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

3

story by rarutori

illust. by ciavis




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Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I’m Bored: Volume 3 [Complete]

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Chapter 1 — Goodbye

Traveling south through the mountains, we entered the kingdom of Ludoria and eventually reached its capital of Wolfir. The city was as large and lively as I remembered it.

That said, although maybe it went without saying, not everything was the same. Passing by a butcher I had frequented in the past, I saw a new face manning the counter. I could see some traces of the old owner's face in him, but he appeared too young to be his son. Maybe he was a grandson? Judging by the sad look on Win's face, it seemed he had noticed as well. That butcher had always been kind to him.

While in the land of the dwarves, there had been no real difference between the speed he aged and that of those around him, but back in the human world things weren't so easy. The only way to avoid confronting that truth would be to keep traveling forever.

Following the street to the dojo, we climbed the stairs leading inside. About halfway up, I noticed there were two...no, four people waiting out front for us.

"Wow, Win and Acer actually came. Your intuition is incredible, Mom," the man standing there said, looking to be in his late twenties or early thirties. He carried himself with an air of preparedness, like he was ready to strike at any moment, and yet the smile on his face showed a genuine affection for us. There was no doubt this was Shizuki. In each of his arms was a child, one a girl of four or five years, the other a boy of about two or three. I supposed being Shizuki's children made them Kaeha's grandchildren. The looks of perplexed wonder on their faces as they stared at us was adorable.

And beside them was the unmistakable figure of Kaeha herself. As we made it to the top of the stairs, she called out to us. "Welcome home, Acer, Win. I thought it was about time I'd see you again. Looks like you've grown quite a bit, Win." She greeted us with a gentle smile, her demeanor much calmer than when we had last met. Win seemed a little embarrassed to have his growth pointed out like that.

“Thanks. I’m surprised you knew we were coming.” As happy as I was to be welcomed home, I was confused how she knew when we would arrive. I had occasionally sent them letters from the dwarven kingdom, but I hadn’t mentioned anything about when we’d actually be back.

“Mom just said ‘I think it’s about time he shows up,’ so we decided to wait outside for you. I didn’t really believe it myself,” Shizuki answered, as surprised by this turn of events as I was. I see, so Kaeha was the one who figured it out. As I turned to look at her, she smiled back at me.

“Yes, I felt the wind was a bit different today. That must have been what told me.” Kaeha couldn’t hear the spirits at all, but her answer still made sense to me.

Stepping inside the dojo, I noticed that the number of students had grown significantly since my last visit. They now rivaled the Rodran School when I had visited them decades ago. There were likely even more students than what I was seeing here, probably numbering well over a hundred in total. In short, the Yosogi School had successfully taken back its place as one of the Four Great Schools of Ludoria.

The students didn’t call Kaeha “master,” though. That was now Shizuki. Apparently she had already ceded the title to him. He seemed well accustomed to the title, meaning the change had likely happened years ago. The number of students now training here spoke well of his abilities.

There were a few faces I recognized among the students, but those new recruits now acted as instructors. A little bit of time changed everything, didn’t it? Well, I supposed that was as obvious as it was inevitable.

Win pointed toward the dojo. “Let’s spar, Shiz. It’s been so long since we’ve had the chance. Also, introduce me to your kids!” He wasted no time asking for a match. Maybe he was a bit excited to be back in the dojo after so long. I almost made a comment about how we hadn’t even given them their gifts yet, but...no, nevermind that. Win was doing this for my sake.

Shizuki nodded with a grin, carrying both of his kids along with him into the dojo. A number of the students seemed to take interest as well, following the pair inside.

“Win really has grown quite a bit. He used to be so small. I’ll go put on some tea, so why don’t you tell me about your time in the dwarven lands?”

I nodded in response to Kaeha. Win certainly had grown. As rude as it might have been, I almost wanted to append an “unfortunately” to that. But any disappointment I felt paled in comparison to how proud I was of him.

I didn’t know how he felt about it personally, but I was sure he could make it on his own any time he thought to try. I felt that keenly as I watched him on our journey through the mountains. He was skilled with the sword, and had earned Oswald’s approval as a fully fledged blacksmith. He unfortunately didn’t have the talent for magic, but the spirits were always on his side.

Of course, I had started learning all of these things well before him, so I was confident I would still come out on top in any contest between us. But I couldn’t say that would hold true for much longer, especially in swordsmanship. In our sparring, he was now taking three or four out of every ten matches. I would probably always be his superior in the Spirit Arts, but that was more of a racial trait than a personal skill. There was no point in getting fixated on that.

Above all, it seemed he was worrying, wandering, and growing in places I couldn’t see. Like just now, how he had so smoothly given Kaeha and I some time alone together. Where on earth had he learned that? It was a complex feeling, at once both a point of pride and sadness. Though I didn’t notice at the time, I was probably wearing a rather pathetic expression on my face.

Seeing me standing motionless in the courtyard, Kaeha stopped and gave a quiet sigh before pulling on my sleeve to drag me behind her. She could be quite overbearing at times, but the fact she pulled on my sleeve instead of my hand was interestingly modest of her. That was just like the Kaeha I remembered.

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Kaeha listened quietly but intently to my story. Having been away from the dojo for more than a decade, I had a lot to talk about.

I told her about helping Oswald forge mithril and secure his position as the

next king of the dwarves, and about my battle with the vampire in Fodor. I told her about putting the old emperor out of his misery, and then returning to the dwarven kingdom to initiate a trade relationship between elves and dwarves. There were also stories of the fist fights, of the hot spring, and of hunting monsters in the volcanic region. There was no end to it.

I imagined most people wouldn't believe a single word, but Kaeha was one of the few who would believe anything I said without question. She laughed, sighed, and even got angry throughout the whole endeavor. The fresh tea grew cold, but the stories kept going, so more tea was put on to ease my throat.

How long did we talk? If I had gone into all the details, we'd have been at it forever, so I had only given her a rough overview of the events. But even so...

"I take my eyes off you for a minute, and look at all the trouble you get into. You're like a hero from a fairy tale. Though I suppose you were like that when you were still here too," Kaeha said with a smile.

For a minute? I suppose ten years wasn't all that long for me, but for a human like her it was quite a stretch of time.

"I am curious about many of the things you talked about. I heard about such hot water ponds existing in the homelands of the Yosogi School, but never about any so close. And I'm glad to hear you have taken an interest in swordsmanship again."

Ah, so there were hot springs in the far east after all.

As for swordsmanship, I wanted Kaeha to teach me again. Even if Shizuki was the head of the Yosogi School now, she was still my master. When I had said I wanted to learn, I could definitely sense the happiness in her expression, even though it was faint.

"But I am most concerned about Win, so allow me to get straight to the point. Do you not have an urge to see him surpass you?" She quickly drew back, taking on a serious expression as she drove to the heart of the issue.

It was a pretty difficult question. I had plenty of answers swirling in my head, so it was hard to pick one to vocalize. I was definitely happy to see him grow, and took great pride in his learning. That was undeniable.

But I was afraid that if I recognized his growth, he would grow fully independent and leave me. I knew those feelings of pain and loneliness were just my own weakness. And I knew it was incredibly late, but as Win grew more and more, there was some part of me that didn't want to see him surpass me so easily.

In short, my heart was in chaos. Since I couldn't pick one answer, I shared them all, earning a happy smile from Kaeha.

"What a coincidence. I gave the headship up to Shizuki, but as much as I celebrate his growth, I still don't want to feel like I've lost to him in swordsmanship. And I don't think I have. We're quite similar, aren't we?" she laughed.

Were we similar? I felt like my feelings were much more pathetic than hers.

"Acer, it is natural to lament your child's independence. Shizuki is still with me because he took over the dojo, but Mizuha went off to become an adventurer. She used the house you offered her, found a husband, and has children of her own." These things made Kaeha both happy and sad at the same time. Like she'd said, we were the same.

Maybe she was saying that to try and comfort me. Indeed, those words made my heart feel a little lighter. I had learned I wasn't the only one who dealt with these chaotic feelings. I had someone I could relate to.

Kaeha closed her eyes, as if thinking over something. I waited quietly for about ten minutes before her eyes snapped open again.

"Then, let's have a contest. A contest between Shizuki and I, and you with Win. Both to recognize their growth, and show them that we won't be so easily conquered."

How had she come to that? I guess I could understand a match between Win and myself, but her and Shizuki as well? Seeing my bewildered expression, Kaeha stood up.

"For three years, I will train you to the best of my ability, while Shizuki will do the same for Win. After that, you two will have a match to determine who is

stronger.” She reached a hand to the sword at her side, the same sword I had once reforged for her. “Even if Win could survive on his own, you’d be more comfortable to see him train a bit more, wouldn’t you?”

I nodded. Like she said, though it was just my opinion, it felt like Win was rushing too much. If the head of the Yosogi School could train him for three years, that would alleviate a lot of my stress.

Of course, with Kaeha teaching me directly for the same time, I had no intentions of losing easily. But after putting our whole hearts and souls into training, I could accept the results, no matter what they looked like. Though Kaeha, Shizuki, and Win may have had their own thoughts about it, I couldn’t imagine a way things could end poorly.

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Despite my long absence, the forge in the dojo had been kept in pristine condition. I relit the furnace, this time with Win at my side.

Shizuki and Win had accepted Kaeha’s challenge of a three-year training match. No matter the result, Win would be thirty-two years old. That would make him fifteen or sixteen by human standards. By the customs of this world, that was around the time he would start living on his own. In my past life, that line had been at eighteen, twenty, or twenty two, but I had no reason to try and enforce that here.

Maybe because things had been made clear now, Win seemed to feel a lot better about his situation. I imagined what I lacked was the feeling of being a proper parent. I didn’t think I had the right personality, so I had wanted to be his guardian or closest friend. But no matter how much I wanted that to be the case I was still undeniably a parent to him.

Any child would see their parent as a figure to adore, to try and catch up to, to overcome, and to earn recognition from. But I had been too lax in fulfilling that role. That may have been fine when he was young, but now that he was a young man slowly approaching adulthood, that half-hearted approach to parenthood had made it difficult for him to face me.

Although...that wasn’t the whole story. Little by little, I had found it more and more difficult to face him myself, leaving us in a position where neither could

interact with the other well.

It was pathetic. The time allotted for us to live was quite different. On top of that, I had been living too colorful of a life recently. When Kaeha had heard of what we'd been through, she said I sounded like a hero from a fairy tale, and what were heroes but forever distant? From Win's perspective, I must have seemed so far away.

However, the fact that we had the time to fret over such issues was a sign of how blessed we were. Most of the people in this world had to fight desperately just to survive. They had neither the time nor the freedom to worry about the intricacies of such relationships. And even if there was no way to cleanly resolve these problems, we had Shizuki and Kaeha to help us find a way to connect properly again. We really were blessed, in so many ways.

"So Win, like before, I plan on doing work like repairing the training swords and taking jobs from the blacksmithing guild. What are you going to do?" I asked, peering into the furnace.

If Win wanted to work as a blacksmith, I could split my work with him. If he proved himself, it wouldn't take him long to earn a master blacksmith's license. But if he wanted to focus on just maintaining the training equipment, that was fine too. He was free to use his time however he liked.

After mulling it over for a bit, he answered. "I want to use the forge. But...I'd like to find work for myself."

I see. If he didn't know how to get work on his own, it would be difficult to make much money as a blacksmith in a human kingdom. In that case, getting a master blacksmith's license would be helpful. That was true if he was going to settle down somewhere, but even more so if he was going to travel around.

"Then let's pay a visit to the blacksmithing guild later. I'll show you how to take on jobs."

If he wasn't going to settle down and open a blacksmithing shop, then getting work through the blacksmithing guild was the easiest option. Naturally, they would take a portion of your earnings, but considering that they often provided a forge, fuel, and materials for you to use, that was an acceptable expense.

“If you want to live as a traveling smith, you’ll want a master’s license. Of course, you need to prove you have the skills to earn that, but you were taught by Oswald, so that shouldn’t be too hard in three years.”

Not all of Oswald’s students achieved the rank of master smith, but I didn’t think it would be a problem for Win. Oswald had recognized his talent and passion, and he had already been learning for...well, not quite ten years yet, but with another three years, he’d get there. That’s how long it had taken me to get my master’s license, after all. There was no reason why he wouldn’t be able to do the same.

“Okay. Umm...thank you, Acer.” Win said awkwardly.

That was hardly necessary. It was only natural that I’d help him learn what he needed to live on his own. I was still his guardian, not his opponent.

In three years, we’d have our contest. We’d fight, with nothing less than everything we had. But that didn’t make us enemies.

“Okay then, let’s start with the maintenance work then. It looks like they’ve gotten quite a lot out of these swords. Can you help?”

While we were gone, the Yosogi students had outsourced the maintenance of their weapons to blacksmiths around the capital, but that meant they weren’t able to get it done as frequently. I thought it might be a good idea to teach some blacksmithing to one of the school’s students, or maybe one of Shizuki’s children. They had a forge inside the dojo, after all. There was no need to leave it unused for so long. That felt like such a waste.

But that would be something to talk about after our three years of training. I had something much more important to focus my efforts on until then. With a nod, Win came up beside me and got started on repairing the swords. Though we didn’t talk much while we worked, the time we spent together in the forge felt calm and peaceful.

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Long ago, when I had first started training in swordsmanship with Kaeha, we had practiced side by side. But now, she stood in front of me with no sword. It made me feel inexplicably uncomfortable.

“You don’t have to make a face like that. I have spent just as much time thinking of how to teach you as we did practicing together. Maybe even more,” she said with a laugh. She said it so flippantly, but coming from her, it was likely the truth. While I was quite honored, at the same time I felt guilty for making her wait so long to teach me. But right now, that didn’t seem to bother her.

“For each person,” Kaeha explained, “the timing needed to best express their strength is different. Similarly, certain timings will make that expression more difficult. For example, when crossing swords with someone, you lose strength as you breathe out, right?”

I felt like I had heard something similar before. Maybe it was a faint memory from my past life.

In truth, the way you breathed was quite important. When hunting with a bow, you had to track your target’s breathing, gaze, and other signals before firing your arrow.

“When you swing your sword, your heart, mind, and body must all be in sync. You also need the right conditions to use your skills to the fullest. Being able to create those conditions is an important part of the battle.” As she spoke, she swung her hands as if holding a sword. Though her hands were empty, her form was so impeccable I could almost feel an invisible blade cutting through the air. Her swordsmanship really was a thing of beauty.

Read your opponent’s breathing, gaze, and mood to find the right timing, then deliver the best strike possible. It was beautiful, the ideal flow of combat. I longed to be able to fight like that.

“Perhaps because of your skill in archery, I think you are already quite good at this. But in contrast, if you aren’t perfectly in sync, or if the situation isn’t just right, you hesitate too much,” she continued, as if she had seen right through all my thoughts.

Ah. Yes, well I supposed she was right. After all, swinging a sword from a broken posture or without the proper groundwork in place was nothing like the swordsmanship I admired. I didn’t want to engage in such sloppy fighting. So when I fought with a sword, I tended to wait for my opponent to strike before unleashing an attack of my own. But if that was all I could do, the moment my

opponent saw through that, I would have already lost.

“That is your main weakness. Even if your posture is broken, even if you aren’t ready, you need to be able to swing to break your opponent’s posture to force openings in their guard. As brutish and unseemly as it is, a strong swordsman is one who can swing his sword whenever necessary to obtain victory.”

I had no argument. She was probably right. No, not probably. If she said it, it was definitely true. But even so, I didn’t want to let go of my mentality. The incomplete style of swordsmanship I had learned just from copying her movements felt much more appealing to me.

We stared at each other in silence for a time. I couldn’t bring myself to answer her, even though I knew she was absolutely correct. Finally, she broke the silence.

“But I know you are stubborn and selfish, so you won’t listen to what I have to say.” Though she said it with a sigh, I could see the smile behind it. “So I’ve been thinking about it. If I don’t want you to remain stuck in that incomplete stage, I need to show you a style of swordsmanship you’ll want to emulate no matter the situation. Even if it comes while falling, while sleeping, or while taking a surprise attack.”

She had followed up her point with something strange. How did this go from her talking about my incomplete swordsmanship to her trying to perfect her forms from an imperfect posture? Was that even possible?

“I said as much before, didn’t I? I’ve spent a lot of time practicing, trying to figure out how to teach you. So I can say it is possible, to an extent. While I am still working on an attack from lying down, I have found a way to attack from falling or after being surprised without changing much,” she said, as if it was the most mundane thing in the world. There was no sense of deception in her voice, or even pride. It was simply an expression of the facts.

She swung her empty hands through the air again, quickly striking in four directions, eight directions, and even behind her. Her invisible sword flowed like water, despite her never taking a stance. At first glance, it seemed like she was just going through the motions, casually copying the movements of actual

strikes, but I could feel her swings cutting the air just as they had before. If she'd actually held a sword in her hands, those casual, unprepared attacks would surely be as sharp as any other.

"All you have to do now is copy me. It's not easy, but I'm sure you can do it." As she spoke, her hands kept moving. Even as a smile rose to her face, her movements didn't lose any of their precision. So she was saying she had learned how to use a sword like this just so I could copy her movements. That was...beyond ridiculous.

After finally coming to a stop, she looked over to see I was still standing there, thunderstruck. "This is the best I can do to teach you. I worked quite hard on it, so I have to say I'm happy to see that look of surprise," she said with a chuckle.

My swordsmanship had been born of my admiration for Kaeha's own. I had practiced so hard specifically to recreate her style. So now, seeing her swordsmanship again, I felt my heart racing. My body was trembling with excitement, demanding to recreate what it had just witnessed. But...

"Uhh, did you teach Shizuki the same thing?" I didn't know if it was okay for me to learn something like this. If this was the ultimate peak of the Yosogi School's style, I didn't feel worthy of it.

Kaeha shook her head. "No. Though it is for the sake of rebuilding the Yosogi School, he is only interested in getting stronger. He has no need for such a bizarre style. He now spends his days developing and refining new techniques of his own," she replied proudly. Unlike me, Shizuki was actually a normal swordsman. He was more interested in winning than some bizarre obsession, and his heart, mind, and body were perfectly in sync. That's what her expression told me. "You are the only student I've had who is strange enough to obsess over reproducing my style. The others aren't nearly as difficult. So I'm the only one who can really teach you."

Even if you had to leave your heart behind, it was better to overwhelm your opponent with sheer skill. That was what she was trying to teach me, and she had developed this style as an example for me on how I could do that.

I bowed my head at her words, then put down my weapon and stretched my hands out forward as if gripping an invisible sword. She had shown me her

example while empty-handed so I would do the same. I didn't know why yet, but that was all the more reason for me to copy her. I'd copy, reflect, copy, reflect, and when I had perfectly replicated her form, I would understand. It was no different than our first days of training together.

Once again, I had a clear objective in front of me.

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"Roooaaaar! I'm gonna eat you!"

I stomped after the children, opening and closing my hands while twitching my ears. As I did, the four-year-old Souha and two-year-old Touki screamed and ran.

Of course, no matter how fast they ran, there was no way two children that young could escape me. Though I made a big show of swinging and missing at them, I noticed Touki lose his footing and trip. I swooped in to grab him, and held him under one arm. He seemed to like being lifted so high up into the air, and when Souha saw how much fun he was having, she immediately grew jealous. She ran back towards me as if asking me to catch her, so I obliged and lifted her up in the same way.

"Sorry for making you take care of them, Acer." The apology came from Shizuki's wife, a woman named Kuroune. Souha and Touki were in fact their children. I shook my head, then spun the two around in the air for a bit before lowering them to the ground.

I liked kids, so being asked to play with them was no problem at all. And I felt no need to hold back with these children, even if they did belong to the Yosogi School's head. However, as I put them down and expected them to run away, they instead leapt back and clung to me.

Haven't had enough, have you? I thought as they shook my legs. Shizuki's kids —Kaeha's grandkids—were quite energetic.

I lifted the two up into the air once again, then stomped my feet on the ground as a signal to the earth spirits. They raised the ground in front of us, creating a slide. Souha and Touki, as well as their mother, were shocked at the sudden display of power. With the two kids still in my arms, I climbed up the

mound and slid down.

Ah, maybe it would be safer to have some soft sand at the bottom.

Once they saw me do it, they knew immediately what they were supposed to do. Setting the two kids free, they quickly climbed up and began sliding down, cheering as they went. I couldn't help but smile as I watched Souha help her little brother climb up the slide. They plunged into the soft bed of sand at the bottom, and immediately got back to climbing back up.

"I'd heard as much from my husband, but you really are quite amazing." With the slide complete, my hands were now free, giving Kuroune a chance to come talk to me once she had gotten over the shock of what I had just done.

Yeah, I suppose that's how it looked. But really, the spirits had done all the impressive work. I had a bit of a special standing with them, but I was still just a student of the dojo.

"It's nothing special. I think being able to teach dozens of people swordsmanship at once like Shizuki does is way more impressive," I replied, keeping a careful eye on the kids to make sure they didn't hurt themselves on the slide.

If I remembered correctly, her maiden name was Eyaspella. That was the same name as the knight captain who had bought my sword so long ago. I didn't know what he was doing now, but I suspected that Kuroune was his granddaughter. In other words, she was the granddaughter of one of the leaders of the Ludoria Royal Swordsmanship school.

I didn't know whether her and Shizuki's marriage had been for love or politics, nor was I rude enough to ask. But in any case, there was now a strong connection between the Ludoria Royal School and the Yosogi School. That had likely played a big part in the Yosogi School's recent growth.

That said, I didn't really care all that much. Shizuki's attitude toward his wife showed that he clearly loved her, a feeling she definitely reciprocated. And they both still had plenty of love to spare for their children, so all the important boxes were checked, as far as I was concerned. Shizuki's children felt like family to me, hardly like the kids of some friend.

Mizuha now lived in Vistcourt, where she was apparently married and with children of her own, so I wanted to visit her. Was she living a happy life too? She had been a strong kid, so I imagined she was fine, but that made me worry she might be overdoing it as well. Vistcourt was still in Ludoria, so it wasn't all that far to travel. I'd go pay her a visit one of these days.

Now, Shizuki taught Win swordsmanship while Kaeha taught me. But in reality, Shizuki didn't have anywhere near as much free time as Kaeha. As the head of the school, he was responsible for teaching all of the students who trained here, so the time he had left to teach Win personally was fairly limited. Of course, the other students also helped with Win's instruction. Our match in three years was not just a contest between Win and myself, but also between Kaeha and the rest of the Yosogi School. It was really an exciting prospect.

Everyone was putting their hopes on Win. Though he might not feel like it yet, as the contest approached, those expectations would grow heavier and heavier, together with their attendant pressure. How much growth would those expectations and that pressure inspire in him? It wouldn't just be in swordsmanship, either. I expected him to grow much as a person as well.

I couldn't wait to meet that future Win, both as a swordsman and as his guardian. Maybe this was something like the fighting spirit I had lacked for so long.

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After a time of practicing empty-handed, I finally graduated to using a wooden sword. Once I started using a physical weapon, I realized why I had started without one. If you didn't fully understand your own movements, the weight and centrifugal force generated by the sword itself could very well lead to you getting hurt.

As I continued my practice, the seasons passed us by, and I eventually reached a level where I could spar with Kaeha. I suspected that I wouldn't be close to the level either of us wanted after only three years. Learning techniques like these properly would doubtless take decades.

But this realization didn't bother me. No matter how incomplete my training would be, I'd bring everything I had to bear against Win. After that, our lives would continue.

But as time passed by, I was met with a considerable loss. A letter arrived about two years after Win and I returned to the dojo, which prompted me to head over to Vistcourt. I was there to visit Clayas and Martena, the former members of White Lake. Or more specifically, their graves.

As high elves ascended into spirits of nature when we died, we didn't have any customs for mourning the dead. Elves were typically buried near trees, which one could then talk to should they be particularly struck by grief. Occasionally, mana in the environment could transform a dead body into a kind of monster, but trees were said to help prevent that.

For humans, praying to the god of the harvest was most common. Wishes for the earth to receive them and grant them rest, and hope that one day they would be given new life. As a priest of the harvest god, that was certainly an appropriate send off for Martena. There were other gods who ruled over death, but most people prayed to whichever god they usually worshiped.

But for me...standing in front of their graves, all I could do was clap my hands together, as I would in my previous life. There was no such custom in this world, or at least in this region, but it felt like the most appropriate way for me to wish for happiness in their next life.

Naturally, there were no depictions of the two on their graves, but the faces of those two young adventurers on the day we first met floated to the front of

my mind.

“Thank you, Lord Acer.”

Looking up from the grave, I saw Airena, the one who had sent me the letter. According to that letter, Clayas had passed away two months ago, and as if chasing after him, Martena had passed a week later.

Human life was really so fleeting. They had reached the pinnacle of their profession as adventurers, earning their seven star rank, and yet still left the world behind in what felt like no time at all. They had been loved in Vistcourt, and their funeral had been enormously crowded, but...after a hundred years, no one would remember them. The only exception would be Airena.

I wanted to tell her that there was no need to thank me, but I couldn’t get the words out. Not after seeing the fragile smile on her face.

“When White Lake disbanded, Martena had said to me, ‘Thank you, and I’m sorry.’”

I silently listened to her story. I didn’t know the full depth of the relationship between Clayas, Martena, and Airena. I could make guesses, but I had no proof to back them up. It appeared to me like those two felt incredibly indebted to Airena, and she to them. Or maybe that was just my imagination, and it was more like regret.

But I had no doubts that their relationship with Airena was what led them to accepting Kaeha’s request. That was what Kuroha, Kaeha’s mother, had meant when she mentioned someone else’s curse. But it was far too late to worry about that. There was nothing to be gained by prying into their personal relationship now. Kaeha had come along with me to Vistcourt, but she was currently at Mizuha’s house. I imagined she planned to visit the grave on her own later.

“If you hadn’t come along and given me a role here, Lord Acer...I may have fled Ludoria to get away from these two.”

As such, there was no way I could understand Airena’s feelings. So rather than offering some cheap attempt at consoling her, I just listened.

“I would have stayed away from Vistcourt for so long, not brave enough to

come back even after a hundred years to confirm their deaths. Maybe I would have eventually worked up the courage, but then I never would have been able to find their grave."

That never would have happened. It was easy enough to deny her theoretical future. I knew she wasn't that weak. She was the most skilled, most reliable elf I knew. Even if she had run away for a time, I knew she would have returned before Clayas and Martena passed away. And even if she didn't manage that, she would have no problem finding their graves.

But there was no point in saying that to her now. She wasn't telling me this to wallow in her own weakness.

"Maybe if I had run away, I wouldn't feel a sadness like this. But then I wouldn't have been able to send them off properly."

She was just grieving, mourning, and putting her feelings into words. Of course it would take time for her to get those feelings all in order. It might take her a decade or two, or over a century. But little by little, she would look over her memories, process them, and at last put them to rest deep in her heart.

"So thank you, Lord Acer."

I nodded.

Following Clayas and Martena's deaths, Airena had made preparations to step down from her role and leave Ludoria. But I had no intention of being so rude as to ask what she planned on doing next. After all, her answer could very well change depending on how she felt at the time. I thought it was fine for her to take this time to mourn. People like us had all the time in the world.

If she wanted to talk about the past, I'd gladly sit with her. After all, the pain Airena was feeling now wasn't just some stranger's problem. It wouldn't be long before I had to face it myself.

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After visiting Clayas and Martena's grave, I met Mizuha. Kaeha's daughter now had two children of her own.

Was it a Yosogi tradition to have exactly two children? Well, I suppose Kaeha

was an only child, but that could have been because of her mother's poor health.

"Please, give my kids your blessing, Mr. Acer. So that they grow up big and healthy."

At her request, I took Mizuha's children in my arms.

Though Shizuki and Mizuha were twins, Shizuki's eldest was three years older than Mizuha's. Of course, just because they were twins didn't mean they had to have children at the same time, but it was still interesting to see how they differed despite growing up so close to each other. Shizuki was always thinking about the dojo, and so wanted to prepare a successor as soon as possible. Mizuha, on the other hand, had focused on her adventuring and waited longer before settling down to have children. It was interesting to see how their differing personalities manifested in the ways they lived.

"You have two great kids, don't you? May the wind and water, earth and fire protect you always." I smiled down at the two children in my arms, who looked back at me with quiet confusion. My "blessing" had no supernatural benefit for this pair, but it made Mizuha happy.

Well, even before thinking of happiness, as Kaeha's grandkids and Mizuha's children, I wanted to wish for their well-being already. There were far too many cases of small children getting sick and never having the chance to grow up. The children of the Yosogi School often grew up strong and healthy, but that was more luck than anything else.

After getting pregnant, Mizuha had retired from adventuring, and began teaching swordsmanship for the adventurer's guild. It was a rather curious twist of fate.

Speaking of which, I had heard that Clayas and Martena's child was working as a knight in the neighboring country of Zyntes. In the end, I never actually met them. I didn't see them here, so I doubted I ever would.

After one more visit, this time to Rodna's grave, Kaeha and I made our way back to the capital. Vistcourt was a nostalgic place for me, but I had given up my home there already, so there was no place for me there. As sad as that reality was, it was one I had come to accept.

Both our friends and our homes had passed away with time, lingering only in memory. This was just another one of the inevitable consequences of time.

After a long, leisurely walk back to the capital, we were greeted on our return with a report that relations with the Rodran School of Swordsmanship—another of Ludoria's Four Great Schools—had begun to sour. In response to the clear alliance formed between the Yosogi School and the Royal Ludoria School, the Rodran School and Grend School had formed an alliance of their own.

As had always been the case, the largest school was the one bearing the country's name, the Royal Ludoria School. The Rodran and Grend Schools likely wouldn't be able to match them, even combined. So naturally, they turned their sights on the Yosogi School instead. After all, there was some history between the Rodran School and the Yosogi School, as old as it was.

Back then, Clayas had smoothed things over between the two schools, but he was no longer here. The Rodran School held a deep admiration for him as one of their own who had achieved the title of Holy Sword of Ludoria, and so had respected his wishes even after his retirement. But now that he was gone, it seemed they didn't feel constrained by them anymore.

I had to say, the situation certainly rubbed me the wrong way. Even I had days where I was in a bad mood. If they had waited a year or two after Clayas's death, it probably wouldn't have bothered me, but the fact they acted so quickly made it seem as if they had been waiting for him to die. It was like the Rodran School was challenging me and the misery I had carried back from Vistcourt.

In that case, there was no need for me to hold back. I had no intentions of taking any lives, but maybe I'd turn Clayas's old fear of me destroying the Rodran School into a reality. I might as well send the Grend School off with them.

But, the moment that thought crossed my mind, I felt Kaeha's hand on my back.

"This is a problem for the head of the Yosogi School to resolve. He hasn't asked for any help. Not from me, and not from you. Let's leave this to him."

Both her voice and her hand were steady and resolute.

I knew it had to be a difficult decision for her to make. When she was just a child, she had lost her father, all of the higher level students, and even the dojo itself to the Rodran School. And yet, she was saying we should stay back and watch.

If she wouldn't do anything, there was no way I could. As much as I was a member of the Yosogi School, I was really only Kaeha's personal disciple. Until Shizuki asked Kaeha for help, I'd have to hold myself back. It would have been so much easier for me to just act, but I swallowed my feelings, restrained myself, waited and watched. Shizuki was hardly alone. He had all the other students of the Yosogi School by his side, Win included.

However, no matter how poor relations were between the schools, it didn't devolve into armed conflict. Such a thing was obviously illegal, and would result in harsh punishment under Ludorian law.

The raid that had spelled the end of the old Yosogi School had been caused by the loss of the head of the school, and the reckless abandon of the higher level students aiming to secure the headship for themselves. Without such extreme circumstances, the thought of violently putting down an opposing school wouldn't even be considered. The thought had only really occurred to me because I was so angry, and could pull it off without leaving any evidence behind.

At this stage, the Four Great Schools were just vying for the upper hand. The Yosogi School was strengthening ties with the Royal Ludoria School, while the Rodran School was strengthening its ties with the Grend School. I didn't really understand the situation that well, as these kinds of things were usually beyond me, but I supposed the conflict was taking a more political turn.

The conflict had bred something of a tension among the students of the schools, so when Yosogi and Rodran students met in public, they were often quite confrontational. I'm not sure whether it would be best to describe it as "unfortunately" or "naturally," but the kind of people who joined these schools to learn swordsmanship had a strong tendency towards being hot-headed. Not

many people who sought out the means to fight and kill lived their lives in peace. There was nothing rare about the story of the student who practiced hard and learned well, looked for ways to put their skill to use, and so rose up in challenge the moment a potential enemy presented itself.

Of course, not every student was so violent. For example, Kaeha had strictly disciplined any students who failed to exercise self control, and that practice continued even after her time as head of the school. Anyone who couldn't accept those rules was not permitted to stay at the dojo. So from my perspective, each and every one of the Yosogi students were pleasant and agreeable.

But one couldn't expect the same level of restraint from the Rodran School students. And even the Yosogi students wouldn't hesitate to fight back once their honor had been attacked. Shizuki was working hard to hold his students back, but there was no telling how long that would last.

The situation wouldn't come to a head for quite some time, but until then, a nervous tension hung over the Yosogi School.

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The day finally came.

Three years had passed since we returned to the Yosogi dojo. The match between Win and I would start any minute now. With wooden swords in hand, we faced each other at the center of the practice floor. Kaeha was behind me, and Shizuki behind Win, watching from a small distance. As expected, the other students were here to cheer Win on, as he had practiced all this time alongside them.

Now that we were here, there was no need for any words between us. Win had truly grown up. I could see that just by looking at the way he stood. He was more or less as tall as I was now, or quite possibly even slightly taller. So there was no reason to give anything but my all. If I held back here, even unconsciously, I'd never be able to face him.

Having lived together for so long, we knew each other's habits quite well—both good and bad—in swordsmanship and beyond. But that was three years ago. How much had Win improved in that time? How many of his bad habits

had he managed to correct?

We both took a ready stance. I took a sideways stance, while Win held a high guard. The sideways guard was Kaeha’s specialty, the most powerful stance in the Yosogi style.



That made it the stance I was most skilled in using too. It was well suited to intercepting an opponent.

Win’s high guard was designed to launch a powerful attack, excelling in both range and power if he was given even a single step. A middle guard was more appropriate if one needed to measure their opponent’s reach, but we were more or less the same height. We were both using the same wooden training swords, meaning our reach was effectively identical. There was no need to feel each other out.

If Win saw my stance and felt I had failed to account for my past weaknesses, this would be an easy match, but...I trusted that he wouldn’t make such an elementary mistake.

“Begin!”

The moment the referee spoke, Win leapt forward and crushed the distance between us. I had expected as much from his stance, but his movements were much faster than I had anticipated. It seemed he had spent his three years

training well.

With his speed, the sweeping slash my stance excelled at was no longer a guaranteed winning move. Retreating here would only let Win push me into a corner. The best course of action for me was to dodge sideways. As I leapt to the side, I spun my body like a top, slamming my sword into him.

The sharp sound of wood striking wood filled the air. He had barely managed to block my strike, but that wasn't the end of my attack. Without so much as a pause to breathe, I struck again as I rebuilt my posture.

Win's face began to pale as he blocked the repeated strikes. The attacks weren't so much overbearing as they were unreasonably forced, but were still sharp enough to throw him off.

I could relate. That was exactly the kind of unease I felt when I first began sparring with Kaeha. However, while I could unleash a barrage of strikes from a broken posture, they were barely passable at best as actual attacks. He would have no problem defending against them if he kept a cool head.

Win's guard held firm, so with my attack complete, we both leapt backwards to claim some distance. That short exchange expressed the growth we had both seen in these past three years. We seemed even at this point, with the scales leaning ever so slightly in Win's favor, but there wouldn't be a repeat of that previous exchange.

Before the match, Kaeha had given me one piece of advice.

Acer, if you really care for Win, then you must win this match. Become the target for him to aim for, exactly as I have been for you.

Those words wouldn't necessarily help me win, but they had nonetheless lit a fire in my heart. I was surprised at how convincing she had been.

So I wouldn't lose. I *couldn't* lose, no matter how badly Win wanted to beat me.

Spurred on by that inner flame, this time I went on the offensive. Win made no effort to meet my advance, jumping backwards and then sideways, trying to confuse me by attacking from the side.

It seemed he had spent his time focused on developing his speed and footwork. He was many times faster than he had been before, but still not fast enough to escape. Twisting my body, my sword raced to the space Win had tried to take.

As much as he had improved his speed, I had improved my range. As long as he didn't attack from directly behind me, my sword could still reach him. So as long as I could prevent that, no matter how fast he was, I could still keep up easily. In truth, Kaeha was just as capable of handling attacks from behind with the minimum possible movement, but I still needed more time to pick that up from her.

As Win realized that his attempt to make me lose my balance wasn't bearing fruit, he quickly gave up on attacking from the side. However, that didn't mean he had given up on victory. If he couldn't confuse me with his speed, he'd overwhelm me with his power instead. In short, he would go back to the same kind of charging attack as he had begun our fight with. Honestly speaking, that was the scariest possibility for me.

Win returned to his high guard, and I settled back into my sideways stance. This would be the deciding blow. I had evaded his first strike, but I had no intention of doing so again. I was confident I had seen enough of his style. His next attack would be faster than any that had come before. But I was confident I could match it.

Like pulling the string on a bow, Win shifted his weight into his feet, preparing to lunge. Now that I thought about it, I guess I never did end up teaching Win archery.

Like an arrow unleashed, Win shot forward with a powerful overhead slash. I answered with a sideways sweep.

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"Once the trouble between the Schools has settled, I'm going to go on a journey west," Win declared on the night after our match, as we were sitting on the ground staring up at the stars.

A journey, huh?

I had expected something like this might happen, but west?

“I understand that you’ve been protecting me from all sorts of things until now, Acer. I also heard that without your intervention, I probably would have been killed right after I was born for being a half-elf.” Though he said it with a smile, the words that came out were quite heavy.

Who? Who had told him that? Was it Airena? No, it was more likely someone like Huratio. It could have been one of the elven adventurers, too. I suppose it was something he should have known someday either way. Really, I should have been the one to tell him when he had grown old enough to handle it.

“But that’s why I feel like I need to learn more,” he said. “About the conflict between different races, and the tragedies that they create.”

That’s why he was heading west. That was where humans were constantly at war with the beastfolk. The religion of the humans living there taught that humanity was the ultimate race, rejecting all others. For a half-blood like Win, it was the worst possible place to go. Both the humans and the beastfolk would see him as an enemy, and even the elves there would also hate him since they wouldn’t know his connection to me. I couldn’t think of a single person who would be an ally to him in a place like that.

But Win knew all that when he decided to travel west. And since he was an adult now, there was nothing I could do to stop him. But there was one thing I had to say.

“Win. Please remember to treasure your life. If you don’t, the humans and beastfolk, and even the elves of the west might end up getting wiped out.”

I wanted to scare him a bit. Though I couldn’t even say whether that threat was empty or not.

Win replied with a strained smile. “You really are overprotective, you know that?”

I couldn’t help it. My son was about to leap headfirst into danger. How could I *not* be worried?

“Don’t worry. I have my own goals, so I’m not going to die. I’m going to see all sorts of things, get stronger, and become a man who can beat even you,” he

declared. Ah. It seemed I was still the end goal for him. “Let’s have another match someday. Next time, I won’t ‘almost’ win. I’ll definitely beat you... Dad.”

As he squeezed that last word out in a whisper, I immediately wrapped him up in a hug. If I didn’t, he would have seen the tears streaming down my face. I couldn’t make a pathetic show like that.

He would leave on his own journey. I wouldn’t stop him. Win, my son, was a full grown man.

It would be another two years before tensions between the Yosogi School and the Rodran School cooled enough for him to be comfortable leaving. I didn’t realize it at the time, but the students of the Yosogi School had actually been barred from the martial arts competitions in Wolfir. That had been their punishment for their attack on the Rodran School in the distant past.

Shizuki was using his connections with the influential Royal Ludoria School to try and overturn that decision, while the Rodran School did everything in their power to protect it. Considering the potential conflict that could spark from repealing the punishment, the country was taking a cautious approach to the issue.

Competitions held in the capital, especially those put on for the king, were an invaluable opportunity for those who wished to make a living through their swordsmanship. The chances they presented were limited, though, so it was only natural that the Rodran School and Grend School would oppose allowing the Yosogi School to participate again.

But through Shizuki’s excellent leadership, the Yosogi School did not rise to their opponent’s provocation, and were eventually given permission to participate once again. Shizuki, Win, and the other high level students all joined, and the results they earned brought great fame to the Yosogi School.

At that point, the Rodran School saw no point in holding on to their dispute. If they continued taking a hostile stance against the Yosogi School, it would only hurt their own reputation. So Shizuki and the head of the Rodran School made peace, and the conflict was put to rest.

If, hypothetically, I had gotten involved in that conflict, such a peaceful

resolution wouldn’t have satisfied me. Unfortunately, I couldn’t empathize with the desire to get famous through swordsmanship. My pursuit of the sword was for a much more personal, internal satisfaction. Success as a blacksmith required people acknowledging your ability, so I had no issues getting involved in those competitions, but being famous came with plenty of its own drawbacks.

So if it had been left to me, I would have simply crushed the problem in front of me, with no regard to its underlying causes or any thought of how to resolve it properly, even if that didn’t end up solving the actual problem.

With the conflict between schools settled, Win departed on his journey to the west. He would no doubt face many obstacles, and would approach them in a very different way than I would. It broke my heart that I wouldn’t be able to see it all happen in person, but someday I’d get to hear all the stories from him.

How would he face his problems? How would they make him feel? Someday, I’d hear the story of his journey—the story of his life—from his own lips.

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One year after Win left on his journey, which would be six years after I had returned to the Yosogi dojo, I began to teach blacksmithing to some of the students there. Shizuki seemed to guess that the only reason I was staying at the dojo was because of Kaeha. Knowing I wouldn’t be there forever, he wanted someone who would be capable of using the forge after I was gone.

For the students themselves, taking the time to learn a new skill like that wasn’t a bad deal. Though they were at the Yosogi dojo to learn swordsmanship, obviously not all of them made a living off of it. Some came just for fun, and others to learn self-defense in this dangerous world. Plenty of students had no family business, or would rather take up the sword than commit to it as a third or fourth son, so there were students with all kinds of backgrounds. A fair number of them turned out to try their hand at blacksmithing.

There was no way I could teach all of them, so I only selected a few among those who took the trade seriously, could bear the extreme heat of the forge, and had a talent for blacksmithing. One note of particular surprise was that

despite my strict criteria, one of the students who made it through the entire selection process was the ten-year-old Souha.

She was Shizuki's daughter, and so Kaeha's granddaughter. In other words, there was a reasonable chance she'd end up as head of the Yosogi School someday. Well, she was Shizuki's eldest child, but she did have a younger brother named Touki. When it came to fighting with a sword, men tended to have an overwhelming advantage in muscle and physique, so Souha's chances weren't exceptionally high.

But there were some cases like Kaeha herself, and the possibility that Souha's future husband could become the head of the school. For that matter, if they showed they had the talent, even Mizuha's children in Vistcourt would be valid candidates.

Anyway, I didn't want Kaeha's grandchildren to be fighting over the headship, nor did I enjoy thinking about it. I'd just have to hope Touki inherited the talent for swordsmanship from his father and grandmother.

Getting back on track, with Souha being so important to the Yosogi School, I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to teach her blacksmithing. If she began learning craftsmanship, the time she had to spend on learning swordsmanship would inevitably shrink. She was still only ten years old, so she had a lot more to learn than just those skills. Reading, writing, math, history, social studies, cooking, sewing, and other household tasks were all part of her curriculum already.

Win had twice as much time to live as a human did, but Souha was one of those ordinary humans. Learning blacksmithing now would restrict her future more than broaden it. For example, it would inevitably reduce her chances of taking the headship of the Yosogi School.

But while I hesitated, her father came to me.

"This is something Souha decided for herself. We've already talked it through, so by all means, please teach her."

As for how Kaeha felt about it...

"There is more to life than aiming for the headship. Plenty of people have

grown stronger through pursuing blacksmithing. But Acer, don't you dare try to seduce my granddaughter," she said with a laugh.

So what was I supposed to do? I didn't want to interfere with others' lives that much, but with the permission from both her father and grandmother, I had no reason to turn her down.

At any rate, I was glad I had been so strict in choosing my students. Even if she was only ten, she was still the daughter of the Yosogi School's head. There was more than one student trying to get close to her for their own reasons. If any of them dared to step foot in my forge just to earn points with her, there would be more fists swinging in there than hammers.

Once I had decided to teach them, the circumstances of their birth became irrelevant. How capable were they of turning steel, metal, or even materials harvested from monsters into finished products? How sincere were they in their approach? Naturally, they'd be incapable of making anything at the start, but it was important to see how well they took instruction. That talent had nothing to do with one's birth.

Thinking on it now, it was a good thing Win hadn't learned blacksmithing from me. While it was true that Oswald's skill in both teaching and blacksmithing far outpaced mine, I wouldn't have been able to view my son in an unbiased light.

But that aside, once we started with the lessons, Souha proved to be extremely good at it. She listened more seriously than anyone to what I said, and took great pains to observe my every move, think them through, and imitate them herself. If I had to think of a weakness, it would be that she didn't have the same stamina that the older men had. Even so, she performed more than well enough for her age.

Seeing how seriously she took her lessons also inspired the other students to be more passionate about their work. Those who couldn't keep up stopped coming of their own accord rather quickly. The rest continued to absorb my skills, not once complaining about being forced to work on the fundamentals, and not once giving up on grander ambitions.

Three years after I began teaching them, I was able to start entrusting

maintenance of the dojo's practice swords to them, and I'd even started to pass along work from the blacksmithing guild. There was a huge demand from the capital for things like nails, farming implements, pots, pans, and other kitchenware, so there was more than enough work to go around.

And of course, standing head and shoulders above all the other students was Souha. As I had expected, the more she excelled in blacksmithing, the farther behind she lagged in swordsmanship, allowing her younger brother to overtake her. Maybe it wasn't my place to worry about that, but I still felt the need to ask. Was she really okay with that? Wouldn't she rather focus on learning the sword than blacksmithing?

But she had just laughed. "It's okay, Master. Touki will definitely become an amazing swordsman like our father and take over the dojo. When he does, I want to be able to support him with my blacksmithing. I'm his older sister, after all!" she said, positively glowing with pride.

I see. I thought I had been fair in my assessment of her, but it seemed I had underestimated her after all. In that case, what she needed from me was not needless worry, but for me to teach her as much as I could...so that someday, she could inherit this forge from me.

Kaeha's efforts had saved the Yosogi dojo from the verge of destruction. Shizuki had grown it even further, and now the next generation was rising up, getting ready to take the reins themselves.

I couldn't have imagined a brighter future for them.

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My life of practicing swordsmanship and teaching blacksmithing continued, calm and gentle, yet passing by in the blink of an eye. Thirteen years after returning to the dojo, eight years after Win left on his journey, and seven years after I started teaching blacksmithing, I relinquished the Yosogi dojo's forge entirely to Souha and her first group of students. Of course, I gave advice whenever they asked for it, and lent a hand from time to time, but officially I had retired from working with them.

The forge that had once operated entirely around me was now led by Souha.

There were plenty of things I could still teach her, but there wasn't really anything left I *needed* to teach her, so I turned my focus to spending time with Kaeha instead.

Little by little, the time it took her to get through our daily training was increasing, and she began needing to spend more of her time resting. That inevitable day was creeping ever closer. Luckily, I managed to find one last apua sitting in the bottom of my bag, so I offered it to her in hopes of putting that day off as much as possible. But she declined it, saying she didn't need it yet.

Another year passed, and eventually she became unable to continue our daily training. I spent the vast majority of my time at Kaeha's side, but since we'd already spent so much time together, we didn't really have a lot to talk about.

It's warm today. It's cold today. The spirits are saying it'll rain tomorrow. The trees in the garden will blossom soon. Those kinds of meaningless conversations filled our days, together with endlessly repeated stories of past memories. But as much as she had heard them all before, she still asked me to keep telling them.

However, even if she was no longer capable of training, she wouldn't let *me* slack off in the least. So every day, in the courtyard right beside her room, I'd spend some time training while she watched from her chair. She didn't have much advice left to give when it came to how I should swing the sword, or how I should put my heart into it.

Well, I suppose she hadn't said much about it beforehand either. Back then, we had practiced wordlessly side by side, me imitating her every move. The only difference now was that I was practicing alone. With her watching me

every day, it didn't feel like much had changed at all.

Another half a year passed. On many days, Kaeha found herself unable to get out of bed, but my training continued. I had no idea how Kaeha would take the fact that her life was coming to a close. Fear? Resignation? Maybe even anticipation? All I knew was that every time we spoke, every time she watched me practice, she had a bright, cheerful smile on her face.

"It seems it's about time," she suddenly declared one day. I had long since steeled myself for this, so I wasn't particularly surprised. But, even so...

"Really? Can't you hold on a bit longer? Three more years would be nice." I didn't want to accept it, so I just joked with her.

Kaeha responded with a bitter smile. "I would love to grant that wish for you, but I am afraid three years is an awfully long time." She shook her head. It looked like it wouldn't work out. We had been living together now for fifteen years, so you might think another three years wouldn't mean much, but...well, that wasn't the issue, was it? "Besides, Acer. You have spent more than enough time with me. I'm ready to set you free again."

Those words felt like a punch in the gut, but I tried not to let it show. This place wasn't a prison for me; I was here because I chose to be. I wanted to be by her side. I'm sure she understood that, but that didn't necessarily mean she was wrong.

"So Acer. May I have it now?"

I nodded. I reached into my bag and pulled out the last apua, then ground it down and spoon fed it to her. Slowly, very slowly, she ate the whole thing. Once she had finished and given it time to settle, she smiled. For the first time in a long while, she managed to rise to her feet.

"What a delicious fruit. Thank you, Acer. Now, please get my sword. The one you reforged for me." Stepping out of her room, she walked out into the courtyard. I hurriedly grabbed her sword from beside her bed and followed her out.

No matter how used to it she may have been, it was still a heavy piece of

metal. There was no way she could use a sword like that in her current state. But even so, she smoothly drew the sword from its sheath.

“This is the end of the road. Where Kaeha Yosogi’s life of swordsmanship finds fulfillment,” she said as she gently brought her sword up into a guard stance. Despite her words, I didn’t cry. Tears would only get in the way of witnessing this.

In the next moment, all sound vanished from the world. Color, the flow of time, everything seemed to fade away. Her slash was quiet, yet brimming with power, capable of cutting down anyone or anything. Maybe these were all just my own personal feelings, but that was the beauty I saw in her swordsmanship. I could think of no other word to describe her but “peerless.”



“I suppose that does it. You were paying attention, right Acer?” As she finished her performance, the sword slipped from her fingers and fell to the ground. I immediately dashed to her side, catching her before her collapsing body could follow suit. She felt so small, so light, so cold.

She reached out a trembling hand and stroked my cheek. “Acer...I love you...” With those last words on her lips, she passed away.

With her final display of swordsmanship burned into my memory, and her last words resting heavy on my heart...I had no reason to hold back the tears anymore. Holding her body tight, I let the tears pour out as I howled. And I continued, long after Shizuki and the other students had come.

After the funeral was complete and her body was interred, I left the Yosogi Dojo behind.

Everyone tried to stop me. Souha, Touki, the other students...even Shizuki, who knew from the start that I would be leaving, tried to get me to stay a little longer. But right now, I couldn’t bear to stay in one place. True, I was feeling

down, but there were many things I wanted to see. Someday I'd be back here to visit Kaeha's grave. When that day came, I'd need to bring as many stories of what I had seen as I could.

I decided to travel far, far away. I had been beset by a sudden spark of inspiration. I wasn't in any particular rush, but once I had told the elves where I was going, I would head east. Long ago, Kaeha had told me that the Yosogi School had originated there. I wanted to see that place for myself, following the many clues she had left behind for me.

I began chasing after the clouds that raced through the sky above me.

Interlude: Kaeha's Letter

I get the feeling you'll cry more than anyone expects, so I felt I should leave you a letter. If you don't, and you're actually perfectly fine, please burn this. Leaving behind something like this just feels too out of character for me.

But if you did perhaps cry for me, then thank you. I lived a happy life. I don't know if I had the courage to tell you before the end, but I love you. It's been so long, I don't even remember when it started.

So if you don't mind, I'd like you to keep this letter as a memory of me, until it's so worn out that you can't read it anymore. It doesn't have to be forever. After all, "forever" is a very long time for you, isn't it? But if you could do this for me, that would be enough. Though, if I did manage to tell you in person, then I probably already am satisfied.

There is one thing that I don't want you to misunderstand. You may see humans, or at least me, as a greedy bunch who don't know when to give up, or as fleeting and transient creatures, but that is not the case. True, we live much shorter lives than you do, so even if we stay together for a time, we cannot truly spend a life together.

But even if someday this letter wears down to dust, even if someday you forget me entirely, I'll be with you whenever you swing your sword. Be it in one hundred, two hundred, or a thousand years. Until the day you can longer hold a sword, I'll be there protecting you.

My swordsmanship will walk with you for the rest of your life, and so I can say I am satisfied.

My beloved.

My adorable student.

The great figure who guided me.

A stubborn blockhead.

A kind person.

No matter what, I will keep you safe. I don’t mind if you cry. One more time, let me say thank you. And I’m sorry.

But please keep walking forward, with your sword in hand. You will no doubt come to save countless people in your travels, in the very same way you saved me. That’s just the kind of person you are.

If you’ve read this letter to the end, then please keep it with you. Because of course, I would be delighted for you to remember me for as long as possible.

Chapter 2 — Yet I Will Still Walk On

A deep blue sky. Open, infinite, stretching to the ends of the earth. But right now, that sky was shaking and rattling. As expected, I wasn't handling the carriage ride well.

It was a large carriage with a solid roof, which I was currently lying on top of, but the irregular, small jostling movements still left me feeling nauseous. That said, this was a thousand times better than being trapped inside the carriage itself. I was thankful for the fresh, open air, but I especially liked the feeling of the wind on my skin.

"How are you holding up, Lord Acer?" With a little bit of concern, but mostly just amused curiosity, the elven minstrel called out to me. Huratio was currently sitting at the front of the carriage, driving the horse forward and probably bored out of his mind.

"I'm fine for now. But this does remind me of how much I don't like carriages," I answered, refusing to take my eyes off the sky. Not every day would have good enough weather to permit this, after all.

Maybe I'd eventually get used to it after riding for a while, but the prospect of what I'd have to suffer through to get there was not appealing to me in the slightest. I was fine riding horses and boats, so how come I couldn't handle carriages? No matter how I wracked my brain, I couldn't find an answer.

"Is that so? Ah, how about you try singing? That always lifts your spirits." He suggested it like it was a great idea, but I wasn't about to try singing in front of a professional. I'd rather just take a nap in the warm sunlight, or even run alongside the carriage.

"That won't work, Hue." Poking her head out from the carriage's canopy, the painter Rebees butted into our conversation. "If you try to force him, he'll just resist all the more. Besides, drawing is much more fun than singing, right Lord Acer? Why not try sketching the scenery you see from up there?"

Watching the scenery from up here was fine, but focusing on my hands with

all this shaking would only make the motion sickness way worse. Maybe a professional like her could manage, but there was no way a novice like me would turn out anything passable.

It was always like this. Whenever the elves spoke to me, it was in an attempt to help me feel better.

After Kaeha's passing, I'd left the Yosogi dojo behind and met up with the elven caravan, the same one Rebees had been dreaming about creating back in the dwarven kingdom. Everyone in the caravan was an elf. They traveled from city to city to sell various goods, as well as find new audiences for Huratio and new sights for Rebees's paintings. The caravan also came to be a representative of all the elves, officially recognized by Ludoria and the surrounding nations. Elves whose curiosity led them out of the forests also often joined the caravan or came to ask for advice, so it became a pillar of support for them as well.

The core of the caravan was Airena, Rebees, and Huratio, but they were also accompanied by a number of other elven adventurers.

"Huratio, Rebees! Stop playing with Lord Acer!" Airena's voice scolded the two from inside the carriage.

Rebees laughed, while Huratio whistled innocently. She said it like I was some kind of toy, but I guess I didn't mind.

Right now, the caravan was carrying me east. I'd be able to take a ship once we reached the Azueda Alliance, so my plan was to stick with them until then. I didn't handle carriages like this well, but I had two other reasons for meeting up with them anyway.

The first was to ask them to take any letters Win sent me from the far west in my place. With both Win and I traveling across the world, there was no way we'd realistically be able to find each other again. But if Win's letters went to our mutual friend Airena, and I kept in contact with the elven caravan, we'd be able to maintain a connection.

Unfortunately, we couldn't rely on the Yosogi dojo to do that for us. It wouldn't be long before there was nobody there who knew us. Humans aged quickly, so time flowed differently for them than Win and me. As unfortunate as

that was, there was nothing we could do about it. I had long since accepted that fact.

However, elves would live longer than Win. So as per usual, the most reliable person I could think of was Airena. I couldn't imagine finding anyone more capable of handling the last thread connecting Win and me.

The other reason I had joined up with the caravan was that I simply felt a little lonely traveling by myself. I wasn't looking for some consolation in my grief or anything. I had no regrets with how things had ended. There were plenty of precious memories stored away in my heart, and Kaeha's letter would always be at my side.

All that was left for me was to get my feelings in order. I didn't need someone to hear my story or anything. All I needed was the sound of people talking. So the lively and cheerful elven caravan traveling from city to city was exactly the kind of bright atmosphere I was looking for, even if I'd only be with them for a short time.

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Using Ludoria as their starting point, the elven caravan traveled around the surrounding countries, and so naturally they became well-informed on current events. I had spent the past few years focused entirely on the Yosogi dojo with no interest in the outside world, so the stories they told me were one surprise after another. For example, Paulogia—the country immediately to the south of Ludoria—had collapsed. Meanwhile, Zyntes and Jidael to the east had begun integrating into a single country. These were really huge developments.

Paulogia had been envious of their southern neighbor's access to the sea, and so they had repeatedly invaded them without success. But recently, the tides had turned, and Vilestorika had retaliated in an invasion that destroyed Paulogia altogether. Apparently they had hired a number of powerful mercenary groups and made a single concerted push to topple their northern adversary. The attack had been so sudden that Paulogia's ally, Ludoria, hadn't been able to offer any support beyond the food they already exported to them. In the few moments they hesitated over sending military aid, the nation had collapsed.

However, neither Vilestorika nor Ludoria was keen on the idea of sharing a border. After annexing a portion of Paulogia's land for themselves, Vilestorika left the majority of the people to their own devices, allowing a surviving group of nobles to establish a new country among the ruins.

As a republic based on commerce, it seemed the people of Vilestorika didn't have much of a taste for conquest. Rather than take total control over a land that would become more work than reward, they preferred having a buffer between them and the massive kingdom of Ludoria. So instead, they offered support in establishing the fledgling nation of Giatica.

Paulogia had no trade relationship with the republic, but Giatica was very different. With a fresh flow of goods and culture coming from the south, despite its nature as a vassal state of the republic, many expected it to flourish far more than Paulogia had. I had passed through Paulogia in my past travels, and had been astonished at the poverty the people there faced in comparison to their northern neighbor.

Ah, but apparently the village I had built a well for back then was still quite prosperous. Huratio had told me all about how the plentiful water and hardworking people had developed the area. Even the well-traveled minstrel had recognized it as a wonderful place, where the people lived in close harmony with the water spirit in the well. Of course, this was Huratio, so I was sure his story was exaggerated to some extent.

But that aside, regarding the events in Zyntes and Jidael, the two countries had always had a close relationship, but now they were starting to merge, with the goal of forming a new nation to be known as Zieden. The purpose of the merger was to help in fending off the invasion...or rather the pillaging, coming from their neighbor to the north east: Darottei.

However, Zyntes and Jidael had a long history of violence with their neighbors of Ludoria and the Azueda Alliance, so the formation of a larger state between them was a cause for concern. As such, Ludoria had begun the process of fortifying their border, while the nations of the Alliance that bordered the two merging nations had begun bolstering their militaries.

So while the circumstances surrounding Ludoria were not especially

dangerous, tensions were starting to rise. With the Great Pulha Woodlands to the west and the mountainous region to the north, if Vilestorika to the south and Zieden to the east agreed to cooperate, they could easily isolate the kingdom. The Duchy of Kirkoim to the south east was ostensibly neutral, but if Ludoria was under blockade by their neighbors, they would doubtless feel pressure as well. Ludoria was a powerful nation with a strong food supply, so such a siege wouldn't take effect all too quickly, but even a silk noose would suffocate them eventually. If all of Ludoria's worries were proven correct, their only solution would be a large-scale war.

Of course, this was all just my imagination. There was no evidence that a siege of Ludoria was being planned. With the fall of Paulogia, there was a reasonable chance that Ludoria and Vilestorika would actually develop a trade relationship instead, enriching both. In my opinion, that was a much more likely outcome. But with two large changes in the geography of the area in such a short span of time, it was no wonder people were starting to feel uneasy.

However, no amount of worrying would help the situation. Since I was heading east anyway, there was little I could do to help.

I suppose I should take this chance to elaborate on my planned route east. The central and eastern regions of the continent were separated by a large band of wetlands known as the Man-Eating Swamp. The swamp was said to be as dangerous as the Great Pulha Woodlands, home to many unique breeds of monster. The freshwater rivers from the Alliance mixed with the saltwater floods coming from the sea to the south, creating an environment that gave birth to all kinds of peculiar creatures. There were even rumors that some remnants of what was thought to be a long extinct race, the lizardfolk, still inhabited the swamp. Of course, those were just rumors.

There were three routes one could take to the eastern reaches of the continent: an overland route to the north that skirted the swamp, a sea route by ship along the southern coast, and a path that went straight through the swamp. With the northern route cutting through a harsh desert and tundra, and traversing the swamp being plainly unpopular, the standard approach was the southern one.

If one were to make it through the swamp, they'd find themselves emerging into a huge grassland populated by halflings and other nomadic tribes. The grassland didn't reach to the southern sea, though, so the coastal region was made up of human kingdoms. North of that grassland was the desert, and further north was a tundra. The desert wasn't entirely unpopulated, it obviously wasn't a very popular place for travelers.

As for me, I fully intended to go on foot through the Man-Eating Swamp. I would be taking a boat, but I had no reason to take it all the way to the far east, and the desert and tundra sounded much more forbidding than a wetland whose main threat was monsters. In more concrete terms, the main reason was that I'd have better luck relying on the spirits for help in a wetland compared to a desert or tundra.

Beyond that, I had to admit, I did want to see for myself if there were actually any lizardfolk living there.

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In the center of the town square, I was showing pictures to a crowd of children. Beside me, Huratio was plucking a melancholic tune on his lute. Being a traveling minstrel with the lifespan of an elf, he had become a master of the lute, lyre, and most other instruments popular in this region.

"Long, long ago, there was a dry little village in a very poor country. The river that flowed near the village was very small, and would dry up if the sun was out too long." As I spoke, I flipped the picture I was showing to the back of the pile, revealing a new one. Rebees had drawn them according to my request. I didn't want them to be too realistic, so while I don't think I could call them caricatures, the images were a bit softer than her usual landscapes. After the picture of the village, I showed a picture of a young girl.

"In that poor village lived a little girl named Mari. Seeing the dried up river, she prayed, 'please give me some water to drink.'"

Yes, I was putting on a picture show. After thinking long and hard over what I could offer to the elven caravan, this is what we came up with. Huratio came up with the stories, and Rebees made the art. Airena also helped in the background, getting the spirits to help with the special effects. I thought it

would make more sense for Airena and I to switch roles, but for some reason the elves really wanted me to be the storyteller.

“Then, a miracle happened. A water spirit emerged from the dried out riverbed and gave her one cupful of water.”



As I said that, Airena quietly whispered to a pail of water beside me. In response to her words, the spirit in the water created a small replica of a little

girl. It's not like all water spirits took that form, but that's what most humans pictured when they thought of water spirits.

"Mari was very surprised, but she was also very thirsty, so she took the water in her hands and immediately drank it down."

By the way, this story about a girl meeting a water spirit by chance and having her village saved from perpetual drought was a fiction Huratio came up with. Apparently it was an embellishment of a legend told in what was once Paulogia. I knew of a similar story...but I guess that wasn't important. If I put too much thought into it, my voice might betray me during the performance.

Though the water spirit had answered Mari's thirst, the powers it granted her hadn't been enough to solve the problems of the whole village. So the village chief thought up a wicked idea. If the water spirit had taken a liking to Mari, they could offer her as a sacrifice to it. Then maybe the river would be filled with water again. Of course, such an idea was totally ridiculous, but there was no way an uneducated human chief of a poor village would understand anything about the spirits.

Under the pretense of saving the village, he tried to bury Mari in the dried out river bed, even though that meant throwing away what little water they had gained from her. Human greed sometimes blinded them to the correct path.

But at the same time, a traveling elf visited the village. He saw the village chief trying to sacrifice Mari to the water spirit, and was furious. Water spirits didn't want human sacrifices. Upon seeing the foolish humans uproot the tiny bud of hope that had started to sprout, the elf cursed the village to shrivel up and die.

But the one to chastise the angry elf was none other than Mari, who had just been saved. She didn't hate the people of the village at all. She wished more than anything to save them. She desperately asked the elf to teach her about the water spirit. Touched by her compassion and tolerance, he agreed to teach her. Her words also resonated with the village chief, who acknowledged that he had been wrong, and declared that once she had grown up, he would surrender his position as village chief to her.

Through the elf's teaching, the girl became a proficient Spirit Caller, and guided the village with help from the spirits. The villagers were no longer

hungry or thirsty, and they lived out the rest of their lives in prosperity.

Or so the story goes.

In short, the story taught about who the spirits were, and it carried the message that elves could teach humans many things if they cooperated, but were very scary if you made them angry. Humans who could see the spirits were extremely rare, and being able to see something no one else could often became a cause for persecution. If spreading this story could prevent even a little of that from happening, I'd be happy.

"And so Mari and the other villagers lived rich and prosperous lives, always protected by the spirits. And they all lived happily ever after."

As I read the last words of the story, Airena called on the wind spirits to create a gust of wind while the other elves threw handfuls of flower petals. The colorful blizzard earned cries of amazement from not only the children, but also the adults watching from afar.

With story time over, we handed out fruit to the children and drinks to the adults. The first round was a gift, but after that they'd have to pay for it. The excited children—and adults for that matter—grew even more rowdy, filling the town square with energy as Huratio broke into a new song. Children pestering their parents for more fruit and adults seeking more alcohol turned the place into a mini party, and the money started piling up in front me.

The show's success was a good demonstration to me of the merits of this caravan. After all, with special effects added by the spirits, there was no way the crowds wouldn't get excited. With Rebees to make more pictures, and Huratio to write more stories, they'd be able to tell all sorts of tales.

To be honest, if they were going to use the spirits, I thought a puppet show would work better than a picture show, but aside from the special effects, the picture show would be a lot easier to imitate. As imitators started to pop up, stories of elves and spirits would naturally spread further into human culture. And no matter how many copycats appeared, the special effects the spirits provided ensured that the caravan would always be a step above.

As I patted a red-faced child on the head as he told me how much he liked the

show, I looked over the impromptu party with a smile.

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That night, we went to eat together at a tavern in town. Aside from me, the elven caravan currently had eight members. There was Airena, Huratio, and Rebees, three adventurers working as their guard, and two elves who had just left the forest behind and had yet to decide what to do with their lives.

Not all of them ate with us, though. There were always two of them watching the carriage at all times, including sleeping with it. The caravan sold things like weapons and armor bought from the dwarves, fruit and medicine grown in elven forests, and other similar goods that were exceptionally hard to find elsewhere. It was too risky to leave the goods unattended. Even if merchants offered us a warehouse to store the carriage in, we couldn't let our guards down.

Leaving such valuables undefended could stoke the greed of humans into a fire that overtook any reason and led them into doing something foolish. It was an unfortunately common story. So even while in town, the caravan never left the carriage unattended, taking turns watching it around the clock. That was as much for the sake of others as it was for themselves. The elves that had lived for a long time in human civilization were well aware of that.

But just because they were on guard duty didn't mean they didn't want a nice hot meal, especially since it had been so long since they had been in town. With a word to Airena, I gathered together some food and brought it back to the carriage. Tonight's menu was stew, soft white bread, chicken drumsticks, and a bit of relatively weak wine. It wasn't enough to get them drunk, but I thought it would liven up the meal a little. The caravan was treating me like a guest, meaning I didn't have a turn on guard duty, so I felt that bringing them something to eat was the least I could do.

Despite how energetic Huratio had been during the day, he was still singing the night away at the tavern. As a minstrel, he gave the impression of being somewhat delicate, but he was surprisingly tough. With the sound of his singing following me out, I stepped away from the tavern and walked to the carriage, quickly enough that the food wouldn't grow cold, but careful enough that I

wouldn’t spill anything.

Today’s guard detail was a veteran adventurer named Julcha, second only to Airena in combat prowess among the members of the caravan, and Piune, an elf who had just recently left the forest behind.

“Oh, Lord Acer! Is that dinner? Thanks!” Julcha noticed my approach immediately, popping out of the carriage’s canopy and waving in greeting. Shortly after him, Piune also poked her head out, looking around before bowing her head to me.

Julcha held the canopy back for me as I climbed up into the carriage, then dished out the food for them and filled some mugs with wine.

“Wow, this looks fantastic!” Piune exclaimed at the sight. She was only one hundred and twenty years old, quite young for an elf. Having just barely left her life in the forest behind, she still grew elated every time she saw a human meal.

Back in my home in Pulha, we had eaten basically nothing but fruit, and it seemed the other elven villages weren’t much different. They would occasionally eat mushrooms or the meat of monsters, but they didn’t cook in the same elaborate fashion as humans, mostly just roasting things over a fire. Apparently many elves who emerged from the forests found food to be the first stumbling block. From that perspective, Piune’s ecstatic appreciation of every dish laid out before her made it fun just to watch her eat.

I’d feel bad for just dumping their food off and leaving, so I sat with them for a time. After all, once they finished, I’d have to come back and collect their bowls and plates anyway.

“By the way, Lord Acer. Your...picture show, you called it? Your show this afternoon was incredible! I didn’t know high elves did such things.”

I gave a strained smile in response to Piune’s excitement. After all, the idea of the picture show had nothing to do with me being a high elf. Telling her about my previous life probably wouldn’t help much either.

“I don’t know about that. It’s really something I just thought of myself. Probably because I like books so much.” My answer was basically a lie, but I

didn’t have a better way of explaining.

Julcha tilted his head in confusion as he ate, but kept his questions to himself. Piune didn’t seem to have any doubts, nodding happily as she spooned more food into her mouth.

“Bu—,” she tried to continue speaking with a mouthful of food before giving up and swallowing. “But really, you are incredible, Lord Acer. I have no idea what I’m supposed to do out here. I just left the forest behind, so who knows what would have happened to me if I didn’t have everyone here.” She barely finished before going back to shoveling food in.

I suppose in a way, her choice to leave home looked rather reckless. But that was only because she wasn’t accustomed to the human world, and hadn’t yet learned how to judge her actions by those standards. As she acclimatized herself to the common sense of the outside world, she would learn to tell what was safe and what was dangerous, and that reckless behavior would naturally fade away.

On top of that, the more she learned, the more likely she’d find something she wanted to do. For example, even people who chose to become adventurers were all classed under that one name, but they came in all sorts of flavors. There were swordsmen and archers, and elves could even fight as Spirit Callers. In the same vein, whether it was to become a minstrel, a painter, or a blacksmith, there was no way you could admire a profession without first seeing it for yourself.

For now, what she needed most was to learn. Young as she was, she had plenty of time to do so. And that was exactly the purpose of the elven caravan.

By the way, my recommendation was that she become a dancer. If she put on an exotic costume and danced along to Huratio’s music, they’d make a killing. As an elf, she wouldn’t need to expose herself so much with her clothing. In fact, something like a veil to cover the lower half of her face, while wearing other loose cloth...oh, now it was just turning into a belly dancer.

Airena would die before putting on a show like that, but I felt like there was still a chance of convincing Piune to give it a try, if I played my cards right. Of course, in the end she should do whatever she wanted to, but until she found

what that was, I felt it was important to get a wide range of experiences. If she found dancing too embarrassing, there was also the option of being a puppeteer, either making puppets or performing with them. After all, a puppet show would work far better with the special effects created by spirits than a picture show.

“But if there’s anything you’re interested in, I’d start there. Why don’t you try doing the reading for the next picture show? Having the children look up at you, totally absorbed in what you’re saying, is pretty fun,” I suggested with a smile.

The first step was always to try. She had already worked up the courage to leave the forest behind, so anything else would be a waste.

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“Are you really leaving, Lord Acer?” Airena asked as we sat keeping watch over the campfire.

It was the night before we entered the first of the towns in the Azueda Alliance. In other words, it was the last night I would spend with the elven caravan.

Airena seemed quite anxious, but that wasn’t because she had heard I was planning on traversing the Man-Eating Swamp. Such a route would be suicide for an ordinary human, but she knew a high elf like me was more than capable of making it through. She wasn’t worried about the dangers I’d face on my journey, but whether I could emotionally handle traveling on my own again. I guess she was indirectly asking, “Won’t you be lonely, traveling by yourself?” Having her bring it up again was honestly a little embarrassing.

I mean, of course I’d feel a little lonely being on my own. I had enjoyed traveling together with the caravan far more than I expected, a sign my heart had grown fairly weak after all. But even so...

“Thank you, Airena. But I’ll be fine.”

Probably.

Like I said, traveling with the caravan had been a lot of fun. My heart had already become brighter, enough to find enjoyment in these things. So I thought I had it in me to keep moving forward.

A lot had happened between Kaeha and I, but I had no regrets in our relationship. Looking back on the whole thing, even including the very end, I was satisfied with how it all went. If it hadn’t been for that awful scandal of Ludorian nobles taking elves as slaves, we could have spent even more time together, but I couldn’t say for sure if that would have been a good thing.

If we had, the chance of Kaeha and I being able to have children together was extremely low. Shizuki and Mizuha would never have been born, I never would have met Win, and with Kaeha’s death, the Yosogi school would disappear entirely except for me. I felt like that was too sad of an ending. But at the end of that road, I might have looked back on it with satisfaction too.

Anyway, that was all just hypothetical. I wouldn’t say it was meaningless to

imagine such things, but there wasn't enough value in it to consider rejecting the ending I had already reached.

"Lord Acer...you really are amazing," Airena replied with a long sigh. I imagined she was comparing myself to her. She probably still felt the pain of Clayas and Martena's deaths, still felt like her grief was dragging her through life. A human might say it had already been ten years since the two had passed, but for an elf like her, she would say it had barely been ten years. That's just how things were.

"In that case, do you want to come with me?" So I tried inviting her along. Thinking back on it, the two of us had never really gone on a long journey together. Our longest excursion had been a horseback ride to the mountains north of the capital. But if she were to come with me, we'd have to avoid the Man-Eating Swamp after all.

Airena shook her head. "No. I really, really do appreciate the invitation. But I will stay with the caravan a little longer. I also have to be here to receive letters from Win, after all," she answered with a smile.

That was her choice. Though this was just a guess, if I had said that traveling alone would be too difficult for me at this time, I suspected she would have insisted on accompanying me. But if it was for her sake, to help her in her grief, she would never try to burden me like that. It was a very fitting decision for her.

We sat there quietly, watching the fire for a while as spirits wavered between the flickering flames. After quite a long stretch of time, Airena broke the silence.

"But I do have one personal request for you."

Oh? What could that be? It was rare for her to ask something of me for herself. Normally when she asked me for something, it was for elves in general, or because there were a large number of lives in danger, and she had no one else to turn to.

"If, during your journey, you come across the white lake, please take me there someday."

Ah, so that was it. I could understand that.

“When we formed White Lake, we chose that name because we hoped we’d become skilled enough as adventurers to find it someday.”

White Lake was the name of the adventuring group Airena, Clayas, and Martena had formed. It was also the name of a lake that appeared in a fairy tale passed down among the elves and high elves. It was a lake of pure water, found in the middle of a vast land of white.

“The three of us were never able to find it...but even if I’m the only one left, I’d like to see it for myself one day.”

I nodded. I could understand her feelings very well. However, granting that wish would be a considerable challenge. If my speculation was correct, the land of white in the fairy tale was referring to a place above the clouds. In other words, the world of the true giants, if it was even real.

To be quite honest, I didn’t know if I could find a way to reach it even if I had the time to search the whole world over. But if that was her wish, then I’d do what I could. I wasn’t in a hurry, and I had no particularly large objectives besides visiting the homelands of the Yosogi School. I doubted anyone else would be able to find the white lake, so I had to be the one to accept Airena’s request.

Basking in the warm light of the campfire, the rest of the night passed slowly.

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After entering the Azueda Alliance, I parted ways with the caravan and took a ship upstream to Lake Tsia. It had been quite a long time since I last boarded a ship. I guess the last time would have been when Win and I were traveling down to Janpemon after we’d first met. That had been more than forty years ago. Back then, he had been small enough to sit on my lap.

Since we were heading upstream, the ship moved entirely on manpower, meaning progress was slow. Even so, it was much faster than making the journey on foot. Once we reached Lake Tsia, I spent a few nights in the town of Folka to rest. Okay, all I had been doing was sitting on a boat, so it wasn’t like the journey was particularly exhausting...but being unable to move for so long made me start to feel stiff, and despite being surrounded by water, we couldn’t really bathe.

Following the river down south and west from Lake Tsia would take you back to Janpemon, but I was headed in a different direction this time. I was curious how Kawshman and Nonna—my two friends who lived in the Alliance—were doing, but at the same time, the thought of checking in on them was scary. Though not by a lot, Kawshman was older than Kaeha, so there was a good chance I wouldn't be able to see him anyway. I wasn't in the mood for any more goodbyes.

If Win were with me, maybe I would have felt differently. But he was far off to the West now. When we fulfilled our promise to visit Janpemon again someday, it would be when no one who lived there remembered us anymore; we'd be sharing memories with only each other.

So instead, I had written letters for Kawshman and Nonna, and left them with the elven caravan. If the two of them wrote replies, I would read them after my journey to the far east was finished.

The boat I was on followed a river heading east. After passing through the countries of Prahiya and Toronen, we made it out of the Alliance and into a pair of countries named Bardoth and Orotenan. The river continued into the wetlands of the Man-Eating Swamp, but as expected, the ship wouldn't go that far.

The nations of Bardoth and Orotenan sat on either side of the river, working together to exterminate the monsters that emerged from the swamp. In other words, they were the gatekeepers of this particularly dangerous region. So despite not being officially associated with the Azueda Alliance, they still received support from them, particularly in regards to food.

I decided to spend a short time in Bardoth, on the north side of the river, to refresh my own food supplies and gather information.

As I walked the streets looking for a place to stay for the night, I saw a surprisingly large number of adventurers. There were also a fair number of shops set up to serve them, from bars and cheap lodgings to brothels and blacksmiths, as well as merchants purchasing materials they had hunted and harvested. On top of that, the city guard had a strong presence there.

The city had a really unique atmosphere. The military engaged in pacifying the monsters of the swamp as well, but plenty of adventurers were still drawn in by bounties and rare materials. I guessed that merchants had followed them in, causing the city to grow.

Though there were quite a few differences between the two places, it still reminded me a lot of Vistcourt. The adventurers here risked life and limb for each and every coin they earned, giving them a rough, brutal air that one could recognize at a glance. But at the same time, they let the money flow freely while they waited for their next job, indulging in every pleasure in the meantime. Without places like bars and brothels to dispel the stresses of battle, the pressure of their lifestyle would inevitably wear them down to the point of collapse.

At any rate, I needed to be careful in choosing where I stayed for the night in a city like this. If I picked some cheap hotel, who knew what kind of trouble I could get wrapped up in? Being cheap didn't necessarily mean it was a dangerous place, but more expensive inns could guarantee a higher level of security.

I could now understand why Airena had made me stay in such an expensive inn back when I first moved into Vistcourt. Elves always stood out in cities. It wasn't easy for criminals to attack you in places where there were a lot of people, but occasionally one or two of them would work up the courage to try something.

I noticed a passer-by's hand reach for my pocket from my blindspot, to which I responded with a swift chop. It was a modification of one of the skills Kaeha had taught me...or rather, I had just used one of her techniques with my hands empty.

"Gah?!"

The young thief crumpled to the ground with a cry, causing all sorts of eyes to turn to him, but I just kept walking. He didn't seem particularly skilled, so I suspected he was the grab and run type. He had probably gotten too sure of himself after two or three successes and decided to try his hand at more exotic prey.

It wasn’t worth my time to restrain him and bring him to the guards. Even if I let him go, it wouldn’t be long before he failed again. He’d likely lose an arm if he tried to rob an adventurer, and if he was caught by the guards, he would likely be imprisoned or forced to fight monsters to work off his punishment. If that was the fate awaiting him anyway, there was no need for me to get involved.

But it had been quite a while since someone had tried to pickpocket me.

Spending the day walking around town, I finally found a suitable inn near the river, one frequented by merchants using the river to move freight. The room fee was quite expensive at two silvers a night, but it was worth it for the security. And really, I had saved up quite a chunk of money from my work blacksmithing, so there was no point in being stingy with it.

Carrying such large amounts of cash around on a long journey would be a pain, so I had converted most of it into precious gems, but I still had a supply of coins to spend.

Instead of having dinner at the inn, I found a nearby bar. The inn was serving food made from imported wheat and fish from the river, but the bars catering to adventurers apparently served meat hunted from monsters. If I was going to be traveling through the swamp, I wanted to know what monsters tasted the best, and which parts of them were edible.

The water spirits in the area would tell me if something was plainly poisonous, but they had no knowledge of flavor. No matter how awful it tasted, if it wouldn’t hurt you to eat it, they’d give it a pass. Spirits didn’t eat, so I supposed that much was to be expected.

To some degree, no matter how bad they tasted, I’d still want to eat as much as I could from any monster I hunted, but right now I was heading into a wetland. That meant lakes, swamps, and marshes. There would be a lot of unpalatable creatures living there. I would need to learn which ones were suitable for food, and what parts of them were good to eat.

Only with that knowledge could I have a satisfying journey.

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“You’re not gettin’ away!”

Spears rained down at the monster caught in the net on the river’s surface, together with the crew’s jeers. The spear points were hooked so they couldn’t be pulled out, meaning they were more like harpoons.

I had come to observe how the soldiers fought the local monsters, and it was a pretty brutal affair. Unfortunately, what I learned here wouldn’t be of much use in the swamp. They used multiple ships to drive the monsters into a trap, ensnared them with nets, and then harpooned them to death. On top of that, the ships were quite large, likely to prevent the monsters from having a real chance of fighting back. As an observer, it looked more like they were fishing than hunting monsters.

From what I had heard, this method only worked on a small variety of monsters. The more common approach was to wait for them to head upstream, then either bait them or blockade them out of the water and drag them onto land for the kill. Even then, not many monsters made it that far upstream.

The monster caught in the net now stuck out its tongue through the holes in the net to strike at the soldiers on the ships, who used large shields to protect themselves. It seemed they had cornered some sort of frog. Frog monsters, as I had experienced with the lava frog in the volcanic region, had high-quality meat that was easy to eat. Apparently they were quite numerous around here, and so had become something of a favorite dish here in Bardoth. I had tried some in the bar the previous night, and while I had to admit the lava frog tasted much better, it wasn’t particularly bad.

By the way, as I had just seen, the frogs that lived here were weak enough that their attacks could be blocked by common shields, and they didn’t have the insane jumping power of the lava frogs, so they really didn’t compare. But a number of people were eaten by these frogs every year, so the soldiers took the battle quite seriously.

The adventurers were further downstream, hunting monsters without using boats, but that wouldn’t be as easy to observe. For them, their skills and techniques for hunting monsters were what put food on the table, so they had no desire to share them with strangers. I could always pay them to let me come

along and watch, but I didn't know who I could trust in this city. If I asked the wrong group, I might end up with people who were no better than bandits, who would kill me out in the swamp and steal my belongings. Of course, that wouldn't be such an easy task, but I still didn't want to go through the trouble.

It seemed my only way to learn how to deal with the aquatic monsters of the swamp would be through trial and error. Besides, there was no guarantee that the techniques used here would be of any use against the monsters living in the heart of the swamp, so it didn't really make much of a difference. If I got too attached to one particular strategy, I might get taken by surprise by monsters I didn't know about, so my best bet was to think carefully how to approach each situation in my own way.

What I found more interesting was the type of harpoon the soldiers were using. Oswald had taught me how to make a great variety of weapons, but harpoons hadn't been one of them. After all, they really were more like fishing tools than weapons. It may have made sense for a coastal nation, but for a landlocked kingdom like Ludoria—nevermind the city of Vistcourt bordering Pulha—there was no need for such implements. They were similar enough to spears, but I imagined there were special techniques needed to make the hooks durable enough.

I bet I'd have a lot of fun looking around the weapon shops and blacksmiths once I got back to town. I would have liked to try making a harpoon for myself, but I didn't have plans to stay in the city long enough to think of finding a forge to borrow. If I just tried to make one by watching someone else's work, I'd be too bothered by the shoddy result to continue on my journey.

If I was going to make a harpoon, I'd need to take the time to fully experiment on it, meaning I would have to settle down for at least a year. My journey east was more important, so I'd need to put off that project for a while.

Beyond that, I was going to be heading into a rather dangerous region, so I would need to bring some kind of medicine along. In any forest, or even in Pulha, I could get what I needed to make medicines just by looking around. The trees would tell me where the herbs I needed were growing, and even if I found something I had never seen before, I could make a good guess as to how

poisonous it was, or what its medicinal properties might be.

But I was entirely ignorant when it came to the swamp. It was a wetland, so it would have plenty of plants. I might be able to manage somewhat, but there was always a chance I'd come up against some sort of unknown disease or unforeseen obstacle. That was what it meant to be traveling in dangerous places.

I would need to prepare as thoroughly as possible. Even then, I doubted I'd be ready for whatever I would encounter there.

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After a two-week stay in Bardoth to gather what information I could, I took my first steps into the Man-Eating Swamp. Using the help of the water spirits, I walked over the surface of the water. Traveling like that for long stretches of time would be exhausting, but while the wetlands weren't exclusively water, there wasn't enough ground to make a reasonable path through the swamp. I didn't have much choice.

I saw the reeds growing in the water start to shake, and received a warning from the water spirits. Something was lurking in the water, approaching slowly. It would make contact in three, two, one...

As my countdown reached zero, I leapt from the surface of the water, looking down to see a large set of jaws snap up at me from below. I drew my sword in midair, poured mana into it and brought it down. The magic sword sliced through the tough hide of the crocodile like paper, beheading the creature in one slash. Though, being a crocodile, it was kind of hard to tell where the head ended and the body began.

Descending back to the surface of the water, I sliced off the crocodile's tail and fled. If I didn't hurry, the blood spilled into the water would draw carnivorous fish here. The crocodile had been huge, but it would take those fish less than ten minutes to reduce it to a pile of bones.

That said, getting my hands on a crocodile tail was a stroke of luck for me. The crocodiles living in the wetlands were one of the more edible monsters. They weren't poisonous and didn't house any parasites. Their meat wasn't foul or rank, so with a bit of rock salt and some fire, you could make quite a delicious

meal out of it.

However, finding a place to make a fire and the fuel needed to start it was a considerable challenge in the swamp. Though there was some ground here, most of it was still wet. When walking on the ground, I had the earth spirits harden it for me, and I had them create a bed of rock for me when I needed to rest. And for cooking, I used a flat rock and fire magic to stand in for a pan and cookfire.

Of course, after I left, I returned everything to the way it was. Though high elves like me could walk around proudly in the forest, we were intruders in a swamp like this. As intruders, we needed to show the proper respect for a place so overflowing with life. My travels through the swamp needed to be marked with humility.

Once I got used to it, living in the Man-Eating Swamp didn't seem like such a bad proposition. There were plenty of water and earth spirits around, and I always had the wind. With their power, along with the skills and magic I had already learned, I could make myself pretty comfortable here. There were even some trees growing here and there. There were certainly a lot of monsters, but in another sense, that meant I had easy access to food.

I continued making my way east, using my bow to take down fish jumping out of the water, my sword to slice apart some crabs, and running to escape a pack of enormous otters. To be honest, with those otters being just as mobile on land as in the water, being chased by them was a little scary. They weren't tasty enough to consider hunting for food, and they were big enough that it looked like they'd swallow my head whole.

One day, after about a month of traveling through the swamp, I felt something watching me. It didn't feel like a monster eyeing up its prey. There was a mixture of curiosity and caution in it, and a clear intelligence. And though they were on guard against me, there was no hostility.

I looked around, but didn't see any likely suspects. Either I was being watched from under water, or they were hiding in the grass. Was this one of the rumored lizardfolk? I queried the water spirits, who informed me that my

observer was in the water, keeping only their face above the surface to watch me. I wanted to see them for myself, but if I got too close, they might perceive it as an attack, so I decided I'd leave them be.

I was happy enough to confirm that the race we thought had been extinct still lived here. It was really difficult to put my joy into words. As long as they were real, there was a chance I would someday get to interact with them. There was no need for me to rush things at this point.

After waving at my observer, I headed off east again. I made way for a crayfish that was larger than me, chased down a frog to get some more food, and used an enormous trout as a stepping stone on my way. There was even a case where I found some ground strangely devoid of earth spirits, until I discovered that I was instead standing on the back of an enormous turtle.

By the way, most parasites that lived in monsters were monsters themselves. That meant they were usually quite large, and the chances of eating them by accident was rather small. However, finding the eggs of these monster parasites was much harder, and if you ate one by accident they were liable to hatch inside you and eat you from the inside out. They were honestly much more dangerous than eating something poisonous.

Cooking the meat properly dealt with most of them, but some parasites were resistant to fire, so you still needed to be careful when eating monsters, especially their internal organs. In town, I could rely on professionals to handle processing the meat, but I could only rely on myself out in the field. If I did accidentally ingest such a parasite, I'd have to use medicine to expel the eggs before they could hatch. If I was too late, I would have to use a different medicine for the hatched parasites, and then find a mage capable of healing the damage that had already been done.

Luckily, I had such medicines with me, and was capable enough with healing magic of my own. And really, the spirits would warn me of anything that would be clearly dangerous to eat long before it made it to my mouth, so it was unlikely I'd ever need to worry about it.

After about another month of travel, I felt the ground beneath my feet start to dry and harden, as I passed from the wetlands into the grasslands. I had

made it out of the Man-Eating Swamp, and emerged into the eastern side of the continent.

Chapter 3 — The Guides of Wind and Fire

The plain that stretched out before me definitely lived up to its name of the Great Grasslands. Apparently it had a unique name like Pulha did, but it was called something different depending on where you were, so for now the Great Grasslands would have to suffice.

The grasslands were populated by halflings and human nomads. Being called nomads might give one the impression of a gentle, easy-going people, but they were actually renowned for being rather daring horse riders who regularly plundered the surrounding nations. However, not all of them were so warlike, and some of them had trade relations with other nations, so you couldn't really categorize them all under a single name.

By the way, the warmongering...or perhaps more accurately, ever-pillaging nation of Darrotei in the center of the continent had its roots here. Defeated in battle in the Great Grasslands, they were driven through the desert and tundra until they eventually conquered the land of what is now their kingdom. They had caused no small amount of trouble for their new neighbors, not to mention the native people of the kingdom they had conquered.

But that tribe had been strong enough to conquer an entire kingdom despite being weakened by their long, arduous journey. The thought that they had been nothing but failures among the tribes that inhabited the grasslands was a little terrifying. The nomads of the Great Grasslands—the equestrian tribes known as the grassland people—must have been quite powerful.

As for the halflings, I didn't know all that much about them, besides that they were a proud people who stood about half as tall as humans.

The wind blew, sending waves through the grass. Both the sky and the plain were painted in vivid blues and greens, stretching as far as the eye could see.

For the time being, I would keep walking east. If I kept going that way, I'd eventually reach the largest kingdom on the eastern side of the continent, which was apparently called the Ancient Gold Empire. The journey on foot would no doubt take months, so even with the food I had managed to hunt in

the swamp, my supplies were plainly insufficient.

I could keep going if I could find monsters to hunt or nomadic tribes to purchase supplies from. But if things became difficult, I might need to leave the grasslands into the southern coastal kingdoms.

As I trudged my way through the grass, I saw a distant herd of horses. I couldn't see any people around them, so they appeared to be wild. Looking closer, I could see a few of the horses had horns on their foreheads. Being brown, black, and fawn colored, it felt odd to call them unicorns...but at the very least, they were certainly not normal horses. They had to be monsters. And yet, as if defending the other horses, the horned ones stood on the outer ring of the herd as they grazed.

The fact that the wild horses had fully accepted these horned ones into their group was very interesting. Normally, monsters living alongside normal animals took positions of leadership due to their superior strength and intellect, but things seemed a little different here. There were multiple horned horses here, and there was no sense of fear or restraint in the attitudes of the normal horses. I suspected that both were quite proud creatures. Though maybe they couldn't be considered equals with the way the horned ones protected the others, that's how they seemed to be acting.

Things were starting to get fun. I could feel a restless energy stirring within me.

I want to try riding one!

If I learned how to ride a horse, would these ones let me? I doubted it would be that easy.

After all, with how long I had been watching them, they were already starting to grow wary of me. Oh well. For now I'd have to be on my way. As much as I wanted to interact with them, I didn't want to threaten their way of life. I had enough food to last me for a while, anyway.

But horse riding, huh? I suppose I had learned a little bit from riding behind Airena that one time. Since horses had shorter lifespans than even humans, I hadn't made an effort to get attached to it. But now, I thought that picking up the skill might be a good idea.

I would live a long time, meet many people, and say goodbye to most of them. Sometimes it would be a goodbye prompted by their deaths, and sometimes just a wave as our paths took us in different directions. Mixing a few horses into the list surely couldn't hurt.

As I pondered this, a sudden gust of wind tore through the plain around me. It felt powerful and directed, as if urging me to action. At the same time, the spirits of the wind whispered in my ear.

Go there. Help them.

The wind spirits were asking *me* for help. That was considerably rare. There was very little that could cause problems for a spirit, after all. It was virtually impossible to interact with them in the first place. It was technically possible to destroy or pollute the environment they inhabited, but if that were the case, they'd fly into a rage themselves long before coming to someone like me for help. In the little over two centuries of my life, this had almost never happened.

Naturally, I didn't even consider denying the request. It was rather intriguing by itself; they wanted me to help someone, but were powerless to do so themselves.

That wasn't especially difficult to imagine. Most spirits, aside from those who were exceptionally powerful and had long histories of experience, couldn't use their powers all that well. To be more accurate, they didn't really know how to use their powers to do things other than naturally occurring phenomena.

The water spirit in the spring near Garalate was one of those rare exceptions. That said, there were a huge number of spirits in the world, so even if the majority were much weaker, finding those exceptions wasn't particularly difficult.

So for example, if a lone wind spirit noticed someone being attacked by a pack of wolves, they might try to help. Okay, it wasn't an especially realistic example, but in the hypothetical scenario where they did so on a whim, while the spirit could surprise the wolves with a sudden gust of wind, it would be difficult to inflict any significant damage. If they tried to do so anyway, like by creating a tornado, they'd hurt the people they were trying to save just as

much.

When I asked for help from the wind spirits, I was giving them precise, particular instructions for them to follow, which allowed them to create more controlled phenomena. In short, just as the myths stated, that was why high elves were created. The spirits were quite powerful, but they existed to carry out the processes of nature, so they lacked the imagination to use their powers for much else. High elves existed to better understand each situation and give the spirits a concrete idea of what they needed to do. That way, the spirits could exceed the limits of nature with their powers.

Of course, though different in scale, normal elves and humans born with an affinity for the spirits could do the same thing. On top of that, by interacting with spirit callers like us, the spirits themselves would gain experience and learn. But with the huge number of spirits in the world and the relatively small number of spirit callers, unless a given spirit followed a particular spirit caller for an extended period of time, it was pretty rare for them to pick up much of anything.

Those spirits who did gain that experience and power were able to transcend nature's limits without the help of a spirit caller. However, the sensibilities of the spirits differed significantly from those of the more material races, so they used their powers in very different ways. Though this was just my impression, I felt they tended to use their abilities in a broader, rougher scope. For example, the water spirit near Garalate had intended to simply wipe out the entire village.

Anyway, that was quite a tangent, but if a spirit got quite close to someone and they were in danger, it wasn't beyond reason that they'd notice me nearby and ask for help. But it was incredibly rare for the spirits to be so attached to someone.

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Urged on by the wind spirits, I set off running. It hadn't been that long since I emerged from the Man-Eating Swamp, so I hadn't really had time to rest and recover yet. But my curiosity was winning out over my fatigue. I couldn't help but feel curious about the wind spirits taking such an interest in someone or

something.

If it had been a water spirit or a fire spirit, I could understand the situation. Water typically flows, but there were times when it accumulated in a given place, becoming an invaluable part of the lives of people and animals. That was why the water spirit in the spring near Garalate had grown so fond of its worshipers and their descendants. The water spirit in the elven caravan's picture show was another good example.

Fire was also an integral part of people's lives, especially in the case of blacksmiths, so it was natural for the spirits to lend their strength. Many people also came to revere fire as a spark of the divine, developing a faith in long-burning flames.

With relationships like that, it was no surprise when spirits came to love the people around them. But when it came to wind spirits, while they were incredibly curious, their transient nature meant they rarely took an interest in the lives of people. They might stick around for those who could see them, like Win, myself, and other elves, but that was very much an exception to the rule. So for the wind spirits to go out of their way to ask me to help someone was intriguing.

Ah, but after thinking it through like this, I felt that I had stumbled on the answer.

For the record, earth spirits rarely took an interest in the people living on the surface either. However, since they liked to stick to one place and could be almost obsessive, once they had taken an interest in someone, they would proactively act to help them out. That said, most of the time, their assistance would go unnoticed.

After running for a time, a nomad camp finally came into view. The name "nomad" might give you the impression that they just wandered the plains aimlessly, but it really just meant that they traveled at certain times throughout the year so their livestock didn't completely exhaust the grass they fed on in a given area. Naturally, those movements would follow a set pattern.

However, even if they followed a pattern in their movements, they still had to dismantle their living spaces and carry them to the next location every so often,

so they still lived in relatively simplistic dwellings. For example, though walls were a given for the cities in the center of the continent, this settlement had nothing but a simple fence. As such, they were not well-suited to fending off attackers.

The settlement before me now was experiencing such an attack, and seemed on the verge of being overrun.

I couldn't help but sigh. After all, I didn't like getting involved in conflicts between humans. I didn't know why they were even fighting in the first place. But even so, the wind spirits were still whistling in my ear, begging me to help.

Well, I guess I had no choice. I was always relying on the spirits for help. Since they had asked *me* for help, there was no way I could refuse. That was common sense for a high elf, but I imagined it went the same for anyone.

As I ran toward the settlement, I lifted my hand. The attackers were a group of around twenty cavalry. They ran circles around the encampment, pelting the residents with arrows. The defenders used their tents as shields and fired back with bows of their own, but they numbered less than half of the attackers. And perhaps because of the surprise attack, they wore nothing that resembled armor. At a glance, it was clear that once they had finished trading arrows, the cavalry would easily run them down and crush the settlement.

"Spirits of the wind," I called out, chopping my hand down swiftly. The spirits received my call, read my intentions, and followed my instructions. A powerful wind rushed from the sky onto the cavalry.

Naturally, it was more than just a gust of wind. The falling wind had been compressed into small bundles like bullets, then dropped onto the heads and shoulders of the horsemen. Taken completely by surprise, the wind blasted the helmets and shoulder armor off of the attackers. Blows to the head could knock one unconscious, or at least dampen their will to fight. Damage to the shoulders and arms would make it difficult for them to fight with bows. Shocked by the sudden attack, their horses began to panic, sending a few of their riders tumbling to the ground.

However, the attack hadn't targeted all of the horsemen. It had struck

precisely half of them. If I had hurt any more, the unharmed likely would have abandoned their comrades and ran, causing yet more casualties. With only half of them injured, the healthy remainder had sufficient hands to collect their wounded and retreat.

Luckily, the attackers were quite smart. Assaulted by an invisible enemy, they immediately regrouped and fled. They didn't hesitate in their confusion, nor did they recklessly continue their attack or even collapse their formation in their flight. In perfect unison, they made an orderly retreat. It was starting to look like I might have picked a fight with the wrong people.

After the attackers retreated, the riderless horses left behind scattered. However, rather than rushing out to gather the precious resource as it fled, the defenders instead dropped face-first to the ground, lying prostrate as they waited for my approach.

...it was kind of unnerving.

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“O shining one, envoy of the wind that graces this plain, you have our deepest gratitude for rescuing us from the hands of the Dahlian soldiers.”

When I arrived at the settlement, I was guided to a particular tent, where a young girl with relatively fancier clothes and jewelry compared to the other nomads had been waiting. Yes, a girl. She was human, and couldn’t have been much more than ten years old.

But she referred to me as the “shining one.” There could only be one reason for that.

“My name is Zelen. I serve as the oracle of the wind for the tribe of Balm. I am called the Child of the Wind.”

She was capable of seeing spirits. I didn’t really know what an “oracle of the wind” was, but I suspected that the nomads here, the Balm tribe, worshiped the wind in the grasslands. And this girl, who called herself Zelen, was a rare case of a human who could see the wind spirits. That meant she could see the immortal nature of my soul as a glow around me, and that the spirits had likely led me here to help her.

But even so...I had to wonder what had led the spirits to taking such a liking to her. The sight of her left me confused, as she was surrounded by old people on all sides. She seemed the exact opposite of the wind spirits, who couldn’t bear to stay in one place for long.

“I see. I’m Acer. In my hometown, I was called the child of the maple. I’m not sure what you mean by ‘envoy of the wind,’ but I suppose I did help because the wind spirits asked me to.”

The elders surrounding her furrowed her brows at that, but Zelen herself nodded, her expression unchanged. I could glean at the very least that Zelen seemed to be ranked higher than any of them. I couldn’t say I was happy about the idea of forcing a child into such a position of power, but as this was my first meeting with the people of this culture, I wasn’t about to start criticizing them.



Even if that meant holding my tongue while they forced this child to act like an adult. For now.

“I implore you. In greatest humility I make this request: envoy of the wind, please guard us from the tribe of Dahlia.”

As she bowed her head to me, I couldn’t help but sigh inwardly. Though I can’t say I was particularly surprised. I didn’t expect I’d get a “thanks, goodbye” after saving them from their previous predicament. There was no avoiding it, since it was a request from the wind spirits, but I still felt like I was getting wrapped up in something bothersome. Though, now that I knew it was a child they were asking me to help, it would have been even harder to turn them down. All I could do was hope that these Balm tribesmen, or at least Zelen, with her mask as oracle removed, were the kind of people I would want to help of my own free will. But at this point, I couldn’t say either way.

In the end, I would need to help rescue the Balm tribe from their current danger. So naturally, before I could do anything, I needed to know about the actual situation they were in. I was invited to eat dinner at the chief’s tent, together with Zelen, her mother Zaiya, and her younger brother Shuro.

Though they called it the chief’s tent, there was no sign of any actual chief. Even so, two young men were stationed outside to guard it, or maybe just to keep an eye on me.

After spending so much time with the humans at the center of the continent, the nomads here gave a bit of an exotic impression. Their skin color was a stronger light brown, and their eyes and noses were noticeably sharper. It was really interesting how much the people changed when all that separated them was that swamp.

The food they provided were things like salt-boiled mutton and buns filled with minced meat, very similar to the meat buns of my previous life. They also had cheese, and a beverage reminiscent of yogurt.

This was likely a great feast for them. For a nomadic people with no agriculture, the shells of the meat buns could only be made with grain either bought from traders or stolen on raids. From the current state of the tribe, it seemed unlikely they were in much of a position to trade with anyone, much less engage in pillaging. This was likely a precious delicacy they had brought out

from their food stores for me.

As for the flavor, everything tasted great. They had nothing like cutlery, so we used our hands to eat, even when it came to the boiled meats. At first I felt at a bit of a loss, so I did what I could to imitate the others eating with me until I picked up the proper etiquette.

The drinks were quite sour, and had a very distinctive flavor...but for some reason it felt like a nostalgic one. Also, though only a little bit, it was bubbling.

Ah, could it have been fermented mare's milk? Though fermented, the alcohol content was extremely low. As a nomadic people, they wouldn't have much access to fruits or vegetables, so it was likely a vital source of nutrition. I wasn't sure exactly why I knew that. I assumed it was knowledge from my previous life, but why would I have known something so specific? Then again, fermented mare's milk—or more accurately, sour milk—was the basis for the drink in Japan called Calpis. Maybe that was why it felt nostalgic to me.

As we ate, they explained the conflict between the Balm and Dahlia tribes to me. It apparently had started with the birth of two children: the Child of the Wind and the Child of Fire. The Child of the Wind was of course Zelen, but the Child of Fire was a boy three years older than her, born to the Dahlian tribe.

The two tribes both worshiped the winds of the plain and operated in a relatively close area, so they often traded and supported each other in times of need. It seemed they'd had a rather good relationship previously. But once the Child of Fire was born—a boy who had the mysterious power to create fire from nothing—a rift started to form between the two.

Anyone could see the boy's powers and understand how potent they were. Creating fire from nothing meant he could burn a person to death whenever he wanted.

As the child grew, the Dahlians used his power to raid the kingdoms to the south. This caused tension between them and the Balm tribe, who also traded with those southern nations. As far as many of those southern people were concerned, there was little difference between the two tribes. They were both just the nomads of the grasslands. The more the Dahlians raided their southern neighbors, the harder it became for the Balm tribe to trade with them.

The Balm people had approached the Dahlians multiple times, imploring them to curb their plundering. The Child of Fire wasn't invincible, after all, and he wouldn't live forever. They argued that once he was gone, both trade and raiding would become quite difficult for them, making their future prospects bleak.

However, the Dahlians ignored their pleading. It was difficult for people to let go of the wealth they had just obtained. That was only natural. In contrast, they instead seemed to feel that it was best to use their new access to wealth to grow their tribe so that once they lost the Child of Fire, they'd have the martial strength to continue their raids.

And there was one thing above all else that they wanted: none other than the Child of the Wind, with her abilities to consult the wind to predict the weather and learn what was happening in far off places. To the wind-worshiping people of the grasslands, she was a symbolic figure. But the Dahlians seemed to believe that by wedding the children of fire and wind, they could give birth to an entirely new power and faith. Just as fire fed on wind, so too did they hope the old faith would feed their new religion, granting them even greater wealth and power. Of course, it would result in the Balm tribe being totally subsumed by the Dahlians.

However, in strong opposition to their methods, the chief of the Balm tribe—Zelen's father—refused to give her up in marriage, not just to protect his people, but the faith of all the people in the grasslands.

As a result, war broke out between the two tribes. And not long ago, Zelen's father and the elite warriors of the tribe had all been slain by the Dahlians and their Child of Fire. They had been killed to the man, not a single prisoner taken. It seemed the Dahlians intended to crush the Balm tribe outright and absorb the remnants, together with the Child of the Wind.

Besides the few men I had seen fighting earlier, all that remained of the Balm people were women and children, boys too young to fight and elders too old. The Dahlians seemed intent to cut down the few remaining warriors capable of fighting, cull the old, and then take the women and children for themselves. That had been the purpose of their attack, and that was the exact moment the

wind spirits had brought me in to help.

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I felt like I had a rough grasp on the situation now.

Granted, listening to the story from only one side, and from only one person no less, was bound to give me a skewed perspective. I was sure the Dahlian tribe had a much different understanding of what was going on. But, to be entirely honest, I didn't care that much.

There was no comparing who was more "right," nor was it worth arguing over. Winning wouldn't make you right, nor would being right help you win. So whatever excuses the Dahlians had, unless I was planning on joining their side, there was no point in listening to them.

Of course, if fire spirits had taken a liking to this Child of Fire and asked me to stay out of it, things might be different...but I doubted there were any such spirits. I suspected the child of fire was actually a user of the divine arts. And a very powerful one too, to awaken such powers without any formal training. To put it in more concrete terms, it seemed he had developed a form of pyrokinesis.

If that was the case, I'd need to accomplish two things to carry out the wish of the wind spirits. First, I'd need to deal with this Child of Fire, who would likely lead the charge on the next assault. I wouldn't necessarily have to kill him, and I didn't intend to, but I'd need to defeat him thoroughly enough that the Dahlians lost faith in his divinity.

My second objective involved the Balm tribe's defense in general. With their chief and elite warriors dead, there was no way they could return to their former strength, so I'd need to give them a new way to defend themselves. The quickest way would be to teach Zelen, who already had a good relationship with the wind spirits, how to utilize their power to fight effectively. As it was, it didn't seem she could use her power for anything besides predicting the weather or learning of distant events. I imagined that was because she thought of the wind as her friend, and so hadn't considered using it as a weapon.

So if I taught her how to use her imagination to fight, she'd become reasonably powerful herself. I suspected the wind spirits themselves would also

be happier that way.

The thought of teaching her left me a little uneasy, though. Would she want to learn how to use her powers to fight in the first place? And if she did, would that lead the Balm tribe in the wrong direction? If she learned to use her power in combat, she could become the symbol of the tribe's power, or even worse: a weapon for them to use. I couldn't imagine that future would be much fun for her.

However, if Zelen didn't learn to fight—and honestly, even if she did—I would have to stay and protect the tribe long enough for their young to grow old and experienced enough to defend themselves. Perhaps not a decade, but it would take at least five years.

Though, in another sense, it would be *only* five years. That wasn't an especially long time for me. If I planned to stay here that long, I could even help with repairing relations with the southern kingdoms once the Child of Fire had been subdued. If I wanted to do some blacksmithing in the meantime, I could always head south and borrow a forge, or even make one myself here.

I had seen plenty of forges in my time, so with the help of the earth spirits, I should have been able to make one without too much difficulty, though it might take some time. Getting access to materials and fuel would be a challenge, but again I could always buy them from the southern kingdoms.

Of course, this all assumed Zelen and the other members of the tribe wanted me here. After all, the quickest solution to the problem would be to utterly destroy the Dahlians, leaving no survivors. That wasn't an option I was fond of, though. I really wanted to do the opposite. I didn't want any more deaths at all, no matter which tribe they'd be coming from. No matter what resentment the Balm people held for the Dahlians, there was no reason for me to shoulder it myself. I'd help them out of deference to the wind spirits, but I'd solve their problems in my own way. Swallowing their grudge against the Dahlians would be the price they'd have to pay for my help.

If they didn't like that, all they had to do was fight for themselves. If they could do that, they wouldn't need my help in the first place. I was sure there would be quite a bit of pushback on this. Beyond the elders who had yet to

trust me fully, even Zelen would no doubt want revenge for the loss of her father. But to be frank, I had no obligation to help them unconditionally.

Really, the spirits had only asked me to help Zelen. If I kidnapped her and fled the grasslands, then stayed with her as I taught her to make use of the spirits properly, that would technically fulfill the spirits' wishes. Of course, such a method would be an incredible strain on my conscience, and would no doubt make Zelen hate me, so I wanted to avoid that as much as possible.

But seeing her trapped in the rigid structure built by these elders, it almost felt like the right thing to do. She was born with the love of the wind spirits...and even if she wasn't, she was just a child. She deserved a chance to run, to experience how big the world around her was. That was how I felt.

But if I was going to abduct her, I'd have to bring her mother and brother along as well, and it was hard to say if that would really lead to their family's happiness.

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The next day, I explained to the elders that I had no intention of killing anyone, to which they predictably responded with outrage. They immediately accused me of being a fake envoy, to which I replied that if I were a fake, I supposed they didn't need my help after all. They went quiet after that. And above all, I never claimed to be an envoy of anyone. In the end, as hard-headed as they were, the elders understood that they had no other options. But even if they could follow that logic, their feelings were a different matter entirely.

I didn't get along well with people who thought old age earned wisdom and authority. It was obvious enough that living a longer life meant you could pile up more experience, but that alone was nothing to be proud about.

Of course, if the experiences you accumulated were beneficial and could be put to good use, that was worthy of respect. Even once aged to the point of being unable to move, the knowledge elders could share was nothing to scoff at. That was why tribes like these held them in high regard.

But I had little respect for those who used that respect to seize authority and control for themselves. Having a wealth of experience wasn't meaningless, but putting on airs for no other reason wasn't deserving of the same deference.

After all, if being old was the only requirement, that made me more important than any human alive. But I liked humans, so I wanted to be equal with them.

As I was now, I could only see the Balm elders as shackles on Zelen. I had no doubt they could see through my lack of respect for them. We didn't get along in the slightest.

What did surprise me, however, was that after thinking about it for a short time, Zelen ignored the complaints of the elders and accepted my terms. Despite being only around ten years old, she swallowed her desire for revenge and expressed her clear choice, even while knowing that it ran directly against the wishes of the elders.

I was taken aback again by how unchildlike she was. But that was the first moment I took interest in Zelen as a person, beyond just the fact that she was a child. What did she see? What burden did she carry? What was she thinking that led her to that choice? I was starting to get curious.

The discussion ended with the agreement that during the next attack, I would fend off the Dahlians by myself. Sending the Balm warriors out to fight but demanding they hold back so as not to kill any of their opponents was a terrible risk to the few men they had left. And beyond that, it would be hard to keep them from getting carried away by their emotions and killing the enemy warriors anyway. So at this stage, it was better for everyone involved if I fought on my own.

Zelen was worried about me going alone, but that just meant she was underestimating me. Or more accurately, she was underestimating the power of the spirits. She needed to see what her friends were really capable of.

Since her eyes were only attuned to seeing wind spirits, she actually had a stronger connection to them than most elves. It was not as strong as a high elf's connection, but it still put her far above any other human.

I didn't like putting it in numbers like this, but for example if you considered your average elf to be a one, and an extremely skilled elf like Airena to be a three, Zelen would reach Airena's level in a few years under my teaching. Though Win was loved by the spirits, he wasn't particularly good at using them in combat, so his cumulative score would be around a two.

If she had restrained herself to only asking wind spirits for help, Airena would have been able to fend off up to twenty or thirty soldiers like the previous attack without much difficulty. There was no reason Zelen wouldn't be able to do the same. Honestly speaking, the Child of the Wind had a lot more potential than the Child of Fire.

By the way, if we were to put me on the same scale, I'd come in at about an eight or nine. Perhaps a better way of describing it was to say an average elf could use about a tenth of the spirits' powers, Airena could manage about three tenths, and I could draw out eight or nine tenths. Of course, these weren't unconditional measurements. There were situations where they could perform better, and others where the spirits wouldn't listen to anyone but a high elf. After all, elven adventurers and elves who lived in the forest were also different.

Anyway, the point was that Zelen had nothing to worry about.

"Excuse me, Sir Envoy." After the discussion was over, Zelen's younger brother Shuro found me and came running over. The boy, two years her junior, came straight out with it. "Please, keep my sister safe. I should be protecting her in our father's place, but I'm too young to be a warrior...so please!" There was a faint tremor in his voice as he spoke.

Ah, yeah. This boy sounded much more like a child. He seemed strangely mature to understand his own age and weakness like that, but he was still much more childlike than his sister. It was kind of cute.

I instinctively reached out a hand and patted him on his bowed head. Maybe that would hurt his pride as a man, but as a child, I wanted to give him reassurance.

"Okay. Leave it to me. Though of course, I can't take your father's place. I'll keep you, your sister, and your mother safe in *your* place."

I didn't know how my relationship with the Balm tribe would pan out, so I could hardly take the place of their chief, but I could very much stand in for one young boy who wanted to protect his family.

The whole exchange made me remember Win. And so, besides just answering

the wishes of the wind spirits, I now had one more reason to fight.

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The climate on the grasslands was surprisingly cold compared to the center of the continent. Maybe it was because there was no large mountain range in the north to block the arctic wind?

A few days had passed since I arrived at the Balm settlement. The people here got up quite early, as they had horses, sheep, and cows to take care of. I got up at the same time they did, stepping out of my tent and shivering as a cold wind blew past.

At this time of year, there was also a warm wind blowing in from the sea to the south, so the temperature varied considerably from day to day. The mixture of warm and cold air also made it easy for storms to form. Constant rain could harm the health of their livestock, so the Balm people prayed to the wind, urging it to be kind to them.

Normally, the oracle of the wind was tasked with predicting the weather and holding rituals relating to it. These oracles collected knowledge about weather, learning to read the behavior of the wind, the movements of the clouds, and so on.

But Zelen was actually just listening to the voices of the wind spirits. Her abilities were almost more of a curse than a blessing. While she'd be fine, future generations of oracles would have much more difficulty because of it.

After taking care of the animals and eating breakfast, the men of the tribe brought out targets and began firing their bows at them. It seemed now was training time. There were people of all skill levels among them, but generally speaking, they were quite good. The especially skilled archers were likely the few surviving warriors of the tribe.

I was discovering all sorts of interesting things by watching them, so I stayed for a while, until eventually the men beckoned me over. Apparently they had seen the bow I carried and wanted to see me shoot. Though the invitation was entirely done by motioning with their hands. Wouldn't it have been easier to just ask me?

Speaking of which, whether they were elves, dwarves, humans, or any other race, whether it was in the center of the continent or the east, the language everyone spoke was the same. It was taught here that language was a gift from the Creator to the people of this world. The Creator gave the gift of language to the beings it created, including the other gods, who then taught that language to the races they created. So while there were some vocabulary differences based on region, everyone fundamentally spoke the same language.

I pulled out my bow as the men asked. As I drew back my first arrow, I was immediately surrounded by laughter. It seemed they saw my technique as being fairly amateur.

I suppose that made sense. Our stances were completely different. For example, I held my arrow on the left side of my bow, while they held theirs on the right. I used my pointer, middle, and ring fingers to draw back the bow, the first two holding the arrow in place. The men here, however, wore a leather and metal accessory on their thumbs, which they used to draw the bow back.

I imagined these differences made it easier to fire the bow from horseback. Wearing a glove like that also made drawing the bow quite a bit easier. Everything I did was completely different from their tradition, making me look like a weirdo who had never held a bow before.

Their laughter wasn't surprising, nor did it upset me. For now, I just had to let go.

The arrow flew straight and true, striking the exact middle of the target. That alone was enough to silence the laughter. One shot was all it took for them to realize their mistaken assumptions.

The men stared at me wide eyed, skilled enough in archery to know my shot hadn't been a fluke. If I fired and hit the exact center of the target again, I'd destroy my previous arrow, so this time I aimed at the next target over. One after another, without so much as a pause in between, I put an arrow in the center of every target they had set up in the training area. My style may have been different from theirs, but I was still quite good with a bow.

"He's a great warrior!" I didn't catch who had yelled that, but it was followed by cheering coming from the other men. I didn't know whether it was my

accuracy or my speed, but either way, my archery seemed to inspire them. The men crowded around me, clapping me on the shoulder as they showered me with praise. Honestly, the way their attitudes swapped so quickly was kind of off-putting.

Well, I suppose the bow was the primary weapon used here in the grasslands...actually it was probably a key weapon on any battlefield. But here, it seemed to be the symbol of a warrior. Since I had shown such skill with their favorite weapon, I supposed their reaction made sense. I suspected their feelings upon seeing my archery were very similar to how I had felt when I first saw Kaeha's swordsmanship.

Though we both used bows, it wasn't just our techniques that differed. My bow itself was built quite differently than those used by the Balm men. Though it was crafted from the branch of a Spirit Tree, mine was still made of wood. But the bows they used were made of something else. I suspected it was a combination of horse bone and leather, bound in a way to enhance its tensile strength. I doubted I could even draw one back, so in a pure sense, we couldn't really compare our skills in archery, nor was there a point to.

Chatting with the other men, I went to retrieve my arrows from the targets. I knew I'd have to collect them afterward, so I really shouldn't have fired at every single target.

But as I was collecting arrows, a breeze blew over us. A warning that enemies were approaching the settlement.

Their warning was not just for me, but for Zelen as well. Rushing out of her tent, the girl immediately dropped to her knees, clasped her hands in front of her chest and bowed to me as if in prayer. Though in this case, she may well have actually been praying.

Honestly, she worried way too much. After warning the other men not to follow me, I gave her a nod and a smile before walking off to put her at ease. She didn't have to worry about anything. There wasn't going to be any problem at all.

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One of the nice things about the grasslands was that you could see an

incredible distance in every direction. The problem was that it made it almost impossible to hide.

Beyond my vision, dozens of mounted warriors were approaching. The moment I could see them with the naked eye, they saw me as well. As one, the Dahlian warriors drew their bows, firing a volley of arrows into the sky. The arrows arced forwards, raining down on me from above.

It was really kind of overkill for a single target. They didn't name themselves, didn't care to find out what this lone man standing in the middle of the grasslands wanted, and gave no demand that I surrender. They didn't try to save themselves arrows by running me down with their horses either. They just put everything they could into destroying me immediately. Knowing how their previous attack had been thwarted, their attack seemed incredibly thorough.

I didn't know if it was a particular trait of the Dahlian tribe, or if it was just common among all the nomads of the grasslands, but there was no doubt as to the skill of these warriors. Unfortunately for them, numbers weren't really enough to faze me.

"Spirits of the wind."

With a murmur and a large wave of my hand, a gust of wind tore the falling arrows from the sky. I looked back to the warriors, surprised to see they had already begun their charge, immediately turning their bows at me and firing again. It was almost as if they had predicted their first attack would fail.

Their first volley of arrows had been furnished with smaller arrowheads, designed to travel long distances. This time, however, they had larger ones, more suited to perfecting accuracy and stopping power at close range. But once again, their arrows wouldn't reach me.

I lifted my hand towards the incoming second volley, prompting the spirits to create blasts of compressed wind to deflect each individual arrow. Seeing their strategy rendered useless, a clear wave of unease passed through the faces of the warriors.

But even so, their charge continued as they drew their weapons for close quarters combat. They were equipped with curved swords, short spears, and warpicks. As they rode past me, they'd strike me down with their weapons,

using the momentum of their horses to smash through my defenses made of wind. Their plan was plainly obvious.

But there was no reason for me to let them try it. Once again, I lifted a hand towards the charging horsemen.

“Spirits of the wind.”

In response to my call, the wind spirits gathered air into condensed projectiles even more solid than the ones that had deflected the arrows earlier, striking the charging warriors in the chest. With their riders dislodged, the now unburdened horses ran past me as their riders tumbled to the ground. I had also used the wind to make something of a cushion for them, so they shouldn’t have been especially injured by the fall.

If I was up against an army of thousands or tens of thousands, I wouldn’t be able to afford such mercy, but against only a few dozen enemies like this, neutralizing them without endangering their lives wasn’t especially difficult.

If they wanted to defeat me, they didn’t need an army. They needed a single powerful individual. For example, a mystic, a dragon, or a giant. A party of adventurers like Clayas, Martena, and Airena may have been able to kill me in their prime as well.

If Airena could suppress my access to the spirits even a little, while Martena supported the group with her divine telekinesis, and Clayas attacked me from up close...yeah, I think they’d win. As I was now, I think I could hold my own against Clayas in melee combat, but once we were engaged, there would be no room for me to retreat. Of course, there was no reason the four of us would ever have to fight.

While the Dahlian warriors were all skilled, none of them were exceptionally powerful on their own. So every time I spoke, every time I waved my hands, more horses were freed from their riders.

But then something changed. Instinctively, I dodged backwards as I felt an intense bloodlust aimed at me, only moments before fire bloomed in the space my face had been.

Ah, it was as I thought. There was that pyrokinesis.

Divine arts varied greatly with the nature of their user, so you couldn't make too many broad generalizations about them, but they usually didn't require any sort of incantation and could be invoked extremely quickly, making them difficult powers to counter. Among them, requiring only line of sight and intent from the user, pyrokinesis was an exceptionally dangerous example. But since I had predicted the kind of power he would have, and had now located him, that power wouldn't work anymore.

Once again I felt the enemy's bloodlust strike me. This time, however, I made no effort to dodge. Instead, I took one of the lingering flames from the previous attack in hand and whispered.

"Spirits of fire."

The next moment, flames erupted around me, engulfing my body entirely. The fire was much larger, much more intense than the previous attack, but it didn't so much as singe my hair. My clothing, my bow, and the sword at my side were all similarly unharmed. That tiny leftover spark from his first attack had contained a fire spirit. As long as that spirit was there, fire was no threat to me.

I drew my sword and dashed forward, aiming for the source of the flames: the Child of Fire. No one moved to stop me. Their secret weapon, the fire that had become the symbol of Dahlia's strength, had been useless against me. Each and every gaze on me was filled with terror. As disciplined as these troops were, they had finally broken.

The same went for the Child of Fire, seized with fear as he watched me bear down on him. Again and again, he unleashed his flames at me, but my sword cut through the inferno each time. The tip of my weapon was ablaze, but with mana running through it, fire was no danger. With the protection of the fire spirits, I could have taken the hits head-on and been fine, but turning the pyrokinesis aside with a sword would likely be more effective at instilling fear in them.

As I approached the Child of Fire, he screamed, seeming to have forgotten he could even run. I lifted my sword toward him and stopped.

"Got you. Looks like I win," I said with a smile.

The effect was instant. Power was most often seen as a strength, but

paradoxically it could also serve as a weakness. For example, seeing the most powerful member of the Dahlian's attack force so handily dispatched, the morale of the Dahlian warriors shattered.

After driving away the other warriors, I brought the Child of Fire back to the Balm settlement, together with a present of the horses the attackers had abandoned.

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As I led the horses and the Child of Fire back into the Balm camp, I was met with cheers and jeers in equal measure. Of course, the jeers weren't aimed at me, but for the child at my side whose name I still didn't know. As they acclaimed me as a hero, they also called for the boy's death.

Both were little more than white noise to me. As much as they called for the boy's death, they were still too afraid of him to get any closer, so their words rang hollow. That said, he *had* been responsible for wiping out their elite warriors, so it was no surprise they resented him.

But just keeping their distance didn't make them safe from his powers. Against the outpouring of hatred against him, the Child of Fire naturally turned his gaze on the crowd. Noticing his attempt to use his power, I grabbed his hair and yanked his head back, causing his gaze—and thus the sudden bloom of fire—to shift up into the sky. The crowd around us screamed, but didn't run. Either they recognized I was stopping him from attacking them, or they were trying to hold on to what was left of their pride.

But honestly, seeing his power up close made me think of how convenient it must be. Martena's divine arts manifested in two ways; her healing ability seemed the most useful, but her telekinesis was still quite a threat. When it came to pure killing power, though, this boy had her beat. The fact that he had developed his abilities so well without any teaching from the church made it hard to deny the Dahlian's claim that he was special.

Of course, whether it was at range or up close, he couldn't overpower me now. The tell that he was about to use his power was just too obvious.

As I was thinking how inconvenient it was to keep calling him "the Child of Fire," and so was about to ask his name, Zelen and the elders emerged from

their tent.

“Welcome back, envoy of the wind. I thank the winds that you have returned safely.” Though her speech was stiff and formal, there was no hiding the overwhelming relief on Zelen’s face. Apparently she had been quite worried about me. But before I could respond to her, the elders butted in.

“Why is he still alive? Why haven’t you killed him yet?!” More babbling nonsense.

So I snorted back. “You’re too young to be this forgetful. You told me if I didn’t want anyone else to die, I’d have to go fight them by myself. I said I didn’t want to kill anyone, and I *did* go and fight them by myself. This is the result. Do you get it yet?” Putting a hand on the back of the boy’s neck, ensuring he didn’t make any stupid decisions, I responded to the elders’ complaints.

They immediately faltered. I suppose the difference in our strength was evident to them. They must have seen me as some kind of monster. Well, compared to ordinary humans, they weren’t really wrong. I had lived for centuries, and wielded powers far beyond them. In truth, these powers were all borrowed from the spirits, but I doubted they understood the nuance in that. Maybe their aggressive attitude was all just an attempt to assert dominance over someone clearly superior to them.

“I suppose if you want to kill him that badly...shall I let him go so you can do it yourself? Now that the biggest threat to you is gone, there’s not much reason for me to stick around. Should I just leave?”

Even with his pyrokinesis, when surrounded like this, even if he was able to bring down a good number of them, the Child of Fire would eventually be overwhelmed. But even without the Child of Fire, the Dahlian warriors were all unharmed. If they returned to seek revenge, or to take the Child of the Wind for themselves to make up for what they had lost, the Balm people would be easily crushed. That was obvious to everyone. The elders quieted, averting their gazes.

Of course, no matter what they had said, I had no intentions of letting them kill him. He was only thirteen years old, still very much a child in my eyes. No matter how much resentment they held for him, the true responsibility for

what he had done lay with the Dahlian leaders for using him as a weapon. On top of that, I had promised Shuro that I would protect him and his family, so I couldn't just abandon them. That was as important to me as fulfilling the wishes of the wind spirits.

Nodding at my words, Zelen stepped out in front of the elders. "There is nothing we can do to bind the will of such an envoy of the wind. Please do as you wish. If you require anything, please tell us. We will do everything we can to provide it for you. The tribe of Balm will not forget the debt we have incurred this day," she declared. As the Child of the Wind, as the representative for the Balm people, and with her declaration so public, there was nothing the elders could do to stop her.

She was really a smart, clever child. She guessed my intentions, and used everything at her people's disposal to grant it. She must have been thinking hard about what to do while I argued with the elders. Her incredible air of maturity was quite interesting.

Despite the heavy weight of responsibility on her small shoulders, Zelen showed no signs of bowing. Wearing the mask of her office, she concealed her heart. She fulfilled her role better than any of the adults around her. I couldn't underestimate her just for being a child.

But at the same time, it made me want to peek at what was hiding under that mask all the more.

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I came to learn that the Child of Fire's name was Juyal. The day after his capture, I took him and Zelen, as well as Shuro at his own request, to a spot a small distance from the settlement. Technically there were also two Balm men with us, either to guard Zelen or keep an eye on me, but for all intents and purposes, it was the four of us.

"So starting today, I'm going to be teaching Zelen how to get more help from the wind spirits. Specifically, how to use them to fight. I'll also be teaching Juyal how to fight, both with and without relying on his powers. And Shuro...I suppose swordsmanship is fine?" One by one, I looked at each of them. After seeing Shuro nod, I continued. "Alright then, I'll be teaching you each individually."

My decision to begin training them had been prompted by Zelen the night before, coming to me to ask for help in learning how to use the wind spirits to fight. As distant as she had been from the actual fighting, she must have used her connection to the wind spirits to watch my fight with the Dahlian warriors. I didn't know what exactly she had felt, or how she had thought about it, but in any case she wanted to grow stronger herself. I hadn't been so sure it was a good idea, but if Zelen herself wanted to learn, I wasn't about to refuse her.

Shuro had been sitting with us at the time, so when Zelen's training was decided, he asked if I would teach him something as well. The archery of the Balm people was far too different from mine, so I decided teaching him swordsmanship would fare better.

"Hey, wait a second! We're supposed to be enemies! Why are you teaching *me* how to fight?" Juyal was the only one who wasn't on board. Well, okay, the two guards watching from a distance clearly weren't keen on it either. However, it seemed he was suffering from a rather significant misunderstanding.

"I don't think we're enemies at all, Juyal. You're not really strong enough to count as an enemy. To be blunt, you're just too weak."

He was basically nothing to me. My words seemed to be more shocking than hurtful to him, but quite frankly they were the truth.

I didn’t mean that pyrokinesis was weak. It was true that with the spirits on my side, something like pyrokinesis wasn’t much of a threat, but that wasn’t why I called him weak. His fatal weakness was that his pyrokinesis was his *only* weapon. In a fight against him, you didn’t need any special tactics at all. All you had to do was take that power into account.

Honestly speaking, with how obvious his targeting was, I imagined a good number of the swordsmen I knew could cut the flames down with their swords like I had. Kaeha obviously could, and Clayas as well. Shizuki probably would have no problem doing so, and I imagined Win could do it too.

In short, Juyal was little more than a fire-spewing cannon. His unique abilities were just a tool used by the Dahlians on the battlefield. It was difficult to perceive a tool like that as an enemy.

But at the same time, it felt like wasted potential. He had such an incredible power, but rather than trying to refine it, the Dahlians only used him as a weapon. Even for a third party like myself, that sounded so boring. And above all, he was still a child. He needed to learn the skills to survive on his own in the future. Not as a tool to be used by others, but as a fully independent human being.

“I guess for now, I might as well teach you swordsmanship too. Oh, and while we’re at it, why don’t you join us, Zelen?” I continued right along, leaving Juyal still gaping in shock. I imagined he had never been called “weak” before in his life. So accustomed to being treated with respect for his powers, his sense of self-worth had been thoroughly shaken. But this was only the beginning. As we lived together, what he valued would gradually begin to change.

“Huh? Umm...but I am a woman. Is it really appropriate for me to hold a sword?” Zelen stammered back, evidently quite shocked by my proposal. Ooh, that expression was really close to showing her true feelings.

Happy to have seen that, I nodded. “Of course. The person who taught me swordsmanship in the first place was a woman. She was incredible, both strong and beautiful.”

I couldn’t help but feel proud whenever I talked about my master, Kaeha. It was unfortunate that these kids would never be able to meet her, but I’m sure

she'd be ecstatic to hear I was teaching them. I didn't know what kind of standing women had in the cultures of the grasslands, but the Yosogi School accepted all comers. Though Zelen hesitated for a while, eventually she nodded with a gentle smile.

First, of course, we'd have to start with wooden practice swords. For today, I had brought some practice swords that the Balm men used in their training, but if we were going to take this seriously, it would be better if I made some tailored specifically to their hands. Ah, maybe I'd get them to help with that as well. Once they had grown sufficiently used to the wooden swords, I'd then start blacksmithing again. The fastest way to get them the straight swords the Yosogi School called for would be to make them myself.

"So first, you're going to be making the practice swords that you'll be using. Don't worry, I'll be helping you, so it won't take too long."

After carving the general shape of the wood into swords for them, I had them refine the shape and polish the weapon themselves. Juyal quietly followed all of my instructions.

Both he and Zelen had been born with a special power, one they wished to use fully. It wasn't really my place to tell them whether that was right or wrong. However, I would still teach them something new. The Yosogi style had been a guiding light for me, so I wanted to pass it down to them.

There was no way to tell how the future would turn out, but I wanted to bring these children to a brighter future, even if I had to drag them at times.

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Two months had passed since I started living together with the Balm people, and the full brunt of winter was upon us.

The Balm tribe lived on the western edge of the Great Grasslands. But as I had mentioned before, the people living on the grasslands were nomads, so they'd move to a new location a few times each year. The Balm were no exception; they moved north in the summer and south in the winter. And during spring and fall, they moved between settlements in the central regions of the grasslands.

The most important of their migrations were the northern summer migration and the southern winter migration. Well, since they had to migrate so their livestock didn't exhaust the supply of grass that they fed on, all of their movements seemed pretty important. But the summer and winter migrations were even more significant.

The northern migration brought them close to the desert, giving them access to resources that were hard to acquire on the grasslands. One might wonder what resources a desert would have to offer, but the image most people had of a desert—an endless sea of barren sand—wasn't especially common. Barren expanses of rock, plains covered in small stones like gravel, and places of mixed earth and clay could all fit under the word "desert." So while the Balm people spent time in the north, they had access to salt, clay, and sometimes even metals that they could harvest from the desert.

The southern migration was similarly important, as it brought them close to the southern coastal kingdoms where they could engage in trade. They moved south to gain access to more food, fuel to keep warm during the winter months, and various other things from their southern neighbors.

Today, I was accompanying a group heading south to the kingdom of Vivnar for that exact purpose.

There were two reasons I decided to go with them. The first was that iron ore was heavy, and extracting the metal from it was actually quite difficult. I wanted to buy some refined steel, as well as fuel and tools for forging. The dried horse dung the Balm tribe used for fuel was good enough for most purposes, but it couldn't generate the heat needed to forge metal, and it was faster to buy the finer tools needed for forging than to make them myself.

The second reason was for the sake of the Balm people themselves. As an elf—or really a high elf, though the difference wasn't important here—I was very clearly different from the nomadic people of the grasslands. That difference would help ease the tensions between the Balm traders and the merchants in Vivnar.

The Balm tribe had been trading with the southern kingdoms, including Vivnar, for quite some time, but the recent aggression from the Dahlians had

caused the southerners to grow wary of all the people on the grasslands, making trade difficult. I hoped my presence would help to ease the tension between the two parties, at least a little.

Ironically, the cause for the Dahlian's increased aggression—the Child of Fire—was with us too. It wasn't a problem, since the people of the south didn't know what he looked like, but the bitter expression on Juyal's face showed that he knew the role he had played in the decaying relations here. However, since none of the Balm people were capable of restraining him on their own, the elders had insisted I take him with me. I didn't think there was much risk of him going berserk or trying to flee at this point, but I couldn't blame the elders for being on guard against him.

"Wow, it's quite rare to see forest folk around these parts. I see, so you met with the nomads, since you traveled east without using a boat. That must mean you crossed the desert. Sounds like quite the adventure!"

After I explained that the Balm traders with me were friendly, I introduced them to the talkative merchant. It seemed my explanation that I had come here overland had led to a bit of a misunderstanding, but I didn't feel the need to correct him. Making it through the desert would have been just as difficult as a journey through the Man-Eating Swamp, after all.

Though the southern merchant's facial features were similar to those of the grassland people, his skin had a darker, more tanned complexion. Even without the difference in their attire, it was clear at a glance that they were different. It would take more than a disguise to sneak into these communities.

As the conversation continued, the merchant eventually came to ask what had led the Dahlians to such aggression recently. It was a perfectly normal thing to ask, since I had taken time to thoroughly explain how the Balm tribe was entirely different from the Dahlians that had been harassing them.

But as much as the question seemed to hit a sore spot with Juyal, he nonetheless paid close attention to the answer.

It went without saying that raiders paid little mind to the circumstances of their victims. Smart bandits and pirates knew that without merchants traveling

the roads and waterways, they'd starve too, so they were careful not to plunder so much as to destroy them. Instead, in exchange for a portion of the freight and money those merchants carried, the thieves would often protect them while they traveled through their hunting grounds. That wasn't out of any consideration for the merchants, though. It was simply to ensure they had ample prey for the future.

It would be hard to rob someone if you stopped to think about their feelings and circumstances. It made sense that Juyal had never been taught about who the Dahlians were pillaging, nor had he made any attempt to learn about them. While they gathered information on which kingdoms were particularly strong and which were on guard against them, they didn't stop to think about the individual people.

But now, Juyal could see the people they were robbing face to face. He could hear their stories, and was beginning to think for himself. I had no idea how he would feel, what he would think, or what conclusions he would come to. Taking responsibility for his crimes by committing suicide seemed like an extraordinarily boring way out, so I wanted him to avoid that if at all possible. Well, even if that *was* the conclusion he reached, he was a child, so I could hardly let him follow through on it.

Also, while we were here, I'd need to find souvenirs for Zelen and Shuro. After all, the coins and jewels I had with me were accepted as currency in these southern kingdoms too.

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Another year passed as I continued to move with the Balm people. Keeping up with their migrations was much easier on horseback than on foot, so I took the time to learn how to ride a horse properly. It had been challenging at first, but once I changed my perspective from trying to be a good rider to letting the horse carry me, I became rather passable at it.

As a high elf, I was pretty good at expressing myself to wild birds and animals, though not as easily as with plants. Well, I'd started hunting once I left the Forest Depths, so I hadn't had much exchange with wild animals since then. But that wouldn't get in the way of me getting along with a horse. I joined the

tribe's youths in taking care of the horses, which led to them growing attached to me.

Of course, I couldn't do nearly as well as the Balm people did, since they were familiar with horses since the time they were born, but I had at least gotten to the level where I could handle the swaying on horseback without a problem.

I wasn't the only one who had spent the year growing. Zelen, Shuro, and Juyal all learned at different rates, but they had each grasped the fundamentals of the Yosogi School. Zelen had also learned a number of ways to attack with the wind spirits.

Now that I was the teacher, I realized just how hard the Yosogi School's swordsmanship was. The training was brutal, especially for the eight-year-old—or wait, he was nine now—Shuro. But when he had difficulties, it wasn't his sister who helped him out, but Juyal. Being a few years older, the training was much easier on him. And as we practiced, the three of them started to grow closer.

However, as his friendship deepened with Shuro, and thus he became closer to Zelen, Juyal's unease started to grow. After all, he had been the one who killed their father, the chief of the Balm tribe. On the battlefield, there was no telling who had been the one to actually take his life, but Juyal's existence was what had brought the battle about in the first place, so he still felt responsible for it. I knew there was more to it than that, but that didn't change the fact that it was technically true.

"Acer...what am I supposed to do?"

He had come to ask me for advice once. But an answer would be meaningless if he didn't come to it on his own.

The situation would continue to change over time, so the best solution would change with it. At the same time, that solution would look different depending on who you asked. The Balm people, the Dahlians, Zelen, Shuro, and Juyal himself would all reach different answers. So it was best for him to take his time and work it out himself.

I had once told the Balm elders that I would leave the grasslands after the threat of the Child of Fire was neutralized. But I was worried about him being a

threat to himself as much as to the Balm tribe.

When I told him that, Juyal's face twisted in pain. Apparently, that was a thought that had crossed his mind before. As hollow a conclusion as it would be.

Of course, what I would do when I left was another story altogether. I could take Zelen and her family away from here, or I could attack the Dahlian tribe myself. Even if I didn't want to kill anybody, a sufficient display of power could convince them to leave the Balm people in peace.

Either way, I'd give it plenty of careful thought. I had already spent a long time hurting other people through my carelessness, so it only made sense that I spend time thinking hard now, even if it was to my own detriment.

Aside from the elders, the attitudes of the Balm people toward Juyal were ever so slightly beginning to soften. I didn't know if it was a trait of the Balm people specifically or the grasslands people in general, but they were very straightforward.

Good things were good. Bad things were bad. Amazing things were amazing. The strong were honored, and the weak were mocked. However, the strong had a responsibility to serve and to use their strength to protect the weak. It was kind of a rude way to put it, but they were like a pack of animals. The whole camp was like a giant herd, made up of humans, goats, and horses.

They also didn't hold their grudges for very long. Juyal hadn't spent the year living here by training alone. He worked every day taking care of the animals, voluntarily helped carry goods back and forth when groups went to trade, and even assisted me in the forge when we returned to the winter settlement.

Though what he provided for the Balm people could hardly account for what he had taken, it was difficult for them to hate someone who worked so hard to help. So little by little, the atmosphere around him changed. But that was making things more difficult for him as well, in a sense.

"Wind on its own is not well suited to hurting people. Even if you hit someone with two things with the same strength, the harder one will hurt more than the softer one. And beyond being soft, wind doesn't really have much of a physical

form. However, if it really tries, it is powerful enough to blow someone away."

On the other hand, I thought as Zelen nodded to my words, I had yet to have much of a breakthrough with her. Though she had begun to show her feelings behind the mask of her office, that was as far as I had gotten.

"So if you want to use the wind to attack, you need it to either take a solid shape, or blow hard enough to knock your target away. The wind spirits will do whatever you imagine for them."

I had told her these things numerous times. From the beginning, she had been exceptionally good at using the spirits. Besides predicting the weather, having the wind spirits communicate what was happening in distant places was much more difficult than using them to fight. I've probably mentioned this before, but getting spirits to follow precise or complicated instructions was far harder than just ordering them to attack someone right in front of you.

Zelen's shortcoming was her inability to imagine a way to fight with them. How much strength was hidden in the winds of the grassland? What could that wind do if it raged? How could you channel that power to make it more destructive? Once she figured that out, the spirits would gladly take down anyone she asked them to.

But I had yet to find out why Zelen wanted that strength in the first place. Did she want to avenge her father? Protect the Balm people? Or did she want the strength to win her own freedom? It very well could have been all of those reasons together.

In any case, as my student, I needed to see where she intended to take that power. If the strength I taught her led to her being unhappy, it would all have been for nothing, so I wanted to make sure she found happiness in the end.

Last was Shuro, a perfectly ordinary and earnest boy, adorable in his own right. He had no special powers of his own, and his body was not yet physically mature, but he was getting a little stronger every day. He was intent on protecting his family, yet was still considerate of Juyal. I suspected at the end of it all, Shuro would be the most skilled with a sword out of the three. It may have been because he started at a younger age than the other two, but there was also nothing to distract from his growth.

Shuro had no special powers, but that in and of itself made his growth the most stunning.

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Another two years passed, marking three years since I had joined the Balm tribe. The children were growing up, slowly and steadily...though from my perspective, their growth was extremely fast. Disappointingly fast. Even Win's growth as a half-elf had felt depressingly quick to me, and the three children here were growing up twice as fast as he did. I really wished they'd slow down. Well, in another sense, these weren't *my* children, unlike Win. As my students, I should really have been celebrating how quick they were growing.

My personal feelings aside, Juyal was now sixteen years old, making him a fully-fledged adult. That had led to him making a decision.

The trigger had been deaths among the Balm elders. Of course, I hadn't killed them, and neither had Juyal. Theirs had been natural deaths. One after another, two of the elders had reached the end of their lifespans and retired peacefully to the earth.

I had never gotten along well with the elders, but they had still been working for the sake of the Balm people in their own way. They had seen their people be crushed in battle, then saved by an elf that they couldn't get along with, but managed to find peace for three years afterward. I couldn't help but wonder what they had been thinking about in their last days.

It occurred to me that their behavior may have all been a ploy to draw me closer to Zelen. Their perpetual obstinacy and hostility toward Juyal and myself may have been to act as a release valve for the feelings of the other Balm people.

The Balm people didn't make graves. When someone died, they only buried their body deep underground, returning their flesh and soul to the grasslands. Even if their remains were dug up and eaten by animals, or infused with mana and turned into monsters, they still understood that as a return to nature. It was a very different view from those of the people in the center of the continent. Even though we had been so antagonistic towards each other, I couldn't help but feel sad as they were buried.

However, even more than me, Juyal took the deaths of the elders hard. They had been the most hostile members of the tribe to him. In the past three years, he had come to be accepted by the Balm people at large. Zelen made no complaints, while Shuro had grown quite close to him. The other young men among the Balm people would even chat idly with him as they worked. So with the elders gone, he feared the Balm people would forgive him entirely.

And so...

“Acer, my master in the sword. I challenge you to a duel, to answer the shame of my defeat three years ago!” He chose to receive his punishment from me, not realizing that it was an expression of his own weakness.

Juyal and I took our weapons in hand, facing each other in the middle of the grasslands some distance from the Balm settlement. I had spent some time...or rather, a lot of time, debating on whether I should accept his challenge. Juyal’s objective was obvious, and one that I didn’t agree with. But as uneasy as it made me, in the end I accepted. After all, it was a teacher’s responsibility to correct their students when they went astray.

I had spent three years teaching Juyal swordsmanship. No spirit arts, no archery. Just the teachings of the Yosogi School. The Yosogi style of swordsmanship I had learned from Kaeha was as important to me as my blacksmithing. So when it came to facing one of my students, I couldn’t hold anything back.

So we faced each other, weapons in hand. That said, though this was essentially a duel, I wasn’t using my magic sword. Instead, I was using the knife I had carved from a grand wolf’s fang. Juyal seemed a little disappointed, but that was too bad for him. If I used my magic sword, it would slice through his weapon instantly, and that would be the end of it. There would be no time for him to express his feelings, nor for me to share my answer to them. The magic sword was so well-suited to Kaeha’s swordsmanship that it was too good for this duel.

However, even if it was a knife, this weapon wasn’t something Juyal could take lightly. Sharp enough to slice through the hide of the most resilient

monsters, it was more than capable of slicing apart a dull sword as well. And if I could use the Yosogi techniques I had been taught with my bare hands, there was no reason I couldn't use them with a knife as well.

That said, the sword Juyal was using was one I had made myself, so even this knife would have a hard time cutting through it. The advantage in reach that Juyal's sword gave him over my knife would be the perfect handicap for our duel.

Juyal leaped forward with a slash. I made no effort to dodge, no effort to block, using an attack of my own to sweep his blade aside. I doubted he expected to lose a contest of strength against a knife. As his posture broke, I continued my barrage of blows.

Though he was capable of deflecting the first few, my continued assault steadily drove him back into a corner.

Yeah, that should do it.

He had learned a lot in the past three years, but I had been training in the Yosogi style for over fifty. He would need another decade or two before he could hope to match me. If he wanted to make me fight seriously, he'd need to use more than his sword. He'd need to rely on his pyrokinesis.

Juyal's eyes flashed open wide, and the air in front of him ignited. I managed to dodge the explosion, but that created the opening Juyal needed to regain his posture and counter, his sword grazing my cheek. A few drops of fresh blood hovered in the air, but Juyal's attack wasn't over.

Slash, slash, fire.

Slash, fire, slash, fire, and stab.

Mixing his swordsmanship together with his pyrokinesis, his assault was unending.

Yes, this was it. This is exactly what I had wanted to teach him. Once unable to do anything but stand dumbly and throw fire, he was now attacking with a complex mixture of flame and sword. In only three years, he had learned what I was trying to teach him so well. It was probably something he had learned in this exact moment.

But it still wasn't enough. Either because he had spent three years practicing only swordsmanship, or because he was afraid of actually hurting me with the fire, though the blooms of flame were faster than any sword, they were still too slow to catch me. His combination of flames and sword hadn't melded perfectly yet, creating a sufficient opening for me to strike back with my knife.

My blade stopped a hair's breadth from Juyal's throat. We locked eyes, but it seemed he had no intention of using his fire. For a time, we stared at each other in silence. Finally, the tension left Juyal's muscles, and he dropped his sword to the ground.

"Why...why didn't you just stab me?" he said, voice quivering. "I challenged you so you could punish me. Why aren't you killing me?"

There were no tears, but I couldn't see it as anything but crying. So I couldn't help but smile.

"You're not that smart, are you? When a student messes up, it's the teacher's responsibility to set them straight. And if they truly regret what they've done, from the bottom of their heart, then it's the teacher's responsibility to forgive them too."

With that, I returned my knife to its sheath. I knew Oswald, my master in blacksmithing, wouldn't hesitate to chastise me, nor to forgive me. Kahea would gladly bear any sin along with me. Kawshman...I wasn't so sure. I'm sure he would scold me though, and gladly bring it to blows if I didn't listen. And of course, I'd return the favor.

As such, I decided to do the same. Juyal's challenge had been a mistake, one I would set straight. And then I would forgive him. And afterwards, I would bear the sin that pained his heart so much alongside him. In truth, it may have also been the teacher's responsibility to cut their student down if things went that far, but it definitely didn't apply in this case.

"You're my student. I'll forgive you, and I'll apologize to the Balm people for you. So, Juyal. I think you should return to the Dahlians."

We looked back at the settlement, where Zelen and Shuro led a well-packed horse out toward us. I hadn't told them to do anything. The spirits must have informed Zelen about what we were doing here, so she and Shuro had come to

this decision on their own. This was their response to the guilt Juyal felt.

“I had considered that after two more years, when Zelen was an adult and the Balm tribe had recovered, that I’d leave and bring you with me...but you’re too impatient, and too serious.”

If I forced him to abandon his people, he’d regret it forever. He would feel like he had run away. He would feel like there must have been something more he could have done for them, and for the Balm tribe. So before he could grow to regret it, I wanted to give him the chance to do what he could.

Arriving beside us, Zelen nodded to Juyal as she passed him the reins of the horse. Her expression was so much like an elder sister smiling down at her misbehaving little brother, it was quite a struggle not to burst out laughing, especially because Zelen was three years younger than him.



Shuro struggled to say goodbye, tears in his eyes as he hugged Juyal. To him, the Child of Fire had been like an older brother. Though it was hard to believe

Shuro had entirely forgiven him, there was no sign of any grudge in their relationship.

I had no idea if returning to the Dahlians would allow Juyal to live as he wished. All I could do was pray to the winds that he would, and trust that the strength I had seen in my student would get him there.

In just three short years, one of my baby birds had already left the nest.

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Two years had passed since Juyal returned to his people. Which meant, the five years I had allotted to spend with the Balm tribe was up.

The inexperienced warriors had trained to the point of being thoroughly skilled, while many of the children had grown into fledgling warriors themselves.

Zelen had turned fifteen, making her old enough to be considered an adult. She was still a young girl in my eyes, but she had grown quite attractive, and was getting all sorts of proposals from the young men. Besides that, her skill in the spirit arts had grown more or less as I had expected. Despite being limited to only conversing with wind spirits, she boasted a power close to that of Airena, a seven star adventurer. She had also become reasonably skilled in the swordsmanship of the Yosogi School. It was actually kind of moving to see how much stronger she had grown in only five years. Those young guys trying to marry her were in for a rough time. As far as I could tell, no one else in the Balm tribe could rival her power.

In the end, I never ended up finding out what she was thinking, or what she was hoping for. But she seemed somehow much freer than she had when we first met. I supposed that was fitting for someone so loved by the wind spirits.

Ah, maybe she had always been like that from the very beginning. No one understood her desires but her, and she followed them with single-minded determination. As harsh and restrictive as her path had looked from the outside, she had never been tied down. I was sure she would lead the Balm people from now on. Of course, assuming she wished to.

In the two years since Juyal had returned home, there had been no conflict

between the Balm people and the Dahlians. In fact, the friendly relations they had once held were starting to grow back.

It seemed Juyal was in the process of seizing power over the Dahlian tribe. I didn't know how he had spent these past two years, nor what his end goal was, but there was no doubt in my mind he was trying his best. No obstacle could stand in his way that he couldn't overcome with brute force. I doubted I'd ever have a chance to learn what his efforts entailed, and unfortunately that meant I'd never be able to praise him for them.

The Dahlians, and the grassland nomads in general, put a heavy emphasis on strength. Juyal was now quite strong, so there was no doubt in my mind that he'd be okay. He had learned that without power, he could never accomplish anything. And he had learned that if you relied solely on power, you were just waiting for someone stronger to come along and crush you. And he had learned that how one used their power was just as important as the power itself. He had learned to care for others, that others cared for him, and had grown strong enough to be able to walk a difficult path. With all that he had learned, he would make a great chief.

Last of all was Shuro. He was still a child, but had begun to show skill on the same level as the other warriors. Though he was still lagging behind when it came to archery, he had far surpassed the level Juyal had been at when we'd had our duel. From now on, even without my instruction, he would no doubt continue refining his skills together with the other Balm warriors.

In short, you could say my role in the grasslands had come to an end. There was still plenty of future to worry about, but I knew my three students were all talented.

"So you are leaving after all?"

After dinner, Zelen called out to me from behind as I made preparations for my journey the next day.

I nodded, not turning to look. "That's right. I've fulfilled my promise to the spirits, and now I feel I've fulfilled my promise to Shuro."

Really, I was in the middle of another journey already. Once my task here was

done, it only made sense that I got back to it. The five years I had spent living with the Balm tribe had taught me how to hunt and survive on the grasslands, so I could continue heading directly east with little difficulty. The grasslands were populated by animals that ate grass, as well as things like wolves and coyotes that hunted them. And of course, there were monsters born from them.

"We have yet to repay you for anything you've given us, Master," Zelen said, placing a hand on my back as I continued packing. I couldn't remember when she had started calling me "master" instead of "envoy." I felt like it had been fairly early on, but maybe it wasn't until after the elders had died.

"Repay me? You don't have to repay anything. I'm not here to saddle any of my students with debt. It's the teacher's job to take care of his students. At least, that's how my masters were." I continued packing, still not looking back, the warmth of Zelen's hand still on my back.

Besides, the time I had spent together with the Balm people and the things I had learned from them were all priceless. I had learned much about the grasslands, like I had said, but I had also learned how to ride a horse. And in exchange for making them swords, the Balm had traded me a horse, so my journey from now on would be much easier.

But above all, the experience of having students of my own for these past five years was more precious than anything. When I had first stuck my head into this conflict between two groups of people I didn't know, I had expected the whole ordeal to be a terrible nuisance. But life here had been surprisingly fun. I had nothing for these people but gratefulness.

"Will we...ever meet again?"

At that question, I finally had to pause. Nodding would be easy. That's all Zelen wanted from me. But that was all the more reason why I couldn't give such a cheap answer. I had learned that lesson before.

What were my plans from now on? The next time someone asked something of me, how much would I be able to come alongside them? If I made another thoughtless promise, and things turned out here like they had before, I wouldn't be able to bring this story back home with me. And I very much

wanted to share the story of Zelen, Shuro, and Juyal with Kaeha.

“There may be more things I could teach you, Shuro, and Juyal, but there’s nothing left you need from me.” After thinking it over for a time, I shook my head. I imagined once I had made it out of the grasslands, I wouldn’t be coming back. “You’ve all grown up wonderfully. My job here is finished. It’s time for you little birds to leave the nest.” Finished with my packing, I patted the top of my bag with a laugh.

Zelen’s hand finally retreated from my back, but her warmth still lingered. Had she wanted me to stay here with her? Or had, as she said, only wanted to repay the debt she felt? I still didn’t understand her feelings at all.

“But if you really get stuck, if something happens that forces you to leave the grasslands behind, there’s a kingdom in the center of the continent called Ludoria. In the capital city of Wolfir, there’s a Yosogi dojo.” If Zelen, Shuro, or Juyal ever needed my help, I’d be there for them. Even once the birds had left the nest, nothing would change the fact that I was their teacher. “If you show them your swordsmanship and tell them my name, they’ll definitely help you. And if you’re lucky, I might already be there.”

Once my journey to the east, to the homelands of the Yosogi School were complete, I planned on returning to the center of the continent. I imagined this would be the last time we’d ever meet, but I couldn’t help but leave her with a little hope.

Zelen gave no reply. And so my final night with the people of the Balm tribe passed.

The next morning, while Shuro broke down crying, Zelen remained her usual self. The only difference I could see was a little bit of redness, a tiny bit of swelling around her eyes. Neither of them wished for anything but for me to stay.

But even so, I mounted up on my horse and resumed my journey east.

Chapter 4 — The Great Distant Empire - Part One

The Great Grasslands seemed to stretch on forever. That said, it wasn't like there were no changes in the landscape at all. There were some gentle hills, and I came across some rivers that were surprisingly deep for how narrow they were. The water in these rivers flowed relatively slowly, so finding a shallower stretch made them easy to cross.

Of course, that wasn't the only thing I had to keep in mind when it came to changing my approach to this new landscape. The hilly part of the grasslands were often claimed by halflings. It was impossible to miss the signs of their dwellings when passing by. Halflings were a fairly diminutive race, and particularly resented being looked down on from horseback, so when meeting them I very quickly had to dismount.

Well, halflings were known to be a kind and easygoing people to those who respected their values. Stories abounded of halflings rescuing humans who had become lost.

But there was another race that populated these regions, one that was much less welcoming than the halflings. They attacked anyone who wandered into their territory, establishing a region in the grasslands that absolutely no one could approach. Trees and grasses there lay trampled down in unnaturally perfect circles. The region was also populated by enormous mushrooms, which grew to form circles of their own. These were known as fairy circles, proof that fairies lived nearby.

Though it didn't seem anyone who lived in the grasslands knew how the fairies lived, what they *did* know was that nobody who approached their circles ever returned. Beyond that, they also had to deal with horses and other livestock being naturally drawn to these circles. There was even a danger of wandering near them by accident if one traveled when visibility was poor, such as during the morning fog.

The fairy, who through discarding the self to become the whole, has forgotten the meaning of death.

Each community of fairies—or possibly all fairies in the entire world—operated as a single living being through one collective consciousness. Though cowardly and timid, they were also exceptionally cruel and malicious. Anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves in their domain would be tortured to death. That said, there were cases of fairies taking a liking to people and living alongside them peacefully. But even then, those people never returned home. Trapped in the fairies' domain, they'd be carefully preserved for future play, like a child keeping precious toys in a toy chest.

Well aware of the inherent weakness of their small bodies, they would occasionally abduct children of other races, integrating them into their collective and raising them as warriors to protect their communities.

Altogether, they were incredibly wicked creatures. But, as I said before, they were also exceptionally cowardly, so I doubted they'd ever try and pull anything with me.

On another note, though I had no way to confirm the truth of this rumor, I had heard that fairies themselves actually hated Fairy's Silver, the metal used to measure one's talent for magic. If that was true, it would be rather interesting. Was the metal's ability to draw mana out of people lethal to their small bodies? Or did it have some sort of negative influence on their hive mind?

My horse carried me further and further east. The leisurely trek through the grasslands took over half a year. The horse given to me by the Balm tribe was a gentle and friendly animal named Sayr. He had been born while I lived with the Balm tribe, and since I had helped in taking care of the horses, he was quite fond of me.

But we wouldn't be together forever. Horses had even shorter lifespans than humans, and depending on how my journey unfolded, I might be forced to leave him behind at some point, like if I needed to take a boat somewhere that was too small to accommodate him. But until that day came, I'd spoil him just as much as I relied on him.

The skies over the grasslands were a vibrant blue, matching the vivid green of the grass. Swayed by the movements of my horse, warmed by the rays of the sun, and cooled by the wind of the plains, I often found myself dozing off. For an inexperienced rider like myself, falling asleep would mean instantly falling off, so despite how comfortable I was, I forced my eyes to stay open while I rode.

If I continued in this direction, I'd eventually make it out of the grasslands and into the Ancient Gold Empire. From what information I had gathered, the empire was divided into five territories.

The easternmost region bordering the ocean was known as the Blue Sea Province.

The Red Mountain Province on the southern edge of the empire also bordered the sea, but the harsh mountainous landscape from which its name derived prevented the construction of any ports.

The western region was characterized by the numerous rivers and tributaries which ran through it, earning it the name of White River Province.

The northern region, the Black Snow Province, had weather patterns influenced by nearby volcanoes. Volcanic ash mixed with the precipitation to create a blanket of black snow during the winter months.

Each province was ruled by a governor, the four of which submitted to the emperor in the central Ancient Gold Province. Together, these five provinces made up the Ancient Gold Empire.

Apparently, each province was populated by a different people as well. For example, the Red Mountain Province was inhabited by serpentfolk, a race of people whose lower bodies were like that of snakes. They had a close relationship to the nearby kingdom of dwarves. It seemed both races were strong drinkers, so they got along quite well.

I'd first reach White River Province after exiting the grasslands. The stories of the land being dominated by large rivers made me recall the Azueda Alliance, so I was curious how different this place would be. Seeing a place firsthand often gave me quite a different impression from the stories people told me.

As I continued east, the scent of water in the air started to grow stronger. Excited at the prospects of the new experiences waiting for me, I patted Sayr on the back of the neck.

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The border between the Great Grasslands and the Ancient Gold Empire was fortified to prevent raids from the grassland nomads. The numerous fortresses naturally had lookouts at all times. The nomads used almost exclusively cavalry in their raiding parties, making them exceptionally agile, so spotting their approach as early as possible was critical to preventing them from breaking into the empire's interior. To deal with the raiders, the fortresses would send an alert to their neighbors upon sighting an attack, all of which would send forces to catch the raiders in a pincer attack.

However, not all nomads living in the grasslands were raiders. There were plenty who only intended to engage in legitimate trade. I had been told those traders would approach the fortresses directly, purchasing visas to gain entry into the empire. Following in their footsteps, I boldly approached the nearest fortress to me, and with a couple gate fees and a bit of money under the table, I was able to gain entrance to White River Province without issue. I was a bit taken aback by how direct they were in asking for bribes, but I much preferred they asked for money rather than set their sights on Sayr.

Now that I had gained entry, I found White River Province to have a very unique atmosphere. Even the homes of the common villagers were built with an entirely different style of architecture than I was used to. Though I supposed Kaeha's home and dojo had a vaguely similar style to it.

Even the plants growing along the roads were considerably different than those of the Great Grasslands and the center of the continent, so just looking at them was quite interesting. Going from walking on fields of grass to the dirt roads of the empire seemed to leave Sayr a bit uneasy, but with a bit of encouragement he got over his concerns and walked on, happily munching at the grass on the side of the road. He must have trusted me quite a bit after how smoothly our journey had been so far. Horses had their own preferences in food, so even seeing what he chose to snack on was enlightening.

Stopping to ask for directions from time to time, I traveled three days to reach the first of White River Province's five great cities, a city called White Tail. The cities were apparently called White Tail, White Claw, White Fang, and White Eye, with the capital named White Heart. I was curious about the naming scheme; all of them seemed to be named after parts of some animal.

White Tail was situated on a large river known simply as Tail River. This river split into two, named One Tail River and Two Tail River, with the city built on the point where they diverged. A large bridge spanned the Tail River, connecting both sides of the two diverging rivers to the sandbank born between them. That middle sandbank would be an important point for interaction between both sides of the river, so the city must have sprung up naturally around it. It was a pretty impressive sight to behold.

Entering the city required me to show my entrance visa from the border and pay a few coins. Identification and a gate toll, not so different a system from that of the center of the continent. However, since I didn't have any of the empire's currency, I had to pay with coin from beyond the Man-Eating Swamp.

I imagined that led to them taking advantage of me. They demanded I pay in silver despite the fact I could clearly see other travelers paying in copper. It was a bit irritating, but there wasn't much I could do about it. I supposed I would need to exchange some of my jewels for the local currency here in White Tail.

The currency used in the empire was broken down into gold tablets, silver tablets, and then large and small copper coins. The gold and silver tablets were quite large lumps of precious metals, far larger than what one would expect of currency. Of course these tablets held much more value than the gold and silver coins I possessed, and were really only used for large scale purchases.

Ordinary people only ever used the copper coins in their daily lives. Called simply large coins and small coins respectively, they each had a hole punched through the middle, as if designed to have a string passed through the middle to be carried around.

Having finally reached a larger city and acquired some local currency, I then found a place to stay. I stabled Sayr, put down my luggage, and breathed a

heavy sigh, feeling the fatigue of my long journey catching up to me. I had crossed the Great Grasslands from their western edge to the eastern one. Even with a few stops along the way, I was exhausted.

I decided to spend three days—no, a week—recovering here. During that time, I would think over what exactly I planned to do here. Okay, what I had to do was plainly obvious. My objective had been clear from the moment I'd decided to travel here. But if I wanted to enjoy that process as much as possible, I'd need to learn a lot more about this eastern nation.

The homeland of the Yosogi School lay even further east, in an island nation beyond the Ancient Gold Empire. I would need to do some research to find out both how to get there, and what would await me once I did. However, there was no need for me to do that research here in White River Province. If there was something that caught my interest in the other provinces, my first move would be to go there. In order to make that decision, I'd have to learn what I could about the empire during my stay in White Tail.

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And so, I found myself being led to a seat at a local bar. I mean, where else was I supposed to go to gather information? Though if I was being honest, I couldn't say being able to drink to my heart's content and partake in some good food for the first time in a while wasn't part of the decision either. Oh, and apparently they didn't call them bars here. They preferred the term "wine house."

"What'll it be today, my foreign friend?" A young waitress came to my table, pointing at some wooden panels hanging on the wall that seemed to be some sort of drink menu. Millet wine, rice wine, grape wine, apple cider, apricot cider. The first two were grain alcohols, while the last three were made from fruit.

I hesitated a bit. A well-populated menu at a bar was often proof of the city being particularly wealthy. Beyond that, in most places when you asked for a drink, you'd get the most popular local choice without any fuss. You could ask for other varieties if you wanted, but as they would almost always be imports, you'd be paying a steep price for them.

"Hmm. Lots of options I've never tried before. Do you have any

recommendations?” Having only just arrived in the empire, I hadn’t tried any of the available options, and so was having a hard time deciding myself. Of course I had tasted grape wine and apple cider before, but the origin of the fruit used in its production had a huge impact on the flavor.

So when you’re lost, the best option is to ask someone for help. In particular, the people working at the places that sold these drinks knew the best combinations, so you could almost never go wrong with their advice...or at least, it was less likely you would.

“Oh, are you planning on treating me too? If so, I like the sweetness of the apricot cider,” she grinned back, drawing a bit of a wry smile out of me.

My impression of the people in the empire, whether it be the soldiers at the border, the guards at the gate, the merchants who I exchanged my precious gems with, or even this waitress could all be summed up the same way. To put it negatively, it would be “shrewd and greedy.” In a more positive sense, I’d say “bold and robust.” Whether they left a good or bad impression came down to the individual, but...

“Then two apricot ciders, please. And something to eat that matches well. Besides that, I’m new here in the empire, so could you teach me a bit about White River Province?”

The impression I got from this waitress was definitely a good one. One thing I had learned was that when someone came to you with their eyes on personal profit, they’d snap you up in an instant if you only indulged them. You had to respond by trying to take advantage of them in equal measure.

“You catch on quick, don’t you? Works for me. Ask away, I’m pretty fond of good-looking, generous guys like you.”

A relationship was then born off of us profiting from each other. I imagined that was a popular method of interaction here in the empire. When I thought about it like that, it started getting a bit exciting. This was how I could come to an understanding with the people here.

Though to be honest, I had to wonder about the character of a waitress who was happy to sit down and drink with me during her shift. Apparently she was the only daughter of the wine house’s owner, so as long as she worked here,

she had considerable freedom. It seemed like a pretty lax establishment.

For nearly an hour, she accompanied me while I ate, only stepping away to deal with the other customers when they called on her.

“So your name’s Elf, huh? I’m Suu. Wait, that’s not your name? It’s your race? Aren’t you a forestfolk?”

Suu had plenty of intriguing things to tell me. For example, in the eastern region of the continent, elves were referred to as “forestfolk.” Now that I think about it, the fallen mystic I had met before—the vampire Rayhon—had called me something like “forest dweller,” hadn’t he? In that case, maybe he had come from the east after all.

That aside, apparently the forestfolk lived in the center of the empire, in Ancient Gold Province. But they rarely ventured out from their homes, so they were still quite a rare sight.

“We can’t get into Ancient Gold Province, so we hardly ever see them. I’m sure the old folks out in the country would love to see you. Ah, next I recommend you try the boiled chicken.”

Though she called it a recommendation, I was getting the impression she just wanted to eat it herself. But I was getting good information out of her, so I let it slide. In truth, everything she brought out for me to eat was a fantastic match for the cider. I used my chopsticks to finish the last piece of roast beef on my plate. Yes, they used chopsticks here to eat.

There were elves living in Ancient Gold Province, but apparently the province was surrounded by walls, and outsiders weren’t permitted entry. If that was the case, I thought the emperor might be an elf, but Suu quickly debunked that notion.

“The emperor? That would be Longcui Dijun, the Jade Dragon. I hear he’s an immortal mystic. Ah, you don’t believe me, do you? Be careful. If you doubt the emperor, you might get arrested!” she whispered before laughing.

It wasn’t that I didn’t believe her, so much as I found the thought of a mystic—a hermit who wished to unify with nature—ruling over such a large empire to

be somewhat off-putting. Rather than saying whether I believed in them or not, I knew full well that mystics were real.

Besides that, I learned that the people of White River Province revered a twin-tailed tiger spirit, that there were no such things as adventurers in the empire, and that monsters were exterminated by the military and private security groups. Listening to Suu taught me very quickly that my ideas of common sense wouldn't apply in the empire.

By the way, the young men and women that might find themselves turning to adventuring as an outlet for their strength in the center of the continent instead turned to the life of an "errant" when more militaristic options didn't suit them. The idea was a bit hard for me to get my head around, but apparently rather than being simple thugs or hooligans, these wanderers had a strong sense of justice, using their power to crush the strong and protect the weak, no matter what the law had to say about it.

From what Suu told me, I got the impression they were something of a cross between adventurers and yakuza, but that was just my personal impression, and not one I was about to share. These errants prized their chivalry above all, and she insisted that those who didn't were all fakes. The fact she felt the need to point it out meant that there must have been a fair number of these pretenders. Or perhaps these fakes were responsible for a considerable amount of harm.

She told me of one true errant: the bouncer hired to keep an eye on this very establishment, a man by the name of Jizou. But what really piqued my interest about Jizou was that he was, at a glance, clearly not human.

He was one of the earthfolk, a race of people who lived primarily in the northern Black Snow Province of the empire. Earthfolk were characterized by having stone, minerals, or gems growing on their skin like thin scales. They were also known for being physically robust and particularly resilient to starvation and thirst, making them well-suited to the harsh environment of Black Snow Province.

On top of that, the material that composed their "scales" determined their position in society: plain stone for ordinary citizens, other minerals for members

of the warrior class, and gems and jewels for nobility. That said, the distinction between what was an ordinary stone, a mineral, or a precious gem was rather vague, so it was difficult for outsiders to discern their social structure. For starters, by definition, stones were composites of multiple minerals.

At first glance, Jizou seemed to be covered in ordinary stone...but upon closer inspection, it was most likely obsidian. Did that mean he was treated as a stone or as a gem? For now at least, I had no idea. But the fact that he was working as a bouncer in White River Province rather than living in his ostensible homeland made it hard to believe he was nobility. If I had the chance someday, maybe I'd ask him. He may get angry at the question, but that was yet another opportunity to start a conversation.

As I glanced over at him while listening to Suu, we happened to meet eyes. He immediately looked away, giving me a bow. Of course I was a patron of the pub, but I had been looking at him too. He gave a very polite impression.

And though it was really just a guess at this point...I suspected he was also quite strong.

As time passed, the wine house began to fill with customers. It seemed dinner time was close at hand. Suu grew gradually more busy, and started coming back to my table less and less.

The shift in tide seemed as good a time as any. I hadn't quite had my fill of drink, but my stomach was quite full. But maybe leaving slightly unsatisfied was for the best. It would help to stoke my appetite for my next visit.

I paid my tab and stepped out of the pub with a big yawn. A full stomach led to heavy eyes. I decided to head back to the inn and call it an early night. I was sure I must have reeked of alcohol, but having no one around to get mad at me for it felt a tad lonely.

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I took a stroll around White Tail on Sayr's back.

The inn had space for me to keep him, but they didn't actually take care of him. While they provided food, it was up to me to take care of the brushing and

exercise.

As much as horses were a means of transportation, they were still animals. Or to be more accurate, though people used them as a means of transportation, horses weren't just convenient tools for us to abuse. Sayr in particular had been born and raised among the nomads, so even staying in a stable was rather stressful for him. Hence my decision to take him out on a walk around the city. He couldn't squeeze into the narrower streets, but there were plenty of roads designed for carriages and carts that he could travel down.

Unsurprisingly, the main attraction of White Tail was the large bridge that connected the east and west banks to the central sandbar. Looking down over the vermillion painted railings to the river below, you could see fish jumping out of water. Apparently quite unsure of the wooden bridge, Sayr was extremely hesitant as he walked over it. It was kind of cute, in a way. I patted him on the neck to try and help him feel at ease.

The residential areas of White Tail were built on the riverbanks, while the commercial district was built on the central sandbar. Being a sandbar, the central island was prone to flooding, so the buildings there were held up on stilts.

There was an extraordinary number of people traveling over the bridge, and none of them gave the least impression of hunger, thirst, or poverty. It seemed White Tail was an exceptionally prosperous city. Of course, being prosperous didn't mean the city had no issues. Really, the more prosperous a city was, the more it attracted large groups of people, causing issues greater in both number and complexity.

For example, disputes between the Water Freight Association and the Merchant Association over rights to use the central sandbar. I would have thought the two sides of the dispute were one and the same, and fighting between them would only hurt both of their profits, but the situation in White Tail seemed a bit different. The issue here was that they were associations in name only, who took commissions from either the sailors or the merchant shops under the pretense of giving them protection. In effect, it was a mafia war.

Unfortunately for me, I happened to be crossing the bridge right around the time one of those squabbles was breaking out. As angry roars started to fill the air, the residents of White Tail quickly left the bridge behind.

Thinking back on it, I probably should have followed suit. However, moving a horse through a fleeing crowd would have been more than a little dangerous. A horse's size and weight could easily crush the people around it. It was the most I could do to keep Sayr from panicking, standing in place as the people ran by.

Because of that, I ended up seeing what was happening. I didn't know whose side he was on, but a man was trying to kick away a child who had fallen on the bridge. Even if his intent was to keep the child from getting caught up in the ensuing battle, the kick was merciless, clearly enough to seriously hurt the child.

So in a heartbeat, my bow was out and an arrow was flying. I took no stance, I didn't take the time to aim, and yet my arrow found a new home in the foot of the ruffian before he could deliver his kick.

The man's scream drew all eyes toward me. Well, as an elf riding a horse, I already stood out. Walking Sayr over to the fallen child, I offered him a hand and pulled him up into the saddle behind me.

Anyway, it looked like my business here was done. I didn't know whether the kid was playing here alone or had been separated from his parents during the rush, but it seemed best I deliver him somewhere safe. I turned Sayr around to head back the way I came.

"You bastard! You think you can just walk away after attacking us?!"

I casually sent another arrow back as my answer to the angry shouts from behind me. It thunked into the wood of the bridge between the man's feet, fast enough that no one could respond.

I mean, just because he yelled at me didn't mean he deserved to get hit. As for the guy who had tried to kick the child, I had done what I could to injure him as little as possible. I had actually gone out of my way to be gentle. This arrow was just a threat. "If you want to fight me, the next arrow won't miss." I doubted I needed to actually put that into words for them to understand.

No one stepped up to get in my way after that. Though in truth, if they

attacked me as a group, I wouldn't be using my bow to fend them off. I'd just use the spirits, so none of them would be in danger of getting badly injured, but there was no need to let them know that. Once I was out of here, they could continue their little squabble to their heart's content. I had no intentions of getting in the way of that.

Leaving the bridge behind, I took the child back home and returned to my inn. I had kind of lost my appetite for exploration. Later, I heard that the battle on the bridge had ended immediately after I left. Apparently my actions had been a bit of a wet blanket on their will to fight.

Not that I cared in the least.

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"Hey, mister! You're the one who saved the kid on the sandbar, right? That's exactly what I'm talking about! That's chivalry! I'm proud to have inspired it in you! Now you're an errant too!"

The next day at the bar, Suu came to accuse me of all sorts of things after apparently hearing about what had happened on the bridge. Well, putting aside whatever this "chivalry" business was, I had only just met her, so I couldn't imagine she had instilled much of anything in me. Rather, if these errants were the mix between adventurers and yakuza that I thought they were, I'd much rather not be involved with them.

When I shook my head, Suu seemed a bit disappointed, but quickly recovered and brought out the food I ordered.

Besides, I didn't think my behavior had anything to do with the chivalry these errants espoused. I doubted anyone would want to see a child getting hurt. I had the ability to prevent it from happening, so I acted. Really I had done it for my own satisfaction, so I couldn't call it anything as upstanding as "chivalry." Were these errants that Suu loved so much something like heroes?

As I mulled over these things, I started to pick at the grilled river fish and rice wine in front of me. Though it was called a rice wine, it had a reddish-gold color to it, and a rather peculiar aroma. Apparently they sometimes let it age in earthenware pots, which brought out the reddish color and mellowed out the

aroma. Though, these aged versions were quite high-class stuff, so I had yet to taste them.

I supposed even the word “rice” could describe plenty of different grains. There were sticky and non-sticky rices, long grain and short grain. Just because this was called rice wine didn’t mean it was made with the kind of rice I was familiar with.

Speaking of rice, it was much more common here than it was in the center of the continent, and was grown in the same measure as wheat in the kingdoms to the south of the Great Grasslands. I hadn’t been particularly interested in those southern kingdoms while I was living on the grasslands, but maybe I’d pay them a visit on my way back to the center of the continent. Though of course, the fastest way back would be to take a ship directly to Vilestorika. Anyway, I could figure out how I was getting home when I was actually going to go back.

If Suu had heard rumors of what happened the day before, I may very well be dealing with a grudge from the group I had attacked. Those kinds of guys hated being humiliated more than anything.

Their authority was backed by violence. If their opponents bowed to their authority, they only needed to exercise enough force to make a show. But if they lost face, if their authority was called into question, their only option was to use violence to force their opponent into submission. That would benefit nobody, and only lead to more bad blood, so they were desperate to protect their image. Though people changed with the land, this was no different here than it was in the center of the continent.

I imagined either the Water Freight Association or the Merchant Association would be looking to get revenge. If they sent one of their senior members to come duke it out with me face-to-face with nothing but our bare hands, I’d happily welcome them. But judging by what I’d seen on the bridge, I wasn’t holding out much hope.

Perhaps it would be better if I just continued on my journey and avoided confronting them at all. I didn’t have all the information I wanted about the empire, but I had found out quite a bit. And besides, there were four other large cities in White River Province that I could still visit. There was really no

reason why I couldn't continue gathering information in one of them.

My only regret would be having to say goodbye to the wine house here. The food and atmosphere was exactly what I had been looking for.

Well, actually, I had plenty of regrets. I hadn't had a chance to peek into any of the city's forges, nor had I toured the shops yet, so there was plenty I still wanted to do in White Tail.

While I pondered the dilemma, two men stepped into the wine house, and after taking a quick look around, came straight to my table. Without a word, they sat down beside me and beckoned Suu over.

"Drinks. Now." Their tone and behavior reeked of arrogance. My impression of them was about as bad as you could get, but I had become a much gentler person than I had once been, so I held my fists back for now. Besides, if I was going to get into a fistfight with them, it would feel better if I let my resentment build up for a while first.

So I'd hold back. For now.

"You're that forestfolk archer, right? Heard you picked a fight with those Hebang guys. Good call. You should come work for us."

I snorted with laughter at the unexpected offer.

"Hebang" was another name for the Water Freight Association, which the guy I had hit with the arrow must have belonged to. Which would mean these guys were from the Merchant Association. But no matter how I looked at them, they didn't strike me as particularly business-like. As I had expected, the name of their association seemed to just be for show, an excuse to put on a protection racket.

"What's wrong? No matter how highly you think of yourself, that's not a smart attitude to take. But, fine. We don't dislike that kind of attitude. If you help us out, depending on your performance, you could even be paid in gold tablets." I had no idea what he had interpreted from my snort, but either way he continued on. If they were offering to pay me in gold, the Merchant Association must have been doing quite well.

But of course, I didn’t care in the least.

“Come on, take a hint. I laughed you off for a reason. You don’t seem like the type I’d enjoy eating and drinking with.” I wasn’t an adventurer, nor was I yakuza. And of course, I was no errant. Fighting and killing for money was about as far removed from my interests as you could get.

“Are you serious? You really aren’t very smart. You planning on joining up with Hebang and fighting us? Guess you don’t value your life very much.”

But clearly they didn’t understand me at all. A dangerous look came over the two men, prompting me to eagerly pull out my set of leather gloves. It seemed we were getting awfully close to the fight I had been hoping for. But suddenly, a pair of hands grabbed each man by the shoulder.

“This man is one of our customers. If he doesn’t want you to sit with him, find another table or find another shop.”

The newcomer squeezed hard. Judging by his tone, he was going quite easy on them. But from an earthfolk, it still ended up being excruciatingly painful for the two men, who paled and cried out.

Jizou had come to defuse the situation before a fight could break out. Unable to answer thanks to the pain, Jizou dragged the men out the front door and threw them outside.

His strength was overwhelming, and it wasn’t just brute force. He was clearly quite skilled, knowing exactly where to grab the men and how much pressure he needed to apply to perfectly immobilize them..

When I thanked him for helping me out, he shook his head.

“I knew you didn’t need the help, but if you got into a fight here, it would make quite a scene. I was just doing my job.”

His answer really made me wish I could exchange some punches with him someday too. Of course, with his body covered in obsidian, I doubted he’d even feel it. But the strange weapon he had didn’t look useful for anything but killing.

It was a long-handled blade that branched out into three tips at the end. The force it would generate from being swung was immense, making it ill-suited to

situations where one intended to show restraint. I had heard about them from my master in blacksmithing, Oswald, but I had never seen one in person, so I was very interested in taking a closer look at it.

Ah, I supposed this feeling wasn't so much a desire to fight Jizou as it was to get to know him. I just wanted a deeper understanding than we could get by exchanging words. I had never met an earthfolk before, so seeing one who was so powerful and skilled had piqued my curiosity. Just like when I had first met Oswald, Kaeha, and Kawshman, there was just something about him that had me charmed.

But putting that aside, Jizou had now picked a fight with the Merchant Association in my stead. Would he be okay? I wasn't worried about his abilities in a fight, but I didn't expect either the Water Freight Association or the Merchant Association to be honorable in their approach to settling grudges.

It seemed my idea of leaving town was going to be a wash. After all, this whole conflict was something I had started.

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A few more days passed, with my daily life as laid back as usual. I spent my time visiting the forges in the city, learning about the weapons and farming tools used in the empire, and walking Sayr around town.

The only real change was that I was drinking a lot less. I had to hold back enough that I could fire an arrow or swing a sword without issue.

The culture around weapons in a given place typically evolved to match the enemies they fought. Most of the weapons I saw in the blacksmiths were long swords and polearms...I supposed they were designed for fighting the mounted raiders from the grasslands? Alternatively, maybe the monsters in the area required the added force that spinning these polearms could generate. Or perhaps they were used as mounted weapons, for fighting opponents on foot. Thinking through all the possibilities as I browsed through the shops was quite fun.

I also found a number of large axes and small blades suited to throwing. What really took me by surprise was the cane I asked to see, which turned out to be a heavy iron rod. It seemed like an incredibly deadly weapon.

How would armor be able to account for the kind of destructive potential of these weapons? I got the impression that most of the armor was meant to be worn as a full suit. There were different options like scale armor mixed with iron sheets, as well as armors built from large plates for maximum protection, so it didn't seem particularly different from what I had seen in the center of the continent. Of course, the details of how they made the armor differed, so there was still plenty for me to learn. What did change quite a bit, reflecting the locale, was the visual style.

The farming tools were slightly different to accommodate the different crops that were grown here, I supposed. I didn't know all that much about these kinds of tools, but I chalked up the difference in the scythes to the difference between harvesting wheat and rice.

I was, unfortunately, starting to get a hankering to make something of my own again. Much to my chagrin, the powerful master blacksmith's license I had earned in Ludoria meant next to nothing here in the empire. I was sure I could find something like a blacksmithing guild if I looked hard enough, but with how the Water Freight Association and Merchant Association had turned out, I suspected that the local blacksmithing guild wouldn't be much different. I wasn't keen on indebting myself to an organization like that.

I could make my own forge as I had done in the grasslands, but getting the space for one would be quite a pain. I also had no connections to get access to fuel or materials, and if I just randomly started blacksmithing, I ran the risk of crossing the local smiths, or even breaking local laws. Larger nations like this had a tendency to restrict your freedoms. It was a huge nuisance.

Well, if the urge to smith something grew too strong, my best bet would likely be to seek out some dwarves. They likely hated elves just as much as the western dwarves had, but with the mithril armband Oswald had given me, I probably wouldn't be treated too roughly.

As I passed the days by, waiting for my opponent to make a move, a gentle breeze fluttered in through my open window. It seemed one of the associations had finally sprung into action.

But their target wasn't me. It was Jizou, on his way home after his shift at the wine house. I didn't imagine Jizou would have much trouble against a small group of thugs, but that was assuming they'd attack him head on. He was working as the bouncer at a wine house. If they, for example, took the waitress there as a hostage, he wouldn't be able to fight back.

After Jizou had left and the wine house was closed, the wind spirits informed me of a group of thugs forcing their way inside. Since they were after Jizou instead of me, they had likely been sent by the Merchant Association.

It was just as I had expected, and what I had been prepared for. Grabbing my weapon, I leaped out the window of the inn and ran through the city streets. This was exactly why I had been going easy on the alcohol.

I managed to arrive at the exact moment three thugs were kicking down the door to the wine house. Perfect, I was just in time.

Suu and her parents lived on the second floor of the wine house. While I doubted they'd kill their hostage right away, they only needed one. If they got rid of Suu's parents just because they were in the way, the wine house would close permanently. I couldn't stand to let innocent bystanders like the pub owners get hurt thanks to a commotion I caused.

I lifted my sword still in its sheath without slowing down. The moment they heard my footsteps and turned, I was already upon them, my sheathed sword striking each of them in the jaw.

I wouldn't kill them. I didn't like killing unless it was absolutely necessary. But I wasn't going to give them a chance to make excuses, and those injuries would make eating tough for a while. I thought that was a suitable punishment for attacking a restaurant.

I left the three unconscious thugs to Suu and her parents, who had followed the commotion downstairs, and ran off once again. Assailants had likely stopped Jizou on his way home, so I needed to let him know as soon as possible that their plan to take hostages had failed. And perhaps, if at all possible, I'd clean up the Merchant Association as a whole.

Never mind that they were the aggressors in this situation, trying to take hostages was crossing the line. There was no need for me to hold back against

them any more.

I’d make up for losing my chance to brawl with them the other day.

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Though he was still defending himself, it was clear Jizou hadn't been putting up much of a fight and was mostly trying to buy time. But the moment he saw me, he immediately understood the situation and crushed the thugs attacking him.

Maybe I had underestimated him. It was clear that if the thugs had brought their hostage here, Jizou would have wasted no time in wiping them out and freeing her. That said, there was no saying what they would have done to the others at the wine house, so my actions hadn't been totally meaningless. But even so, he was so strong that rather than "incredible," my mind went to the word "terrifying."

I had underestimated him, but not his skills. It was his physical abilities that exceeded my expectations. The triple-bladed sword's handle was made of metal, yet Jizou could whirl it around in one hand like it weighed nothing. Using what was effectively a polearm with one hand wasn't especially out of the ordinary, but that meant throwing one's whole body behind each swing. The way he spun the solid metal weapon like it was no more than a stick went far beyond simple proficiency.

However, looking at the thugs he had laid low revealed that not a single one of them had died. They had all been knocked out, but Jizou hadn't killed any of them. There was clearly more than brute force behind Jizou's blade.

For a brief moment, I wondered if I'd even be able to beat him. I had no intention of fighting him in the least though, so it was a pointless thought. I didn't enjoy fighting that much, and I didn't really care about proving who was the strongest, yet I found myself inexplicably comparing myself to him.

With the help of the spirits I was sure I'd have no problem, but if we were fighting with just our weapons...things would be a bit more difficult. If I had the chance to slice through his weapon with my sword's magic, I'd probably win. But if he somehow figured out the nature of my weapon, I'd be in for a tough fight. If I had to fight him *without* my magic sword, I didn't see any way I could beat him. I imagined he'd snap my arms like twigs in the first exchange.

"I don't like dragging things out, so I was thinking of mopping up the rest of them tonight. What do you think?"

Jizou's lips curled into a grin as he nodded at my suggestion. I was a bit startled to see such an aggressive expression from him. I doubted his cool and collected demeanor was fake, but it was interesting to see this hidden side of him.

I had spent the past few days locating the base of the Merchant Association. As I mentioned before, the authority of the Merchant Association was derived solely from their capacity for violence. It formed the backbone of their entire organization. So if they were thoroughly defeated in combat—having their headquarters crushed in retaliation against their actions, for example—they would lose their hold over this city.

I highly doubted the merchants falling victim to their protection racket were happy about the current situation, and the guards and city officials that had turned a blind eye in exchange for bribes would have no reason to spare the group once it began to decline.

The Merchant Association made its headquarters in a large mansion on the central sandbar of the city. I immediately dashed up to the two lookouts on duty, striking them with my sheathed blade. Their challenging shouts were caught up in the wind, never making it inside.

There wasn't really much point to that trick though, since Jizou then proceeded to use his blade to smash open the front door. Not even the wind spirits could suppress a sound like that. His bold entry drew a wry grin out of me, who had been intending to sneak in over the walls.

I supposed this would be both flashier and faster, so it worked fine.

Jizou and I continued through the mansion, mowing down the thugs who came to inspect the commotion. Among the screams and roars of the battle, I started to lose track of which of us were really the thugs in this situation, but it was their fault for picking a fight with us either way.

The advantage we had in launching a surprise attack like this was hard to overstate. Our preparations had been complete and thorough, while they were neither physically nor psychologically ready to fight in the least. Plenty of them ran toward the battle while still in a state of confusion, totally unable to

demonstrate their true abilities. Some took the time to prepare themselves mentally, but they still had no time to find armor, and so came at us with nothing but a sword in hand. They were certainly in a much better position than the others, but still far from well prepared. Still others were hungry, exhausted, asleep, or in the worst case drunk. That's what happened when you weren't ready to fight.

Using their superior numbers to their advantage, they could have formed a wall to block invaders. With archers positioned on the roof, their mansion would function as a miniature fortress. I'm not sure that would have been enough to stop the two of us, but it would have at least given them a bit more staying power. But the way they tried to rush us down one or two at a time made it an easy victory for us.

But like I mentioned before, preparation was key to battle. While they hadn't been expecting an attack from us, they were ready for aggression from the Water Freight Association, the group they called Hebang. They had, after all, tried to recruit me as an archer for that reason.

I sensed a sudden surge of bloodlust. In response...

"Spirits of the wind!"

I called on the wind spirits, just as Jizou was enveloped in a wave of fire. Wind rushed in to create a barrier, protecting Jizou from the sudden heat in the last possible second. It clearly hadn't been perfect, though; Jizou's face twisted in pain as he swung his weapon to scatter the flames.

The sudden explosion of fire looked quite familiar to me. Though I hadn't heard the incantation, I could recognize magic like that anywhere.

"They've hired sages?" The obsidian covering Jizou's body began to grow. Was the stone in his skin protecting him from the fire? It seemed to be a natural ability of the earthfolk, but I didn't exactly have time to chat with him about it. Jizou raised his weapon in a defensive stance as we found three men in strangely long robes watching us from a distance.

Sage...that was a title I was unfamiliar with. At the very least, I hadn't heard anything about them from Suu. The three men drew paper talismans from their

robes, igniting as they were thrown at us.

That was unmistakably the fireball spell. However, they hadn't used any incantations at all, meaning this was an extremely fast method of unleashing magic. The fireball spell in general was faster than something like the exploding fireball, with the downside of significantly less destructive power, but this was still far faster than I would have expected.

But unfortunately for these mages, even if it was an entirely unknown form of magic to me, it was useless against me without the element of surprise. The wind wrapped around the three fireballs, crushing them together and snuffing them out. Those fireballs must have been like a secret weapon to them, as seeing them rendered entirely powerless by an invisible and unfathomable power had left the three mages thoroughly rattled. Though I supposed logically speaking, magic normally had no issues slaughtering people once it had been successfully activated, so their reaction was somewhat justified.

But against Jizou and myself, their shock was too big of an opening to pass up. The two of us wasted no time in putting the three mages to sleep. Normally they would have been a considerable threat, but unfortunately they were no match for a high elf who understood magic. Searching through their clothes, I retrieved the other paper talismans they had on their persons and pocketed them.

When I had the time, I'd study these things I assumed to be relics. They seemed to be expendable, simple sheets of paper with inscriptions drawn on them with a brush, but something so simple shouldn't have worked for a relic. As I had learned from my time making relics with Kawshman, even something as small as a single wrinkle in the paper could cause them to lose their effectiveness.

That meant these paper talismans must have been treated in some way to preserve their inscriptions. And since they could only be used once, there was a fairly quick and easy way of doing it.

Jizou had called the mages "sages." Were these simple relics the way magic was used here in the empire? I was extremely curious, but my priority right now was finishing my business with the Merchant Association.

It seemed the sages really were the association's trump card, as we didn't come up against any meaningful resistance after defeating them. We reduced half of their mansion to rubble, making it obvious to anyone who saw it just how overwhelming their defeat had been. I had never even drawn my sword, and Jizou had indulged me in my desire for mercy and refrained from killing any of them, but not a single one of them escaped capture.

This surely spelled the end for the Merchant Association.

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Rocked in the saddle by Sayr's clopping down the highway, I made my way north. This time, however, it wasn't just the two of us. Walking alongside me was Jizou, the earthfolk I had met in White Tail.

We'd left the city immediately after the commotion we caused. We weren't ashamed of what we had done, but that didn't change the fact that our attack on the Merchant Association had been against the law. The Association had been dealt with, but the guards and officials who had been accepting a steady stream of bribes from them likely weren't happy about that. Staying in the city would be inviting unnecessary trouble, and Jizou seemed to agree.

You might expect that the Water Freight Association would now be free to run rampant through the city, but apparently that wouldn't be the case. White River Province was home to quite a number of the errants Suu admired so much, and our actions in White Tail had sparked no small amount of envy among them. While I couldn't say they were exactly following in our footsteps, a good number of them had moved to White Tail in search of thugs to dispatch.

The ideal target for their vigilantism was the Water Freight Association, who despite being the trigger for the whole situation, hadn't been harmed in the least by it. According to Jizou, it would only take one wrong move to bring an army of ecstatic errants down on their heads. It was honestly pretty scary when he put it like that.

Maybe it was unreasonable for me to say after all I had done, but it really sounded like the logic of outlaws. While the errants' behavior might be based on their morals and ethics, both of those things could vary widely based on the individual, so it felt like stepping into dangerous territory. That said, I often

found myself trampling over human laws with the excuse of being an elf or a high elf, so I wasn't really in a position to say anything.

Putting aside my personal impressions on the matter, the end result was that things ended up concluding rather favorably for me. I learned quite a bit about the differences between the Ancient Gold Empire and the kingdoms of the central continent, and I had discovered the existence of sages. I had even managed to get my hands on some of the relics they used.

The inscriptions they had drawn on the talismans were mostly familiar to me, but there were some I didn't know. I had also been able to figure out that they had preserved the integrity of the relics by coating them in a kind of special wax. Of course, I had no idea how the wax was made or even what it was made of, but I imagined Kawshman would be overjoyed to see them when I brought them back to Odine...or maybe not. By the time I'd get back—if not already by now—Kawshman would have likely passed away. The ones celebrating would be his successors. Even if not, I was happy to have learned something new for myself.

However, the greatest treasure I had won from my stay in White Tail was without a doubt my friendship with Jizou. Watching someone as skilled and physically powerful as him fight was extremely satisfying. Of course, it would have been appalling to watch from the other side of the battle, but I had no reason to make myself his enemy. I had even started to fall in love with that weapon he was using.

I doubted it would be feasible for me to learn how to use it from him, though. His combat style was based on his tremendous physical abilities, something I definitely couldn't imitate. No matter how muscular I had become after a life of swordsmanship, blacksmithing, and traveling the wilderness, he was just on an entirely different level. I could break bones and jaws when I struck with my sheathed sword, but the people Jizou beat down looked like they had been trampled by a large carriage. And that was when he went easy on them. There was nothing I could do to copy his style of fighting. But someday, I might find a good teacher for learning to use long weapons like that.

Maybe I was just making excuses for myself, but I wasn't thinking of cheating on the Yosogi School or swordsmanship in general. Learning how to use long

weapons would also teach me how to fight against them. That would definitely help improve my swordsmanship. It was the same as how learning swordsmanship had deepened my understanding of blacksmithing. I was also starting to rely on my sword for fighting more than my bow, so adding more ways of fighting to my arsenal couldn't be a bad thing.

I thought that would be enough excuses to get out of a scolding from Kaeha. Or maybe she wouldn't get angry in the first place. As long as I didn't get so busy I forgot about my swordsmanship, I imagined she'd love to hear all about it.

"By the way, is there some destination you have in mind for your journey, Acer?" Though we had walked much of the way in silence, Jizou suddenly spoke up, as if the question had just occurred to him. I couldn't help but chuckle a little at how long it had taken.

"Yes, actually. I'm heading east. But I'm not really in a hurry. I have tons of time, so I want to look around the empire while I'm here. And it doesn't look like I can cut straight east anyway."

If I could pass through Ancient Gold Province then I'd have no issue, but I couldn't get in, so there was no point worrying over it. I would have to pass through either Red Mountain Province or Black Snow Province to get to the eastern edge of the empire. I would then take a ship from Blue Sea Province further east, heading for that island nation. I was already taking the scenic route, and I wasn't in a hurry, so I figured I'd just go where the wind took me.

"I see. In that case, what do you think about heading north, up to Black Snow Province? It's not exactly an exciting place, but there's someone I'd like you to meet," he said pointing his blade north ahead of us. I couldn't see anything down that road, but what was he seeing? I was starting to feel a little curious.

I'd have to choose between going north or south at some point. If going north meant having a guide with me, it seemed like the natural choice.

With a nod, I patted Sayr on the neck. It seemed the wind had turned north after all.



Chapter 5 — The Great Distant Empire - Part Two

Following the rivers, we traveled north. Or more accurately I suppose, north east. The fastest way to travel through White River Province was by boat, but with Sayr in our party, traveling over land was more convenient. There were surprisingly few ships that allowed horses on them, and he would be trapped in a closed space for days while on board anyway.

On top of that, the developed water freight industry in White River Province had spawned an equally developed industry of piracy. There was always a risk that someone might try and steal Sayr while I wasn't around to defend him.

The biggest difficulty in traveling over land was the sheer number of rivers that populated the province. Each one required either finding a bridge to cross or taking an extended detour to get around. That is, if one was an ordinary traveler.

Doing what I could to encourage the nervous Sayr, I strode across the surface of the rivers. With the help of the water spirits, I could walk on flowing water like it was solid ground. The presence of rivers was no obstacle to my path. Jizou watched the whole process with shock, but in the end, he followed me without a word. As courageous and heroic as he was, he still walked with slow, nervous steps across the water.

Taking shortcuts across the rivers, we followed the shortest possible route to Black Snow Province. It was a good time of year to be traveling, but it wouldn't be long before White River Province was beset by the rainy season, causing the rivers to swell and grow considerably more violent. Once that happened, traveling across the surface of the water like this would be more difficult.

According to the wind spirits, we had about half a month before the rainy season would be upon us. I felt like we would probably be out of White River Province by then.

Making it out of White River Province would take us into Black Snow Province, which was hardly a welcoming locale. There was an active range of volcanos to the north, filling the air with ash. This meant wind and rain occasionally brought volcanic ash down on the province, and in the winter months it would mix with the snow to create the black snow phenomenon from which the province derived its name.

While land covered in volcanic ash wasn't totally barren, it wasn't exactly fertile either. Coupled with the lack of available water in the area, it was difficult for anyone to live there other than the earthfolk who were resilient to hunger and thirst.

Though no matter how robust they were, it was still a challenge to raise any amount of wealth in a land like this. The situation drove many of the earthfolk to other parts of the empire to earn money. With powerful, resilient bodies and a spirit cultivated by the harsh conditions of their home, the earthfolk were prized both for their ability as warriors and workers. Jizou's time at the bar in White River Province had been part of his plan to make money away from home.

The most critical issue we had to resolve upon entering Black Snow Province was finding sufficient food for Sayr. Even if prone to damage from floods, White River Province was a fundamentally prosperous place. Sayr had no difficulty finding food along the roads we traveled, and his every need was accounted for while we stayed in villages and cities.

But in Black Snow Province, we'd have difficulty finding both wild grasses and supplemental feed for him. And after all we had been through together, I had no intentions of leaving him behind. I wasn't going to let go of him until I found the perfect person to take care of him. So at White Eye, the northernmost town of White River Province, we bought as many vegetables as we could carry and piled them on his back. There wouldn't be any room for me to ride him anymore.

As for water, if we could find even a little bit, the water spirits could help me expand it into enough to drink. That wouldn't work for food though, so the majority of our baggage was made up of food for Sayr. Of course, there was an earthfolk city in Black Snow Province, so we should be able to secure more food

there, as expensive as it might be.

Had we taken the route heading south, it would have taken us through Red Mountain Province, a place where the terrain itself was dangerous for horses, so neither was a great option. But there was nothing to be gained from lamenting the challenge. After preparing as thoroughly as we could, we made our way into the ashen Black Snow Province.

Strangely enough, the border between White River Province and Black Snow Province was very obvious. And not in the sense of something like a border checkpoint. Once you crossed a certain line, the environment just completely changed, from the color of the earth to the taste in the air.

Obviously, there was nothing natural about this sudden change. There had to be some external influence, as otherwise the change should have been much more gradual. You would expect the amount of ash in the air to steadily increase as you traveled further in, but instead it was like there was a boundary line the falling ash refused to cross, leaving Black Snow Province densely covered while White River Province was entirely untouched.

The strangest thing of all, though, was that Jizou thought it was entirely ordinary. When I had asked him about it, he had responded with confusion, as if he hadn't understood the question. Perhaps this was just the way things were for everyone in the empire, not just him. But what was happening here was clearly unnatural. I couldn't help but feel like this was the result of someone's meddling.

Just like how the people of White River Province worshiped a white tiger spirit, it seemed the people of Black Snow Province revered a turtle spirit said to have a black shell. I wondered if the change in the environment had anything to do with the difference in their religious beliefs. I wasn't planning on staying all that long in the empire, so I doubted I'd find an answer to that question even if I actively pursued it.

At the very least, the spirits weren't giving me any warnings. They did have something to say about the effects breathing ash like this would have on Sayr and myself though, so the wind spirits kept the air clean for us. It didn't seem like the air quality was an issue for Jizou.

Anyway, if the spirits didn't give any warnings, then I doubted whatever secrets the land held here would influence my journey. Guiding Sayr forward on foot, I stepped into the ash-laden landscape.

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I had traveled to quite a number of places in my time. I'd handled rugged mountains and dealt with frigid, icy winds. I had cut my way through the dangerous volcanic region and the Man-Eating Swamp. I had traveled for extended periods of time in the wilderness, living off the land and having no contact with civilization. So I was pretty confident in my skills as a traveler.

But Black Snow Province was exceptionally brutal. It felt to me much like the desert north of the Great Grasslands. I could feel hardly any life in the land around me. The sky was dark. Sunlight barely managed to reach through, but this was apparently fairly clear weather according to Jizou. Maybe an eruption would cause even more ash to fill the air, making things significantly darker.

The ashen environment was inhospitable to plant life, leaving the landscape incredibly barren. There was a steady wind I could use to find which direction I was going, but without Jizou there to guide me, I may very well have gotten lost regardless.

And yet, even in a place like this—or perhaps more accurately, *because* it was a place like this—there were still monsters.

"Jizou."

I warned Jizou of the danger lying ahead of us. There was no change in the environment, but the monsters that lived in Black Snow Province hid within the ash, only emerging when they were ready to strike.

I stomped on the ground twice and called upon the earth spirits to solidify the ground beneath Sayr and I into something close to metal. Protecting Sayr from monsters that attacked from underground would be quite a challenge, but with the ground beneath us hardened, the monsters would naturally target Jizou instead.

And for someone like him, detecting the vibrations of their movements underground and leaping out of the way the moment they struck was easy

enough. And boy could he jump. I had seen the way he walked on land and water, so I could tell he was a lot heavier than he looked. Either his body was physically dense, the obsidian growing across his body was particularly heavy, or maybe a combination of both.

And yet, despite his weight, he leapt a tremendous height into the air. As the enormous mole monster emerged, grasping at empty air, Jizou retaliated with a swing from his triple-bladed sword. With his unbelievable strength and weight, the weapon sliced cleanly through the giant mole, splitting it in two from head to tail.

What, were you waiting for my turn? I obviously didn't have to do anything. While I might be able to deliver a similar attack after jumping into the air, it wouldn't be nearly as powerful.

"This one is quite big. We're lucky." Jizou smiled, looking down at the felled beast.

I supposed he was right. Being a mole, its meat was edible and we could make use of its hide. Being attacked like this could be seen as a stroke of luck.

"But you remember what happened last time we got attacked. It looks like we've come out on top half the time. Can fifty-fifty odds really be called good luck?"

The monster that had attacked us the other day was terrible. It had been some kind of snake, covered in a rocky hide and with sand and gravel mixed in its flesh. I liked to use everything I could from monsters I had killed, and of course eat them if they were edible, but even I had to give up on that one.

But Jizou shook his head. "It's rare for even one in ten monsters here to be anything close to edible. Finding one after only two attacks means you must have great luck."

So he said. That was...pretty bleak. I didn't like talking down on people's homes, but as much as I might be able to survive here, I didn't exactly want to. That said, apparently Jizou was only talking about how edible the monsters were. There were others who could be harvested for useful materials besides food. At any rate, the rock snake had left me with a horrible impression.

After that, we were attacked by monsters once every day or two, but as Jizou had predicted, none of them were edible. Considering how hard food was to come by in this environment, apparently soldiers tended to form groups and hunt monsters, aiming for the few that were useful for food.

After seeing Black Snow Province with my own eyes, I could understand why people said no one but the earthfolk could live here. They were incredibly strong, and the land they inhabited was aggravatingly harsh. When we finally made it to Black Shell, the lone city of Black Snow Province, I couldn't help but give a relieved sigh. That had been the most difficult journey I'd faced in quite a while.

Black Shell was a city carved into the south side of a mountain, built underground to protect it from the falling ash. The volcanic ash came from the north, so the large mountain served as a wall and roof to shelter them from it.

The population was a little over three thousand, with another thousand or so earthfolk who worked in other parts of the empire. Those two groups made up their entire race, totaling less than five thousand members.

Seeing an underground city like this reminded me of the dwarves. I felt like they had a lot of similarities with the earthfolk. They both had solid, robust bodies and lived in harsh environments. A small number of them lived away from home, mixed in with human civilization, but they were a proud people. Though I'll admit, the only earthfolk I had ever met was Jizou, so he was really my only impression of them so far.

Though the gate guard was quite surprised to see me, a short talk with Jizou was all it took to get me inside the city. Many of the adults left the city behind to find work throughout the empire, so the great number of children in the city really stood out.

Shocked and curious gazes followed Sayr and I throughout the streets. Ah, I suppose this was likely the first time any of them had seen a horse. I would love to give them the experience of riding a horse too, but unfortunately Sayr was already straining under the weight our journey had put on him. My first priority would be to find a place for him to rest.

Jizou led me through the streets to a large stone castle at the center of the

city. Apparently there was someone there he wanted me to meet. What could possibly be waiting for me there?

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Unlike outside the castle, the earthfolk inside had vibrantly colored, gem-like scales of blue, red, and green growing on their bodies. No, not “gem-like.” They were probably actual gems.

The material that made up the scales of the earthfolk apparently denoted their status in society to some degree. The most common type of scale, made of simple stone, were for common folk. The next up on the ladder were the warrior class, whose scales were made of minerals. At the top were those with scales made of gems, the noble class that ruled earthfolk society.

I think I’ve mentioned this before, but differentiating between stones, minerals, and gems was extremely difficult, making determining an earthfolk’s social status based on appearance alone equally challenging for outsiders. On top of that, Jizou had taught me that earthfolk who could temporarily increase the amount of stone growing on their bodies were treated with more respect regardless of their overall status.

Jizou himself had increased the amount of obsidian on his body to protect himself from the magical fire in our previous adventure, using it as a shield to supplement the protection I had given him from the wind spirits. Maybe that was why even the glittering noble class treated Jizou politely and with familiarity.

But apparently these weren’t the people Jizou wanted me to meet. They were effectively officials who worked to keep the castle running. He wanted me to meet the one they served—or more accurately, the one all earthfolk served.

Even I could start to guess at who this person was. The only ones who lived in Black Snow Province were the earthfolk. If all earthfolk served this person...then there was no doubt they were the governor of Black Snow Province.

Before I was granted an audience, Sayr was taken away for me, and the other earthfolk spent some time washing and preparing me.

The audience chamber was made of pure white stone, from the floors to the walls and even the support pillars. In the middle of the room sat a woman on a throne, a young human with night-black hair.

But I recognized her. No, that wasn't quite right. I recognized the air about her. The last person I had met with this aura had been much more twisted, his body leaking power. It was a human body that had become one with nature, sublimating into a greater being. As small as she was, she had all the majesty of a great mountain.

"No way...a mystic?" Despite the occasion, I found myself standing awestruck. But rather than be offended by my lack of manners, the girl instead nodded to me happily.

"Precisely. Ancient true one, it is an honor to make your acquaintance. My name is Wanggui Xuannu, the governor of Black Snow Province. I'm also known as the Black Turtle, but you can call me as you wish." She spoke with a tone of familiarity, like we were simply old friends that hadn't met in a while.

But even at a glance, I could tell she was incredibly powerful, far stronger than the last mystic I had met. Even comparing the two seemed rude, as that vampire had been a fake, fallen mystic. This woman was the real deal.

"Please, don't stand on ceremony. In truth, I should be the one paying respects to you. But being so formal doesn't really suit me, so I hope you'll forgive my laxness."

Her friendly disposition was throwing me for a loop.



It made me feel stupid for being so on guard against her.

“In that case, I’m more than happy to keep this informal. My name is Acer. As you’ve guessed, I’m a high elf. This is the first time I’ve seen an authentic mystic. I really owe Jizou one.”

Yes, being so guarded was really pointless. I didn’t know how old she was, but she had a distinctly calm demeanor. She carried herself much in the same way Kaeha had in her last days. It was clear Xuannu was also a master of some martial art, though I could only guess which of the two was superior. At this distance, regardless of if I was on guard or not, she could kill me without breaking a sweat. There was no point in being suspicious of the friendliness of someone like that.

“Really? I’m happy to hear it. He used to be quite the troublemaker when he was younger. To think he brought a friend home to see me. I hope you two stay close.” She spoke of Jizou like she was his mother or grandmother.

But *he* had been a troublemaker? It was hard to imagine, compared to the Jizou I knew. Though, now that I thought about it, having left home to find work and ending up as an errant rather than a laborer somewhere did fit the image.

At any rate, no matter what his past had been like, it wouldn’t change my evaluation of him much. From our first meeting in White River Province to entering this castle, he had been a reliable companion.

Xuannu seemed quite happy at my reply, but her expression soon turned serious. “But for an ancient true one as yourself, I cannot simply treat you as his friend. I am sure you have figured this out for yourself by now, but the Ancient Gold Empire is not just any human kingdom.”

It seemed we were moving into the main topic. After seeing a true mystic seated as governor in the empire, I figured it must have had its fair share of secrets.

She constantly referred to me as the “ancient true one.” Not “high elf” or “forestfolk.” Just a person. That was likely a holdover from the days when high elves were the only people who existed. That would have been at the time of creation, where the world was populated only by spirits, high elves, giants, phoenixes, and dragons.

Giants were referred to as such because they looked like larger versions of

other people, and the only other comparison for people at the time would have been high elves. For her to refer to me like that meant that the Ancient Gold Empire must have had deep connections to some truly ancient beings.

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"How did it go?" After finishing my audience with Xuannu, Jizou came to meet me. He seemed a bit worried, likely because of how long the conversation had gone.

"She was quite happy to learn 'Jizou the troublemaker' had become such an upstanding guy. Oh, she also gave me permission to stay here, and a permit to enter Ancient Gold Province."

My answer seemed to leave him a little embarrassed. In truth, it had been less of an entry permit and more of a request to specifically go there...but there was no need for Jizou to know that. It wasn't something I had to do immediately, and she'd also told me to rest in the castle for as long as I wished. Jizou had brought me to meet her out of good will, thinking she might be able to help me on my journey. The fact she had tasked me with more work was purely coincidence.

"Ah...that was because obsidian is a stone with unclear standing. I was a bit reckless long ago. Back then, she taught me all sorts of things, including martial arts."

Obsidian didn't have much shine to it as a jewel, but was far from being an ordinary stone. Though it wasn't a mineral either, that was the station closest to his personality. Specifically, he was the kind of person to always be carrying a weapon. As such, when he was young, he found himself overwhelmed by his own strength and impulses. Xuannu had used martial arts as a means of channeling that energy somewhere useful.

Anyway, he felt quite indebted to her. It seemed the governor thought of all the earthfolk as her sons and daughters.

"Martial arts, huh?" If I had plans on staying here for a while, learning how to use a polearm like Jizou's from her could be a lot of fun. But thinking of what lay ahead of me, I couldn't bring myself to spend years here in the castle. I wanted to head down to Ancient Gold Province as soon as possible.

Besides, this place was very ill-suited to Sayr's health. I couldn't let him run outside freely with how much ash was in the air, and with no wild plant life, there was nothing for him to eat but the vegetables I gave him. The earthfolk in the castle may have been willing to provide for us, but I couldn't rely on their generosity forever. After taking a few days to rest, I'd be on my way.

"Maybe in five days or so, I'll head to Ancient Gold Province. Thank you, Jizou. There are now many more roads I can travel."

According to Xuannu's story, if I had stayed in White River Province much longer, there was a considerable chance its governor would have tried to make contact with me. But even so, the fact of the matter was that Jizou had opened up the path before me by bringing me here.

Jizou shook his head. "I'll go with you until you reach Ancient Gold Province. I won't be allowed inside, but I'm glad you got permission," he said with a smile.

Ah, so that's how it was. He had set up the audience between me and the governor, so I thought he would get permission to visit Ancient Gold Province along with me. I was actually a little disappointed.

"Really? Then thanks, I'll be counting on you." But the fact he was willing to accompany me that far made me happy. He may have brought me this far only because he was already heading home, but taking me to Ancient Gold Province came from nothing but his kindness. I was really thankful to have him around.

Mystics were those who internalized the power of nature, sublimating themselves into beings that became one with nature, attaining immortality in the process. They were the closest living things to the spirits themselves, and so they could only live in places where the power of nature was strongest, such as valleys deep within the mountains.

And yet Xuannu had told me that the governors within the empire, and indeed the emperor himself, were all mystics. Wanggui Xuannu in Black Snow Province, Baimao Laojun in White River Province, Huang Mu in Red Mountain Province, and Zhang Shegong in Blue Sea Province. And finally, the emperor Longcui Dijun in Ancient Gold Province, making five mystics in all.

It was a somewhat unnatural state of affairs. While White River Province and

Black Snow Province certainly had peculiar environments, I wouldn't have thought the power of nature was especially strong there. There had to be a reason for this unnatural compatibility.

Why did mystics live in a human kingdom like this?

Why had mystics taken boring jobs in government like these ones had?

How did the mystics find sufficient natural power—or whatever substitute they used—to sustain themselves?

The answer to all those questions waited for me in Ancient Gold Province. I doubted any of them would be fun to learn, but it didn't seem to be a future I could avoid. Fate was a complex web, tangled and binding me to misfortune. For example, it had brought me to the dwarven kingdom, where I had to fight Kawshman's old master. I had been brought to this far eastern land by my lingering affection for Kaeha and the Yosogi School. Basically, by my sentimentality.

No one had plotted against me. And yet, as if being sucked down by a whirlpool, my path was being drawn to Ancient Gold Province.

I found it a little frustrating. Of course, I knew that what awaited me was going to be a rare and unique experience, but having things decided for me like that left a bad taste in my mouth. Though if it had been one of my loved ones who made that decision, I would happily oblige them.

And I knew that pouting and struggling against this fate would get me nowhere. For now, I'd just have to let the current carry me where it may. If I wanted to secure my freedom for the times when it mattered most, I needed to follow the waters down, to find the source for myself.

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The day after my meeting with Xuannu, I took Sayr for a walk around the city, considering what work I might be able to do for the earthfolk living here during my short stay in the city. If my host was rich and prosperous, I'd have no issues with indulging in their generosity, but you could hardly say that about the earthfolk.

When it came to money, many of them worked across the empire, and they could even take precious metals and jewels from their own bodies to sell, so they weren't especially hard pressed for currency. But securing food and water in Black Snow Province was a considerable challenge, meaning they relied heavily on imports. Sayr and I needed more of it than any earthfolk in the city, so I could hardly stand idle while being such a drain on their resources.

While looking around Black Shell, I noticed there was a surprisingly small number of shops, and those that did exist operated on a barter system, rather than using currency. It made the economy feel rather primitive, but I supposed that was unavoidable.

The most valuable things to people in this place were food and water, resources rationed out to the common people by the nobility. There weren't enough resources to go around in the city to develop a strong, free economy, or to create a significant enough wealth gap to divide the people into different economic classes. I was sure the castle had its own stores, but those would be for emergencies, not for the nobility to waste extravagantly on themselves.

As I walked around the city, I noticed a number of inquisitive children were trailing behind me. I supposed having never left Black Snow Province, I was the first person they had seen who wasn't an earthfolk, and it was likely their first time seeing a horse as well.

After thinking over it for a short time, I dismounted. One of the braver boys, looking close to seven or eight years old in human terms, came up close, so I tried to pick him up. As expected, it was a lot more difficult than it looked. However, he was still lighter than me with all my traveling equipment, so I managed to lift him off the ground and into Sayr's saddle. Now that I thought about it, I didn't actually know how fast earthfolk grew up, or how long they lived.

“Count to one hundred, and then it’s someone else’s turn, okay?”

The boy in the saddle nodded excitedly, eyes glittering. Sayr looked to me in confusion, but after I took his reins with a reassuring pat, he dutifully followed behind me.

“Ooone, Twooo, Threee, Fooour...” The boy counted out loud as we walked around town.

The view from atop Sayr’s back was quite different than what I saw walking through the town on foot. Maybe it was just the crowd of excited children bustling around me, but despite feeling poor and needy, the city also felt much more alive and energetic.

After reaching a count of one hundred, the boy on Sayr’s back obediently slid out of the saddle and gave another child a turn. Even the young children here understood that they couldn’t survive in a place like this without cooperation.

I lifted the next child up into the saddle, this time a girl. She wasn’t quite as boisterous in her counting as the last boy, but her small voice still had a pleasant, cute ring to it.

Eventually my thoughts turned back to what work I could do for the people here.

Blacksmithing wasn’t a terrible idea. Considering the ever-present threat of monsters, the demand for weapons and armor would be high, and I’d love the opportunity to learn about the style of craftsmanship here. But the time I planned to spend in the city would be too short to accomplish much of anything in that field.

So I supposed the best I could offer was the classic: securing a water source. As the province’s name suggested, there was plenty of snow in the winter. Even if it was mixed with volcanic ash, it was still water. And even during the other seasons, there was still rain. So even if water was hard to come by in Black Snow Province, it still existed here.

The problem was that the water was buried deep under layers of ash. It wouldn’t be hard at all for me to find it and dig a well reaching down that far.

However, I felt like it would be best to consult with Xuannu before doing something like that. I didn't know much about the mystic arts, aside from that they interacted with nature. There was a distinct possibility that Xuannu had the ability to make such wells herself, but for some reason or other had refrained from doing so. It would be safer to wait until I had permission to start digging wells myself. This was my way of saying thanks for letting me stay, so I wanted them to be happy with it.

As I swapped another child out of the saddle, the girl in my arms grabbed at my ears. Apparently they were quite interesting to the kids here.

I had to say I was quite impressed. In all the years since I had left the Forest Depths behind, nobody had ever grabbed them like that. Though the rock covering her body was a simple stone rather than a mineral or gem, I got the impression this girl was going to grow up into someone important.

Of course, having her pull on my ears hurt quite a bit, so I did have to eventually convince her to let them go. But it wasn't such a big deal that I'd get angry over it, and seeing her honest apology made me happy more than anything.

Besides all that, I was interested in seeing what kind of crops they could grow here. "Volcanic ash" on its own wasn't an especially helpful term, as depending on its particular make up, different crops would be able to grow. The ash in the air also blocked much of the sunlight, but this just allowed plants that preferred darker conditions to thrive. I was sure I'd be able to find something.

For example, when I used to live with Oswald in the kingdom of the dwarves —who I supposed was likely the king now—we had potatoes and mosses that grew underground, happy as long as they had access to water.

This wasn't something I could really do during my current stay in Black Shell, rather it would be more like sending back food to them that I'd find during my travels. That was a bit outside of the scope of what I was looking for right now. I'd probably have to discuss that with Xuannu too.

I knew that wealth didn't necessarily correlate with happiness, but I knew how difficult it was to live with limited access to food and water, even if the earthfolk were particularly hardy.

With my tour of the city complete, and having finished giving rides to the children, I made my way back to the castle. In the end I hadn't really found anything concrete I could do for the people here, but both I and the children had had a lot of fun. That would do for the day.

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I pressed an ear to the ground and listened for the voices of the spirits. Many earthfolk started gathering around to see what I was doing, lured in by my eccentric behavior, but Jizou kept them at a distance. Having him around was a huge help. Normally I could hear the spirits no matter how noisy my surroundings were, but here in Black Snow Province, the water spirits were quite distant.

Focusing my concentration, I sought out the faint voices below the ash, below the earth, and even deeper down. Ah, there they were. Though it was quite a ways down, there was definitely water.

But...hmm. It was too far away. Sure, I was capable of opening a hole down to that depth. Even if the land was built from layers of ash, it was still earth, and had its attendant spirits. The earth spirits would have no problem opening a pit that reached this far down.

The issue was what came after that. How exactly were they supposed to bring the water back up from such depths? It was too far to reach with a simple rope and bucket. Even if I could open a hole down to the water, it wasn't a well if they couldn't get the water out of it. It would just be a danger, something children might slip and fall into. Though I supposed normal wells also needed something to stop children from falling into them. According to Jizou, since earthfolk didn't float very well, many of them couldn't swim.

So what could I do? I'd have no difficulties finding the water and opening a hole leading to it, but I wasn't especially experienced with drawing the water back out. I continued staring at the ground, puzzled.

"What's wrong, Acer? I guess you couldn't find water after all? I mean, considering this place, I guess that's to be expected." Though Jizou seemed to be trying to console me, he wasn't quite right.

I couldn't help but smile at his words, which helped to lift my spirits. There

was no need for me to struggle with this problem by myself. It wouldn't be hard for me to open a hole down to the water and draw it up to the surface myself, but I was a traveler. I would only be here a few days, so I could hardly keep drawing water up for them forever. But even if there weren't any high elves in Black Snow Province, there was someone who could do something similar, right?

I was sure a mystic like Xuannu would have no problem doing something like drawing water up from underground. If she was willing to put in a little work, the problem would be solved. If she wasn't, or if the earthfolk weren't willing to ask that of her, they could always develop their own ways to access the water.

I could only do the task that was in front of me. So I shook my head.

"No, I found water. I'm going to dig for it now, so stand back a bit."

I stuck my hand into the earth, imagining a straight shaft reaching down to the water. I made the walls as hard and smooth as stone, so earth wouldn't break off and contaminate the water. With a word to the earth spirits, the ground in front of me opened up.

The crowd of earthfolk watching gave cries of shock and admiration. For a high elf like me, it was entirely ordinary that the spirits would respond when I called for them, but I supposed it was quite a surprise for people like these who had never seen them work before. The earthfolk living here, in this land covered in volcanic ash, knew better than anyone how brutal the earth could be.

The hole in the ground continued down, eventually reaching the source of water I had found. The release of pressure caused the water to surge upwards, but it wasn't quite enough to get it to the surface. I wanted the first shot to be really impressive though, so I asked the water spirits for a bit of help in bringing it up the rest of the way.

In response to my request, the water spiraled up from the depths, spraying into the air and showering everyone. Though they had been shocked before, the earthfolk began cheering. There weren't many chances for the people living here to experience water that hadn't been dyed black by ash. For people whose everyday life included collecting black rainwater and filtering it to make it potable, naturally clean water like this must have looked beautiful.

Of course, this would only last for a short while. The moment I stepped away, the water would stop. But that was fine. I'd leave the rest of the work to Xuannu and the people of Black Snow Province.

After the initial excitement of the geyser died down, starting with Jizou, the adults gathered around us started crafting a roof and enclosure for the well. They didn't want ash from the sky falling in, nor did they want children accidentally stumbling into it.

As I watched them work from a short distance away, I glanced upwards. The sky was gray. Between the ash and clouds, I couldn't see the sun at all. The rain mixed with ash, and when it got cold the snow would too. Hence this place was called Black Snow Province.

I would only be spending a few short days here. What could I do for the people who braved this harsh environment in such a short time?

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On my way to Ancient Gold Province, I Jizou and I were accompanied by a group of other earthfolk men, each bearing mineral scales, meaning they must have been members of the warrior class. While Jizou was more than sufficient as an escort, these warriors had volunteered of their own accord to come with us.

Both the earthfolk and Xuannu had been overjoyed with the well I created. After discussing the issue with her, I found out that her abilities were more suited to combat, so finer work like searching for water was a challenge for her. She could find something obvious, like water flowing in a river, but searching for water veins deep underground was beyond her.

I couldn't help but wonder about her qualifications as a mystic, but I supposed everyone had their own strengths and weaknesses. While Xuannu was particularly adept in combat, the governor of White River Province, Baimao Laojun was apparently specialized in the more mystical side of things. He was also quite well studied when it came to magic, as the Sage's Federation—the empire's equivalent to a mage's guild—made their headquarters in White River Province. Huang Mu of Red Mountain Province was skilled in cooking and

preparing medicines, while Zhang Shegong of Blue Sea Province excelled in economics. Hearing about a mystic who specialized in making food very much piqued my interest, but unfortunately my current plans wouldn't take me anywhere near Red Mountain Province.

On top of that, it seemed Xuannu had high expectations of my plan to search for crops that could be grown in Black Snow Province. Due to some circumstance or other, while she and the other mystics could leave their provinces if needed, they couldn't travel beyond the borders of the empire.

In short, it didn't seem she had any plans for me once my journey to Ancient Gold Province was complete. That was a bit of a relief.

Besides that, I had told her quite a bit about the Yosogi School and my magic sword, and many other things about the world outside the empire, and she had listened with rapt attention to all of it. She was particularly interested in magic swords, saying she would invite the governor of White River Province to visit me with her should I end up staying in Ancient Gold Province for any length of time. She was sure the governor would take a keen interest in the relics, and she wanted one for herself, so she had happily requested I make one for her if time allowed.

I wasn't especially in a rush, and it did sound like fun. So I told her that if nothing came up that suddenly made me want to leave Ancient Gold Province, then I'd settle down for a bit and accept her request, to which she nodded. Smiling, but silently.

Oh, so there *was* a chance I'd be upset at what I saw there. Well...I suppose we'd have to wait and see.

The journey to Ancient Gold Province was particularly boisterous. Jizou wasn't especially talkative, but the other earthfolk warriors were surprisingly cheerful. One by one, they came up beside me and struck up new conversations.

That said, their skills in combat were the real deal. Since there were so many of us, we attracted a large number of monsters, but not a single one even made it close to me. From what I could observe, none of the earthfolk warriors excelled quite the same way Jizou did, but they each had a strong grasp of their

own abilities, their teamwork making the combat seem all but effortless.

Normally, facing large monsters head on wasn't a viable strategy. However, with the strength and weight of the earthfolk warriors, even a small group of them could stop the charge of larger monsters. A few of them had large shields they used to block any incoming attacks. Once their opponent had been stopped, the others would descend on them as one, quickly dispatching the monster.

The entire race of earthfolk totalled less than five thousand members in all...and I was starting to think that was a good thing for the other races. If there were tens or hundreds of thousands and decided they wanted more land, I couldn't see them having much difficulty taking it from the other provinces by force. That's how powerful they were in combat.

We eventually reached the border of Ancient Gold Province, denoted by a large wall that enclosed the entire province. The interior was completely obscured from view, and of course the wall was in perfect repair, so there was no way to enter except through the official gates.

The northern gate was decorated by the image of a large, pitch-black turtle. It must have been a depiction of the spirit turtle that the people of Black Snow Province worshiped. It had to be a reference to Wanggui Xuannu, but looking at the picture, I couldn't see the connection between them.

"Stay healthy, Acer." Jizou's parting words to me were simple and to the point, quite in character for him. I doubted we'd ever meet again, but I supposed he was right. There was little value in making a long, drawn out and decorated goodbye.

"Yeah, you too. Take care of yourself. And everyone, thank you for bringing me here."

I held out a fist, which Jizou met with his own and a laugh.

The group of earthfolk all sent me off with smiles as the gate opened. Back in the saddle, I guided Sayr straight through.

The moment we passed into the province, I felt something was off. At the same time, the scenery in front of me instantly transformed. Looking through

the gate, I had seen a road leading off into the distance. But now that I had passed through it, my vision was blocked by a sea of trees, each taller than the walls that surrounded them.

This uneasy feeling and bizarre transformation wasn't new to me. The dense natural energy that infused this forest felt almost the same as my home in the Forest Depths. That sensation I felt when passing through the gate was much the same as the one I had when I passed through the barrier made from the powers of the spirits and Spirit Trees separating the Forest Depths from the rest of the Great Pulha Woodlands. I had heard that forestfolk lived here in Ancient Gold Province, but now there was no doubt in my mind that this place was sacred ground to elves.

It was at the same time nostalgic and a bit unpleasant. The forest itself was fantastic, of course. But the stark difference between the forest and the climate of Black Snow Province, separated only by a single stone wall, was just too much for me. Though I guess even the elves in the center of the continent had no interest in the world outside their forests.

What bothered me most were the walls themselves. They had very clearly been built by some other race, with no sign of elven craftsmanship in them at all. Had the other races isolated the elves in here? Or had the elves forced other races to build the walls, acting as nobles and aristocrats over them? Could you really call someone who was satisfied living like that an elf?

Anyway, I was getting ahead of myself. There was probably a reason for all this. There had to be. Until I met the emperor himself, Longcui Dijun, I couldn't judge them.

I suddenly felt a strong desire to know the reason behind this wall. The lingering emotion of my farewell to the earthfolk had already been blown away.

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The gate behind me slowly closed. Operating the gate were two elves in official-looking uniforms. As they spun the large crank, the gate slowly shut to the sound of moving chains. When the gate finally closed and the sound stopped...

"There is no greater joy for us as forestfolk than to welcome one of our

ancestors, a true one to this forest of Ancient Gold. It is a great honor to meet you," the two elves greeted me with a bow. I couldn't see the slightest sign of artifice behind their smiles. They seemed genuinely ecstatic to see me.

However...one of their ancestors, huh? Elves were made by the gods inspired by the creation of the high elves, so calling us their ancestors wasn't entirely wrong...but it wasn't a title I much appreciated. Besides a difference in lifespan, the amount of power the spirits would lend us, and what happened to us after we died, there wasn't much of a difference between us.

While many people would find the gap of three hundred years in our lifespans enormous, for an elf that lives seven hundred years and a high elf that lives a thousand, the difference wouldn't actually feel particularly significant.

But I supposed sticking to my guns here wouldn't help much. Until I had a grasp on the situation in Ancient Gold Province, things would be smoother if I just went with the flow.

Giving the two elves a gracious nod, I turned back to encouraging Sayr forward, who was still confused at the path in front of us disappearing.

"The trees won't get in our way, don't worry."

He really was a smart horse. He could sense danger and knew to steer clear of it, but was brave and trusting enough to follow my instructions in the face of it.

The trees of the forest withdrew, pulling back their roots and trunks to create a path for us. I had never been to the Ancient Gold Forest before, but there was no chance of me getting lost, not with the trees themselves guiding me. Even in an unfamiliar place, no matter what secrets the land held, the trees would always welcome me. I never doubted that, and so would never hesitate. This was my territory.

The two elves had likely been sent to guide me, and so chased after me in a panic. They must have guessed that I had no need of a guide, though, as they followed behind me in silence.

Honestly, I wouldn't have minded if they talked...and actually, it would help me out quite a bit if they were willing to explain things to me. But it felt odd for me to start the conversation, so for a while I let the silence continue.

As we walked, I noticed something I would expect in any forest of this size. We were passing by an enormous Spirit Tree. Bringing Sayr to a halt, I leaped out of the saddle and approached it.

“May I?” I asked, looking up at the tree. In short order, the tree began to shake, dropping a few fruit from its branches into my outstretched arms.

Spirit Trees if this size grew apuas. But...these were a little different than the apuas I was familiar with. They were still brimming with the energy of life, but they had a stronger, sweeter scent to them.

Taking a bite, I discovered the flavor was closer to that of a peach. The apuas I knew had a sour sweetness like those of apples, but it seemed the Spirit Trees in Ancient Gold Province were different. It was quite an interesting discovery. I felt bad eating by myself, so I shared my haul with my two guides and Sayr.

“Wow. Even the Mystic Tree gives its fruit of its own accord to you. I guess I should have expected as much from an ancestor,” one of the elves replied.

A Mystic Tree, making these Mystic Peaches I supposed. It seemed the mystic emperor’s shadow reached even this far.

Putting aside who exactly this emperor was though...

“These peaches are great. I like apuas personally, but these are just as good. I’d love to introduce them to my friends back home, and it would be great if I could bring some apuas here for you to try.” I had taken a liking to these Mystic Peaches. Sayr seemed quite fond of them too, judging by the way he rubbed his head against me happily.

Now that we had nourished ourselves, it was time to continue. With the lifegiving fruit in our bellies and the air of the forest in our lungs, I could feel my head clear and my limbs fill with strength. Hopping back on Sayr’s back, I continued deeper into the forest, guided by the trees themselves.

The journey through the forest took two weeks. But to be fair, our path wasn’t a straight shot to our destination. I wanted some water to drink and bathe in, and of course Sayr needed water as well, so we followed a small stream.

There were plenty of plants growing here that I was unfamiliar with, so we often stopped for me to inspect them, and for Sayr to find tasty plants to snack on. We weren't in a hurry in the least, so it felt more like a casual walk through the woods.

Though there was only supposed to be one Spirit Tree—or rather Mystic Tree—in a given forest, we saw more of them from time to time as we walked.

It seemed this was a special place, just like the Forest Depths. The forest around us was rich with blessings, so we had no difficulty securing food...though the elves with me were quite shocked to see me eating some of the dried meats I had brought with me.

But I didn't let that bother me. I just craved meat sometimes.

Though of course, I couldn't make a cooking fire in the forest. Most of the food we found could be eaten raw, and being a kind of holy ground for elves, the weather was warm and pleasant. Curling up beside Sayr was all I needed to stay comfortable throughout the night. Many elves disliked the idea of starting fires in the forest, and at the moment I wasn't really in the mood to push them on it.

The forest ended up being quite a bit bigger than I had expected. I was sure there were plenty of forests around that were even larger, but as sacred ground to the elves, it seemed large. For example, the Great Pulha Woodlands were absolutely enormous, but the sacred ground in the center, the Forest Depths, made up only a tiny portion of it. If I had to guess, I didn't think it would take more than a week to cross it from end to end on foot. Of course, that was if you knew your way around the forest and the trees opened a path for you. An ordinary human would get lost long before they made it to the other side.

But the entirety of Ancient Gold Province had the same quality to it. While it was certainly smaller than the other provinces that made up the empire, it still took us two weeks to get from the northern gate to the center. That meant there had to be something powerful enough living here to support such an immense forest.

Hmm...?

That brought on an odd realization.

There was definitely something powerful living here. Did that mean there was something similar living in the Forest Depths? Until now, I had assumed the Forest Depths were supported by the vast expanse of the Great Pulha Woodlands that surrounded it, but maybe that wasn't correct. After all, Pulha itself was known to humans as a dangerous place overflowing with powerful monsters. What if whatever was giving the Forest Depths its power was also supporting Pulha at large? If that was the case, maybe the walls built around Ancient Gold Province were as much to keep the forest inside as they were to keep others out.

So, what was living in the Forest Depths? What would the high elf elders keep hidden from me?

Oh. Well, it would almost certainly be a phoenix. The immortal birds were the connection between the high elves and the true giants, born to connect the earth to the sky. So naturally, they'd have to live either with the high elves or the true giants.

In that case, it was easy to guess what the creature living in Ancient Gold Province was. Spirits inhabited the entire world, high elves the deep forest, and true giants the land above the clouds. If phoenixes lived together with the high elves...that just left the true dragons, the guardians of the world.

The emperor of the Ancient Gold Empire, Longcui Dijun, the Jade Dragon, had hidden the answer to that question in his name the entire time. This entire empire had been built as a cradle for a dragon, to keep it from waking until the end of days.

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"Welcome, true one. You are Acer, correct? My name is Longcui Dijun. Welcome to the Ancient Gold Empire."

As I entered the castle at the center of Ancient Gold Province, a young human man came out to greet me, looking perfectly average in every way. He had no air of great wisdom, nor of powerful ambition, and his movements gave no impression of any skill in combat. He gave the exact opposite impression that Xuannu had in Black Snow Province. And yet, somehow, there was something clearly suspicious, something slippery about him.

I highly doubted he was a fake. An incredible power swirled about the castle. The trees of the forest absorbed most of it, so I hadn't felt it much during the journey here, but there was nothing to inhibit that power here in the castle. Anyone who didn't have some way to resist this power would find their heart and mind crushed by it if they stayed here long.

My elven guides hadn't come with me into the castle, and had taken Sayr away with them. They seemed fully aware of how dangerous this place was to them. So no matter how plain and ordinary this man seemed, there was no doubt he was exactly who he claimed to be. It was clear at a glance how difficult it would be to survive living in a place so filled with power.

Dijun had likely infused himself with the power of a true dragon, ascending to the level of a mystic. The power of a true dragon wasn't all that much different from the power of nature itself, I supposed. This man was definitely a true mystic.

"Judging by your expression, you've already guessed a lot of what's going on here. That's too bad. I had hidden so much, hoping I could try and surprise you," he said with a bright smile.

I kind of wanted to punch him. So this was why Xuannu thought I might get angry. Though I knew it was on purpose, he left himself so open it felt like I could actually hit him if I tried. That meant he was welcoming the opportunity, right?

Okay, it was decided. I was going to punch him.

But the moment I made that decision and clenched my hands into fists, he continued.

"But that will make this conversation go a lot smoother." As if he had read my mind, he took a half step back.

But he was too naive. Against anyone else, breaking the tension like that might force them to give up, or raise their own guard. Most high elves probably wouldn't have been bothered by his attitude in the least. But I was a bit of a weirdo. And when this damned elf made up his mind to punch someone, stepping out of the way wasn't nearly enough to save you from that fate. So in response to his half step back, I lunged forward, swinging my fist directly for his

jaw.

The punch landed perfectly, sending Dijun soaring through the air. And yet, I didn't feel any weight or feedback from the contact. It felt only barely more substantial than striking a piece of paper floating in the air. In other words, at the same time my fist struck, he had used his own power to fly backwards.

Twirling through the air, Dijun landed on his feet. As expected, despite his outward appearance, he held an incredible power.

"There's nothing I hate more than being manipulated," I said. "If you're still willing to toy with me after knowing that, then I'm ready to fight you no matter how strong you are."

If you have a request, make it. If you want to force me to do something, try it. If you want to earn my trust, be sincere with me. That was all I asked for.

Dijun looked incredibly taken aback by my words. But in short order his expression changed, showing a much more sincere smile. "Ha ha, I didn't mean to provoke you at all, sorry. I see why Xuannu liked you so much. You're quite a bit different than I had expected a true one to be, but being more straightforward is fine with me."

The air about him changed entirely. Larger, sharper, and yet flexible and cunning. Truly an appropriate aura for a mystic. I hadn't seen the true depths of his power before because he had hidden it perfectly. Now, I couldn't see the true depths of his power because it was so vast.

"Then allow me to cut to the chase. Ancient beings stepping foot in the Ancient Gold Empire have caused the true dragon sleeping in this land to begin to stir. So, I want you to go and persuade the dragon to go back to sleep."

There was no telling what would happen if the dragon truly awoke. The dragons were said to be asleep until the world came to an end. Looking at it the other way around, if the true dragons awoke, that very well could signal the end of the world. Even if this lone dragon waking didn't bring about such a massive disaster, it would at the very least obliterate the Ancient Gold Empire.

Oh, hold on. Did that mean my coming here had actually put the empire in danger? In that case, Dijun's suspicious behavior earlier may have been an

attempt to avoid laying the blame for the current situation at my feet. And my response to him trying to be considerate was to punch him. I was the worst, wasn't I?

"Of course, I know that you're only here by coincidence, and that your journey will take you away from here. And your arrival alone is not the only thing causing the dragon to stir. But as we are not ancient beings like you, we have no way to urge the dragon to return to its slumber."

Once again, he was speaking with consideration for my feelings.

Well. Now I felt bad.

For now, I guess we should talk, so I could take the chance to make a sincere apology for attacking him.

Without knowing anything about the situation, I had doubted him. Unfamiliar with the ancient races, Dijun had treated me with a strange level of reservation. Both of our attitudes caused us to completely misunderstand each other. It would be hard to make any decisions without clearing that up.

On top of that, I had no intentions of leaving them out in the cold when it came to dealing with the true dragon. After all, even if it wasn't my intention at all, I felt really bad for stirring things up for them here.

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“Ah ha ha, I see, you’re pretty assertive for a true one. No wonder you’re so straightforward. Or maybe the energy of the awakening dragon has gotten to you? Sorry, looks like I approached this the wrong way.” Once our apologies had cleared up the misunderstanding between us, Dijun began to laugh happily.

Who exactly had he expected to come visit him? Some big-headed elf, indifferent to the affairs of the world? Well, I suppose the elders in the Forest Depths would have fit that bill. That’s why he had tried to conceal as much information as possible, provoking me into acting the way he wanted. So when I turned out to be much simpler than he expected, I suppose he had been happy to learn that things would go so smoothly.

The result, however, was the misunderstanding born between us. I couldn’t really blame him; even if he was a mystic, he wouldn’t exactly have had many opportunities to meet with high elves. Then again, I couldn’t say I met mystics all that often either.

I no longer had any reservations about dealing with Longcui Dijun. I understood his thoughts, and realized where I had gone wrong. Dijun was here to guard the dragon’s sleep. It only made sense he’d start to panic if the dragon began to stir.

He might have been right about the dragon having some effect on me. Ever since entering Ancient Gold Province, or really the empire at large, I had felt a little more aggressive. It was possible I had subconsciously picked up on the energy of the dragon so close to waking, and it had tilted my feelings in that direction. If so, it was another indictment of my own inexperience.

According to the emperor, this land had originally been infused with the power of the sleeping dragon, causing nature to run wild and monsters to overrun it. In order to preserve its slumber, the dragon had divided its own power to create four creatures who would guard the land. These were the white two-tailed tiger, the black turtle, and so on. As beings feared even by the gods who created the common races of this world, the true dragons were also capable of creating life.

However, the four guardians were only concerned with protecting the dragon’s sleep. They entirely ignored the monsters running rampant in the land,

who freely attacked anyone, leaving it an area everyone feared. The ancient people of the grasslands and the southern kingdoms had apparently invaded multiple times, trying to cut off the source of the monsters pouring out of it, and had even come up against the four guardians. The people had misconstrued the four guardians and even the sleeping dragon as creatures of evil, and so had attempted to fight them.

Such behavior would have doubtless led to the dragon's awakening eventually. Someone needed to rule this land if they wanted to prevent that. And so, though they had gone by different names back then, Longcui Dijun and the other four mystics were chosen. Even as immortal mystics, they wouldn't be spared from the world's destruction.

So, in cooperation with the four guardians, they built a new nation here, calling it the Ancient Gold Empire. The guardians became the guardian spirits of the four provinces, and were likely the source of the extreme changes in environment and climate between them. No, it was probably more accurate to say that the mystics used the influence of the guardian spirits to create barriers of their own.

Each of the provinces was set up as its own independent nation in consideration of the fact that no kingdom could last forever. If the politics or people of any single province eventually fell to corruption, as long as Ancient Gold Province was still intact, they could crush the rebellious kingdom and build a new one in its place.

That was the nature of the four mystics and the dragon's four guardian spirits. However, I never asked whether they actually had been forced to rebuild any of the provinces.

Sealing the power of the dragon in Ancient Gold Province, they built a forest around it and left it in the hands of the elves, the forestfolk. Longcui Dijun lived here as a mystic, absorbing the dragon's power. The other four mystics drew their power from each of the dragon's guardians, cutting off their environments from the rest of the world. The power of an eternal being like a dragon was close to that of nature itself.

And that was about all I had to ask. I had figured out everything I needed to

know. I couldn't pass judgment on whether the mystics were in the right or wrong, but I understood that what they were doing was for their own survival and the survival of the people who lived in the empire. I imagined the high elf elders wouldn't look kindly on the existence of the empire, nor of the mystics and the people who fed off the power of the dragon and its guardians to extend their own lifespans. But personally, I had no reason to condemn their way of life.

Longcui Dijunn led me into the depths of the earth below the castle. Yes, the sleeping dragon was quite literally at the center of the Ancient Gold Empire. As we descended the spiral staircase, the power in the air grew stronger and stronger. While that was in part because we were getting closer to the dragon, I could also tell that my approach was causing the dragon to stir.

But even though the power that filled the air should have been suffocating, I didn't feel the least bit bothered by it. In contrast, it felt more like I was being wrapped up in a warm blanket.

At some point, however, the emperor began to buckle, unable to continue further. No matter how powerful he was as a mystic, no matter how he fed off the dragon to sustain himself and his own powers, it seemed he still couldn't approach the dragon itself.

That was all the more reason why I couldn't leave this alone. I told Dijun to head back to the surface and continued downward. Though we were far below where any sunlight could reach us, a faint light still illuminated the staircase, allowing me to see where I was stepping.

That soft glow came from an enormous creature lying at the bottom of the stairs. A beautiful dragon, with scales and wings both glittering gold. A true dragon, guardian of the world, slumbering until the end times.

Though to be quite frank, considering the myths, it was an awful lot smaller than I had expected. I had pictured them as the size of mountains, but this one was only about the size of a small fortress. Of course, there was no guarantee that what I was seeing was the dragon's true form. Actually, considering the power it exuded, I would be much more surprised if it *couldn't* freely

manipulate its size.

I finally found myself standing before the dragon's eyes. Its eyelids slowly lifted, the beautiful golden orbs within turning to me.

"Ohhh, ancient friend. Have you come to wish for the end of this world?"

Its thoughts alone set the air about us shaking, yet it still felt gentle.

"No, of course not. I just wanted to see you sleeping. Sorry for waking you up." Stepping closer, I stretched a hand towards its enormous body. I would never wish for something like the end of the world. But somehow, I could guess what was coming next.

"Pay it no mind, friend. However, now that we have met, I must pass judgment. Friend, please teach me of the outside world."

The end times spoken of in regard to the true dragons was a crisis which only they could rescue the world from. For example, if the world were to become overrun with monsters, and the high elves together would prove incapable of exterminating them—though the threat could just as well be from people—then the dragons would act. The dragons would burn the world to ash, turning it into a barren wasteland. Then as high elves, our role would be to fill the world once again with trees, and direct the spirits in rebuilding nature.

Yeah, there was no need for something like that now. So I laughed with a nod.

"It's kind of a long story to tell all at once, though. How about instead I come down here every day and tell you a little bit? It'll be a good story to lull you back to sleep."

Honestly speaking, I was pretty confident in my storytelling ability. I had told Kaeha bedtime stories to help her sleep countless times, and had learned quite a bit from watching the elven minstrel Huratio at work. I was quite confident that I could satisfy even a true dragon with my tales.

I wanted to avoid telling the story all at once so the dragon would have plenty

of time to think calmly over his decision. Not everything I had to say about the outside world was happy and fun. So instead of immediately dumping all of that on it, I'd lay the story out little by little, day by day, calmly and gently.

The true dragon...well, with it being a dragon I couldn't really tell, but it almost seemed to smile. So to start, I decided to talk about myself.

"Let me begin with the story of how I left the Forest Depths behind. Let's call act one 'The Damned Elf and the Damned Dwarf.'"



I thought back. Why had I decided to leave my home in the forest that day? How had I made it out? What had I encountered along the way? And after

making it out of the forest, what did I see? Who did I meet? I thought of all my friends, all the people I loved who were now gone. The elf who supported me back then...and has been supporting me ever since. The damned dwarf who called me a damned elf all the time. I told him everything, in hopes he would understand what I had felt through all my experiences.

Pressing my forehead to the dragon's glittering scales, I closed my eyes and talked. From my mouth, and from my heart, as I did whenever I spoke with the spirits.

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A month passed since I began telling my stories to the dragon. My intention had been just to give him the general gist, but he had been quite determined to pull out as many tiny details from me as possible, so we hadn't made much progress yet. I imagined it would take quite a while before he was satisfied.

We had decided I'd speak for an hour each day. That was definitely the limit for a bedtime story. Any longer would leave you more awake than you had been before, even if you were a dragon. Anyway, I'd patiently tell him my story. Besides, I wasn't in a rush to go anywhere.

Since it was only one hour out of my day, I had expected to have a lot of free time on my hands. But Xuannu had made good on her promise and came to visit with Baimao Laojun in tow, so I found myself a lot busier than I anticipated. She had asked me to make a magic sword for her if I was going to be staying in Ancient Gold Province for a while.

What very much took me by surprise, though, was Baimao Laojun, who upon seeing my magic sword, immediately asked me to teach him blacksmithing. He had plenty of knowledge about the rituals and engravings needed to make a relic like my sword, but he was interested in the techniques used to preserve the inscriptions on the blade, and wanted to learn the skills needed to make those inscriptions in the first place.

He had been the one who invented the paper talismans used by the sages of the empire, and naturally creating them required a certain level of craftsmanship. That said, those who use magic already spend a great deal of time copying texts and ritual inscriptions. They would already have had plenty

of practice, so it wouldn't be much of a stretch to pick up that new skill.

But creating a magic sword required knowledge of both magic and blacksmithing, two professions that otherwise had no connection to each other. Relics hadn't been popular in the center of the continent because it was easier to just use the spells yourself, and also because of the difficulty in creating them properly. I had already been an accomplished blacksmith by the time I started learning magic, and Kawshman's master in magic had been a dwarf, so that second hurdle hadn't been much of an obstacle for us. That was the only reason we had even considered studying relics, and it had been vital to our success in creating magic swords.

From Baimao Laojun's perspective, the idea of a relic that wasn't expendable, but rather was a weapon that could use magic repeatedly, was fresh and interesting. He was quite passionate about learning how to make them himself, despite being an old man with long, white hair.

Okay, I suppose age didn't really matter much when it came to a mystic, but his appearance made me want to ask, "Are you sure, Grampa? Can you even lift a hammer?"

He looked like an old man, and in fact was actually older than me—something I couldn't say about most people I had met—so it didn't feel quite right for me to act like a teacher to him. But he was well aware of my feelings, and I had plenty of time to spare anyway, so in the end I accepted his request. I did kind of owe him one after all the trouble I caused in White River Province, after all. In exchange, he agreed to teach me how to make the wax they used for their talismans, as well as sharing with me his knowledge of rituals.

After hearing that, Xuannu decided that her payment for the sword would be teaching me how to use weapons that were popular in the Ancient Gold Empire.

All at once, my free time was completely booked. Speaking with the dragon, taking Sayr for walks in the forest, working in the forge together with Laojun in a corner of the castle, studying magic, and training with Xuannu...my days were so full that they passed by lightning fast.

As I ate mystic peaches and breathed the air of the forest, if I turned my

attention to them, I could hear the voices of the trees and the spirits. Ever since I had begun speaking with the true dragon, I could hear many other voices more clearly. I felt like I had grown closer with the natural world.

Once again, I was training alongside Xuannu.

While I had known that these would be the heaviest, most forceful weapons I had yet to learn, there was surprisingly more to them that made them unique. Of course, long weapons like these excelled at delivering single powerful blows, but you could also amplify their strength significantly with the barest of movements. Beyond that, it was so easy to target your opponent's lower body that it seemed almost unfair.

On that topic, many of the weapons used in the Ancient Gold Empire were designed for assassinations. In particular, the rope javelin—a throwing knife with a long rope attached to the hilt—was very interesting in how its trajectory seemed entirely separate from the user's movements. It moved like a snake, like a wasp, or like the tail of a monster, but was totally unpredictable.

Xuannu also taught me how to fight against a weapon like this, but the experience made me quite glad I'd never had to do so before. If I had to face something like this without any prior knowledge of it, there was a good chance I would be so intrigued by the weapon I would let my guard down.

But anyway...

"Hey, Xuannu. Today I was talking to the true dragon, or rather the golden dragon, and he said that there were only four true dragons in total. Do you know where the others are?"

With the question still nagging at the back of my mind after my conversation with the dragon that day, I tried throwing it to her. At this point, it wasn't just me telling the stories anymore. The dragon had started teaching me as well. But being hit with such a bombshell left me with no idea how to process it. The revelation had left me feeling much like how Xuannu looked right now.

"N-No, I can't say that I do. Do me a favor and warn me before you bring up subjects like this. You're going to give me a heart attack. And...just to be sure, but that wasn't a joke, right?"

As expected, she didn't know anything. If the mystics didn't know, then at the very least I could say there wouldn't be any dragons in the eastern region of the continent. They were likely on other continents, or under the ocean or above the clouds. If they were nearby, I had thought it might be worthwhile to pay them each a visit and assure them that the current world was in good shape, but it was looking like that would be quite a challenge.

Beyond that, there were apparently also other kinds of dragons, imitations made by the lesser gods. Any story that circulated among people of sightings of dragons likely referred to one of these other breeds. And if there were elves to match the true elves, and other types of dragons to match the true dragons, there were likely some kind of false giants to match the true giants. This world was still full of mysteries.

After I shook my head, Xuannu stopped to take a few deep breaths. After calming down, she turned to look at me.

"The only knowledge I have of ancient peoples like yourself is about the island to the east, that crescent-shaped kingdom in the ocean. Yes, the same one you are heading toward. I have heard that the people in the south there make war with oni to the north."

Oni. It was the first I had heard of that term. I had to wonder if they were at all related to fallen mystics, the vampires and soul eaters.

"The oni living there worship the true giants. To put it in terms you'd understand, the oni are the descendants of demons. When the demons had been on the verge of extinction, the true giants gave shelter to a small group of them, hiding them in the northern reaches of that island."

Demons. In the same way mana caused animals to transform into monsters, people could use it to transform themselves into demons. Humans, elves, dwarves, and any other race could undergo the process. They were deemed too dangerous to tolerate, and so had been wiped out. The high elves had been integral to that extermination.

"At first, there were so few survivors that there was no issue with them living in secret. But as they grew in number, their territory became too small for

them.”

And so war had broken out between them and the people inhabiting better land. As a result, while they had originally been confined to a range of mountains in the north of the island, they now held about half of the island itself.

While the island had been divided into multiple kingdoms in the past, they had since united to face the threat of the oni. That meant the Yosogi School had likely come from one of the nations destroyed by the oni invasion, whose survivors had fled west.

“So even if you head east, I doubt you’ll find what you’re looking for. In the center of that island grows the enormous Fusang Tree, said to have been planted by the true giants. The oni to the north and the people to the south therefore both call their kingdoms ‘Fusou’ after the name they give the great tree. There is nothing there for you to find but war.” After saying that, she returned to swinging her sword. It seemed she had no interest in speaking further on the subject.

An island, on which grew a Fusang Tree. How many years would it be before I set foot there myself? Even if there was nothing there but war, I still wanted to see it for myself. It’s not like I’d had any expectations to begin with. Surely meeting a true dragon was enough of a story to carry home with me, but this Fusang Tree had caught my interest as well. I decided I would return to the center of the continent after I had seen that giant tree for myself.

After making my decision, Xuannu and I didn’t speak of it again.

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In the sweltering heat of the forge, my hammer rang on red-hot steel. Steel had different quirks based on where it was made, and so sang a different tune when you struck it. Working steel here in Ancient Gold Province reminded me of that, as it had back in the Great Grasslands where we obtained our steel in the desert to the north. Actually, this steel had been brought here from Black Snow Province. Did that mean it had been harvested from the bodies of earthfolk?

Though the quality of the steel changed, the heat and sweat of the forging

process was always the same. Stopping my hammer, I wiped the sweat from my face with a heavy sigh. I had reached a good point in my work to take a break. I wanted to get a bit more work done today, but to keep my focus sharp, I'd need a breather to gather myself.

"By the way, what kind of person is Zhang Shegong? I heard he's a mystic that's good at making money, but that sounds like a contradiction to me." My question was to Baimao Laojun, working across from me, who had also stopped. Though we refrained from idle chatter while working, there was nothing wrong with talking while we were on break.

It had been three years since I began teaching him blacksmithing. After all that time, the one thing I had learned was that mystics weren't fair. For example, while I was drenched in sweat, he hadn't sweat a drop. He didn't even seem to notice the heat of the forge. And yet he could still tell what condition the steel was in, and could recognize temperature changes in the furnace. He was basically cheating. Then again, any normal human would probably harbor similar feelings toward me.

"Hmm. I suppose you heard that from Xuannu? That description is very characteristic of the way she speaks, but saying he 'makes money' seems rather narrow-minded," he replied, running his hands through his long, luxurious beard. That was rather rare. I had never heard any of the mystics speak critically of the others before.

"For someone as well-traveled as you, I imagine you have no difficulty with the idea of 'value' being a nebulous concept," he continued, apparently in the mood for quite a bit of talking.

Yes, that was something I knew well. Whether it was the value of gold, possessions, knowledge, information, people, or life, each was regarded differently depending on the place, time, and person evaluating it, and that value was always changing.

For example, the gold and silver coins used in the center of the continent seemed rather cheap here in the empire, and were entirely useless in the Great Grasslands. Buying low and selling high was the fundamental basis of trade, drawing profit from the discrepancies in value. No matter how much you knew

about the sea, that knowledge wouldn't help you once you were living inland. The knowledge of an impending war was worthless once war actually broke out and everyone knew of it. The value of a person was different in a country where slavery was banned and a country where their labor was essential for surviving the winter. Killing a person in peacetime was a grave offense, but the taking of life lost all weight on a battlefield.

After thinking for a time, I nodded. Money could buy anything you needed. Good quality items were good no matter where you took them. Skills and knowledge were more precious than gold. Control of information meant control of the world. People deserved respect. Life was the most valuable thing of all. I liked to think these things were all true, and in many cases they were, but there were times when they weren't. Though maybe that was all just semantics.

"As such, material wealth is of little value to mystics like us, with such long lives. Well, I suppose that snake likes being rich, but it's nothing more than a hobby." Laojun continued, growing a little more heated. "Zhang Shegong's specialty is in manipulating value. He can step into a worthless village and develop a profitable industry there. He can manipulate the information he has to increase the value of things. He loves people and ensures those under him prosper, but he also knows how to coldly cut them off. That is because he can manipulate the value of a person within himself."

To put it in other words, Zhang Shegong was skilled in dominating economics...no, more accurately, dominating people. He was basically a ruler. I could sort of tell what Laojun was trying to say. But it was still barely a vague concept, pieced together from my experiences traveling this world and from my previous life.

"At present, though it has the advantage of facing the sea, Blue Sea Province is far and away the most prosperous in the kingdom. In contrast, Black Snow Province is the poorest. Though it is indeed a brutal land, Xuannu lacks the talent to develop it properly."

His words were harsh, but they seemed to be the truth. I had no doubt that it was a point of incredible frustration for Xuannu, given how she loved the earthfolk living there as her own children.

Laojun looked hard at me, as if trying to see how much I had understood. And then he nodded, satisfied.

“Allow me to say a little more. Xuannu’s specialty is ‘determination.’ Aside from Cui, her indomitable drive makes her the most powerful of the mystics here. Moreover, the earthfolk she has raised could crush any of the other provincial armies. She is skilled not only in devoting herself to a craft or study, but also compelling others to do the same.”

So her abilities extended to her skills as a mystic as well, not just in combat? And yet she was still unable to match Longcui Dijun. The emperor was certainly well situated as the head of the five mystics. He was entirely unfathomable.

“Huang Mu is capable of understanding the hearts of people, and is unnaturally good at taking hold of them. Be on guard if you ever meet her. If you let your guard down, you’ll be hers in an instant,” he finished with a laugh.

What was that supposed to mean? I supposed they were all immortal mystics. In their long lives, there was a good chance conflict had arisen between them at some point.

Quite some time had passed before I realized it. If we didn’t return to work soon, I’d miss my goals for the day. However there was one last thing I wanted to ask. Well, actually there were two, but I felt it was best to avoid the topic of the emperor.

“On that note, aside from magic, what’s *your* specialty?” So I asked about him instead.

Longcui Dijun was the most mysterious of the mystics. Right now I was on good terms with all of them, but there was no guarantee that would always be the case. That was why Huang Mu and Zhang Shegong had avoided meeting me, and why I avoided probing too deeply into the emperor himself.

Laojun gave a faint smile. “Study, imitation, and thinking. So, master, please continue to teach me. Add your skills to my own, so I might become even more rich. Come, let us get back to work!”

I felt somehow like he had both answered the question and avoided it. It felt like I had been tricked by a cat. However, it didn’t feel bad in the least. So I

picked up my hammer, once again immersing myself in my work.

◇◇◇

Seven years passed since I began speaking with the golden dragon. To be quite honest, even I was quite surprised by how well I could tell the story of my life.

Laojun and Dijun both ended up taking a liking to Sayr for some reason, one day bringing in another horse from somewhere to live alongside him. The two had children, and a portion of the castle was sectioned off for them to exercise and graze. I was starting to wonder whether I should take Sayr any further with me on my journey. He was still quite attached to me, and his children grew quite close to me as well, but there was no doubt that the life they lived here was the best they could find.

I had always intended on letting go of Sayr when my journey demanded it. Of course, I intended to be quite strict with determining who I'd leave him with, but I doubted I'd find someone better to take care of him than the mystics. Leaving Sayr with them was probably the best option...without accounting for how lonely it would make me feel.

The stories I shared with the golden dragon finally reached my time in the Ancient Gold Empire. It wouldn't be long before my stories came to an end, and it would be time for me to travel once again. But at this point I was well accustomed to farewells. All that was left was to pick the best path forward.

After seven years of practice, I had grown somewhat proficient in the use of the longsword, but even Xuannu was starting to praise my Yosogi style swordsmanship.

"It's like that style of swordsmanship was made just for you. Well, I suppose technically it was, wasn't it? It's really a shame your old master has already passed away. I would have liked to meet her, even if only once." Or so her praise often went.

Though really, she wasn't praising me as much as she was the style itself, so she was really praising Kaeha. Hearing her admiration for Kaeha made me far happier than anything she could have said about me, so I had no problem with that at all.

After learning how to use longswords and pole weapons, I felt my swordsmanship had taken a decisive step forward. In particular, my understanding of distance was much deeper now. Little by little, step by step, I was slowly growing. Though only a handful of decades wasn't nearly enough time, after a few hundred years, I would reach the peak that Kaeha had shown me. The seven years I spent here had reaffirmed that goal in my heart.

Though I was still in the middle of my journey, when I stopped and looked back on the way I had come, I saw so many things that I had gained already. However, carrying around something huge like a polearm would be a hindrance in my travels, and I would barely have any opportunity to use it.

"So I've come today to tell you again that I'll be leaving soon. As of right now, I've run out of stories to tell you. So that ends my tale." After saying that, I pulled my forehead off of the dragon's scales.

His large eyes narrowed.

"Ah, friend. The time we spent together has been greatly pleasing. Anger, sadness, happiness, love...and this leftover feeling of heartbreak and satisfaction. You truly live in a wonderful world."

The dragon shook with its quite exaggerated speech. A small handful of scales dropped to the ground in front of me, taking me by surprise.

"Old friend, I apologize for having nothing more interesting to offer, but please take these as a gift. I imagine you will find some use for them. Though they hardly make up for the time you have exhausted to tell me of your world, I hope you will accept them."

I tried picking up one of the scales, discovering it was rather thin and extremely light...but of course, it was huge. Each one was about the size of a good shield.

What do I do with these...?

He called me friend, so there was no need for him to give me anything.

Seeing my confused look on how to deal with the scales, the golden dragon gave a small chuckle.

“There is no need for me to raze such a wonderful world. I will return to sleep for a time. Should you find yourself back here someday, I would love nothing more than to hear more of your stories.”

With that, the dragon closed his eyes.

Ah, that was actually not a bad idea. Someday I’d be overflowing with stories to tell, and it would be fun to have such an attentive audience.

“Good night, old friend. Until next time.” With that, I turned around. My role here in the Ancient Gold Empire had come to an end.

The only problem that remained was what I should do with these scales. Like, seriously. What *could* I do with them? They weren’t exactly something I could walk around with, nor could I just casually hand them out to people. The dragon made it sound like he expected me to make them into something...but was I capable of that?

If I could break them down into smaller pieces, I could stick them together into something like armor, or make them into the lining for a cloak. If I could melt them, it might be interesting to try mixing them with metal as well. But these were the scales of a true dragon. I doubted I could break them at all, let alone melt them down.

Well, after I made it back to the surface, I’d talk to the mystics about it. In any case, there were too many to just spend on myself.

The golden dragon’s gift—or maybe more accurately, his prank—had extended the duration of my stay a little. But I didn’t mind at all. Really, I was excited more than anything. The next time I came here to speak with the golden dragon once more, I’d start with the story of what I did with his scales. In any case, the world would continue on for a long, long time.

The next stage of my story would be the island nation to the east, the land

where the Fusang Tree grew and the Yosogi School found its roots. I could hardly imagine what would be waiting for me there.

Excerpt — Dripping Memories

Grasslands, Banquets, and Horsing Around

The Balm people did not stay long in one place, instead traveling around the Great Grasslands as they raised their livestock. Most of the other nomads living there had a similar lifestyle, I supposed. The constant movement was to ensure their livestock, horses, sheep, goats, cattle, and camels, didn't exhaust the supply of grass in any one location. Their migration usually sent them north or south, but it occasionally took them east and west as well.

Of course, they weren't just blindly wandering around the plains. They traveled between fixed locations, rotating between large pastures throughout the year. The growth of the grass they relied on was influenced significantly by the weather, so migrations only happened after consulting with the chief of the tribe and the oracle of the wind. If the grass in the usual place hadn't grown satisfactorily, they had alternatives they could fall back on.

However, the current Balm tribe had no chief, so their oracle—the Child of the Wind, Zelen—was left to make the decision on her own. Four years had passed since I began living with the Balm people. Until recently, the elders of the tribe had advised Zelen in her decisions, but now those elders were gone.

Today, a large fire had been built in the center of the camp in preparation for a great feast. It was a party, to say goodbye to their current home and pray for safety in their migration to the next. The Great Grasslands were home to wolves and other beasts, as well as the monsters that were born from them, so traveling between settlements could occasionally be dangerous. The wild animals and monsters typically targeted livestock, but those who guarded them could also fall prey. So before any migration, the Balm people always held a party like this to leave behind at least a few positive memories.

Once again, an earthenware vessel was passed to me. I drained it in a single go. I had long since grown accustomed to the sweetly sour and faintly foaming fermented mare's milk that they drank here.

Honestly speaking, as far as alcohol went, it was far too weak for my tastes, but I guess it wasn't my place to demand luxury. We had traded for some stronger spirits from kingdoms to the south, but getting drunk on those now would make the next day's travel much more difficult. With that in mind, sticking to the fermented mare's milk was the safest option. At least I could make up for what it lacked by enjoying the food before me.

Piled up on one of the large plates before me was a special mutton dish made just for this day. Grabbing a bone that seemed to be a rib, I started biting off mouthfuls of meat. It had the pleasant flavor of roasted meat, seasoned well with rock salt. Next, I reached for a bowl of soup, which was also filled with generous chunks of meat.

Ah, I could recognize this one by smell. This was goat meat boiled in the soup. Of all the animals the Balm kept, goat meat had the strongest odor. Making it into a soup drew the scent out even more, making it quite a difficult dish for those who weren't fond of the smell. I, however, had long been accustomed to even the bizarre meat of monsters. Something like this was no issue for me.

Drinking down the soup, I popped the leftover chunks of meat into my mouth. As much as I'd grown used to eating with my hands, soup really would have gone down better with a spoon or chopsticks.

I spent a good amount of time enjoying the food of the banquet before my night was interrupted.

"Warrior Acer!" One of the young men stood, calling my name. I could feel a burning passion in the gaze he turned on me. "As a warrior of the Balm, I, Zeelam, challenge you!" he declared, pointing a fist towards me.

Ah, I get it. So that's what this is.

Not too long ago, he had proposed to Zelen, but she had rejected him. I had no idea why she had turned down one of the most prominent warriors of the Balm tribe, but it seemed Zeelam hadn't given up quite yet. If he could best me, Zelen's teacher, her attitude toward him might change. Even if it didn't, he would gain more support in his endeavor from the rest of the tribe, improving his chances for his next attempt. That seemed to be what he was going for, at

least.

But even though we were both warriors, he knew there was no way he could match me in swordsmanship or archery. Of course, if it was horsemanship, he'd run circles around me, but challenging someone from beyond the grasslands to a contest in that skill would be more shameful than anything. So in the middle of this banquet, where weapons were forbidden, he wanted a contest of fists.

He must have thought that it'd be an easy fight, considering my slender frame. He had referred to me as a warrior, not as the envoy of the wind. It was a very Zeelam-like way of challenging someone, trying to force me to fight on his terms.

This sounded like it was going to be fun. I didn't know why he was so interested in Zelen, nor did I much care. Had he been charmed by her appearance? Did he admire her way of life? Or did he hope marrying her would help him secure the position of chief? I didn't mind either way.

The only thing that mattered was that right now, he was challenging me. If it was out of love, that was fine. For ambition, then no problem. I took no issue with people picking a fight with me while we drank. Rather, I gladly welcomed such challenges.

Challenging me in an area they excelled in wasn't something I saw as unfair. I'd sooner praise them for making such a tactical decision than berate them for it. But if he had picked a fist fight thinking it would be easy, he was in for a rude awakening.

I stood up, pulling my gloves from my pocket and slipping them on. "I accept your challenge. But I should warn you, I'm quite good at fighting."

No dwarf could easily best me in a fist fight, let alone a human. If he wanted to win, he'd have to squeeze out every ounce of strength he had.

Zeelam seemed to take my smile in response as a sign of underestimating him, as he immediately launched forward. But instead of lunging directly into a punch, he dropped low, aiming to tackle my legs out from under me.

It was quite a good feint. There was no sign of his rush being for show, so most people would be too distracted by his fists to respond properly to an

attack on their legs. Unfortunately for him, I had spent a very long time learning Yosogi School swordsmanship. Reading an opponent through their eyes, posture, and center of gravity was easy enough for me. And while I didn't know what they called it, tackling someone's legs out from under them was a technique I had seen from the Balm already.

I stepped forward into his tackle, bringing a knee up to meet his face. If he had been expecting a counterattack, there was a good chance I would have missed. Even if he couldn't avoid the knee entirely, a slight change in angle could greatly reduce the damage it would inflict. If that had happened, the tackle would no doubt knock me over, and I'd be at a major disadvantage.

However, he had been relying entirely on the success of his feint, and so took the knee directly to the face. No matter how seasoned a warrior he may have been, such a vicious and unexpected blow was too much for him, and so predictably, he immediately crumpled to the ground.

It was perhaps too harsh to say he'd let his guard down, but he had failed to predict what would happen, and really did lack the strength, endurance, and fighting spirit to deal with the situation. Any dwarf I knew would have kept coming at me after taking a knee to the face like that, and they especially wouldn't just pass out. Believe me, I had learned that first hand. If you weren't at least that tough, you couldn't fight me at all. Okay, maybe that was going too far.

If Zeelam had tried to come at me properly rather than attempt to take me by surprise, it would have been a better fight. Basically, he had made an error in judgment which led to him using the wrong strategy. All the calculations in the world wouldn't help if there was a mistake in them.

Unfortunately, the same went for me. I hadn't held back as much as I should have, so the fight was over before I could really have any fun. My desire to fight was still smoldering, unsatisfied. I didn't even get to punch him.

The fight had ended so abruptly, the crowd around us fell into a shocked silence. It had kind of ruined the atmosphere of the party. When fighting over drinks, it was no fun unless all the spectators around you egged you on. Some among them might find the situation too tense, but you could apologize to

them afterwards.

“That wasn’t nearly good enough. Is that the best you Balm warriors can manage? Come on, who’s next?!” So I breathed fresh air on the waning fire, giving a small jab at their pride to invigorate their fighting spirit.

And exactly as I had planned, young warriors began standing up one by one to challenge me. Seeing someone as powerful as Zeelam so handily defeated, they knew beating me would be difficult. But one after another, they rose up to show off just how strong the Balm tribe was. What happened after could only be called “horsing around.”

A young woman watching began to cheer on the second challenger. The two had been betrothed, their marriage to happen in the near future. So as a wedding gift to them, I let him get a free punch in on me. I had no obligation to take a second, though, so I met it with a counter. He managed to keep his wits about him after that blow, and stepped in to follow up with a headbutt. His boldness began to stir up the whole crowd, not just his fiancée.

The “festivities” continued long into the night, leaving I and the rest of the Balm warriors covered in injuries.

We were forced to delay the migration by another day as we all recovered, everyone being lined up to get scolded by Zelen afterwards. Of course, not even I could escape the lecture. But as much as she tried to scold me, there was a cheerfulness in her expression she couldn’t quite hide. It was as if she had just come down from a huge laughing fit, and was now trying hard not to relapse back into it. I was sure she had found the absurd night before just as fun as the rest of us.

No matter how weak the drink was, a fight after alcohol was all water under the bridge afterward. So as her harsh words still stung my fresh wounds, it was a somehow pleasant sensation.

Wise Horse of the Forest

I stood alongside Sayr, brushing him down.

While staying in Ancient Gold Province, the elves that served Longcui Dijun took care of Sayr for me, but I still did what I could to find time to brush him myself. He usually accepted his grooming quietly and calmly, but today he was constantly fidgeting and pressing his head into me.

He really was a smart horse. It seemed he realized I had lots of spare time today, and was eager to have me all to himself. It was quite cute to see, but also made me feel bad for him, since it meant he was usually holding back around me.

Between talking with the golden dragon, learning magic from Laojun, teaching him blacksmithing in turn, and learning martial arts from Xuannu, I had become rather busy since coming to Ancient Gold Province. I was barely spending time with Sayr at all anymore, in comparison to how much we'd been together while we were traveling. But he recognized how busy I was, so he stood quiet and still to help me get the brushing done as soon as possible.

Yes, he was being considerate of me. But today, Laojun and Xuannu had returned to their own provinces, so I barely had anything to do. It seemed the two of them needed to make regular visits home. I imagined they had to maintain the environment there, on top of making decisions as the governor of the province. I didn't expect Sayr to understand the responsibility the mystics carried...as smart as he was, he was still a horse. But he did seem to understand that I had free time on my hands.

I guess I'd spend the day relaxing with him, then. I had already finished my conversation with the golden dragon. Getting a chance to ride Sayr around for the first time in a while sounded like fun.

Once I had made that decision, Sayr suddenly calmed down and stopped pushing his head into me. It was like he wanted to finish the brushing so he could go out as soon as possible. He really was a smart horse, but I found it a little unfortunate. I quite enjoyed playing around with him while brushing him.

Once our preparations were complete, I hopped into the saddle. There was a little bit of space around the castle in the center of Ancient Gold Province, but it quickly turned into forest. However, the trees would open a path for me if I

asked them to, so...why not try running today?

I put my hand on Sayr's back, feeling his desire to go all out. So it was my job to make a place for him to run.

"Sorry, but could you open a path for us? We want to run a bit," I called out to the trees. The leaves rustled as their trunks slid out of the way for us. If you looked at it from the sky, it probably would have seemed like someone had split the forest in two.

Normally, the trees moved in a slower, more relaxed manner for me, but that wouldn't be good enough if we wanted a place for Sayr to run. Sayr seemed to recognize the forest's good will toward us. With a cheerful neigh, he took off in a canter through the trees, quickly shifting into a full gallop.

The scenery around us whizzed by as we raced through the forest. It had been the first time Sayr had been able to run at full speed in quite a while, but it felt like he was going even faster than when he had run across the grasslands. I thought it might have been an illusion created from running through an unfamiliar environment...but no, he was definitely going faster than usual.

Was he being influenced by the golden dragon's power as well? Or was it an effect of the mystic peaches I had fed him from time to time? It may have even been a combination of both. Neither the mystics nor the spirits had warned me of anything, so for now it seemed the changes in Sayr were only positive. His legs were faster, and his body was stronger.

But at this rate, wouldn't he eventually turn into a monster? To be fair, the process of an animal transforming into a monster wasn't necessarily a bad thing. The monsters that attacked people already had a violent nature that was just being exacerbated by their new strength.

Quiet, peaceful animals that turned into monsters didn't usually attack people. Of course, that was only when people didn't go out of their way to bother them. It was said that the horses of the Great Grasslands nomads inherited the blood of gallant horse monsters that populated the area. In a way, the changes occurring in Sayr right now were just a return to his ancestral characteristics.

Sayr ran at a full tilt for a while, but eventually had his fill and returned to a gentler pace. He didn't appear particularly tired, but his desire to get out and stretch his legs seemed to have been satisfied. I slipped off his back and retrieved some mystic peaches. Though I hesitated for a while, I decided to feed him one. The way he happily chomped at the fruit was really cute.

Stroking his nose, I decided to stop and take a break for a while. Once we were done, I'd climb back in the saddle, and we'd go for another run through the forest.

A Good Friend

In the end, I wasn't sure which of us was the first to think of it. Looking back, maybe it had been something we were both interested in all along.

If Jizou and I crossed swords, who would win?

The next day, I'd be leaving the earthfolk city in Black Snow Province behind. Jizou was accompanying me with the earthfolk escort to Ancient Gold Province, so it wasn't like we'd be saying goodbye right away, but both of us understood this would probably be our last chance. Ah, or perhaps it was *because* of the other earthfolk accompanying us that he had decided we could finally do it now without worrying about the aftermath.

The wind was strong this day, bringing more ash raining down on the city. We stood facing each other in one of the training grounds in the earthfolk castle, holding our favored weapons. Of course, I was using a wooden sword instead of my magic one, and Jizou was wielding a smooth wooden club instead of the three-bladed monster he normally used. It was just a sparring match, not a fight to the death. Of course, Jizou's strength was plenty terrifying even in this friendly competition.

"Acer, of the Yosogi School." I gave a curt introduction. Now that I thought about it, this may have been the first time I'd properly introduced myself to him.

We had met at the wine house in White Tail, where we had associated as bouncer and customer. Though never really speaking directly, we slowly

became familiar with each other and naturally ended up fighting side by side. We had hit it off after that, traveling together to Black Snow Province, but never actually formally introduced ourselves.

"Student of Wanggui Xuannu, Jizou of Obsidian." His lips curled upward as he introduced himself in turn. He was probably thinking the same thing as me. Either he had guessed what I was thinking, or stumbled across the same realization on his own.

Either way, the two of us really were natural born friends. That was all the more reason why I wanted to fight him.

I was the first to make a move. Though Jizou had surrendered his usual weapon, he was no less powerful without it. If I took a solid hit, I'd be thoroughly crushed. Now that we finally had the chance to spar, I would have regretted letting it come to such a quick conclusion.

Staying light on my feet, I darted around him, attacking with stabs rather than slashes. Though he could leverage his power to move quickly, I had the advantage when it came to agility. I used stabbing attacks to avoid having our weapons clash. It wasn't much of a problem if Jizou used his club to block my sword, but if he met my attack with an attack of his own, I'd be easily blown away. Though since the sword was made of wood, with his strength, he'd probably just smash the sword itself.

So, I stabbed. This kind of attack didn't need any particular weight behind it, just sharpness. It didn't need a lot of movement either. Jizou wasn't the kind of opponent I could overcome with plain persistence. With fierce and precise movements, I pried open a hole in Jizou's defenses and struck.

He grimaced and retreated a couple steps, bringing his club up between us, but I didn't relent. When your opponent retreats, press your advantage. Don't give them room to breathe.

But I couldn't get too close. Though he was using a wooden club, his knees and elbows were also fearsome weapons. If I closed in too much, he'd turn his deadly body against me directly. However, luring him into doing so could open his defenses up for another attack.

I continued darting around him, moving left, right, forward, and backwards. I used quick, sharp, and sudden movements to keep him guessing. Of course, I was moving far more than he was, meaning I was burning through my stamina that much quicker, leaving my breathing ragged. But as much as I was a swordsman, I was also a blacksmith. I was confident in my stamina and focus, and had no problem dealing with being short on breath.

In contrast, for as much power as was hidden in Jizou's body, I doubted he could go all out for very long. From what I had seen during our journey here, he only ever used his full strength in short bursts. For example, taking a single huge leap into the air, or at just the moment of impact when attacking. He brought everything he had in those brief moments, but otherwise restrained himself.

Though this was all just my personal theory, it seemed to me that earthfolk were incredibly powerful, but it took a tremendous amount of energy to feed that output. They were famed to be resilient against hunger and thirst, but I suspected that was because they were intentionally living in a constant state of reservation, minimizing the amount of energy they consumed.

After all, while we were still in White River Province, I had seen Jizou eat an incredible amount. Once we crossed the border into Black Snow Province, his intake sharply decreased. In short, earthfolk were remarkably good at tuning themselves to match their immediate environment.

If so, then that was the weakness I'd exploit. Of course, it went without saying that a warrior as skilled as Jizou was well aware of his own weaknesses. I couldn't imagine he'd fail to see what I was doing and respond appropriately.

As I approached to strike once more, JIzou suddenly surged outwards, stomping the ground with incredible force. The floor beneath us shook, hard enough that I thought for a brief moment the earth spirits had been involved. The moment his foot impacted the ground, a sound like an explosion rang out and a shockwave hit my body. Broken fragments of the floor shot out towards me like cannon balls.

Sensing the danger, I broke off my attack for an instant...but also stopped moving my feet. That was without a doubt the greatest opening I had shown in our fight so far. Naturally, Jizou had no intention of letting that opening go,

spinning his club as he lunged toward me. Standing stock still, there was nothing I could do to defend against his attack.

Or so he thought. But once again, I was moving. My movements were sudden, as if I had planned this all out in advance.

If I don't want you to remain stuck in that incomplete stage, I need to show you a style of swordsmanship you'll want to emulate no matter the situation. Even if it comes while falling, while sleeping, or while taking a surprise attack.

Kaeha's words passed through my mind. Yes, what I was using now wasn't a part of the Yosogi School. This was something she had learned just to teach me. It was Kaeha's...it was *our* swordsmanship. Even from an imperfect posture, even when in a state of disarray, unleash an almost perfect attack.

I swung my sword up to intercept Jizou's strike.

With a crack, the wooden sword burst into pieces. It was exactly what I expected to happen if I tried to block one of his strikes. But it wasn't just my sword. Jizou's club had met a similar fate, unable to take the force of my own attack.

I tossed aside the hilt of the broken sword and laughed. Jizou joined me in laughing, throwing away the remnants of the club he was holding.

My arms hurt, as did my shoulders. Jizou, on the other hand, looked entirely unharmed. Earthfolk really were resilient. It made me think back to my fist fights with dwarves, which made my laughter continue.

At any rate, I had no desire to challenge Jizou to a fistfight. We had expressed ourselves plenty already. Any more damage than this and I'd have trouble making the journey tomorrow. Actually, my arm already *really* hurt, enough so that I wasn't sure how I'd make it the next day. But if I was the only one complaining about being sore, it would feel like I had lost somehow.

So instead, I stuck out my aching hand toward him. I hadn't lost. This was an offer of a draw. Jizou took my hand in his, gripping firmly.

"Let's do this again someday."

Side Stories — Fragments of Meeting

Inn in the City of Wheat

The crude laughter of men filled the dining hall. The source was a group of “adventurers” looking more the part of street thugs, who had come to town a month ago. They didn’t stay at our inn, yet every day they were here, ordering the cheapest food possible and staying as long as possible. They were also constantly threatening the other patrons who came to eat or stay the night.

It was clear they were here in an attempt to disrupt our business. They had probably been hired by another large inn in town, judging by the fact they stayed there every night.

Apparently the owner of that inn two generations ago had been shot down by my grandma a long time ago. She had been quite popular for her beauty, but only had an eye for the looks of her suitors, so had turned no small number of men away. The guy in question had been quite handsome in his time, but grandma hadn’t seen much in him. Anyway, the point was that for a long time, we had been at odds with each other.

Three years ago, when I was about twelve years old, their son had come to confess to me as well, but I turned him down too. Oh, but I hadn’t rejected him because I didn’t like the way he looked or anything. But I didn’t like the way he looked down on us for having a smaller inn than they did. Well, he wasn’t exactly a winner in the looks department either, but that meant little to me after the way he ridiculed us.

Anyway, now we had to deal with this group of annoying ruffians. My dad and my grandparents were quite good looking, and excellent cooks, but they weren’t strong enough to throw out a bunch of rowdy adventurers. If we called the guards we’d get a temporary reprieve from them, but they weren’t breaking things or hurting anybody, so it wasn’t like they’d be arrested.

This was just a guess, but I figured that bigger inn was paying them to mess with us. I had intended to go tell them off myself, but mom and dad had

stopped me. But every day our number of guests coming to stay and customers coming to eat were dropping, so we had to do something.

We had a little bit of money ourselves, so we could hire adventurers of our own. But once we did that, the conflict between us and the other inn would get much more serious. Grandma said that I didn't have to worry, that things would work themselves out soon enough...but I couldn't imagine things changing any time soon.

I held back as long as I could, but eventually I reached my limit. I knew we had to take action. But when the day I resolved myself to confront them came, when I finally snapped and decided to give them a piece of my mind, things worked out just like grandma had said.

It all started when a stunning woman walked through the front door.

"Excuse me. Is Nonna here? Also, there are six of us who'd like to stay the night, though we need food for eight..."

And for some reason, she knew grandma's name. Now that I thought about it, grandma always bragged about a beautiful elf who had stayed at the inn a long time ago. Was this the woman she was talking about? She *did* have those pointed ears.

I stared back in stunned silence. Seeing that, she gave me a gentle smile...but then we were interrupted.

"Well well, look at you. You're an elf, huh lady? I wouldn't stay here if I were you. Try that place across the street. Or would you rather stick around and serve us drinks?"

Yes, the adventures that had been harrassing us the whole time were still here. The elf woman looked at me and the adventurers, then nodded to herself for some reason.

"Just two stars. So you're dropouts, too afraid to actually fight monsters. You should really learn how to pick your battles," she replied, her voice terrifyingly cold. Even I felt a wave of frigid air pass through the room.

But what was she trying to do? Insulting them like that would just make them

angry. I desperately looked around, trying to think of a way to cover for her if the adventurers tried to hurt her. But instead, those ruffians looked at her with pale faces and wide eyes.It was like the cold blast I felt earlier had actually frozen them in place.

What was going on here?

“Ah...er, umm, that’s uhh, not what I meant. A-Anyway, sorry, but uh, we gotta go.” Stumbling over themselves both in word and action, the adventurers found themselves unable to leave with the woman blocking the door. When she finally stepped aside to let them pass, they beat a hasty retreat outside.

No way. Were they scared of her? Men that rough were scared of some random woman? Sure she was an elf, but she didn’t look *that* strong.

In response to my confusion, she gave me a gentle smile. “Did I surprise you? I’m sorry. I haven’t seen such pathetic adventurers in a long time, so I got a little angry. It sounds like you’ve got a bit of a situation here. Would you mind telling me about it?” she said, as if trying to console me.

The woman—her name was apparently Airena—was indeed an elf, just as she appeared.

“Ah, it’s a good thing Lord Acer didn’t come after all. If he had seen all that, who knows what he’d have done...” After listening to my story, Airena let that slip. This Lord Acer person seemed to be a big shot among the elves, and she said he was the elf my grandma met a long time ago. But he wasn’t able to visit himself, so instead Airena had come to deliver a letter from him. Grandma was really disappointed she couldn’t meet him herself, but from the way Airena talked, I was glad we didn’t have to deal with such a scary person.

After delivering the letter and talking with grandma for a while, Airena said she’d do something about the other inn. She said was going to go to the lord of the city, the Duke of Travoya, and make him put a stop to the harassment. I wasn’t sure why she was so sure she could do that, but grandma said that as an elf, that sort of thing was normal enough. I guess I had to believe her.

What was a much bigger deal though, was that Airena and her friends from an elven caravan decided that from now on, every time they visited Janpemon,

they'd stay at our inn. A caravan staying at the inn was nothing out of the ordinary, but these elves were special. They were traveling around the human kingdoms, acting as representatives of the elves who lived in forests around the continent.

I didn't really understand what that meant, but apparently as far as Travoya was concerned, they were something like diplomats, high ranking government officials and nobles. Any harassment going on at a place they decided to stay would be a disgrace to the duke, so he would waste no time in crushing anyone that tried it.

And at the same time, news of the elven caravan staying at our inn brought many curious people to come visit as well. We were already a fairly small inn, so the sudden surge in popularity had us filled to bursting in no time. If the rooms were constantly packed, we wouldn't be able to accommodate the elven caravan when they eventually did visit.

That defeated the whole purpose, so it was decided we'd expand the inn, all within a few months since Airena's first visit. The bakery beside us and one of the houses behind us understood the situation, and agreed to sell their buildings to us. Of course, we paid them well enough that they could move their business and set up shop somewhere else in the city, but investigating further turned up the duke's own hand behind their decision to sell. But with the expansion of the inn, our family wasn't quite enough to manage the whole enterprise, so we also had to hire new people.

Just a few months earlier, I had been puzzled over how to deal with those ruffians harassing us. The situation had totally reversed. When I said it felt like a dream, grandma laughed.

"It does, doesn't it? Those people...no, that person is always making people's dreams come true. I hope you get to meet him too, someday." It didn't seem like she was talking about Airena though. Maybe she meant a different elf.

I asked if she meant the scary guy, but grandma said he was really kind. He had made the sword that was now one of the royal treasures of Travoya, and had been quite the doting father to his adopted son. He was like the wind blowing through the wheat fields, she said.

I started to think, if that’s the kind of person he was...maybe I would like to meet him someday after all.

A Threat to the Ancient Sleeper

How long had it been since the birth of the Ancient Gold Empire? After taming a land gone wild due to the true dragon's rampaging power, we had built a nation and made a deal with the dragon's sacred beasts. The whole empire was created to be its cradle, keeping humans from attacking it, protecting the dragon's sleep to keep its apocalyptic powers at rest. That was about the time I had adopted the name Wanggui Xuannu as well. Yes, long, long ago. So long it felt stupid to try and put a number to it.

Every nation that rises will inevitably fall. Whether short or long, they each have a limited lifespan, just like any person. It was like a law of nature that kingdoms grow, then collapse, and then be built upon by something new.

However, that couldn't be allowed for the Ancient Gold Empire. If this cradle were to be destroyed, and the dragon awaken, it wouldn't be the end of only one nation. The dragon's flames would incinerate the whole continent, if not the entire world. As such, it was imperative that the Ancient Gold Empire survive, and so many measures had been taken to ensure that it would.

For example, dividing the empire into five provinces. Blue Sea Province in the east, White River Province in the west, Red Mountain Province in the south, and Black Snow Province in the north had all been set up as independent but still subservient states. Should any of them fall to corruption or otherwise lose their ability to fulfill their role, they would be crushed by the others and rebuilt from the ground up.

The only exception was Ancient Gold Province in the center. As the resting place for the true dragon, it wouldn't be as easy to rebuild. So instead, it had been filled with trees, to be managed by the forestfolk. These "elves" from the west had long lives and hated change. But above all, they had no interest in the world outside their forest.

Each of the five provinces was ruled by a mystic, whose role was to ensure that the kingdom flourished. However, there was one such leader who had failed, causing their province to be destroyed and renewed. In spite of that, the

Ancient Gold Empire had remained unshaken, persisting for longer than any would think possible for a mortal empire. And of course, it would continue to exist for much, much longer.

However now, the Ancient Gold Empire faced a terrible threat to its very existence, one which the past loss of a single province hardly compared to. Nevermind one province, nevermind the empire; the entire continent—and perhaps even the entire world—was now at risk.

The threat had suddenly appeared in the empire a few years ago. It hadn't just sprung from the earth, of course. The person responsible had very intentionally traveled here from the west, crossing the Man-Eating Swamp and the Great Grasslands on foot to reach us. Seriously, the things he claimed to have done to sate his "curiosity" were absurd.

At first, we had no idea what the nature of this threat was. It was unlike anything that had happened in the empire's history, and far beyond anyone's predictions. But there was no doubt that something was causing the dragon to stir, despite there being no particular commotion in the empire.

Had the dragon been awakening naturally, we would have had no choice but to give up. The dragons would only awake at the end times, but it was inevitable that those times would eventually arrive. You could call that a law of nature as well. If the dragon awoke, deciding it was time for the world to end, we could only accept that our time had run out.

However, if something was actively causing the dragon to awaken, we wouldn't need to resign ourselves to that fate yet. If we could eliminate that interference, we could keep the dragon asleep. So we five mystics turned our eyes to our provinces, searching for what might have been disturbing the dragon's rest.

Baimao Laojun, the governor of White River Province, discovered something ten days after we'd first sensed the change in the dragon's sleep. There had been quite a commotion in one of the cities in his province, caused in part by one of the forestfolk from beyond the empire. This forestfolk had rescued a

child, protected a wine house from attack, and then brought down a band of ruffians in the city by force. It sounded unlike the behavior of any forestfolk I had ever heard of before.

In any other situation, we would have written him off as nothing more than an odd one among the forestfolk We'd have made a note of it and moved on. In this case, however, the forestfolk in question had—exactly once—displayed a power incomparable to that of his kin.

He had used wind to catch a sage's fireballs, crushing them mid-air. If he had used water to extinguish the flame, or created a barrier with wood or earth, it would have made sense. If he had used wind to deflect the fireball, I would have understood. But to catch a fireball mid-air and crush it like that required a tremendous gap in ability over the sages he had been fighting.

Baimao Laojun hypothesized that either this forestfolk had trained himself to the absolute peak of ability, or he was no forestfolk at all. Instead, he could have been one of that ancient race, the true people made by the creator at the beginning of the world.

Under normal circumstances, it would obviously have been the former. The latter was effectively impossible. Though we knew of the true people, their existence was more myth than fact. After all, they were an ancient race on the same level as the true dragon sleeping within the empire. But when we considered the recent stirring of that dragon, a true one arriving in the empire explained everything.

Zhang Shegong, the mystic who ruled Blue Sea Province, immediately proposed we kill him. Baimao Laojun disagreed, as we had no idea what effect killing a true one might have on the dragon's sleep. Huang Mu, the mystic of Red Mountain Province, suggested we make contact and ask him to leave the empire.

I was undecided. The decision would be made by Longcui Dijun, the emperor who ruled in Ancient Gold Province, but it would be a decision made in consultation with the four of us.

"Right now, the true one is traveling with one of my people. It appears he is also heading up towards Black Snow Province. I would like to meet him first,

determine whether he is really a true one, and learn about his nature.” After a considerable deliberation, that was the decision I reached.

Yes, right now the true one was being accompanied by one of the people I had raised. Though he had been quite a handful, he was a tenacious and honest boy. If he had acknowledged the true one enough to travel alongside him, then I wanted to meet him for myself.

After hearing all of our thoughts, the emperor nodded. “Each of your ideas has merit. So first, let us leave things to Xuannu. If she meets with him and finds him amiable, I will meet with him myself. If not...we will request he leaves the empire. Should he refuse that, the five of us will work together to kill him as soon as possible. Is that good enough?”

With the emperor’s decision, it was determined I would meet the true one myself. Acer, the self-proclaimed “high elf.”

For a few years, the threat that was Acer stayed in the empire. Both I and Longcui Dijun accepted him, tasking him with the duty of returning the dragon to its slumber. Baimao Laojun also seemed to take an interest in him. However, though years had passed since his arrival, Zhang Shegong and Huang Mu had yet to meet him.

They had decided that, in the eventuality that Acer proved to be a threat to the empire, or showed evidence he might become one in the future, they wanted to have the ability to make unbiased judgments about him.

I felt like they had made the right choice. I doubted I would be able to treat Acer like an enemy now. After seeing his swordsmanship, hearing the stories of his journeys, and receiving a magically infused longsword that he forged with his own hands, I worried that I might just end up taking his side. I couldn’t say anything about the emperor, but Baimao Laojun likely felt the same way.

Acer really had a mysterious charm about him. I didn’t know whether that was because of his nature as a member of an ancient race, or if that was just the kind of person he was. All I could say was that the two mystics who would never meet him were losing out. With Acer’s knowledge, Zhang Shegong would have learned countless ways of making more money. And he was definitely the

kind of person Huang Mu would like.

Above all, for mystics like us, it was rare to have a person we could talk to as equals. I could honestly say I celebrated the opportunity, and did everything I could to enjoy it while he was here.

That threat to the dragon's slumber had brought an undeniably positive influence to us. Perhaps the dragon had predicted that, and so stirred from his sleep so he might meet Acer himself.

As a new day started, I had to wonder: what would Acer show me today?

The Wind

From the moment I was born, I could feel the wind flying freely to the farthest corners of this vast world. When I was young, I believed I could do the same. But in reality, that was not the case.

How old was I when I noticed the cage woven around me? The customs of my tribe, my obligations, and my role as a child with special powers all served to shrink my world down. Above and below, left and right, forward and backward, everywhere I looked were obstacles, blocking the path of the wind. I couldn't go anywhere.

Of course, that's just a metaphor. The wind was always blowing freely through the grasslands. But it wouldn't take me with it.

My role was to serve as the oracle of the wind. As that title implied, I was tasked with predicting the weather by reading the wind that blew over the grasslands. When rain fell in distant places, it helped the grass that fed our livestock grow. If rain were to fall on us, we needed to either move to keep the livestock dry, or move them into tents to protect them.

My tribe, the Balm people, held such faith in the wind, and it blessed us with the many gifts of the sky and grasslands. I was meant to be a priestess who served the wind and prayed for its blessings. But unlike all of the oracles before me, I could actually hear the voice of the wind.

The people of the tribe called me the "Child of the Wind." I had really thought

that was something to be proud of. But at the same time, I found the title suffocating.

I loved the wind. I could always feel it around me, could always hear its voice speaking to me, so I never considered it to be all that special. But everyone in the tribe, and even my own family, insisted that I was unique. For the tribe, for the tribe, for the tribe, fulfill your role for the tribe.

Despite all that, I still loved my family. In particular, my little brother was very cute, growing close with me regardless of my title. I didn't hate the people of the tribe either. But from time to time, I'd be struck by the strong impulse to break free from everything that bound me, to smash the invisible cage that kept me trapped here. I thought that having to always repress that desire was simply my lot in life.

Yes, right until that incident.

Another tribe on the grasslands—the tribe of Dahlia—began to make war against us. Of all things, their objective seemed to be me. They sought to wed me to their own special Child of Fire, and when the Balm tribe refused to give me up, they attacked. As chief of the Balm people, my father went out to lead our warriors in battle against them, and never returned. Many of our brave, elite warriors were lost alongside him. Unlike me, who could only listen to the voice of the wind, it seemed the rumors that the Child of Fire could use his abilities to fight were true.

With the loss of the chief and our elite warriors, the elders fell into a panic, and we all waited hopelessly for our inevitable annihilation. The Dahlians had retreated for a time to tend to their wounded, but it would not be long before they attacked again. Their objective, me, was still out of their grasp.

Though really, even if the Dahlians had left us alone, we likely would not have survived for long. The grasslands were filled with wolves and other, scarier monsters who always tried to hunt our livestock. Having lost our warriors, moving through the grasslands to find pasture for our livestock would no longer be possible. We would either lose our livestock little by little until we starved and died, or be eaten ourselves by wild animals and monsters.

If that was the case, giving myself up to the Dahlians and having the rest of the tribe absorbed into theirs seemed like the best future. The surviving men would become lower class workers and forbidden from having children, while the women would be wed to the Dahlian warriors, mixing our bloodlines. Even so, compared to a future of starvation or being killed by wild animals, at least we'd still be alive.

However, there was no room for my brother in that future. As the son of the former Balm chief, there was no way the Dahlians would let him live.

Learning all of this sparked no emotion in me. The cage around me would be destroyed, only to be replaced by one even more rigid. I had lost my father, and I would lose my brother, but I would continue to live as the Child of the Wind. I didn't feel angry about it at all. The only emotion that filled my heart was once again the impulse to destroy everything around me.

What did it mean to be the Child of the Wind? There was no freedom for me, to soar in the open air like the wind does. Not for me, who spent all of my strength trying to suppress the inexplicable urge to smash the world binding me to pieces. It felt like my heart was being torn apart.

So I prayed. For the first time since I was born, I begged the wind that had always been at my side to save me. I didn't want to lose my brother. I didn't want to live in a cage. I wanted to destroy this world, to blow it all away.

In response to my prayer, a new wind blew. A huge gust, blowing away the tiny world I had known with a laugh.

He wasn't a human. The wind had brought someone to us who was truly free, as unfettered as the wind itself. He ignored the demands of the elders, crushed the Dahlian warriors single-handedly, and took the Child of Fire captive. But he didn't hurt him. He even began teaching him how to fight. It was like he didn't know a single thing about living in the grasslands.

He was so absurd, so powerful, so free. It made me want to laugh. And yet, because I was the Child of the Wind, he showed me special favor. He said the wind was his friend, and he had come to help me at its behest. But after seeing how he dealt with my brother, maybe it was just that he liked kids. He probably

had spared the Child of Fire and come to my aide for the same reason.

He taught all three of us—me, my brother, and the Child of Fire—all sorts of things, like how to use a sword. He also taught me how to fight with the wind. But the most important thing he taught me was the true nature of the impulse that dominated my heart.

I knew the wind wasn't just kind and gentle, but I had never realized it held the power to throw people up into the sky, or smash people to pieces from above. I had never imagined that a storm could snap a wide tree in two. If you compressed the wind into a small space, then unleashing it could destroy everything around you.

That was the source of the destructive impulse that had always accompanied me. Yes, I was truly like the wind. I doubted he ever knew about the struggles I faced. I had grown so used to hiding my feelings, I hesitated to show him who I really was. I couldn't let go of the idea that if he knew of the violent impulses I felt deep down, he might abandon me, even though I knew that was absurd. But he acted like my fears and struggles were all irrelevant, slowly changing the world around me.

The way he lived, the way he taught us, also made me realize something. Even as a woman, I could still hold a sword. Values and beliefs that the tribe took for granted were not the values and beliefs I had to hold for myself. All I needed to break free from them was a free spirit and my own strength. Once I realized that, the cage around me shattered. Well, maybe the cage was still there. But I no longer felt restrained by it.

At long last, he departed from us. I wanted to ask him to stay, but he wouldn't even turn to look at me. I wanted him to teach me so much more, to guide me forward, but he said his job here was done. Somewhere deep down, I had already known that was how it would end. Holding down a man like him was as impossible as trying to contain the wind itself.

The Child of Fire had compared him to fire as well, warm and gentle, yet at times powerful enough to hurt people. Those words certainly rang true. But even so, I still thought of him as the wind. Free, impossible to take hold of, at

times overbearing and greedy. He was exactly the same as I was now.

I had learned what I needed to know to be free. And I had learned just how small my world was. So I decided I wanted to expand that world outward.

He had said he would teach me nothing more, so it was something I would have to do for myself. I would learn to stretch my world out to the very edges of the grasslands, and even further.

I refused the proposals of the young men from my own tribe, betrothing myself to the new chief of the Dahlia tribe, the Child of Fire. Yes, to Juyal, the boy who I had learned alongside. Many voiced their objections, but no one remained in the tribe of Balm who could stand in my way. Ironically, though in a different way than the Dahlians had wished for, the Balm and Dahlian tribes had become one.

With the Child of Fire and the Child of the Wind together, our new larger tribe would one day hold influence over the entirety of the grasslands. My world would stretch out to the ends of the grasslands. No, even further than that. The story of our people would reach to the southern kingdoms and the empire in the east as well.

And someday, it would reach him, too.

Thoughts Left Behind

Now that I thought about it, though all I was doing was writing a letter, I don't think I had ever been as nervous in my whole life. I was truly blessed to still be having brand new experiences even at my age.

On the desk before me waited a sheet of blank paper. There was a pen in my hand, and an inkwell beside me. My mother was quite skilled at using a horse-hair brush for writing, but I found them a bit difficult. She had tried to teach me numerous times, but I had never quite gotten the hang of it.

But now that I look back on my life, was there anything I was good at besides swordsmanship? As head of the dojo, I taught plenty of students, but I didn't think I was an especially skilled teacher. In particular, when I saw my own son Shizuki teaching after he took over the dojo from me, it made me realize how

inadequate I really had been.

My mother had taken care of the cooking and most of the chores of daily life, and when she passed on, my children, grandchildren, and students took over in her place. Even Mizuha had learned how to take care of a household from her grandmother rather than from me.

I guess I was kind of lacking, both as a teacher and a woman.

Ah, there was one thing I was good at besides swordsmanship. I was an expert at thinking of that man, and teaching him specifically. Before I realized it, that had become my whole life.

I still remembered the day we first met. He was a beautiful person, watching me practice my shoddy swordsmanship that was good for nothing but putting on a show. He was like a character that had stepped out of a fairy tale, so far removed from the brutal nature of the sword.

And yet, the second time we met, he requested that I take him in as my disciple. Every day had been agony, and I saw nothing ahead but dark gray clouds. But that moment had filled my world with color.

He made me cry a great deal. Well, I suppose it hadn't been his fault. Our goodbyes had been painful, but even when he was away and I couldn't rely on him, even when I was engulfed in the despair of our differing lifespans, seeing him again on his return filled me with incomparable joy. I think, however, I could blame him for making me cry on the day he threatened to give up on swordsmanship.

I had been forced to realize that we truly couldn't spend our lives together. He really was like a character from a fairy tale—no, like one who had stepped out of a myth. He was a high elf, and I was but a common person. We had virtually nothing in common. The scale of our lives was incomparable. Our lifespans weren't even close. As members of different races, even if we slept together, I couldn't offer him any children. Our meeting at all was a miracle in the first place.

But that miracle had enchanted me. Of course, the fact that he was a high elf wasn't all that important to me. His kindness, his values, the way he dealt with people, the way he thought, the way he approached swordsmanship,

everything about him seemed so different from the people I knew. Ah, but like he said, even the other high elves living in the forest couldn't empathize with his values, or his way of thinking. The man that had charmed me, Acer, was a truly unique existence.

In the face of these truths, there was a time when I had lost control of myself. Well, it didn't feel that way to me, but that is how my mother described it. There was a time, I supposed, where it felt like everything was going wrong. In particular, working with the dojo had felt like I was just stumbling around in the dark. When I tried to teach new students the same way I had taught Acer, they didn't pick up anything at all.

There was definitely a period of time where I was constantly high strung. With a woman heading the dojo, there was no end to the people who came calling with all sorts of motives. But among it all, there was one thing that taught me to look forward, to live positively: my children, Shizuki and Mizuha.

The weight of having those two with me helped plant my feet firmly on the ground and brought happiness back into my life. Beside them was my mother, eternally patient and always supportive. If it hadn't been for her, I don't think I would have survived. I wouldn't have lasted until Acer's return.

Of course, I couldn't leave a message like that behind for him, so I crumpled the page into a ball and discarded it. I knew that me, my life, and my feelings would be a terrible weight if I were to saddle him with them.

My intent wasn't to express any kind of resentment. I had nothing but gratefulness for the part he had played in my life.

There were only a few things I wanted to express to him. The fact that I loved him. The fact that I had been happy. The fact that my swordsmanship had been engraved in him. And above all, the joy of having him live alongside me.

Hmm...even so, that was still a bit heavy. I was sure he'd cry when I died. That thought made me smile, but also worry a little. So I wanted this letter to be an encouragement to him, to help push him forward. I was but a perch, and he a bird destined to soar among the clouds.

There was something deep inside me, a dark, greedy feeling that wanted us to die together. I wouldn’t live all that much longer, so I imagined I wouldn’t be free of these feelings until the day I died. So in order to suppress them, I set those feelings alight, swinging a sword in my heart. In my heart, because my body was no longer capable of moving much.

If at all possible, I wanted to leave Acer with the picture of my ideal swordsmanship, the craft that had consumed my life.

It took many attempts, and a small amount of hardship, but in the end the letter was finished. Leaving it with Shizuki, I instructed him to give it to Acer after I passed away. And I insisted over and over and over again that Shizuki was not to read it himself. Having my own child read something I wrote like this would be horribly embarrassing.

However, I was a little curious...no, extremely curious how Acer would react when he read that letter. No matter how he reacted, I would never be able to see it...but I hoped it would leave him with a smile.

Side Story — The Creation Game: The Races of Creation

Honestly speaking, I was pretty impatient, and quick to give up. Well, okay, compared to humans, I could stay focused for quite a while on something, but that was just because we perceived time differently. Compared to other high elves or even normal elves, with their slightly shorter lifespans, I was definitely of the impatient type.

Basically, what I'm trying to say is that even though I understood how necessary it was, I had grown quite tired of sharing the stories of my life with the golden dragon every day. I knew, of course, that the fate of the continent may well have hung in the balance, but I couldn't hold on to that nervous feeling for long. The golden dragon enjoyed my stories so much, I had started to feel like there wasn't all that much danger.

That was certainly how I felt now.

"Hey, golden dragon, I want to try something new with you today. I brought this."

Ignoring the dragon's shocked expression, I pulled out a game board and some pieces. For quite a while, I had been finding stones and carving them into the appropriate shapes, all to put this game together.

What is this, friend?

After quietly inspecting the board and pieces for a while, the dragon tilted its head slightly in confusion. Though he had been alive since the time of creation and knew all sorts of things about the past, the dragon knew very little about the present. Satisfied by the dragon's response, I nodded.

"I think I mentioned it before, but it's a game where the pieces are designed after us. You sounded like you were interested in it, so I put together a set of pieces. Look, this one is the dragon. It looks just like you, don't you think?" I lifted up the dragon piece for the golden dragon to see.

It was called “The Creation Game.” My friend Rodna had taught me how to play back when I lived in Vistcourt. As the name suggested, it was a game designed following the motifs of the creation myths of this world, using pieces designed after dragons, phoenixes, spirits, giants, and high elves, the five ancient or “true” races.

The rules were rather complex, allowing for games with two players or four. Each of the pieces followed unique rules for their movements, and the players moved them attempting to capture the pieces of their opponent. However, not just any piece could capture any other. For example, the giant piece could only take high elves, the dragon piece took giants, the phoenix took dragons, the spirits took phoenixes, and the high elves took spirits. Once you had captured pieces, you then put them together into combinations which gave you a score. That was the main thrust of the game.

The length of a game was determined beforehand, usually something like fifty or a hundred moves. The board I had made for the golden dragon wasn’t that big, but the size of the board, the layout of the squares, and the number of pieces used could differ considerably. True masters of the game would play on a board the size of an entire table, and could play a single match for days. Of course, I was no such master, so a normal board game was enough for me.

“So, this board and pieces are a present for you. Unfortunately, I couldn’t really make them in a size that fit you properly.”

With his size, the golden dragon wouldn’t be able to move the pieces on his own, but he could tell me the move he wanted to make and I could do it for him. As long as the two of us were playing together, it should still work fine.

So the people of the present day play games modeled after our kinds? Heh, what a pleasant thought.

The golden dragon’s huge body shook as he chuckled. Like we were stuck in a small pot, the dragon’s laughter caused the air to shake around us, his power swirling out into the atmosphere. I imagined Longcui Dijun was running around in a panic right now, but there was nothing for him to fear.

They neither forgot us, nor fear us, but turned us into pieces for a game. How interesting. Friend, I am grateful for your gift. Please, teach me how to play.

There was no doubt the golden dragon was in a good mood now.

Putting the board down on the floor and lining up the pieces, I explained the rules for the pieces one by one. And so the races of creation played, moving pieces that represented themselves. It was a bizarre experience, and quite an interesting one.

By the way, either because he was so old or because he and his brain were so big, the golden dragon was extremely intelligent. One explanation of the rules was enough for him to memorize them, and he quickly figured out all of my tactics and engrossed himself in the game.

I decided it might be best to teach the mystics how to play as well, in case they needed to help calm the dragon down once I had left.

Afterword

This is Rarutori. Thank you for picking up the third volume of “Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I’m Bored.”

Yes, volume three. This volume was quite the turning point for the series. Though Acer is always meeting and saying goodbye to people, there was a very important parting this time. Beyond that, he also traveled quite far, seeing all sorts of places. I hope you enjoyed the journey along with the wonderful illustrations Ciavis has provided, depicting the places he’s gone.

Jizou looks awesome!

In the afterword of volume two I looked back on the themes of volume one, so this time I’d like to go over the themes for volume two.

The first chapter of volume two was about raising children. Naturally, the focus was on Acer and Win. The theme of chapter two was about what it means to love someone, as well as the meaning of family. Chapter three was meant to show the lives of the dwarves, with chapter four further exploring them. And lastly, chapter five was focused on the interaction between elves and dwarves.

Though it is hardly limited just to volume two, one of the themes of the volume was that everyone makes mistakes through life, Acer included. But those mistakes didn’t invalidate someone or mark the end for them. There are some mistakes you can never make amends for, and some that you can. How you feel about the mistakes you’ve made in life is deeply connected to attaining happiness in your future. Deciding how to live and how to interact with others given these facts is one of the overarching themes for this series.

Though of course, sometimes making a mistake means that you die...

Anyway, let’s get into the alcohol discussion! I still haven’t been able to go out, so I’d like to talk about the Kurand Sake Gacha. Yes, it’s a gacha. I love gachas.

I’m the type to take things rather seriously, so out of self-respect I refrain

from indulging in mobile games much, but when traveling around town, if I have the time, I'm the type to stop and check out the gachapon machines. "I'm getting alcohol, so there's no losing!" That was my attitude toward this one.

To describe how it works, you select a course (indicating the types and flavors you typically like), then pay some money, and they send you something to drink. That's all it is. They're divided into categories of NR, SR, SSR, and LR, and as you can probably guess, LRs are the best (usually, most expensive) ones.

This time I pulled on a five-bottle course (which included rice sake, plum sake, fruit-based drinks, liqueur, and others), and received mostly rice sake. I ended up getting three NR bottles, one SSR bottle, and one limited edition bottle that wasn't in the pamphlet. As a bonus, I also got a bottle of craft beer.

They were all great, but in particular the limited edition one, "NOT FOUND NO. 5" was my favorite. With some salted fish, pickled vegetables, and a 720mL bottle, I knocked myself right out. I'm the kind of person to get really sleepy when drunk...

When I first saw it, I looked at the label and thought "what the heck is this?" Checking on their website, it seems like it was a kind of unique beverage that, while high quality, never made it out into the world for some reason or another. If you wanted to buy that one specifically, you normally had to become a member, but it was good enough to make that worth it.

The other drinks I got were good too, but above all, the excitement of wondering what drinks I was going to get and the chance to experience something new made the whole experience fantastic. The only problem was that, by buying five at a time, I put a lot of pressure on my fridge space. If you can clear that hurdle, I highly recommend it.

Oh, and you don't have to buy five bottles at a time. There are options for three, a set of eight craft beers, or a set of nine small (180 mL) bottles of sake, so if you're at all interested, I highly recommend it.

With that out of the way, the next leg of our journey will take us to the kingdom of Fusang, a country with a very Japanese culture. Of course it won't be identical, so I hope you pick up volume four to see it for yourself.