of Drant."

She let out a heavy sigh. "Well, there's a bit of a history there. Father says he knows the elder, but the rest of the village generally isn't welcoming to outsiders."

“All right, let’s board. We’ll ship out as soon as everyone’s settled.”

With that, the soldiers grabbed their bags and clambered onto the ship. Ariane, Chiyome, and I made our way toward the gangplank.

As soon as I set foot on deck, Dillan called out to me. “Arc, could you come over here?”

We followed him into the hold. The interior of the ship was broken into different rooms and sections.

“Kyii!” Ponta mewed greetings to people as we walked past, eliciting surprised glances from the soldiers as they caught sight of the rare creature.

At the stern of the ship, Dillan opened a door and invited Ariane, Chiyome, and me inside. The room itself wasn’t all that large, but it was well decorated and featured two bunk beds, one on each side of the room.

Ponta dove onto one of the beds, batting at the comforter to test its softness before looking excitedly back at me.

“I apologize for not being able to secure a larger vessel for this journey,” Dillan said. “There aren’t too many rooms, so you three will have to share.”

A smile graced Dillan’s lips as he left the room, saying he had other duties to attend to.

Ariane watched her father leave, then turned mechanically toward me. Her expression spoke volumes. She wasn’t in a position to complain, since her father had managed to secure a space for us on this ship in the first place, despite most of the ship being dedicated to the rescue force. Besides, Ariane had volunteered to help track down Sasuke.

She sighed dramatically, apparently having come to terms with the situation. She shot me a look. “We’re splitting the room down the middle. That’s your side!”

Her amethyst skin took on a rose-colored hue as she pulled Chiyome over to their side of the room and dictated her terms. Chiyome looked confused at Ariane’s behavior. The Jinshin clan was mostly men, so Chiyome was used to spending long periods of time with them. She probably didn’t think much of sharing a room with me. Ariane, however, wasn’t so keen on it.

However, Ariane was a member of the elven soldier class, which, as far as I could tell, was also mostly men. There was something a little princess-y about the way she was reacting. Honestly, I found it kind of adorable.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

Ponta ran around happily, sniffing at everything in sight and paying no mind to the imaginary line dividing the room.

A short time later, I felt the whole ship shudder. Looking out the window, I could see the world moving outside. Apparently, we were underway.

“Welp, I guess our four days at sea starts now.”

With that, I stepped back into my side of the room and sat down on my bed, setting my bag on the ground beside me. Ponta hopped up onto my lap, wagging its fluffy tail.

It was pretty clear what the fox wanted: a snack.

“We just started, y’know. Hold on for a bit, okay? How about you and I go for a walk?”

“Kyiiii… Kyii!” Ponta quickly moved through a range of emotions, from sadness at being denied a snack to excitement at the prospect of heading off on an adventure.

I picked it up by the scruff of its neck and headed for the door.

Ariane spoke up from behind me. “You better knock before entering, you hear? I don’t want you just barging in!”

“I wouldn’t even dare.”

After placating Ariane, Ponta and I stepped out into the hall.

“I don’t get why she has a problem with being under the same roof as me. It’s not like it’s any different from back in Lalatoya.”

I shook my head in confusion at Ariane’s prim and proper side.

It almost felt like a plot pulled straight out of a manga, where some perv got to stay in a room with two women. But this wasn’t a kids’ story.

I made my way up to the deck. The port was already a tiny dot in the distance as we glided west along the ocean.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

Ponta got a running start and scrambled up to the top of the railing along the side of the ship. It narrowed its eyes contentedly as the sea breeze blew through its dark green fur.

Then someone called out to me from behind. “Are the rumors of you joining Lalatoya true?”

No greeting, no preamble. Just straight into a question. I turned around to find a familiar face.

“Ah, Danka. It’s been awhile.”

“Kyii!”

Danka didn’t acknowledge either of our greetings.

“It’s true. Elder Dillan invited me to become a member of Lalatoya Village.”

Danka raised an eyebrow. “You said you were a human, no? And yet you’re welcomed as an elf with open arms. So, which is it?”

I’d forgotten that I’d claimed to be a human the last time we met. To be fair, I hadn’t been lying—I only learned that I’d assumed the form of my dark elf counterpart from the game *after* my skeleton body transformed back into flesh and blood.

“I was suffering from memory loss at that time and thought I was human. I didn’t even know who I was.”

Danka eyed me with suspicion. “Save your lies for someone else. Even if you did lose your memory, a simple look would tell you what race you are! You’re hiding something, and I want to know what it is.”

Dillan had warned me that it was still too early to reveal the full situation with my body. For now, he wanted to increase my standing in Lalatoya before letting anyone else in on my secret.

After proving that I wasn't actually undead, I'd been fortunate enough to have Ariane and her family accept me as a normal person. But I'd realized recently that this wouldn't be the case among all elves.

Many groups of elves lived apart and even thought ill of one another. I'd originally assumed that the entire species was a tight-knit group, but, as time went on, I came to realize that they weren't all that different from humans. Danka had worked closely with Ariane to rescue the enslaved elves, yet now he was in front of me, his green eyes full of suspicion.

As a soldier charged with preserving the safety of his village, it made sense for him to mistrust someone as powerful as me whose background was shrouded in mystery. Thankfully, I'd anticipated running into a situation like this.

I locked eyes with Danka and repeated the story Dillan had told me to provide.

"I'm suffering from the effects of a rather unique curse. My outward appearance differs from person to person. Elder Dillan has asked me to say no more. If you have further questions, please speak with him."

Ponta, who'd been patiently watching this exchange, hopped up from the railing and landed on my shoulder. My vision was instantly obscured by a large, fluffy tail.

"Watch it, Ponta! I can't see anything."

"Kyii!"

I'd overreacted a bit, due to the tense situation, but Ponta quickly obliged and wrapped itself around my neck like a scarf.

Danka scowled and began walking away. "Whatever you do, don't you dare betray her trust, Arc."

With that, he slipped through the door and disappeared below deck. He was almost certainly talking about Ariane. Regardless of how he felt about me personally, at least he accepted me as a friend of Ariane's. For now, it seemed like a crisis had been averted.

I turned back to look out at the vast ocean and sighed in relief.

I stayed on the deck for a while, alternately watching the ocean and the crew. It felt good to take in the sea breeze, but eventually I grew tired of the unchanging view.

I let out a yawn. Ponta yawned as well and scratched its ear with its hind leg.

“Well, how ’bout we head back?”

“Kyii!” Ponta readily agreed to my suggestion.

I made my way down to the cabin and pushed the door open—that’s right, I didn’t even bother to knock. Ariane had discarded her leather armor and was only wearing her decorative robe as she relaxed on her bed. Chiyome had taken off the top of her usual black ninja garb.

At first glance, I thought she was just sitting there in her underwear, but upon closer inspection, it looked more like an undershirt of some sort. Time seemed to freeze, an eerie silence enveloping the room. This, however, only lasted a moment. Ariane hurled her pillow at me, but it missed and slammed into the door as I closed it behind me. A muffled tirade followed.

After the encounter with Danka, I’d completely forgotten about knocking. It wasn’t like I’d even seen anything particularly exciting, but Ariane was intent on reminding me how little attention I paid to things.

It didn’t help that this was the first day of our journey.

I promised it wouldn’t happen again and things calmed down a bit.

Fortunately, nothing noteworthy happened the rest of the day.

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Four days later, the ship carrying the rescue force approached the coastline bordering the Ruanne Forest. Somewhere inside the dense tree cover lay the village of Drant. As far as I could tell from the deck, the trees in Ruanne weren’t anywhere near as massive as those in the Great Canada Forest.

We trekked along the coast until we came upon a bay. The surrounding land was all sand, devoid of any trees. Several piers jutted out into the water. The only vessels docked there were small fishing boats. The elves of Drant apparently weren’t running

any large-scale fishing operations.

Even at this distance, I could spot the characteristic pointed ears and green-tinged blond hair that marked the elves. Their clothes were also similar to the traditional garb worn in Canada. After determining that there was simply no way our large ship would ever be able to dock, we sailed a short distance up the coast, dropped anchor, and started lowering the small boats sitting atop the deck into the water.

Dillan boarded the first boat with a contingent of soldiers and took off toward the shore.

"So, I guess we're stuck on the ship until Dillan gets permission from the village elder for us to come ashore?" I used my hand to shield my eyes from the glare as I watched the small boat make its way toward the shore.

Ariane did the same, her golden eyes fixed on her father and the elves who were beginning to gather on the beach. "They really don't seem happy to see us."

Thanks to her impeccable vision, Ariane was able to get a good look at the people coming to meet Dillan. She sounded rather annoyed.

At Ariane's side, Chiyome also watched the beach with great interest. "Are your interactions with Drant that rare?"

"I'd say once every four, maybe five years or so."

They almost followed the same schedule as the Olympics. This seemed to have little to do with trade and more to do with keeping the lines of communication open.

"As far as they're concerned, they believe that we in Canada have turned our backs on elven culture. They're proud to live on their own, without any other species around them." The irritation was obvious in Ariane's voice.

"Does that include dark elves?"

Ariane looked over at me. "Ah, well, hmm. Now that you're an official member of our village, you'll learn about it in due time. But don't worry for now."

All I could do was nod in response to her rather vague reply.

Apparently, there were forces at work in the Great Canada Forest that I was utterly unaware of.

The only other non-human species I knew about were the dark elves and the mountain people. I hadn't seen anyone else, but it was possible they were living in villages farther east.

I caught sight of movement near Dillan's entourage on the beach. They'd docked their boat at the pier and had been approached by a group of people who'd come out of the trees.

The person speaking directly to Dillan seemed to be in charge, while the others around him appeared to be guards of some sort.

The leader looked over at our ship and nodded before reaching out and shaking Dillan's hand. Dillan waved toward the ship, and the remaining soldiers began boarding boats.

"We've got permission to land! Everyone, get the boats ready! We'll be making several trips, so standby to leave!"

A member of the ship's crew began shouting orders, followed by shouts of acknowledgements from the other deckhands. The soldiers began loading the boats with supplies.

However, one of the soldiers from Drant began shouting angrily at us as soon as we docked at the pier.

"Go no farther! No one has granted you permission to enter the village!"

The man huffed angrily, stopping us in our tracks.

"You bastards from Canada brought not only dark elves with you, but beasts as well?"

Disdain dripped from his words. Ariane, who'd been standing by quietly, tensed with barely contained rage.

"And you, in the armor! Show me your face!"

His voice boomed across the beach. All eyes were now on me.

I lifted the helmet—with Ponta on it—off my head as instructed, exposing my face.

“Kyii!”

The man’s brow furrowed as he examined me, casting his gaze across my black hair, red eyes, and brown skin.

“What the hell are you?”

I’d taken a swig of some of the spring water from the base of the Lord Crown, which changed me from my skeleton body to my elven form, just in case something like this happened.

“We’re simply here to travel through the forest to the Salma Kingdom. Will you allow us to pass?”

I slid the helmet back over my head and stretched out my arms in a gesture of peace.

“Absolutely not! No outsiders are allowed to enter the Ruanne Forest!”

Dillan spoke a few words to the leader from Drant. One of the guards came running over to the man blocking our way and whispered in his ear.

The man furrowed his brow even further and shot a menacing glare in my direction before turning and walking away. Thankfully, Dillan had managed to smooth things over.

After the man departed, the other guard stepped forward and bowed to us before speaking.

“The village elder has granted you permission to travel through the forest. If you take that path leading into the woods, you will find yourselves in the land of the humans in about half a day’s time. Please understand, however, that you have not been granted permission to enter the village.”

Once he finished speaking, the man returned to the group near Dillan.

The rescue force began making preparations to move out. Dillan waved to us.

Chiyome and I bowed in response. Ariane continued glaring daggers at the man from

earlier.

“Well,” I said, “now that we’ve gotten permission, we should probably—”

Before I’d even finished, Ariane broke in, her resentment bubbling over as she ground her heel into the pier. “What the hell is up with these people? I don’t understand why the high elders would agree to help jerks like these.”

Chiyome sighed softly. “At least they agreed to let us pass through the forest.”

I nodded. I didn’t know what we would’ve done if we’d been forced back onto the boat.

If necessary, we could’ve used Dimensional Step to sneak through the forest, but I was still happy to have official approval.

“Well, shall we get going?”

Ariane, Chiyome, and Ponta all chimed in.

“Sure.”

“Let’s.”

“Kyii!”

We’d soon be making our way into the humans’ domain again, so Chiyome pulled a large hat over her head to cover her ears and tucked her tail into her clothing, while Ariane drew the hood of her charcoal-gray cloak low over her face.

We made our way to the trail leading off from the beach that the villager had indicated.

We walked up a gentle incline and into the woods until we came across a clearing marked off by three large trees with stairs running along their outer perimeter, reminding me of large screws drilled into the ground. Though nowhere near as large as Lord Crown, these trees were much bigger than anything I’d seen in the Great Canada Forest.

I could see numerous homes built among the massive roots at the bases of the trees.

Apparently, this was Drant.

It looked nothing like the settlements in the Great Canada Forest that I was familiar with. A large barrier of wood and stone surrounded the whole village like a castle wall. Still, similar walls I'd seen back in Canada seemed a lot better at fending off attacks than the one surrounding Drant.

I spotted a large group marching toward the village gates—the rescue party and their guides.

Ariane frowned and looked over at me. "By the way, Arc. When did you get that spring water? I was worried for a moment when that guy told you to show your face."

"Oh, that?"

I dropped the rucksack off my shoulder, undid the string holding it shut, and pulled out a book of loose-leaf paper.

"I drew the interior of our room on the ship to help me remember what it looked like. Using that, I was able to teleport to the shrine and back to get some water from the spring."

I flipped to the most recent page and showed the image to Ariane. Chiyome leaned in to take a look as well, her cat ears twitching.

"Oh, that's the book you bought in the Landfrea market. Is that our room on the ship?"

She looked intently at the rough sketch of our room I'd drawn that morning.

In order to use my long-distance teleportation magic spell, Transport Gate, I needed to have a strong image of the location in my mind.

This wasn't much of a problem in unique locations, but this time I'd needed to teleport into one of many cabins aboard a ship at sea. If I didn't have a perfect memory of what the room looked like, it was entirely possible that I wouldn't be able to teleport back at all.

It wasn't so hard to recall your own room, due to the amount of time you spent there, but very few people could actually remember the details of a hotel room they'd spent the night in.

By using this book, I was able to supplement my memory and increase the number of

locations I could teleport to. Ever since I'd gotten it, I'd sketched many of the places we'd been. If I kept this up, I'd eventually be able to travel the whole world quite easily.

Ariane's eyes went wide. "Wait, is that me?!"

She put her finger on the page for added emphasis. I'd drawn Ariane sleeping soundly on the bed.

"I think I did a pretty good job capturing your beauty. What do you think?" I puffed out my chest with pride.

Ariane opened her mouth several times, as if she wanted to say something but couldn't find the right words. She slammed the book shut and shoved it back toward me. Her ears were turning pink.

"Just forget about it!"

Chiyome looked a little disappointed. "The blanket was over my head, so you could only see my tail…"

She was right. I'd drawn exactly what I could see from where I sat on my bed. Since Ponta was sleeping with me, I hadn't drawn it either.

Ponta smacked my helmet with its paws. Next time I drew a location, I'd have to be sure to include the cottontail fox too.

"Could we take a short break here before heading out? I'd like to get this place down on paper."

I could teleport back to the shrine any time I wanted, but I'd need to have a reminder of some sort in order to return here. The unique design of Drant would make a great teleportation location, and I'd almost certainly be able to recall it in the short term, but I liked having this as insurance in case my memory faded.

Besides, having a list of places to teleport to would come in handy.

"Sure, that's fine. But I don't want any trouble, so let's keep our distance."

We moved a short way off the path.

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Fortunately, the scene in front of me was pretty easy to draw, and I was done in no time at all.

I compared the image on paper with the village of Drant in the distance. I was satisfied with how well I'd done.

"Not too bad, if I do say so myself."

Ariane just yawned loudly. She stood and stretched before brushing the dirt off her bottom.

"You done?"

Chiyome climbed down from the tree where she'd been keeping watch.

"Are we heading out?"

I nodded, only to be met with a look of confusion.

I waved my hand in front of me to check on something.

"Well, I mean, I plan to head out shortly. Just wait a moment."

I headed a short distance away from the two women before summoning Transport Gate.

Ponta rushed over and dove through the air, landing on its rightful place atop my head.

A circle of light appeared at my feet, and the world went black for a fraction of a second. A moment later, I was at my destination.

The dense foliage almost entirely blocked out the sky, except for faint pinpricks of light that managed to find their way through.

I was standing in front of the Lord Crown in the middle of the ruins of my shrine. It was still a work in progress.

I looked at the familiar surroundings. After taking a deep breath, I called out.

“Heeeeeey, Shiden! You there, boy? C’mere!”

My voice rang through the vast woods. A moment later, Ponta decided to give it a shot too.

“Kyiiiii! Kyii kyiiiiii!”

Ponta had greater success. I could hear the rustling of an animal shoving its way through the undergrowth. Shiden, my driftpus, soon appeared. It let out a cheerful cry as soon as it caught sight of Ponta and me.

“Grweeeeeeeen.”

I braced myself and caught Shiden in a tight embrace, bringing its headlong rush to a sudden stop and carving massive grooves into the soft earth at its feet.

This charge was Shiden’s way of showing affection. For any normal person, however, it would be as terrifying as watching a small truck barreling toward them. The driftpus viewed these shows of strength as vital to building a relationship.

Though it might have looked like a tiny, muscle-bound dragon, there was something endearing about the way the driftpus acted.

“Kyii! Kyiiiiii!”

Ponta called out from atop my head, eliciting a growl and a shake of its shaggy white beard from Shiden.

After letting the two have their moment, I butted in.

“It looks like you’ve gotten used to living here, but I just don’t think the mountain life is right for you. How about we go on a little trip together? You can get some exercise in while you’re at it.”

I rubbed Shiden’s muscular neck before throwing a saddle onto its back and mounting it.

Shiden shook its head and let out a loud snort, almost as if it understood what I was saying. It cheerfully pounded its feet to signal it was ready to go.

I once again summoned Transport Gate. The scene changed in an instant, and we were back standing in front of Ariane and Chiyome.

“Eek!”

Ariane jumped back in surprise at the massive beast that had appeared before her, sending her falling back onto her rear. Once she’d figured out what was going on, she glared at me.

“Wanna give us a warning next time?! Jeez…”

She seemed intent on trying to cover up her sudden fright by blaming me.

“Do you plan on taking Shiden into the human kingdom, Arc?” Chiyome slowly approached the massive beast.

“I just thought it’d be a good idea to let him run around in an open space for a bit. Besides, it’s not like we’re going to run into anyone the moment we cross the border.”

People here generally lived pretty close together. They tended to gather around sources of water and flat plains suitable for farming. However, due to the threats presented by roaming monsters here, they almost always lived in walled-off communities.

Even the farms outside the protective walls were typically rather close to the towns and villages, since it wasn’t possible to develop land far from their homes. Generally speaking, humans lived within sight of the nearest settlement.

Besides, if we were talking about some massive creature, like the forty-meter-long Dragon Lord, that’d be a different story entirely. But at only one-tenth the size, Shiden wouldn’t draw much attention.

Moreover, we needed to travel through a land four times as big as the Rhoden Kingdom before we even made it to the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

With Shiden’s strength we’d be able to plow through forests and dense overgrowth without needing to find a trail. Plus, it could maintain its speed across the vast distance.

Chiyome patted Shiden’s nose, satisfied with the answer. “Thanks for the help, Shiden.”

Shiden snorted loudly.

“All right, then, let’s get out of the forest before we run into those Drant jerks again.”

Ariane was all business as she started loading our bags onto Shiden’s saddle. She’d apparently gotten over her earlier shock.

I pulled Shiden’s reins and turned it back to the path we’d been walking on earlier.

“All right, everyone ready?”

Ariane hopped up behind me, while Chiyome settled down in front.

Ponta climbed onto Shiden’s head and found a spot among its white mane.

“Kyiiiii!”

At Ponta’s instruction, Shiden let out a roar and began running forward.

The wispy trees encroaching on the path were immediately trampled as Shiden barreled through the forest, forging a new trail. From time to time, a stray branch would whip back toward us, and Chiyome would duck as low as she could, letting me take the brunt of the blows. I hardly felt them, thanks to my powerful armor.

Ariane scrunched up to use me as a human shield.

“Gyahahahahahaha!!!”

My raucous laughter echoed ominously through the Ruanne Forest. To passersby, we must have made a rather terrifying image—a man laughing maniacally atop a massive beast plowing through the woods.

The trees grew less and less dense until we finally broke out into a vast plain.

While in the forest, Shiden could move at about the street speed of a car. But once we were out on open ground, it immediately sped up. I figured not even an hour had passed since we’d started riding.

We were now running through a vast landscape of hills and valleys that stretched toward the horizon. I pulled lightly on the reins to get Shiden to slow down a bit.

“The forest wasn’t all that big, apparently. Or maybe the path we took was the shortest way through?” Chiyome looked back at me as she spoke, prompting me to look over my shoulder at the Ruanne Forest and then back to the hillside in front of us.

“Getting through Ruanne was just the first step. There’s no way we’re going to be able to figure out where Sasuke went across these vast plains, so we should probably make our way straight to the Holy Hilk Kingdom. What do you think?”

Chiyome nodded. “You’re probably right, but it might not hurt to find out what we can at any towns we come across.”

“All right, then we’ll head toward the Holy Hilk Kingdom.”

I glanced around, cocking my head to the side in confusion at the undulating hills around us.

“Now, the question is… which way is it?”

Ariane pointed in the direction of our objective. “According to Chiyome, the Holy Hilk Kingdom is west of the Delfrent Kingdom, right? We came in from the coast to the south, so that means it must be to the northwest.”

Considering I had zero sense of direction, I wasn’t in any position to correct her.

I pulled on Shiden’s reins and pointed his nose in the direction Ariane pointed out. It seemed to be greatly enjoying its mad dash up and down the grass-covered hillsides. Its six powerful legs kicked up massive clouds of dirt as we continued through the tranquil countryside.

After a short time, Chiyome let out a shrill cry. “Arc, there are horses and man-spiders coming in off to our right!”

I glanced in the direction Chiyome was pointing to find a herd of racing horses led by what looked like a knight who, much like myself, also had a small girl riding in front of her. Behind her was a group of well-armored cavalry, crowded close as if to protect the girl.

Behind the rushing cavalry, I caught sight of the now-familiar creatures—their lower bodies like those of a spider, while their upper bodies looked like two people grafted together in the middle. They sported four massive arms, each equipped with shields

and weaponry. Even though they were unmounted, they still managed to keep pace with the horses.

The distant scene looked almost like something you'd see in a B movie, though I could only imagine how terrified the people being chased must have been.

"Well, talk about good timing! It looks like the people we're looking for are coming right toward us!"

I snapped the reins, and Shiden immediately changed course straight for the charging army, without me having to provide further direction. The driftpus was actually pretty smart.

"After we help the people being pursued, we'll figure out where those monsters came from!"

"Got it!"

Chiyome and Ariane replied in unison as the driftpus beneath us drove its six massive legs even harder into the earth, increasing its speed and closing in on the monsters.

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The Sobir Mountains defined the border between the Salma Kingdom and the Nohzan Kingdom, its neighbor to the east.

Along the eastern side of the mountain range was the Wiel River, which cut across the land before emptying into the South Central Sea. This area had once been part of the Nohzan Kingdom, but it currently belonged to the Salma Kingdom.

The land was ruled by Margrave Brahniey—margrave was an upgrade from his inherited title of marquis, since he'd brought the land into the Salma Kingdom's fold.

Brahniey's domain was covered in grassy hills and devoid of any settlements or even farmlands. A single, barely maintained road cut through the land… A road down which a carriage was now racing at top speed.

The carriage itself looked shoddily built, but the four horses that pulled it were of a rather elegant breed.

Stones of all sizes covered the road, causing the carriage's wheels to rattle noisily as it bounced along.

Ten mounted knights rode alongside the carriage, outfitted in elaborate armor, with majestic swords hanging by their sides. It was clear from a glance that this was no normal group of soldiers.

The knights had been dispatched from the capital of the Nohzan Kingdom in order to protect their young charge in the simple carriage—Princess Riel.

However, since they were currently intruding into another kingdom's domain, they didn't display any royal crests as they rushed across the land, trying to keep out of sight.

The impromptu caravan was led by two decorated knights, a man and a woman, who were charged with leading Princess Riel's protection detail.

Niena, a young woman with a long black ponytail, brown skin, and eyes so dark they were nearly black, was one of the two leading the group of bodyguards. She looked almost like a child herself.

She voiced her dismay over the current situation to the brawny man with short brown hair riding next to her.

"We left the capital two days ago, but even though we swapped out horses to maintain our pace, we've slowed ever since we entered the Salma Kingdom. Don't you think it'd be wiser to keep up our speed until we reach Count Dimo?"

Zahar thought it over for a moment before shaking his head. He was a man of few words, but his expressions spoke volumes.

"We're already in enemy territory, so it's not like we can just stop by a town and keep changing out our horses whenever we want. Ultimately, we'll get there faster if we keep the horses at a comfortable pace rather than running them straight into the grave."

Niena let out an exasperated sigh, but she knew he spoke the truth.

At their current pace, they were about a half day's journey from Count Dimo's domain. As Zahar had pointed out, they'd be in dire straits if the horses became too exhausted to move—or even died—while they were in a hostile country.

But even though Niena knew that moving at this speed was the rational choice, between the undead encounter back at the capital and the risk of being caught in a foreign land, she didn't want to stay any longer than she had to.

Niena shook her head heavily and tugged on her reins, slowing her horse to pull up beside Princess Riel's carriage.

Riel opened the window. "What's goin' on, Niena? Somethin' wrong?"

The young girl tilted her head in confusion, curious as to why her lead bodyguard would leave her place at the head of the formation. Niena was taken aback at how astute the young girl was, but she shook her head.

"Not at all, Princess Riel. How about you? You must be tired riding in this carriage for so long."

The childlike innocence disappeared from Riel's face. "This isn't the time for me to complain about creature comforts! Not with the capital in peril."

This left the nearby guard detail at a loss for words.

Despite the girl's young age, the tone in her voice made it clear that she took her assigned task very seriously.

"Please tell Zahar to hurry, Niena. I want to get to Count Dimo as soon as possible."

Niena nodded and tugged on her reins, directing her horse back to the front of the party.

Just then, one of the guards let out a panicked shout.

"M-m-monstrous spiders are coming in from the rear!"

Niena glanced back over her shoulder to scan the horizon. It didn't take long for her to spot a man-spider creature running down the hill after them.

It looked like a set of massive, black spider legs stitched to two discolored human torsos, each with its own pair of arms. It wore armor, and was armed with swords and shields. The creature moved so fast that it seemed to glide along the ground toward the carriage.

Niena knew in an instant that this was the monster she'd heard about back at the castle, though its very presence raised questions.

Undead were well known here, and while they weren't particularly common, they were hardly rare. To avoid their loved ones meeting such a fate, people typically cremated their dead. For such a large number of undead to attack Saureah in concert, they'd have to be under someone's control.

Not only that, undead didn't just appear out of nowhere in such large numbers, much less outfitted in matching armor.

Niena had once heard a legend, passed down from generation to generation, about someone who'd learned the dark art of controlling the undead, but that was nothing more than a story… wasn't it?

She shook her head to drive away the notion. Now wasn't the time to think about such things.

"Zahar, the same monsters that were attacking the capital are closing in on us! I want you to lead the princess's carriage out of here!"

"Protecting the princess's carriage is your job." Zahar turned to the other guards and bellowed out an order. "You four deadbeats, come with me! We're going to take that monster head on!"

Zahar took off at full speed toward the incoming creature.

"We found you, little one!"

The man-spider's twin heads sported mouths that looked like crude gashes ripped into their faces. Their voices echoed in low, eerie tones as they spoke. Their myriad eyes focused on Zahar and his knights.

The small squad drew their swords, keeping one hand on the reins to guide their horses.

Despite Zahar's humble beginnings, he'd worked his way up to earn the title of a knight. Each of the guards following him into battle was an expert in combat, and they would gladly throw down their lives for the royal family. The group spread out, with Zahar at the lead, and tried to surround the monster.

However, sensing what the soldiers were planning, the man-spider crouched low to the ground and, in an impressive show of strength, launched its enormous body through the air and over their heads.

"Wha?! No way! About face!"

Even a well-seasoned warrior like Zahar was taken by surprise. After uttering a few choice words, he yanked hard on his horse's reins and turned around. But all he could do was watch helplessly as the man-spider rushed toward the carriage, once again throwing its immense body into the air.

Princess Riel, watching from the window of her carriage, let out a heartrending scream.

"Wh-what is that thing?! Nienaaaaa, it's coming closer!!!"

Niena reached out, pulling Riel's small body through the carriage window and tucked her under her arm like a bag.

"Niena!"

"Hang on tight, princess!"

Mere moments later, the man-spider smashed into the side of the carriage with a tremendous crash, sending splinters flying in every direction.

The four horses pulling the carriage were thrown to the ground. Two of them died instantly. The driver's body was split in two, staining the earth a deep burgundy.

Niena seated the young princess on the saddle in front of her and pushed the horse forward at full speed. She then glanced over her shoulder to look for the beast.

"Rwoooooooaoaaaaar!!!"

The man-spider used its massive swords to spear the two horses that had survived

before belting out an angry roar. Its eyes darted across the landscape, settling on the fleeing figures of Niena and Riel.

Before it could give chase, however, Zahar and his soldiers began their assault.

At least half of their weapons bounced off the monster's armor, hardly even leaving a scratch. It wasn't all for naught, however. Zahar was able to land a successful strike.

The man-spider let out an annoyed roar and began slashing wildly at the knights, though they had no intention of turning back now.

"Don't let it advance another step!"

Zahar ordered the guards to surround the creature before launching another strike.

During the first attack, he'd struck a critical blow to one of the man-spider's legs, causing it to slump. On the next run, the knights sliced several deep wounds into its human torsos.

The man-spider's screams of anguish only increased in pitch as black blood sprayed out of its body like a fountain.

"Grwwaaaaaaaaaaaar!!!"

Suddenly, its eyes all fixed on Niena, and, ignoring the blood pouring out of its wounds, the man-spider rushed past Zahar and his men in pursuit of the princess.

"It's going after the princess again! I don't care what you have to do, just stop the damn thing!"

The knights spurred their horses after the man-spider. The beast looked back and hurled one of its massive swords at its pursuers, cleaving straight through two of the soldiers with a loud splurch.

Zahar watched as the two fell. He locked his jaw and gritted his teeth, a vein bulging in his forehead.

He'd figured that the man-spider's wounds put it at a disadvantage, but that clearly wasn't the case. He'd misjudged the creature, and two people were dead because of him. He could spend hours beating himself up, but now wasn't the time.

Zahar clenched the reins tightly. He took slow, controlled breaths to keep his anger in check, his eyes filled with pure hatred.

Ahead, the remaining guards turned their horses to place a physical barrier between the monster and the princess.

The man-spider let out another mighty roar and attacked the riders head on.

One of the soldiers shouted to Zahar, “Miss Niena ordered us to assist!”

Zahar nodded in acknowledgment. Niena was certainly aware of the danger she was putting the princess in by sending away guards, but the reasoning behind her decision was sound. If they couldn’t stop the immediate threat, there’d be nothing left to protect.

Zahar raised his sword and issued his next command.

“I want everyone to aim for its legs! If we can stop it from moving, the princess’s safety will be assured!”

The knights let out a battle cry and rushed toward the man-spider.

Niena continued glancing over her shoulder as she rode away. Unfortunately, this prevented her from seeing another approaching threat.

“Niena, look up ahead!” Princess Riel’s voice was surprisingly loud despite her small stature.

Niena looked in the direction her young charge was pointing. The rolling hills around them offered countless places for an incoming enemy to hide. It was an ideal landscape for the hunter to pursue its prey—in this case, Niena and Riel.

“You won’t get away! Death to all who try to escape!”

Another man-spider had appeared from behind a hill, metal weapons held at the ready in its four arms.

Niena’s brain temporarily froze as it attempted to process what it was seeing. In that moment of hesitation, the monstrous man-spider closed the distance and brought down its weapons with a mighty roar.

“Nienaaaaa!”

Princess Riel’s scream brought Niena back to herself. In an amazing feat of skill, she deftly avoided the incoming mass of metal. She drew her sword and attempted to strike back at the man-spider, but just as she was about to launch her attack, the man-spider swung one of its massive swords, forcing her to dodge the blow.

Her severed arm—sword still firmly clutched in its hand—flew high into the air before tumbling uselessly onto the ground.

“Gyaaaaaaaaauuuuuuugh!!!”

Niena’s body jerked violently, the initial shock quickly replaced with an immense pain as she and the horse fell to the ground. Riel toppled out of the saddle and rolled in the grass, receiving minor scrapes and bruises all over her body.

Zahar watched the horrible scene unfold from afar. His voice wavered as his usual cool demeanor cracked.

“Princess Riel! Niena!!!”

The first man-spider rose up on its injured legs and let out a raspy laugh. It placed itself between Zahar and the princess.

“Get out of my way!!!”

Zahar and his knights were thoroughly enraged and struck the beast down with their blood-soaked weapons. However, there was still a significant distance between them and the princess.

The remaining man-spider towered over Niena, watching her intently as she groaned in pain, its fang-filled mouth twisting in a hideous smile.

“Nohzan Kingdom ends here!”

The monster lifted one of its massive swords for another blow.

Princess Riel propped herself up on her elbows, tears streaming down her face. She couldn’t take it any longer.

“Stoppit!!! Leave’r alone!!!”

But her screams couldn’t alter the sword’s trajectory.

Right before its blade struck flesh, the man-spider froze, both of its human heads jerking up and looking off into the distance. The hillside shook with a thunderous boom, the earth itself groaning beneath them.

Out of a valley between two of the hills strode a gigantic figure that managed to make even the man-spider look small.

The monster was covered with ruddy brown scales and boasted two massive horns atop its head. A thick white mane ran down its back, rippling in the wind.

The beast ran toward the frozen man-spider, impaling it on its two horns. Black blood oozed from two gaping holes in the man-spider’s side.

The monster shouted, its voices unsteady. Spittle sprayed out of the gashes that served as its mouths.

“Who dares interrupt us?! You will die here too!”

Three figures sat atop the large creature facing off against the man-spider—two women and a hulking knight.

“Ariane, Chiyome, can you take care of that one?”

The knight was outfitted in silver armor, covered in intricate white and azure designs. His black cloak was billowing behind him. The armor was simply magnificent, like something worn by the knights of legend. His blade gave off an eerie, blue glow, while the shield he wore on his back was marked with mystical runes.

In stark contrast with the imposing knight was the green ball of fur sitting atop his head, its tail wagging gently back and forth.

The two women dismounted. One was still a young girl who wore an oversized hat pulled low over black hair and simple black-lacquered greaves. She was armed with a dagger at her waist.

The other woman was much taller and dressed in a charcoal-gray cloak that covered

much of her face. It did little, however, to hide the alluring curves of her figure.

Both women drew their weapons and, without a moment's hesitation, took off toward the man-spider Zahar and his men were still tangling with.

The taller woman became engulfed in flames that flickered across her body before finding their way to her sword's blade. Her chants were drowned out by the crackling air around her, the flames growing larger by the second. Once she'd worked herself up to a full-blown inferno, she swung her burning blade through the man-spider.

The flames lapped tentatively at the monster before consuming its body, its open wounds charring instantly, filling the air with the distinctive smell of burning flesh.

"Aaaaaaaaugh!!!"

The younger woman closed in to put the hideous monster out of its misery.

She made several gestures with her hand while chanting a spell, her clear azure eyes staring straight into the beast. Two wolves made of water appeared at her sides.

A white mist rose from her dagger, tracing a long trail through the air. She moved it like an extension of her body, making multiple deep cuts in the man-spider's body.

The man-spider attempted to resist, but her wolf companions bit back ferociously, preventing it from landing any blows. Every time it attempted to retreat, one of them bit at its legs. When it tried to swing its blade, the other jumped up to bite deep into its arm.

Zahar and the rest of the guards watched in stunned silence. The women's fighting abilities were like nothing they'd ever seen before.

The man-spider finally collapsed pathetically to the ground, its energy spent, its body covered with wounds from the flame and ice attacks. It was like watching a bizarre dream as the two dueling elements came together to bring down the beast.

The man in silver armor stood off in the distance. He slowly began waving his mystical blade through the air. His voice boomed through his helmet.

"Wyvern Slash!"

His massive sword cast off a wave of glowing energy that cut straight through the man-spider's legs… and a massive tree behind it. The now-legless man-spider hit the ground with a heavy thunk.

"You bastard!!!"

Its bloodshot eyes glared at the armored knight as it spewed its hatred.

"That's amazing…"

"Nnnng…"

Riel and Niena watched as the battle carried on in front of them.

Now that the man-spider was properly immobilized, the knight took the shield off his back and approached the monster.

Sparks flew as the monster traded blows with the knight, the blades emitting ear-piercing screeches with each clash. Thanks to its four arms, the man-spider was able to launch into a second attack the moment its first was blocked.

However, the knight seemed to have anticipated this and brought up his shield with his left hand, effortlessly deflecting the blow. He then scored a first, second, and even a third strike past the man-spider's defenses.

The knight used his shield well, though his swordsmanship was rather unrefined, causing the tip of his blade to miss its mark on the fourth strike. His sword embedded itself in the ground behind the monster, carving a deep scar into the earth.

Had the blow actually landed, it would have chopped any normal human in two. Not even a sturdy shield would have blocked it. The knight retrieved his sword.

The two powerful fighters continued dueling at a level surpassing that of mere mortals. They carried on, blow for blow, the knight occasionally wounding his enemy.

Realizing there was no way it could win, the man-spider gave up any semblance of defense and went into an all-out attack.

"Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaawr!"

The knight slammed his sword into the ground, bracing himself.

“Rock Fang!”

Fang-shaped boulders sprouted up out of the ground all around the man-spider, trapping it.

With his opponent now thoroughly stuck, the knight shouted out his next attack.

“Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg!”

Purple lightning ran up the masterfully crafted sword, which gave off a soft azure glow. A giant blade of light grew out of it, piercing the man-spider’s body.

Thick, black blood sprayed everywhere as the light blade slid out the monster’s back, cleaving its human-like torsos in two.

The man-spider slumped to the ground, like a marionette whose strings had been cut. It twitched for a moment before melting into the earth, leaving nothing but a dark stain.

“Well, I certainly didn’t expect to run into them so soon,” the knight mumbled to himself as he took stock. The blade of light disappeared as he returned his sword to the sheath on his back.

His gaze settled on the princess and her injured guardian.

Zahar ran at full tilt, past the remains of the man-spider, and stopped next to them.

“Niena! Princess!”

Seeing Zahar’s face, the princess finally seemed to grasp the gravity of the situation and crawled over to her fallen bodyguard.

“Hang on, Niena!”

“Pri… Princess Riel. I’m… I’m so glad you’re safe…”

Tears ran down the young girl’s cheeks as Niena’s face contorted in pain.

“Hang in there, Niena!” Zahar called out to his comrade-in-arms as he put pressure on her stump. Her face was growing paler by the second. “Go get something to stanch the bleeding!”

The remaining guards began looking around for something to use, as the silver knight approached.

“Excuse me, but could you give me a little room?”

The knight’s calm tone irritated Zahar. He glared at the man who’d saved their lives only moments ago.

The knight gently pushed his way through the guards and knelt beside Zahar.

Princess Riel looked up at the stranger with teary eyes.

The knight poured water from his skin over Niena’s severed arm to wash off the dirt. Then he placed it against her stump.

“Nnnnggraaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

“What the hell are you doing?!” Zahar couldn’t take any more, but all he could do was glare at the knight, hatred flashing in his eyes. The knight paid him no mind, holding the arm firmly against Niena’s body while murmuring a spell.

“Heal!”

A warm glow shone where her stump met the rest of her arm as the skin began knitting itself back together.

All eyes were on the mysterious knight, as if he were a god from the legends.

Riel stared, wide-eyed. She swallowed hard. Zahar and the guards were also at a loss for words. Niena looked at her right arm as if it were some bizarre creature attached to her.

The light faded, leaving nothing but unblemished skin where the wound had been. Zahar’s breath caught in his throat. He’d heard about the healing magic wielded by priests and other church officials, but this went well beyond the stories. Mending a cut or reducing swelling was one thing, but reattaching a severed limb? That was

something else entirely. It made the magic performed by priests seem like child's play.

Zahar looked up in time to see the knight's two companions approach.

They both knelt next to Niena to check on her, but they didn't seem surprised in the least. This probably wasn't the first time the knight had done something like this.

Zahar felt himself trembling.

The other guards—the best the Nohzan Kingdom had to offer—gave the knight a wide berth. None of them could fathom what might have brought such a powerful sorcerer to the middle of nowhere.

Margrave Brahniey—the man who claimed these lands—had, for years, aggressively defended them against their rightful owner, the Nohzan Kingdom.

If this knight served Brahniey, and the magnificent armor he wore suggested he was no mere mercenary, then it would only be a matter of time before more of the Nohzan Kingdom's land was taken. Zahar swallowed hard at the thought.

The knight looked back down at Niena. His body language radiated concern.

"Kyii!"

The green ball of fur sitting atop the knight's helmet hopped down and sniffed at Niena's face, as if checking on her. It waved its large, fluffy tail back and forth in the air, lightening the tension.

Seeing that everyone had relaxed, Niena passed out.

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"Niena? What's wrong, Niena?!" The young girl immediately broke into tears at the sight of the unresponsive woman and started screaming her name.

Judging by her decorative armor, the woman on the ground was a knight of some sort. As soon as the stress she'd been under was over, she lost consciousness. The woman was still breathing, though, so I figured she was all right.

"You have nothing to worry about. She just passed out. Though my magic healed her

wounds, she still lost a lot of blood. She'll need to rest for a while."

The young girl pulled her gaze from the fallen woman—Niena—and looked up at me.

I nodded, which seemed to put the young girl at ease. She slumped back into a sitting position on the ground.

Now that I looked closer, the young girl also appeared to have some scrapes and bruises, her once-majestic dress torn and covered in blood and mud. However, she still managed to smile as she gazed down at her bodyguard.

The guards around us were all outfitted in expensive gear, and were clearly here to protect this young girl. Niena had referred to her as Princess Riel, so she was probably someone important.

"Hold still, please…"

I placed my hand on the girl's injured body, summoning another spell.

"Heal!"

A gentle glow enveloped the young girl's body, concentrated around her cuts and bruises. A moment later, they disappeared into her skin, and no sign of her injuries remained. Riel's eyes went wide in surprise.

"Th-that's amazing!"

The large man sitting beside Niena looked from the excited girl to me to his unconscious comrade. Princess Riel frowned.

"What're you doing, Zahar? Stop staring and say thank you!"

The girl wiped away her tears with her little fists and waved her arms, a mischievous smile on her face. She certainly didn't act like the child of nobles.

The burly knight—Zahar, as she called him—bowed his head low. The rest of the royal guard followed suit.

"Thank you for your assistance. We truly are…"

He faltered for a moment, at a loss for words.

Riel stood, picking up where Zahar had left off. She spoke with an authoritative tone that seemed at odds with her short stature.

“I am Riel Nohzan Saureah. It is thanks to you that we were able to survive this encounter with our pursuers. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

The preteen girl carried herself regally, despite her young age. Her name, Nohzan, sounded familiar. If I recalled correctly, Lamburt, back in the Rhoden Kingdom, conducted a lot of trade with the Nohzan Kingdom.

Given her name, and the large number of soldiers following her, the only logical conclusion was that this girl was a member of the royal family.

Zahar looked absolutely aghast the moment the girl identified herself. Judging by his reaction, I guessed that there must have been a very good reason why he didn’t want her to identify herself. Perhaps they were on a secret mission?

Now that I thought about it, the land on the other side of the Ruanne Forest was almost certainly the domain of the Salma Kingdom.

What’s more, this was actually an incredibly small contingent of soldiers to escort a member of the royal family through foreign lands.

Was she here to pass a message along to the Salma Kingdom? Was she a defector?

Something else she’d said nagged at me as well. She’d referred to the man-spiders as “pursuers.”

That meant that the threat hadn’t been blocking her way forward, but had rather come from behind. Judging by the expressions on Ariane and Chiyome’s faces, they’d realized the same thing. Ponta was oblivious as usual, cheerfully scratching its ear with one hind leg.

Zahar and the other guards exchanged glances as they tried figuring out how to fix this situation. Zahar let out a low groan. Riel, however, appeared unconcerned, and looked straight up at me with her large doe-eyes.

“You’re pretty strong, y’know. Just who are you anyway?”

I looked to Ariane and Chiyome, wondering how to answer this deceptively complicated question. Ariane nodded.

“I am Arc Lalatoya. We are in the middle of a mission of our own.”

“My name is Ariane Glenys Lalatoya.”

“I’m Chiyome.”

If Riel was annoyed at our rather casual demeanor in the presence of royalty, she didn’t show it in the least. Zahar, however, looked shocked. I couldn’t recall saying anything that might warrant such a reaction. Unless he’d picked up on the elven names, perhaps?

Riel continued. “Oh, travelers! If you aren’t in a hurry, I’d like to ask you to join my guard and escort me to our destination. What do you think? Of course, I’m willing to pay.”

Zahar was clearly beside himself at her unexpected suggestion. He decided to try and put a stop to it.

“P-Princess?! Please consider—”

Riel put up a hand, silencing Zahar.

I could understand where he was coming from of course. Having her ask someone else to protect her when that was his sworn duty wouldn’t sit well. The fact that we were complete strangers made it all the worse.

“We must make our way through the Salma Kingdom and to Count Dimo at all costs,” Riel said. “I don’t care what happens to us, but one way or another, we need to make our way to the count and implore him to send his men to the capital before they’re all killed too!”

Her tiny fists clenched tightly as she spoke. She might have been a young girl, but her intense gaze and the strength in her words made me wonder who exactly I was speaking to. Zahar and the rest of her guards were speechless.

Apparently, they weren’t supposed to be out here in the Salma Kingdom. To be fair, neither were we. Besides, out here, where there were no clearly defined borders,

setting foot in a foreign country was a calculated risk. You'd be fine as long as no patrols found you.

To Riel, the risk of traveling through the Salma Kingdom was worth it if she could get an audience with Count Dimo. Judging by what she'd said, it sounded like she was going to ask him to send reinforcements to the capital of Nohzan.

The question for me was, just who was Count Dimo anyway?

I cast a sidelong glance toward Chiyome, but she just shook her head. Apparently, she didn't know anything about him either.

All the same, Riel's concern over the citizens back in the capital being murdered by monsters was something we needed to take seriously.

I wondered if these monsters were the same as the undead man-spider we'd just fought. If so, that would make the Holy Hilk Kingdom the likely culprit.

I glanced over at Ariane. She sighed heavily and shrugged. The faint glimmer of her golden eyes, barely visible beneath her gray cloak, said it all. She was exasperated with me, as usual.

Chiyome leaned in close to me to whisper something.

"Hmm…"

After Chiyome finished speaking, I reached up and slowly removed my helmet, revealing myself to Riel.

"You're an elf?!"

"An elf? From Ruanne?!" Catching sight of my brown skin, black hair, and burning red eyes, Zahar assumed I was an elf from the nearby Ruanne Forest.

Right before we'd faced off against the man-spider, I'd taken a swig of the hot spring water, just in case something like this happened. At least, I wish that were the reason…

The real answer was that I'd been training with Glenys and Ariane in my elven form lately, and I was hoping to see if I was getting any better.

When I stepped out onto the field of battle as a skeleton, I was fearless, and could face any challenge without a second thought. However, once I drank the magical spring water, not only did my flesh and blood return, so did my emotions. I often found myself nearly paralyzed with fear.

However, gauging by how this battle had gone, my extensive training with Glenys was at least having some sort of effect. I still couldn't quite handle the long-term stresses involved, but in a brief battle, I was definitely able to hold my own. I'd still need more training, though.

In the back of my mind, I could hear the jeers and gentle prodding Glenys and Ariane offered during training to urge me on. I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

My current form looked nothing like Ariane and the other dark elves in this world, but the elongated ears were all most people needed to be convinced. I didn't bother pointing this out, but there was one small misunderstanding I felt I should clear up.

"Actually, we're not from Ruanne. We come from the Great Canada Forest."

Ariane slowly pulled back her hood, revealing her amethyst skin. She fixed her golden gaze on Zahar. I thought I heard someone gulp.

"Kyii! Kyii!"

Ponta, as usual, was quick to make sure that it got a proper introduction as well.

"Canada? Where most of the elves live? What brings you all the way out here?"

Zahar clearly knew about the forest, though his young charge seemed never to have heard of the place, gauging by the look of confusion on her face.

"What's Canada?"

I went straight to business. "As you can see, we are not human. Are you still interested in hiring us? If so, we would like to ask for payment in the form of an information exchange. Would that be acceptable?"

Zahar and the other guards looked to Riel. There was a short pause.

Zahar opened his mouth, as if to speak on behalf of the princess, but Riel stepped in

front of him, silencing the older man. The princess puffed out her chest with pride as she spoke.

"We'll tell you whatever it is that you wish to know, assuming it is information we can share. It's a cheap price to pay for safe passage!"

I looked in Chiyome's direction, prompting her to step forward and pull the large hat off her head. The moment Chiyome's cat ears came into view, the small crowd gathered in front of her began murmuring among themselves.

"A beast girl…"

One of Chiyome's cat ears twitched at this.

I didn't sense any malice in these words, though this was perhaps due to the fact she was accompanied by elves. It amazed me that Canada's reputation was so strong throughout the northern continent.

Chiyome fixed her clear, azure eyes on Riel. "There's just one thing I want to know."

She spoke in a low, controlled voice. Riel, Zahar, and the rest of her guards listened intently.

"I want to ask about my comrade, who traveled through the Nohzan Kingdom a short time ago. Were there any notable events here recently?"

Chiyome cast her gaze across the group. Her eyes landed on Riel and Zahar, imploring them to tell her what they knew. But Zahar could only shrug. Chiyome let out a sigh of defeat.

For a moment, it looked as if we'd come up empty. Suddenly, one of the guards perked up and whispered something into Zahar's ear. He coughed once into his fist before turning back to Chiyome.

"A bandit—a beastman, if the rumors are true—infiltrated the palace's vault a short time ago. It caused quite a stir. No one had managed to infiltrate such a heavily defended part of the palace before. But after a careful investigation, it seems that nothing was stolen. The culprit has yet to be found."

Zahar looked less than pleased to discuss the event, and watched us carefully for a

reaction. Yet Chiyome's expression didn't offer any clues as to what she was thinking.

I, however, was intrigued by this. Though it wasn't clear to me just how tight the security was around the palace's vault, I had to imagine it was no easy feat for a normal person to sneak in. The fact that someone would bother to break in, not steal anything, and sneak back out was even more curious.

Chiyome and the other mountain people up here on the northern continent eked out meager existences while avoiding contact with humans. I could think of few humans, let alone mountain people, who would willingly leave the palace's vault empty-handed.

I watched Chiyome out of the corner of my eye, searching for any hint as to what she was thinking. Like me, she probably assumed that Sasuke was the bandit Zahar spoke of.

Ariane picked Ponta up from where it was weaving in and out of her legs.

After another moment's hesitation, Zahar spoke again. He didn't look happy.

"That's not all. Apparently, similar incidents have occurred in all of the kingdoms surrounding the Holy Hilk Kingdom. The Hilk responded by sending out their templars to round up all of the beastmen within these kingdoms. They say they're in need of manual labor, and have sent requests to the Nohzan Kingdom and other neighboring countries asking us to hunt down the beastmen for them."

Chiyome's azure gaze drilled into Zahar. The hulking man's expression was almost apologetic as he realized the weight of what he'd just said, but he didn't look the least bit afraid of the girl in front of him.

Something nagged at me about all of this. "And you just let the templars, a foreign army, enter your territory?"

The other guards bristled. Zahar put up a hand to stop them from saying anything.

"Obviously, we wouldn't normally allow something like that to happen, but in this case, it was done in the name of building a better relationship with the church. Despite the Holy Hilk Kingdom's rather small size, their military forces are incredibly powerful. None of the countries were in any position to refuse."

Riel, who'd been listening patiently while Zahar spoke, looked stunned to hear this. She clenched her fists even more tightly. Apparently, no one had told her about this.

Seeing how she was one of the heirs to the Nohzan throne, the very idea of a foreign country meddling in their affairs was probably difficult for her to accept.

Worse, it was the Holy Hilk Kingdom pulling the strings.

Sadly, we didn't exactly have time to dwell on these matters.

I placed my fingers to my lips and summoned Shiden with a loud whistle. He immediately looked up from where he was munching away at the grass and came stomping over to us.

"We'll consider that information payment for now. But we really should get out of here before another one of those monsters shows up. Let's get you to Count Dimo. We can continue the conversation on the way."

Riel nodded in agreement. "Right. We've no time to waste!" She was speaking more to herself than anyone else.

Zahar bowed and thanked us once again. He then moved over to where his comrade, Niena, was lying on the grass. He hefted her over his massive shoulder, making his way back to his horse.

I scratched the back of Shiden's neck and looked out across the hilly landscape. First things first, we needed to make our way to this Count Dimo person.

The problem was figuring out which direction that was.

CHAPTER 3
ARC, THE ONE-MAN ARMY

Back in Saureah, the capital of the Nohzan Kingdom, it was the second day of the siege of the undead. Where they came from or who they worked for was still unknown.

The limited number of troops in the capital had so far done a respectable job using the towering defenses that surrounded the city to hold off the nearly endless number of undead soldiers.

The yells of the royal guards and the screeches of the half-man, half-spider creatures that led the assault could be heard all the way to the massive palace at the center of the capital.

The palace itself looked more like a military fortress, its very construction evidence of the decades of war the country had endured.

Despite its rough exterior, however, many of the interior rooms were lavishly outfitted for receiving important guests, allowing them to be entertained at a level matched by few other kingdoms.

In one such room, two people sat on large sofas facing each other.

One was a strict-looking older gentleman, dressed in rather reserved clothing, though it was apparent on closer inspection that he'd spared no expense on the materials and workmanship of his attire.

The man's name was Asparuh Nohzan Saureah, the ruler of this kingdom.

He was well known for coming off as gruff to those he dealt with, though he was speaking in subdued tones to the man sitting across from him.

"And so you have chosen to stay here, Cardinal Palurumo?"

The other man, dressed in the elaborate robes of a Hilk clergyman, nodded as he took a disinterested sip of his tea. He offered a warm smile to the king, reaching up to adjust

his delicately arranged black hair. The man, one of the seven cardinals serving the pontiff of the neighboring Holy Hilk Kingdom, was clearly a stickler for details.

Cardinal Palurumo Avaritia Liberalitas responded cheerfully.

“Why, it’s my responsibility to call out to our Great Father and ask Him to send the onslaught of undead running for the hills. The Hilk followers living here would doubt my faith were I to turn tail and flee, causing the capital to descend into even greater panic.”

Palurumo let out a heavy sigh and fixed the king with an intense gaze.

“Our Father watches our actions. This is just another trial, and we cannot allow ourselves to turn our backs on Him. I am confident He will award Nohzan Kingdom with great blessings for overcoming this challenging time.”

He brought his hands together and lowered his head in prayer. The king nodded, not looking completely convinced.

“This trial has almost certainly brought us in the capital closer together, but I worry about whether we can actually survive…”

The king cast his gaze toward the window, narrowing his eyes as if to try and see something off in the distance.

“I’ve sent my own children to try and muster up reinforcements, but I wonder if the walls will hold long enough for them to return. You say that this is one of God’s trials, but why would He test us so?”

The king steepled his fingers. He looked exhausted.

Palurumo watched with great interest, a glint of pleasure in his gaze. However, this went unnoticed by the king as he stared at his own reflection in the polished wooden table.

“I am certain that our benevolent God would not turn his back on the good people of Nohzan. That is precisely why I am here, to help keep them on the righteous path.”

The king looked back up at Palurumo. “I see…”

Cardinal Palurumo Avaritia Liberalitas offered a charming smile.

“Even we exalted followers of His Heavenly Father are human, no different from the other citizens here in the capital. But we are called to save those who have strayed from the path and offer a helping hand to those who need it. I have already sent my own servants to speak with the pontiff.”

A look of relief washed across the king’s face. It was as if God Himself had spoken these words.

However, a moment later, another question came to mind.

“But… how did you get a messenger out of the capital? It’s completely surrounded.”

Palurumo’s eyebrow twitched.

“Our templars are quite skilled. I sent some of my best men out late last night. Heathens like the undead are no match for them.”

The king appeared satisfied by this explanation. “I see, I see. I’ve heard reports that the undead lose much of their coherence at night and move about with reckless abandon. I should have guessed that you would have taken that into account.”

Palurumo’s finger twitched ever so slightly at the king’s words, but he quickly brought another winning smile to his lips, struggling to keep up the façade.

“Though they are large in number, I personally feel there is little to fear from the undead. We just need to hold out for His holy retribution.”

The king nodded at this, his eyes glimmering with hope. However, there was something strange about the way Palurumo reacted.

“Is there something wrong, cardinal?”

Palurumo coughed gently into his fist and brought his usual smile back to his face.

“Nothing to worry about, no. I was just distracted.”

Palurumo watched King Asparuh leave the room before closing his eyes and furrowing his brow, as if looking at something far, far away. Suddenly, his eyes shot open.

“I’ve lost touch with the specter warriors I sent after them. Apparently, her guards

were much stronger than I anticipated. But this isn't the first time something like this has happened. I feel like I have the worst luck."

He breathed out heavily through his nose, looking at the empty space where the king had been sitting.

"So be it. I'll just have to send more specter warriors after them. Whether they'll even be able to catch up is another question entirely, however…"

His face contorted into a cruel, almost sadistic smile.

"I suppose it's about time I encourage the people to find some holy enlightenment. After all, I have a front row seat to watch these hopeless sinners meet their fate. I might as well enjoy it while I can."

His laugh echoed throughout the room.

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The sun was heading steadily toward the horizon, bathing the sky in deep, scarlet hues. Long shadows cast by the surrounding hills stretched in front of us as we made our way south, joined by Princess Riel of the Nohzan Kingdom.

Despite being a mere eleven years old, she conducted herself with all the regality of a noble. She rode with her bodyguard, Zahar, as we made our way toward Count Dimo's domain.

From time to time, the young princess would poke her head up from between Zahar's burly arms to look over in my direction.

It wasn't me that she was looking at, however. She was looking at the massive driftpus leading the formation of guards, and at her unconscious bodyguard Niena. Despite the distance between us, I could easily make out the worry on her face.

As head of the guards, Zahar had originally planned to carry Niena on his steed, but he and Riel were already a heavy burden, even for the massive war horse.

When it came time to discuss how to transport the princess, now that her carriage was in ruins, she'd immediately asked to ride with me on Shiden. There wasn't even a hint of hesitation in her voice.

Zahar, however, would have none of it. There was no way he was going to leave his princess in the care of outsiders.

Using a rope, I'd tied Niena to my back. Behind her sat Ariane.

Four people would have been one too many to fit on the driftpus, despite its massive size, so Chiyome wound up borrowing one of the horses from the fallen guards.

Though she had little experience with horses, Chiyome was quite gifted when it came to all manner of sports. She was already holding the reins and riding like a pro.

Chiyome and the other mountain people boasted excellent physical strength and agility, allowing them to easily run through forests. As such, they had no need for horses or other working animals.

Since they lived in small villages hidden deep in the mountains and forests, I could see how horses weren't really a necessity for them. However, once they finished their new settlement in the area beyond the Furyu Mountains, they'd have to get used to life on the plains. In fact, they were currently cutting down all the surrounding trees just to construct their buildings.

I started thinking that it might be a good idea to bring them some horses, so the people there could learn how to ride. The animals would allow them to travel long distances and carry heavy materials.

When we'd decided that Chiyome would ride on her own, I'd instructed her to gently stroke her horse's neck to help it get used to her before showing her how to use the reins.

Looking over now, I could see that she was already riding like a seasoned professional. It seemed that animals took to the mountain people pretty quickly.

I glanced down to find Ponta curled up in Shiden's white mane. It let out an exaggerated yawn. It had been said spirit creatures rarely bonded with humans, so it made sense that the cotton-tailed fox and Shiden had become fast friends.

Though Ponta had initially shown reluctance when I approached, it quickly grew close to me after I offered it some food. I wondered if that was because it could somehow tell I was actually an elf.

“Kyii?”

Ponta looked up at me curiously, as if it sensed my gaze. I shook my head and looked away.

Thinking back on when we first encountered Princess Riel and her envoy, I realized that Ponta hadn’t really acted skittish around them. It especially didn’t seem to have any issue with the princess herself, though it made no effort to get any closer to Zahar or the other guards than was absolutely necessary.

Niena, Princess Riel’s unconscious bodyguard, seemed to be an exception, though, as Ponta readily approached her and wagged its cottony tail across her face, as if teasing her. Ponta was a curious little creature, and had no problem playing the tough guy when up against someone unconscious.

I turned my attention ahead and began scanning the surrounding hills. Then I felt something jerk behind me.

“Wh-whoa! What’s going on?!”

Niena’s voice cracked as she yelled, apparently having just woken up.

Her faculties came back to her in bits and pieces. She started jerking around as she tried to process just exactly how she’d ended up being tied to the back of an armor-clad knight.

“Where am I?! And who the hell are you?”

It only made sense that she would be confused—anyone would be if they woke up and found themselves unable to see anything but metallic armor in front of them.

Zahar brought his horse up next to Shiden. “Calm down, Niena.”

“Let’s stop for a moment. It seems Niena’s woken up.”

Riel popped her head up from between Zahar’s arms. “Niena? Niena, I’m so glad you’re finally awake!”

“Princess! Just what’s going on here?”

Niena frantically looked around for the overjoyed voice of her young charge. Once her eyes found Riel, she calmed down and stopped struggling.

“How’s your arm, Niena? Any discomfort?”

I pulled to a stop next to Zahar and quickly undid Niena’s bindings. Her eyes went wide, and she looked down at her arm as the memories of what had happened came flooding back.

“That’s right… My arm. It was chopped off, wasn’t it?”

She moved her previously severed arm around, flexing all of its muscles.

Princess Riel hopped out of Zahar’s arms with a broad smile on her face as she explained what had happened to her bewildered bodyguard.

“Arc, that knight over there, used his healing magic to fix your arm!”

Niena slid off Shiden’s back and dropped to a knee to wrap the girl in a warm embrace.

“I’m so glad you’re okay, Niena! I was so worried!”

“My apologies, Princess. I didn’t mean to alarm you.”

Niena bowed her head slightly to the young girl buried in her arms. Princess Riel responded by burrowing her tear-soaked face deeper into Niena’s chest, consoling herself with the sound of Niena’s heartbeat.

The two stayed that way for a short time before Zahar called out to them from atop his horse. His head darted around, concern clear on his face.

“Princess, we don’t have much time. Now that we know Niena’s out of the woods, we need to hurry along.”

Princess Riel frowned. She slowly pulled away from Niena’s arms. “I know. You’re right. Fort Hill is just a little farther off?”

Zahar confirmed this with a nod, and Riel turned her attention back to Niena.

“I really am glad you’re all right! You should thank Arc here for saving you!”

Zahar hoisted her back on to his horse, and the two took off again.

Niena turned her attention to me. A moment later, she caught sight of Ariane, and her eyes went wide.

"An… An elf?!"

Her shock only grew when Chiyome drew her horse alongside Shiden.

"A beast girl too?!"

Riel called out from up ahead. "Niena, you owe these people a debt of gratitude for saving your life! Not only that, but they're also escorting us to our destination, so try to not be rude, okay?!"

"My apologies, Princess!"

Niena turned back to us and bowed low. "Arc, I can't thank you enough for everything you've done. Not only did you slay that monster, but you saved my life."

Niena was much younger than Zahar, but she still conducted herself like a proper knight of the royal court. She had a feminine face with strong, stark features, brown skin, and piercing eyes. However, the look of surprise at the sight of Chiyome and Ariane was unmistakable.

Though she didn't unleash any insults directly, it was clear that she felt the same way about other species as many who'd grown up under the influence of the Hilk.

That was just how things were, I supposed.

When you spent your entire life believing in a particular religion and its values, it wasn't easy to just reset all that.

If anything, the fact that Princess Riel *hadn't* seemed to react to this was impressive.

"There is nothing to thank us for. I simply couldn't stand the sight of a young girl in pain. I did what I could to help. Anyone would have done the same."

Niena bowed her head once more in thanks. "And what became of my horse?"

“Ah, over here!”

One of the guards came riding over, leading a horse behind him.

Since Niena wouldn’t be able to ride while unconscious, he’d tied her horse to his and rode the two together.

Niena took the reins and hopped up onto the saddle. It was hard to believe she’d even been injured in the first place. After collecting her sword and gear from another royal guard, Niena took after Zahar’s horse.

“Sorry for causing you such worry.”

Zahar dismissed her apology with a wave of his hand. “Hmph. I know you’ve just recovered, but I’m counting on you, Niena.”

With that, the procession began moving again as we continued on our way to Count Dimo.

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The scarlet hues gave way to deep purples as night settled in, and the landscape around us finally began changing.

Just as we were beginning to lose visibility from the setting sun, we caught sight of a massive wall ahead, standing around ten meters tall.

It was difficult to make out the details amidst all the shadows, but the wall appeared to be made of stone, stretching far off to the left and right. So far, in fact, that I couldn’t see where it ended in either direction.

The sight reminded me of the wall we’d seen down on the southern continent that separated the rest of the peninsula from Tagent and the other human colonies.

“What’s this wall for?”

I tugged gently at Shiden’s reins to slow the beast down and looked over at one of the guards.

“That is the wall surrounding Fort Hill. On the other side is Count Dimo’s domain.”

My anxiety eased up instantly at this explanation.

“Looks like we’re finally here.”

Riel sounded relieved as well, but Zahar shook his head.

“The entrance is still a little farther east.”

He reached into a small bag hanging from his saddle and pulled out a folded piece of cloth. Riel watched him with great curiosity.

“Hey, what’s that?”

Zahar unfolded the cloth and held it out. It bore a majestic crest (the royal crest of the Nohzan Kingdom, perhaps?) sewn into it.

Zahar used twine to tie the cloth to his sheath, making an impromptu flag and marking us all as an envoy of the royal family. He then handed the flag to one of the other guards, who held it high above her head as we rode on.

I figured the reason they hadn’t displayed any crests until now probably had something to do with the fact that we were in foreign territory. With allies waiting on the other side of the wall, it was probably safe to identify themselves now.

It was nearly pitch-black now, and I had doubts about whether anyone would even be able to see the markings on the flag, but it was still best to signal ourselves as friendly before approaching a heavily fortified wall.

Ariane leaned up to look over my shoulder, taking great interest in what was happening ahead of us, her golden eyes scanning the massive wall of stone.

A question then sprang to mind.

“Hey, Ariane, do elven villages also have their own crests?”

She nodded. “Of course we do, but they’re rarely used by anyone other than soldiers outside the forest.”

Before I could ask for further details, Ariane pointed over my shoulder toward a shadowy figure atop the wall.

“I see movement.”

I looked in the direction Ariane had indicated. I could see torches placed at regular intervals along the top of the wall, along with small shadows moving against the night sky. Apparently, they had guards keeping watch along the entire perimeter. A few moments later, I heard voices shouting.

By the time we reached the wall, a contingent of soldiers had assembled atop a massive gate—the only path through the wall—and were staring straight down at us.

An older man called out. “Identify yourselves! Beyond this wall lies the domain of Count Dimo, entrusted to him by the Nohzan Kingdom.”

Zahar dismounted, leaving Princess Riel atop his horse, and approached the gate. He shouted up to the commander atop the wall.

“My name is Zahar Bakharov! I come here with Princess Riel Nohzan Saureah, heir to the Nohzan Kingdom, and a contingent of guards.”

He took one of the torches from near the gate, bringing it close to his horse. The guard holding the royal flag stepped into the light.

“I am Princess Riel Nohzan Saureah, and I have been sent as a messenger by my father to seek an audience with Count Valmuer du Dimo. I demand that you open the gate immediately!”

The young princess spoke clearly and with authority, causing the commander to immediately begin issuing orders to his men.

“Open the gate! Open the gate at once! Make way for Princess Riel! Hurry up, I say!”

I could only imagine how surprised the men must have been to see their very own princess out here in enemy territory, and with such a small contingent of guards.

The massive gate shuddered and slowly began creaking open. Before it even had a chance to open completely, the old man came racing down, already out of breath. Zahar took the reins of Riel’s horse and led it toward him.

“Please forgive me, Princess Riel. I never imagined that you of all people would be out here in the Salma Kingdom!”

The commander bowed low, practically touching the ground. Fortunately, Riel didn't seem to mind.

"It's fine. It's your duty to stop any encroachment by the Salma Kingdom. However, we are on rather urgent business from the king."

The commander looked on in disbelief at what he was hearing. Once he heard the reassuring thud of the gate opening behind him, he bowed again.

"Come in, please. We are but a humble outpost, hardly fit for a princess, but please make yourself at home."

Zahar simply nodded and waved for the rest of his soldiers to follow him in.

Riel's horse led the way, followed by the rest of her guards and then by Shiden and me.

Unfortunately, my giant lizard companion was scared by the flames and reared back as we approached the gate, causing a great deal of alarm among the nearby soldiers.

The commander's eyes went wide as he turned to Zahar for an explanation. Zahar only offered a nod as he walked past, leaving the old man to hesitantly usher the rest of us inside the fort.

After passing through the gate, I could feel all eyes on me as I rode Shiden through the fortress grounds. I could only imagine how much worse it would be if I took off my helmet. I took a swig from my waterskin, just in case. If it came down to my helmet, it'd be easier to explain away being an elf.

"Kyiiii."

Ponta let out a yawn and blinked heavily. It was already pretty late, the courtyard illuminated only by what little moonlight broke through the cloud cover.

Ariane and Chiyome kept their cloaks and hats pulled down low to avoid drawing attention to themselves as they took in their surroundings.

The fortress was, in a word, spartan. It seemed highly unlikely that Count Dimo was anywhere near this outpost.

However, without any torches nearby, I couldn't see very far into the distance.

I glanced over at Ariane, and it seemed like we were in agreement: we'd stay here for the night and leave at first light. From the way she was rubbing her bum, it seemed she was done riding for the day.

"What're you talking about, Zahar?! Fort Hill is only half a day's journey from the count's home in Keen. There's no reason to stop here!"

Zahar shook his head at Princess Riel's outburst. "We've had quite the journey since leaving the capital. You need rest, Princess."

"We can't just lounge about when our people are in danger!"

Niena approached Riel and looked her straight in the eyes. She spoke gently to the young girl. "The risk of you falling ill is just too great, Princess. Who could ask the count for assistance if not you? Besides, no matter when we arrive, it will still take time for Dimo to assemble his forces."

Riel's gaze fell to her feet, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

The commander of the fortress had been standing quietly by while this conversation played out. Finally, he spoke up.

"I understand that you have come to save the capital from a grave threat, so I took the liberty of sending one of our fastest riders to deliver a message to Keen. Please, rest here for the night, Princess."

The older gentleman bowed his head.

Princess Riel looked down at him from atop her horse, then slowly turned to look at the bodyguards who rode on either side of her.

"Fine, fine. We'll stay the night."

The two bodyguards and the commander looked relieved.

We, still posing as Princess Riel's guards, were then assigned rooms at the barracks. Ariane and Chiyome were given one room, while I was given my own. The rooms, obviously meant to house soldiers and maybe some higher-ranking officers, were simply constructed and sparsely decorated. My room had two beds that looked to be of questionable quality.

I sat down on one with my armor still on and it immediately let out a loud creak, as if crying for help. I ignored the sound and slumped over with a heavy yawn.

Ariane, Chiyome, and I were invited to have dinner with the others at Fort Hill, but we decided to beg off since we were merely mercenaries under the employ of the princess.

I was actually pretty interested in what kind of food a fortress sitting on the front lines might serve a princess, but the possibility of another mishap, like the one back in Chiyome's village, was too much to risk.

They brought us dinner so we could eat alone. We carefully laid the items out on the table in Ariane and Chiyome's room.

Judging by the smell wafting off the freshly baked baguette, it seemed to be made of wheat. It also came with a soup filled with a variety of boiled vegetables and beans, along with a piece of unidentifiable meat still on the bone.

I'd expected the food to be a lot simpler, but I was pleasantly surprised to find that it exceeded my expectations.

According to the person who'd dropped the food off, a small market had sprouted up just outside the walls, to do business with the soldiers inside. They'd even started farming wheat nearby. Thanks to this, the fortress had access to relatively fresh vegetables and even bread.

"Looks like they're able to make some pretty decent food here. And the guard wasn't lying, there's quite a bit of variety." Ariane sounded impressed as she took a bite out of the baguette. Her hood was now draped around her shoulders, exposing her elven ears.

Chiyome nodded as she gnawed on the meat. "Seems like it. To be honest, the Jinshin clan doesn't have much information on the land out here."

Count Dimo's domain was located on a peninsula that stretched out into the South Central Sea. Brahniey, once a province of the Nohzan Kingdom, had been invaded by the Salma Kingdom long ago, separating the peninsula from the rest of the Nohzan Kingdom. The massive wall served as their primary means of protection.

Thanks to this, there were relatively few monsters roaming about the peninsula side

of the wall, which allowed them to have far more farms than in the countries to the north.

However, the wall didn't close the peninsula off from the mainland entirely.

I asked the guard who'd brought our dinner why this was. As he explained, I could see him glancing at Ariane out of the corner of his eye.

According to him, the Ruanne Forest ran along the western edge of the peninsula. Due to a pact the count had formed with the elves, vowing not to interfere with each other's business, the humans were unable to finish the wall.

If the Salma Kingdom ever attempted to pass through the Ruanne Forest in order to infiltrate the count's domain, they would have to fight the elves first. For this reason, the lord of Brahniey found himself unable to advance.

The unfortunate side effect of this was that monsters were still able to travel through the Ruanne woods and thrive on the other side of the wall. Though there were fewer monsters here, settlements still needed defenses to keep them out.

To me, it seemed natural to just build around the Ruanne Forest, but apparently, it wasn't that simple.

For one, there were already people living in the lightly wooded areas on the edge of the forest. Making matters more complicated, Ruanne stretched for quite a distance from north to south, so building a wall all the way around it would double the length—a huge drain on the count's coffers.

After the soldier finished his explanation, I closed the door behind him, making sure the door was locked before sitting down to eat.

"Kyii!" Ponta had already polished off its soup and was begging for more.

I pulled my helmet off. "Well, it looks like we found the undead we were looking for, even if by accident."

I could tell by the way my stomach grumbled that the effect of the mystical spring water I'd drunk earlier was still working. I hadn't yet turned back into a skeleton.

Before I began eating, I tore off a piece of meat and dropped it into the bowl Ponta was

urgently pushing around on the floor.

I felt two sets of eyes on me and turned toward Chiyome.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. That bandit Zahar was talking about, who entered the palace vault, do you think…”

“It was Sasuke. I’m certain of it.”

So, my hunch was correct.

“All they said was that it was a mountain person, though, right? At least, that’s what I heard.” Ariane sounded skeptical.

I found myself agreeing with her. “When I heard that someone was able to slip into the palace vault while under heavy guard and get away scot-free, I figured it had to be someone incredibly talented. Someone used to moving unseen, like a member of the Jinshin clan, seems like a safe bet, but we don’t have any evidence that it was Sasuke.”

Chiyome took another bite of meat and shook her head. “But they said that nothing was stolen. According to Hanzo, Sasuke had taken it upon himself to look for the clan’s long-lost pledge spirit crystal.”

A pledge spirit crystal… The name brought to mind the diamond-shaped crystal with a rainbow sheen that Chiyome had found at the ruined shrine on the other side of the Dragon Wonder.

These unique crystals had been brought to his world by Hanzo, the founder of the Jinshin clan, and they allowed a person to pledge their mind and body to a spirit—in this case, giving the magically disinclined mountain people the ability to use spirit magic.

All members of the clan were able to use spirit magic, which they referred to as ninjutsu, on some level, but the six great fighters of the Jinshin clan each had one of these pledge spirit crystals within them. Chiyome was one of the six.

My memory of the details was a bit fuzzy.

“This is the same one you spoke about at the shrine? You said that Hanzo had originally brought ten, but your clan only has nine of them, right?”

Chiyome nodded. “Sasuke must have gotten his hands on some information, which is why he snuck into the Nohzan vault. But, assuming we can trust what Zahar said, the pledge spirit crystal wasn’t there.”

I dipped a piece of bread into my soup and stuffed it into my mouth. “I see. But that means he must have snuck in there recently. It wasn’t much later that he showed up on the southern continent.”

Ariane’s ears twitched at this. “Meaning… he found something in the vault that sent him off to the southern continent?”

Chiyome paused. “Right. Though, I don’t know what that might be.”

“Well, if it’s a clue we need, I guess our only choice is to enter the Nohzan Kingdom’s vault ourselves.”

Ariane and Chiyome turned toward me in unison.

“You mean sneak in like Sasuke?”

Ariane was right to be skeptical. Though my Dimension Step ability was incredibly useful for sneaking into places unseen, things would get hairy fast if we were discovered.

But there was a better way to get in.

“Actually, I was thinking we could just ask Princess Riel to let us join the reinforcements she’s sending back to the capital. I don’t see why she’d turn us down if we ask her to let us look around the vault as payment.”

Ariane crossed her arms across her large chest and furrowed her brow. “That’s… You might be onto something. Do you think Saureah is under the same kind of attack we saw in Tagent?”

The mere mention of Tagent caused Chiyome to tense up.

We still didn’t actually know what was going on in Saureah, as no one had bothered to tell us anything. It probably wasn’t prudent for them to discuss the details with mercenaries.

This was the best we could piece together from what we'd overheard. The Nohzan Kingdom was under attack by some sort of bizarre monsters, including the man-spiders from earlier and a massive number of undead soldiers.

If we intended to look around the palace vault, we would need to ensure the capital's safety first.

Assuming Saureah turned into a battleground, like Tagent had, the whole city would go up in flames, and there wouldn't even be an intact vault to see.

"After we visit the count tomorrow, we'll need to see if we can join the reinforcements. If the capital falls, so will the vault, and any chance of finding out what happened to Sasuke."

Ariane nodded. "Agreed."

Chiyome, however, frowned slightly. "I wonder about that, though. We won't know if Count Dimo will even agree to the princess's request until we get there."

This elicited a puzzled look from Ariane. Elves were incredibly loyal, and would never think twice about rushing to aid their comrades. "But it's the capital, right? Why wouldn't he send reinforcements?"

Chiyome turned to Ariane. She was overlooking an important detail. "You know about the strained relationship between the elves in the Great Canada Forest and those in Ruanne, yes? It's possible the same is true for Count Dimo and Princess Riel. Didn't you feel a tinge of resentment over the idea of dispatching a rescue party from Canada when we were back on the ship?"

Ariane scowled and bit her lip. "I suppose you have a point."

In the case of the Great Canada Forest and Ruanne, their connection started and ended at the fact that they were all elves. They didn't have much else in common, unlike the situation we were dealing with here.

"We'll head off to Keen first thing tomorrow and figure out where we're going from there. Regardless of what happens, we need to head to the Nohzan Kingdom."

If we couldn't join Princess Riel on her way back to the capital, then we'd have to find our own way there. But the idea of having to travel there with my awful sense of

direction was terrifying.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

I glanced down at Ponta. It was prodding its bowl with its nose again, urging me to give it some more food. I ran my hand through its fur affectionately.

“I can always count on you to be the same, Ponta. No matter where we go.”

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We were up early the next morning, before the first signs of light.

Zahar brought the party south along the darkened road leading from Fort Hill to the town of Keen. A simple carriage, borrowed from the soldiers at Fort Hill, carried Princess Riel in the middle of our caravan, flanked on either side by guards.

Ariane, Chiyome, and I held up the rear on my massive driftpus.

We spotted Keen a little before noon. The trip had taken slightly longer than expected, due to several breaks we’d taken along the way.

The town was also surrounded by a massive, sturdy wall of similar construction to the one back at Fort Hill. Anyone wishing to assault the town would have their work cut out for them.

Multiple roads filled with carts of all sorts ran in and out of the town. From what I could see beyond the walls, the people appeared to be thriving. They didn’t seem to want for much.

The guards accompanying us looked surprised by what they saw. Apparently, this was the first time many of them were seeing this distant land split off by the Salma Kingdom.

According to one of the guards who’d been born here, the massive wall did a pretty good job at keeping out most monsters—other than those that slipped in through the Ruanne Forest—so the lands to the south were ripe for farming.

Much of the harvest was shipped from the port of Clyde to the Nohzan Kingdom, but there was still a great deal left over for the lord living in Keen.

Zahar led the party at a fast clip toward the town, eyeing the heavily stocked caravans. The princess's simple carriage, surrounded by a contingent of well-armored guards—not to mention me on my giant driftpus—began drawing a lot of attention as we approached.

The closer we got, the more crowded the roads became, leaving us with little choice but to slow our pace. However, I could see through the carriage's window that Princess Riel wanted nothing more than to get into town as quickly as possible.

At the gate, it appeared that they'd been expecting us, likely thanks to the messenger the commander had sent out the night before. Guards came out and cleared the road, allowing our party to easily pass through. Zahar offered up a salute as we rode past.

Once we entered the town, several mounted knights joined us to clear the way to the count's manor. A crowd formed along the sides of the road, watching us with great interest.

Ariane, her hood pulled low over her face, muttered to herself as she scanned the crowd. "Well, we certainly stand out."

"You can't really blame them for staring."

We stopped in front of the count's manor. The entire building was surrounded by a sturdy-looking wall. Though shorter than the one that surrounded the town, it was still a good five meters tall.

The knights leading the way parted to flank the large entrance built into the wall. On the other side, I could see a large, U-shaped building standing three stories tall.

A well-dressed older gentleman stood outside the front entrance, along with a dozen servants. They were all standing by, waiting for the carriage's arrival. Or, more specifically, the arrival of its precious cargo, Princess Riel. If I had to guess, I'd say the well-dressed man was the count.

Riel's carriage came to a gentle stop in front of the building.

The man gave Shiden and me a quick look over. His surprise only lasted for a split second before he bowed low to greet the carriage.

The driver opened the carriage door, and out stepped Princess Riel.

Zahar and Niena appeared instantly next to the young girl, standing protectively by her side.

Riel took in the scene around her before turning toward the count.

“Thank you for coming out to meet me. I take it you’re Count Dimo?”

The man glanced up, still bowing low. He had a round face and a shock of white hair, styled in a manner reminiscent of pictures I’d seen of Bach.

“That is correct, Princess. I am Valmuer du Dimo, lord of these lands.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have much time for pleasantries. I believe the situation has already been explained to you. I’m here to ask you to assemble an army to reinforce—”

“Apologies for cutting you off, Princess, but the message I received was quite different. I am to keep you safe until things have calmed down in the capital.”

Riel’s eyes went wide. She looked back at her two bodyguards.

“Just what’s going on here?! We were sent by my father as an envoy to seek reinforcements! Why would you send a message that I should be protected?”

Zahar took her accusatory gaze in stride and dropped to a knee. He spoke in a clear, even tone.

“This is what the king wishes. Terva and Seyval have been entrusted with securing reinforcements for the capital, while you have been sent here for your own protection.”

“What?! Father said no such thing!”

Tears were forming in the corners of the young royal’s eyes. Niena looked down at the girl sympathetically.

“Princess, your love for our people is well known. That is why the king couldn’t just tell you that he was asking you to secure your own safety.”

Riel shook her head, as if to drown out Niena’s soothing voice.

“I know that Father is always looking after me! But I refuse to stand by and wait here while my people need me!”

Tears were now flowing freely down her cheeks.

“Count Dimo! I beg you, how many soldiers can you bring together to come to the capital’s aid?”

The count’s round face tensed at this.

“Princess Riel, if our country is truly in peril, I would love to dispatch every soldier available to me. However, it’s simply not realistic to send troops all the way out to the capital from here.”

He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped at his brow before continuing.

“You see, I only have about 2,000 soldiers at my disposal—500 soldiers here in Keen and another 1,500 out in Fort Hill. But if the fort is abandoned, the Salma Kingdom could seize the opportunity to strike.”

After taking a deep breath, the count lowered his gaze and continued.

“What’s more, it would be no simple task to march such a large contingent of soldiers through the Salma Kingdom back to our homeland. A small number might be able to make it, but any significant troop movement would almost certainly draw unwanted attention. Sending a ship out from Clyde might also be viable, but that would take five, maybe six days to arrive, not counting the time needed to assemble our forces.”

A look of defeat washed over Riel’s face as Dimo spoke. Her head slumped. “I… I see. So all we can do is stand by and watch as the capital falls to ruin?”

Her eyes went dark, as if a gray cloud had passed overhead, and her shoulders shook as she started sobbing. The princess’s guards turned away, unable to watch their young charge in pain.

Riel was the first to break the heavy silence, a look of determination on her tear-streaked face.

“Well, I’m not just going to give up! The capital is protected by two walls, and I know Father won’t give in without a fight! I don’t care how many days it takes, we need to

send reinforcements!"

Niena was taken aback. "Please, think this through, Princess! Even if we did send reinforcements, there's no way you could lead them. We must respect the king's wishes and keep you safe."

Zahar spoke up next. "Listen to reason, Princess Riel. If we dispatch any soldiers, *I* will be the one to lead them."

The princess shook her head, sending tears flying. Her shoulders continued shaking as she clenched her fists. "No, I refuse to just sit around and be coddled!"

Count Dimo and the others watched the pitiful scene unfolding. Was she just some selfish brat in their eyes?

Her two bodyguards, however, looked pained. They knew better than anyone just how much she loved her people.

"Besides, given the number of undead attacking the capital, we might also find ourselves in danger."

The only people to hear the princess's final concession were her bodyguards, along with Ariane, Chiyome, and me.

"Kyiiii…"

Ponta peeked its head out of Shiden's thick mane, apparently having noticed just how tense the situation had grown.

I crossed my arms, unsure of what to do next. We were at something of a crossroads.

Chiyome and Ariane turned to me, their eyes asking the same question.

"Aaaah…"

The simple sound of me trying to organize my thoughts drew the princess's attention. Riel and I locked eyes. She looked at me curiously.

"Hm?"

The young girl crossed the distance between us with several large strides. She stopped right in front of me and tilted her head back to meet my gaze.

"Arc, I would like to express my gratitude for ensuring our safety on the journey here!"

I found myself at a loss for words. I silently knelt in front of her.

"I can hardly begin to express my appreciation. Still, I would like to ask another favor of you."

This sent a round of murmurs whisking through the crowd around us.

"And what might that be?" I had a good guess, but I prompted her to continue.

"I would like you to take me back to the Nohzan Kingdom so that I can find a lord willing to offer me assistance! I have heard stories of the elves' superior fighting prowess and would like to ask you to serve as my guard once again!"

Looks of shock washed over those around us, including the princess's bodyguards and Count Dimo. The count was the first to voice his surprise.

"What are you saying, Princess Riel? Are these people elves?!"

"That's what you're hung up on?" Ariane muttered.

I obviously understood how she felt, but the count's reaction wasn't entirely unreasonable. Considering that his lands shared a border with the Ruanne Forest, I could only imagine what he thought of elvenkind.

"The elves of Ruanne have sworn not to get involved in our matters. What are you doing here?"

Ariane yanked back her hood in annoyance.

"You… You're not like those elves."

Between her amethyst skin, golden eyes, and snow-white hair, Ariane looked quite different from the elves Dimo was used to dealing with.

"Of course not! I'm not even from Ruanne! I'm a dark elf, from the Great Canada

Forest."

The count turned to the princess's bodyguards for an explanation.

"We were attacked on our way here and they came to our aid," Zahar responded.

"What will happen if the church finds out we've had relations with the elves?"

Riel grew annoyed at how far off-track the count had gotten and reined him in. "That's not important right now! I'm asking Arc and his friends to escort us back to our homeland!"

This sent her bodyguards into a frenzy.

"Please, consider what you're saying, Princess!"

Zahar walked straight toward us as he spoke to Riel. The young girl stepped behind me.

Somehow, I found myself serving as the princess's bodyguard on her way back to the Nohzan Kingdom. This was a rather fortuitous turn of events, given that we were hoping to get a look at the palace's vault, but there was still one major sticking point.

Riel said she wanted to return to the Nohzan Kingdom in search of a noble who would lend his forces to save the capital, but what if the capital fell before we could make that happen?

Moreover, the princess's guards and Count Dimo objected to her returning to the Nohzan Kingdom. If I took her up on her request, it seemed unlikely they'd hand her over without a fight.

I could always try explaining the situation to them, but we didn't have much time.

One way or another, we needed to make our way back to the Nohzan Kingdom. Though, whether or not the princess would accept my terms for helping her was still in question.

I glanced back at the young girl before turning to Chiyome. She'd been watching the events unfold in silence, her face unreadable as usual. However, I could sense a tension in her azure eyes. I turned back to Zahar, who was fixing me with a steely gaze.

“Arc, return the princess, and I’ll pay you for your assistance.”

He extended a beefy arm toward me. I could feel Riel’s tiny hands grasping my Belenus Holy Armor. The feeling seeped straight through the armor and into my bones.

“I would like to take Princess Riel up on her request.”

Riel let out a cry of excitement from behind me. Zahar just stared at me, aghast. Before he could say anything, however, Niena exploded at me.

“Don’t be stupid! The capital is surrounded by an army of at least 100,000 undead! There’s no way I’ll allow you to bring the princess back to such a dangerous place!”

Her voice shook with rage. Everyone around her immediately tensed up, including Ariane, Chiyome, and myself. We had no idea how many enemies there were until now.

“The capital is under siege by that many soldiers?”

Count Dimo and the rest of his entourage had gone still. Apparently, they also hadn’t been informed about how grave the situation truly was.

“Is… Is that even possible? I’ve never heard of such a large number of undead in one place.”

He turned to look at Riel’s bodyguards, his eyes desperately seeking an answer. They avoided his gaze.

The look on Niena’s face was all the confirmation we needed. The number was hardly an exaggeration.

“I… I guess it’s impossible then?” Princess Riel’s weak voice called out from behind me.

Ariane leaned in to whisper to me. “Not even the strongest wall could hold up against a siege of 100,000 undead.”

Riel overheard her, and was quick to object. “Father wouldn’t give in so easily! Besides, my brothers are coming back with reinforcements of their own. I know the capital can hold them off. I just know it!”

“You have two brothers?” I asked. “Did they also request reinforcements?”

The young girl nodded. “Once my brothers come back, they’ll show those bad guys what for!” She shook her tiny fist in the air.

Even assuming her brothers were able to assemble forces large enough to face off against 100,000 undead, it would still take some time before they could mobilize.

But if we could rush back to the capital and reduce the enemy’s numbers a bit…

I wasn’t sure exactly how big the city actually was, but capital cities tended to be rather large and densely populated. Even with an army of 100,000, it seemed highly doubtful that the undead could encircle the capital entirely.

If we could break through where the invaders’ lines were thinnest and make our way to the capital, I was certain Ariane, Chiyome, and I could help hold it. I glanced at my comrades to see what they were thinking.

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Ariane was certainly skilled in spirit magic, but swordsmanship was where she truly excelled. Chiyome was also able to make use of spirit magic in the form of ninjutsu. Shiden, my lizard-like driftpus, was built like a tank but ran across the open plains like a roadrunner. Ponta, my little furry eating machine, rounded out our party.

Lacking any real-world experience, I couldn’t say how long we might hold off the enemy, but I figured we could at least stall them for a while.

We all exchanged looks. Ariane seemed resigned, Chiyome nodded firmly, and Shiden… Well, I had no idea what Shiden was thinking. Ponta was almost certainly thinking about food.

“I guess that settles it, then. We’re off to the capital of the Nohzan Kingdom.”

Everyone around us, including Princess Riel, looked surprised.

“Before we do that, we need to visit several other lords and assemble an army!”

Riel hopped out from behind me. She started explaining her plan, but I shook my head.

“Princess Riel, I don’t know what kind of defenses the capital has, but I can say for certain that they’re in too much danger for us to waste our time traveling around in search of allies. Your brothers will need time to assemble their forces. Therefore, I’d like to bring whatever soldiers I can, no matter how few, straight to the capital in order to buy some time before reinforcements arrive. What do you think?”

Riel blinked several times as she let my words sink in. Finally, she nodded in agreement. “You’re right. It’ll do us no good to bring a massive army if there’s no capital left to save!”

Zahar butted in. “Please, don’t be so rash, Princess! A small party would be crushed instantly in the face of an army 100,000 strong! The best choice would be to break through the enemy’s lines where they’re weakest and reenter the capital. But even then… what if the reinforcements are late, or never come at all?”

His booming voice caused the young girl to flinch and go quiet. She looked up at me, and our eyes met.

“We will do whatever the princess deems best. As I’m sure you already know, the three of us are more than capable of holding our own on the battlefield.”

Riel nodded, her face serious. The rest of her guards look less assured. Meanwhile, Ariane looked annoyed, and Chiyome started blankly ahead.

This could turn out to be a great opportunity for us. Who knew? If we showed the humans just how helpful elves could be, it might even help improve relations out here in the Nohzan Kingdom.

Besides, if we were fighting against undead soldiers, I did have an ace up my sleeve that I could use to take them all out in one go. It wasn’t something I could practice, though, so I’d need to wait until I was in the middle of a real battle.

“Well, Princess?”

“Princess!”

Riel looked between Zahar and me, seemingly pulled in two competing directions. After a moment, she puffed out her chest, her mind made.

“It’s decided. Zahar, Niena, we’re going back to the capital! If the Nohzan Kingdom falls,

not only will we be finished, but our neighbors will also be in grave danger!"

"What?"

"Huh?!"

Both of her bodyguards bit down on their lips to avoid saying something they'd regret. They each took a knee. It was all they could do now that the princess had made her decision. I could practically feel the hatred they shot my way. I was sure the way they saw it, they were taking their young princess straight into an inferno with a pack of kindling on their backs. Worse, they were going with elves and a cat girl—beings they'd been taught to disdain by the Hilk religion.

I would have loved to help improve interspecies relations, but this wasn't the time or place.

I'd been hoping to avoid using my teleportation spells in front of humans, but if it came down to it, I was willing to use them to get Riel out of danger.

Riel cast her gaze across her kneeling bodyguards, then looked over to the count.

"Count Dimo!"

"Y-yes, Your Highness?"

"I want you to get us your fastest… No, wait, get us your cavalry! You don't plan on letting us return to the capital without an escort, do you?"

Her entire contingent of guards all looked at the count expectantly. The pressure from their stares was palpable. Riel might have been small, but she was definitely a member of the royal family. It was evident in the way she spoke.

If the count allowed Riel to return without sending any kind of escort to ensure her safety, this could come back to bite him. Of course, the issue would be moot if the entire country fell, but if the Nohzan Kingdom overcame its current threat, he would almost certainly find himself at risk of losing his title.

Riel compromised and agreed to take only the fastest members of his cavalry. It made sense, considering he probably couldn't muster many knights on such short notice anyway.

Losing a whole cavalry company would be quite a loss, but when weighed against having his title taken away, it was a small price to pay.

"A-absolutely. I'll send up my cavalry at once. Someone, call the captain of the guards!"

Count Dimo practically fell over himself as he tried escaping back into his mansion.

"I wonder if we can really count on him," Riel muttered under her breath.

As I looked at her stormy gray eyes, I felt a certain regret that I couldn't quite put a finger on.

"I hate to bring this up, but I'd like to discuss our payment."

A look of concern washed across her face.

A part of me felt like some cruel old man trying to get one over on a little kid, but ultimately, it was best to ask for whatever I could get from her.

"Aah, right. How much will it be for everything?"

She was clearly trying her best to stay cool, but I could see that her hands were shaking as she looked back up at me.

However, it wasn't money I was after.

"I only ask that you pay us if we succeed. As for what I want, first off, I'd like you to give us free reign to look through the palace's vaults."

Behind Riel, her bodyguards eyed me with suspicion.

"You're not after any of our national treasures, you just… want to look through the vaults in Saureah?"

Riel spoke the words slowly, as if trying to understand them.

I nodded. "That's correct. We're looking for something in the vaults."

I saw Chiyome nodding out of the corner of my eye.

“That’s fine. I’ll grant you permission to enter the vaults. And the second thing you want?”

“For my second request, I would like you to release all enslaved elves and mountain people in the Nohzan Kingdom and pledge to make such trafficking illegal.”

Not only were Riel’s bodyguards taken aback by this, but so were Ariane and Chiyome.

Riel eyed me with suspicion and repeated my demand to herself several times, as if working her way through it. Finally, she smiled up at me.

“I assume you’ll be taking in everyone we release? In that case, I see no problem with…”

“Princess Riel, please, wait a moment!” Niena interrupted her before she could even finish speaking. “This is not a decision that you alone can make.”

Riel looked back at her bodyguard, confused. “Why not? Arc here is just asking that we hand over all of the elves and beastmen that are currently in prison. Balancing that against the survival of our kingdom, I think it’s a pretty easy choice.”

“You don’t understand, Princess. He’s asking for… He’s talking about the slaves!”

“Slaves? But aren’t there different types? Those who are in debt, those who committed crimes, and those who were taken during war?”

Niena hesitated for a moment, as if unsure how to proceed.

Judging by the way they were talking, I felt like I had a fairly good understanding of what was going on.

“So, in your opinion, would you say that there are no slaves, either elf or beast, in your country?”

Niena set her jaw and made no attempt to reply. It seemed like she was trying to hide the existence of the slaves from Princess Riel.

Considering that the Hilk teachings held a rather negative view of the elves and mountain people, my guess was that it was just an implicit understanding among the neighboring countries that they keep these people in enslaved.

After all, the Holy Hilk Kingdom was dispatching their own templar forces into foreign nations to capture mountain people. If it came to light that these nations enslaved them as well, the Hilk could very well demand that they hand their slaves over to the church.

The military gap between the countries would ultimately keep them from being able to say no to such demands.

"What's going on here? I was told that we, like the Rhoden Kingdom, forbid owning elves or mountain people as slaves!"

Riel was clearly upset. She looked back and forth between Niena and me several times.

I was asking for them to release slaves that they didn't officially own.

Assuming what they claimed was true, then making this deal wouldn't change anything for the Nohzan Kingdom. But if some within Nohzan did, in fact, own slaves, then the country would need to take possession of the slaves from their captors in order to hand them over to me.

I had no idea how many slaves were out there, but Niena's reaction suggested that it wasn't a small number.

Moreover, the slaves were at extreme risk so long as the capital remained under siege. I wasn't sure how many people lived in the capital, but they would need to start rationing supplies soon. The first ones to get their rations cut would be the ones at the bottom.

And the lowest of the low were almost certainly the slaves that no one admitted existed.

Elves were often bought and sold for harems or for breeding and could fetch a high price, but the mountain people were generally sold for manual labor and would probably be the first to go.

I looked at Princess Riel and her two bodyguards, standing by in silence. Maybe if I gave a little, I could get this tied up easier.

"Hmm, well, if what you say is true, and it's illegal to enslave elves or mountain people in the Nohzan Kingdom, then there's nothing to negotiate. However, you and I know

that there are plenty of people out there willing to break the law."

The look in their eyes confirmed that they knew what I was suggesting. Princess Riel was the first to speak.

"So, anyone who is found to be in violation of the law will have their slaves taken from them and sent on to you, correct?"

She was wise beyond her years.

This way, the royal family would maintain the moral high ground while also making it easy for them to liberate the slaves owned by their subordinates.

So long as the royal family did what was right and just, I would only need to give them a little helping hand to make sure the rest of the nobles knew about this policy.

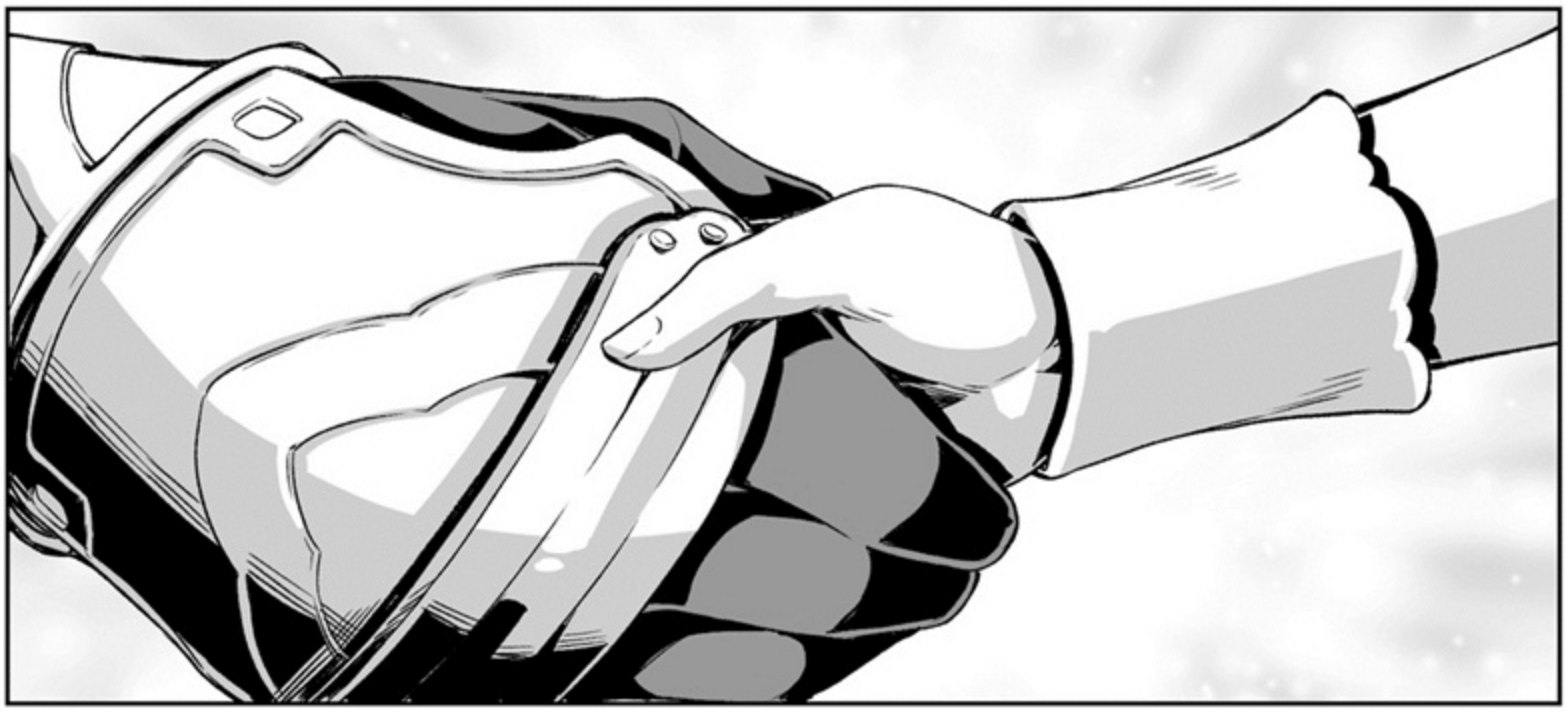
Otherwise, the nobles would reject the royal family's decisions as unjust and start a rebellion, sending the country to ruin and making all of this pointless.

I nodded in agreement before dropping to a knee and offering my hand. The young princess gripped it with as much strength as she could muster.

Behind her, her bodyguards held their heads in their hands in defeat.

If I ever hoped to see this promise come to fruition, I would need to make a show of force to convince people that her decision was just.

Just thinking about this caused me to crack a smile under my helmet. I could feel the young girl tense slightly, as if she were able to sense what I was thinking.



CHAPTER 4
ARC, THE PALADIN

Brahniey, once a part of the Nohzan Kingdom to the east of the Wiel River, now formed the eastern border of the Salma Kingdom.

The Brahniey family had been entrusted by the Salma Kingdom with overseeing this region.

Two generations back, nearly seventy years ago, the man named Brahniey was head of the royal cavalry and had been granted the title of margrave by the king of Salma as a show of appreciation for his incredible military victories.

Many of the nobles back at the capital balked at the idea of a mere commoner taking this title, even if he was a captain of the knights. They ultimately pushed him out to oversee a land torn asunder by war, at risk of being taken back by the Nohzan Kingdom at any moment.

Despite these obstacles, the land itself was quite fertile. The only real dangers it faced were from the monsters that occasionally came down from the Sobir Mountains. The retired captain went to work at once improving the land's defenses and making it a safer place to live, ultimately bringing more prestige to the region.

The Brahnieys were now considered one of the more influential noble families in the Salma Kingdom, causing even more frustration among those who'd objected to their rise in the first place.

The Brahniey family lived in the rebuilt manor of the Nohzan lord who'd once wielded power over this frontier land.

The building's decorative architecture had been left as is, and it stood in stark contrast to the newly constructed walls and towers surrounding the manor. The two rulers' tastes in design couldn't have been any more different.

An older gentleman sat at a large desk in one of the manor's many spacious rooms, doing what looked to be administrative work. However, there was nothing about the

man's appearance to suggest his true age. He wore perfectly tailored clothing that suggested he was a man of high status and showed off his muscular figure underneath. The man glared down at the paperwork in front of him.

A head of thinning white hair and a white mustache were the only indications of how old Margrave Wendly du Brahniey actually was.

He was the current lord of Brahniey, a title inherited through the generations from his father's father, and he'd spent much of his life holding off constant encroachments from the Nohzan Kingdom.

The room was quiet, save for the scratch of his pen rasping across paper, until a knock at the door broke the silence. Margrave Brahniey looked up.

He spoke in a low, clear voice that resonated throughout the room. "Come."

A young woman bowed before entering the room and walked straight to the margrave's desk with a cool confidence rarely seen in this world of nobility, pomp, and circumstance.

Generally, the only women who would come before him were either drab servants or the impeccably dressed wives of fellow nobility. The woman before him looked more like a secretary.

After acknowledging her, Margrave Brahniey set his pen down and nodded at the woman to speak.

"One of our patrols just came in with an interesting report."

"Oh?" The margrave stroked his well-groomed mustache as he watched the woman across from him with great interest.

"Some villagers to the southwest witnessed a mysterious creature attack a military force escorting a carriage."

Brahniey raised an eyebrow. Since these lands had once belonged to the Nohzan Kingdom, they were constantly under attack, as their original owners had tried to take them back. However, this sounded like something entirely different.

"We couldn't get an exact figure on the size of the force, but it consisted of a carriage

and several mounted knights. Likely an important person and their complement of guards. The witnesses didn't get a clear look, but they said the group carried no flags or markings of any kind."

Brahniey scratched at his chin. "Off to the southwest? I suppose they could be messengers dispatched from the capital in Larisa. Where did the carriage go? And what's this about a monster?"

"The reports state that the group was traveling east. We sent a party out to investigate and found the remains of the carriage and several corpses outfitted in elaborate armor. However, we couldn't find anyone who looked like they would have been in the carriage, so we can only assume that they escaped. As for the monster, we've created a sketch based on witness statements."

The woman pulled a piece of parchment out of the stack in her arms and handed it to Margrave Brahniey. He furrowed his brow as he looked down at the bizarre figure sketched on the page.

"Legs of a spider and… what's this up top? Two humans stitched together? Four arms? This is either some new monster or…"

His eyes darted up to focus on the woman standing across from him.

"Have you learned the identities of any of the bodies?"

"No, we haven't. Judging by the quality of the gear, we can assume they were guarding someone important, but they carried no identification."

"No identification is suspicious in its own right. Maybe one of those damn nobles from the central provinces is trying to learn how things are going out here on the frontier?"

Brahniey mumbled to himself, feverishly rubbing at the spot where his forehead met his receding hairline.

"No, it couldn't be… could it? Someone from the Nohzan court visiting Count Dimo? But why? They could just take a boat down to the port of Clyde, so there's no reason for them to risk traveling by land."

He stroked his mustache once again and turned his attention back to his secretary.

“Assemble a task force to find these intruders and slay these monsters. I want you to send six platoons to the south and have each of them perform a thorough search of the surrounding area, keeping a close watch on one another.”

The woman nodded. “As you wish. I will speak with the captain of the knights at once.”

She bowed and left the room.

Margrave Brahniey stood from his chair and looked out the large window next to his desk.

“Just what exactly is going on in the Nohzan Kingdom?”

His question echoed throughout the empty room as he gazed down at the garden below.

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“How’s this?”

Princess Riel sat in a comically large chair in front of an even larger desk in a room we’d commandeered in the lord’s mansion. In front of her sat a piece of parchment, on which was a contract that outlined the terms of my payment for helping save the capital.

She slid the parchment toward me.

After giving it a quick read, I nodded in satisfaction and slid it back.

“It hits all the major terms we agreed on.”

Ariane whispered in my ear. “Do you actually think a promise between you and a little kid is going to carry any weight?” She eyed Riel’s two bodyguards with suspicion.

“You’re not wrong,” I whispered back, “but I don’t actually expect all of the terms to be met right away.”

Ariane looked back at me, confused.

I couldn’t deny that a country so fully under the influence of the Holy Hilk Kingdom

and its discriminatory teachings against non-humans probably wouldn't follow such an agreement to the letter.

Ariane furrowed her eyebrows and scowled. "Then what's the point of signing a contract?"

Having a written contract signed by the princess herself could come in handy in the future when pushing for them to comply with the terms. And if they didn't agree, I had another card I could play.

"All we need to do is show this to the Holy Hilk Kingdom if we want it enforced."

Chiyome's ears perked up at this. Ponta wagged its ears about, too, as if to show its agreement.

Unlike our other two companions, however, Ariane still looked confused.

"We can just do what the Holy Hilk Kingdom does with its own templars. If we show them what for, they'll realize we're a force to be reckoned with."

The scowl on her face only grew more intense. "You're not putting together some sort of stupid plot again, are you?"

Before she could push the issue further, Princess Riel slid the contract back over to me. "All right, I signed it. After you sign it, the contract will be valid."

I glanced at Ariane. She looked puzzled.

"Actually, I think it would be better if Ariane signs this."

Riel and the other representatives of the Nohzan Kingdom turned to look at her. She scowled and glared at me. Even in her hushed voice, I could feel the force behind her words.

"What the hell, Arc! Why me?"

My reasoning was simple. "I'm still a newcomer to the village. I have no status. Ariane is in a better position to be signing these kinds of things."

All eyes were on Ariane. Most of the humans had probably assumed that I served as a

representative of the elves. But, as I'd just told Ariane, my time in Lalatoya was still relatively short. The contract would hold a lot more weight if she signed it.

There was also another, bigger reason: I couldn't actually write in this world.

If I stopped and stared long and hard at words, the meaning would eventually come to me. But writing in a language with unfamiliar letters and grammar was another thing entirely.

I'd probably need to deal with that at some point.

With all eyes on her, Ariane let out a dramatic sigh and took the pen, signing the contract in front of her.

"Fine. How's that?"

The princess gave the contract a final read and nodded. "Perfect. The contract is now complete! Can I assume this means you three will assist us in saving our kingdom?"

A look of uncertainty washed over Riel's face. Ariane averted her gaze and shrugged her shoulders.

I took the contract and nodded firmly, in an attempt to put the young princess at ease.

"You have nothing to worry about, Princess Riel. We will give our all to rescue the Nohzan capital from the armies of the undead."

The young girl let out a breath, as if a heavy burden had just been removed from her shoulders.

Niena, who'd been watching quietly from the sidelines, motioned for me to come closer. When she opened her mouth, she spoke in a clear, decisive tone.

"If we come across casualties at the capital, do you think you would be able to use your healing magic on them like you did for me?" She rubbed at her right arm unconsciously as she spoke.

I wanted to avoid using any type of spectacular magic, out of fear of causing more problems in the future, to say nothing of the effort it would take to heal a city full of people. Even though I had ample reserves of magic, trying to heal such a large number…

“I promise I’ll do what I can, as long as it’s within my abilities.”

She let out a breath and nodded in thanks.

This wasn’t an entirely selfless promise.

If I showed off my abilities to heal people in the middle of a tragedy, even the most ardent of Hilk believers would have to admit the good behind the act, even if it was performed by a non-human.

Though removing the stigma on non-humans might be hoping for a bit too much, at the very least, I figured it would help build good will among some people.

A servant walked into the room to deliver a message to the princess. “Princess Riel, the count has assembled his cavalry.”

“Tell him we will be out shortly.” Riel hopped down from her oversized chair and strode over to her awaiting bodyguards. “You don’t look too good, Niena. Maybe you should stay back?”

Just as she’d said, Niena looked pale, probably due to all the blood she’d lost when the man-spider lopped off her arm. I’d already confirmed through previous attempts that my magic couldn’t restore lost blood.

Niena shook her head and dropped to one knee. “I could never allow myself to sit here in luxury while you head off to the capital alone, even with your blessing.”

I wondered if the young princess truly grasped the determination behind Niena’s words. She seemed to hesitate, as if thinking over what the older woman had just said.

“You’re a stubborn one, Niena.” Riel smiled. “Ah, well, I guess we better get ready to go!”

The young girl grabbed an elaborately decorated piece of leather armor and pulled it over her dress. Apparently, this was the style preferred by the royal family.

Unlike the heavy armor worn by her guards, this elegant leather armor didn’t seem like it would offer any real protection. But I supposed it was better than nothing.

Riel led her guards out of the study, leaving Ariane, Chiyome, and me alone in the room.

Ariane was the first to speak. She sounded exhausted. “Well, this is turning out to be yet another strange and unexpected situation.”

Ponta cocked its head. “Kyii?”

Chiyome looked apologetically at Ariane. “I’m sorry, this only happened because of my original request…”

Ariane shook her head. “Oh, no, no… I didn’t mean to sound like I was blaming you, Chiyome. Just that I’m not really a representative of my village. I don’t know if it’s okay for me to be entering into agreements with humans like this, you know?”

Her look of concern morphed into a glare as she turned her attention to me.

“This is merely a personal contract between us and the Nohzan Kingdom. There’s no need to get the people of Canada involved. Besides, the contract simply outlines payment for our services, so it all comes down to whether or not they’ll uphold their end of the bargain. If we don’t succeed, then there’s nothing lost.”

“I guess you’re right…”

Ariane still didn’t look satisfied, but my explanation seemed to at least put her at ease. She let out a breath.

“But if we don’t succeed, we won’t be able to get inside the vault.”

Chiyome frowned. She was still trying to figure out what had happened to Sasuke.

“Well then, I guess we best get going.”

With that, the three of us left the study to join Princess Riel.

***

We stepped out into the spacious grounds in front of the mansion to find a hundred mounted knights in formation. They were all outfitted in full plate armor and sat upon massive horses. The harsh, reflected light of the midday sun made them glow.

Princess Riel looked out across the gallant knights and nodded in satisfaction.

For my part, however, I couldn't help but think about how they were going to be eaten alive by the 10,000 undead soldiers waiting for us.

Judging by the determined looks on all the knights' faces, I guessed that Count Dimo hadn't told them what they were actually facing or why they'd been assembled.

That was probably a smart call. After all, if they did know what was waiting for them, the whole cavalry platoon might just turn tail and run, embarrassing the count and forcing Princess Riel's bodyguards to refuse to let her leave. Their ignorance probably worked out to our advantage.

The whole courtyard went silent at the sight of the princess, save for the nervous pawing of the horses' feet.

Count Dimo stepped up beside Riel. "All right, soldiers! You have all been granted the great honor of escorting Her Royal Highness, Princess Riel, back to the capital! Take this order to heart and protect her with your lives!"

The assembled knights sat up even straighter.

Zahar, who would be leading the escort, spoke next.

"I'm sure many of you have already heard a brief summary of our mission, but we will be taking the shortest route back to the capital, which means we will have to cross through the Salma Kingdom. We will arrive at Fort Hill before sundown, and then, first thing tomorrow morning, make our way through Brahniey. We have a long, hard route ahead of us, so any stragglers will be left behind! I'm counting on you to do your best!"

Murmurs ran through the assembled knights, but Zahar quickly put an end to them by ordering the formation to depart.

"Dimo's calvary, you will head to Fort Hill! Take this letter from the count to the commander of the fortress."

Zahar pulled out an envelope sealed with wax and handed it to one of the knights, who gave a salute. Then the whole formation took off at a gallop.

The princess's guards pulled into a tight formation around Niena's horse, which Riel was also riding, to form a protective barrier.

After seeing off the cavalry, Zahar turned toward me. “Arc, I’d like you to take up the rear.”

“Understood.”

Zahar returned to the princess.

I looked around the courtyard until I spotted a familiar reddish-brown beast relaxing in a far-off corner. As I drew close, I saw that it was busily munching away at the grass, leaving nothing but bare dirt.

Shiden glanced up at me as I approached, chewing on its afternoon snack.

The greenery wasn’t looking so good, but I’d just have to rely on the kindness of Count Dimo’s heart to overlook this.

“Let’s get going, Shiden.”

I patted its back, just behind the saddle.

“Grweeeeeeeen!”

Shiden let out a growl and brought its massive body up to its full height.

The count’s staff let out gasps of surprise at the sight of the large beast and put more distance between us.

It was a fair response. Driftpus looked rather dangerous to the untrained eye, though they were generally docile in the company of the person they considered their master.

I hopped up onto the saddle, followed by Ariane behind me and Chiyome in front. Ponta took up its now-favorite perch atop Shiden’s head, buried deep in the driftpus’s white mane. After making sure we had everyone, I took hold of the reins.

We followed Princess Riel’s entourage through the gate and down the road leading out of Keen.

Glancing up at the sun, I thought back over the distance between here and Fort Hill and mumbled to myself while keeping an eye on the bobbing figures ahead.

“I wonder if we’ll actually make it by nightfall.”

Chiyome turned to look back at me. She didn’t say anything, but I knew what she was thinking and replied with a nod.

“All in due time.”

Even though guards had been dispatched to keep the roads clear, the whole town had a lively air to it as the townsfolk gathered around to get a look at the princess.

We kept our eyes straight ahead as we followed the procession through the town.

While Count Dimo’s cavalry had been sent out at top speed, the princess’s procession moved rather slowly. In fact, I had to be careful that the driftpus didn’t get out ahead and leave everyone else behind. I couldn’t help but wonder if having six legs really helped you run all that much faster. The same thought had crossed my mind when I fought the giant basilisk.

Vast, fertile fields stretched off into the distance on both sides of the road. Every time we passed a farmer working the soil, they would look up at us with interest.

At last, we spotted the towering walls of Fort Hill in the distance.

Though it hadn’t even been twelve hours since we’d left this place, it still felt somewhat nostalgic to be here again.

The cavalry held the count’s flag aloft, and the gate slowly opened.

Ariane let out a heavy sigh and muttered to herself. “We’re done for today, right? At least we can finally relax for a bit.”

I glanced down and spied Ponta sleeping peacefully in Shiden’s mane.

Come to think of it, we’d skipped lunch.

The cavalry disappeared through the gate, followed by the princess and her guards. Once we crossed the threshold, the gate closed behind us.

One of the knights approached the commander of Fort Hill and handed over the count’s letter.

All of a sudden, panic erupted among Riel's guards. I heard the young girl call out.

"Hang in there, Niena!"

I looked over to find Niena slumped atop her horse. She didn't look well.

Zahar called out, trying to take control of the situation.

"Get her someplace where she can rest! Hurry!"

Two nearby guards quickly helped Niena off her horse and carried her away while Riel watched, worry etched on her face. As soon as she noticed my gaze, she came running over toward me.

"Arc, can you go check on her?"

I hopped off Shiden and looked down at the young girl. "I can, but I suspect Niena is simply suffering from anemia. She needs to rest and eat properly."

Tears pricked the corners of Riel's eyes.

"I'll do what I can for her. After that, we'll just have to wait and see."

This seemed to bring some relief to the young girl, a faint smile gracing her lips.

Ariane called out to me teasingly. "You really can't stand to see a little girl cry, can you, Arc?"

"You're hardly one to talk."

But Ariane turned to look at the setting sun, pretending she hadn't heard me.

Under different circumstances, we'd let Niena rest for two or three days, but I doubted she'd agree to put aside her role as Riel's bodyguard.

For a moment, I considered knocking her out with a karate chop to the neck as soon as she woke. But if I did it wrong, I might accidentally kill her.

In terms of restorative magic, I had Rejuvenation and Reanimation at my disposal, but they each only worked some of the time, so I wasn't sure I could count on them. It

seemed unwise to test their limits when someone's life hung in the balance.

I looked up to see the setting sun cast its golden glow across Fort Hill. I had to squint to see the giant ball dipping lower and lower in the sky. It looked like the entire sky was ablaze.

It would take about two days to pass through the Salma Kingdom. I could only hope that we'd make it through without any major trouble.

I shook my head to clear it. It'd do me no good thinking about things I couldn't control.

***

Brahniey was located in the southeast of the Salma Kingdom.

The region was surrounded by the monster-infested Ildbah Forest to the northeast, the human-hating elves in the Ruanne Forest to the southwest, and the massive Fort Hill to the south, which protected Count Dimo's lands.

To the southeast ran the Wiel River. There were relatively few human settlements in the area, but it was full of vast, fertile farmlands, rolling hills, and endless plains.

A group of thirty heavily armed and armored soldiers marched in a column across the hills. They surrounded two carts, which bore the mark of Margrave Brahniey. The carts were filled to the brim with rations, weapons, shields, and more.

This was one of the platoons the margrave had dispatched to look for the intruders who'd crossed into Brahniey's territory, and to hunt down the mysterious monster that had been sighted earlier.

An older man, the commander of the platoon, led the formation from atop a horse. He let out a sigh, muttering to himself as he scanned their surroundings.

"I heard that the force that passed through here might have been related to the Nohzan Kingdom, so I figured we'd at least find something in this region, but we keep coming up empty-handed."

A young man walking alongside the commander's horse nodded in agreement.

"I wonder if the platoon south of here is having any luck. We haven't found anything

even remotely like the monster…"

The younger man, the platoon's deputy commander, carried a shield to protect the commander as he walked beside the horse.

"While I'd certainly love to get the accolades that came along with it, I'm not exactly fixing for a fight with a monster we know nothing about."

The commander muttered to himself as he pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket. He frowned as he looked down at the sketch of the monster.

"I wonder, though, if something this atrocious really exists."

His deputy commander let out a hollow laugh and glanced over his shoulder at the cart filled with massive shields.

"What were they thinking, throwing equipment at us and telling us to go find something no one has ever seen before?"

This elicited a laugh from the older man. "That's why there's another squad following us. Once we're killed, they can go back and report our deaths to the margrave. See? No worries." He ended his joke with another hearty laugh, though the younger soldier could only shake his head.

One of the soldiers on the perimeter of the procession called out.

"There's a figure approaching from the north!"

All of the soldiers immediately turned.

Looking north, the commander caught sight of someone running downhill straight toward them. The figure was moving as fast as a galloping horse.

Just like the sketch on the parchment, the monster had large, spider-like legs and two human torsos, each with its own pair of arms. However, there was one thing the notes had neglected to mention, something that caused all the soldiers to go silent.

This strange monster was wearing metal armor and wielded two large shields and two massive scimitars.

Across his career, the commander had fought all manner of humanoid monsters—from goblins to orcs and even the feared minotaur. Some of them had been armed, either with weapons of their own making or those looted from human corpses, but time and again they'd proved to be less intelligent than their human counterparts, unable to use even the finest of weapons with the same finesse.

However, the man-spider bearing down on them clearly knew how to use the weapons it wielded. It was like watching a nightmare come to life.

"Wh-what the hell is that?! It has the same weapons we do!"

The deputy's cries brought the commander back to reality.

"Get ahold of yourself! Soldiers, diamond formation! And get the shield bearers out here now!"

The commander's voice boomed as he issued commands. The soldiers pulled the large shields out of the carts and began forming into a diamond to face the oncoming monster.

"Spear bearers, form up behind the shields and prepare yourselves for the clash. Archers, bracket the monster in so it can't change direction!"

"Aaaand… fire!" On the deputy commander's mark, the archers lined up behind the wall of shields and let loose a volley of arrows.

Every single one of the arrows missed its mark, thudding uselessly into the ground on either side of the monster. As soon as it was within striking distance, the deputy commander shouted his next order.

"Strike!"

The spear bearers launched their weapons in unison.

Dull, metallic clangs rang out as the monster used its shields to deflect the onslaught. Panic began overtaking the soldiers.

The monster didn't escape entirely unscathed, however. With only two shields to bring to bear and a body the size of a minotaur, it couldn't block the entire volley. Several spears scored direct hits on its thick, spider-like legs. One even tore straight through,

eliciting a pained howl from the creature.

“Nnngraaaaawwl!!! You’re finished, scum!”

The monster’s eerie voice sent a chill up the soldiers’ spines. The commander himself even tensed up.

Never before had he encountered a monster that could speak. It was beginning to feel as if they were facing a demon that had crawled out of hell itself. The very thought caused the soldiers to tremble with fear.

However, this was no time to let their emotions take hold. Even after the hard blow the monster had taken from the spears, it still managed to close the distance to the formation and throw its body straight into shield bearers.

The heavy crash was followed by loud screams, the crack of bones breaking, and the metallic scent of freshly spilled blood. A cloud of dirt engulfed the platoon as it descended into chaos.

“Hold the line! Shield bearers, push back against the monster! Spear bearers, aim for its legs!”

Realizing how well protected its upper body was, the commander instructed his soldiers to attack the monster’s weak points.

The shield bearers put all their strength into pushing the man-spider back, all the while taking heavy blows as the monsters slammed its own shields into them.

The spear bearers thrust their weapons into the man-spider’s lower body. Thick, black liquid sprayed into the air as the soldiers stabbed over and over, their own bodies quickly becoming stained.

The monster was a lot more powerful than the commander could have guessed, and they were taking casualties at an alarming rate. Still, if the battle continued like this, it seemed likely they would win. The commander squeezed his fist, silently willing his soldiers on.

Just then, one of them called out a terrified report: “There’s another one to the northwest!”

The commander turned.

A second man-spider stood atop a nearby knoll, its eyes locked on the battle. The monster let out an ear-splitting cry and charged.

Nearly half of the soldiers had already been killed or injured fighting the first monster. If another joined the fray, they'd be done for.

"Dammit!"

The man-spider raced down the hill as fast as its spidery legs would carry it. The joke the commander had made to his deputy earlier might very well come true.

He clenched his jaw and thought of his family back in the capital, thankfully a long distance from here.

Another soldier shouted above the fray. "Clouds of dust spotted to the south, cavalry of unknown origin, about a hundred strong!"

"What?!"

The commander and his deputy turned in unison.

Sure enough, a force of nearly one hundred mounted knights rushed toward them at high speed. They steered their horses in a wide arc, attempting to skirt around the battlefield.

Judging by their movement, it was clear they weren't reinforcements, but the commander had no idea who these knights could be. Something in his gut told him this was the force he'd been sent to find.

The invaders spotted before had consisted of a handful of knights and a carriage, yet the group rushing past them now was ten times that size.

The only logical explanation was that these soldiers belonged to Count Dimo. But why would he send troops straight through the middle of Brahniey? Only one possible answer came to mind: Could this all be the work of the Nohzan Kingdom?

But the very idea that the people in Nohzan had learned some sort of ancient, dark magic was laughable.

The commander tried to remain calm as he focused his attention back on the battle. His soldiers' time was running out.

"One of the knights is approaching!"

The commander turned to look at the unidentified soldier speeding toward his lines. His eyes went wide, his throat growing tight.

"What in the holy hell…"

***

Saureah, capital of Nohzan, sat at the center of the country.

The jewel of the kingdom was under siege from an army of undead that had appeared out of nowhere—an army numbering 100,000 strong.

The undead relentlessly attacked the double walls surrounding the city, some trying to tear it down stone by stone, others attempting to heft their undead comrades up and over it. The battle had raged on for days at this point.

Since undead tended to grow stronger after sunset, the royal forces had originally doubled down on their defensive positions at night. However, when night fell, these particular undead would abandon the wall and start roaming the countryside as if in a daze. At daybreak, they would resume their attack.

The military commanders initially suspected this was some kind of ruse, but after two or three days of the same routine, they began guessing there was something more sinister at work.

This didn't mean they could just take it easy at night, however, since the undead could come rushing back at any moment.

Among the nigh uncountable enemies were dozens of bizarre half-spider, half-human creatures, many of which were observed tending to the wandering undead soldiers once night fell, even going so far as killing some of them.

Despite being few in number, these man-spiders were incredibly powerful, far more than the rank-and-file undead. Thanks to the immense strength afforded to them by their massive legs, they presented a great threat to the city both day and night.

Once these man-spiders made it past the outer wall and through the town beyond, they would find themselves confronted with yet another wall. This inner wall marked the original boundaries of Saureah before it had undergone an expansion. Due to the constant conflicts in the region's past, the inner wall was formidable in its own right, and served as a sturdy defense against any attempted invasion. The old town district, within the confines of the inner wall, was guarded at each corner by immense stone turrets.

Asparuh Nohzan Saureah, ruler of the Nohzan Kingdom, along with several of his top advisors, sat in a cramped room looking down at a map of the city. Their expressions were anything but pleased.

A somber atmosphere hung over the room, with no one willing to break the silence. Finally, King Asparuh spoke up, his voice tense.

"How many days has it been since we sent out for reinforcements?" He was beginning to lose track of time.

"Today marks the seventh, I believe," his prime minister replied.

The king let out a heavy sigh and rubbed at his forehead. "Seven whole days… Even if my sons were able to secure reinforcements, it will still be at least another seven before they arrive. Cardinal Liberalitas also sent a request for assistance to the Holy Hilk Kingdom, but that, too, will take time."

Deep lines etched the prime minister's forehead. Words could not do his feelings justice.

The king could take no more of the oppressive silence. He shook his head, changing the subject.

"How is the demolition of the houses near the inner wall coming along?"

"Almost ninety percent complete." The prime minister scanned the map in front of him, focusing on the inner wall.

They'd briefly considered drawing the line of defense all the way back to the inner wall, should the outer wall fall, but that raised the issue of what to do with all the residences between the two. There were very real fears that the man-spiders might use the houses near the wall as platforms to bound over the inner wall, so the king had

decided to demolish all of them.

The residents of these houses weren't pleased with this decision, but given that this could very well determine the survival of the kingdom, they had little choice but to agree to it.

"The slaves have demolished the buildings and smashed the bridges much faster than planned. Their physical prowess is simply unmatched."

King Asparuh nodded. "Putting them out there was a risk, but I imagine they don't want to die at the hands of an undead horde either."

"True. Though, if and when we prevail, the Hilk church will certainly have words for us. With the cardinal here in the capital, the higher-ups will certainly hear of it."

The king had chosen to purchase all of the independently held slaves to demolish the houses. Putting them out in public was a risky move, but they needed a strong labor force, and they needed it now.

Of course, there were concerns that putting the beast people out there on their own might lead to a revolt, but just as the king had said, the slaves were invested in protecting their own lives.

However, if the cardinal were to report the existence of the beast people to the Hilk leaders, the church would almost certainly demand that the slaves be surrendered to them.

King Asparuh let out a heavy sigh. "So long as the country is still standing, it'll all be worth it."

His prime minister nodded in agreement.

"This will likely be of little comfort, Your Highness, but we should consider ourselves lucky that we're facing off against the undead."

The king looked back at his prime minister with great interest. "Oh? And why is that?"

"We're fighting against an enemy without any reason or logic, something that all of the residents here in the capital can unite against. If we were fighting another kingdom, or a proper army, it's entirely possible we might find turncoats in our midst."

The king laughed darkly.

Stories like this were hardly uncommon. Countries splitting, coming together, and splitting again were a common occurrence. The annals of history were full of cities falling at the hands of traitors.

He cracked a knowing grin. “I suppose you’re right. The whole populace is focused on survival. Few people even objected to the slave issue. I suppose we *should* consider ourselves lucky.”

A messenger came crashing through the door and tumbled to the floor.

The prime minister was generally not a man to allow such impudent behavior in front of the king, but he sensed that now was neither the time nor place for correction.

“What is it?”

The messenger managed to rise to his hands and knees before blurting out his report. “The outer wall, it’s fallen! They broke through near the southern gate!”

The king bolted up from his chair, sending it clattering to the ground. “Assemble all forces and have them drive the undead off at once! Order them to hold the lines until all citizens have retreated to the inner wall. Go!”

The messenger and the advisors rushed from the room.

The king and his prime minister looked down at the map on the table, their eyes fixed on the buildings near the inner wall that still remained standing.

Could they finish in time?

King Asparuh clenched his jaw so tight his teeth began aching.

***

The horses’ breaths came out as white puffs in the crisp night air. From the dim moonlight and twinkling stars, it was hard to believe the sun would be rising soon.

Despite the early hour, Count Dimo’s cavalry sat in full armor atop their horses, assembled in neat columns in Fort Hill’s courtyard.

The faint sounds of clanking armor and creaking reins gave voice to the tension that the soldiers must have been feeling. Hooves clopped impatiently on the ground and knights whispered among themselves, filling the air with apprehension.

At long last, Fort Hill's gate—the one facing the Salma Kingdom—began opening, exposing plains for all to see.

"Hyaah!"

The knights drove their spurs into their mounts as one. The horses whinnied loudly before galloping out of the gate.

Princess Riel and her bodyguard Niena hurried after the knights, followed by their smaller contingent of guards. From what I could see in the torchlight, Niena's complexion seemed to be improving.

The healing magic I'd used on her last night almost certainly hadn't done anything, but she'd finally gotten some food in her, which was probably what had done the trick. I remembered watching Niena ravenously tear into her food. The thought sent chills up my spine, even though it wasn't all that cold.

Ponta looked at me curiously. "Kyii?"

Even a grown man would have had a hard time holding down that much food. I glanced down at little Chiyome sitting in front of me and at Ariane behind, the latter fighting back a yawn, and thought about all the tough women there were in this world.

"Arc, what idiotic thing are you thinking about this time?"

I was met with a golden glare from the elven woman behind me. Somehow, she could always read me.

I took Shiden's reins and directed it to follow the princess. "And we're off."

"Grweeeeeeeeeeeeen!"

"Kyiiiiiiii!"

Shiden hefted its massive body forward. Ponta cried out excitedly and held tight to Shiden's neck.

Chiyome reached down and picked Ponta up by the scruff of its neck, pulling it close to her chest. Ponta wagged its tail as it burrowed in close.

***

We moved along the unlit path in a silent procession toward the Nohzan Kingdom. The horses' hooves stomped through the wild grass as it swayed gently in the breeze.

Fort Hill fizzled into the inky blackness behind us, fading away among the endless plains.

Soon, the sun began rising to our right, the dark blues and purples of night giving way to bright greens that spread out all around us.

We'd just passed through the middle of the Salma Kingdom, the trip going rather smoothly so far, even with frequent stops to let the horses rest.

The sun was high in the sky as we turned north after eating a simple lunch of preserves.

"It's been pretty smooth sailing so far."

Ariane stifled a yawn as her eyes gazed out at the unending countryside.

"Unending" probably wasn't the right word for it. The flatlands we'd left that morning had slowly given way to hills that looked like deep wrinkles in the earth.

I stared up at a bird flying high above, wondering where we were exactly.

Panicked whispers rippled through the cavalry ahead like a wave.

"What's going on?"

Ariane pointed straight ahead. "Over there. It's another one of those undead monsters!"

Chiyome's ears perked up. She squinted her eyes. "There's a second one even farther off. Are they coming for the princess?"

I looked around, desperately trying to spot the monsters the two women had so easily spotted. My eyes settled on a group of soldiers marked by a crest I'd never seen before. They were battling one of the man-spiders.

“Do you think those soldiers are from the Salma Kingdom?”

We had a great view of the whole battlefield, though this also meant that the soldiers had likely spotted us as well. Fortunately, they were too preoccupied with the man-spider to send any soldiers to confront us.

Count Dimo’s cavalry picked up on this and gave the soldiers a wide berth. Apparently, they just planned to pass the battle by.

This was the obvious choice, considering we were technically an invading army.

However…

“Those men are doomed if no one steps in.”

It looked like at least half of the Salma Kingdom’s soldiers were wounded. The other half was doing their best to hold the line against the attacking man-spider. However, the second monster was quickly closing in.

They were pretty much done for.

Niena, with Princess Riel in front of her, slowed her horse to pull up next to Shiden.

“What is it?” I yelled to be heard above the horse’s galloping hooves.

Niena looked over at me. “The princess has a request!”

The young girl yelled as loud as she could. “Arc, I’d like you to help the Brahniey soldiers and kill the monster they’re fighting!”

The women riding with me looked at the young girl as if she’d just sprouted a second head.

I said what my companions were thinking. “Those are the enemy, Princess!”

“I know that! But I can’t just stand by and let them die!” The princess realized what she was asking of me, but still wanted to offer her assistance.

Ariane, who’d been listening to the exchange, spoke up. “We don’t have time to talk this over!”

I nodded to the princess and grabbed the hilt of my sword. “Understood! Let’s give them a hand!”

With that, I tugged Shiden’s reins and turned the beast toward the man-spider racing downhill.

“Grweeeeeeeeeeeeen!”

Shiden let out a mighty roar as it ran straight into the monster.

I drew my sword and stood up on the saddle, holding the reins in one hand and my mighty blade in the other.

“Chiyome, keep your head down!”

Chiyome ducked, lying flat against Shiden’s muscular body.

“Wyvern Slash!”

I sliced my blade through the air, sending an arc of energy straight toward the man-spider, chopping clean through its front legs.

“Gggraaaaaaaaaaaaugh!!!”

The monster collapsed with a heavy thud, tumbling end over end as its human mouths cried out.

Shiden rushed forward on its six muscular legs, impaling the man-spider with its two massive horns.

The creature’s armor and weapons went flying from the force of the blow, pieces of its body scattering in all directions as Shiden dragged it along the ground. I could hear bones snapping and muscle tearing. At last, the man-spider slumped to the ground, motionless.

Even so, my cohorts offered the monster no quarter.

“Stones of the earth, I call upon you to crush my foe!”

Using her spirit magic, Ariane brought forth multiple boulders and dropped them onto

the man-spider.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

Ponta summoned up gusts of wind, sending them shooting toward the man-spider like mini razor blades, leaving shallow cuts in its skin.

“Body to water, aqua lance slash!”

Chiyome made several gestures, and a lance made of water appeared in her hand. She threw it with all her might, impaling the monster.

The man-spider’s body fizzled into black bubbles as its body dissolved, leaving nothing but a dark stain on the ground.

“Kyii!”

Ponta waved its tail about triumphantly. Chiyome reached down to pat our little companion on the head.

After confirming that the man-spider was indeed gone, I slid my sword into its sheath and lowered myself back onto the saddle.

I glanced over at the Salma Kingdom's soldiers to find them staring in awe at a black, fizzling mass in front of them. Apparently, they'd also taken down their opponent.

I led Shiden around the battlefield to catch up with Princess Riel's group. As we rode past the Brahniey forces, I locked eyes with a man who looked to be their commander. He seemed at a loss as to what had just happened, which was just as well. We needed to put some distance between them and us before they realized who we were. That was, assuming they could even pursue us, given the heavy losses they'd endured.

"That pretty much does it, eh?" I turned my attention forward as we left the Brahniey forces behind.

"What were they doing out here anyway?" Chiyome tugged at Ponta's fur.

"Kyiiiiiii! Kyi!""

Ponta cried out angrily at her rough handling, though I was sure she wasn't doing it on purpose.

Shiden increased its speed to catch up with the princess, and we reached her in no time, thanks to its muscular legs.

Considering how bad my sense of direction was, I'd been a little worried about finding Riel and the others after our confrontation with the man-spider, but Shiden seemed to have picked up the scent and was able to take us straight to them. Who knew that driftpus came equipped with auto-pilot? Shiden was proving more and more useful by the day.

Once we caught up, Niena dropped back once again to ride beside us. Apparently, the young princess wanted to talk to me.

"How'd it go? Did you save the Brahniey forces?"

I nodded. "I know I already asked this, but are you sure that's what you wanted back there?"

Niena looked at me in agreement.

Princess Riel frowned. “They say that Margrave Brahniey is not only a genius on the battlefield, but also an intellectual.”

“Oh?”

“If anyone from the Brahniey forces reported back that we’d left them to die, he would most likely have come to the conclusion that the undead had something to do with us, possibly even that they were serving the Nohzan Kingdom.”

The young girl fixed me with an intense gaze as she spoke. Niena and I exchanged glances.

“Would he truly have come to suspect our involvement?”

If the margrave was as smart as the young girl gave him credit for, then even if a survivor had witnessed the princess riding past, it seemed like quite a leap in logic to tie the undead to the Nohzan Kingdom.

Niena seemed to agree with me on this point. “I don’t mean to refute what you’re saying, Your Highness, but Margrave Brahniey stole our country’s lands. I don’t think it’s necessary to feel bad for our enem—”

“Those undead are clearly following someone’s orders.” The princess puffed out her cheeks and adamantly shook her head. “We don’t know who is controlling them, but we at least know that they are not working for the margrave.”

This caught Niena and the rest of us by surprise. Ariane and Chiyome both looked at the young girl with great interest.

“That’s true… The fact that the margrave’s own soldiers were being attacked pretty much rules out his involvement.”

“So, if the margrave isn’t involved, that means he’ll want to do something about them the moment he receives the report. Hopefully his soldiers will mention our presence.”

Chiyome’s ears remained perked up as she took in the conversation. Once the princess finished speaking, she looked back at me. Her eyes spoke volumes.

I shook my head in response to her unspoken question.

Based on Sasuke's last words, we had reason to believe that the undead were being controlled by the Holy Hilk Kingdom, but we still didn't have definitive proof. Not only was the Hilk the primary religion among the humans here, but we were in the middle of a country bordering the kingdom, where their influence was strongest. It would do us little good to voice our suspicions about the Hilk, especially considering that Ariane, Chiyome, and I were non-humans.

If we had some real information to work with, it was possible the princess might listen to us, but the rest of her envoy would likely dismiss our complaints outright, as non-human slander against the church.

As with any religion, there were ardent believers everywhere, and you couldn't easily spot them in a crowd. Given that, it had probably been a poor choice to so carelessly reveal our true identities. Neither Riel's guards nor the accompanying cavalry seemed to show any sort of negative opinion about us, but that was likely because they knew we were powerful allies on the field of battle.

I was starting to feel as though the chance of Princess Riel actually making good on her end of the bargain was getting smaller and smaller. But maybe I was just being pessimistic.

Somewhere ahead of us lay a massive army of 100,000 undead, and the citizens of a capital fighting desperately for their lives. How would they react when they were saved by people who weren't even human?

"You'll never know till you try…"

"Huh?" Riel looked over at me, confused at my sudden comment.

But I simply shook my head.

***

Several more hours, and nearly as many breaks, later, the setting sun began casting a deep scarlet glow across the cavalry leading the way.

The land around us was transitioning again, the endless hills replaced with an expansive forest.

Unlike the massive, ancient trees that made up the Great Canada Forest, this looked

like a standard, textbook forest.

After days of nothing but sloping hills, grasslands, and the occasional farm, the familiar sight of dense trees was a comfort.

I wondered if this was my elven side finally coming out. Or perhaps I'd just gotten used to living among the trees. The cavalry rode straight into the forest, weaving between the trees.

Ariane watched the action over my shoulder. "I guess we're going straight in?"

After we'd all entered the forest, the soldiers dismounted, tied their horses to nearby trees, and began setting up camp. It seemed like we were going to stay the night here.

Ariane, Chiyome, and I hopped down from Shiden's back. Zahar came over and explained our next move.

Apparently we were in the Ildbah Forest, which marked the border between the Nohzan and Salma kingdoms. Tomorrow, we'd follow the perimeter of the forest to the Nohzan Kingdom, but tonight, we'd camp among the trees.

Camping wasn't the best description, exactly, since we couldn't light any fires out of fear of attracting attention to ourselves. Instead, we all propped up our canvas bags and used them as coverings.

After eating some dried beans and limited provisions, the soldiers settled in for a night of light sleep.

***

Early the next morning, we left the pitch-black woods behind and began our journey around the perimeter. As before, the cavalry led the way, followed by Princess Riel and her guard. Ariane, Chiyome, and I brought up the rear.

Today marked the sixth day since the princess had left the capital.

Riel continued encouraging Count Dimo's soldiers, as well as her own, but her façade broke from time to time, and I could see the unease on her face.

It wasn't unreasonable. She was just an eleven-year-old child watching the fate of her

country teeter in the balance.

As I watched this young girl do everything in her power to save her father, I hazarded a guess that he was much the same, and would do whatever he could to protect his people.

For Riel, losing the country was tantamount to losing her father.

***

As we rode on, the hope of finally catching sight of Saureah was on everyone's minds.

In this world, all settlements had at least some sort of defensive perimeter to keep the monsters out. In most cases, even with an army of 100,000 undead, breaking through was no small feat.

The biggest problem the people of Saureah were likely facing, then, was running out of food.

I didn't know how the capital treated their non-human slaves, but I was sure they wouldn't last long once the supplies ran out.

We could have sped the journey up considerably if I were to take Princess Riel with me using Dimensional Step, but my ability to teleport was seriously hampered during twilight hours and when visibility was poor. While I certainly could have waited until the sun rose a little higher in the sky, I was also trying to avoid exposing my teleportation abilities to the humans.

I didn't feel the same hesitation about using my abilities with Ariane and Chiyome. It was kind of curious, now that I thought about it.

Maybe it had something to do with the sense of solidarity I felt with them… some sort of connection we non-humans all shared?

While my mind wandered, the sun continued its slow ascent.

Around noon, we finally started spotting our first signs of civilization in the form of properly maintained roads, a convenience we'd been denied along much of our trip. Shortly after, the cavalry spied a decent-sized town ahead and immediately began flying the flags of the Nohzan Kingdom.

A trumpet sounded as we approached. The cavalry led their horses toward a stable in the middle of a pasture just outside the gate.

People entering and leaving the town looked at my driftpus with great interest. Two of Riel's guards fell back to ride alongside Shiden and shield us from unwanted attention as we made our way to the stable as well.

Once inside, I saw knights and guards scrambling to remove their gear from the horses' saddles. Zahar stood in the middle of the bustling soldiers, barking out commands.

"We're trading horses! Be sure to check your new mount before we depart!"

Zahar walked over to me and gave Shiden a look over.

"Arc, is your… mount going to be okay? We can switch you over to a horse if you want."

I rubbed Shiden's neck, eliciting a light growl from the beast as it pawed the ground with its front hooves. It seemed eager to get going again.

"I'll be all right, thanks."

"All right then. Once we've gotten everything sorted, we'll head back out."

Zahar turned back to supervising the soldiers. I sat in the corner and watched with great interest.

In all, it took about thirty minutes for the knights to get the gear off their old horses and onto new ones. We left the town in a hurry.

As we proceeded toward our objective, I noticed something peculiar. It looked like we'd picked up a few additional cavalry at the last stop. This new group bore an unfamiliar crest.

After asking around, I learned that these were knights of the lord whose town we'd just left. It wasn't an impressive number of soldiers, but they were far better rested than we were.

We spent the remaining daylight hours running our steeds hard.

That evening, we camped outside a small village. This time, the mayor supplied us

with freshly cooked food. Ah, the joys of being on your home turf.

Niena said that we would arrive at Saureah sometime tomorrow.

Count Dimo's soldiers were happy to hear that we were almost at our destination, though Princess Riel's guards were considerably more somber.

Niena brought Riel a bowl of piping hot soup. The young girl looked rather melancholic as she sipped at it.

At my feet, Ponta lapped hungrily at a plate of stewed vegetables, its fluffy tail wagging back and forth cheerfully.

"Kyi kyiiiii!"

"You live in your own little world, don't you, buddy?"

After it had licked the plate clean, I scratched under Ponta's chin as it went about grooming itself. Once that task was out of the way, the fox smiled contentedly and let out a yawn. A full belly and a long day were enough to lull anyone to sleep.

Chiyome watched Ponta as it settled in for the night and mumbled to herself. "I just hope the capital's still standing by the time we get there."

Ariane's ears perked at this, but only God knew what we would find in the morning.

***

We left early the next day, before the sun had even peeked above the horizon.

The cavalry, now around 150 strong, led the way north. The horses thundered down the road through the early morning mist, kicking leaves high into the air. The earth itself groaned.

We didn't run across any merchants or other travelers. Aside from the galloping horses, the world was silent.

I could sense that something about all this troubled Ariane. She pulled back her charcoal hood, exposing her pointed ears. She closed her eyes and propped herself up on the saddle.

I glanced over my shoulder at her. “Did you hear something?”

She put a finger to her lips. “Shh!”

I glanced around. There were stands of trees here and there, but nothing remarkable that I could see.

A moment later, Ariane opened her eyes and shouted. “There’s something out there!”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than a shadowy figure leaped from the underbrush toward the cavalry’s lead element.

“Waaaaaugh!”

“Wh-what is that?!”

Several of the soldiers panicked and tried steering out of the way. However, they were too late to react and were knocked to the ground, horses and all. This caused a domino effect that sent several more knights tumbling.

More figures appeared from the trees lining the road, as if they’d been waiting to ambush us.

They were humanoid in shape, but there was something about them that wasn’t exactly human.

The creatures had multi-jointed arms, though the exact number differed from one to the next; some had three, others just one.

Most noteworthy, however, was the thing sticking out of each of their necks—a pulsating organ, like a giant worm, or an exposed intestine. At the tip of this organ was a glistening mouth, reminiscent of a sea anemone’s.

They opened their mouths wide and began feasting on the fallen knights and defenseless horses.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaugh!!!”

One of the soldiers let out a bloodcurdling scream and stumbled off into the trees. The right half of his body had been gnawed away.

Those horsemen who'd managed to avoid the earlier pile up charged into the forest, only to be met with more of the worm-like creatures, lunging out of the bushes to take bites out of the horses' exposed stomachs.

"What the hell are those things?!" Zahar shook with rage as he watched the anarchy unfolding in front of him.

Fortunately, Princess Riel and her guards had stopped in time to avoid the ambush, but all they could do was watch the carnage.

The leader of the cavalry barked out orders as she tried desperately to get her soldiers back in order, but they were all too busy trying to fend off the new menace.

"Do you know what those things are, Ariane?"

She shook her head, narrowing her eyes in a fierce look of disgust. "I've never seen them before. I can definitely tell you that they're undead though."

Chiyome pinched her nose and scowled. "I can smell the rotten stench of death from here."

Apparently, this was a new type of undead.

Assuming these creatures were working with the man-spiders, that meant they'd probably been placed here to prevent anyone from reaching the capital.

"Ready your spears to protect our comrades! They're the only weapons that can combat their long reach!" Zahar's voice bellowed above the clamor as he called out orders to Riel's guards. Each of them pulled two rods from their saddlebags and screwed them together, forming a long staff with a wicked-looking blade—some sort of portable spear by the looks of it.

In no time, the soldiers had their spears at the ready, waiting for Zahar to give the signal.

On his mark, they thrust their weapons forward as they charged into the fray.

I tugged on Shiden's reins, unsure what I should be doing.

Zahar looked over at me. "Protect the princess at all costs!"

With that, he lifted his own spear aloft and joined the fray.

I brought Shiden up alongside Niena and the princess. The young girl trembled slightly, her face a ghostly white as she watched.

The worm-men opened their gaping maws, revealing bits of flesh clinging to their teeth. It was enough to make my blood run cold.

"Ariane, Chiyome…"

Without me needing to say anything further, my two compatriots hopped off Shiden and unsheathed their blades.

"We've got this, but we're leaving the enemies around the capital to you, Arc." Ariane couldn't resist getting a jibe in.

She held up her sword, its delicate blade engraved with lions, and chanted. The words came out of her mouth like poetry. "Holy flame, heed my call! Devour thine enemy and burn it to ash!"

Flames generated by the spirits grew along the gleaming blade before sparking out of the tip like fireworks.

Ariane took off in a mad dash, her hood back and her white hair whipping behind her. She closed the distance to one of the worm creatures and slashed straight into it. Flames leaped from her sword like a burning snake, engulfing her opponent.

"Body to water, aqua shuriken!"

Chiyome moved her fingers deftly through the air as she summoned up blobs of water. With a final gesture, they came together to form spinning stars. The water shuriken cut through the air, embedding one after another into the worm creatures closing in around Ariane.

From where I stood, it almost looked like she was shooting some sort of high-intensity water laser as she carved her way through several enemies at once.

"Kyii!"

Ponta seemed to be enjoying the battle a little too much. It summoned up a gust of

wind and, using the membrane that stretched between its limbs, Ponta caught the updraft and floated into the air.

I reached up and grabbed the scruff of Ponta's neck.

"Let's sit this one out, huh? It's too dangerous for you, little buddy."

The worm-like appendages sticking out of these monsters could shoot out at incredible speeds, and I was worried about Ponta getting swallowed whole.

"Kyiiiii…"

Ignoring my angry little partner for a minute as it kicked its legs about pathetically, I swung my blade through the air toward a worm creature, summoning my Sword of Judgment technique. A magical rune appeared at the worm creature's feet. It gave off a faint blue glow as a blade of light shot up out of the ground and speared the creature clean through.

Much like the man-spiders, these monsters fizzled away into a dark sludge as soon as they were killed.

The anemone-like protrusions sticking out of their necks whipped about with great speed, but the rest of their bodies moved quite slowly.

They really weren't all that tough if you could attack at range.

Riel's guards were using their spears to great effect, stabbing the creatures through their stomachs and pinning them to the ground while others used their swords to finish the job. They were slowly regaining control of the battlefield.

Ariane and Chiyome were largely to thank for that.

While I sat atop Shiden, watching the battle rage on, one of the worm creatures managed to sneak up behind me and tried taking a bit out of my mount. Unfortunately for it, the driftpus's scales were far too tough for its teeth to penetrate, and it was left gnawing uselessly at Shiden's tough hide.

Shiden looked annoyed at the whole thing and, with a mighty swish of its tail, batted the worm creature away.

It was like a giant slapping away a flea. Unrecognizable chunks of meat covered the area where the monster had stood.

“Wow, that packed a wallop.”

Niena and Riel looked at Shiden in disbelief. He really was like a walking tank.

I gained a newfound respect for the fear the people of Tangent must have felt toward the tiger clan.

Turning my attention back to the battlefield, I discovered that the soldiers had nearly killed all of the worm creatures.

Ariane extinguished the flames on her blade and looked around at the carnage.

“Those things weren’t much to write home about.” She gave an unimpressed shrug.

Chiyome readjusted her oversized hat. “They were pretty fleshy, which made them easier to deal with. We’d have had a bit more of a challenge if they were armored like the undead back in Tagent.”

“Well, I guess I should see if anyone needs healing.”

Now that I knew Riel was safe, I made my way over to the wounded to see what I could do for them. I figured I’d earn as many favors as I could while I had the chance.

Everyone watched in awe as I cast healing spells on the downed soldiers, mending those who’d normally be left for dead.

Last night when we camped, I’d drunk some of the mystical hot spring water to restore my body to its elven form and taken off my helmet, which meant everyone here almost certainly knew that I wasn’t human.

So, which would they ultimately side with? The elves who’d saved their lives, or the church’s teachings?

I chuckled to myself. I could be pretty crafty when I wanted to be.

I made my way toward the stand of trees, where I found the remains of some of Count Dimo’s soldiers. My magic wasn’t strong enough to do anything for them.

With missing limbs, a quick spell would at least stop the bleeding, even if regenerating the limb was impossible. Restoring flesh that had been ripped away was also easy enough. However, many soldiers were simply beyond saving, some with missing heads, and others with just too much of their bodies eaten.

In total, we lost ten soldiers in the ambush. Another ten had been injured.

“Do you think those weird monsters have anything to do with the undead attacking the capital?” Riel called out to me as I returned from healing.

She seemed to be thinking aloud, so I decided not to answer. However, I suspected she was right.

Chiyome popped out of a bush. She was holding something in her hand.

“Hey, Arc, look at this.”

It was a blood-covered rack meant for carrying a heavy load on one’s back. A bundle of twigs had been tied to it, but the shoulder straps had been ripped to shreds. Probably all that was left of someone who’d wandered this way.

Some of the other soldiers had found similar artifacts.

“Someone making their way to the capital found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

A horrified look washed over Princess Riel’s face. “We need to get moving!”

Niena nodded and shot Zahar a look. The burly man nodded back and began issuing orders.

“Anyone who can’t fight will have to stay here! Everyone else, mount up and prepare to head out!”

“Hooah!”

We left a small number of knights behind to escort the wounded back to town. The rest of us took off at a fast clip toward the capital.

The confidence had drained from the soldiers’ faces. Tension was thick in the air as we

moved through the woods, the sound of thundering hooves reverberating off the trees.

Once we broke out of the forest, the road curved gently upward, forcing the cavalry to slow down.

Once they reached the top of the hill, they dropped their speed to a slow trot. I supposed they wanted to take a look at our surroundings while we still had the high ground.

The princess's guards also slowed as they approached the hilltop. Once Riel realized what they were doing, she urged her bodyguard on.

"Niena, we need to hurry! We should be able to see the capital from the top of the hill!"

Niena took their horse up to where Zahar was waiting with the rest of his troops, pushing her way through to the front. Everyone was standing stock-still, staring straight ahead.

I urged Shiden after them.

"My god…" The words slipped out as soon as the capital came into view.

Down the gentle slope, off in the distance, I could see an undulating mass surrounding the city.

It looked like a swarm of ants that had discovered a piece of candy.

I couldn't help but think about how wide the gap was between the 150 soldiers we had with us and the distant swarm. The midday sun glinted off the undead soldiers' armor, casting an eerie glow on Saureah's walls.

I could just make out a few small figures moving about atop the walls—the defenders, doing their best to repel the onslaught.

The young princess's throat seemed to seize up at the sight.

Niena offered up some support. "They're nothing more than a mob. The castle's guards can certainly handle mindless undead, no matter how many there may be."

This seemed to have a positive effect on the young girl. "You're right. We've gotta do

whatever we can to hold the line until my brothers get back with their reinforcements!"

The princess's energetic speech managed to break the soldiers from their stupor. They turned to look at her, their faces registering shock.

Riel nodded in satisfaction. "All right, Zahar, what's next?"

Zahar saluted her. "Assuming the bizarre things we just fought were part of the same force, that means it's highly probable that the other routes to the capital are crawling with enemies. Clearing out the access points for the reinforcements should be our first order of business."

Riel nodded in agreement. "All right then! We'll split up and have my guards guide the cavalry through some of the major routes in and out of the capital."

Zahar unfolded a large map and went over the assigned sectors with the cavalry commanders.

The commanders hurried back to their units and joined their soldiers in a loud battle cry.

Chiyome let out a faint gasp. Her head rocked back and forth, her ears twitching. "I sense a change in the winds…"

Before I had a chance to ask what she meant, a loud, hideous crash came from the direction of the capital.

We all turned to find that a massive hole had been punched in the wall near one of the gates. Countless undead soldiers flooded through the gap.

One soldier broke the stunned silence. "The south gate, it's been breached…"

"This is bad. Really bad," Zahar muttered under his breath.

I looked over to see Riel trembling. "No, it can't be… My brothers haven't even gotten back yet…" Her voice was hoarse, her gray eyes wide with fear. Niena hugged the young girl from behind.

Chiyome spoke in a low, steady voice. "If we don't act fast, this will be an even worse tragedy than Tagent."

Undead soldiers flooded the hole in the wall, but there were simply too many to fit through. They began climbing over one another in their haste to attack. Still, it was only a matter of time before they all made it inside.

I didn't know much about what lay beyond the wall, but I figured we still had some time, so long as the town had some sort of defenses to impede the intruders. Otherwise, the citizens would have little choice but to hole up in the castle. Or, if they didn't have enough rations, try to escape out the other side.

Zahar's voice broke through the murmurs of the terrified soldiers. "Calm yourselves! They've only breached the outer wall. The inner wall still stands!"

The soldiers seemed to take heart at this, though their eyes were still filled with worry.

Apparently, the capital had another defensive wall farther inside. At least that would buy us a little more time.

"Welp, I guess we should help."

Ponta looked at me curiously. "Kyii?"

"Are you really going to do this?" Ariane called out from behind me.

I twisted around to face her. "It'd be a complete waste of time if we came all the way out here just to stand by and watch the capital fall. Things might get a bit hairy, but it'll work out one way or another."

"Grweeeeeeeen!" Shiden let out an immense roar. Apparently, it was also ready to put up a fight.

"Ariane, Chiyome, I'd like to leave Princess Riel with you while I head off to the capital. I'd like to try to clear the way first. Besides, you two should be more than enough to keep her safe."

Ariane hopped off Shiden without a word, followed shortly after by Chiyome.

"You're not going out there alone, are you?"

Riel's voice jumped an octave as she stared at me in astonishment. Though I understood what she was asking, I decided it best to dodge the question.

“There’s no need to worry, Princess. Ariane and Chiyome will protect you. You have nothing to fret over.”

Ariane allowed herself a sigh of annoyance.

I plucked Ponta from Shiden’s mane and handed it down to Chiyome.

“Kyiiii?” Ponta shot me a curious look.

“Sorry, buddy. Things are going to get a little wild. I want you to stay here with Chiyome, okay?”

“Kyii!”

I wasn’t completely sure if Ponta actually understood what I was saying, but I decided to take its mew as affirmation. The cottontail fox curled up in Chiyome’s arms.

Ariane looked conflicted, as if she didn’t want to let me go alone.

“All right, I’m off!”

I tugged at Shiden’s reins and we took off toward Saureah—or, more specifically, toward the horde of undead trying to force their way in.

“Grweeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeen!” Shiden let out a thunderous roar as its six muscular legs carried us toward our objective at tremendous speed. My Twilight Cloak whipped noisily behind me.

Even now, I was still taken aback at just how fast Shiden could move. Within a matter of minutes the sprawling capital filled my entire field of view.

I let go of the reins, taking my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg in one hand and my Holy Shield of Teutates in the other.

I locked my feet in the stirrups and rode straight toward the hole in the wall.

The horde of undead finally took notice of the massive lizard bearing down on them.

“Bwahahahaha!” Without thinking, I let out a loud laugh from deep within my belly. There was something about the feeling of impending battle that excited a primal part

of me.

Among the swarm, I caught sight of several man-spiders.

Shiden used its horns to toss some undead warriors out of the way, trampling others. The driftpus was just too massive to be slowed. I used my sword to chop through even more of the undead, but we didn't seem to be making any real progress in reducing their numbers.

At last, Shiden couldn't progress any farther as the sheer mass of bodies between us and the wall became too dense even for the mighty beast. I gave it a slap on the back.

"Time to go, Shiden!"

Shiden bellowed in reply, tracing a tight arc through the crowd and back down the route we'd taken in.

A large number of undead were closing in on us.

I hopped to the ground with a heavy thud and gave Shiden another powerful slap on the back.

"Get back to Ariane!"

"Grweeeeeeeen!"

Shiden took off, its heavy footfalls thundering in the distance. I chuckled to myself.

"All right, guys, the kiddie gloves are off now."

The undead soldiers surrounded me, their weapons held high. This was the chance they'd been waiting for.

I swung my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg toward the horde.

"Wyvern Slash!"

A wave of energy chopped clean through the group, sending body parts flying.

However, more undead soldiers flooded in almost immediately, stepping on top of

their mutilated comrades.

“Wyvern Slash!”

I swung the sword once more, sending another blade of energy into the oncoming undead.

“Wyvern Slaaaaaaaaaaaash!”

Tiny pieces of flesh rained down around me.

My attacks had managed to whip up a rather significant cloud of dust, reducing my visibility. This moment of calm, however, was interrupted by a looming shadow lunging straight at me with dual shields and dual scimitars.

The man-spider let out a manic laugh as it brought its blades down. I caught one with my shield and barely deflected the other with my sword.

I was suddenly very aware of just how insufficient my skills with a blade were.

“Shield Bash!”

My shield emitted a faint glow as I slammed it straight into the section where the human torsos met the man-spider’s lower half. I caught a brief glimpse of the agony on its face before it went flying off into the distance.

“Sorry, but I don’t have a lot of time to play with you guys right now.”

Some of the undead soldiers’ severed torsos had begun crawling toward me.

“Flame Viper!”

A circle of flames started smoldering at my feet before a large column of fire erupted into the air, in the shape of a snake. The viper lashed out in all directions, incinerating everything in its path.

I turned to find another man-spider coming toward me, but it was engulfed by the flaming snake, leaving nothing but a smoking pile of ash.

I inspected my surroundings, and discovered that a large circle of barren wasteland

separated me from the nearest enemies. I must've killed a ton of them, but that was only the tip of the iceberg.

I needed to buy more time.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, fixing my gaze straight ahead.

Having no concept of fear, the undead soldiers trudged toward me, with no concern for their own safety.

"Well, I never figured I'd have a chance to use this attack, but I guess now's as good a time as any."

I stabbed my sword into the earth and summoned up a spell.

"Angel of death, hear my call! The Holy Knight calls you forth!"

I could feel the magic coursing through my bones as I used up all my power. This was nothing like any of the spells I'd summoned before.

A massive rune of light appeared at my feet.

"Open the doors of heaven and send the Archangel Executioner Michael down to me!"

Scarlet and gold flames erupted out of the rune, scorching an arcane symbol into the ground as a beam of light shot into the sky.

Slowly but surely, the column of light grew to cover a vast swath of the plains surrounding Saureah.

When the light faded, the giant rune was now floating above me, along with the scarlet and gold flames. A distant choir singing hymns could be heard emanating from the rune.

The flames began burning even more vividly as the shadow of a figure emerged from deep within. The shadow stood around five meters tall, around the same size as my demon Sutekh.

As the figure came into view, I could see that she was wearing scarlet and gold armor decorated with intricate symbols. In her left hand, she held a shield designed to look

like a wing, while in her right, she sported an elegant crimson blade.

Her helmet only covered the top of her head, revealing a pair of lustrous lips curved into a smile. Her hair ran down to her shoulders, flames dancing at the tips. Waves of heat radiated off her body.

But the most noticeable thing about the figure standing before me were the six massive wings behind her. As she stretched them out to their full span, feathers dropped to the ground, turning any undead they touched into balls of light.

This was one of the Holy Knight's four special skills, Archangel Executioner Michael.

"Whoa…"

I could hardly believe my eyes.

A being whose body was entirely made of flames… This was a story ripped from the Bible itself. I couldn't help but stare as a shiver ran up my spine.

The version of the angel I was used to in the game didn't wear such elegant armor, nor was her face covered. She was more of an ephemeral goddess type. Something told me that the being floating in front of me was in a whole different league from what I'd been expecting.

Just what was this thing?

The angel opened her mouth and let out a sound that could best be described as music, but I couldn't understand the words. There was so much power behind that small burst that it sent a shockwave spreading out in a circle around us, destroying any undead in its path.

I now stood in the middle of a circle, 300 meters or so in diameter, devoid of any enemies.

As I watched in amazement, the angel began trembling. Slowly but surely, she shrank, bit by bit, as she flew toward me. If this were anything like the game, I knew exactly what would happen next.

"Gyraaaaaaaaaaaugh!!!"

However, it was nothing like the game at all. It crashed into me with immense force, and I could feel something massive burrowing deep into me. No words could describe the feeling—the closest I could come was that it was unpleasant, but that hardly did it justice. It felt like my whole body was under attack, like something was scraping away my insides.

The Holy Knight had four unique skills. They were all quite similar, but each of the angels you could summon had a different elemental affinity. They were like a cross between fighting and summoning techniques, in that you possessed the skills of the angel you summoned once they bonded with you.

Even though I'd completely maxed out my character, this technique still took up a whole third of my magical power… and only lasted for five minutes. With its half-day recharge before it could be used again, the cost to the player was incredibly high.

I hadn't fully appreciated the severity of my actions until I could feel the impressive power coursing through me.

I knew one thing for certain, however: the spell itself wasn't capped at five minutes. But humans couldn't survive becoming one in body and spirit with a fallen angel for anything longer than that.

I honestly couldn't imagine casting this spell ever again.

I could barely contain the immense power of the mighty Archangel Michael in my two-meter frame. The spirit hung close to my back, unwilling to let go.

“Nnnnngrauuugh!”

I used my sword like a cane, slowing pushing myself back to my feet.

By the time I was in a standing position, I was completely out of breath, exhausted by the effort. I focused my eyes on the route ahead.

When a Holy Knight entered this state, they could only use the abilities of the summoned angel. They were all pretty much overkill, practically breaking the game.

Looking ahead, I saw the undead once again begin massing in front of me. I unleashed one of the angel’s attacks.

“Four Flame Rondo!”

My body went through the motions without me even needing to think as the Archangel Michael took over my body.

I spun lightly, as if performing a dance, my feet tracing flames into the ground. The design erupted into scarlet fire all around me. As I twirled at the center of the column, it grew, engulfing everything around me.

Waves of flame rippled across the ground, incinerating the undead, leaving nothing but dust in its wake.

It was an elegant dance. If I’d been watching as the archangel performed these steps, I’m sure I would have found it quite beautiful. Unfortunately, since I was the one dancing—a massive hulk completely decked out in armor—I couldn’t even begin to imagine how silly I looked.

The dance continued for a short while, until all the enemies in the area were completely wiped out. Looking into the distance, I could see that the number of undead had dropped significantly.

If I had to guess, I’d say the attack wiped out at least a couple thousand.

But I didn’t have time to gloat. My mind was beginning to lose touch with reality, and there were still hordes of undead rushing the capital.

I’d nearly reached the massive hole in the wall. This was probably my one chance to

do something about the majority of the undead.

“Kaelm Phoenix Pirouette!”

My voice mingled with one more feminine than mine as I unleashed another attack. It must have been the voice of the Archangel Michael.

I didn’t have much time to think about this, however, since I began floating as soon as I heard the soothing, melodic tones.

My body moved of its own accord, my arms spread wide as I looked up at the sky, back arched. Massive wings of fire burst from my back, shooting flaming feathers through the air.

The wings carried me easily into the sky, feathers raining down and bursting into flames as soon as they made contact. Everything the feathers touched—be it an undead soldier or a field of crops—turned to ash. It filled the air like a black snow.

This attack lasted longer than the last, and managed to kill at least half of the undead surrounding the capital.

I figured about half my time was already up. Even if I wanted to kill the remaining enemies, I was reaching my physical and mental limits.

If I could just hold on…

“Ruby Flamma!”

I launched into the next attack the moment my feet touched the ground, this time using my sword to cut huge, flaming swaths through the air. The ability was reminiscent of Ariane’s spirit magic, but the sheer power behind it was something else entirely.

With every fiery slash, the flames surrounding the blade grew larger and more out of control, until it looked like I was wielding some kind of whip. Any undead soldier struck by the thing was thrown back through the air.

Once the flaming whip reached its full length, I began swinging it around and around, lighting up the entire region.

With each flick of my wrist, undead soldiers were blasted out of existence, the whole

landscape turning into a literal inferno.

Unfortunately, I was a little too careless with my movements and lost control of the whip, sending it through the hole in the city's wall and tearing a gash through the gate.

Luckily, I took out all of the undead swarming the area at the same time.

Once the attack came to an end, I let out a heavy breath and took a quick tally of the undead. Their ranks had dwindled enough that I could actually comprehend the numbers now.

I'd messed up a bit on that last attack, but all that was left for me to do now was some cleanup work.

I couldn't be sure exactly how many undead had already made their way into the capital, but I could say with absolute certainty that if I entered the city like this, everyone in it would be wiped off the map.

With a heavy sigh, I looked back over my shoulder at the long route I'd taken here.

I could feel the archangel leaving my body as I hit the limit of my abilities. A rune appeared above my head, sucking it up before fading away again. I stabbed my sword into the ground to keep myself upright as I slumped to my knees.

"Well, I don't think I'll be using that again. That was rough…"

Looking out across the now-clear entrance to the capital, I let out a heavy sigh.

***

The king of the Nohzan Kingdom had his own contingent of soldiers, whose sole job was to protect the capital and other important regions.

Those assigned to protect the capital were known as the Saureah Guard.

The soldiers were usually assigned with keeping watch, walking the outer wall, and, when necessary, resolving minor disturbances that took place in their area of operation.

That was, until one fateful day.

It was still in the early twilight hours, that mystical time just before the sun crests the horizon to wash away the night's shadows, when the world is blanketed in mist.

The guards on patrol looked out across the plains; there was something amiss beyond the wall.

A horde of heavily armored soldiers lurched out of the dark, wave after unending wave, to bear down on the city's walls.

The guards immediately sounded the alarm, warning bells clanging in the still night air.

Initially, they'd thought this was a surprise attack by the Salma Kingdom.

However, there were bizarre creatures among the soldiers. Though their upper halves initially appeared to be human, upon closer inspection, it became clear that they each had two torsos—with two arms each—connected to a set of massive spider legs. They were heavily armed, a weapon in each of their hands.

Initially the Saureah Guard split into two battalions, leaving the confines of the wall to kill or capture the invaders, but during the opening moments of the melee, it became clear that the soldiers weren't human at all… or at least, not anymore. Underneath their helmets, they were nothing but skeletons.

One entire battalion was wiped out in no time at all, and half of the remaining battalion was brutally murdered as they attempted to flee. The guards dispatched a messenger to the palace, but the undead army kept growing and growing. In the span of only a few hours, Saureah was completely surrounded.

For six days straight, the commander of the Saureah Guard spent day and night at the wall, directing the defenses. He was absolutely drained, a shadow of his former self.

Even if there had been more soldiers available for him to trade off with, the commander was far too busy gathering information, meeting with the troops who came to reinforce their lines, or otherwise planning the city's defense.

The soldiers atop the wall were constantly using their spears and stones to drive back the undead that tried breaking through or climbing over the wall. However, each fallen undead soldier simply became a platform for its comrades to stand on, and the platform kept growing. After a while, the risk this presented grew too great to ignore,

and they were left with no choice but to pour oil down the side of the wall and light the pile of bodies ablaze. But even then, the undead kept coming.

The guards did their best to defend the wall and city within, but their casualties were mounting by the day.

Their salvation came in the form of the enslaved beastmen who volunteered to join the defense. Not only did they bolster the guard's dwindling numbers, but they were also incredibly strong, each one able to replace two or more of the human soldiers.

Even with their support, however, the sheer number of undead was astounding. The mood in the capital darkened.

On the seventh day of the siege, the south gate fell. The undead came flooding in like a river through a leaky dam. The commander steeled himself for the end of his beloved kingdom.

That's when the battle took an unexpected turn.

A figure, wearing gleaming armor and wielding an impressive sword and shield rode in from the south on a lizard-like creature, kicking up a massive trail of dust. The hordes of undead seemed to matter little to him as he hopped off and began fighting, taking down wave upon wave with each attack.

One of the powerful man-spider creatures attempted to stop the oncoming knight, but even it was easily dispatched with little effort.

To the soldiers who'd been fighting night and day to defend the city, watching this lone knight stand up against the vast forces of the undead was like a gift from God.

Using what appeared to be some kind of magic, the silver knight summoned a large, glowing rune around him. A column of light burst up out of the center. When the light faded, a large human-shaped figure stood in its place.

The figure was outfitted in elegant armor and sported six massive wings. Flames licked at its body.

It was a messenger of God—an angel.

To those who'd been praying for salvation, the silver knight and this supernatural

figure seemed like a godsend. That meant they were here to perform God's work.

After clearing some space around himself, the mysterious knight performed what could best be described as miracles.

Every time he summoned the power of the angel, another large swath of the undead army was turned to dust. He moved gracefully through the air, performing one miracle after the next as he blasted the undead away.

The soldiers watching felt as if they'd just woken from a nightmare.

The knight's last act as an instrument of God was to summon a heavenly sword and utterly purge the lands beyond the outer wall of the undead.

He also destroyed half of the gate with his almighty strength.

Still, the whole thing felt like a miracle to the guards who'd spent the past week atop the wall in a desperate bid to defend the city. They watched, completely dumbfounded, until the sound of screams erupting from the space between the outer and inner walls brought them back to their senses.

The battle wasn't over yet. They still had to deal with the undead that had managed to breach the gate.

The commander ordered the reinvigorated soldiers to destroy the remaining enemies. They couldn't let this blessing go to waste.

Victory was almost theirs.

***

Princess Riel and her contingent of guards stood at the outskirts of Saureah, stunned speechless as they witnessed a miracle take place in front of them.

Arc, facing off against over 100,000 undead soldiers, laid waste to the opposing army all on his own.

As soon as she saw the column of light, Ariane knew what Arc had planned. He was going to summon forth one of his demons to do the fighting for him. This wasn't the first time she'd seen him do something like this—the first was in the battle against the

hydra in the Holy East Revlon Empire town of Leibnizche, when he summoned forth Ifrit, and again when he summoned the demon Sutekh to fight the Dragon Lord.

All the spirit energy running through the air had a rather charged feeling to it, and one Ariane wouldn't easily forget. After all, this "summon magic," as Arc called it, was similar to the spirit magic used by elves.

In a way, it was like reaching out and letting the forces of the world work on your behalf. Put simply, spirit magic was a method of asking the spirits to offer you their assistance.

The creatures Arc summoned forth, however, were nothing like the simple spirits Ariane was used to.

These beings could barely contain all of the spirit energy that flowed through them. Actual encounters with these "spirit kings" or "spirit deities" were rare.

And yet, Arc was able to summon forth a force more powerful than anything Ariane could imagine. The air vibrated with the intensity of the power brought to bear.

Scarlet-gold armor, six beautiful wings, and hair of flames… Ariane distantly remembered reading about something like this in the past. This being was one of a very select group of special spirit deities.

The power on display was unlike any other spirit. The very act of summoning forth such a thing was a feat in its own right. Ariane couldn't even begin to imagine the sheer burden calling forth such a powerful spirit would place on the body and mind.

And yet, Arc was able to easily control it.

Were this any other spirit that Arc was summoning forth, his attacks wouldn't be anywhere near as strong as they were now. But with this massive force behind him, he was clearing the land with ease, quite literally wiping his enemies out of existence.

Chiyome trembled and squeezed Ponta a little closer as she watched. Maybe it was the spirit within her reacting to the energy. All of Ponta's green fur was standing on end as well.

Ariane turned her attention back to the capital… and Arc.

Arc had previously mentioned that he intended to show off a little bit, since he'd made sure the humans around them knew he was an elf. But she worried he might be overdoing it. By demonstrating this kind of raw power, he might actually increase the humans' fear of elves.

Princess Riel looked up at Ariane and swallowed hard. "I hear you're even more talented than him, Ariane. Is that true?"

Her look conveyed fear and awe.

Ariane paused, unsure how best to answer. She smiled at the young girl.

"I'm better with a sword, if that's what you're asking. But he's a bit unique, even among us elves."

She decided that it probably wouldn't be to their advantage for someone as influential as Princess Riel to believe that all elves were as powerful as Arc.

While she hated the awful treatment the humans subjected her comrades to, being feared by all humankind would do the elves no favors.

Ariane's father had always told her that humans' lifespans were much shorter than those of elves, so their experiences faded as one generation gave way to the next.

The Rhoden Kingdom, for example, had attacked the elves' home in Canada, only to be beaten back nearly to the point of extinction, a mere 600 years ago. And yet, they were now using elves as their playthings, having entirely forgotten the awesome might of the Dragon Lord and the fighting prowess of the elves.

In that same way, Ariane felt an odd sense of relief that they would also likely forget the sense of awe they felt toward the power Arc wielded in a relatively short period of time.

It was now only a matter of time until the capital was free once again. After that would come the post-battle negotiations.

Ariane let out a heavy sigh at the thought of all the work awaiting them.

EPILOGUE

Wendly du Brahniey, margrave of a patch of land on the eastern border of the Salma Kingdom, sat alone in his study, looking down at several books spread out across his large desk.

He was an older man, muscular for his age, with thinning white hair, a mustache to match, and a sharp, hawklike gaze.

Though a noble of the Salma Kingdom, Brahniey was disliked by many of the lords nearer the capital—a feeling he very much reciprocated—so he rarely bothered to make an appearance.

This land had been taken by force, and a constant military presence had been a necessity here ever since, to defend against both human enemies and invading monsters.

Thanks to this presence, the lands of Brahniey were much safer than other regions. This allowed for more developed land, leading to a greater tax income, which ultimately fed and bolstered Brahniey's military. It was a positive, self-reinforcing cycle.

However, if Brahniey ever *wasn't* able to bring a conflict to a quick resolution, profits would plummet, leading to a rather hefty deficit when it came time to pay his soldiers.

Because of this, the margrave generally had very little time to find a solution when a new report landed on his desk.

A short time ago, he'd sent out soldiers to deal with a rather serious issue, and was now waiting on the results. Waiting, however, was not something the margrave was used to.

Margrave Brahniey's aide knocked on the door and entered the room. He interrupted her long-winded greeting.

"Did you find those mysterious intruders?"

She nodded, not in the least put out by his brusque demeanor.

“We believe so. However, something more important has come to light. It’s about the monsters we heard about before. Of the six platoons sent out, the second suffered heavy casualties, the first and third took minor injuries, and the fifth was nearly wiped out. I have a list of the dead.”

Margrave Brahniey’s face had grown redder and redder as his aide delivered the report. He yanked the list out of her hand and skimmed the names.

“According to the platoons’ reports, they encountered four monsters in total. Though they managed to kill all of them, casualties were incurred with each encounter.”

“Four?! There were four of those freaks running around my lands?”

The margrave’s eyebrows arched almost ridiculously high as he turned his gaze back to his aide. The expression on his face would have intimidated someone with less fortitude, but she simply nodded. After a moment, he turned his attention back to the paper.

“While the fifth platoon was engaged with two of the monsters, they encountered soldiers of unknown origin. You can find a description of the force and their numbers here.”

The aide pulled out another sheet of parchment and handed it over.

A deep scowl marred Brahniey’s face as he yanked it out of her hand.

“A movement of a hundred troops and… What’s this? A monster being ridden by a knight and two others?”

The margrave ran his eyes over the same sentence several times, trying to make sense of what was written there. “According to the report, this mysterious knight and the women riding with him assisted the fifth platoon, but there’s no mention of the other troops getting involved.”

The woman nodded. “That’s correct. Thanks to them, the fifth platoon survived. Or at least, half of them did. If the troops had attacked our weakened platoon, it would have been a swift victory.”

The margrave nodded. She’d practically read his mind.

“It says here that they were heading north? The mounted troops were probably Count Dimo’s men, but that leaves the mysterious knight. A mercenary, perhaps?”

Margrave Brahniey stood from his desk and walked over to the map pinned to the wall. He stroked his mustache in silence as he looked it over.

“Let’s see… we first lost track of them here. Then they reappeared with even more soldiers… here. That means…”

The margrave turned his attention back to his aide.

“This is only a guess, of course, but it seems like something has happened in the Nohzan Kingdom. What it is, I can’t say. However, I’d wager a royal was being pursued by those monsters on their way out of the country. Once they secured the count’s assistance, they returned the way they’d come. The question is, why did they help my soldiers when they could have just left them be?”

He rubbed his chin.

“Send a messenger to the Nohzan Kingdom with just enough guards so they don’t appear threatening. And send search parties to the capital in Larisa as well.”

The aide wrote this all down, well accustomed to how quickly the margrave threw plans together.

“I want this done as fast as possible. I have a bad feeling about this…”

The aide bowed and left the room, closing the door behind her.

The margrave cast his gaze across the mountain of books piled high on his desk. He pulled out a single piece of parchment.

On it was a report with a description of a monster that had been spotted entering the Ruanne Forest on the far side of the Wiel River. The information was shaky, since the observation had been made from far away and late at night, but it specifically mentioned that the monster had four arms.

“Dammit! Why didn’t I remember this when I saw that report? I don’t know what those idiots in the capital think they’re doing, but they could very well be in danger.”

He clenched his jaw and crumpled the report before throwing it at the map on the wall.

***

Of the four countries in the southwest corner of the northern continent, the Nohzan Kingdom and the Holy Hilk Kingdom were the only ones that shared borders with the other three.

The capital of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, the center of the most influential religion on the northern continent, lay on the far side of Mount Alsus, which was essentially a massive mythril mine within the Rutios mountain range separating the country from the Great West Revlon Empire.

A huge space had been clawed out of the mountainside by hand, at the center of which stood a large building surrounded by an open-air corridor. The entrance was such a brilliant white that the sunlight reflecting off it made it nearly impossible for those approaching the compound to see.

This was the central cathedral in Alsus, and the home of Pontiff Thanatos Sylvius Hilk, the head of the Hilk religion. Aside from the pontiff and his cardinals, only a select few were ever allowed entry to the holy church.

The exterior was magnificently decorated, as if to show all who laid eyes on it the power that the Hilk wielded. But the opulence didn't stop here. The interior corridors and rooms were even grander in their design.

In one such room, a man sat in front of a large desk, reading a stack of reports.

The most noteworthy thing about the room was its occupant—a man dressed in elegant robes and wearing a large miter emblazoned with the symbol of the Hilk church. His face was completely obscured by a veil.

The man was Pontiff Thanatos Sylvius Hilk.

A hand covered with a white glove made from the most delicate of silks reached out for one of the papers and brought it up to the veil.

The pontiff nodded with delight as he read the report. It covered the exploits of one of his cardinals leading an attack on the capital of the Delfrent Kingdom, using an army

of undead warriors.

“Well, well. So, Delfrent’s capital has fallen. However, it seems our undead army wasn’t quite the lethal force I’d been hoping it would be. But with the specter warriors, they were able to pull off a victory.”

The pontiff allowed himself a hearty laugh, his raspy voice echoing in the silent room.

“It’s almost time to launch our attack on the empire. But perhaps we shouldn’t play our card to the west just yet.”

Pontiff Thanatos reached up under his veil to scratch his chin.

“We’ll need bigger, more robust warriors if we hope to break through such heavily fortified walls. Or maybe something with a little punch behind it? But explosive undead tend to be a huge drain on resources. What about just climbing over the walls?”

He let out a low, throaty chuckle.

The pontiff picked up another dense report and began paging through it, only half paying attention, until he came across something curious.

“I’d heard a silver knight was the one who felled Cardinal Charros. How interesting. Perhaps I should send someone down to the southern continent and cause some trouble there. But there’s no need to hurry. Right now, we must strike while the iron is hot.”

Pontiff Thanatos stood up from his chair and grabbed his holy scepter before making his way out into the hall, closing the door behind him.

The sound of his sinister laughter continued echoing in the now-empty room.

SIDE STORY
LAHKI'S MERCHANT DIARY, PART 5

The large port town of Lamburt was located on the western edge of the Rhoden Kingdom.

Located between two massive waterways that entered the bay of Bulgoh, Lamburt enjoyed thriving trade with the Nohzan Kingdom on the far side of the bay. Many of the goods it imported would ultimately be shipped off to Olav, the capital of the Rhoden Kingdom.

The waterways were wide enough for both large freight ships and smaller paddle boats laden with goods to pass through.

Though Lamburt was also surrounded by walls, they were only around five meters tall.

A massive dock had been built along the edge of the town, boasting multiple piers that jutted out into the water. All manners of vessels, both large and small, were docked here, the piers crowded with people loading and unloading cargo.

After it was unloaded, the cargo made its way to the old town district, which had been around since the port was first founded. Beyond the innermost canal lay the new town district, which sported narrower roads and more densely packed buildings.

In the southern part of the new town district was a massive market. Stores selling all manners of goods lined the streets, and the townsfolk could come here to shop for their daily needs.

In one corner of this market stood a small store that had just opened for business: Lahki's Shoppe.

Lahki, the owner of this little shop squeezed between two massive storefronts on either side, had recently made a bit of a name for himself among the other business owners. Until recently, he'd been pounding the proverbial pavement as a traveling merchant. He was a friendly, well-dressed young man, somewhere in his twenties,

with tousled brown hair and a ready smile.

He hardly looked like he was cut out for the life of a merchant, one that relied on traveling the globe, living by your wits, and surviving by any means necessary. Yet what made this young man and his new store the talk of the merchant community were the products he sold.

A merchant's wares indicated what kind of person they were, and the connections they'd made throughout their life. This meant that trade deals weren't only for the products themselves, but also for the merchant's connections.

Lahki's Shoppe dealt mainly in bits and bobs from monsters.

When he'd first opened, it was with parts of a grand dragon. Not only were these rare in their own right, but the sheer volume was impressive. Grand dragons were large, frog-like monsters, sporting tough skin and shells as hard as stone. They were considered one of the toughest monsters around.

Grand dragons lived in rather remote regions, and were typically only spotted in the forests near the Karyu and Furyu mountain ranges in the northeast of the Rhoden Kingdom—places few humans dared travel.

Even just traveling to where the grand dragons lived was no easy feat, as one would face countless monsters along the way. Assuming someone were to survive all that, make it to the grand dragons, then slay one, the person would still need to overcome the intense physical challenge of hauling the body back.

This made grand dragon parts quite valuable.

Yet this merchant, Lahki, had come out of nowhere with a large supply of grand dragon parts. It was only natural that he became the talk of the town.

The most famous part of the grand dragon was its boulder-like shell. Each and every one was slightly different in shape, making them popular for carving. These incredibly valuable pieces were used to decorate the palaces and manors of the nobility and other members of the upper classes.

Grand dragons' tough and supple hides also served as excellent armor, prized among the knights and nobility, since they were even stronger than many types of metal armor.

All sorts of rumors had sprung up about Lahki the day he'd ridden into town, his cart brimming with such valuable materials, which he'd quickly sold off to buy a large supply of grain and other staples.

Coming into such riches and then blowing it all on a new commodity was hardly unheard of among merchants, so it was widely believed that Lahki had simply made an unfortunate mistake.

Yet, this wasn't even remotely the end of him. After opening his own shop, he continued sourcing all sorts of rare and even never-before-seen materials.

In short order, Lahki's Shoppe was known throughout Lamburt as the place to get monster parts. There was never any shortage of visitors stopping by simply to see if he'd gotten anything new in stock.

At present, a man stood in the spacious waiting room on the second floor of the shop. The room had been decorated with all manner of exquisite items.

The man was well dressed and had white hair, with a white beard to match. Despite being small in stature, the man was well-built, and didn't seem to be showing any signs of old age.

"So, how's it going? It seems like you've gotten into the swing of things, yeah?"

The man was Doktor, the owner of Doktor's Emporium, one of the largest grain dealers in Lamburt's new town district.

The young man sitting across from the renowned merchant smiled sheepishly and scratched his head.

"Well, it's certainly been quite a challenge getting all these goods together. It's the first time I've even laid my hands on so many of them. But I really appreciate all you've done for me. I couldn't have gotten this far without your support."

Lahki bowed his head at the older man, who waved off the gesture.

"Don't talk nonsense, m'boy. I told you before, didn't I? One of these days, the time will come for me to ask a favor of you."

Doktor offered up a smug grin, but there was nothing in his smile to suggest any sort

of maliciousness to his motives.

“By the way, who’s that knight who keeps offloading goods on you?”

Lahki offered up a sheepish smile. “So, you noticed, eh?” He lifted the teapot sitting on the middle of the table and poured some for himself and his guest.

“We’re neighbors, aren’t we? What do you take me for? There are all sorts of rumors surrounding that knight and his exploits.”

Doktor smiled as he blew on the hot tea before taking a sip.

“Well, I suppose that’s true. Arc… Well, he doesn’t really go to any of the other shops for some reason. He only comes by from time to time to talk. I first met him back in Diento. We just happened to cross paths here again in Lamburt. To be completely honest, it’s a mystery why he’s so kind to me. I just can’t wrap my head around it.” Lahki’s shoulders slumped, and he let out a sigh. He lifted the teacup to his lips.

Doktor nodded several times. “Hmm. Well, I can see where he’s coming from.”

Lahki was taken aback by this. He’d expected Doktor to agree with him on the matter.

“Oh, what makes you say that?”

“Just a hunch. The knight isn’t visiting you out of the kindness of his own heart. There’s something he wants too. But regardless of what that might be, you should take advantage of the relationship and sell everything you can.”

Doktor let out a raucous laugh. After sniffing his cup, he lapped at the tea with his tongue. “Y’know, I’ve never had tea quite like this before.” He took another whiff and tilted his head to the side.

Lahki smiled brightly and held up his own cup. “Ah, this? It’s also from Arc. Smells great, doesn’t it?” He took a swig of the tea.

Doktor’s face suddenly turned serious, and he leaned in toward Lahki, lowering his voice. “Now, this is just between you and me, but I’ve heard rumors that the knight is actually an elf. Is that true?”

Lahki was caught off guard by this question and accidentally inhaled some tea, sending

him into a coughing fit. “Hyack! I, umm, well…”

His eyes darted around the room as he thought of how to respond to Doktor’s question. Before he had a chance, however, the older man spoke up again.

“Hahaha! No worries. Just forget about it.”

Lahki’s reaction was all the answer the older man needed. Doktor smiled and shook his head before finishing his tea in a single gulp and standing up.

“Well, I think I’ve overstayed my welcome. I’d best be on my way. If you ever happen to need any wheat, you know where to find me!”

“Uh, of course! You’re the first on my list.”

Doktor was already halfway down the stairs by the time Lahki got out a reply.

After seeing Doktor off, Lahki rested his head on the table and thought back on his reaction. Arc was well known around town, and there were all sorts of rumors surrounding him, but Lahki had done his best not to confirm any of them. Yet he just wasn’t able to hide his reaction when directly confronted.

While he was reproaching himself for being so weak-minded, his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone walking up the stairs.

“Lahki, you’ve got a visitor!”

He looked up and spotted a familiar figure.

The woman had semi-long chestnut-colored hair and was dressed in clothing that de-emphasized her chest. She was neither masculine nor feminine, but somewhere in between.

Rea, a childhood friend of Lahki’s, was a mercenary who’d made something of a name for herself here in town. Back when Lahki had been a traveling merchant, she’d served as his bodyguard. Now she was both his trusted aide and a clerk in his shop.

She cocked her head, looking quizzically at Lahki as he sat there with his head on the table.

“What’re you doing?”

Lahki lifted his head weakly.

“Arc’s here!”

“Wha?!”

Lahki bolted up from the table and hurried down the stairs. Upon arriving on the first floor, he found a cart drawn by two horses parked inside.

Though smaller than the buildings on either side, Lahki’s Shoppe was still big enough to accommodate a horse-drawn cart for loading and unloading supplies, thanks to how far back the building stretched.

A large cloth was pulled taut over the contents of the cart, making it impossible to see what was inside.

A man hopped down from the driver’s seat, dressed head to toe in gleaming silver armor etched with ornate designs in white and blue. The black cloak he wore fluttered as he moved.

Even the most ostentatious royal plate didn’t hold a candle to the armor this man wore. As soon as he noticed Lahki coming down the stairs, he offered a casual wave in greeting.

“Sorry to intrude on you like this.”

The man cheerfully crossed the distance between them and offered his hand.

“N-no, not at all! I’m sorry for making you wait.”

Lahki took Arc’s hand and gave it a shake, bowing his head.

“Kyii!”

When he looked back up, he spied a green ball of fluff hopping from Arc’s shoulder up onto his head. Lahki pulled his hand back in alarm.

“Ah, sorry. Ponta gets nervous around humans.”

A light laugh escaped from Arc's helmet as he watched Lahki and Ponta's interaction.

Lahki shook his head. "So, what brings you here today? Did you come to sell another slain beast?"

Arc took a look around the shop before rubbing his chin and nodding. "I did, I did. But there's also something I want to ask you about."

He stopped, waiting for Lahki to prompt him to continue.

"Have you ever thought about owning a boat?"

Lahki tilted his head to the side, unsure what to make of this question.

"A… boat?"

Arc responded with an enthusiastic nod.

Lahki thought of all the boats that made their way through Lamburt's waterways. "I guess it would be useful to have a boat… maybe…"

"Useful, huh? Well, you see… I got into a fight with some human pirates, and they kind of just… abandoned their ship. I figured I'd sink the thing, since I didn't really have a use for it, you know? But for now, a friend of mine is hanging onto it for me."

"P-pirates?!"

That singular word kept echoed in Lahki's head. He was almost afraid to ask his next question.

"The pirate ship… it's not a galley by chance, is it?"

Arc's answer was pretty much what he'd expected.

"It's a sailing vessel. A bit on the large size as far as human ships go."

Lahki brought his hand to his forehead and looked up at the roof. He let out a heavy sigh.

"A sailing vessel is too much for a shop this size. I also don't really have any use for a

ship right now."

Undeterred by Lahki's refusal, Arc pointed a finger at the young merchant.

"How about this then? I'll sign the boat over to you, and you can lease it out. Any money you get from the lease can be reinvested in your shop."

The knight continued pressing the issue, eliciting a nod from Lahki before he quickly corrected himself and shook his head firmly.

"Ah, well that does make… No, wait, I can't! Why are you so kind to me anyway, Arc? I know I'm not really good at this whole merchant thing." Lahki offered up a rueful smile.

A faint laugh escaped Arc's helmet as he crossed his arms. "I have my reasons. Think of it as an investment in my trading business."

Arc pulled a piece of parchment out of his bag and handed it to Lahki. The merchant quickly skimmed its contents.

"You've already gotten a ship holding permit approved by the lord?"

A permit was needed to own and operate any type of freight vessel, large or small. On top of that, there were other costs associated with having a ship, like taxes on a berth at the dock, taxes for ownership, and more.

Without enough sales to justify the expenses, it would be difficult to break even.

Lahki was completely speechless at how much background work Arc had already gone through, but his business was hardly large enough to even fill a ship, to say nothing of the connections he'd need to make use of it.

Even if he were to lease it out, he'd still need to find clients.

"Well, uh, Arc… while it's definitely every merchant's dream to have their own ship, right now, I just don't think I can use it. I don't really have the connections."

He tried explaining the current market in as nice a way as possible, so as to not offend the man who'd done him so many favors.

Arc put a firm hand on Lahki's shoulder to stop him. Then he brought his other hand up to chest level and stuck his thumb into the air. Even though Lahki was unfamiliar with the gesture, the meaning was clear. There was no problem.

"Don't worry about all that. I've heard talk that the Rhoden Kingdom is about to begin trading with Canada, primarily for cultivation rune stones. I asked the lord here to help get a ship that could run the route to Limbult, where the trade will take place, but he wasn't able to secure a big enough ship in time. So that's where giving you this ship came in."

Lahki's eyes grew wide. "W-wait! You mean the Rhoden Kingdom will begin trading with the elves?!"

Lost in excitement, Lahki grabbed Arc. He could hardly believe what he was hearing.

Every merchant worth their salt knew that the Grand Duchy of Limbult was the only human civilization the people of Canada, the largest elven settlement, would trade with. As such, the Grand Duchy had incredibly deep coffers and wielded unparalleled political influence despite its small size.

The cultivation rune stones Arc spoke of were one of the many highly sought-after magical items created in the forests of Canada. By crushing the stones and sprinkling the powder on the ground, one could make even the most barren spot of land fertile. Considering the limited space available to humans for agriculture, given all the monsters on the loose, anything that improved their crop yield would be a blessing.

The more crops a field could grow, the more valuable the land was—and by extension, the more income it would bring in.

The mere idea of the Rhoden Kingdom establishing a trade relationship with Canada was enough to send a jolt of electricity up the spine of any merchant.

This was truly a landmark deal, and the knight in front of Lahki was talking about it like one would the weather.

"Lord Petros hadn't heard about it yet, either, so I understand your surprise."

By the way Arc was talking, it sounded like Lahki owning the ship was already a done deal. He'd informed the lord and gone through the work of acquiring a ship holding permit. A merchant would be foolish to turn down an offer that had already been

accepted by the lord.

Left with no option but to accept his lot, Lahki asked the one question that had been bothering him.

“You said this was a pirate ship, yeah? Was it damaged at all when you attacked it? I mean, if it was, that’d require the work of some pretty specialized shipbuilders to repair, and I can only imagine all the money…”

Arc punched his fist into his hand as if he’d just remembered something, cutting Lahki off. “Now that you mention it, one of the masts is broken, and there was a little damage to the hull.”

Lahki started feeling dizzy. “H-hold up. One of the masts was broken? Is there any way I can have you fix all that in Canada?”

Arc looked at Lahki and let out a laugh. “No worries, Lahki. I’ve brought you some stuff that should cover the repair costs. You can either sell them, or maybe even use them to bargain for repairs.”

Arc opened up his rucksack and pulled out some items wrapped in hemp cloth, which he handed over to Lahki.

Every time Arc pulled something new out of his bag, Lahki felt as if his heart would stop. He slowly unwrapped the cloth and examined its contents.

There were several thin, diamond-shaped objects inside.

Each was about the size of Lahki’s palm and seemed to emit a faint blue glow. Though they looked to be made of metal, they had a slight squishiness to them. The objects clinked as they rolled against each other.

“Wow, those are pretty.”

Rea was now standing at Lahki’s side and looking on with great interest.

Lahki nodded in agreement, though he still was unsure of what exactly he was holding. They were nothing like he’d ever seen before.

“So, um, what are they?”

Arc plucked one of the objects out of Lahki's palm and squashed it slightly.

"Dragon Lord scales."

Lahki felt a chill run up his spine.

Surprised at the lack of response, Arc scratched the back of his head in confusion. "Well, uh, I kind of thought they might be valuable. I mean, if this isn't enough to cover the ship repairs, then I can…"

Lahki realized that the other man had grossly misinterpreted his reaction. He shook his head emphatically. "N-no, it's not like that at all! Do you mean to say that these are real Dragon Lord scales? I'm not doubting you or anything, of course…"

Rea's eyes went wide. She took a step back from Lahki. Picking up on her reaction, Lahki noticed just how ecstatic he was and paused to take a deep breath. After calming himself, he turned back to Arc, trying to control his tone.

"Sorry about that. So, um, where did you get these scales?"

Arc brought his hand to his chin and hummed lightly. "Well, to be honest, these were scales I found at a spring atop the mountain where the Dragon Lord lives. So I guess I can't actually say for sure that these are scales from a Dragon Lord and not just a really big lizard."

Lahki looked down at the faintly glowing scales resting in his palms. "No, I believe you. It should be a simple matter of having an appraiser look them over. But I really don't think it would be proper for me to accept such a valuable gift."

As far as humans were concerned, Dragon Lords were at the top of the animal kingdom. Since time immemorial, tales had been written about their immense power.

In one such story, a king decided to slay a Dragon Lord and turn its scales into armor, hoping to claim such power for himself. However, the Dragon Lord eradicated his army in the blink of an eye and, out of annoyance, wiped the entire kingdom off the map.

In spite of—or rather, because of—these stories, Dragon Lord scales were highly prized.

And here were five of them.

Not only would these be more than enough to repair the mast, but if he sold them all, he'd probably have enough left over to buy another small boat of his own.

Arc cocked his head, still confused by Lahki's reaction. "Huh, really? You know, I just kind of found them while I was cleaning the bath."

"B-bath?"

The two men exchanged confused glances.

"I have no particular use for these scales, so if they really are that valuable, and if it will help you boost your reputation, then by all means, I want you to have them. The bigger your business grows, the easier it will be for me to gain access to the market."

Arc placed the scale he was holding back into Lahki's hand and crossed his arms.

"Sorry for coming in so suddenly, but I'd really like you to do this for me. Is that okay with you?"

Lahki pulled the Dragon Lord scales close to his chest and bowed his head. "Th-thank you, Arc. I'll do my best to not disappoint you." He looked back up. "Now, what is it you came to buy?"

Arc reached into a pouch, pulled out another sheet of parchment, and showed it to Lahki. There was a picture drawn on it.

"I'd like to make a brick oven, kind of like this. I'd like to ask you to get the supplies together. Is this something you can help with?"

Lahki looked down at the picture. He nodded to himself. "Of course I can help, but are you going to be making it yourself? I could send out a craftsman, you know."

Arc crossed his arms and shook his head. "It's kind of in the middle of nowhere, and not really a place I can bring just anyone to."

Lahki bowed his head again in apology. "Sorry, I didn't mean to overstep!"

Arc laughed. "It's no big deal. Anyway, I'll leave the cart here, so just put the supplies for the oven inside. I'll come by in a few days to pick them up."

“Understood. I’ll calculate the costs and write up an invoice by the time you return.”

Arc replied with a firm nod before turning around and making his way out of the shop. Rea watched with great interest as the knight left.

“How does he plan on getting home if he’s leaving his cart here? You think he’s staying at an inn or something?”

Lahki just shook his head. “The less we think about it, the better. Anyway, help me break down the list of supplies so we can start looking!”

Rea sighed. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

AFTERWORD

This is Ennki Hakari, the author of *Skeleton Knight in Another World*. Thank you so much for picking up Volume 6 of this story!

We've made it all the way to the sixth volume of this story. I really can't thank you enough for supporting me through it all.

What's more, the misadventures of the Skeleton Knight Arc are now continuing on in manga form.

The manga, drawn by Akira Sawano, is currently being posted on Overlap's online webcomic publishing platform, *Comic Gardo*. By the time Volume 6 is published, the third chapter should already be online. I'd love it if you'd invite your friends to go have a read!

As always, it's only thanks to the hard work of my editor, the talented illustrator KeG, my proofreader, and all the others who helped out that *Skeleton Knight* was able to return to store shelves for Volume 6.

I hope you continue to support *Skeleton Knight in Another World*.

Well, that's about it for now. I look forward to seeing you again in the next book!

MARCH 2017 – ENNKI HAKARI

Riel Nohzan Saureah — *HUMAN*

The lone princess of the Nohzan Kingdom, Riel was raised with a sense of duty to her country, under her grandfather's guidance. Despite her young age, she will risk anything, even her life, to fulfill her royal duties. Her bodyguards Zahar and Niena keep a close watch over her, with the latter looking after her young charge like she would her own sister.

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