Master of One

# Prologue

My eyes focused hazily, taking in a rolling set of low dunes covered in sparse green grass.

A distant building swam slowly into focus, and my eyes took in mossy stone. A fort. Ruined. Twenty feet across, fifteen feet tall, defensible, except its front door has been shattered. The ruined scraps of iron-banded wood still cling limply to the rusted hinges.

Flicking my eyes left and right reveals pale-barked trees that stretch into a wide-spaced forest. Beyond that my vision slowly vanished into the outskirts of a forest of pale-barked trees.

A brightly glowing light suddenly appeared with perfect clarity in the middle distance of my vision. It swirled into the shape of a loose wheel for a moment and spiraled in place, before flowing off into elegantly script.

Welcome to Voltania.

You are being Judged.

The words poured into my mind as divine knowledge. The ‘You’ was plural. Everyone here was being Judged. Our actions measured, our accomplishments recognized, in a way that would ultimately matter.

The words were gone, but they left that profound knowledge in my head.

A rush of sound hit my ears as though time had been frozen and suddenly resumed. The squawk of squabbling gulls in the distance behind me snapped into focus, assaulting my ears from somewhere behind me.

I snapped my head around, suddenly focused and aware of the need to take in my surroundings.

I was standing at the top of a small grassy knoll in the middle of a wide field of sandy grass a quarter of a mile away from the ruined fort.

There was no one else in my view. The fort itself was the only visible sign that any sort of civilization had ever touched this land.

The skies above were thickly clouded, permitting only a hint of sunlight to shine through.

I looked down and examined myself. My body was clad in a basic shirt and pants made of coarsely woven, undyed cotton. The garments fit relatively well and draped loosely from well muscled limbs that flexed as I shifted my weight. They moved easily - very easily - and otherwise seemed to be in about the right shape and size. Nothing about them felt awkward or unfamiliar, and my fingers rippled smoothly as I opened and closed my hands.

I knelt and examined the grass. It was long and thin, growing up through coarse sand in several small batches. Beach grass. I couldn’t see the ocean, but between the cawing of the gulls and the sent of salt in the air I could tell it was near.

I did not remember how I got here.

I had died.

I knew that.

But I didn’t actually remember dying.

I could pull up the details of my life - up to a point - but at some point in thinking through recent history, no topic I brought up was anything recent. I remembered my friends, some current events, some recent news stories I’d read, but I also knew that I didn’t know what happened to them. Not recently, anyway.

And I knew that it felt important. Both that I couldn’t remember what happened recently, but that I could remember them at all.

I realized I’d been staring into the distance again with a sense of urgency, snapping into the moment. On instinct, I thought to myself- ‘Character Sheet’.

A bright white set of elegant script overlaid my vision.

Like the golden words from before, they somehow clearly filled my middle distance, the words simply overlaying reality like a very fancy three dimensional heads up display.

Name: Daniel

Species: Human

Class: Invoker

Specialization: Emanator

Might: 50

Agility: 50

Endurance: 50

Affinity: 100

Chronointerconnectivity: 25

Interpersonal Gravity: 100

Perks:

Reincarnate

Aura Access

Meridian Cultivator

Titles:

Master of One

# Chapter 1

With single thought I dismissed my character sheet and it faded instantly from my view.

I had barely finished reading before a figure had stepped through the doorway of the distant fort and strolled drunkenly around the outside.

I hadn’t actually noticed him at first, since my attention had been fixed on the glowing words. For that matter, he still didn’t seem to have noticed me, despite the fact that I was still standing in plain view in the middle of a wide clearing.

I took a moment to examine the man from where I stood.

He appeared to be human, but with such filth-covered skin that I wasn’t actually entirely sure.

He was dressed in some kind of haphazardly assembled armor formed from some clumsily beaten sheets of metal that had been pounded roughly into shape and then hastily stitched onto ill-fitting leather straps. Its crowning glory was the large metal disc that hung over the center of his chest, providing at least a nominal attempt at preventing someone from harming anything vital.

His legs were unarmored, garbed instead in loose undyed cotton pants.

Disheveled brown hair hung in limp ropes around the sides of his head.

He was also swaying from side to side visibly with each step, incredibly drunk to the point it was obvious he was hovering on the edge of passing out even from this distance.

I was under no impression that he would a great conversationalist, but he was the first and only person I’d seen since I arrived, and I needed information.

I started forward.

By the time I’d crossed the uneven field to reach the fort, the man was leaned up against the outer wall, pissing on it. One hand propped him up against the solid stone, the only thing preventing him from collapsing into his own puddle.

I stopped about a hundred feet back and waited. If I wanted to try to make a good impression on the man, I wasn’t going to approach and surprise him while his pants were barely hanging down around his knees.

An uncomfortably long time later, he finally managed to finish up and I experienced a strange flood of gratitude as he finally pulled up his pants.

I gave him a few more moments to ensure that he had time to retie his belt before stepping forward towards him. As I did, I put both of my hands up , facing my empty palms flat out in front of me to show how empty they were. When I made it to about eighty feet away, he suddenly whirled around unsteadily to face me.

I froze and watched his ruddy face scrunch up as he leaned forward to squint at me as though trying to decide if I were real.

“I’m not looking for a fight!” I called out, taking no further steps towards him.

He began to lean slowly to one side, stumbled, caught himself, then found a wavering balance and managed to pull himself somewhat steady once more.

His right hand raised slowly towards me, stretching his index finger out to point. I watched it move with my eyes narrowed in focus.

When his finger pointed directly towards me, the man let out a surprisingly wet grunt and a bead of bright orange light appeared at the tip of his finger.

Everything froze, all sound drawing to a halt as the same glowing golden light from when I first arrived flowed into view in front of me. Just as before, it formed glowing golden words which, as far as I could tell, were actually floating as three dimensional shapes in the middle distance between us.

Bandits (3)

By the time I managed to process the letters they vanished, and time rushed back in.

I dove to the side as the bead of orange blazed to life in the form of a searing ribbon of scorching energy. It streaked past me, narrowly missed my shoulder and instead dug a thin smoking trench a few inches into the sandy grass.

I hit the ground on hands and knees, and began to scramble forward into a run. I circled the man, outpacing him as he spun to keep his finger trained on me.

My body moved more easily than I expected. I remembered keeping myself in shape, exercising regularly, but the way my limbs now responded was steadier and swifter than I had ever been.

My feet pounded into the sand.

Another bead of orange formed at the tip of the bandit’s finger and another blast of orange light blazed past me. He was drunk enough that this blast was a good ten feet ahead of my current path, and the line it cut into the ground made an uneven scar as his aim wandered.

I thrust my right leg into the ground hard to push off, threw myself in his direction, and launched into a sprint.

I didn’t have an exact plan, but if this man was going to try to kill me, I didn’t have any other realistic choice. The land behind me was a massive open field of loose sand without so much as a scrap of cover, so fleeing simply wasn’t an option.

If I was going to survive, I was going to close to melee with him where I could at least try to fight him hand to hand. It didn’t look like his control over the blasts he unleashed was particularly solid, so if I could just tackle him to the ground, would open up the option of hitting him until he stopped.

Another bead of orange began to form on the tip of his finger and tracked towards me as I closed the last twenty feet. Before it could release its blast, I threw myself to the side again, hard. The orange energy just barely grazed my arm, searing a hole through my shirt with a strange ripping noise. I felt a line sting along my arm but I had managed to divert enough of momentum to the side to avoid real harm.

When my feet landed, though, my sudden change of direction cost me in balance, but I pivoted and dug my feet hard into the sand, then pushed off again in a display of agility that surprised not only him, but also myself. While I lost all momentum and speed, I avoided his aim and somehow managed to barely catch myself as I somehow avoided slamming my face into the ground.

The man’s bleary eyes tracked my as I closed. This near, I could see a sharp nose and narrow mouth, separated by a thin black mustache. He could’ve walked the streets in Barcelona without standing out from a crowd, if you somehow washed the thick layer of grime from his skin.

His arm began to swing around to point towards me.

I lunged at him to close the final few feet. My final push brought me inside the reach of his arm and I balled up my hand into a comfortable feeling fist.

It was a familiar gesture, but perhaps not overly so. I had memories of making a fist in my previous life. I hadn’t been a fighter, but the gesture was still somewhat familiar.

My fist drew back tight against my chest. It felt as though time slowed down as I turned my hand palm up, and punched out with as much speed and force as I could manage.

I felt my knuckles drive into the top of the man’s gut, the blow landing just at the base of his ribs.

I had a memory of punching something before I died. Punching bags, mostly, but there had been at least one fight. I felt like I had a solid idea of what a hit like this did to me, even. I remembered a solid blow to my midsection that had knocked the wind out of me for a full fifteen minutes.

The first of the three bandits died when my fist tore through his body in a shower of intestines and blood.

The spray splattered across the mossy stone walls of the fort behind him.

His head and shoulders spun through the air and landed several feet away with a wet slap. They rolled to a stop about the same time that his hips and legs collapsed to the ground.

My right hand was absolutely covered in blood but seemed otherwise unharmed. When I looked down at the cotton shirt and pants I wore, I discovered that while they weren’t as soaked as I might have feared, some of the fountain of blood and guts had splashed off of the wall and spattered me with drops of red.

I took steady breaths and discovered that despite my desperate sprint I somehow wasn’t even slightly out of breath.

Before I could even begin to process what had just happened, the sound of shouting from the other side of the fort walls grabbed my full attention. I couldn’t make out the words themselves, but as I listened, the voices seemed to be approaching approaching rapidly.

I spared a quick glance down to the remains at my feet. My eyes landed on a long sheathed knife and I immediately reached down to snatch. The weapon was tied to the belt by a rough length of cord, but that snapped easily with a single quick tug.

Now armed, I stepped quickly and lightly to the wall to remove myself from the approaching men’s immediate line of sight.

The fact that I had just pressed my shoulder against a wall newly painted with a man’s intestines only occurred to me when I felt the cloth of my shirt suddenly soak through with his blood.

I was saved from having to think too hard about that sensation by the sudden emergence of a tall man in leather armor, both of which had seen better days.

His dark skin was cleaner than the drunk’s had been, and his motions were somewhat steadier, but the mostly empty bottle which dropped from his grasp as he pushed past the door spoke to him being only moderately more sober than the last.

Despite his condition, he didn’t actually hesitate on emerging. His eyes swept over to take in his friend’s remains, and he stared blankly at it for only a moment. Then shock swept over his expression and his eyes grew wide.

I began to creep towards him. He shook himself and spun his head in time to see me approach from about ten feet away. When his eyes locked on to me, he instantly shouted angrily, “Kill this fucker!”

His hand reached to his side as he began to stomp towards me. His right hand dipped to his waist and he wrapped his fingers just below the head of a surprisingly ornate handaxe, then drew it smoothly from its polished leather sheath. The motion betrayed no sign of the unsteadiness that was in his gait a moment before. As he took the last steps towards me, he slid his hand along the polished wood of the haft he found the leather grip at the base.

My fingers wrapped around the knife still sheathed in my hand. I whipped it free and flung it into the chest of the second bandit in a single fluid motion.

The blade rammed into his chest so hard it sank through until barely a few inches remained visible in his chest.

He’d been wearing stiff leather armor, but the dark brown plates didn’t appear to have so much as slowed the knife in its motions. His gaze dropped to his chest to take in the hilt for only a moment before he crumpled to the sand in a heap.

I wasn’t sure if it had been an entire minute since the first drunk asshole started to shoot blasts of energy towards my face, but it felt as though I’d been in a life-and-death brawl for an eternity already.

The golden letters had spelled out that there would be three bandits, so it wasn’t a surprise when the final one emerged from the door.

He was was enormous. Clad only in a rough leather loincloth, he was somehow pasty white despite what must have been constant exposure to the sun. He was built on thick, heavy lines that made me think immediately of the biggest trucker I had ever seen, with a massive beer belly, arms like barrels, and a slack jawed expression that left his thickly chapped lips hanging open.

The only thing he was missing from my memory was a confederate flag t-shirt and a massive head of dirty blonde curly hair spreading in a stringy mop along his neck.

Instead, this one had three inch long tusks curling up and out of his mouth from his lower jaw. Said jaw hung open in disbelief as he emerged from within the fort to be greeted by the sight of one of his companions torn literally in two while blood poured from the mouth of the other who was now convulsing on the ground at between us.

The heavyset newcomer snorted, stamped his feet once each, then clapped his meaty hands together in front of his chest. When they pulled apart, a thick length of gray metal extended between his palms and folded into view - not on hinges, but as though he were somehow pulling it closer along a distant axis until it arrived full sized and he was holding a long staff. He gave the heavy weapon a surprisingly fast spin over the back of one of his hands and then caught it in both with the reverberating smack of metal on thick, meaty palms.

I kicked at the ground and sent a spray of sand from the ground into the air in front of me. The newly armed man let out a loud, “FUCK!,” as the grit landed in his eyes. His right hand released the staff and flew to his face to try to wipe them clear, but I didn’t give him much of a chance to recover. I drove my legs into the ground hard as I sprinted forward. He was tall enough that my feet had to leave the ground as I drove a fist into the bottom of his chin.

Another spray of blood coated the front of the fort as the massive man’s skull shattered. His body toppled back, collapsing in the middle of the broken doorway of the fort with a heavy thud.

I bounced on the balls of my feet, barely catching my balance as I landed on the uneven sandy ground.

Adrenaline still pumped through my veins, but aside from the sound of my own slightly breathing, the only noise I could pick up was the distant cries of gulls.

# Chapter 2

When no one else emerged from the fort, I took it as a good sign the golden letters had been right. Three bandits. No more.

A sudden chill ran through my shoulders and down my spine. A moment later I realized it was because a rain that was as much misty haze as falling drops had started to fall overhead. The rain itself was cool, but my body still felt hot from the exertion and exhilaration of the sudden confrontation, and I found that I welcomed the contrast.

I pulled my shoulders up and stood to my full height. I’d been tall before, and while I’d had a few inches on either of the first two bandits, the third had towered over me by a full head and shoulders.

I walked closer and examined his body. I immediately noticed some distinctly non-human features – the tusks were a standout, on closer inspection I realized the gray boots I’d thought he’d been wearing were in fact thick hooves. His legs were thick poles, and at their base were a massive set of hooves.

Rather like a pig’s.

My character sheet had said that I was human, and it was obvious there were other words that could have filled that space. Something like a memory tickled at the back of my head at that thought, but when I tried to follow it there wasn’t anything there.

The rain began to pick up and I looked around at my options for shelter.

My eyes passed over the three corpses that now littered the ground.

I hadn’t had a chance to talk them. They hadn’t given me the chance to plead my case. It wasn’t that they had seemed unintelligent - I’d seen obvious emotions on their faces, even.

I couldn’t bring myself to feel bad about their deaths.

They had tried to kill me, without a moment’s hesitation, and we were being Judged.

I didn’t know how we were being scored, but I had a feeling some people had some pretty strong opinions on the topic.

I walked over to the second man to search his body. The hilt of the long dagger still protruded from his chest, but when I wrapped my fingers around the base of the hilt to try to pull it out, I discovered that the blade had bent and lodged itself pretty permanently in his chest.

I left it, and instead turned my attentions on the axe that had fallen to the ground at his side. The head of the axe was dark polished metal, decorated with etched lines that resembled Celtic knotwork. The blade was longer than the hatchets I remembered using when camping, though those memories felt older even than the others - it had been a long time since I’d been out in the woods.

I scooped the weapon off of the ground and found its balancing point by resting the haft between my thumb and forefinger.

I’d always done that with the little hatchets, too. I remembered feeling slightly silly about it, but knew that the balance of something you swing was important, even if it was just a little axe to trim twigs and branches to feed the fire while camping.

This axe was heavier than the fancy alloy camping hatchets, but only slightly. Despite its sturdy appearance, it moved easily, and I transferred it to my offhand so I could continue searching for anything of interest.

The second and third man both had small leather pouches tied to their belts. The massive porcine figure might have had more, but I wasn’t willing to rifle through his loose leather codpiece to find out. I stepped around his body to look inside the fort.

The interior of the building was a single open room that was in a state of massive disrepair. The walls and floor were mostly intact - it looked as though the moss would take quite a bit of time to tear those apart - but the thick wooden beams of the ceiling had already rotten through some time ago. Half of the now turned the back of the fort into a jumble of splinters and broken beams.

I checked overhead. I could hear the steady drum of rain on the still remaining wood overhead. It didn’t seem to be bulging or moving, so I took that as a sign it wouldn’t immediately collapse. Rather than facing the sudden downpour outside I elected to remain in shelter for now and hope that if the roof decided to come down I’d manage to scramble clear before it did.

A small fire crackled and hissed just inside the edge of the remaining ceiling. Mostly sheltered, the occasional raindrop landed in the flames but didn’t look to be in danger of immediately putting it out. Some smoke lingered in the room, but much more poured out through the massive open hole above.

I rushed over and grabbed some of a nearby pile of dried sticks and branches, noting that there were also a handful of somewhat larger dry logs. I went to work and soon the fire blazed brightly enough that I was convinced it wouldn’t burn for a while without attention. The heat of the flames went a long way towards warding off the chill seeping into me, but it also highlighted the fact that my shirt and pants were both currently soaked.

I stripped off my shirt, leaving me bare from the waist up, and tossed the sodden garment over the back of an ancient wooden chair as I turned to finally survey the room.

It had probably been a barracks. There were wooden frames that had would have once been canvas cots. A few still held and looked like they might support a body, while a pile of canvas in the corner suggested that the big one had ripped apart the rest to use as padding while he slept on the wooden floor.

An ancient table in the corner looked like it might have once been nicely polished wood, but time and weather had leeched out most of the color. The handful of nearby chairs were in similar condition - rickety, but not quite ready to collapse.

Of potentially more interest was a polished leather chest shoved up against the wall just inside the door. Wider than it was tall, I guessed it was about three feet across. It looked well oiled, with thick wooden feet at all four corners to keep it off of the wet ground. The lid was held shut by means of a simple leather buckle and leather strap.

I walked across the room and squatted down to check it out. When I unbuckled and opened the lid it revealed the chest was half-empty. It had also clearly been rifled through, since everything was in a jumble, but I identified several shirts and a couple pairs of pants, a leather-bound journal, and a few items of tin cookware.

My right hand was still covered in blood so rather than dirtying the only clean clothing I might have, I closed the lid and walked back to the door of the fort. Rain still fell in steady sheets outside, though it looked as though it might be slowing.

I considered my options. I had fire here, and shelter, but if I sat around staying dry, I would also wind up caked in drying blood.

I knew that the ocean wasn’t far, if I could make it to the beach I could wash myself off.

I couldn’t drink that, though, and while I wasn’t thirsty yet, I knew I’d need water eventually. I hadn’t seen any obvious canteens, but spotted a few dirty bottles that I assumed were filled with whatever my attackers had been drinking.

I only had to think for a moment before turning that option down. I walked back to the chest and pulled out the largest of the tin pots, then carried it with me to the door.

I leaned out into the still falling rain and set it on the ground. Droplets began to spatter noisily into the container, but that turned to splashing as it began to slowly fill with clear water.

That done, I turned in the direction of the still crying birds and began to walk through the rain.

# Chapter 3

It was a matter of twenty minutes walk to cross the field of patchy grass in the rain. I crested a small hill on the far side and was greeted by a swath of yellow sand, scattered driftwood, and lumps of seaweed. White-capped waves rolled in to wash over the beach, and I could finally see the gulls I’d been hearing since my arrival as they hopped around to hunt for whatever scraps caught their attention.

The beach curved away in both directions. To the left, that meant it disappeared from view behind a low rise. I turned my head to the right and saw that a few hundred feet away the sands were abruptly cut split by a rocky cliff which cut through to rise over the ocean.

Atop the cliff, barely visible in the rain, I could just make out a dark wooden building.

Details were sparse thanks to the rain, but the glow of warm orange light emerging from within the windows suggested the people inside put more care into their surroundings than the men who had attacked me.

I considered abandoning the fort and approaching as I was. I gripped the handaxe I’d claimed in one hand. I’d brought it in case I was attacked again, and I still wore the now blood spattered pants I’d had on when I woke up, but I’d left everything else behind in the ruined fort.

Showing up half naked, holding an axe, and covered in blood, didn’t seem like the way to kind of reception I wanted.

I turned and began to walk down the beach towards the ocean.

The fullness of the waves and amount of beach visible told me it was nearly high tide, but from the way the seagulls were chasing the waves I could guess that the zenith had passed. Every time a wave retreated along the sands the birds fought for what scraps of food the ocean had been willing to surrender in its retreat.

The gulls were at soaked by the rain as I was, but while they eyed me as I stepped into their midst, they didn’t immediately flee at my approach. Instead, a pocket formed as they parted before me, and I walked towards the sea surrounded by their constant chatter.

Halfway to the water, I stopped to strip off my pants. They weren’t in bad shape compared to what was left of my original shirt, so I hooked them over a driftwood log before I waded into the ocean.

The water was far warmer than I expected.

I’d grown up in New England. The Atlantic wasn’t always freezing, but that far north it’s waters ranged from bracing to hazardous depending on the time of year.

This was warm enough that with only a few moments to adjust, I felt reasonably comfortable. The waves were warmer by far than the rain which still poured down from above.

I spent several minutes washing the blood from my skin. Handfuls of sand helped scrub my skin clean as I planted my feet in the wet sand and let the waves roll over my knees.

As I worked, I caught a shape out in the distance of the sea. A ship, far enough out from land that I could barely make out the vague gray shapes of a set of massive sails. I spent a few moments staring at it before bracing myself. Teeth clenched to keep them from chattering, I marched out of the waves and back up the shore.

I pulled my soaking wet pants over my still wet legs with some effort. Still soaked by both the waves and the rain, I set my mind against the discomfort and began to march the distance back towards the fort, drawn by the prospect of shelter and warm fire.

When I arrived, the building itself appeared unchanged, but stepping up to the door revealed a new inhabitant within.

She was short and slender - through I would have called her wiry rather than just skinny. She wore practical brown leather trousers and cream colored cotton shirt. A sturdy leather jacket rested atop a wooden chairs next to her as she stared into the fire.

She didn’t react to my arrival.

Her hair was long and a beautiful silvery-white color. She had gathered it into a simple braid behind her head, which hung nearly the whole way to the ground when she sat. She was seated on one of the rickety chairs that had been left behind in the fort. Her face was illuminated by the nearby fire, the orange glow revealing tan skin smooth and unlined. As I looked more closely, though, I noticed tiny creases at the corners of her eyes and mouth that somehow banished any assumptions I might have made about youth.

The long sharp point of her closest ear rose to a few inches past her hairline.

Elf. My mind supplied the word unbidden, and nothing I could see suggested it was wrong.

I cleared my throat.

The woman spoke without turning, as though she’d been waiting for me to announce myself. Her voice was rougher than I would have expected based on her appearance – not quite like a pack-a-day smoker, but raspy and hoarse.

I wondered how many hours she’d spent talking around a campfire like the one into which she now stared.

“If you aren’t going to attack me, you should probably come in out of the rain.”

I hesitated for only a moment before starting to step around the body of the pig-like man that still half-blocked the fort’s door.

Without looking in my direction, the elven woman gestured towards the body and added, “Your doing, right? If so, you’ve more right to this shelter than me. Fought for it. I just stepped in when the rain started.”

She let out a laugh that I charitably decided not to label as a cackle and finally turned her head towards me. While I wouldn’t have initially described her as beautiful, there was a strength and a handsomeness to her strong jaw and sharply defined nose that spoke of an appealing inner vitality. Her eyes remained half closed, but I had little doubt she was aware of everything she deemed important. When her lips curled up I immediately saw the source of the little lines at the corners of her lips in her smile.

“If you aren’t the one who did this, you might as well come in anyway. Just know that I don’t intend to challenge anyone for this space - I’m just here to get out of the rain.”

It was my turn to smile. The axe was still held in my hand, but I stuck a finger through the loop of leather cord at the base of its haft and let it dangle loose. I held up both my hands at the woman, palms out, and informed her, “This was my doing. I have no intention of attacking you. These three decided to try to kill me unprovoked. As long as you don’t do the same, you’re welcome to shelter here from the rain-” I paused, then added, “-so long as you don’t mind if I take the chance to dry off and get dressed while you do so.”

The elf nodded once without speaking, then turned her head back towards the fire. I stepped around the body in the door to finally get under the roof of the fort again and out of the rain. The storm wasn’t getting any heavier, but it hadn’t really lessened in the last twenty minutes either. After spending most of an hour in it I was freezing, and just being in shelter was a welcome relief.

I turned towards the leather chest just inside the door, rather than approaching the seated woman. Squatting down, I popped it open again to find some way to dry off. There weren’t any towels, so I grabbed the thickest looking shirt inside and used that to instead. While not ideal, it worked well enough to wipe most of the moisture from my skin. I draped the now soaked garment over the edge of the chest to dry, then looked through my options to actually wear.

A light green cotton shirt caught my attention and I lifted it out of the chest. It was nicer than anything I’d seen any of my attackers wear, but as I held it up I could see why none of them had claimed it. It was significantly too large for either the drunk or the axe wielder, small enough that the pig-man probably couldn’t have gotten it over his head.

It was a little big for me, but would do for now. The warmth it offered when I slipped it on over my head was a welcome comfort and I could feel the shivering that had been running through my torso begin to subside.

I found wool pants and a leather belt in the chest as well. There were stripes of soft brown cloth that I guessed were meant to serve as underwear, but I wasn’t willing to take the time to figure out how they were meant to be worn.

I glanced over at the woman by the fire. She didn’t appear to be looking in my direction. She hadn’t appeared to be looking at the door when I arrived, either, but from her lack of reaction when I first addressed her, I assumed she was keeping track of me some other way.

This wasn’t the time for modesty. I stripped off my sodden pants and spent a minute using the same thick shirt to dry my legs. When I pulled on the wool trousers from the chest, the fabric felt scratchy against my skin, but it was warm, dry, I started to feel human once again.

Clothed and with my skin beginning to dry, I finally approached the woman by the fire. She had been tending it while she sat, feeding it from the piles of dry wood to her side. The bandits hadn’t stocked a vast supply of sticks and twigs, but I guessed we could keep things burning for a couple of hours at least with what remained.

I brought over one of the other ancient chairs and placed it near the fire, far enough away from the woman that I felt like I wasn’t crowding her, but near enough to feel the heat of the flames as they dried my skin.

I wasn’t overly concerned that the elf woman would attack me. She hadn’t when I had literally had my pants around my ankles a few moments ago, so it seemed unlikely she would do so now. Neither did I feel a particular need to encroach on her personal space.

She waited in silence until I sat down, then turned to face me once more and gave me another smile. This one was gentler than the last, and after the instant attacks from the first three people I met on this world the expression was incredibly welcome.

“I’m Yuuna. And I’m going to bet that you have some questions.”