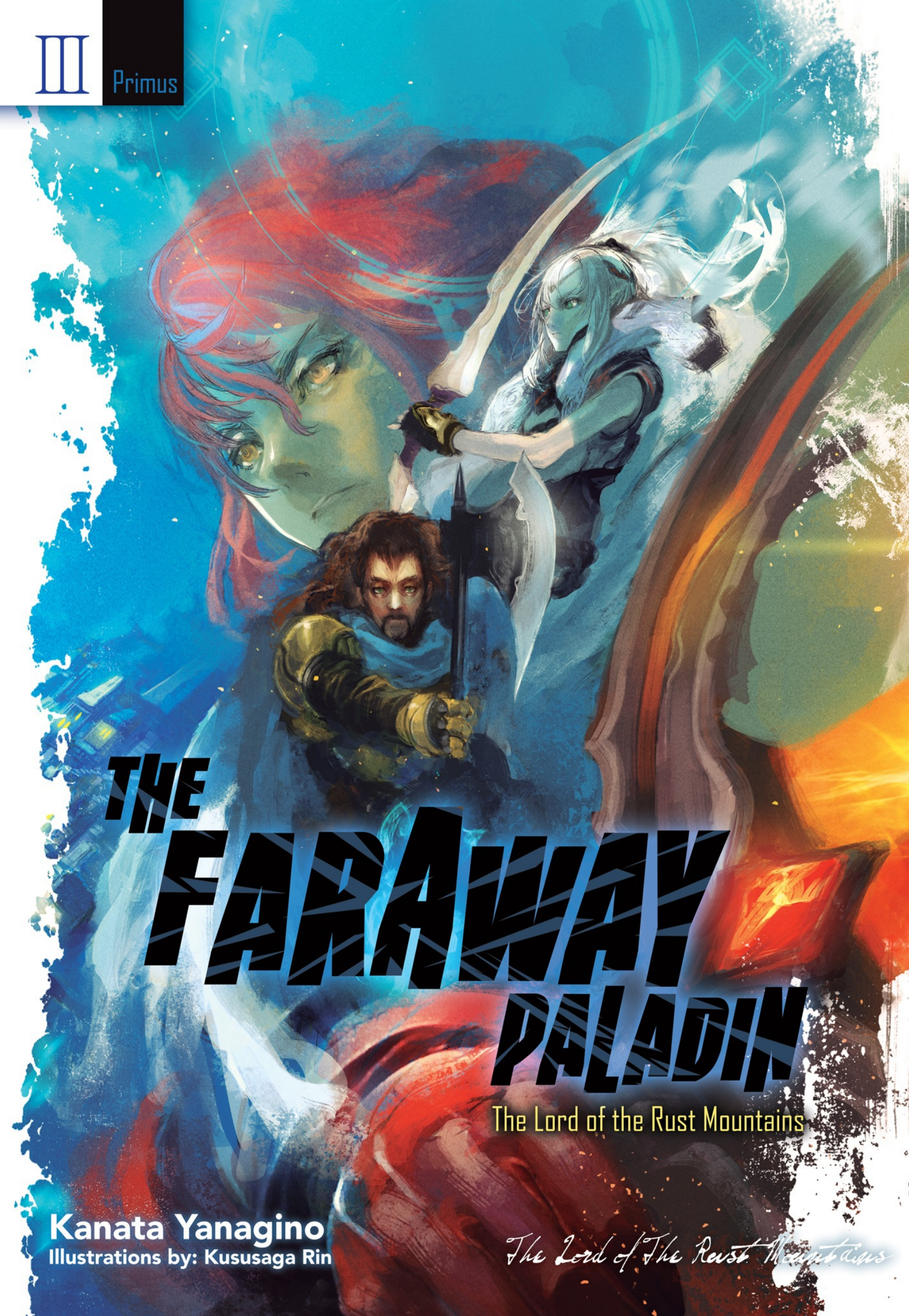
III Primus



THE FARAWAY PALADIN

The Lord of the Rust Mountains

Kanata Yanagino
Illustrations by: Kususaga Rin

The Lord of The Rust Mountains


THE FARAWAY PALADIN III (PRIMUS) THE LORD OF THE RUST MOUNTAINS


Vindalfr
William
I could hear the sound of trees cracking. Accompanied by the dreadful sound of living trees being torn apart, a giant appeared who was over three meters tall and wearing fur.
Forest Giant



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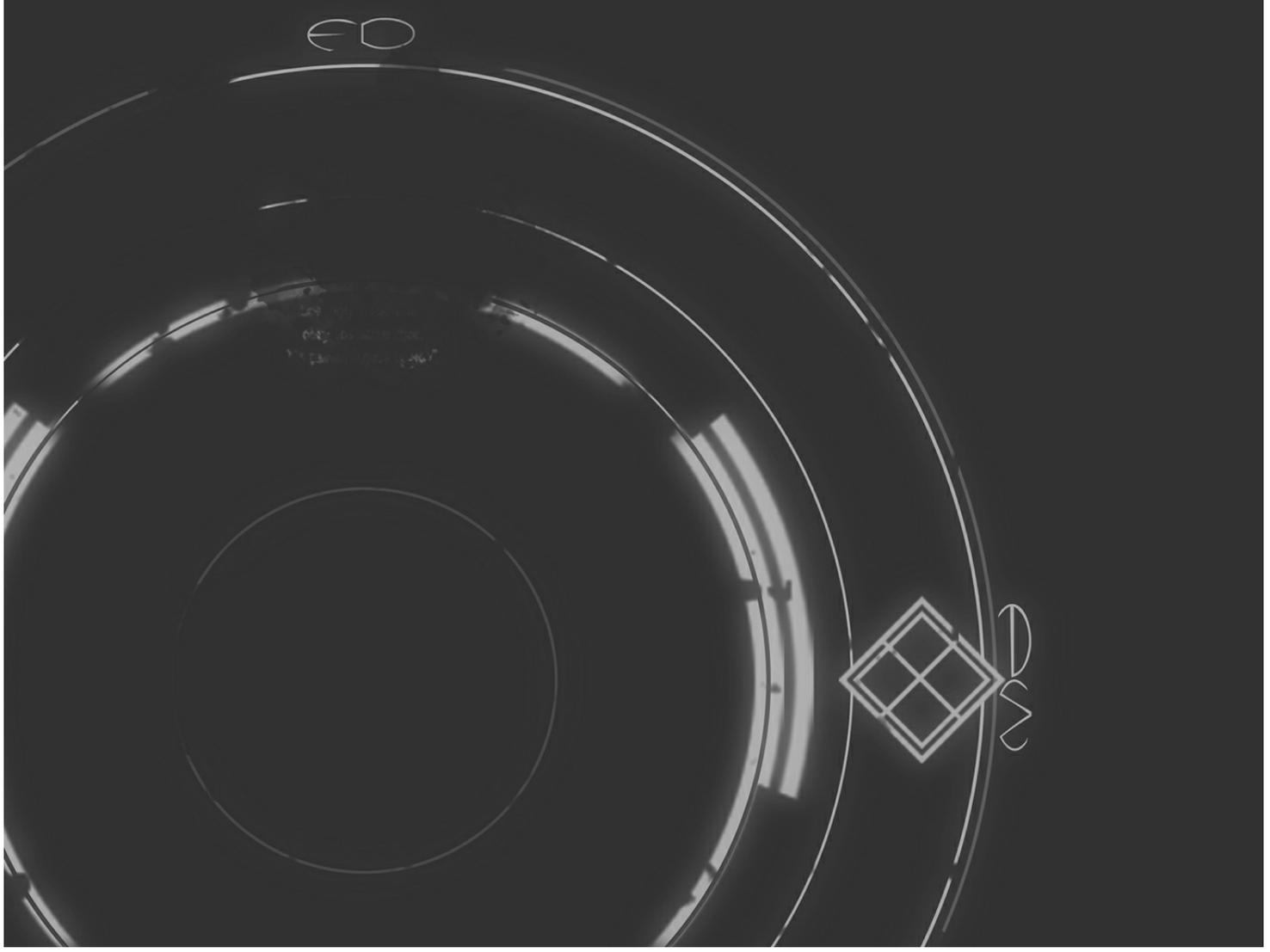
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Illustrations: Kususaga Rin
Illustration and Typesetting Design: Kimura Design Lab

So asked Blaze,
god of fire and craft:

"What is the nature of valor?"

Prologue



Deep in Beast Woods, the domain of its great lord—the Lord of Holly—had been transformed into a hell of swirling miasma, rotten leaves, and withered trees. Misshapen figures spilled out in droves from the paths ahead leading into the center of the lord's domain. They were low-ranked demons called Spawn.

Under refreshing early summer sunshine ill-suited to this place, we sprinted through dead trees that reminded me of the ribs of a rotten corpse.

"Menel!"

"On it!"

Silver hair fluttered. Menel came to a halt, spread his arms, and called out to the fae in a clear voice.

"'Fairies of all kinds, faint spirits, those who play in the twilight and the morning mist—'"

As I listened to him incant behind me, I moved forward with my favorite spear, Pale Moon.

"'Awaken! Your gentle guardian, the lord of the woods, is in crisis! Now is the time to repay the kindness you have been shown!'"

Nature's power had been weakened in this place swirling with noxious gas. The fairies here had lost their power, and their sense of self had begun to dissipate, but Menel's strong call began to restore it. Even I could feel the fairies beginning to congregate around him, as if drawn to his clear voice.



A natural power great enough to send shivers down my spine was beginning to gather where he stood.

“‘Grip your blades, nock your bows! Arrow of Salamander, Hammer of Gnome, Spear of Undine, Blade of Sylph...’”

Knowing I could count on him, I focused all my attention on the approaching Spawn, which were shaped like vaguely person-shaped clay figures made by children. Brandishing my spear, I impaled them and swept them away one after another.

“‘Now the horns of war hath sounded! These arrogant invaders—’”

His incantation had come to its final line. With a powerful yell, I tackled one of the Spawn with my shield, sent it flying into the incoming horde, and then took a huge leap backwards to the side.

“‘—May the Great Four damn them all!’”

The instant he finished, a storm of death erupted before my eyes. Flaming arrows, suddenly fired, struck the enemies like a volley from a team of professional archers. Huge hammers of rock rose, blowing away miasma as they lifted into the air, then smashed down upon the demons. Clear water spurted out of lakes of sludge, drew helices in the air, and bored through the demons’ chests. And in the distance, blades of raging wind scattered the miasma and sent head after enemy head flying. It was a full-scale attack by the elementals who had responded to Menel’s call with furious cries of their own.

“Will! Let’s go!”

“Got it!”

We rushed onward, stepping over the fallen corpses of the Spawn. Whatever had poisoned the Lord of Holly’s domain and corrupted the natural cycle of these woods was just ahead. We ran, kicking up the sickly, fallen leaves.

Just in front of the old stone arch that formed the entrance to the center of the lord’s domain were two demons, both of which looked like a cross between a person and a crocodile. One had a hooked spear in hand, and the other a long, sharp sword. I guessed they were about two meters in height. Their heads

brought dinosaurs to mind, and they had tough scales, rubbery skin, and thick muscles. There were sharp spikes on the ends of their peculiarly long tails. They were Commander-ranked demons called vraskuses.

“Watch out for the tail spikes!”

“Ya. You take the spear one!”

We kept it brief and split to the left and right. The vraskuses followed suit and headed towards us, each aiming for its own opponent.

I took a single breath and slowed down before finally stopping in a defensive stance and pointing the blade of my spear directly at the vraskus as it closed in at a speed halfway between a walk and a run.

We were almost within a spear’s distance of each other when it abruptly stopped in its tracks, as if it was unsure of itself. Its reptilian eyes rolled unblinkingly over me, and the vraskus tried circling around to my right and then my left, thrusting its hooked spear in my direction several times. With slight foot movements, I kept myself facing the demon and my blade pointed towards it. The vraskus growled, seemingly frustrated. It couldn’t find an opening to attack.

While keeping that distance between us, I very slowly relaxed my stance in a way almost too subtle to notice and created an opportunity for the vraskus to exploit. Sure enough, it lunged out with its hooked spear, trying to take that advantage. With a grunt, I slammed my own spear against it so that it caught and forced the hooked spear downwards. Refusing the vraskus any time to react, I thrust Pale Moon forward in retaliation and penetrated straight through the vraskus’s hard scales and then its heart.

The demon let out a choked cry of pain. I drew my spear back swiftly and stabbed twice more for good measure, still not allowing a counterattack.

When it came to demons of this rank, it often took a lot more for an injury to be fatal than it would for a human. If I didn’t make sure the vraskus was dead, it wouldn’t be surprising if it continued to fight me like mad, even with a hole punched through its heart.

I pulled the blade out once more and watched. The vraskus collapsed, its large

body hitting the ground knees first. The corpse turned to ash and crumbled away. I breathed out, and a nostalgic voice revived at the back of my mind.

— *I could just charge straight in there and lop its head off.*

I chuckled to myself. That was what my dad, Blood, had said when he'd once rated the strength of a vraskus. Unfortunately, I had yet to reach his level. I didn't know how much more training I'd need to catch up with Blood, but I felt as though I was at least close enough now to see his back in the distance.

An energetic shout from beside me told me that Menel's battle was also finished.

After the two sized each other up for a while, Menel's vraskus had shielded itself with one of its arms, which it was obviously prepared to lose, and charged at him. However, gnomes had grabbed its ankles from behind, causing it to lose its balance. Menel hadn't cast a spell to do that; he was in perfect communion with the fairies, and they were carrying out his will. It was something only an expert could have pulled off.

Menel stepped forward decisively and forced his dagger into the demon, then channeled some kind of spell down the blade, causing an explosion in the vraskus's torso. The creature twitched and convulsed, expelled some kind of white smoke, and collapsed. It was over.

"Sweet. And I'll take this, too." Menel showed no hesitation in snatching the longsword from the body as it crumbled to ashes. It looked like quite a fine weapon, with a shiny, metallic gleam to the steel of its straight blade.

"The altar for the lord of the forest should be... through here," I said.

"If Commander demons are the gatekeepers, then..."

"Yeah."

Whatever had come here was a force to be reckoned with. We exchanged looks, renewed our sense of caution, and stepped through the stone arch into the true heart of the Lord of Holly's domain.

◆

The domain had been turned into a stinking, toxic bog. While Menel was

busily casting Waterwalk on the two of us, I increased our resistance to the toxic air with the prayer of Anti-Poison.

I took a good look at our surroundings and saw that beyond the withered forest's curtain of broken branches and discolored leaves, there was a huge old tree. Its height wasn't so different from the trees surrounding it, but it was obviously thicker. In fact, its trunk was so big and so thick that when I attempted to estimate its circumference by imagining my arms wrapped around it, I immediately felt foolish for even trying. Once we got closer, it would probably look like nothing more or less than a sheer wall of rock.

"Menel."

"Yeah. That's the Lord of Holly. He rules over this region of forest in winter."

Around the old tree, roots as thick as bridges undulated like waves on the ocean's surface. They were stained black half along their length, probably affected by the poisonous swamp that was covering the ground. Surrounded by those enormous, heaving black roots, there was a stone altar.

"That's gotta be it," Menel said.

As we approached, I could hear a Word of Creation booming out. I could tell just by the way it resonated: this was a hex. It was blasphemy. It sounded like a pot boiling and bubbling with all the world's negative emotions—hatred, resentment, anger, contempt, mockery...

It was a Taboo Word, a type of Word which good sorcerers kept sealed away in the recesses of libraries, concealed from the eyes, and which they treated as strictly outside their fields of study. They were cursed Words that could make air and water go bad, earth parch, and fire weaken and die.

Something was there, speaking that which should never be spoken.

I approached it slowly, remaining alert to my surroundings. With the art of Waterwalk, my feet floated above the poisonous bog and created ripples on its surface as I moved.

The demon standing atop the enormous altar, its arms spread wide as it recited Words, looked like a person, for the most part. It had a burly, muscular body that was covered with hair, and a rugged face that looked as though it had

been roughly chiseled out of a rock wall. The strangest thing about it, however, was the huge pair of antlers that were growing from its head; they reminded me of a moose. The demon looked at us, and its recitation slowed to a stop.

“What happened to the gatekeepers?” it asked in fluent Western Common Speech.

“What do you think?” Menel asked back.

Seeing the longsword in Menel’s hands, the horned demon nodded and hummed in understanding.

I was growing increasingly tense.

“I see. If I’m not mistaken... you are Sir William, the Faraway Paladin. And you are Meneldor, of Swift Wings.”

He had intelligence and the ability to gather and process information. This demon was in a completely different class than those that were ranked Soldier or Commander.

“A General...” I muttered. “It’s a horned wilderdemon... a cernunnos.”

The wilderdemon heard me and grinned. “So two noble warriors are here... This will speed things along.”

The moment he said it, I sensed things rising all around us. Menel and I had both been roughly aware of their presence, but all the same, this was an ambush. Bizarrely shaped demons appeared from the shadows of the tree’s enormous roots. Some were a cross between a buck and a bull, while others were snake-lizard hybrids.

“They must die here,” the wilderdemon said. Following his words, the other demons prepared to attack.

“Menel, is this distance okay?”

“More than enough. Back me up.”

Menel slowly touched one of the Lord of Holly’s blackened roots. “Lord of Holly, half of the Twins and he who rules the woods from the summer to the winter solstice...”

An oak-leaf pattern had formed on the back of Menel's pale white hand. With both his hands on the root and his eyes closed, Menel looked almost like a priest in the middle of prayer. Realizing something, the cernunnos tried to give an order to the demons, but it was too late.

"Thy Twin, the Lord of Oak, entrusted me with this..."

A mysterious power flowed from his hand into the root. Although it had blackened and lost its strength, the root now began to hear a pulse, almost like a heartbeat, from the trunk of the old tree.

"The power that makes a lord a lord. I bestow it now upon thee."

The ground shook and slowly, the roots of the old tree began to move. They ensnared the terrible demons and dragged them into the bog. Squelching sounds and the screams of demons echoed for a while, and then there was silence.

"You pests... So the Lord of Oak was already yours..." The cernunnos had been watching over this from atop the altar. He was quick at regaining his composure; he'd already contained the anger and unease I'd seen on his face for just an instant. "But unless you defeat me, it all amounts to the same."

The cernunnos muttered a Word, and a halberd formed in his hands. He stood ready for battle.

"I will," I replied. "For the sake of these woods—" I drew a breath, then held my spear at the ready as I spoke the next words. "—I swear it on the flame of Gracefeel, goddess of eternal flux!"

I charged headlong towards him.

◆

A roar filled the air. The halberd smashed against a corner of the altar, sending countless shards of stone flying towards me. I knocked them away with my shield by reflex, defending myself and Menel, who was behind me.

Right now, Menel was in the middle of transferring the sovereignty of the woods to the Lord of Holly after having received it from the Lord of Oak. He wasn't completely defenseless, but he was very vulnerable, and there was

nothing he could do about it.

“Flame, repel the darkness!” I offered a prayer, constructing a shining barrier around Menel. This cernunnos was a strong enemy. If he suddenly turned his attacks on Menel during the battle, it was possible that I might not be able to fully protect him.

I’d given up the initiative to erect that shield. Intending to take advantage, the cernunnos’s decision was to incant a Word.

“*De fumo ad fla—*”

But that was a bad move.

“*Tacere, os!!*”

My words, uttered with the best timing I could manage, shut the cernunnos’s mouth tight. The next moment, there was a deep boom, and an angry storm of toxic smoke and furious fire erupted around the cernunnos with a force that could have been mistaken for an explosion. Its Word had misfired, just as I’d intended it to.

— The single best opportunity to kill a powerful sorcerer is when that sorcerer casts a large spell.

That was what Gus had taught me. Long incantations were not something to do unless you were confident you could recite them in their entirety.

But it seemed that my opponent had been anticipating this move as well.

As the smoke spread to the left and right, I chose the right and ran towards the cernunnos, thrusting my spear into the fog. There was the high-pitched squeal of metal grating on metal. The halberd and the spear caught on each other, and groaned under each other’s pressure.

“Hmm. You switched instantly from concentrating on prayer to discerning the nature of my Word and interrupting. Very good, very good.”

There was a gust of wind, and the smoke dissipated. I frowned; I couldn’t see any obvious wounds on the cernunnos at all.

He probably had an almost complete resistance to poison and fire, or maybe all magical phenomena. I guessed that the reason he’d been able to incant

without hesitation was because he knew there would be no problem even if it backfired on him. If he could speak the whole thing, so much the better; but it would serve as a smokescreen even if he couldn't. It was a no-lose decision, and he had ended up using the smoke to draw even closer.

He knew he had an extremely powerful resistance, and he knew that I was a user of blessings and magic. He had read the situation well; it was no wonder he was so composed. It was probably fair to call him a strong opponent. But I had ways to deal with strong opponents, too.

With an aggressive shout, I put strength into my arms, trying to force the halberd down. Taken by surprise, the cernunnos grunted and resisted with his own strength.

If he had a resistance to magic, I merely needed to settle this in close combat. The strike of a blade had proven effective even against the demons' High King that Blood and his allies had once fought. I couldn't imagine that there was any demon with greater defense than that. This demon had a physical body like any other, and that meant that some kind of physical attack would probably work on him, whether that was cutting, thrusting, or striking.

Our clashing weapons came violently apart, we both leaped backwards, and then a furious battle started, the two of us running along the tops of roots as wide as roads as we exchanged attacks. Our positions swapped and shifted at dizzying speed and attacks came from all directions, sometimes even from above or below, before we collided face-to-face once more with a crash of metal on metal louder than anything before it.

The spear and the halberd interlocked, twisted, and groaned as both of us tried to force the other's weapon down. Veins stood out on the cernunnos's thick arms, and its muscles bulged. I got myself into a solid stance, grit my teeth, pressed down with greater force, and gradually, my spear began to overpower the halberd.

"A-Are you *human*?!" The color was draining from the cernunnos's face.

I thought that was a horrible question. These were nothing more than the results of my training.

Breathing out slowly, I pushed even harder. The cernunnos let out a

desperate roar, and tried suddenly applying his strength in another direction and using footwork to shift his body around. As he tried to mask his inadequacy in strength with these moves, I pushed ever harder, relying only on my muscles.

He probably didn't have much experience with being overpowered in a straight-out contest of strength, and I wasn't going to be beaten by little gimmicks like this from someone whose inexperience and uncertainty was plain to see. I used my trained muscles to push and push until I was totally in control.

Now was the time to use technique.

I shouted and yanked the spear in a different direction. The spear sprang upwards, and its blade connected directly with the wilderdemon's enormous antlers, exactly as I'd intended. A look of shock spread over its face. I deliberately didn't apply enough power to crush them; instead, I smacked the end of its long, moose-like antlers upwards.

Now then... if there were a pair of long antlers growing out of the head of a humanoid creature, and the end of those antlers were to be violently forced upwards, what would happen to the creature's neck?

"Ghk—"

The answer: it would bend and twist very easily. It was simple physics, and there was very little the cernunnos could do about it.

I caught the blade in its antlers and tugged the wilderdemon towards me. It stumbled wildly. Because it was being dragged around by the antlers, its neck was being wrenched about, and it couldn't keep its balance.

There is a close connection between your sense of balance and the angle of your neck, which is why it suddenly becomes difficult to balance on one foot when you're looking directly upwards. All that considered, no experiments would be necessary to answer whether a person could keep their balance while having their neck *forcibly twisted.*

I dragged the demon to the ground and flowed into a downward swing of the spear. A spear wasn't just a stabbing weapon; the handle I held in my hand was over two meters long and made to withstand full-force collisions. If I swung it down with all my might, that strength and its centrifugal force would come

together to make my spear nothing less than an absolutely brutal blunt instrument.

I slammed it down. I heard, and felt, the demon's antlers and skull break. A roar of pain rang through the forest.

Even then, the cernunnos made a frenzied attempt to fight back—it was a General, after all—but that resistance was very short-lived.

◆

By the time I'd made sure the wilderdemon had turned to ash, and claimed the halberd left behind, Menel had already completed his work.

"Phew."

I hadn't noticed because I'd been incredibly preoccupied, but he looked exhausted. His silver hair was dull with dirt, and unless I was seeing things, even his cheeks looked a little sunken. Menel had been the one with the most exhausting job this time around, so it was probably only natural.

All this had started on the day of the summer solstice, when snowdrops had blossomed out of season. By the time a few days had passed, a completely peculiar situation had developed, where all the fruit was overripe and falling rotten off the trees, and the trees were growing rapidly and dying at random, and eventually, even the wild animals and the fairies were going mad and wreaking havoc.

Menel was quick to notice something was wrong, and told me with a sour look on his face that the woods were being thrown out of kilter. Since we happened to be stopping in Whitesails at the time, His Excellency Ethel asked us to resolve the situation, and we accepted. And where we headed was the domain of the Lord of Oak.

According to Menel, the woods in the area were ruled from the winter solstice to the summer solstice by the Lord of Oak, and from the summer to the winter by the Lord of Holly.

He told me that on the winter solstice, the day that marks the return to spring when the sun recovers its shine, the Lord of Oak takes over sovereignty from the Lord of Holly. Then the sun rises and sets, and when it reaches the summer

solstice, when all its best days are over, the Lord of Oak hands its sovereignty back to the Lord of Holly once more.

As he described it, it was the relationship between the two great and ancient Twins, also referred to as the Fraternal Kings, that maintained the cycle of nature in these woods. That was why we'd headed to see the Lord of Oak. The natural order of the woods had gone wrong the moment the summer solstice passed, so Menel had reasoned that the Lord of Oak must not have handed over the sovereignty for some reason, or perhaps was in a state where he *couldn't* hand it over.

But that turned out not to be the case. In the woods' other domain, the incarnation of the Lord of Oak appeared before us and told us that the problem was the Lord of *Holly,* who was in a state where he couldn't accept sovereignty over the woods. Because of this, the Lord of Oak said, the sovereignty had remained with him for too many cycles of the sun and moon, and many abnormalities were starting to occur in the woods.

The sovereignty the Twins possessed was a powerful thing and would bring only harm unless it was passed into the proper hands at the proper time. It would not be long before the forest suffered a critical failure that would damage it so badly that it would be unable to fully recover for a good many years.

I asked if there was any way to surrender the sovereignty, and the Lord of Oak answered that it could not be relinquished unless someone showed himself strong enough to be fit to receive it, as the Lord of Holly had for him and as he had for the Lord of Holly. His voice sounded as if he had given up on everything and accepted his doom.

"Then leave it to me," Menel said vehemently. "Great Lord of Oak, please, entrust your sovereignty to me."

But the incarnation of the Lord of Oak told him it was impossible. Perhaps it could have been done, he said, if Menel was one of the earliest generation of elves created by the god of the fae Rhea Silvia herself; but as he was, with his half-human blood, he wouldn't last more than a month bearing the burden of the sovereignty of the woods.

“If I can last a whole entire month, we’re good. We two’ll solve the rest.”

The Lord of Oak was silent for a while, and then said, “But if the Lord of Holly is already lost, your soul will come to ruin after a month.”

“Ya, I guess it will.”

“Why would you go so far?”

“Because I swore to atone for my sins and live a positive, forward-looking life.” There wasn’t a hint of embarrassment in Menel’s voice as he told this to the lord of the woods. “That was the vow I made to a great god through my friend, who rescued the soul of someone I owed a lot to. That’s it, no other reason.”

The Lord of Oak fell quiet again. After a long silence, Menel’s self-imposed challenge earned his approval, and he declared that he would set a trial for Menel.

“This trial is a secret rite of the woods. You—strong warrior, wielder of magic, agent of the god of the flame—you have no right to join him.”

“I understand that,” I said. Menel and I looked at each other; I nodded to him, then turned back to the Lord of Oak and said, “I’ll wait. Right here, for as many days as it takes.”

“I’m not gonna take that long, brother.” Menel laughed and told me to quit worrying. Then he and the incarnation of the Lord of Oak left me behind and headed into the depths of the lord’s domain.

I never found out what happened in there, how much hardship Menel had to endure, or what he had to overcome. But after I had waited patiently for one night, he came back the following morning with a face full of fatigue, but smiling proudly in spite of it.

After that, we immediately headed for the domain of the Lord of Holly.

The rest of the journey proceeded wonderfully swiftly. Now that Menel had received sovereignty over the woods, not a single tree or bush obstructed his path. We discovered demons in the Lord of Holly’s domain, destroyed them, and that was everything up to the present moment.

“...”

I was kind of getting the feeling that problems caused by demons were on the rise again around here recently.

There were some that we’d handled ourselves, and others that we’d just heard reports of from other adventurers after they’d solved the issue independently. They were all kinds of different incidents, really, but... now that things had escalated to demons capable of breaching the domain of a forest lord and laying a curse upon it, I felt that things were getting a little bit serious.

As I wondered what was behind all of this, my mind was filled with a hazy sense of anxiety difficult to put into words. It was like I was overlooking something, but I had no idea what.

My thoughts were interrupted by a voice.

“You, children of men.”

◆

I looked to see another person’s figure at the altar. Wait, was it actually a person? People didn’t have skin like bark, and they certainly didn’t have plant leaves and ivy in place of scalp and facial hair. But both Menel and I had a familiarity with this figure’s appearance; the incarnation of the Lord of Oak had looked very similar.

“I am the Lord of Holly,” said the incarnation in a gentle tone. “Truly I thank you and commend you for your valor in removing those brazen invaders, and for your bravery in traveling to this domain to transfer the sovereignty. But first, I must restore order to these woods. A moment, if you will.”

The lord’s incarnation spread his arms. A recitation I couldn’t understand spun fluidly from his mouth. This Word was probably another of the woods’ secrets, and might even have been completely unknown to humans.

A short while after he began reciting, the ground gradually began to rumble. Tremors emanating from the old tree known as the Lord of Holly could be felt through the whole domain. They continued for a while, and then gradually settled. The moment they could no longer be felt, the change occurred.

Jets of clean water spurted one after another from the toxic bog that surrounded us. Menel could have done something similar when he had been in possession of the sovereignty, but not on anywhere near this scale. The poison was washed away with the force of a tsunami, and in no time at all, it had been diluted to nothing.

Many trees had succumbed to the cursed poison and withered, some falling down tragically and others dying upright; but now, life sprouted from them and grew before my eyes, becoming seedlings, then saplings, then adult trees, and blossoming with all the flowers of summer. A fresh scent drove out the foul odor. Plants, flowers, and mushrooms began to spring up around the trees. The life of the woods returned to the poison-damaged earth. Leaves grew, the wind danced, and glittering beams of sunlight shone through the trees.

“Wow...” Like watching a film being played in reverse, it was a sight of rebirth that shook the soul. Even Menel was captivated by it. “Lord of the Woods, huh. He’s using that crazy power like it’s a natural extension of his body...”

Menel had groaned with pain every night while the sovereignty had been with him. Even though he hardly even used its power, the simple act of holding it within his body had caused him such great pain that even my benediction couldn’t ease it.

Menel shrugged a little, accepting this as the difference between a person and a Lord of the Woods. But then the Lord of Holly spoke, having now completed his recitation in its entirety. “This is thy future also, child of man and fae.”

Those words seemed to stun Menel. Finally, he said, “What?”

“The sovereignty of the woods dwelt in thy body for a time. Gone though it now may be, the blood and power of man and fae already flowing in thee have begun to incline to the fae and steadily become more fit for a Lord of the Woods.”

“Huh?” I froze in surprise as well.

“Worry not. The change is not immediate.”

Easier said than done, I thought... and Menel still looked frozen.

“Umm... What’s going to happen to him?” I asked.

The Lord of Holly answered, but to Menel. “If thou dost not neglect thy training, thou wilt live far longer than a century, and thereafter become a new Lord of the Woods.”

At about that point, Menel finally started working again. “Ohh... ohh, uh...” Menel clapped a hand to his forehead as if he were fishing up some old memory. “Now that you mention it, back in my old home, I heard the oldest of the elves talking about this once. Elves acknowledged by a forest lord form a contract with him, and when their life draws to an end, they go into the forest before passing away. Their body becomes a wild animal, or a boulder, or a tree...”

And their soul became a lord who ruled over the forest.

“Yes. Thou madest such a contract with my brother, the Lord of Oak.”

“That’s not what I thought I was doing.”

“Be that as it may, such is signified by thy acceptance of the woods’ sovereignty, sapling.”

“Can I refuse?”

“It is possible. Thou could die as a human, were that thy desire.”

“I see...”

“Think not of it now, but the time shall come.”

Menel nodded, his jade eyes remaining firmly fixed on the Lord of the Woods. His expression was serious.

“And to thou, human child, disciple of the flame. There is something I must tell thee.” The Lord of Holly turned his gaze to me. “Thou surely knowest of the mountain range to the west, rich in reddish-brown stone.”

“Do you mean... the Rust Mountains?”

Their color was said to come from large deposits of red iron ore.

“Indeed.”

The lord’s incarnation nodded and opened its mouth. What followed was a

fluid and foreboding stream of words.

“In a future not far off for you men, the fire of dark disaster shall catch in the mountains of rust. That fire shall spread, and this land may all be consumed.”

“Uh...”

“The wilderdemon also came from those mountains of rust. That land is now a den of demons, wherein the great lord of miasma and wicked flame slumbereth upon the mountain people’s gold. Fightest or acceptest thou this future, be thou ready, for that day shall not be long in coming.” The words spoken from the mouth of the Lord of Holly echoed with the weight of a prophecy around the forest domain.

“Aren’t *you* gonna do anything about it?” Menel asked him pointedly.

However, the Lord of Holly’s reply was blunt. “If I am to perish, that too is fate.”

He seemed to be passive by nature. The Lord of Oak had been the same.

“To us, the fire of destruction leads to rebirth. Humans may again disappear from this continent, demons may flourish, the lord of wicked fire may roar as he will. It is no matter; the woods will live on.”

All around, newly grown trees that had sprouted from those that had fallen waved in the breeze. Nothing more needed to be said.

“Therefore, child of man, sapling: this is a warning, and also my duty.”

It was his duty to us, who had righted the problems with the sovereignty and fought for no reward.

“I promise you a bountiful harvest this autumn.”

With that, the incarnation of the Lord of Holly disappeared.

◆

“Lord of the Woods. God...”

The two of us talked as we walked back.

When we traveled through the forest, Menel would normally use his elementalist techniques to get the trees to open a path for us, but the routes he

took now were... more than that. He ducked behind trees and between large boulders, taking me along trails with unreal scenery and cavorting fairies glittering gold.

“This way.”

“A-Are you sure?”

“No sweat. I can tell. Uh, I’ve become able to tell.”

On the boundary between the invisible world inhabited by those not human and the transient world in which we spent our lives were the fairy trails. They were a mystery of the woods, and any ordinary person who became lost and wandered into them would face the consequences. Menel passed through these trails one after another as if they were simple shortcuts.

The air was cool, and it felt like the wind itself was sparkling. Night and day traded places at a dizzying pace. The leaves of the trees, wriggling like living creatures, were even more vibrant and richer in color than during the season of new green leaves. And when darkness fell, it was deeper than any night in the transient world. The glittering fairies blinked on and off in the jet-blackness as they laughed together and fluttered from place to place.

I couldn’t deny that the sight was fantastic, but...

“If I lose sight of you, I’m going to be in big trouble...”

From all over, I could hear the sweet yet ominous laughter of the fairies. Not all of the laughs I could hear were welcoming; some were laughs intended to threaten the foreign humans, others the kind of insulting and mocking laughs that might feature in disturbing fairy tales. It was scary.

An unusually powerful concentration of mana was swirling around. My skin was tingling the same way it did when I used a powerful Word. I swallowed.

“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna lose sight of you. Even if you do get lost, I can search you out and pull you back in.”

“I didn’t know you could do that...”

“Can now, yeah. Not too happy about it, to be honest.”

It seemed that having once had the sovereignty dwelling inside him, its effects

were still lingering. He'd been a talented elementalist in the first place, and now he had climbed a few rungs higher still—or maybe I should say he had been forcibly pulled up.

"I was planning on getting there on my own," Menel muttered. It sounded like things were complicated. "Eh, whatever. Power's power, whether it's handed to me or not. I've just gotta get used to it and make it my own. Same thing in the end."

As always, Menel was very swift to accept and adapt. He must have been thinking that power was power, whether you were given it or developed it yourself, and the only question was whether you could wield it effectively when you wanted to.

"Well, stuff like powers, I can go through and test out one by one. The real question is the whole 'becoming a forest lord' thing. What's your view on that, Will?"

"It's pretty incredible, but it's such an overwhelming thing to imagine I don't really know what to think, I guess."

"I know what you mean."

I couldn't see anything particularly different about Menel's profile as he walked alongside me. Just like usual, he was walking at a fixed pace while occasionally glancing around to make sure nothing was out of the ordinary. "Longer than a century, as the Lord of Holly put it... We're talking about after my life runs out in two, three hundred years, maybe even further in the future than that... a world that far in the future."

I found it very hard to imagine. "I'll be dead by then."

"Yeah." Menel nodded. "I'll keep watch over your grave, see how the lives of your kids and your grandkids play out... Well, I guess I'll be pretty settled by then, come to think of it."

"You were planning to do all that..."

"Damn right I was. You've done way too much for me." He didn't even hesitate.

I had no idea how to respond to something like that. But I could tell he was serious, so I just nodded solemnly and didn't make a joke out of it.

"But yeah... After all that's over, maybe becoming one with the mountains and the woods wouldn't be a bad way to live."

I kept quiet and listened to him muse.

"Half-elves have to choose one or the other eventually. The elves' way of life, existing in the woods, living eternally with the water and the soil as something like the fae; or the humans' way of life, burning bright as a roaring fire, and vanishing with the wind."

Menel said that choosing was the fate of all who were born between two races like that.

"I'll disappear into the forest, become an old tree like those ones, see where the things you're gonna have achieved end up. Then, I'll slowly wither and fall, and return to the great circle. Sounds good to me." He laughed. "You said 'only in dying is there life' before, right, in one of your sermon things? You know, that one where you were really uncomfortable and awkward."

"What?! That's so mean, I did my best! But yes, I did say that."

"Life's long, so the way I was thinking of it, I'd just collapse and die someday and that'd be that. I didn't really feel it before, but I'm finally sort of getting what you meant."

Life always comes back to death in the end. So starting to think about "how you want to die" inevitably comes back to "how you want to live."

"I want to see where your achievements end up. And to do that, I'll even change the way I live my life if I have to." He gave me an awkward smile. It made my chest tighten.

"I might not be able to do anything that big, you know."

"You kidding?" Menel couldn't help a small laugh and a shrug. "What do you think you've done since you met me? You killed a wyvern barehanded, you killed a chimera, you're all the rage with the troubadours, with several adventure stories to your name, and just now you hunted down a General-class

demon and beat it one on one. You've made legends *already.* And I'll bet you're gonna have that same vacant look on your face when you make some more."

He slapped my back roughly.

"I'll fight beside you, and if I survive all the way to the end, I'll wrap things up by vanishing into the depths of the woods. Of course, I'll make sure to say something awesome and memorable before I disappear."

"You'll become legend."

"Both of us will. Not bad, huh?"

"Yeah."

That sounded like it might be a fun blueprint for the future. It was, of course, always possible that one of us would die in battle, and if it came to that, I didn't know which of us would pass away first; but if we survived, I would definitely pass away before Menel. There was no way around that.

The thought felt kind of lonely, and I started to feel sorry for having to leave him. But if he could smile like that as he imagined the future, as things went, that had to be "not bad."

"Say, Will. How do you wanna go?"

"Well, I'm not as decided on that as you."

Menel's eyes went a little wide as if he found that surprising. "Knowing you, I thought you'd have it all planned out."

"The thing is..." I sighed heavily. "I do think about it, but everything just changes so *fast*!" I shouted it out in frustration. "I left my home, right, and the next thing I know I'm a paladin! And I blink again and I'm a feudal lord with everyone supporting me! And apparently Bee's songs have reached the continent to the north too now... At this pace, there's no *way* I can imagine where I'm gonna be in ten years' time!"

Menel burst out laughing. "Human lives are short and intense, but *you* really take that to an extreme. I guess that's a hero's fate."

"I'll take being a hero if I have to. I just wish I could draw up a proper plan for my life..."

“A hero who plans out his life? That’s so unfitting it’s kind of funny.”

“So mean!”

We made jabs at each other for a while and laughed together. Then, unexpectedly, Menel stopped walking. As if checking something, he stared at the space between two trees, where there was nothing except total darkness.

“Here it is.” The silver-haired half-elf reached between the trees. When he did, they receded, as if giving way to him. Then the space shimmered, like the surface of water, or the air in scorching heat, and wind blew through.

Led by Menel, I took a single step forward into the shimmering space. For an instant, I felt a strange sensation similar to resurfacing after being underwater, and then, all at once, my field of vision widened.

“Huh...?”

There were no trees around me in either direction, and there was no gloom or darkness. I looked up and saw that bright sunlight was pouring down from the summer sun hanging in the middle of the sky. The summer sky was clear overhead, with cumulonimbus clouds far in the distance. I lowered my gaze. The road snaked gently off to the horizon, and on both sides was a series of partitioned fields, creating a patchwork of beautiful, natural colors. A gust of wind blew, and the vast fields of wheat swayed.

“Wait. This... is...”

No way.

“We’re out of Beast Woods. This is Wheat Road.”

“In *one day*?!”

I looked around as I said it, but this was definitely the Wheat Road I was familiar with. But that domain was in the deepest part of the woods. It was dozens of kilometers through the woods as the crow flies—maybe hundreds, I had no idea—and we’d traveled that rough road in a single day?

“That’s what a Fairy Trail is. It’s not like we can go *anywhere* with it, though. Just the places I know.”

“If you could, you’d be a weapon of war. Wow... the woods’ secrets are

scary.”

I remembered what Blood had taught me: Never get in a fight with an elf in a forest.

Then, after taking one more step forward, I suddenly realized. “Isn’t this where I met you, and where we came out of the woods with Bee and Tonio, too?”

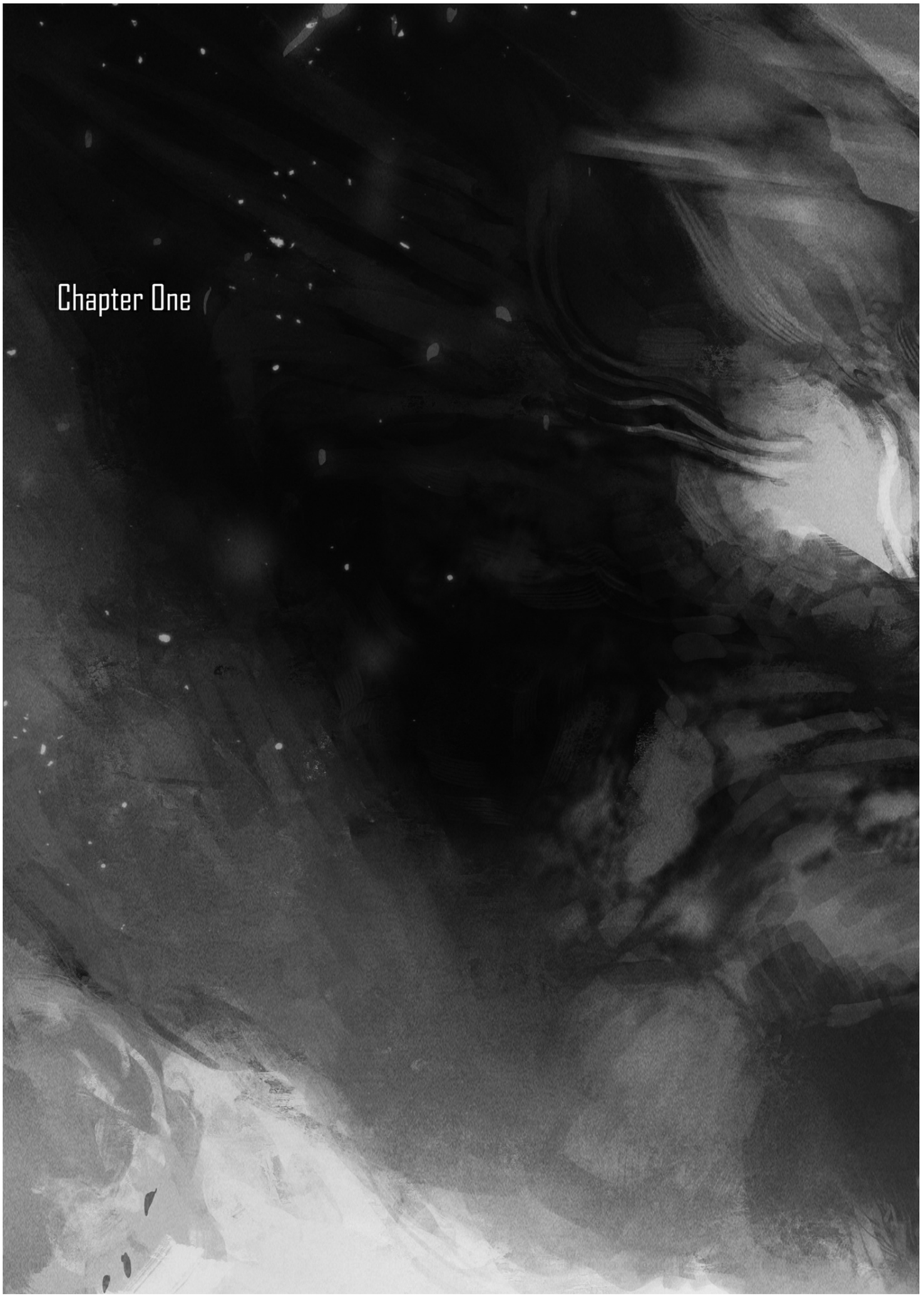
“Yeah, it is.”

There was a rush of wind. I heard the ears of wheat rustling in the field.

“It’s already been two years since we met, huh...”

I’d set off from the city of the dead, made friends, toppled a wyvern, become a paladin, and defeated demons and a chimera, and my efforts hadn’t ended there, either. Long and yet short, it had been a whirlwind period of my life.

By the solstice system, I was seventeen.


Chapter One

The wisteria hanging from the pergola swayed in the breeze. We were in the courtyard of the lord's mansion at the center of Whitesails, the city that was the gateway to the continent of Southmark. Flowers of bright colors blossomed in full glory under the mansion's windows, surrounded by the brilliant white of its walls.

"Thank you very much for your trouble." Under an arbor in the courtyard, His Excellency Ethelbald, Duke of Southmark and feudal lord of Whitesails, spoke to us in a solemn tone. The gentle sunlight of early morning surrounded us. "I expect you're getting tired of hearing that from me," he added, a smile crossing his face as his expression relaxed.

I wasn't very good at coming up with witty responses, so while I was still thinking of what to say, Menel replied casually, "You got that right. Sending us to work every time something comes up..."

"That would be because the paladin is my retainer, after a manner at least."



“And what about me, who isn’t your retainer? You’ve got me running around doing work for you as well, here.”

“If I mobilize Sir William, I get a second hero tagging along for free. Truly good value.”

“I’m not a freebie you got at some street stall.”

“But you *are* the dear friend of the paladin.” Another response shot back. “Just as a friend fights for his friend, so a knight fights for the people and his liege. Am I wrong?”

“Service, devotion, fealty... Sure, they sound attractive, but what’s the reality like? If you put too much burden on someone, he’s gonna grow unhappy with you. And once you start to suspect he resents you deep down, it’ll be hard to count on him when it really matters. Isn’t that how things work? I wonder what’s gonna happen when you have to go up against something scary without *this* hero to help you.” Menel pointed at me with an exaggerated motion.

Menel had no direct allegiance to Ethel, and he had nerve and no restraint. He would be frank with anyone, even a member of the royal family.

I couldn’t remember clearly what had gotten Ethel and Menel talking, but conversation between the two of them had become more frequent at some point during the past two years, and now they spoke quite a lot.

“Heheh. Indeed, indeed, the thought of my paladin running off is certainly scary. In that case, I had better keep him well compensated to make sure I keep him, hadn’t I?”

“Yeah, see, exactly. That kind of attitude’s important. Then this guy can feel good about showing you loyalty.”

Ethel laughed graciously. It looked like he was quite enjoying his exchange with Menel. That aside, I was coming to the frightening realization that some haggling about how I should be compensated had apparently been occurring just under the surface of their discussion. By the time I became aware of it, the flow of the conversation had already shifted to me receiving a reward.

“I shall see that money and items of your request are sent to you later. Now

then, that aside, Sir William...”

“Y-Yes, what is it?”

“I have something I want to talk to you about. I would like you to give me Meneldor here.”

“Huh?”

From Ethel’s face alone, it was plain to see that he was serious, and his solemn tone removed all doubt.

“He is a skilled elementalist and a spectacular hunter. And not just that—he is a half-elf, slow to age, and he has no reservations about speaking his mind. I want him. I dearly want him!” The duke sounded like he was greatly enjoying himself.

I gave a half-laugh, half-sigh as I thought about what to say. “Your Excellency, Menel is not an object. As much as you say you want him, he is not mine to give.” I paused. “If he were to say he’d like to serve Your Excellency, then that would be another matter, but—”

“I serve no one,” Menel said, interrupting. “Like hell I’m gonna be bartered around like some dog or cat.”

Although Ethel had been demoted to commoner status, he was a member of the royal family. But this made no difference to Menel, who flatly rejected his offer, closing his jade eyes and waving a hand in front of his face to show he wasn’t remotely interested.

Ethel sighed upon seeing Menel’s reaction. “Dear, dear. What a shame. I can never have enough talented people, you see.”

The Duke of Southmark was from the northern continent of Grassland. Brother to the King of the Fertile Kingdom, he was in charge of expanding the kingdom into Southmark. He probably had a lot of difficult things to deal with and was always short of people and resources.

“I just need one more ship, I just need one more trustworthy, competent official... I am sure you too must have thoughts like these.”

“Yes. Especially recently... I’ve started to understand what that feels like.”

After being pushed into the position of lord of the region of Beast Woods and doing all kinds of work to develop the area, I'd developed a close familiarity with that kind of difficulty.

"I see. How is the river port?" asked Ethel.

"Fortunately, it's going okay with everyone's help, but there are a few issues..."

"Hm. Let's hear them. Perhaps I can give you some advice."

"Not very generous of you," Menel said. "Only advice?"

"Material support as well. That is, if you are willing to take it in place of the reward I mentioned earlier..."

"Tch."

The two of them smirked at each other. Then, from the entrance to the courtyard, I heard gravel being stepped on and the sound of heavy breathing.

Walking towards us while wiping copious amounts of sweat off his face was Bishop Bart Bagley, the man in charge of the main temple of Whitesails. He had a portly body and was wearing loosely fitting priest's robes with gold and silver thread woven in. His movements exuded impatience, and he had a sternness to his expression that came from his quick-to-anger personality and the stress of his daily responsibilities.

As usual, he was a person who, to put it politely, did not impart all that positive an impression—but even so, I respected him.

He stopped in front of the arbor, gave a bow to Ethel, and then turned his gaze on Menel and me and gave us a long, searching stare. "Hmph. Returned victorious, I gather. I was expecting all the flattery from people calling you a hero and a peerless, brave warrior to have gone to your head and earned you a crushing defeat or two by now."

I bowed to him. It was because he was someone who would speak like that to me that I continued to respect him as much as I did. I returned a full smile to him. He blasted air out of his nose and turned the other way.

As Ethel watched us, he let out a chuckle and said, "Thank you for coming,

Bagley.” Then he composed himself, and his serious face was back. “Well then, let us hear your report of the incident.”

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“The fire of dark disaster shall catch in the mountains of rust. That fire shall spread, and this land may all be consumed.”

After we finished giving our account of the incident and the killing of the demon responsible, we then began to speak of the prophecy. Silence immediately descended upon the table under the arbor. Not reporting it hadn’t been an option.

“Those were the words the Lord of Holly used.”

“The Lord of the Woods said that...” His Excellency grumbled to himself and massaged his temples. “Beasts, then demons, and no sooner had I begun to think things had settled down than we face the unidentified threats of a ‘fire of disaster’ and ‘lord of miasma and wicked flame.’ The story I heard from you in the past, of the demons’ High King sealed in a city of the dead, also concerns me. The trouble never ceases, it seems. Good heavens, this continent. It never bores.”

I could sense considerable tiredness in him. Since becoming a paladin, I’d seen him forced to do a lot of work responding to demon plots, damage caused by beasts big and small, and all kinds of other things. He provided aid to settlements that had suffered real damage from attacks. He negotiated with the mainland to coax aid out of them. He had knights patrol areas to prevent damage before it happened. He employed adventurers on a temporary basis to hunt down and kill the causes of these problems. He took care of the documents necessary to carry out all of that. He actually traveled to the affected areas and provided consolation and on-site instruction. And of course, he couldn’t neglect normal city governance, either. I had never seen Ethel relaxing and enjoying a break.

Out of consideration for the duke, the bishop asked in his place. “Hunter, what level of power does this Lord of the Woods have? Can his so-called prophecy be trusted?”

“I have a name, old man.”

“As do I, boy.”

The two of them glared at each other and tutted. These two did not get on very well.

“U-Um, both of you, try to get along...”

“Hmph. Get along with this lout? You must be joking.”

Menel snorted. “You got that right. I hate self-important guys like him.”

The two of them openly displayed their displeasure of one another, Bishop Bagley by crossing his arms and looking down on Menel, and Menel by resting his chin on his hand and drawing his eyebrows together. It felt really uncomfortable that my friend and the person I respected hated each other’s guts so much.

As I wrung my hands, Ethel smiled brightly at the pair. “But I’m sure you’d both agree that as a business partner, the other is more than suitable, yes?”

“Well, indeed. I am not ignorant of his talents.”

“Wouldn’t even be in the same room as him otherwise.”

Neither of them sounded happy about it. His Excellency glanced in my direction and winked.

“Fine, whatever,” Menel said. “This is business. I’ll answer. Have a look at this.” He took a map out of the leather bag he’d been carrying and spread it out on the desk. We had obtained this map from Tonio, a merchant we were on friendly terms with. It was a detailed, pretty carefully crafted map of this area as it had been during the Union Age. Being two hundred years old, the map had changed quite a lot, and it was covered from corner to corner in Menel’s corrections.

He traced a finger across it as we all peered over. “So, first off, when I say ‘Lord of the Woods’—there are leylines around there which are like conduits for the mana in the earth.” He drew several invisible lines with his finger, probably representing the leylines, and then pointed at the spot where many of them crossed. “Where they meet, you have a Domain, and ‘Lord of the Woods’ refers to its lord. As for what a lord actually is, it varies. It can be a great fae dwelling

in a tree or a boulder, an old wild animal that had its den in the Domain for a long time and gained intelligence, or a bunch of other things."

Pausing for breath, Menel brushed his silver hair back behind his ear. "Not only do they live far longer than one or two hundred years, they're directly connected to the leylines. They store up a lot of memories and knowledge, and are constantly drawing mana into their bodies from all the areas the leylines connect them to. The lord is the woods' heart, its brain."

This world was made up of Words. When the trees rustled, or sunlight filtered through the trees leaving patches of light and shadow, a skilled sorcerer could pick out faint Words from the fluctuation in mana and interpret them.

Of course, there was a limit to how much information a sorcerer could read from something like that. Even magic users as great as Gus, who had raised me with Blood and Mary and was known as the Wandering Sage, couldn't learn all there was to learn just by listening to the rustling of trees. But Gus had also told me that was because we humans read Words within the framework of human thought. If it was a being much closer to Nature, then...

"The Lord of the Woods isn't as powerful as the gods, who can even read the unwritten future to an extent, but... if this is coming from him, you can bet there's a damn solid basis behind it." Menel's tone was firm. "It's less a prophecy and more, uh, an educated prediction."

Bishop Bagley hummed quietly. "It appears necessary to prioritize this matter, Your Excellency."

"Yes. The Rust Mountains... Fallen capital of the dwarves, and a den of demons..."

Everyone under the shade of the arbor had a serious expression. It wasn't surprising. There had been nothing but trouble recently, including many incidents not worth an explicit mention, and now, on top of it all, we had to contend with a 'fire of disaster' that would come from a den of demons. It would depress anyone.

So I decided to laugh.

"Sounds great!"

The three of them turned to look at me. I did my best to put on a huge grin.

“I can go as wild as I like!”

If you got ripped, you could solve pretty much everything by force. Blood gave very good advice. “We know the location of the problem, and even better, it’s in enemy territory, desolate to the point that there’s no risk at all of me hurting any bystanders! This problem was *made* for me!”

I clenched a fist as I said it, and Ethel couldn’t help but laugh. “Come to think of it, you’re right. Can I trust you with this, then, paladin?”

“Of course!”

Bishop Bagley and Menel both sighed at once and automatically glanced at one another, then snorted and looked away again.

“Give the word, and I’ll gather some men and head out at once—”

Ethel chuckled at my eagerness. “No, I doubt there’s a need to rush it that much.”

I nodded. I’d suggested it energetically on purpose to help clear away the gloom, but actually I was of the same opinion.

Everyone here was a quick thinker, so I was sure they’d all realized as well: regarding the “fire of disaster,” the Lord of Holly had said that “it shall not be long in coming,” but he had also promised us “a bountiful harvest” for the autumn. That meant that unless something happened that the Lord of the Woods didn’t foresee, we could safely assume that nothing would happen until autumn at least.

“I’m afraid that we don’t know very much regarding the Rust Mountains, either,“ Ethel said. “Can I also ask you to gather information?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I will try asking my friend who’s a troubadour and the dwarves who live at the port. As for the prophecy from the Lord of the Woods, we should keep it a secret between all of us here for the time being.”

Everyone nodded, as if to say they’d already been planning on it. The period from the summer to the autumn was the busiest time of year for the farmers, who made up the majority of the population. The summer wheat harvest

wasn’t yet over, and they had a lot ahead of them once autumn came around: planting winter wheat, fattening up their livestock with nuts and berries from the woods, harvesting fruits, and making alcohol. Now that the threats of beasts and demons had finally been alleviated, everyone’s lives had begun to settle down and they were all looking forward to the harvest. At a time like this, none of us wanted to arouse fear in people by spreading unsettling rumors.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure this will work out somehow.” I forced a smile.

The duke laughed. “I start to believe it when I hear it from you.”

“Hmph. Don’t let the hero treatment go to your head, or your complacency will be the end of you,” Bishop Bagley said, showing his concern in his usual way.

Menel and I looked at each other and exchanged wry smiles.

◆

There was some further discussion over a host of little details, and then we left the mansion. His Excellency and the bishop seemed to have even more to talk about. They had it tough.

“So, what are we doing?” Menel asked. “Right now, I mean.”

“Let’s go see Bee first to get information on the Rust Mountains. She should be in the plaza right now.”

Menel gave a small grunt and pulled the hood of his cloak over his eyes. There was a reason he preferred to avoid attention.

“Fff.” Menel scrunched up his face as if to say he’d known this was coming. The plaza was filled with the sound of a three-stringed instrument known as a rebec.

“Near and far away, vicious-looking beasts ran riot. People and horses came and went no longer. The north wind drowned out wails and cries. Around the woods, the howls of beasts echoed.”

The tale being recited was one I had heard before, of people suffering at the hands of demons and the beasts they controlled.

A single young holy warrior with the blessing of the god of the flame

appeared from parts unknown. The young warrior reformed a beautiful half-elven hunter who was turning to crime in that time of distress, and the two became friends. The warrior saved him from his predicament, and they headed to the city together.

What they encountered there was a wyvern bent on the city's destruction. The warrior broke its neck with his bare hands and gained renown. He raised the people's plight with the lord, who dubbed him a paladin for his commendable resolve. His name drew brave adventurers to his cause.

At last, the paladin and his party finally headed to the barren valley that was the base of the demons and their beasts. But they were caught in a despicable trap and forced to flee. The paladin fought his way out of the battle with the dark power of his sealed demonblade. But when his friend was gravely injured, the demonblade's darkness came close to engulfing him.

As the warrior was nearly reduced to a berserker, his friend the half-elf brought him back with words and fist. Hot tears were shed; an embrace was shared. The two regained their solidarity, and gave battle to the beasts.

"Thus the heroes marched on the valley, where a great, clawed beast stood in their path. The head of a lion, with razor fangs. The head of a goat, with evil magic. The head of a dragon, with crimson fire. And its wriggling tail, a venomous snake. Its raging roars rent the wind, and its feet shook the earth as it walked."

Leading the other beasts was a gigantic beast with three heads called a chimera. The warriors set up a wall of shields, raised their swords high, and bravely took on the pack. Among those warriors was a swordsman also known as the Penetrator, who used a sword faster and sharper than anyone else's.

"William the Faraway Paladin and Meneldor of Swift Wings charged into battle together."

Around here, the storyteller's speech style began to heat up.

"O great god lost to history, O reticent guide of souls! God of the flame, ruler of the eternal cycle, Gracefeel! Will you guide our heroes to the darkness ravaging the frontier, and show your radiance to the world once more?!"

The chimera battle was tremendous. I listened as Sir William, with his peerless strength, grappled with the chimera and punched it with his bare hands. Ohh, he just punched the chimera and sent it flying. It hit a rock and smashed it in half. I let out a “whoa” in spite of myself. What a hero.

Menel, beside me, had a huge frown on his face.

When it came to the half-elven hunter, descriptions of his beauty abounded. Every time he did something, excited squeals would come from the audience, particularly the girls.

“Ahaha...”

Young men with brownish hair and blue eyes could be found everywhere, so I didn’t stand out that much. Menel, on the other hand, was a half-elf with silver hair and jade eyes. He couldn’t have been more distinctive. These stories meant he would become the center of all kinds of attention, so he was probably feeling a bit uncomfortable.

But as the passionate retelling of our chimera kill continued beyond the throng in the proud and happy voice of the storyteller, Menel’s expression softened, a reluctant smile crossed his lips, and he let out a sigh, as if the will to resist had deflated out of him.

At the same time, a loud cheer erupted from the audience. Sir William had just impaled the chimera’s lion head with his favorite spear.

◆

The tale ended, and tips were thrown. I waited for the audience to disperse, and as the troubadour was packing up, I waved a hand and called out to her in a subdued voice.

“Bee.”

Her pointed ears pricked up. It seemed that was all she’d needed. She whipped around in surprise, and her face lit up with a beaming smile. She came running over and catapulted herself at me, crying out, “You were listening!”

“It worked out that way, yeah!” I said as I caught her and spun in circles on the stone paving. She giggled playfully. This girl, a halfling troubadour with

charming facial expressions, messy red hair, and the physique of a child, was our friend Robina Goodfellow. She was as bright as ever today.

“It looks like it’s still popular.”

“You have *no idea*. It’s my go-to staple thanks to you! Look at this!” Bee showed us a basket full of copper and silver coins. “Made a bundle yet again! Yeeeah!”

“Good to see our hard work is making piles of cash for someone,” Menel said jokingly.

“Awww. Okay then, it’s near enough lunch time anyway, I think I oughta pay you guys back a little!” Bee laughed, put her hands on her hips, and looked up at us. “What do you wanna eat, you two?”

“Meat,” Menel said immediately.

“You know if your fans heard that they’d be so let down.”

“Shaddup.”

“Don’t you have something a bit more, I dunno, *something*? Elf-like, elegant, you know.”

“Okay. Vegetables. Garnishing the meat.”

That got a laugh out of me.

In the poems and stories, elves were an elegant tribe living in the depths of the forest in harmony with nature, and didn’t have much of an image as meat-eaters. But in actual fact, living in the woods—living in harmony with the woods—also meant eating animal meat as a predator. I had a memory of learning from Gus long ago that the reason elves were renowned as archers was because they were excellent hunters. And that was borne out in reality; Menel was quite the meat-eater.

“What about you, Will?”

“Meat for me too, I think... It isn’t often we come here to the city.”

“You warriors are real meat-lovers, huh...”

As a side note, there weren’t many opportunities to eat the meat of livestock

in the countryside. I would say there were only two main times: when old livestock died, and during the autumn when it came time to slaughter livestock that wouldn't survive the winter. Cows and horses were valuable workers, after all, and it took quite a lot of effort to slaughter and butcher even a single one. Not only that, but those animals could be taken to the city and sold for cash rather than eaten.

Due to all those various reasons, everyday meals in the countryside would normally be bread, wheat porridge, and beans, or occasionally the meat of birds and other wild animals that a huntsman would come back with.

In the city, however, cattle and other animals brought in alive from the countryside were slaughtered and broken down everyday, and they lined the front of the butcher's. Because of the large population, there would always be people who wanted meat today, and dedicated businesses and shops could survive here by meeting that demand. And with specialist shops came an increase in eateries that depended on them to serve meat. All of which meant that you could get your hands on a meat dish far more readily in the city than anywhere else. Passing it up wasn't an option.

"Boy oh boy, you two have no grace at all," Bee said, spreading her arms in feigned disappointment.

"Oh yeah, and what about you?" Menel asked. "What do you want?"

"Me? Hmm..." The red-haired troubadour looked as though she was thinking for a moment, and then she laughed. "Meat, I think!"

◆

A little before noon, the three of us carnivores were drawn to a tavern by the delicious smell of meat, and we went straight in before it got too busy. As Bee secured us a table meant for four, she called out to the brown-skinned shop owner boiling something in a large pot. "Excuse me! What are you cooking today?"

"Boiled mutton, my dear!" he replied in a spirited voice.

"Woo! For three, please, and great big helpings!"

"Comin' right up!"

What came out on each of our plates was a well-boiled, piping-hot lump of mutton on the bone. On the side, there were also boiled vegetables, and some kind of bread made by kneading wheat flour into dough, fermenting it, and then steaming it. It was similar to the steamed buns I knew from my past life. Because the city of Whitesails was a port town facing an inland sea, you could see food culture from a wealth of regions here, which was really interesting.

“Ah, this is Arid Climate cooking, isn’t it?” Bee said, pinpointing its origin in a single glance.

“Sure is,” came the reply from the cook. “That’s the taste of my homeland.”

Arid Climate... I’d heard of it before. If my memory served me, it was a land of nomads, sprawling steppes, and endless wastes. True to its name, dry winds blew across the land, and climatically, it was cool. I’d heard that although caravans of merchants crossed that land heading to countries in the far east, it was quite a dangerous place that was scattered with plateaus controlled by tribes of goblins. And finally, the thing that had left the biggest impression on me when I heard about the place was—

“Is it true that there’s a race of centaurs around there? Half-man, half-horse?”

The shopkeeper laughed and nodded. “There sure are. Scarily good with a bow, every last one of ’em. All right, I’ll leave you to dig in.” And he went back to the kitchen.

Menel, still with his hood on, stared intently at the mutton. “From below the neck up to the ribs, looks like,” he said, identifying the cut.

It looked delicious. My anticipation built. But instead of immediately attacking the food, I first paused for a moment. “Mater our Earth-Mother, gods of good virtue, bless this food, which by thy merciful love we are about to receive, and let it sustain us in body and mind.” I prayed with my hands together. “For the grace of the gods, we are truly thankful.”

As I finished offering the prayer, Menel and Bee joined in. “We are truly thankful.”

“Let’s eeeeat!”

We took our knives and wiped them, then inserted them into the lumps of

boiled mutton in front of us and started cutting them up. None of us spoke, although it wasn't on purpose; it just happened as we each intently focused on taking apart the meat. I'd heard it said that people can't talk much while eating crab, and apparently the same thing went for mutton.

I inserted the knife, cut away a single bone and all the meat that surrounded it, and sunk my teeth in. My mouth filled with the umami flavor of the meat and a saltiness that was just a little stronger than I expected. The mutton had a pretty distinctive smell and texture, and every time I bit into it, the flavor seemed to ooze out and really gave me the feeling that I was eating *meat*. The light and fluffy steamed buns had a mild flavor to them, and worked well to break up the meal, like white rice.

"This is great!"

"Ya, this one's a winner."

"Told you! Ah, it's good eaten between bread, too."

"Hm, I hadn't thought about that." I tore open one of the steamed buns and stuffed the boiled vegetables and some of the meat I'd cut off inside it. It was delicious.

But I thought this was a good point to take a break, and decided to broach the main topic. "By the way, there's something I want to ask you, Bee."

"Hm? What's that?"

"Something's come up, and... I want to know as much as possible about the Rust Mountains."

"About the Rust Mountains?" Bee lifted her eyes from the boiled meat and knife in front of her and looked at me. "A poet's poems aren't free, bucko. Gonna pay me for the info?" She grinned at me mischievously.

"P-Pay you? Umm..."

Menel spoke up before I could. "If we end up going to the Rust Mountains, you'll be first to hear about what we got up to. Material for a brand-new adventure story. Sound good?"

"Okey-dokey, you've got a deal!" Bee nodded.

I had a bad habit of overthinking comments that weren't meant to mean anything. I needed to learn to think on my feet more.

"That said, I really don't know all that much." Bee laid her knife next to the boiled mutton on the plate for the moment, and started to talk. "Two hundred years ago, the Rust Mountains were apparently called the Iron Mountains. And there used to be a country there called the Iron Country. It was the underground kingdom of the dwarves, the mountain-dwellers that are the minions of Blaze, god of fire and craft. It was a powerful country that made a name for itself during the Union Age."

Bee continued. "But that was just another thing lost in the chaos of two hundred years ago. The dwarf lord in his halls of stone, along with many powerful warriors, died fighting in those mountains trying to hold back the demon invasion. Much blood was shed, many weapons lay scattered on the ground... and once the Iron Mountains became a den of demons, at some point they started being referred to as the Rust Mountains instead. That's what I've heard."

It represented the ruin of what iron once was, the pitiful wreckage of former glory, full of corroded weapons and the rusted, metallic smell of spilled blood.

"I don't know the details of what happened in that battle," she said. "There really is no info at all."

"Why's that?"

"Because the dwarven warriors and the people of those mountains who fought to defend them were completely wiped out. And also..." Bee took a breath before continuing. "Because the fate of the dwarves who escaped their country was so cruel. You must know, Will, you sheltered some dwarven refugees about a year ago, right?"

I thought back to those people with exhausted eyes. They had been covered in mud, smelled foul, and had huge beards covering their sunken cheeks.

"It's obvious what would happen to a people driven out of their homeland by war, right? That's why they won't tell me anything about the mountains that were once their home, or the last battle that happened there. It's a hard, painful memory for them, one of tragedy and humiliation, but at the same time,

their shared memories of glory are the single bond keeping them together and allowing them to hold onto their pride.”

Even though Bee had no instrument and was just talking off the cuff, there was a kind of power in the way she spoke. She had a flowing, sing-song voice that was pleasing to the ear, and she knew just how to pause to draw the listener in.

“So it’s a secret they keep hidden within themselves. No one who isn’t from the fallen Iron Country knows. So that’s all I can tell you. Sorry...” Bee gave an apologetic smile. “If you want to know anything else... I think there were dwarves who migrated to your river port, right?”

“Yeah.”

“They’d open up if you were the one asking, I think. No, I’m sure of it. If you keep what I said in mind.”

I nodded and smiled at her. “Thank you.”

I wondered how much of it they would tell me. While picturing the rugged faces of the dwarves, I thought about the prosperity and fall of that kingdom of mountain people.

◆

After that, Bee said she would wander about singing her stories for a while longer, and Menel and I left her to it. We departed the city of Whitesails and headed south.

After a few days, we returned to Beast Woods, and stepped foot into the fairy trail.

Once again that strange scenery surrounded us, of day and night trading places at whirlwind speed, the forest wriggling, fairies whispering amongst each other, and horribly thick darkness. The tingle I felt down my spine was no different than the first time I’d done this. I walked cautiously through that place for about half a day, the sense of awe and fear never leaving me.

We passed through a strange ring of light that was the way out of the fairy trail, and our field of view opened up. I felt wind blowing towards me. I took a

moment to get my bearings, and realized that it was dusk, and I was standing on top of a hill.

An endless number of trees stood tall, and beyond them an orange sun was setting in a red sky. The sky around me had started to turn the color of night, and I could just make out the twinkling of the stars. There was forest as far as my eyes could see, and a vast river snaking through it.

I shifted my gaze and saw that straddling that great river was a ruined city of two colors: a dull gray, and the green of clinging plants. And nestled right next to it was an expanse of soft-red brick roofs and white plaster. It was a living city, with people coming and going through it.

A long time ago, after I had that battle with the god of undeath and said goodbye to my parents, I followed this river from the city of the dead downstream to the north. It was there, before meeting Menel, that I had seen a half-submerged city, and at this very moment, human hands were hard at work redeveloping it.

“Looking at it like this, it’s gotten pretty big,” Menel said in a murmur.

“Yeah. It’s grown quite a lot in just two years.”

We talked about it as we made our way down the hill and said hello to the people we passed as we walked through the sunset streets.

We found Tonio near the harbor, talking about something with a warehouse keeper. Noticing us, he cut his discussion short, gave us a brief wave, and came over.

“Welcome back, both of you.”

“Thank you!”

“You’ve returned considerably earlier than I was expecting. Is the abnormal _”

“Safely resolved. We’re done with our report to the duke as well.”

Tonio looked at us in amazement.

Menel and I looked at each other and laughed conspiringly.

“Goodness, you truly are frightening. What trick did you use this time?”

“A secret elementalist trick,” Menel said. “Might not be much use for business, though. It’s not suited for transporting stuff.”

“It sounds useful for gathering information, however. I’d very much like to hear the details from you later, if you’d be willing to share.”

“I said it’s a fig secret and you’re still trying to get it out of me? Wow. Aggressive tactics.”

“I *am* a salesman,” Tonio said, laughing.

When I first met Tonio, I got quite an impression of tiredness from him, but lately I was getting the feeling that some of his spirit had returned. Maybe the fact that business was booming had caused self-confidence, a sense of fulfillment, and all those kinds of things to show on his face.

The redevelopment of this city was something Tonio had taken the opportunity to propose while the adventurers were still in one place after getting rid of that chimera. We had sent many parties of battle-hardened adventurers out on a large-scale sweep to remove all the dangers still hanging out in the ruins. With Ethel’s support, we had performed maintenance on the river port, dismantled the ruined buildings for materials, and rebuilt houses.

Then, using this place as his base of operations, Tonio started a lumber business in the depths of Beast Woods, felling trees, building rafts, and sending them downstream. This was hugely successful. The development of the Whitesails area had left it in need of firewood for fuel and lumber for construction. Meanwhile, Beast Woods, which was located upstream, had a ruined port city that could be redeveloped, as well as an abundance of wood resources. Where there’s demand for something, you stand to make a big profit if you can find a method of supplying it.

That may seem obvious, but it was the way that Tonio reliably spotted those obvious opportunities and actually took advantage of them that defined his way of doing business.

As for me, after I killed the chimera, the areas around there had reached an easy consensus on making me a feudal lord, but it seemed that all they were

expecting from me was the military might to guarantee the region's safety and for me to use my title of paladin to stand in front of His Excellency and represent the area. It wasn't as though there were a mountain of things for me to make decisions on, either. In fact, despite being a lord, I didn't even have a house.

I'll repeat that: I didn't even have a house.

I thought of persuading some village to let me live with them, but my entry into the village would mean I would be forcing my way into the top of their social hierarchy. There would be people who wouldn't be very happy about that, and others who would try to use me. Furthermore, I thought it was completely foreseeable that some people in the village would get the idea of using my existence to give themselves the diplomatic advantage in relations with other villages. So given all that friction I would probably cause, I was hesitant to ask to live in a village without careful thought.

There was the option of not settling anywhere and governing by traveling around my territory—I knew examples of that from my past life—but that method had all kinds of problems, so I wanted to avoid it if possible.

And so I decided to get on board with Tonio's business. I invested, helped provide security, and while I was at it, I settled here in this newly formed city.

Together with Menel and some adventurers including Reystov, I spearheaded beast and demon hunts for the city's security and provided medical treatment. Sometimes I headed out to various places in Beast Woods by request and handled an assortment of minor issues by coordinating with His Excellency and the priests I had borrowed from Bishop Bagley, including Anna. And that was how I spent my days.

It was just about that time that it happened. A band of mountainfolk—that is, dwarves—came, hearing that the woods had become pretty safe. I was the first one to meet them, in the woods. They were covered in dirt and mud, and looked as though they had fought starvation and wild animals to get here and only barely made it. They seemed to be really struggling, so I provided them with food and temporary lodging, and tried to help them find jobs.

Dwarves were a race of craftsmen who were good with their hands, but these

were drifters, and I wasn't expecting a high level of specialized knowledge from them. But once we got talking, I found that many of them did have a surprising amount of knowledge in things like smithing, the manufacture of leather, woodworking, pottery, weaving, and carpentry. I asked them why on earth they had gone through so much just to come all the way here to the depths of Beast Woods, but they wouldn't speak about it.

In any case, since they had skills like that, I wasn't going to let their talents go to waste. I decided to invest most of the money I had on hand, which I'd gotten from exploring ruins and so on, into their craft. I offered to lend them the funds to build all kinds of facilities: a woodworking shop to process the logs after they'd been chopped down, a leather-processing facility for making products out of the skins of the beasts we hunted, a smithy, kilns for pottery and making charcoal, and more.

I intended that proposal to be taken at face value, but they goggled at me in surprise, and came to the negotiating table greatly fearful and wary of what kind of terrible interest and terms I would impose on them. And when I presented them with the interest and terms, they goggled at me again.

But for me at the time, it was a necessary decision. There are an unbelievable number of things needed to maintain and expand a newly created settlement: weavers, woodworkers, stonemasons, carpenters, blacksmiths, leatherworkers, charcoal burners, and much more besides. At the beginning, you can get by to a certain extent with makeshift purchases and amateur work, but before long, you need skilled professionals.

There weren't very many craftsmen curious enough to come all the way to the back of Beast Woods when they already had marketable skills. So now that people who had the skills we so badly needed had made their *own* way to us, there was no way I could waste their potential on unskilled labor like loading and unloading wood. They were emphatically worth spending my money on.

However, simply lending a person money would just make them suspect that I had some underlying motive. That was particularly true for these dwarves, many of whom were acting very cautious. I could only guess what had happened to them while they had been out roaming the land. Several among them insisted that creating debts was a bad idea. I visited them several times,

each time re-explaining my circumstances in the hope of winning their trust.

As I bowed my head to them for the nth time and told them we needed them, their leader, a man named Agnarr, spoke up. “I think,” he said, “if this man betrays us... none of us could be blamed for having believed him. What do you think, everyone?”

I remembered feeling very happy for those words.

Not long after, workshops of all kinds were built; the air filled with the sounds of hammers, saws, and looms; and fires burned in kilns.

Once workshops existed, people opened shops targeted at the people who worked there. As the list of items being shipped to Whitesails grew longer, there was also an increase in the number of ships coming and going along the big river. Of course, it was a waste for the ships to come back up the river without any cargo, so they started to return loaded with things they thought they could sell here, and after selling them, they went back down the river loaded with this city’s products.

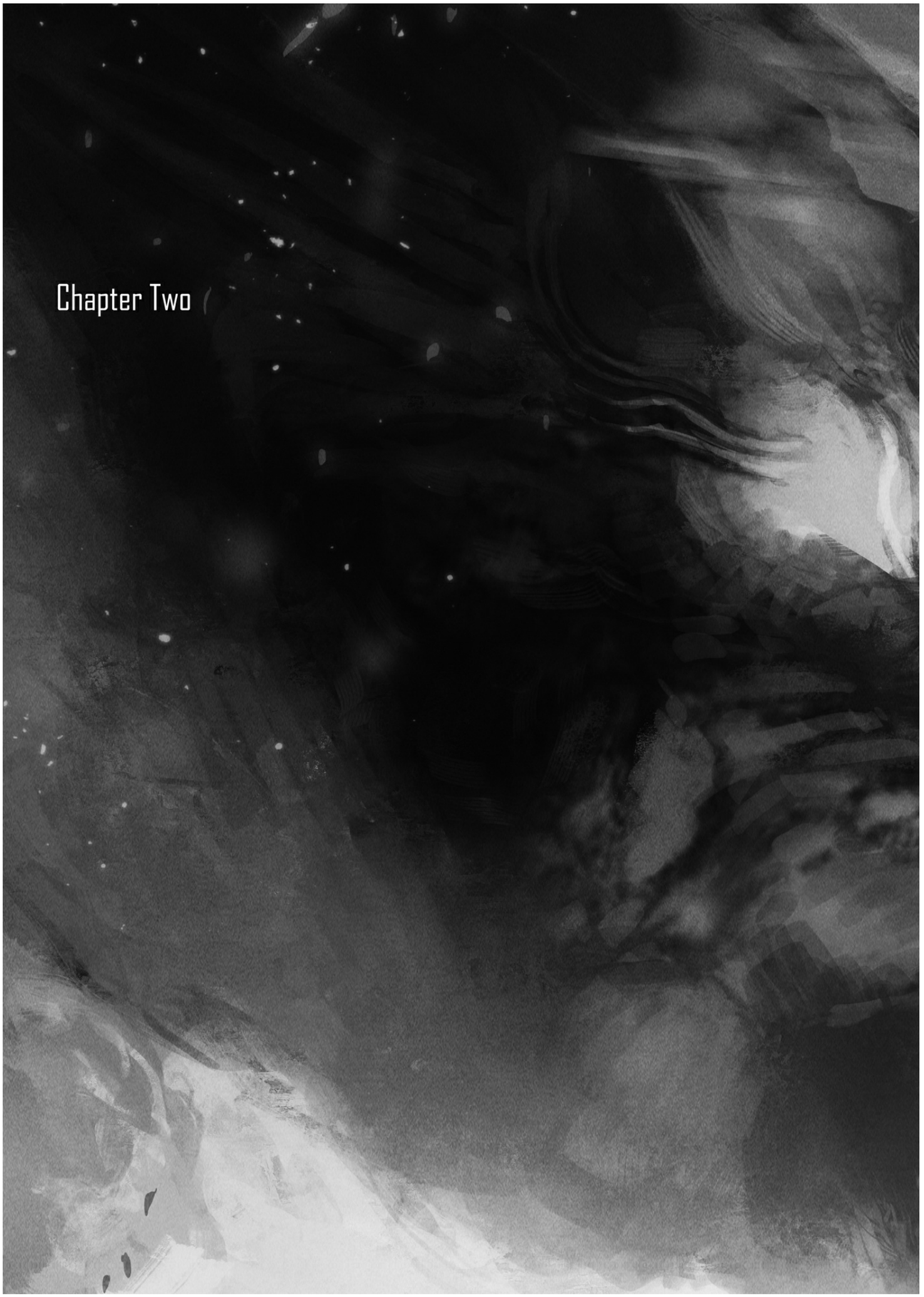
Goods and money changed hands again and again, and this was accompanied by an influx of people. By now, this place that was once a half-submerged city was rapidly becoming a center for river trade. Ships carrying wood and leather goods cruised down the river with the logs, and ships loaded with products came from downstream, their sails swollen with the wind.

More and more houses were appearing each day, and the sounds of the craftmen’s hammers and saws never stopped until the sun went down. I felt quite happy about it all.

“Well then, shall we head back?”

“Yep!”

People now called this city “Torch Port.”


Chapter Two

That night, after I fell asleep in my home in Torch Port, I had a dream.

It was a dream of that city of the dead, of which I had such fond memories.

“Listen closely, Will. What, in fact, are the fae?” Gus, with his pale blue body, spoke slowly while stroking his chin. “In a time beyond time, the God of Creation spoke the Words, engraved the Signs, made the sun and the moon, split day from night, and gathered water to separate the oceans and the earth. Fire was born, wind was born, trees were born. It was before gods, and before people.”

Blood was there too, leaning his skeletal body against the wall, hearing Gus’s lesson but not listening to it. It was a peaceful moment in the afternoon.

“Within the water, earth, fire, air, and trees dwell the great Words of the First God. They were more than natural phenomena; they possessed clear individual will.”

“Phenomena with minds of their own?”

“It may be hard for you to imagine... Hmm, especially since there are no elementalists here. If there had been, I could have had them make the sylphs dance or something; that would have made the explanation simple. Well, no matter.” Gus shook his head.

That “no matter” didn’t mean “it doesn’t matter anyway”—rather, it meant “you will meet one before long, so you simply need to keep this in the back of your mind.” And in actual fact, I did meet Menel shortly after, and could now understand what Gus meant by “phenomena with individual will.”

“Owing to the fact that they had wills of their own, these fae split into two types after their creation. The first was a long-lived way of existence spent clinging to unstable phenomena along with the lesser minions, that is, the fairies and elementals. If an elementalist were to go to a mountain of fire, even today he should be able to see a great fae known as a Lord of Fire there, with elementals of fire obeying its will. In the depths of the vast oceans there would drift a Lord of the Sea, and deep in an ocean of trees a Lord of the Woods would stand silent.”

Gus paused. “Elementalists, incidentally, are those who can perceive and

communicate with the fae and fairies who exist in the invisible world overlapping our transient one. Shamans, in other words."

As I listened to Gus, I nodded and took notes. There was no better way of remembering things than listening, thinking, and writing.

"The other group, however, chose a different path."

"A different path?"

"Not the nebulous existence of the fae, omnipresent within phenomena, sometimes existing, sometimes not, perhaps dead, perhaps alive, and at some point becoming too indistinct to perceive. Instead, they chose to live a crystal-clear existence, and die a crystal-clear death. In other words, the human way of life."

I found it slightly amusing that Gus the ghost was the one saying this to me. He seemed to be aware of this and shrugged his shoulders. "They fell in love with humanity."

His uncharacteristically romantic phrasing caused Blood to make a sound like he was spitting out a drink. Gus instantly willed a small pebble to fly in his direction.

"Ow! What was that for, old man?!"

"You know what! Now pipe down!"

After muttering irritably under his breath for a moment, Gus continued. "Of the elementals who longed for life with a body of flesh, those who belonged to the air, water, and trees brought the matter up with the goddess of the forest, Rhea Silvia. She was a pleasure-seeker, impulsive and fickle, but that was why she was able to see eye to eye with the ever-changing phenomena that the fae were."

And the goddess saw fit to grant the fae what they desired.

"Thus the elves were born as the minions of the goddess Rhea Silvia. They were a race with lives as long as the trees, as swift as a gale, and as graceful as a flowing spring. That goddess who lived for love took the fae's admiration for humans into account, and made it so that the two races would be compatible. It

is said that this is the reason that humans and elves can produce mixed-blood children."

Gus shrugged his shoulders. "But there is an old saying: 'The neighbor's wheat looks riper.' It is sometimes the case that a thing can only be admired from a distance. Although some elves actively mingled with humans, there were also those who yearned for the time they were fae."

He went on. "Those elves of ancient times, who lived with passion and mixed with people, disappeared naturally with time due to their mixed blood and natural lifespans. Even now, every once in a while, a half-elf will be born from two human parents—a remnant of those elder elves. Meanwhile, the elves who yearned for the days of the fae, and chose to live deep in the forest and insularly among their own kind, preserved their purity."

"Uhh, I don't—"

"I'm not trying to say one's better than the other or make some kind of point here. I am simply telling you that there were two groups who each made different choices. Nothing more."

It felt like a topic I could see myself sinking into thought over, but Gus seemed relatively content to brush it aside.

"Yeah, so, 'cause of all that, the elves who exist now are pretty unsocial. They're good guys if you get to know 'em, but that can take a while." Blood added to Gus's explanation. "They're a skinny bunch, but quick on their feet, and they make good hunters and fighters. Many of 'em have what it takes to be elementalists, too. They go back to the fae, after all. Uh, the takeaway here is, don't get in a fight with an elf in a forest. 'Cause that's some scary shit."

Blood then told me that there were apparently even some he had no idea what to make of, who had mastered elementalism to its utmost limits and could discard their body of flesh and turn back into a fae.

"Those stories are somewhat unreliable..." Gus said. "Though, if there were to be a being capable of such a thing, I doubt it would be anything other than an elf. They are the minions of the god of the forest, and the closest things there are to fae. They are close to human, and far from it, too. A great race."

With that, Gus brought his talk about the elves to a close.

“But there were also some who obtained flesh-and-blood bodies in a different way: the fae of earth, rock, and fire. Earth and rock command the attribute of immutability, while fire controls destruction and creation. None of them were very close to the goddess Rhea Silvia, and neither did they long for the human way of life.”

“Really? Then why did they get physical bodies?”

“The object of their admiration was human technology. They found it incredibly fascinating, the way we extracted ore from the earth, heated it with fire, refined it, and made it into metal. It is said that fae and fairies are not generally too fond of metals and money, so these were certainly an odd group.” He shrugged. “They made their way to see Blaze, god of fire and craft. Blaze was stubborn and spoke little, preferring to create and tinker, but he was also a god of battle and anger who, once enraged, would bring about terrible destruction. He exchanged brief words with the fae who had shown an interest in the industrial arts, and once he was sure of the strength of their determination, he nodded wordlessly, and granted them physical bodies as his own minions.”

Gus commented that so far this was the same as the elves.

“And so the race of dwarves was born as the minions of the fire god Blaze. The dwarves were as unyielding as earth and stone. They lived long lives, could see through darkness like their way was lit by fire, and were skilled in the use of the furnace. But they were destined to deal in the metals the fae disliked, and so their nature started to diverge from the purity of the fae, and the fairies kept their distance. Due to this, there are no elementalists among them comparable to the elves.”

In silence, I listened to him talk. It was an interesting story that felt rewarding to listen to. I thought about the elves and dwarves, races that looked like humans but were not, and wondered if I’d meet them in the outside world someday.

“Instead, they put their faith in the deity Blaze who was their forefather. They researched the old Words and combined them with the skills of metallurgy and engraving. When it comes to the art of infusing objects with Words—that is to

say, engraving the Signs—you will not find more talented artisans. The majority of the dwarves live in mines, preferring to live underground due to their origins as fae of the earth and rock. They are short, perhaps related to where they live, and barrel-chested. They are heavy drinkers, they are physically strong, and the majority of them grow beards. And on top of being highly talented craftsmen, they are also excellent warriors."

When I heard that, my eyes naturally went straight to Blood. "Yeah," he said, and nodded. "Those guys are the real deal."

I was shocked. I could tell from Blood's voice that this was genuine praise.

"T-Tell me more about them!"

"More? Uh, I'll give it a shot. Hmm..." Blood thought for a little while. "They're simple, honest people, and... they understand the meaning of fighting, and what courage is. They're more upright inside their hearts than anyone's ever stood."

There was no sarcastic response from Gus, not this time. Instead, with gentle eyes, he simply listened to him speak.

"One thing is always on their minds, day in and day out."

"What's that?"

"The question of what's worth laying down their life for. What's their reason to fight." Pale blue will-o'-the-wisps roared in Blood's eye sockets. "And when they find it—" He paused. "They go into battle with their souls burning with the fire of courage, and never once fear death."

I got the chills. If they could make *Blood* of all people say that, these dwarves had to be incredible, true warriors.

"I salute those dwarven warriors. The ones I met, at least, and who fought alongside me, were true champions."

I was now greatly looking forward to the day I'd meet them. I wondered what their faces looked like, their straight backs, their braided beards, their shining axes, their prideful, forthright gaze. I imagined all those things, and fantasized of the day when I would fight shoulder-to-shoulder with them.

“As for me, I am not particularly fond of them,” Gus said sullenly.

I was surprised to hear him say that. “Really?”

“Mm... Of course, I will admit they have marvelous knowledge and skills. I will even admit they are warriors with resolve,” he said, and sighed. “But I’ve never known such an obstinate, tightfisted lot in all my life! They are unbelievable!”

I stood there blinking speechlessly for a moment, then looked to Blood and saw him meeting my gaze with a look that said “Can you believe this guy?”

Gus clearly had a repulsion for his own kind.

◆

I awoke in dim light. I could see the room’s plank ceiling above me. I’d had a pretty nostalgic dream.

“Oh...”

Somehow, I got the feeling that I now understood the real reason I’d helped out those dwarves back then: I’d felt sad. And it wasn’t because my imagination had been betrayed; it wasn’t because they hadn’t had straight backs, braided beards, shining axes, and prideful, forthright gazes. It was because Blood, the one and only Blood, had acknowledged this race as warriors, and they had looked at me nervously, cautiously, submissively, covered in dirt and mud, with thin arms and legs, and their eyes flicking about, full of insecurity. And the sight of them was just terribly, unbearably sad.

That isn’t what you are, I must have been wanting to tell them. *It simply isn’t. In truth, you all... are amazing. You’re... so, so much more—*

Of course, I was just pushing the image I had inside my head onto them unasked. I knew that. But even so, I couldn’t help myself. I wanted them to take back their pride, to drop that submissive, nervous look, to hold up their heads and push out their chests. And that was why I was so happy that they were able to live with pride here in this city.

I slowly got out of bed. It was made of bundles of straw with a white sheet pulled over it. It was much better than sleeping directly on piles of hay, because now the straw didn’t scratch my body. I slowly opened the door, went out into

the hall, and to the well in my yard.

The house I currently lived in was located close to the center of the city. It had been refurbished from a mansion in the ruins that had managed to retain its structure comparatively well. I hadn't especially been looking for a big house to live in, but if *I* had refused a big house, it would have made everyone else feel awkward. Besides, they suggested it as a good idea because I often had visitors and guests who needed a place to stay, anyway.

As I result, I ended up employing some servants—specifically, maids. I had memories of the novels from my previous world, so the sound of the words "employing maids" had made my heart flutter a little, but—

"Ah. Good morning."

"Ohh, good morning, young master William."

"Pffhaha, don't you look a sight! Go and tidy your hair, dearie!"

The ones who applied were old ladies who lived nearby. That's reality for you.

Of course, that aside, they did great work with the cleaning, cooking, and laundry, so it was very helpful having them around. Thanks to them, I had a lot more free time to spend on my own training. Gus had mentioned to me before that money could buy time to a certain extent, and this was exactly what he meant.

I used a bucket to fetch some water from the well. As I pulled the bucket up, I thought about how useful it would be to have a hand-operated pump. I thought I remembered it using a directional valve and pressure to draw up the water... but couldn't quite remember the full details. But thinking about it more carefully, we couldn't afford to be so wasteful with metal anyway. I might have been able to recreate the design, but we wouldn't be able to make it widespread, so I concluded as I washed my face and rinsed my mouth that there was almost no point.

"Okay."

I had bed head, so I put water through it to fix it. It didn't work.

"Huh?" I wet my hair a little more and made sure it was just the way I wanted

it. Boing. My hair sprang up again. “Grr...” I adjusted it once more, this time really taking care to set it properly.

“Finally!”

It sprang up again. It was being horrendously stubborn.

I fixed it. It sprang up. I fixed it. It sprang up.

“O-Okay. This time I’ve definitely got it.” Boing. “Gaaahh!!”

I tipped the entire bucket of water over my head.

◆

“*That’s* why your head’s so soaking wet?”

Menel and I were in the yard. While laughing at my stupidity, Menel continued to press my head in one direction, while I resisted and pushed back against him. We were doing neck training.

Training the neck muscles is modestly important. If you’re punched in the head or have your legs swept out from under you, it’s your neck muscles that protect your head. If they’re weak, it’s relatively easy to get seriously hurt.

“Come on! Nine... ten!”

“Gnnngh...”

As he pressed with all of his strength, I breathed out slowly and resisted with all of my own, pushing his hand back.

“Okay. Swap.”

I exhaled and relaxed.

And we just kept going like that, piling up basic muscle and stretching exercises. Arms, legs, abs, back—each day, the place I focused on was different, but I made sure to train every body part I used in battle. Having a flexible and strong body underpinned everything, and I would lose it if I didn’t keep up my training and consume enough food.

Back in the city of the dead, I was able to train every single day, but once I started getting work and needed to be on the move, that wasn’t so easy. Having finally established a central base, I had recently become able to train sufficiently

again, and without that, I probably wouldn't have been able to overpower the cernunnos physically. Blood had done well to keep up that much muscle power while being a traveler. I wondered if he'd used some kind of trick. I should have asked him.

"Okay, so next is..."

"Swings," I said, and picked up what I'd be practicing with. It was not a sword, but something about three times as heavy: a long and thick block of wood with a handle attached. I gave it a test swing to start off. It made a satisfyingly low sound as it gouged a path through the air.

Blood had told me that being able to swing around training equipment heavier than a weapon was the best indication that you'd be able to swing around your actual weapon in the heat of battle. I saw no faults with that argument, either.

Menel let out a short, incredulous laugh. "Ridiculous strength. You'd never know it from looking at you."

Being a descendant of the elves, Menel had a slim body, amazing agility, and was able to burst into action incredibly quickly. But that wasn't all; he had his own share of strength, as well.

"But I *wanted* people to know it from looking at me!" I said.

Of course, even with the way my body looked right now, people *were* getting the impression that I worked out. That was good. But for some reason, I wasn't turning out like Blood. No one would describe me as "a commanding, heroic-looking man!" or "a giant of muscle!" My skeletal structure and that kind of thing was probably part of the issue, but I was also starting to suspect that in this world, muscle mass and muscle strength weren't entirely proportional. Maybe mana or some factor like that had something to do with it.

In any case, I wanted more of a "tough guy" image, but both my body and my personality were finding it very difficult to complete the transformation, and I thought that was a tremendous shame.

"People like you. Why change?"

"Look, people long for what they don't have, okay?!"

“Learn to be satisfied...”

After that brief yet heated discussion, we started practicing our swings, Menel with a practice pole that was skinnier than mine. We practiced downward swings and upward cuts over and over, each of us counting out the repetitions. We moved our legs, torsos, arms, and swords with purpose, making sure to keep them working together so that the movement that started with the legs was conveyed all the way through the tip of the blade.

Verify the current state of your movements and sharpen them toward the future.

“Hm...?”

I felt someone’s gaze on me. Reystov and other adventurers sometimes came to join in with my morning training, and sometimes kids who lived nearby came around as well to peek at what we were doing.

But I got the feeling that wasn’t quite it.

◆

Suspicious, I searched for the source of the gaze—and there it was. On the other side of my small vegetable garden, someone was peeking at us over the hedge. It was someone with black hair. I didn’t recognize them.

“Menel, wait there a moment,” I said, and walked over there.

I didn’t mind them watching, but if they kept on doing it sneakily like that, other people might mistake them for a burglar or something. This world was pretty rough, so when something like that happened, it would sometimes result in angry shouting and possibly even bloodshed. There was no need to peek; all this person needed to do was call out to us, come straight into our yard, and watch. Neither Menel nor I would mind that very much.

“Good morning,” I called out, and the person behind the hedge cringed in fright.

Trembling, they raised their head.

It was a male dwarf with a hunched back and braided black hair. It was hard to tell his age, but his beard was short, so he was probably still young.

“Nice weather, isn’t it?”

“U-Umm... G-Good... morn...ing...” He stood up, flustered.

As we faced each other standing for the first time, I realized he was quite tall for a dwarf, and big-boned, too. But because of his stoop and nervous behavior, his body had none of the intimidating presence I would have expected.

“You’re very welcome to come in and watch, instead of watching from there.” I figured he was introverted, and spoke to him in the calmest, kindest manner I could.

“U-Uh...” His restless eye movement was just starting to calm down, when—

“Hey, Will, what are you fussing about over there?” Menel stopped practicing his swings and came over. He was probably wondering why I was taking so long. “Hm? Who are you? Haven’t seen you around here before.”

After seeing that a new person was now talking to him, the dwarf’s shoulders twitched and he let out a small, frightened squeak.

“All right, brother, I’m not gonna eat you. You interested? Come watch if you want.”

“N-No, I...!”



Menel spoke to him kindly, but the mistake had been made. If you spoke to someone like this in that tone of voice—

“I, I, I’m fine, thank you! I’m sorry for interrupting your training! Bye!”

He bowed his head, hurriedly and yet pretty politely, and then scampered away, almost tripping over himself. I kind of wanted to stop him, but there was a hedge between us, and nothing had really happened to call him all the way back, anyway.

“Mmgh...” After watching him disappear in no time flat, I sent Menel a slightly reproachful look. Maybe it sounded offensive, but I kind of felt as though a cat that was just starting to get used to me had gone and run off...

“Yeah... my fault.” Menel raised a hand as a gesture of mild apology. He was obviously aware. “Turns out that has the opposite effect on guys like that.”

“Of course it does...”

“Not sure if he was interested in the training or you.”

When someone came to peep on us, it was usually one or the other.

“The training, don’t you think? Dwarves are a race of warriors, after all.”

“Did that guy look like he was warrior material to you? My bet’s on him wanting to see the paladin everyone’s been talking about.”

As we talked to each other, I returned to practicing, slightly disappointed. For some reason, I felt like he and I could have gotten along well. I wondered whether he would come to watch me train again.

As I focused, that feeling slowly melted away inside my heart and disappeared.

◆

Hammers clanged, and saws rasped. I could hear looms at work weaving cloth, children playing in the streets, and a boss calling for his apprentices. And together with these, I could hear work songs being sung to set a rhythm for their labor.

Having finished all kinds of jobs of my own, I stood at the entrance to

Dwarftown—the common name for the area around the streets where the dwarves lived—listening to these bright and pleasant sounds.

As I looked around, I noticed that quite a number of extensions and modifications had been made to the stone houses, and many of them now looked more like workshops. Laundry lines were strung everywhere, and clothes were blowing about in the breeze. Thinking to myself that this place always felt alive, I walked in.

As I was walking down the street, one of the rasping noises ceased. Several dwarves who had been doing a little woodwork at the side of the road stopped, took off their hats, and bowed deeply to me. I knew one of them. That slightly chubby, cheerful dwarf with a bushy beard was...

“Thanks for your work, Thori.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Welcome, Paladin. All by your lonesome?”

“Ahaha. It’s nothing that calls for an attendant. Is Agnarr around?”

“If it’s Agnarr you want, he’s at home, I believe! Hodh, go run and let him know the Paladin’s coming!”

“Ai,” a younger dwarf said, nodding. He set down his tools.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that...”

“Nonsense! Agnarr wouldn’t feel right about us just sitting back and not giving our liege lord a proper welcome when he visits!”

“Ai!” The younger dwarf called Hodh nodded and dashed off before I could stop him.

Now that a messenger had been sent out to inform Agnarr about my visit, it would both be rude and a nuisance to him if I made my way over there too soon. After all, the point of sending a messenger to someone was to give them time to prepare. And since I wasn’t here often, I decided to spend a little time talking with Thori before going.

Many of the dwarves were people of relatively few words, but Thori was a talker, and laughed as if he was completely happy to have been born that way. I, too, found him approachable and easy to talk to.

“How has life been treating you recently?” I asked.

“Hahaha! It’s like night and day! I can make what I want, sell what I want! No need to worry about where tomorrow’s meal’s coming from! It’s a real blessing.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Has there been any trouble in the area, or anyone in poverty?”

“Hmm, well...”

Thori came up with a few examples: complaints about the noise from the smithy, trouble that was being caused by lifestyle differences between dwarves and men, and several bread-and-butter matters. I took out a copper writing implement that was a combination of a pen and an inkwell, and noted everything he said on the back of a miswritten document. Paper was too valuable to waste, so I kept a bundle of them on me for memo use.

“Oh? That portable pen is well made.”

“I had Agnarr make it for me some time ago.”

“That explains it. Agnarr’s work is good.”

A portable writing implement was quite a difficult thing to make, but he had made it straight away for me when I asked. There really were a lot of talented craftsmen among the dwarves.

“And... there have been a lot of people moving into this city recently, both humans and dwarves. We can’t complain, I mean, that’s what we did too. But that doesn’t mean we can always find jobs for them...”

“You do have a point.”

“But it’s not healthy for fit young people to be idling around all day not working.”

“Yes, it could even have an effect on crime.” I nodded.

It was good that more people were coming to this area as word of its development got around, but it was obvious that it wasn’t going to be easy to find jobs for all of them. There were a variety that had been created: the loading and unloading of cargo at the river port, the civil engineering and

construction needed to turn the ruins back into a city, commerce and industry jobs, the timber trade, and even service jobs at eateries and taverns. However, that still didn't make it easy to continually create enough employment to support dozens of new people.

Having a job is important. The feeling of contributing to society brings self-esteem to us humans, and if the job is lost, the self-esteem goes with it. At the same time, losing your job means losing your income. Everyone gets panicky and concerned when they're financially insecure and have no idea what tomorrow will bring. People with low self-esteem who are full of anxiety and feeling pressured often only need one little push to turn to crime. They kind of get into a state where excuses for crime seem reasonable.

For instance:

"I've been backed into this terrible situation, so what do you expect?"

"I have no choice; I'm doing it to survive."

"There's no way I'm going to live much longer anyway, so I'll just let loose and do whatever I want."

"There's nothing else I can do. I have no future anymore anyway. I'm not the only one to blame for this; society and everyone else who pushed me this far are just as much at fault. And even if I steal a little from this guy, it's not like it's going to kill him. Come on, be brave! Do it now!"

...And so on.

You might wonder how I could imagine something like that. The answer is that the terrible state I got myself into in my previous world hadn't counted for nothing. I could roughly predict the thoughts of people on the precipice and those who weren't far off.

Anyway, an increase in people like that meant more crime. Of course, there would certainly be people who would admirably endure their situation and not resort to crime, but there would also be perfectly ordinary people who couldn't endure and would resort to such things. Since both groups existed in a certain proportion, an increase in the crime rate was going to be unavoidable the moment you upped the number of jobless, anxious people. And if you couldn't

avoid an increase in crime, public order would deteriorate, more resources would have to be spent on cracking down, and that would start a vicious circle. The problem had to be severed at the root.

People moving here was inevitable, so maybe the solution called for here was to somehow create jobs to keep the economy moving?

If problems like this were allowed to fester, the situations that could grow out of them were really bad. As the number of people coming here increased, people would start fighting over the simple labor jobs that didn't require any particular skills. Public order would deteriorate. A conflict would flare up between the original residents and the migrants. Trouble would start.

It would develop in that manner from what was at first an economic battle into discriminatory feelings against a specific group. And once the economy and discriminatory views started to become entangled, it would cause serious problems that would easily last for several centuries.

This situation was a ticking time bomb, and if we couldn't dismantle it here and now, the explosion in later generations was going to be horrific.

Even in my memories of my past life, the acceptance or restriction of immigration and refugees had been an incredibly large social issue. Now that I'd been put in the position of solving it myself, I understood well how difficult doing so actually was. The economy had to be grown by making sure money was changing hands and there were enough jobs to go around, and unless the issue was taken care of fully, it could snowball into something serious. It really was as Gus said: it was extremely important for money to circulate and keep on circulating. My head was starting to hurt thinking about it.

"Paladin, sir?" Thori said in a concerned voice, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Oh... Sorry. I'll think up some kind of plan when I get back."

I figured the first step would have to be talking with Tonio to get some kind of public infrastructure project started up, maybe port maintenance or irrigation projects or something, and take on a larger workforce. I also thought I'd better pick the brains of those who knew more about these things. Putting in honest legwork and gathering a consensus of opinions was fundamental to big projects like this. After all, I didn't want to cause any riots, and that meant I needed to

stimulate the economy before that had a chance to happen. It was also going to be important to reduce cultural friction.

Just as I'd finished organizing my thoughts, the young dwarf Hodh who had run off earlier came back with perfect timing. "Ai. Says he'll be waiting."

"All right. Thank you very much for taking the trouble." I smiled and bowed slightly to him.

He opened his eyes wide and waved both hands in front of him frantically. "No, no! Don't bow to me!"

"No, really, it was a big help. And you, Thori. Thank you very much for today. Let's talk again."

"It's an honor to hear that from you, Paladin. Anytime!"

I bowed to both of them and left. The two responded by bending into deep bows until I left their sight, which I found kind of uncomfortable. I soon realized that the other dwarves in the street must have noticed me too, because they were also bowing.

Of course, my place in society was high enough now that it was only natural for that to happen, and strongly refusing their show of respect would only leave them in an awkward position. I had no choice but to accept it, but even so, I couldn't help feeling a little unsettled. Was the reason something to do with my previous life's memories, or was it just that I still wasn't accustomed to it?

I felt that I needed to get used to things like this and learn to assume a dignified air. But on the other hand, the idea of becoming completely accustomed to having people revere me also scared me a little, and I worried that something precious inside me would go numb.

Becoming important wasn't easy.

◆

"I apologize for the sudden visit."

"Not at all. Thank you for coming."

I was in the parlor of one of the larger mansions in Dwarftown. Those first solemn words had come from a dignified dwarf with a smooth bald head and a

neatly braided steel-gray beard. He was Agnarr, the dwarf with the most influence in this town.

Beside him was a bony old dwarf with sleek white hair. I didn't recognize him. My first thought was that his eyes looked pretty tired.

"This is Grendir. He represents the migrants who moved into this town just recently and is also my great-uncle."

"Pleasure." Keeping it short, he bowed his head to me.

"My name is William. I was entrusted with the governance of these Beast Woods by His Excellency Ethelbald, Duke of Southmark." I placed my right hand over my heart, brought my left foot back slightly, and bowed to him in return. If he represented an entire group, I couldn't afford to treat him lightly.

Grendir responded with the same gesture, performed with incredible fluidity. Did that mean he knew of the old etiquette? If he did—

"Please sit down." My thoughts were interrupted by Agnarr offering me the seat that was reserved for the most important guests.

"Thank you very much." Given my position, I couldn't refuse this, so I suppressed the urge to be polite and sat down.

After a short while, Agnarr's wife brought in some tea.

There are many stories about dwarven women. Some say they are beautiful and fairy-like, while others disagree and say they are incredibly chunky and muscular and have beards. But I had learned from meeting them personally that the correct answer was "all of the above."

In their youths, dwarven women were just a little plump and beautiful like spirits of the forest. But perhaps because they didn't care much about their appearances, once they got married, they quickly turned into looking like rough, middle-aged ladies. And the dwarven men weren't very concerned about the change.

On top of that, it seemed to be part of dwarven culture to hide their women from outsiders and not let them out in public. I suspected that coincidental glimpses of female dwarves had been outsiders' only source of information, and

what had resulted were the extreme stories of them all being fairy-like or having beards.

As for whether Agnarr's wife fell into the fairy or bearded category, I decline to comment.

I took a sip of my herbal tea and thought about how I should proceed. The Iron Country topic was one close to their hearts, so rather than asking about it immediately, I figured it would be better to have a little bit of friendly chat beforehand to break the ice.

Taking in the unique aroma and bitter taste of the herbal tea, I went with a safe question. "So, Grendir, why did you and your group come here?"

"To die."

A terrible answer came back, and I had a coughing fit, almost spitting out my tea. "Ahem. Sorry."

"Grendir, you will shock him being so blunt," Agnarr said, lightly reproaching him.

Grendir made a troubled face, and went quiet for a while. I sat up straight and waited for him.

He spent some time collecting his thoughts, then started to speak in a composed voice. "We don't have long ahead of us. It is our wish to die gazing at our homeland."

"Sir William, for your information, Grendir is a survivor from the mountains to the west."

Now things made a little more sense. I imagined that once I grew old and my final days approached, I would want to die gazing at the hill where that temple stood.

"The mountains of our old homeland are no longer ours, and the land at the base of the mountain had been transformed into a forest teeming with beasts. But after we heard the rumors that a hero had reclaimed that land..."

But that still didn't mean I'd understood everything Grendir was feeling. I wondered how powerful those feelings must be.

“Looking from afar at our beloved mountain range, dreaming that one day our old home will be taken back. If I can die like that, how happy I would be... We all shared those same feelings with each other, and came here as fellows of similar mind.”

How sad must it be that they were unable to return to their homeland no matter how much they wished for it?

How frustrated must they feel that their homeland was stolen from them and they were never able to take it back?

How much must they have gone through to reach this point, where they could bring themselves to say they’d be happy to die looking from afar at the place that was once their home?

“We will do any job you ask of us. Please, as much trouble as it is, please allow us to stay in some corner of the city.”

I couldn’t truly understand the way he was feeling. But for that very reason, as the person in charge of Torch Port, I felt as if I had a duty to make a statement of intent and responsibility.

“Please don’t worry. I will do everything I can.” I held one of Grendir’s hands with both of mine, looked into his eyes, put feeling into my words, and hoped strongly that he would understand. “I *will* protect you all from injustice.”

“Ohh...” His hand trembled. My eyes shifted to it for a moment, and when I looked back, I saw that tears were streaming down his cheeks. He gripped back with his quivering hand, and said two words, over and over. “Thank you... Thank you...”

◆

Two hundred long years ago, those famous halls of stone known as the Iron Country had a monarch. Short and thin in stature, he was a pensive lord of few words who preferred the art of language to that of fighting. He was the final ruler of the Iron Country, and his name was Aurvangr.

He had inherited the country from the previous monarch and ran the kingdom smoothly, but it was said that the warriors there bemoaned the fact that their new king was beloved not by Blaze, god of fire, but by the god of

knowledge, Enlight.

As for the people, they did not dislike their monarch. He treated both those who could fight and those who could not equally and did not particularly differentiate between them. He understood the feelings of those who were not warriors well.

The warriors, however, were not happy about the fact that they, who stood at the front lines in constant danger and were prepared to sacrifice their lives, were treated the same as those who were not. They furiously bewailed their monarch as they downed their drinks, shouting in outrage with raised fists that he took them too lightly and that his name was the only part of him that was the least bit manly or grand.

The only response the monarch Aurvangr ever gave to these complaints and angry voices was a flustered laugh.

Though there was a small amount of dissent, the kingdom was running well on the whole. It was a peaceful time. The kingdom enjoyed prosperity and was full of happiness, and though there were small misfortunes, there were always people who could afford to lend a helping hand. No one ended their lives by the roadside, angry, suffering, and resenting the world.

But the storm came.

It was a catastrophe, an invasion by hell's demons. The most famous southern countries of the Union Age fell one after another, burned to the ground, and the demonic forces closed in upon the Iron Country.

Though numerous titles existed to refer to that king of demons, there was no one who knew his true name. He was called the Undying Bladefiend, the King Among Kings. The Purest Evil, the Inexhaustible Darkness, the Rider of Warstorms, the Cackler...

The High King of the Eternals.

Their defeat was beyond questioning. The southern kingdoms of Southmark had all been known as powerful countries capable of standing as the first line of defense against the forces of evil, and the High King had toppled them with the ease of tearing thin paper. How many days could they last against such an

enemy, even in the underground halls of the famous Iron Mountains?

Furthermore, the latest word was that there were ancient dragons among the High King's forces, and this news had turned every warrior among them pale and speechless. It was at that time that a messenger came from the demons.

"Will you serve the High King?" the demon said.

He explained that the High King liked swords, and that he could make his own forces but not weapons. Then, he made them an offer, saying that the mountains of iron would be left alone if they could serve him with the skill of their craftsmen. He suggested that if warriors existed to protect the people, accepting his offer would be the right choice.

Saying he would hear their answer in three days, the demon departed, leaving the dwarves behind with bitter looks on their faces.

An explosion of debate followed. A gag order was placed, but the rumor of the demon's message spread in no time at all, and soon everyone was talking about it. In fact, throwing them all into disarray might have been just another part of the demon's plan.

The monarch alone was silent.

The dwarves were an insular people to begin with, and some among them said that if the only difference was going to be who they sold their weapons to, they didn't see the problem. Mothers with infants made pleas as well, saying that their children would die if they were dragged into a war.

The monarch alone was silent.

Of course, there were also many people who insisted that demons could not be trusted and that they should fight to the death. But when it came to how to fight them, everyone had a different opinion and no conclusion could be reached. Everyone was in chaos, and everyone was emotional, screaming, and wailing. There was even bloodshed. No one knew what to do.

The monarch alone was, as always, silent.

And the day came, with the silent monarch's lieges unable to decide on anything. It was then that Aurvangr spoke for the first time.

“I will decide,” he said, and stepped in front of the demon who had returned to hear their response.

“And what is your answer?” the demon said.

“This.” Aurvangr drew his blade across the demon’s neck with lightning speed, lopping his head off. The demon collapsed with a heavy thud.

The enchanted sword Calldawn, passed down in the Iron Country for generations, gleamed with a perfect shine, allowing none of the demon’s blood to taint its surface.

“This is the steel you wanted. The weapon you wanted. And you shall have it!” The small, thin dwarf-lord raised his sword high into the air.

The people cheered. The warriors were choked with tears. Realizing that they had terribly misjudged their monarch, they prostrated themselves in apology and shame for their ignorance.

Then, the fallen demon’s head began to laugh. “The dragon is coming.” It was an ominous, thick voice, and bloody foam spilled from his mouth as he spoke. “The dragon is coming! The dragon is coming! Valacirca! Calamity’s sickle descends upon you!” The demon screamed madly, only the whites of its eyes visible. “Nothing will survive!”

Aurvangr stamped on the demon’s head and crushed it. Then, he muttered. “I won’t let that happen.”

◆

Preparations for battle proceeded quickly. The dwarven warriors surrounded themselves in iron, with helmets, armor, axes, and shields.

“We will draw in hell’s demons and kill them all beneath the earth,” the monarch Aurvangr declared. “Let these underground passages be their graves.”

The people and the warriors all obeyed his words, and made preparations to kill the demons. They set up fiendish traps and complex labyrinths, readying for the demon siege.

They finished in only a few days, and once they were done, Aurvangr gathered them in the great hall and gave them an order.

“All of those who are not warriors, and all warriors who are young and inexperienced: leave the Iron Mountains now.”

When the people heard this, there was an outcry. They had been intending to die with their monarch. Did he think of them as dead weight? They wanted to be be allowed to stay.

Despite the din of anger, disappointment, and pleading voices from the crowd, Aurvangr remained quiet. He allowed the people to have their say for a while, and once the roar of the crowd seemed to have lessened, he struck the floor with the end of Calldawn’s scabbard. The sound echoed around, and the din became a murmur.

Having found the right moment to continue, he rested his hands on the end of the sword’s handle, raised his head high, and said, “My people: I am going to die. All the warriors who stay behind will likely die as well.”

Everyone fell silent. Aurvangr’s words were the words of a dying man.

“But we must not permit the death of the Iron Country.” His words were full of quiet determination. “My people: I think of you like my own children, and therefore, it rends my heart to give you such a selfish order. But I must order you regardless: live on!”

The monarch spoke without stopping. “Even if you lose your homeland, and are tarnished with humiliation and regret, I command you to descend the mountain and live on! That is the battle I order of you! You do not run today, you take command over a different battlefield!”

His voice echoed throughout the great hall. “As lord and warriors we shall protect our pride, protect our names, and die in these mountains where the spirits of our ancestors slumber! And you will abandon your pride and put all your being into life! You must never allow the fire of the furnace to die!”

He drew a deep breath, and shouted one more time. “Men, live on! Live and fight! Until we return to glory again! That is my final order!”

Those were the last words the survivors ever heard spoken by the Iron Country’s final ruler.

He took the warriors and left the great hall, and after readying themselves for

their battle, they confronted the tremendous demon army and the ancient dragon without fear. Every one of them fought valiantly, and every one of them died.

The dwarves who went down the mountain and the warriors who were protecting them lost their homeland, and they became a wandering people. They crossed to the north with many refugees, living lives full of suffering and humiliation. But in spite of it all, they grit their teeth, kept the words of their lord in their heart, and for the next two hundred years, some as craftsmen, others as mercenaries, they survived.

◆

"That is our secret, the tale passed down among the people of the Iron Mountains," said the bald dwarf Agnarr, his face flushed red from alcohol. "I wasn't born at the time. As for Grendir..."

Grendir, the white-haired dwarf, was crying. It was probably half because he had some strong firewater in him, but even so, he really was a mess of tears.

I had asked them if they would talk to me about their past, and they had quietly nodded and told me their story.

"I... We had only just been appointed warriors to the king at the time..." Grendir snivelled like a child. "We couldn't even fight beside the warriors who came before us... We just had to obey the order and... run away with the others..." He broke into sobs. Agnarr watched over him uncertainly.

Eventually, he continued. "And that was not easy. It was cold... and too hard a journey for the children... Oh, the children... They kept dying. There was a bright boy, always smiling and urging everyone around him to keep going, and he became increasingly exhausted, until even a smile was more than he could muster... He was a shell of himself, and then a cold was all it took, he stopped moving, even, and... just died. He died on my back as I carried him!"

The long train of refugees suffered random attacks by lone demons. There was dissension over their scarce food supply. And even when they reached a town, there were more of them than the towns could handle. It was the same when they crossed to the north; they were just one group of many in the same situation, and found it very difficult to find jobs.

“I no longer remember how many died. Slurping mud and gnawing on tree roots wasn’t the worst by far. Young women sold their youth for bowls of porridge for their children. Some of the men who couldn’t stand by any longer turned to thievery and were beaten to death for it. We were skin and bone, reduced to begging...”

I quietly listened to him talk and realized that the dwarf-lord’s bravery and the people’s anguish had already brought tears to my eyes.

“And yet we lived... We lived. We overcame that age of chaos and lived through the next two hundred years. Somehow, we lived through...” Grendir spoke quietly. “And then you, William, you returned this land back to the hands of people. Not only that, you even cry with us.”

Grendir gazed up in the direction of the Rust Mountains—no, the Iron Mountains.

“Someday, we’ll be able to go back. Someday, we’ll be able to return it all to the way it was. Someday, we’ll be able to achieve what our ruler ordered...” His voice was shaking. “How precious a thing it is to be able to believe that... How grateful we are...”

As Grendir thanked me over and over, he slowly fell into an alcohol-induced sleep. He had been downing drink after strong drink to help him talk about his painful memories, so it was only natural.

“Grendir must have been happy to bare his heart to someone,” Agnarr said, smiling. “That is our history. I hope you can understand.”

“Thank you so much. That must have been incredibly difficult for you both.”

“You’re welcome.”

There were a few more words to wrap things up, and then I departed Agnarr’s mansion.

I had been so engrossed in their story of the past as we all drank together that I hadn’t noticed how much time had gone by. When I got outside, it was already evening. The dwarves had finished their work and were either returning to their houses or stopping by taverns.

As for me, I was doing a lot of thinking. I thought about those mountains of iron, the dwarves who were left behind, the feelings of the then-monarch Aurvangr. I thought about Blood, Mary, and Gus, who had lived during that time; the fearsome High King; and the Union Age, when the world was prosperous and peaceful. I also thought about the Lord of Holly's prophecy.

And as I walked aimlessly with my thoughts wandering over all these things, it suddenly occurred to me how dark it had gotten. It was already nighttime. Because there weren't many lights here, night was a lot darker in this world than in my past one.

As I stood confused in front of a row of nondescript houses wondering what street I was on, the light from a tavern caught my eye. I decided to walk over. I was sure that if I got a look at the sign hanging outside, I'd at least be able to figure out what street this was. This "city" was small enough for that to work.

Then, I heard some kind of commotion and the sound of someone being punched. Was there a tavern brawl going on? I quickened my pace, and someone came crashing backwards out of the door to the tavern. I hurriedly caught him. His braided black hair fluttered.

"Oh!"

It was that dwarf who had come to see my morning training. He looked like he had been badly beaten.

◆

After catching him, I froze for a second in surprise. He looked surprised as well, but recovered before I could. Ducking a quick bow to me, he went straight back into the fray inside the tavern, yelling out, "Stop this!"

It only took a short glance to tell me most of what I needed to know about what was going on inside. The tavern was a mess of tipped-over tables and chairs, and two male customers, both human, were in there having a fight. They both looked like pretty muscular craftsmen, and their faces were red. They probably had a lot of alcohol in them already.

"Ahh! Stay outta this!"

"This ain't got no'n'a do with you! Bug off!"

The two of them started getting heated, breathing heavily, stinking of booze. The other patrons were either watching from a distance and trying not to get involved, or deliberately fanning the flames from the sidelines. The young tavern girl looked troubled.

“Please, stop, I said!” The dwarf was trying to physically separate the two of them, but he wasn’t very good at it. In fact, he was just getting thumped and shoved away without any effort. I couldn’t really understand it. He looked strong enough to me from where I was standing.

Then it clicked: he wasn’t used to physical fighting. He was timid, and the way he moved showed he was afraid of hurting either of them, which put the craftsmen who were used to fighting and committed to their punches at an obvious advantage.

In this dangerous age, it was unusual to see someone so unused to fighting. With his muscle and physique, the dwarf could just grab hold of one of them and squeeze as hard as he could, and it would be pretty effective.

“You want a fight, I’ll give you a fight!”

“Sto—*pmfh?!*”

Ouch. That looked like it hurt.

There was a reason, by the way, that I was just standing by and watching: no one had yet drawn any weapons. This wasn’t the peaceful society of my previous world; here, it was the norm for even craftsmen to keep at least a dagger with them on their belts or hidden in an inside pocket. They hadn’t drawn those, and what’s more, they weren’t getting violent against anyone else. In other words, though the people here may have been getting riled up, they were all exercising at least a minimum of restraint by this world’s standards.

“Do it outside, you’re disturbing the other—*gmf*!”

“Just shut your piehole!”

“Butt out already!”

I thought I should probably just watch for a little longer. The dwarf was doing

his best to keep them off each other, after all, and they probably had a reason for fighting. If I, the liege lord, stepped in all of a sudden, it would just make everything into a big deal and—

“Gaaaah—Hey! Hold this guy down for me!”

“Yeah, let’s shut him up. Then it’s back on!”

And then, confusingly, the two who’d been fighting started teaming up. The dwarf kept coming back to stop them no matter how many times they punched him, so it seemed they’d come to an agreement on removing him first. I started to wonder if the two of them weren’t usually on pretty good terms.

“Get down and stay down!”

One of them grabbed him around the neck, while the other started kneeing him repeatedly. I thought this had probably gone far enough now. I didn’t mind when it was just two men fighting each other bare-handed, but I couldn’t stand for them ganging up on someone else.

“Let’s stop now, all right?” I said, stepping into the tavern.

“Huh?! Who as—”

“Not another...”

The two of them turned to look at me and completely froze. Both their mouths hung open. The patrons who had been cheering them on did the same.

“Let’s stop now. I can’t continue to overlook this.”

The color instantly drained from their red faces. See? This is why I wanted to avoid this... Oh well.

“I have no intention of making a big deal out of this. You’ve just had a bit too much to drink, that’s all. Am I right?” I looked each of them in the eye, seeking an answer. They just nodded repeatedly. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen anyone nod so hard. “Then why don’t you just say sorry to the people here, go home for today, and hit the hay? Don’t worry, I won’t make anything of this.” I smiled.

The two of them cringed—I had no idea why they were so terrified—and started apologizing to the dwarf and tavern girl with incredible energy. The exhilaration and headiness of alcohol felt very empty once you sobered up.

“We caused you all this trouble...”

“Should never’a let the drink get the better’a us!”

Apologizing profusely, they left behind money to compensate the tavern for the trouble they’d caused, and then they cleared off together. So they *had* come here together. They were probably usually good friends.

They left behind them the worn-out dwarf, the stunned barmaid, and the rest of the patrons. Now what was I to do about this...

◆

The dwarf had been hit a few too many times and seemed to be feeling groggy, but he soon came around. Specifically, after I settled everyone down, he came to before I had a chance to cast a resuscitation blessing on him. He was a tough one.

“Oh...” He looked round and round and then, as though grasping the situation, he bolted to his feet. “Tha-Thank you for...!”

“Hold on, hold on.” I stuck my palm out against his forehead and stopped him from bowing. “Your face and head were hit quite a lot. You shouldn’t make sudden movements like quickly standing up or lowering your head.”

“Oh... Okay...”

I explained to him that even when it didn’t look like much, damage to the head could lead to situations that were no joke. He seemed to calm down after that. I got the tavern girl to bring him a chair, and sat him down. “Also, a washcloth, chilled with well water or something, please.”

“Yes, sir!”

I realized there were far fewer patrons here now. It made sense. They’d come to the tavern on the way back from work, planning to gripe and let loose a bit, and were just having a good time watching a fight that had broken out when suddenly the liege lord had wandered in and shut it all down. Anyone who wanted to stay out of trouble would obviously find another place to drink.

I reflected on the trouble I’d caused the place as I spread out a hand in front of the dwarf’s hazel eyes. “How many fingers do you see?”

“Three.”

“All right, that’s good. Do you feel queasy or cold? Any headaches?”

“Nothing.”

“What’s your name?”

He fell silent for a moment, as if deciding what he should say, and then finally spoke. “Al.”

Al wasn’t a very dwarf-like name. They usually sounded rougher and used a lot of voiced consonants. It might have been a nickname or something.

“Al. Okay. You might already know, but I’m William. Nice to meet you.”

“I-It’s very nice to meet you, too.”

He wasn’t having any trouble responding, and I couldn’t see any dangerous symptoms like arm or leg convulsions or non-stop nosebleeds. I’d have to see how things went, but for now he didn’t seem to have any problems. Still...

“I’m amazed there’s so little wrong with you after being punched about and even repeatedly kneed like that.”

“Toughness is my strong point,” the black-haired Al said, smiling.

Benediction wasn’t something to just use whenever I felt like it, so it was always better if regular treatment could do the job. I gave my thanks to the tavern girl and held the wet washcloth against the places where he’d been hit. “One more thing. Where’s the tavern owner? I’d like to apologize for adding to the disturbance.”

“Oh, my father is... laid up at the moment...” The tavern girl broke my gaze and looked at the floor sadly. So that was why this place was so unruly right now.

“Do you want me to take a look at him?”

“I, I would never dream of asking so much of you, sir...!”

Being in a position of importance really was frustrating.

“I don’t mind. My god would be angry with me if I knowingly abandoned a sick person. And a paladin can’t afford to be forsaken by his god; that wouldn’t

even make for a good tragedy in this day and age.” I shrugged jokingly, and the tavern girl’s expression softened as well. “Once he heals up, I would encourage him to pay a visit to a place of worship and make an offering.”

“Y-Yes, of course...!”

“All right, then, Al. I’ll be right back, so please just rest there.” I made my way to the tavern’s living quarters.

◆

The tavern owner’s illness wasn’t that big a deal. It was just a stubborn skin disease. But since it affected how he looked, it was understandable that he couldn’t come into the tavern. He had to consider the impressions it gave the patrons and the rumors that might spread.

I placed my palm against the affected areas and prayed. It cleared up immediately.

“Ohh...”

“Thank you so much... Thank you so much...!”

“The god of the flame gave me this power. So please, show your appreciation to her,” I laughed.

“U-Um, what about... payment or... donations... or...”

“Lots and lots, please.”

“Huh?”

“Lots and lots of appreciation. Give only the money or things you can spare; all I ask is that whatever you give is full of feelings of gratitude for the god of the flame.”

The father and daughter laughed at my bad joke.

This was something Bishop Bagley had told me a long time ago. If you didn’t seek payment for healing people, ultimately, not paying would become the default, and the entire priesthood would feel the squeeze. Sentimentally, I wanted to heal people for free, but priests couldn’t survive on air alone any more than anybody else, so I could see that it was necessary to seek at least a

little in return.

“In that case, why don’t I cook something for you? Right now, if you want!”

“Father’s cooking is really good!”

“Oh, wow, I’d love that. As it happens, I skipped dinner today by accident...”

Once we had a pleasant mood going, we returned to the tavern to find Al repairing the door. Come to think of it, the door broke, didn’t it, when he—

“Wait, what are you doing?!”

“I was bored just sitting around...”

“You’re injured, you’re supposed to be—wow!”

The door and its destroyed latch were now almost completely fixed, despite the fact that he could only have used makeshift materials and tools.

I was seventeen solstice years old now, and I’d been living in this world for sixteen years already. Woodwork and craftsmanship weren’t beyond my understanding and I could even do a bit of them myself, but that was how I could tell.

“Wow...”

His skill was on a different level.

It was only a casual quick fix, but that made the difference in skill even more obvious. In a very short span of time, he had done a beautiful repair job that couldn’t be faulted.

“Ooh!”

“Now that’s something.”

The tavern owner and his daughter were equally impressed.

“No, it’s really nothing... Not compared to you, William...” Al, however, spoke to the floor. “You’re strong and brave and...” It seemed as though he didn’t have much confidence in himself. Because of my memories of my previous life, I could kind of understand how he felt. But that was all the more reason...

“You should stop saying things like that.”

“Huh?”

I squatted down and gazed up at him, looking him in the eyes. As I remembered the way Mary had spoken to me, I realized I was speaking a little more politely than usual. If I’d have been depressed like this, she would probably have said something like...

“Stop jinxing yourself by calling yourself weak and cowardly in a roundabout fashion. Words have *power*. Power to bind people and curse people.”

His hazel eyes wavered hesitantly.

“It’s one thing for an enemy to curse you, but please stop placing such curses on your own heart. Don’t you think that you at least should be your own heart’s biggest ally?”

In my past life, I hadn’t been able to manage that, either, so I wasn’t really one to talk. But despite that, I spoke firmly and with a smile. There were times when it was important to pretend, regardless of what you might or might not have achieved in your past.

“R-Right!”

I was glad to see that Al seemed to be sitting up a little bit straighter.

◆

This world had a type of cooking called jar-boiling, in which all kinds of ingredients were put into a wide-mouthed jar with water, alcohol, salt, herbs, and spices, and brought to a simmer. In essence, it was basically a hotchpotch, but when it was made by someone who was good at it, the delicious, savory taste of the broth, the flavor of the herbs, and the piquancy of the spices all complemented each other perfectly, and it tasted very good.

There was such a jar placed in front of me at this very moment, with a large lid over its wide opening. The tavern girl lifted the lid with a thick cloth, and a wonderful smell swelled out. It was jar-boiled river fish.

“Wow...”

Inside, there was large white fish of the kind that could be reliably caught in the great river flowing beside Torch Port, chopped-up in-season vegetables,

slightly aged wine, rock salt, and herbs, all cooked together into a stew. It came with crusty multigrain bread, a piece of cheese with a distinctive smell which was apparently goat's cheese, and even wine diluted with hot water.

This would be categorized as a top-class meal. Even a main meal of porridge with a few vegetable scraps mixed in and a garnish of some kind of salty preserved food would have counted as "pretty good." While visiting the poor villages of Beast Woods to offer medical treatment, I had often found myself floored by what was offered to me for food. In this area and time period, it was all too common to find food that had abandoned the concepts of nutritional balance and eating for pleasure. It made me appreciate that "cooking" was an art that could only exist upon a foundation of wealth. So I was very grateful for proper meals.

"Mater our Earth-Mother, gods of good virtue, bless this food, which by thy merciful love we are about to receive, and let it sustain us in body and mind." I said grace, the same prayer as usual. It had become a habit by now.

Prayer was a very effective method for changing your mood and putting your thoughts in order. This was something I had only learned after being born into this world.

"For the grace of the gods, we are truly thankful."

Even in my previous life, religion was something that had been passed down continuously for millennia. Anything surviving that long had to have considerable advantages and utility. That much was obvious.

"Cheers." I raised my cup to the black-haired dwarf named Al. Al timidly raised his cup back.

I used a large wooden ladle to serve it out from the jar into earthenware bowls.

"Oh, this *is* good."

The fish fell apart very easily, and the roughly chopped vegetables had absorbed the flavor of the broth. It had a slightly salty taste and went well with alcohol. This was probably the way the laborers liked it.

Al nodded in agreement. He dipped some of the crusty bread into the sauce

and ate it. It looked delicious, so I copied him. It was indeed delicious. I also enjoyed the unique flavor of the cheese. It would have been too pungent on its own, but it was just right paired with the bread.

The two of us ate up the tavern cooking with relish. Al's expression had been quite stiff in the beginning, but the tasty cooking seemed to have mellowed his mood.

A question occurred to me. "Come to think of it, what brought you here to begin with?"

I didn't doubt in the least that he was well intentioned and had only been trying to stop those two from fighting. That was clearly the kind of person he was. But there were a lot of humans in the streets around here. Fortunately, there hadn't yet been any large public clashes between races here in Torch Port, but even so, dwarves and humans had different cultures and led different lifestyles. It was inevitable that the residential areas would end up becoming a little segregated. What had brought a dwarf like him here?

"U-Um, I..."

I nodded and waited patiently while he tried to get his words out.

"I, I only just moved here, and..."

"Go on."

"T-To, ah, get a feel for the place? I guess you'd say, or... umm, I mean..."

Ahh, so he was exploring, I thought, but deliberately didn't say it myself, instead nodding for him to continue.

"Something like... exploring..." He seemed to shrink back into his chair as he said it.

"There's nothing very strange about that, if you ask me. It's necessary, right?"

"Yes..."

This city had its share of nasty people, but I paid attention, and Reystov and company also kept watchful eyes out, so no one dared to start anything big in public areas like the main streets. And since no major trouble would start just from walking around, it was relatively important to do that first of all and

become familiar with the area. Obviously, this world didn't have public transport, detailed city maps, traffic signs, or house numbers on display. Unless you walked around on your own two feet for a while taking in everything you saw, you really wouldn't know your way around.

Al might have been peering at my morning training not just because he was interested in it, but also to make sure he knew the location of the liege's mansion.

"The clan is busy trying to smooth everything out, but it's still..."

"Oh, you mean Grendir?"

"Oh, um, yes."

"Don't worry about that. We have it mostly organized."

I hadn't only been listening to their old war stories. Agnarr and I had also made progress on dividing up the residential areas, lending out what was needed to get by for now, and organizing the amount of people who wanted to migrate here and their various skills.

I told Al that in any case, there was no need for him to worry, and he looked at me with eyes full of all kinds of emotions. They were eyes that looked up from below, as a child on the street might look up to an adult, and they were full of envy, respect, admiration, and probably a little self-deprecation and submissiveness.

"You're amazing."

I recognized those eyes somehow. I had probably looked just like this in my previous life. That was probably why.

"You're strong, dependable, you can even manage other people. Seriously, compared to me..."

"Well, why don't you give it a go yourself?"

"Huh?"

I couldn't help it anymore. I had to do something for him. "You can reach a certain level of strength just by eating and training. Seeming dependable is all down to how you act and building confidence through experience. And you

naturally learn how to manage other people when you have enough experience interacting with them."

All a person needs to gain those things is an average body, an average brain, and a little bit of strength to act on their desires. That was the case both in my past world and in this one. If a person is unable to gain those things, it's often the case that their motivation is broken, or *has been* broken. Some event may have broken them down. It can happen to anyone.

Going by the information I could remember, I seemed to have received a reasonable education in my past life, and I had been doing well up until a certain point, ambitious in my own way. I couldn't remember where I'd broken or been broken, but there are often other factors besides willpower, ability, and talent that play a part in things like this.

For instance, one's environment and luck. Even the most determined and talented person, if they are unlucky enough to be cast into a hostile, cruel, negative environment, can be knocked down and beaten until broken. And whether they can recover from that is entirely up to the whims of fate.

Life is not always wonderful. Not everything in life is beautiful, nor is it good. There are people who love to put others down and make them suffer. If you look for the reason they became so twisted, you will find a second perpetrator, and if you look for the reason that perpetrator became twisted, you will find a third. I had learned through leaving the city of the dead that even deplorability like that was simply part of the reality of this world.

I now found it understandable that the god of death, Stagnate, had come out with the idea of a paradise for only the most distinguished of undead. Of course, "it's understandable" was as far as I could go. Faced with the question of whether I could *accept* it or not, the answer was no, I could not, and I'd decided I wouldn't. Which was why—

"It must be some kind of fate that I met you here. If you're willing, Al, would you consider assisting me by becoming my squire for a while?"

As one who had decided not to accept the god of undeath's ideals, I felt as though I had a duty to make sure the way I lived was equally principled. For instance, by not saying goodbye here and instead offering a helping hand to a

person on the verge of giving up.

Al avoided my gaze, looking at the hand offered to him.

“D-Do you really... mean it...?”

I nodded and smiled at him.

Even though I’d made the offer with the best of intentions, there was no guarantee that he’d take it. Trust was something to be gradually fostered, and helping people took patient, steady effort. It was much rarer that one could just come up with an idea and have everything sort itself out at the snap of a finger. Even if I couldn’t get him to be receptive to my suggestion now, I thought I’d like to build up a friendship with him while I kept my arm patiently extended.

“Don’t worry, I’m not just saying it. After all, sorcerers are free to change the subject or remain silent, but lying is the one thing they must never do.”

“Ah... I think I’ve... heard that before...”

“Yes. It’s true. And I’m also a user of magic.”

According to Gus, if a sorcerer lied, the power his Words held would be weakened. Words could carry different weight depending on who used them, and could be blunt or sharp. The Words of a liar accustomed to telling falsehoods would lose both their weight and their edge as time went on. That was why, even though magic was something that could be studied and practiced, only a handful of people were capable of becoming great sorcerers.

“So I don’t lie. If you have some kind of ambition, and you want to try doing something about it, I want to help you.”

Al was silent for a while. He sheepishly extended his hand, then pulled it back. “I might... cause you a lot of trouble...” He breathed in deeply. “But please teach me.”

He took my hand.

◆

Not only was Al a recent migrant here with no sense of where anything was, it was also nighttime. So for the time being, I decided to help him back to Dwarftown.

When I got there, there was a bit of a commotion going on. As I got closer, wondering what this was about, I saw a frenzied group of dwarves, each of whom was carrying a light. They noticed Al and their faces changed color.

“Young master!” They rushed up to him noisily.

“Where in the world have you been?!”

“You have to tell us where you’re going!”

“We were all so worried...”

These and other comments pelted Al like machine-gun fire. I could tell that they’d all been worried for him, but they seemed to be making his head spin.

“In any event, I’m glad you’re safe!”

“I, I’m sorry!”

Ahhh. Yeah. Yeah. I got the feeling I understood Al’s upbringing and his problem. I had no idea how important Al was, but he was probably descended from dwarven nobility.

Based on the old stories I’d heard from the dwarves, their most ardent desire was the revival of the Iron Country. They wanted to take back their lost homeland. Of course, I thought that was a good thing. The noble bloodline was also one of the integral components in achieving that, so I could understand them not wanting to lose it.

But in Al’s case, that attitude seemed to be toxic. I figured he was more or less an adult now, yet simply going out on his own to check out the city and coming home late was enough to create a big fuss. He had probably been protected to such an extent that he had never had a proper fight before and had been raised with care, a lot of care, too much care.

I didn’t think of him as a spoiled rich boy brought up under the protection of adults.

I remembered from my previous life. I had read it at some point. I knew. *Overprotection and excessive interference are forms of abuse.*

Don’t do that. Don’t do this. You should do *this*. You should do *that.* The correct decision to make is *this* one. How many children manage to develop

decisiveness, action, and willpower when everything involving them is decided by others like that? I understood the reason why he'd shrunk into his chair when he told me he went exploring: he was being raised in an environment where even that wasn't allowed as it should have been.

"Anyway, please, don't do this kind of thing anymore," one of the dwarves said, trying to wrap up the discussion.

Wearing an expression that kind of showed he was feeling smothered, Al went to nod.

"Excuse me," I said.

This was a family problem and none of my business, but I didn't want to see how Al would end up in the future if things continued as they were. Even though it may have been a bit headstrong of me, I thought that this alone was a good enough reason for chiming in.

"My name is William G. Maryblood." I placed my right hand lightly over the left side of my chest and did a simple, traditional bow, purposefully choosing the one for greeting those of lower rank.

There were many older dwarves among them. My name and my gesture quickly tipped them off, and they hurriedly responded with the bow for greeting a superior.

"First, I would like to apologize. I happened to meet Mister Al in town, and the two of us hit it off. I'm afraid I kept him talking until quite late."

"N-No, that's all right!"

I could hear whispers from the back and words like "liege" and "paladin." I also saw a number of people trying to get a measure of my strength by sight, so I made no attempt to conceal it through my stance or movements. I made sure to present myself as strong.

"It's really him."

"Horrifically strong."

The whispers continued. A dwarf with a plainly visible scar on his face warned the others with a heavy air. "More than that. All of us put together wouldn't

stand a chance against him. We'd be crushed."

I, uh, I wasn't sure I'd go that far. If everyone here suddenly turned on me, I could see myself hesitating about how to deal with it and making a wrong move.

As many of the other dwarves went pale upon hearing his words, the dwarf with the scarred face pushed through them and stood before me. "My name is Ghelreis. I would like to express our acceptance of your apology regarding the young master, and our deepest gratitude for your concern." He cast a hard look over me. He had the eyes of a soldier. "Well, then, what business do you have with us?"

"I wish to take Mister Al as my squire."

A murmur rose among the dwarves.

◆

"You say you want the young master... as your *squire*?"

"But..."

"But that's..."

The murmurs spread, and some people started to raise their voices.

"Master, being the paladin's squire would be terribly dangerous!"

"You'd be taken along on beast hunts!"

"I beg you to reconsider!"

I looked at Al. He looked as if he didn't know where to turn, and his forehead was damp with sweat.

"I think you had better spend a night slowly thinking this over."

"That's right. We'll all talk about it together."

Al went pale as they kept on pressing him. I could see he was about to nod. It was probably almost a reflex by now.

So I asked simply, "What do *you* want to do?"

Al's eyes opened wide and his pupils trembled slightly, as if the voices all

around him were making him hesitate. Then he pressed his lips into a hard line.

“I...” He forced the words out. “I want to study under this man!” His voice carried surprisingly well, enough that all the other dwarves, taken aback by his sudden outburst, fell silent. “I want to know what makes a warrior, what bravery is! I want to grasp the answer for myself, with my own hands!” His words were filled with a heat like fire. “Without exposing myself to danger, without taking a step forward on my own, what of warriors can I learn?! What of bravery can I learn?!”

Al pulled himself up straight, his braided black hair bouncing as he did. A scorching light dwelt in his wide-open hazel eyes. “I want to be one who feels no shame in who I am, not before the great spirits of our ancestors nor before the gods who created us! How can I claim to be a dwarf without knowing of battle, valor, and chivalry?! I have no intention of changing my mind!”

Al’s lone shouting overwhelmed the burly mountain-folk. I was amazed. To be honest, I never expected him to be able to say it so clearly. He was more amazing than I thought.

“Sir Will! I would like you to make me your squire here and now!” Al ran up to me, got down on one knee, clasped his hands together, and held them up to me. I heard Blood’s voice in the back of my mind.

— In the way of the warrior, clasping both your hands together and presenting them to another is a symbol of offering your “sincerity.” If a warrior offers you his sincerity, you have two choices: you either reject it, or you accept it by wrapping both your hands around theirs. Don’t do it lightly. Accepting a warrior’s sincerity is serious business.

It was night in the temple. Blue will-o’-the-wisps inhabited his vacant eye sockets. His skeletal jaw clacked audibly as he grinned.

— What does it mean? Well...

“The sincerity thou hast offered—” I took his fervent hands and wrapped mine around them. “I shall protect by mine own hands.”

When we finished our atypical handshake and Al looked up at me, his expression, which had been stiff and anxious with tension and heady emotion,

relaxed with relief.

“That’s not the full ceremony, but all the same, I have accepted Al’s oath to become my squire. As his knight and master, I will now take your questions.” Clapping Al on the shoulder a couple times, I looked around at the dwarves. “I would also like to ask a question of all of you. Is my name insufficient to be his master, even if this is only temporary?”

A squire was not that low a status to hold in this day and age. There were even some members of the royal family and sons of nobility who, in order to add to their own prestige, served as squires of knights noted for their military and moral excellence.

In terms of the Kingdom, I was the feudal lord ruling over a faraway piece of land, and a retainer’s retainer. Specifically, I was a retainer of Ethelbald, Duke of Southmark, who was himself a retainer of King Owen. So, I wasn’t *that* high in the social order. But all the same, I had made names for myself and was well known as the Wyvern Killer, the Beast Killer, the Torchbearer, and the Faraway Paladin, among others. Whatever status Al had among the dwarves, I was confident that I had achieved enough that he shouldn’t feel ashamed to work for me.

The dwarves answered my question with hums and murmurs, stuck for an answer. Then Ghelreis muttered solemnly, “It is not for us to argue.”

“You *accept* this, Ghelreis?” another dwarf replied.

“The young master wills it.”

“But—”

“The young master,” Ghelreis repeated, “who has been considerate to our hardships and never once insisted upon his own way since childhood *wills it*.”

The dwarves who had been trying to argue back said nothing further.

“Young master, I will find a way to tell Grendir.”

“Th-Thank you, Ghelreis.”

“However—” Ghelreis turned a hard stare on Al, who twitched. “I will think of you as having died this day.”

“I...”

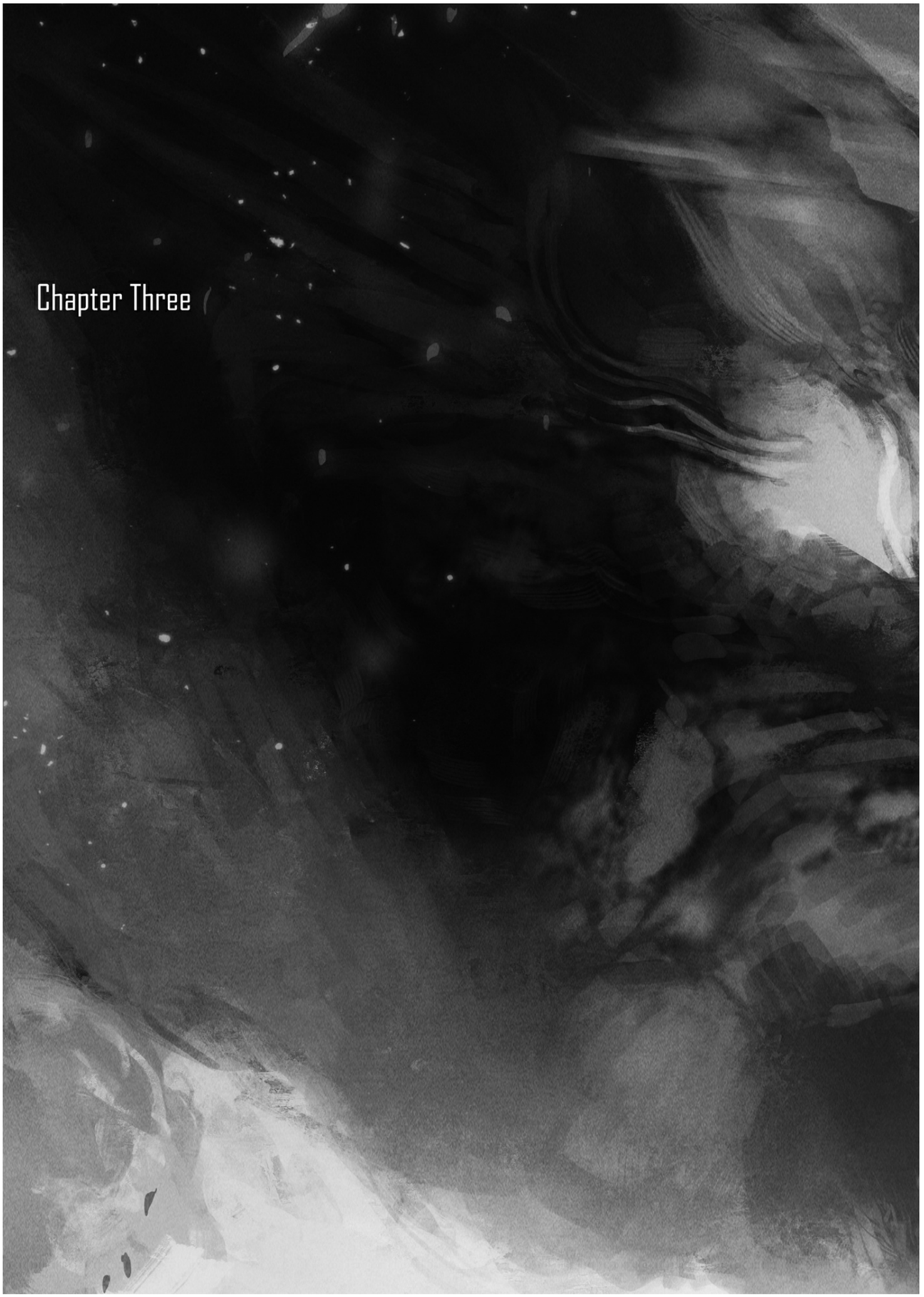
“Now that you have placed your sincerity in the hands of a superior warrior, never treat your life as something too precious to lose. Serve him well and be prepared to die without hesitation if that is called for.” The dwarf with the scar spoke to Al with a stern expression. The tension in his words made Al’s expression tighten as well. “Are we agreed?”



“I understand!”

Ghelreis looked at me. “Grendir and I will pay you a visit in the near future. The young master is in your hands.”

“I hear you loud and clear,” I answered, and the dwarf’s scar creased as he smiled gracelessly. It was the smile of a warrior, and it reminded me of Blood.


Chapter Three

The black-haired dwarf Al became my squire, and Grendir paid us a formal visit a few days later. Good to his word, Ghelreis seemed to have persuaded him.

“Uhh, so, Al,” I said. “Squires are often asked to cover for their own expenses, but I will be providing your equipment and also paying you a wage.”

“A-Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“It’s not a question of minding. I can’t go taking money from the dwarves who moved here right now. They’d see me as a heartless monster.” Many of them still didn’t even have a reliable way of supporting themselves. There was no way I could take money from them. “So let’s talk about how much to pay you.”

“Huh? Uhm... If I can serve you, that’s... enough for...”

“No.”

“O-Okay.”

“One thing that a certain person I know always told me is that money is important. Hmm, let’s see. Taking on a squire isn’t quite like hiring a servant, for example, but—”

“Right.”

“If I don’t pay you or you don’t accept payment, that can be taken as your work, your ‘sincerity,’ not having any value.”

He didn’t reply.

“It might not be very classy to put a price on everything, but it’s what everyone looks at, so I want to make sure I don’t cut any corners where money is concerned.” I spoke with finality, thinking that Gus would probably say the exact same thing.

“You’re so adult.”

“I’m just trying hard to grow up.”

We decided upon his pay and the other details of the arrangement. He would live in my mansion and work for me, and join in with my morning training. After

that, I started to think about what I'd teach him first, which caused me some hesitation.

"All right, once more around!"

Al followed behind me, panting as we ran laps of the city.

Now that I thought about it, I had never taken a pupil before and had no experience in teaching. I tried remembering what I'd been taught by Blood, but there were a lot of differences between me, who had begun learning as a child, and Al, who already had a grown body. In what way and in what order was I supposed to teach him things like how to fight and how to be a warrior, and how could I get them to stick?

Very soon after beginning to consider these things, I felt a renewed appreciation for Blood, Mary, and Gus. They had taught me their own skills as if there was nothing to it, but now I wondered how much planning had gone on behind the scenes to get me to absorb so many things so efficiently. Which should be taught first, footwork or stance? Standing here in the shoes of a teacher, I realized that even seemingly insignificant decisions like these had logic and planning behind them.

"Almost there! Push yourself!" I ran just ahead of him to encourage him. He was sprinting his heart out and almost collapsing from exhaustion, but he was still fighting to keep up.

Teaching was making me realize just how far I still was from the place my parents had reached. But one day, I was sure, I'd catch up to them.

"Good work! Walk around for a bit to get your breath back, and we'll move on to muscle training!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"In a battle, muscular strength is the foundation upon which everything else rests. In the words of my mentor, 'Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force!'"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

So I could stand shoulder to shoulder with those three, so I could tell them

with a smile how far I'd come, and so I could do justice to the sincerity Al had offered me, I vowed to do my utmost.

◆

Now then. It bears repeating that what that was expected from me was the military might to guarantee the region's safety and for me to use my title of paladin to stand in front of His Excellency and represent the area. So I was providing my squire Al with a warrior's education as well, hoping first of all for him to become physically strong. The woodlands around here were dangerous, and I regularly set foot in the most perilous parts of them and fought against innumerable dangers. If he couldn't protect himself, he would be useless.

Al aside, however, you might ask if I wasn't doing anything remotely resembling the activities of a feudal lord, which is a separate question worth answering.

There was a little bit of a gathering that day.

Because of the Fertile Kingdom's Southmark expansion policy, people from many areas of the northern continent of Grassland were coming to settle here.

For example, the cook in that mutton place in Whitesails was from Arid Climate in the northeast. Reystov, I suspected based on his external characteristics and his imposing yet quiet bearing, was probably born somewhere even further north on the northern continent, probably around the Ice Mountains. Ethel and Bishop Bagley, of course, had come from the original Fertile Kingdom and specifically its capital, Ilia's Tear.

Many others came from the Allied Kingdoms, a federation of small-and medium-sized kingdoms to the west of Fertile, or from the Hundred Warring Kingdoms in the southeast, which was still a conflict zone where warlords fought for power. Still more came from the islands dotted around Middle-sea, from large forests all over that were home to the elves, from the dwarven mountains, and from even farther away than that. There were also wanderers like Bee the troubadour, who had no singular home at all to speak of and traveled from place to place.

Torch Port really was home to all kinds of people, and they tended to live in concentrated areas with others from the same country or cultural sphere, so

every street and section of the city had its own personality.

On the other hand, the fact that each individual part had its own personality was also a source of conflict. Gestures carried different meanings in different cultures, certain expressions could be taken as serious insults, disagreements could arise in contracts and payments as a result of the two sides having different business customs. And in some cases, things couldn't even get that far because the groups couldn't understand each other's language to begin with.

So yes, there was trouble, and all kinds of it. Early on had been the worst. There was even one time when an argument became magnified, people standing up for one side led to more standing up for the other, and the situation escalated into almost becoming a battle between multiple groups in the middle of town, their families and friends behind them. Menel, Reystov, and I settled things down by force before they got serious, but it just served to underline how scary differences in culture really were.

If you let these kinds of things go, the turmoil would only get worse, so after consulting with the priests, I also created a variety of rules and penalties that would apply only within the city. I established rules to observe when selling, rules to observe when using the boats and port, and a rule for when problems arose; that one said to make your case with logic and reason to the feudal lord or one of the priests who worked for him and await instructions. They also laid out what kind of punishment you would receive if you ignored this process and started a disturbance or joined in with one and escalated it, among other things.

The experience made me realize that the ancient laws of my past world that placed equal culpability on both parties in the case of a fight had been made for a good reason. It also made me think of the struggles faced by Ethel, who ruled over the larger city of Whitesails, and Bishop Bagley, who ran the main temple there.

In any case, in addition to the firm-handed approach of rules and punishments, some softer touches were also required. One of these was to set up regular gatherings where representatives of each group would meet and talk. I had been trying to show up as much as possible, and that day, I left Al's training to Menel so I could take part. I heard all kinds of different opinions and

noted them down. We talked from late morning until the afternoon, with a break for lunch in the middle.

After we broke up, I made my way to a certain tavern. It was the one where I had talked with Al. I just wanted to check that there hadn't been any particular problems after the incident and that the owner's illness hadn't flared up again. It had only been a minor illness, so I didn't expect a problem, but illnesses that had their roots in lifestyle or nutrition problems sometimes recurred easily, even after I cured them with benediction. Neither prayer nor miracles were all-powerful.

"Okay, so..."

The "feudal lord walking in during business hours incident" wasn't something I was keen to repeat, so I made sure that the sign hanging on the door did read "Closed." I could hear talking going on inside, so I went to knock on the door, but before I could—

"I'm sorry to spring this on you. Thank you very much!"

"Not at all. Consider it done."

The door swung open in front of me.

"Oh!" My eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Oh my! It's you, sir!" The tavern girl had her hand over her mouth and was looking at me in surprise from behind the dwarf who had opened the door.

"Good afternoon," he said.

At the door to the tavern, I had run straight into the dwarf with the scar, Ghelreis.

◆

The tavern owner's illness seemed to have completely cleared up, and he showed no signs of another flare-up. They invited me to stay awhile, but I said I couldn't inconvenience them while they were busy preparing to open for the evening, and I took my leave immediately, with Ghelreis walking down the street beside me. We were headed the same way.

Neither of us was saying a word.

Ghelreis, like most dwarves, didn't speak much, and he had quite a harsh air about him that made it difficult to start up a conversation with him. But the silence was worse; I couldn't bear it. I brought up a topic.

"What brought you to the tavern today, Ghelreis?"

"They have a reservation for a large party or something in about ten days. They hired me to procure a decent amount of beast flesh."

"So you hunt for a living?"

"No. I'm a kind of mercenary, hired muscle. But I happen to have a little skill with crossbows and traps as well, you see—"

"It's something like a side job, then?"

"That would be a fair description."

Once I actually tried talking to him, I found he was a surprisingly eloquent speaker. So he was a mercenary, a warrior for hire. That was the same job Blood had. The old scar on his face had clearly been made by a sword, so it made a lot of sense.

We walked down the street in the glittering afternoon sunlight. The faint clanging of hammers reached us from some distant workshop. Different groups of people enjoying their own conversations passed us by. Every so often, one of them would notice me and acknowledge me with a nod or a bow.

"It's a good town," Ghelreis said. "It's almost unimaginable how quickly it's developed, considering that it was only built a few years ago."

"Yes. It couldn't have been done without all the help we received from all kinds of people."

Ghelreis nodded. Then silence fell again. This time, it wasn't so suffocating.

"Paladin," Ghelreis started.

"Yes?"

"I was once a warrior who served the Iron Country." He spoke quietly, wearing a calm expression as he walked beside me. "At the time, I was still inexperienced as a warrior and was not permitted to die with our lord. I held to

his last wishes and protected the people who had been left behind. I earned my daily bread by taking up my weapon and fighting for whoever would hire me."

I remained quiet and listened.

"It isn't easy to find a place to live in peace. We wandered across many lands to make it here." Despite how quietly he was speaking, lots of different emotions showed in his voice. I thought I could sense them churning inside him.

"Please, guide the young master well."

"I will." I stopped walking, looked at him with a serious expression, and placed my fist against my heart. "By the flame."

◆

A line of sweat ran down my neck. Al and I were locked in a grapple on the grass in my yard. Menel was watching us from the sidelines.

After a lot of thought, I'd decided that the next thing to teach Al after the fundamentals was grappling. Al had a naturally good physique, and appeared to have muscle strength, too, despite the fact that he hadn't had any training. Maybe that was just the nature of dwarves. My idea had been to begin by teaching him grappling moves, where muscle power had an especially large influence, so that he could gain confidence in his own abilities.

But I hadn't been expecting this. I was somewhat stronger than him, but even though I was pulling him towards me with all my strength, he was starting to resist me. In a simple push-and-pull exercise, he was holding his ground to a certain extent. He was showing astonishing muscle strength and intuition considering that he hadn't received any specialist training. There was no other way to say it: he had a natural talent for this.

I understood the reason why he'd been hesitant to hit or grab anyone before. With this extraordinary level of natural muscle strength, it wasn't surprising he'd developed an attitude like that. In fact, he might actually have injured someone unintentionally at some point in his past, or at least come close to doing so.

"Al." I spoke casually, deliberately not letting any strain or effort show in my expression. "Is this your full strength?"

He grunted and pushed harder. My whole body groaned under his tremendous power, but I resisted and pushed back. The body Blood and I had forged together wasn't so puny that it couldn't handle this.

"I think you've got more," I said.

He whined.

I needed him to know it was okay for him to go all out, to be more savage. That was probably what had to come first for him.

"If this is all you've got..." I dropped my hips and pushed forward with all my might.

"Wh-Whoa!" Al started sliding backwards, his feet leaving marks in the grass as he tried to press his weight into the ground.

"I can overpower you. I'm stronger."

So it's okay for you to go a little more wild. It's okay for you to use all the strength you've got. As I spoke those words to him inside my heart, I maneuvered my body and pulled close to him, then lifted him up and threw him on the ground as hard as I could. I kept my grip on his collar to make sure he at least didn't hit his head. He made a sound like the wind had been knocked out of him.

"Sorry, Al," I said. "You lose."

My general rule was to hold nothing back when it came to this side of things. Getting used to pain was a part of training, and I had to approach this prepared for him to hate me. I didn't feel good about it, though.

"Ho—"

"Hm?"

"How do you do the move you just did?!" Al asked me with sparkling eyes, leaping to his feet immediately. Even though I was forcing him to run for ages, throwing him about, and making him go through stuff that was pretty painful and hard to endure, he showed absolutely no sign of giving in. He really was persistent and eager.

"That one?" I hummed in thought. "Menel, come here a sec."

“What am I, your punching bag?”

“It’s easier to get the idea looking from the side. Please.”

“S-Sorry about this!”

Menel tutted. “Fine. You better give me a clean throw, you got it?! A *clean* throw!”

I wondered if the day Al became a warrior might come sooner than I expected.

◆

Training in magic in this world was similar at times to training in acting and calligraphy. To speak the Words, it was necessary to enunciate them precisely in terms of both pronunciation and volume, so vocal training was mandatory. Similarly, to use the characters—that is, the Signs—it was necessary to write them precisely, so penmanship practice was a requirement.

As a result, a sorcerer’s handwriting was naturally beautiful. I had heard that sorcerers who worked for powerful figures often served a second job as their scribe. I was no exception to this rule; Gus’s tough education had made sure that I could write quite beautifully.

I was in my office.

My quill, made from a beast feather, slowly traveled from left to right across the paper as I carefully wrote down the concise and formal message that I’d come up with in advance. I was using the very best quality paper I could get my hands on, and the same for the ink.

I finished writing and used some sand to absorb the excess ink. After folding the paper neatly in thirds to hide the text, I folded it again in thirds horizontally and prepared to apply the seal.

I slightly warmed some scarlet wax over a flame, dripped it onto the paper and sealed it, and then pressed the signet ring I’d made just last year onto the wax. It left behind a symbol of a flame shining on a ring of fate inside a shield. It was my family insignia, the crest of Maryblood. I’d had quite a few ideas for it, but ultimately I’d settled on a “ring and flame” symbol for Gracefeel, and a

“shield” symbol to represent a knight.

Lastly, I made sure that the front had both my signature and the name of the recipient: Bishop Bart Bagley.

“Good.”

The letter contained a request for Bishop Bagley to search the libraries for some information for me.

I thought back on those words that the Lord of Holly had spoken in his domain in the woods.

— The fire of dark disaster shall catch in the mountains of rust. That fire shall spread, and this land may all be consumed. That land is now a den of demons, wherein the great lord of miasma and wicked flame slumbereth upon the mountain people’s gold.

And then there was what I’d heard from the dwarves.

— The dragon is coming. The dragon is coming! The dragon is coming! Valacirca! Calamity’s sickle descends upon you!

Based on what I knew now, I needed to have some research done in the temples and the Academy where the sorcerers assembled. After all, I was going to be up against a formidable opponent.

If “the fire of disaster” and “the lord of miasma and wicked flame” in the Rust Mountains had been a General-ranked demon, I would have been confident that I could scrape out a victory. Even if he had followers with him, I could manage something. I had built up enough experience over the last two years that I could say that for sure. And even if the worst came to the worst and it all looked hopeless, I still had my trump card, Overeater. As long as I didn’t make a mistake and get killed out of nowhere—and of course that was always a possibility in any battle—I could win against a General. But...

“Valacirca.”

If I remembered correctly, it was an Elvish word that referred to the Northern Sickle, a constellation made up of six stars. It consisted of two stars connected like a handle and four curved like a blade. Each of those stars had the name of

one of the six main gods: the god of lightning, the Earth-Mother, and the gods of fire, fae, wind, and knowledge.

“Calamity’s sickle, the sickle of the gods—”

And the name of a dragon.

This dragon was feared enough to have earned that big of a name from the proud race of the elves. I was certain that it had to be a dragon in the true sense of the word, and it must have existed since time immemorial.

I’d never fought a dragon. They hadn’t even turned up in Blood’s heroic stories. So it was virtually impossible for me to even guess at their strength or my chances of winning.

Born at the time the Progenitor created the world, the dragons had wielded their power in the battles between the good and evil gods, power that was said to be unmatched by any except the gods themselves. They had huge, supple bodies covered in tough scales, and they possessed the innate intelligence to manipulate Words. They had strong wings to catch the wind, fangs as thick as trees, and claws as sharp as the finest blades.

Most of them had now vanished from the world. There was one theory that it was because the battles between the gods had reduced their numbers too severely, and another that they had left the confines of the physical world behind and ascended to the dimension of the gods. Whatever the truth of these theories, the fact of the matter was that there were hardly any dragons left in this world. Only the many ornate legends about them and the various demidragons that were said to have been their minions long ago were left as proof that the dragons had once existed.

“A dragon...”

To repeat: *their power was second only to the gods.* Even the Echo of Stagnate had been hopelessly dangerous, and that was after Gus had destroyed one half of his physical body and probably put him in a weakened state. He had brought me to the brink of death. If the goddess of the flame hadn’t come to my rescue, I would have died then and there. I remembered the terror the god of undeath had made me feel. A shiver ran down my spine.

“An Echo and a dragon...”

Which was stronger? I didn’t know. But I was certain of one thing: there was no chance at all of a dragon being significantly weaker than Stagnate.

I wanted to be extremely cautious. That was why I’d decided to send a request to the bishop to see if he could find out anything that could help me while I still had time to spare. All kinds of books and a lot of talented people were collected at the temple and the Academy to which Gus had once belonged. Apparently, the temple and Academy even had the occasional elf who had left the forest in search of knowledge sign up. There was a chance that some old oral lore would turn up.

I breathed out slowly to calm myself down.

I took a little bit of pride in my strength—I was a man, after all, and a warrior trained by Blood. But at the same time, there was something I’d learned from all the battles I’d fought. Battles represented reality at its most cruel, treacherous, and unforgiving. Once one started, it was almost inevitable that someone would die.

“God...”

My hands were shaking for the first time in a while. This was an opponent who was at least my equal and probably stronger. There was a serious likelihood I could lose. It was an opponent who would probably steal away my life with heartless brutality.

“Oh, man...”

I found myself thinking about Mary. I remembered her hugs and the pleasant smell of fragrant wood burning. *Will. William.* I heard her voice, my mom’s voice, calling my name.

I murmured quietly. “I’m scared...”

“Don’t be so feckin’ gutless!”

I jumped. I was sure someone had heard me.

“Come on! Again!”

The voice was coming from outside the window. I looked out. Menel and Al

were having a mock battle.

◆

“Hah!” Wearing armor and holding the practice sword I had made in his hands, Menel effortlessly kicked Al over. “What’re you doing hesitating to hit me when I’ve got armor on? You’re more of a softy than Will. A pushover!” Menel provoked Al and frowned down at the dwarf as he lay on the ground groaning. “Come on, what’s wrong? Giving up already? Gonna turn tail and run home, rich boy?”

“I, I’m not giving up!”

Al attacked him again with his practice sword. Menel didn’t even dodge. He allowed the sword to come straight down onto his forehead guard and didn’t so much as blink as the thud rang out.

“Brother, you’re hitting me square from the front and that’s all you’ve got? Are those thick arms just for decoration? Huh?” With the sword still resting on his head, Menel edged up to Al and glared at him. Al winced. “Oh? Oh? Cowering, huh? Just gonna cry and run away? Go on then.”

“I, I’m not going to run!”

“Then hit harder! Put some power into it, you loser!”

Al let out a wild yell and swung his practice sword about with all his might. Menel took the blows skillfully on his armor, but those impacts looked pretty heavy even with armor to block them. I was impressed that he wasn’t showing even a hint of pain.

Recently, Menel had been taking over the role of the strict coach for Al’s training.

Al was just too gentle. He had a lot of muscle power and showed good intuition when it came to learning technique, but when it came to actually hitting Menel with the practice sword or grappling, he would get beaten and thrown, even though I knew Menel had less muscle.

For a person, having the kindness to feel sympathy and be hesitant to hurt anyone was a virtue that couldn’t be faulted, but for a warrior, it was nothing

other than a weakness. I'd discussed this with Menel, and we had concluded that the only way forward was to make the motions a matter of muscle memory. And so, Menel was being offensive towards Al, kicking him over, and pressuring him with an intense focus on making him strike back. Just as I'd been trained to get used to killing birds and other wild animals, getting used to very stressful battle situations and striking living opponents with all his strength had to be the first steps for Al.

Al yelled out again. There was a tremendous crash, followed by a brief choking sound. Al had swept his practice sword horizontally and smashed it into Menel, knocking him back despite the chestplate armor he was wearing. That must have hurt. That seriously must have hurt.

"Heh. You were pretty fired up that time." Menel didn't let the pain show on his face. He just furrowed his brow a little and forcibly kept a calm expression. "That's the way."

Menel was doing a really good job of being a teacher. He was actually a caring person who had a lot of life experience. Perhaps he was even more suited to teaching than me.

"Th-Thank you very much!"

And Al was earnest. Even though he sometimes flinched or held back out of concern for his opponent, he never allowed Menel to break his spirit despite all the shouting, intimidation, and pressure. His hazel eyes sparkling, he yelled out a battle cry and charged at Menel, a warrior overwhelmingly stronger than himself.

Al was really impressing me. I could see that he was getting slightly stronger with every battle. What he couldn't do one day, he would be able to do by the next. And what he couldn't do the next day, he would be able to do the day after that. They were all little changes. Sometimes he would put his effort into the wrong thing and lose some ground for a little while. But what if he kept making those little improvements for ten whole days? What about twenty? Thirty? Fifty? A hundred? A thousand? What if he never stopped at all?

Warriors aren't warriors because they're born that way. They *become* warriors by making mistakes, getting injured, and learning from it, making the

smallest of improvements many times over.

Below my window, Menel kicked Al over again. He rolled on the ground, completely covered in dirt. But to me, he looked like he was shining like a gemstone. He had the irregular gleam of a rock that was yet to fall into human hands. He was going to be cut and polished, and I was sure that he would shine even more beautifully. The thought of it somehow calmed my worries a little, and I felt warm inside.

Blood... Were there times when you felt like this?

◆

When lunchtime came around, Al sat in the dining room drained of all his strength. Menel had driven him hard for what must have felt like forever.

Menel was really something to have robbed someone as persistent as Al of all his stamina. That said, it seemed to have taken a lot out of him, too. Apparently he didn't want to appear weak in front of the person he was teaching; he told me he was going to eat out and asked me to deal with Al, then staggered off to town. He reminded me of a wild animal or something. Maybe that was just what he was always like.

"Food's up." On the table, I placed deep bowls full of the vegetable and smoked meat soup my housemaids had made during their morning visit, followed by a plate of boiled eggs and bread that was more stodgy than fluffy and light. There was certainly quantity here. It was important for building up his body.

"I, I'm not sure it'll all go down."

"Force it down. If you don't, your training will go to waste. You have to eat even more than you've worked out or you'll defeat the point of the training."

Eat a lot after exercise—this was one of the fundamentals that Blood had repeatedly drilled into me. If Al couldn't do this, the training wouldn't serve its purpose. It was better not to exercise at all than to weaken your muscles by exercising while fasting.

"There's no need to rush, but get it all into your body."

“O-Okay...”

After saying grace, I poured the herbal tea I’d boiled into two cups while watching Al slowly attack the meal. I was training every day just as he was, so I kept quiet as I chewed and drank. I had no intention of going out of my way to start a conversation with someone who was clearly worn out and tiring him out further.

I chewed the distinctive multigrain bread and tried to recall where in my previous world had heavy, somewhat sour bread like this. Perhaps it was somewhere like Germany? As I thought idly about things like that, Al sat up straight and opened his mouth. “Um... I’d like to... thank you again.”

“Hm? What’s up?”

“I really am very grateful for everything you’re doing for me. Taking me in as your squire, giving me training and even food and pay...” His hazel eyes were locked on me. I put down the piece of bread I had pinched between my fingers and met his gaze.

“Do you... know about our past?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Th-Then, you know about my position, too?”

“I think I have a pretty good idea. I won’t probe into it. You can tell me any time you like or not at all.”

“Yes, sir...” Al lowered his gaze slightly.

Even the name I was calling him by was probably an abbreviation. I still didn’t know his real name.

“I... was nobility within the clan.”

“Right.”

“My mother and father passed away from illness when I was young, so I was brought up by the clan, protected from trouble.”

“It certainly looked that way.”

He looked like he was being greatly cherished. But that was exactly why he’d

developed this complex.

“But a part of me wondered whether that was okay,” he said. “We dwarves look up to the god of fire as our creator. Our pride is a warrior’s pride. Yet I, who bear responsibility to that clan, am so weak and cowardly...”

He might also have been feeling a sense of duty and responsibility as someone born into nobility.

“Wh-When I heard about you, I admired you. You’re about the same age as me, and you already have many great tales told about you and are looked up to as the lord of an entire region. I wanted to be like you.” The tension in his face relaxed and a toothy grin replaced it. “So... being able to serve by your side is like a dream. I can’t tell you how happy I am that I can learn of warriors and bravery from you.”

His smile was contagious, and made me feel a kind of ticklish happiness. “Thanks.” I laughed, embarrassed. “Even if this arrangement is only temporary, I’ll work hard to be a fitting master for you.”

Then, I smiled a little nervously, and added, “But I’m not very confident I can teach you about bravery.”

◆

Al looked at me blankly. It was as if he didn’t understand what I was telling him.

“Umm...”

“What I mean is, I’m not actually very brave.”

There was a pause before he responded. “Even though you stood up against a wyvern and a chimera?”

I nodded. “Listen, Al. The world at large might see those as the actions of a brave man. They might see me as a champion standing up against terrifying monsters. But I’m not so sure.”

I really couldn’t see it that way myself. After all—

“Can you really call it ‘bravery’ to challenge an opponent when you know for a fact you can win?”

Al goggled at me. “You knew for a fact you could win?”

“I mean it.”

That was just how it was. If I had to go against that wyvern again and fight it bare-handed a hundred more times, I was sure I’d win at least ninety-nine. Even if I had to take on that chimera, as long as I had the right weapons and armor, I would almost never be bested.

“I’m overwhelmingly more powerful than a wyvern or a chimera. That’s my most honest analysis. I can kill those things just by trusting my training to make the right moves.”

Al was speechless. It looked like he didn’t know how he should respond.

“I’m probably a lot stronger than you and the others imagine.”

In fact, probably the only ones to have a concrete grasp on just how much I deviated from ordinary people were Menel, Reystov, and maybe a few others with good eyes.

“They don’t scare me. Wyverns or chimeras.”

Only once had I felt fear from an opponent’s strength in battle: that being shrouded in black mist. I had despaired, fallen to my knees, and curled up on the ground. And the reason I was able to stand up again had absolutely nothing to do with being brave. If I’d been alone, I was sure that I’d have stayed there clutching my head until the storm was entirely past, crushed under the weight of my fear and despair.

“A person who beats those far weaker than himself is no brave hero. Winning against something that doesn’t scare you isn’t bravery.”

“Then—” Al hesitated for a moment before asking. “Then what *is* bravery?”

“Honestly? I’d like to know that too.”

I’d been able to stand back up only because Mary had been there to admonish me. I’d forced my shaking legs forward because I wanted to protect those three. It wasn’t that I was especially brimming with courage. In fact, I wasn’t relying very much on my mental strength at all. I had a well-trained body and was well prepared. I was winning because I had every right to win. That was

all.

Perhaps my old nature had carried over into this world. Maybe I really was a coward.

“How are you meant to challenge an opponent who’s stronger than you? Hopelessly stronger than you?”

The time for battle was drawing near, and I doubted I would get a chance to put together a surefire winning strategy. When that time came, would I be able to fight? Did I have that much bravery?

◆

That afternoon, Al and I were in my office getting the small amount of paperwork I had to do out of the way when I heard noises at the entrance to the mansion. Wondering whether I had a visitor, I put the paperwork away for now. Then, there was a knock at the door.

“William, I’m back,” said a familiar voice. The door opened, and there stood a man with an unshaven face, piercing eyes, and a well-built body. His thick beast-hide cloak was mottled with blood spatter and grass stains that couldn’t be washed off. He was an adventurer who carried the title of “the Penetrator.”

“Reystov! Welcome back! How’d it go?”

“I dispatched all the beasts you ordered. There were a few Commander demons going around leading troops, so I took care of those as well.”

Beast Woods was vast. Beasts and demons showed up all over it to cause problems. It was physically impossible for me to handle them all by myself. I always struggled to secure people who had both a trustworthy personality and the necessary combat skills to solve these issues. Reystov, meanwhile, was an adventurer seeking strong, substantial enemies to defeat for honor and glory. His skills with a sword, especially his lightning-quick thrusts, were the stuff of epics, and he was a loyal adventurer with class among a sea of ruffians.



In short, our interests basically matched. I guaranteed his basic needs and provided a steady stream of enemies. He lent me his sword skills, defeated those enemies, and added more exploits to his name. Officially, Reystov worked for me, but actually I was the one who could stand to learn from him. He was a real veteran. This alliance, in which it wasn't clear which of us was really superior, was going very well so far.

"I didn't come across anything particularly unusual. Should I just report the details to Anna as per normal?"

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind."

"Also, I heard you had a new squire, but—" He looked at Al. "He looks like a nobody," he muttered in a low voice.

For a while now, Reystov had been going around villages far from here, so this was the first time he'd seen Al. He gazed at the dwarf standing there and said nothing for a few moments. Al tried to say something, but subjected to the man's hard stare and blunt way of speaking, he shrank back a little and produced only a whimper.

Reystov walked straight up to him. "You're stooping too much." He slapped Al lightly on the back, grabbed his shoulders, and pulled them up towards him. "Your shoulders are too far forward. It makes you look despondent and completely destroys any commanding presence you might have had. Listen closely: if you're a man, tuck your chin in, straighten your back, and keep your jaw tight. Don't let your eyes wander. Keep them trained on either the eyes or the mouth of whoever's facing you."

"R-Right!"

"Good. You look a little more respectable now." Reystov always made eye contact when speaking. "I am Reystov. You are?"

"A-Al."

"Al. I see. What do you think of William?"

"I, I respect him!"

Reystov nodded. "Then, as a squire, don't conduct yourself in a way that

lowers the status of your master."

Al's breath caught in his throat.

"Always walk tall and dignified, with your back straight and your eyes fixed forward. When opening your mouth, speak the right words with confidence. If you cannot, choose to remain silent instead. That is what will make you *somebody*. Got it?"

"Yes!"

As Reystov continued talking to Al, I could see Al's back getting straighter and his eyes becoming more focused. I got the feeling that I knew how Al felt at this moment. When Reystov looked at you with that penetrating stare while giving you advice, you felt as if what he was saying was actually achievable. It gave you confidence. It might have been another one of his talents that he could have that effect on people.

"William."

"Yes?"

"You don't mind?"

"No, be my guest."

Reystov could be a little too brief sometimes, but we had known each other for a few years now, so I had grown to understand him most of the time. By "You don't mind?" he meant "Do you mind me sticking my nose in and correcting him on his demeanor and so on?"

"In fact, I was planning on asking you to help."

"I see." Reystov nodded slowly, then looked at Al again. "You said your name was Al?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to speak my mind for a while."

"Yes, sir!"

The earnest Al and the experienced and straight-talking Reystov looked like they were going to get on well together.

“Oh, Reystov?” I said, getting the sudden idea to ask him something.

“What?”

“What do you think bravery is?”

He wrinkled his eyebrows, looked at me, and said, “I don’t know what’s on your mind, but you’ll never figure that out until you stop thinking that way.”

◆

Some time passed. As our information-gathering continued, I kept a wary eye on the Rust Mountains, but in the end, it was peace personified from summer to fall.

We had a wheat harvest and a lively harvest festival. Parties were held with freshly brewed ale and fruit wine. Gathered around a fire with drink in our hands, there was no distinction between dwarf and human. Everyone drank with a smile and made noise together. For the sake of the harmony of the city, I took the initiative and went to a bunch of different parties myself. Reystov got together with Grendir, Ghelreis, and all those others, and once they all started talking of their heroic stories, they hit it off well. Menel had his arms around Al’s and my shoulders. It was rare to see him in such a good mood.

Once autumn arrived and nutritious nuts like acorns started falling from the trees, that was the time of year to let the livestock pour into the woods. By doing this, the animals would fatten up enough to survive the winter, although a portion of the herd would then be slaughtered and their meat smoked or salted to preserve it for the cold season to come. People stepped into the forest more often at this time of year too, in search of blessings like fruits or mushrooms and firewood to help them through the winter. As the Lord of Holly had promised, the woods this year were bountiful, and everyone was pleased.

This was also a busy time of year for the adventurers.

Up until now, the people who lived in this area had been very restricted because they and their livestock would be targeted by beasts if they went into the forest. They had been forced into making meager livings within the small safe areas surrounding the villages they secured, because to go deep into the forest would have been an act of suicide.

However, two years after I arrived, this situation improved dramatically when the adventurers and I carried out large-scale beast hunts. After that, quite a large area became property of people once more. The beasts' territory shrank, and more land could be used for foraging or raising cattle. But even so, this was still Beast Woods. There were plenty of beasts that tried to make their way into the regions where people lived. Fending them off was one of the major jobs of adventurers around here, alongside exploring the ruins hidden deep in the woods.

Villages hired adventurers to be beast hunters for them specifically, in return for accommodation, food, a little money, and the hides of the beasts they brought down. Through this arrangement, the villages were kept safe and the adventurers got rewards and sometimes even honor when they took down a big enemy. Of course, they died sometimes too. I also saw the occasional adventurer accidentally develop a deep relationship with a village daughter or widow and just end up settling there.

In any case, the beast hides and bones obtained from their hunts were sold to Torch Port along with any gathered wheat, vegetables, firewood, or coal. With the money they earned, the adventurers resupplied and fixed up their equipment, and the villagers bought farm tools, daily essentials, and livestock. Through this, the villages became richer and increased their output, and Torch Port, meanwhile, got the food and fuel it needed to sustain its citizens.

The craftsmen worked busily off the food provided by the farming villages. Blacksmiths, potters, woodworkers, weavers, and more made products for both rural and urban areas. At regular and not-so-regular intervals, ships came from Whitesails loaded with goods we couldn't make in the Torch Port area. Laborers unloaded them from the ships and, in their place, loaded the ships with pottery and wood products produced here instead.

This river trading between Whitesails and Torch Port was profitable for the merchants. In some cases, they also made money by getting their hands on a warehouse or something similar and opening up shops aimed at the potpourri of people who lived in this city.

As for me, the liege lord of Beast Woods, I collected funds and labor from various points in this system and used them to govern and manage the area,

although I was reliant on the priests I'd borrowed from the bishop for the majority of the work. For example, I instituted land taxes, community service for a fixed number of days, fees to use the ports, warehouses, and markets, and so on.

And so Torch Port had a functional economy, industry, and government. At present, the city's various industries were growing every year, and although the labor market fluctuated a little, it held steady in favoring sellers by a reasonably safe amount. It was thanks to this that we weren't in a state of needing to take urgent action even though immigrants from Grassland to the north were on the rise. Although it wobbled from time to time, we had a well-balanced positive feedback loop.

This was something to be happy about, but it was important to remember that we were running a dangerous juggling act. This meant that if the balance broke down, the positive feedback loop we were currently enjoying would also collapse very quickly.

What would happen, for example, if the rural areas across Beast Woods that were the foundation of this system were badly damaged by beasts? It would result in a domino effect. There would be a food crisis at Torch Port, which depended on the villages to supply food and fuel, and on top of that, it was very possible that the fuel shortage would mean that the workshops would have to suspend operations. If something like that happened, the merchants would also have to put a hold on their business, and there would be fewer ships going back and forth. Then tax revenues would go down, our ability to deal with the problems would be lessened, and the beasts would run rampant to an even greater degree. It would be difficult to recover from that chain of events once it kicked off.

Looking at it objectively, we had very little redundancy or room to err in case something happened. Any trouble had to be nipped in the bud early.

◆

"Haaaah!"

I felt my body lift into the air. Heaven and earth changed places. I hit the ground with my arm and correctly broke my fall. Instantly, a foot stamped down

right beside my head with tremendous force.

I'd been holding back a little bit, but even so, a loss was a loss.

"Fantastic! That was great!" I said in a cheery voice, looking up.

"Th-Thank you very much!" Al said back.

Al had been taught by all kinds of people over the past few months. He now stood up straight and carried his head high. He was really starting to give the impression of someone strong and brave. He was yet to fight any real battles, but his skills were improving greatly, and he was carrying himself more appropriately, too.

He really did seem to have a natural gift for this. Speaking purely about the matches we'd been having to practice his armed and unarmed combat, the odds were still against him in a fight against Menel, Reystov, or myself, but nevertheless, he was already looking pretty respectable. His unarmed fighting in particular was amazing.

Something I realized during our many training sessions was that dwarves were pretty well suited for grappling techniques. They were heavyset and had strong muscles but were short in height. Al was tall for a dwarf, but even he wasn't so tall as to exceed the height of a human or elf. And the fact that dwarves were short meant that they had a low center of gravity.

Amateur grapplers often imagine grappling as applying force from the top down and pressing the opponent hard as if trying to crush them, and often that's what they actually do. But the correct way to do it is to lower your center of gravity and lift your opponent into the air from below. If this is difficult to understand, try to imagine a large ball and a smaller ball about half its size pushing against each other sideways. The small ball will slip underneath and push the large ball upwards. Once the opponent's feet are off the ground, they can't apply force anymore. Become the small ball, stand firm below, and use the power of the ground to push the opponent upwards—that's one of the correct principles for winning a grapple.

In that sense, the dwarves were blessed to have short and heavyset bodies. The only problem was their short reach. I wondered if that meant that long-handled weapons would be best suited for them in armed combat.

“My lord, my lord.” Someone called for me.

I turned around to see a businesslike woman with braided, flaxen hair. “Anna.”

Anna was one of the priests that Bishop Bagley had dispatched to me. She was always helping me out with the running of the city, religious services, and stuff like that. I’d heard recently from Bee that there was something going on between her and Reystov, but I couldn’t read that kind of thing, so I had no idea whether it was true or not.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“A situation that requires a little urgency has been brought to my attention.”

“What’s happened?”

“I’m told there has been an undead sighting in the woods.”

“Undead...”

For a while now, the main troubles around here had revolved around beasts and demons. It had been quite a while since I’d had to deal with anything involving undead.

I had arranged for matters relating to undead near Beast Woods to be brought to me first of all via the temple. I could throw it over to the adventurers, but they wouldn’t necessarily have any method for returning the dead peacefully to the eternal cycle of samsara. Granted, a few warriors with maces could pulverize a zombie or a skeleton to the point of unrecognizability and the problem would be solved for the people under threat, but I felt that was a bit too cruel. Because of my history of being raised by Mary, Blood, and Gus, I couldn’t help but feel for the undead, so I was trying to make sure that as often as possible, matters like this were handled by me personally, or failing that, one of the priests.

“Ah!” I suddenly got an idea. This might be perfect for Al’s first battle. Due to my devotion to the god of the flame, I had a large advantage against the undead. If Al got into danger, it would be much easier to support him than if we were facing a beast.

“Al, about this, I’m going to handle it personally. Will you come with me?”

Al’s face lit up. “Y-Yes, sir! Please allow me to accompany you!”

◆

Traces of summer still lingered in the forest, which smelled strongly of greenery and soil and was full of thick undergrowth and exuberant bushes and vines. Coming through here when the visibility was as bad as this was dangerous, even if the situation had improved slightly compared to the height of summer.

I turned around to face Al, who was walking behind me. “I hear that dwarves can see well in the dark, but make sure not to over-rely on your sense of sight.”

“O-Okay.”

Al was wearing studded leather armor and a helmet, and he had a shiny battle axe in his hands. He looked pretty stylish now that he was standing up straight and was properly equipped, and all the more so because he had a solid build to begin with.

“So let’s go over this,” I said. “Where are we going?”

“Pillar Mound to the west.”

The recent beast hunts had expanded the area available to people. New ruins were being discovered frequently by beast-hunting adventurers and others who ventured deep into the woods to gather wild vegetables and hunt. The place we were heading now to get rid of the undead was just such a place. Its discoverer had called it Pillar Mound, and it was apparently a small hill with lines of old, rotting, wood posts.

“The report of its discovery was made very recently, but a search still hasn’t been carried out. There are several reasons for that. How deep into the woods it’s located—” The wind blew. A gray-white mist began to descend around us. “The fact that this area gets very misty. It’s unclear whether that has something to do with the geography, an ancient magical barrier, or if it’s something playing tricks, maybe a fae or something that’s settled here.” The mist was growing thicker with every step we took. “And lastly, the fact that there was an unholy aura about the area. The hunter who made the discovery said that they saw

‘undead,’ but...”

The experience seemed to have shaken them up quite a bit, and they were only able to give vague information about the sighting—something like a bone-chilling presence and the sense that something was moving in the mist. They might simply have been seeing things. Or it might have been a beast or a golem of some sort that had wandered out of a ruin.

“We don’t know what might turn up,” I said. “It could be nothing. An atmosphere like this can make you see things that aren’t there. But let’s be careful.”

“Yes, sir!”

We walked through the mist in silence for a little while, searching for anything out of place. Suddenly, our field of vision opened up. From behind me, Al stifled a yelp of surprise.

“Oh, wow.” The sight took my breath away. Countless rows of wooden pillars were lined up on a hill shrouded in thick fog. They seemed to have once been covered in red paint, although it was half-peeled off by now.

“C-Creepy.”

“Yes. But magnificent.” I gazed through the gray-white fog at the forest of rotting red pillars with peeling paint. The rows became more indistinct the farther back I looked and appeared to sway in the fog in the distance. They looked like the horribly twisted, slender figures of blood-red giants standing silently in this place as the last vestiges of the activity that had certainly once existed here.

I signaled with a hand gesture, and we moved carefully forward, trodding on the wet soil. Menel and Reystov weren’t here this time. It wasn’t a big enough deal for all of us to go, and we had the Lord of Holly’s prophecy to think about, so I had them standing by in Torch Port. But I slightly regretted that decision. If anything, Menel was the one suited to this kind of search. As a half-elf, he had sharp senses and could also call fairies to his aid, so he was more suited than me to this kind of reconnaissance work. That said, we couldn’t help what we didn’t have. I would just have to deal.

While casting my eyes left and right, I slowly approached the hill. The first thing I did was to check the pillars. As I thought, they were made of wood. They had been sawn with precision, were all either octagonal or hexagonal in shape, and had been buried deep into the ground. I wondered if the red was part of the customs or culture of a now-lost tribe. Perhaps it carried some kind of religious message or prayer.

A warm gust of wind whooshed by, taking me by surprise. Al let out a short scream and turned pale.

I looked in the direction he was pointing.

Behind a pillar, something was there, looking at us.

◆

As I reflexively held Pale Moon at the ready, I looked at where Al was pointing. He was looking at something with a cracked face, brown skin that had started to rot, empty eye sockets, haphazard teeth...

It was—it looked exactly like—

“That’s not a zombie,” I said, smiling.

“Huh?”

“Come on, look more closely.” I took Al and walked closer. It was a figure carved from wood into the shape of a person. Horrifyingly black holes had been cut into the figure for eyes, and it bared rows of teeth made from the quills of bird feathers. The wood used was probably the same as the pillars.

“Maybe he’s a grave keeper?”

“G-Grave keeper?”

“Yeah.”

The fact that they had placed a frightening figure like this here probably meant that—

“This is probably a burial mound. A graveyard.”

I looked around at the lines of pillars. Each one of these was surely the tombstone of someone who had once lived here. Once I started thinking that

way, I got the feeling that it explained this strange place neatly.

“The reason for the figure with the frightening face is probably to intimidate grave robbers.”

Some may think, “It’s only a figure, what’s the big deal?” but just like the Japanese dolls from my previous world, humanoid figures that feel as if someone’s *intent* lives within them are pretty scary. It would probably seem even scarier to people who came here with a guilty conscience intending to loot the graves. It might not be able to scare off all unscrupulous people, but if at least those who still had some doubts could be kept away with this, that alone would be useful. It was kind of like fake security cameras in my previous world.

“Actually, the mist might be a magical barrier too, or some kind of agreement with a local fae.” The people of the past had probably arranged this so that the ones they loved who had passed away before them could rest in peace. “I think this place was probably made over many generations and with a lot of effort and feeling.”

I gently laid down my spear and got to my knees. Then, I put my hands together and prayed.

We haven’t come here to disturb your burial place. Please rest in peace.

After praying for a while, I opened my eyes and saw that Al had been doing the same.

“Um... but then...”

“Hm?”

“But then where are the undead?”

“Now that we know this is a grave, I’m starting to think there’s a good chance they were just seeing things.”

“Huh? I’d have thought undead would be *more* likely to show up if it’s a grave...”

Al’s words confused me. I tilted my head. “Why? *They’ve all been respectfully laid to rest.*”

Graves generally contained corpses that had been given a memorial following

a proper procedure. It was actually rare for graves to produce undead, despite the image they may conjure up.

“It’s when someone is killed and their body hidden or when a dead body is left out in the open that it becomes more likely for them to receive the protection of the god of undeath.” I paused, then added in a subdued voice, “He’s a kind god in his own way.”

“The god of undeath is... kind?”

“Yes. Really kind.” I shrugged.

Even though I had once fought him as an enemy, I had to admit it: the god of undeath, Stagnate, *was* kind. It was just that I and most likely the majority of everyone else couldn’t accept what that god viewed as kindness, and that was why we called him an evil god. But the way I saw it, that label did nothing to change the fact that he was kind.

“People suffer miserable, hopeless deaths that are too awful to watch. Stagnate, the god of undeath, can’t stand that. So just as the seasons and nature shift with the blessing of the god of the fae, the god of undeath grants all creatures who have met with death the right to overturn their tragedies by becoming undead and rising to their feet again.”

“Um—”

“Yes, I know what you’re going to say. That wouldn’t make most people happy. In fact, a blessing like that would be nothing but a nuisance.” I shrugged. “For the living, it would be a little bit unbearable to say the least if their dead parents rose rotten from the grave for a final embrace. And as for the dead, regrets of the moment just before death are usually burned into their heads. No real rationality is left; they just lose control. Only a very small subset of people can become rational undead. Only those with strong wills and souls.”

But even so—

“But even so, it’s a fact that what the god of undeath is giving is a blessing, not a curse. From the bottom of his heart, he’s trying to tell them that they don’t have to end their lives in frustration and encouraging them to overturn death with the radiance of their souls.”

“Um...” Al looked like he’d been badly wanting to say something. “Master Will, err, you know an awful lot about Stagnate. Could it be you’ve...”

Oops.

“Have you met an Echo of—no, what am I talking about. That couldn’t happen, not even to you. Have you met one of Stagnate’s Heralds or something?”

“...”

“Why are you looking away from me?!”

“N-No reason, I just, uh, I just... Hahaha...”

“Don’t *laugh*!”

“Hahaha...”

◆

With the odd moment like that to break things up, we walked around the hill for a while, but as I expected, we didn’t spot anything suspicious.

“Yeah, it feels likely they were just seeing things.”

“S-So it was all a false alarm...”

I laughed sympathetically. “Well, it’s like that sometimes.”

Al had come steeling himself for his first battle, and it had just been a false alarm. His shoulders sank and his expression showed a mix of disappointment and frustration. “Ah—b-but, the hunter said they sensed an unholy aura, didn’t they?!”

“An ‘aura’ is a pretty vague concept, after all. With an atmosphere like this place has, if you thought you saw something undead here, you might feel like you sensed an aura, don’t you think?”

“I guess so...”

That being said, he did have a point. That ‘aura’ was the one thing that was still bugging me. If the hunter really was seeing things, we just had to go back and say it was nothing. But it would be terrible if we reported that it was nothing and then there were casualties later. With these thoughts in my head, I

went around the hill one more time.

“Hm?” Through the mist, behind bushes and undergrowth at the bottom of the hill, I got the feeling that I caught a glimpse of something. “Al, this way.” Making my way through the undergrowth, I moved towards it.

Hidden among bushes and undergrowth at the bottom of the hill was a dilapidated old door.

“Is that a way into the mound?”

It probably wasn’t very large, judging by the size of the hill. I regarded the door with suspicion. There was a chance that some magic or a trap had been set up as a measure against grave robbing, but I had to check. I mentally said some words of apology to the people buried here.

“Let’s check this out, too.”

“Right.”

I listened out carefully and cautiously placed a hand on the door. It had an extremely simple construction without even a lock, and even though many years must have passed, it still just about opened.

“*Lumen.*” I converged mana onto the Sign engraved in my favorite spear, Pale Moon, securing myself a magical source of illumination. “Okay. Good. And... *Flammo Ignis.*” I also used a Word to create fire and light the torch I’d brought with me. “Al, hold onto this.”

“Yes, sir. But why two different types of light?”

“If you were an intelligent undead who could see in the dark and you wanted to use darkness to ambush someone who couldn’t, how would you go about doing it?”

There was a long silence.

“I’m glad you understand.”

Magical light couldn’t be extinguished with water, and conversely, the Word of Negation that could erase a magical light wouldn’t erase a fire that physically existed. If we used two kinds of lights, it wasn’t very likely that we’d lose both of them at the exact same time. It was one of the fundamentals of exploring.

Once I'd prepared our light and performed a few additional equipment checks, we cautiously made our way through the wet soil passage, keeping alert for any signs of a cave-in. We soon reached the burial chamber at the innermost part of the mound. At that instant, my entire body was assailed by an abnormally dense unholy aura.

Al let out a frightened yelp. I froze completely and my hair stood on end.

No. No, something was wrong.

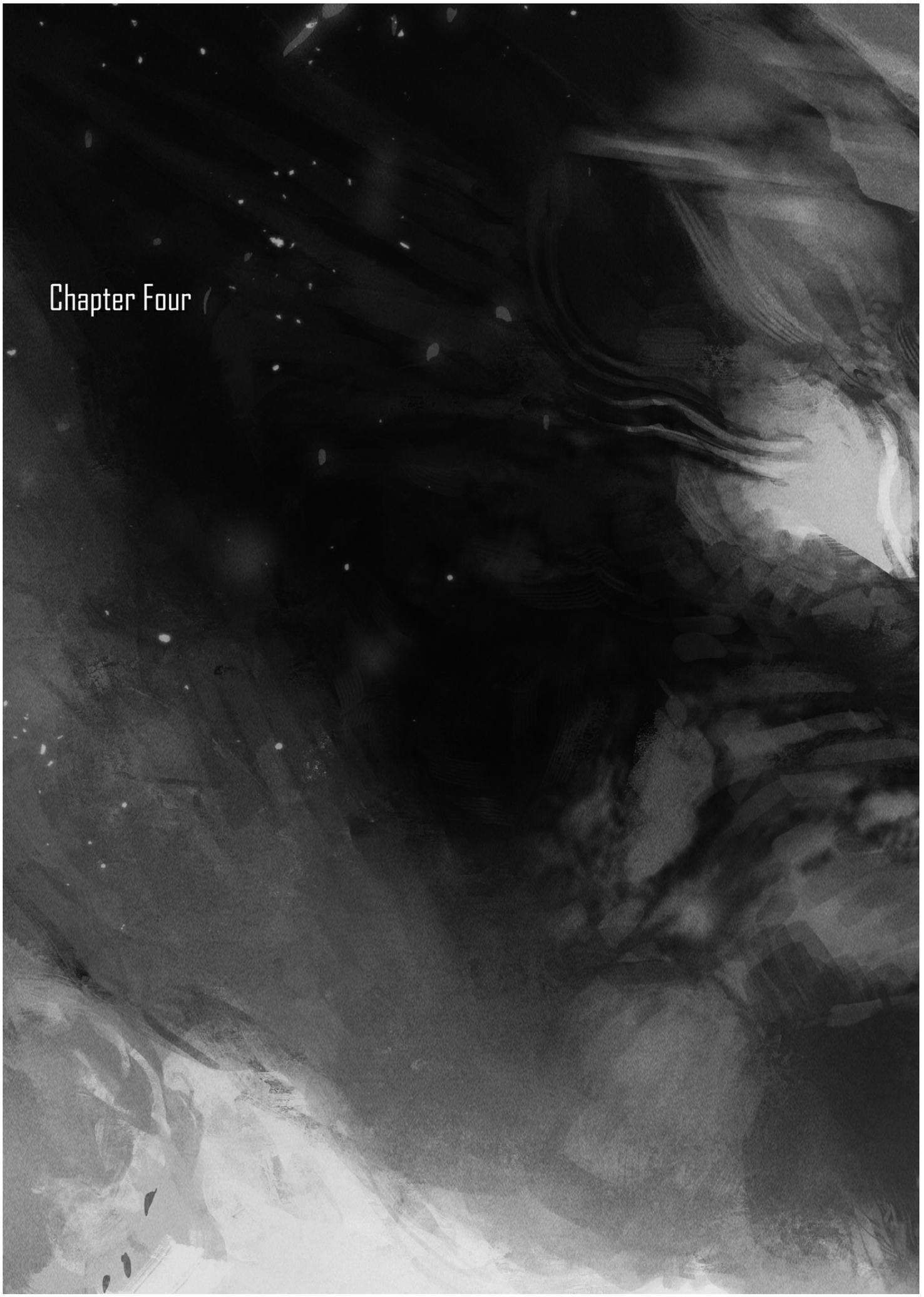
This was no normal, naturally occurring undead—

"Welcome to my temporary abode."

A voice echoed from deep in the darkness. An icy chill ran down my spine. That thick aura, so strong it made you want to drop to your knees—I'd felt it before. Al was shaking violently, both of his hands still wrapped tightly around the handle of his battle axe.

"Has it really been two years, warrior of the flame?"

In the darkness at the back of the burial chamber, red eyes glowed. He was grinning. I could see it in his narrowed eyes.


Chapter Four

Several wooden coffins were lined up in the burial chamber. The ceiling was shaped into a stable arch, and patterns reminiscent of flowing water were drawn on the walls in vivid red. The chamber went back a little way, but it couldn't really have been called spacious.

"I can't protect both of us." I called out to Al as I took a step forward. "Run as fast as you can." I steadied my breathing, focused on the circulation of mana—

"Oop. Easy there, warrior of the flame. You too, dwarf."

I could feel his satisfied grin.

"If you're intending to fight me, you can have the victory right now. I am not an Echo today, you see."

Once he said it, I noticed. His presence wasn't as concentrated as it had been back then, nor as overwhelming. The strength of it was incomparable to the average demon or beast but, conversely, that was the extent of it. It was not the aura of that unreasonably absolute being.

I pointed Pale Moon's luminescent blade towards the back of the chamber. There was an altar where animal bones had been laid. They were probably a totem for ancestral spirits. Sitting atop the altar was a raven with glossy black feathers and red eyes that felt somehow sinister.

"A Herald."

Heralds communicated the will of the gods and were a step down from the more powerful Echoes.

"Very perceptive."

The sense that he was smiling got even stronger.

"Oh, and you can feel at ease. I haven't laid a single hand on the dead in this burial chamber. Their souls have already returned to the great cycle, and a makeshift troop would stand no chance against you anyway."

The raven's eyes narrowed.

"Yes, thanks to the thrashing you gave me, I won't be able to manifest an Echo in this land for a while, no matter what I do."

Al seemed to have been stunned to silence.

For a while, huh? How long was “a while” in a god’s terms, that was the question. Was it a few years? A few decades?

“And so, as you can see, I sent out a Herald and—”



“Decided to go fishing?”

“Very perceptive once again. My word, you are as sharp as ever.”

I got the feeling that, for some reason, he was becoming more cheerful each time he spoke.

“Nasty, you are.”

“Oh, I’m sure fishing is always very nasty business for the fish. That is the nature of a god. We cannot be measured by human standards.”

The unholy aura the hunter had sensed here in Pillar Mound must have been the work of the raven before me who was the god of undeath’s Herald. He knew that if he dangled a hook into this region with an undead sighting attached to it, I would be highly likely to *take the bait*. If he didn’t catch me the first time, he could just change locations and try again. It was a very patient and godlike approach. Only...

“It doesn’t seem like you’re after revenge for last time.”

“Yes. Firstly, I owe you an apology.”

“*What?*”

“My previous Echo displayed disgraceful behavior in its final moments. I feel deeply ashamed. There was no excuse for it.”

The raven sounded completely serious.

“An Echo is an attempt to project the power and mind of us gods into the nature of a person or fae. Some distortion is necessary. Newly born Echoes tend, to varying degrees, to be infantile, emotional, and rash. Of course, that doesn’t make it acceptable.”

My mouth hung open. I never thought I’d hear words of apology from a deity, from an actual, unmistakably real *god*.

Al’s mouth was flapping. This being’s aura alone was enough to make anyone feel certain that he was a Herald of the gods. It was no wonder that Al was so confused at the sight of him talking to me in such a friendly way.

”Oh, dwarf. This ‘warrior of the flame’ and I have crossed blades once

before. Although I had been worn down quite a bit by his mentor by that point, I must say, he was a formidable foe. How long has it been since an Echo of mine was last destroyed by a pure human? Not to mention that he seems to have become stronger still since then. He may even stand on a par with the heroes of legend if he continues to—"

"Stagnate." I stopped him, using a deliberately threatening tone. It didn't seem as though he was going to actively fight me, but what was in front of my eyes was still a Herald of an evil god with dangerous ideas. I had no idea what he was planning. "I have no intention of being drawn into a conversation with you. What do you want?"

"How unfriendly. What's wrong with indulging me with a little chat? Has our relationship turned so cold?"

"What kind of a *relationship* do you think we have?"

"Come now, don't tell me you forgot that impassioned night we spent together? We both spent a little time on the receiving end."

"I wasn't aware that gods enjoyed jokes."

The raven clicked his beak in representation of a laugh.

"And so, today I have come with a topic of interest for the big, strong warrior who caused me to die a little death."

"Do I have permission to break your neck?"

"Gracious, no. What a horrifying thought."

While casually exchanging words with him, I tutted internally. Now that I was attempting to have a proper conversation with the god of undeath, I could understand even more deeply how formidable he was. In terms of simple strength too, of course, but even more so in terms of his other aspects.

This god could *really* speak. You could trade jokes and quips with him. If you told him your troubles, he would surely listen intently. He might even sympathize. He would try to work together with you to find a solution or guide you in the right direction with his godly powers. And he would be sincere the entire time.

Yes, as frightening as it was, he was sincere. That was what made Stagnate an extremely dangerous god. Most likely, those ultimately taken in by his charms would voluntarily become undead, voluntarily rally under his flag, and voluntarily remain loyal to him. Gracefeel, who was the god I worshipped, had been ringing alarm bells inside my mind since the beginning of this conversation, desperately urging me not to get comfortable around him.

"Your glib talk won't work on me. What do you want?"

"Ah, yes."

The raven batted his wings once as if to fix his appearance and faced me formally.

"Champion who defeated me, paladin of the flame—"

His oracular voice and gestures were fitting for one who proclaimed himself a god.

"Accept my revelation."

At the moment he said it, a powerful image was thrust into my mind.

The next thing I knew, I was in the dark in the bowels of the earth. The horribly thick darkness corrupted even my sense of distance. There was only one thing I could see in its depths: a single golden eye. A long, thin pupil stretched vertically down the eye as if it had been slightly torn apart. The enormous body stirred, and the sound of its scales grated harshly on my ears. I was looking up at it. I couldn't move. I knew I had to fight, but my body wouldn't move. Why? *Why?*

I thought about it and realized. It was no wonder I couldn't move. How could I move when my arms and legs had all been torn off?

The faces of Mary, Blood, and Gus floated across my mind. I thought an apology to them. They had raised me for nothing.

That's when it snapped its fangs at me. It snapped them over and over, as if ridiculing its foolhardy, idiotic challenger. And then there was light. The toxic, burning breath stored inside its belly, a mass of incandescent heat, traveled from its belly up its throat and then, at the instant it lit up the dreadful face of

the one-eyed dragon, my consciousness ended.

◆

I started. My mind returned to reality from the imagery that had been etched into it.

My breathing was ragged. I had only lost consciousness for an instant, but the experience had been powerful. What I had seen, I was certain, was my own death, as a possible future.

“William, thou shalt challenge the dragon and die defeated, thy purpose not fulfilled.”

His prophetic words had a ring of truth to them. Stagnate ruled over immortality, and it was probably possible for him to read that future as well.

“If you would like to spare yourself a meaningless death, do not fight the Gods’ Sickle, the foul dragon Valacirca.”

His red pupils pinned me to the spot.

“If you cannot trust me, I suggest you ask Gracefeel’s opinion. Ask whether with your power and her protection you can win against the dragon as you are now. You will get the same answer.”

The sight of a jet-black raven speaking a human tongue was uncanny and only made his words all the more powerful.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you demonstrated that you have what it takes to be a hero.”

The raven’s reply was unhesitant.

“I adore humans. Heroes in particular, as your teachers were. A hero overcoming the impossible and ending injustice with the radiance of their soul is a sight I find beautiful from the bottom of my heart. I even believe them to be the physical embodiment of the possibilities of human beings, no, all beings.”

I let him continue.

“That is why I want to preserve that sight in an eternal form. It is unbearable to watch souls like that being dragged down from their potential by common fools and reduced to nothing, their shine dulled by suffering and regret. It is the same to imagine you killed by a worldly fool like Valacirca. The thought makes me sick.”

Worldly?

“Hm. So your research hasn’t turned that up yet. Yes, worldly. Valacirca is a foul, materialistic dragon.”

Stagnate spat out those words, and then began to talk more eloquently about him.

“Valacirca’s name as the ‘Gods’ Sickle’ originates from the time of the great wars between the good and evil gods. At the time, I was on what you might call the side of good. And Valacirca was there, too—a dragon with an overwhelmingly massive body, dark-red scales, and fiery, noxious breath. He was one of the strongest and most ferocious dragons serving the Big Six.”

He told me that Valacirca was a powerful and cruel dragon who declared openly that the only reasons he served the forces of good were that the dragons and giants who would oppose him were powerful and he would receive a good reward.

“I’m surprised the good gods felt like employing him.”

“If they had done otherwise, he would have become their enemy instead. Even that good-natured bunch are capable of calculating what’s in their own interest.”

He did have a point. It was wartime. They wouldn’t refuse help from hired fighters because of a little bit of bad manners.

“He was fixated on three things: battle, victory, and treasure. He would win, steal, and be very pleased with himself. A straightforward, beastlike nature, don’t you agree? And because of that, the Big Six were that much more cautious about how they handled him.”

He was dropped in at the most critical points and won. The dragon without a name began to be called Valacirca, the Gods' Sickle.

"At a certain point during those wars, I turned my back on the forces of good. I will avoid going into the details of what occurred after that, but ultimately a final battle took place in which the sides of good and evil were evenly matched and almost destroyed each other. The gods and the dragons were all heavily wounded, and many departed to a distant world. From that point on, the gods were limited in their ability to directly interfere with the world."

That was a piece of mythology that was passed down in this world. Because the gods interfered with the world in practical ways, unless some god deliberately spread a false story, the general outline would get passed down precisely.

"Valacirca successfully and intelligently survived this last all-out war and went to sleep."

To prepare for the next war and plunder.

"The dragon always slept a long time. Every time he awakened, he took part in a war. If there was no war, he fanned the flames himself. He did not take sides but lent his strength to all involved. And every time he did, the gods' plans were disrupted. As far as I know, the last war he participated in was the pandemonium started by those demons from Hell."

That was the Great Collapse and the end of the Union Age.

"He met the High King and lent him his power. His usual cunning and materialism, I'm sure. Swords aside, the High King wasn't one with a great attachment to treasure, you see. And Valacirca laid waste to the Iron Country, suffered a serious battle wound, and took to sleep to allow it to heal. Removed from the tide of battle, once again he cleverly excused himself..."

"W-Wait!" Al, who had been stiff with fear up until now, suddenly raised a startled voice.

◆

"Battle wound? Did you say he suffered a serious battle wound? Did my

ancestors—”

“Hmm, what’s this? Are you a descendant of the mountain dwarves?”

“Y-Yes!”

After hearing that answer, the raven laughed. It was a joyful laugh.

“My oh my, the hand of Fate in action! Very well, then. Dwarf connected to the Iron Mountains! I, Stagnate, god of undeath, shall reveal to you the truth: the Lord of the Iron Mountains, Aurvangr, was a true hero!”

It was an innocent voice, like that of a child showing off a treasure to a friend.

“Hear this! And take pride! Calldawn, that legendary sword of many generations, stole one eye from the foul dragon that has lived since the time of the gods!”

As the god spoke of Al’s ancestors with the greatest pride, Al’s quivering hand tightened into a fist. “I-Is that the truth?”

“It certainly is. I acknowledge it here: his heroism was spectacular and satisfying to the extreme!”

Al’s voice choked with emotion. “Th-Thank you... Thank you...”

The raven that was the Herald of the god of undeath watched over Al warmly. From this scene alone, it would have been hard to think of him as an evil god. But it was also a fact that this was a god whose sympathy led him to produce a great number of undead, corrupting the laws of life and death and each time bringing about disaster.

“William, warrior of the flame, one day you may be able to surpass even Aurvangr’s glorious accomplishments and sever the head of Valacirca. But now is not that time. Avoid battle. Bide your time and train.”

His words seemed to be genuine words of concern for me.

“*Even if there are victims,* as hard as this may be for you to accept.”

I hesitated over how to respond. The next moment, I felt a crawling sensation run up my spine.

“Listen, the dragon slumbers lightly now.”

An underground rumbling echoed around the burial chamber.

rrrrrRRRRR...

The ground shook. I could hear a roar that seemed to echo from the very depths of the earth.

rrrrrrrrRRRRRR...

It was a terrifying sound that seemed to hold a tight grip on my soul. My hands were shaking. When on earth was the last time I felt fear from the roar of a living creature?

rrrrrrrrrrrRRRRRRRRRR...

After that last roar, significantly longer than the others, the noise and the shaking both stopped abruptly.

“The dragon has demonstrated his power. To him, it was probably nothing more than rolling over in his sleep on the brink of wakefulness. But even so, I suggest you return to your territory quickly, or things are going to get out of hand.”

The god of undeath’s raven looked displeased.

— The fire of dark disaster shall catch in the mountains of rust. That fire shall spread, and this land may all be consumed.

— The dragon is coming. The dragon is coming! The dragon is coming! Valacirca! Calamity’s sickle descends upon you!

Those ominous words once again crossed my mind.

◆

Al let out a wild yell. His weighty battle axe swung horizontally straight into the face of the crazed giant lizard, breaking bone and scattering skin and flesh.

“Hmm, another four are approaching from west-northwest. What now?”

Stagnate’s Herald-raven croaked loudly from up in the air.

Not bothering to answer him, I swung around my sling as one of the lizards sprang out of a bush to the west-northwest and landed a direct hit on its head. A red flower blossomed. I hardly looked at it. I swung around the next stone. Two more lizards leaped out one after the other. I picked one of the two and buried the stone between its eyes.

The other drew closer. Al blocked with a shield as it tried to bite him and, summoning an instant of courage, he faced it from the front and smashed his axe down into its head.

His first battle had turned out nothing like I’d been expecting. Still, he was moving pretty well.

The last one of the four came at him, too. He fended it off with the movements that had been ingrained into him by training, making panicked yelps all the while, and finally crushed it with the axe. The giant lizard kept fighting wildly until it was completely dead.

“Do you understand now? That is a dragon roar.”

It was the kind of terror only a ruler could wield, and it had the power to strike panic into the hearts of all creatures great and small. Gus had once told me that this was the reason outstanding heroes were needed to slay a dragon. It made sense. If a dragon could inspire this kind of panic just by roaring, then it wouldn’t matter how many average soldiers you assembled; they would only serve to accelerate the chaos.

After that dragon roar, we escaped from the burial chamber with dirt falling in pieces from the ceiling to be immediately confronted by beasts that had lost their minds to the dragon’s howling.

The god of undeath’s Herald-raven was yet to leave and seemed to be enjoying himself as he flew at my side. In fact, it had even gotten to the point that he was giving me helpful information about the beasts that were coming. I was thankful for that, but the sense that this could be a calculated move was making me unable to feel happy about it. What was I supposed to call this

emotion?

“Ah, hello. Northwest. Some more bad news is coming this way.”

I could hear the ground rumbling at regular intervals and the sound of trees cracking. Those were not the sounds a four-legged creature made as it moved...

“It’s a forest giant. That will give even you a bit of a hard time.”

Accompanied by the dreadful sound of living trees being torn apart, a giant appeared who was over three meters tall and wearing fur. He had a club in his hand and was foaming at the mouth. He was clearly deranged with panic. As soon as Al saw it, he bent back with a cry of horror and surprise.

“It looks like it wasn’t prepared for Valacirca’s howling. What now, hero?”

The Herald-raven looked down at me from the sky, with a genuine, irritating pleasure in his red eyes.

Forest giants lived deep in the woods and were generally mild-mannered, although it depended on the personality of the individual and the clan. They were also relatively small as giants went.

“Are you going to kill it?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you will stop it? That? How?”

“Don’t you know?”

Blood shouted inside my head.

“Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force!”

I tossed my sling aside and sprinted towards the giant.

◆

Bellowing angrily and foaming at the mouth, the forest giant swung his club in a horizontal arc towards me. It was a very bulky club, as if a section had just been cut out of a tree trunk. I stopped dead, folded my arms up compactly, held my shield in position with both hands and my left shoulder, and took the hit head-on. There was a powerful impact. I pressed my feet down hard, and they gouged out a trail in the ground as I was pushed backwards a little.

“This is... nothing!” I pushed back.

Despite his loss of control, the forest giant seemed startled by the unexpected feeling of resistance. Hastily pulling back his club, he then released a flurry of blows with surprisingly limber movements of his arm. I took them all on my shield. A normal shield would have broken into pieces already from the impact, but I had carved layer upon layer of Signs into this one over the past two years. It wouldn’t break easily. As I sustained all the giant’s fierce blows, I gradually closed the gap between us.

With a loud roar, the giant finally switched to a two-handed stance and brought the club down as if to crack my head in half. It was a frontal attack that took advantage of his great height and superior body weight. As the club came down, I thought about how impressive it was that he’d had the judgment to use this particular move while in a mad frenzy.

But I’d been expecting this attack. Holding my shield at a tilted angle, I deflected his blow to my left. The feel of the strike being forced in a different direction when all his previous attacks had just been stopped by the shield took the giant by surprise, and his posture faltered. I’d been waiting for that moment. Twisting my body as I took a big step forward, I grabbed hold of the giant’s thick arm, and I pulled it in towards me hard and spun my whole body in the style of a sacrifice throw. The giant’s center of gravity tilted forward. He was unable to fight it. I felt the interesting sensation of a massive weight floating into the air, and the next instant, a tremendous rumble shook the earth.

“H-He *threw* the giant?” Al said, stunned.

“Yes, he did.”

I couldn’t afford to pay attention to them. I ignored them, held the giant down, and immediately prayed to the god of the flame. The prayer I was using was Sanity, a so-called resuscitation miracle that caused the target to recover from confusion. I felt the power of my god being channeled through me, and then the deranged forest giant made some drowsy, confused noises and the light of sanity returned to his eyes.

“As usual, your actions leave me speechless.”

“What did you *expect* me to do?”

Unless you performed the prayer while directly touching the target, Sanity only had a mild effect, so a plan was needed if I wanted to cast it on a giant who had lost his mind. Power was needed to carry that plan out, and I happened to have it. That was all.

Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force. And if you have techniques and magic as well, that's even better.

As a rule, Blood's teachings were correct.

◆

"I really did something sorry."

"It's no trouble. Can you get back without help?"

"I think it is get back somehow."

"Oh, uh, *'Giant-language, slightly, understand.'*"

"Ohh! *'What a surprise! That helps a lot!'*"

It was an incredibly jumbled conversation.

"Umm... the dragon... *'Dragon, howl, dangerous, is'*..."

"Yes, it is derrible, I know. *'I must return to my tribe. After that, I think I will move somewhere a little safer.'*"

"Oh, in that case, please mention the name of William the paladin. *'If, people, collide, my-name, William.'*"

"William. Paladin, William, god it. *'All right. You have my gratitude, Sir William.'*"

After I threw the forest giant, touched him with my hand, and performed the miracle of Sanity, he regained his self-control.

However, a serious problem arose when we tried to communicate: neither of us was very proficient in the other's language. Although most of the languages in daily use in this world were distantly related, all being derived from the original Words of Creation, the language of giants was a little too esoteric. Even Gus, who had taught it to me, had been working from a very patchy memory of it. That was why we were having this halting attempt at communication using

both of our languages.

"*'I am Gangr of the race of Jotunn,'* I, Gangr of Yotun, William. *'William, champion of men.'*" Gangr placed a big, rugged palm against one of mine. It was a giant greeting. We looked like an adult and a child comparing palm sizes. "*'I will not forget this debt. If you have any troubles in the forest, call for me.'*"

"How can I call you?"

"*'Shout out: "Gangr of the Jotunn, William is here." The trees will pass on the message.'*"

The title of "forest giant" was apparently deserved. He seemed to be on friendly terms with the fae and the fairies.

After that, Gangr bowed many times to us and headed off back into the forest once more.

"That's the first time I've ever seen a giant."

"Me, too. He really took me by surprise."

"Even though you can speak their language?!"

"My magic teacher was a walking encyclopedia."

As Al and I talked, the Herald-raven came down from the sky. He tried to nonchalantly land on my arm, so I dodged him, and he tutted shrewdly as he landed on the ground instead.

"You saw that. That is the influence of an ancient dragon feared even by Hell's demons."

The god of undeath's red-eyed Herald spoke. He was continuing the conversation we were having just before the roar from Calamity's Sickle.

"There is no hero in this age or region greater than you. If he awakens and seeks war once again, there will be no other way to defeat him than you. But even you are not sufficient."

"And because of that you're telling me to accept that there'll be some victims? Uh, we may be enemies, but that doesn't sound like you."

The Herald-raven made a disgusted expression.

“As vexing as it is, a thousand lives cannot replace ten thousand. Since more lives can be saved by you remaining alive, I am forced to recommend that. If it were possible, I would gladly set down an Echo and slay him myself. But unfortunately, thanks to a certain someone, I have been rendered impotent. Thanks to a certain *someone*.”

He made no attempt to hide his bitterness.

“D-Don’t any of the other gods look like they’ll make a move?”

“They have their own plans, on a far greater and all-encompassing scale. Gods like Gracefeel and myself, who rejoice and weep over the joys and sorrows of the little people, are if anything eccentrics.”

I said nothing.

“This plan does not please me, either. But I believe it to be the best plan in the current situation. Think on it very, very carefully, flamebearer, knight of faraway lands.”

With a loud flap, the Herald-raven spread his wings.

“Farewell. We shall meet again before long.”

He flew off into the mist. Al and I watched him go in silence, my expression bitter and Al’s a little disconcerted.

“He’s looking after you,” Al said.

“No, he’s got his eye on me.” I hadn’t forgotten about the death threat he gave me when I destroyed his Echo before, even if he had now apologized for it.

“They say that the gods desire heroes, people who will spread their divine message and carry out their will on earth.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re a hero who represents the god of the flame, so...”

“The god of undeath wants to put me in his debt, I bet.”

Rather than being hostile to me, he was trying to become someone beneficial to me. By doing so, he was intending to slowly mollify my hostility towards him and exploit those past favors to gradually, very gradually, break me down. For

an instant, I pictured myself reduced to an undead knight. I shook my head to rid myself of that sinister image. Stagnate was very well versed in subtle manipulation.

“What do you plan to do from here?” Al asked, concerned. “The god of undeath said that even you... um... couldn’t beat the dragon.”

“Good question,” I said. “I wonder what I’m meant to do.”

I had no good answer for him.

◆

The creatures of the forest had been driven to panic by the dragon’s howling. I got back in a hurry and was immediately swamped with requests to take care of the damage they were causing. Reports had been coming in from all over. I dispatched adventurers and priests to many different places and busily exchanged letters with Whitesails.

Now, some time after, everything had finally settled a little. I was in Torch Port. The dragon’s roars were still continuing intermittently. At the same time, conflicts were occurring because of all the creatures changing their habitats, although they weren’t going as crazy as the first time this had happened. Naturally, we were starting to see victims as well. Fewer people and horses were traveling on the roads, and I got the impression that the ships going back and forth looked a little lonely on the river.

Everyone was terrified of the dragon—and the rumors that those *were* a dragon’s roars spread incredibly quickly—that lived in the Rust Mountains. Dragons were that much of a threat. It would only have to wake up and take to the sky on a whim, and never mind Torch Port, even Whitesails could be destroyed. It’s a fact that everyone dies sooner or later, but how many people could remain calm after hearing the roar of their own death?

At the moment, I was in the gloom of my office with all the shutters closed, passing my eyes over a letter from the temple under magical light.

A reply to my letter had arrived from Bishop Bagley.

The information he had found about the foul-dragon backed up what the god of undeath had revealed to us. Valacirca, Calamity’s Sickle, was an Elder Dragon

who had been alive since the time of the gods. Its claws tore through steel and its scales broke the swords of heroes, and as if to reflect its own nature, it had breath of toxicity and mania.

Toxicity and mania. I could never forget those properties. They were the same as the abnormal wyvern and chimera I had encountered two years ago. Those creatures were said to have been created from evil research carried out by hell's demons. They had probably been experimenting using the breath that spilled from the mouth of the foul-dragon as it slept, and mixing that breath with beasts and attempting to tame them.

In his letter, Bishop Bagley warned me that there was unmistakably a high-level demon there in addition to the foul-dragon. At length, he attempted to dissuade me from fighting, saying that I was not experienced enough, that he couldn't imagine me winning, and that there would be no shame in running away.

"No shame in running away, huh?"

He was saying that because he thought that I *would* go. What had made him think that? How exactly did he perceive me? I was still agonizing over that decision myself...

The dragon would probably awaken soon. If the god of undeath and the Lord of Holly's words meant anything, there would be casualties, too. The first thing that was likely to happen was that the dragon, once awoken, would attack a nearby settlement on a whim, and people would die.

It wouldn't end there. There's no way a lively, smooth circulation of money and goods could exist in a place that a dragon could fly over at any moment. The flow of things would stagnate, the to-and-fro of horses and ships would cease, and beasts would once again stalk human settlements as if they owned the place. Traders and manufacturers that depended on that circulation of money and goods would fail one after another, and people would start to become jobless. The destitute would turn to crime, public order would worsen, the government would become powerless, and its authority would hit rock bottom. Far more people would probably drown under the waves created in the wake of the dragon's whim than ever succumbed to its claws.

A complete region, a whole society, would be brought to ruin by a single dragon. That was a situation I couldn't allow. I had to take action to stop it, and after the dragon got started would be too late. Once there were direct victims, it would be impossible to stop the effect from spreading. I had to solve this problem before dragon fangs ever ripped into human flesh.

Yet even now, I couldn't make the decision to take action. The word around town was that some people were saying the paladin had turned chicken. I couldn't call that complete and total nonsense, either.

— ***Thou shalt challenge the dragon with the protection of the god of the flame and die defeated, thy purpose not fulfilled.***

I hadn't been able to sense any deception in the god of undeath's words. His revelation was true. I couldn't win, not right now, with the power I currently had. Ever since I'd become aware of that, I'd been unable to move forward.

Before I knew it, my hands were together in prayer.

◆

I didn't know what to do. I offered an imploring prayer to the god of the flame, but I felt no response at all. My god wouldn't answer me anything. Of course not. God wasn't a chummy friend or a useful business contact. But I wanted to hear her voice right now. I wanted her to tell me there was a way I could win. Or even if there wasn't, I wanted her to order me to fight and demonstrate my righteousness. If she would say that to me, if I could just have her say that to me, I was sure I could head into battle.

I let out a small groan. Memories of my previous life flashed into the back of my mind: a dark room, the light of a monitor. Myself, unable to take that step forward. Time passing idly.

Time passing idly.

The feeling of restlessness burning in my chest.

Time passing idly.

Groaning.

Shedding tears.

Time still passing idly.

Unable to take that step.

Unable to take that step.

I tried to summon the courage many times, but I still couldn't take that step. Unable to step out, I continued bathing in the status quo long after the water had lost its pleasant heat. And the final collapse grew gradually closer.

I groaned again. How much had I changed since that time? My world was different. My environment was different. I had a muscular body, wondrous magic powers, miracles from God. I had been given, I had obtained, abilities like the hero of some story. I had been acting the part this entire time.

And what had changed about me?

I was stronger and could do more now. So what? Had I become able to cope with failure? Had I become able to do something to combat despair? In the end, wasn't my spineless nature still just the same as my previous life?

I heard a thick, muddy voice coming out of a pit of coal-black mud deep inside my heart. *Did you have fun,* it said, *winning against opponents you had no chance of losing to? It must have felt very good, being praised to the skies as a hero and acting modest. Were you able, for a brief moment, to think you could become someone successful in this world? Being loved, being raised. Obtaining incredible power. Being the center of all your friends. Being respected, being validated. You enjoyed all that, didn't you?*

But when you can't win, this is what you are.

The voice gurgled out of the black pit of mud deep inside my heart. Deep down there was my past self of my previous life. And "I" laughed, as if to say, *You know, really, don't you?*

You are me, and I am you.

I clutched my chest. I understood. Even I understood. I understood very well that I was only being weak-spirited. It was the side of me that felt sorry for myself, just like the time when Mary told me off. But my mom wasn't here to admonish me now, not anymore. I had to stand on my own two feet. But what was the way to do that? In my previous life, I just stayed down on the ground. Even this life was no different. I would have stayed down forever if not for Mary. I had no idea how it was possible to stand back up.

My thoughts went around and around in circles. I knew I'd fallen into a bad state, but I had no clue what I was supposed to do about it.

How long had I been lost in thought? I heard the sound of a knock and looked up.

"Coming in," Menel said, opening the door and entering without any hesitation. Noticing how dark the room was, he screwed up his face and quietly called out to a fairy of light to illuminate the room. "You're still thinking about it."

"Yeah."

Menel sighed. "So that's why you didn't notice. Look outside. Things are getting a little bit hairy out there."

"Huh?"

Now that he mentioned it, it did seem a little noisy outside. I opened the shutter a little way and took a peek outside the window. There was a whole crowd of dwarves in front of the mansion.

◆

"We want to hear the paladin's thoughts!"

"Does he mean to slay the dragon or not?!"

I could see Grendir, and Ghelreis, and others I knew as well. They were all old dwarves with crude weapons over their shoulders, calling out to be heard.

"And what do you intend to do with the answer?!" Facing them was Al, standing on his own in opposition to all the other dwarves. He no longer trembled as he did that day.

“If he is thinking about slaying it, we demand to go with him!”

“And if the spirit of fear has taken hold of the Paladin, we intend on heading to the mountains on our own!”

“We dwarves are to blame for the failure to slay this dragon!”

“It is dwarven blood that must be spilled!”

“Our dishonor must be washed away with blood!”

Voice after voice cried out loudly.

“Stop this! It’s suicide!” Al spread his arms and shouted back. “The dragon is a formidable foe, and the Paladin has a plan in mind! Do not disrupt it!”

“I don’t know what you’ve been ordered, but stop trying to stall for time!”

“I have not been ordered a thing! I am telling you not to be reckless!”

“You call us reckless?!”

“Even if all of you unite to take on the dragon, you will be unable to deal him a single scratch!”

“What did you say?!” One of the dwarves had had enough. Declaring that he was letting himself through to ask me my plans, he stormed up to Al and made a grab at him.

“I told you to *stop*!” In a single flowing motion, Al knocked the dwarf’s arm out of the way, lifted him off his feet, and dropped him against the ground back-first. The crowd of dwarves broke into murmurs at this display of skill. “You are—You have aged, all of you, so much that you cannot even win against me! Stop this! I do not wish for you all to die meaningless deaths!”

As Al shouted out in a clear voice with his head held high, everyone was silent.

Then Grendir stepped forward and slowly opened his mouth to speak.

“Young master...”

“Grendir.”

The two looked at each other.

“Young master. You have grown well. You are a sight to behold. But, but you see, that is why...” Grendir’s face crumpled. “It has been long enough... We... simply want to die...” He forced the words out. “We wished to die with our lord, on that day, in that battle, on those mountains. We have lived two hundred years since death was denied us that day. They were long centuries, spent swallowing our pride as wretched vagabonds.”

Al listened in silence and didn’t shy away from his words.

“We kept telling ourselves we had done enough, we had done enough, we had *had* enough, our obligations were fulfilled... and now, finally, we have learned that detestable dragon is alive! What is so wrong with wishing to continue from that day?! What is so wrong with wishing for battle and death?!” Grendir grabbed hold of Al as he shouted. Al allowed it and grabbed back firmly. “Let me pass! I will make the Paladin speak his mind!”

“I refuse!”

Grendir’s aged yet still muscular body soared through the air before slamming down in the yard. As if that was their signal, the other old dwarves descended on Al. Al struck them, threw them, and floored them. There were a few minutes of shouts and groans as they scuffled, and at the end, it was Al who remained standing.

“You asked me what was so wrong, Grendir.” Al stood tall as he addressed the dwarves lying flat and groaning in the yard. “All of your heads are so full of thoughts of death that you are not thinking of victory. That will not do. You must know that. When the proud warriors of the mountains lay down their lives and charge into battle, they do so to win.” His eyes were earnest, and his voice was kind. “It was all of you who taught me this.”

— *One thing is always on their minds, day in and day out. The question of what is worth laying down their life for. What is their reason to fight.* Blood’s words revived in my mind.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry. I will make you all a promise.”

— *And when they find it...*

“The Paladin *will* make up his mind. And when he does, I will go with him, and

we will win back the glory of the dwarves!”

— They go into battle with their souls burning with the fire of courage, and never once fear death.

“I, Vindalfr, grandson of Aurvangr, last monarch of the Iron Country, swear upon my grandfather’s name that I will take back the mountains that were once his!”

That cry was felt not just by the dwarves but by me as well. My heart beat loudly, and a heat spread through me from deep inside my chest. Now that I thought about it, Al had always been this kind of person. He was like this when I first met him in the tavern, and he was like this when he cried out that he’d become my squire. He had always been someone brave, and I had sworn to protect the ‘sincerity’ he offered me with my own hands.

“He’s pretty cool,” Menel muttered.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“We’ve gotta keep up.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, do you remember?”

“Remember what?”

“Your oath.”

I couldn’t help but give a small smile. “Sorry. I forgot it for a moment.”

“Heh. I thought as much.”

— I dedicate my whole life to you! As your blade I will drive away evil, and as your hands I will bring salvation to those in sorrow!

“You go through working out pros and cons and whether you can win or not, but the final outcome’s always been something you never bother to think about. Am I right?”

If pros and cons were what concerned me, I could have left Beast Woods alone. I could have gone literally anywhere else.

“*You did what you did ’cause it was the right thing to do.* So all you gotta do is

keep that up.”

Menel smiled. I smiled back.

There was no need to think about how to stand up or summon courage. As you struggle desperately forward to protect someone or fight for something you believe in, courage comes afterwards all by itself.

◆

Once I’d made my decision, the rest was quick.

I walked to my front door with Menel, who was kind enough to come with me. I think we were both smiling. I opened the door and, in front of Al and all the other dwarves, including the dirt-covered one who’d been thrown on the ground, I made my declaration.

“I will slay the dragon!”

Everyone stopped moving with the same shocked look on their faces.

I composed my expression and posture and continued speaking. “I have decided that I will go to slay the dragon. Al—Vindalfr—I commend your words about taking back your grandfather’s mountains. Will you accompany me?”

Al’s eyes went round. He broke into a wide smile, his hazel eyes glittering. “I had faith you would say that. Gladly!”

Menel shrugged. “You sure you want to accept that easy?”

“That’s rich coming from you, Meneldor. You’re planning to follow him no matter what happens! You’re not fooling anyone!”

“He’s learned to defend himself.” Menel laughed and gave him a nod. “We’re against a dragon, so numbers aren’t gonna help. And we can’t spare too many people who could defend the villages, either. We’ll take you, me, Will, and someone who knew the mountains two centuries ago to show us the way.”

“I would—”

“No, I will go.” Ghelreis, the dwarf with the scar, stopped Grendir as he tried to volunteer, and he put his own name forward.

“Ghelreis, you—”

“I can’t leave this to someone without a will to live. Besides, you have a duty to unite your fellows.” I noticed that Ghelreis’s clothes weren’t dirty. It looked as though he had managed to stay out of that frenzied fight and hadn’t taken Al on, either. “I will guide you.”

“Thank you very much.” I was thankful to have someone composed.

So we had me, Menel, Al, Ghelreis...

“And me.” Reystov appeared from behind a building. “I’ve packed already.”

I chuckled. As usual, Reystov wasn’t one to let a challenging foe pass him by. “Very glad to have you on board. Looks like we’re decided.”

“So us five men are off to pick a fight with demons and a dragon. It’s not gonna be a pretty trip, that’s for sure.” Menel laughed. “Do we have some kind of winning strategy?”

“No,” I said definitively. I may have been undecided for a good number of days, but I hadn’t been wasting my time doing nothing. I had been giving my magical equipment a check-up, turning the pages of my spellbooks, and moving my body as I remembered my training with Blood. And as I did all this, I thought of all kinds of plans. As a result of all that thinking, I was forced to a single conclusion. “There’s no surefire way to kill a dragon.”

They weren’t so easy that you could do something about them with a cunning plan or unusual item. That was what made them dragons. But, at the same time, this world was real. It wasn’t a computer game with systems like levels and hit points. It was possible to get unlucky and be easily killed by something much weaker than yourself, and conversely, it was possible to get lucky and kill something stronger. At the end of the day, a dragon was a living being with a body of flesh, and if its head was chopped off or stabbed through, or its heart was impaled, it would die. As low as the probability of victory was, I was certain that it couldn’t really be absolutely zero, no matter what the god of undeath said. Of course—

“The odds aren’t good. Will you still come with me?” I looked around at everyone.

“Yes, sir!” Al was the very first to nod. His eyes were clear and earnest.

“That’s where honor and glory are.”

“There could be no greater satisfaction for a warrior.”

Reystov and Ghelreis spoke calmly, with the dignity of seasoned warriors.

“I’m used to having to deal with your craziness.” Menel shrugged his shoulders, and so it was settled.

I declared it anew—

“Let’s go. To slay the dragon and take back the mountains!”

Everyone who had come to see what the fuss was about joined the dwarves in raising a huge cheer.

◆

Sometimes, when you finally make the decision to do something and start the ball rolling, unexpected good luck can follow. This was one of those times.

With our departure looming, I penned letters to the bishop and His Excellency, brother to the king, in which I explained all the details of the situation and humbly requested for them to take care of things while I was gone. After that, I went out to my yard and was inspecting my equipment there when a red blob came hurtling towards me. I caught it in a hug, and within a moment we were holding hands and spinning around.

“Wa-haaa!!” She let out a cheerful squeal of laughter. I hadn’t heard this voice in a while. “Heheh. It’s the one and only... ME!”

“Bee! Long time no see!” Clutching my hands was a playful halfling troubadour with ears pointed like leaves and red and curly hair—Robina Goodfellow! “I haven’t seen you for months. Where were you this time?”

“Hehe. Grassland to the north. I started at the Fertile Kingdom, then I went around the coast visiting the Allied Kingdoms to the west. And now I’m back!”

“That’s amazing!”

Most of that area, I only knew through books and rumors. She traveled to so many more places than me. The circumstances of this unstable place had me running around so much that I hadn’t even managed to cross to the northern

continent at all yet.

“Was it cooler in the north?”

“Yeah, but listen, listen!”

“What?”

“A dragon roared, right?! You’re going off to kill it?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Then I can make it into a story like we promised before?!”

“Of course. Be my guest.”

“Yahoo!” Bee did an excited little dance while still holding my hands. I ended up being spun around in the yard again. “It’s a troubadour’s dream to be able to make a new dragon-killing saga.” Bee laughed. “I’ll start by spreading around a prologue for you. You need one, right?” This smile was mature.

“Yeah, I really do. Thanks.”

Simply spreading that I had headed off to slay the dragon would do a lot to calm people, and the power of songs and stories was indispensable for that. They were this era’s media.

“It’s no problem. Just don’t give me a sad ending, okay?” She raised her eyes to mine as she said it.

I nodded. “I’ll work hard to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Yep. Do your best. ’Cause tragic endings are *not* popular right now!”

“The audience reactions are what you’re worried about?!”

As Bee and I laughed and talked nonsense to each other, Tonio came following after her.

“Bee, you’re in too much of a rush. Please don’t leave me behind.”

“Haha, sorry, sorry!”

“Will, I’ve secured you a full suite of everything I thought you might need, including provisions, travel gear and clothes, mountain equipment, and so on.”

Tonio didn’t disappoint. He was quick to prepare. Too quick, actually. I only

just decided I was going...

“You went ahead as if I was definitely going?”

“Yes. In fact, I was very anxious that I might not make it in time for your departure. I was constantly expecting you to burst into action at any moment. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you are very quick to act once you know you have a battle on your hands.” Tonio laughed. “I’m not sure if you were deliberating or merely biding your time, but in any event, I confess myself relieved.”

“Imma make it so he was biding his time. That way’s cooler!”

“Don’t build it up like that! That’s the reason ‘Sir William’ is turning into this massive brawny man loaded with ingenious tricks!”

I’d happened to hear a poet who wasn’t Bee reciting a story about me on a street in Whitesails, and he was using phrases like “a towering giant of a man” and “eyes of profound wisdom.” Sure, a little bit of embellishment couldn’t be helped, but I thought that people around where I hung out made too big a deal of me.

“I hesitate like anyone else. I don’t want to die or get hurt or anything.”

“But you’re going, right?”

“Yeah. It’s a precious oath I made to my god.”

Bee smiled softly when she heard that. “I’m stealing that for my story. O champion of the flame, devout warrior who serveth God, may the winds of fortune be with thee!” She strummed her rebec.

Tonio smiled gently as usual. “Will, I won’t tell you not to overdo it or try anything crazy, because I’m sure now is the time you most need to push yourself. If there is anything else you need, please let me know.”

Feeling grateful for that offer, I thought for a moment and decided to execute one of the strategies I’d been brewing.

“I would like to ask you for one thing. It’s quite big...”

◆

Then, when I fell to sleep the night before we set off, I awoke under a starry sky of dancing phosphorescence. The ground below me was dark and reflected the stars like a vast plane of water, but in the water's surface there was the large reflection of a faint light. It was behind me. I turned to see a figure holding a lantern-like light with a long handle.

The figure was wearing a hooded robe that covered the eyes. I already knew who it was.

"It's very good to see you again, god of the flame." I bowed my head, as I had some time ago.

"..."

My god gave no response. She stood there in silence for a little while, and then—

"Victory is very unlikely."

She began with that.

"Stagnate is right. As you are now, you are not the dragon's match. But if you spend a few years training, you may contend with him."

"What will happen to Southmark in that case?"

"Man shall be there almost no more. Even the land to the north shall suffer."

"I thought so."

"You will go, then?"

I nodded. Then I bowed deeply to her once more. "Thank you for telling me it's okay to run."

I was surprised to sense slight unease coming from below her hood. Her silence felt as if she was carefully choosing her words.

Regardless of how I was feeling inside, I would probably have headed straight for the dragon if she'd simply ordered me to. I had that much of a debt of gratitude to this god of mine. And yet, for the entire time I was undecided, she didn't respond to my prayers or give me any revelations. There had to be a

reason, and I was sure I knew what it was.

“I... I would not that you should die.”

I couldn’t help smiling after hearing those kind words. “I’m honored. Thank you very much.”

“But still you say you will go? To hold to the oath you made to me.”

“Yes.”

“Then I shall not say it displeases me.”

I sensed a faint smile under her hood.

“The oath you made that day belongs to the two of us.”

— *Please, go forth with me.*

On that day, I had indeed said it: that I would dedicate my whole life to her, that as her blade I would drive away evil, and that as her hands I would bring salvation to those in sorrow. Yes, I had indeed made her that oath.

“Kneel.”

I got down on my knees and bowed my head. I heard her gently lowering her hood, and I felt her walking up to me.

“I command thee, William.”

She rested her small, white hand gently on my head.

“Fear thou not, for I am with thee. Be not dismayed, for I am thy god. I will strengthen thee; I will help thee; I will keep thee with my flame.”

My god’s Words and the feelings they carried slowly permeated through my entire body.

“Go, my knight. Slay the dragon and pay that which you have vowed.”

While still on my knees, I looked up at the face of the goddess smiling at me gently. I placed my hand on the left side of my chest and vowed.

“By the flame.”

◆

When I woke up, I could feel a warm energy slowly working its way around my body. My god's words and feelings burned as a flame inside me.

Then we finished our preparations, had a huge celebratory send-off, boarded our river boat, left the city, and went down the river to slay the dragon and fulfill my oath. And that night, concealed by a nearby rocky section of riverbank, we *got straight off the boat again.*

"We'll take 'er from 'ere," one of the men said, slapping his shiny metal chestplate. A thirty-some adventurer with a red face, thick arms, and carrying a sword on his hip with a vibrant red sheath, he was one of those people who Reystov had called "bluffers" back in the tavern two years ago. I'd learned his name later; it was Marcus.

"Yes." I nodded. "Just as we discussed, please."

"Aye." Marcus grinned. "Easy money. Thanks for the job as always."

"Not at all."

"'Ere's 'oping for more in the future." Then, after slapping Reystov on the shoulder and telling him to stay alert, Marcus and his team disappeared down the river.

Reystov and I quietly watched them go. When we turned around again, Al was looking at us blankly. Ghelreis also looked a little puzzled. Menel wasn't showing much in his expression, but he looked as if he wanted to say something.

"Umm, why are we getting off here?" Al said. "It'd make sense after going a little farther, but—"

I nodded. Indeed, Al would be making a good point if we were going to continue down the river, cut through the forest, and aim for the mountain range to the west. However...

"*The demons are just as aware that we would come that way.*"

A look of epiphany swept over Al's face, and Ghelreis nodded in understanding. Yes, in addition to the sleepy-eyed foul-dragon, those mountains were crawling with intelligent demons from Hell. If we were careless

enough to act in a way our enemies were anticipating, we would be allowing them to seize the initiative.

“We had a rousing send-off down the river. I guess it won’t be long before the lowest of the demons and their familiars start watching from a distance. You know, to try to pin down where we’ll disembark. The leaders of the demons will probably want to predict the path we’ll take. They’ll be eager to surround us and kill us as soon as possible.”

It was unclear what kind of relationship there was between the demons and the foul-dragon right now. Were they cooperating, in opposition, or simply indifferent? I didn’t even know that much. I decided to remove from consideration the extremely optimistic picture that if the demons’ base was attacked, they would leave everything to the foul-dragon while they sat and did nothing. It was probably safe to assume that they would defend themselves at least independently, or worse, by working together.

In just the same way that I’d been checking my equipment and gathering various kinds of information while I was making my decision, I was of course also thinking of a strategy for how to attack the mountains.

“Which is why...” I walked along the riverbank to a place tucked away behind some rocks. Al followed me, and his eyes went wide. What was there was the sleek silhouette of a river boat that I’d had Tonio secretly arrange for me. A surprise attack would have been the ideal situation, but the Rust Mountains were untrodden ground, which meant we couldn’t use a fairy trail. So the method I’d chosen was this one. “We’re going *up* the river.”

The Rust Mountains were once called the Iron Mountains, and a country of dwarves had prospered there. At this era’s level of technology, it would be impossible for a major city to exist anywhere except beside a large water source. Which meant that naturally, there had to be an enormous flow of water into the area. By analyzing geographic information from neighboring areas, I discovered that it was a branch of this huge river. I also confirmed it with the dwarves themselves.

The river forked somewhere further upstream and flowed to the west, so if we went upstream and then went back down again at the point where the river

forked, we could *invade from the other side of the mountain range.*

“While the demons are all on guard around the front entrance, we’ll break in by kicking down the back door.”

That was why I’d asked Marcus and the others to be decoys. They would throw off the eyes of the demons for us, toying with them by disembarking, all breaking up and going separate ways, then coming back, going out with the boat again, and doing that over and over again all the way down to Whitesails. Now that’s living up to the reputation of bluffers.

Incidentally, Bee supervised their disguises. She really got into it, giving advice like, “Act knighty, you know, kinda like you’re used to fighting! Oh, the handsome look is good, but don’t hit on anyone! Oh, and definitely don’t be wishy-washy, that’s even worse!” Thanks to her, their group took on the perfect image of the Paladin and his party that had been spread through song and poetry.

We paid them a more than satisfactory reward, and their morale was high as well after Bee declared that if we succeeded, she would tell the story of the Shadow Knights along with the story of my slaying of the dragon. And if some low-ranked demons attacked them, they had the people to deal with it, so I was confident they’d do a good job.

The only question remaining was whether we could make our way to the back side of the mountain range through the other route unnoticed while the demons’ eyes were on our diversion. Or so I thought; Al seemed to have something else on his mind.

Menel gently slapped his shoulder a couple times. “You’ll get used to it. He makes moves like this from time to time. It’s like it’s nothing to him.”

“I, I’d heard that he was a man of wisdom and courage, but to think he had military talent as well...”

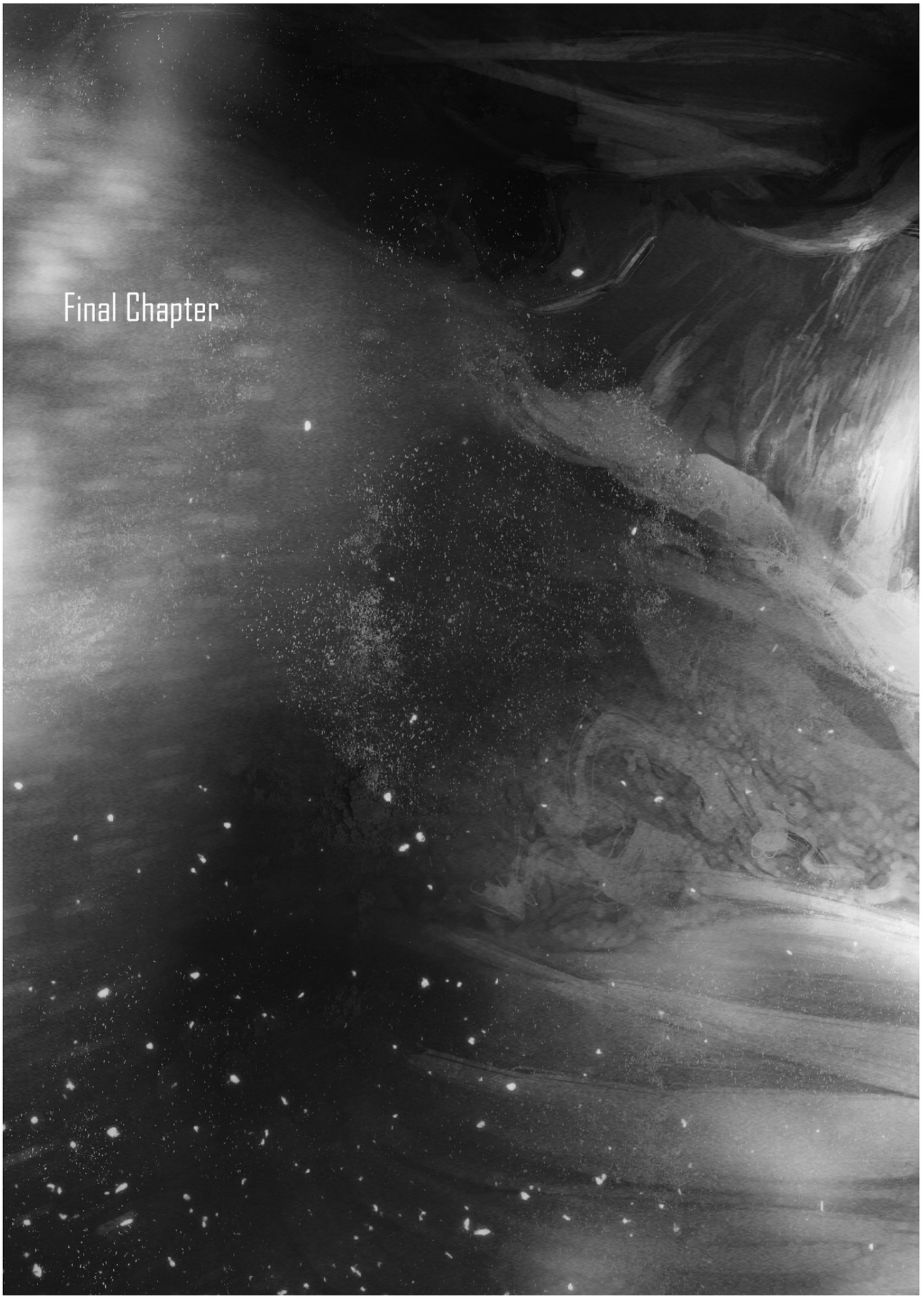
“I don’t think it’s *that* much of a big deal,” I said, a little confused.

Al shook his head. “If we go even farther south than Torch Port, we’ll be heading straight into the danger area that even includes that lakeside city where the High King fell! I heard it’s shrouded in a swirling magic fog that even

seasoned adventurers can’t do anything about! If you’re suggesting that we deliberately choose that place to pass through—what an amazing, courageous idea!”

After hearing those words, I scratched my cheek, kind of lost for a reaction, and then said, “Uh... actually... that’s where I grew up.”

Every one of them gawked at me.


Final Chapter

Under the morning sun, the invisible boat moved without sound and yet at remarkable speed. To get this result, I had cast the Word of Invisibility on the boat, and Menel had called to the fairies of wind to cast the spells Tailwind and Mute.

There was a chance that the demons plotting the resurrection of the High King were also keeping watch for people going upstream. It would be stupid if they detected us out of the blue and our attempt to outwit them was ruined, so I'd decided to take all possible measures to prevent it. We were also using a host of other techniques to hide the existence of the boat going upstream. Unless they were keeping multiple opposing factors active including the Word "See Invisibility," they wouldn't be able to perceive us.

Additionally, thinking about things from the demons' point of view, keeping watch over the upstream areas of the river was probably not worth spending that many resources on. And even when we actually traveled upstream, I couldn't sense any unusual presences or eyes upon us. It was probably safe to assume that we hadn't been found by the demons. If we actually had been discovered and a circle of demons was already waiting to close in on us somewhere up ahead, we were just going to have to say, "Well played," and cut our way through them.

Anticipating the enemy's moves in a situation like this is like moving around in thick fog. It's not like a game like chess or shogi where you can perceive all your opponent's moves. All you can do is consider as many possibilities as you can, choose the path that leaves you with the broadest set of options, and have faith in your own decisions as you move through the haze.

"Tricky," I muttered into the fog. The boat was currently surrounded by it.

After taking out the boat, I had given everyone a brief explanation of my birth. They were surprised, but they didn't doubt my story. We had that much trust in each other, and the fact that everyone treated me like a hero probably made it easier to accept the unique circumstances of my background. Menel in particular listened to me talk without batting so much as an eye. Conversely, the one who showed the biggest reaction was probably Al. Though Reystov and Ghelreis had looked at me in horror at first, they listened to me calmly as I

explained things in the proper order.

When I got to talking about the god of undeath, however, everything flipped. Al knew that Stagnate had his eye on me, so he listened calmly and even chipped in extra information; the other three who *didn't* know reacted with considerable surprise, and when I explained to them that I was a marked man and that Stagnate might interfere with this journey of ours as well, they grimaced. Demons and a dragon—that would be more than enough for anyone. I felt the same way they did.

Well, as far as the god of undeath Stagnate was concerned, I did think that he probably wouldn't proactively attack us. As much as I might have wished otherwise (and I greatly wished otherwise), he seemed to have taken to me. Though, again, I *greatly* wished he hadn't!

Just thinking about it was starting to give me the feeling that that red-eyed raven was about to fly in from somewhere. I shook my head to chase the unwanted thoughts from my mind and focused my gaze on the fog in front of me.

"Is this Maze Fog, by any chance?" Ghelreis asked.

"Yes." I nodded.

"A magic higher than Maze Alley that protects the sorcerers' Academy. I'd heard rumors, but never seen it before." This encounter with the unknown was making Reystov a little more talkative than normal.

Al was even more entranced. His eyes were sparkling and he let out a gasp of wonder.

"That's top-level magic," Menel said. "I know there was something like that in the deepest parts of my old home, the Great Forest, and I think the Eldest of Elders could use it, but a human? Not an elder of the elves who's lived a thousand years, but a *human* whose lifespan is only a few decades learned this and put it to practical use? You serious?"

I nodded. *You bet I'm serious,* I thought. *If you think this is something, just wait until you find out he lets rip with stuff like the Word of Entity Obliteration during actual battles.*

“I’ll open up a way through. Give me a moment.” I focused my concentration. I read the Words within the mana of the flowing mist, analyzed their structure, and deciphered the context.

I only realized this after entering society, but Gus’s way of writing was incredibly idiosyncratic. While he was teaching me, I just assumed that that was the way it was, but after setting out and meeting a few orthodox sorcerers, I had been astonished by the difference in their style, which was neat and emphasized readability.

How could I describe Gus’s writing? It wasn’t quite like dirty code in programming. In fact, it was more like the opposite: terrifically efficient and concise, but taken too far. It was compressed to the extreme for the sake of Gus the genius’s convenience, and that was exactly what made it difficult to read. Gus probably had no desire to enable anyone other than himself to understand the meaning of the Words he wrote. I had no doubt that if I brought a sorcerer of even considerable skill here, this mist of Gus’s would have them burying their head in their hands.

“Hmm... This Word is placed here, and this one over here, so...”

Of course, that obstacle meant nothing to me.

“Knowing Gus, he’ll have set up this here... and this will be this way... and of course the obvious answer means that right here is a trap...” I made my fingers dance and cast Words into the appropriate places within the mist. The mist smoothly receded, leaving a tunnel-shaped passage. “Okay. Let’s go.”

It was like unlocking the door to my house. It didn’t require any real effort.

◆

Once we escaped the long tunnel of mist, scenery unfolded all at once before us. A refreshing wind blew past. Having come all the way up the river, we saw a city of stone spread out before us, built up to the edge of a vast lake. It felt medieval, or even older. I could see tall towers and an aqueduct built with a series of beautiful arches.

All of it was aged and in ruins. Many of the buildings’ roofs had collapsed, and the plaster on the walls had fallen off, leaving the buildings in a state of pitiful

disrepair. Grass grew through gaps in the streets' stone paving, and green vines and moss clung to the buildings. The city was wasting away among the greenery as though it was enjoying a quiet doze after all of the activity that must once have taken place here, and the light of the sun shone softly over it all.

A shiver ran up my spine. This sight brought back memories. It brought back so many memories. How many times had I dreamed of returning here?

The sleek boat glided soundlessly up the river and arrived at the lake, which was filled with clear water and glittering brightly in the sunlight. I saw a small hill. On the top of that hill stood the ancient remains of a temple, unchanged, just the way I had always known it. A quiet gasp escaped my lips, and tears came to my eyes. A flood of powerful emotions tore at my heart.

"Hey." Someone clapped me on the back.

"Menel?"

"Get going. We'll tie the boat and catch up."

After that comment, I couldn't resist any longer. "Thank you!" I shouted, and I leaped from the boat towards the shore in a single bound of several meters. I was in such a rush that I almost fell over as I landed, but I hastily regained my balance and ran through the nostalgic ruined city.

As I sprinted, the scenery flew by me on both sides at a terrific speed. Jumping over anything that was in my way, I ran breathlessly like a child. The temple drew closer.

I ran up the hill. "Blood, Mary, I'm back! I'll fill you in later!" I gave a hurried greeting to their graves and performed a short prayer, then flung open the door to the temple. "Gus, I'm back!"

What I had returned to was silence. Those nostalgic sculptures of the gods looked just as they always had, bathed in the sun's rays streaming from the skylight. The temple was very quiet.

"Huh...?" I looked left and right. As I glanced around the temple, I called out several times. "Gus? Gus?"

Where was he? Gus...?

“Gus? Are you here? Gus?”

I was suddenly seized with anxiety. My chest tightened with panic.

Gus? Don’t tell me—

“BAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!” The loud shout from behind me caused me to nearly jump out of my skin. I turned around as the shout was replaced by gleeful cackling. “Unpreparedness is the greatest enemy of all!”

Pale and half-transparent, with unfriendly eyes and a hooked nose that made him look as crotchety as he was, wearing a robe and generally looking exactly as I’d been remembering him for years—

“Welcome home, Will.”

Old Grandpa Gus was there.



◆

Something warm filled my heart. Once the fact that I had finally returned home hit me, I no longer knew what to say.

Gus pretended to place his hands slowly on my shoulders. Of course, Gus's spectral body and mine could never touch, but even though it might have been my imagination, I thought I could feel warmth.

"Will." Gus looked me in the eyes, and with the most serious of expressions, he said, "Have you made money?!"

"That's the first thing out of your mouth?!" As usual, he came out with something that was all kinds of awful. "How about, you know, 'You're okay,' or something like that?!"

"Oh, shut up! You were trained by Mary, Blood, and *myself,* lest you forget! The idea that you could die that easily is preposterous! I wasn't the least bit worried about your safety! Not the least bit, you hear me?!" He repeated it for emphasis.

I know that! You don't need to say it!

"Ugh. Okay, fine! *Yes,* I've got the money changing hands and making itself useful."

"Oh?! Specifically?!"

"I understand the strong interest, but why do you look a bit surprised?"

"Well, with you being such a kind soul, I'd been considering the possibility of you getting fleeced."

That was mean. Though, okay, yeah, I guess it could have happened.

"Umm, off the top of my head: a trading company, a port, warehouses for rent, a lumber mill, a tannery, a smithy, ceramic kilns..." I also had arrangements with each of the settlements to lend them the money to buy farming tools and livestock, and I'd put money into public infrastructure as well. I wasn't running everything perfectly in the black, but the money I spent was definitely 'living' like Gus said, so as I listed off everything on my fingers, I figured he'd be pleased enough. But his mouth was agape for some reason.

“What is it?”

“What are you involved in right now?”

“Umm, I’m the feudal lord of the area down the river.”

“Feu—?!”

“Heheh. Surprised?”

Gus hummed. “I see.” His face turned sympathetic. “So some dowager’s sunk her claws into you. You poor child.”

“Why are you assuming I’ve had... claws sunk into me?!”

“If you haven’t, I suggest the second daughter of a declining aristocratic family who’s about one step away from missing the boat. Ripe and luscious.”

“Oh my god, stop, you’re disgusting!”

That was horrible! So horrible! I mean, sure, it wasn’t like I’d figured out how to approach women and stuff, but even so... horrible!

“I won my territory and my title on my own by skill! I’m a respected paladin now, so there!” I stuck my chest out. I’d done so much in the past two years. I thought I should be allowed to brag to Gus at least.

He grunted in approval. “Yes, you have done well for your age in such a short amount of time without any prior connections.”

“See?”

“And what about love?”

I looked away.

Well, you know, I thought. *Yeah. It’s like, I’m devoting my life to God, and my destiny is to fight and I might die at any moment, so, I mean, having a family and stuff like that, I’m not sure if it’s really...*

“So if I understand correctly, you’re wussing out and you don’t know anyone in the first place.”

That cut deep.

“Ohhh, how I long to gaze upon the face of my great-grandchild before I move

on to the next life...”

“Will you stop being so deliberately annoying?!”

“So my grandchild turns out to be a wuss who can’t score with a single woman.”

“I, I’m, I’m not a wuss!”

“What are you, then?”

“P-Pure!”

Gus breathed a deliberately drawn-out sigh. Damn him.

“You don’t take after Blood here, I see. Before he met Mary, Blood had acquired a huge reputation for this sort of thing.”

“So Blood was a popular guy.”

“His love affairs make for quite the topic, you know.”

“Okay, stop right there. Hearing about my dad’s love life makes me feel uncomfortable.”

The worst part was that unlike with the stories I heard from Bee, Gus had actually been there, so I didn’t have any get-outs like “but it’s just a legend” to hide behind. That said, I did think Blood having a reputation where women were concerned sounded a lot like him.

“He knew exactly where to draw the line. He’d only ever lay hands on women who knew what they were getting into. When it came to starry-eyed maidens, he would simply show off a bit and give them a glimpse of a beautiful dream before going on his way. You should follow in his footsteps.”

“I said I don’t want to hear about my dad’s love life! God!”

Gus cackled. “How fun it is to irritate other people.”

“You’re supposed to be a sage, an intellectual! How is it that this conversation has been nothing but money, women, and ways to irritate your grandson?!”

Our verbal spar paused there for a moment, and we stared at each other. We both snickered, and then broke into full-blown laughter. Two years had passed, but Gus was still Gus. Somehow I felt so happy for that, and Gus probably

thought the same.

“On a more serious note, is there really no one? There’s normally *something* when you go adventuring. You know, like rescuing a strong-minded woman captured by bandits, or gallantly saving a merchant adventurer who lost her bodyguards, or recruiting a dependable swordswoman, or protecting a polite and proper lady of a fallen kingdom. Any number of things. Why are you giving me that look?”

“All of those were guys.”

He laughed his head off.

◆

As I was talking with Gus, all the others caught up, presumably after tying the boat somewhere or having found a place to dock it. I waved to them from the top of the hill and beckoned them to the temple. I’d already told everyone about Gus, so Menel, Al, and Reystov just looked at him with faces that said, “Ah, so this must be him.”

Ghelreis, however, changed color upon seeing him.

Gus inclined his head quizzically. “How odd. Have we met somewhere?”

“I was a wounded soldier who escaped those mountains two hundred years ago, traveling sorcerer. I would never have guessed that you were the infamous Wandering Sage...”

“Ahh, that callow soldier. You’ve aged.”

“Indeed I have. I never expected the day to come when I would be able to see you again...”

I asked them to explain.

Just before the attack on the High King, Blood, Mary, and Gus had come across a group of refugees from the Iron Country. They were suffering from injury and disease and gave no names in particular. Mary gave them the best treatment she could, and Gus and Blood assisted her.

Ghelreis and Grendir, who due to being young and inexperienced had not been permitted to be part of the king’s battle array, were heading north

protecting the refugees at that time. They told me that Mary healed the wounds the refugees had suffered during repeated encounters with demons. It sounded very much like her. I could see Mary's face in my mind.

"It is thanks to you and your group that I have lived to this ripe old age and now look up to a new lord and indeed am able to travel alongside your grandson, Sir William."

"Mm. A marvelous coincidence. How wonderful."

"Even in the face of a dragon, I will show no fear. I swear it..."

"Hm?"

"Hm?"

Ghelreis and Gus sounded equally confused. There was a pause.

"Dragon?" Gus prompted.

Ghelreis nodded. Gus started shaking.

"Dragon?" Gus slowly turned his head towards me.

"Yeah." I nodded.

"Why wasn't that the first thing you said?!"

"Because you were all 'money, money, money' as soon as we started talking!"

It immediately turned into an argument.

"A dragon. A dragon?! You aren't talking about Calamity's Sickle that's been roaring recently?!"

"That's him! Valacirca!"

"You dunce, you'll be killed!"

"I still have to do it!"

"You're telling me the only way is to fight? After considering all the other ways?!"

"What other ways are there?!"

"You idiot!" Gus shouted, flinging a spectral arm into the air. "Didn't you even

consider *persuasion*?!”

It was an idea that no one had even imagined.

“P-Persuasion...?”

“The gods *hired* Valacirca. That means there’s a chance that this can be resolved with money and objects.”

Everyone looked flabbergasted.

“You know, this kind of idea feels very familiar to me.”

“That’s funny, Menel, sir, it does to me as well.”

“Mm.”

“Yeah...”

They all nodded with deep expressions. To be honest, I wasn’t sure if I was entirely content with being put in the same box as Gus, but I managed to hold back.

“Granted, I imagine it would be difficult to cajole an evil dragon that has lived since the time of the gods. But there is no need to restrict your solutions to just one. Always keep your thinking flexible. Avoid becoming blinkered.”

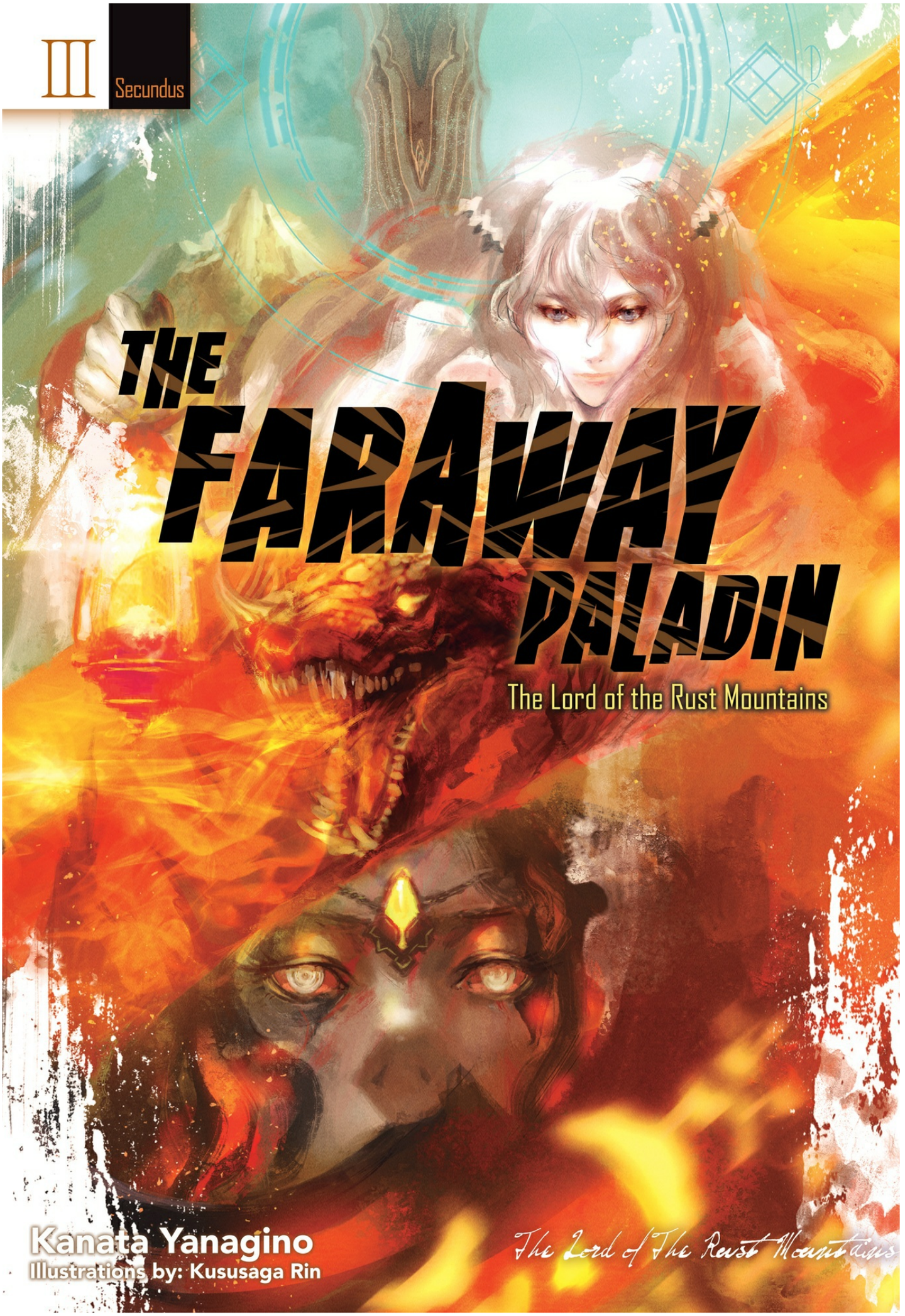
“Okay.”

It was a very Gus-like way of thinking, and a Gus-like way of speaking, too. I felt like I’d gone back in time, and it made me feel happier than I could explain.

Gus cleared his throat. “I apologize for that unsightly argument.” He smiled at everyone. “Friends of my grandson: A warm welcome to you all.”

I could tell from his voice that he was in the best of moods.

III Secundus



THE FARAWAY PALADIN

The Lord of the Rust Mountains

Kanata Yanagino

Illustrations by: Kususaga Rin

The Lord of the Rust Mountains


THE FARAWAY PALADIN III (SECUNDUS) THE LORD OF THE RUST MOUNTAINS


I am Valacirca! The strongest and oldest dragon, feared even by the gods!
Meneldor
Vindalfr
William

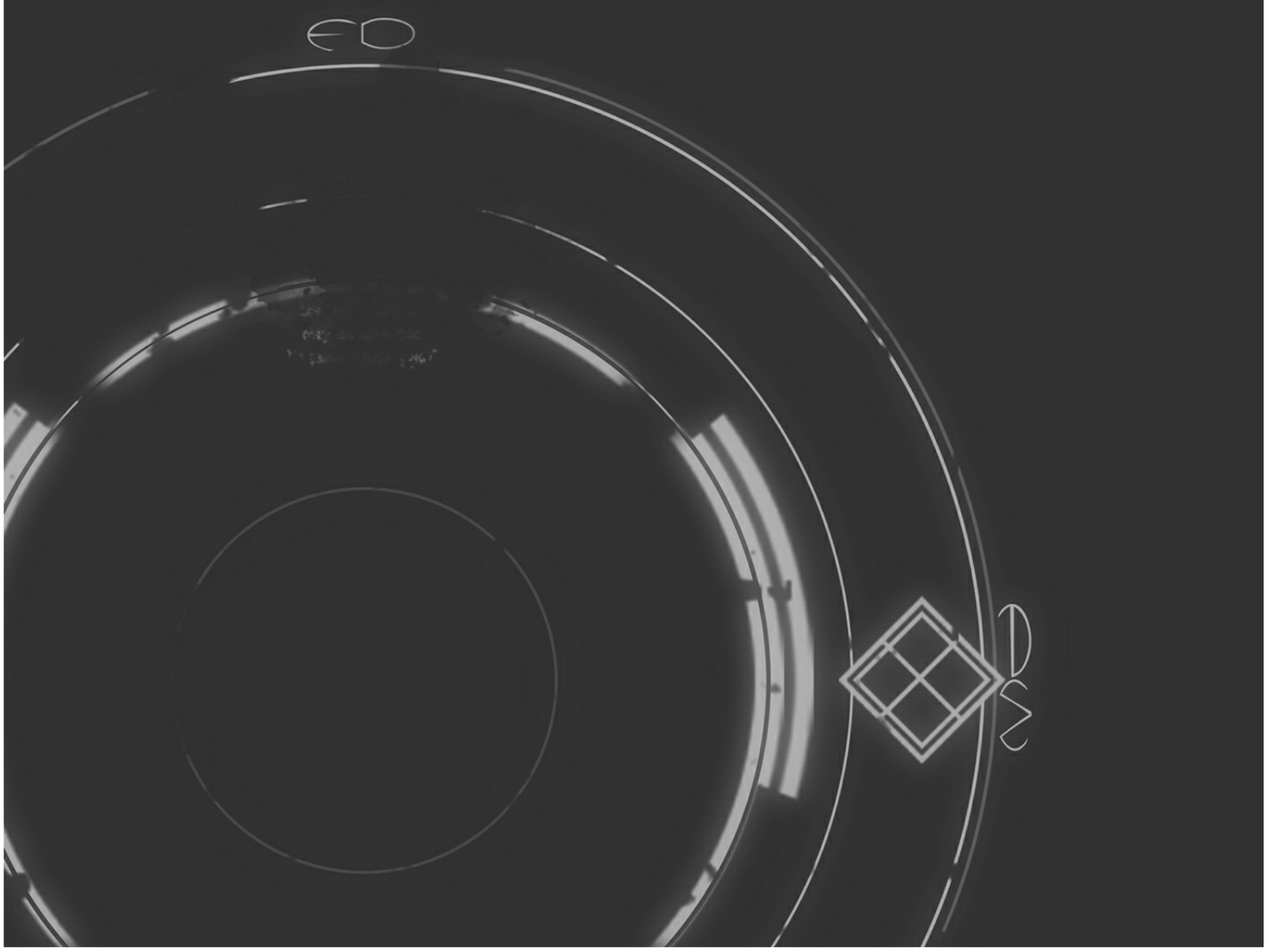


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Prologue



The room featured stonework walls, a small wooden chair and writing desk, and even a comfy-looking bed set into an alcove in the wall. On the shelves and writing desk were everyday items, books, and countless memos that I'd left behind when I set off on my journey. It was my room in that beloved temple on the hill.

I had returned to that city of the dead.

A peaceful homecoming—if only that were the case. The number of demon-related incidents was climbing every day as the dragon howled in the Rust Mountains to the west. The god of undeath's Herald had prophesied that I would die if I took on the dragon, but after a lot of deliberation, I decided to challenge it anyway for the sake of my oath, which I didn't want to break. Of course, I had no intention of dying in vain. I had even put together a strategy. We would go up the river to slip by the demons and launch a surprise attack from the western side of the Rust Mountains. That required going through the city of the dead, and it was for that reason that I'd returned home. It was a small detour before the battle for our lives.

Gus had shown everyone to individual rooms around the temple, and for now we were taking a short moment of respite. The room given to me was this one, which I fondly remembered from my years as a boy. I traced a finger across the cold stone walls. It brought back several memories.

The three undead couldn't tell much of a difference between hot and cold days, but for me, being a living human, the cold winter night had been pretty harsh. Gus grudgingly arranged for a heated stone for me to keep me warm. As I waited by the fireplace for the stone to warm up, Blood told one of his epic tales, with exaggerated gestures of his hands and body. Mary listened to Blood's story with a smile on her face as she sewed, occasionally saying one or two words to keep him talking.

It was a dazzling, happy past. And though it was gone and Blood and Mary were no longer here, I was sure that didn't take away from those days in any way. My happy past continued to shine. And probably, even after Gus disappeared, and even after I died, it would still continue shining forever, like beautiful sand settling at the bottom of the flowing river of time.

My face cracked into a smile. Returning to my home may have made me a little sentimental.

Then, there was a knock on the door to my room. The old door creaked as Menel poked his head around it. “Hey. Coming in.” He peered around the room with interest. “This your room?”

“Yeah.”

Menel hummed vaguely as he looked around. “Small.”

“It was a pretty good fit for me when I was a kid, though.”

These were originally mere sleeping rooms for priests who served the temple. They had a simple construction with almost no space to store anything unnecessary.

“Hey, Will, that old Gus guy, he’s pretty awesome.”

“I thought you were going to say he’s cruder than you imagined, or something.”

“Well, uh. He is. He is, but, uh...” Menel went quiet for a moment while he chose his words, and then spoke in a whisper. “When he was showing me to my room, I felt like he could see right into my mind.”

I nodded.

Many of this world’s greatest and most renowned sorcerers didn’t speak much. Telling lies weakened the power of the Words of Creation. Blunt and empty Words that had no edge and no weight wouldn’t result in anything. So the sorcerers who were called sages chose silence and never took part in common conversation. But as for Gus, he talked, and he talked a *lot*. He laughed joyfully as he willingly talked about money and women and other lowbrow topics. Yet the power of his Words never weakened. Just as a single word from a normally silent person carries extra weight, there was a cutting sharpness in every word of truth from that man who tempered his genius with worldly affairs.

“Yeah, he’s great, isn’t he?”

As far as I knew, there had only been a single occasion when Gus had spoken

anything like a lie: when he decided, in that gloomy underground city, that he needed to kill me.

“He’s my grandpa,” I said proudly and laughed. Menel laughed too.

◆

After I’d set down my stuff, loosened my equipment, and allowed myself a little time to breathe, I left Menel in charge of everyone else and headed over to see Gus. I was looking for information from him.

Right now, Gus was a disciple of God—my god—and bound to this city, but at the same time, he was a sage from two hundred years ago. I thought he might know something beneficial, but that was not the case.

“Regarding the foul-dragon Valacirca, also known as the Gods’ Sickle and Calamity’s Sickle, I’ve never laid eyes on him.” Gus shrugged. “If I’d had the opportunity, I would have wanted to meet him for a negotiation at least once. If he hadn’t joined up with the demons’ forces, we would never have lost so many heroes’ lives in the fight against the High King.”

Gus explained that when it came to dragons as old as the gods, the choice of a single one to side with your forces or the enemy’s had an enormous influence on the balance of a war.

“If you’re going to fight him, I’d focus on his old wounds. Valacirca has fought all kinds of battles since ancient times, against Echoes and numerous heroes, and there are multiple rumors of times during those battles when he sustained wounds and had scales torn off. A dragon’s scales are tough. I’ll tell you now, I doubt even Blood could have cut to the skin through dragonscale.”

Joined by two dwarves, a human warrior, and a half-elf hunter, I was going to be heading to mountains ruled by a dragon, aiming to strike him where his scales had been torn off. It kind of felt like a situation I might have found in an old fantasy novel in my past world. It was no laughing matter that this was now my reality.

“What about the Word of Entity Obliteration?” I asked him about one of the plans I’d been thinking of. Gus had used that Word to take down the Echo of the god of undeath. If we used that, maybe we’d stand a chance...

“Well, yes, if it were to hit, then it could probably blast away a dragon, certainly.”

Gus obviously thought it stood almost no chance of hitting.

“Do you know the reason that Elder Dragons can soar swiftly despite their enormous size? The ancient dragons, as denizens of myth, are closer to the Words than we who live in the modern age.”

Therefore, dragons flew.

“Words soar through the air by nature. That’s why.”

Thanks to being closely connected to the Words, dragons could fly in disregard of all physical laws.

“That’s right. The most ancient of dragons are also users of the ultimate Words. What’s more, Valacirca isn’t a negotiator like the god of undeath. He’s a hardcore, seasoned warmonger. Will, you seem to have become a pretty good user of magic, but if you make this into a battle of Words, you will lose.”

“Magic battle: not in my favor. Got it.”

“A physical battle’s not in your favor, either. His size and the physical strength and toughness that come from it are no joke. As Blood would put it, you’re not a match in muscle.”

It wasn’t as if any of that was news, but it still hurt that I couldn’t win with overwhelming body strength. It meant that I couldn’t use the main strategy that had been leading me to victory so far.

“Since times of old, the tactic for killing a dragon has been to make full preparations, then wait for a moment when the dragon is unprepared and launch a surprise attack on its den. But this time... well, you know about the horde of demons around there. Valacirca is most likely using the demon forces as a replacement for a warning siren.”

“I get the feeling I’m starting to understand the reason the god of undeath tried to stop me.”

The dragon had the power of ancient magic, overwhelming size and muscle, and the experience and knowledge to compensate for his own weaknesses. No

wonder Stagnate concluded that I had virtually no chance of winning right now.

“Hmph. Stagnate, huh? Was it a Herald?”

“A raven came.”

Gus snorted, unamused. “It sounds like he’s taken to you.”

“Much to my displeasure.” I frowned as well.

“His thoughts are those of a god. Most of us earthly beings can’t follow them.”

“Yeah.”

“And far too ‘friendly’ for a god! No, ‘devious’ is the word I’d use! Bringing us a contract at a time when we couldn’t escape—I’ve never known such slyness! It brought me great satisfaction to tear *that* contract apart, I assure you! It violated all sense and reason! You’d have thought a god could afford to be less underhanded! It’s no wonder he’s counted among the evil gods!” After getting all that off his chest, Gus sighed. “But I can’t say I’m not the slightest bit grateful,” he said, his expression sullen.

◆

“After becoming undead and being given the opportunity to raise you, Blood and Mary, two of my very few friends, who I even thought of as a son and daughter, were able to pass on in happiness.” Gus glanced away from me. Over there were Blood and Mary’s graves. “And I, too, was given the chance to raise you,” he said, without returning his gaze. “I never took a student. My knowledge and techniques would die with me, and I would blossom brightly and scatter gracefully away. I thought I was content with that, but far from it. You’d be surprised how much regret you feel once you die and all is lost.”

“Gus...”

“Thanks to you, they’ve been carried on. I guess this is all part of the richness of life. Though I’m long dead, of course.” He laughed loudly. Then, after a short pause, he spoke again with a more serious expression. “Listen, are you sure you understand?”

“Don’t worry. I know.”

That was why I'd come alone to talk to Gus. The reality was—

"There's virtually no room for negotiation with a dragon."

"Precisely." Gus nodded. "Even the gods have acknowledged that there is no greater force in this region than you. That makes this the perfect moment for Valacirca to strike."

"I think so, too. *The gods are already wary of Valacirca.*"

The god of undeath had told me that he would want to slay the dragon himself if he could manifest an Echo. And Gus had told me that whether a dragon that old and ancient sided with your forces or the enemy's would have an enormous influence on the balance of a war. Dragons living in the current age were that much of a threat, and conversely, for a dragon to live in this age demanded he work that hard for it.

"Valacirca himself is probably aware that he's in a situation where if he continues sleeping and becomes isolated, eventually some god will see him as an obstruction to their plans and send an Echo or one of their disciples to kill him. Once the injury Lord Aurvangr inflicted on Valacirca's eye heals, he's going to need to either take the initiative to build up a force of his own or join one somewhere else and start a war."

"Precisely. He's like a fish who must constantly swim to stay alive. Valacirca can only live within the maelstrom of war, and because of that, he'll never regard you, with your peaceful views, as his master. If there's no being as overwhelming as the High King in this modern age, he'll have to raise his own banner or join with other forces to start a great war. In any event, he has no other choice than to throw the world into chaos and make the gods focus elsewhere." He looked at me. "And you are the only one with any power to make him think twice."

I nodded. "And I don't have enough. From a dragon's perspective, I guess he might hesitate a little, but I'm an obstacle he can overcome."

Just as I had overcome every obstacle in my path that I thought was surmountable, the dragon would look at me in the same way, and attempt to overcome me.

“Will... You’re going to die.”

“Maybe, but I’ve decided to fight.” The warmth my god had left with me was still alive within my chest. “Leaving the dragon alone won’t help. A war will start anyway.”

“You could just run.” Gus looked at me intently.

“Gus...” While feeling grateful for his words, I gave him back a smile. “Living and being alive aren’t the same.”

Abandoning everything and just hanging on was only ‘being alive.’ I’d learned through both of my lives that that wasn’t good enough.

Gus sighed. It was a deep sigh of resignation. “So be it.”

I switched my tone to a brighter one and changed the topic. “Oh, right, Gus. I’ve been wanting to ask you this for a while. I heard a story about when you three killed a wyvern. Do you remember the human boy and half-elf girl you lent money and a dagger to?”

“Hmm? Oh, that takes me back. I do indeed.”

“They moved up in the world and became nobility. I heard the half-elf girl is still waiting now, even as an old woman.”

“I see...” Gus smiled. It was a lonely smile. “But, well, just look at me. I’m afraid I can no longer go to collect.”

“In that case, can I go in your place?”

Thankfully, Gus seemed to have understood what I was getting at. “Mm, please do. Collecting money is an important task, and a dead man can’t do it!”

“Right! It’s important to get people to give back what they’ve borrowed!”

Yes, I still had plenty of things I wanted to do. The odds were against me, but I had no intention of dying.

“Then it’s fine by me.”

I could tell that “since you intend on returning alive” was implied.

“If you’re going to be my agent, then I can’t very well have you dying, can I?” He grinned broadly, rolled up a sleeve, and clenched a fist. “The equipment

used by our brothers-in-arms who took on the High King are still here in this city. Would you and your party like some new gear before you go?”

“Of course!” I grinned back and nodded.

◆

Saying he would show us some weapons, Gus led us outside the temple. By the side of the temple, there was a small storehouse. Mary had used it in place of a shed to store things like tools for taking care of the vegetable garden.

I frowned and cocked my head to the side. I’d been inside the storehouse before, of course, and there weren’t any weapons in there then. Come to think of it, though, where *had* Blood been storing his weapons? I never—

“Watch.”

As I got that far in my thinking, Gus muttered a couple of Words, and at one edge of the dimly lit storehouse, in a place that I’d thought was floor, a hidden door appeared. Everyone’s eyes opened wide. It was Misdirection magic.

“I didn’t know we had a place like this...”

“We couldn’t show you where they were as a child. Especially not after the recklessness of the Mary incident.” He gave me a look. “You can’t see through the Word of Misdirection without a suspicious mind. When you came to the storehouse, you always had a purpose. You would have been so preoccupied thinking about whatever you came for that you would never have bothered suspecting there might be a Word set upon the floor.”

Then he laughed and added that the trick to using Misdirection magic was to place it somewhere where the target would never even consider they were being misled.

Simple power aside, I still didn’t feel like I was even close to matching up with Gus in terms of crafty use of Words like this. I didn’t have the experience or the personality.

“You’re too honest, that’s your problem,” Gus said, grinning as if he’d read my mind.

I laughed and gave a resigned shrug.

“Now then. It seems that wine was once made here at this temple. Blood and Mary turned the part above ground into a shed, but this was originally a wine cave. Accordingly,” he said, opening the door with psychokinesis, “it goes underground.”

We followed Gus’s magical light down a set of stairs paved with flat stones and entered into a wide-open space. To our left and right, there were racks where wine barrels must have once been stacked, and—

“Whoa...”

“Ooh, wow!”

Menel and Al exclaimed in turn, and Reystov and Ghelreis stared in amazement. The place was full with weapons and armor. I could tell that each and every one of them was a work of equally fine craftsmanship.

“Take whatever you want,” Gus said, smiling. “I’m sure their owners would allow it.”

Everyone gave him a little bow and went around investigating the weapons. Even Reystov and Ghelreis’s eyes were shining. It really was true that no matter what age a man reached, he would always love things like weapons, steel, and leather.

And now that I knew they’d been maintaining a place like this, I had to wonder—

“Gus, was this Blood’s...”

“Mm. He was the one taking care of the armory. These are the weapons of the warriors who once joined us in taking on the High King. There are also some good-quality weapons here that were just left in this city by unknown owners. In any case, Blood said he couldn’t bear to leave them to rust up and get covered in dust, so he brought them in here and gave them regular maintenance.”

Now it made sense. All the various types of weapons Blood had brought out from somewhere for my training when I was young probably came from here. As I looked around at all the weapons in this new light, many of them did look kind of familiar. Hmm, except—

“When I fought Stagnate at the bottom of the temple hill, the skeletons that rose up had rusted weapons and stuff.”

“Yes. Most of those were nothing special, just ordinary weapons picked from the city to bury alongside them. It was Blood’s idea. He said a warrior always needs some kind of weapon, even on the way back to the eternal cycle. Did you notice that hardly any of them were wearing armor? That’s why.”

Gus added that the mithril mail I was wearing, which I’d gotten from one of the skeletons, was something that particular person had requested be buried with him.

“Oh! Then... I should—”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, keep it. It’s not worth worrying about at this point. Just think of it as a compensation fee for the trouble his corpse caused.”

“You just do things any old way, don’t you?!”

But I couldn’t relinquish it at this point. I faced the graveyard at the bottom of the hill and prayed. *I have to take this mail. I’m sorry...*

Gus laughed loudly. “Well, I’m sure he’ll forgive you. It’s for Blood’s son, after all.”

“What kind of person was he?”

“His name was Telperion. Silver-string Telperion.” If I remembered correctly, that elegant-sounding name was Elvish. “He was born in the Forest of Erin.”

“When the glittering silver bowstring sings, there is no enemy who does not fall.” A voice drifted like a cool breeze. It was Menel. I looked over, and saw that he was gazing upon a glittering silver bow and smiling. “I’m from the same place.”

◆

“Ohh, so you’re from the Great Forest of Erin.”

“Pretty much,” Menel replied curtly.

Gus had the eyes of someone looking at something long lost. “Your silver hair—do you have a blood connection to Telperion?”

“Distantly related, but both part of... Ithil... Silvermoon Branch... uh...”

“Is it what in human society we would call a lineage?”

“That’s the one. Huh. Surprised you knew that.”

In elven society, a clan with shared mythology was called a Trunk, and a lineage that could be traced back to the family relations was called a Branch. Each of those was prefixed by a name in some way associated with the beauty of nature. I’d learned this from Gus.

“Telperion once stumbled over the translation for the same word.”

“Huh.”

“So what kind of person was this Telperion?” I said while peering at the pieces of gear Menel was looking at: leather gloves, a bow with a silver string, and several strangely shaped mithril arrowheads.

While I was looking at these, Gus thought for a moment, then said, “He was incredibly conservative and proud. A very elvish elf. He used to fight a lot with Blood back when they’d only just met.”

“Ahh...”

Despite how he looked, Blood was a man with quite a lot of common sense. However, he could definitely be quick to anger, and if he ran into the typical elf that you heard about in the stories, an argument was all but certain.

“Telperion was descended directly from the head of the Ithil Branch,” Menel said. “Noble blood. Wouldn’t surprise me if he had a high opinion of himself to match. Probably annoyed the crap out of anyone who had to deal with him.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Why did someone noble like that go outside the forest?” I asked.

Menel hummed.

“Why don’t you tell him the story?” said Gus, smiling wryly. “When a warrior inherits a famous weapon, it’s an ancient custom to talk about its history.”

Telling the history of the weapon—Blood had said the same thing when he’d passed Overeater down to me. Menel’s expression turned a little bit

complicated, and then he started to speak in a clear voice.

“Silver-string Telperion. He was a master of the bow; he had fellowship with the fae; he flew like the wind across the plains. His flute whistled elegant and bright. He could recite countless traditions and legends from memory, and even among the wise elves, few could match his wisdom. So they say.”

Menel recited well. He was clearly familiar with this, even if not to the same level as Bee. The sound of his voice had started to draw the others around as well. He was good enough to make money off this—in fact, he seemed to have been doing all kinds of work before, so maybe there *was* a time when he earned money through telling stories.

“Telperion had a friend. A kid who was born the same year as him—rare for elves, who don’t have many children. They grew up together as foster brothers. The foster brother wasn’t as talented as Telperion, but he had passion and a dream.”

It was a dream of one day going to the outside world.

“The foster brother talked about his dream, but Telperion couldn’t understand. All things pure and beautiful are in the forest—why would he want to go to the corrupted outside world? Telperion and his foster brother got on well, but when it came to this, they always argued, apparently.”

Speaking eloquently, Menel continued. “But the foster brother died. They were hunting beasts that had trespassed into the forest. They took down one, but then Telperion was attacked by a second that they didn’t realize was there. And the foster brother shielded him, even though the day he’d leave the forest, the day he’d dreamed of for so long, was just around the corner.”

It was a sudden death, with no last words.

Menel dropped his tone slightly. “Telperion held his corpse and let out three long, sorrowful screams. The screams echoed around the forest, lingering long after they had ended, and the fae are said to have shed tears at the sound.”

There was a mystery-filled atmosphere about this story of the past, told in a storehouse lit by magical light as weapons with history surrounded us.

“And after Telperion spent seven months in mourning for his friend, he

decided to set out on a journey. Shrugging off opposition from his elders, he donned his friend's chain mail and took his silver-stringed bow in hand."

Without having any idea what good there was in the outside world—

"He went in search of the indefinable 'thing' his friend had dreamed of."

◆

After getting that far, Menel looked back at Gus. "That's as much as I know. That, and he died hunting the High King. The elders in the Forest of Erin mourn Telperion's death even now. I heard it enough to make my ears bleed."

"Hmm..."

"This is perfect, actually. I was thinking about asking you this anyway, Gus the Sage."

"Gus is fine."

"Old Gus, then." Menel fixed his jade eyes on Gus and asked, "Did Telperion find the 'thing' he was looking for?"

Gus smiled when he heard that question, with eyes that seemed to look off into the distance, as though recalling a very nostalgic memory. "Mm, he did indeed. Telperion certainly did discover something wonderful!"

"I see." There wasn't much of a change in Menel's expression, but his mouth turned up at the corners slightly. "That's good. Glad to hear it."

Menel didn't ask anything more—not about Telperion's answer, nor about the person himself. Instead, he lowered his eyes and fell silent, perhaps in prayer, then put on the gloves and took hold of the mithril string shining silver.

Gus laughed. "All that aside—Meneldor or whatever, can you handle that? Mithril strings are a good match for fae, but it's said that an average archer will lose fingers."

"No problem." He changed the string over to his own bow and drew it back a few times. The bow bent back like a full moon, and the string sang a beautiful note as it was stretched to its limit. Gus listened nostalgically to the bow's prelude to battle.

“See?”

“So... aren’t you going to let it go?” I said.

“N-No, you idiot! Dry-firing damages the bow, don’t you know that?”

“What?! Really?!”

I didn’t use bows, so I had no idea. Ah, but now that I thought about it, that would mean that all the energy that would be used to fire the arrow would instead go into the bow. Yeah, that didn’t sound very good.

“I can’t believe the stuff you don’t know sometimes when you seriously know pretty much everything else.”

“It’s how I was educated.”

“Don’t try to push the blame onto me, boy.”

Al and the others listening to us laughed.

“Uh, guys,” Menel said, “we don’t have the luxury of using time like elves. Quit looking at us and go find a weapon you think you can use. Go on!”

“I’m decided,” Reystov said, unfazed. “Don’t want one.”

◆

“You don’t *want* one?” Menel said in disbelief. “They’re all pretty good weapons, brother.”

“Yeah, it’s a hell of a sight. But I don’t care how well a weapon performs, if I ain’t used to it, I can’t trust it,” Reystov replied pointedly. Gus and Ghelreis nodded in understanding.

“I guess.” Menel still sounded doubtful.

“Umm...” Al was tilting his head, so I decided to say something.

“Right... This depends a lot on your style. Menel’s style is tactical, I guess—he makes use of whatever’s around, so he can be more flexible with his weapons. He can always borrow the power of the fairies, after all. So long as he can disrupt the enemy with his feet, staying at medium-to-long range and attacking from there, he’s happy with anything.”

Even if Menel had to go defenseless through a wasteland with monsters roaming around everywhere, he'd probably do just fine by picking up rocks or something and calling to the fairies for help.

"In contrast, Reystov's specialty is close-range fighting. When your thing is battles at a risky distance where a single moment can make the difference between kill or be killed, you can't help being insistent about some things. It's not like he can't fight with a makeshift weapon, but he's specialized for his current one."

Reystov optimized his weapon for his body and his movements and made sure that he could unsheathe it in a split second if anything happened. He became one with his weapon. His modified sheath, the sturdy handle, his neatly trimmed nails—all of it was for that purpose.

"So he can't swap his weapon for an unfamiliar one at the eleventh hour," I concluded.

Reystov nodded and agreed. I could use pretty much anything as well, but when it came down to it, my mindset was closer to Reystov's, so I understood well how he felt.

"Boring or not, I want to fight with a weapon I'm comfortable with," he said.

Al blew out a puff of air, seemingly impressed at how Reystov could say that so firmly with all these incredible weapons in front of him. "That's amazing."

"That said, ah... Reystov. You know what you're up against. Are you sure?" Gus sounded apprehensive.

"Doesn't bother me. But—"

"But?"

"Gus the Sage, I want to borrow your skill with the Signs."

"Oh?"

"If you could carve some Words into my weapons and armor just so much that it still feels basically like what I'm used to, that'd be great. I could get used to a small change like that in a few days."

"I see. Alright, let me have them a moment." Using psychokinesis, Gus took

Reystov's sword and leather armor. He took them apart effortlessly and examined them closely from all kinds of angles, beginning with the sword. "Hmm. It's ordinary, but... northern-style equipment, I see."

"Yeah."

At the foot of the Ice Mountains in the far reaches of the northern continent of Grassland, there was a group of warlike folk who continually forged steel in a canyon where freezing wind blew. They constantly fought against the evil gods' minions coming down south, and they specialized in blades with the cold, crystal clarity of ice and robust, practical construction.

"Blood preferred the wider swords of the south. I haven't seen a northern one in a while. Hmm, it's a good sword. Well-used and cared for, even though it has been worn down somewhat."

Swords couldn't be used endlessly. If you gave them a proper sharpening, you would lose an amount of steel about the size of a small ring. Repeated enough times, the weapon would become thin and eventually either bend or break. However, at times, names given to swords survived longer than others, in just the same way as the names of old heroes—like Blood, Mary, and Telperion.

"One day, they will speak of this as 'Reystov's sword' and not as an ordinary one."

"Yeah." Reystov nodded. "Hope so."

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After that, Al and Ghelreis upgraded their weapons and armor as well.

"Hmm. I will take these." Ghelreis chose metal armor, a large shield, and a one-handed mace. The armor was large and rounded, and I got the impression that it was specialized for glancing off attacks. The shield was also large and sturdy, and I could tell that it must have belonged to a famous dwarven warrior. And the mace, which was diamond-shaped, had a number of protrusions called flanges and looked like it would pack an incredible amount of blunt force.

"Ohh, Sword-smasher Bavor's set. You have discerning taste."

"There are many users of blades."

Some demons had outer shells that were hard and smooth. Blades weren't very effective against enemies like that because the blade would slide and leave you open. If we needed to, both Reystov and I could perform stunts like using our swords to deal a blunt-force hit or strike at the joins in their shells. Even so, I was grateful to have at least one person with a blunt weapon.

"Bavor was a wandering dwarven warrior, not part of any clan, but he had a playful personality. He was a master at bending and smashing blades of any kind, but he was friendly, you see. I don't get on well with dwarves, but he could hold a friendly conversation even with me. He had that kind of wonderful warmth to him."

"Oh?"

"He took part in the defeat of the High King. He called it revenge for the Iron Mountains."

As Ghelreis listened to this anecdote of a hero of his race, a subtle smile crossed his scarred face.

I heard Menel's doubting voice again. "Oh, come on, don't you think that's just a bit too heavy?"

"No, I can handle it, I think."

I turned around to see Al holding a hefty halberd, tentatively and gingerly swinging it and pulling it in as Menel watched him. It had a pretty bulky construction and was made fully of metal right down to the handle.

"Yes, it's okay. I can swing it, no problem."

"Ohh! That's some impressive strength you have to be able to swing that around." Gus was blinking his eyes in astonishment. "Its former owner was Ewen the Immense."

I remembered hearing that name in Blood's stories when I was a child.

"Skill aside, he was Blood's twin in monstrous power. He had a round body and was always smiling. He was a good guy. He wasn't very fond of fighting, though. If things had been more peaceful, he might have been able to continue as a skilled farmer, who knows."

He'd had Blood's back during the battle against the High King, plowing down the demons without end until he himself was ended.

It wasn't just Ewen the Immense, it was Sword-smasher Bavor and Silver-string Telperion, too—in fact, *all* these heroes that Gus was now speaking of and that Blood had spoken of fondly in the past had lost their lives for the sake of the effort to defeat the High King. Each one of the hundreds of weapons and pieces of armor filling this armory had a story, and each of those stories was now concluded, the final period struck by war and death. Now only these arms still slept here in silence, with many stories that once mattered greatly to someone locked away inside them.

I found myself in prayer, as if something had prodded me to do it. I felt like it would have been wrong not to.

God, god of the flame, please, wherever they may go—

I whispered. "Let there be guidance and repose."

When I returned from my transcendent state of prayer, Gus was smiling at me. It was a different smile from normal, a smile that seemed to say he was thinking fondly of his old home.

"Hey, Gus?"

"What?"

"After I do something about the mountain demons and the dragon and come home again, can I bring this poet girl back here with me? She's a halfling and she does get a bit excited... if that's still okay."

"Sure, do what you want. I'd be happy to tell her any story she wants told." Gus really was wise. He was very quick to understand what I wanted.

"Thanks." So many stories here had gone untold. I was sure that Bee would be very glad to retell them.

"Say..."

"Hm?"

"By the way, Will..."

“Yeah?”

“Could that girl be...” Gus’s eyes shone expectantly.

“She’s a good friend, but we don’t have the relationship you’re hoping for.”

Gus’s shoulders drooped. For some reason, he looked terribly disappointed.

◆

After that, we found some well-built dwarven armor for Al as well. This city was originally a place where both humans and dwarves lived, so there was plenty of armor for the dwarven physique.

How was it that dwarves, a foreign race, had lived here? That had struck me as strange once or twice when I was training in the underground city, but now I understood. This lakeside city was a transfer point for trade with the Iron Country, which was why people and dwarves lived together here. Its ruins told of a prosperous city, big and wealthy to the point that Torch Port as it stood right now didn’t even compare. It must have been a place full of smiling faces.

I wondered—I wondered if one day I would be able to bring such a sight back to this area and this city. Would I be able to smash apart the demons’ schemes, avoid being roasted by the dragon’s flames, safeguard the peaceful activity of the city and help it to grow? I wanted to.

As I thought about this, I picked out a few items from the many weapons and pieces of armor here.

“A big shield?”

“Yes.” I nodded back to Reystov. “As a measure against dragon breath.”

It was an impressively large and obviously heavy-duty shield, big enough for a person to hide their entire body behind, and it had the Word of Protection engraved upon it countless times. The circular shield I’d been using so far was useful, and I intended to keep on using it, but that shield’s primary emphasis was portability.

“Considering our opponent, the bigger the shield, the better.”

There were disadvantages as well: the larger shield would make it more difficult for me to attack with my own weapon, and its increased weight would

be more of a pain to handle. However, I now had enough strength and skill that I didn't have to give even the slightest thought to those differences.

"And some additional armor..."

I added on several pieces of metal armor. When I left this temple years ago, I had no idea how far I was going to have to travel, so I couldn't possibly have worn these. But now that I knew the rough distance to the field of battle, that wasn't a problem anymore.

"And this."

It was a pretty thick—in other words, heavy—dagger with straight edges and a well-sharpened point.

"Hm? What's up with that dagger?" Menel said. "Isn't the handle the wrong way?"

"Ah, you're right," Al said, peering at it. "That's unusual."

"It's meant to be worn on your right."

Most bladed weapons are worn on the left of the body. That's to enable the familiar movement of holding the sheath in place with the left hand while the right hand grips the handle and pulls it out. However, this stiletto had been made to be worn on the right, to make it convenient to pull out in a grappling situation. It was made so that if you got into a close quarters fight where it might be quite difficult to draw your weapon, you could conclude everything with two actions: first, grabbing the handle with your dominant right hand and pulling it out with a backwards grip, and second, swinging it down forcefully.

"You take this, Al, and get yourself used to it. I'm sure that halberd will come in useful, but you aren't going to be very nimble with it."

"Oh! Okay! Umm... Who owned this dagger?"

"My dad."

Al's eyes went wide in shock. "I couldn't—"

"It's okay. Take it."

Blood had once told me with a proud grin that this right-wield was a great

trick. He said that he had claimed victory over countless monsters and formidable opponents in situations where he couldn't use his more familiar two-handed sword. He had even brought it to that final battle, so there was no doubt it was one of his favorites.

"I just felt like it would be better for you to hold onto it for some reason." It was just a gut feeling. But Blood was one to trust his gut. So I decided to do the same.

"So it's a momento."

"Yes. But I'm giving it to you. You should have it."

It looked like he didn't know what to say.

"It's okay." I handed over the dagger. "I've already received a lot of precious things from them."

Right, Blood and Mary?

I whispered those words inside my heart.

◆

And so we finished our preparations and decided to stay the night in the city of the dead. Also, there was of course no food or anything of the sort here. I could receive bread from God, just as Mary had been doing, but that was essentially the minimum amount needed to physically survive. Menel looked at me incredulously and said, "I have no idea how you survived in a place like this for over ten years," as he went out into the woods to find us some food (and test his bow). He'd probably be back with something before it got dark.

Menel had always been pretty skilled at a variety of things, but he had taken an even greater leap forward in the past two years. He could pull tricks like sneaking up behind a wolf stalking its prey, and surprising it by petting it on the back. It really was incredible. Even I couldn't do that.

Reystov and Ghelreis had also gone to look for food, except they had gone fishing at the lake. It hadn't been so long since those two had met, but it seemed that as two hardened warriors, they'd already connected on some level. They were probably having some kind of conversation, or maybe just

sitting there saying nothing with their fishing lines dangling into the water.

Starting tomorrow, we would probably find ourselves in situations without adequate access to food regularly. We were heading into completely untrodden land. It would be a treacherous and difficult journey. All of us understood that this place, guarded by Gus—who was currently cooped up in his room to engrave Signs on all of our equipment—could be our final safe haven.

“Finally finished,” I said with a sigh. I had been cleaning up the kitchen area with Al as I waited for the others to return.

For the past two years, the only one here had been Gus. In addition to being unable to feel heat or cold, Gus never got hungry or tired, so the kitchen was completely covered in dust. After wrapping a cloth around my mouth, I’d dashed around doing the routine I was used to. Cleaning was something I’d done a lot of while helping Mary. The temple was big, so there were quite a lot of places that needed it.

“You could have left it to me.” Al’s expression was a little complicated. He seemed kind of surprised that his master the Paladin would do housework.

“It was faster to do it together. Besides, what about you? You’re royalty.”

“Only in name,” Al said as he raised one hand and spun it in a small circle. It was a dwarven gesture of mild disagreement. “Everyone in the clan treated me very well, but we were still poor. I learned to repair, to craft, and much more. Many times I thought, ‘Why was I not born as a simple workshop lad?’”

“If you’d been born as a workshop lad, you would have imagined this instead.” I placed my hand dramatically against my forehead and said in an exaggerated, serious voice, “Could it be that I am actually the last prince of a fallen land, with a mission to resurrect my kingdom?”

Al laughed out loud. “I’d like to tell that version of myself that it’s not actually as good as it sounds!”

“Yeah. You’re not kidding.” Dragon slaying was not my idea of fun in real life. “But you’re still going to go ahead with it.”

“Yes, I am.” Al’s eyes were clear. As usual, he looked quiet and gentle on the outside. But the self-deprecating impression he had once given off was now

completely dormant.

◆

"In truth, they all miss their old home," Al said. "They want to go back, and they want to *take* it back. But they've been through so much that even wishing for that is now more than they're capable of. I probably understand that better than anyone."

I remembered the expressions of the many dwarves I'd met so far, as well as the joy I'd felt upon returning to my own home.

"That's why I want to go," he continued. "I want to show them all that they can take back their old home, that it's okay to try. If by risking my life I can light a fire in everyone's hearts, I think that would be a very wonderful thing."

I nodded quietly. It took kindness and courage to say something like that so earnestly. It occurred to me that perhaps a person like this was the most suited to being a king.

"But it seems that I've gotten you involved in it, and—"

"No, you haven't." I denied it immediately. That was definitely wrong. "I knew I'd have to fight. If I abandoned everything here and rushed to protect myself, I wouldn't be able to face my parents or Gus."

After all, the three of them had taken on the High King with all his formidable strength, betting on the slim chance of victory.

"And I wouldn't know *what* to say to my god."

God gave me one more chance out of pity for the regret carried by my soul. If, in full knowledge of the fate that would eventually befall me, I once again shrunk away from risk and feared stepping forward, slowly coming to the same end as before where I was afraid to venture anywhere, how could I possibly face my god then?

"I have something I want to do someday," I said.

"Something you want to do?"

"Yeah."

I didn’t want glory. I didn’t want wealth. I was even prepared to throw away happiness. There was only one thing I wanted.

“I want to hold my head up high. One day, when I return to the god of the flame, I want to hold my head up high, acting just a little bit cool, you know...”

To stand facing that expressionless god with confidence, not feeling the least bit hesitant—

“And say, I was able to live a proper life, and it’s all thanks to you.”

And thank her as directly as possible.

Al listened quietly as I spoke.

“So I won’t run from the dragon. I’ll fight. And it’s because of you, Al, that I was able to make that decision.” What would have happened to me if I hadn’t heard Al’s shout of resolve back then? Who knows—I might even have chosen the wrong path. “So thank you.”

Al smiled. “Thank *you*, sir. It was you who made me your squire and taught me confidence and courage. I swear on this dagger you have given me that no matter how this may end, I will never regret that decision.”

Feeling very slightly embarrassed, I nodded.

In the battles ahead of us, circumstances weren’t always going to allow us to fight while protecting or being considerate of each other. I was glad to hear that he was mentally prepared.

“Yeah. I’m counting on you, Al.”

“Yes, sir!”

We shook hands once again. Then, I heard someone calling out from somewhere a good distance away outside my window. Apparently Menel had come back.

Al ran to the window, peered out, and let out a cry of surprise. “He’s got a deer! A deer!”

“A deer?!” How had he hunted *that* so fast?! “Quick, let’s get everything ready to butcher it!”

“Yes, sir!”

Things suddenly got hectic.

◆

Fat dripped from the roasted deer’s thigh onto the fire and hissed. A gorgeous aroma filled the air. The wild vegetables to go with it had been washed, cut, and were already sauteing slowly in the pot.

“Wow...” Al was visibly excited. Menel looked a little bit triumphant, and Reystov and Ghelreis were unusually quiet.

“Hahah. No hard feelings, ya?” Menel slapped them on the shoulders annoyingly as a joke. The two of them knocked away Menel’s hands simultaneously with grumpy looks on their faces, causing Gus to burst out laughing.

They hadn’t caught a thing.

“It was bad luck.”

“Mm.”

They both looked in too much of a bad mood for that to be true.

Incidentally, I wasn’t sure about Ghelreis, but Reystov’s hobby was fishing. In his spare time, I often saw him with his line in the water, but he’d pretty much never split any catches with me, so I had a reasonable idea of his skill level.

“I mean,” I started, “it’s not like everyone’s expecting you to be great at fishing just because you’re a strong warrior—”

“It was bad luck.”

“Uh...”

“You hear me? Bad luck.”

“Y-Yeah, ahaha, terrible,” I said awkwardly, deciding not to push it.

I’d known him to put some seasonal flowers into the empty wicker basket that should have held the fish and give it to Anna or someone, saying it was a flower offering to the gods. Personally, I thought that was pretty nice and romantic, so I really didn’t see a problem with him never catching anything, but

from his perspective he probably wanted to get better at it.

“Right, should be ready to start now,” Menel said.

The way to eat an animal that was roasted whole like this was to cut off parts with a knife as they finished cooking. We also had holy bread, so our evening meal was something like sandwiches, filled with sauteed vegetables and the roasted venison we’d carved off. We’d left the extra meat to smoke so we could keep it for tomorrow onwards.

“Okay, let’s eat.” I said grace to the good gods as usual and tucked in.

“Sir Meneldor, I must ask, where and how did you kill this deer?”

“I was walking along animal trails, keeping quiet and hidden, and just bumped right into it.”

Al seemed surprised. “Right into it?!”

“Ya. Didn’t have time to think about anything, so I just fired on reflex, and it was like the arrow was sucked right into the sweet spot.”

“That is most fortunate.” Gus ran his fingers through his ghostly beard as he nodded.

“The blessings of the fae god were with you.”

“Not with us, though.”

“Mm.”

“How about you just own up and admit you suck at fishing? You’ll feel a lot better.”

“J-Just bad luck.”

“Give it up!”

Not wanting to get involved, all I could do was sit back and laugh awkwardly.



I used a knife to scrape some rock salt into the bread stuffed full of venison and sauteed wild vegetables and took a large bite. The sandwich was absolutely delicious, oozing with hot meat juices. And the atmosphere was lively and cheerful.

For some reason, I remembered the time when Blood and Mary were still around. My chest tightened a little with a helpless feeling of nostalgia.

After our meal was over and everyone had returned to their rooms, I wandered outside on my own. Under the starry sky, I sat in front of Mary and Blood's graves and spoke to them inside my heart about all kinds of things.

I'm back, I said. *You not being here makes me uneasy, but I'm doing okay. I made both friends and allies.*

I filled them in on all kinds of things: what I'd done since I'd been gone, the people I'd met, the things I'd gained.

I remember your last words. I promise I'll continue to abide by them. I'll see you again.

I looked behind me. Gus was there. He hesitated for a while, choosing his words as he floated in place in the air. "How I wish I could go with you and help you along," he muttered in a pained voice. "It hurts me that I'm powerless when it's most crucial."

I shook my head and smiled at him. "Just those words are enough. Don't worry, Gus. Just wait here, with Blood and Mary."

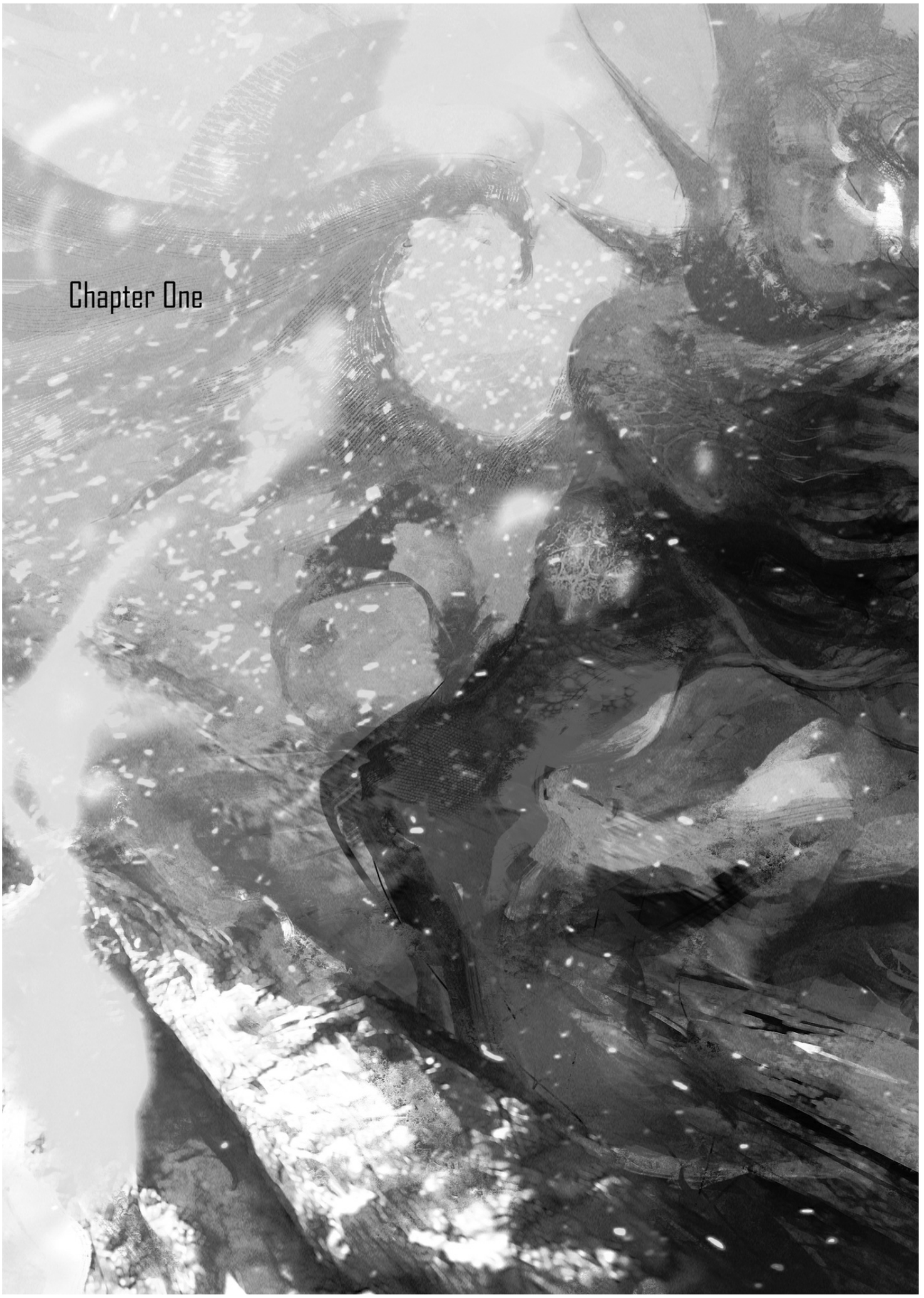
"Mm. I'll be waiting for you."

"Yeah."

"And when you next come back, make sure you bring your wife with you."

"E-Enough already!"

And so my short homecoming came to an end, and my journey to slay the dragon began.



Chapter One

Autumn was in full swing. It was that time of year where every day was slightly colder than the last. With the wind in its sail and a sky of thin cloud above, our boat seemed to glide across the gently rolling surface of the lake. To the north, I could see the splendor of the mountain range surrounded by cloud. Those were the Rust Mountains.

“So we just have to go down this branch of the river to the west?”

“If the map is correct. If there are signs that the landscape’s changed, we’ll turn back for now.” I nodded to Menel, who was looking back at us from the foredeck. He started calling to the elementals again.

We were sailing our boat across the lake in order to circle around to the west side of the Rust Mountains.

Menel looked very natural calling to the fairies and summoning the wind to steer the boat. Elementalists and sorcerers who reached the point of being able to read and control the wind were always in demand by the coast, where ships came and went, and would never struggle for food or somewhere to sleep. Menel had probably lived off jobs like that at one point in the past.

“This rope, you do this.”

“Right!”

Toward the stern, Reystov was teaching Al about ropework and how to manage the sail. Not only did Reystov have many years of experience as an adventurer, he also had a good memory and more hobbies than most. On this kind of journey, he was as consistently useful as Menel. Al didn’t have that kind of experience, but through training with Menel and me and going on this journey, he was quickly developing the qualities of an adventurer, even if he wasn’t yet very polished.

“Alright, so, about where we’re going. Ghelreis, do you have any idea what we can expect?”

The scar-faced dwarf of few words shook his head. “I’m afraid I know of nothing after the Great Collapse.”

Gus and my parents had been bound to the city, so they also didn’t know

about anything beyond its boundaries. From here on, we would be heading into a “dark region”—territory not marked on any map, where no one had set foot.

“Except,” Ghelreis said quietly, “before the Great Collapse, there was a forest of elves to the west of the Iron Country. It was called Lothdor.”

“Lothdor... the land of flowers?”

“You understand Elvish, then?”

“Gus schooled me in it, so yes, I know the basics.”

Gus didn’t know much about the very minor languages like the one the giants used, so I was a little patchy on those, but otherwise, I knew how to use quite a few languages. Elvish especially had little linguistic change because its speakers lived long lives. Because it hadn’t changed much from the Elvish Gus knew two hundred years ago, it was one of the languages I was particularly good at.

“Lothdor... I’ve heard of it before,” Menel said from the foredeck as he looked out over the luxuriant forest along the shore. Then, he started reciting softly in Elvish. “Slip past the Iron Country, where the dwarves live in caves *Cross the radiant Rainbow Bridge, and arrive yourself in Lothdor* On silver harps and golden flutes the Remmirath play and sing.”

It was a flowery Elvish song.

“That is?”

“A song about a journey. Passed down in my old home.”

“A nostalgic song. Yes, and quite correct.”

Lothdor was a garden of many colors beyond the Rainbow Bridge, where petals from the trees scattered over chalk houses, and the babbling of the river harmonized with the sound of elven music.

Ghelreis muttered, “The elves of Lothdor didn’t get on well with the Iron Country.”

“Ahh... Because of how much they were cutting down?”

“You’re well-informed.”

“Nah, I never heard about that. Just, we had the same kind of problem where

I used to live.”

Menel explained that this was a common cause of arguments between elves and dwarves. Elves, who lived in the forests, built their lifestyles around hunting, gathering, and forest farming, and they gained a multitude of blessings by living in harmony with the fae. Meanwhile, dwarves, who lived in the mountains, chopped down trees and used fire to make charcoal, refined iron, and produced a multitude of tools. Elves preferred the trees and large open spaces in the forest, where light filtered in, while the dwarves preferred the darkness of deep caves.

“We fight all the time. Our lifestyles and cultures are too different.”

“Mm...”

This was probably a topic they both had a lot of opinions on as a half-elf and a dwarf.

“As you say, Sir Meneldor, there was fierce contention between us at times, and plenty of hatred as well. If I had a copper coin for every insult that was traded, every bitter word spoken, I would be rich. Still, they were our neighbors. We bought the grain, leather, and salt produced in the forest of elves, and we sold them mithril, iron tools, and other crafted items.”

The boat entered the wide branch of the river. To our left and right were thick expanses of forest. We let the current take us gently down the water’s path.

“The Remmirath folk were skilled in poetry and fairy techniques, and were both proud and hard to please. Just like us, in fact.” Ghelreis was being unusually talkative. “We had respect for them—and they for us, I imagine.”

As I listened to his story of elves and dwarves, I imagined what it was like two hundred years ago, during the age in which Blood and Mary lived. “And what happened to them in the Great Collapse?” I asked.

“I know at least that they remained holed up in the forest and stubbornly resisted. They never gave up. As the demons’ assault intensified, the Western Gate was closed, and the Rainbow Bridge was sealed.” Then, the unusually talkative Ghelreis spoke in a murmur. “It’s possible... It’s possible that they survived.” His words sounded like a prayer. “Elves live long lives. It’s possible

that—”

He stopped abruptly. I followed his line of sight, and I too went silent. He let out a small groan.

The garden of many colors beyond the Rainbow Bridge, where petals from the trees scattered over chalk houses and the babbling of the river harmonized with the sound of elven music, wasn’t there. Ahead of our boat, the water was dark, stagnant, and turbid, and there were rows of pitifully withered trees.

◆

For a while, no one spoke.

“Is... no one left? No one?” The words fell weakly from Ghelreis’s lips. He opened his mouth as if to shout something, then closed it tight without a sound. After spending a little while like that taking it in, he said, “It’s hard to let go.”

“Ghelreis...” Al sounded concerned for him.

But Ghelreis shook his head. “Don’t mind me, young master.”

Silence fell on the boat for a while, and an awkward atmosphere developed.

Reystov changed the subject. “Hmm. Looks like the river’s path changed over the last two hundred years.” The river was flowing through and around the large, withered trees that used to be a forest.

“Hold on,” Menel said, scrunching his face up. “I’ve seen this kind of thing before.”

After he said it, I realized as well. The dying trees, the stagnant water—this was—

“A Taboo Word...”

“Yeah,” Menel said hatefully. “If an elven lineage with a Branch name gets serious about holing themselves up in their home forest, no enemy can touch them. The enemy’s numbers or weapons don’t even matter. They’ll be misled, divided, surrounded, and picked off again and again.”

Even Blood had said to avoid fighting with an elf in the forest. That was why—

“They must’ve brought out a Taboo Word, gathered together high-level Word users, and done a ritual to rot the whole fig forest, those no-moral demon shits.”

People often think that people or groups who take an “anything goes” attitude toward fighting are strong. Some even claim that if nothing is off-limits to you when you fight, you can beat virtually anyone. In one aspect, that’s correct, and in another, it’s wrong. An “anything goes” approach to fighting is very strong in the short term, but in the long term, it’s weak. Once you use a banned move, the ban on that move is also lifted for your opponent, and their response will be ferocious. And once others perceive you as someone who will ignore both morality and good faith for the sake of your objective, you won’t even be able to form alliances with them. In fact, it can even provide them with a good excuse to join forces against you. Used improperly, “anything goes” is weak, resulting in victory and glory that is short-lived and downfall that is inevitable.

High-level goblins and high-level undead understood this logic, and despite being minions of evil gods (those gods being Illtreat—who ruled over tyranny—and Stagnate, respectively), they even had a kind of morality. That was because, when it came down to it, they lived in the same world as the rest of us.

However, this logic didn’t work on the demons, who were the minions of Dyrhygma, god of dimensions. Maybe their minds worked differently, or maybe they had different goals; whatever the case, they saw no benefit in abiding by these moral principles. They were simply monsters from another world who aimed to invade and control.

As I looked at the withered forest of the elves, I thought: *This can’t stand. We can’t let beings who think nothing of doing something like this run rampant any longer.*

“We have to destroy them.”

“Heh. What’s this now? You sound fired up.”

“What about you? Your face is like ‘now it’s on.’”

“You bet. Can’t let ’em live.” He grinned fiercely like a wild animal. It caused Al to clench a fist, and Reystov and Ghelreis to smirk slightly.

“But before that—”

“Ya.” Menel responded at once, and Reystov and Ghelreis nodded, too.

Al tilted his head to the side and looked around, puzzled. The boat was advancing through the stagnant water between withered trees. It didn’t look as though there was anything unusual at a glance.

I took Pale Moon in my hand.

“*There.*”

I thrust it into the water. At the same time, the water’s surface swelled and burst. The shining blade of my spear had pierced straight through the head of a giant serpent.

◆

“A water serpent?!” Al cried out in surprise.

“Get over it, there’s more coming!” As Menel shouted at him, another large serpent burst out of the water on our port side. Almost simultaneously, Reystov’s sword ran through the air like a bolt of lightning. But the water heaved, and the boat lurched. It was enough for even Reystov the Penetrator to marginally miss his mark. He failed to deliver a lethal blow—

There was an almighty grunt. Ghelreis’s mace shattered the serpent’s head.

“Not good,” Menel muttered, looking around. I watched Al do the same—then draw a sharp intake of breath. Several—no, *dozens* of long, thick shapes were wavering on the surface of the murky water around us.

“Menel! Full speed!”

“On it!”

No sooner had I given the instruction than Menel was calling to the elementals to summon a powerful current and strong tailwind to move the boat. However—

“Feck, not much reply! The fairies are weak here!”

It was probably the result of this entire piece of land being cursed by the Taboo Word. The spirits of nature seemed to be slow to respond. If this was

how things were, there was a good chance that Menel's spells for use around water, like Waterwalk and Waterbreathing, wouldn't work very well, either. If our boat sank or we were knocked off it, we'd be in danger.

"Keep your focus on the spells! Reystov and Ghelreis, port side! Al, back Menel up!" I shouted out orders as I struck out with Pale Moon, then swept it sideways into another one of the serpents that had burst out of the water to starboard.

This wasn't a great situation to be in. The serpents were bleeding into the water. It was possible that the blood would draw even more of them here, and maybe other aquatic monsters as well. There was no time to hesitate. It was risky, but I decided to turn to an attack Word. I would make the blast go off underwater and take them all out in one fell swoop by the same principle as blast fishing. With my course of action decided, I chose the shortest and most powerful attack Word in my arsenal.

"*Vasta—*"

At that instant, the boat shook violently. My Word was disrupted. I was forced to shift my concentration to a desperate attempt to control the Word and prevent it from exploding.

The moment I did, one of the largest water serpents burst out of the water and sunk its teeth into my side.

I grunted in surprise and confusion. The boat lurched. I lost my balance. Digging my feet in didn't work. I was pulled forward. The murky surface of the water suddenly got a lot closer.

"Will?!"

There was a huge splash and I was pulled under the stagnant water.

◆

The instant before I fell into the water, I took a deep breath and filled my lungs with air. Many people in this world couldn't swim, but fortunately, I'd been taught the basics of swimming both in this world and my previous one.

The serpent that had bitten into my side twisted in confusion. Its curved fangs

didn’t have the power to puncture my mithril mail; nor did its jaw have the bite force to pressure my abdominal muscles and crush my internal organs. Muscles win again. That said, of course, if the serpent squeezed me tight and dragged me into the depths, I would definitely drown.

Bubbles rose toward the surface. In the stagnant water, opening my eyes only resulted in its muddiness filling my vision. I couldn’t see. Of course, I couldn’t utter any Words, either. So as I tensed up my stomach to prevent myself from being crushed, I prayed instead.

What I pictured in my mind was light and purity. In the next moment, there was a flash, and the murkiness vanished about sixty meters in every direction, transforming into water that was pure and clear.

It was the Prayer of Purification.

Having secured a usable view, I opened my eyes. The water was teeming with giant serpents, and I could see them all clearly as they swam. Several of them were gunning right for me now that I’d fallen into the water. As one aimed for my foot, I drew in my leg to dodge it and swung my arm at another trying to wrap itself around my chest, knocking it away.

It was difficult to move, like the water itself was constricting me. If I continued fighting in the water like this, sooner or later, I was going to lose. But I had already seen a way out.

As one of the snakes darted straight at me, aiming for my throat, I grabbed both its top and bottom jaws and used brute strength to tear both flesh and skin away. The giant serpent threw itself around in my hands, and its blood flowed into the purified water.

With one hand, I grabbed the one attached to my mail and held it still, drew my dagger from my belt, and sliced open its neck. More and more blood poured out into the water, turning it a cloudy red.

Then, the other serpents started to sink their teeth into the two that were shedding blood. These were not beasts; they were merely large water snakes. In other words, they were attacking me not because of the overaggressive nature characteristic of beasts and other monsters, but purely because they were predators and I was their prey. In which case, I didn’t need to fight them to the

death; I just needed to provide them weaker prey, prey that was easier to attack.

A few more of them came at me separately. I killed them as well.

I'd been moving around underwater for a while, and the need to breathe was becoming hard to ignore. I endured it, hanging on until the serpents' attention had turned from me to their weakened brothers, and then I started to swim for the surface. My clothes had absorbed water and clung to me, feeling incredibly heavy. I desperately thrashed upward.

Finally, my head broke the surface next to the boat. I gasped loudly for air. How many minutes had I been fighting underwater? The air tasted so good.

"Sir Will!" Al immediately threw me a rope.

I grabbed onto it and somehow made it back onto the boat, water dripping from every part of me. I breathed hard with both my hands flat against the deck. My entire body craved oxygen.

"Will!"

"You okay?"

I managed a nod back at everyone calling to me. I spotted Pale Moon, which I'd let go of just before falling in. As I thought about how glad I was that I hadn't dropped it into the water, I got my breathing together, faced the water, and—

"*Vastare.*" I blasted an attack spell into it with all my might.

This time, my aim was true. A vortex of destruction formed under the highly conductive water. The blast swept through it and slammed into the serpents, turning their flesh to mush and crushing their bones. The boat rocked badly.

I let out a puff of air. "That should do it."

Not a moment later, the remains of many serpents floated to the surface.

"God. No mercy from you," Menel muttered, astounded.

Well, sure, I thought. *I can't exactly leave enemies that are actively attacking our boat alive.*

"Menel, let's move out of here. Also, I think we've mostly gotten rid of them,

but everyone be on your guard.”

“Got it.”

“Understood.”

“U-Um... The water turned very clean all of a sudden.”

“Huh? It’s just the Prayer of Purification.”

“Huh?” Al looked as if he was totally confused, and so was I. “Umm, the Prayer of Purification is normally for one bottle of water or a pond at most...”

“Oh...” So the power was the problem.

Menel slapped Al on the shoulder as the latter looked at me, bewildered. “It’s just brute force. Get used to it.”

“Wha?”

“It’s his standard battle tactic: do everything with a barbaric level of force. He doesn’t even think anything of it. Better get used to it.”

Al hesitated.

“That’s what I did,” Menel added with an expression as if he’d attained some higher understanding.

“A barbaric level of force?” I said. “Come on, that’s a bit mean.”

“What do you call it, then?”

“I have more power and moves than a barbarian, so it’s *more* than a barbaric level of force.” I gave him a smug grin. Menel shook his head without a word, and Al nodded at him with a complicated expression. “J-... What’s that face supposed to be?!”

“Disbelief, Sir Even Barbarianer.”

As we joked around with each other like that—

“This change in landscape’s the problem.” Reystov’s muttered words cut our idle chatter short.

◆

He was right—this area was very different from our map and the information

we had, both of which were two centuries out of date. The stagnant river had changed its course and completely swallowed up the forest that used to be here. The river banks were now sopping wetlands, and I couldn't see a single place where it would be easy to land our boat. On top of that, this place was home to many dangerous creatures, like those water serpents. It provided a stark reminder why these were dark regions that mankind hadn't ventured into for the past two hundred years.

"Ghelreis, do you see anything you recognize here?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "This is all just too..."

"Oh!" Al suddenly exclaimed. "What about those, Ghelreis?"

Everyone looked in the direction Al was pointing: down at the water made clear by the Prayer of Purification. I looked down, and under the shimmering surface I could see the remnants of a line of buildings.

"Hmm." Ghelreis looked at those ruins and started to think.

"What do you think?" Al prompted after a pause.

"The architecture of these buildings..." Ghelreis said slowly. "They're of elven construction. I'm sure of it."

"Ohh, nice, brother!"

"Good eye."

"Yeah. Good going, Al."

"I really didn't do anything," Al said with some embarrassment as we all praised him.

"Which would that be on the map, then?"

"Probably this..."

While allowing our boat to drift slowly away from the serpent carcasses, we all investigated the map together. Once we'd pinned down our rough location, we started moving again.

However, because this whole area was polluted by the Taboo Word, steering with the spell Tailwind wasn't working out very well. Even if I used the Prayer of

Purification to clean the air and water surrounding us, it wasn't as if that would immediately do something about the weakened fae. Some improvement could be expected if I factored in Menel's skills as an elementalist and his power as a future Lord of the Woods; however, Reystov correctly pointed out that if we made large changes, there was a chance that the demons would notice.

Because of that, we decided to turn to more primitive methods. We stopped relying on the sail and decided to drop oars and row. Menel stood at the boat's stern, gripping the tiller and calling out to us. We fell into rhythm with his voice and rowed forward as two teams on the port and starboard sides.

The water was dark and stagnant. There were lines of trees withered white, all large and hundreds of years old, and they made me think of the corridors of columns called stoas within ancient temples. It was a forest where even sound had died, except for the occasional unsettling noise from aquatic creatures. At some point a thin white haze had covered the area. We could only see a vague outline of the Rust Mountains.

The boat continued forward amid the sounds of oars creaking and pushing through the water. There was some conversation at first, but even that lessened as time went on. Around the time that the dismal atmosphere of our surroundings finally caused us all to go silent, I sensed something in the water to starboard.

When I looked, I saw bubbles forming, and then several hands appeared, followed by horribly pale arms, extending out of the stagnated water. Some had rotted, while others were all bone. The arms began to struggle and cling to the boat. The vessel groaned.

◆

As our boat wobbled, Reystov and Ghelreis each brought out their weapons. They were magical weapons, newly acquired in the city of the dead, and would probably work well against undead.

"Enemies?" Menel was especially cool-headed. He took the time to ask me, even as he stood ready to draw his weapon.

"No." I shook my head. "They're just suffering." I extended my hand to one of the arms grasping the boat. The arm had become bloated with water and stank

of a raw, fishy smell. As I took its hand, I heard Al's breath catch. "It's okay," I said, hoping that my intent would get through to the undead. "It's okay now."

You don't have to suffer anymore. You don't have to keep resenting. You don't have to keep trying.

"You won't wish misfortune on anyone anymore. You won't curse them, and you won't make them suffer." I felt the strength leaving the arm I was holding onto and all the other arms around the boat. "I'll handle everything somehow."

It'll be okay now, even if you don't keep on trying.

It'll be okay, even if you don't keep on protecting.

It'll be okay, even if you don't fight.

It'll be okay, even if you don't bear the burden.

You can let it go. So—

"Please, rest long and easy." I spoke each word slowly and prayed. "Gracefeel, god of the flame. Repose and guidance."

Divine Torch lit up in the cloudy sky. The miraculous floating flame began to guide the wandering souls back to the eternal cycle. Several pale-blue specters appeared, fading softly into vision. They had beautiful braided hair, pointed ears that reminded one of bamboo leaves, and handsome features.

"＿＿＿＿"

They faced us in silence and gave us a proud and elegant bow.

"Ohh..." Ghelreis's voice trembled. This must have been exactly what the elves of Remmirath Branch had looked like in bygone days.

"＿＿＿＿"

They tried to speak; perhaps they had something they wanted to tell us. But it wasn't to be. Their slumber at the bottom of the river had stolen the language from their throats. It was a hard sight to witness, but they were graceful in spite of this. They gave a beautiful shrug, then pointed in a direction with a slender finger. Spinning the finger in a circle—perhaps that meant "as fast as you can?"

"We should go that way? As swiftly as possible?"

A nod came back. Then, the one standing at the front raised two fingers, made a fist, and held it in front of his heart. The motion was seamless.

“Will, that’s...”

“Don’t worry, I know what it means.” I returned them the same gesture. It was a friendly gesture of parting. “May the blessing of the flame be with you,” I said. Then, with gentle smiles, the ancient elves of Remmirath faded and disappeared.

As Al, Ghelreis, and Reystov stood in silence, Menel spoke suddenly. “Let’s go. Full speed in that direction. Now. Hurry!”

“Huh?”

“Don’t trust an elf’s sense of time!” Sounding slightly panicked, Menel called to the elementals with a quite forceful tone and used the Tailwind spell once more. Then, as he applied the Waterwalk technique on himself extra thoroughly, he shouted, “You know those stories you hear? About when elves say, ‘Wait a bit,’ it means, ‘In a year or so’? Those are true!” The boat rocketed forward at incredible speed, cutting through the stagnant water and advancing through the mist. “Those guys with their chill sense of time just told you ‘as fast as possible,’ brother! You better—”

A scream reached us from somewhere deep in the mist.

“I feckin’ knew it!” Menel cursed, and then yelling loudly, he sprinted into the mist with the quickness of a skipping stone.

Menel didn’t normally speak when he was fighting. Shouting a war cry brought out your power and helped to negate fear, but that was a warrior’s way of fighting, not a hunter’s. Menel moved in silence and killed in silence. There were probably two reasons he was raising his voice now despite that: to communicate his presence to the screamer and to allow us to follow him without losing track of where he was. Leaving his voice as our guide, he led the way farther and farther into the mist.

“Row! Hurry!”

Due to the timing of when we heard the scream, the Waterwalk spell hadn’t been cast on anyone except Menel. He probably wasn’t able to cast it on

everyone with a single spell in this place where the fairies' boon was weak. Since the situation was already difficult, it was only natural that Menel, who had the most precise grasp of what was going on, should take the lead.

We pushed harder against the oars and rowed faster. The bank approached rapidly. It was wetland with sparse patches of weak-looking plants growing here and there, and there was no clear water's edge separating it from the river.

"Easy! Watch your blades in the mud!" I called out and lifted my oar. We all knew what we were meant to do. We quickly jumped out of the boat, submersing ourselves up to the thighs in stagnant water, and pushed the boat up onto the bank.

Immediately grabbing our weapons, we started sprinting one after another. My feet kept sinking into the mire. I forced them up as I ran. The ground was terrible. If a battle unfolded, my ability to move around might be heavily restricted. As I worried about this, we all pushed forward as a group.

Before long, we heard an aggressive yell, then the dull sound of flesh and bone being cut through. On the other side of the mist, Menel had used his longsword to behead a giant, eyeless serpent that had burst out of the lake of mud to attack him. The snake's head spun and splatted into the mire.

On the ground beside Menel was the figure of a person I didn't know. She had long, blonde hair that had frayed and spread—perhaps her hair had been braided and come undone—and long, pointed ears. It was an elf. Did one of them survive?!

"Menel, is she oka—"

"Not yet!" Menel shouted quickly. The next moment, several serpents burst out of the mud on either side of him. He dodged them as they bit at him, his tied silver hair flowing as he moved. In concert with that movement, he swung his sword at one of the serpents, but the blade failed to cut all the way through its body. It dug in and stuck there, and then, the next moment, something astonishing happened. The first serpent, made headless by Menel's sword, lunged at his legs in an attempt to coil itself around them.

Cursing under his breath, Menel was forced to let go of his sword. He kicked away the headless serpent trying to entangle itself around his legs and leaped

away from his attackers. With the Waterwalk technique cast upon him, his movements were graceful even in this bog.

“It’s coming! Get ready!” He helped the golden-haired elf to her feet and retreated in our direction. The serpents followed hot on his heels. And from the way they moved, finally, the complete picture became clear to me. *It* wasn’t *serpents.* Under the mud, all those eyeless serpentine necks, each thicker than a man’s torso, were connected to the body of an even larger serpent. The many-headed giant serpent bared its yellowed teeth and repeatedly lashed out its red tongues, threatening us.

“What the?!”

“The ruler of the bog...”

“A hydra.”

Once everyone grasped the nature of their opponent, their cautiousness of that enormous, bizarre body was plain to see. Then, the wound where one of its necks had been severed by Menel began to bubble and foam. Slowly, a new head began to form.

“*Sagitta Flammeum!*” Instinctively, I cast a Word. The flaming arrow, constructed by Words and born from mana, landed a direct hit on the neck trying to regenerate. There was a violent explosion, and the hydra twisted in pain. Then it howled. The air quivered with the sheer force of the noise.

“Whoa!” Menel and the elf he had rescued, the pair with the most sensitive hearing, covered their ears. I didn’t have the time to pay attention to them. My eyes darted back to the head. It had been burned, and the scorched tissue had stopped regenerating.

“Fire works! Al, Ghelreis, Reystov! To the front!”

The enraged hydra bore down on us. Everyone drew their weapons, readied their shields, and advanced.

“Menel, take her and retreat!”

“Got it!” Menel pulled back, swapping places with the advancing front.

I couldn’t be there with them. Since I had to keep an eye on all the serpent

heads spreading out in all directions and prevent them from regenerating as they were chopped off, I had to stand well back for a good view.

“So I’m at the back...”

I’d always been the kind to rush forward shouting. I’d managed to get through all my battles that way. Fighting from this position was something I hardly ever did. Now wasn’t the time to get sentimental about it, but it felt like a surprisingly fresh experience.

“I’ll burn them as you cut them off! The front’s up to you!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Understood!”

“No sweat.”

They all responded. And so the battle began.

◆

The flash of a blade, swift yet concealing tremendous power, took off one of the hydra heads. That slash belonged to Reystov. He had severed a mass of flesh and bone that was as wide as a trunk and thrashing around wildly. It couldn’t be accomplished with any ordinary level of training or skill. In fact, even Menel, who had reached an impressive level of skill himself, had already failed once and had his sword taken. But Reystov continued dropping heads one after another, making it look easy. I continued to cast *Sagitta Flammeum* after him.

His frightening level of skill didn’t seem to have dulled in the least. And he wasn’t done. A brief but energetic grunt accompanied his next slash, and one of the heads that the hydra had raised high into the air far out of the reach of his sword split vertically down its length. This had to be the effect of the new Word that Gus had engraved into Reystov’s beloved blade. Judging by what it had done, it was most likely a Word of Gus’s own making based on Extension and Sharpness. My senses as a user of magic told me that a sharp blade, formed out of mana for just an instant, had cut beyond the length of Reystov’s sword to split the hydra’s skin.

Gus really had good judgment. That upgrade was a very good match for Reystov. Given that the user was already at a high and stable level, simply giving them a sharper sword with a longer reach was a far better idea than trying to increase their power or giving them the ability to shoot fire or lightning.



It made it hard to judge the sword's range from an outside perspective, making it a nuisance for enemies and incredibly useful for allies.

"*Sagitta Flammeum!*" Another head fell, and I followed it with another fire arrow. As long as there was no unusual change in circumstances, I was planning to go with this single strategy for the rest of this battle.

On the face of it, using a whole variety of Words according to the fine details of the enemy's situation moment by moment might appear to be a wise approach and good support. But in actual fact, following the full four steps of "see, think, decide, use" in sequence would make you slow to act. It was better to choose a reasonably effective, short magic and follow just the two steps "see, then use" over and over. The front guard would also feel more at ease knowing exactly what was about to come flying over their heads.

A poor player overthinks the wrong decisions. And at least in a situation like battle, where things change constantly, being stubbornly simple about everything has fewer ways to fail.

I cast *Sagitta Flammeum* multiple times in succession. Double casting as Gus had taught me, I drew Signs with my right hand, guiding the magic to make sure I wouldn't hit the front guard by mistake.

I was just repeating the same words and the same characters in a routine fashion, so there was no delay or hesitation between each one. On the contrary, the more I repeated this, the faster I became.

Several arrows hit in succession. The hydra's remaining heads screeched loudly in anger. One of the outside heads swept towards the three at the front like a whip, trying to knock them away. It was Ghelreis that braced for it with his large shield. With his short yet sturdy, barrel-like body, he held the shield at an angle. Viewed from the side, his body and the shield formed a shape like an upside-down letter "y."

Sparks scattered everywhere as the hydra's sharp, hard scales scraped across the huge shield. Ghelreis wasn't blocking it; he was deflecting it upwards. The other two crouched down behind him, and the hydra's swipe sliced through air.

Ghelreis roared. A powerful strike from his mace slammed into the hydra's

open body. Hydras had a strong ability to regenerate, but their internal organs couldn't handle powerful impacts. The hydra recoiled, and attempted to fight back with several of its heads, but Ghelreis refused to move from the spot, as if he were rooted to the earth. In addition to his dwarven physique, his Sword-smasher armor set probably had some kind of magical effect to help him hold his ground.

"Now, young master!"

"Right!"

As the hydra's attention was on Ghelreis, Al charged forward. He held his halberd of immense strength behind him, then swung it diagonally upwards, crashing it into one of the hydra's heads. There was a sickeningly loud sound of shattering bone and scattering flesh. The result was less a slash wound and more a violent rupture. The head bent dramatically backwards, half-torn off.

Al yelled out as he pulled the long handle of his weapon back towards him and unleashed another strike. This time, the head was torn away completely. Unlike Reystov's clean severing, the cross section left by Al's attack was a mess, as if a giant had used all his strength to rip the hydra's head away from its body.

While feeling a little disturbed, I cast another fire arrow. I heard a sigh behind me from Menel. "Well, looks like I'm not gonna be needed anymore," he grumbled. "Whatever. Didn't want to waste arrows anyway."

It was already clear which side had the edge.

◆

While protecting Al from the hydra's attacks, Ghelreis dealt steady blows to the hydra to make things harder for it and weaken it a little. Al secured a position where he was well protected by Ghelreis and could afford to take large swings. He sent another of the hydra's heads flying. And whenever there was a spare moment, there was a brilliant flash from Reystov's sword out of nowhere. Reystov was so good at hopping in and out of range that I kind of wanted to watch and learn. As for me, my only job was to watch them and repeatedly shoot guided fire arrows.

"Hey, you alright?" Menel was giving encouragement to the elf, who seemed

to have been wounded, as he kept watch over the area. It looked as if he was just kicking back while the rest of us fought, but deliberately not getting involved with the fight and keeping a look out was an important job in itself.

In a pressing situation like battle, it's only natural to want to join in and help if you have the ability, but if too many people get involved at once, it increases the risk of friendly fire and collateral damage. It's an valuable decision to choose to stand by so that your allies don't have to be concerned about additional enemies joining the fray and can concentrate on the battle before them. I wanted to believe that nothing would be crazy enough to jump into the middle of a hydra battle, but this was a dark region where people had never ventured. There was no way of knowing what might be lurking here.

"*Sagitta Flammeum!*" The three at the front continued to deal severe blows to the hydra, and each time, I delivered a flaming arrow to the wound site to increase the damage.

It wasn't long after that that all the hydra's heads were severed. It sank into the bog without even giving up a final scream.

"D-Did we kill it?!"

"Remain on your guard. Hydra venom is so deadly that even most miracles cannot cure it."

"Yeah. Snakes like this can struggle wildly even after all the heads are cut off sometimes."

"E-Even once all the heads are cut off?"

"Yeah. Won't help anyone to let it spite you just before it dies."

After checking that the three at the front were on their guard, I turned to look at what was going on behind me. "Menel."

"Will, need you right now. She's bitten!"

I hurriedly ran through the bog over to them and had a look at the elf Menel was holding in his arms. Her frayed blonde hair was covered in mud, and her violet eyes were hazed over and unfocused. Although she was wearing plain travelers' clothing that was covered in mud, she was clearly very beautiful. She

had a well-defined nose bridge and slender jaw line, and looked to me like the perfect example of a female elf in every aspect. If we'd met under normal circumstances, I might have been a little stunned. If she wasn't twitching and drooling from deadly poison like she was right now!

"Stay with me!" No wonder Menel hadn't let her out of his arms! No wonder he hadn't been fighting! Panicking, I started to pray for the Miracle of Antidote.

"There's... no hope..." The elf extended a quivering hand to stop me. "It's hydra... poison..."

I grumbled. This wasn't good. Not just the Miracle of Antidote, but any prayer with the power to heal could fail to have an effect if the target rejected it. That was because the good gods didn't want their healing to be used for torture or extending life when it wasn't desired. There were many ways for an inventive person to put the ability to cure poison or heal wounds to evil use.

It had to be difficult for her to even speak right now, yet she still turned down treatment, preferring to die without fruitless attempts to cling onto life. Elves really were dignified.

As I was wondering how I could convince her, Menel took her hand and lowered it. "Don't speak."

"No... You must... North... village of... others..."

"Ugh! Dammit, accept the treatment, wood-kin!"

"Wood...kin...?" The elf's eyes, which were starting to lose their focus, opened wide and took in Menel. She met the direct gaze of his jade eyes.

"This is no ordinary priest," he said. "Friend of the forest, you will survive. Accept this miracle." His tone was final. "Pray."

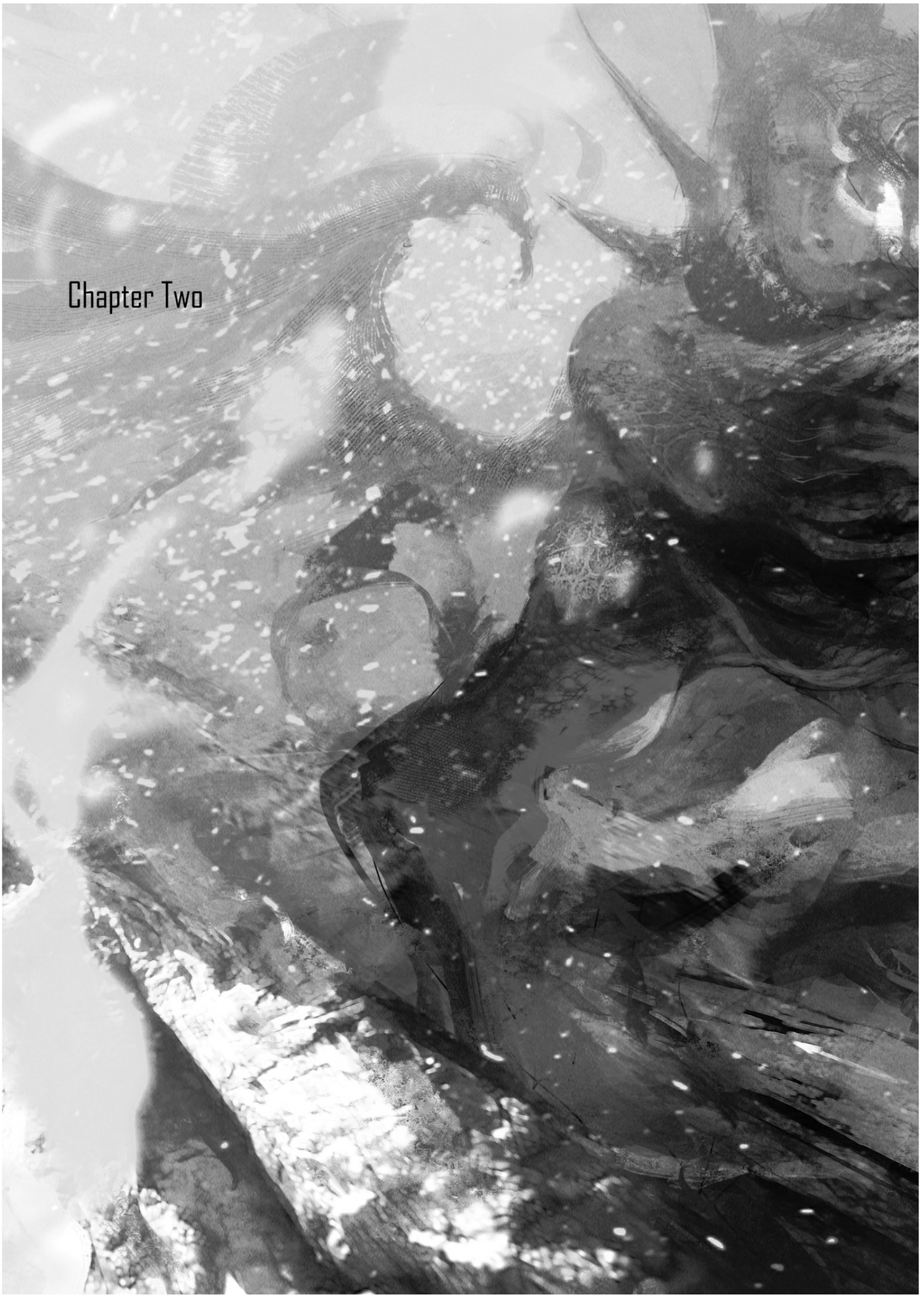
The elf was barely conscious now, but as Menel spoke those words to her while holding her hand, I was certain, although it was very slight, that I saw her nod her head.

And so, I offered a prayer to my god.

God, if you may, please heal this noble elf.

The prayer became a miracle, and the miracle became a faint light that shone

down upon her body. Very soon after, the unconscious elven woman’s breathing slowly started returning to normal.


Chapter Two

We made sure that the hydra was definitely dead and that the female elf had been healed. Then I handed my gear to Al, pulled the elf's arms up, crouched down, and lifted her over my shoulders. It was like the fireman's carry that firemen and lifeguards in my previous world used for transporting people in need of rescue. It made a person easy to lift and fast to move around with.

We had to move immediately. We'd fought a rowdy battle and gotten blood everywhere. Already we could hear the raspy screeching of monstrous birds circling the cloudy sky overhead in search of carrion. If we didn't leave this place as soon as possible, we were guaranteed to encounter new enemies drawn here by the smell of blood.

After recovering his longsword from the hydra's carcass, Menel said, "Wait a sec."

"We don't have much time," Reystov replied with a dubious look.

"I'll be quick." Menel wrapped a cloth around his hand, pulled out his dagger, and started doing some kind of work on the hydra carcass. He inserted the blade carefully into the joint behind its fangs in its upper jaw, equivalent to the joint between the cheek and the ear in humans. "Good," he said, and he poured the jet-black bodily fluid from the hydra into a small bottle he had with him.

"Is that... venom from its venom gland?" I asked.

"Bet we'll find a use for it."

"Be careful."

I'd learned a little about poisons from Blood and Gus. They were hard to handle; storing them while preserving their toxicity and making intelligent use of them when needed were both difficult tasks that required proper knowledge.

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

Menel was a talented hunter and a warrior of the forest. He knew more than me about how to handle poisons from plants, animals, and beasts, so I was probably worrying for nothing.

"Sorry about that. Let's go."

With that, we trekked back to the boat through the bog. Based on their

physique and equipment, Al and Ghelreis looked like they were finding it difficult to walk, but I felt as if my situation was even worse, with the weight of the elf over my shoulders pressing my feet deeper into the mud. I used my strength to force my way through. Muscle power came in useful even at times like these. I was so glad I'd trained!

"That hydra..." Al mumbled as we walked. "What a fight that was." His hands were trembling slightly. Now that I thought about it, that was the first time he'd fought anything so large.

"Absolutely," Ghelreis said. "We would have been in some trouble had we not fought it together."

"That old champion Berkeley killed one single-handed," Reystov chipped in. "So they say."

The Berkeley Tale of Valor was an old epic that Bee told from time to time. In the days when the traces of myth were still common in the world and the evil gods' minions were prevalent, the name of the wandering warrior Berkeley was spoken everywhere in the ancient kingdoms.

Berkeley served Volt, god of lightning and judgment. He was brave and noble and defeated many monsters, wielding his immense power for the sake of innocent people. However, he had an intense fondness for the pleasures of the flesh, and one day, a twist of fate and the jealousy of a wicked woman conspired to create the conditions for his downfall. In many ways, he was the perfect example of a hero.

"Starting to doubt it now I've seen the real thing, though. No one could take one of them down alone... Or, hmm." Menel turned to look at me.

"What?"

"No, was just thinking you could probably manage it..." All the others turned to look at me with interest, so I decided to give it serious thought.

It would probably be easy if I could blast the hydra with a powerful Word from outside its range. However, it was unrealistic to think that I could spot a hydra living in a marshland of swirling mist and attack it without it noticing. So I was going to have to assume I'd be running into it in the bog itself. I also

decided to assume I'd been anticipating fighting a hydra and had come properly prepared with weapons enhanced with fire Signs or something.

If I protected myself with a good magic shield and spent the opening stages of the battle just chopping off as many of its heads as I could, or if I did what Berkeley did and held one of its edgemost necks against my side, using it as a shield so I could be the one dragging the hydra around, maybe it would work out somehow? With several layers of physical enchantment spells and blessings, it would probably be alright.

Of course, given that I would be fighting a hydra alone in a swamp, there would always be a danger of something unexpected killing me. But still, even without considering the dirty trick of pulling out Overeater—

"I think my chances wouldn't be too bad," I said.

Menel bent his neck dramatically back to look straight up at the heavens and apologized to Volt for having doubted the accomplishments of his hero.

◆

We all returned to the boat, covered in mud, and loaded our gear into it. At the same time, we laid out sheets and blankets for the still-unconscious elf (whose name we were yet to discover) and wrapped her up in them to keep her from getting cold. Then it was back into the thigh-high mud to push the boat back to the river.

Slowly, the boat began moving again, following the current.

"Hmm..."

"Eck. Mud everywhere. Didn't realize we were this bad."

"Ahh! Leeches?!"

"Burn 'em off."

"I'll get some water and things ready."

We'd all undergone a mud baptism, so we used benediction, fairy blessings, magic, and more to get rid of the mud and make ourselves look completely decent again. This was important. If we contracted a disease in a place like this, the word "hassle" wouldn't come close to describing the problems we would

face. I could heal people with benediction, but it would still take time for them to get their strength back. There were even some troublesome diseases that could lie dormant with no visible symptoms for some time and flare up suddenly later.

“There we go.”

Once we were all mostly clean, we finished dealing with the remaining aftermath of the battle. Without a word, Reystov took the helm and kept watch for us.

“So, about this elf.” I took another look at the elf wrapped up in blankets. She had the kind of rich golden hair that I imagined nature’s spirits would like. Her fine-featured face was pale and looked haggard. Her violet eyes were still lowered, but she was definitely breathing.

We had finally reached a point where we could pause for a moment to talk about her. Considering the precedent of the water serpents, it was admittedly hard to call the boat a safe place to be, but it was better than anywhere else. We couldn’t expect anywhere in these dark regions to be completely safe.

“Is she a survivor of the elves?”

“I imagine so.”

“Look, we’re not gonna get far talking without her.” Menel showed no restraint. Saying, “Hey. Wake up,” he tapped the elf on her cheeks, which were like a work of art, hard enough to make a slapping sound. When he saw she still wasn’t waking up, he brought a little bottle containing strong, distilled alcohol up to her full lips and poured it into her mouth without hesitation.

The effect was instant. The blonde-haired elf bolted awake with wide eyes, coughing violently from the liquid’s intense strength. She looked left and right, trying to make sense of what had happened to her.

“Wakey-wakey,” Menel said, grinning like a trouble-making kid. The rest of us had frozen a bit, shocked at the way Menel handled it.

“Wh-What was that?!” she sputtered.

“Woke you up with a spicy kiss. How you feeling, my fellow forest buddy?

Splitting headache? Wanna puke?”

“G-Gods, you’re vulgar! You’re an offense to the ear and an ache upon the brain!”

Though I had healed her with benediction, she was in recovery from a near-death state. She had to be feeling drained, but that apparently hadn’t taken the fight out of her.

“Well, you sound well enough.”

“And... And did you just say... k-kiss? You... You didn’t dare!”

“Calm down. You smooched this bottle.”

She went red to the tips of her ears and railed against Menel in the fastest Elvish I’d ever heard. I couldn’t make it all out with my skill at the language, but I could tell it was a barrage of intense and bitter sarcasm. Menel let it run off him like water off a duck’s back.

Al and Ghelreis didn’t seem to be proficient in Elvish and were unable to keep up with their conversation, and Reystov had his hand on the tiller and was keeping well out of it. I thought about saying something to the pair of them so we could all move on, but apparently even Menel had the sense to know that things had gone on long enough. As the elf paused for breath for a moment, Menel placed his hand over his heart with a polished motion and gave her a greeting in Old Elvish. “*‘The stars shine on the hour of our meeting.’*”

The elf frowned, retracted her sharp tongue, and responded with the standard formal greeting in a similarly refined manner.

Menel shrugged. “Sorry for shocking you. It’s just how I was raised. I’m Meneldor of Ithil.”

“Swift-winged heavenly eagle of the silver moon, I am Dinelind of Remmirath.”

“Enchanting silent tune of the net of shining stars, may our meeting be blessed.”

Spoken in beautiful, rhythmical Elvish, it was a rhyming exchange in the traditional format.

“So you *can* behave normally,” Dinelind said, frustrated.

“Elven greetings aren’t my style.” He shrugged. “No more, please.”

Dinelind gave a small, resigned snort, smiling with her violet eyes. “Alright.”

Then she looked at me, who had been completely left behind by the conversation, and switched to slightly dated Western Common Speech. It was the way of speaking I was most familiar with: the language spoken in Blood and Mary’s time. “My apologies. Are you the leader of this group? It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Dinelind.” *Dee-neh-lihnd.*

“William G. Maryblood.”

“You saved my life. You all have my deepest gratitude.”

She gave me a graceful bow.

◆

The dark, thick, stagnant river flowed slowly. Carried by the water’s flow, the boat progressed to the north between withered trees that reminded me of bones exposed to the elements. A slight current of air was filling its sail. That was because Menel had used the Tailwind spell again. It seemed the fairies had regained a little of their power.

“So then we...”

After introducing ourselves to Dinelind, we explained to her that we were on a journey to kill the foul-dragon Valacirca and the mountain demons. She was astonished. “Just the five of you? Are you serious?”

“You think we’d come all the way out here for a joke?”

“You might. I admit that William over there seems unlikely to do that. He looks sensible and sincere.”

“And I’m neither, am I?”

“Ask yourself. But this really is reckless.”

“We’re aware it’s reckless. But we have to do it all the same.”

“I see. You’re very brave.”

Dinelind was relatively proficient in Western Common Speech, but her mother tongue was definitely Elvish. She mostly talked to Menel and me.

“So, Dinelind, why were you there being attacked by a hydra?”

“Well, I don’t mind telling that story, if you have a little time to listen.”

“Let’s eat first,” Menel said. “Can’t ever trust an elf’s littles.”

He had a point. As long as we were in an area as dangerous as this, there was nothing to be lost by getting food in us whenever we were able. If our boat ever capsized, that would be the end of our food supply.

“Al, you got the smoked venison there, right?”

“I do, but... Would that be okay?”

“Yes, I can eat venison just fine.”

Given Al’s doubt, apparently elves really did have a strong image as vegetarians.

“About the only elves who don’t eat meat are those who underwent special training and became strongly fae in nature.” She explained that all other elves hunted like normal and ate meat and fish. “It’s the duty of us elves as rulers of the forest to hunt and fish to preserve the balance of nature.”

The idea of applying moderate pressure to maintain ecological balance was a very elf-like way of thinking.

On the boat, we ate the venison we’d smoked in the city of the dead along with some holy bread. We couldn’t very well use fire, so we had to have it cold, but the smoky taste of the cold venison made it a pretty tasty meal in its own way. Dinelind ate the bread like it was a new experience for her, and the venison with salt sprinkled over it made her eyes go wide.

“Wait.” Menel frowned upon seeing her reaction to the food. “What do you guys normally eat?”

Dinelind shrugged sarcastically. “You can imagine, can’t you?”

The marshland and cloudy river had a thick aura of impurity and death. The creatures we’d seen so far were snakes and stuff like that. It wasn’t as if I

couldn’t imagine it; I just didn’t really want to.

“And I think you have a good idea of why I was there, too. That’s why you suggested we eat first and shared your food with me.”

Menel grumbled and shut his mouth. Judging by his reaction, she had hit the bull’s-eye.

Dinelind spoke in a detached tone. “As you guessed, there were too many mouths to feed.”

Menel frowned even harder.

◆

Too many mouths to feed... I wondered what that meant.

“Was there something wrong with you?”

Whenever I heard of people being abandoned when there were too many mouths to feed, those who couldn’t work were usually first to go. The practice helped a group to strike the balance between food supply and food consumption, ensuring its survival. In both my past world’s history and the world I was living in now, in the event of a famine, the old and infirm would be first to go, and their loss would enable the healthy and the work animals to survive. Dinelind looked a little peaky, but otherwise she seemed in good shape.

“No,” she answered.

“Huh?”

“Will, that isn’t the way elves think,” Menel said, wrinkling his brows.

Dinelind nodded. “Yes, exactly.”

“Umm, I don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand. It’s simple,” Menel said, with a complicated expression. Then, he spoke with conviction. “Elves are *noble*. They *never forsake the weak*. No matter how bad things get, an elf will never abandon the old or the sick. From the looks of it, it must be a completely isolated village, surrounded by danger.”

Around us, the stagnant river and marshland extended as far as we could see.

“I bet whenever there’s a food shortage, those who can move and fight volunteer to leave,” Menel continued. “Best case, they can find some way out, make their way to somewhere inhabited, and call for help. And even if they don’t, that’s one less mouth to feed. Right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Who would think of sending the weak out to fend for themselves? That’s ridiculous,” Dinelind said seriously.

The weak were to be protected, and the strong were to be first to make sacrifices. She spoke not with a tone of fanaticism or blind faith, but as though this was absolutely natural common sense.

“You really are an elf,” Menel muttered.

“Excuse me? Was that a compliment or an insult?”

“A compliment, dammit.” Menel avoided looking directly at her as though she were the sun.

Elves are proud and noble—that was a common refrain I’d heard from everyone. I was beginning to see why.

“Elves never change,” Ghelreis said quietly. The old scar on his face was warped by the corners of his mouth pulling up into a smile.

We talked for a little while about a few less consequential things, and then I brought up the topic once more. “Dinelind, would you mind showing us to your settlement? If you’ll teach us the way to the mountains, we’ll do what we can for you.”

“‘Dine’ will do.” She brushed her blonde hair back with her fingers—it was still untied from her run-in with the hydra—and did it back up to around neck length. “That’s more than I could have wished for,” she said, and nodded. “Thank you.”

◆

We held a course through the wetland down a narrow branch of the river for a while. Around the time the sun started to set, the forest came into view.

But it wasn’t the kind of beautiful forest that Ghelreis had talked about. It had a strong aura of death, like a patient stricken with a terminal disease near the

end of his days. The branches of the trees were creepily discolored all over. From their weakly drooping branches hung leaves that were already brown and half-withered.

Following the current, we rowed the boat into the forest. Although the haze was very thin, I could feel toxicity in it, and all around, I could sense the bloodlust of viciously brutal lifeforms. Everyone frowned. Although we'd expected it, the forest was clearly not in a normal state.

From the tiller, Reystov muttered his mind. "This looks awful."

"Yes, that's because it is." Dine admitted it freely. "The forest is completely corrupted and shrinks every year as if it's necrotizing. The animals here are all crazed monsters. It's surrounded by mist and marshland, and we have no idea which way we'd have to go to contact any other groups large enough to matter. And to top it off, the mountain which is our only landmark is a den of demons and a dragon."

No sooner had she murmured the word "dragon" than its roar echoed once more from the west. Strange birds screeched and flew, and I thought I sensed the forest's monstrous animals cowering in fear.

"And what's worse, the dragon's been like that recently. Some of us even said this might be the end."

"This... doesn't look like just the effects of a Taboo Word."

"Yes. It's the foul-dragon's miasma."

"The foul-dragon?"

The dragon was in the mountains. How could it—

"The tunnels that the dwarves ran underground."

Al and Ghelreis grimaced when they heard that response.

"For good and bad, we elves of Lothdor and the dwarves of the Iron Country were neighbors. There were a lot of paths between us both above and below ground. So after the Iron Country fell, the miasma of the dragon lying in its ruins flowed through the tunnels to every part of the forest, and it continues to do so today."

“That’s...”

“Mm...”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t mean to imply anything against you dwarves or anything like that. I was just explaining the facts of the current situation, that’s all.” Dine waved her hand candidly and continued. “The fairies’ boon is weakened around here, and the water, air, and food have all absorbed the poison. The longer we live, the more the poison builds up inside us. Many here are bedridden and unable to move at this point. The beauty of Lothdor is a thing of the distant past. We don’t intend to accept our destruction or lose our pride, but even so, right now, this place is a dead man walking.”

The boat continued forward. A few fences came into view, then houses. They were dirty, dingy, battered, chalk houses. A few elves shambled out to look at the unfamiliar boat.

“We never expected heroes to come from the outside to slay the foul-dragon. I feel like I’m dreaming.” Those words that Dine quietly uttered sounded full of all kinds of emotions.

How many people had died of illness already before we even arrived? How many had been driven by the shrinking forest and dwindling food supplies to go out in search of contact with the outside world on a journey from which they would never return? There must have been people who knew her among them. If explorers had found this place earlier, before the foul-dragon problem materialized, would there have been people that could have been saved?

As I entertained those foolish thoughts, Dine walked to the bow of the boat with graceful movements that made her seem almost weightless and spun on her heel to face us. “Welcome to Lothdor.” She had the palm of her right hand placed over her heart, one leg slightly pulled back, and her head bowed. It was an old style of greeting. “We extend our warmest welcome to you, heroes.” Her expression blossomed into a broad smile.

◆

For the next while, things became very busy.

Deciding that Dine had explained the situation well enough now, I requested

to be allowed to heal the gravely ill. The leaders of this elven settlement seemed to be unsure whether it was a good idea to expose the most vulnerable among them to strangers who had arrived out of nowhere. I bowed my head earnestly and pleaded to be allowed to heal them.

One of the elder elves with pure-white hair and an old scar noticed our weapons and armor. Through a bout of terrible coughing, he said, “If warriors with kit like this are pleading with us, we should not force them to shame themselves.”

“Let me cure your cough,” I said.

“Wait.” He coughed again. “There are those who need it far more than I—”

“I’ll cure you all.” It was only a matter of who would come first. I intended to cure every elf I laid eyes on.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Healing through benediction is a considerable drain on your concentration and vitality. You can’t heal person after—”

“One or two hundred won’t be a problem.”

“Hundred?!” All the elves who were assembled here, including Dine, stared their eyes out at me.

“I can heal you all, and I will.” I prayed as I spoke. I lowered my eyes slightly, concentrated intently, and asked for the assistance of the god of the flame. The next moment, a dim light glowed, and the elder’s cough was gone. It was over in a few seconds. There was a small commotion among some of the elves; others were speechless.

I could attain a state of deep prayer in the span of a single breath. I’d reached that level naturally through being taught by Mary and praying every day. Merely being blessed with the power of miracles wouldn’t be enough to allow a priest to survive in the thick of battle if they hadn’t mastered this through training.

“Please gather everyone with serious symptoms. Those who can’t be brought here, I will go to visit one by one.” I looked around at everyone. “Don’t worry,” I said, and placed my hand over my heart. “I’ll heal you all, on the flame of Gracefeel.”

The elves nodded at each other, quickly splitting the task among them. Then they all rushed off to separate parts of the settlement.

By the time I was fully done healing everyone in the community, the sun had long since set. I stood by the river of foul water at the outskirts of the village and exhaled deeply. I could hear the sound of music coming faintly from the village.

Even those in critical condition, debilitated on their death beds with paralyzed limbs, had gotten up one after another. They cried tears of joy when their arms and legs started to work again, and hugged people with no regard for whether they were friends, acquaintances, or strangers.

Everyone was cheering, and from there it was only natural for food and drinks and instruments to be brought out. Soon, a party started. Everyone was all over me as the guest of honor, and I was forced to drink cup after cup of fruit wine. The elves were very interested in talking to Ghelreis and Al. Even Reystov quietly joined in on the drinking. As for Menel, he was dragged around by Dine, who was completely drunk, and they danced in front of the campfire. Whatever kind of dance that had been, he hadn't looked used to it.

It was a pleasant night, with the moon visible only hazily in the cloudy sky.

I would have liked to stay a little tipsy, but I used the Prayer of Detoxification to remove the alcohol from my bloodstream. I had no idea when a battle could occur. I couldn't yet afford to abandon myself to liquor.

Suddenly, I heard the flapping of wings. A large raven alighted on a twisted branch next to me. It had glossy black feathers and red eyes that had something ominous about them.

"Is your journey progressing smoothly?"

It was the Herald-raven of the god of undeath, Stagnate.

"Yes, so far at least... owowow."

A warning from the god of the flame rang like a headache through my head.

I'm sorry, but please calm down, God, it's okay.

"Hahaha. Gracefeel really does love you."

The raven clicked its beak in laughter. Then it paused for a beat, tilted its head, and said,

“Would you like to try being loved by me as well?”

“Very funny. So? Get to the point.” I stared into its red eyes.

“It’s nothing, really. Just a warning. If you are to turn back, this is likely your final opportunity.”

At the same time, the ground shook. I heard a rumbling that seemed to reverberate from the bowels of the earth.

rrrrrrrRRRRRRRRR...

I could hear roaring from the mountain range to the west. It was a terrifying sound that seemed to grip my soul within clenched talons. As the roaring came to an end, silence fell. Even the merry musical tunes of the elven village stopped dead as though petrified by the noise.

“I will say it one more time. If you challenge him, you will die.”

His red eyes were piercing.

◆

“If you take on the dragon, you will die, with no way to escape.”

The god of undeath spoke flatly.

“Build up your strength.”

“If I do that, Al and the others will die, I expect. If the dragon is to harm anyone, the dwarves believe that their blood should be first to be spilled.”



“Indeed, the dwarves will die. Humans, elves, and dwarves alike will die in the hundreds, even thousands, when the foul-dragon awakens. But as a result of the casualties, faith will collect around you and Gracefeel.”

The gods’ power depended upon faith. Each time the damage caused by the foul-dragon increased, belief would gather around my god as people turned to her for help to get rid of the dragon. The power that my god gained from people’s wishes and prayers would feed directly into my own battle strength, provided that Gracefeel blessed me with it, and it would certainly be power enough for slaying a dragon.

“If the dragon causes great harm, skilled warriors and other ambitious, talented people will gather from all over hoping to gain fame by slaying it. As will disciples of the good gods charged with a mission. If you band those heroes together under the protection of Gracefeel returned to full strength, you will be able to make your blade reach the foul-dragon’s throat.”

Once again, I was reminded how convincing his words were.

“I am not fond of a plan like this, either. But you *should* allow there to be victims. It would be a courageous course of action, not a cowardly one.”

It was a convincing and sound argument. However—

“I can’t do that.”

“Why? Do you wish to save *everything* that badly?”

The Herald-raven shifted on the branch, irritated.

“I’ll grant you this: If you continue onward without forsaking a single thing, there may remain the slightest of possibilities that you could save everything you desire to save. But if you fail, the lives lost will not be a matter of ten or twenty thousand. And it will be a while before there is another hero who compares to you. For the sake of protecting some thousands of lives, you would put ten or even a hundred times that number at risk, even knowing what I’ve told you? It is the height of recklessness.”

“Stagnate, god of undeath, I’m sure you’re right.”

I did think he was. I could find no fault with his logic. If I was looking for the

optimal solution, that was probably it.

“If you agree, then—”

“But the moment I do that, the oath and devotion I depend upon will be broken.”

The god of undeath’s eyes grew wide.

Yes—that was the one problem.

“And you’re deliberately talking about ‘the right decision’ because you know that.”

“…”

It was to break my resolve and incorporate me into his forces. As though this were some pagan ritual in which power was gained by sacrificing people at an altar, he was recommending that the best path was to give up, to let it happen, to gain power in exchange for blood and flesh.

“Am I wrong?”

“…”

The god of undeath’s answer was silence.

“Stagnate, god of undeath.”

“Yes?”

“I am a weak person. I know myself to be just an ordinary human with a fickle heart, easily swayed and broken and quick to give up.”

I had no intention of saying that being reborn had changed me. The fundamental nature of my heart, my soul, probably hadn’t changed from my previous world. So if I let something happen, if I gave up on it, that would be the moment when I would break. I understood how that descent worked, and it started with making excuses that there was nothing I could do, that I had no opportunities, that it was impossible to continue—accumulating reasons to give up, and repeating those same excuses to myself over and over.

“But despite that, my god taught me that it was okay to start over. She allowed me to stand up and walk on my own two feet once more.” While

staring into the god of undeath's red eyes, I spoke of my feelings toward the god of the flame. "I was able to meet my precious family. I made treasured friends and allies. I have things I'm meant to do and things I want to do. She gave me the opportunity to reach out my hand once more for the things I'd lost, the things I'd given up on."

I had no idea how I could ever thank her enough. That reticent god wearing a hood had given me many truly precious things. And that was why.

"I will see that through. I will keep to my oath, keep faith in my heart, and until the very instant I fall over dead, I will be her hands and her blade."

Maybe it wasn't optimal, maybe it was twisted and ugly, but it was my belief that it was the only way for me. It was the only road before me, lit by the light of her flame.

"On the flame of Gracefeel."

"..."

The god of undeath still remained silent. Saying nothing, he looked at me... and sighed deeply.

"Dear, dear. Another attempt failed."

◆

The distant sound of music could once again be heard from the elven village. Although they had stopped for a time because of the roaring of the dragon, they seemed to have gotten over it and started playing again. The crystal-clear, jaunty tones of a harp echoed pleasantly around the forest.

"You are correct. I realized it from the moment I first met you. Your soul is not particularly strong. If you give up, you will break and begin your descent. Your soul is nothing more than that, and I was well aware of it."

I remembered the despair of our first meeting. Then the reason he'd pressed me so hard must have been because he had seen right through me.

"It never occurred to me that you could become a hero. I thought of you as an extra to the Three Heroes, a brittle soul, notably skilled due to training, but nothing more."

In actual fact, that was what I was. If not for Mary's scolding, if not for the grace of God, I would have folded in the face of the god of undeath and met my ruin.

"But you overturned all my expectations. You did not give in. You did not fold. In fact, you stood up, challenged me, and even defeated me."

The god of undeath's Herald-raven laughed cheerfully.

"Paradoxically, that is what will make you capable of becoming a hero, feeble soul."

"I never thought about 'becoming a hero.'"

"Hahaha. Knowing the extent of your own weakness and *because of it* refusing to give up, refusing to fold, being willing to die for what you believe in... "

As the elven music played in the distance, the god of undeath strung his words smoothly together with the melody.

"That *is* what people call a hero, William G. Maryblood, inheritor of all that defined the trio I once desired."

I didn't know how to reply to that. I only knew that for some reason, I felt strangely calm. I was talking to the evil god who had once thrown me into despair. He was my enemy, and I had risen up to oppose him and put my life on the line to fight him. And yet, my heart was as tranquil as it was when I prayed.

"Despite knowing it is in vain, I must say this once regardless. *Join me.* A seat on my right shall be prepared for you. You shall have eternal protection and armies of undead. We will kill the dragon, defeat heroes, bring down all the other gods and conquer the world. You and I together."

I probably felt so calm because I knew that the deity called Stagnate, with his ideals, schemes, mercy, and everything else that made him, was truly a being to be respected. But for that very reason, I placed my hand over my heart and, with the utmost respect—

"Thank you, Stagnate, god of undeath. But no."

I turned him down.

“In vain, as I thought, then.”

The raven laughed as if he had known it all along.

“Yes.” I nodded. “After all, you *don’t want to see the fall of a hero*, do you?” The instant I said that, the Herald-raven froze. For some strange reason, I had remembered all kinds of things. “If I lost my devotion to Gracefeel and became yours, I’m sure I wouldn’t be able to remain the kind of being you’re looking for.”

“…”

Stagnate had told me once that he wanted to create an eternally kind world. That he couldn’t bear to look at a soul that had been dragged down and lost its radiance among regret and suffering.

“Stagnate, god of undeath. You are my respected enemy, and a great deity.” I thought so from the bottom of my heart. “So I will not bow to your temptations. I will carry on being your enemy. Because I respect you.”

I may not be able to sympathize with you; we may have been enemies since we first met; but I know that you are great. I know that you are merciful in your own way. And so I want to pay you the greatest respect, by not becoming yours and continuing to be your enemy.

“What can I say?”

The god of undeath remained silent for a while and then spoke slowly, in a low tone.

“This is the first time that a human child has seen through me so completely. Despite how straightforward you appear, you are surprisingly sharp. You have understood the divine will of a god; you could rightly call yourself a wise man.”

“I’m honored,” I said, unsure how to reply to his frank words of praise.

“But what a shame it is. You will die. Die torn apart by a dragon.”

The god of undeath’s Herald-raven laughed bitterly.

“If you ever change your mind, feel free to call me any time, won’t you, hmm? I shall make you a high-level undead in the blink of an eye. Any time is

acceptable, even the instant of your death or after your head goes flying. Oh, if you call me after your head has gone flying, would you settle for being a Dullahan Lord? Or would a No Life King be more to your taste?"

The god of undeath sounded as if he was enjoying himself. I shrugged. "I'm going against a dragon. If I lose, there won't be a trace of me left."

"Hahaha. How right you are!"

We both laughed.

"Then I shall take my leave. Gracefeel must be getting quite ticked."

Although the warning revelation had certainly stopped ringing inside my head, I could somehow sense that her stress levels were building. Gracefeel was very godlike most of the time, but on matters concerning the god of undeath, I got the feeling that she seemed childish, maybe even human.

"Farewell, then, paladin of the flame, my wise and foolish foe!"

Leaving those words behind, the Herald-raven flew off and was quickly obscured by the darkness of night. As I watched it go, I was careless enough to allow a hint of a smile to creep onto my face.

"Owww!" The concept of a sharp, pinching sort of pain was sent into my head. I winced.

Th-That was mean, God!

◆

The following morning after my unexpected chance encounter and dialog with the god of undeath, the post-party elven settlement was filled with the sounds of an argument.

Having made quite a lot of use of benediction the previous night in addition to my conversation with the god of undeath, I was just a little mentally fatigued. Rubbing my eyes, I wandered out of the hut that had been provided for me and looked to see what was going on.

"Look, just let me go, goddammit!"

"You can't seriously expect us to just let you go and do that!"

It was Menel and Dine who were arguing. My dozy brain considered this for a few seconds. “Oh, it’s just a lovers’ quarrel,” I concluded, and had just about started to head back into the hut to get some more sleep when I was gripped firmly on both of my shoulders.

“Hold it, you.”

“Would you care to repeat that?”

Their voices sounded pretty threatening. This was finally enough to wake me up completely, and at the same time, make me break out in a cold sweat. I laughed nervously in the hope it would get me out of this. *Tell me, God, what’s the right answer to that question?*

Dine sighed. “It’s not exactly the time to abandon ourselves to romance.”

She had a point. This was a time of life and death for their village. Whichever way you sliced it, there were clearly matters that took precedence.

“Ya.” Menel nodded in agreement and shrugged. “If only it was, huh? Too bad.”

I didn’t miss Dine’s shoulders twitch and her composure falter. I couldn’t help seizing at the topic. “So if circumstances were different, you would have been saying something to her?”

“Hm? Well sure, she’s pretty, right?”

Dine knit her beautiful brow. She turned her cheek away from Menel and was about to say something back when he continued.

“Probably would’ve tossed her some flattering bullshit in place of a greeting, sure.”

Dine froze. And then she started trembling.

Menel...

“I don’t get you...”

“Ya, well, you’re so unused to women it actually makes me worried for you.”

There was a pretty big gap between Menel and me when it came to where we each stood in the world of chatting up women. It was probably on the same

level as a Japanese person in my previous world compared to an Italian. Though that said, Menel could be pretty dense at times as well.

“With Ithil elves, once you’re able to recite a single love poem in front of a woman, that makes you an adult.”

“That’s why you Ithils are always called irresponsible!” Dine glared at Menel sharply with her violet eyes.

Menel shrugged casually. “Well, Remmirath folk are apparently a bunch of headstrong shrews.”

“Oh, you went there!”

Before I knew it, the argument had started up again. They both had tongues as sharp as swords, and as the verbal spar unfolded between them, the Elvish got faster and faster, and I could no longer pick the words out. When it came to these kinds of arguments, elves made heavy use of sarcasm and metaphor, which made it even harder to grasp.

But Dine kind of looked like she was having fun.

I suddenly thought back on the heavy expressions of the elves when we first arrived at the settlement. They’d lost many talented warriors and elementalists in the war-torn era of the Great Collapse and were cut off from civilization. Their forest was violated by curses and poisons, became isolated and diseased, and fell into decline. And two hundred years went by, during which not a single one of the brave elves who journeyed out in search of contact with the outside world ever returned...

Those years must have been so difficult that silly arguments like this went right out of everyone’s mind.

“You really are a ■■■■■■!”

“And you’re a feckin’ ■■■■■■■■.”

That one left her open-mouthed.

I wondered what those insults meant. If even the great Gus had no memory of learning them, I figured they had to be pretty bad.

◆

After their argument had calmed down, I intervened and brought the conversation back on topic.

“So what was that about going somewhere?”

“The Lord of the Woods,” Menel said, clearly still in a bad mood. “The Lord of the Woods around here. I should be able to heal it a little.”

That was a good point. I had my hands full with healing yesterday, but I’d been thinking about discussing this with him when we got up. I figured Menel would be able to improve the situation in this forest a bit. However—

“We can’t possibly let you.” Dine’s response was curt. “No way.”

“For God’s sake...” Menel frowned, but Dine had her arms folded in a pose that indicated she wasn’t going to budge an inch.

The Lord of the Woods was the forest’s core, the being that was its greatest weak point. If something with power and malice came into contact with it, terrible damage could be done. We’d seen that just recently when Beast Woods had begun to be contaminated by that Cernunnos. Even if they were somewhat indebted to us, the elves who lived in this forest probably wouldn’t allow outsiders in so easily.

“Umm, but, Menel can be trusted. I swear it. If you need some kind of guarantee, you could take me hostage or...”

Dine shook her head, as if to say I’d gotten it all wrong. “It’s not that. We do trust you all.”

“Huh?”

“We trust you and we’re thankful to you. I don’t know how many people you must have saved just last night. If there’s something you seek, we want to do whatever we can to satisfy your request. If you ask us to provide you with military strength, we’ll give you warriors, and if you need to be shown the way, we’ll gladly guide you.”

“Then why?”

“If we could show you safely to the Lord of the Woods on your request, then there would be no problem.” Dine looked down. “The area around the Lord of

the Woods is beast territory now. It's no longer ours. We *can't* guide you."

"But that's even more reason—"

"Even more reason for us to depend on you?" Dine tilted her head and smiled. "You saved our lives and gave us back hope. And you're just about to head into battle. How could we possibly push *another* battle onto you, completely inconsiderate of your circumstances? 'Oh, please, heroes, we're in such trouble and we can't handle it on our own, please drop everything you're doing to help us, we beg you!'"

She shrugged. "I'm sorry, but no. As if we could make such a shameless request. This isn't about asking others for help, it's about clinging like a leech to people to whom we're already indebted and placing further burden on them."

Lost for a response, I unconsciously looked to Menel for help. *Umm, what is she... just... what?*

With an incredibly complicated expression, Menel said simply, "See? Elf."

I could only nod. They were incredibly noble and an incredible pain to deal with. I could understand what everyone had said about them.

This nature of theirs might have arisen from the way they lived such long lives in perpetual youth. As a result of hardly aging, there weren't many children or elderly in the settlement who needed protecting. Most of them were physically young. That was what enabled them to make these choices. Humans who grow old in no time at all couldn't hope to imitate them.

"That's how it is, so thank you, but there's no need for you to needlessly use your power to help us."

As I was thinking about what I should do about this, Ghelreis lumbered over. Because it was dawn right now, his hard expression, made sterner by the scar running down from his forehead, looked drowsy. His eyelids were still half-closed. "What is it?" he asked.

"Well, you see..." I explained the situation to him.

A deep expression spread across his face. "Truly, elves never change."

"What do you think we should do?"

Ghelreis hummed and nodded. “Just do it, I say.”

Well said, I thought. It was clear that he was a veteran. “Alright, let’s just do it, then. Menel, can you tell where the Lord of the Woods is located?”

“It’s weak, but I can just about pick it up, sure.”

“Ghelreis, please gather Al and Reystov. Full gear.”

“Mm.”

“Once we’re all here, we’ll eat breakfast and go.”

Dine looked between us all, flustered. “W-Wait, what? Wait a minute. You’re talking as though you’re going on a stroll to walk off your breakfast. Where are you going?”

“Well, beast hunting.”

“B-But we don’t...”

“Who said we can’t help unless we’re asked? We’re sticking our noses in whether you like it or not,” Menel said lightly. “And more to the point”—he poked my arm—“there’s no way regular old beasts are going to wear us two down at this point.”

It really wasn’t much different from an after-meal stroll, and it would inconvenience me more to have to abandon them. I had sworn an oath to my god that as her hands, I would bring salvation to those in sorrow. In this world where gods existed, a very strong oath was a serious thing to make. It was even close to a geas, a type of vow from Irish mythology in my previous world. It was easy to imagine that breaking one intentionally wouldn’t bring about good results, and more importantly, if we came back here to find this settlement destroyed, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night.

Ghelreis was right. It would be best for us to take it upon ourselves to interfere and help for our own reasons.

“So,” Menel said, “what do proud and noble elves do when the people who helped them go wandering into dangerous territory all by themselves?”

Dine groaned in frustration. “Oh... boo!” It wouldn’t make sense for them to stop us, and they would find it physically impossible to do so in the first place.

“Wait there a minute. I’ll go and call some skilled people who can get moving right away. Don’t you dare go on your own! Understand?!” Dine went running off.

Menel, Ghelreis, and I looked at each other and laughed out loud.

◆

All across the land, forests home to elves were held to be inviolable territory. I could give all kinds of reasons, but the simplest and most powerful one was that most elves who kept guard over a forest were excellent hunter-warriors or elementalists. Opposing the race of elves within a forest meant a brutal death. Specifically, you would be chased around like a hunter’s prey, unable to get any real sleep, and after being toyed with by the fairies, you would become food for the animals. Therefore, elven forests were off-limits, sacred territory feared and respected by all races.

The elven settlement in Lothdor, however, didn’t have very many strong warriors or elementalists. This made sense; the main hunter-warriors and elementalists among them had apparently died in battle, boldly fighting the demons during the collapse of the Union Age. In elven society, that was a severe loss, because elves typically lived long lives and didn’t bear many children.

Things got even worse after that, when the forest was cursed by a Taboo Word and the fall of the Iron Country left it isolated. Due to the roaming monsters and the poison, even food was difficult to come by and the fairies’ power was weakened. There was no way they could raise any new warriors or elementalists under those circumstances. And from what I heard, the few talented elves who survived the Great Collapse attempted contact with the outside, only to fail and never return.

Now that I thought about it, some of the corpses in that murky river were only partially rotten. If those remains had been two hundred years old, they would surely have all been bones by now... which could only mean one thing.

Furthermore, due to the fall of the Iron Country, the supply of weapons had dried up, so metal products seemed to be very precious. There were even people using stone arrowheads or spears with stone blades, as if it were the

Stone Age.

I could see that if beasts had claimed the Lord of the Woods' domain in circumstances like this, there was no way that the elves could reclaim it very easily. In fact, I thought it was impressive enough that despite being put in such a stressful situation, they had still managed to keep things under control and continue sending people out without giving up on contacting the outside. It felt as though they had already stepped some distance over the line where a human settlement would have long since collapsed.

"So, the beasts that have taken over the domain are bug-type beasts... devil-bugs, I think they're called..." We were walking through a forest of dead trees under a cloudy sky. Dine had accompanied us in the end, joined by four elven hunters. "The defensive strength of the giant earwigs with their hard shells is hard to deal with..."

"Ah! These, right?! I'll do my best!"

"Mm. This will be good training, young master."

Al smashed them with his Immense halberd as they appeared. The ones he missed were crushed by Ghelreis's Sword-smasher mace.

"Then there are the purple poison moths that come down from the sky..."

"Right." Telperion's silver string sang a high-pitched, beautiful note in Menel's hand as it was pulled back and then released. The approaching poison moth was shot perfectly through its weakest point and fell to earth.

"Ah, watch out, poison scales..."

"Sure, sure."

Without even an incantation from Menel, the wind scattered the scales according to his will.

They were hardly having any difficulty. As the three of them cleared away the giant bugs, Dine stood there dumbfounded. The other elves were equally surprised. But there was nothing particularly surprising about it. This threat wasn't significant enough to destroy an already seriously weakened elven village. These three hadn't trained themselves so weakly that this would give

them a hard time.

“There’s nothing for us to do, is there?” I said, smiling wryly.

“Standing by’s important,” Reystov admonished me.

He was right; the reason Al, Menel, and Ghelreis could focus on what was in front of them and go all out was because we were standing on alert behind them. This was an important role in itself. But ultimately, I remained in that role all the way into the domain, where we were confronted with the sight of so many cocoons and larvae that it almost got a “blergh” out of me.

Menel cleared it up. He poured some strength back into the Lord of the Woods. The noxious air began to clear. Power returned to the forest. The elves cheered. And still I hadn’t gotten anything at all to do.

It made me feel kind of... itchy.

“Maybe I should have gotten in on the action...”

“You know, for how calm you look, you can be real bloodthirsty sometimes.”

I looked away.

◆

The large trees, which had been covered in revolting bugs and started to die, regained a little of their vitality. The elves were openly displaying their joy, but gradually their beaming expressions began to fade, and before I realized it, looks of shame had taken their place.

“William, are you sure this was okay?” Dine asked the question that seemed to be on all of their minds.

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“If the dragon or the demons notice you because you’ve done this...”

“We’ll be in big trouble.” I nodded. That would definitely be bad. We were already at the western foot of the mountain range. Now that we had drawn so close, it would be difficult for them to immediately move all their forces positioned on the east side over to the west, but even so, what we had done was still risky.

“Then you—”

“However—” I put a hand up and stopped Dine as she tried to argue further. “Abandoning this village at this stage would be even more unthinkable. Who knows how many of you could die by the time we get back.”

Poison, monsters, food, resources—the factors that could lead to someone dying in this place were too numerous to list. Furthermore, it was possible that we wouldn’t be able to return at all. As long as we were going to be fighting, we intended to win, but only a fool wouldn’t give any consideration to what might happen should he lose.

“So this is fine.”

Just as I’d declared to the god of undeath, I had no intention of abandoning anyone in order to win. I’d made an oath to that effect, and I intended to keep it. And that was why my god was providing me with such extraordinary protection. It was far too late to contemplate breaking that oath.

“Are you sure?”

“I swear on the flame of the goddess, I don’t regret it.”

That’s right. I didn’t regret it. Judging by the prickling feeling on the back of my neck, things probably hadn’t turned out very well, but I was prepared for that, and I had been ever since the day I chose this way of living. Only...

“Al, Reystov, and Ghelreis... I’m sorry for getting you involved in my personal business.”

Menel aside, this hadn’t had much to do with the other three. I bowed my head to them, thinking that they might not have a very good opinion of me.

“I knew you would do this, so please don’t let it play on your mind, sir,” Al said. “Without you, Sir Will, I wouldn’t even have reached this place to begin with. I’d probably have died on the way.” He smiled.

“The young master is quite correct.” Ghelreis nodded slowly with his usual stern face.

“Yeah,” said Reystov. “Nothing new there. Anyway, if I know you, you’re planning on going right now. I packed already.”

Reystov understood my pattern of behavior. I was grateful for that.

“What? Right... now?”

“Yes. Can you show us the way to the nearest underground path? Oh, we’ll be abandoning the boat, so please do what you want with the cargo and food we can’t carry with us. We’ve also left a simple map.”

If I’d just said, “You can have these,” there was a chance that the elves wouldn’t accept them, so I was going to leave it all behind to give them no choice. If one of the elves used our boat to go upstream, return to the lake, and head towards the city by the lakeside, Gus would probably attend to the rest as he saw fit. My grandpa was proficient in Elvish and also knew that our city was located downriver.

Dine still hadn’t replied.

“If we’ve been noticed by the enemy, speed will be of the essence,” I prompted. “So please make it quick.”

“Alright.” Dine nodded and looked around at the other elves behind her as if to check something with them. Then she turned back to us. “I’ll send one of us back to the village to inform everyone. So please, take us with you. We should at least be good as decoys or shields.”

They all wore the same expression of steadfast resolve. Menel opened his mouth to reply, but I forestalled him. “We don’t want you,” I said, dismissing their resolve out of hand. “You’re too weak.”

I thought I heard them quietly gasp. Though I’d called them “recovered,” that only meant that I’d removed the toxins and miasma inside their bodies. The physical strength lost by being poisoned for so long couldn’t be recovered by benediction. Even these, the finest fighters among them, didn’t look well in the face.

“We can’t afford dead weight.” I was firm about it.

Dine scrunched up her face. “You’ve done so much for us, and you want us simply to show you the way into a death trap?”

“Yes.”

“This is so humiliating,” Dine muttered, furrowing her brow and looking as though she had just taken a bite of something terribly bitter. “But... alright... fine. We’ll abide by your decision.”

The elves behind her began to protest.

“But Dinelind...”

“Don’t you think this is rather...”

But Dine turned back to them and said, “Surely you don’t think we should turn our eyes from our own powerlessness and compound our shame?” Those words silenced them. “Right now, we can’t do anything to change the fact that we’re weaklings in poor health. We’re weaklings...” It sounded as though she was trying to convince herself.

“It’s this way,” she said, and started walking. “Follow me.”

I got a slight glimpse of her violet eyes. She was fighting back tears of frustration.

Menel whispered to me. “Hey, Will... you know I could’ve...”

“No. I was the right one to say it.” Menel had probably been intending to take that unenviable job and make himself the bad guy, but I thought that would probably be far too cruel.

◆

It was a set of strange metal doors fitted into an enormous stone arch. A mixture of dwarven construction and elven ornamentation, the doors had countless Signs engraved upon them in an ancient style of writing. Toxic miasma seeped out of small gaps around their edges.

“The West Gate... I never thought the day would come when I would come here again,” Ghelreis murmured with feeling.

“So this is the entrance to the Iron Country...” Al gazed at the doors and spent a while in silence with his lips drawn together. No one said anything for a while. Ghelreis hadn’t been back home in two hundred years, and for Al, this was the first time.

“You’re really going through here?”

“Yes.” I placed poison-resistance magic and blessings on each of us. Menel added to that by summoning some assistance from the elementals of air, gathering clean and fresh air into our surroundings. Reystov cast his eyes around cautiously, while Ghelreis and Al gave their undivided attention to a final inspection of their gear.

As they worked, I gave the doors a look-over. They had a large door knocker made of metal that was fashioned after a flower. Several large Signs that were engraved near it were now quite worn away. I read them carefully.

“*Pulsate et aperietur vobis.*”

On a closer look, the doors were made of an evil-warding metal that no one knew how to smelt any longer, and not only that, multiple blessings had also been placed upon them. They were the kind of doors that would inflict serious damage upon the minions of the evil gods if they so much as carelessly approached them, let alone knocked. They were doors made with the advanced technology of the Union Age, which were impossible to recreate with the world’s current level of technology.

“Al, knock,” I said to my gentle, black-haired friend. “That’s the sign.”

“Sir Will, umm, you want me to be the one to do it?”

“Who better?” He was the true successor to the lost Iron Country; there could be no one with the right to open these doors other than him. “This job *should* be yours.”

“Okay...” Al went quiet as if hesitating for a while. Eventually, he pushed his lips into a thin line, and made his way towards the doors. He was tall for a dwarf, but standing next to the enormous doors, he looked very small. He took a single deep breath, took hold of the door knocker, and with a serious manner, he struck the doors twice, producing two deep, resonant sounds.

The Words engraved upon the doors shone, and the structure enclosing the doors rumbled. Slowly, weightily, as though welcoming us in with both arms spread wide, the huge doors opened—

That instant, a powerful chill ran down my spine. My entire body stiffened, and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. A single image was thrust

into my mind.

A gold reptilian eye staring at us.

Pierced by its glare, I felt my heart tighten as though it were being slowly squeezed. My legs trembled. I felt like I was going to fall to my knees. My breathing grew ragged and heavy. Instinct grabbed reason's collar with all its strength and screamed madly into its face: *Run. Run, run, run! Abandon everything and run right now! You can't win!*

Then I noticed the others. They were on their knees, clutching their chests. It looked as though several of the elves had already passed out. The golden eye in my mind narrowed as its stare grew more murderous. The pressure increased further. My mind was scrambled by worry and fear. My knees started to buckle.

I clenched my teeth. Tensing up all the muscles in my body, I opened my eyes wide and dug both my feet into the ground. I calmed the stormy sea inside my heart and forced my ragged breathing under control.

"*Fortia!!*"

I shouted out the Word that meant bravery and strength. At the same time as the influence of the Word spread like a wave through the space surrounding me, there was a sudden release of pressure inside my head, and the image of the golden eye vanished without a trace. I breathed heavily. It was gone. I could sense nothing.

But I knew he was grinning.

◆

"So we *were* noticed..."

This wasn't the work of demons. Even a demon with the rank of Commander, no, even a King probably couldn't perform a feat like that. I hadn't felt such a sense of despair and pressure since the god of undeath's Echo. And it had taken no more than a look. Without a doubt, this was the work of the dragon. It was the foul-dragon from the age of the gods, whose power even the gods recognized and whom Stagnate had predicted would be my death.

"Calamity's Sickle, the foul-dragon Valacirca..."

The demons aside, I'd never expected to be able to cheat my way to a victory against the dragon. I'd felt a prickling on the back of my neck immediately after we'd purified the Lord of the Woods, so I'd even had a vague awareness that we'd been detected. I'd known it—but I hadn't expected Valacirca to be this far off the scale.

Menel breathed very deeply and hit his own quivering legs over and over, cursing at them. Reystov was breathing slowly and steadily. His hand was gripped very, very tightly around the handle of his sword. Ghelreis and Al had just about managed to prevent themselves from collapsing by leaning against one of the doors.

When I turned around, I saw that all of the elves had passed out with the exception of Dine. Even she had sunk to the ground and was shaking heavily and weeping.

That malicious gaze from below the earth was so harmful on its own that "devastating" would be too tame a word. So this was a dragon, and this was what it meant to oppose a dragon. I'd been expecting it, but I couldn't help shivering at just how far removed from everything else it was. Demidragons and dragons were nothing alike. This dragon was probably even above the god of undeath's Echo in terms of power.

"You... You're going to fight... this?" Dine murmured in shock.

"Yes. That's why we came."

I looked up at the reddish-brown mountains to which we'd drawn so close. I thought of the peaceful scenery of Whitesails and Torch Port. I thought about the whiteness of the sails traveling back and forth on the river and sea, the cheery shanties, the bustle of people putting their all into their daily labor, the daily activity that ought to continue a long time into the future.

"To take back the mountains. To take back peace."

I gripped the handle of Pale Moon once again. The spear, which I'd grown quite accustomed to by now, fit snugly into my palm just as it had when I first laid hand on it. I incanted a single Word and lit up the blade.

Everyone had already regrouped without me saying anything. With their

weapons in hand, they had picked themselves up and were standing firm. It struck me how ready they looked. Those were the resolved expressions of warriors.

“So, we’ll be going,” I said.

“Don’t sweat it, we’ll make it back alive somehow.”

“Yeah. Just another job.”

“I’ll do my best...”

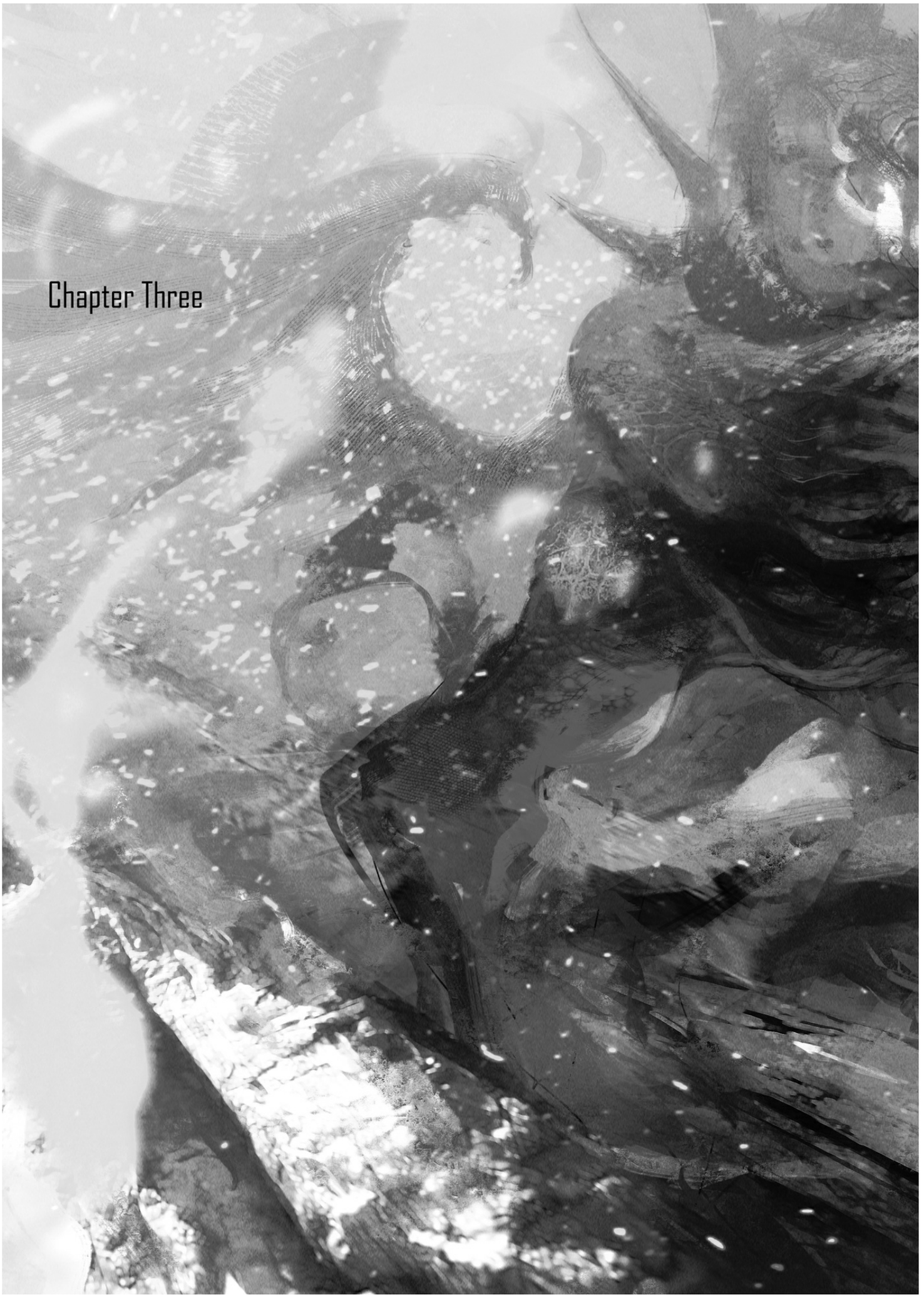
“Mm.”

We all offered a parting remark, and headed for the open doors together. Beyond, the creepy entrance to a pitch-black tunnel awaited us like a gaping maw.

“Wait.” It was Dine’s voice. As I turned around, she shakily rose to her feet and looked directly at us. Her face was pale, but still she gracefully placed a palm over her heart. “We elves of Lothdor will not forget this debt. I swear here to our creator, Rhea Silvia. One day, we will repay your kindness.” She smiled, as though giving us her blessing. “May the protection of the good gods and the spirits of courage be with you wherever you go.”

All of us replied with a smile and a nod. And then we walked. Into the stone tunnels of the dwarves, the roots of the Rust Mountains, the ruins of the once-prosperous Iron Country, the downward slope of darkness—

We walked forward, never turning back.


Chapter Three

Beyond the West Gate lay stone walls and stone floors—endless stone passages that gave a rigid and cold impression. The passages were wide with high ceilings, probably because they had been important trade routes with the elven lands.

A lot of dust had piled up over the past two hundred years. It would have been normal for a place like this to have spider webs everywhere and be covered in droppings from bats and beasts, but there was no sign of anything like that. The reason was the foul-dragon's miasma filling the air with a black, mist-like smoke.

"Urgh."

"I don't think any of us want to stay here long."

Though I'd stacked anti-poison miracles and magic upon us, I could still sense something unpleasant. And because of the miasma filling the air, we didn't have a very clear view ahead of us, either.

"Enemy encounters and traps are the big worry," Al said.

Ghelreis nodded. "Apart from the demon traps, I also cannot deny that there might still be some untriggered traps that were set by our fallen brothers."

He was right. Since they'd been trying to repel a demon invasion, the dwarves of the Iron Country at the time must have prepared a large number of defenses. In a situation like this, it was possible to anticipate that we wouldn't be dealing with tame traps that set off alarms, but serious ones that could kill you instantly if you stepped on them.

"About light. Gonna be using fire?"

"Let's not. There's a chance that there are buildups of bad air."

The best practice for a source of light was to prepare both a magical light and a regular flame and make it so that even if one went out, you still had the other. However, this used to be a mine, so I had some concerns that buildups of gas could ignite here. Deciding to hold back on the fire, I supplemented Pale Moon by converging mana into several pebbles with the Word of Light engraved upon them and handed them out. Menel threw them into lanterns with shutters,

making it so we could control the amount of light being produced. It was a trick that also considered the scout at the front of the party, who needed to work in low light.

“What order are we going in?” Menel asked.

“Menel, you lead us. Be on your guard for traps and demons. Ghelreis, you go behind him.”

I placed Menel, who had good ears and could detect traps, at the front. Next came Ghelreis. Like all dwarves, he could see in the dark and excelled at sensing things underground, and additionally, he had a good grasp of what the internal structure of the Iron Country was like at the time.

“Then Al and I will go in the middle. Reystov, you take the back, please.”

I placed Reystov the veteran at the end of the line and asked him to watch out for attacks from the rear. Because I could use magic and was the most powerful force in battle and Al had high physical offensive strength, I placed us right in the middle so we could quickly change places according to the situation.

“Our opponents are demons. There are some that crawl along walls and ceilings, and some have wings. Take care you aren’t surprised by an attack from an unexpected direction.” Everyone nodded.

As we got walking, I noticed Al constantly turning his head, so I added in a quiet voice, “Oh, I didn’t mean to stay alert in all directions at all times.”

“Really?”

“Yes. After all, that’s impossible.”

A person who has his guard up in all directions at all times only exists in the imagination. Humans can’t change the fact that they find it easier to detect things in front of them than behind them, and being constantly on your guard in enemy territory is exhausting. That’s why it’s meaningful to have a few people each look in different directions to cover for each other.

“Just keep it in the back of your mind. It’ll make it faster for us to reorganize ourselves.”

When you are actually attacked from an unexpected direction, whether or

not you were told that might happen translates to a difference in the speed of the reaction. When something they weren't expecting in the slightest happens to a person, they freeze up and stop thinking for an instant. It happens to everyone. I'd mentioned it just to be safe, but I'd forgotten that this kind of dangerous journey was a first for Al.

I re-explained in a way that was easier to understand. "Menel and Ghelreis are watching what's ahead and on the ground, and Reystov is keeping an eye out behind us, so we should focus on what's happening above and to the sides. The stuff about surprise attacks is just something to bear in mind. This will get pretty tiring, so we'll take little breaks from time to time and have someone stand on watch."

"Right!" Al nodded enthusiastically. He really was quick on the uptake, and his close-combat skills were improving rapidly as well. I was sure that he would get used to the tried-and-tested techniques of exploration just as quickly.

The straight path continued. We all pushed forward in silence.

Every so often, Menel would stick a palm out behind him to stop the rest of us, and spend a moment listening out or disarming a trap. Deterioration over the years had already rendered the bow guns in the walls harmless due to lack of tension, but the same couldn't be said for the pitfalls and spike balls. Menel discovered those kinds of dangerous traps effortlessly and neutralized them with a practiced hand by either disarming the mechanisms or marking the spots that would trigger them.

As Ghelreis watched him work, he said briefly, "The Rock Hall soon. After that, it branches terribly." Then, as an afterthought, he said, "This has been unexpected."

I nodded in agreement. "Yes. *There weren't any demon ambushes.*"

There hadn't even been one. We'd clearly been discovered by the dragon, yet there was no sign of any of them coming to intercept us.

◆

"Does that, um, mean that the dragon and the demons aren't acting as one?"

"Can't be sure of that yet. Rock Hall's coming up. They're probably all waiting

there, right? Hoping to surround the enemy in a wide, open place and finish them off with a full-scale assault. Usual stuff."

Drawing the enemy deep into your own territory to encircle and destroy them was certainly an effective technique.

"On the other hand, if there *isn't* an ambush in the Rock Hall..."

"Yeah. Al's right if so."

Ghelreis had said that the path branched terribly after Rock Hall. Once we made our way into one of those branches, the demons wouldn't be able to track us completely. There was no way that whoever was leading the demons would choose *not* to send his forces to intercept us at Rock Hall. If something like that happened, the only possible interpretation could be that the demon leader hadn't noticed our intrusion in the first place. In other words, it would be the surest possible proof that Valacirca, almost certainly the owner of that murderous stare, hadn't teamed up with the demons at all.

"Wait..." Menel held a palm out behind him and stopped everyone. He listened out for something at the other end of the gently curving passage.

"What?"

"Noise. Something metal jangling. And footsteps, back and forth." He spoke in a hushed voice.

"Is there an ambush?"

"Can't tell. Something's there. That's all I'm sure of."

"Rock Hall is very close," Ghelreis said.

"Um, so... doesn't that mean... this is... um..."

A demon ambush was probably a safe assumption. We all nodded together and gripped our weapons.

"Ghelreis and I will go in with our shields up and test the waters."

We took the large shields off our backs. If we covered each other with these shields which could cover the vast majority of our bodies, we would be able to endure their attacks even if they had us half-surrounded and fired on us all at

once the moment we left the passage. After seeing how much power they were packing, we could decide our course of action according to the situation. For instance, we could withdraw, barrage them with magic, or retreat slowly into the passage as we dealt with them.

"Menel, you provide support from the end of the passage. Al and Reystov, stand by. Use your judgment and attack when it looks right." Keeping it short, I told everyone their roles. We reorganized our line, cut down the amount of light from our lanterns, silenced our footsteps as much as we could, and continued along the passage in deadly silence.

Stopping just before the Rock Hall, I made sure everyone could see my hand—the hand gripping my spear—and I raised one finger. Then I raised a second. And at the instant the third was raised, Ghelreis and I started charging forward, our shields held in front of us.

Once we entered the wide-open space, the miasma thinned.

It was a vast cylindrical space with a very high ceiling. A spiral staircase ran up the wall, similar to the inside of a screw hole, and at countless places along it I could see passages going off in different directions. And also—

"Ohhh!"

"Dwarves! Dwarves are here!"

"Humans, too, and an elf."

"Did Lothdor not fall?!"

"Are you alright? Did you have to run?"

"Are you injured? Don't worry, my brothers, this place is safe!"

Many voices echoed around the Rock Hall.

Ghelreis's face crumpled. I, too, unconsciously grit my teeth.

"How is the war going?"

"Come over and talk."

"You must have had a hard time."

A large number of skeletons were calling out to us.

Gathered near a sturdy defensive barrier, they stood wearing armor, with axes in their hands and shields on their backs, full of the will to fight. They had been reduced to undead, their rational minds probably half-consumed by the attachments they had held in life, and even now they still continued to fight, not even understanding what had become of themselves, to protect their already long-lost homeland.

◆

Ghelreis pressed his lips together tightly and breathed in and out several times before he finally managed to squeeze out one word. “Everyone.”

“Ohh!”

“You, you’re Ghelreis!”

“I thought you escaped.”

“What about the people? Are they safe?”

“Why are you here?”

Having no eyeballs, the skeletons had no normal sense of vision. They must have recognized him through some supernatural sense.

“Could it be you snuck away from the group and came back?!”

“Hahaha. How very like you.”

“You’ll be in for it when the Captains hear about this.”

“But you have guts.”

“Indeed. Having you will be a tremendous help. Come, let us fight together.”

The skeletons laughed loudly. Ghelreis tried to say something, but the words caught in his throat. Nothing else would come out. Who could blame him?

I should probably send them on, I thought, and went to take a step forward when someone grabbed my shoulder. I turned around.

“Al...”

Al—Vindalfr was there. He had a serious expression unlike any I’d seen from him before. In his eyes dwelt a dignified light. “Let me. I think I should be the

one to tell them.”

I watched him walk towards them. There was no need to lend him a hand. That was how I felt.

“My lord?”

“Lord Aurvangr?”

“No, but it can’t be. His Highness should be in the throne room.”

Al stepped forward in front of the murmuring skeletons.

“My name is Vindalfr!” He struck the long handle of his halberd against the stone floor. “I inherit the blood of Aurvangr, final ruler of the Iron Country!”

The skeletons stirred again upon hearing these words.

“Final?”

“He will not be the final.”

“Not as long as we are here.”

“Yes.”

“Look at us. Our spirit remains strong as ever.”

“As long as we remain standing, the Iron Country has not yet fallen.”

“Yes. It has not fallen.”

“It has not fallen.”

Al looked around, not responding to the voices being raised from every direction. “This is a spectacular defensive barrier, well constructed. You must have been mending it and improving it continually for some time.” His face expressed complex emotions that couldn’t be put into simple words. I wondered what he was thinking right now about this sight he’d encountered in the homeland he’d never before visited.

“Sure is.”

“We exhausted all our technical capabilities.”

“We will never allow the demons entrance through the West Gate.”

“The Iron Country will never fall.”

“Yes. It will never fall.”

Voice after voice denied ruin.

“I understand. I understand.” Al accepted those voices. And then, he screamed, “But even so, the Iron Country has fallen!” It was a pained, heartrending scream. “You warriors all died! Our monarch Aurvangr perished! Lothdor withered pitifully, and the Iron Country became the Rust Mountains, infested by demons and a dragon!”

Ghelreis, Menel, Reystov—none of them said a word.

“That... cannot... be.”

“It will not fall.”

“The Iron Country will not fall.”

“It will never fall.”

But now, some of the skeletons had started to make quiet groans.

“You know it is true! As brave warriors and dwarves, do not avert your eyes!” Al’s voice beat the truth against them, again and again. And before I knew it, the skeleton’s voices had also begun to wither. Their faces no longer had any expressions, but I felt as if I could see them filling with despair.

“But still...” Al drew a deep breath and shouted even louder. “But still, you warriors!” The halberd that had once belonged to Ewen the Immense struck stone once again. It had a crisp sound, the kind that called a person to attention and made them stand up straight. “My grandfather Aurvangr did strike back at the foul-dragon and stole away one of its eyes! It is a hero’s accomplishment, praised even by the gods!” Al’s natural voice echoed around the Rock Hall. “And I... I, Vindalfr, have rushed here with heroes of this modern age to carry on his great feat!”

His back was no longer curved.

“All you warriors! The Iron Country has fallen! It has fallen without doubt! But may our creator Blaze and the god of the flame Gracefeel hear my words on their holy thrones—”

The skeletons' drooping heads began to rise.

"I swear to you here! That on the names of the good gods and the countless spirits of our ancestors, I will take back the Iron Country and its former prosperity!"

They were powerful words, words of zeal that lit a fire inside the heart. There was no timid hunched-over dwarf standing there anymore. Instead—

"The fire of the furnace still burns! The flames shall spread from your divine torch and purge the rust, and the mountains of rust shall be mountains of iron once again!"

A lord stood before us.

The skeletons moaned. But the tone was different from before.

And then Al walked up to each of them in turn. He held their hands, smiled at them with a face on the brink of tears, and spoke to them. "So... please... enough. Rest now. You have all done well." Each time, another of the skeletons returned to ash.

For a while, the Rock Hall was filled with the sounds of axes, shields, and armor clattering to the stone floor.

◆

After the final corpse had crumbled to the floor, Al turned around. His expression made him look like a completely different person. Maybe all the things he'd experienced up until now had changed him, or maybe it was that one instant. Perhaps it was both. People tend to have aspects that rarely change, but sometimes, a person can change into something unrecognizable in a single moment.

"Well said. Well said, young master." Ghelreis's voice was full of emotion. "Let us purge the demons and accomplish this without fail. Young master, this bag of bones will protect you even if it costs him his life."

"Please don't let it cost you your life," Al said with a wry smile. "There are still many things I need you to teach me. About these mountains, and about battle."

As Al said this without a hint of tension, Menel clapped him on the shoulder.

“The revival of a country. Brother, what a pain-in-the-ass oath you made for yourself. You didn’t need to get so serious about it. That was dumb.”

Al shook his head. “No, it wasn’t so dumb.”

“Oh?”

“Unlike the oaths that you two made, Menel, Sir Will, mine has an end. So who’s the dumb one?” he said mischievously.

“You got me.” Menel laughed.

Reystov nodded, completely cool as always. “To fulfill that oath, first we need to win. And survive.”

“Right!” Al nodded, then looked back at me. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Sir Will. Shall we go? I await your instructions.”

Hearing how humbly he prompted me, I couldn’t help but laugh a little. “No more ‘Sir.’”

“Huh?”

“Having royalty as my squire would be a little too much, don’t you think?”

There were appearances and authority and things like that to think about. If Al was going to set his mind on taking back his country and becoming its ruler, I couldn’t always have him bowing his head to me. So I decided to tell him that now was a good point to end our relationship as knight and squire, master and disciple.

Al suddenly got all flustered. “What?! B-But, um, Sir Will!”

“Look, I said no more ‘Sir.’ The determination you just showed and that oath, you meant them, didn’t you?”

“Of course!” His answer was instant. He strode up to me and looked directly up at me. “I will not break my oath to the gods and my ancestors.” Then his tone became even stronger. “But Sir Will, you will still always be Sir Will to me. You are my one and only master, and I respect you.”

His imploring eyes took the wind out of my sails. In his hand, he was gripping the handle of Blood’s dagger, which I had gifted him.

“Is that so...”

“Of course it’s so. Just because I call myself a ruler doesn’t change my feelings of respect.” Al’s determination looked firm.

“I guess we’ll have to keep it, then.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, and Al?” I smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “You did well. I’m proud of you. And they must have been happy, too.”

“Thank you!” Al nodded, smiling brightly. Then, as if he had suddenly realized something, mixed feelings showed in his expression. “I wonder if I should be a little bit grateful to the god of undeath, too.”

As someone serving the god of the flame, it was a little hard for me to agree with that. But still, there was no doubt that the reason the warriors had been able to pass on happily was because of Stagnate’s blessing. The only problem was that it was also due to Stagnate’s blessing that they had gotten so lost and spent the last two hundred years suffering from their obsession. I could only make the same kind of complicated expression myself.

“J-Just a little is probably okay,” I said to him.

He laughed nervously and offered a small prayer to the god of undeath as well. I got the feeling that my god was making an incredibly sour face, but I apologized in my mind, asking for her understanding. “Right then,” I said, after a breath.

“Ya.”

Our conversation reached a stopping point, and everyone took that as a cue to take hold of their weapons again. I could hear sounds in the distance, coming through all of the Rock Hall’s passages, that seemed to be getting closer. Among them were heavy footsteps and light footsteps, dragging noises, grating noises, and eerie cries.

“It was necessary, but it seems we’ve taken a little too long.”

It seemed that the demons had finally picked up on our intrusion. But it was too late now.

“Let’s go,” I said, holding up my spear. “To take back the Iron Mountains and the country of the dwarves.”

From here, the task was simple. Push forward, farther and farther forward, and cut and kill and slash and slay.

“On the flame of Gracefeel!”

◆

The first thrust of my spear pierced the bat-like wings of the wiry demon in front of me. As it fell, I kicked it as hard as I could. A strong impact shook my greave. I had definitely shattered its skull. Not stopping to check, I swung Pale Moon around again with a shout. I swept aside several smaller demons in one swing, smashing them into a wall and destroying them.

These were strikes with no technique, just pure muscle power, but in a melee like this, going wild and never letting up was a better idea than overthinking things. Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force.

After smashing and destroying the remainder of the mob as well, fully repulsing the attack from the rear, I turned to look at the others. The group of demons attacking us from the front were being overwhelmed. Pincer attacks are a powerful strategy; however, lacking the power to make the pincer lethal, they had achieved nothing more than splitting apart their own forces, making each side a target for being individually destroyed.

The wide stone passage continued to fill with the crumbling dust of defeated demons. Reystov in particular was displaying incredible fighting skills at the front of the line. He was unstoppable death incarnate. The moment he encountered an enemy, he leaped into range and killed it with a swift thrust straight out of his normal stance. In the rare case that they survived the hit or that several foes charged at him at once, he would chain together attacks and kill them all before they had any say in the matter.

That was all he was doing when it came down to it, but that simplicity was his strength. No matter what kind of enemy came or from where, he would get the first strike and make it lethal. He would crush his opponent with the strongest attack at first encounter, never giving them the chance to dictate the pace of the fight. It was a simple style of relentlessly forcing his greatest strength onto

his opponents.

To undo his strategy, one would either have to unleash an incredibly cunning scheme or use simple strength or numbers to give Reystov more than he could handle. But Reystov was a solidly high-level master of the sword, and on top of that, his favorite weapon now packed extra ferocity, having been strengthened by Gus's Signs among other things. Just now, a few demons had attempted to shoot him and cast magic at him from outside his range, but they crumbled to the ground after being impaled through the throat and spinal cord by his sword's "extending thrust."

Reystov was untouchable. And now, Al was learning a lot from him about how to fight. Al had always been quick at absorbing knowledge, picking up techniques and attitudes like sand absorbing water, but I'd never felt it as strongly as right now.

As if he had copied Reystov's boldness and simply imprinted it on himself, Al leaped into dense patches of enemies and swept them away with his Immense halberd before they could manage a response. Its thick and bulky blade was sized like a traffic sign or something from my old world. The sight of Al bellowing as he sliced demons in half with it was pretty amazing to behold.

No matter what enemy appeared, Al would force them to face his phenomenal physical strength and heavy weapon, obliterating all their defenses and sending them flying. That was probably the bedrock of Reystov's fighting style, and Al had picked it up from him.

Three demons had just come charging at him at the same time. One giant swing of his halberd cleaved them all through the chest. He was like a small tempest.

"There should be a branch coming up next. Take the right."

Ghelreis, on the other hand, wasn't getting directly involved much. He just gave us directions as he watched Reystov and Al grow the pile of demon corpses at a frightful pace. From time to time, he would lumber into action and deliver a mighty finishing blow to a demon who was still breathing or use his large shield to cover a tiny gap in Reystov and Al's defense.

There was absolutely nothing flashy about his work, but it was a great source

of relief to know that we had backup waiting, with strength in reserve, who could trade places with us if needed. The reason Reystov and Al were able to go so wild was a result of Ghelreis's intelligent support. He truly was quietly brilliant.

"Got it nice and easy back here thanks to our tough-as-nails front line," Menel said casually while firing his bow. Silver-string produced an airy note, and the glint of the mithril arrowhead shot through the air. At the end of the passage, beyond the darkness and miasma, something gave up a mortal cry. We made our way forward and discovered, in the process of turning to dust, the remains of a Commander-ranked demon shot through the heart.

At a whistle from Menel, winged fairies danced playfully through the air, retrieved the arrow that had come to the end of its flight, and carried it back into his hands. Menel's gaze as he accepted it was the complete opposite of his casual expression.

He manipulated the elementals of earth to trip up dangerous demons, and he used the elementals of air to prevent his enemies from being able to utter Words. The support of the fairies was extremely precise, striking directly at critical points and demonstrating Menel's full potential as the linchpin of our defense.

"And thanks to all the demons piling in, there's no need to watch out for traps, either," he added.

It wasn't all bad news that waves of demons were coming one after another. The fact that these were passages that demons continued to pour through meant that the dangerous traps must either have been removed or set off by rank-and-file demons. There was little danger to us in following the path they'd already taken. That was the reason I could afford to break up our previous formation and put Al and Reystov, who were very good at forcing their way through enemies, in charge of the front.

"Will, are you okay by yourself back there?"

"Hm? There's not much pressure coming from the rear. I'll be fine on my own."

The demons were launching sporadic attacks from the back as well to

pressure us, but these I was handling by myself, eliminating every enemy that came my way.

Demon armies were more of a hassle than human ones. The Soldiers were all savage warriors with no fear of death, and the Commanders were just the same, with the addition that many of them were also users of magic and blessings. If a large number of fearless Soldiers forced me into a chaotic battle in a relatively wide and open place with constant long-range attacks from Commanders and Generals, even I could find myself checkmated.

That was why I had laid out a plan for outflanking our enemy to get inside the tunnel-filled Iron Country. This approach gave us a good chance of victory. At the risk of repeating myself, if a pincer attack is carried out without the power to make the pincer lethal, it's nothing more than a division of forces that makes each side a target for individual destruction.

"Rear guard all by yourself and not breaking a sweat. You're as ridiculous as ever. Gods."

"It's not really like that."

If I'd been on my own, I was sure that I'd have built up so much mental fatigue that I'd definitely have made some kind of mess-up by now. The only reason I was able to push myself so far was because I had allies whom I could leave the other side to.

◆

"Ghelreis, how far along are we now?"

"We've avoided the main route where we'd have been more easily surrounded and descended to the third level through the side paths. Soon will be the Hall of Light, and I expect the dragon will be in the Great Cavern beyond that."

We pressed onward, calmly crushing our enemies as they came. I had no idea where the leader of the demons would be; however, there were only a limited number of places in the dwarves' underground kingdom where a dragon could indulge in a long slumber.

"Long ago, our forefathers drained the stagnant water from an underground

lake and created the Great Cavern. It lies at the very core of the Iron Country."

There the dragon was entrenched, and in all probability, he was waiting for us—Calamity's Sickle, with its golden eye.

"The demons should work out that we're heading towards the dragon. Assuming they lie in wait for us, where would that be?"

"The Hall of Light, I imagine. It's the throne room where Lord Aurvangr gave his last speech so many years ago."

"We have to take it back," Al mumbled.

I nodded too. "Yep. Let's take it back."

We meant the throne—and also the crown. They were just symbols, but that was also what made them important.

"All that work for a symbol? Whatever floats your boat, I guess. I'll back you up."

"Me, too. Everything taken should be taken back."

Menel and Reystov nodded and continued forward, beating the hell out of even more demons. They poured out in great swarms, but the majority of them were Soldiers, or Commanders at worst. Pitted against accomplished warriors, they might as well have been scarecrows.

We traveled through dim stone passages one after another that twisted and branched, sometimes into up and down routes and sometimes with stairs. Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of light.

"Huh?"

A strong, warm light, at odds with this underground space, spread out from a rectangular doorway. It looked like the entrance to a world of light. When we stepped inside, a bright space was there, a vast space with lines of many pillars. There was a chalk ceiling, and a smooth floor in which I couldn't see any joins. All over the ceiling were lines of magic lights cut from clear crystal with Signs carved into them. It was beautiful, dazzling lighting, as though the light of the sun had been replicated within the room.

I didn't have to be told to know that this was the Hall of Light, the seat of the

monarch. And dead ahead, opposite the entrance and at the other end of the rows of pillars, was the throne. It was beautiful and decoratively carved, and sat on it was a single demon.

How could I describe that classless demon sitting brazenly upon the throne? The first words that came to mind were “humanoid insect.” The green shell like a jewel beetle’s that encased its two-meter-tall muscular body made it look almost like a samurai in full armor. In its hands was a horrifyingly thick, spiked club. The demon had the mouthparts of an insect, complete with mandibles. And like some kind of sick joke, on top of its head, in addition to a pair of feelers, sat the crown.

If I remembered correctly, this was a General-ranked demon: a Scarabaeus.

“Sir Will...” After looking at the figure of the demon for a while, Al’s expression turned serious. “Let me do it.”

“Al—no, Vindalfr. Good luck.”

“Thank you.” Al marched forward, no longer turning around to reply.

“Wh—Hey!”

“It’s okay, Menel. Let him go.”

“You want to talk about it first?! That’s a fig General! His chances are—”

“Even so, this is Al’s fight.” I said it so strongly that Menel fell silent. “It’s the fight of a king for his throne.” Menel didn’t look at all happy about it, but a warrior’s pride was at stake. This was a battle in which none of us could afford to interfere.

◆

In the chalk pillar hall filled with light, Al marched confidently towards the throne, which was placed on a slightly higher level than the rest of the room. The beetle-demon—the Scarabaeus—languidly rose to its feet.

I could feel a prickling in the air as mana converged on the spiked club in its hands. And I could tell even from its emotionless, bug-like exterior that it held strong contempt for its diminutive challenger and had confidence bordering on arrogance in its own power. Even though its forces had been thoroughly

slaughtered and its territory encroached upon, it was probably convinced that it could simply deal with us itself and there would be absolutely no problem.

As Ghelreis watched Al march forward, he took a fresh look at the demon and muttered, “I don’t like the look on it.”

I thought the same thing. But the demon’s arrogant confidence wasn’t without basis. Even though it may have borrowed the power of the foul-dragon to do it, this beetle-demon had in fact been the fall of the Iron Country, wiping out an entire army of dwarves who were prepared to fight to the death.

“It’s strong,” I replied.

If this was the supreme commander of the demon army that the High King had dispatched to the Iron Mountains, it would most likely mean that it was at least the equal of the horned demon called a Cernunnos that I’d fought in the Lord of Holly’s domain. It was probably stronger.

With humans, a commander’s rank and their prowess in battle don’t necessarily match up, but when it came to demons, the ones of higher rank were generally stronger and smarter. If it were me fighting it, the odds would likely be in my favor. The beetle-demon did look solid and had magical armor I couldn’t identify, but I thought I’d still be able to overcome it. For Al, though, this might yet be too difficult an opponent.

“You’re gonna let him die ’cause of some pigshit warrior hang-up?” Menel said with a very sour look on his face. “You’re not the only one who taught him, you know.”

“Yeah, I agree.” Reystov nodded. “But either way...”

“Yes. We probably won’t be able to find the time to get involved.”

Just as Al began to close in on the Scarabaeus, the demon raised a sickening cry from its mouthparts. At the same time, the Hall of Light’s dazzling illumination dimmed. The light from the Sign-engraved crystals had been obscured by winged demons descending on us from all angles.

“Fig!” Menel shot through several of them in such quick succession that it would have been impossible to follow the movements of his hands. Demons fell one after another onto the highly polished floor.

This was what it came down to. Demons didn't possess the poetic sense to entertain the idea of a one-on-one fight in any case, and there was no advantage to them in doing so. It was obvious that they would surround us here and go for the kill. That was the real reason I had allowed Al to go alone.

"Now I get it," Menel said. "Hey, Al! If it looks like it's not working out, hold out till we win and keep him on his own! Don't you die!"

The best case would be if Al won, of course, but even if he didn't, so long as we could just keep their "strong piece" occupied with our "weak piece," we could turn the tide of battle comfortably in our favor. If Blood had been here, he might have recommended a one-on-one battle without that kind of calculation behind it, but as for me, I didn't romanticize battle like that. It was simply a calculated decision.

But I had no intention of making light of those sorts of ideals. One's pride, one's duty, one's mission—the amount of passion brought about by these formless things sometimes had the power to smash all ordinary predictions and calculations.

"Thank you very much, Menel!" Al called out. "But I will win. I will beat this thing!"

Then he roared. "On the flame and the fire, the mountainfolk shall put thee to death!" He sprinted at the demons' leader with the ferocious roar of a warrior. "Take my dwarven axe!" His halberd cleaved an arc through the air towards the commander of the demons.

◆

The demon's club intercepted the halberd. Splinters flew everywhere. Immediately, the halberd turned, cutting a new arc towards its foe. Roaring, Al chained together attacks with violent intensity, pulling back and swinging around his long-handled axe. Because Al was tall for a dwarf, when he swung around his halberd, he had a moderate edge in reach compared to the Scarabaeus with its club. With this all-out barrage of blows from outside his opponent's range, which reminded me suddenly of Blood and his broadsword, Al was probably intending to make the most of his advantage.

However, I didn't have the luxury of watching intently.



The Hall of Light reverberated with loud footsteps, the shrill screeching of weapons, wails, and deathly cries.

Hordes of Soldier demons attempted repeated assaults against us through the entrance we came in by, and each time, they were crushed by Reystov and Ghelreis. Like a storm, Reystov stabbed, swept, and cut them down with his blade of mana. The ones who managed to narrowly evade his attacks were checked by Ghelreis waiting to the side and smashed to pulp.

Just as a lion doesn't fear a herd of gazelles, and a wolf doesn't fear a flock of sheep, the two trained warriors didn't fear these hordes of demons and in fact were driving them away. I too readied my spear, pointing it towards a demon that was starting to get too close and held a curved sword in its hand.

All around the hall, demons that had probably been waiting in ambush here the entire time were appearing. They were mostly Commanders, but occasionally there were some of higher level that were likely approaching General rank. Brandishing Pale Moon, I stabbed them, slammed them, and destroyed them one by one.

A chill ran down the nape of my neck. I instinctively bent backward. Something swept by where my throat had just been. Then came a second and third strike. I parried the slash and the thrust mostly by gut feeling and took a large leap backwards to dodge. I'd definitely knocked away something, but I still couldn't see a thing.

"*Cadere Araneum!*" I incanted a Word, dropping down a web of magic. Entangled in the web, there was something in a place where nothing seemed to be. Maybe this demon had hidden its form with the Word of Invisibility, or maybe it was always invisible to begin with. I had no time to check. As the enemy struggled, I swung down my spear and crushed it. "There's invisible enemies here!"

"Oh, for hell's sake! 'Gnome and Sylph, dance hand in hand! Whirlwinds of ochre and curtains of dust!'" Immediately after I shouted, Menel called to the elementals of air, and dusty winds blew about the hall. It was the spell Ochre Dust. We fired arrows and threw daggers one after another into the places where the dust warped strangely, and invisible foes let out cries of mortal

agony.

Menel dashed around the battlefield keeping a reasonable distance from the rest of us, prioritizing flying demons, spellcasters, and enemies with frustrating abilities like that invisibility and taking them out at frightening speed. I felt grateful that because of him, I didn't have to be too wary of back attacks and could focus on using my muscle power to tackle the things in front of me.

That said, I also couldn't afford not to use my head.

"*Currere Oleum.*"

After completing a sideways sweep with the blade of my spear, I cast a Word and ran grease across the floor. Several of the enemy group fell flat on the ground. As they struggled to escape while covered in grease, I ran each of them through with the blade of my spear. The tricks I'd inherited from Gus for the specialized use of magic for crowd control were as versatile as ever.

Once the enemy forces had eased off a little, I breathed out and took a glance around at the situation. Reystov and Ghelreis were still fighting and holding an advantage.

I took a look over at Al as he let out a loud roar.

From a series of overhead swings hammered down with all his might, he suddenly changed direction and executed a precise foot sweep. But it wasn't just any foot sweep; the Scarabaeus's foot had been taken out by a halberd with a metal hook. Its left ankle twisted violently.

"■■■■!"

The demon let out an inhuman scream, its mouthparts making scratchy insectile noises, and it collapsed to the ground. Al stepped forward. He raised his halberd high into the air. He was going for the kill.

That instant, the demon grinned.

The Scarabaeus dodged the axeblade and jumped, as though it had no ankle injury at all.

"Wh—"

No, it wasn't "as though." As if by a miracle, its wound was *actually gone*.

“Blessing!”

By the time I realized it, it was too late. The attack that Al had put his whole body into had missed, and the demon, laughing raucously, slammed its club into his torso.

◆

“Gah—”

Al’s feet left the ground, and he slammed back-first into a pillar. At the same time, there was a flash. Layers of chains made of mana wrapped themselves around Al’s body, binding him to the pillar. The club had the Sign of Spellbinding engraved into it!

It looked as if Al had managed to take the blow itself on his armor, but there was no way to avoid the damage to his organs. He had just barely kept hold of his halberd, but those magical chains couldn’t be destroyed by physical strength. He was in mortal danger.

Demons were warriors who knew no fear, and the higher-level ones among them were sometimes sorcerers or priests of the god of dimensions, Dyrhygma. I should have known that they would use blessings just like me!

I grunted in frustration. I wanted to fire off the Word “Dispel Magic,” but doing so wasn’t so easy. As two demons came at me from the left and right, I exploited a slight mismatch in their coordination, first kicking one away and then immediately turning adroitly and stabbing the other. But even in that small amount of time, the next attack from another demon was already heading my way. I whipped my spear down and smashed the demon to the ground. This really wasn’t the kind of situation where I could afford to give Al a helping hand.

“Dammit!” Menel cursed. He had his hands full as well.

Reystov and Ghelreis, too, were stretched to their limits dispatching hordes of demons. The beetle-demon clicked its mouthparts and laughed unsettlingly as it drew close to Al, who was still chained to the pillar.

“Al!” I couldn’t help but shout.

“I’m... fine.” Amid the noise of battle, for some reason, I could make out his

voice—and the heat that filled his words. “I will not lose.” The indestructible chains groaned. “I swear on my oath and on the dreams of my kin...”

Al’s face turned bright red as he pulled at the chains with all his might. The pillar to which he was chained seemed to warp. It groaned. Fissures ran through it—

“I will...”

The Scarabaeus realized what was about to happen, and it raised its spiked club in a panic, ready to strike. But it was too late.

“Take back our homeland!”

The pillar that the magic chains were wrapped around broke apart. The chains slackened. Al’s halberd, which he had swung up from below to intercept the demon’s club, had at some point become engulfed in bright-red fire. I felt the aura of a god. It was a brave, manly aura that was neither the god of the flame’s nor the god of undeath’s. I got the feeling that the corners of his mouth had curled up into an awkward smile.

Al bellowed. The axeblade imbued with divine fire traced a crimson trail and sent the spiked club flying through the air with the Scarabaeus’s hand still attached. But the beetle-demon was itself a storied warrior. Disregarding its sliced-off hand, it drew a dagger with its other hand and charged forward, trusting in the defense of its shell.

But that was nothing other than a blunder. *That was Al’s range.*

He grabbed hold of the Scarabaeus’s arm. He bent down low and pulled it towards him, just as I’d taught him, with the same movement I’d used when I threw the forest giant. There was a mighty roar. A large body flew through the air, and the King of the Iron Country slammed the invading demons’ supreme commander to the ground.

It may have been protected by a tough shell, but the impact shook through its body, knocking the breath out of it. Yet the demon showed a dogged refusal to be beaten. Out of nowhere, it issued four jointed, insectile limbs from its body and wrapped them around Al, pulling him in towards it. The two fell to the ground and rolled, fighting. Then, a piercing, alien scream arose from the

tangle. Sticking into a gap in the Scarabaeus's shell near its neck was a right-wield stiletto. Blood's favorite custom dagger would not permit its opponent to fight back at this range, and healing miracles would be of little help to the demon with that blade still lodged into its neck.

"What you've taken—" Al held the struggling demon down and forced the blade in farther still. "You will return!"

The demon twitched two or three times. Then, at last, it stopped moving completely.

Blood's voice, which I remembered so fondly, revived once more in my mind.

— One thing is always on their minds, day in and day out. The question of what is worth laying down their life for. What is their reason to fight.

"The enemy general," Al yelled, "is slain!"

— And when they find it, they go into battle with their souls burning with the fire of courage, and never once fear death.

"Wow..."

You were right, Blood. You really were. It was just as you said.

Dwarves are true warriors.

◆

After Al had claimed the head of the Scarabaeus, the demons who had been surging towards us until that point suddenly slowed. Perhaps they had been under the Blessing of Frenzy, which the evil gods often gave to their followers.

If this was a story, the enemy would probably have taken flight at this point. However, it seemed that the demons weren't such easy foes. The mere death of their general hadn't caused them to lose the will to fight or their ranks to collapse. On the contrary, a few Commander demons immediately took over leadership and rallied the Soldier demons, putting up a strong resistance; meanwhile, several demons with bat wings flew around the hall, perhaps trying to take back the head of their leader. They darted at Al, who had mostly checked out mentally after claiming the demon's head.

"You feckers!" Menel shot down most of them, firing arrows in quick

succession, but finally his quiver was empty. Two demons came from above, descending quickly upon Al. There wasn't time for him to defend—

I tossed my shield aside, bent my body backward, and hurled Pale Moon with all my strength.

It wasn't a spear meant for throwing, but my body was well trained and my weapon familiar, and they answered my unreasonable request regardless. Two dying screams overlapped. Its blade glinting and its handle bending, the spear I had thrown had flown through the hall, impaled the two demons through the chest, and pinned them to a distant pillar.

"We're not done, Al!" I called out. "Keep it up just a little longer!"

Coming to his senses, Al shouted back, "Yes, sir!"

Blood had told me once in the past that on the battlefield, the moment when a warrior defeats a strong foe and claims their head is the moment when they leave themselves the most vulnerable. I even had a memory of a relevant picture I'd seen in my previous world, in a book about Japanese history. I think it was about the Sengoku period or Edo or something. It had showed a warrior in the process of claiming the head of the enemy he'd defeated getting his own head chopped off by a different enemy. It showed that the moment of sweet victory is exactly when defeat and loss creep up on you.

Even as my mind wandered over these irrelevant thoughts, my trained body never stopped moving. Seeing that I'd lost my weapon, a demon swung its two-handed greatsword down towards me. I stepped towards it and to the side, dodging the swing. Then I placed both my hands on the back of the handle and continued the arc downwards, forcing the swing of my opponent's sword to continue beyond the point where it should have stopped. The natural limits of the demon's body prevented it from keeping hold of the sword.

And then I snatched it.

At the same time, using the momentum from my opponent's swing, I sliced the demon wide open from its thigh to its stomach with its own sword. In terms of time, it was a mere moment. From the demon's perspective, in the single instant it had swung its sword down, its opponent had dodged and closed in, and simultaneously its sword had disappeared from its hands and its thigh had

been slashed. The demon might not even have understood what had happened. While thinking that I'd never expected to use this showy technique in an actual battle, I swung the sword I'd stolen without a moment's hesitation and finished the demon off.

To be honest, this weapon's center of mass was a little too close to the hilt, and I wasn't very fond of two-handed greatswords. However, under Blood's teaching, I had learned how to handle pretty much anything that could be called a weapon. Whatever a weapon's intended purpose, as long as it wasn't something difficult like a chain weapon, I could probably use it, and I wasn't about to be choosy in a situation like this.

Another demon charged towards me. I gave it a slight opening which it took, attacking me head-on. With perfect timing, I pulled one leg back and dodged, then countered by chopping off its hand at the wrist.

It was useful, and honestly to be expected given the greatsword's weight, that all I had to do was connect and wrists would fly off regardless of bone or anything else. I personally preferred spears, but I felt like maybe I could understand why Blood had adored two-handed swords so much.

I continued brandishing the greatsword for a while, lopping off limbs and chopping through torsos. Then, I checked the situation around me again.

Reystov was breathing quite hard. I couldn't blame him. He'd been going too wild for too long by this point. Ghelreis was similar. Only the sound of heavy breathing could be heard from beneath his helmet. Even Menel, who commanded a view of the whole battlefield and had been lending his support to everyone, was starting to dull, and Al was hard at work protecting him in spite of his own injuries.

If we continued this much longer, we really would reach our limits. But now that we'd killed the majority of the high-level demons, the rest of them were starting to show signs of faltering. It was about time I acted. I dashed at the final Commander I could spot, chopped off its head, and belted the Word of Departure at the demons in the hall.

"*Discede!*"

I felt a colorless, transparent pulse of mana spread out from me like a wave.

We had secured the upper hand now. The point of this attack, using a Word that left strong mental effects, was to give the demons a final extra push.

The demons who were hit by it cringed and stopped dead in their tracks. Some of them who were especially weak or took a direct hit from the Word immediately turned to dust and crumbled where they stood, and the rest who survived finally started to scatter.

◆

The demons started to flee. Al must have been at his limit; he sunk to the floor on the spot.

Menel and Reystov, who were used to fighting for real, summoned the last of their energy to sink arrows and blades into the backs of the escaping demons, inflicting as much damage on their forces as possible. Even though they had lost their leadership, having demons on the loose would be a recipe for chaos in this area. The fewer of them there were, the better. If our enemies were showing us their backs, we had a duty to take them out and not ignore them.

Meanwhile, Ghelreis kept a vigilant watch, and as for me, after finally taking a moment to catch my breath, I set about healing everyone's wounds.

"Gracefeel, goddess of the flame, grant us healing and vitality..." I put my hands together and prayed. Warm light flowed from everyone's wounds, returning them to normal as if the injuries had never existed there to begin with. However, I couldn't bring back the stamina everyone had used up. We couldn't afford to get overconfident.

After that, we did a once-over to make sure there weren't still any enemies hiding anywhere. After we confirmed that we had completely chased the demons from the Hall of Light, we all shared smiles again. Each of us spontaneously raised a hand, and the crisp, refreshing sound of palms clapping against palms reverberated around the hall. My arms were tired, but a gentle warmth was left behind in my palm. It was the warmth of victory.

"Thought we were really gonna die there," Menel said, laughing in relief. "Turns out charging into the main base of the demons with just the five of us was pretty reckless." He put an arm around Al's shoulder. "Good job, brother! You really pulled it out of the bag!"

“N-No, I hardly...”

“No, you holding the boss back made it a ton easier for us to go all out,” said Reystov.

Ghelreis nodded, too. “If their general had been allowed behind us, we could have been smothered and killed.”

I was in total agreement as well. “It was you who took them back. The mountain, and the crown.”

I picked the crown off the Scarabaeus’s head, which was rolling on the ground, and tried to hand it to Al. However, he turned it down with a shake of his head. “No. Not yet. We still haven’t taken everything back.”

After hearing his voice so full of determination, I nodded too. He was right. Indeed, we hadn’t yet taken back the whole of these mountains. The dragon remained.

“But if we do take it all back, Sir Will, I’d like you to be the one to crown me.”

“What? That’s a job for a high-level priest, isn’t it?”

“You *are* a high-level priest, numbnuts!”

“Huh? Oh... So I am.”

Everyone burst into laughter. I laughed, too. It had only just occurred to me that we could laugh. We could all still laugh.

Our opponent was going to be a strong foe the likes of which we’d never faced. It was difficult to call our situation ideal, but battle was always like that. Even if the situation left a lot to be desired, we had to do the best with the cards we had. We’d used up quite a bit of stamina, but we were still brimming with the will to fight. Our spirits hadn’t been dampened. We were in the best condition we could hope for right now.

“Let’s go. We’ll start by putting all the magic and blessings we can on us ahead of time.”

“Wait.” Reystov was frowning.

“What’s wrong?”

“Look over there.” He pointed to the area in the center of the hall, where countless demons had turned to dust. There were little mountains of the stuff all over the place.

“Huh?” Al tilted his head. Then, all at once, he turned completely pale. “It’s gone.”

“Gone? What’s gone?”

“The Scarabaeus’s body!”

“What?! Wait a fig second, we’ve got the head right here...”

We had its head. But—only now did I realize—*it hadn’t turned to dust*! Demons, who were visitors from another dimension, always turned to dust when they were killed. Sometimes weapons or other small parts of them would remain, but nothing like this.

“It ran off...”

“Will, slow down, brother, how the hell could a body without a head—”

“If its body is like a bug’s, there’s a chance. Haven’t you ever seen a bug moving after its head’s been pulled off?”

Insects have a rope-ladder-like nerve cord running throughout their body from the cerebral ganglion that corresponds to their brain. I remembered reading somewhere in my previous life that it was one of the unique features of insects’ bodies that they could distribute their information processing because of that structure. In other words, if that beetle-demon’s body resembled a bug’s on the inside as well...

“It had its head taken off and it still ran. I don’t know how capable of thought it is right now, but...”

Some high-level miracles could regenerate missing body parts. I had my doubts whether a head could be regenerated—such a thing was impossible to test or verify for humans—but it wouldn’t be at all surprising to me if it was possible for demons.

“Menel, track it.”

“Got it!” Menel immediately started tracking its movements.

While he worked, I began placing effects and strengthening magic on everyone. If we allowed the general to get away and rebuild its forces, we would be done for. There was every chance that next time, we really would be surrounded and killed.

“After it!”

Everyone raised a battle cry.

◆

Tracking the Scarabaeus took us out of the Hall of Light and following passages even deeper into the heart of the mountains.

Ghelreis said, “This is the way to the Great Cavern.”

“Maybe it went to get help from the dragon?”

“Possible. But it’s also possible it can’t think much and it’s just running blindly wherever its body takes it.”

I hoped it was the latter.

With a full set of strengthening magic upon us in preparation for an encounter with the dragon, we ran through the labyrinthine stone passages, shining up our surroundings with the light of our magic lanterns. The farther we advanced, the thicker the miasma became. If the dragon was the one producing this miasma, it had to mean that he was now very close by.

“Be careful, everyone!”

We made our way through the corridors, passing dusty, ancient rooms and halls. We crossed bridges over deep chasms. And finally, we reached a large, dark hall.

I couldn’t tell just how large it was; even with the range and brightness of Pale Moon’s blade set to their maximum, its light didn’t reach the far walls. It must have been an enormous smithy. Furnaces full of cold ash from which the fire was long gone were lined up like rows of giant tombstones. I could imagine that long ago, next to these roaring furnaces, experienced craftworkers had yelled at their apprentices over the racket of clanging hammers. There would have been songs to set the pace of the work as the contraption for transporting the ore

clattered to and fro. But now, the fires were gone and the hammers had ceased; there were no voices of dwarves and no machines in motion. The darkness and silence was total.

Ghelreis, who knew how this place had once been, clenched his teeth. “Let us not lose track of it.”

“Yes.”

Nodding, we followed the demon’s trail.

It wasn’t very long before we were able to find the Scarabaeus. It had its back to us, facing the darkness of the Great Cavern, and it was making some very animated movements. It craned back and raised both its hands high above where its head should have been, as if pleading to a higher power for salvation.

At that exact moment, the demon was crushed.

Replacing it in my vision was a huge—altogether too huge—scaly arm. The General that Al had struggled so hard to defeat, who had been one of the highest-ranked demons there was, had been squashed like a mosquito in a single strike.

“Ghaha. How weak.”

From behind the Scarabaeus crumbling to dust came an inhuman laugh.

A black figure was lying there in the darkness. It was massive. No, the word “massive” didn’t even come close to describing it. What came to mind at this moment, as out of place as it was, was my old school in my previous world. If the school building as I looked up at it from the front gate had been a living creature, perhaps it would have made me feel like this.

The silhouette shifted. I was hit by a cloud of heated miasma. I could see the glint of gold and silver in the area around the silhouette, reflecting the light of our magic lanterns.

“Welcome to my bedchamber.”

A golden eye stared at me. I was gripped by an urge to turn around and sprint in the opposite direction. What the hell was I supposed to do against this?

I grit my teeth and tensed my stomach.

“Weakling, mortal, speak thy name.”

The black dragon cloaked in miasma with a golden eye, Valacirca—Calamity’s Sickle—slowly raised his head.


Chapter Four

He looked exactly like most people's conception of a wicked dragon, stretched out on a mountainous expanse of the dwarves' treasure.

He had obviously strong jaws, twisted horns, and a thick and supple neck. His body was covered with tough scales, and from it grew a pair of large, membranous wings. The sharp, swordlike protrusions running down his spine became progressively smaller as they continued all the way to the tip of his long, elegant tail. They were as beautiful as they were fierce. I could see a brilliant mind in his golden eye shining in the darkness, and in the same body resided a nature that was horrifically vicious and savage.

"Well? Are you not going to name yourself? Struck speechless, I suppose."

He was so imposing that none of us dared move. My throat felt raw. My heart pounded at a terrific rate. Instinct, reason, and all my senses told me to run, told me that an overwhelming predator was right in front of me!

I acknowledged that terror inside my heart. Fear and anxiety are inner monsters that grow the more you deny them, the more you avert your eyes from them. If I couldn't acknowledge the frightened, cowardly part of myself, if I averted my eyes from it and pretended to be strong, the fear would grow even more vicious in the darkness. What was necessary for confidence was not swagger; what was necessary for bravery was not pretending to be strong. *Everything begins with acceptance*, I remembered Mary telling me. She was never disloyal to herself. She embodied all of this.

"Oh?"

I had to admit it. I was scared of this thing. I was hopelessly scared, and I wanted to run away. Taking conscious control of my breathing, which had become quick and shallow, I slowly inhaled and exhaled. I straightened myself up, raised my chin, tightened my abdominal muscles. Then I looked up at the dragon and asked him, "Shouldn't you give your own name before asking the name of another?"

I was incredibly frightened. But I had decided to accept that and not run regardless.

"Hmm."

The dragon looked down upon me, and with a noise that was neither a growl nor speech, it breathed miasma-tainted breath out of the corners of its mouth. The hot miasma belching out could have been mistaken for black smoke.

“It seems you are not the common ruck seeking to plunder my treasure.”

Then, stopping to consider, the dragon murmured.

“Of course, you did claim the head of this Scarabaeus leading the mountain demons and put them to flight. There was never the possibility of you being average warriors.”

Seemingly satisfied, the dragon continued.

“In that case, I shall oblige. I am the Gods’ Sickle, Calamity’s Sickle. Born with the light of the final stars, living more moons than the moon itself, I am the king of poison and brimstone and brother to lava—”

The dragon lazily got up. The miasma blasting out heat was so thick now I was almost coughing.

“Valacirca.”

The dragon as old as the gods named himself, spreading his wings with commanding presence.

“Now answer, small one.”

He had given his name in the fixed style I often heard in ancient poetry. I had to respond in kind.

“My grandfather was the Wandering Sage, my father the War Ogre of Leo, and my mother Mater’s Daughter.” I placed my hand on my heart, raised my voice, and named myself. The foul-dragon’s mouth twitched slightly. “People call me the Torch of the Borderlands and the Faraway Paladin. Disciple of Gracefeel, goddess of flux, I am William G. Maryblood.” I gave my name with pride. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, dragon of the age of the gods.”

I made my greeting not too polite and not too informal, and gave it with my head held high. The dragon was silent for a moment.

“Heh... heheh...”

He suddenly started laughing in a low voice, and then spoke at an equally low volume.

“What a coincidence. Familiar names.”

“Familiar?”

“If they had reached me before the demons, it is possible we could have fought together, shoulder to shoulder.”

The dragon seemed to be looking somewhere into the distance. Perhaps he was seeing the Great Collapse of two centuries ago. Gus had said it, too: persuading the dragon to join our own forces was a possible strategy.

“Heheh. I detect a faint smell of the god of undeath. And you are a disciple of the torch. Yes, that explains why the ages don’t add up.”

With just that little information, Valacirca seemed to have guessed my circumstances.

“Now, then. We have talked long enough about names and histories.”

“Yes.” I glanced at my allies. While I was talking, they seemed to have managed to come to terms with the threat posed by the dragon. I was sure they’d contribute. I composed my breathing and prepared for battle.

“Faraway Paladin. Would you be interested in bringing me under your umbrella?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

◆

My mind went blank for a moment.

“Why are you so surprised?”

The tone of the dragon’s voice was at odds with his words and seemed to contain a taunting grin.

“You have overthrown the mountain demons. I have lost the force I was dependent upon. It would be dangerous and restricting even for me to remain isolated. You must see the necessity for me to seek other forces in which to to place my trust.”

There was a jingling sound. In his claws, Valacirca had scooped up some of the countless pieces of treasure scattered all over the room. He looked at it lovingly and with great enjoyment.

“I have my own motives, of course. I will demand a considerable price. But fear not. I have no intention of deliberately butting heads with a champion of your caliber.”

The dragon laughed as he demanded treasure.

It was by no means a bad offer in the short term. The power of a dragon was vast. He would be a great asset to have on our side. However—

“In fifty years’ time, you’ll kill me, destroy everything, and shift your loyalty to someone else,” I told him dryly. The beetle-demon had been killed, squashed like a bug. “I’ve seen how you do things.”

The foul-dragon was silent. His body trembled. Just as I braced myself for an attack, he roared with laughter.

“Very good, very good! Exactly!”

His laughter slowly died down. He tilted his head, and a sinister grin spread over his face.

“But don’t you agree? *It’s still a good deal...*”

I fell silent in spite of myself. He had a valid point.

If I maintained the strength to pose a risk to Valacirca as I protected him as part of our forces, it would give the dragon a reason to team up with me. He might serve me relatively loyally, relatively lazily, at least to the extent that he wouldn’t be hostile. In that case, was there actually a need to engage in a fight right now with desperately low chances of victory? After all, the god of undeath had said that my chances of winning would increase with time. Wouldn’t it be better to leave this in the hands of my future self?

“Let me ask you. How much of a reason do you really have to fight me?”

It was like the devil was whispering into my ear. It was easy to tell that Valacirca had probably made this suggestion fully understanding the effect his words would have on me.

“Have I personally harmed anyone close to you? No. Are you a man of such greed you would go after my treasure? I doubt it. And I can see clearly that the fame of slaying a dragon means nothing to you. When I started to awaken, you came here with determination in your heart and a spear in your hand because you thought me a threat to innocent people. Didn’t you?”

Valacirca whispered.

“You see? The threat is gone. I will bow my head to you...”

None of my allies could say a thing. This development was so much to process, they couldn’t even gather their thoughts to speak. My mind too was overloaded. What was this? What the *hell* was this? In some part of my mind, I’d been thinking of Valacirca as a creature on a rampage with nothing more to him than his strength. Did that describe me more than him?

“Now choose, Faraway Paladin, hero of the modern age.”

A shiver ran down my spine. His golden eye pierced me.

“Will it be peace... or else, battle and death?”

As hot miasma hissed out of both corners of his mouth, the question posed by Calamity’s Sickle echoed throughout the Great Cavern and filled it with dread.

◆

I’d planned to fight the dragon. But the dragon was trying to bow its head to me.

“Well? What are you waiting for? Does my history with the dwarves bother you? Certainly, I held the demons as my masters, fought the dwarves, and gained treasure from it, but that is the way of hired work, is it not? If my new masters say that they cannot restore the mountain while poison fills the air, then I will gladly move elsewhere.”

He was scheming, of course. He spoke rationally of the risks and costs, and occasionally a malicious smile crossed his face and he said things including:

“You are a hero, are you not? Show you have what it takes to handle me.”

This utterly unanticipated development had my mind on the verge of chaos. Logically speaking, what the dragon was saying made sense. It sounded correct

from the viewpoint of efficiency and risk management. If I avoided battle with the dragon and took him under my umbrella, we would be safe for the time being, and I could also increase the strength of our forces. But I had a bad feeling about this. I had the feeling I was being tricked, but I didn't know exactly how. What was it? What was I overlooking?

"I am not known for my patience. Choose swiftly."

The dragon chose that moment to pressure me. My mind spiraled faster towards chaos. Should I reject the dragon's words? But that would be the start of a desperate battle to the death. Then should I accept them? But that would be just what he wanted me to do. The same thoughts spiraled around and around inside my head. I was trapped in an endless circle.

I'd felt this somewhere before. It was my previous world. I had the feeling that I'd done something similar while huddled up in that dark room.

I let out a small groan. Memories flashed through my mind: a dark room, the light of a monitor. Myself, unable to take that step forward. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. Restlessness burned my chest. Time was being frittered away. I still didn't know what I was supposed to do. I groaned. I shed tears. I was still squandering time. What could I do to find salvation? What was I supposed to choose? What was I meant to do? I didn't even know that anymore.

Someone, someone, anyone, please...

The memory of having come to an end without making a choice accelerated my panic. Something black and sticky started to crawl out of a pit deep inside my heart.

What do I do? What? What? What—

My breath became shallow. My arms and legs were cold and stiff. And yet my back was clammy with sweat. I had reached peak confusion.

That was the moment. I felt as if someone had placed one of their small hands softly on the top of my head.

My neck jerked back to look upwards. Of course, I couldn't see anything there. There was just the dark roof of the cavern. But whether it was

coincidence or inevitability, looking up made me take deeper breaths. As I breathed deeply, oxygen entered my body and raced through my blood. Refreshing air blew into my blunted mind, and as my senses began to function once again, her words came back to me.

— *The oath you made that day belongs to the two of us.*

Of course. I was already given salvation. By her. And I had sworn an oath to her, an oath that was more important to me than anything else.

— *Fear thou not, for I am with thee.*

My heart thumped loudly.

— *Be not dismayed, for I am thy god.*

My hazy thoughts started to become clear.

— *I will strengthen thee; I will help thee; I will keep thee with my flame.*

Heat once again surged into my body, which tension and confusion had made sluggish and cold. It was like a warm flame had flared to life within my chest. If the thing called courage could take a form, perhaps this was it.

“Oh...”

Sparks of insight fired inside my head. It was fascinating how fast my mind was ticking now. Logic pieced itself together.

Using his powerful presence and pressure to cause me to lose my cool and make bad decisions was all part of the strategy of Valacirca’s offer. As long as I didn’t succumb to that, the rest would be easy.

First, I turned around.

“Menel, Al, Reystov, Ghelreis.”

Menel had already nocked a mithril arrow onto his bow. He’d recovered most of them in the hall. Al also had his halberd in hand, and his stance showed he could spring into action at any time. Reystov’s hand was resting on the handle of his sword, poised to unsheathe it at lightning speed. And the sight of Ghelreis’s sturdy body and massive shield was very reassuring.

“The result of this discussion will decide everything. Be prepared.”

They all nodded, with the faces of warriors who had steeled themselves for battle. I turned back to face the dragon.

“Oh?”

Valacirca spoke in a low growl. Maybe I looked quite different to him as well now.

“So you’re decided. Then state your choice, Faraway Paladin. Peace or death?”

“I won’t be choosing anything,” I said, rebuffing the question the dragon had taken such pleasure in asking. ”You’ll be the one making a choice, Valacirca.”

◆

The foul-dragon twitched.

“Oh? And what will I be choosing?”

Before answering his question, I took a step towards him and looked up at him. The dragon which I had thought of as like a school building now looked at least a bit smaller. The size I had seen before was probably false, an illusion created in my mind by intimidation and pressure.

“Whether you will change, or not.”



I put the question to him directly. This was the first time the foul-dragon's eyes went wide.

Once I thought about it with cold logic, it was simple, really. Bringing the powerful foul-dragon under my command appeared logical at a glance, but when I thought about how someone only superficially obedient would act, it really was nothing but a fool's choice.

Say that I did bring Valacirca into my forces. What would he do after that? Obediently do what I say? Indulge himself in sleep peacefully? As if. I would kill him before long, because I saw him as a threat. So if not that, then what?

Obviously, he would be at work behind the scenes.

To raise the value of his own existence, to make sure that he wouldn't be discarded, the foul-dragon would bring wars to me, make enemies for me, and continue to create conflict. And what's more, they would be brutal, large-scale battles that required the power of a dragon. I wouldn't be able to abandon Valacirca then. And as I continued to seek the dragon's power and fight alongside him, the dragon would gradually become an emblem of vital importance. That would make it even more impossible for me to dispense with him. To ensure his safety until the day he flew away from me, he would eat away at me and the entire area around me while calling himself my subordinate.

I couldn't imagine that someone like me would be able to control the machinations of a dragon living since time immemorial. I would have to stick with the dragon, for the sake of morale as well, even while knowing he was working against me. It would be like a nasty drug.

"Let's be clear. The 'peace' you refer to is 'a restricted peace between you and me'. It's by no means 'my peace,' and it isn't 'peace for the innocent people,' either. Am I wrong?"

When he heard that question, the dragon laughed as if he found this so very entertaining.

"Kaha... khahaha... khahaha! Precisely. You are correct."

The elder dragons that had lived since the age of the gods were some of the

closest creatures to the Words of Creation. And the power of Words was weakened by lies and untruths. Although the dragon might try to trick me, if I asked him a straight question, he would never tell a lie.

"In that case, I'm certain about my condition. You must change."

"Heheh. Change how?"

"If you will swear to change your fanatical, scheming nature of always seeking war—"

I stared straight into his golden eye.

"If you will say you truly seek my protection—"

If he could say he would live in peace—

If he could say he would no longer seek bloodshed except when necessary, and express a desire to reign in his frenzy and live with the good gods—

"Then I swear on the god of the flame that I will protect you. As long as there is life in me, I will guard you from any and all adversaries."

It made no difference whether he was a dragon or a person. Wherever there was someone in true sorrow, I would offer them a helping hand. Wherever there was evil that would harm the innocent, I would fight them. That was what I had vowed that day to my silent, black-haired god.

"That's the way I live my life." I had decided that it would be. "Now choose! Will it be a change of heart, or else death?! I await your answer, dragon!" I shouted my question to him.

A cloud of heat and miasma rose up.

"Excellent!"

The first word from his mouth was praise.

"You have answered the Dragon's Riddle well, Faraway Paladin."

His wings spread to their full extent. He raised his chin.

"You are not a wretched savage wielding power without purpose. Neither are you a crafty coward out to save his own skin. You possess courage and wisdom and are prepared to follow the path you believe to be right!

Marvellous! You truly are the successor to those heroes who preceded you!”

The relaxed, lazy posture the dragon had shown until now was gone. He was no longer giving the slightest impression that he was treating me as a curiosity.

“I acknowledge you as a true champion.”

Before me stood a great dragon as old as the gods.

“With that in mind, changing my nature is out of the question!”

The dragon roared.

“I am Valacirca! The Gods’ Sickle, Calamity’s Sickle! The king of poison and brimstone and brother to lava! Poison exists to kill and maim, lava exists to seethe and boil! War! Disaster! Decorations awarded! Treasure! Death! Virgin sacrifices! Heroes! What is a dragon without these?!”

The god of undeath, Stagnate, had referred to the foul-dragon Valacirca as worldly and materialistic. I did think that description was fitting. He had worldly attachments, and what’s more, the things to which he was attached—money, conflict, safety, sleep—all seemed to be what could be called basic needs. However, there was a true nature behind that.

“I am Valacirca! The strongest and oldest dragon, feared even by the gods!”

It was to stay true to himself as a dragon, to keep on living his life as a dragon with burning intensity. These were the out-of-place thoughts going through my head as the dragon roared at me loudly enough to make my skin tremble.

“Hero, and the warriors who follow you: It will please me to bury you here, and append another page to my chronicle of terror. And it will please me to be slain here, and be spoken of in tales of valor across the four corners of the world.”

His fangs snapped and clicked. The enormous mass of tough muscle before me began to move. Negotiations had broken down. The dragon had refused to reform. The only way forwards now was battle.

“Now, if you are prepared to be incinerated to your souls by dragonflame and vanish completely from the eternal cycle, you have my permission! Test yourselves against me!”

Amid all this, for some reason, I was a little bit excited.

Dragon slaying. Charging at a fearsome dragon, relying only on the steel in your very own hand. *Dragon slaying!* It wasn't in my nature to romanticize battle as much as Blood; at least, I thought it wasn't. But this situation had some kind of irresistible draw to it. Valacirca was an opponent who was unquestionably deserving of my respect, and he was going to be the strongest enemy I'd faced so far. He was worth challenging. He was worth fighting!

"I am the Faraway Paladin, William G. Maryblood! Have at you!"

Naming myself like a knight in an old chivalric romance, I charged at the foul-dragon as old as the gods.

◆

In the dim light of the Great Cavern, Valacirca swung his claws at me.

"Kah!!"

"*Acceleratio!*"

With a Word, I accelerated straight towards the foul-dragon. I ducked his sword-like claws and his fingers which were each as thick as a human's torso, and pressed forwards towards him. A low sound accompanied his tree trunk-like arm swinging above my head. That one attack could have taken my head off.

The stereotype of large creatures being sluggish is a falsehood. Large creatures are strong and fast just by virtue of their size. The length of each of their steps is on a different level, and each swipe of their arms covers an entirely different range. The same goes for their ability to withstand attacks. Being stabbed with a thumbtack would probably be a fatal wound to an ant, but do the same to an elephant and the tack would be unlikely to even break the skin.

In that sense, Valacirca was simply strong. When it came down to it, he was hopelessly physically strong. And I was well aware of it.

"*Lamina!*"

Leaping in close, I extended a blade of mana beyond Pale Moon's physical

blade and thrust it towards what appeared to be an old wound on his side. However, the dragon twisted, and my blade met resistance, blocked by the dragon's scales.

Dragonscale...

— If you're going to fight him, I'd focus on his old wounds. A dragon's scales are tough. I'll tell you now, I doubt even Blood could have cut to the skin through dragonscale.

Gus's words came back to me. Cutting through dragonscale would have been difficult even for Blood. But I wasn't just going to follow in Blood's footsteps forever!

I took a quick breath and roared. I made the muscles throughout my body work in concert, transferring force from my feet to my knees, then my thighs, twisting my body at the hips to transfer force to my shoulders, my arms, my wrists. Summoning every last bit of force as expertly as I could, I pushed my obstructed blade in harder.

"Gnng?!"

Valacirca groaned. I felt the unmistakable sensation of the blade piercing the dragon's massive, tough scales. I kept going.

"*Acceleratio!*"

A roar of surprise accompanied an arm lashing fiercely out at me. I avoided the strike as I accelerated with Pale Moon still embedded in the dragon's skin. Clutching my spear tightly with my whole arm, I ran alongside Valacirca, using my blade of mana to slice a horizontal wound into the dragon's side. From there, I headed straight for a small gap between the rows of giant furnaces, hoping to escape, but Valacirca was not one to miss that.

"Hng... Hahaha... So you strike through the defense of dragonscale! Perfect, bracing stimulation!"

Behind me, I heard him roar out and then draw in a large breath. He was surely about to unleash scorching miasmic dragonbreath. I was protected by several layers of magic and miracles, but if his breath hit me directly, it wouldn't be surprising if I was burned beyond recognition or even melted. My heart

leaped in panic. However, the lethal breath was never to touch my back.

“You’re not only up against Will!”

“Shh!”

Even without looking, I could tell it was Menel and Reystov. While I was charging in from the front, they had already spread out and made their way around to his left and right sides. The two of them were skilled enough to inflict serious wounds on the dragon.

Menel’s Silver-string produced several elegant notes. The radiance of mithril arrows cut through the darkness of the Great Cavern. Reystov’s nameless sword glinted as he drew it and slashed in a single lightning-speed motion. Engraved with Gus’s Signs, the sword’s slash extended like a twisting snake, closing in on the dragon.

Menel’s target was Valacirca’s golden eye, while Reystov had aimed at the toes on the foot Valacirca was putting his weight on. The arrow carried enough force to shoot through an eyeball, and the slash had the sharpness to chop off toes. Even an ancient foul-dragon like Valacirca couldn’t ignore them.

“Tch!”

He was forced to twist his neck and pull back his leg to dodge. With his posture disrupted, he couldn’t hold the aim he had before. I reached the gap between the furnaces and spun around. As the dragon swung its neck, breathing in random directions, I blocked the heatwave with my large shield.

The heatwave from his breath, thick like black smoke, held more than enough heat to roast a human whole. But with the defensive magic and the many blessings that were placed on my entire body, as well as my magic shield engraved with Signs to protect against heat and poison, I endured.

This was *just the heatwave*. If his breath engulfed me directly, instant death would be putting it lightly. When Valacirca said that my soul itself would be incinerated and I would vanish from the eternal cycle, he might have been telling the truth.

“Impressive teamwork... haven’t you?!”

With an effortless swing of his arm, Valacirca clawed huge chunks out of the stone floor, transferring momentum to countless stone pellets that were sent scattering towards Reystov. But Ghelreis's Sword-smasher shield and armor knocked them out of the air. Valacirca didn't care. He swung again. But this time, out of nowhere, an old wooden tower platform that had been built inside the Great Cavern came toppling down.

"...?!"

It was Al. With his Immense halberd, he had smashed the platform's seemingly fragile supports, sending it toppling onto the dragon. Valacirca knocked it away, but broken pieces of wood fell everywhere and obstructed his vision.

It has to be now, I thought. I couldn't see a long battle being anything but a disadvantage for us.

It was difficult to imagine a mythological dragon running out of stamina. It was probably best to treat Valacirca as having inexhaustible energy. The same went for his ability to withstand our attacks. He could probably comfortably withstand as many as we could deal him. That was why right this moment, he was enjoying the fight and testing us out instead of going on a serious rampage against us.

We, on the other hand, would be finished for good if even one of Valacirca's attacks landed a direct hit. He would still have plenty of opportunities to attack no matter how many hits he took, whereas we would be done for if we took so much as one serious blow. I'd known this before I took him on, but just knowing it didn't make these conditions any less ridiculously one-sided.

If we attempted to win in a straightforward confrontation, it would call for a strategy of offense and defense similar to passing through the eye of a needle. We would have to make it succeed over and over. Then Valacirca would finally get serious, and we would have to repeat that feat at an even higher difficulty, at which point perhaps we could catch a glimpse of victory over the horizon.

It wasn't a matter of it being difficult. It would be *impossible*. Our stamina wouldn't last. Our concentration wouldn't hold up. Even if we used up our entire lives' supply of luck in a single fight, it still wouldn't be enough. So I had

to bet on this right now.

I rested my spear and shield against a furnace and spread my arms wide.

"*Ligatur, nodus, obligatio...*"

A colossal amount of mana converged and darted at high speed. My Words, incanted quickly and with extreme precision, flew at Valacirca like shooting stars.

"*...conciliat, sequitur!!*"

While the dragon's vision was obscured by the collapse of the platform, I bound him in chains of mana that formed a multilayered magical seal.

"*Vastare!*"

The dragon immediately fired off the Word of Destruction. At the moment his vortex of devastation was just about to wrench apart the chains, I finished my response. The Word meaning "guardianship" drawn by my right hand obstructed the vortex. The Word meaning "erasure" drawn by my left hand wiped it out.

"...?!"

Triple casting. It was Gus's specialty, and a technique that I had been practicing constantly. This particular combination was the most hidden of hidden techniques, burned into my eyes on the day I saw that battle between Gus and the god of undeath's Echo.

"*Pallida mors aequo pulsat pede...*"

With my arms spread wide, I visualized myself scooping in the enormous amount of circulating mana and gathered it at a single point. And all the while, I weaved fluent Words and scribed fluid Signs.

"You would cast *that* in a real battle?!"

"*...pauperum tabernas...*"

I ignored the dragon's roars. In an almost trance-like state of extreme concentration, I made fine adjustments to the mana and carried out the ritual movements in an abbreviated form.

“*...regumque turres!*”

“■■■■!”

For the first time, Valacirca cut the idle chatter. In a rasping kind of voice unique to dragons, he started reciting some kind of Word at a furious pace. But it was too late now. This was a ritual spell intended to be cast by a team of several people working in tandem. It was one of the ultimate magics, which was virtually impossible to perform on your own.

“*Damnatio memoriae!*”

It was a colorless, invisible pulse of destruction. As it traveled, it tore to shreds the connections between all of Creation’s Words, breaking them apart and isolating them. The body, the soul, the phenomenon—it rendered them all meaningless and returned them to mana.

The acme of destruction through Words, the devastating pulse of the Word of Entity Obliteration slammed into Valacirca.

◆

A crater was gouged out of the floor, as though a humongous creature had taken a full bite out of it. Strong winds blew about the Great Cavern, as if to fill in the blank formed by the pulse that had wiped everything from existence. The dragon was nowhere to be seen. It had... looked as though the pulse had engulfed and annihilated him...

“Did we... do it?” Al said while looking all around the cavern.

“Seems kinda like it,” Menel said cautiously.

Ghelreis agreed. “Victory sometimes comes with unexpected ease.”

Reystov cast his gaze carefully around the cavern and eventually nodded too, the hem of his cloak flapping in the raging winds.

The dragon had been annihilated. Thanks to an opening created by Al, his very existence had been wiped out with the ultimate destructive magic before he ever took us seriously.

And yet, somehow, I couldn’t convince myself we’d won. Was it because it had been so sudden, so anticlimactic? Not every encounter ended with a high-

stakes, intense battle to the death. Sometimes you could be stabbed without a fight by someone who should have been below your level, and conversely, sometimes you could be facing someone better than you and have a fluke drop a cheap win into your lap. I knew all that, and yet for some reason it still didn't feel real. Had we really won? This victory had fallen into our laps so easily that it still didn't seem to have sunk in for any of us.

We stood there feeling strangely empty as the wind blew between us, howling.

The wind was... howling?

The moment I realized, an extreme chill ran down my spine. I immediately guarded with my spear and large shield as I shouted.

"No! He's still—"

But it was too late. Four bodies sprayed blood. At the same time, a violent impact slammed my shield. I was sent flying backwards. I rolled and bounced across the rubble-covered ground.

The wind *had claws*. It was a nonsensical description, but there was no other way to describe it. The wind blowing about had changed for an instant into sharp claws.

Suddenly, an old story I'd heard from Gus when I was a child crossed my mind. It was the story of a sorcerer who transfigured himself into an animal, took on the animal's thought processes perfectly, and ended up as nothing more than a wild beast.

"Trans...formed?" I mumbled, stunned.

"Ghaha... Precisely."

The wicked wind that had sucked four people's blood swirled inward, and the shape of a dragon once again formed in the crater.

Metamorphose...

Just as the name suggested, it was transfiguration magic. However, this was an extremely risky Word beyond a human's ability to control. Anything more than changing into a different person with a similar body shape was very

dangerous. Just spending a short amount of time transfigured into an animal, even one with similar body mass, could result in your mind being held back by the animal, preventing you from returning. And transforming into something inanimate with completely different mass? That required you to prepare yourself for the possibility you would never be human again. Using it that way was equivalent to taking a revolver loaded with a few randomly positioned bullets, putting it to your temple, and pulling the trigger. The circumstances would have to be very extreme to even consider it.

But now that I thought about it, how had Valacirca even *entered this underground kingdom* with a body of his size in the first place?

“So you realized. Yes!”

The foul-dragon laughed. It was howling laughter, as if he couldn’t contain his amusement.

“We are close in nature to the Words.”

The elder dragons were denizens of myth, the closest beings to the Words of Creation.

“Yes, the Word of Entity Obliteration probably would eradicate even me.”

His golden eye pierced me. Scorching breath flowed slowly from his powerful jaws.

“If you could hit me with it, of course.”

He had completely predicted the Word of Entity Obliteration’s trajectory. Not only had he predicted it, he was well aware that strong winds kicked up afterwards and had used the Word of Metamorphosis to transform into wind to make it look like he’d been annihilated. He had disguised himself among the raging winds that followed the blast and struck everyone down with his claws.

He was well versed in how to counter even the strongest destructive magic. No, not just destructive magic; I was sure that whatever other Word I had chosen, the result would have been the same. This dragon had fought on all battlefields and battled against all Words, including all those Words and Signs that were lost to the past. He was familiar with them all, and he had conquered each.

So this was a dragon. This was a foul-dragon as old as the gods.

A cold, clammy sensation spread through the core of my being.

I knew this feeling well.

Its name was despair.

◆

The foul-dragon calmly drew himself up. He had a slight cut on his side, nothing more.

“Now...”

We were at an overwhelming disadvantage. I tightened my grip on Pale Moon’s shaft. I thought despair would swallow me if I didn’t.

“Faraway Paladin, you fought admirably and with bravery.”

Surprisingly, Valacirca hadn’t tried to kill me right away. But I had too much on my mind to consider a response. I glanced around. The others didn’t seem to be dead yet. Wait, how was that possible? It was a complete surprise attack with the striking power of a dragon and he’d failed to kill any of us? That was impossible. He had chosen not to kill them. Which had to mean...

“In light of you fighting so hard, I will make you an offer. What do you think of becoming my servants?”

It was just as I thought.

“I see you understand. I have provided you an excuse.”

Valacirca smiled. He looked as though he was enjoying this, and in fact, he probably was.

“If you turn me down, I will burn your allies to cinders. Bones, souls, and all. There. Now that your allies’ lives are in need of protection, you have a noble justification to submit to me.”

I couldn’t cover everyone at the same time. They had collapsed in different places, Menel and Al on the left and Reystov and Ghelreis on the right. In the first place, I had no more plays to use against this dragon, no more ways to bring a quick end to this battle.

“I have seen many with eyes like yours. You will not be swayed or intimidated just because I threaten to incinerate you. Even now, you are stubbornly searching for a way to cut through this situation.”

He was right. Even at this moment, I was silently holding off on answering while my mind worked desperately to come up with some kind of an out.

“But you have nothing. Am I right? Even with time to analyze the situation.”

I had to admit that it was just as the foul-dragon said. I had no more convenient breakthrough ideas.

“Oh... no, not exactly nothing. You do have one move, one way not to yield to me.”

His words caused me to frown. A move? I still had a move, in this situation?

“*You can kill yourself.*”

The idea had never even occurred to me.

“You are adored by the goddess of flux, are you not? All you need to do is cut off your own head.”

There was no hint of laughter in Valacirca’s voice.

“There will be a next world, won’t there? And one after that. And one after that. As many as you please. If you think winning is impossible, toss out the game board and hang yourself. If you want to reject tragedy, simply say, ‘Not yet. There will be a next world. This isn’t where I’m meant to fight,’ and drive a dagger into your own chest.”

His words were a hideous caricature of the truth. Everyone knows that things can’t actually be simplified that way. But that probably wasn’t the dragon’s point.

I shook my head. “I won’t take that choice.”

“Good. If you saw that little value in your own life, you wouldn’t even be worth subjugating.”

To Valacirca, who had an attachment to this world and had lived in it since the age of the gods, whether or not I had the will to make the most of my own life

was a crucial point he couldn't budge on.

"Then choose. Join me, or resist and be eradicated."

My allies had been severely wounded to the point that they couldn't do anything to help. I myself wasn't uninjured, and my game-winning moves had already failed. I didn't even know how many thousands of successful attacks would be needed to win by ordinary methods. I was completely checkmated. The situation now was even more desperate than it had been in my battle against the god of undeath. However—

"If I join you, I can easily imagine how you'll use me."

"I imagine so."

He would spread war, stir up chaos, and continue to create the kinds of situations that a dragon preferred. My dialogue with him so far had told me loud and clear that he couldn't live any other way.

"Then I can't go along with you."

"Your allies will die."

"That isn't how I see it."

Valacirca tilted his head.

"How do you see it?"

"We came resolved. No matter how many of us we lose, as long as just one of us can stick our blade into your throat, we'll have achieved our goal."

We were warriors. Throwing away the opportunity to win the battle in order to protect an ally wasn't what any of us wanted.

"But you no longer have any prospect of victory."

"I do." I steeled myself and looked up at Valacirca. "If I drive this blade into you thousands or maybe millions of times, I will win. Am I wrong?"

My response seemed to take Valacirca off guard. His eyes went wide. Then he chuckled, amused.

"A prospect that lies at the far end of thousands of miracles."

“Thousands, millions, billions, I don’t care. If there’s a chance of victory, a possibility of fulfilling my oath, then that’s what I’m going to bet on.”

That was the path I had chosen.

— So when you get hit, put up with it and move in. You’re dead if you step back anyway, so you go for broke. You keep your attacks coming, and bury your sword or spear or fist, whatever you’ve got, in there over and over.

That was one of the fundamentals of battle I had learned from Blood. When you’re hurt, move in. Step forward and give back what you were given.

“You’re about to find out how stubborn I can be.”

I probably couldn’t win. I was probably going to die. But I forced a fierce grin onto my face. The foul-dragon followed suit, baring his fangs.

“Foul-dragon Valacirca...”

“Faraway Paladin...”

Gripping my familiar spear, I assumed a battle stance.

“I will slay you!”

“You will die trying!”

I ran ahead towards my final battle.

◆

The period that followed felt like being caught up in a flood and swimming as hard as I could to save myself from drowning.

During the battle’s opening stages, I used all the Words and tactics I could to move us away from the place where Menel and the others had collapsed. It was possible they would still die in the heatwave, but I wanted to do as much as I could for them. If Valacirca had stubbornly resisted, it would probably have been impossible to move battlegrounds, but the dragon didn’t do that. Perhaps he’d decided it wasn’t worth concerning himself with defeated foes, or perhaps he was arranging things to make it easier for me as his enemy to give him my all.

I sprinted. Attacks flew at me from his sharp claws, thick tail, trampling feet,

and at times body slams and deadly breath. I accelerated and dodged, hitting him with both Words and my spear with carefully judged timing. The dragon, speaking in a raspy voice, hammered me with many brutal Words, including several I had never even heard of. I summoned all of my knowledge and all the Words I could muster to counter them. Sometimes, he howled at me with an intensity that shook the mountain.

I stacked blessing upon blessing to protect myself from ruptured eardrums and the grip of fear. Several times, I was late to react and got injured by flying stones and the heatwave from his breath. Each time, I healed myself with a blessing and got back to my feet. I avoided immediate death by inches several times. My large shield had long been buckled and broken. I gave a long and frenzied scream as I continued fighting, covered in my own blood.

Claws came from the right. I dodged. Spear punch. Through the scale. Now a stomp. I pressed forward and sideways. Ducked and covered. Word, response, negation. Claws swung. Tail swung. I dodged. Spear—

“GRAH!!”

The red insides of his mouth closed in, fangs bared. Valacirca had used a bite for the first time. My body had gotten used to the cycle of claws, tail, stomp, and couldn’t react immediately. But I reacted still, although a little late, forcibly shielding my body with Pale Moon. I was knocked flying, the dragon’s fangs just grazing me. I stood up again, went to hold my spear at the ready, and realized that it felt strangely light. My breath caught at the back of my throat. Pale Moon was broken. My favorite weapon, which I’d been using for so long—its shaft was bent, its blade shattered; no one could fix it now.

In an attempt to fire up the fighting spirit that had broken along with my spear, I yelled another mad war cry and pulled out Overeater. Valacirca had several wounds across his body. If I could drive it into him and recover my energy, I’d still have—

“I’m afraid—”

The moment I stepped forward, my foot was blown off. I yelled out in pain. Several destructive Signs had been engraved into the ground on the spot where I had placed my foot. When had he set those up? Sometime during this battle?

Sometime before?

“I know that demonblade.”

Of course. Valacirca had been part of the High King’s forces.

“It is a fearsome blade, isn’t it? It has an interesting history. It was tempered by a King-ranked demon to face off against and kill the High King, who was always crazy for swords. But once you know the trick, there are ways to defeat it. For example...”

Even as I withstood the intense pain to pray and heal my foot, many flame arrows floated around the foul-dragon. He spread his wings with a heavy flap and distanced himself far from me. Apparently, he didn’t even intend to entertain close-range battles anymore. From his posture, I could tell he was planning to finish me off with breath and long-range Words.

“Though I was toying with you, I never expected a mere human to cause me so much trouble. Faraway Paladin, William G. Maryblood, I shall praise you for inflicting so many wounds upon me.”

My mind was hazy. I couldn’t focus.

“If this had been a test of each other’s skills, I may have handed you the garland of victory and commended you on a battle well fought. Your power is no less than the heroes of the age of the gods. You are truly powerful, a champion of the modern age.”

The strength had left my arms. My voice shook, and I couldn’t utter Words properly. The dragon was as alive as ever.

“But this is a battle to the death.”

The dragon headed towards me to take my life. I had to defeat the dragon. I’d promised my god. I had to fight.

I summoned the last reserves of my strength, using my sword to help me stand. I started gathering mana. I desperately focused my concentration, healing my wounds as if it would make a difference.

“I will not make you suffer. Die.”

The dragon inhaled, then unleashed hellish breath that would surely

incinerate me to nothing.

It was hopeless. There was nothing I could do about this.

Even as those thoughts went through my head, I somehow held up my sword and tried to utter a Word. I had been given life. I had to live it until the end. That was my thinking.

The scorching miasmic breath engulfed me. But the end never came.

◆

“Oh...”

I realized that a warm flame was floating in front of me. Around the flame, a transparent barrier of some kind was being generated.

“God...?”

It was as if it was protecting me from the dragon’s breath.

“A Herald? Heh. Not enough power to manifest an Echo? Goddess of the flame, you waste your time.”

Dragonbreath struck the barrier. It struck it over and over. The flame wavered. Fissures ran along the barrier. But still she protected me.

“Are you that keen to keep your hero? But support from the Herald of a single god will change nothing.”

Against the violence of a dragon, even that was nothing more than a play for time. But still she didn’t give up. She kept on blocking the dragonbreath, over and over.

— I will strengthen thee; I will help thee; I will keep thee with my flame.

I understood. She was trying to keep her promise.

“God...”

The flame said nothing. As always, she remained silent and simply continued to protect me. But like all things, that too had to come to an end.

“■■■■!”

The dragon spoke a raspy Word. An unknown pulse burst towards us, and the

barrier shattered without a trace. Already, the foul-dragon had enough breath stored in his mouth to kill me.

“Paladin! You were a foe well deserved of my breath! I will burn your figure into my memory, and your soul and bones from the face of existence!”

This roar of Valacirca’s resounded around the Great Cavern. It was probably his way of offering me a final tribute.

“I’m afraid I have an issue with that.”

A new voice with an easygoing attitude suddenly came from the side.

“What?!”

The dragon immediately breathed in that direction, but the owner of the voice took an incredible arc through the air and evaded it.

“This hero is my catch, my foe, and I do not appreciate him being taken.”

With wings blacker than the night and ominously shining red eyes, the thing gliding back down towards me was—

“Stagnate, god of undeath?!”

The foul-dragon groaned.

◆

Valacirca couldn’t hide his surprise. Beside me, the god of undeath faced the foul-dragon and spoke volubly.

“So let me see, foul-dragon Valacirca. You said that support from the Herald of a single god will change nothing. Hahah. Precisely! I myself predicted as much. These heroes are insufficient; they and the god of the flame, still insufficient! I said that killing the wicked Calamity’s Sickle was beyond them! However—”

The Herald-raven clicked its beak. It sounded like he was taking great pleasure in this.

“Come to think of it, I never considered what might happen if two gods were present. I wonder? Perhaps these heroes would stand a chance of victory? Personally, I have a feeling that they might, but what say you,

Valacirca?”

“You’re as talkative as ever, god of undeath.”

“Why is it that we don’t get along, Valacirca? You and I are cut from the same cloth. I’d say we share similar pleasures.”

“Mine are nothing as distasteful as yours. My life and soul exist to incinerate and shine with glory. What good is it to make things last forever? Materialist.”

“That is what I call distasteful. Beauty should be preserved forever. It’s a natural emotion. Vandal.”

Valacirca looked displeased. I couldn’t blame him; Stagnate had spoiled his battle.

“And aren’t you a charmer, Paladin? To have not just one goddess but two come running to your aid! That was virtually unheard of even in the age of the gods.”

Valacirca sent me a sarcastic glare. But more importantly, I got the feeling that some kind of shocking truth had just been revealed to me. Two? *Goddesses?*

“Does it matter whether I present myself as a god or a goddess? To gods, gender is mere outward decoration. Right?”

The raven seemed to shrug. Then, stopping on my shoulder, it tried to rub its head against my cheek. God’s flame rushed in to obstruct him. A silent face-off was underway near my shoulder.

“Hahaha. No need to get so angry, Gracefeel. I am offering to lend you a hand. Surely I can be allowed one or two perks. Hm? Judging by your reaction, you want to know ‘why now.’ You know, I had planned to stay out of this. But after seeing such a rousing battle, I feel I will regret not offering any support.”

“You would stick your beak into my battle for that? You hero-crazy hedonist.”

Valacirca spat the words at him.

“Precisely! This hero, this meddlesome paladin, is worth going crazy for!”

Stagnate answered loud and bold.

“Now! The battle is far from over! Do you have the will to continue fighting, William G. Maryblood?! Paladin of the flame, my wise and foolish foe! You once said you would keep to your oath, keep faith in your heart, and keep on fighting until the very instant you fell over dead. Do not tell me those words were false!”

I snorted. I was a total wreck. My arms and legs had been torn off and healed with benediction more times than I could count. My stamina and concentration were both exhausted, and my spear was broken, too. The only reason I was standing was because I had my sword to lean on. Honestly, I was at my limit. I wanted to let my consciousness go, drop everything, and sleep. But even so...

Even so, if Stagnate was going to say that to me, if Gracefeel was going to stay by my side—

“I guess I have no choice.” On wobbly legs, I stood ready for battle and fixed my gaze on the dragon. “Valacirca.”

“What?”

I smiled at him. “Didn’t I tell you I’d be stubborn?”

“Hahahah. Yes, you did. Horribly stubborn. Your stubbornness has even driven the gods to action. How heroic.”

The dragon grinned.

“Very well. A human is only a dragon’s equal with the full protection and blessing of a god. And dragons exist to reduce those god-praised heroes to ashes!”

Valacirca spread his wings. He was as healthy as ever. I had dealt him several wounds and ripped off several of his scales, but nothing more than that.

“Compassionate goddesses who rule over souls! Graceful maidens without battle blessings! Tell me! What protection will you provide this hero, and how will you kill me?!”

Defiantly, Valacirca stood tall, as if daring them to try him.

The fact was that neither the god of the flame nor the god of undeath was a

god of war. The god of the flame clearly didn't have that kind of nature, and having actually fought once against the god of undeath, I knew that he—or she—had essentially no knowledge of the martial arts. Valacirca was right. Both of them were fundamentally merciful gods. Even if the god of undeath gave me her protection as well, I had my doubts whether my blade would ever—

"Hm? I won't provide him anything."

The god of undeath said flatly.

"This man is my adversary. He has declared that he will remain as such. I certainly have no reason to give him a blessing."

"Oh?"

"However, Valacirca, I suspect you are forgetting... *where we are*."

When he heard those words, the dragon's eyes widened. Of course. How could I forget?! This place was—

"This is the Iron Country! The mountain where brave warriors of fire linger in regret of falling to an army of demons and a foul-dragon!"

An enormous burst of power exploded from the god of undeath's Herald-raven. The power spread outward like an invisible wave, reaching all parts of the mountain.

"Now return! Your allies and descendants have come back to you, and with them stands an unmistakable hero! They have returned to defeat the demons, take on the dragon, and reclaim the mountains that are your home!"

I could hear the sound of boots, countless boots.

"Slumbering lost, he is no warrior who would stand by now! I call upon you to take up the sword of revenge and bury your regrets! Feed the fire of courage once again!"

I could hear the sound of armor, of axes drumming against shields, of booming voices that shook the ground.

"Warriors of the dwarves!!"

An army of pale blue specters poured out of a great many entrances into the

Great Cavern. The dead dwarven warriors roared, to take back their homeland and take on the dragon once again.

◆

The god of undeath's Herald-raven flew through the Great Cavern like a guide. War horns blew loudly, signaling the march to the field of battle. I could feel the regular pounding of their war drums in my stomach like a heartbeat. The flames of pale blue souls danced. I could hear hundreds or thousands of people marching in step. The dragon watched this quietly with scrunched-up eyes, perhaps intrigued, or perhaps nostalgic.

As I watched all this, I heard footsteps behind me. There were four sets. "You guys... aren't undead, are you?" I turned around as I said it. I knew from their aura that they weren't, but I couldn't help myself.

"Chill. We're alive."

"Yes. See?"

"Close shave, though."

Menel and Al were there, and so were Reystov and Ghelreis.

"Your solo heroics pulled the dragon's attention off us."

"Then, with the blessing of our divine creator—although, the young master was unfamiliar with it, so it took time for us to be healed, of course."

Now I understood why Al's blade had become enshrouded in divine fire when he fought that demon. He had gained the protection of Blaze. That meant that just like me—well, perhaps not quite like me, but given time, at least, he could heal his own wounds and stand back up. Me not giving up had meant something. The god of undeath had taken action for me. My allies had once again stood up for me. Knowing that, I could keep on fighting.

"William... Sir William. This is, this is..."

Ghelreis stared at the army before him with a stunned expression. It looked like he couldn't decide whether to believe what he was seeing.

"They're going to fight with us for now. They'll be valuable reinforcements."

“Ohhh...” Tears rolled down his cheeks.

He had once dreamed of this field of battle and never been able to obtain it, and now he had finally arrived. Just then, I heard more footsteps. These were heavy. Clad in brilliant mithril armor, but with a slim, gentle appearance, the ghost of a single dwarf walked towards us. In his hand, he held a gleaming, golden sword. Ghelreis gasped and dropped to one knee as if on reflex. That gesture told me everything.

“Grandfather?” Al said in shock.

The last lord of the Iron Country, Lord Aurvangr, was there. He wordlessly stroked Al’s hair as if to say ‘well done.’ Al’s face crumpled, and tears brimmed in his eyes.

Then, Lord Aurvangr turned his gaze to me. Still saying nothing, he held the blade of his golden sword in his gloved hand and presented me the hilt.

“Huh?”

Um. To me? Shouldn’t you be giving that to Al? Those thoughts and doubts did pass through my mind, but his strong gaze won out. I gripped the hilt and received the sword.

It was Calldawn, the famous sword that had claimed one of Valacirca’s eyes. It was an enchanted sword that had been handed down through generations of dwarves and had probably existed since the time of the gods.

“Hero of the flame. Please... look after my grandson... and... this mountain...”

His voice came out hoarse and raw. Then, the armor being worn by Lord Aurvangr’s ghost, and his flesh too, slowly started to break down.

“Grandfather? Oh no... Grandfather?!”

Of course. I’d been told. *Valacirca’s flame could incinerate even souls.* Lord Aurvangr’s soul had most likely been roasted by the dragon. Its shape had probably become unstable a long time ago. It was probably reaching its limits just holding together for this long.

Tragically, heartlessly, the specter slowly melted and broke down, until...

“Not yet.”

A soft voice and a power as gentle as the breeze stopped the collapse.

“Not yet.”

It was my god. The Herald-flame of Gracefeel, goddess of the flame, had spoken.

◆

“Hearken, ye that cannot retain your souls.”

My god’s words were not only directed at Lord Aurvangr. I looked and saw that several hundred of the dwarves in that army were in a similar condition. As they roasted, melted, and their spectral bodies started to break down, the warriors still kept their will to fight; yet even that seemed more than they could hope for.

“All ye that are burned by the breath of the dragon and can no more return to samsara.”

She seemed to speak calmly, but there was a certain sorrowful quality to her voice. And then—

“O ye that are born in this world and lived well! O ye that endured!”

My god, who had always spoken with few words and a level tone, shouted loud for the first time. Her words were filled with unmistakable praise for the lives they had led. They were words of gentle appreciation, praise, celebration, and direct justification.

Though they were ghosts, some of the dwarves trembled or broke down crying. To have one’s way of life validated by a god—could there be any greater honor, as a person or a warrior?

“I shall bestow upon you a final blessing! If even in death, after your souls have perished, you yet desire to bring forth good and righteousness—”

The flame danced in the air. It was beautiful and yet frail, like a firefly dancing through the night sky.

“I shall guide you! Gather unto the heroes that live in this time!”

The divine flame danced. It was the souls’ guiding lantern, preserving them

before they came apart and beckoning soul after soul to our side. One after another, they came flying towards me and the others. I braced, but there was no impact or pain. However, their feelings came through to me. I felt their regrets, their lamentations, their unfinished business; and I understood their fervent desire for the victory they had been unable to achieve.

Come with us, they said. *Please, let us go together. Fight alongside us.*

As their words echoed inside my heart, mysteriously, power seemed to well up within me. The exhaustion weighing down my entire body like a lead weight began to vanish. My hazy mind became refreshingly clear. I felt as if I could immediately sprint into action.

Everything looked so clear to me now. These warriors' souls, left to roam around the mountains that had been brought to ruin by the dragon, had almost been lost. But now, they were giving me power. I could tell without being told that their souls had been passed on to us.

Menel, Reystov, and Ghelreis also accepted those souls with somber expressions. And once he had confirmed that all of the burned souls had gathered with us, the soul of Lord Aurvangr, which was close to breaking apart, extended a hand towards Al. Al took it.

"Grandfather..."

"I will not say I'm sorry. My grandson, please, bring life back to this country and its people."

"I know. Please leave it to me!"

The two of them looked at one another. Then, the soul of Lord Aurvangr scattered into golden particles and disappeared into Al's chest. The god of undeath's Herald muttered:

"What a pity. It seems I must share the fun."

Then the foul-dragon gave a pensive growl and spoke sedately.

"It looks like you're ready, Faraway Paladin."

Even as the situation unfolded like this, Valacirca still didn't start attacking us in haste. He waited calmly for us to completely finish.

“I... guess you didn’t do that out of kindness.”

“Khahaha. Of course not.”

The injured dragon spread his wings and drew himself tall.

“It is much like aging alcohol. Before I crush the heroes, I wait for them finish all their preparations, get everything in order, fill themselves to the brim with hope, and march towards me. The moment when their faces warp in despair...”

He bared his fangs.

“...is my greatest pleasure.”

There was no hint of a lie in Valacirca’s words. He probably *had* seen off more heroes than he could count that way, and incinerated them down to their souls.

“Now challenge me if you dare, Faraway Paladin. Either I will bury you here, and another page will be added to my chronicle of terror, or you will slay me here, and I will be spoken of in tales of valor across the four corners of the world.”

The dragon’s whole body brimmed over with miasma.

“Now is the moment of truth.”

I couldn’t answer him straight away. I looked at my god.

“Here I go.”

“Yes. I command thee again.”

The Herald-flame of the goddess flared up with an unmissable flash of brilliant light. And she, Gracefeel, goddess of flux, gave me my order in a solemn voice.

“Go, my knight. Slay the dragon, and pay that which you have vowed.”

I looked about at my allies and the ranks of dwarven ghosts.

“I swear on this sword, on the flame, on all the souls of warriors that dwell within me!”

I lifted the golden sword high, raised my voice, and shouted at the top of my lungs.

“The evil dragon shall be slain!!”

In response, a battle cry of hundreds shook the mountain.

“Roar, fire of courage!”

“Our enemy, this is the end of your evil!”

“The time for retribution has come! The hour of justice is at hand!”

“*Bellator! Bellator!*”

“*Fortis Fortuna adiuvat!*”

As if in reply to the countless shouts shaking the earth, the foul-dragon howled. The final battle began.

◆

“RRRRRRRRAAAAAAAA!!”

The dragon’s roar shook the Great Cavern. It was a terrifying, draconic howl, which without serious preparation would be enough on its own to wear down your soul and leave your mind vacant. He lashed out with his claws at the same time. Screaming out loud, I swung my sword in a horizontal arc, knocking his attack off course, and I stepped in close.

“*Sagitta Flammeum!*”

“Flame, protect me!”

The dragon’s Word and my Sacred Shield blessing collided and wore away at each other. With a bright flash, both were dispelled.

My entire body was full of energy as I moved. Fervent heat filled my chest. Crystal-clear consciousness extended to every part of my body. I felt as though I had perfect control over everything down to the finest movements of my fingertips. I could anticipate and follow the enormous masses that were the dragon’s arms and legs even without looking as they assailed me from above.

I dodged his claws, pierced his scales, got behind him, cut him open. The blade of the enchanted sword Calldawn vibrated, producing a wondrously clear tone. No matter how many of the dragon’s scales I cut off, the sword remained unscratched and unblemished. It didn’t seem that even the slightest speck of

blood had marred the blade. I was keeping Overeater sheathed for now, but Calldawn might have been just as sharp, perhaps even sharper.

Valacirca gave an angered roar, but he still made no attempt to avoid a close-quarters battle. He swiped at me aggressively with his claws, trying to crush me with them. Now that an army of this size had appeared with me as their standard-bearer, he must have decided that it was better to suffer a few flesh wounds to eradicate me quickly than take it easy from afar.

He committed to each decision and never hesitated. His arms, which reminded me of the trunks of enormous trees, gouged through the air with a mighty sound, swinging first left then right. My tension high, I dodged those swipes and saw my timing to draw in close again, but before I could—

“■■■—!”

The unfamiliar Word spoken by the dragon coincided with my field of vision lurching to a horrible angle. Sludge had spurted out of the supposedly solid ground, and my right foot had sunk into the soil.

Panic struck. From my previous world’s knowledge, I recognized this as liquefaction, but I couldn’t come up with a Word to counter it on the spot. This Word hadn’t been passed down into the modern age. It was a Lost Word, forgotten since the age of the gods.

I had no way of responding. I had no idea what would even work. I couldn’t speak a Word on reflex, and I had no time to think!

“Now crush!!”

In that moment of hesitation, a palm the size of a large table, with fingers like human torsos and sword-like claws, came tearing down towards me. The strike had the dragon’s whole body weight behind it. If I took it directly, there was no way I’d be able to endure it. Even if I resisted it a little, I would be completely crushed. My leg was caught and I was in no position to instantly jump out of his range. I couldn’t escape.

His palm slammed down. Dirt was thrown into the air.

“Will?!”

“Sir Will?!”

My allies shouted. And for the first time, Valacirca gave out a clear cry of pain. He stared at his *missing finger* in utter disbelief. I had struck back with the blade of Calldawn, severing a single one of his fingers, and fit myself into the gap just before his palm hit the ground.

The dragon’s fingers were as wide around as a human’s torso, but that was just thin enough to sever with a single swipe of my sword, as long as I timed it right. And I’d been exchanging blows with him for long enough now to have a perfect grasp of the timing.

Although Valacirca was a battle-hardened dragon—no, *because* he was a battle-hardened dragon, the tempo, rhythm, and patterns of his attacks weren’t that complicated. He could crush most opponents just with his unfairly huge body and his countless Words. He had no need to add in other tricks like complicating the tempo and rhythm of his attacks or coming prepared with multiple different attack patterns.

A tiger doesn’t train in the martial arts to take down its prey. This dragon was exactly the same. Natural predators don’t bother with unnatural things like training or tricks. They have no need to. In terms of both raw physical ability and years of practice, I couldn’t compare. But if there was one thing I could exploit, this was it.

I pulled my foot out of the mud and moved straight into an attack, taking advantage of how much losing a finger had shaken him. But Valacirca was not to be underestimated. He immediately let loose a powerful binding-type Word, attempting to ensnare my legs. I was forced to hammer a Word of Negation into it and take a leap backwards.

The way he used support Words was extremely skillful. Even though he’d probably never trained in anything like martial arts, his use of Words must have made many a skilled hero suffer a very bitter defeat. He wasn’t just using straightforward attacks.

“RRRRRRRRRAAA!!”

“AAAAAAAAAAA!!”

His howl and my battle cry intertwined. Sword and claw, Word and blessing crossed each other again.

“Fiiiire!”

Countless arrows shot from the side towards the dragon’s enormous body. Apparently, while I’d been facing the dragon from the front, Al had led a platoon around the side.

“Chaaaarge!”

Another platoon of dwarves charged at the dragon from a different direction.

“Hahaha! Yes!!”

The foul-dragon gave a roaring laugh, and his rampage grew ever more furious.

◆

With a single swing of the dragon’s claws, a warrior in full armor was diced into pieces and flung through the air. With a single sweep of his tail, the top halves of several warriors literally disappeared. Dragons were beings close to the Words. Not even ghosts could escape their clutches.

But the dead dwarven warriors would not be cowed. They didn’t flinch, they didn’t fear. Roaring in unison, they kept moving directly forwards towards the dragon. They buried swords and axes into his legs. They pelted him with longbow arrows and crossbow bolts. His scales blocked most of them, but it was here that the wounds I’d inflicted on the dragon finally started to pay off. Bit by bit, damage started to accumulate over his body.

“There!”

Menel’s own arrows blended into the endless volley, the elementals of air applying slight corrections to his already deadly accurate aim. One after another, the arrows sunk into the wounds I’d inflicted at the exact spots the dragon was bleeding from.

The arrowheads were not shining with the radiance of mithril. They were black as sin. Then I realized. He had slathered the mithril arrowheads with the hydra venom he’d obtained in the marsh. Hydra venom was such a strong

poison that a single drop of it could cause a large and vicious beast to roll onto their back convulsing. No matter how large or tough Valacirca was or how strong his miasmic nature, a poison that intense being delivered repeatedly into his wounds was going to have its consequences. If it had been Menel's arrows alone, the dragon might have had some way of dealing with them, but right now there was also the incessant rain of arrows from the dwarves. Using the other arrows as camouflage, Menel was free to chip away at the dragon from afar.

Bit by bit, Valacirca's movements began to dull. And as they did, Reystov, Ghelreis, and the dwarven spirit warriors daringly took their blades to him. More of the dragon's scales were torn off. Reystov's approach was different from mine. He didn't try to cut directly *into* the scales; instead, he slid his blade into the small gap behind them and sliced them off. That is, he inserted his blade between the dragon's scales *as it was moving around*. It was a feat of monumental speed and masterful technique.

"Pests!"

Valacirca's supple tail swept sideways to slam into them.

"Now, everyone!"

All around Ghelreis, the dwarves put up layer after layer of shields, using the ground and their bodies to support them at a diagonal angle.

"We are invincible!"

"Roar, fire of courage!"

As the dwarves bellowed, the wall of myriad shields was built. Magic shields engraved with Signs activated one after another.

"?!"

The dragon's tail swept in, but veered diagonally upwards. The ordinary dwarves and their countless shields had made no attempt to avoid the blow. Instead, they had knocked it off course.

"Give us back—"

By that time, Al had drawn close to the dragon's legs.

“Our home!”

With his abundance of physical strength, Al held the halberd clad in divine fire high above his head and brought it down with a full swing into the dragon’s leg. At the moment of impact, there was a tremendous sound. It was a volcanic, explosive strike, as if the god of fire’s fist had been delivered directly to the dragon’s leg.

At last, Valacirca’s enormous bulk toppled off-balance and crashed to the ground with a thunderous boom. This was our chance. We could finally take aim at the vulnerable parts of his body that had been inaccessible before because of the dragon’s sheer size. The tide of battle had begun to turn in our favor!

I ran towards the dragon’s huge body. As I did, a chill ran down my spine. The foul-dragon Valacirca was grinning.

◆

Black smoke spilled from Valacirca’s mouth. In fact, I could see his belly and throat glowing red. It was obvious that an enormous amount of miasmic breath, storing the overwhelming heat of lava, had built up inside his belly. He looked ready to burst.

The realization hit me. For a very long time now, *Valacirca hadn’t used his breath*. This situation was exactly what he’d been aiming for. He had allowed his breath to overflow inside his belly all this time and drawn the main warriors in towards him, waiting for exactly this moment, when he could engulf himself and everything around him!

“I didn’t want harm to come to my treasure, but...”

If I had to guess, he was confident that he was the only thing that could withstand this heat. Valacirca had called himself the king of poison and brimstone and brother to lava. His own heat and poisonous breath would never be fatal for him, even if he pushed his own limits, storing up more than his body was meant to handle and expelling it all at once. This was Valacirca’s final trick. If that breath left his mouth, we were finished.

“Gallant warriors...”

“*Maxima...*”

I left the whole concept of making decisions behind me.

“This is your destruction!”

“*Acceleratio!!*”

I blindly incanted a Word and kicked off the ground. Action-reaction abnormalized. I could feel the bones fracture in my takeoff foot. As I pushed the bones throughout my body to breaking point, I flew towards the dragon’s throat like a bullet.

Everything became gray. Time moved like molasses. Valacirca’s eyes locked on me as I flew towards him. I saw him go for the breath anyway.



I raised up Calldawn and screamed a battle cry. The warriors' memories I held within my chest told me the Word needed to draw out the power of this enchanted sword. It was a sword that the god of fire, Blaze, had given to his own minions as they headed into the darkness of the underground. Generations of dwarven lords throughout history had imbued it with mana in annual ceremonies. And its true nature was just as its name implied.

"*Solis... ortus!!*"

Blinding light and fire erupted from the golden sword, eradicating the darkness covering the Great Cavern in an instant. The incandescent blade of light, the miniature sun that the silent god of fire had given to his minions, plunged into the throat of the wicked black-dragon. The dragon's scales, the tough muscle in its neck—none of it mattered to the blinding blade.

At the same instant, all the scorching poison of the dragon's stored breath erupted from his sliced windpipe and exploded everywhere. The force of the explosion blew my body into the air. For a brief moment, I thought I saw the corners of the foul-dragon's mouth curve up, as if he were saying, "Bravo."

If the miasma and scorching heat that was Valacirca's breath had issued from his mouth, it would have headed for all of us. But it erupted out like an explosion, and all of it headed towards me instead, as the one who had slashed the dragon's throat. Of course it would. It was obvious what would happen if you stuck a knife in a hose full of water just before it was about to start spraying. But despite how obvious it was, my body had moved before I'd thought at all. I'd taken such a direct hit that I was sure not even my soul would remain. But...

Maybe taking down a dragon isn't a bad way to go. That was my honest, natural thought. *If this is how I go, it's pretty good. Cut the throat of a godly dragon, and perish. What an amazing end.*

The storm of burning fire and poison corrosive enough to melt bone engulfed me. But a moment passed, and all I felt was confusion. The pain of my flesh burning, the agony of my bones melting, was yet to come. The badge of honor on my arm shone weakly, protecting me. Its shine was quickly swallowed up by the storm of heat and poison.

But in that moment, I felt that Mary was scolded me, saying, “You mustn’t give up.”

The intense heat and poison hit me at last, finally surpassing the protection of my stigmata. My skin melted. My flesh melted, exposing my bones. My eyeballs, my organs started to melt. Gritting my teeth through the pain, *I pulled out Overeater.*

“■■■■■!!”

Voicelessly screaming with a scorched throat and unable to see, I stabbed the blade into Valacirca’s body. I could feel the thorns of mana growing. My body, being melted away by poison and heat, started being repaired. It was agony enough to drive me insane. The cells throughout my body were incinerated, regenerated, incinerated again. Still I kept my desperate grip on Overeater, with hands that were melting and regenerating over and over.

I melted.

I healed.

I melted.

I healed.

There was pain, only pain.

Pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain—

If you just let go of the sword, all this—

I forcibly suppressed the thought.

Pain.

Pain.

Pain.

I had to live.

Pain.

Pain.

I melted.

My body melted.

I healed.

Pain. Pain, pain, pain...

But through it all, I had to live.

Because that... was my promise... to my god.

To the end. To the end. To the very, bitter end!

Never give up on living!

With my entire body consumed by excruciating pain, clinging onto a single promise, I lost consciousness.

◆

I woke up lying in a puddle of blood.

“Will! Hey, Will!”

“Sir Will!”

Menel and Al had shaken me awake. Reystov and Ghelreis were also looking over me, concerned.

“Nn... ggh... Wait, what?”

Strangely enough, my body wasn’t hurting. In fact, I felt great.

“Hey, can you talk? You know what’s going on?”

“I’m... okay, Menel.”

“Don’t stand yet.”

“No, really... I feel pretty good.” I got up. I didn’t even stagger. My entire body was covered in blood and felt disgusting, but that was all. The blood splattered on me was still warm. I couldn’t have been out for very long.

I looked around. Valacirca’s now-unspeaking corpse lay there quietly. He was huge. Seeing him lying there silent had given me a new appreciation of his size. I had cut down a dragon... and survived... apparently. It didn’t feel real.

Lying on the battle-ravaged ground were Calldawn and Overeater, both of

them completely intact. These were definitely weapons from the age of the gods. It seemed that even dragonbreath couldn't destroy them.

The pale dwarven warrior spirits were slowly beginning to fade away. Perhaps slaying the dragon, which had always been their desire, had left them with no more unfinished business in this world. Without their help, we would have had no chance of winning.

"Thank you." I lowered my head. In reply, they raised their shields and axes and gave us unreserved smiles.

"You saved us, brothers."

"Thanks for the support."

"Farewell, friends and forebears. The young master and I will take it from here."

Menel, Reystov, and Ghelreis spoke in turn. Al was the last. "I swear I will bring back the Iron Country as it once was," he said quietly, placing his hand over his heart.

They replied to this with satisfied smiles, and then slowly, like smoke, they rose toward the heavens. Gracefeel's Herald-flame quietly accompanied them. For a while, we stood in silence and watched them go.

After I had seen off the dwarven warriors, I took a moment to check what state I was in. Even my mithril mail was in tatters, and my clothes had been completely incinerated. It was no surprise. I had taken a blast of fully-charged dragonbreath face-on. The cloak I was currently wearing had apparently been considerately put on me by Al as I lay on the ground naked. I still had burns and poison sores all over my body. I looked at my arms and saw that my badge of honor was still there. I breathed a little sigh of relief.

"Hm?"

Except for those burns on my arms, all the other burns and sores across my body were slowly fading.

"What?"

Something was strange. Ever since I got up, I'd been feeling fantastic. I felt as

if I was overflowing, somewhere deep inside me, with an outrageous amount of power and *fight*.

"Umm..." I looked around near me. My eyes settled on a large rock as big as a person's head. I picked it up easily with one hand. The weight wasn't unusual, but it was unusual that I was able to grip it one-handed with just my fingers. That should have been nearly impossible.

"The hell?"

"What?!"

Everyone's eyes widened. But somehow, I still felt that I could go further. I squeezed my hand. Cracks formed in the rock. The cracks became fissures, spread in the blink of an eye, and the rock broke apart, falling from my hand in pieces. I was speechless. *What was that?*

"You sucked the life from a dragon of the gods. What did you expect?"

I heard the flapping of wings. A raven with crimson eyes landed on a large piece of rubble in front of me. It was Stagnate's Herald-raven.

◆

"Your soul and body were heated red by dragonbreath, forged through an exchange of life with the dragon, and quenched with the dragon's dying blood."

I frowned.

"Your face tells me you're confused. To put it bluntly, divine dragon factor has mixed deeply into your soul and body. It makes sense that you can break a rock with your bare hands. You've become *something* somewhat close to a dragon but with the form of a person, and right now that's expressing itself unsuppressed."

Umm.

"As I'm sure you'll be able to tell if you try it out, in that state ordinary blades won't pierce your skin, and the Words of ordinary sorcerers will feel like nothing more than a gentle breeze. If you wield any ordinary weapon, the weapon will break, and as dragons are close to the Words, dragon factor will

multiply the power and accuracy of your own Words as well. Your lifespan... well, who can say? Your natural lifespan doesn't seem to have increased as far as I can tell, but you're much more resistant to infirmity and infection. As a result, you might live some amount longer."

What was this insanity?

"That said... Right now, you're burning with power and a desire to fight, aren't you?"

"Yes, it's... quite strong."

"It was factor from that prideful and violent dragon. It's to be expected. That state will cause the beast within you to grow. Do your best to suppress the dragon factor and not let its power go to your head. Otherwise, it will be your downfall."

Siegfried suddenly came to mind. He was the main character of a German heroic epic, a hero who gained an immortal body by bathing in dragon blood but brought himself to ruin through love and hate. What destroys warriors is sometimes not the battles they fight, but the comeuppance for their actions.

"I'll remind you, I don't want to see you dying a miserable death."

"Stagnate..."

The god of undeath's Herald-raven clicked its beak and laughed. Its body was slowly starting to disappear, unraveling into a mist the color of darkness.

"I've used up all of my strength but, well, I did help slay that meddlesome foul-dragon and put you in my debt. Not a bad trade. You *do* feel grateful to me?"

"Yes."

I wasn't going to deny that. If not for Stagnate's interference, I would have died. Though I hated to admit it, I owed her my life.

"Wonderful! When dealing with a hero like you, burdens of obligation and debts of gratitude pay far greater dividends than suppression and subjugation! I will regret losing those dwarven warriors Gracefeel guided, but I expect it will serve me better not to ask for them and increase the debt you

owe me.”

“This is what’s scary about you.”

I *was* susceptible to that kind of manipulation. And I couldn’t just dismiss her if I owed her gratitude, even though she was an adversary to the god of the flame. Now that I thought about it, she’d managed to put Blood and Mary in her debt for certain things in connection with the High King, too. The essence of this god was definitely in her crafty manipulation skills and not her prowess in battle. Plus, because we’d once engaged in serious mortal combat, the god of undeath had a good understanding of the lines I would never budge on. I had no intention of going back on my words calling her an enemy, but it really was difficult to know how to approach this god.

“Well, it’s time for me to go. Gracefeel, thank you for your assistance.”

Gracefeel’s Herald-flame came floating gently down. Stagnate’s eyes as she watched her descend had a slightly complicated look within them. There were probably a lot of complications between these two gods as well.

“Stagnate, god of undeath.”

My god answered in a quiet tone.

“Even now, it is not too late. Will you not cast away your ideals? Will you not put away the power of undeath and guide souls with me again? If you will do this, I—”

“Stop there. And no. I will pursue my own ideals. My choice is made.”

“I see.”

The Herald-flame wavered. She seemed lonely and sad.

“Fare thee well, then, elder sister.”

“Yes. Farewell, younger sister of mine.”

Strangely, those words didn’t surprise me. They just felt right. I’d long felt that these two gods had something in common.

“Now then, William G. Maryblood. Your heroic brilliance has grown even brighter, and you have obtained vast power. But as brightness grows stronger,

so darkness spreads. Take care. Do not go mad for war, do not hate, and keep the womanizing to a—oh, of course, you don't have a woman."

"That's none of your business."

"I understand your desire to devote yourself to my little sister there, but at least find yourself a partner. You're depriving me of the pleasure of tempting your offspring!"

"That is an awful reason!"

Were all my children and grandchildren going to have to put up with this?! What kind of curse was that?!

"If you like..."

The Herald-raven cocked its head at me. Its red eyes glistened bewitchingly.

"I can manifest a female Echo here one day. Would you care to have a child with me?"

"..."

My god's Herald-flame positioned herself between me and Stagnate and flared up fiercely, threatening her.

"Tch. I'm not asking for anything *from* you, you know. Is one child too much to ask? Rhea Silvia used to do it all the time, falling in love with heroes and bearing demigod children."

The goddess of the fae, Rhea Silvia, was said to live for love. I was sure I'd heard those kinds of stories about her, too. As far as I remembered, that was mainly in the age of the gods, though...

"Well, no matter. I'm out of time. I'll give up for now. Oh, yes, one more thing—"

As Stagnate's transformation into mist finally approached its end, she thought for a moment.

"William G. Maryblood... I once suggested you try being loved by me. I must confess a lie."

"What?" I said in confusion.

An apparition of an intellectual and kind of glamorous goddess with a mischievous smile overlapped the Herald-raven.

“I am in love with you, William G. Maryblood.”

And with that, the great god of undeath, my respected adversary, dispersed freely into mist and disappeared.

◆

For a while, everyone—even God—was silent. What just happened? That was what they call a confession of love, right? From a god? To a person? And not just any person, someone who had openly declared his hostility to her? And to top it all off, I’d been left feeling like the victim of a confess-and-run. What was I meant to do?

As I stood there confused, Menel slapped me on the shoulder. “Wow, you can’t hold down a goddess. Best of luck, Will.”

“Shut up!”

How was I supposed to respond to whispers of love from a god?! I wouldn’t even have known how to handle a person!

“Better prepare yourself now. Women like that look laid back, but they’re actually pretty clingy.”

“Please don’t, seriously...”

The fact that Menel spoke from experience made it all the more real and frightening. Couldn’t I just pretend I hadn’t heard her?

As we had this stupid exchange...

“My knight. Heroes.”

My god tightened up this strangely relaxed atmosphere with a solemn voice. Everyone sitting and standing corrected their posture.

“You slayed the foul-dragon well. You were magnificent.”

Finally, it started to sink in. I had beaten Valacirca. I had defeated that incredibly terrifying foul-dragon and survived. I could go home alive. The thought caused a rush of relief. It felt as if Gracefeel was looking at us with

affectionate eyes.

“I shall reward your efforts. Speak unto me your desires.”

“If I may,” said Al, responding to her gentle voice. “Goddess of the flame. Would it be possible to clear the foul-dragon’s miasma from the area around these mountains, including Lothdor?”

“Now that the foul-dragon is gone, I can grant that request to an extent.”

“Then that’s what I wish for. Please purify our homeland.”

“Eh, then I guess I’ll ask for that as well,” Menel said with a shrug. “Gotta think about Dine and the others.”

Ghelreis said the same thing. “I would also like to ask that of you. For the sake of my late friends.”

Reystov nodded. “That works for me. I got what I wanted. This sword fought a dragon.”

I was a little surprised by how selfless everyone was. But then again, if they weren’t, there was no way they’d have come with me to fight a battle with such slim odds of victory.

“I’ll ask the same. Please purify and bless this land.”

“Your request is heard.”

Gracefeel’s Herald-flame incanted a Word I had never heard before. A fire blazed up exuding a curious holy aura. I could only describe it as “sacred fire.” As it spread, the fire caught alight the drifting miasma and burned it to nothing.

The fire burned up only the unholy poison, leaving no marks on anyone else. The holy fire spread across the land. The Rust Mountains began turning back into the Iron Mountains.

“Mourned shall be those who were lost; and blessed shall be those who are yet to be born.”

My god spoke Word after Word with compassion, as though she herself was praying. She spoke kindly and quietly, holding the endeavors of us small and short-lived people in a soft embrace.

“Let there be peace upon this land. May it flourish, and may there be joy.”

As her Words continued, God’s Herald-flame blurred and started to fade away. Just like the god of undeath, she had probably exhausted so much of her power that she was unable to maintain her Herald’s form.

“O heroic dragon-slayers. This land, and you that reclaimed it—”

Beyond the Herald-flame, I saw a god who had been emotionless smile softly inside her hood.

“Have the blessing of the flame forever.”

With those softly spoken words, a warm glow of light, and a striking release of the last of the sacred fire that was burning out the miasma, her Herald-flame disappeared. Unlike the god of undeath, she had hardly said anything personal to me. I thought that was very much like her. She might not have been as easy to get close to as Stagnate, but I was actually fond of the way my god was so earnest.

For a while, none of us said anything. Inside the Great Cavern, where everything had disappeared, we all basked in the glow of victory and the feeling of being alive. I suddenly got the idea to walk over to Valacirca’s corpse and close his large eyelid. With his eye closed, the foul-dragon looked just like he was sleeping. Until the moment he met his end, Valacirca remained a powerful, wicked, and proud dragon. I offered a quiet prayer for him.

I didn’t know where the soul of this formidable being would go. After all, Valacirca had said that life was a thing to be burned through, something that should shine brightly. He might have rejected a return to the eternal cycle and perished of his own will. But even so, I prayed. And I wished the soul of this dragon godspeed.

“Okay.” I finished my prayer and turned around. “We still have quite a lot of things to take care of, but let’s get it done and head back.”

“Right! You rest, Sir Will. We’ll handle—”

“No, no, no. I can’t do that.”

“Oh yes you can, you’re having a break. You’ve been going way too nuts.”

“Agreed. I never thought you’d go for the kill at a moment like that. It was a damn good strike, though.”

“Indeed it was. I don’t believe I will ever forget that flash like the sun. We shall have to have a victory celebration when we get back!”

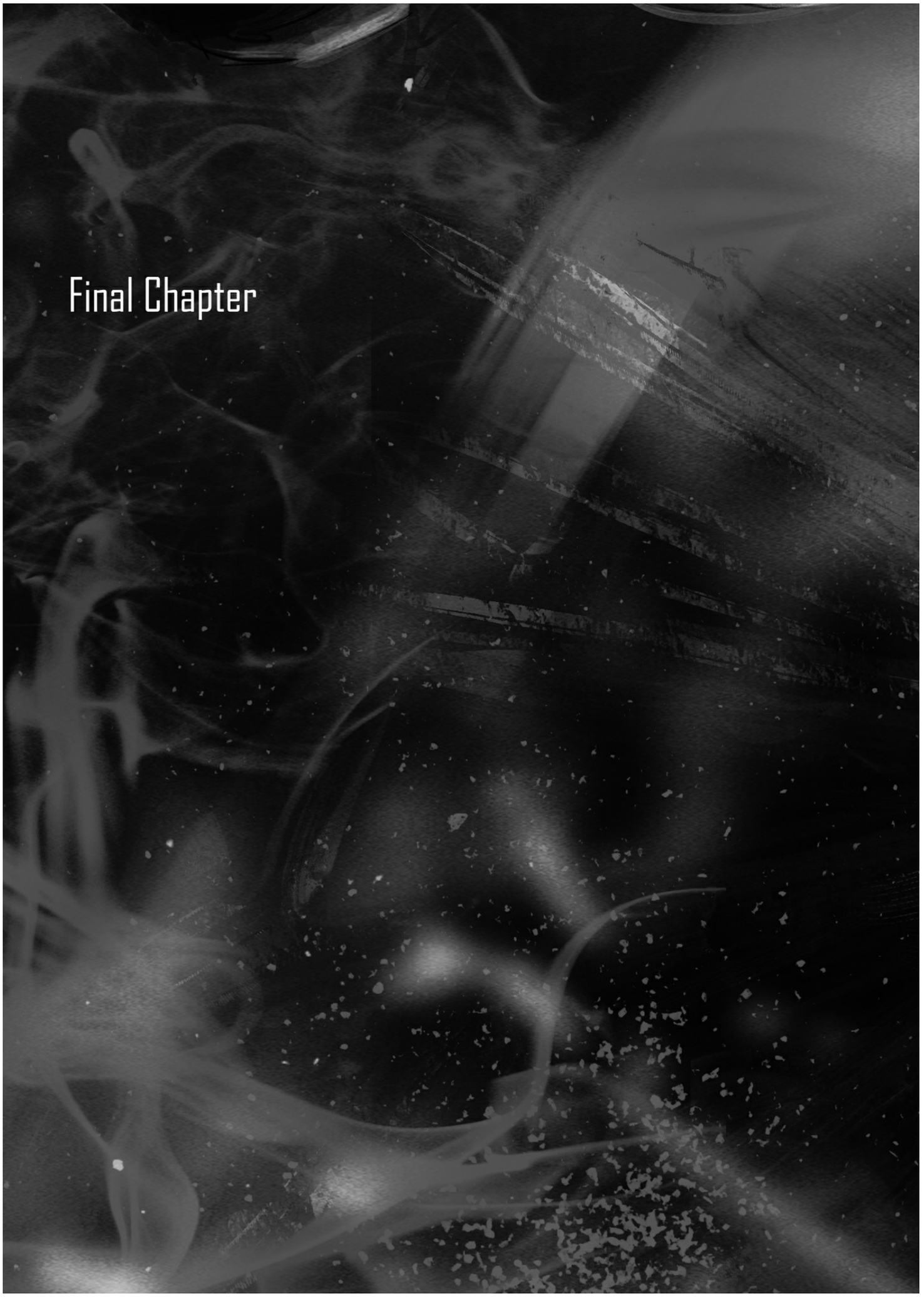
“Oh, nice! Let’s invite the Lothdor bunch, too, and get them to play for us.”

“That sounds wonderful! And we’ll have food and drink—”

“Tonio and Bee probably have it all worked out already. We’ll be having a blast for sure.”

“Ooh, I think I’m looking forward to it already!”

We were all chat and smiles. Started by no one in particular, the glorious sounds of high fives filled the cavern.


Final Chapter

After that, we acquired a number of dragon scales and treasures as proof that we'd successfully killed the dragon. With regard to Valacirca's corpse, it would be a problem if we just left it there to rot, so I used benediction to place the Miracle of Preservation on it. According to Reystov, almost all parts of a dragon's body made for high-grade ingredients and materials, so it was possible that we'd end up returning later with equipment to take it apart.

The idea of dissecting the remains of my adversary and making tools from him left me with some complicated feelings because of my sensibilities from my previous world. But that was what it meant to slay a dragon here. I was sure Valacirca had been prepared for that, and I wasn't about to hesitate, either. Having won, I intended to make full use of my victor's privileges.

That said, there was a staggering amount of treasure and dragon to move. It was too big a job for now with only the five of us. Considering the possibility that it might all get taken away by the remaining demons, we decided that for now we'd set up thorough barriers with Words and Signs and go back to the city the same way we came. The reason for not going down to the east on land, instead leaving to the west and going around the water route, was so that we could also check on the state of Lothdor and fill them in with what happened.

Incidentally, as for clothing, we'd brought some spares and also found some magical clothing embroidered with Signs among the dragon's treasure hoard. With all this together, we had just enough to make do. Full-blown winter was almost upon us, and walking around half-naked wasn't my idea of fun. Even more unamusing, I might add, was the fact that my body had turned into something that would probably cope just fine in these conditions.

On the way, everyone helped me test the capabilities of my body now that it had been exposed to dragon blood. To put it bluntly, they were quite inhuman. It was mostly just as the god of undeath had said. My muscular strength and endurance had been raised even further beyond the level I'd trained them to. My defense, especially, was very far from human. I couldn't be cut or stabbed with a worker's knife. While being very careful, we did a restrained experiment to see whether Reystov could slash me, and that went through just like normal, so apparently I wasn't invincible or immortal.

It was a similar story with my Words. I tried incanting a few, and I was amazed at how accurately I could produce the results I wanted. My precision had increased. When I honed my senses, I felt that my process of converging mana both inside and outside my body had changed somewhat. My maximum power had increased as well. I had a feeling that if I felt like it, I might be able to reduce this entire area to scorched earth with a single shout. I truly was a dragon in human form.

As for my take on all this, I felt that the situation I'd been put in wasn't very good. It was true that my battle strength had gone up. I would probably have the upper hand against Stagnate's Echo if we had a rematch, and I thought I could even put up a reasonable fight against Valacirca on my own. Judging purely by my physical abilities, if I faced an ordinary beast like the ones you could find around here, I'd probably be able to hum to myself as I crushed them without the slightest risk. And *that* was bad news.

It was incredibly dangerous to have risk disappear from battle. If I got used to this body exposed to dragon blood and took it for granted, the way I fought would become arrogant and lax. Once that happened, I was bound to die sooner or later. I wasn't sure whether it'd be by running into an enemy stronger than me, making too many enemies, or simply by being murdered, but in any case it wouldn't be pleasant. It was the same as the warning I'd received from Blood when he gave me Overeater.

What's more, it would be bad for me both as a religious person and as someone involved in politics. How strongly and for how long can a person empathize with the vulnerable if he never lets the heat or cold discomfort him, doesn't know hunger or thirst, and has the strength to survive in any place all on his own? I could see myself eventually becoming an ignorant and arrogant person who knew neither the freezing cold nor the hunger of having nothing to eat and whose only qualities were strength and intelligence.

This power wasn't a blessing from the dragon. It was a *curse.* I wondered if Valacirca had foreseen this. He almost certainly hadn't expected me to survive the breath he unleashed when we crossed in those final moments. But I could imagine him laughing and saying, "Dragons are beings who curse champions and bring their lives to destruction." I had no idea how to eliminate the dragon

factor mixed into my body and soul, and anyway, even if I did find out, this power was certainly useful. I couldn't possibly relinquish it until things were a little more settled.

In short, right at the last moment, the dragon had got me good. I had won the battle, but the war between me and Valacirca would continue for my whole life. If I met my destruction as the foul-dragon intended, I would lose. If I didn't, I would win.

As we finally exited the seemingly endless network of underground tunnels and made our way out of the West Gate, I looked up at the mountain and muttered, "You won't beat me."

◆

We went out the West Gate and made our way down to the foot of the Iron Mountains. When the rocky paths lined with boulders came to an end, our field of view opened up. A refreshing breeze blew.

"Wow..."

Fresh buds had sprouted on what had been rows of dead trees. The poisonous sludge had vanished and become fertile soil. Where there had been bog, there was now either firm ground or rich fen, depending on where you looked. It was completely different from the wet and dismal sight I'd encountered when I first came here.

"Heeey! Heeey!"

A group of elves called out from the distance and headed our way. At the head of the group was an elf with golden hair and violet eyes I recognized as Dine.

"So you *are* all right!" she said, running up to us. "We heard the dragon howling so many times, and the next thing we knew, everything went quiet and suddenly this strange fire rushed past us and this whole area was clean..."

Then, taking in the fact that none of us were missing, she hugged us all, sobbing out, "I'm so glad you're safe!"

The smell of poison no longer surrounded her, either. The only smell floating

around her now was a pleasant one, a mixture of a womanly scent and the smells of earth and greenery.

“You’re making a big deal of it,” Menel said.

“I am not! I really... thought you might never come back...”

“We won, though. I mean, look around, the dragon’s dead. Will killed him.”

In contrast to Menel’s curt attitude, Dine’s voice was choked with tears.

“Look, I’m not dying yet. I’ve got stuff to do.”

“Stuff?”

“Well, for starters, this place needs restoring. This area’s still dealing with the aftereffects of the foul-dragon’s poison, right?”

“That’s a good point.” Al nodded and frowned with a concerned expression. “There were some traces of miasma left in a few places in the mountains, and there are probably some demons left over, too.”

Certainly, it seemed that quite a lot of the miasma had been cleared away, but it wasn’t to the point where I couldn’t sense any at all. Besides, the dangerous demons who had settled here because of the toxic environment wouldn’t leave so easily. It looked like it was going to be a while yet before the Iron Country and Lothdor could regain the bustle they’d had in the old days.

“We have a mountain of the dragon’s treasure, so for the time being we can draw a little from that.”

“We shall need to consider how to distribute it, as well.”

“It’ll be no good to have a ton of wealth entering the system and screwing up the balance of goods and money. Have a chat with Tonio or something.”

“Right!”

“Also, since we’ve taken back the mountain, the people who lived in the old Iron Country will try to come back, right?”

“So we’d better make sure it’s ready to take them or we’re gonna have a mess on our hands.”

The list of things to do kept growing longer.

“I don’t much feel like it, but maybe I should show my face back at my old home forest as well and ask if they could send out a few talented elves,” Menel muttered with a frown on his face.

The silver-haired half-elf who had once run away from that forest would be returning there as a decorated dragon-slayer holding the qualification of Lord of the Woods and carrying an item that once belonged to one of their departed heroes. When I thought about just how much drama that would create, well, suffice it to say his expression didn’t surprise me. Menel wasn’t the kind of person to think of going back successful so he could have the last laugh. If he wasn’t comfortable somewhere, he was the type to burn his bridges behind him and cut the whole thing out of his life. He’d probably never intended on bothering to go back there.

However, when it came to adjusting the delicate balance of mountains and forests, it was better to have multiple skilled elementalists at hand who knew about the workings of nature and the fae. There was no question that it would be to our advantage if Menel could regain his connection with his homeland.

“Then I’ll come as well,” Dine said.

“You?”

“We’re the ones they’re helping! Of course I have to come and bow my head to them!”

“Uh, well, I guess. Let’s take a trip across the sea in spring, then. You okay with that, Will?”

“Of course,” I said with a laugh and a nod.

I had the feeling that it would just make for even bigger drama, but I couldn’t see how that was going to hurt me!

“Damn you, grinning like it’s not your problem!”

I laughed again. It looked like it was going to be a while yet before the Iron Country and Lothdor could regain the bustle they’d had in the old days. But even if it took some time, I was sure: one day, the splendid townscape of Lothdor would be rebuilt and filled with beautiful songs and music, and the furnaces of the Iron Country would again glow with bright-red fire as the sounds

of hammers echoed through its halls.

◆

After the warm reception at Lothdor, we got back on our boat, set sail up the now clear-flowing river, and arrived at the lake. We crossed the lake, made our way through the mist, and headed back to the city of the dead.

“Aha!” Gus was there. He was floating near the outskirts of the ruined city, looking restless.

As a completely random aside, the sight of a ghost under bright sunlight is incredibly strange.

“So you didn’t snuff it. Hmm...” Gus looked at me suspiciously. “Your mana flow is odd. Dragon factor?”

He got it in one. It was no wonder they called him the Wandering Sage.

“That’s a curse, you know.”

“I know. I’ve come to terms with it, too, Gus.”

It was the price for my victory over Valacirca and the proof that that prideful foul-dragon had indeed seen his draconic philosophy through to the end.

“Good,” he grunted. Then, with a switch of attitude, he said, “Come on, then! You all look very tired!” and invited us into the temple.

I hadn’t been too aware of it until now, but I guess I was quite high-strung. I kneeled in front of Blood and Mary’s graves, told them all about my battle with the dragon, and then, completely spent, I slept like a log. I had fought battle after battle, and now I had finally arrived somewhere where I didn’t have to be on my guard. Having been exposed to the blood of a dragon, my body was hardly complaining of tiredness at all. However, I had been put at risk of death so many times that my mind must have been in need of a break. I fell asleep, forgetting even about my morning prayer routine, and I dreamed of the days of my childhood with Mary and Blood. It was a fun dream of running around on that temple hill.

◆

Our brief moment of rest came to an end. It came time for us to return to

Torch Port.

“Let us return the weapons we borrowed,” Al said to Gus. Gus casually waved a hand.

“No, no. Take them, I won’t use them.”

“But aren’t they mementos of the precious allies who fought with you?”

“You’re an upright lad, aren’t you?” He smirked. Gus was actually pretty fond of people with conscience like this. “That they belonged to comrades-in-arms is all the more reason they should be passed down to new users. Weapons and armor were created as tools. Leaving them locked up in storage, not even presented for anyone’s appreciation? Nothing could be more meaningless.”

“Then I’ll take these with many thanks.”

“Mm. They will be the equipment of a new dwarven lord. You will do that gear an honor.”

“Oh.” Those words reminded me. “Calldawn.”

That golden sword was still strapped to my hip. I hadn’t thought about it until now. My primary weapon, Pale Moon, had been seriously damaged, and I couldn’t afford to use Overeater lightly. There had still been a chance of a battle with roaming beasts or the remnants of the demons, so I’d kept Calldawn on me all this time...

“No. That sword belongs to you, Sir Will.”

“I can’t take this. It’s been passed down among the dwarves for generations. It’s your treasured sword!” I insisted that he’d need it to demonstrate he was their legitimate ruler and so on, but Al refused to take it from me, saying that Lord Aurvangr had deliberately given it to me.

“Sir Will, you were born under the star of a hero. Please take this sword to help you so you don’t lose your life in the battles to come.”

Despite all that, I couldn’t simply *take* this sword. So I decided that I would borrow it instead and put down in writing that the sword was to be returned to the Iron Country after I died.

“Anyway, you’re kind of talking like stronger and stronger enemies are going

to head my way. I faced a dragon this time. A dragon! That's gotta be *it*, right? It's not like enemies stronger than that turn up every day of the week!" I said, finishing with confidence. Everyone was silent, looking at me with gazes of pity. It felt like they were thinking, *Knowing him, there'll be swarms of them*, or something. So cruel!

"Uh, y'know, live... strong." Reystov patted my shoulder clumsily but gently. "We'll help you out a little bit."

"Um, that really doesn't make me feel any better!"

Reystov made a troubled face. It was such an unusual expression for him that everyone laughed.

◆

We traveled downstream from the city of the dead and returned to Torch Port. As we drew close, the buzz was already starting to spread. Women doing work on the outskirts covered their mouths with both hands in great surprise and almost tripped over themselves in their rush to get back to town. I heard voices exclaiming that their liege had returned and everyone was safe.

Before long, a large, noisy crowd of people had spilled out from town. By that time, we had docked our boat at the wharf; and by the time we made it ashore, Tonio was there at the head of the group to greet us. His hair seemed kind of messy, and there were bags under his eyes. I'd left him in charge before I left, but now that I thought about it, there must have been a lot of trouble during the times when the dragon was howling. It looked like I'd put a lot of strain on him. I felt pretty bad about it.

"I'm pleased to see you back. Were you... successful?"

In answer to his question, I untied a package that I'd given to Ghelreis to hold onto, revealing the twisted end of a horn and a large, thick scale.

"The demons who live in the mountain, and the foul-dragon Valacirca,"—I held the horn high in the air—"have been slain!"

A great cheer went up. Valacirca's roars and growls had reached all the way to this town. They must all have been pretty worried. And in this very moment, all their worries had been resolved.

“Woohoo! Congrats!!” A red-haired halfling came flying at me from out of the crowd. I caught her and spun her around. Bee laughed. “You’re all fine, right?! That’s great! And oh my god is that a dragon horn? Show me a sec, I’ll put it in a story later! Wait... What the—your new gear is *amazing*! Where did you get it?!”

She was really getting carried away. I could tell we were all in for a grilling later. She was going to dig down to the last detail. I was still thinking about it when a wave of joyous and thankful people swallowed me up.

There was Agnarr, Dwarftown’s leading figure. Thori and Hodh were here, too. Marcus of the Bluffers, whom I’d asked to serve as a decoy on our way out, had returned safely. He grinned at me in congratulation of our joint success.

The old dwarf Grendir had his arms around Ghelreis and Al’s shoulders. His eyes were streaming with tears. I spotted Anna, the priest, talking to Reystov with a smile and expressing her appreciation. Reystov nodded back. Menel seemed to have snuck away and was watching the fuss from a distance. That was very much like him. At least he looked like he was in a good mood.

I was mobbed. Thanks, congratulations, well dones, hoorays, and more flew about. As I handled them with smiles, hugs, and handshakes, eventually things started to settle for the time being, and Tonio clapped his hands together loudly to get everyone’s attention.

“Alright, that’s enough, everyone! Our lord and his party are tired! They have, after all, returned from having defeated a dragon!”

He made his way back through the crowd towards me.

“We’ll allow them a little time to recuperate, and have a party tomorrow!” He glanced in my direction and said, “I assume that’s all right with you?”

I nodded. I was no longer any match for Tonio when it came to arranging these kinds of things. Going along with the flow Tonio had created, I shouted, “We will be celebrating the slaying of the dragon! Everyone, I hope you will eat, drink, sing, and celebrate to your hearts’ content tomorrow!”

Especially loud cheers went up among the crowd. All these familiar faces were smiling. They looked like they were having fun, enjoying themselves, and simply

being happy. I thought about how I'd protected this happiness. If I hadn't taken on Valacirca, or if I'd lost to him, I would never have been able to witness this. I'd protected the things I'd gained.

There had been a point to me being reborn from my last world in which I had holed myself up constantly and was unable to go anywhere, a point to forcing myself up and keeping on walking. The full appreciation of that filled my heart and caused a lump to rise in my throat.

◆

The first thing in the morning the following day, the grand celebration started. Tables from all over the town were dragged out into the square, and white tablecloths were draped over them. Garlands were hung everywhere, and right from the early hours of the morning, steaming-hot dishes made by the ladies of the town were pulled out from houses all over. So many people had showed up, each groomed and dressed for the occasion, and every one of them was smiling.

In formal dress, I raised my voice on the platform. "Uh, I won't talk long. I'm as starving as the rest of you!" I cracked a light joke. Laughs came back. "In celebration of the successful slaying of the dragon and the bountiful blessings we have received, I ask you to raise your cups to the goddess of the flame, and all the good gods!"

"To the goddess of the flame, and all the good gods!" everyone shouted.

"Cheers!" I called out, and they all called back the same, raising their countless cups. There were some made from horns, and others made from wood; some had been decorated in vibrant colors, while others were plain. They all knocked noisily together and were drunk dry one after another as the party progressed.

All over, conversations filled the air unprompted, punctuated with bursts of joyful laughter. Amid all this, I heard the musical sound of strings. Seizing on the chance to profit, Bee had happily started playing her rebec and telling a story.

It was a story of elves, dwarves, and their two countries, finally returning to this land after being lost to the Great Collapse two hundred years ago. It was the story of Lothdor and the Iron Country. The delicate movements of her

fingers lent color to her tale, sometimes with bright music and other times sad.

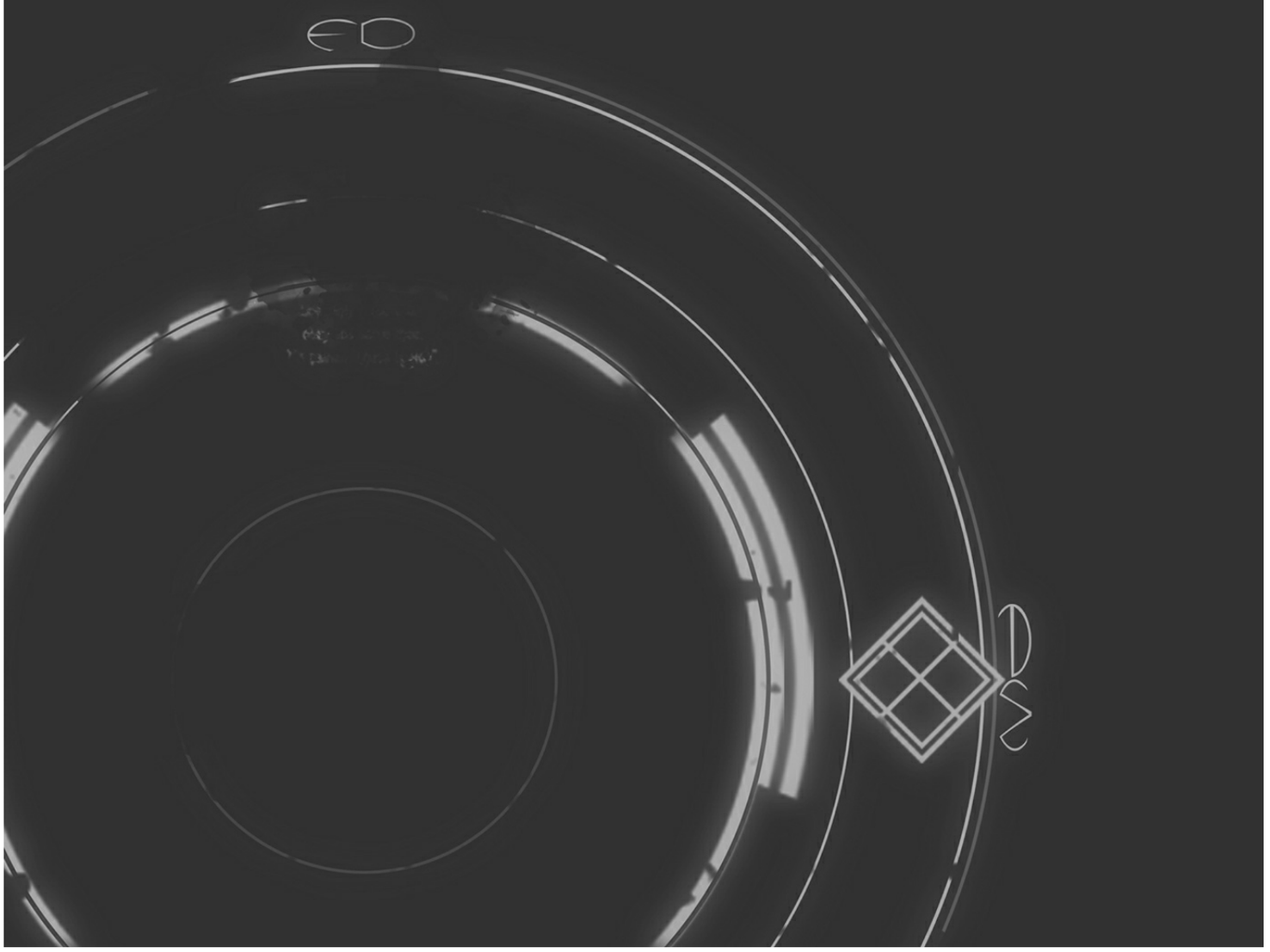
Then there was a transition. The sound stopped. She spoke quietly, without music. The story of the two countries ended with their destruction. But then, ever so quietly, the strings began to sing again. And Bee sang that as long as there were people, as long as there was the will, the countries would revive. Just like reincarnation's eternal cycle, even when all fell into darkness, the caring goddess of the flame would shine her light upon it.



Even if poison and darkness covered everything, and the land became a place of terror where hideous demons roamed and a wicked dragon howled, still the Faraway Paladin would bravely venture forth, driving out the darkness of this southern continent with the gentle goddess of the flame by his side. Bee's rebec sang of how the Paladin slayed the dragon, loudly for all to hear.

The Faraway Paladin III: The Lord of the Rust Mountains — *Finis.*

Side Story: The Moon's Journey



Glittering rays of sunlight shone through an endless number of enormous trees lined up like a temple's colonnade. We were deep in Beast Woods, in the domain of the great Lord of the Woods, the Lord of Holly.

"Ohh! This is, great place! *'You are very thoughtful, Sir William.'*"

"*'No, trouble.'* So, about what we discussed..."

"Muh-huh. We accepted."

The one nodding back was someone so large he was impossible to forget. He was the forest giant I'd fought with once, Gangr of the race of Jotunn. Tribal giants were walking all around the area with curiosity, setting up large canopy tents made of beast hide. The men were over three meters tall and the women more than two and a half, so they were quite the sight. It kind of made me feel like a halfling.

"Fighting people is a pain, whether win or whether lose."

"You're not kidding."

I had slain the dragon, returned home, and held a party. If this were a story, it would have wrapped up at that point with "And they all lived happily ever after" and the fall of a curtain, but unfortunately, this was reality. There had been a lot of things to do in the aftermath. I'd reported to various relevant parties including His Excellency Ethel and Bishop Bagley to tell them that the issue had been safely resolved. To avert riots, I'd allayed the concerns of people who had become anxious. I'd checked the spread of misinformation by widely publicizing the facts. The dragon's howling had caused trouble that required an urgent response all across Beast Woods. I'd brought all kinds of trouble under control, even trouble that was only brewing.

Even after all that was mostly dealt with, there were still a host of other things I needed to do. Figuring out what to do about the clan of forest giants we'd discovered had been one of them. Just like the dragons, the race generally called giants was said to be neutral, neither affiliated with the good gods nor the evil gods.

"Neutral" here didn't mean that they wouldn't support either side because they disliked conflict entirely. They could cope without the protection of either

set of gods, and if someone picked a fight with them, no matter which faction the aggressor was part of, they had the strength to hit back and do a spectacular amount of damage. So they had no reason to bother getting involved in a faction war between these guys called gods. They were “neutral” in an extremely powerful sense.

It was said that in comparison to other giants, forest giants had only weakly inherited the blood of the Primordial Giants who existed in the age of the creation myth. Over the generations, their divinity had diminished, their lifespans had shortened, and they had become smaller, too. Despite that, however, their bodies were still three meters tall, and they had a high level of skill as elementalists, although they still fell quite a way short of Menel. There weren’t many of them, but they were a race of extremely high-quality and powerful battlemages. And this was what the comparatively weak-blooded forest giants were like.

The anecdotes about the Primordial Giants who had retained a strong influence from the age of creation were even more crazy. There were the towering Storm Giants, who lived in the eyes of tempests in the southern seas and walked the seas accompanied by raging winds. There were the Lava Giants, who spent eons sleeping within lava in large volcanic belts and woke up from time to time when the volcanoes erupted. There were the Cloud Giants, who made their home atop inexhaustible thunderclouds in the wastes far to the east and ran about the skies at will.

Though many of them had already departed this dimension, just hearing them described gave me a dizzying feeling of scale. I could understand why it was said that dragons and giants were equals. If I’d been something like that, I would have been able to fight Valacirca, one of the Primordial Dragons, in a physical punching match without ever retreating a single step.

Anyway, the problem was that we had discovered we had some very powerful neighbors deep in the forest. They may not have been quite as extreme as the mythical beings I described, but they had certainly inherited their blood. The fact that they were living in the depths of Beast Woods meant that beasts were nothing to them. In fact, judging by the lines of beast-hide canopies, they were the predators here, and the beasts were their prey. They were stronger than

the beasts, in other words.

If they spread outwards and had an unfortunate collision with the steadily expanding area where people were living, all hell would break loose. Specifically, if a careless encounter turned into a fight and someone ended up dying on one side or the other, there might be no coming back from that. The casualties that would result would be absolutely no joke, and nothing good would come of it for anyone.

Of course, because the two of us did know each other, the negotiation route was open. It was possible that we could work something like that out with compensation. But that was a last resort, not something to rely on from the beginning. Which was why—

“Gangr and clan will protect big Lords.”

I had decided to approach them to ask whether they would move to the areas of the forest with the two gigantic trees known as the Twins of the Woods: the Lord of Oak and the Lord of Holly. I already knew their locations from the time we had that trouble with the horned demon called a Cernunnos.

Those two Lords of the Woods were the most vital part of Beast Woods. We couldn’t allow their domains to be destroyed with a Taboo Word or something, or it would be a disaster. However, the sacred territory of a Lord of the Woods had to remain lush with greenery by its nature, and so we couldn’t afford to let many people into it or develop it on any large scale. Basically, the only way to handle those areas was to treat them as forbidden; yet providing them no protection at all was also not an option.

We were between a rock and hard place, and that was where the giants came in. They would get a virtually permanent place to live, where they would never inadvertently bump into humans, and the Twins would have powerful guardians they could talk with living right nearby. This would most likely be beneficial for both of them.

I shook hands with him to conclude our contract. His hand was big and thick.

“Come to think of it... *‘Gangr, where, Western Common Speech?’*”

“Long ago, near the outside the forest, a good man was... uhh... ang... angry...

angry culture...? *‘Farming.’* I learned a bit from trade him fur and grain.”

“Huh...”

“That was before three hundred springs came, or more. After, one of the clan fought with humans. We moved into forest deep.”

That really was a long time ago. But if that was the case—

“Is it still... *‘possible, trade-things’*?”

“Muh-huh. *‘We would be grateful to trade for metal, but what do you need?’*”

“We *‘want, herbs, wood, beast hide, bones.’*”

We talked like that about the items we wanted for a while and agreed on the general idea. We could leave the specifics to the people who would actually be involved in the trading.

“Oh,” Gangr said as that topic fizzled out. His eyes were on my back. “What you... uh... *‘What happened to that spear?’*”

I did my best to force a smile onto my face as I answered him, but I probably made it a bitter one accidentally. “Unfortunately, it broke during my battle with the dragon.”

Gangr looked sorry for asking.

◆

Pale Moon was destroyed. It had been shattered, broken, and mangled during my battle with Valacirca. It may have been a spear protected by countless Signs, but attacks from a dragon, a being close to the Words, were the one thing it couldn’t handle. I’d been taking care not to let my weapons get destroyed, of course, but there was a limit to what I could do in that situation. So there was nothing I could have done. I just had to accept it...

I gave a long sigh. It was still depressing.

Having returned to Torch Port after that, I was now sitting on a pier and sighing. To tell the truth, I had already checked whether Pale Moon could be fixed. I had His Excellency introduce me to the most skilled blacksmith in Whitesails, and I asked him if there was anything he could do. The reticent

blacksmith silently shook his head and said nothing else.

I must have had a unbearably sad look on my face when I received that answer. Perhaps out of pity, the blacksmith did some shortening work on the part of Pale Moon's broken blade that had the Word of Light engraved on it and made a little dagger for me. The parts with the Signs of Sharpness and Strengthening were shattered and unsalvageable.

"It's hard to get over it."

I pulled the dagger shortened from Pale Moon from its sheath that was strapped to my hip and held it up to the sun. The blade gleamed nostalgically. But this dagger now fell far short of the standard of performance that I needed out of a weapon. It was lacking in too many ways for even my normal self to wield, and I dreaded to think what would happen if I tried seriously swinging it around after awakening the power of the foul-dragon sleeping in my soul. It would probably break the first time I hit it against something.

I had many opponents to fight, from beasts to the remnants of the demons and even the minions of unknown evil gods in the south. I couldn't keep on using a poor-performance weapon just because of sentimentality. It was probably about time I searched for a new main weapon already. After all, at this point, I could pick whatever weapon I wanted.

Even the weapons I'd picked up while hunting around old ruins included several spears that simply outperformed Pale Moon. And if I wasn't happy with any of those, I could pay some money to the merchants of Whitesails and buy a whole collection of spears from all kinds of places which could be transported here by ship. If I used my connections and made some earnest requests, I could probably even obtain the secret weapons of the dwarves or the elves.

I had access to a spear of old magic, with Signs of fire and lightning incorporated into the blade. There was a spear that tracked the enemy when thrown and could be returned to hand with a single Word. There was a consecrated spear that sharpened the mind of its holder and enhanced their resistance. Another option was a spear of misdirection made of mithril that was imbued with mystifying fairies. There was even a plain but easy-to-use spear that had simply been made to be extremely sharp and durable and which had

been fortified with a Sign so that it would never dull.

But none of them felt right.

I'd probably been using Pale Moon for too long. Objectively speaking, Pale Moon wasn't that strong a spear. It couldn't match up to Overeater, the life-sucking sword that a demon king had made to kill the High King he opposed; nor was it a match for Calldawn, the small golden sun created by the god of the forge. It was simply an ordinary sturdy spear with an adjustable length and a shining blade. But even so, no matter what anyone said about it, that ordinary sturdy spear with an adjustable length and a shining blade had definitely been the Faraway Paladin's main weapon. It had been the one weapon I most relied upon.

I couldn't believe this had become of my favorite weapon. I probably still hadn't picked myself up from the shock. I got the feeling I could now understand why Reystov insisted so strongly on his favorite sword. None of these weapons had the most important factor I'd taken for granted all this time: absolute confidence in them built up over years. Losing this was a bigger blow than expected.

I gazed silently at the dagger and thought about what to do with it. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't take this shortened Pale Moon out on my adventures. If I did, it would either be simple dead weight, or I would break it. And yet, it didn't feel right to leave it just decorating the mansion as a memento. What to do, I wondered. What could I do with this...

There were still many things to be done in the aftermath of the dragon-slaying, but I couldn't get my mind off this. While I was deep in thought—

"I'm gonna do this, dammit! I'm doing this and I mean it!"

I heard a pretty spirited voice.

◆

Walking along the street beside the river, apparently seething with anger, was a boy about thirteen or fourteen years old. He had messy, black hair and strong, hazel eyes. He'd thrown on a coat over rough hemp clothing, and on his back was a crude quiver and bow. Also strapped to his waist was a club that he'd

apparently cut from wood without much care. I guessed he was a hunter or adventurer in training.

“I’m gonna kill a beast and get its head!”

“L-Let’s not, Glen... It’s too dangerous!”

“Shut up, Alex, I’m going!”

Chasing after the boy was a ginger kid of about the same age, wearing slightly more substantial cotton clothing. My eyes were drawn to the dark, patched-together robe and the pretty old-looking ash wand with a little bit of cloudy silverwork at the tip. This one was clearly a sorcerer—but didn’t seem like a product of the Academy. Perhaps it was some regional hexmage branch of magic?

As I continued to watch idly, the boy disregarded the sorcerer’s attempts to stop him and went marching away from town.

I was getting a bad feeling, so I hurriedly called out to the two of them. “Um, excuse me.”

“Uh? Who’re you?”

The boy named Glen stared up at me with a combative look on his face. The sorcerer kid who had been called Alex looked a little relieved. I bent my knees a little and looked Glen in the eyes.

“I was just wondering where you’re going in such a rage.”

“Beast hunting, okay?! Beast hunting!”

“Beast hunting?”

“Yeah! What? Something wrong with wanting to be an adventurer?!”

Based on where we were and the direction they’d come from, I had a sneaking suspicion I knew what had happened here.

“Ahh... Did you happen to go to the Brown Bear?” I said, giving the name of an inn.

“So what if we did?!”

“U-Um, we... We just... bumped into each other on the road and... he said

let’s go together... and then, um...”

“Those assholes!”

“Ahh...”

The Brown Bear was the hangout of some particularly rough adventurers, even for Torch Port. There were some fairly nasty characters among them. If a couple of young, aspiring adventurers went wandering into a place like that, the way they would be treated would probably be decidedly cruel and demeaning.

It was a safe bet what had happened. They’d pretty much been laughed out of the building, and now Glen was burning with determination to come back with the head of a beast or something and shove it in their faces. He in particular looked like he had a strong sense of justice. It had probably left a very bitter taste in his mouth that his companion had been mocked as well.

However, the cruel reality was they simply weren’t strong enough. I could tell at a glance that although Glen, most likely a hunter originally, had certainly undergone some training, he was only one or two rungs up from a beginner. As for Alex, the sorcerer kid, he—maybe she? It probably wasn’t worth asking. In any case, I had no idea about the extent of Alex’s knowledge, but he didn’t look like he had any practical battle experience. The way he stood and moved his eyes about was typical of an amateur. If a beast suddenly appeared in front of him, he would probably have difficulty uttering a swift and precise Word.

“If you keep heading that way,” I said in a cold voice, “you’re going to die.”

This was Beast Woods. I knew firsthand how dangerous it was. Alex the sorcerer jumped a little and shrunk back. Maybe he sensed something in my tone. Glen looked overawed for just a second, but his fighting spirit quickly rekindled and he snapped back, “You can’t be an adventurer if you’re scared of dying, dumbass!”

He had guts. But how much?

“Alright, but have you ever thought of a situation worse than death?”

“Huh?”

“Snake-beasts paralyze their enemies and dissolve them alive in their

stomachs over several days. Have you ever imagined what it feels like for your body to be slowly dissolved?”

Alex breathed in sharply and gulped.

“Or becoming a zombie,” I said, while apologizing internally to Stagnate. “Or losing all your arms and legs and unluckily surviving. Or getting taken away by bandits and being sold into bondage.”

If he gave himself over to anger and rushed into the deep part of Beast Woods teeming with beasts, those were the kinds of fates that awaited him, unless he was blessed with very good luck. Well, actually, Beast Woods was too dangerous for there to be many bandits, but the others were true. In any case, if I could get him to reconsider, that would be for the best.

Glen grit his teeth, then drew in a breath and said, “We’ve got nowhere to go back to anyway! We’ve got no choice.”

Apparently they had no way of retreating. Glen, I supposed, had either been abandoned or lost his parents or something. From the look of Alex’s gloomy expression, it was the same for him.

“But Glen, I think Alex there won’t be able to abandon you. Alex is going to die with you.”

That took the wind out of his sails. He bit his lip. He had come all the way to Torch Port in desperation, with no knowledge and no idea of what to do. He was simply trying to use anger and momentum to force his way through the anxiety of not being able to see a way forward or a way out. I was sure that even he knew that continuing on this path would get him nowhere.

“U-Um, are you... an adventurer?” Alex asked.

“No, I’m not.” At least, I didn’t think I could call myself that anymore. “But I kind of understand them.”

“Y-You do? Then please! Please tell us! What should we do?!”

“Okay, so...”

Even when the situation is against you, full of unknowns, and panic is running high, first calmly gather information. The passion Glen had was important, but

Alex's calm disposition was also an important quality to have. With both those traits between them, their chances of survival looked good.

"Forget about the Brown Bear for the time being. At the end of that street, there's a tavern with a sign outside like a big fish. It's called the Cerulean Seagod. Try giving that place a visit. The owner there will look after you."

The owner of the Cerulean Seagod would draw together aspiring adventurers who were just starting out into proper parties, assign them requests they could handle, and give them a little bit of advice as well. Unlike the rough inns like the Brown Bear, it was a tavern of relatively—I stress that word—*relatively* good repute.

As Alex nodded at me and Glen continued to regard me with a little suspicion, I decided to give them a little more advice, though I knew they hadn't asked for it.

"Listen. 'Adventurer' probably sounds exciting to you, but do you know what it actually means? It means *risk-taker*. The job of an adventurer is to take on *risk*. And it isn't about being reckless or foolhardy. It's about making sure you're absolutely prepared so you can survive, and facing off against risks that are a matter of life and death with everything you've got."

And then Fate will bias her ruthless dice just a little in your favor.

"Never get desperate. Check what you're told. Don't skimp on gear. And you also need just a little wisdom and courage. And then someday you'll definitely get to where you want to be." I grinned. "The good gods bless you."

Before I knew it, I had taken Pale Moon's shortened dagger out and offered it to them.

"Huh?"

"Take it."

"Heh. A dagger? That's a hell of—"

"G-Glen! Glen! It... It has a Sign on it!"

"A Si—It's a *magic dagger*?!"

"Yep. The Sign really isn't anything amazing, though. I'm giving it to both of

you.”

I felt that I wanted to celebrate the start of these young adventurers’ journeys. I couldn’t travel out on adventures with Pale Moon anymore. But if Pale Moon, the spear I’d found underground on that day, could travel on adventures with someone else—if its journey could continue—that would surely be a wonderful thing.

“It has the Word of Light engraved on it, so it should be good as a lantern, at least.”

“Wh-What are you after?”

Oh, right, it would be a bit scary for someone to just give you an item like this. After all, they had no idea what I was getting out of this or why I might be doing it. I would find that creepy, too.

“Well... would you mind sticking around for a bit of a long story?”

“A long story?”

“Yep. You see, it’s an ancient warrior tradition when handing over a magic weapon to talk about its history.”

“It better not be bullshit.”

“G-Glen!”

I laughed. “I don’t mind if you treat it that way.”

In exchange, I thought it was only fair for me to keep them a while.

“This is the story of a spear,” I began. “It was forged by ancient dwarves, it killed a chimera, it punched through dragonscale...”

And the Faraway Paladin trusted it more than anything else in the world.

I recounted the journey of Pale Moon, which was always there to light up the world, even on nights when the darkest clouds covered the sky.

— *Finis.*

Afterword

To all of you with a completed book in your hands, allow me to begin with a greeting. I am Kanata Yanagino, deeply obliged to see you all once again. With your support, I was able to publish this third book. Thank you so much.

I sit here with the revised manuscript now finished, writing the afterword and thinking back to one year ago. I remember being quite panicked at the time, particularly while I was writing *Primus*. The problem was the size of it. I discussed the parts that would correspond to the third book beforehand with my friends and set the storyline in stone before I ever started to write. But once I got writing, to my horror, the amount of text started to grow far beyond what I had planned.

I had heard from several sources that this was something that happens sometimes when writing a novel. However, I had wrapped up books one and two with about the amount of text I was expecting—beginner's luck, perhaps. The pixie of carelessness and conceit took hold of me, I started to think, *Maybe I actually have a keen sense for text length?* and then reams of text took me completely by surprise.

As the volume of text continued to grow, I got very panicked and started rushing the story along, and my friend K-sensei had some words with me about that. The day I scrapped quite a large amount of text and rewrote it is one I remember vividly.

This work was an amateur creation published on the net. It was something I was writing as a hobby, the way I wanted it, with the story unfolding the way I wanted it to unfold. That was how it was supposed to be. But once I got lucky enough to be published commercially, greed started to surface whether I wanted it to or not. I wanted all the story's turns to be more interesting, to make sure all the things I mentioned early served their function by the end, to keep it all down to the size of one volume. I even wanted to leave a little bit of extra space if possible to fit a bonus story in the published version.

I wanted it to be popular. I wanted it to sell. I wanted it to be a work that I could show to others with pride. I came to the realization that although the volume of text had inflated hugely, more than anything, what had inflated were my own desires.

After that, I had a change of heart. You can't eliminate these kinds of desires completely, but I did my best to suppress them and go back to basics. I decided to write as I wanted, not worry about volume, pretend I had never been contacted about a book version, and tell the story of Will's adventure that I wanted to tell. Before I knew it, my pen was flowing naturally again. As I wrote the battles in the last act in particular, I was very excited and absorbed, and words flowed straight from my mind to the page. I feel as though writing this story has taught me a lot of important things.

This third book was stuffed to the gills with the many things I received from the fantasy worlds I fondly remember from my past. I sincerely hope you all enjoyed it as well.

Finally, some acknowledgments. To Kususaga Rin-sensei, who drew such beautiful illustrations for me: I am filled with happy feelings every volume whenever I lay eyes on your drawings. I also want to congratulate you on the release of your art book, *Genji Asai / Kususaga Rin Art Works*. I was very moved by the comments you made on the illustrations included from this series. I adore Menel's design.

To Minoru Kawakami, who provided the testimonial on the obi strip: I am deeply grateful. I have been a fan of yours since the first time I laid hand on your work in middle school.

To all my friends, thank you once again for the many ways you have helped me.

To my editor and the editors at Overlap; everyone involved with this book's printing, sales and marketing, and everything else related; and to you, the person who took this book into your hands, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Praying that we can meet again,

Kanata Yanagino, November 2016

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Translated by James Rushton Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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