

Another long chapter...

Chapter 155:

– Haru –

Night had begun settling over the Forbidden Lands by the time the Hunter and Alma returned to camp.

The desert changed quickly after sunset. The oppressive heat bled out of the sand, replaced by a cold that crept through the cave entrance and curled around everyone's ankles. Beyond the canvas barriers and sharpened stakes surrounding the camp, the last strip of orange sunlight disappeared behind the black ridges. Stars emerged overhead in numbers I rarely saw back in Kyoto.

Inside the cave, the Research Commission's temporary base remained busy.

Handlers checked the Seikrets for injuries. Supporters carried wooden crates filled with scales, claws, teeth, and several organs I couldn't identify. Researchers crowded around Alma, bombarding her with questions while she attempted to record three different reports at once.

The Hunter walked through all of it without saying much. His armor was scratched, scorched, and partially coated in dried mud. One shoulder plate had cracked nearly in half, and the edge of his enormous sword looked like he had been using it to cut through mountains.

From the amount of monster material his team had brought back, he might have.

According to Alma, they had encountered several enormous creatures while searching for survivors. The Hunter had apparently killed multiple monsters almost single-handedly, protected the civilians, gathered useful samples, and returned before dinner.

I respected efficiency.

His Palico strutted beside him with its tiny chest puffed out, carrying a bundle of claws almost as large as its entire body. "We were amazing, meowster!" the little cat announced.

"I'm sure you were."

"I delivered the final blow to one of them!"

The Hunter glanced down at him.

The Palico's ears flattened slightly. "I distracted it during the final blow," he amended. "Which is nearly the same thing."

"Absolutely."

Gemma was already sorting through the harvested materials near her portable forge. Plates went into one pile, bones into another, and anything flexible enough to serve as binding or reinforcement went into several smaller trays.

I wandered over as she examined a curved horn beneath the light of an oil lamp. "Are you making his new equipment now?"

Gemma looked up. Soot streaked one cheek, and the sleeves of her work shirt had been rolled above her elbows. Between the heat of the forge and the physical labor, a faint sheen of sweat glistened across her skin.

That was mildly distracting.

"Some of it," she said. "His gauntlets are nearly done for. Boots aren't much better. And that greatsword's taken enough punishment to qualify for retirement."

The Hunter placed his battered weapon beside the forge with a heavy thud.

The stone floor cracked underneath it.

Gemma looked at the crack. Then she looked at him. "I'll add that to your bill."

The Hunter shrugged and walked toward the food supplies.

I crouched beside the piles of harvested materials. Even without activating my Ultimate Skill, I could feel something unusual inside them. Like the dead monsters had left behind impressions of themselves. "Mind if I watch?" I asked. "I've seen enchanted weapons forged before, but your equipment works differently."

Gemma's lips curled into a mischievous smile. "You can watch. Just make sure you're watching my hands and the forge instead of staring at my breasts and ass."

"But you have such nice breasts and ass." The words left my mouth before common sense could catch them.

Gemma froze. The tips of her ears turned red first. The blush spread across her cheeks a moment later, made more obvious by the firelight.

A nearby supporter suddenly became deeply fascinated by organizing a box of hammers.

Gemma cleared her throat and adjusted one of her gloves. "You really don't have an off switch, do you?"

"I'm a chef. We appreciate quality ingredients."

She stared at me.

“That sounded significantly worse out loud,” I admitted.

She nodded. “It did.”

“You’re fortunate I’ve already been paid.” Gemma turned toward the forge before I could dig the hole any deeper. A small smile remained on her face despite her effort to look professional. “I’m starting now,” she warned. “Watch closely, fox boy.”

“Lord of the Kitchen...” My Ultimate Skill unfolded over the forge, not imposing itself strongly enough to interfere with Gemma’s work, but allowing me to perceive every material in precise detail.

Monster plates became layered composites of keratin, mineral deposits, and strange energy-dense fibers. Bones contained structures that should have been too light to support their own weight, yet possessed greater tensile strength than most enchanted steel. Sinew behaved like naturally occurring magical wire, conducting the monster’s lingering power through anything it bound together.

Gemma started with the gauntlets.

She selected sections of dark shell from one of the creatures the Hunter had killed, then cut them into overlapping plates with a narrow saw. The tool looked ordinary, but its teeth were made from monster claws and vibrated at a frequency that sliced through the material without cracking it.

She heated each plate over the forge.

That surprised me.

The flames weren’t hot enough to melt the shell. They weren’t supposed to be. The heat loosened the internal fibers and awakened the dormant energy inside the material, making it briefly responsive to pressure.

Gemma shaped the plates with a series of controlled hammer strikes. Every impact compressed the fibers in a deliberate direction, guiding how force would spread across the finished armor. She wasn’t simply making metal take a particular shape.

She was teaching dead monster parts how to behave.

That was incredible.

She layered the plates over a flexible hide backing, joined them with treated sinew, and sealed the connections using powdered monster bone mixed into a thick resin. The substance hardened almost instantly when exposed to heat.

The boots followed a similar process, though Gemma reinforced the soles with springy cartilage taken from a creature whose legs had allowed it to launch itself across long distances. She

oriented the internal fibers vertically, allowing them to compress under the wearer's weight and release the stored force with every step.

Strength enhancement. Impact resistance. Increased acceleration. Reduced exhaustion. Better footing across unstable terrain. None of it relied on a spell. There were no runes, mana circuits, enchantments, or blessings. The materials themselves retained the physical and supernatural traits of the creatures they had belonged to.

Then Gemma began working on the greatsword. She used a massive length of pale bone as the core, surrounding it with dark metal refined from mineral deposits found inside one monster's armored hide. The sharpened edge came from several overlapping fangs ground down and fused together under tremendous pressure.

Despite the size of the weapon, she moved with practiced speed. She never wasted a motion. Every tool was placed exactly where her hand expected to find it. When she needed something from the opposite side of the forge, she kicked a lever and rotated the entire work surface toward herself without looking away from the blade.

I had spent two lifetimes in kitchens. I recognized mastery when I saw it. What should have taken a normal blacksmith days was finished in less than two hours.

Gemma quenched the greatsword in a trough filled with dark green liquid. Steam exploded toward the ceiling, carrying a sharp smell of herbs, minerals, and monster blood.

When she finally lifted the weapon free, the blade gleamed beneath the firelight.

The Hunter returned as if he had sensed the exact moment his new equipment was ready.

Gemma helped secure the gauntlets and boots before handing him the sword.

The change was immediate.

The dormant energy inside every piece of equipment surged to life. The gauntlets reinforced the Hunter's muscles and bones. The boots tightened his balance and multiplied the force he could generate through his legs. The greatsword linked itself to the rest of the set, circulating energy through his body in a closed system.

He was still human. Completely human, from what I could tell. But with that equipment, his physical capabilities rose massively. His strength jumped several times over. His reflexes accelerated. His skin, muscles, and skeleton became durable enough to survive impacts that should have turned a normal person into paste.

The people of this world weren't superhuman by birth. They wore the strength of the monsters they had defeated. Every hunt made them capable of hunting something stronger. Every victory became the foundation for the next one.

“That is so damn cool,” I murmured.

Gemma wiped her forehead with the back of one arm. “What is?”

“Your entire crafting system.”

She gave me a strange look. “You watched me work for two hours and that’s your expert conclusion?”

“I was more eloquent inside my head.”

The Hunter tested his greatsword with a single horizontal swing.

The displaced air extinguished three nearby lanterns.

Gemma nodded with satisfaction. “That’ll do.”

Before I could ask about the weapon’s exact properties, shouting erupted near the camp entrance.

Several supporters ran toward the canvas barrier. Two armored hunters reached for their weapons, their relaxed posture disappearing instantly.

“SOMEONE’S COMING!”

“GET A MEDIC!”

“THEY’RE INJURED!”

I turned toward the commotion.

A lone figure stumbled through the entrance.

His clothes had been ripped in several places. Blood ran from a gash along his ribs, another wound crossed his shoulder, and bruises covered most of the skin I could see. Lightning burns crawled across both arms in branching patterns. His black hair was singed at the ends, and one sleeve had burned away almost completely.

My eyes widened. “Sasuke?”

Sasuke Uchiha lifted his head.

One eye was swollen. Dried blood trailed down his cheek from the other. He looked like someone had electrocuted him, stabbed him repeatedly, thrown him off a cliff, and then decided the cliff hadn’t done a thorough enough job.

I crossed the camp before the nearest medic took three steps. “What the hell happened to you, man?” I asked. “You look like you electrocuted and stabbed yourself over and over.”

Sasuke gave me an annoyed glare. Considering the swelling around his eye, it lacked some of its usual intensity. "I killed a *lightning dragon*."

Several nearby conversations stopped.

One of the hunters stared at the burn patterns on Sasuke's arms. "Lightning dragon?" he repeated. "You don't mean—"

"Rey Dau..." another hunter whispered.

That name spread through the gathered crowd.

"Rey Dau?"

"He fought an apex by himself!?"

"In his condition?"

A broad-shouldered hunter with a grey beard stepped forward and looked Sasuke over with newfound respect. "You're lucky to be alive, lad."

A younger woman beside him shook her head. "Lucky doesn't cover it. A Rey Dau can wipe out an entire unprepared hunting party."

The Palico's fur stood on end. "You hunted a Rey Dau alone? That was either extremely brave or *extremely stupid*, meow."

Sasuke's glare shifted toward him.

The Palico took shelter behind the Hunter's leg.

I walked around Sasuke, inspecting the injuries. Most of the damage wasn't immediately fatal, but a couple of his ribs were cracked. His chakra reserves were nearly empty, his demonic energy had been heavily depleted, and his left shoulder looked partially dislocated.

Still, he had apparently killed a strong thing.

I laughed and clapped him on the back. "Good job there, Sasuke."

Sasuke's face went white. He made a sound halfway between a hiss and a strangled groan before nearly falling to one knee.

Right. Injured. Probably shouldn't clap injured people.

"It looks like I've got my work cut out for me in this competition," I continued, pretending that hadn't happened. "Do you need help transporting the dragon's corpse, or do you have it stored away in a scroll?"

Sasuke went very still. His expression tightened. For a moment, he didn't look angry. He looked embarrassed. "I don't want to talk about it."

That was suspicious. "You killed a lightning dragon but don't want to talk about the corpse?"

"No."

"Did you accidentally destroy it...?"

"No."

"Did you forget where you left it...?"

His visible eye twitched. "Haru..."

"Did something steal it...?"

Sasuke's silence became so heavy that it answered the question more clearly than words ever could.

I decided to let him keep what little dignity remained to him. For now. "Fair enough."

I reached into my personal storage space. My hand disappeared into a ripple of distorted air before closing around a familiar glass flask.

I pulled out the Flask of Crimson Tears.

The red-gold liquid inside glowed softly beneath the camp's lanterns, washing the nearby stone in warm light. Several researchers immediately leaned closer, and Alma's hand darted toward her notebook.

Sasuke eyed the flask suspiciously when I offered it to him. "What is that?"

"Healing potion."

Sasuke looked from the flask to me. "You expect me to drink an unknown substance you pulled from who knows where?"

"You let Orochimaru bite you..."

His jaw tightened. "That was different. And I never LET HIM bite me."

"And yet you also injected yourself with whatever drugs he gave you, joined a terrorist organization, attacked a jinchūriki while exhausted, and apparently tried to fistfight a lightning dragon."

"I killed it."

“Yes, and then something stole it.”

Sasuke’s murderous glare confirmed my theory.

I smiled and pushed the flask into his hand. “Take a sip. It’ll heal you right up.”

He stared at the glowing liquid for another long moment, pride battling basic survival instinct across his face. Survival finally won. Sasuke raised the flask and drank. The Flask of Crimson Tears worked almost immediately.

Red-gold light spread from Sasuke’s stomach through the rest of his body, tracing the pathways of his chakra network before sinking into muscle and bone. The gashes along his ribs pulled themselves closed. Bruises faded from dark purple to yellow and then disappeared entirely. His dislocated shoulder shifted back into place with a wet pop that made several nearby supporters wince.

Even the lightning burns vanished, leaving smooth skin behind.

Sasuke lowered the flask and stared at his restored arm.

The camp had gone silent.

Alma’s glasses reflected the potion’s fading glow as she watched from several feet away, notebook open and quill frozen above the page.

“Better?” I asked.

Sasuke rolled his shoulder experimentally. “Yes.” He sounded disappointed about it.

“Try to contain your gratitude.”

“I didn’t ask for your help!”

“You limped into camp looking like someone had tried to tenderize you with a lightning hammer.”

“I would have recovered.” Sasuke held the flask back toward me. “Eventually...”

I accepted it and returned it to storage before Alma could get any closer. Judging from her expression, she was considering whether tackling me would let her obtain a sample.

Sasuke had healed completely.

His clothes hadn’t.

The Kuoh Academy uniform Rias had given him was beyond saving through conventional methods. His white shirt had lost an entire sleeve, the jacket was shredded across the back,

and his trousers had been burned from the knee down on one leg. Several bloody tears remained along his ribs even though the wounds beneath them had closed.

"Can't you repair that with demonic magic?" I asked.

Sasuke looked down at himself. "No."

"You're a devil now."

"I'm aware."

"Devils use magic to fix their clothes all the time. Rias does it whenever a fight tears her uniform."

He turned his head to the side. "I haven't learned how..."

That made sense. Sasuke had only recently joined Rias's peerage, and his approach to magic education likely involved ignoring everything that couldn't be weaponized against an enemy.

Repairing fabric probably ranked somewhere below smiling and discussing his feelings. "Do you have spare clothes sealed in a scroll?"

Sasuke's expression tightened. "No."

Of course he didn't. He had come to another world to hunt giant monsters, carrying enough weapons to start a small war, but hadn't packed an extra shirt. *Freaking angst-y teenage ninjas...*

I opened my storage space again and searched through its contents. After moving aside several cooking knives, emergency spice containers, two aprons, a barrel of Kappa sake, and an alarming number of women's undergarments I refused to identify individually, I found one of my spare kimonos..

I held it out.

Sasuke stared at it. "No."

"You can't walk around camp with half your ass hanging out."

"My ass is not hanging out!"

Gemma glanced over from her forge. "A little bit of it is."

Sasuke twisted around, trying to inspect the damage to the back of his trousers. His expression darkened when he realized Gemma was right.

She grinned and returned to polishing the Hunter's new greatsword.

I shook the kimono once. "Take it."

Sasuke snatched the clothing from my hand. "I'll return it. I don't want charity."

"Then consider it a consolation prize for losing your dragon."

Sasuke's Sharingan flashed red for half a second.

I smiled pleasantly.

He took the kimono and stalked toward the Hunter's tent. The Hunter had disappeared inside earlier to remove the rest of his damaged armor, and since it was the only private changing area nearby, Sasuke was forced to use it too.

A few minutes later, Sasuke emerged.

The kimono fit him surprisingly well. I was broader through the shoulders, but the obi compensated for the difference, and the dark fabric suited his general atmosphere of permanent brooding. With his black hair, pale skin, and severe expression, he looked more like an Uchiha heir than he ever had in Kuoh Academy's Western uniform.

He adjusted one sleeve with visible irritation. "At least this is better."

"See? You look good."

"I'm more accustomed to these clothes. They resemble what people wear in the Elemental Nations."

"And now you owe me twice."

Sasuke glared.

"Three times if we count the healing potion," I added because it was funny.

His eye twitched again. I was beginning to understand why Naruto and Naruko enjoyed antagonizing him.

Before Sasuke could respond, Alma appeared directly in front of me. I hadn't seen her cross the camp. Her notebook was open to a fresh page, and the earlier exhaustion from her expedition had vanished beneath intense academic excitement. "What was that potion? How did it work? What was the active ingredient? Was the light a magical effect or a visible byproduct of accelerated cellular regeneration? It repaired muscle damage, burns, blood loss, and skeletal trauma simultaneously. Did it restore the body to a previous state, or did it provide sufficient energy for natural healing? How did it know which structures were damaged? Why didn't it cause uncontrolled tissue growth? Can it cure disease? Poisoning? Missing limbs?" Alma inhaled sharply. "CAN I STUDY IT?"

I blinked at her.

She stared back, practically vibrating.

“Slow your roll, cute glasses girl.”

Alma’s mouth stopped moving. A blush spread beneath her freckles. “I— Cute?” Her glasses slid slightly down her nose. She pushed them back into place with one finger, trying to recover whatever professional composure I had just destroyed.

Gemma snorted from across the forge.

Alma shot her an annoyed look before turning back to me. “The potion,” she said, considerably more carefully. “May I examine it?”

“Sorry. That one isn’t available for research.”

Her shoulders dropped. “Why not?”

“It was a gift from my beloved Ranni.”

I touched the storage space where I kept the flask. The Crimson Tears had saved my life before, particularly when I contained an antimatter explosion inside my own body. I didn’t fully understand how Ranni replenished it, but its supply never seemed to decrease permanently.

That alone made it too valuable to hand over for experimentation.

“And gifts from Ranni aren’t things I share without asking her first,” I continued. “Especially magical ones.”

Gemma stopped working. “Wait.” She set down her polishing cloth and turned toward me. “Ranni is a *different woman* from the two you’re already courting?”

“Oh. Naruko and Kushina?”

“Yes, them.”

“Then yes. Ranni is different.”

Gemma slowly rubbed both hands over her face. “Do you need a gift for her too?”

My tails began wagging before I could stop them. “Yep. But technically, Ranni comes from a matriarchal society, so it’s her responsibility to give me a betrothal gift.”

Alma’s quill hovered over the notebook. “A matriarchal society?”

“The Carian royal family.”

“ROYAL FAMILY!?”

“Ranni’s a princess.”

“YOUR BELOVED IS A **PRINCESS?**”

“Also a goddess.”

Alma’s quill touched the paper. “Goddess...” she repeated faintly.

“Of the moon.”

Gemma stared at me for several seconds.

Alma looked as if her head might explode. Then she began asking questions. So many questions. How old was Ranni? What was a physical body in this context? Was she a disembodied spirit? What were the Carians? Did I come from a matriarchal society too? How many women was I courting? Were Naruko and Kushina related? Why did both need proposal equipment? Was plural marriage common among my species? What exactly was a kitsune? Why did I have ten tails? Was each tail biologically independent? Did the number increase with age, power, or romantic partners?

I raised one hand. “That last theory is incredibly dangerous. Never repeat it around my mother.”

“Your mother also has tails like you?”

“Twelve.”

Alma flipped to another page. “Is twelve the natural maximum?”

“No idea.”

“How old is she?”

“I enjoy being alive.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you never ask a beautiful woman her age when she can destroy a mountain.”

Alma’s pout deepened. It was adorable.

I escaped by moving toward the camp’s cooking area.

The Commission had brought back a wide variety of meat from the day’s hunts. Gemma and the researchers had already separated anything needed for crafting or study, leaving several enormous cuts piled inside a cold-storage tent.

I selected meat from a heavily muscled herbivore the Hunter had killed near the caves. Its flavor profile, according to Lord of the Kitchen, sat somewhere between beef and venison, with enough intramuscular fat to stay tender over direct heat.

Perfect. I cut it into thick strips, marinated them in soy sauce, rice wine, garlic, ginger, honey, and a little Pandoran citrus, then threaded them onto metal skewers with onions and brightly colored desert peppers.

Alma followed me.

I began preparing a pot of rice.

"Where is your homeland?" she asked.

"Kyoto."

Alma wrote it down. "Where is Kyoto?"

"Japan."

She waited.

I added water to the rice.

"What continent is Japan on?"

"It's its own Island near Asia."

Her quill slowed. "I've never heard of either of those!"

"That's unfortunate..."

Gemma laughed from her forge. "He's messing with you."

"I KNOW HE'S MESSING WITH ME!" Alma adjusted her glasses sharply and moved closer.

"Are you from across the ocean? Another region beyond the Forbidden Lands? An isolated civilization?"

"No."

"Then where?"

"A different universe."

Alma stared.

I placed the pot over the flame.

Gemma's hammering stopped again.

Even Sasuke, who had taken a seat near the cave wall and was pretending not to listen, glanced in my direction.

"A different what?" Alma asked.

"Universe."

She obviously did not know what that word meant. "You mean a different world?"

"Yes."

Her expression brightened. "Across the sea?"

"No."

"Beyond the known continents?"

"No."

"Underground...?"

"Not generally."

Alma closed her notebook. She took a deep breath. Then she opened it again. "How did you get here?"

"Through my restaurant."

"Huh... What!?" Her quill nearly tore through the page. "How?"

"Ranni did it..."

Alma let out an annoyed huff!

I brushed the skewers with glaze and placed them over the fire. The meat hissed as fat struck the flames, sending a wave of rich smoke through the cave.

Every head in camp turned toward me.

Within minutes, hunters, researchers, supporters, handlers, and Palicos had begun forming a line without being asked.

I pointed toward the skewers. "Dinner's ready."

The camp surged forward.

Alma was forced aside by three hungry hunters and a Palico carrying two bowls at once. By the time she fought her way back toward me, I had already moved to the other side of the cooking station and begun serving rice.

She glared over the top of her glasses.

I gave her my most innocent smile.

"You're doing this deliberately," she accused. "You're avoiding all my questions with vague answers!" Alma's cheeks puffed out.

Gemma accepted a plate from me and looked between us. "You broke her."

"She's cute when she pouts."

That made Alma blush again. Her glare lost most of its effectiveness.

I handed her a skewer and a bowl of rice. "Eat before it gets cold."

"I still have questions though!?"

"I'm sure you do."

She took one bite of the glazed monster meat. Her eyes widened behind her glasses. The notebook slowly lowered. For the next several minutes, Alma finally stopped asking questions.

A good meal remained the most effective form of crowd control in any universe.

Hours later...

Thor still hadn't returned by the time the camp settled down for the night.

I wasn't particularly worried.

The thunder god was somewhere in the distant forest, and his divine presence stood out against this world's unfamiliar energy like a bonfire in a dark room. If Thor encountered anything capable of seriously threatening him, I would feel the resulting explosion from across the continent.

More likely, he had found something interesting and forgotten that time existed.

That happened to warriors surprisingly often.

Sasuke had claimed a bedroll at the edge of the camp, positioning himself as far from everyone else as possible. He lay facing the cave wall with his arms folded, clearly pretending to be asleep so nobody could ask what had happened to Rey Dau's corpse.

Alma had eventually exhausted herself.

She sat at a folding table surrounded by notes, her head resting on her crossed arms and her glasses slightly crooked. She had spent nearly two hours attempting to catalogue everything I had revealed while simultaneously constructing increasingly elaborate theories about the Fox Hole.

Gemma slept near her forge, curled beneath a blanket with one hand resting suspiciously close to a hammer. The Hunter and his Palico had taken the tent Sasuke used earlier, while everyone else had distributed themselves around the cave.

Eventually, only the night guards remained awake.

I waited another twenty minutes before slipping out.

Not because I needed to hide what I was doing. I simply didn't want Alma waking up and insisting on joining me for "field research."

Cold desert air rolled across my face as I emerged from the camp.

The night sky stretched endlessly overhead. With no cities nearby, the stars appeared impossibly bright, crowded together in glittering rivers. Three pale moons hung above the horizon, their combined light turning the dunes silver.

I stood there for a moment, breathing it in.

This was a hunt. Just me, an unknown wilderness, and a monster worthy of becoming a proposal gift.

I could have activated Lord of the Kitchen and declared the entire region part of my domain. I could have searched every living thing within range, traced the residual energy of the white wraith, or asked Ranni to point directly at its location.

That would defeat the purpose. Aela would laugh at me for a month if I called that hunting.

So I relied on the oldest advantage my species possessed.

I closed my eyes and breathed through my nose.

The desert unfolded through scent.

Cooling sand. Dry stone. Dust carried down from the mountains. Faint moisture beneath the earth. The metallic tang of monster blood several miles away. The pungent musk of herbivores moving in a loose herd to the south.

Human scents lingered around the camp behind me.

Alma smelled faintly of ink, leather, and desert flowers.

Gemma carried charcoal, heated metal, sweat, and machine oil.

The Hunter smelled like half a dozen different monsters layered over a core of steel, herbs, and dried blood.

Sasuke's trail was unmistakable. Ozone. Smoke. blood. Demonic energy. And the particular cold, lonely scent of someone who spent far too much time brooding dramatically in high places.

I followed it.

The sand exploded beneath my feet.

I crossed the desert as a golden blur, keeping my speed low enough that I didn't create a continuous sonic boom. Dunes disappeared beneath me. Stone ridges became dark streaks at the edges of my vision. Several nocturnal monsters sensed my approach and buried themselves so deeply that only terrified vibrations remained beneath the ground.

Sasuke's path was easy to retrace.

He had flown east on his summoned hawk, but the creature's feathers carried his scent. Every wingbeat left a faint wake through the air, settling across the landscape in a trail only enhanced senses could follow hours later.

The terrain grew increasingly broken.

Sand gave way to black stone, then towering formations split by narrow canyons. Static prickled across my fur before I saw the battlefield.

The cavern's ceiling had partially collapsed.

I slowed near the entrance and walked inside.

The air reeked of ozone.

Lightning had fused sections of stone into glass. Deep cuts crossed the walls where Susanoo blades had struck. Burn marks from Sasuke's fire techniques overlapped craters blasted into the ground by Rey Dau's attacks.

I crouched beside one of the larger depressions and placed my fingers against the stone.

Sasuke had fought hard.

I could reconstruct much of the battle from the damage alone. Rey Dau had controlled the sky and forced Sasuke into the cavern. Sasuke had tried lightning first, discovered that the monster absorbed it, and changed tactics. Several collapsed stone arches suggested he had

weaponized the terrain. Black residue along one wall carried the unmistakable spiritual distortion of Amaterasu.

A large stain darkened the ground near the center.

Rey Dau's blood.

Several broken scales lay scattered around it, but there was no corpse.

I walked around the stain.

Something had landed directly on top of the dead monster.

The impact marks were shallow despite the creature's apparent size. Its weight had been distributed with extraordinary control. Four sets of claw impressions appeared around the corpse, each barely penetrating the stone.

Wings had displaced dust toward the cavern walls.

Whatever stole Sasuke's kill could fly.

That explained how it escaped so quickly. Sasuke had been nearly out of chakra, his summoned hawk was injured, and his new devil wings were unlikely to match a native aerial predator over long distances.

Still, stealing an apex monster from Sasuke Uchiha required confidence. Or intelligence. Probably both.

I found a pale scale lodged in a crack near the bloodstain.

It was almost white beneath the moonlight filtering through the broken ceiling, but faint rainbow colors moved across its surface when I turned it between my fingers. The material was far stronger than it looked. Even applying enough force to crush enchanted steel didn't bend it.

White. Flying. Strong enough to carry an entire Rey Dau corpse. Sneaky enough to approach Sasuke without him noticing until it was already taking his prey.

"Well," I murmured, "I think I found my *wraith*."

I brought the scale closer to my nose. The scent was faint. Cold stone. Old bone. Something metallic and predatory. Beneath it lingered the almost clean smell of high-altitude air.

Rey Dau's blood provided the easier trail.

The white wraith had wrapped or dragged the corpse when taking off, causing droplets to scatter across the cavern floor and up the broken wall. Outside, the trail continued northeast.

I slipped the scale into storage and launched myself forward again.

The blood trail crossed the remaining desert before turning toward the distant forest.

I reached the first trees within minutes.

This ecosystem felt completely different from the dunes. Moist earth replaced dry sand. Enormous roots twisted through the ground, some thicker than buildings. Plants glowed softly beneath the canopy, their leaves pulsing with stored energy.

Several large creatures moved through the darkness.

One stopped chewing long enough to look up as I passed overhead, then immediately flattened itself against the ground in the universal posture of an animal hoping a greater predator hadn't noticed it.

Halfway through the forest, I sensed Thor.

He was standing waist-deep in a river and scrubbing himself with such determination that he was removing a concerning amount of the riverbank along with whatever had gotten on him. Mjolnir rested on a nearby boulder, and pieces of discarded armor had been arranged along the shore to air out.

Even from several miles away, the wind carried a faint *odor*.

My nose wrinkled. It smelled like rotten eggs, spoiled onions, swamp gas, fermented giant sweat, and the concept of humiliation.

Thor plunged his entire head beneath the water, surfaced, sniffed one arm, grimaced, and started scrubbing again.

I considered stopping. I desperately wanted to know what had happened. But the blood trail was already fading, and questioning Thor could wait until later. Whatever story produced that smell would only improve with his attempts to hide it.

I continued past him without making my presence known.

The forest eventually thinned.

Mountains rose ahead, their jagged peaks cutting across the stars. Pale stone towers reached thousands of feet into the sky, linked by narrow natural bridges and broken shelves of rock. Cold air descended through the valleys, carrying the scent of snow despite none being visible at lower elevations.

The trail grew stronger.

Drops of Rey Dau's blood stained stone ledges and cliff faces. The white wraith had flown higher as it approached the mountains, occasionally striking the dangling corpse against the terrain.

It had been carrying the body somewhere specific.

I slowed as I entered the first ravine.

Here, the world became strangely quiet. No insects chirped. No small animals moved through the rocks. Even the wind seemed reluctant to enter.

Long scratches marked the cliff walls. Some were fresh, others old enough for erosion to soften their edges. Bones littered several narrow shelves above me—remains of large monsters, picked clean and arranged in deliberate piles rather than scattered randomly.

Territory markers. This was the domain of an apex predator. I followed the blood deeper into the mountains until the ravine opened into a vast stone basin surrounded by vertical cliffs.

At the far end, hundreds of feet above the ground, a cavern entrance split the mountain like a black wound.

Rey Dau's blood marked the rocks below it.

Something moved in the darkness.

My tails rose behind me. Blue foxfire flickered along their tips, then faded as I deliberately suppressed it. I smiled up at the cave.

"Found you..."

The cavern entrance was smaller than I expected.

That stopped being true once I stepped through it.

Beyond the narrow opening, the passage expanded into an enormous chamber buried inside the mountain. The ceiling rose hundreds of feet above me, supported by black pillars that looked grown rather than carved. Pale blue crystals embedded in the walls still emitted a faint, flickering light despite the age of the structure.

I stopped walking. "What the hell?"

This wasn't a nest. **It was a laboratory.**

Massive vertical pods covered the chamber.

Some stood upright along the walls in orderly rows. Others hung from the ceiling in clusters, linked to the stone by black conduits resembling roots or veins. The smallest pods were twice my height. The largest could have held creatures the size of dragons.

Clouded glass covered their fronts.

Something floated inside one of them.

I approached carefully.

The pod contained a pure-white monster curled into a fetal position. It had four limbs, folded wings, and a broad armored skull. Pale organic chains wrapped around its forearms, trailing through thick liquid like the tendrils of some deep-sea creature.

It wasn't the same monster I had tracked.

This one was smaller. Younger, perhaps?

I examined it. The creature possessed characteristics from multiple unrelated species. Its armor resembled reptilian scales but contained mineral fibers more commonly found in the shells of desert monsters. Its muscles were layered like those of an aerial predator, while its bones had the flexible internal structure necessary to withstand violent high-speed impacts.

The organs controlling its chains were stranger still.

They had been deliberately integrated into the creature's nervous system.

It was a *chimera*. Someone had *designed* this thing piece by piece.

I moved to the next pod.

Another white monster floated inside. This one had a longer snout and heavier forelimbs. Its chains ended in sharpened hooks rather than blunt segments.

The third pod was empty.

Cracks spread across its glass from a large hole punched outward.

I looked around more carefully.

Dozens of pods had broken from the inside.

Some had shattered so long ago that dust coated the broken glass. Others showed newer damage, with scratches in the surrounding floor suggesting their occupants had crawled or dragged themselves away.

There had been more than one white wraith. Potentially many more.

“How interesting,” I murmured. The entire place looked abandoned. Dust lay thick across the machinery, and mineral deposits had formed over several conduits. Tree roots had invaded cracks in the walls. Whatever civilization constructed this facility had disappeared centuries ago.

Maybe thousands of years ago. Yet portions of the laboratory remained active.

Faint energy moved through the walls. Several pods still regulated their internal temperature. Symbols flickered across a cracked panel near the chamber’s center, too damaged for my translation magic to reconstruct completely.

This world’s ancient inhabitants had created its monsters...

They had possessed biological knowledge sophisticated enough to combine traits from different apex species, technology capable of maintaining life for centuries, and a power source stable enough to continue operating long after their civilization vanished.

Then something had happened. Their creations broke free. I wondered if the white monsters destroyed their makers or merely survived whatever catastrophe had already ended them?

A heavy tearing sound drew my attention deeper into the chamber.

Rey Dau’s corpse lay near the base of a broken pod.

Sasuke hadn’t exaggerated the monster’s size. The lightning wyvern stretched across a significant portion of the floor, its wings folded at unnatural angles and one horn shattered near the base. Black burns from Amaterasu scarred its hide, and a deep wound through its throat showed where Sasuke had delivered the killing blow.

The body was already **half eaten**.

Large sections of its chest and abdomen had been stripped away. Several lightning-infused organs were missing entirely, and the exposed ribs bore fresh tooth marks. The white wraith had apparently brought Rey Dau here as food.

Sasuke would be furious when he learned that. Which meant I absolutely had to tell him!

I couldn’t see the white wraith itself.

But I could sense it. Its presence clung to the darkness above me. It had hidden itself among the inactive conduits and broken machinery near the ceiling, suppressing its breathing and heartbeat with impressive control.

It was waiting for me to approach the corpse.

Predators rarely appreciated strangers entering their dens and examining their dinner.

I smiled. The faint displacement of air came from behind me. I hopped sideways.

Something enormous crashed into the spot where I had been standing!

The impact shattered the floor and hurled chunks of ancient stone across the chamber. One piece struck a dormant pod, cracking its glass and causing dark preservative fluid to leak down the front.

The white wraith rose from the crater.

It was larger than I had expected.

Standing on all fours, its shoulders reached nearly twenty feet high. White armor covered its body in interlocking plates, with patches of pale grey hide visible around the joints. Its forelimbs were disproportionately powerful, ending in claws capable of gripping stone. Broad wings folded against its back, their edges lined with sharp structures resembling bone.

Its head looked like a combination of several different predators. Draconic jaws. Forward-facing eyes. Armored ridges that swept backward into short horns.

The most distinctive features were the chains. Thick white links emerged directly from organs embedded in the monster's forearms. The chains curled through the air with independent movement, flexing like muscular tendrils. Each link was covered in small hooked structures that opened and closed as they tasted my energy.

"Hello," I said.

The wraith roared.

The sound shook dust from the ceiling.

Both chains shot toward me. One swept low enough to cut through my legs while the other descended from above. I caught the first with my bare hand and slapped the second aside.

The impact sent a shockwave across the chamber.

Several cracked pods finally shattered.

I expected the chains to recoil.

Instead, the one in my hand tightened. Tiny hooks pressed against my skin—not hard enough to pierce it, but enough to establish contact.

Something pulled at me. It was subtle. A slight pressure beneath the skin, followed by the sensation of energy flowing down my arm.

My eyebrows rose.

The chain was absorbing my **life force**. Not just my magicules alone. Not just my Youki or stamina either. It drew from everything simultaneously, converting the stolen power into something the creature could use.

I yanked my hand free.

The white wraith staggered.

For one second, I thought I had injured it.

Then its entire body spasmed. The monster stumbled sideways, claws carving furrows through the floor as every muscle contracted at once. Pale light erupted between its scales. It threw its head back and released a tortured roar that climbed in pitch until it became nearly ultrasonic!

Its body began changing.

The white scales along its forelimbs darkened to pale blue. The color spread across its chest and neck in branching patterns like fire traveling through dry grass. Its muscles expanded, stretching the armor plates apart before new layers grew to fill the gaps.

The creature increased in size by several feet.

Its broken scales repaired themselves.

The chains thickened, each link gaining a faint blue glow around the edges.

I stared. "That was barely anything." The amount it had taken from me wouldn't have powered one of my tails for a second. I could regenerate the loss faster than it drained away.

For the white wraith, that tiny fragment of my power had been transformative.

The creature's energy had multiplied several times over! It shook itself, dislodging fragments of old armor as sharper blue-white plates grew beneath them. Its wings expanded and slammed open, sending a blast of wind through the chamber.

The wraith looked at me again. Its eyes had changed from colorless grey to bright blue. There was more intelligence in them now. And hunger.

"Oh," I whispered.

The monster lunged. It crossed the space between us far faster than before, swinging one chain horizontally while driving its opposite claw toward my chest. I ducked beneath the chain and caught its wrist.

The impact drove my feet several inches into the stone.

I grinned.

The wraith twisted with surprising skill, using my grip as leverage to throw its body sideways. One wing struck me across the face hard enough to launch me through an empty pod.

Glass exploded around me.

I landed in the remains of the machinery and looked down at the shallow scratch across my cheek. It healed immediately.

The white wraith watched the regeneration. Then both chains lifted. It understood. Maybe not the details, but enough to know I possessed more power than it had taken. The hooks covering its chains opened eagerly.

I climbed out of the broken pod and brushed glass from my shoulders.

This had started as a hunt for proposal materials.

Now I had a question. *How much could it absorb?*

The sensible approach would be to kill it immediately. Its life-draining ability made it dangerous, and allowing it to consume more of my power might create a problem. Gemma had warned me specifically about underestimating unknown monsters.

On the other hand—

I was curious. The creature had multiplied its strength after absorbing less energy than I used to heat a frying pan. What would happen if I gave it more? Could its body adapt indefinitely, or would it eventually reach a limit?

“That is incredibly irresponsible,” I told myself. And yet curiosity won out. Mostly because I wondered what the monster would taste like after **evolving** from my power.

The white wraith roared and charged again.

Golden light erupted around me. My human body expanded violently as I released my true form. The laboratory trembled. Ancient machinery collapsed beneath the pressure of my aura, and several intact pods cracked simultaneously.

Golden paws struck the floor.

My back rose toward the ceiling. Ten enormous tails unfurled behind me, each thick enough to crush buildings and long enough to stretch across the chamber. Blue foxfire ignited along my fur, illuminating every corner of the ancient laboratory.

The fifty-foot golden fox that filled the chamber was far larger than the wraith.

For the first time, the creature hesitated.

Its chains lowered slightly. Every predatory instinct it possessed screamed that something had gone catastrophically wrong.

I lowered my head until one massive golden eye stared directly into its blue ones. "Come on," I rumbled. "Are you gonna give up the chance to evolve further?" The words vibrated through the mountain. "I want to see what you can become."

The white wraith's fear lasted less than a second. Then hunger overcame survival instinct. It threw both chains around my foreleg. The hooks latched into my fur, and power began pouring out of me.

This time, I let it. Blue fire raced down the chains.

The wraith's eyes widened. Its body convulsed as a torrent of demonic life force flooded into organs never designed to process anything on that scale. The floor beneath it melted. White armor turned sapphire. Its muscles tore apart and rebuilt themselves faster, larger, and denser.

Wings expanded until they struck both walls. New chains burst from its shoulders in sprays of pale blood. Its roar deepened until it shook the entire mountain.

I felt the first genuine resistance when the creature pulled against my leg.

My fox grin widened.

– Thor –

...After what felt like genuine hours of scrubbing, Thor finally managed to remove the stench from his body.

He stood waist-deep in the river and cautiously sniffed his forearm. Cold water. Soap. Wet leather from the armor he had washed beside the bank. No rotten fruit. No lingering trace of the green cloud that had struck him with enough force to launch a god through three trees.

Thor sniffed again, more deeply this time. Nothing. "AT LAST!" His triumphant shout echoed through the forest.

Several Wudwuds gathered along the riverbank immediately started laughing.

Thor's expression darkened.

The small forest creatures had been watching him scrub himself for most of the evening. Some sat on rocks eating fruit. Others had brought their children to observe. At one point, a particularly bold Wudwud had demonstrated Thor's flight through the air by throwing a pink fruit against a tree.

They had all found that hilarious.

Thor glared at them. He considered scolding the creatures for failing to warn him about the Congalala's vile intestinal weapon. *No honorable warrior expected an opponent to turn around and blast me with a cloud of poisonous flatulence in the middle of a wrestling match!*

Then Thor remembered the Wudwuds repeatedly describing the beast as "stinky."

They had mentioned the odor at least six times. One had pinched its nose while speaking about it. Another had performed a surprisingly accurate pantomime of the Congalala bending over.

In hindsight, the warnings had been perfectly clear.

That did not mean they were entitled to laugh for hours.

Thor climbed from the river and pointed an accusing finger at them. "A warrior's temporary misfortune is not a subject for endless mockery!"

The Wudwuds laughed harder.

One fell backward off its rock. Thor briefly considered summoning lightning close enough to frighten them, then decided Jane would probably disapprove of terrorizing tiny forest people. Instead, he snatched up a towel and dried himself with as much wounded dignity as he could manage.

Night had settled over the forest while he bathed. Glowing insects drifted among enormous trees, and pale flowers opened beneath the three moons. Strange roars occasionally sounded in the distance, promising no shortage of worthy opponents.

His armor lay disassembled along the riverbank. Thor inspected each piece before putting it back on. The enchanted metal no longer carried any trace of the Congalala's stench. He fastened his bracers, secured his chest armor, and draped his red cape over his shoulders.

Mjolnir rested on a nearby boulder.

Thor extended one hand. The hammer flew into his grasp. That simple action still filled him with relief. For days after Odin had cast him out, Mjolnir refused to move beneath his fingers. Kunou had lifted it effortlessly, renamed it Sparkling Lightning-Chan, and then discarded it after growing bored. Thor had traveled to Skyrim powerless and furious, only to discover that the Nords cared little for his titles.

The Companions had made him work.

They made him hunt, carry supplies, clean equipment, and fight without relying on divine power. They laughed when he complained and struck him when arrogance made him careless.

Somewhere during those difficult weeks, Mjolnir had judged him worthy again.

Thor would have preferred never to lose it. He would also have preferred if Kunou stopped reminding everyone that she lifted it first.

The dead Congalala remained in the clearing beyond the river.

It had fought well before resorting to dishonorable chemical warfare. Thor had eventually defeated it by striking it unconscious with its own stolen fruit, then breaking its neck before it could unleash another cloud.

The hide remained largely intact, exactly as he wanted. Its pink fur was thick and unexpectedly soft. Jane would look magnificent in a coat made from it.

Thor also intended to bring Jane one of the monster's unusual organs to study. He had no idea which organ produced the gas attack, and under no circumstances did he intend to investigate personally.

He would let the *scientists* decide. Now he only needed to transport the carcass back to Haru.

The world shook.

Every glowing insect in the surrounding forest vanished at once. Water rippled across the river as a surge of magical power rolled over the land. Trees groaned beneath the pressure. Leaves tore free of branches and spun through the air despite the absence of wind.

Thor went still. The Wudwuds stopped laughing.

A second surge followed the first. This one was greater. Far beyond the forest, something enormous released a deafening **roar**.

The sound arrived like a physical shockwave. Water exploded upward from the river. Birds fled from the canopy in panicked clouds, and distant monsters cried out in alarm.

The Wudwuds screamed. Every one of them scattered simultaneously, diving into hollow trees, burrows, and patches of dense vegetation. Within seconds, Thor stood alone beside the river.

He knew the first power. "It's Haru."

The second presence was unfamiliar. And growing.

Thor seized his helmet, forced it onto his head, and tightened the last straps of his armor. Mjolnir spun once in his hand before he launched upward. He broke through the forest canopy in a burst of leaves. Lightning gathered around him as he rose above the trees. From that height, he could see the forest stretching across the horizon, broken by rivers and enormous stone formations.

The source of the disturbance lay in the mountains beyond.

Blue fire illuminated the night.

Thor climbed higher.

Another impact shook the world.

One of the distant mountains split down the center. The upper half slid sideways, trailing stone and dust before crashing into the valley below. The resulting plume rose thousands of feet into the air.

Thor narrowed his eyes.

Two titanic figures battled among the peaks.

The first was unmistakable. Haru's true form towered over the surrounding landscape, a golden fox nearly fifty feet tall with ten enormous tails. Blue flames crawled through his fur and streamed from his jaws. Every movement sent waves of demonic power across the terrain.

Thor had seen Haru transform before when Hela had asked to see her beloved's true form.

The other monster was new. It stood more than **one hundred** feet tall, large enough to dwarf even the fox Demon Lord. White and silver armor covered a body assembled from the traits of several different apex predators. Its upper limbs were thick enough to uproot ancient trees, while broad wings stretched across the valley. Blue light pulsed beneath its scales. Several enormous organic chains emerged from its forelimbs and shoulders, each one moving like a living serpent. Two had wrapped around Haru's torso. Others struck at his tails, tearing through stone whenever he dodged.

The monster pulled.

Haru's paws carved trenches through the mountainside as the chains dragged him forward.

The giant fox lowered his head, planted all four legs, and pulled back.

For a moment, neither moved.

Then Haru twisted. He tore the white monster from its footing and swung it through an entire mountain.

Stone erupted outward. The creature vanished into the collapsing peak.

Thor whistled. "That is an impressive beast!"

The white monster burst out of the opposite side before the rubble finished falling. Its chains wrapped around a nearby mountain spire, using the anchor to redirect its momentum. It swung around the peak and struck Haru across the face with both hind legs.

The impact created a thunderclap.

Haru flew backward. His enormous body crashed through a stone ridge and disappeared in an avalanche.

The white beast landed on all fours, roaring toward the fallen fox. Blue energy intensified beneath its armor, and its body visibly expanded. New scales grew across its chest. The chains became thicker and longer.

Thor's warrior instincts sharpened. The creature had grown since he first saw it. Even at this distance, he could perceive threads of Haru's energy moving through the chains. The monster was stealing power from him and using it to **evolve**.

That should have been alarming.

Instead, exhilaration surged through Thor's blood. This was a true monster. A creature capable of trading blows with a Demon Lord, demolishing mountains, and growing stronger in the middle of combat. A worthy opponent from a world built around hunting impossible beasts.

Perhaps Haru would permit me to join the battle?

The avalanche exploded.

Ten golden tails erupted from the rubble and wrapped around the white monster's legs. Haru pulled it off balance before launching himself upward. His jaws closed around one armored shoulder.

Blue foxfire detonated between his teeth.

The monster screamed as flames consumed half its upper body. It drove its chains into Haru's sides, drawing more power even while its armor melted.

The transferred energy rebuilt the damage almost instantly.

Its new scales grew back blue instead of white.

Thor laughed. The sound boomed across the forest. His worries about the Congalala, the ruined evening, and the hours spent bathing disappeared. This was why he had come to the Forbidden Lands. Not merely to win Jane's affection. To remember the joy of facing something strong. Thor swung Mjolnir overhead. Storm clouds formed in seconds, swallowing the three moons. Lightning flickered through them as the hammer pulled him toward the distant battlefield.

Then he remembered the corpse.

Thor stopped in midair and looked back toward the forest.

The Congalala remained beside the river, surrounded by Wudwuds who had cautiously emerged from hiding and were already poking at it.

He pointed Mjolnir toward them. "Guard my prize! I shall return!"

The Wudwuds waved. One immediately climbed onto the monster's stomach.

Thor decided that was good enough. He turned toward the mountains and accelerated.

The sky cracked behind him. Lightning wrapped around his armor as he crossed the forest, flying toward the battle between the golden fox and the evolving white wraith.

"Fear not, future brother-in-law!" Thor shouted. His voice rolled across the landscape like thunder. "Your future good-brother comes to aid you!"

The white monster smashed Haru through another mountain.

Thor grimaced.

"And I remain your good-brother!" he added hastily. "Not your good-son! We shall never speak of that possibility again!"

– Gemma –

Gemma had been sleeping peacefully beside the warm embers of her forge when the entire cave began shaking.

Tools rattled against the portable workbench.

Several newly sorted monster plates slid from their crates. A hanging lantern swung violently overhead before tearing loose and crashing against the stone floor.

Gemma sat upright. "What the fuck?"

A second tremor rolled through the cave. This one was stronger. The ground bucked beneath her bedroll. Cracks spread across the stone walls, spilling dust over the sleeping camp. Somewhere in the darkness, a stack of metal containers toppled with an earsplitting crash.

Hunters and supporters scrambled awake.

"EARTHQUAKE!"

"SECURE THE EQUIPMENT!"

"GET THE SEIKRETS OUTSIDE!"

“SOMEONE STABILIZE THAT SUPPORT BEAM!”

Gemma threw off her blanket and lunged toward the forge. She caught her tool chest before it fell, hugging it protectively against her chest.

People could run.

Good tools were harder to replace.

A deafening roar echoed through the mountains. The sound reached the cave as a wall of pressure. Everyone froze. The few remaining lantern flames guttered, and loose stones rained from the ceiling.

That was not an earthquake. It was a **monster**.

Before anyone could react, a second roar answered the first. This one was deeper. Larger. It carried something unnatural in it, an overwhelming pressure that made every animal in the camp panic simultaneously.

The Seikrets shrieked outside.

Gemma’s heart began pounding. *Two monsters. Two very large monsters.*

“Move!” Fabius shouted. “Everyone outside! Keep away from the cave walls!”

Nobody needed convincing.

Hunters grabbed weapons. Supporters seized medical packs and emergency supplies. Researchers gathered whatever notebooks they could carry before joining the rush toward the entrance.

Gemma shoved her feet into her boots, snatched up a hammer, and followed. She emerged into cold desert air beneath a sky filled with stars.

The entire camp was already staring toward the distant mountains. Blue light flashed beyond the forest.

A mountain exploded.

For several seconds, Gemma’s mind refused to understand what she was seeing. The range lay miles away, beyond the desert and the dark forest. Even at that distance, the debris plume climbed high enough to blot out part of the horizon.

Then something enormous moved through the dust.

A massive golden fox crashed through a ridge, sending stone tumbling down both sides of the mountain. It rolled once, dug its claws into the earth, and rose with ten huge tails fanned out behind it.

Blue fire burned along its body.

Its opponent leapt from the ruins.

The second monster was even larger. White and silver scales covered its vaguely draconic body, though sections had turned blue. Broad wings opened as it landed on another peak, and several enormous chains whipped through the air around it.

One chain struck the golden fox.

The collision produced a flash bright enough to illuminate the distant forest.

A moment later, the shockwave reached the camp.

Tents snapped against their anchors. People stumbled backward. Gemma planted her boots and shielded her eyes while a blast of hot wind swept over the desert.

“HOLY FUCKING SHIT.”

Every fear response in her body screamed that those creatures were too large, too powerful, and far too close.

A different part of her brain immediately began cataloguing materials.

The white monster’s scales had absorbed a direct blast of blue fire without disintegrating. Its chains remained intact after striking the golden creature with enough force to shatter a mountainside. The fox’s claws had carved through solid rock like soft clay.

What could I forge from either of them? Armor made from those white-and-blue plates might absorb elemental energy. The chains could be incorporated into a transforming weapon—perhaps a greatsword that separated into a segmented whip, with each link retaining the creature’s ability to drain power. And golden fox fur—

Gemma had no idea what it did, but considering the scale of the battle, she could probably use a handful to forge something capable of killing an apex predator. “Yes,” she whispered to herself, “I have a one-track mind.”

She forged monster corpses into weapons for a living. This was essentially pornography for blacksmiths.

“Hunter!” Alma pushed through the crowd, glasses crooked and notebook somehow already open.

The Hunter stood beside his Palico, wearing the equipment Gemma had completed only a few hours earlier. His hand rested on his new greatsword as he watched the battle.

“Get your equipment ready,” Alma ordered. “If those creatures continue fighting, they could destabilize the entire region. We need to draw them away before they destroy the surrounding ecosystem.”

The Hunter nodded once. He reached for his greatsword.

“Don’t bother.” The voice came from behind them. Sasuke Uchiha leaned against the stone beside the cave entrance, wearing Haru’s dark-blue kimono. His injuries had disappeared completely after drinking from the mysterious red flask, though his expression had remained just as unpleasant.

Everyone turned toward him.

Sasuke looked at the distant battle with open contempt. “All of you will **die**...”

The Hunter’s hand tightened around his weapon.

Several nearby hunters bristled.

Sasuke didn’t seem to notice or care. “That monster has reached Ultimate Class,” he continued. “Haru is beyond Satan Class. Just getting close to their battle will probably kill you.”

Silence spread through the camp.

Gemma looked at Alma.

Alma looked at Sasuke. Then she turned back toward the mountains.

The giant golden fox seized the white monster with several tails and slammed it through the side of a peak. Blue flames erupted from its jaws a moment later, turning the entire mountainside into a burning silhouette.

Alma slowly lifted one hand and counted. “One, two, three...” Her finger moved across the enormous tails. “...eight, nine, **ten**.” Her face went pale. “It has ten tails,” she whispered. Then her head snapped toward Sasuke. “IS THAT HARU?”

Sasuke scoffed. “Obviously.”

The camp erupted.

“THAT’S THE CHEF?”

“HE SAID HE WAS A FOX!”

“HE DID NOT SAY HE WAS *THAT MUCH* FOX!”

“HE COOKED US ALL LUNCH AND DINNER!”

“WHY DID NOBODY TELL US WE HAD A GIANT MONSTER SLEEPING IN OUR CAMP?”

Gemma continued staring toward the battle. The golden fox was Haru. The handsome, shameless man who had boarded their airship without anyone noticing, produced a gold bar from thin air, flirted with her beside the forge, and cooked food good enough to make hardened hunters cry could transform into a monster larger than most buildings.

Gemma had spent most of the day flirting with him.

That was crazy. It was also, if she was completely honest with herself, extremely hot. She accepted that this revealed uncomfortable things about her tastes. Then again, she made weapons from monster bones and wore a necklace carved from the fang of something that had once tried to eat her. Her standards for normal attraction had never been particularly conventional.

Fabius stepped closer to Sasuke.

The Guild leader’s usual composure had cracked. His eyes remained fixed on the distant fox, but the muscles in his jaw tightened whenever another mountain shook. “What does ‘Ultimate Class’ mean?”

Sasuke glanced at him. “A level where destroying a city requires little effort.”

Several people swore.

Fabius pointed toward the enormous white monster. “And beyond Satan Class?”

“A Satan-Class being could erase a *nation*.”

Another flash illuminated the horizon.

The golden fox caught the white monster’s jaws between its forepaws and hurled it into the ground. The resulting crater swallowed part of the valley.

Sasuke folded his arms. “Haru is stronger than that.”

Fabius stared at him. The Guild leader had so many questions that he appeared incapable of selecting one.

A small figure pushed through the gathered hunters. Nata stopped at the edge of the camp, staring at the distant white monster. The boy’s eyes widened. “That’s it.”

Alma turned toward him. “What?”

“That’s the White Wraith!” Nata stepped forward as if getting closer would help him see across the miles separating them. “Its chains—the wings and white armor. That’s the monster that attacked my village.”

The White Wraith rose on its hind legs and tore one of the golden fox’s tails away from its body. The severed tail dissolved into blue fire before reaching the ground, and a new one grew from Haru’s back moments later.

Nata shook his head. “But it wasn’t that big. It was large, but not...” His voice faltered. “Not that.”

The wraith now stood more than twice as tall as the golden fox.

Blue energy moved beneath its scales in luminous veins. Every time its chains struck Haru, the glow intensified and its body expanded slightly.

Sasuke’s expression darkened. “That arrogant fox did something stupid.”

Gemma looked at him. “What kind of stupid?”

“The monster is absorbing his power.” Sasuke’s black eyes suddenly became red eyes for some strange reason. Strange patterns rotated inside them as he studied the battlefield. “He probably noticed its ability and decided to feed it energy just to see what would happen.”

Alma stared at him in disbelief. “Why would anyone do that?”

“Hmph! Because Haru is arrogant.”

The white wraith wrapped three chains around Haru’s torso and swung him through a mountain.

Sasuke’s mouth tightened. “Arrogant but extremely powerful...”

The fox vanished beneath the collapsing peak.

Nata gripped Alma’s sleeve. “Is he losing?”

“No,” Sasuke said. His answer came without hesitation.

The mountain exploded outward.

Haru erupted from the rubble in a storm of blue fire. His body had grown larger, golden shoulders rising nearly level with the wraith’s chest. He caught two chains in his jaws and pulled hard enough to drag the monster from the opposite ridge.

“I can still sense more power inside him than the white-and-blue monster has absorbed,” Sasuke continued. “He’s controlling the fight.”

Gemma wasn’t convinced.

The white wraith crashed into the valley, rolled, and immediately returned to its feet. Its damaged wing repaired itself as energy flowed through the chains.

“How much stronger can that thing get?”

Sasuke’s red eyes narrowed. “That depends on when Haru stops playing with it.”

A streak of lightning appeared over the forest. It raced toward the mountains, resolving into a flying man with a red cape and a hammer raised overhead.

Gemma blinked. “Who—or what the hell is that?”

“Thor,” Sasuke said bluntly. Sasuke stared after him. “Idiot number two has arrived...”

It was strange, from this far away Gemma’s eyes shouldn’t even be able to make out that it was a flying man that joined the battle, and yet she clearly could, as if something about the man was larger than life itself. His hammer collided with the white wraith’s face. Lightning exploded across the entire mountain range. The monster staggered one step. Then one enormous chain swatted Thor out of the sky.

He disappeared through three distant peaks. *Was he even alive after a hit like that?*

The golden fox threw back his head. Even from miles away, Gemma could tell he was laughing.

– Haru –

I clamped my jaws around the White Wraith’s throat.

My fangs punched through its blue-white armor and sank into the dense muscle beneath. Strange blood flooded my mouth. Thick, metallic, and almost artificial. It tasted like alchemical preservatives, monster marrow, and concentrated life force.

Beneath all of that, I tasted myself. My stolen magicules saturated the creature’s blood. They had been processed and changed, but the underlying signature remained mine. Blue foxfire flickered between my teeth as my power reacted to its corrupted reflection.

The White Wraith thrashed. Its enormous claws tore trenches through the ground. Three organic chains wrapped around my torso and tightened, their hooks digging through my fur as they tried to drain one final burst of energy from me.

I bit down harder.

Its armor cracked.

The chains went rigid.

The White Wraith couldn't even release a final death scream. Its throat collapsed between my jaws, severing its spine and destroying the strange organs that controlled its chains.

The massive creature shuddered once. Then it went limp. Its weight dragged my head toward the ground as the hundred-foot monster collapsed. The impact sent a final tremor through the ruined valley and kicked up enough dust to bury a village.

I released its throat and planted one paw on the corpse.

Then I threw my head back and **howled**. The sound rolled across the Forbidden Lands. It echoed through the mountains, crossed the distant forest, and scattered every flying monster within miles. Blue foxfire surged along my ten tails, lighting the night brighter than the moons overhead.

Victory felt good. When the last echoes faded, I looked around. *Mistakes might have been made.*

The mountain range had been thoroughly remodeled.

Several peaks no longer existed. One had been split down the center, while another had collapsed into a neighboring valley. Craters overlapped across the battlefield, and long sections of exposed stone had melted into rivers of blue glass.

The terrain probably hadn't looked this bad before. On the positive side, we had avoided destroying the ancient laboratory.

That wasn't an accident.

Once the White Wraith grew large enough to threaten the facility, I deliberately pulled the battle away from it. Every time the monster tried retreating toward its lair, I intercepted it and redirected the fight into the surrounding mountains.

The laboratory contained dormant pods, unknown machinery, and evidence of an ancient civilization capable of artificially creating monsters. The Hunters Guild would want to explore it.

Alma might actually explode from excitement.

I looked down at my prize. The White Wraith's corpse twitched. Its huge body began shrinking. The armored limbs contracted first. A hundred feet became eighty, then sixty. Its enormous wings folded inward as bones shortened and muscle mass compressed beneath the scales.

"What?" I pressed one paw against the corpse. I couldn't stop it. The White Wraith's body had been artificially enlarged by stolen life force. Death had interrupted whatever process maintained the transformation, forcing its physical structure back toward its original configuration.

Within seconds, the monster had shrunk from over one hundred feet to roughly twenty.

Its energy hadn't diminished. The same tremendous amount of power remained compressed inside the smaller corpse. Its scales retained their blue coloration, and my magicules continued circulating through its dead tissues in stable channels.

That was probably still good for crafting.

I still frowned. "Less meat though..." I had been looking forward to seeing what a hundred-foot life-stealing chimera tasted like on the grill. At twenty feet, it could still feed a large crowd, but not the enormous interdimensional barbecue I had begun imagining.

How tragic...

Golden light surrounded me. My massive body compressed as blue foxfire swept across my fur. Paws became hands, my muzzle shortened, and the world appeared to grow around me until I stood in humanoid form beside the corpse.

My fox ears twitched atop my head. Ten golden tails swayed behind me, several singed or dirty from the battle. The damage would repair itself quickly, but I'd need a long bath to remove all the stone dust.

I rolled my shoulders. "That was interesting."

I genuinely hadn't expected the White Wraith to absorb so much power. Its original body should have torn itself apart after the first substantial infusion of my magicules. Instead, it had adapted continuously, rebuilding itself every time it reached a new threshold.

Things had gotten slightly out of hand.

Only slightly... Meh... I handled it in the end.

Thor's arrival had been less helpful than expected.

The thunder god descended from the sky wrapped in enough lightning to turn night into day. He struck the White Wraith directly in the face with Mjolnir, staggered it half a step, shouted something about aiding his future brother-in-law—

And was immediately **swatted** through several mountains.

It had been unexpected. It was also extremely **funny**.

I spread my senses across the surrounding landscape and found Thor's divine presence buried beneath several thousand tons of rubble. He was alive, but his energy had become unpleasantly still.

I walked toward the crater. "Thor?"

No answer.

I hopped down, using platforms of foxfire to descend past shattered ledges. Near the bottom, I found part of a red cape protruding from beneath a collapsed slab.

“Are you still alive?”

“Ow...” Thor replied.

I chuckled. “That sounded alive.”

“Brother-in-law,” he groaned, “I believe many of my bones are no longer where the Norns intended them to be.”

“That happens sometimes.” I lifted the slab with one hand and tossed it aside.

Thor lay embedded in the rock beneath it. His helmet had cracked, one arm bent in an alarming direction, and a large portion of his armor had folded inward across his chest. Mjolnir rested several feet away at the end of a furrow.

The White Wraith had struck him almost directly in the face.

I pulled out my Flask of Crimson Tears.

Thor tried to raise his head and failed.

“Drink.”

“I cannot feel my jaw.”

“Then this might get messy.” I opened his mouth carefully and poured a small amount of Crimson Tears between his lips.

Red-gold light spread across his body.

The broken bones repaired first, snapping back into place beneath the skin. His ribs expanded as his crushed chest restored itself. The dented armor shifted outward, pushed by regenerated muscle, while cuts and bruises vanished.

Thor shot upright. “Ha!” He climbed from the crater as if he hadn’t been reduced to divine debris moments earlier. He rolled both shoulders, stretched his neck, and summoned Mjolnir into his waiting hand. “That was an amazing battle, brother-in-law!” he declared. “One day, when my family takes Asgard back from my evil father, we shall sing this tale for ages to come!”

I climbed after him. “You should probably leave out the part where you got taken out in one blow.”

Thor’s face reddened. “Yes,” he said solemnly. “We should definitely leave that part out.”

"Maybe claim you were struck while protecting innocent villagers."

"An excellent suggestion!" Thor looked around the devastated mountain range, apparently deciding the battle had been a resounding success despite his limited participation. Then he remembered something. "I must return to the forest and retrieve my prize."

"What did you kill?"

"A mighty pink ape!" Thor spread his arms to demonstrate its size. "The beast possessed magnificent fur and strength worthy of respect. I defeated it in honorable unarmed combat." He said that last part slightly too quickly.

I sniffed the air around him. He smelled clean now, but faint traces of something unspeakable clung to Mjolnir's leather strap.

My eyes narrowed. "Did anything unusual happen during the fight?"

"No." The answer came immediately. *Too immediately.* Thor's gaze shifted toward the horizon. "The ape fought honorably. There were no strange or humiliating developments worthy of discussion."

Interesting...

"I'm sure."

"The pink fur shall make a beautiful coat for Lady Jane," Thor continued. "Though I confess I do not know how to forge the hide into proper clothing."

"I found a human camp nearby."

Thor's attention snapped back to me.

"They're professional monster hunters. They have a blacksmith named Gemma who specializes in turning monster parts into weapons and armor. I'm sure she can make Jane a proper coat."

Thor grinned and clapped one massive hand onto my shoulder. "You always seem to have everything planned out."

I laughed. "It only seems that way in hindsight. Most of the time, I'm just winging everything."

Thor stared at me for a moment. Then he threw back his head and laughed. "I suppose we are more alike than we initially thought!"

I couldn't help chuckling. *Maybe he was right.* We both tended to charge into unfamiliar situations, fight whatever looked interesting, and solve the consequences afterward. The primary difference was that I was usually much luckier. *Usually.*

Thor summoned a storm around himself and rose into the air. “I shall retrieve the ape and meet you at the camp!”

“Try not to get farted on again.”

Thor dropped several feet. His face went pale. “How did you—”

“My nose is very good.”

“THAT DETAIL SHALL ALSO BE REMOVED FROM THE SONG!” Lightning cracked across the sky as Thor flew toward the forest at maximum speed.

I turned back to the White Wraith. Its corpse would fit into my storage space easily now. I touched one blue scale and opened the dimensional inventory beneath it. The body disappeared into a ripple of distorted air. I also stored several broken chain segments scattered across the battlefield. Gemma could analyze them separately without cutting into the main corpse.

Once everything useful was collected, I launched myself into the sky. Blue foxfire formed beneath my feet. The ruined mountains blurred behind me as I crossed the forest and desert. Without the need to follow a scent trail, the return trip took only minutes.

The Hunters Guild camp came into view near the cave. Every lantern had been lit. Dozens of people stood outside.

I descended in a spiral of blue fire and landed several yards from the entrance. My feet touched the sand lightly, though the residual energy around me sent a ring of dust rolling through the camp.

Nobody spoke.

Alma stared at me with her notebook hanging limply from one hand.

Gemma stood beside her, still clutching a smithing hammer. Her eyes moved from my face to my ears, then slowly counted all ten of my tails.

The Hunter rested his new greatsword against one shoulder. His Palico hid behind one boot and peeked at me.

Fabius looked like a man trying to decide which of several hundred urgent questions should come first.

Sasuke leaned against the cave wall with his arms folded and an expression of profound irritation.

Everyone else simply stared.

I looked behind myself.

Nothing was there.

I checked my clothes. The battle had destroyed my shirt, but I still wore trousers, so that wasn't the problem.

My ears twitched. "Why is everyone looking at me like that?" I asked.

XXX