

YTECAT

Season One

*A dark fantasy about grief, survival,
and what it costs to stay human
when the world keeps asking you
to be something harder.*

Rob Florendo

4our.it/ytecat

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Our world is cruel. It is unrelenting and unforgiving, and it does not pause to ask whether you are ready for what it brings next.

I wrote Ytecat thinking about that — about what it actually means to be strong in a world like that. The easy answer is to carry it alone. To close off, to distance yourself, to decide that needing someone is the same as being weak. It feels safer that way. It costs less, until it costs everything.

Real strength, I think, looks different. It looks like trusting someone else to hold what you can't. It looks like understanding your own flaws clearly enough to let another person fill that gap — not because you have no choice, but because you choose to believe they will. That takes more courage than carrying the weight alone ever does.

This story is about what happens when people choose each other anyway. Not because the world gets easier. It doesn't. But because enduring it together is the only way to overcome it at all.

— Rob Florendo

I

KASUMI

The village of Kasumi was the kind of place the world forgot about.

Tucked between hills that caught the morning mist and held it until midday, it was small enough that everyone knew every name, and quiet enough that the loudest thing most evenings was the sound of a family at dinner. The roads were unpaved and the market was three stalls on a good day and the nearest town was far enough that most people went their whole lives without seeing it. Nobody minded. There was enough here. There was more than enough.

Tonight, that family filled a house near the centre of the village --- seven children packed around a table too small for all of them, elbows fighting for space, laughter loud enough to carry through the walls. Their mother moved between the kitchen and the table without stopping, a woman who had long since learned to hold seven conversations simultaneously and follow none of them to their conclusion. Their father sat at the head --- a big man with calloused hands and a farmer's silence, watching his family the way men do when they don't have words for what they feel.

Haruki, the eldest, was seventeen. He had his father's build --- medium frame, warm brown skin, golden undertones --- but his mother's eyes, dark and warm and paying attention to everything. His face was still young enough to be called round but he carried himself like someone older, the weight of being first showing in his posture rather than his expression. He passed bowls without being asked and made sure the youngest had enough before he served himself and answered his siblings' questions with the patience of someone who had been answering questions his entire life.

Hayate sat beside him. Ten years old, broad-shouldered in a way that promised something in a few years, with the same warm brown skin and dark eyes as his brother but olive undertones and a restless energy that made him look like he was always about to do something even when he was sitting still. He was the youngest of seven and he knew exactly what that meant --- the most loved, the most indulged, the loudest voice at the table and the last one anyone expected anything from. He took full advantage of all of it.

Between them sat the rest --- two brothers and four sisters, one set of twins, all of them loud and warm and thoroughly convinced their own conversation was the most important one happening at the table.

They were halfway through the meal when the screaming started.

It came from outside --- distant at first, a single voice, then more, then not distant at all. Their father was on his feet before anyone else reacted. He crossed the room in three strides, the chair scraping back behind him, and reached for the door.

He didn't get to it.

The door came off its hinges.

Five demons filled the entrance. They were wrong in the way that made the stomach drop before the mind could name what it was seeing --- too tall, too dark, proportions that didn't resolve correctly no matter how long you looked at them, moving like something that had never been taught to move like a person. The smallest of them was bigger than their father. They brought the smell of something burnt and old and deeply wrong.

The table went silent.

Their father grabbed the nearest thing --- a hand tool leaning against the wall --- and swung without hesitating.

The first demon went down.

The other four did not stop.

Haruki and Hayate moved at the same time, without words, without a plan. There was no plan. There had never been a plan for this. Haruki grabbed a blade from the kitchen --- a long carving knife, not a weapon but the closest thing to one --- and put himself between the demons and his siblings. Hayate grabbed anything his hands found. Two demons broke toward them. The other two spread into the room.

The noise that followed was not something either brother would speak of later.

Haruki's demon was fast. He was faster, though he had no idea how or why --- his body moved like it had always known how to do this, precise and controlled, finding the gap and pressing it with the carving knife until the demon stopped moving. His hands did not shake. He did not understand that either.

Hayate's was different. His demon was bigger and angrier and it took longer. Rage turned out to be cleaner than fear, and he had enough of both. He fought with the reckless, overwhelming commitment of someone who has not yet learned that hesitation exists --- all forward momentum, all noise, no technique. When the demon finally stopped, Hayate was breathing in ragged pulls and his hands were shaking and he didn't look at them.

By then, the room was quiet.

Their father lay near the door, still holding the tool. He had not hesitated. Not for a single second. In the last moment that mattered, he had been exactly the man they had always known him to be. The other two demons lay dead on the floor --- killed in the seconds after Haruki and Hayate turned from their own fights.

But the seconds before that.

Haruki looked at his family.

He looked for a long time. Long enough that Hayate, who had been staring at his own hands, looked up and followed his gaze and understood.

The table was still set. The bowls were still full.

The brothers did not speak. There was nothing to say that the silence wasn't already saying. They did not stay --- not because they were callous, but because the part of the mind that handles the unbearable sometimes does so by moving, and moving was the only thing available.

They left under cover of night.

The village was burning in several places by then, other families, other doors. They moved between the shadows without lamps, without anything except the clothes they were wearing and what their hands had picked up in the fight --- the carving knife, a demon's blade, instinct, and each other.

At the edge of the village, Hayate stopped.

He turned back. Haruki stopped beside him.

The fire was visible from here --- orange against the dark hills, the mist that usually softened everything in Kasumi now catching the light and glowing with it. The outline of the house was still there. Then it wasn't.

Hayate's face was doing something complicated and unresolved. He was ten years old. His family was gone. The place that had made him who he was burned in front of him. There were no words for any of it --- so he said nothing, and looked until he couldn't anymore.

Haruki stood beside him and said nothing. He had looked already and understood already and was doing the only thing he knew how to do,

which was to be present for his brother while the world ended.

They stood until neither of them could look anymore.

Then they turned, and kept walking.

II

AKEBONO

They walked for three days before they saw the town.

The road was unpaved and long and the brothers did not talk much on it. There was nothing to say that wouldn't make things worse and they had both worked that out quickly, so they walked in the particular silence of people who understand each other well enough to know when words are useless. Haruki set the pace. Hayate matched it without being asked.

They were armed with what their hands had found during the fight in Kasumi --- a carving knife, a demon's blade, and nothing else worth mentioning. Not weapons exactly. Close enough.

The road gave them two days of nothing and then, on the third morning, bandits.

There were four of them. They came out of the treeline on both sides in the way that suggested they had done this before and expected it to work, which it probably usually did. Two swords, one axe, one club. They were bigger than the brothers and there were more of them and they were not wrong to be confident.

They had not seen what Haruki and Hayate had seen several days ago. They did not know what that does to a person.

The fight was not clean. It was not the precise, controlled thing that the demon fight had been --- this was messier, fuelled by exhaustion and grief and the kind of desperate recklessness that comes from having very little left to lose. But something had changed in both of them since Kasumi, some instinct that the demon attack had unlocked and left running, and it showed. Haruki moved like he was solving a problem rather than fighting a person --- reading angles, finding openings, always two steps ahead of where his body needed to be. Hayate moved like a force of nature with bad intentions, overwhelming and relentless, drawing the attention of two bandits at once and somehow making that work in his favour.

The weapons from Kasumi did not survive it. The carving knife snapped on the third block. The demon's blade lasted longer, which surprised nobody, but by the end neither of them were fighting with what they had started with.

By the end Haruki was fighting with a bandit's sword he had picked up off the ground beside a bandit who no longer needed it. Hayate had acquired an axe by similar means. Both of them were bleeding from places that were inconvenient rather than serious and breathing harder than they should have been.

The bandits that could still move decided they had somewhere else to be.

Haruki and Hayate stood in the road and looked at each other.

"Better than the knife" Hayate said, looking at the sword in his hand.

"Low bar" said Haruki.

They kept walking.

Akebono announced itself gradually --- first a smell of cookfires and people, then the sound of a town doing its daily business, then the buildings themselves rising over the last hill on the road. It was medium-sized, larger than Kasumi by more than Hayate had words for, built around a central road that widened into a market square near the middle. The name meant dawn. Looking at it through the late afternoon light, exhausted and hungry and carrying borrowed swords, it felt like exactly that --- not a destination, but a beginning. A place where a person might stop running and figure out what came next.

They entered through the main gate with their heads down and their wounds visible and nothing to their names except the clothes on their backs and the weapons in their hands.

They had been walking for perhaps ten minutes, following the flow of people toward what looked like the centre of town, when Hayate stopped.

Not because of anything he saw. Because of something he smelled.

It was there and gone in a moment --- carried on the foot traffic moving past them in the other direction, something warm and clean and completely out of place among the cookfire smoke and the animal smell of a busy street. He turned his head without thinking about it. His eyes

found her automatically, the way they would find a sound in a quiet room.

She was tall, with golden-blond hair that moved with her in long waves, wearing practical travelling clothes in earthy tones with a bow across her back and a dagger at her hip. Hazel eyes, slightly upturned at the corners, carrying an expression of mild focus --- a woman who knew where she was going and was going there. She had a folded piece of paper in one hand that she glanced at briefly as she walked, then tucked away.

She passed them without looking up. Whatever she was thinking about, it was not them.

Hayate watched her go for exactly two seconds before Haruki's hand closed around his collar and redirected him forward.

"Job board" Haruki said.

"I know" said Hayate.

"Now."

"I know."

The job board was a large wooden frame mounted to the wall of what appeared to be Akebono's administrative building, covered in listings of varying age and urgency. Haruki stood in front of it and read methodically from the top left. Hayate stood beside him and read the numbers on the payouts.

"Escort job" Hayate said. "Three days, decent pay."

"We don't have horses."

"Delivery run---"

"Two days on foot each way, we'd starve before we got paid."

Hayate squinted at the board. "Goblin camp clearance. Multiple listings." He pointed at the payout figure. "That's not bad."

Haruki read the listing. Goblin camp, estimated eight to twelve occupants, possibility of a shaman. The pay was better than the escort work and the job was immediate. He looked at the figure again, then at Hayate, then at his own hands --- the borrowed sword, the dried blood on his knuckles from the road.

"We're exhausted" he said.

"We're also out of money and haven't eaten since we left Kasumi."

Haruki was quiet for a moment. He was doing the thing he did --- running through scenarios, checking the outcomes, weighing the options against each other with the patience of someone who had learned early that decisions made quickly were usually decisions you paid for later.

"Fine" he said. "Goblins."

Hayate was already pulling the listing off the board.

The camp was half an hour's walk from the eastern gate, tucked into a shallow depression in the treeline where the goblins had made a rough

settlement of stolen materials and bad decisions. Eight of them, as advertised --- small, green, armed with crude weapons, and not particularly intelligent individually. As a group they were slightly more dangerous, which was not saying much.

The brothers cleared them in under ten minutes.

It was not elegant. Haruki was running on fumes and Hayate's shoulder was still stiff from the bandit fight and neither of them had eaten a proper meal in several days. But the instincts that had woken up on the road were still there, still running, and eight goblins were not four demons. They went down with considerably less drama.

The shaman was a different matter.

It emerged from the largest structure in the camp --- a hunched figure in ragged robes, staff already raised, the air around it crackling with something that smelled like ozone and bad intent. It was faster than the grunts and smarter and it had been watching them clear the camp, which meant it had information they didn't.

It used that information effectively for about three minutes. Haruki took a glancing hit from a force bolt that spun him sideways. Hayate charged twice and got redirected both times by bursts of wind that weren't aimed at killing him, just slowing him down while the shaman positioned itself.

On the third charge Haruki feinted left, drew the shaman's attention, and Hayate came in low from the right with the axe.

The shaman went down.

Both brothers stood over it breathing hard, and for a long moment neither of them moved.

Then Hayate's nose found something.

He turned. Near the centre of the camp, on a flat rock that served as a makeshift table, was a clay pot sitting over a small fire. Inside the pot, something was bubbling. It smelled like meat and roots and the kind of warmth that the body goes toward without the mind's involvement.

Hayate was sitting on the ground next to it before Haruki had finished turning around.

"That's goblin food" Haruki said.

"I know" said Hayate, already eating.

Haruki looked at it. Looked at his brother. Sat down on the ground beside him and ate without further comment.

They were most of the way through the pot when the sound of footsteps reached them from the camp entrance --- measured, the walk of someone who had not heard a fight and was not expecting trouble.

A figure stepped through the gap in the treeline and stopped.

She was the blonde woman from yesterday. The hazel eyes were currently taking in the scene in front of her with an expression that moved through several distinct phases in quick succession --- alertness, assessment, confusion, and finally a carefully neutral something that was

trying not to be judgement and not entirely succeeding.

She looked at the eight dead goblins. The dead shaman. The two boys sitting on the ground eating out of a communal clay pot with their hands.

"I had a listing for this camp" she said.

Haruki looked up. "Sorry --- we had ours first. There are multiple camps in the area though, if you have more listings."

She glanced at the pot. At Hayate, who had not stopped eating. Back at Haruki.

"Are you all right?" she asked, which was not really a question about the food.

"We've had a long few days" Haruki said simply.

Something in her expression shifted --- the careful neutral softening slightly at the edges, the judgement dissolving into something more considered. She looked at them for another moment, then nodded once.

"Multiple camps" she confirmed. "Multiple listings on the board. You won't have cleared them all." She pulled the folded paper from her pocket, glanced at it, tucked it away again. "I'll take the next one."

She turned and walked back the way she had come.

Hayate watched her go for a second, then looked back at the pot. "She seemed nice."

"Eat" said Haruki.

They turned in the listing at the administrative building as the sun was going down. The clerk behind the counter counted out the coin, paused, added an additional amount, and slid it across.

"Shaman bonus" he said. "Listed rate plus ten percent."

Haruki looked at the coin. It was more than he had calculated on the road. Not a lot more, but enough --- enough for lodging, enough for a meal tomorrow, enough to keep moving.

"Thank you" he said.

They found a boarding house two streets from the job board --- cheap, clean enough, a shared room with two narrow beds and a window that faced the street. Haruki paid for two nights and kept the rest in the purse he had taken from the bandits on the road.

They sat on the respective beds and Haruki counted the coins out between them on the blanket. Hayate watched him do it.

"How much?" Hayate asked.

"Enough for tomorrow. Maybe the day after if we're careful."

"So we keep hunting."

"We keep hunting." Haruki looked at the pile. "We'll go to the market tomorrow. Get proper weapons. These---" he glanced at the bandit sword leaning against the wall "---will do for tonight."

Hayate lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He was asleep in under a minute --- the particular total collapse of someone who has been running on nothing for several days and has finally given the body permission to stop.

Haruki sat with the coins for a little while longer. He counted them once more, put them back in the purse, and set the purse on the small table between the beds where he could see it.

Outside, Akebono continued its evening. Cookfire smoke and distant voices and the ordinary sounds of a town that did not know it had two new arrivals who had nowhere to go and nothing to their names except borrowed swords and the particular determination of people who have already survived the worst thing they can imagine.

He turned out the lamp.

III

AKEBONO, DAY TWO

Hayate woke to the sound of nothing.

No voices from the next room, no siblings at the door, no smell of breakfast from downstairs. Just the ordinary noise of a town going about its morning and the particular quality of light that meant he had slept longer than he intended.

Haruki was at the window.

He was sitting on the sill with his back against the frame, one knee drawn up, looking at the street below. He hadn't heard Hayate wake. His face was turned away but Hayate didn't need to see it --- he knew the shape of that stillness. He had been lying in the same stillness himself for the first few minutes before he'd shaken it off and sat up.

He understood without needing to name it. He let it sit for a moment, then cleared his throat.

"Morning" he said.

Haruki turned. Something in his expression reset quickly --- not hidden exactly, just put away.

"It's afternoon" he said.

Hayate looked at the light coming through the glass. It was, in fact, afternoon.

"Good afternoon" he said.

Haruki almost smiled. "Get dressed."

They ate what the boarding house offered --- bread that was a day old and a thin soup that was mostly hot water with ambitions --- and headed for the job board.

Lyra was already there.

She was standing in front of the listings with her arms crossed and the focused expression of someone running calculations, the bow across her back and the dagger at her hip. She did not look up when they approached.

Haruki stopped a polite distance away and waited until she had finished reading whatever she was reading. Then he said, "Excuse me."

She looked up. Her eyes moved from him to Hayate and back again with the quick, assessing quality he was starting to recognise --- the look of someone who had learned to read people fast and trusted the reading.

"The goblin camp" Haruki said. "Yesterday. I apologise for the lack of manners. We hadn't eaten in several days and we weren't thinking clearly."

A pause. Something shifted in her expression --- not softening exactly, but recalibrating.

"Lyra" she said.

"Haruki." He extended his hand.

She looked at it for a moment as though the gesture was slightly foreign, then shook it. Her grip was firm and brief.

"Hayate" said Hayate, from slightly behind Haruki's shoulder.

She glanced at him. He gave her a small wave. She did not return it but she didn't not return it either, which Hayate decided to count as neutral.

Haruki did not waste time. "We're looking to take on larger jobs. The kind that pay better but need more people. We work well together and we could use a third who handles range --- you cover priority targets from distance, we front-line. Any earnings split three ways." He paused. "It's a reasonable arrangement if you're open to it."

Lyra looked at him for a moment without answering. Then --- "You're human."

"Yes."

"And you want to party with an elf."

"I want to party with someone who can shoot" Haruki said simply. "You can shoot. The rest of it isn't relevant to me."

"It's relevant to a lot of people" she said. "The history between the races isn't exactly ancient. Most of it is still living memory for my people."

"I know." Haruki's voice was even. "But I don't have ill feelings toward elves. Or toward any of the other races. Our only vendetta---" something crossed his face then, just for a moment --- a fracture in the calm, something dark and raw moving underneath it before the composure closed back over "---is with the demons."

It was there and gone in under a second. His expression was steady again before most people would have registered the change.

Lyra had registered it.

She said nothing about it. She filed it away in the same part of her mind where she had filed the things she had seen at the goblin camp yesterday --- because she had been there earlier than they knew, watching from the treeline before she'd stepped into the clearing. She had wanted to assess them before they assessed her. Standard practice.

What she had seen was a seventeen year old fighting with a calm, expressionless face that belonged on someone twice his age --- precise and controlled and completely without heat, like a man solving a problem rather than surviving a fight. She had watched him move and noted the instincts underneath the technique, rough but real, the kind that couldn't be trained from scratch.

She had also noted the younger one, who fought like a small catastrophe and somehow made it work.

The crack in the calm just now --- the split second of grief and something much harder underneath it --- told her more than the fighting had. You did not look like that unless you had earned it.

"Temporarily" she said. "I want to see how you fight first. Properly, not a goblin skirmish."

"Fair" said Haruki.

She turned back to the job board and pulled a listing without hesitation. "This one. Large goblin camp --- multiple shamans, possible chief. The payout reflects it." She handed it to Haruki. "Sunrise at the gate."

Haruki looked at the listing, then at the payout figure, then at Hayate.

Hayate nodded.

"Sunrise" Haruki confirmed.

Lyra was already walking. "I have errands" she said, without turning around. "Don't be late."

They had the rest of the afternoon for the market.

It was larger than anything Kasumi had prepared them for --- stall after stall stretching through the central square and down several side streets, selling everything from food to tools to cloth to weapons. The noise of it was constant, the smells layered on top of each other in a way that took some getting used to.

Hayate noticed it within the first few minutes. Haruki noticed it shortly after.

The market was divided.

Not by signs or barriers --- nothing so formal. Just by the particular arrangement of where people stood and where they didn't, which stalls had which customers, which groups moved through which sections. Humans browsed human stalls. The elven merchants clustered together three rows in and their customers were predominantly elven. Further down, dwarven work displayed to dwarven buyers. The races moved around each other with the practiced efficiency of people who had long since learned to occupy the same space without acknowledging each other.

The brothers looked at it.

"Hm" said Hayate.

"Mm" said Haruki.

They moved on.

The weapon stalls were a disappointment. Everything was either too expensive, too cheap and obviously poor quality, or neither and still somehow wrong in a way Haruki couldn't articulate beyond a general sense that the person selling it didn't know enough about what they were selling. He stood in front of a rack of short swords and felt the particular frustration of not knowing enough to know what he was looking for.

Hayate had drifted ahead of him, which was normal. Haruki kept half his attention on his brother's location as a matter of habit and kept looking at the short swords.

"Haruki."

He looked up.

Hayate was standing about fifteen metres away, in the gap between two rows of stalls, looking at something. He wasn't pointing. He was just looking, with the expression he got when he had found something and was deciding whether to say anything about it.

Haruki walked over.

The door was set slightly back from the main row of stalls --- easy to miss, which was perhaps the point. Nondescript wood, a single small window set not quite at eye level, dark inside. The kind of place a person walked past without registering it unless they happened to be at exactly the right angle.

Above the door, a hand-lettered sign. The letters uneven, the spelling worse.

wepons

Hayate looked at Haruki.

Haruki looked at the sign.

"We should check it out" Hayate said.

"It says wepons."

"I know what it says."

Haruki looked at it for another moment. Then he sighed in the way he sighed when he had already decided something and was taking an extra second to pretend he hadn't.

"Fine" he said.

Hayate was already at the door.

IV

WEPONS

The shop was smaller inside than the door suggested.

Every surface was occupied --- weapons on the walls, weapons in barrels, weapons laid flat across makeshift shelving that had been added incrementally by someone who kept acquiring more stock than they had planned for. Swords, axes, daggers, spears, things that were somewhere between a tool and a weapon and had committed to neither. The smell was iron and oil and the particular dusty warmth of a space that had been lived in for a long time.

Behind the counter, a dwarf was arranging a row of short blades with the focused attention of a man who had strong opinions about the correct order for short blades. He was broad and compact with a grey-streaked beard tucked into his belt and the calloused hands of someone who had been working with metal his entire life. He looked up when the door opened, and his expression went through three distinct phases in very quick succession.

Warm welcome. Recognition that his visitors were not who he expected. Poorly concealed panic.

"I paid already" he said immediately. "Three days ago. Spoke to the man with the scar personally. We have an arrangement."

Haruki blinked. "We're here to buy weapons."

The shopkeeper looked at him. Looked at Hayate. Looked back at Haruki.

"To buy" Haruki confirmed.

"Weapons" Hayate added helpfully.

The shopkeeper's expression did not fully resolve into anything comfortable. He looked them over with the careful suspicion of someone who had been surprised before and had not enjoyed it. His eyes dropped to the weapons at their belts --- the bandit sword, the borrowed axe --- and his brow furrowed.

"Have you lost your vision?" he asked.

"No" said Haruki.

"Both of you?"

"Both of us" said Hayate.

The shopkeeper stared at them for another moment. Then he made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a grunt and waved a hand at the shop. "Look around then. I'll be watching." He picked up the short blade he had been arranging and set it down in a slightly different position, eyes still on them.

Haruki moved toward the sword section along the left wall. There were perhaps thirty blades on display --- different lengths, different weights, different levels of visible craft. He stood in front of them and looked and realised almost immediately that he had no idea what he was looking at. He could hold a sword. He could use a sword in the approximate sense of the word. Whether the steel in front of him was good or poor, whether the balance was right or wrong for what he needed, whether the price was fair or extortionate --- he had no reference for any of it. He felt the particular frustration of standing in front of a decision he couldn't make properly.

He glanced at Hayate.

Hayate had not gone to the sword section. Hayate had gone directly to the back wall, where the largest weapons in the shop were displayed, and he was standing in front of a greatsword with the expression of someone who had just seen something that confirmed a long-held belief about the world.

It was enormous. Longer than Hayate was tall, broad-bladed, with a simple crossguard and a grip wrapped in worn leather. It was the kind of weapon that announced its presence in a room. Hayate reached up and put his hand on the grip and looked at it the way other people looked at things that belonged to them.

Haruki walked over. Checked the price tag hanging from the crossguard.

Twenty silver.

He checked the purse. Thirty-five silver total --- everything they had, including the shaman bonus. Fifteen left after the greatsword, which was not enough margin if the hunt tomorrow went badly.

He looked at the greatsword. At Hayate's hand on the grip. At the purse.

"We'll take it" he said.

Hayate looked at him. Something in his face that was not quite surprise but was adjacent to it.

Haruki was already walking back toward the short sword section. He looked at the wall for another moment, then turned to the shopkeeper. "What's your cheapest short sword?"

The shopkeeper, who had been watching all of this from behind the counter with the expression of a man witnessing something he could not categorise, set down the blade he was holding. He went to a large barrel near the end of the counter and reached in without looking, the way a person reaches into a barrel they have reached into many times. He pulled out a rapier and set it on the counter.

It was plain. Functional. The blade was clean and the crossguard was simple and there was nothing remarkable about it in any direction.

"Five silver" the shopkeeper said. "Not popular. Been in the barrel two years."

Hayate, who had followed Haruki back to the counter with the greatsword already in his hands, looked at the rapier. Then at Haruki.

"That's the cheapest one?"

"It's fine" Haruki said.

"It's five silver."

"I know what it costs."

"You're spending twenty on mine and five on yours."

"Hayate." Haruki looked at him. "Trust me."

Hayate looked at the rapier. Looked at Haruki. Made the face he made when he disagreed with something but had decided not to push it. "Fine."

Haruki put twenty-five silver on the counter. The shopkeeper counted it twice, then looked up at them with the expression of a man who had accepted that he was not going to understand this transaction and had made peace with it.

"Thank you" Haruki said.

"Mm" said the shopkeeper.

They left. He watched them go through the small window, two boys heading back into the market --- one carrying a greatsword that was nearly as tall as he was, one carrying a rapier from a barrel that nobody had wanted in two years.

He shook his head and went back to his blades.

The afternoon went to the space behind the boarding house --- a narrow strip of packed earth between the building and the fence that was just wide enough to move in. They trained until the light went. Not sparring exactly --- just getting acquainted. Learning the weight and the reach and the way each weapon wanted to move. Haruki worked the rapier through slow deliberate passes, finding the balance, noting the way it rewarded precision over force. Hayate swung the greatsword in wide arcs and grinned every time it connected with the practice post they had hammered into the ground.

By the time they went in for the night Haruki had stopped feeling like he was fighting the weapon. That was enough for now.

The gate at sunrise was cold and quiet. Two guards on duty, a handful of other adventurers heading out for early jobs, the particular grey light of early morning that made everything look temporary.

Lyra was already there.

She was leaning against the gate post with her arms crossed, bow across her back, watching the road. She straightened slightly when they approached and looked at their weapons --- the greatsword on Hayate's back, the rapier at Haruki's hip --- with the assessing look Haruki was beginning to recognise as her default mode.

"Do you know how to use those?" she asked.

"Trained all afternoon" Hayate said.

She looked at him for a moment. "You trained all afternoon."

"Yes."

She looked at the greatsword. At Hayate. At the greatsword again.

"Don't die" she said. She turned and started walking.

The brothers fell into step behind her.

"She seems confident in us" Hayate said, quietly, to Haruki.

"Walk faster" said Haruki.

V

THE CHIEF

The road out of Akebono's eastern gate was well-worn and straight for the first kilometre, then curved into the treeline and became something less certain. Lyra walked at a pace that made clear she was not interested in being waited for. The brothers kept up without difficulty, which seemed to mildly surprise her, though she said nothing about it.

Hayate tried conversation first.

"Have you been in Akebono long?"

"No."

A pause.

"Where did you travel from?"

"Further north."

Another pause.

"Is it nice up north?"

Lyra glanced at him sideways. "Focus on where you're walking."

Hayate looked at Haruki. Haruki gave him a small shake of the head. Hayate faced forward and walked in silence for approximately two minutes before trying again.

"Have you cleared many goblin camps?"

"Yes."

"More than ten?"

"Yes."

"More than twenty?"

Lyra stopped walking.

She turned and looked at Hayate with the patient expression of someone who was going to say something once and expected it to be sufficient. "We have a job to do. There will be time for conversation after it's done. Until then --- eyes forward, ears open, mouth closed." She held his gaze for a moment to make sure the point had landed. Then she turned and kept walking.

Hayate looked at Haruki again.

"She's very focused" he said, quietly.

"Walk" said Haruki.

They stopped at the tree line a hundred metres from the camp and crouched low. Lyra had a hand up before they reached the edge --- the gesture of someone who did not need to explain why they were stopping

because the reason was obvious to anyone paying attention.

She surveyed the camp without speaking. So did Haruki.

The settlement was larger than the one they had cleared yesterday --- more structures, better organised in the rough way that goblins organised things, which was to say chaotically but with evident intent. Haruki counted the visible goblins methodically. Fifteen. No shamans visible. No chief.

"Fifteen on the surface" Lyra said, her voice low. "No shamans showing. No chief." She paused. "The listing speculated a chief. The payout was set accordingly. That means either the intelligence was wrong, or they're not showing themselves yet."

"Which do you think?" Haruki asked.

She looked at the camp for another moment. "I think we proceed carefully."

She turned to the brothers. "I want to see how you fight --- properly, with those weapons, against something that will push you. Go in. I'll cover from here. Call out anything that changes and don't do anything reckless."

Hayate was already grinning.

"That second part was specifically for you" Lyra said, looking at him.

"I know" said Hayate. He was still grinning.

She looked at Haruki. Haruki shrugged in a way that meant he agreed with her concern and had long since accepted there was nothing to be done about it.

Lyra notched an arrow. "Go."

Hayate went.

He was three strides into the open ground before the sentence had finished, greatsword already off his back, moving with the particular energy of someone who had been waiting for permission and had not required much of it. Haruki ran after him, which was something he had been doing his entire life and expected to continue doing.

Something fired in the back of his mind as he ran. A calculation that hadn't finished yet --- the payout on the listing had been high. Higher than fifteen goblins and a possible chief justified, even accounting for the shamans. He had noted it yesterday and filed it away and now, running across open ground toward fifteen goblins with no shamans and no chief in sight, the filed note came back with more urgency than before.

The payout doesn't match the numbers. Something is wrong.

He kept running. There was nothing else to do with the information right now except hold it.

The fifteen goblins went down in under eight minutes.

It was not a difficult fight. The goblins were disorganised and reacted poorly to Hayate's opening charge, which was large and loud and drew

every eye in the camp to him simultaneously --- which was, Haruki had come to understand, less recklessness and more a crude but effective tactical instinct. While the goblins were watching Hayate, they were not watching Haruki. Haruki used the space that created.

By the end Hayate had taken down eight of the fifteen, which was more than half and considerably more than his share by any reasonable accounting. Haruki had taken five. Two had run into Lyra's arrow range and had not returned.

Haruki straightened up and looked at the camp. No shamans. No chief. The unfinished calculation was louder now.

Across the clearing, Lyra lowered her bow and started walking forward from the treeline. Her expression was neutral but her pace had the quality of someone who had seen enough to form a preliminary assessment and was coming to deliver it.

She made it two steps into the clearing.

The tree line on the far side of the camp erupted.

Twenty goblins. Two shamans --- robed, staffs already raised, the air around them beginning to crackle. And behind them, moving through the press of its own forces with a weight that did not need to hurry, a goblin chief. Larger than any goblin the brothers had seen. Armoured in rough plates of scavenged metal. Carrying a sword that was sized for something bigger than a goblin and using it like it wasn't.

The force split without hesitation --- as if it had been planned, as if they had been watching and waiting for exactly this moment. Fifteen goblins and one shaman peeled left, cutting toward the brothers. Five goblins, the second shaman, and the chief drove directly right.

Directly toward Lyra.

VI

OUTNUMBERED

Lyra moved before the thought formed.

Two steps back, three, four --- creating distance, her hand already at the quiver, fingers closing around an arrow with the automatic precision of someone who had done this ten thousand times. She notched it and brought the bow up in one motion and assessed what was coming at her.

The chief. The shaman. Five goblins spreading wide to cut off her angles.

She had fought worse. The angles were bad and getting worse and the shaman's staff was already beginning to crackle, which meant she had seconds before it added magic to the problem.

Movement to her left.

Hayate was already gone.

She had not seen him decide. One moment he was at his brother's side, the next he was crossing the open ground between them and her position at a dead sprint, greatsword up, driving directly into the goblins closest to her rather than turning back to help Haruki with the group

bearing down on them.

She registered it without letting it distract her. He had looked at the situation --- archer, dagger offhand, no real melee capability against a chief and a shaman simultaneously --- and moved to address it before anyone had asked him to. The decision had taken no time at all.

She pulled the bowstring back and kept her eyes on the chief.

Haruki did not move.

Not immediately. He stood at the edge of the cleared camp with his rapier half-drawn and looked at what was in front of him and let his mind do the thing it did --- the rapid, involuntary process of pulling a situation apart and looking at what was underneath.

The first camp had been straightforward. Goblins in position, no coordination, no awareness of tactical advantage. You went in and you cleared them and the difficulty was physical, not intellectual.

This was different.

Fifteen goblins as bait --- visible, countable, just threatening enough to draw them in. The real force held back in the treeline until the party was committed and split. Attack the moment the guard came down. Focus the strongest threat --- Lyra, with her range --- and screen the others from regrouping. It was not sophisticated by any military standard. For goblins it was extraordinary.

The last camp had a shaman and it had still been manageable. A shaman added magic, not strategy. Strategy came from somewhere else.

Strategy came from the chief --- the one variable this camp had that the last one hadn't. Under the chief these were not mindless creatures operating on instinct. They were a coordinated unit following a plan.

Which meant the rules had changed.

He looked at the numbers. Twenty goblins, two shamans, one chief against three fighters --- one of whom was already engaged, one of whom was an archer in melee range of a chief. They were outnumbered, they had been outmanoeuvred before the fight started, and they had been caught with their formation already broken. If the goblins pressed the advantage they had right now the outcome was not good.

He needed to do something that changed the shape of it. Something that gave them a problem to solve instead of a wall to run into.

The sound of Hayate's greatsword connecting with something snapped him back.

The lines had met. Hayate was already deep in it --- greatsword moving, goblins scattering and regrouping around him --- and Haruki had been standing here thinking while his brother fought. He moved.

Not forward. The goblins screening the brothers' side had pushed up expecting him to either engage or retreat, and he did neither. He bent his knees and jumped --- clearing the front rank entirely, two metres of air, landing clean on the other side in the gap between the screening party and the chief's group.

Both groups of goblins stopped.

He had put himself between them. If the chief's group continued pressing toward Lyra, their flank was open to him. If the screening party turned to deal with him, their flank was open to Hayate. They could not ignore either problem without creating a worse one.

The lines redistributed.

The chief split from its group and continued toward Lyra alone --- steady, deliberate, sword raised. The two shamans and seven goblins turned and drove toward Hayate. The remaining thirteen goblins from the screening party swung around to face Haruki.

Lyra and the chief. Hayate and the shamans and seven goblins. Haruki and thirteen.

Haruki raised the rapier.

"All right" he said, to no one in particular.

Lyra had not stopped watching Hayate.

She tracked the chief in her sightline and kept the bow trained and waited for the angle she needed, and with the rest of her attention she watched the younger brother fight.

The technique was poor. Raw and unrefined, the greatsword moving in arcs that were wider than they needed to be, footwork that relied on momentum rather than positioning. A trained fighter would have found gaps in it inside the first minute.

But the instincts were something else entirely.

He had moved to protect her before the ambush had fully registered. He had read the situation --- archer, exposed, wrong weapons for close quarters against a chief --- and responded to it before she had asked for help, before his brother had directed him, before anyone had said a word. And then just now, watching him against seven goblins and two shamans, she had seen it again --- the way he angled himself to keep the shamans in his sightline without being told to, the way he used the greatsword's reach to manage space rather than just to strike, small unconscious adjustments that a fighter learned after years of nearly dying.

He was eleven years old. He had trained all afternoon yesterday. She had seen battle-hardened veterans with less situational awareness.

She filed it away next to everything else she had filed about the brothers since the goblin camp yesterday and pulled the bowstring back another fraction and waited for the chief to make its move.

VII

FIREBALL

The chief was fast.

Lyra had accounted for fast. She had not fully accounted for this --- the way it covered ground, low and direct, sword up and angled to meet her arrows before they arrived. She loosed and stepped back and the arrow glanced off the flat of the blade and spun away. She loosed again, adjusted the angle, and it deflected that one too without breaking stride.

She kept moving. Back, and back, drawing it away from the others, buying herself room to breathe and think. The chief did not slow. It came forward with the focused patience of something that had decided how this ended and was simply closing the distance.

She needed an angle it couldn't deflect. She didn't have one yet.

She kept looking.

Haruki had thirteen goblins and a rapier and no illusions about what that combination meant.

The rapier was a precise weapon. Elegant, even. Well suited to finding gaps, to controlled exchanges, to the kind of fighting where

technique mattered more than force. It was not a weapon for cutting through numbers. It was not a weapon for thirteen.

He knew this. He adjusted accordingly.

He did not try to win. He tried to make winning as expensive as possible for as long as possible, which was a different thing entirely and required a different mind. He parried rather than struck. He moved rather than held ground --- using the goblins' own momentum against them, letting them push into each other, turning their aggression into a problem they were having with themselves rather than with him. When an opening presented itself he took it cleanly and without hesitation. Two goblins went down in the first minutes, not from any dramatic offensive push but from the simple accumulated cost of fighting someone who refused to give them a clean exchange.

Eleven remaining.

He could hear Lyra moving behind him --- the measured retreat, the bowstring, the intervals between shots that told him she was still functional and still thinking. He could hear Hayate ahead of him, the greatsword moving in the wide arcs that announced themselves before they arrived.

He kept his feet moving and waited.

Hayate had seven goblins and two shamans and considerably more energy than the situation perhaps warranted.

The goblins were manageable. The shamans were the problem --- hanging back behind the goblin line, staffs raised, watching him with the careful attention of things that understood their own value and intended to protect it. He had been keeping them in his sightline since the lines redistributed, watching the way they moved in relation to each other, noting that they had not yet acted independently.

He made a decision.

He pulled the greatsword back behind his shoulder --- both hands on the grip, weight shifting back onto his rear foot --- and ran.

Not at the shamans. At the goblin line between him and the shamans, seven of them spread across his path, and he was going to go through them rather than around them because around them took time and time was something Haruki did not have thirteen goblins worth of.

He saw it in his peripheral vision as he closed the distance --- one shaman's staff trailing embers, small and orange against the air. The other shaman's staff moving in slow deliberate arcs, the wind building around it, visible in the way it bent the grass and lifted the robes.

He understood what was coming.

He pressed forward anyway.

The swing started from his right shoulder and came down in a diagonal arc that had everything behind it --- his weight, his momentum, the full commitment of someone who had decided the outcome before the movement began. The blade connected with the goblin line and kept

going, carrying through five of them before the resistance finally stopped it.

The fireball hit him in the left shoulder.

It was not like being burned. It was like being hit by something that was also fire --- the force of it lifting him off his feet and throwing him backwards, the heat arriving a fraction of a second after the impact as if the two things had been travelling together and the impact had simply arrived first. He heard himself make a sound he did not intend to make.

He landed on his feet.

He did not know how. His legs found the ground and held it through some mechanism that operated below conscious thought, some part of him that had decided falling was not acceptable and had acted on that decision without consulting the rest of him.

The smoke cleared slowly.

His left shoulder was gone in the sense that it was still there but everything about it was wrong --- the cloth burned away, the skin beneath an angry, blistered ruin from the shoulder joint down toward the chest. It did not hurt yet in the way it was going to hurt. That was coming. He could feel it building at the edges of the numbness like something waiting for permission.

He tightened both hands on the greatsword.

Two goblins left in front of him. Two shamans behind them. His left arm was functional in the approximate sense of the word.

He adjusted his grip and looked at what was in front of him.

VIII

TWO ARROWS

Lyra had been counting.

Not the goblins --- Hayate and Haruki were handling the goblins. She had been counting the chief's deflections. The intervals between them. The angle of the sword each time it came up to meet her arrows. She had been feeding it information and watching what it did with that information, and now she had what she needed.

The chief favoured its right. Every deflection came up strong and fast on that side --- instinctive, automatic, the movement of something that had done it so many times it had stopped thinking about it. The left side was different. There was a lag there, small but consistent, a fraction of a second between the threat registering and the sword responding. Not enough for most shots. Enough for the right one.

She kept moving, kept the chief tracking her, and started repositioning.

It took four retreating steps to get the angle she wanted --- the chief between her and the fire shaman, all three of them on the same line. The chief did not notice. It was focused on her, which was exactly what she

needed it to be.

She reached into the quiver and pulled two arrows. One between her index and middle finger. One between her middle and ring finger. She notched the first and drew in one motion, aiming not at the chief but just above its left shoulder --- a shot that any observer would read as a miss before it left the string.

She loosed.

The chief's sword came up on the right side, fast and automatic, tracking the arrow's path. The arrow passed above the left shoulder exactly as aimed. The sword was on the wrong side to meet it and the lag meant it stayed there a fraction too long.

Lyra had already notched the second arrow.

She loosed it directly behind the first, through the window the first arrow had opened, on a line that continued past the chief's left shoulder and kept going.

The fire shaman dropped.

The two goblins on Hayate's side saw it happen.

They had been holding their ground with the wind shaman behind them, and then the fire shaman was simply gone --- dropped mid-cast, staff clattering to the ground --- and the confidence went out of them. They froze. Looked at each other. Looked at the staff on the ground.

Hayate did not freeze.

He launched himself at the wind shaman before the goblins had finished processing what had happened, greatsword coming down in a diagonal arc that took the shaman's head clean off. The momentum carried through --- the blade swinging wide, catching both goblins and sending them flying.

His side was clear.

He looked past the empty ground in front of him at the chief, still pressing toward Lyra, and ran.

The chief heard him coming --- turned and braced, sword up, weight dropping into a solid stance. The sneak attack was gone before it arrived. Hayate kept running, closing the distance, greatsword coming up.

"Lyra" he called, mid sprint, without looking back. "Cover Haruki."

Lyra was already moving.

She pulled arrows from goblin bodies as she passed --- enough --- and came around the outside of the fight at a run, finding the angle on Haruki's side. She assessed in the half second she had.

Haruki was still on the defensive, the rapier moving in tight controlled arcs, holding ground through technique rather than force. Nine goblins remained, still pressing from multiple angles.

She loosed twice in quick succession. Two goblins dropped. The formation broke --- the remaining goblins pulling back, reassessing, the collective instinct of something that had just lost two of its number to a threat it couldn't locate fast enough.

Haruki felt the pressure ease and went forward.

He moved into the gaps the panic had opened and used the rapier the way it was meant to be used --- precise, economical, finding the point and committing to it. Two more down before the remaining goblins reformed.

Seven left. Still circling.

Across the clearing, Hayate and the chief had been at it long enough for the cost to show.

Hayate's burned shoulder had moved from numb to something considerably less manageable. His grip on the greatsword was still firm but the swings were coming from a different place --- tighter, more careful, compensating for the arm that was not fully answering. The chief had found this and was using it, pressing the left side, forcing Hayate to cover angles he couldn't cover cleanly.

He was holding. He was not winning.

IX

ONE DOWN

Haruki and Lyra finished the seven goblins together.

It was not a long fight. Seven goblins against two fighters who had been at this long enough to stop thinking about it --- Haruki working the rapier through the gaps, Lyra shooting from close range, methodical and efficient. One by one they went down until the ground on Haruki's side of the clearing was still.

They turned at the same moment to check on Hayate.

Two goblins were moving through the grass behind him, low and quiet, closing the distance while his attention was entirely on the chief in front of him. They had been there for some time --- waiting, holding back until the right moment.

The moment had arrived.

"HAYATE --- BEHIND YOU!" Haruki shouted.

Lyra was already moving. She grabbed an arrow from the nearest goblin corpse, notched it, and loosed in one motion. The nearest goblin took it in the head and dropped.

The second drove its sword into Hayate's upper right torso before he could turn.

Hayate went rigid. The body's response to something it had not processed yet --- the moment between the wound and the understanding of the wound. He stood completely still for one second with a goblin sword buried through his upper right side.

The chief's backhand caught him across the side of the head.

He went flying, the goblin still gripping its sword, both of them leaving the ground together. The goblin landed first. Hayate landed on top of it. The crack of the goblin's skull was audible across the clearing.

Haruki was already running toward the chief, rapier raised. As he closed the distance the chief turned to meet him and their blades connected --- not a glancing exchange but a full clash, the chief's weight behind its sword pressing down against the rapier, Haruki holding the line through technique rather than strength.

Behind him, Lyra moved through the clearing and collected arrows from the goblin corpses --- methodically, quickly, refilling her quiver enough to work with. She found her position and started shooting.

She knew the chief's weaknesses by now. The left shoulder. The knee joint. The lag on the upper left that she had already exploited twice. She capitalised on all of it --- landing hits that would have finished a lesser opponent, hits that drew dark blood and slowed the chief's movement. The chief absorbed them and kept fighting.

It was still standing. So was Haruki.

The fight ground on --- neither side giving ground, neither side breaking. Haruki held the blade exchanges and looked for openings. The chief pressed and recovered and pressed again. Lyra shot and repositioned and shot again.

She reached into the quiver. One arrow left.

She looked at the fight in front of her and understood that this was going to have to end it.

She started moving --- wide around the chief's right flank, drawing its attention, pulling it around to open the left side. The same left side. One shot. She needed the angle clean and she needed a moment where the chief was committed enough to the exchange with Haruki that it couldn't recover in time.

Haruki's foot caught a goblin body.

He went down hard --- full length, the rapier skidding from his hand, the ground coming up fast. The chief's sword was already rising above him. He looked up at it from the ground and did not look away.

Lyra notched her last arrow and pulled the string back.

A goblin sword came spinning out of the far side of the clearing.

It crossed the open ground end over end and buried itself in the chief's head. The chief staggered --- one step, two, the sword arm dropping.

Lyra loosed.

The arrow hit between the chief's eyes.

The chief fell.

The clearing went quiet.

Haruki got to his feet. He and Lyra turned at the same moment, following the line the goblin sword had come from.

Hayate was standing at the far edge of the clearing. His shirt was dark with blood from the open wound in his chest --- the place where the sword had been, before he had pulled it from his own body and thrown it across the clearing at the chief. His right arm was still extended from the throw.

He raised his fist.

One moment. Claimed in full.

Then he fell.

They were running before he hit the ground.

X

LIGHT DUTY

Hayate opened his eyes to the ceiling of the inn room.

For a moment he just looked at it --- the familiar grain of the wood, the crack running from the window frame toward the far corner that he had memorised from the first night without meaning to. Then he turned his head.

Haruki was sitting on the edge of the other bed, talking quietly with Lyra who had pulled the chair from the corner and sat facing him. They had the easy back and forth of people who had been talking for a while already --- not animated, just steady, the conversation of two people who had run out of urgent things to say and moved on to the ordinary ones.

"You look like shit" Hayate said.

They both looked over. Haruki's face did the thing it did when he was relieved but was not going to say so --- a small exhale, a slight softening around the eyes, the smile that came a half second after the relief rather than with it.

Lyra said nothing but she did not look away either, which from her was approximately the same thing.

"How do you feel?" Haruki asked.

Hayate took stock. His right torso was a dull, deep ache that sharpened when he breathed too fully. His left shoulder was a different kind of pain --- surface, hot, the burn making itself known every time the cloth of his shirt moved against it. His legs felt fine. Everything else felt like it had been wrung out and hung up to dry.

"Manageable" he said.

"You were unconscious when we carried you back" Haruki said. "Lyra and I healed what we could on the field. The magic has helped but the body needs to finish the work itself. Two days of light duty minimum."

"Two days."

"Two days."

Hayate looked at the ceiling again. "Fine."

Haruki continued --- measured, thorough, the way he explained things when he wanted to make sure there was no room for argument later. The healing was slower than it should have been. Not because of the wounds specifically but because of everything surrounding them. A week of accumulated damage --- the demon attack on Kasumi, three days on the road with no proper rest, the bandit fight, the first goblin camp, the afternoon of weapons training, the second goblin camp with a

chief and two shamans. The body had been absorbing all of it without being given time to recover, and it had finally called in the debt.

"I need rest too" Haruki added. "Not as much as you, but I'm not at full capacity. Lyra and I will keep taking jobs --- light work, nothing that requires us to be combat-ready. We need the money and we can't afford to stop entirely."

"And me?"

"You stay in town. Rest. Eat. Don't do anything that reopens that wound."

Hayate looked at him.

"Hayate."

"I heard you."

"Do you agree?"

A pause. As much as he wanted to argue --- and he did want to argue, the instinct to push back was immediate and strong --- he could feel the truth of it in every part of his body that was currently making its opinion known. Even he could not pretend this was nothing.

"Fine" he said again. "Two days."

Haruki nodded. He stood, and Lyra stood with him, and they moved toward the door.

Lyra stopped at the door.

She turned back. Her eyes found Hayate and she held his gaze for a moment --- steady, assessing, with something underneath it that she was deciding whether to let through.

She let it through.

"Thank you" she said. "For what you did with the goblins. Splitting them up the way you did." A pause. "I don't know if I would have survived if you hadn't moved when you did."

Hayate looked at her. The thanks was genuine --- no qualification, no armour around it, just the words given plainly. Coming from Lyra, who gave nothing plainly, it landed with considerably more weight than the words themselves carried.

"You're welcome" he said. His ears were warm. He was fairly certain his face was doing something he would prefer it not to be doing and there was nothing he could do about it.

Lyra held his gaze for one more moment. Then she turned and walked out.

Haruki, following her, glanced back at Hayate with the expression of someone who had noticed everything and had decided to be kind about it.

He said nothing. He closed the door behind him.

Hayate lasted approximately forty minutes before the ceiling became intolerable.

He got dressed carefully --- the torso wound making the process longer than it should have been --- and went downstairs and out into Akebono.

They had been here for days and he had seen the job board, the market, the goblin camps outside the eastern gate, and the inside of this inn. That was the full inventory of Akebono as far as he was concerned, which was clearly not the full inventory of Akebono. He turned left at the end of the street and started walking without a destination.

The town was larger than it looked from the main road. Side streets branching off the central market, residential blocks further back, the smell of cookfires and animals and people living their ordinary lives in the ordinary way. He walked through it and looked at things and let his mind go quiet, which it rarely did but occasionally needed to.

He found the park by following the sound of birds.

It was a modest space --- a square of grass and old trees set back from the surrounding buildings, the kind of place a town put in when it had the room and the inclination. A few benches. A path worn into the grass by years of foot traffic. And on one of the benches, sitting very still and looking at the entrance to the park with the focused attention of someone waiting for something, a child.

Beastman. Snake hybrid --- Hayate could see it from twenty metres, the particular quality of the skin on the child's arms, the way the light caught it. Scales along the forearms and neck, subtle but unmistakable. The eyes, when the child glanced up at his approach, had the vertical pupils of a snake. A forked tongue, visible for a moment. Fangs at the

edge of a mouth that was currently pressed into the careful neutral expression of someone who had learned not to show what they were feeling in front of strangers.

The child looked at him. Looked away. Looked back.

Hayate sat down on the bench a comfortable distance away and said nothing for a moment.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Fine" the child said. Immediately. The word of someone who had been asked that question before and had a prepared answer for it.

"You don't look fine."

"I'm fine."

Hayate looked at the park entrance the child kept watching. "Are you lost?"

"No."

"Waiting for someone?"

A pause. Longer than the others. "My teacher. We were meant to train magic today." The child's eyes moved to the entrance again. "He hasn't come."

"How long have you been waiting?"

The child didn't answer, which was an answer.

"I'll wait with you" Hayate said.

The child looked at him with the open suspicion of someone who had learned that offers from strangers were rarely straightforwardly what they appeared to be. "You don't have to."

"I know. I'm bored." Hayate leaned back on the bench and looked up at the trees. "I'm not allowed to do anything useful for two days so I'm just walking around. I've got time."

The child looked at him for another moment. Then looked back at the entrance. "Fine."

They sat. The child made several attempts to end the conversation through the strategic use of short answers and deliberate silences, and Hayate absorbed all of them without taking offence and kept talking anyway, which was something he was naturally good at.

After a while the entrance to the park remained empty and the child's teacher had not come and Hayate had an idea.

"I know a bit about magic" he said. "Not a teacher --- I'm not qualified for that. But if you want something to do while you wait, I can show you what I know."

The child looked at him.

Something happened in the carefully neutral expression --- a crack in it, small and involuntary, the particular light that appears in a person's eyes when something they care about very much has just been mentioned unexpectedly. The child tried to put it back. Did not entirely

succeed.

"Okay" the child said.

Hayate went through it the way he understood it --- not formally, not with any particular structure, just the shape of it as he had come to know it through his own affinity and what Haruki had taught him and what he had worked out for himself.

Six elements. Each one with a natural inclination --- toward offence, toward defence, toward healing and support. Earth and Water on the defensive and buffing side. Fire and Dark on the offensive side. Light and Wind for healing and support, though Wind had an enhancement quality that sat somewhere between the two.

Every person had at most two. Some had one. Some had none --- no affinity at all, which was more common than people assumed.

He demonstrated with his own. Dark first --- a shadow bolt, small and controlled, the dark energy condensing in his palm and firing at a spot on the grass where it left a scorch mark. The child's eyes went very wide.

Wind next --- he let the enhancement run up his forearm, the air tightening around the muscle, the subtle increase in speed and force that came with it. He moved his hand through the air and the displacement was visible, a fraction of a second faster than it should have been.

"Dark is mine" he said. "Offensive. Wind I use for enhancement --- making myself faster, hits harder. Wind also has healing and support

applications but I---" he paused "---I mostly use the enhancement side."

The child had stopped making any pretence of looking at the park entrance.

"What are yours?" Hayate asked.

The child held out one hand. The air around it moved --- subtle, the kind of manifestation that was still finding its shape. Wind, clearly, though young and unformed. The child let it run for a moment and then let it go.

"Wind" Hayate said. "That's good. Versatile. What's your second?"

The child shook their head. "I don't know yet. It hasn't come."

"That's normal" Hayate said. "Second affinities take time. It'll show up."

The child looked at him. Then, with the deliberate care of someone doing something they had decided to do rather than something that had simply happened --- "My name is Kira."

Hayate smiled. The kind he didn't always mean to. "Hayate. Good to meet you, Kira."

Kira looked like he was trying to decide whether to smile back and had not finished deciding when something at the edge of the park caught Hayate's attention.

Two figures. Hooded. Walking toward them from the far entrance with the purposeful ease of people who knew where they were going.

Hayate noticed the smell before he noticed anything else about them. Salt. Clean and sharp, like open water, like the sea. He had smelled it once before, briefly, in the market.

He stayed where he was and watched them come.

\[Section 1 ends here --- Chapters 11-20 continue in Section 2\]

XI

KIRA

The two figures stopped a few metres away.

For a moment nobody moved. Then Kira was off the bench and running, crossing the grass at full sprint, and the taller of the two figures caught him in a hug that suggested this was not an unusual occurrence.

"Rask!" Kira's voice was muffled against the figure's cloak.

The figure --- Rask --- held him for a moment, then stepped back and looked him over in the way of someone checking for damage. Satisfied, he straightened up.

"I apologise for being late" he said. His voice was low and measured, each word placed with care. "We were held up."

Kira accepted this with a nod, then turned and looked back at Hayate with the expression of someone who had something to report.

Rask followed his gaze.

"What was happening here?" he asked. Not unfriendly. Not entirely neutral either --- the question of someone who wanted a complete

answer and would notice if they didn't get one.

"He was keeping me company" Kira said. "And he explained how magic works. All the elements, and the affinities, and how everyone has at most two." He paused. "He showed me his. Dark and Wind."

Rask looked at Hayate.

Hayate could see the doubt moving through the eyes visible beneath the hood --- the reasonable, considered doubt of someone who had learned not to take things at face value, running the available information against what he was seeing and finding no obvious reason for alarm but not quite clearing it either. A moment passed. The doubt did not disappear but it settled.

"Thank you" Rask said. "For keeping him company. And for keeping him safe."

"He seemed like he needed the company" Hayate said. "I didn't do much."

"You did more than you think." Rask glanced at Kira, then back at Hayate. "My name is Rask. This is my companion---" he gestured to the second hooded figure "---Freyja."

The second figure inclined their head.

"Hayate" said Hayate.

Rask nodded once. "I apologise, but we have somewhere to be." He looked at Kira. "Is there anything you want to say?"

Kira turned to Hayate. He stood up very straight, the way children do when they are being deliberate about something, and bowed his head.

"Thank you! My name is Kira!"

Hayate looked at him --- this kid who had spent the first twenty minutes of their acquaintance trying to end the conversation and had spent the rest of it completely absorbed in everything Hayate had to say, who had shown him his Wind affinity with the careful pride of someone sharing something important, who was now bowing with his whole small body like the manners mattered very much.

Hayate smiled.

He wasn't aware of it. It arrived without consulting him --- wide and genuine and entirely involuntary, the kind of smile that had nothing behind it except the simple fact of the moment.

"It was a pleasure, Kira" he said.

Kira straightened up, satisfied. Rask placed a hand briefly on the child's shoulder and guided him toward the park exit. The hooded figure called Freyja followed. At the entrance Kira looked back once and raised a hand.

Hayate raised his back.

They were gone.

He sat on the bench for a moment longer. The park was quiet again. He noticed, belatedly, that he was still smiling, and had been for some

time without knowing it.

He got up and kept walking.

He didn't intend to end up back at the weapons shop.

He had been walking without a destination for the better part of an hour, moving through streets he hadn't seen yet, looking at things without any particular purpose, when the nondescript door presented itself between two market stalls with its small high window and its hand-lettered sign.

wepons

He went in.

The shopkeeper was behind the counter this time without the panic --- looked up when the door opened, registered the face, and settled into something considerably more relaxed than their first meeting.

"You again" he said. Not unfriendly. "Break it already?"

"No" Hayate said. "Just exploring. Ended up here."

The shopkeeper looked at him for a moment with mild curiosity. He set down what he was working on and extended a broad hand across the counter.

"Well, welcome back. My name is Gerd."

Hayate shook it. "Hayate."

"Hayate." Gerd nodded as if filing it away. "Looking for anything in particular or just looking?"

"Just looking" Hayate said. Then, after a moment --- "Actually --- your rapier section. Can I try some of them?"

Gerd raised an eyebrow. "Thought you were the greatsword type."

"I am. It's for someone else."

Gerd gestured at the section along the left wall. "Help yourself."

Hayate moved to the rapiers and started working through them --- pulling each one, checking the weight, running it through a slow deliberate pass the way Haruki did during training. He didn't know rapiers well enough to assess the quality of the steel or the craft of the balance. What he knew was the feel of Haruki's weapon --- the specific weight of it, the length, the way it moved in a hand when the person holding it knew what they were doing. He was looking for that feeling in another blade.

He tried six. Put five back.

The sixth he held a moment longer, moving it through the same slow pass a second time, then a third.

"How much for this one?" he asked.

Gerd looked at it. "For you --- twenty silver."

Hayate set it back on the rack carefully. "I'll come back for it."

Gerd nodded. No questions. Hayate thanked him and headed for the door.

"Tell your brother to come in himself next time" Gerd called after him. "Save you the guesswork."

Hayate stopped. Looked back.

Gerd had already picked up what he was working on before, expression neutral, the picture of a man who had said nothing of particular significance.

Hayate walked out.

The light was going by the time he turned back toward the inn.

He heard them before he saw them --- Haruki's voice, then Lyra's, coming from the street ahead. He rounded the corner and found them walking toward him, both of them considerably less clean than they had been that morning. Soot on Haruki's jacket. Something that might have been scorched earth on Lyra's sleeve. The particular dishevelled quality of people who had been doing something physical and were ready to stop doing it.

Haruki looked at him. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine" Hayate said. "What happened to you?"

"Job" Haruki said simply.

"Was it a fire job?"

"There was fire involved, yes."

Lyra looked at her sleeve and said nothing.

They went back to the inn, cleaned up, and went to find dinner --- the three of them, moving through Akebono's evening streets with the easy quiet of people who had run out of the need to fill silence.

XII

THE RAID

Two days of light work and actual meals had done something measurable for all three of them.

Not fully recovered --- that would have taken longer than two days --- but functional in a way that felt different from the grinding exhaustion of the week before. Hayate's torso wound had closed to a tight, itching line that pulled when he moved too fast. His shoulder was still tender but no longer the constant distraction it had been. Haruki moved without the careful economy of someone managing pain. Lyra, who had said nothing about her own condition throughout, seemed simply herself again, which Hayate was beginning to understand was a deliberate choice she made regardless of how she actually felt.

They went to the job board in the morning and found it immediately.

It was larger than the other listings --- a full page rather than the usual half, the handwriting more deliberate, the language more specific. An old tomb on the outskirts of Akebono's territory, built for fallen kings, now overrun with skeletons. The scale of the infestation required multiple parties. All interested to meet at the town square at sunrise the following day. The payout figure at the bottom was the largest any of

them had seen on the board.

They stood in front of it for a moment.

"Skeletons" Hayate said.

"In a tomb" Haruki said.

"Large payout."

"Also large tomb. Large number of skeletons."

Hayate looked at him. "Are we doing it?"

Haruki looked at Lyra.

Lyra was reading the listing a second time with the focused attention she gave to things she was taking seriously. She finished, stepped back, and said --- "It's dangerous. More dangerous than anything we've taken so far." A pause. "I think we should do it."

Hayate was already pulling it off the board.

They had the rest of the day and Lyra used it.

She had been watching the brothers fight for long enough now to have formed a complete picture --- not just of what they could do but of the specific shape of what they couldn't. She knew what she was working with and she worked with it rather than against it.

Efficient movement first. She took them through it methodically --- the way a fighter conserved energy over a long engagement, how much

stamina was wasted in an unnecessary step, an overextended swing, a defensive movement that covered more ground than the threat required. Hayate absorbed it through doing rather than listening, adjusting on the fly, his natural instincts finding the efficiency faster than the instruction did. Haruki absorbed it the other way --- understanding the principle first, then applying it, each movement deliberate until it wasn't.

Battlefield awareness next. She addressed it directly, without making it pointed --- how to track the ground as well as the enemy, how to account for the bodies and the debris and the uneven terrain that a fight always generated around itself. Haruki took this one without comment. He knew what it was about. He did not need her to say the goblin camp.

She also had them swap weapons.

She had her reasons --- she wanted to see their adaptability, wanted to understand their range, wanted to know what happened when each of them was taken out of their natural mode. But she had also watched the brothers train together before she had arrived at the camp that first morning and she had noted something then that she was now confirming: they already knew each other's weapons. Not with skill but with familiarity --- the particular ease of people who had held something many times. Haruki moved the greatsword with a caution that was about respect for the weight rather than unfamiliarity with it. Hayate moved the rapier with a care that was about not wanting to break it.

She filed that away with everything else she had filed about them and said nothing about it.

By the time the light went they were better than they had been that morning, which was all she had aimed for.

The town square at sunrise was cold and still.

Their party arrived first --- or nearly first. The dwarves were already there, four of them, standing in a tight group with the particular self-contained quality of people who had worked together long enough to stop needing to talk. Broad, solid, armed with axes and hammers, wearing the kind of armour that had been repaired so many times it had become its own artefact. They looked at the approaching party --- human, human, elf, mixed and walking together --- and the looking was not neutral.

The orcs arrived minutes later. Also four, also a unit, also armed and ready. They assessed the situation with the same eyes the dwarves had used and reached what appeared to be the same conclusion, though they expressed it differently --- not cold like the dwarves but openly uncomfortable, a visible recalibration of expectations.

The last party was two figures, both hooded, standing slightly apart from the others. They had arrived before everyone and had chosen their position accordingly --- close enough to be present, far enough to be separate.

Hayate smelled it before he saw them.

Salt. Clean and sharp. The same smell from the park, from the market before that. He glanced at the two hooded figures and felt something click into place. He said nothing. He had not told Haruki or

Lyra about Kira, about Rask, about the park --- it had not seemed relevant at the time and now it seemed like the wrong moment to bring it up. He watched the figures from the corner of his eye and kept walking.

Their party took a position away from the others. The distance between the groups was not large but it was deliberate --- felt from both sides, maintained by both sides. The dwarf party looked at them the way people look at something they do not have a category for and have decided they do not like. The orc party looked at them the way people look at something that offends a principle they have held for a long time.

Haruki noted it. Hayate noted it. Lyra had clearly already noted it and had moved on to other things.

The square was getting on toward full light when three figures arrived from the direction of the main street.

The man in the centre walked with the ease of someone accustomed to being looked at and had stopped registering it. Human, well-dressed without being ostentatious, the kind of wealthy that expressed itself in quality rather than display. A cross-shaped scar ran over his left eye --- the eye itself grey, flat, the colour of something that no longer worked. The two men flanking him were large in the way that suggested it was professional rather than incidental, their eyes moving across the assembled parties with the practiced assessment of people paid to assess.

The discomfort in the square shifted when he arrived. The dwarves exchanged a look --- brief, controlled, the look of people swallowing something they objected to. The orcs were less controlled about it. One of them said something low to another that did not carry across the

square but carried in tone.

Taking orders from a human.

The scarred man stopped in front of the assembled parties and looked at each group in turn without hurrying. His good eye moved across them with calm attention.

"Thank you for coming" he said. His voice was measured and pleasant. "I'll keep this brief."

He outlined the job cleanly. The tomb's location --- half a day's walk east of the gate. The scale of the skeleton population inside, which was substantial and had been growing. The tomb's layout, as best it was known --- large, multi-chambered, built for royalty. He did not minimise the danger. He named it directly and let it sit.

Half the bounty now, he said. Half on completion. The party that recorded the highest kill count would receive a bonus payment on top of the completion fee.

He looked at them all.

"Last chance to walk away" he said. "No shame in it."

Nobody moved.

He reached into his coat and produced coin bags --- one per party, the first half of the bounty, distributed without ceremony. He handed them over and stepped back.

"I'll be in town" he said. "Come find me when it's done." He turned and walked back the way he had come, his two companions falling into step behind him.

The parties stood in the square for a moment.

Then the orcs ran.

Not walked --- ran, breaking from the square at a pace that made their intention clear. First on site. First kills. First chance at the bonus.

The other parties watched them go.

"Should we---" Hayate started.

"No" said Haruki. He was watching the direction the orcs had gone with an expression Lyra recognised --- the one that meant he was thinking about something and had not finished yet. "We go at our own pace. Arriving last isn't the worst position."

Hayate looked at him. "You have a reason for that."

"I have a feeling" Haruki said. "Which isn't the same thing." He looked at the others. "Let's go."

They set out --- separately from the dwarves, separately from the hooded pair, their own unit moving at their own pace through Akebono's eastern gate and out onto the road toward the tomb.

XIII

THE TOMB

They were the last to arrive at the entrance.

Haruki had suggested it on the road --- hang back, let the others go in first, take the time to think. The others had not argued. The entrance was a stone archway set into a low hillside, the kind of structure that had been built to last and had succeeded --- old in a way that the goblin camps and the bandits on the road had not been, carrying the particular weight of something that had been here long before any of them and would be here long after. Steps descended into darkness beyond the arch.

Haruki stood at the top of the steps and looked at it.

"Something's off" he said.

Lyra stood beside him. "I've been thinking the same thing since the square."

"The danger emphasis. The scarred man made a point of it --- named it directly, gave it weight. But skeletons are not that dangerous. Strong, yes. More than goblins." He paused. "But thoughtless. They don't adapt,

they don't coordinate, they don't surprise you. You read the pattern and you stay ahead of it."

"Why the big deal then" Lyra said. Not a question.

"That's what I keep coming back to."

Hayate was looking at the steps. "Are we going in or not?"

"We're going in" Haruki said. "Carefully."

The darkness at the top of the staircase became something else at the bottom.

Light --- warm and flickering, torches mounted to the stone walls at intervals, already burning. Someone had been here ahead of them and had lit the way. Haruki looked at the torches and felt the bad feeling settle slightly.

"That helps us" he said, keeping his voice low. Sound carried differently underground --- a lesson the stone walls were teaching immediately. "Lit routes are cleared routes. We take the one that isn't lit."

They moved down the narrow hallway in single file --- Haruki at the front, Lyra at the rear, Hayate between them with the greatsword angled to fit the passage. The torchlight threw long shadows and the stone on either side was cold and close and the air smelled of age and dust and something underneath both of those things that Hayate couldn't name.

The hallway opened into a large room.

Five paths branched out from it in different directions. One of them --- the leftmost --- had torches lit along its visible length. The other four were dark.

Haruki looked at the lit path. Then at the others.

"One path" Lyra said quietly. "Three parties. They all went the same way."

"Or were directed to" Haruki said.

Hayate looked at him.

"The rightmost path" Haruki said. "We go our own way. And we move quickly --- I want to be out of here as soon as possible."

The rightmost path was dark and they moved through it with a torch Haruki had pulled from the bracket behind them. The first room they reached had four coffins and four skeletons --- upright, moving, turning toward them with the slow mechanical attention of things that operated on proximity rather than thought.

The party dispatched them in under two minutes. No injuries. No complications. The skeletons moved in straight lines and telegraphed every action before it happened, and fighting them felt less like combat and more like solving a problem that had already told you the answer.

They kept moving.

The next room was larger --- six coffins, six skeletons. Same result. The room after that was larger still. Each room yielded easily, the party

working through them with the efficient rhythm of people who had found the correct approach and were applying it repeatedly. They came out of every room unscathed.

The bad feeling did not go away.

Haruki could not locate a reason for it. The skeletons were manageable. The path was clear. Everything was proceeding in the most straightforward way possible. He kept moving and kept the feeling filed where he could see it.

"Still one lit path" Lyra said, from behind him, between two rooms. "We should have crossed at least one other party's route by now."

Haruki said nothing. She was right. Three parties in a tomb with five paths and only one trail of lit torches --- the mathematics of it did not resolve cleanly no matter how he arranged it.

He kept moving.

The scream reached them in the hallway between the fourth and fifth rooms.

It came from ahead --- not close, not far, somewhere further down the path they were already on. A single voice, cut short.

The three of them looked at each other.

They ran.

The hallway ended in a set of doors --- heavy stone, already open, the darkness beyond them giving way to something larger. They came

through at speed and pulled up.

The room was enormous.

The ceiling rose into shadows too high for the torchlight to reach, supported by pillars that ran in two rows down the length of the space --- ornate, carved, the stonework detailed in the way of people who had built this to honour something and had taken the time to do it properly. The walls between the pillars were etched from floor to ceiling with images --- figures, battles, processions, the pictorial history of kings laid out in stone across the entire length of the chamber. A story told in a language of pictures, old enough that the people who had commissioned it were dust.

At the far end of the room, a figure.

They were too far to make it out. A dwarf lay on the ground between them and it --- one of the four from the square, armour caved in on the left side, still. The other three dwarves were spread around the figure in a rough formation, weapons up, not attacking. Frozen.

Haruki was already running toward them.

As they closed the distance the columns fell away on either side and the room revealed itself. The orc party came into view --- four of them, also surrounding the figure, also not attacking. And behind a pillar to the right, the two hooded figures, pressed against the stone.

All three parties. All here. All looking at the same thing.

They were close enough now.

The skeleton king stood at the centre of the room.

Ten feet of ancient bone, still and terrible, wearing a crown that was large and ornate and had clearly been placed on a head of some importance once upon a time. In one hand --- a longsword. Longer than Hayate's greatsword. The blade was jagged along its edge, the metal eaten by time and neglect, the pommel missing entirely, leaving only the bare tang. It was a weapon that had not been cared for in a very long time. It was still obviously lethal. The blood on the blade, dark and not yet dry, confirmed it.

Hayate felt something.

It was subtle --- a wrongness in the air around the king that he registered not with his eyes but with something underneath them. A dark mist clung to the skeleton, barely visible, more felt than seen. His Dark affinity pulled toward it the way a compass needle pulls toward north, and what it found there was not right. Not the ordinary darkness of an old tomb. Something else. Something that had been placed.

He tightened both hands on the greatsword.

Across the room Haruki had gone very still --- the particular stillness of someone absorbing a situation too quickly to respond to it yet, running the numbers, finding them insufficient. His expression gave nothing away except to someone who knew his face.

Lyra had stopped moving. Her hand was at the quiver. Her eyes were on the king and they were not afraid --- they were doing what they always did, which was assess. But the assessment was taking longer than

usual.

The skeleton king's empty gaze moved across the room.

It found them.

XIV

THE KING

They hit the throne room at a run and spread without discussing it.

Haruki broke left immediately, toward the fallen dwarf --- moving past the frozen adventurers without stopping, dropping to one knee beside the body. The gash across the torso was massive, the kind of wound that told you everything you needed to know before you checked. He checked anyway. Two fingers to the neck, held there for a moment.

He shook his head.

No healing the dead.

He stood and turned back to the room.

Hayate had not stopped moving.

He had cleared the two hooded adventurers in a single leap --- both feet leaving the ground, the greatsword coming up and over into a large downward arc aimed at the king's left side. The other adventurers watched him go with the paralysed expressions of people who had just seen a fierce dwarf warrior killed in one strike and had not yet resolved what that meant for their own survival.

Lyra had been watching Hayate from the moment he broke into a run. She read the charge the way she read everything --- completely, immediately, already ahead of it. Her hand moved to her quiver and she cast instead, the water magic building in her palm and releasing outward.

Bubble Shield bloomed around Hayate mid-air --- a skin of moving water that caught the light from the torches and scattered it, wrapping him in something that would absorb the kinetic force of whatever hit him and distribute it rather than let it land clean.

The king saw the strike coming.

Its sword came up to block --- fast, the movement of something that had been doing this for a very long time. Hayate saw the block forming and made the adjustment before the collision, bleeding force out of the swing at the last moment, softening it just enough that when the greatsword met the king's blade he landed on it rather than being thrown by it. Both feet planted on the flat of the king's sword, weight balanced, the greatsword no longer a striking weapon but a brace.

He extended his left hand.

The shadow bolt condensed in his palm --- dark energy pulling from the shadows around them, the torchlight dimming slightly as he drew from it --- and fired at the king's head. A crack of displaced air. Dark smoke bloomed around the king's crown.

Hayate jumped backwards.

He landed between the two hooded adventurers and the king, greatsword back in both hands, and looked at the frozen figures around him with an expression that had no patience in it.

"IF YOU'RE NOT HERE TO HELP," he said, at a volume that used the full height of the ceiling, "LEAVE. YOU ARE IN THE WAY."

Haruki was already walking forward. He passed between two of the dwarves without looking at them, his voice carrying across the room with the calm of someone who was not shouting because he did not need to.

"While we would appreciate your help --- if you have no intention of fighting, now is your chance to leave."

He stopped and faced the king's direction and waited.

Lyra, from somewhere behind him, made a sound that was almost a laugh. She cast Bubble Shield on Haruki --- the water wrapping around him the same way it had wrapped around Hayate --- then turned, ran three steps, and leapt onto a broken pillar that had shed its upper half at some point in the tomb's long history. She landed on the flat top of it, found her footing, and notched an arrow.

The room held its breath.

One of the hooded figures moved.

They stepped forward from behind Hayate, hands already moving --- earth magic building between their palms, the particular dense quality of it different from Lyra's water, heavier. The spell extended outward in

two directions simultaneously --- across Hayate's greatsword, the metal visibly responding, sharpening, the edge catching the torchlight differently than it had a moment before --- and across the figure's own weapon, which was a trident, long-handled and three-pronged, the metal darkening and tightening as the enhancement took hold.

The figure pulled back their hood.

She was young --- fifteen, round-faced, with light-to-medium warm skin and full cheeks and dark brown eyes that were bright even in the torchlight. Her hair was very dark, straight, falling past her shoulders. She had the human upper body of someone built for combat --- practical armour, the enhanced trident in one hand --- and below the waist, where legs would have been, the deep navy-black of cephalopod anatomy, multiple tentacles moving with a fluid, functional grace that supported her weight on the stone floor and gave her a stability that two legs would not have. A bangle on her wrist caught the light --- simple, metal, unremarkable.

She stepped to Hayate's side and faced the king.

The second hooded figure sighed. The sound of someone who had assessed the situation, found the options, and selected the one they objected to least. They stepped forward.

Tall. Lean. Built with the particular economy of someone for whom every movement had been refined toward a purpose. Warm brown skin with an earthy quality, features sharp and slightly hooked at the nose --- an avian cast to the face that resolved, as the hood came back, into something that suggested a bird of prey without committing to the

metaphor. Amber eyes, sharp and still, the eyes of something that missed nothing. Dark hair kept close. And from the shoulder blades, folding back as the cloak fell away --- large dark-feathered wings, each one longer than he was tall, tucked against his back with the practiced ease of someone who had been folding them into small spaces their entire life. Dual daggers crossed at his back, handles visible above each shoulder.

He turned to Hayate.

"Good to see you again."

Hayate stared at him. Then at the cecaelian beside him. Then back.

"I KNEW IT WAS YOU TWO!!!"

The skeleton king roared.

The sound hit the walls and came back from all directions at once, filling the chamber with something that was less a noise than a pressure. The shadow bolt smoke surrounding the king's head dispersed in the force of it --- blown outward, gone, leaving the crown and the empty eyes and the jagged sword visible and unobscured and pointed directly at Hayate.

It lunged.

Two fireballs crossed the room from behind Haruki and hit the king at the base of the skull simultaneously --- not one after the other, together, the combined impact staggering it forward and to the left. Haruki looked back.

Beside the orc party's rear position, one of the four orcs had a staff raised. A caster. He was looking at Haruki with the expression of someone who had made a decision and was watching to see if it had been the right one.

Haruki had also cast. His hand was still extended, the Fire affinity cooling.

They had fired at the same moment without planning it.

The three orc warriors moved without being asked. They stepped forward and spread --- positioning themselves between the king and their caster, a shield line that had clearly been a rehearsed formation. All four orcs looked at Haruki. A single nod, passed across the distance between them. Not friendship. Not alliance. The acknowledgment of people who understood that survival required something they objected to, and had decided to do it anyway.

Two of the dwarves stepped forward. They did not look at Haruki. They did not look at the orcs. They looked at the king and raised their weapons and took their positions on the line without acknowledging anyone around them.

The third dwarf was still on the ground beside his fallen companion, one hand on the stone, not yet ready to stand.

Haruki looked at the room.

Along the semicircle --- dwarves on the left, orcs on the right, Rask above already lifting into the air on dark wings, Freyja beside Hayate

with the enhanced trident levelled, Lyra on the pillar with the arrow drawn, Hayate at the centre with the greatsword up. Every race present. Every weapon raised.

The skeleton king stood at the middle of it and looked at all of them.

XV

ELEVEN

The skeleton king did not wait.

It came forward with the kind of speed that didn't belong in something that old and that large, sword sweeping low in an arc that forced everyone to scatter. Three orcs threw themselves backwards. The two fighting dwarves split left and right. Rask launched upward on his wings and Freyja planted her feet and drove her trident into the stone floor, bracing. Haruki and Lyra broke in opposite directions. Hayate jumped back and landed in a crouch.

The blade caught nothing but air and the edge of a dwarf's pauldron, sending him spinning but standing.

Twelve people in the room. No formation. No signal. No idea what each other could do.

Hayate went first, because Hayate always went first.

He came in from the right --- a heavy diagonal slash that the king caught on its forearm without flinching, the bone taking the greatsword's edge and not breaking. Hayate felt the impact travel up both arms and

swore under his breath. The king's free hand came down like a hammer. Hayate rolled, barely, and the fist cratered the stone floor where he'd been standing.

Haruki came in from the left a half-second later. His rapier found the gap between two vertebrae in the king's neck --- a precise, controlled strike that should have severed something important. The king turned its head and looked at him. The strike hadn't reached anything vital. Its eyes, empty and dark, fixed on him.

Haruki took three steps back. Reassessing.

The orc caster --- standing behind his three companions --- raised his staff and sent a bolt of fire at the king's spine. It hit. It scorched bone black. The king lurched forward a half-step from the impact but kept moving toward Haruki.

The three orc warriors fanned out without being asked, positioning themselves between the caster and the king on instinct. They didn't look at anyone else. They were working with themselves, not the group --- but they were working.

Lyra, from her broken pillar, had been watching all of it.

She fired two arrows in quick succession --- both at the king's left knee joint, both landing true. The king's leg buckled. Not much. Enough.

Freyja saw the buckle and moved. She surged forward with her trident levelled, driving it into the back of the knee as the joint was compromised, and the king went down on one leg with a sound like

cracking stone. She twisted the trident, widened the gap in the joint, then pulled back before the king's hand could close around her.

Half a second of stillness.

Then the king pushed itself back upright.

Rask, watching from above, had seen enough. He folded his wings and dropped --- straight down onto the king's crown, daggers first, driving both blades into the eye sockets. The king reached up and grabbed him before he could disengage. Rask went with the momentum, twisted in the grip, and drove a knee into the king's jaw hard enough to snap its head back. When it released him he was already in the air again, wings catching before he hit the ground.

The king shook its head. Reset. Turned slowly. Looked at all of them.

Something was changing in how it moved.

Hayate noticed it first. The king had been reactive --- responding to attacks as they came. Now it was still for a fraction of a second longer before each move. Waiting. Watching. Whatever controlled it was adjusting.

"It's learning us," he said.

He didn't shout it. Somehow everyone heard it anyway.

Haruki heard it and understood what it meant. They had a window --- the same window the king was using to read them --- and they needed to

stop fighting like twelve strangers and start fighting like something else.

He looked at the orc caster across the room. The orc looked back.

Haruki held up two fingers, pointed at the king's left side. The orc's eyes narrowed. Then he nodded once.

Haruki circled right. The orc prepared a spell.

The king tracked Haruki --- the mobile blade was the obvious threat. Its weight shifted left. It raised the jagged sword.

The fireball hit it from the left. Haruki came in from the right in the same instant, rapier driving into the gap between ribs that Freyja had found earlier in the fight. The king staggered --- both impacts registering simultaneously, no way to brace for both.

Hayate came up from underneath, wind-enhanced, driving his greatsword upward at an angle that forced the king's arm back and the jagged sword wide. It was too heavy to recover quickly at that angle. The arm stayed back for a half-second too long.

Lyra put an arrow in the exposed armpit joint.

The king's sword arm dropped. Not permanently. Not without the shoulder working against it.

For the first time in the fight, the skeleton king stepped backward.

The third dwarf --- still crouched near his fallen companion, hands on the stone floor --- finally looked up. He watched Haruki reload for another strike. He watched the orcs move without being told. He

watched two humans, an elf, a beastman, and a cecaelian operate like they'd been doing this for years.

He stood up slowly. Picked up his axe.

He didn't look at anyone else. He just moved forward and took a position on the far left of the line.

Twelve still standing. The king in the centre.

Not allies. Not yet. But something had shifted in the room --- the kind of shift that doesn't need a name to be real.

Then a voice came from the king's shadow. Low. Unhurried. Almost bored.

"This bores me."

Something rose from the darkness pooling at the skeleton king's feet. It stepped forward --- through the king, not around it --- and the shadow peeled away like smoke.

One hand.

The skeleton king --- ten feet of ancient bone that had just pushed twelve fighters to their limit --- flew sideways into a pillar with a crack that shook the ceiling.

It did not get up.

The figure stood where the king had been, looking at all of them with the mild curiosity of someone who had just knocked over a glass.

XVI

ZAQARU

Haruki and Hayate knew what it was before it had fully emerged from the shadow.

They had seen this before. Not this specific creature --- but the shape of it, the proportion, the quality of wrongness. Kasumi had burned it into them at a level below thought, below memory, somewhere in the body itself. The smell, the particular darkness, the way light seemed to behave differently around it. They knew.

Everyone else in the room did not.

The other parties had heard of demons. Had grown up in a world defined by the demon invasion, had taken jobs to clear the creatures that bled through the frontlines, had understood in the abstract that somewhere beyond the defensive line something terrible had taken eighty-three percent of the world and was still holding it. But hearing of a thing and standing in a room with one were separated by a distance that no amount of description could close.

The dwarves had gone rigid. The orcs had taken a collective step backward. Lyra, Freyja, Rask --- all of them still, all of them processing

something that their experience had not prepared them for.

Hayate was already moving.

"DEMONNNN!"

He crossed the distance at a dead sprint, greatsword up, every part of him committed to the swing before the word had finished leaving his mouth. Simultaneously, without coordination, without a signal passing between them, Haruki's hand came up and the fireball left his palm --- Fire affinity channelled and released in the same motion, aimed at the demon's centre.

The demon looked at both attacks coming.

It raised its left hand and extended one finger.

The greatsword stopped. Not deflected --- stopped, the blade pressing against a single finger and going no further, Hayate's full momentum and weight and the force of the swing absorbed by one extended digit without the hand behind it moving at all.

The right hand came up. One finger. The fireball changed direction and dissipated against the ceiling.

"Now, now" the demon said. "Settle down, children."

Hayate jumped back and landed in a crouch, greatsword still raised, breathing hard. He looked at his sword. Looked at the demon's finger. Said nothing.

The demon straightened up and looked at all of them with the attention of someone who had nowhere else to be.

"My name is Zaqaru" it said. The voice was pleasant in a way that made the pleasantness worse --- measured, conversational, carrying no urgency because urgency implied the outcome was uncertain. "I am a Lieutenant from the army of the great Aszag." A pause. "I need not know your names. You will be dead soon enough." The mild interest in its expression shifted into something that might have been satisfaction. "Take pride in the fact that you have mildly entertained me for the past twenty minutes."

It disappeared.

Not moved --- disappeared, the space it had occupied simply empty, no transition between presence and absence. The room had no time to respond before it reappeared --- behind the dwarf who had been last to stand, the one who had finally pushed himself up from the floor beside his fallen companion and taken his position on the line.

The grin that appeared on Zaqaru's face was not the expression of something that felt joy. It was the expression of something that had learned what joy looked like and was using the shape of it.

One hand came forward and drove through the dwarf's chest from behind.

Zaqaru lifted him. The dwarf's feet left the ground. Zaqaru leaned in close and brought his mouth to the dwarf's ear.

"Scream for me."

A pause. Long enough to be deliberate.

Then Zaqaru laughed --- a sound that had no warmth in it anywhere --- and threw the dwarf sideways. The impact with the wall was total. Stone cracked. Blood hit the surface and spread. The sound of bones was audible across the chamber.

Zaqaru looked at what remained with mild disappointment. "Well. He was no fun." His eyes moved across the room until they found the original dwarf --- the one the skeleton king had killed before they arrived. He pointed at it. "Let's hope at least one of you screams like that first one."

Haruki walked forward.

He moved with the careful deliberateness of someone managing something that wanted very badly to be something else. His fists were closed at his sides. His jaw was tight. The rage was there --- visible to anyone who knew his face, burning in his eyes with the particular heat of someone who had seen this before, in a different room, on a different night, and had been living with it ever since.

He stopped at the front.

"What do you want?" he asked.

His voice was level. It cost him something to make it level and he paid it anyway, because he had assessed the situation in the seconds since the dwarf had hit the wall and arrived at the same conclusion every

time --- they were not going to fight their way out of this. Not yet. Not without more information, more preparation, more of something they did not currently have. Diplomacy was not a preference. It was the only tool that bought time.

Zaqaru tilted his body into a slow arch, spine curving backward in a way that suggested the bones inside were arranged differently than expected. He considered the question as if it were genuinely interesting.

"Oh? Was it not obvious enough?" He straightened. "I want to hear you scream. I want to see you suffer." A pause, each word placed with care. "I want to taste your pain."

He raised his right hand and looked at it --- the dwarf's blood dark across the fingers --- and drew his tongue slowly along one of them. He looked at Haruki. He winked.

Rask had not landed since the king went down.

He had been in the air throughout, circling the upper reaches of the chamber where the torchlight didn't fully reach, wings folded to reduce his profile against the shadows. He was moving now --- slowly, without sound, angling toward the demon's back. Haruki saw it in his peripheral vision and understood immediately.

He kept talking. He kept Zaqaru's attention on him and kept talking and made sure nothing in his face or his posture suggested that anything was happening behind the demon's back.

Hayate had seen it too. He had seen something else as well --- the way Zaqaru had moved, the shadow peeling away from him and closing back around him, the dark energy of it. He reached for his own Dark affinity and felt for the shadows at the edges of his feet. Trying to find what Zaqaru had found. Trying to understand it by feel.

Freyja's hands were already moving. Enhance Earth building between her palms --- she cast it outward in two directions, toward Rask's daggers above and toward Hayate's greatsword beside her. The metal of both weapons responded, darkening slightly, the edges finding a new quality.

Lyra cast from the pillar --- Bubble Shield, twice in quick succession. The water bloomed around Rask first, then around Hayate, catching the torchlight in moving patterns across the stone floor.

The remaining orcs and dwarves saw the shields go up. The shock was still in their faces but something underneath it had shifted --- the practical instinct of fighters who recognised a preparation when they saw one. They looked at each other. They started buffing without being asked, hands moving, whatever they had available.

Zaqaru watched all of it.

He looked at the Bubble Shields. At Freyja's enhancement. At the orcs and dwarves moving. At all of it, taking it in with the same mild interest he had brought to everything since he had stepped out of the shadow.

Then he laughed.

"While a futile attempt---" he said, and the laughter was still in his voice underneath the words "---I respect and appreciate your willingness to charge into death."

He raised both arms out to his sides. Wide, open, welcoming.

"Now come." The grin. "Entertain me some more."

Rask folded his wings and dropped.

He had been still for the fraction of a second it took to align everything --- position, angle, the Enhance Earth on both daggers, the Piercing Flames building between his palms and along the blades, Fire and Wind combining into something that punched through resistance rather than burning across it. The nape of the neck. The gap between the base of the skull and the top of the spine. A fraction of a second to cross the distance and everything committed to the strike before he moved.

He moved.

XVII

TRUE DESPAIR

Zaqaru did not see Rask coming.

He had been looking at the party below him --- at Haruki still at the front, at the orcs and dwarves who had started moving, at all of it with the satisfaction of something that had already decided how the evening ended. He had not looked up. He had not considered up.

Rask hit him at the base of the skull.

Piercing Flames connected --- fire and wind combined punching through the thick skin at the nape of the neck, not clean enough to behead but enough. The impact drove Zaqaru forward, his body pitching with the force of it. Two cuts opened on the sides of his neck, deep, green-black blood welling immediately.

Freyja was already moving.

She had watched Hayate's greatsword stop against one finger and filed it --- the skin was dense, reinforced in a way that cut damage would struggle against. She planted her back foot and drove her palm downward. The stone floor responded --- a pillar of earth erupting

beneath her feet, launching her upward and forward, her shield coming around in front of her as she flew.

Zaqaru was still pitching forward when the shield connected with his face.

The sound was solid and total. Green blood burst from his nose, scattering across the stone floor. Zaqaru hit the ground on one knee.

Lyra had the neck cuts in her sightline before he landed.

She drew the bowstring back and channelled Light into the arrow --- not a standard shot, something more deliberate, the light magic building along the shaft and concentrating at the tip until the arrow glowed white. She loosed.

Luminary Bolt crossed the chamber and found the gap in the tough skin at Zaqaru's neck. It connected. The light detonated on contact and the damage it did was visibly different from anything else that had hit him --- deeper, the green flesh around the wound reacting to it in a way it had not reacted to the physical strikes.

Haruki grasped his rapier with both hands and combined Fire and Light --- not separately, together, the two affinities channelled simultaneously into a single concentrated point. The rapier became a focus. The energy built.

Solar Flare.

A burst of concentrated sunfire hit Zaqaru's head from the front.

The time between Rask's Piercing Flames landing and Haruki's Solar Flare was under one second.

Zaqaru took all of it --- the neck cuts, the shield to the face, the Luminary Bolt, the Solar Flare --- in a single compounded instant, and for the first time he did not look mildly interested. He looked pained.

The orcs and dwarves charged. They landed blows --- axes and swords and the orc caster's fire staff finding the demon from multiple angles. Not all of them did equal damage. The ones that didn't stuck in the skin and were shaken off. The ones empowered with light --- the glow still fading from Haruki's Solar Flare catching the edges of nearby strikes --- cut deeper.

The party was noticing it. Separately, without discussing it, all of them arriving at the same observation. Light hurt it more. Significantly more.

Hayate had not charged. He was watching Zaqaru's shadow --- the way it moved when Zaqaru moved, the way it had peeled away and closed back around him before. He was reaching for his Dark affinity and feeling along the edges of the shadows at his feet, trying to find the same seam.

Zaqaru entered his shadow and was gone.

He reappeared in the shadow of one of the pillars along the left wall --- further back, the torchlight not quite reaching him, laughing with the unhinged quality of something that had been hurt and had decided to enjoy it.

Hayate watched the transition with his full attention. Every detail of it.

"Now I'll show you true despair!"

The speed defied the eye. One moment Zaqaru was at the pillar, the next he was behind two of the orc warriors, the transition between the two positions invisible. Both hands came up. One head in each. He brought them together.

The sound carried.

Both orcs went down.

The dwarf axe-fighter directly behind him was already mid-swing. Haruki saw it --- saw the axe coming, saw the angle, saw the opening --- and channelled Light into the blade as it moved. Radiant Edge ran the metal white in the fraction of a second before it connected.

It connected.

The light damage bit. But the dwarf's strength was not enough to carry the swing through the demon's hide and the axe lodged --- buried in Zaqaru's side, the dwarf's hands still on the handle, unable to pull it free.

Zaqaru reached back. One hand closed around the dwarf's torso. The other closed around the dwarf's head.

He pulled.

The head came away from the body with the spine attached --- a single motion, the vertebrae separating from each other in sequence, the whole length of it coming free. Zaqaru held it for a moment. Then he swung it sideways.

The spine caught the nearest dwarf across the midsection and cleaved through. That dwarf went down in two pieces.

Lyra had the neck wound in her sightline again. She drew and channelled --- Luminary Bolt, the light building at the tip --- and loosed at the exposed cut.

It connected.

Zaqaru grunted. The sound was small and involuntary and it was the most honest thing he had expressed since he stepped out of the shadow.

His eyes found Lyra.

He disappeared --- not the shadow step, just speed, the movement too fast to track. Lyra had learned the pattern. Every disappearance targeted a back. She was already moving --- forward, not back, a single long step that took her past the position she had been standing in.

Zaqaru's fist hit the pillar behind where she had been.

Stone cracked and debris flew. A chunk caught Lyra on the side of the head --- not the fist, the debris, but enough. She went down. Hands and knees on the stone floor, the world tilting, blood running warm from above her ear. Conscious. Thinking. Not standing.

Freyja pulled her arm back and threw the trident --- a full-force throw, the weapon spinning across the chamber. She caught Haruki's eye mid-flight and nodded once.

Haruki read it. He channelled Light into the trident as it flew --- Radiant Edge running along all three prongs simultaneously, the weapon glowing white against the dark of the chamber.

Zaqaru moved to dodge. His body did not respond the way it had an hour ago --- the accumulated damage, the neck wounds, the lodged axe still in his side, all of it slowing the response by the fraction that mattered.

The trident hit his right shoulder and punched through.

He reached for it with his other hand --- and it vanished. A puff of displaced air where it had been. It reappeared in Freyja's hand across the room, the bangle on her wrist warm from the recall.

Zaqaru entered his shadow again.

He reappeared further back than before --- the shadow of a pillar near the far wall, the torchlight barely touching him. He looked at the room. At the bodies on the floor. At the party still standing.

"It's not as fun when you're not suffering." His voice had lost the pleasantness. "I grow tired of this. But before I make my exit --- I'll leave you with a parting gift."

A magic circle appeared beneath the last remaining dwarf. Green neon, vivid and wrong, lighting the stone floor around his feet. Then it

vanished.

The dwarf looked down. Checked his armour. His arms. Found nothing. He exhaled.

Then the blood came.

Every orifice simultaneously --- eyes, nose, mouth, ears --- dark and fast, and with it something worse, something that moved through the blood as it spread across the stone. Maggots. The dwarf went down and did not get up.

Zaqaru laughed.

The shadows of the remaining pillars began to shimmer --- a subtle wrongness in each one, the darkness moving in a way darkness did not move. Grunts began to emerge. Twenty, more, stepping out of the pillar shadows with the patient inevitability of something that had been waiting for the signal.

Hayate whistled.

It was short and specific --- not loud, not a shout, the kind of signal that was meant for one person. Lyra looked up from the floor, blood on her face, still on her hands and knees.

She read it immediately.

She pushed herself upright, channelled Light and Water together --- the two affinities combining into something that was both and neither, a full-body enchantment that ran from her palms outward. Dawnbless

bloomed across Hayate --- across his skin, his clothes, his greatsword, the light settling into him like heat.

Hayate moved left. Two steps, three --- putting himself between Zaqaru's sightline and the pillar shadow the demon was standing in. Blocking the view. Giving himself the angle.

He felt for the shadow beneath Zaqaru's feet and found it.

He stepped in.

The cold closed around him --- the particular lightless cold of the shadow space, no vision, only the feel of the shadows around him and the knowledge of where the exit was. He moved through it. Found the shadow at Zaqaru's feet. Felt the boundary.

He came through it swinging.

The greatsword, lit white with Dawnbless, took Zaqaru's left arm at the shoulder in a single arc.

The arm hit the floor.

XVIII

TOGETHER

Zaqaru screamed.

The sound filled the chamber --- raw and involuntary, the sound of something that had not expected to be hurt and had been hurt significantly. Then the laugh came up through it, the two sounds occupying the same moment, the laugh winning.

Beneath it, something else. Not audible exactly --- but present in the set of the shoulders, in the way the remaining eye moved across the room. How can I, a Lieutenant of the great Aszag, be pushed back by such low beings?

He recomposed himself. Straightened. The arm was gone and he straightened anyway, and when he spoke his voice had recovered most of its pleasantness.

"I have important business to attend to." He looked at the grunts still pouring from the pillar shadows. "I'll leave my children to finish you off."

Zaqaru vanished into the dark and did not come back.

The room exhaled.

Twenty-two demon grunts stared at seven exhausted people from every shadow in the room. Smaller than Zaqaru --- knee-height to waist-height on a human --- but there were a lot of them, and they moved with the twitching, unpredictable energy of Aszag's army. No formation. No patience. Just hunger.

Haruki spoke before anyone else could.

"Tight line. No one breaks forward." He stepped into the centre. "Rask --- above us, not ahead. Pick off anything that flanks. Freyja --- left edge, shield facing out. You two---" he glanced at the two remaining orcs without hesitation "---right edge. Hold it."

The orcs exchanged a look. Then moved.

"Lyra. Conserve. Single targets only."

"I know," she said. She was already upright, ignoring the blood drying on her temple.

Hayate rolled his shoulders. "What about me?"

"You're with me. Front and centre." Haruki's eyes scanned the grunts beginning to creep forward. "Don't go looking for shadows. Stay visible."

Hayate opened his mouth.

"Stay. Visible."

He closed it.

The grunts came in a wave --- not a charge, more like a tide that just kept moving forward. Haruki met the first three with controlled footwork, redirecting rather than absorbing. His rapier was a needle, finding joints and seams, conserving every movement. No fire. No light. Just the blade.

Hayate planted himself beside his brother and let the greatsword do the work it was designed for --- wide, sweeping arcs that cleared ground rather than targeted. He was tired. The shadow step had cost more than he expected, a hollow ache behind his eyes he hadn't felt before. The greatsword felt heavier than it had an hour ago.

Freyja's shield met two grunts at once on the left flank, the impact shunting them sideways. She followed with a short trident jab --- no enhancement, no magic, just the steel catching a demon under the jaw. The trident snapped back to her hand before the body dropped. A third grunt clawed at her leg and got through --- a short gash across her calf. She didn't stop moving.

The two orcs on the right were fighting well. Not together with the party --- but alongside it, holding their edge with the grim efficiency of people who understood the cost of failing. The orc caster had nothing left in his staff. He was using it as a club.

Rask moved overhead like a ghost --- silent drops, twin daggers, then back into the air before anything could respond. No Piercing Flames. Just the blades and the positioning. He took a glancing hit across the ribs from a grunt that got lucky and bit back the sound.

Lyra fired twelve times. She didn't miss once. But twelve arrows from twenty-two grunts left ten standing, and she was pulling shafts from corpses to keep herself armed.

Haruki called every adjustment.

"Freyja --- step in, two on your right." "Hayate --- left, now." "Hold the line, don't chase."

He never raised his voice. He never stopped moving. He read the room the way he had in the fight before --- but this time, he was doing it alone, without Zaqaru to anchor his attention. Just twenty-two chaotic, unpredictable things that wanted them dead.

It took longer than it should have.

By the end, there were no demon grunts left standing.

There were also seven people on the floor.

Not dead. Just done. Haruki sat with his back against a broken pillar, rapier across his knees, eyes closed. Hayate was flat on his back, one arm over his face. Freyja had her shield propped against a coffin and was staring at the ceiling. Rask had landed and not moved since. Lyra was cross-legged with her bow across her lap, too tired to even check the cut on her head.

The two orcs had dropped where they stood.

The throne room was quiet except for the sound of seven people breathing hard in the dark.

After a while the two orcs stood up.

They crossed the room to where Haruki was sitting and stopped in front of him. The caster looked at him for a moment --- not the look from the town square, not the look from the entrance of the tomb. Something different.

"You fight well" he said. "And command equally as such." He paused, the words coming with the care of someone who meant them and knew they would land strangely. "I'm not typically one to commend. Especially not a Human. I mean no disrespect --- I have not had the most pleasant experience with your race. Or any others, for that matter." His eyes moved across the room --- at Lyra, at Rask, at Freyja, at the brothers. "We would not have survived without you. Without all of you." He looked back at Haruki. "My name is Izel. I am a mage, as you can tell. This is my comrade, Gordo --- a fierce warrior."

Gordo, standing beside him, gave a single nod.

Haruki looked up at them from the floor. He did not stand immediately --- not out of disrespect but because standing required more from his body than he currently had available. He introduced the party from where he sat.

"Haruki. The one on the floor is my brother, Hayate."

Hayate raised one hand from behind his arm. Did not otherwise move.

"Lyra."

Lyra nodded once from across the room.

Rask and Freyja introduced themselves from where they sat.

Haruki looked at Izel. "Thank you. For fighting. For adapting." He meant it plainly. "You worked alongside people you had no reason to trust, in a fight none of us were prepared for. That's not nothing."

Izel considered this. Then nodded.

Hayate had gotten himself upright and made his way to where Rask and Freyja were sitting against the far wall. He dropped down beside them and looked at Rask.

"Where's Kira?"

"In town" Rask said. "Safe."

Hayate nodded. Something in his shoulders released that had been held since the fight started.

Footsteps behind him --- light, deliberate. Lyra appeared at his side, bow across her back, the dried blood on her temple dark in the torchlight.

"Do you know each other?" she asked.

Hayate looked at her. Then at Rask and Freyja. Then back at Lyra.

"We've met" he said. "In the park. A few days ago --- when I was on light duty. Kira was waiting for Rask and I kept him company for a while." He paused. "I meant to mention it."

Lyra looked at Rask. Rask looked at Hayate with an expression that suggested he was updating several things simultaneously.

The conversation that followed was easy in the way that conversations are after something difficult has ended --- moving through topics without urgency, the two groups finding the shape of each other now that the context of the tomb had stripped away everything that wasn't essential. Freyja and Lyra fell into their own thread. Izel and Gordo joined from across the room. Rask said less than everyone else and listened to more.

The tension from the town square was gone. What was left in its place was not warmth exactly --- too early for that, too much history in the world for that to happen in one afternoon --- but something real. The particular respect that comes from having survived something together and knowing, specifically, what the other person contributed to the survival.

Haruki looked around the room.

"Should we head back to town?" he said. "Get some food. Proper rest."

The collective response was not enthusiastic so much as immediate and unanimous.

Lyra was already on her feet. She crossed the room, crouched beside the skeleton king's remains, and picked up the crown. It was large and ornate and had clearly meant something once. She turned it over once in her hands, then put it in her bag without comment.

Haruki watched her do it. He had not thought of it. He suspected Hayate had not thought of it either.

They walked out of the tomb together --- not split into parties, not maintaining the careful distances of the town square. Just people moving in the same direction, at the same pace, through the same dark hallway and up the same stairs and out into the night air of Akebono's outskirts.

Not allies yet. Not friends.

But together.

XIX

THE CROWN

The road back to Akebono felt shorter than the road out had.

It always did, Lyra had found --- the return journey carrying less weight than the outward one, the uncertainty resolved, the body running on the particular fuel of having survived something it wasn't sure it would survive. The group moved at an easy pace, nobody pushing, the silence between them comfortable in a way the silence at the town square had not been.

Haruki looked around at the group as they walked.

"We should go to the tavern" he said. "Properly celebrate."

Freyja's response was immediate and total. "Yes."

Rask looked at her. He sighed --- brief, resigned, the sigh of a man who had known what her answer would be before he looked. He nodded.

Izel agreed without hesitation. Gordo shook his head --- he had matters to attend to, errands he had put off. He would come by the tavern once he was done, if they were still there. Lyra said yes. Hayate did not say anything so much as produce a sound of pure uncomplicated

joy.

They were still a few hundred metres from the gate when Haruki saw the figure.

A large man, standing just outside the entrance --- not moving, not doing anything in particular, just waiting with the patient stillness of someone expecting a specific outcome. Haruki placed him before they had closed half the distance. One of the scarred man's bodyguards from the town square.

The bodyguard stepped forward as they approached.

"Is it done?"

"It's done" Haruki said.

He glanced at Lyra. She read it, reached into her bag, and produced the skeleton king's crown --- large, ornate, the metal dull from centuries in the tomb. She held it out.

"Is this what you were looking for?"

The bodyguard's eyes moved to the crown.

Something happened in his face --- a widening, small and fast, there and gone before most people would have registered it. His expression returned to neutral in under a second.

Nobody noticed.

Lyra noticed.

"That's what we were looking for" the bodyguard said. He reached into his coat and produced a collection of smaller bags --- coin, one per survivor --- and began distributing them. He moved along the group without ceremony, dropping a bag into each extended hand.

When he reached Haruki, Haruki took the bag. As he did, his eyes caught the bodyguard's wrist --- the sleeve riding up slightly with the motion of the handoff. A symbol, seared into the skin. Not a brand exactly --- more deliberate than that, more specific. He had never seen it before. He did not know what it meant.

He said nothing. He took the coin and stepped back.

The bodyguard looked at the group. "Who had the most kills? There's a bonus for the highest count."

Rask spoke before anyone else. "We all killed equal amounts. Distribute it evenly between us."

The bodyguard looked at him. A short sound that might have been a laugh. "That's not how this works." He turned, walked back through the gate, and disappeared behind one of the buildings before anyone had decided whether to respond.

The group stood at the entrance for a moment.

Haruki was watching the space where the bodyguard had been.

Gordo parted ways just inside the gate --- a brief nod to the group, a word to Izel, then off in a different direction with the purposeful walk of a man who had somewhere to be. Rask stopped shortly after.

"I need to check on Kira" he said. "I'll join you at the tavern."

"Bring Kira" Hayate said immediately.

Rask looked at him. Then at the group --- at the cuts and the dried blood and the general state of seven people who had spent several hours in a tomb fighting things that wanted them dead. "It's best not to. He'd only worry."

Hayate opened his mouth.

"He'd worry" Rask said again, with the finality of a man who had made the decision and was not revisiting it.

Hayate closed his mouth. Considered. "Fine. But bring him next time."

Rask looked at him for a moment with an expression that was not quite a smile and not quite not a smile. He turned and walked.

Freyja went with him --- she would clean up at their inn and meet the others at the tavern.

The remaining three --- Haruki, Hayate, Lyra --- walked together through Akebono's evening streets toward their own inn.

"Did anyone else find it strange?" Haruki said, after a while.

"The bodyguard" Lyra said. Not a question.

"He never asked about the missing party members. Four dwarves went in. None came out. He didn't ask."

They walked.

"He was surprised when I showed him the crown" Lyra said. "His face --- just for a moment. Like he wasn't expecting us to come back with it." A pause. "Or to come back at all."

Hayate had been quiet, which was unusual enough that both of them had been waiting for it to end. "He was standing at the gate" he said. "We packed for days. We thought we'd be wandering around that tomb for days. Instead we found the skeleton king and finished it in hours." He looked at Haruki. "Was he planning to stand there for days until we came back? Or did he know it would be quick?"

Haruki said nothing for a moment. Then --- "There was a symbol on his wrist. Seared in. I've never seen it before." He glanced at them both. "I'll draw it for you at the inn."

They reached the inn entrance. Hayate slowed, then looked at Lyra.

"Are you heading back to where you're staying, or---"

"I was thinking" Lyra said, with careful deliberateness, "of renting a room here. Given we're party members now." She did not say anything else. She did not need to. What had started as a temporary arrangement had become something that neither of them had formally acknowledged and all of them had stopped treating as temporary.

"THAT'S A GREAT IDEA!" Hayate's voice bounced off the buildings on either side of the street.

Haruki looked at his brother. At the expression on his face --- the giddy, unconcealed, completely unguarded delight of someone who had forgotten to hide what he was feeling.

He said nothing. He smiled, small and private, and held the door open.

They went inside, healed each other, washed the tomb off their skin, and headed for the tavern.

XX

KIBOU

The tavern was warm and loud and smelled of cooked meat and spilled mead, which was exactly what all of them needed.

Rask, Freyja and Kira were already in the corner when the party arrived --- a small table, Kira sitting between the two of them with the particular contentment of a child who had been fed and was in the company of people he trusted. He was mid-sentence when he looked up and saw Hayate crossing the tavern toward him.

He was off the bench before the sentence finished.

"Hayate! What are you doing here?"

"Celebrating" Hayate said. "We had a victory today. Thought we'd come here."

Kira's eyes went wide. "We're celebrating too! You should join us!"

"That was the idea. It was a combined effort."

Something lit up in Kira's face. He turned and ran back to Rask, planting himself in front of him.

"You never told me Hayate would be here!"

Rask looked at him. "You never asked."

Kira's face collapsed into a pout. "No fair!"

The laughter that came from the approaching party was immediate and collective --- Lyra's quiet and genuine, Haruki's surprised out of him, Izel covering his with a cough that didn't quite work. They pulled tables together and sat, and the corner of the tavern became something louder and warmer than it had been.

Haruki looked at Hayate as they settled. "How do you know the child?"

"Met him in the park" Hayate said. "Few days ago, when I was on light duty. He was waiting for Rask, I kept him company. Taught him a bit about magic." He shrugged. "Then Rask and Freyja showed up and that was that."

Haruki absorbed this. Then he looked at Kira with an expression of exaggerated sympathy. "Of all the people in Akebono who could have taught you magic --- you found the worst one."

Kira looked at Hayate. Hayate looked at Haruki. The table laughed.

The food arrived --- meat and bread and more mead than was strictly necessary --- and they ate and drank and the conversation moved the way it does when people have survived something together and are still processing the fact that they survived it. The tension of the past several hours dissolved into the warmth of the tavern and the relief of being

alive, and for the first time in longer than most of them could specifically recall, none of them were thinking about what came next.

Across the tavern, the other patrons had noticed the corner table. The looks ranged from confused to openly uncomfortable --- five races, sitting together, laughing. It was not something Akebono saw regularly. The party did not notice. They were too busy. Too happy. Too relieved. The guard that each of them had been holding up for months, in their different ways, had come down --- not permanently, not even fully, but enough. Enough to breathe.

The debrief happened naturally, the way debriefs do when everyone at the table was there for the same thing.

They went through the fight --- who had moved well, what had worked, what hadn't. Freyja's Earth Pillar launching her shield first into Zaqaru's face got a round of appreciation. Rask's Piercing Flames connecting before anyone had processed he had moved drew quiet acknowledgment from the table. The orcs' willingness to hold the right flank with no prior coordination got specific acknowledgment from Haruki.

Then someone brought up Hayate charging the skeleton king.

Then someone brought up Hayate charging Zaqaru.

The laughter that followed was long enough that the table next to them turned to look.

Haruki stood up. "Hayate. The shadow step. Explain it."

Hayate leaned back in his seat. "I watched Zaqaru. Watched how he moved, how the magic flowed through him when he did it. I understood the concept --- enter one shadow, exit from another. Entering was the easy part. I got that from just his foot, the first time." He paused. "Creating an exit was harder. I couldn't figure out how to channel my magic into something I wasn't touching."

"So how did you solve it?" Lyra asked.

"I put my foot in first. Just the foot. And once I was partially in --- I could feel the other shadows. Within about ten metres, maybe. Like a sense of where they were, not a picture. Then it was trial and error to find which shadow came out where." He looked at his hand. "I used my foot as the baseline. If it came out safe, the rest of me would follow."

Haruki stared at him. He said nothing for a moment.

"You learned a demon's technique" he said finally. "By watching it once."

"I had a good view."

Lyra leaned forward. "What are the weaknesses?"

Hayate thought about it --- genuinely thought, not performing the consideration. "It's slow. It's not for moving fast, it's for moving safely. You have to plan it. Coming out of the wrong shadow could kill you." He looked at her. "And once you're in, you can't see anything. Nothing. So you commit to your exit before you go in, and you'd better be certain it's safe, because you have no vision until you come out."

The table was quiet for a moment.

Freyja looked at Haruki. "Maybe you could learn something from him." She kept her voice completely straight. "Considering you tried to reason with the demon."

The table erupted.

Izel waited for it to settle, then said with absolute composure --- "I knew we could beat him from the beginning."

The table erupted again, louder.

The three men entered the tavern without announcement.

The party was mid-laugh and did not notice them until they were already at the table --- the scarred man and his two bodyguards, standing at the edge of the group with the ease of people accustomed to walking into rooms and being accommodated.

The scarred man looked at each of them in turn. His expression was measured and pleasant.

"Well done" he said. "I heard it went well." He reached into his coat and placed the skeleton king's crown on the table in front of them. "You all killed equal amounts, as I understand it. No bonus to award." He paused. "Consider the crown your reward instead. A trophy for what you accomplished today." He looked around the table. "My name is Dagan."

Haruki looked at the crown.

He looked at the six people around the table --- humans, elf, cecaelian, beastman, orc. Six ways to split a crown.

"That's very generous, Dagan" he said. He stood, and bowed. "Thank you."

Dagan nodded. He began to turn.

Then he stopped.

His eyes had found Kira --- sitting at the end of the bench, half asleep against Freyja's arm, scales catching the candlelight. Dagan looked at him for a moment. Then he completed the turn and walked out of the tavern with his bodyguards behind him.

Haruki sat back down.

"The crown is meant to divide us" he said, quietly enough that only the table heard. "Coin splits six ways. A crown doesn't. He's hoping we fight over it."

The table looked at the crown. Then at each other.

Izel nodded slowly. "Then you should keep it. Your leadership got us through."

"Hayate should have it" Haruki said. He looked at his brother. "Zaqaru retreating was the turning point. Everything after that was manageable --- the arm is what forced him out. Without that, we face twenty-two grunts with Zaqaru still present." He pushed the crown across the table. "It's yours."

Hayate looked at it for a long moment. Then, reluctantly, picked it up.

The evening continued and the mead continued with it.

Gordo arrived several hours later --- the party noticed him before he reached the table, a cheer going up that turned heads across the tavern. He made his way through the other tables and Haruki could see him clocking the looks from the other patrons as he passed --- the discomfort, the stares. Gordo's expression acknowledged it and moved on. The party itself was past noticing, the mead having done its work on most of them.

"I can't stay" Gordo said, when he reached them. "Just came to drop by. It's late, I need to turn in."

Izel protested. Gordo was firm. He had plans in the morning.

Rask looked down the bench. Kira had fallen asleep --- fully, completely, the boneless sleep of a child who had held on as long as they could and then surrendered entirely. Rask sighed.

"I should get him back."

Gordo looked at Kira. "Where are you staying?"

Rask told him.

"That's on my way. I'll take him." He held up a hand before Rask could respond. "It's no trouble. Stay."

Rask looked at Kira. At Gordo. "Are you certain?"

"I'm certain."

Rask bowed his head --- a small, genuine thing. Gordo picked Kira up with careful ease, adjusted the child's weight against his chest, and walked out of the tavern. Kira did not stir.

They called it some hours after that.

Everyone except Hayate and Lyra was comprehensively drunk --- Haruki listing slightly, Izel requiring assistance to locate his own coat, Freyja laughing at something nobody else had said. Rask was the most functional of the group and was still not entirely functional.

Hayate looked at Izel. "You're staying at our inn tonight. You're not walking anywhere alone in this state."

Izel considered this with the gravity of a man working through a complex problem. "That is," he said carefully, "a reasonable position." He sat back down.

Lyra appeared at Hayate's shoulder. "I'll walk with Haruki and Izel. You take Rask and Freyja."

They left the tavern in a loose, somewhat diagonal procession and split at the first corner.

The blood trail was faint.

Hayate almost missed it --- two blocks from Rask and Freyja's inn, a dark smear across the cobblestones that caught the lamplight at the wrong angle. He slowed. Crouched. Pressed two fingers to it.

Cold. But the consistency was wrong for old blood. This was from tonight.

He said nothing. He straightened and kept walking, but the easy loose feeling of the evening had gone. He watched the street. He watched the shadows.

They reached the inn.

Gordo was at the doorway.

Not standing. Not waiting.

Hayate was moving before his mind had finished processing what he was seeing --- crossing the remaining distance, dropping to his knees beside the body. Lacerations everywhere. The kind of damage that was not a fight but a message. A dagger pinned a folded piece of paper to Gordo's chest, driven through his heart, the note dark with blood.

Hayate pulled it free with hands that were not quite steady.

He read it.

Then he read it again.

If you wish to be reunited with the child, come to Kibou. Don't look for us. We'll find you.

[Section 2 ends here --- Chapters 21-33 continue in Section 3]

XXI

GORDO

Rask and Freyja stumble close enough that they notice Gordo's body. The pair immediately sobered up and ran to investigate. Hayate shows them the note. Rask, in a fit of rage, immediately takes to the air to attempt to search for Kira. Freyja charges into their room to search for clues. Hayate freezes for a moment, then gets up and starts to search the surrounding area for anything that could point them to who kidnapped Kira.

Hayate finds Gordo's sword about 3 metres away from the body. The sword, covered in blood. Gordo fought, and fought hard. He likely injured at least one of the kidnappers. Scattered around the sword, bolts of cloth and some leather. Likely from the fight. Freyja comes out of the room and runs to Hayate. Nothing in the room was stolen, most of their bags and gear were still there. The beds were made, nothing was out of place. It didn't look like there was a struggle. This leads them to believe that Gordo and Kira were ambushed before they got into the room.

Hayate tells Freyja that he will run back to their inn to call the others. Freyja agrees, and thanks him. She advises that she will stay there at their room and wait for Rask to come back down. Hayate runs off, back

to their inn to tell the others.

Hayate gets back to their inn, runs up the stairs, and sees Lyra sitting right outside their door. He tells her something terrible happened, then charges into the room. In the room, Haruki half dressed laying on the bed passed out, and Izel laid across the floor, also passed out. Hayate yells to wake them up, no response. Lyra uses water magic and splashes Haruki and Izel's face with water. They both wake up. Hayate proceeds to tell all three of them what happened. All four of them rush back to Rask and Freyja's room. They leave in such a rush that Haruki is still half dressed.

They arrive at the room. Freyja, sitting on the bed. The dagger in one hand, and the note in the other, tears rolling down her face. She shows the others the note as well as the dagger. Lyra picks up the note and reads it. Izel walks over to Gordo's body, says an orc prayer, then closes his eyes. "Rest in peace, brother. I swear on my clan that I will avenge you!" Haruki grabs the dagger to investigate. He looks at it and sees a symbol on it. He's seen it before. Suddenly, it comes back to him --- it's the same symbol that was seared into Dagan's bodyguard's wrist. But why? Was he unhappy about their performance of the job? Did they accidentally kill the skeleton of one of his deceased relatives? Did he want them to die in the tomb? So many questions ran through his head. Hayate shakes Haruki which snaps him out of his train of thought. "Did you see something?" Hayate asks. "Let's wait for Rask to get back, then we can decide on what to do" replies Haruki. Lyra moves to console Freyja who is distraught.

Around 20 minutes later, Rask lands back on the ground, breathing heavily, and tired. Freyja runs up to him and asks "Any luck?" Rask shakes his head. "What about down here, any luck?" "We found a couple of things, but Haruki thinks he has a lead." Haruki walks over and explains to everyone that he has seen the symbol on the pommel of the dagger before --- on Dagan's bodyguard's wrist when he was handing them the bags of coin. He can't think of a reason why Dagan would want to kidnap Kira, or why he has a grudge against them. All are still and in thought. Hayate breaks the silence and says "No point thinking about it. We should go to Kibou, rescue Kira, and beat the answers out of Dagan." Everyone agrees, then Haruki asks --- "Anyone know where Kibou is, or how to get there?" Lyra explains "I know how to get there, but walking to Kibou would take 2 months. It's the closest human town to the frontlines. We could rent horses, but there are no stables here in Akebono." Hayate chimes in, saying that he remembers seeing a job on the board which was to escort a carriage to Kibou. Lyra responds saying that on a carriage, they could get there in just over 3 weeks. All six of them agree --- they travel to Kibou, rescue Kira, and get their answers.

The next day they grab the job listing from the board, and meet at the designated location. A carriage arrives, with none other than Gerd driving it.

XXII

THE ROAD

Gerd arrives on the carriage. Haruki and Hayate yell out his name in excitement. The rest of the party --- a mix of depressed, tired, and confused. Haruki and Hayate explain to the rest of the party how they know Gerd. They then ask him what he's transporting to Kibou. Gerd explains that he's had enough of the high taxes in Akebono, and the protection fees he is constantly forced to pay. He is making no money in the town, and is looking to move closer to the front lines to get more business.

Before the conversation can continue, Rask interrupts and asks if they can continue the conversation while they are on the road as he is eager to get to Kibou as quickly as possible. The smile on Haruki and Hayate's face disappears, and they agree. Haruki asks Gerd if he's ready to go, Gerd says yes. They all mount on the carriage, Haruki, Hayate, Freyja, and Izel in the carriage, while Lyra and Rask sit outside, atop it. They then set off.

On the way, Hayate whispers to Gerd --- "Do you still have the short sword?" Gerd whispers back "Sorry, I sold it to another adventurer just before I packed up shop." Haruki interrupts --- "What are you two

whispering about over there?" "Nothing!" replies Hayate.

Some time passes, and Haruki asks Freyja and Izel their reason for travelling. Izel responds saying it's a custom for orcs. Once they hit a certain age, they are to venture out into the world with other children in their age group. They set out as a party, and are not allowed to come back to their clan until they have hunted a worthy foe. This is to harden them, and weed out the weak. Haruki asks if the crown of the skeleton king is not enough. Izel responds, maybe for a solo hunt, but as he ventured out as a group, he would need to return with a larger trophy. Haruki was going to make a comment that he was now no longer part of a group, but held his tongue.

They then look towards Freyja as if waiting for her reason for wandering. Freyja tells them that she is the youngest in a large family. She tells them that in Cecaelian culture, women fill the role of medic/housewife, but she'd always wanted to be a warrior. She looked up to her eldest brother, idolised him, and wanted to join him in being a warrior. Her eldest brother would train her in how to fight, despite their protest. A few years ago, the Cecaelian found a gap in the demon defences by the shoreline, so they capitalised on their aquatic supremacy to launch an offensive. Fifty elite Cecaelian warriors were chosen to swim around their defensive line, infiltrate, then disrupt their backline. While that was happening, the main army was ready to charge the front. They were going to pincer them then use the confusion to push forward. The main army never got the signal to attack, none of the 50 ever returned. Till this day, she believes her brother is alive, held captive by the demons. So she stole their family heirloom --- the magic trident that

returns to whoever is wearing the bangle --- then set out to find and rescue her brother. She ran into Rask and Kira not long after leaving her village, but Rask never says much. He's never explained why he joined, and Kira doesn't know much, he just follows Rask. They've been travelling together for about 6 months now.

Haruki responds --- once we rescue Kira, we'd be happy to help you find your brother. I'm sure the others would agree. Hayate nods his head then says --- "Anything to get back at those demons."

As Freyja begins to ask Haruki their reason for wandering, Lyra knocks at the roof of the carriage, as if to get everyone's attention. With her sharp elf eyes, she sees trouble up ahead --- "Three packs of dire wolves approaching from the right side." Gerd stops the carriage, and everyone disembarks, preparing for combat.

The party dispatches the wolves quite easily, taking minimal damage. They make a great party. Freyja at the front line, tanking and blocking hits. Haruki and Hayate also on the front, screening and taking out enemies. Lyra from the back providing ranged support with her arrows. Izel also from the back, but providing magic support. Rask from above, taking out high value targets and disrupting enemy back lines. Their teamwork only continues to improve as they fight more as a team.

A week passes. They have fought several enemies now, from dire wolves, to trolls, to goblins. With each fight, their skills with their weapons sharpen. Their speed at which they cast spells increases. They continue to get stronger because while they don't know what lies in Kibou, they know it's at the frontlines, which means they will likely face

more demons.

Scene jumps to them settling in for the night. Everyone is crowded around a campfire with full bellies, ready to turn in. Lyra and Freyja have guard duty tonight, so they set up above the carriage for a better vantage point.

Lyra, overhearing their conversation about Freyja's motives, makes a comment. Lyra says that she too would be happy to help her find her brother once they've rescued Kira. Freyja heard Haruki and Hayate saying it before, but somehow, hearing it from Lyra felt different. It felt more real. Maybe it was because it was coming from another female, or maybe because it came from someone she has grown close with. Either way, it felt it had more weight. Freyja smiled, thanked Lyra, then started crying. Lyra wraps one arm around Freyja and whispers "We'll find him, don't you worry" then pulls her in closer.

A few moments pass, and Freyja recollects herself, then asks Lyra how long she's been travelling with the brothers, and what her reason for wandering is. Lyra explains that she joined their party about a week before meeting her and Rask. They joined up for a goblin extermination quest and have been partied since. Lyra pauses, as if attempting to dodge the reasoning for her wandering. Freyja again asks "And your reason for wandering?" Lyra hesitates for a brief moment, considering if she should tell Freyja or not. Before Lyra could answer, Freyja says "You have my promise that I won't tell another soul unless you say so."

Lyra smiles, then tells her that she grew up in the Elven capital, Dawnholt. She comes from a fairly large family, but a single parent. Her

dad was never home as he was always out completing jobs to put food on the table and a roof over their heads. Although not the eldest, she was forced to take care of her brothers and sisters. She made many friends, or at least she thought were friends at the time. Almost all betrayed her. She also had a few lovers, similarly, almost all betrayed her. Sick of the large city and the people within the city, she left as soon as the youngest sibling was old enough to take care of themselves. She left because she wanted to be free, wanted to forget about the betrayals she faced, but after hearing and seeing first hand about what the demons are doing, she wants to put a stop to it to ensure that their evil never reaches her family back home.

Freyja pauses for a moment to absorb all the information, then gives Lyra a hug and says --- "I'm so sorry you've been through all that. I would have liked to be friends with you in that big city." Lyra wraps her arms around Freyja, and hugs her back. Freyja then tells Lyra --- "Want to hear something strange? Haruki reminds me so much of my big brother. Everything from his kindness, to how strong he is, and how he is quick to analyse and react. Part of me is relieved as it feels like I've already found my big brother." Lyra responds --- "He is quite capable, isn't he? Can you believe that he has very little combat experience?" She then continues to explain how before that, they were just simple farmers. Lyra explains that their village was attacked and Haruki and Hayate lost their whole family. How they were forced to fight off the demons, before running away from their home town. And that they only have about a month of combat experience, but they're shaping out to be strong warriors, with Haruki also being an exceptional leader. Freyja, even more impressed with Haruki now, sees him in a new light.

Scene fades, sun rises, and they prepare to set out again.

XXIII

CHAINED

They walked into Kibou together and made it perhaps thirty metres before Rask stopped.

"I would like to set out to retrieve the heirloom as quickly as possible" he said. "So we can get Kira back."

"I agree with you" Haruki said. "But I think this is a trap."

Rask looked at him.

"Lyra said it herself in that room --- there are stronger parties in Kibou, larger ones, better equipped for this kind of job. He chose us specifically. And he didn't decide that when we arrived here --- he planned it before we left Akebono. The tomb job, Kira, all of it was already in motion." Haruki looked at the street around them --- the foot traffic, the market noise, the ordinary business of a large town. "There's more going on than we know."

"Even if it's a trap" Hayate said, "we still need to go. Kira is still there."

"Agreed. But we're not having this conversation here." Haruki kept his voice low. "One of the guards back there called him Lord Dagan. That's not a title you earn from merchants and adventurers --- his influence reaches town officials. We find an inn, get off the street, then plan."

They found one two blocks from the gate --- modest, clean enough, a proprietor who asked no questions about the composition of the group. They rented three rooms and reconvened in one of them.

"What do you think Dagan is actually after?" Izel asked, once they were settled.

"Irrelevant right now" Rask said. "The immediate priority is the heirloom. We get it, we get Kira back."

Haruki said nothing. He was somewhere else --- the particular inward stillness that meant he was running through something and hadn't finished yet.

Hayate looked at his brother, then reached over and pulled the scroll from Haruki's bag. Haruki didn't notice. Hayate unrolled it across the bed and studied the map.

"Lyra. How long to the marked location?"

Lyra leaned over to look. "Assuming we avoid demon parties --- four days."

Haruki came back. He looked at the scroll, then at the room, then straightened up.

"Okay. Here's the plan."

He looked at Rask first. "Take flight and scout the route to the marked location. Get as close to the village as you safely can and survey the area. If it looks too dangerous, don't push it --- come back immediately. What we need is information. Mark anything on the map that matters --- potential ambush points, viable camp sites, terrain we can use or they can use against us. High cliffs, dense bush, long tree lines. Take the full day if you need it."

Rask nodded once.

Haruki looked at Lyra. "You and Freyja get supplies. Four days assumes a clean journey --- plan for five. Ten days total, there and back."

Lyra nodded.

"Hayate --- you and Izel go to Gerd's shop. Take all the weapons and ask him to service them, sharpen them, full maintenance. While you're there, ask him what he knows about the town and about Dagan. Keep it casual --- you ran into him here after Akebono, you're curious. Don't tell him anything, don't pull him into this."

Hayate was already nodding.

"I'll take the job board and the tavern. I want to know what people here know about the kidnappings, about Dagan, where he operates from. If anyone asks why I'm interested in him, I admire him. That's all." He looked around the room. "Keep your ears open out there. One thing on

its own might mean nothing. Everything together might mean something. We meet back here mid-afternoon, share what we've learned, and head out at sunset. We travel at night --- less chance of being seen."

The room was quiet for a moment as each of them absorbed their assignment. Then the nods came, one by one --- some accompanied by a grunt of approval, some without. Nobody argued.

"We all know what we need to do" Haruki said. "Go. Be safe. Don't take any risks."

Hayate rolled the scroll back up and threw it at Rask. Rask caught it without looking and tucked it away.

They went.

Hayate spotted the sign from halfway down the street.

wepons

He and Izel pushed through the door to find Gerd still unpacking, wares spread across every surface in the organised chaos of a man who knew exactly where everything was and had not yet convinced the shop of the same. He startled at the sound of the door.

"Cleared by the guards, I hope?"

"Of course" said Izel.

Hayate and Izel walked to the counter and set down their weapons alongside a bag of silver. "Think you can service these by mid-afternoon?" Hayate asked. "We'll pay extra --- need it done

quickly."

Gerd left what he was doing and walked over. He looked at the weapons, then at the silver, then back at Hayate.

"Don't worry about paying. I still owe your lot for the escort job --- never got to pay you after you were taken in." He picked up the nearest blade and turned it in his hands, already assessing. "I'll get these done urgently and we'll call it even."

While Gerd worked, they stayed and talked --- asking about the town, about what he'd seen since arriving, about Dagan, all of it wrapped in the casual curiosity Haruki had prescribed. Just two people catching up with a familiar face in an unfamiliar city.

Gerd confirmed what they already knew. Dagan was influential. Dagan had money. Beyond that, Gerd had nothing to add.

They waited for the weapons and kept the conversation light.

The job board at Kibou's administrative building was larger than Akebono's and considerably more grim in its contents.

Haruki stood in front of it and read while other parties came and went around him, listening to their conversations without appearing to. Nothing useful passed between them.

After a while he stopped listening to the conversations and started reading the board properly.

Of every ten listings, nine were hunt quests. Imps, mostly --- the low-level demon creatures that had been seeping through the open portal for decades, aimless and destructive. A handful of contracts for demon stragglers. A few for creature infestations that had nothing to do with the frontier at all.

In Akebono the board had been bandits, goblins, occasional tomb work. Here it was almost entirely demons. He stood there for a while and let that settle.

High above the town and the road beyond it, Rask moved.

He had his presence concealed --- the technique that folded him into the sky, reduced his silhouette to something a watching eye would skip past. Below him the road narrowed and then disappeared into the kind of terrain that demon forces preferred, and he followed it forward slowly, marking the map in short careful strokes as he went.

He was calmer than he had been in days. Not because Kira was safe --- Kira was not safe, and that fact lived in him like a splinter, constant and sharp. But rushing this would not help Kira. Getting spotted would not help Kira. The only thing that would help Kira was good information, and good information required patience.

He understood his role. He did it.

The market was busy enough that moving through it required attention. Lyra and Freyja worked through the supply list methodically. Food for ten days, medicine for whatever they might encounter. At one stall Freyja stopped.

The display was a row of small glass vials, each one filled with what appeared to be plain water.

"Holy water" the shopkeeper said. "Blessed with light magic. Genuine --- not the diluted stuff you get at the eastern stalls."

Freyja thought about what Zaqaru had done when light magic connected. She looked at Lyra.

Lyra had never seen holy water before and her expression showed it --- a careful scepticism. But she trusted Freyja's instinct, and the logic behind it was sound. She nodded.

They bought several vials and packed them carefully.

As Lyra was closing her bag, something caught her ear.

It was two stalls away --- a conversation between two shopkeepers, low enough that it was clearly not meant to carry. It carried anyway.

"More of those robed figures at the north gate again last night."

"Guards let them straight through, I suppose."

"Straight through. Didn't touch the sacks they were carrying."

"Of course not. This is why we can't make any money. They bring in those goods, sell them under our prices---

"Nobody wants legitimate wares anymore. They all want those."

"Maybe it's time to move on. Find another town."

"Where would we go? An orc town?"

Both of them laughed at that, and the conversation drifted into something else.

Lyra straightened up and looked at Freyja. "Did you catch any of that?"

Freyja shook her head.

Lyra told her what she'd heard as they moved away from the stall, keeping her voice low.

The tavern was warm and already busy by mid-morning.

Haruki took a stool at the bar and ordered something mild. The bartender glanced at him.

"First time in Kibou?"

"That obvious?"

"You've got the look." He set the drink down. "Came from where?"

"Akebono."

The bartender nodded. Haruki asked him about the town. The man talked freely. Nothing Haruki didn't already know or couldn't have guessed.

"One thing worth knowing" the bartender added, "is that this is the largest weapons market for the seven races. Everything passes through

here --- armies come to restock, adventurers come to upgrade, merchants come because the buyers are here." He shrugged. "That's why it's worth living at the frontline. The money follows the war."

Haruki thanked him and kept the conversation light, filing the detail away.

A few minutes later, a group came through the door --- four of them, loud, already arguing about something.

"You need to keep up" the loudest one was saying. "I'm not carrying dead weight."

"The only reason you're pulling anything is that sword you bought from Dagan" another one said. "Without that you're nothing special."

"Maybe if you woke up before noon you'd get to his shop before the good stock sells out."

Haruki took a slow drink.

The conversation moved on. He had what he came for.

He finished his drink and headed back to the inn.

XXIV

THREADS

They walked into Kibou together and made it perhaps thirty metres before Rask stopped.

"I would like to set out to retrieve the heirloom as quickly as possible" he said. "So we can get Kira back."

"I agree with you" Haruki said. "But I think this is a trap."

Rask looked at him.

"Lyra said it herself in that room --- there are stronger parties in Kibou, larger ones, better equipped for this kind of job. He chose us specifically. And he didn't decide that when we arrived here --- he planned it before we left Akebono. The tomb job, Kira, all of it was already in motion." Haruki looked at the street around them. "There's more going on than we know."

"Even if it's a trap" Hayate said, "we still need to go. Kira is still there."

"Agreed. But we're not having this conversation here." Haruki kept his voice low. "One of the guards back there called him Lord Dagan."

That's not a title you earn from merchants and adventurers --- his influence reaches town officials. We find an inn, get off the street, then plan."

They found one two blocks from the gate. They rented three rooms and reconvened in one of them.

"What do you think Dagan is actually after?" Izel asked, once they were settled.

"Irrelevant right now" Rask said. "The immediate priority is the heirloom. We get it, we get Kira back."

Haruki said nothing. He was somewhere else --- the inward stillness that meant he was running through something and hadn't finished yet.

Hayate looked at his brother, then reached over and pulled the scroll from Haruki's bag. Haruki didn't notice. Hayate unrolled it across the bed and studied the map.

"Lyra. How long to the marked location?"

Lyra leaned over to look. "Assuming we avoid demon parties --- four days."

Haruki came back. He looked at the scroll, then at the room, then straightened up.

"Okay. Here's the plan."

He looked at Rask first. "Take flight and scout the route to the marked location. Get as close to the village as you safely can and survey

the area. If it looks too dangerous, don't push it --- come back immediately. What we need is information. Mark anything on the map that matters --- potential ambush points, viable camp sites, terrain we can use or they can use against us. High cliffs, dense bush, long tree lines. Take the full day if you need it."

Rask nodded once.

Haruki looked at Lyra. "You and Freyja get supplies. Four days assumes a clean journey --- plan for five. Ten days total, there and back."

Lyra nodded.

"Hayate --- you and Izel go to Gerd's shop. Take all the weapons and ask him to service them, sharpen them, full maintenance. While you're there, ask him what he knows about the town and about Dagan. Keep it casual --- you ran into him here after Akebono, you're curious. Don't tell him anything, don't pull him into this."

Hayate was already nodding.

"I'll take the job board and the tavern. I want to know what people here know about the kidnappings, about Dagan, where he operates from. If anyone asks why I'm interested in him, I admire him. That's all." He looked around the room. "Keep your ears open out there. One thing on its own might mean nothing. Everything together might mean something. We meet back here mid-afternoon, share what we've learned, and head out at sunset. We travel at night --- less chance of being seen."

The nods came, one by one. Nobody argued.

"We all know what we need to do" Haruki said. "Go. Be safe. Don't take any risks."

Hayate rolled the scroll back up and threw it at Rask. Rask caught it without looking and tucked it away.

They went.

Hayate spotted the sign from halfway down the street.

wepons

He and Izel pushed through the door to find Gerd still unpacking. He startled at the sound of the door.

"Cleared by the guards, I hope?"

"Of course" said Izel.

Hayate and Izel walked to the counter and set down their weapons alongside a bag of silver. "Think you can service these by mid-afternoon? We'll pay extra --- need it done quickly."

Gerd left what he was doing and walked over. He looked at the weapons, then at the silver, then back at Hayate.

"Don't worry about paying. I still owe your lot for the escort job --- never got to pay you after you were taken in." He picked up the nearest blade, already assessing. "I'll get these done urgently and we'll call it even."

While Gerd worked, they stayed and talked --- asking about the town, about Dagan, all of it wrapped in the casual curiosity Haruki had prescribed. Gerd confirmed what they already knew. Dagan was influential. Dagan had money. Beyond that, nothing.

The job board at Kibou's administrative building was larger than Akebono's and considerably more grim in its contents.

Haruki stood in front of it and read. Of every ten listings, nine were hunt quests. Imps, mostly. A handful of contracts for demon stragglers. In Akebono the board had been bandits, goblins, occasional tomb work. Here it was almost entirely demons. He stood there for a while and let that settle.

High above the town, Rask moved slowly and methodically, marking the map. He was calmer than he had been in days. Rushing this would not help Kira. The only thing that would help Kira was good information, and good information required patience. He understood his role. He did it.

Lyra and Freyja worked through the supply list at the market. At one stall Freyja stopped at a display of small glass vials.

"Holy water" the shopkeeper said. "Blessed with light magic."

Freyja thought about what light magic had done to Zaqaru. She looked at Lyra. Lyra was sceptical but trusted the logic. They bought several vials.

As Lyra closed her bag, something caught her ear --- two stalls away, a conversation between two shopkeepers not meant to carry.

"More of those robed figures at the north gate again last night."

"Guards let them straight through, I suppose."

"Straight through. Didn't touch the sacks."

"Nobody wants legitimate wares anymore. They all want those."

"Maybe it's time to move on."

"Where would we go? An orc town?"

They laughed and moved on. Lyra told Freyja quietly as they walked away.

The tavern was warm and busy. Haruki took a stool at the bar and ordered something mild. The bartender noted he was new. They talked about the town. Nothing Haruki didn't already know --- until the bartender mentioned that Kibou was the largest weapons market for the seven races, positioned at the centre of the frontline. Armies came through here to restock. Haruki filed it away.

A group came through the door a few minutes later, loud and already arguing.

"The only reason you're pulling anything is that sword you bought from Dagan" one said. "Without that you're nothing special."

"Maybe if you woke up before noon you'd get to his shop before the good stock sells out."

Haruki finished his drink and headed back to the inn.

XXV

RAVEN

Hayate and Izel were back first.

They unpacked the weapons onto the table and Hayate went to find the innkeeper and order food for six before anyone else had arrived to ask for it.

Lyra and Freyja came next, dropping supplies upstairs before coming back down to sit. The four of them settled at the table and talked about nothing in particular --- the town, the weather, the size of Kibou's market compared to Akebono's.

Haruki and Rask came through the door at the same time, from different directions. They sat down. The food arrived.

Haruki looked around the table.

"Anyone run into issues?"

Rask shook his head. He reached into his coat and spread the map across the table --- marked now, a network of small notations in tight careful script. Potential ambush positions, viable camp sites, terrain features called out along the route. He had not made it all the way to the

village, but close enough.

Freyja reached into her bag and produced the vials of holy water. She explained what the shopkeeper had told them and why she thought it was worth the purchase given what they knew about demons and light.

Lyra added what she'd overheard at the market. Robed figures at the north gate, large sacks, guards waving them through without checking.

"Likely weapons" she said. "Illegal ones."

Hayate reported no issues, then paused. "Gerd refused payment. Said he still owed us for the escort job --- called it even."

Izel grunted. Nothing to add.

Haruki had been listening to all of it without speaking. Now he looked at the map properly.

"Kibou is the largest weapons market for the seven races" he said. "Positioned at the centre of the frontline --- armies come through here to restock. Every party fighting on the front comes here to buy." He paused. "At the tavern, a party came in. One of them was arguing that the only reason their leader was worth anything was the sword he bought from Dagan."

The table was quiet for a moment.

Hayate leaned forward. "Could the weapons being smuggled through the north gate be the same ones Dagan is selling?"

"Most likely" Haruki said. "What seems to be happening --- he's creating them and enchanting them somewhere else, then bringing them in through the gate without checks."

Lyra looked at the table, working through it. "What kind of enchantment permanently increases a wielder's strength? I know magic that temporarily sharpens a blade, boosts piercing capability for a short window. But permanent enhancement --- I've never heard of that." She looked at Izel. "Have you?"

Izel shook his head slowly. "No. I've seen casters sustain enhancement effects on weapons for over a day --- that alone is extremely rare. Something permanent, something that increases the user's actual power?" He paused. "No. Nothing like that."

Freyja held up the bangle on her wrist. "My trident is enchanted, but it doesn't make me stronger. It simply returns to me when I call it. And this is a tribal heirloom --- it can only be recalled by whoever wears this bangle. The idea that Dagan is producing something like that at volume---" she set the trident down "---I find very hard to believe."

Rask looked at the map. "Even granting all of that --- how does any of it involve Kira? Or us? We knew none of this before we arrived here."

Haruki was quiet for a moment. "The tomb" he said finally. "What if it used to be where he made the weapons? Something went wrong --- everyone in there turned to skeletons. He needed it cleared. Needed someone to go in and clean it out without knowing what they were cleaning." He looked at the table. "Then we came back out alive and with the crown. He hadn't planned for that. He assumed that if we

survived, we might have found evidence of what the tomb was used for. So he took Kira --- to find out what we knew, and to silence us if needed. When he realised we knew nothing, he pivoted. Use us for a job, keep our attention on that, get Kira back, leave town. We'd have no reason to stay."

"Which makes this a suicide mission" Hayate said. "He can't kill us directly --- too visible, too many questions. So he sends us somewhere he knows we won't come back from."

"Not entirely" Haruki said. "If it were purely a suicide mission, he gains nothing from it. He's too careful for that. I think the heirloom is real --- and I think it's something he needs. Something connected to the enchantment, something he hasn't been able to retrieve himself. He's using us because we're convenient and expendable, but he'd still rather we succeeded." He paused. "The mission serves him either way. We die, problem solved. We come back with the heirloom, he gets what he needs."

The table sat with that for a while. Eating continued, slower now. Someone refilled a cup. Nobody spoke.

Rask set down what he was holding and looked at the map.

"Whatever the reason" he said, "it doesn't change what we need to do. We retrieve the heirloom. We get Kira back. And we get closer to the truth." He looked around the table. "That's enough."

One by one they nodded.

"Well said" Haruki said. "Finish eating. Rest until sunset. We leave when the light goes."

They ate in silence after that --- the quiet of people who had said what needed saying and were now preparing themselves for what came next.

They were pushing back chairs and heading for the stairs when Hayate said her name.

Lyra turned.

He was standing a few feet away, right arm extended, something resting in his open hand. She walked over and held out her palm and he placed it there.

A necklace. Fine chain, small pendant --- a raven, dark metal, wings folded, the detail in it precise enough that it had clearly been made by someone who cared about the difference between a raven and any other bird.

"It's beautiful" Lyra said. She looked up. "Where did you get it?"

"Found it at the market. On the way back." He shrugged. "I saw it and thought you might like it."

"Is there a reason you got it for me?"

"Nope." He was already taking a step back toward the stairs, hands finding his pockets. "Just thought you might like it."

"I do like it" she said. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

He raised a hand without turning around and kept walking.

They gathered at the gate as the sun touched the horizon. Six of them, armed and packed. The gate guards looked at them and said nothing.

The sun went down.

They walked out into enemy territory.

XXVI

STILL

They were four days from Kibou on foot. Rask had mapped the safest route --- wide berths around open ground, tree cover where possible, rest points at defensible positions. It was good work. Thorough. The kind of scouting that should have made the journey feel manageable.

It didn't.

The first day passed without incident. Then the second. By the third, the silence had stopped feeling like luck and started feeling like something else entirely. Demon territory this close to the frontline should have had presence --- scouts, stragglers, imps bleeding through from the advance lines. The job board in Kibou had been full of contracts to clear them. They were everywhere, right up until they weren't.

Nobody said it out loud. They all felt it.

They moved in a loose formation --- Freyja and Hayate at the front, Haruki and Izel in the middle, Lyra at the rear with an arrow already notched. Rask drifted above them, wings folded to reduce his silhouette against the sky. The roads deteriorated steadily the further they pushed

--- cobblestone to packed dirt, packed dirt to overgrown track, overgrown track to nothing at all. Just Rask's markings and the quiet understanding that forward was the only direction available.

What had once been farmland stretched out on either side of them. Fields that might have been crops or pasture, now wild and tangled and reclaimed. Collapsed farmhouses appeared every few hours like punctuation --- three walls standing, roofs long gone, whatever families had lived there either fled or not. Haruki checked each one they stopped at. All empty. All the same.

On the second night, they made camp in the shell of a waystation --- a relay point for travellers that had clearly not been used in decades. Haruki took first watch while the others slept. He sat at the entrance with his rapier across his knees and looked out at the dark and thought about the silence.

It wasn't reassuring. It was a question he didn't have an answer to yet.

Rask landed at the edge of the camp on the third morning without warning, as was his habit. He looked at the map, then at the horizon.

"We're close" he said. "Half a day, maybe less."

"Any movement?" Haruki asked.

Rask paused for just a moment. "No."

Haruki looked at him. Rask looked back. Neither of them elaborated.

Izel, turning a piece of wood over in his hands at the far wall, spoke without looking up. "You'd think they'd have something out here. Scouts, at minimum."

"They do" said Rask quietly. "We just haven't found it yet."

The camp went still.

They broke it twenty minutes later and moved out without much conversation.

The third night they camped at the base of a long ridgeline Rask had marked as a favourable position --- elevated ground to the east, dense tree cover to the west, clear sightlines in both directions. Freyja took watch with Izel. The others settled in.

Hayate was sitting apart from the group, back against a tree, staring up at whatever sky was visible through the canopy, when Lyra came and sat down nearby. Not next to him exactly. Just near.

For a while neither of them said anything. The fire was low. The others were asleep or close to it.

"You're not tired?" Lyra asked.

"I am" said Hayate. "Can't switch it off."

Lyra pulled her knees up and rested her arms across them. "Kira?"

"Kira. The village. All of it." He paused. "You?"

"Same."

Another stretch of quiet. An easy one, which was not nothing given who they were.

"Can I ask you something?" Hayate said, still looking up.

"You're going to regardless."

He almost smiled. "When we first met. At the goblin camp. What did you actually think of us?"

Lyra considered it. "Honestly? I thought you were going to get yourselves killed within a week."

"And now?"

She glanced at him sideways. "I think you might make it to two."

He did smile then, properly, the kind he didn't always mean to. He looked at her and she was already looking elsewhere, which was probably deliberate.

"I'm glad we ran into you" he said. Simply. No armour around it, no aggression to hide behind. Just the words.

Lyra didn't answer immediately. When she did her voice was even, measured, the way it got when she was being careful. "Get some sleep, Hayate."

He looked back up at the canopy. "Yeah."

He didn't sleep for another hour. She stayed where she was the whole time, and neither of them mentioned it.

The fourth day Haruki walked beside Freyja for most of the afternoon, the two of them falling naturally to the middle of the formation together. At some point, without either of them planning it, the conversation had drifted from the mission to everything around it --- what Kibou had felt like walking in, whether the holy water would actually work, what Cecaelian food tasted like compared to human food.

At one point Freyja said something that made Haruki laugh --- a real one, surprised out of him --- and he shook his head and said "that is exactly the kind of thing my sister would have said."

Freyja looked at him. Something moved across her face that she didn't name.

"You had sisters?" she asked.

"Four" he said. The smile stayed but changed slightly. "Loud. All of them."

"I would have liked them" Freyja said.

"They would have liked you too" Haruki replied, and meant it plainly, the way he meant most things.

Freyja looked back at the road ahead. She didn't say anything else about it. But she filed it away somewhere careful, the way you do with things you don't fully understand yet.

Rask descended from above. "We're close" he said. "Just beyond that ridgeline."

Everyone stopped.

Ahead of them, just visible over the rise --- the outline of rooftops.
Still. Dark. Silent.

The village.

Haruki looked at the others, then back at the ridge. "Stay close" he said quietly. "We don't know what's waiting on the other side."

They wait until sunrise before entering the village. Trying to look for an heirloom at night with lamps would only give away their position. They rest in the treeline and wait for the sun to come up.

XXVII

GALLU

As the sun rises, Haruki asks Lyra to use her elf eyes to check for any ambushes. Lyra says clear. He asks Hayate if he can feel anything in the shadows. Hayate says no. Rask flies up under concealment and surveys the area. All clear. Haruki signals him to stay airborne.

The rest of the party head toward the village, weapons drawn. They check the first house --- Freyja enters first, Haruki and Lyra follow, Hayate and Izel remain outside. Clear. Same with the second.

Moving to the third house, Izel spots something on the ground. A small wooden ornament, the size of his hand. On the ornament --- an exact carving of Dagan's drawing. His stomach sinks. He reaches for it, starts to call the party over --- and laughter begins. From everywhere. From nowhere.

The party regroups into a tight circle, weapons out. An explosion from above. They look up --- smoke, and Rask falling from it.

Freyja sprints. The party follows. Lyra casts Bubble Shield on Rask mid-fall, absorbing the impact. Freyja catches him. "Still breathing." Haruki begins healing while the others form a perimeter.

A shimmer over the village. Then, in an instant, demons appear. One hundred grunts. Two larger figures at the back.

One walks forward through the ranks. Rests his chin on a grunt's head. One arm. Familiar scars. "Great to see you again."

Zaqaru. Healed up, but the scars remain. His left arm still missing.

"I was expecting more despair in your eyes," he says with a sigh of disappointment.

The second large figure approaches. "Aren't you going to introduce me?"

Zaqaru straightens up. "Allow me to introduce my captain. Gallu, the Wicked."

Slightly taller than Zaqaru. Winged, bulky. A large hammer --- the head carved in the likeness of a human skull. He looks at Hayate. "So these are the ones who took your arm. They seem weak." A large grin. "I like that."

Haruki, still crouched healing Rask: "What do you want?"

Gallu looks down. Notices Freyja. "You look familiar. Have I seen you before?"

Freyja sets Rask down gently and stands. "My brother. You've seen my brother."

"Maybe. Hard to tell. You fish folk all look alike, especially dead on the ground." He laughs.

Freyja charges shield-first, screaming "WHERE IS HE?!" Gallu catches her arm one-handed, effortlessly. "Prison camps everywhere. Maybe one of them. Maybe the demon realm. I wouldn't know."

Hayate leaps --- upward strike at Gallu's arm. The blade stops dead. No cut, no give. Like swinging into stone.

Gallu swings the hammer one-handed. Fast. Too fast for something that size. Hayate braces --- hammer connects with the greatsword, sends him flying into a tree.

Freyja uses Earth Pillar on Gallu's elbow joint. His grip loosens. She breaks free and rejoins the party.

Haruki looks over at Hayate on the ground. Hayate opens one eye. Haruki nods. Hayate closes it.

Haruki stops healing Rask. Rask regains consciousness --- still hurt but functional. "We'll need you."

Haruki walks forward. "What do you want?"

Zaqaru: revenge. Never saw their suffering before. Wanted round two. Dagan provided it. Plus --- the arm. "I won't fight you myself. I wish to watch you suffer, lose hope, and die." He raises his remaining arm to give the charge command.

Haruki's hand glows --- Radiant Edge.

Hayate leaps from Zaqaru's shadow. Takes his other arm clean off. Pushes off Zaqaru's face. Rejoins the party.

"CHARGE!!" Zaqaru screams as he falls back.

One hundred demon grunts charge.

XXVIII

SEPARATED

The first wave broke against them like it expected resistance and found something worse.

Freyja didn't wait for them to reach her. She stepped forward into the charge, shield angled low, and used their own momentum to send the front rank sprawling. Three grunts went down in the first two seconds. She stepped over them. The trident left her hand before they'd finished falling --- punched through one grunt's chest, vanished, returned to her grip, left her hand again immediately. She had done this hundreds of times now. The mechanics were automatic.

What was not automatic was the thing sitting behind her eyes.

You fish folk all look alike, especially dead on the ground.

She threw the trident again. And again. Each throw harder than the last.

Rask moved through the left flank like a man with somewhere to be.

The cracked ribs he'd woken up with were a fact he had noted and set aside. The cut above his brow had clotted. Neither of these things

slowed him --- he had fought through worse and the body knew what was being asked of it. He dropped from a low glide into the press of grunts, both daggers already drawn, Piercing Flames burning along the blades. The fire and wind combination punched through demon hide cleanly. He was already moving before the grunt finished falling.

In the tomb he had fought with precision born of discipline. Now the precision was still there but something colder sat underneath it --- a patience that had nothing to do with calm. He was not hurrying. He did not need to hurry. He simply needed to keep moving until there was nothing left between him and Kira, and he was prepared to cut through every single one of the hundred to get there.

A grunt lunged from his blind side. He sidestepped without looking, drove a dagger backward into its neck, kept walking.

At the centre of it, Haruki and Hayate had stopped needing to think about each other.

It had happened somewhere over the past weeks without either of them marking the moment --- the point where fighting beside someone stopped being coordination and became something closer to instinct. Haruki moved left and Hayate was already covering right. Hayate overextended on a wide arc and Haruki was already filling the gap he'd left. No calls, no signals. Just the accumulated weight of having nearly died together enough times that the body learned to compensate.

Haruki was bleeding from his shoulder --- a claw in the first rush, deep enough to matter, not deep enough to stop him. He fought through it the way he had learned to fight through most things, which was to

acknowledge it fully and then refuse to let it be relevant. His rapier moved in short, precise arcs, finding joints and gaps in the grunts' guard. He was not trying to be spectacular. He was trying to be sustainable.

Beside him Hayate was spectacular whether he intended it or not.

The greatsword moved in wide punishing sweeps that cleared space rather than picking targets --- three grunts at a time, five, the blade carrying enough force that even a partial hit sent bodies sideways. He was stronger than he had been in the tomb. Noticeably. The weeks of fighting had done something to him that training alone couldn't replicate, and it showed in the way he moved --- less effort, more result, the sword an extension rather than a weight. Shadow Step held in reserve, used only when the press became genuinely dangerous, each use faster and more controlled than the last.

Izel worked the rear in long controlled bursts --- fire rolling out in deliberate columns across grunt clusters, buying breathing room, protecting the flanks. He had learned the party's rhythms too. He knew when Freyja was about to throw and kept his fire clear of her line. He knew Rask's flight paths. He did not need to be told these things anymore.

Lyra had always fought on her own terms.

Distance was the terms she preferred --- enough space to read the field, time the shots, pick targets rather than react to them. She had been doing it long enough that it felt less like a strategy and more like breathing. Back, shoot, back again, never letting the fight come to her if she could bring herself to it instead.

The difference now was the quality of it. In the tomb she had been good. Now she was something beyond good --- the movement fluid and economical, the arrows finding marks she wouldn't have trusted herself to hit three months ago. A grunt at forty metres through two others. A running target, lead it right, loose on the exhale. She had stopped counting kills because counting had stopped being useful.

She called positions as she moved. Left flank thinning, Rask has it. Grunt cluster forming behind Hayate, Izel already turning. Freyja pushing too far forward --- "Freyja, pull back two steps" --- and Freyja pulled back two steps without breaking stride.

She was useful here. She was very useful here.

She was also moving backwards, as she always did, and the party was moving forwards, as they tended to when the rage was up, and neither of these things was wrong on its own.

A hard press from the right drove her left. She angled away, loosed twice, dropped both, kept moving. Another cluster cut across from the village edge --- she pivoted, the dagger out for the one that got too close, back into her off hand, arrow notched and loosed before she'd fully reset. The muscle memory was there before the thought was.

Back. And back. And back.

Somewhere ahead of her Hayate was pushing deep into the grunt lines, Freyja pressing with him, the two of them creating a momentum that pulled Haruki and Izel forward to maintain the formation. It was working --- the grunts were folding under it, the numbers thinning ---

and nobody was thinking about what was happening at the edges because what was happening at the centre was working.

Lyra fired her last arrow from a full quiver and reached back for another.

The field behind her was empty. She had not noticed it emptying.

She fired again. Stepped back. Her heel caught the edge of a drainage ditch running along an old field boundary and she stumbled, caught herself, stepped across it without looking down.

Another wave. She retreated further, drawing them with her, thinning them. Operating on the part of fighting that ran without deliberate thought, the part that had been built over months of exactly this.

It was only when she reached back and touched the last four arrows in her quiver that she stopped.

She looked up.

The village was behind her. Forty metres at least. The sounds of the fight came from that direction --- Freyja's shield, the crack of Izel's fire, Hayate somewhere in the middle of all of it --- but muffled now, at a distance that shouldn't have been possible.

Between her and the others, a dense press of demon bodies that had closed in silently behind her while she was focused forward. Not a gap in them. Not a seam.

She stood very still.

A grunt lunged from her left. She put an arrow through it on reflex --- three left --- and the stillness was over, replaced by the immediate and absolute problem of being alone with no clear route back, a near empty quiver, and the dagger in her off hand that she was already gripping without having decided to reach for it.

She did not call out. Calling out would tell them where she was.

Somewhere in the chaos ahead, she knew Hayate would notice the gap where her voice had been. He always did. She had watched him do it for months --- the way his eyes moved across the party in the middle of a fight, checking, always checking.

She just had to stay alive long enough for it to matter.

She raised the dagger, back to a collapsed wall, and waited for the next one to come.

XXIX

OVERWHELMED

Scene starts off with the main party, continuing to fight, holding the line. Haruki keeps an eye on both Gallu and Zaqaru. He can see that they are slowly thinning the numbers. He suspects that once the numbers get smaller, Zaqaru and Gallu will likely join the fight.

Hayate looks around to assess how many more demons they have left to kill, and notices that Lyra is not within sight. He looks to his right and sees a small group of demons about 40 meters away, all clumped up and facing away from them. Instinctively he knew --- Lyra had been separated. Without hesitation, he tries to use Shadow Step. Too far. He uses Tailwind instead --- a gust of wind that propels him upward and diagonally toward Lyra's location --- and leaps over the blocking demons.

He lands on the demon closest to Lyra, crushing its skull with his fist. A small crater where he lands. He swings, cleanly takes out two, clips a third. Jumps back and lands beside her.

"You okay?"

Lyra breathes a sigh of relief. "Yeah, got lost looking for the bathroom."

Hayate smiles. "Let's make our way back."

Lyra puts the bow away and draws the dagger in reverse grip. She considers Dawnbless but decides to conserve mana. Zaqaru and Gallu are still on the field.

Gallu sees them on the outskirts and misreads --- thinks they're fleeing. He teleports ten metres behind them. "Trying to escape? I haven't had my fill yet." Zaqaru follows. Gallu extends his left hand --- dark mist erupts. When it clears: another hundred demon grunts.

Hayate and Lyra stand back to back, surrounded. Hayate, broken voice: "Heh. Bring more." Everyone sees through it.

Haruki can't see this --- too many demons in the way. But Gallu and Zaqaru disappearing tells him enough. He tells the party to hold the line.

He casts Flame Wall --- connecting the two locations --- and runs through it. He arrives and sees the second horde of one hundred.

"Welcome to the party."

"Next time, let me know Lyra has been separated. Reckless. Broke the formation."

"Sorry."

Scenarios run through Haruki's mind. Half the first hundred still standing, now another hundred. Gallu and Zaqaru watching, ready to

strike at any moment. Complete advantage.

The fight breaks out on Hayate's end. He kills some but gets overwhelmed. Takes several cuts. Lyra is focused on defence, holding their back --- exhausted. One wrong parry and a demon breaks through.

The Flame Wall dissipates.

Haruki joins in. The three together hold, somewhat, but are still being pressured.

Gallu: "This is wonderful! First demon to take a life gets a promotion!" The demons cheer. Their attacks become more relentless.

An arrow hits Hayate in the right shoulder. He flinches but keeps fighting. Two more arrows, same spot. His shoulder drops. Zaqaru fires a Shadow Ball --- same location. It connects and explodes.

Hayate releases his grip on the greatsword. His right arm --- unusable.

XXX

SORRY

Haruki runs to Hayate. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

Haruki extends his hand to heal the shoulder. Hayate grabs it before he can cast. "I'm good. Save your mana for when we need it."

Haruki pauses. Drops his arm. Raises the other to offer his rapier. "We still need you in the fight and this is better than nothing."

Hayate reluctantly takes the rapier in his left hand.

Haruki bends down and picks up the greatsword.

Haruki gripped the greatsword by the handle and felt the weight of it pull through his whole arm.

Not because it was too heavy --- he had held it before, during training, during the sessions where Lyra had made them swap to understand each other's range. He knew the weight. But knowing a weight and taking it mid-fight, with a bleeding shoulder and forty demons still standing between him and the tree line, were different

things entirely.

He adjusted his grip. Found his footing. Swung it once experimentally and felt the arc pull through his whole body in a way the rapier never did.

This is what he carries.

Not just the sword. The aggression that lived inside the way it moved --- the commitment required, the decision made before the swing started that there was no taking it back, no adjustment, no second thought. You chose your target and you went. Every single time. Haruki had always understood that about Hayate intellectually, had watched it from beside him in a hundred fights, had accounted for it in every plan he made.

He had not understood until now what it cost.

The grief underneath it. The rage that was not really rage but something rawer --- the feeling of a ten year old boy standing in the ruins of everything he had ever loved, with nothing left to do but pick up a weapon and make sure it never happened again. Charging first because hesitating meant thinking, and thinking meant remembering, and remembering meant the ground coming up to meet you and not being able to get back up.

Haruki gripped the greatsword tighter.

He thought of Hayate at eleven years old, shaking so badly he could barely stand, looking at Haruki with eyes that were asking a question Haruki hadn't known how to answer. *What do we do now?*

He swung the greatsword and cleared three grunts in one arc and understood, for the first time, that his brother had never stopped asking that question. He had just learned to ask it louder.

Across the field, Hayate held the rapier like it might break.

He knew it wouldn't. He had watched that blade turn away strikes that should have broken it --- demon claws, a goblin chief's sword, the flat of the skeleton king's longsword. Time and again it had held. Haruki had chosen well, as he always did. Hayate knew this weapon the way you know something you have watched save someone you love, over and over, without fail.

It felt nothing like his greatsword.

It was light in a way that felt almost wrong, precise in a way that demanded something from him he wasn't sure he had --- patience in the swing, commitment to the point rather than the arc, the understanding that you did not clear space with this weapon, you found a specific gap and you put the blade through it and nowhere else.

This is what he carries.

The responsibility of it settled over him slowly, the way cold water did. Every decision made twice --- once for himself, once for the person standing next to him. Every situation assessed before acted on. Every reaction held behind the teeth until it had been examined and found useful. The question running underneath all of it, constant and quiet, the thing that kept the calm in place when everything was falling apart ---

What would father do?

Hayate's throat tightened.

He had not thought about his father in months. He had not let himself. Thinking about his father meant thinking about the morning of the attack, meant thinking about what they had come home to find, meant the specific and unbearable memory of Haruki's face in the aftermath --- not grief, not yet, because there wasn't time for grief, because someone had to hold it together and Haruki had looked at Hayate and made a decision so quietly that Hayate hadn't even seen him make it.

He had just become steady. Overnight. Because someone had to be.

Hayate drove the rapier through a gap in a grunt's guard --- precise, controlled, exactly where it needed to go --- and felt something shift in his chest that he didn't have a word for.

He glanced across at Haruki, who was moving through the grunts with the greatsword in wide, unfamiliar arcs that were nevertheless working, and thought --- *he has been doing this since we were children. He has never once put it down.*

He looked back at the fight in front of him.

He said nothing. There was nothing to say that the weapons hadn't already said.

But when Haruki called a position a moment later, Hayate was already moving to it before the words finished, and the gap between

where one of them ended and the other began had never been smaller.

Lyra watches in amazement. They had swapped weapons --- she could see that much --- and neither of them had slowed. The greatsword in Haruki's hands moved differently than it did in Hayate's, more measured, less brutal, but it was working. The rapier in Hayate's hands found gaps it had no business finding given who was holding it. They moved around each other like they were sharing a single thought.

She had never seen anything like it. She wasn't sure she ever would again.

Lyra, distracted by the brothers' dance, drops her guard for a brief moment and catches an arrow to her left thigh. She winces and kneels. Haruki stops and checks. She gets up. "It's nothing, just a flesh wound."

Haruki pauses in thought. He considers their available options, then whispers something to Lyra. Hayate cannot hear. Neither can the reader. It will be revealed later.

Lyra: "Are you sure?"

Haruki: "We don't have time for me to explain. You'll just need to trust me."

Lyra nods.

Haruki yells to Hayate: "Follow Lyra. She knows the plan. Do not go off on your own again."

Hayate agrees.

Haruki casts Flame Wave --- a conical wall of fire that pushes enemies back --- to create distance. Then turns and creates another Flame Wall to connect the split party.

"GO! Proceed as planned. Hayate, stick with Lyra --- that's an order."

Lyra grabs Hayate's hand and pulls him. They run through the Flame Wall. It collapses section by section behind them --- Haruki conserving mana.

Haruki turns back toward the demons. He smiles.

Gallu: "We've been through this. None of you are getting out alive."

Zaqaru and the remaining demons laugh.

Haruki begins to glow with light. Embers snap outward from his body.

"You won't have a choice in it."

As soon as Hayate and Lyra reach the rest of the party, Lyra yells: "Make for the treeline. Haruki has a plan!"

Rask casts Wildfire --- a powerful beam of fire enhanced by wind --- to clear a path. "Let's go!" The party sprints.

Back to Haruki. The light intensifies. Flames pour from him. The demons are blinded --- light passing through their eyelids. The front rank begins to catch fire.

The party reaches the treeline. Lyra yells to keep running, back to Kibou, full speed. Hayate and Freyja protest --- they need to go back. Lyra says it's part of his plan. He intends to meet them at the inn. She'll explain on the move.

Hayate hesitates. Remembers: *"Proceed as planned. Stick with Lyra."* He puts his hand on Freyja's shoulder. "Haruki has a plan. He always does."

Freyja nods. They sprint.

Back to Haruki. Gallu, blinded, walks forward anyway. Swings the hammer aimlessly --- takes out his own men. Gets closer. His body begins to sear from the light.

"I'm sorry, Hayate. Live on and carry my will."

Haruki activates Supernova --- Light and Fire mixed with his own life energy. A devastating explosion, akin to its namesake.

The explosion engulfs the entire village and most of the demon army. It expands. Then collapses. A giant crater remains.

Back to the party, running at full speed. They hear the explosion. Then silence. They want to turn back. They keep running. They've gotten this far because of him.

XXXI

OKAY

Nobody spoke.

That was the first thing. The silence settled over them before they had cleared the village perimeter and it stayed, heavy and total, through the first hour of walking and into the second. Freyja kept her eyes on the road ahead. Rask flew low, barely above the treeline, wings barely moving. Izel walked with his staff across both shoulders and looked at nothing in particular. Hayate was at the back.

Lyra had tried, once, in the first few minutes. She had opened her mouth and looked at Hayate and then closed it again. There was nothing to say that the silence wasn't already saying better.

Hayate had not looked back. He had decided that early and held to it. Looking back was not something Haruki would have done.

He kept walking.

They made the journey in just under four days. Nobody counted. Time had stopped being a practical matter somewhere around the explosion and had not resumed. They moved, they stopped, they slept in

shifts without discussing whose turn it was, they moved again. Rask's marked rest points on the map guided them without anyone having to make decisions about it, which was good, because nobody was making decisions.

Haruki had always made the decisions.

On the second night Freyja sat apart from the group and didn't eat. Rask sat beside her and didn't speak. After a long time she said, very quietly, "He reminded me of my brother." Rask said nothing. She didn't need him to.

On the third night Hayate sat watch alone and stared at the rapier across his knees for a long time. The blade was clean. He had cleaned it without thinking about it, the way you maintain something that belongs to someone important. He turned it over once, looked at the edge, and put it down beside him.

He did not sleep when his watch ended.

Kibou's gate appeared through the trees on the morning of the fourth day. The guards at the checkpoint looked at the six of them --- down from seven, visibly damaged, carrying the particular silence of people who had come back from somewhere they hadn't expected to return from --- and let them through without questions.

The town moved around them normally. Market stalls, other adventurers, the sounds of a city that did not know what had happened 60 kilometres into demon territory. Hayate looked at all of it and felt very far away from it.

They climbed the stairs to their rooms. Nobody suggested splitting up.

They sat in the room that had become the meeting room, the planning room, Haruki's room in every way that mattered, and for a while they just sat.

Then Izel reached into his bag.

He placed the wooden ornament on the table. Small, carved, Dagan's symbol exact on the face of it. He had been carrying it since the village. He set it down without ceremony and looked at it and then looked at the others.

Haruki had been right. Haruki had always been right, from the tomb onwards, piecing it together carefully while the rest of them caught up. The weapons. The smuggling. The symbol on the bodyguard's wrist. The job that sent them directly into a demon ambush. All of it one thing, connected, running back to a single point.

Dagan.

Not a contractor. Not an influential businessman with deep pockets and murky ethics. A demon agent. Raised by demons, funded by demons, working their agenda from inside the walls of a human city while the seven races bled themselves dry trying to hold the frontline.

Hayate picked up the ornament. Looked at it. Put it back down.

"He knew" Hayate said. "He figured it out before we left. That's what he whispered to Lyra."

Lyra nodded slowly. "He said he didn't think we were coming back from the village. That the job was designed to kill us. He wanted me to get everyone to the treeline regardless of what happened to him." She paused. "He told me --- he would create an opening so Hayate and I could regroup with the rest of you. That once we were all clear, you were to run for the treeline and not stop until you reached Kibou. He said he would buy us time, then conceal himself with light magic and make his escape once we were all clear." Her voice did not waver. "He said he would meet us back at the inn."

The room was very quiet.

"He knew" Hayate said again. Differently this time.

Nobody corrected her. Nobody said what they were all thinking --- that a man who had already decided to detonate himself into a supernova had no intention of concealing himself afterward. That the escape plan was never for Haruki. That it was for them. So they would run. So Hayate would run.

So Hayate would keep going.

Freyja was crying quietly. Rask sat with his elbows on his knees and his hands folded and looked at the floor. Izel stared at the ornament. Lyra watched Hayate.

Hayate stood up. Walked to the window. Looked at Kibou moving below him, ordinary and indifferent.

"Okay" he said, to no one in particular.

XXXII

CURSE

They heard the news before dawn.

A runner came through the inn at speed, knocking on doors, voice tight with the specific urgency of someone delivering information they didn't want to be delivering. Demon forces sighted at the eastern perimeter. Large numbers. Moving fast. One figure at the front, enormous, winged, walking through his own advance line like it wasn't there.

Gallu.

Blind, according to the runner. Both eyes burned through. Walking forward anyway.

They were in the street before the runner had finished his circuit of the inn. Around them, Kibou was waking into panic --- soldiers moving to posts, civilians being directed away from the walls, the watchtowers lighting signal fires that painted the pre-dawn sky orange. The section of wall that had been under repair when they arrived was still under repair. It would not be finished in time.

"We should leave" Izel said. Not a suggestion. A practical observation.

Nobody moved.

Hayate was looking at the eastern wall. His jaw was set and his hands were at his sides and he was doing the thing he had learned from Haruki, which was to wait until he was sure before he spoke.

"He said he'd meet us at the inn" Hayate said finally.

"Hayate---" Lyra started.

"He said he'd meet us at the inn." He looked at her. "He always has a plan. He told me to trust him. I'm trusting him."

Lyra looked at him for a long moment. Then she looked at the others.

Freyja was already checking her trident. Rask was already in the air, circling low, assessing the eastern approach. Izel looked at the wall, then at Hayate, then exhaled slowly through his nose and unslung his staff.

"Then we stay" Lyra said.

The town's fighting force assembled at the eastern wall within the hour. It was impressive, Haruki would have noted --- coordinated, disciplined, Kibou had clearly done this before. Adventurers alongside soldiers, Dwarves and humans and a handful of other races all moving to position without the racial friction that would have defined the same scene in Akebono. The frontline had a way of burning that particular hesitation away.

The party took position near the gate. Lyra's quiver was restocked. Freyja's shield was braced. Hayate held the rapier in his left hand and said nothing about it.

Around them, several hundred fighters checked their weapons and armour and prepared themselves in the particular private way people do before something begins.

Then the first rank dropped.

Not from the demons. Not from anything outside the walls.

From inside.

Fifty fighters in the front rank simply collapsed. No warning, no sound, no visible cause. Here and then not here, the same instant, all of them simultaneously. Then it started --- blood from every orifice, eyes, nose, mouth, ears, pouring dark and fast, and with it something worse, something that turned the stomachs of the fighters standing beside them --- maggots, writhing through the blood, covering the ground beneath the bodies before they had finished falling. The men beside them stumbled back in shock. Someone screamed. Then another rank --- not all of them, not even most, but enough, scattered through the formation like a pattern that made no sense until it did.

The cursed weapons.

The same curse that had taken the dwarf in the tomb. Scaled across hundreds.

Hayate understood it before he could have explained how. He grabbed the nearest soldier by the arm --- "Drop your weapon. Drop it now. If you bought it from Dagan, drop it" --- and the soldier stared at him and the man beside the soldier was already on the ground bleeding from his eyes and the soldier dropped the sword and stood there shaking.

Around them the formation was dissolving. Not from the demon advance, not yet, but from within --- the cursed blades activating simultaneously, taking the men and women who had trusted Dagan's impossible enchantments, who had bought strength at a price they hadn't known they were paying. Bodies on the ground. Healthy fighters staring at their own weapons not knowing if they were holding death. The discipline that had taken years to build collapsing in ninety seconds.

Gallu's laughter reached them over the wall.

He had known. He had always known. He hadn't been waiting for a worthy fight. He had been waiting for this.

Hayate looked at the gate. Looked at the eastern approach. Looked at the bodies on the ground and the living fighters standing in shock and the wall with its unfinished section and did the mathematics of it without wanting to.

Haruki would have known what to do.

Haruki would have already been doing it.

Hayate tightened his grip on the rapier and said --- "Form up. Anyone still standing, form up on me" --- and was already moving

toward the gate when the demons came through it.

They held for two hours.

It was not nothing. Against those numbers, against that coordination, against a blind demon general who walked through arrow volleys and fire and did not slow --- two hours was not nothing. The party fought as a unit in the chaos, pulling what remained of Kibou's fighting force around them, Freyja anchoring the line, Rask disrupting from above, Izel burning paths through the advance, Hayate moving through the rapier's constraints with a precision that was not his natural language but was becoming it.

They held.

And then Gallu reached the line and the holding stopped.

He moved through the remaining defenders the way weather moves --- not targeted, not tactical, just present and total and impossible to reason with. The skull hammer rising and falling. The blind eyes that tracked sound and movement and heat. The burns on his face and hands from Haruki's light that had not slowed him in any meaningful way.

Hayate went for him twice. Both times Gallu found him without seeing him, one massive hand catching the rapier on the flat and sending it spinning, the second time a backhand that Freyja's shield intercepted at the cost of driving her sideways into a market stall.

The third time Hayate came at him, Gallu caught his wrist mid-strike. Just held it. The grip like a vice, effortless.

"You fight like him" Gallu said. Conversationally. Like they were not in the middle of a battle. "The one who did this to my eyes."

Hayate went still.

"Brave" Gallu said. "I'll give him that. Braver than most. He stood there and smiled and let it build until there was nothing left of him." He tilted his burned, sightless face slightly. "There was nothing left, you understand. Nothing to find. Nothing to bury. Just a crater and some ash and a very large hole where your little village used to be." A pause. "Took Zaqaru with him too. My best lieutenant. Gone. Just like that."

Something crossed his face that might have been irritation. Might have been something closer to respect. It was difficult to tell on a face that burned.

"Brave" he said again. "And stupid."

Hayate's hand was shaking. He did not know when that had started.

"He bought you time" Gallu said. "Was it worth it?"

Freyja's shield hit Gallu across the jaw before the sentence finished. The grip released. Hayate stumbled back and Freyja was already pulling him --- "Move. Now. MOVE."

He moved.

"FALL BACK" Lyra's voice, cutting through everything.
"EVERYONE FALL BACK TO THE WESTERN GATE."

It was not a retreat. Hayate told himself that as he pulled Freyja up and moved. It was not a retreat it was a repositioning it was tactical it was what Haruki would have---

The inn collapsed behind them as Gallu's hammer took out its foundation wall.

Hayate did not look back at it.

XXXIII

THEY WALKED

They came through the western gate in a broken stream --- the party, what remained of Kibou's defenders, civilians who had not evacuated in time, people carrying things and people carrying nothing, all of them moving west under a sky that was beginning to lighten toward dawn and was lit orange in the east by things that were not the sunrise.

Lyra ran the count without being asked. It was something Haruki would have done.

Rask came down from above and fell into step beside Freyja. He looked at the gate behind them and then looked forward and said nothing.

Izel was bleeding from a cut above his ear. He had not mentioned it.

Freyja's shield arm was shaking with the effort of holding the shield up. She had not lowered it.

They moved.

1.5 kilometres from the gate, Hayate stopped.

The others went a few steps further before they noticed, then stopped too. Lyra turned first.

He was facing east. Behind them Kibou burned --- not all of it, not yet, but enough, the smoke rising thick and dark against the early sky. The watchtowers were still standing. One of them was on fire. The gate they had come through was still visible, small with distance.

Gallu would not pursue them immediately. Hayate knew that. Gallu had what he wanted. The town, the supplies, the weapons market that had been feeding the frontline, the strategic position at the centre of the defensive line. He would consolidate. He would not hurry after a handful of survivors when he had just taken a city.

They were safe, in the immediate sense of the word.

Hayate looked at the smoke for a long time.

He thought about Kasumi. The way smoke looks when a place that meant something is burning. The way it smells. The way the sky takes on a specific quality that you do not forget and do not want to remember and cannot stop remembering.

He had been ten years old the first time.

He thought about a rapier chosen from a barrel for five silver because it was cheap and they had thirty-five coins between them and the world was enormous and frightening and they had nothing but each other.

He thought about Haruki at seventeen, becoming steady overnight because someone had to be.

He thought --- what would father do?

And for the first time in his life, standing in front of the smoke, he thought --- what would Haruki do?

He turned back to face the others. They were watching him. Freyja with her shield arm still shaking. Rask on the ground for once, wings folded. Izel bleeding quietly. Lyra with her hand near the raven pendant at her throat, not quite touching it.

He looked at all of them.

"We keep moving" he said.

His voice was steady. He was not sure how. He held onto it anyway, the way you hold onto something that belongs to someone important.

He started walking west.

After a moment, one by one, they followed.

The smoke rose behind them into a sky that was almost morning. Kibou burned. The road west was long and the world was large and eighty-three percent of it belonged to the demons and the seven races held what remained not because they were winning but because they had refused to stop.

They walked.

END OF SEASON 1