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WHAT DO YOU MEAN I'M THE STRONGEST?

I'M NOT EVEN AN ADVENTURER YET!

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WHAT DO YOU MEAN I'M THE STRONGEST?

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“Are those...people?”
“Bandits, I assume. They must
think we’re a juicy target...”

【 Noor 】

【 Sirene 】

【 Lynneburg (Lynne) 】

【 Rolo 】

I PARRY
EVERYTHING 6
WHAT DO YOU MEAN FOR THAT STRENGTH?
DO NOT EVEN AS AN ADVENTURER YET.
“You have no talent at all.”
So the man was told.
But after mastering [Parry]
and becoming the strongest...



A massive shock wave swept over me.
The ground rumbled more violently than before,
and a cloud of sand so large it resembled
a dust storm shot up into the air.

“It jumped...?”

I PARRY
EVERYTHING

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT, CAPTAIN?
I'M NOT EVEN AN ADVENTURER YET!

【 The Story So Far 】

In the depths of the dungeon below Mithra,
Noor freed the adventurer Astirra,
an exact look-alike of the Theocracy's
reigning high priestess. Upon learning that her captive
was loose, the high priestess gave her body to Holy Mithra,
allowing its transformation from a giant
skeleton into an even more horrifying monster.

Noor and the others were on the back foot
against Holy Mithra's overwhelming strength.
Rolo used the magician's ring he received from Oken
to summon Rala, the Dragon of Calamity, and it
joined the fierce battle. Their desperate
clash seemed to have no end in sight,
but then Lynne dealt the decisive blow,
using fusion magic to reduce the monstrosity to ash.

In the aftermath of the conflict, the adventurer Astirra
resolved to stay in Mithra and become
Holy Prince Tirrence's mother.

I Parry Everything
What Do You Mean I'm the Strongest?
I'm Not Even an Adventurer Yet!

Characters

Noor



Noor

At twelve years old, after being told that he had no talent for any of the six classes, he went into isolation and spent a decade honing his only skill: [Parry]. Despite being an adventurer of the lowest rank, he's unbelievably strong—though he's the only one who has yet to notice.

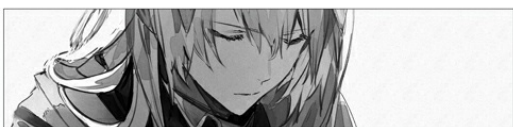
Lynneburg (Lynne)



Lynneburg Clays (Lynne)

Fourteen. Unequaled in all fields, and the first princess of the Kingdom of Clays. Enemy powers made an attempt on her life, but Noor managed to save her. She has called him "Instructor" and followed him ever since.

Ines



Ines Harness

A knight of the Kingdom of Clays. She has wielded a unique defensive skill since she was a child and uses it in her capacity as Lynne's bodyguard. Twenty-one.

Rein



Rein Clays

Lynne's brother and the first prince of the Kingdom of Clays. Twenty. A calm and collected man who bears the duty of guiding the Kingdom as the king's advisor. There are some goals he will go to any length to achieve.

Rolo



Rolo

A demonfolk boy. The circumstances of his birth and upbringing are mysterious. As his race is largely scorned and oppressed, he has lived a very miserable life.

Astirra (Her Holy Highness)



Astirra the Adventurer

One member of the trio known as the Philosopher's Goblet. She spent years trapped beneath the Holy Theocracy of Mithra before Noor set her free.

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Chapter 107: The Oracle's Orbs

"Can you see me, everyone?"

In temples across the continent, followers of the Church of Mithra bore witness to a miracle: a violet orb projecting an ethereal image in pale light. They held their breath when the image first appeared; then quiet exclamations of wonder interspersed the silence.

"Look... It's the high priestess..."

High Priestess Astirra, the founder of their religion, was even more beautiful than the stories about her proclaimed. Excluding the few who had attended ceremonies held in the Theocracy, most had never seen her face, let alone had the opportunity to hear her voice. Yet there she was before them, all thanks to the oracle's orbs distributed to every church across the land. She was dressed in such solemn splendor that she seemed divine, and many sighs of admiration came from those beholding her.

"Look at her beauty. She truly is God's messenger."

"You're being disrespectful. Commoners like us shouldn't stare so much."

"But she looks so—"

"Shush! Her Holy Highness is about to speak. Don't you dare miss a word."

Over the adherents' excited chatter, the high priestess's voice carried through the church.

"To those of you who are seeing me for the first time, it is a pleasure to meet you. And to those of you I've met before, I am honored to make your acquaintance again. I am Astirra, the high priestess of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra. You are all seeing me like this today because I have a request to make. It's a very important one, so please pause your work and lend me your ears."

Her projection stood several times larger than the average person and spoke in a tone so warm and gentle that it won the hearts of everyone who heard it.

Her words echoed throughout the church as clearly as a bell, and those listening eagerly anticipated what she would say next.



“First, I must apologize. You have all most likely heard about the recent disturbance in the city of Mithra—about monsters spilling out of the Dungeon of Lamentation beneath the Cathedral and attacking the populace. As you are no doubt also aware, this should not have been possible. It would mean that the dungeon has remained unconquered all these years.”

The congregation broke out in hushed conversation and confused whispers; no one knew quite what the high priestess was trying to say.

“Huh...? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I thought the high priestess conquered the dungeon and established the holy city above it.”

“Shush. Her Holy Highness hasn’t finished.”

“This revelation will confuse you, I’m sure. But before I explain, I must tell you the truth: Holy Mithra, the object of our devotion, was an abomination from the dungeon’s depths that I failed to slay. Ignorant of that fact, I spent the past two centuries spreading its teachings. That is why I must apologize to you all.”

The followers began to stir, and many stared at each other in bewilderment. The high priestess paused as though she could see the commotion, then resumed at the same unhurried pace.

“Your surprise is only natural, but please, hear me out until the end. For this concerns a matter of tremendous importance: our future.”

Such calmly delivered words soothed the bustling audience. Their attention returned to the projection of their founder.

“Leading a swarm of monsters, the abomination that had spent years lurking under the holy city sought to annihilate its populace. Only with the help of several guests visiting for Holy Prince Tirrence’s coming-of-age celebration were we able to defeat it. Among those guests was a boy of a people we have long stood in opposition to: the demonfolk.”

The high priestess suddenly vanished, and a boy with a slight build appeared in her place. Consternation rippled through the adherents as they all gazed upon their first-ever demonfolk.

“His name is Rolo. He fought the monstrosity by our side, risking his life to save the age-old enemies of his people.”

“That’s a demonfolk...?”

“He fought with followers of the Church? That’s impossible. Everyone knows the demonfolk are an evil race who manipulate monsters.”

“Are you doubting the words of our founder?”

“I... That’s not—”

“They really fought together? The high priestess and this demonfolk?”

“As you know, Mithra has been in conflict with the demonfolk for centuries. They have killed many of our people—and we, many of theirs. But it was only with Rolo’s assistance that we vanquished such a terrible foe. Our bloodstained past can never be changed, but our future need not be so gruesome. Rolo’s example has shown us that we can wash away hatred and suspicion with deeds of courage and compassion.”

Those gathered carefully studied the projection of the boy.

“You know...this guy in the holy city saw a huge dragon in the sky. He said it blasted a disgusting monster with dazzling beams of light.”

“Now that I’m seeing one, I’ve got to say—demonfolk don’t look as evil as the stories make them out to be.”

“But looks can be deceiving! Those people are rotten to the core!”

“This is our founder’s will. What reason do we have to oppose her?”

“But the divine revelations were wrong! She just told us so! That means the path she’s led us down has been mistaken from the start!”

“Then what *should* we believe in...?”

“And so, everyone... My request.”

As her followers tried to come to grips with their shock, High Priestess Astirra reappeared in the projection. She stared down at all those gathered.

“For centuries, I spread teachings that were secretly malign—a grievous sin, if ever one existed. I cannot change the mistakes I made, nor do I deserve your

forgiveness, but I ask this of you nonetheless: please, won't you accompany me a little while longer? Though I realize how self-serving it sounds, I must beseech you to put your faith in me."

Facing her congregation, she bowed deeply.

"High Priestess...?"

She had admitted to her mistake; her followers had no reason to listen to her request. Yet the sincerity in her eyes and voice had everyone enraptured. They listened intently for fear of missing even a single word.

"The Holy Theocracy of Mithra was founded on its people's trust in my words. You put your faith in my promise of a better future, and now I've sullied that faith with my mistake. That is precisely why I must make amends. I consider it my duty to grant you all the happiness you desire, so please, even if only until then, won't you continue to support me?"

"High Priestess..."

"I am an unworthy leader whose only merit is her lifespan. But still, I share your burden. Though I do not mean to presume upon your kindness, I implore you—please allow me to continue forging ahead with you all. Please permit me to face the future with you so that we might overcome any hardships together. This is my request to you as an individual; I am the mouthpiece of a false god no longer."

The last notes of the high priestess's request faded, leaving the church silent. The projection disappeared, and a brief while later, a holy soldier came forth to proclaim the end of the congregation.

"Thus concludes the first Founder's Address. An announcement shall inform you when the next one is due. Until then."

As everyone trickled out of the hall, many began to discuss what they had just witnessed.

"So...what do you think?"

"I think it was all too complicated for me. How about you?"

"The main takeaway was that we don't need portraits of that disturbing

skeleton in our houses anymore, right?”

“H-Hey! Have you forgotten where we are right now?! You can’t insult Holy Mithra like that when we’re... Oh, wait. I guess that doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Yeah. So, as I was saying, I’m pretty sure that was her point.”

“In that case, the first thing we should do when we get home is remove all the sacred images of Holy Mithra from our walls.”

“Yep.”

Among some of the other followers, a similar conversation was being had.

“I’ve never been able to say this before, but...that portrait has terrified me ever since I was a kid.”

“Me too! I put it up because we had to, but to be honest? It gives me the creeps.”

“Me three. I’ve always wanted it gone.”

“Same here. When the high priestess said it was a monster, my first thought was ‘Yeah, that checks out.’”

“Mm-hmm. She looks way more divine if you ask me.”

“Isn’t it great that we can take those portraits down?”

“Sure is. In fact, I don’t see anything wrong with all this. Do you?”

“Can’t say I do. Those revelations boiled down to our forefathers listening to our founder’s will. If she’s decided on a policy change, we should respect that.”

“And we’ll get to see her face during future congregations, right? If that ain’t happiness, I don’t know what is.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait! I won’t sleep a wink the night before the next one; I’m going to be too excited. This is the first time I’ve been glad to be part of the Church.”

“Don’t be so quick to accept all this,” a grave-looking man interjected, his eyes downcast. “If that ‘Holy Mithra’ was a fabrication, what have we been putting our faith in all this time? And what should we worship now?”

The others pondered the question.

“‘What should we worship now,’ huh?”

“That’s obvious. The high priestess said she’d continue to guide us.”

“Yeah. So we’ve just gotta pray to *her*.”

“Hey... We’re taking down those pictures of Holy Mithra, right? How about we put the high priestess on our walls instead?”

“Nice thinking! That’ll definitely brighten up my house. As soon as I get back, I’m going to commission a painter friend of mine for a portrait of her.”

“Oh, I want one!”

“And me. Maybe I should order a bunch for my relatives as well.”

“Guess I ought to commission one for each person in my family... No, double that! Then we’ll have some spares on hand.”

“I’ll pay extra to get some *huge* ones made—big enough to cover an entire wall. Think I’ll get five to begin with.”

“I, uh...don’t think my friend can work that fast...”

Anyone would expect the Church’s followers to be gloomy and anxious in the face of such monumental revelations. Yet as they made their way outside, they looked much brighter and more resolved than before the congregation.



“Phew... How was I, Tirrence?”

“Wonderful, mother.”

Still standing atop her podium, Astirra took a moment to catch her breath. She had just finished giving a lengthy address to her people. Then she studied the expression of the boy whose features bore such a striking resemblance to her own.

“I didn’t mess up any of my lines, did I?” Astirra asked. “Was I standing naturally? Oh, and while it might be a little late to ask...I don’t have bedhead or anything, do I?”

“You were excellent in all regards. It was an address that will go down in history.”

“Really? Well, if *you’re* saying it, then it must be true. Thank goodness. I was so nervous—but at the same time, I’ve always wanted to do something like this.” Astirra gave a gentle smile—the same kind she’d worn during the address—and concluded, “It was a good experience overall.”

“Nevertheless, I must apologize. It was inconsiderate of me to ask you to make that promise to the Church’s faithful. By all rights, this is an issue that we of the Theocracy should solve on our own.”

“It’s fine. If we’re talking about responsibility”—she turned her gaze from Tirrence to the white-bearded man across from her—“*we* were the ones who unleashed that monster on the world to begin with. We can’t just sit by and not try to fix things. Right, Oken?”

“Ho ho. Indeed. I’ll do all that I can to set this right. That being said, I’m impressed you gave that whole speech without any mistakes. I was getting all anxious, wondering when you would stray from the script and start spouting nonsense.”

Astirra giggled. “How hurtful, Oken! I don’t mean to brag, but I have an excellent memory. I remembered every word of the script Tirrence wrote for me.”

“Well, I never doubted that... I was more worried you’d suddenly have a ‘good idea’ for how to improve it and start ad-libbing. You stuck to what was written for the most part, but I thought my heart would stop when you strayed a little at the beginning.”

Holy Prince Tirrence bowed deeply to the smiling old man stroking his voluminous beard. “Spell Sovereign Oken, allow me to thank you again for providing the oracle’s orbs and for your indispensable assistance with the address in general.”

“Ho ho, what an upright young man! Say nothing of it; this was a good test run for those orbs, *and* you provided me with almost all the necessary materials and capital. It was a win-win situation, no? *I* should thank *you* for giving me the perfect opportunity to unveil my new invention!”

“If we hadn’t distributed your orbs to churches across the continent, we would never have been able to convey the Theocracy’s new direction to our followers in such a timely fashion. There was a chance of widespread chaos and confusion. It was a stroke of great fortune for us that mother had a close friend so well-versed in magical items.”

“Ho ho! I daresay you’re praising me too much!”

“I was surprised too,” Astirra added. “To think *the* Oken could invent such a handy magical item! I’ve revised my opinion of you a little.”

“I didn’t grow this old without picking up some wisdom!” Oken let out an embarrassed chuckle and continued stroking his beard. “Still, I agree that sending out a paper address wouldn’t have been nearly as effective. Delivering the news ‘in person’ was sure to convince many more people. It’s a blessing that it went off without a hitch, given how little time we had for testing.”

“Ah. I thought that might be the case,” Astirra said, sounding slightly exasperated. “I was actually rather worried about it breaking down halfway through.”

“Hmph. There was no need to be; I put everything in the capable hands of my outstanding subordinate!”

“That’s a relief. Though it’s rare to hear you praise somebody like that.”

“Ho ho. She’s a real gem, I’ll have you know. Dug her up myself!”

“Oh?” Astirra smiled. “I’d appreciate the chance to meet her one day.”

Oken smiled right back at her—and a moment later, a man with deep scars across his face briskly approached them. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Holy Highness,” the new arrival said.

“Um, aren’t you the Kingdom of Clays’s...?”

“Yes, it is my role to govern the Kingdom.” The scarred man came to a stop before Astirra, then turned so that he was facing both her and Oken.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty. I’m Astirra—the real one.”

“I’ve heard the story. You look exactly like the former high priestess.”

“So I’ve been told. I must admit, I never expected a monster to roam the surface while wearing my face.”

The pair exchanged a look and a slight smile.

“I’ve also heard that you did much for my daughter, Lynneburg,” King Clays said. “She could have lost her life if not for your actions. I wanted to thank you for that—as both a king and a father.”

“Oh, right. You *would* be her...” Astirra trailed off and giggled. “She’s especially reckless, you know. I’m glad that I got to her in time; it was quite a precarious situation.”

“I could thank you a thousand times, and it still wouldn’t be enough. If there’s anything that you desire, I’ll do whatever I can to provide it. As this is a *personal* extension of gratitude, there are some limits, but you need only say the word.”

“That’s okay, Your Majesty. I really don’t need a reward. It was thanks to Lynne that we’re all still here today. Helping her a little was the least I could do. If she’s doing well, then that’s enough for me!” Astirra brought her hand up in front of her chest and gave a thumbs-up.

King Clays laughed, his eyes wrinkling. “You might look the same as your predecessor, but you’re nothing like her on the inside.”

“Is that so?”

“Indeed. Anytime I faced the old high priestess, there was this looming unease that she might pounce and devour me. But with you, I get the feeling I can speak freely.”

Astirra chuckled softly. “Perhaps that’s because I’m not a monster like she was. And the feeling’s mutual—as you’re the king of one of our neighbors, I’m relieved you aren’t someone scary.”

“We really are on the same page. Going forward, let’s build and maintain a strong relationship between our countries.”

“Yes, that sounds wonderful. There are many in your kingdom to whom I owe so much. That includes your daughter.”

“Then I suppose I must be even more grateful to her than I am already.”

“Mm-hmm. It’s almost hard to believe what a fine young woman she is. I’d love to meet her parents one— Oh, I suppose I already have.”

“I’ve heard your Tirrence is rather outstanding too. As I understand it, he prepared the script for your address.”

“Oh yes! Isn’t he just? I couldn’t be more proud of my son!”

The two rulers—the highest authorities of their respective countries—exchanged good-natured smiles.

“Come to think of it,” Astirra mused, “Lynne came here with you, didn’t she?”

“She did,” the king confirmed. “She’s over there with Rolo, speaking to Milva, the new emperor of the Magic Empire. I thought about asking her to come over here with me, but they seemed so deep in conversation that I decided not to. It’s nice to see kids of a similar age get along.”

“Is that so? I’m glad everyone’s doing well.” Wearing a kind smile, Astirra slowly examined their surroundings. “Still, there are people from such diverse backgrounds here, and so many faces I don’t know. Is *everyone* a dignitary of a foreign country?”

The high priestess continued to look around. On the odd occasion that she locked eyes with one of her guests, she gave them a warm smile and a small wave. “This won’t do at all,” she said. “I don’t know any of their names. Someone’s going to realize I’m not the same high priestess.”

“In that case, why not do a lap around the room with me? I’ll slip each person’s name into the conversation as we greet them. You can pick them up as we go along.”

“Oh, that really would be helpful! I’m quite confident in my memory, so hearing their names once should be enough.”

“Excellent. You’ve much to gain from getting to know the dignitaries in our corner of the world.” King Clays copied the high priestess and gazed around the hall. Then his expression suddenly clouded. “Speaking of which...I can’t see a single person from our neighbors to the south. I thought dignitaries from Sarenza were invited, but...”

“Really? Tirrence?”

“Invitations were sent to all the relevant dignitaries of nearby countries,” the prince explained. “But unfortunately, we have yet to receive a response from Sarenza.”

Standing next to King Clays, Oken exhaled through his nose. “Not an appearance, a messenger, or even a response. They’ve much to lose from Mithra’s new direction, so I suppose they’re staying home to lick their wounds.”

“Nearly everyone else appears to be present,” King Clays noted. “If we’re going to greet them all, why don’t we have Lynne tag along with us? I can introduce the guests to her, which should minimize the risk of anyone getting suspicious of you.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea!” Astirra replied. “Each time we approach someone, I’ll say hello and pretend to know them. Your help is much appreciated, Your Majesty.” She scanned the room. “Hmm? Is Noor not here today?”

“I meant to tell you, but unfortunately not,” the king said with a wry smile. “My daughter and I very much wanted him to be a part of this ceremony. But when we invited him, he flatly declined.”

“He did...? But you’re the king.”

“Mm-hmm. He told Lynne that he had other things to see to and asked her to give me his regards.”

“I see...”

“I never know what that lad’s thinking,” Oken remarked. “He played more than a bit part in saving Mithra, and there’s no doubt in my mind that today’s events will go down in history. It’s a shame he couldn’t be here.”

“He mentioned *wanting* to come,” the king conceded. “He just couldn’t get away from his prior arrangement. I have a present from him, though—something he wanted to give you, High Priestess.”

“Huh? He went to the trouble of getting me something?” Astirra’s expression lit up in delight...but only for a moment. As she accepted in both hands the strange wooden carving the king was holding out to her, she couldn’t help

looking bewildered. “What...is it, exactly? I’m grateful, don’t get me wrong. It’s just...”

“I don’t know the details, but it’s meant to ward off evil.”

“Still, what *is* it? A human-eating monster?”

“No, it’s supposed to be a bear.”

“A bear?” Astirra’s brow furrowed deeper as she studied the unusual item. “But why?”

“He thought it bore some resemblance to you, I’m told. Any idea why? As it so happens, I received one too.”

Astirra stared at the carving for a long while. “No... I don’t have a clue.”

The two exchanged looks of confusion before King Clays spoke again. “Hmm... Well, he also wanted to give one to the holy prince.”

Astirra fell silent once again. Then she finally said, “Would you like a second one, Tirrence?”

“I shall gratefully accept,” the prince replied. “Though I wonder what kind of significance they hold...”

“He said you two would probably understand when you saw them,” King Clays noted.

“Us specifically?” Tirrence asked. “That’s strange... I couldn’t even begin to guess.”

“Me neither,” Astirra agreed.

For a while, the three examined their carvings of a bear with its arms spread wide. Many more perplexed glances were exchanged.

Chapter 108: The Unveiling Ceremony

“The day’s finally here.”

Half a year had passed since the Magic Empire’s invasion, and the city’s reconstruction was advancing everywhere you looked. But today was especially exciting for me—a project I’d worked on, the creation of the royal capital’s new aqueducts, had recently been completed, and an unveiling ceremony was being held in celebration.

Looking back, it had taken a lot of work to get here. First, we’d needed to clear the remains of the buildings Rala had destroyed. Then we’d tamped down the earth and started excavating the waterways. I’d contributed to every step of the process, so seeing it all wrapped up was pretty moving.

My black sword—which helped me with almost everything these days—had played an enormous role in our construction work. It had carried us well ahead of schedule, meaning the aqueducts were opening early.

After returning from Mithra, I’d gone back to helping out on construction sites. One of my tasks had been to help expand the aqueducts, but as I’d worked, the foreman realized that my sword was carving through not only the earth but also the buried stones getting in our way. It had caused a small commotion as everyone expressed their shock.

Following a discussion with the construction site’s higher-ups, it had been decided that I would use my sturdy sword for more than just excavation. So I was sent to the Masons Guild workshop to help create the main components of our aqueducts.

The masons hadn’t been too pleased with me initially—my finger dexterity wasn’t the best, so I’d accidentally broken a lot of stone components. I’d persevered, though, and eventually improved enough to work the stone into the right shapes.

Despite my initial mistakes, carving stone soon became second nature to me.

The masons' eyes had almost popped out of their heads when they'd seen me work. It would normally take five of them three days to carve a single stone component, but with my black sword, I could produce twenty or thirty in just one.

The workshop soon ended up with a surplus of aqueduct components, so the masons sent me back to the construction sites to continue excavating. Then, when their supply ran low, they asked me to help them out again. It resulted in many round trips but apparently contributed to our being so far ahead of schedule.

For my part, I was glad to have found a new use for my sword.

That wasn't the only significant discovery I'd made, though. My black sword was so old and decrepit that I'd assumed it wouldn't be able to cut through anything—but then I'd noticed that it actually had a bladed section. Though it was just as nicked and scratched as the rest of the sword, which was probably why it hadn't caught my eye sooner, testing it out had revealed that it could split wood cleanly in two. As long as I positioned it just right, that is. To my surprise, it was able to slice through anything small—even stone!

My discoveries hadn't made my sword any less unsuitable for cutting through monsters, but they *had* given me new ways to use it. And use it I did. The weapon was such a powerhouse that it earned me the favor of the masons, who even offered me a permanent job at their workshop. I politely declined, of course.

To summarize, a decent chunk of the newly completed aqueducts used stone components *I'd* made. They wouldn't be visible once there was water running through them, but my heart swelled with pride when I thought about how much my work would support the daily lives of the city's people. In a sense, I was one of the central figures in today's unveiling ceremony.

"Noor—as the workers' representative, please come forward."

I started upon hearing my name and glanced around. A crowd of my coworkers was looking at me, and the guy standing beside me nudged my shoulder.

"Psst, Noor. They want you to go up!"

Now that I thought about it, I *was* told that I might be called up today. But...what was I supposed to do? Lowering my voice to a whisper, I asked my coworker for help.

“Hey...what do I actually do up there?”

“Don’t tell me you zoned out this morning when the foreman explained it all to you... Just go stand in front of those important-looking people.”

“Right. Got it. Thanks.”

“Important-looking people,” huh? I searched for anyone who might fit that description and spotted a plump, well-dressed middle-aged man. As I approached him, the younger man standing by his side caught my attention. Wasn’t that...?

The younger man’s eyes shot open in confusion when he saw me. “Sir Noor?” he said. “I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me.”

I was right—it was Lynne’s brother!

“It’s been a while,” I replied. “What are you doing here?”

“The new aqueducts were a nationally managed project,” he explained. “By all rights, it should have been my father here at the unveiling ceremony. But as he’s away right now, I’m appearing in his stead.”

“I...see?” I was impressed; not only was their family rich, but they were always busy with work of some kind.

Lynne’s brother stepped in closer. “That aside...why are *you* here, Sir Noor? I heard my father and sister invited you to the ceremony in Mithra. I assumed you were there with them.”

“Oh, that. Yeah, I appreciated the invitation, but I turned them down.”

“You...turned them down?”

“I wanted to be here for the unveiling. Was that wrong of me?”

“If my father had no objections, then there is nothing more to be said,” Lynne’s brother replied. He looked troubled, but then he caught sight of the black sword slung over my shoulder. “If you don’t mind my asking, why do you

have your weapon with you at a time like this?”

“Oh, this? It played a crucial role in my construction work. Figured I might as well bring it with me.”

“You used the Black Blade...for construction work...?” Lynne’s brother studied my sword, an incredulous look on his face. But when the crowd started to murmur, he returned to his senses and gave me a wooden box containing a small gold coin.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A token of our appreciation. Please take it.”

“Right. Thanks. Can I go now?”

“S-Sure. Good work.”

I accepted the coin, which had “To commemorate the completion of the aqueducts” engraved on it, and returned to my spot in the crowd.

The rest of the ceremony went off without a hitch, and water began flowing through the city’s new aqueducts. I spent a while watching it with my coworkers, enjoying the satisfaction of a job well done, then headed to the Adventurers Guild to finish up my usual errands.



“Great work on the commission this time ’round, Noor. Heard you were a tremendous help with those construction works. Here are the living expenses you asked for. Take ’em.”

I’d arrived at the Adventurers Guild and given the guildmaster my commission completion slip, which he’d stamped before placing a leather pouch containing my living expenses on the counter. We’d gone through the routine many times before, but something didn’t feel right. Though he sounded appreciative, the look on his face told me he had something weighing on his mind.

“What’s wrong?” I asked without even thinking. “Did something happen?”

The guildmaster slowly lowered himself into a chair. “Truth is, we received a huge amount of coin today from the Builders Guild and the royal castle’s branch of the Masons Guild. You probably see where I’m going with this, but it was the

reward for all the work *you* did.”

“Was it really that much?” The guildmaster always took care of my money for me, so I didn’t have an amount in mind, but I *had* done a lot of work. It stood to reason that I’d received a little more pay than usual.

“How can I put this...? You could buy a dozen or two of the city’s inns and bathhouses and still have money to spare. There’s more here than you’d get for slaying a dragon. You’d need to hunt down ten to even come close—ten big ones, I mean. And you made it all in one swoop from commissions within the city? I can’t believe it. Because of you, the Guild is more in the black than it’s ever been. Feels like I can’t tell left from right anymore.”

The guildmaster seemed upset, but I couldn’t see the problem. It didn’t sound like the Guild had lost anything. “Isn’t being in the black a good thing?”

“Sure...but also no. I mean, speaking as management, it’s a huge lifesaver. But the problem has to do with you.”

“Me?”

Taking in my clueless reaction, the guildmaster quietly sighed and scratched his head. “As I’ve told you before, your contract with us includes a fairly large handling fee. We take a percentage of your commission rewards. To make a long story short, you’re losing out. You do all the work while we just sit around—yet here we are, raking it in.”

“I wouldn’t say that you just sit around...”

“We stamp your documents. Big deal. That’s *all* we do. These days, the people who commission you ask for you by name. The Guild doesn’t need to mediate or put its reputation to use anymore; we just pass the jobs along. It’s all upside down. I know I’m being stubborn, but for the umpteenth time, you’d be better off dealing with your clients directly.”

“Yeah, you’ve told me that before.”

“And that’s not all. It isn’t just the Builders Guild that wants you now—you’ve also caught the attention of the royal castle’s Masons Guild, elite craftsmen who’ve supported the city throughout its long history. They rarely even acknowledge outsiders who have just moved to the royal capital. ‘We want him,

no matter what it costs,’ they told us. ‘Don’t let the Builders Guild take him.’”

“Really?”

“You’ve got a war being fought over you, and you’ll come out on top no matter who wins. I know you’re not interested, but no person in their right mind would turn down the deals they’re proposing—the terms are *that* good. They even gave you huge bonuses on top of your rewards for their commissions.”

“That so? Sorry.”

“Trust me, you wouldn’t be so calm if you’d seen the numbers. In the first place, the problem is that you’re leaving these huge sums to me without even bothering to check on them. I could be skimming off the top of your income, and you wouldn’t even know it. I know you’re a good guy—*too* good, some would say—but it wouldn’t hurt you to be a little more cautious of other people.”

“You say that, but it hasn’t caused any issues, right?”

“But if you keep being careless and it *does* cause one, there won’t be any recourse. Cripes...” The guildmaster scratched his head, then looked straight at me, his expression more serious than before. “Noor. If you only ever take my advice once, make it today. Think *hard* about this: is there a reason you *need* to be an adventurer? You’re making enough money already, and you’re in high demand. Are you sure you don’t want to find a regular job? Your working conditions would improve in a heartbeat.”

“Hmm...”

Why do I need to be an adventurer?

Being asked anew had me searching for an answer. For as long as I could remember, being an adventurer had always been my number one goal, not making money through construction work. But why was that? Maybe it came down to my desire to see unknown lands and experience new things. That wasn’t the only reason, though—there was also the sense of pure yearning that had stuck with me ever since I was a child.

“It’s because...I want to have fun traveling through unknown lands,” I said at

last.

“Hmm...” The guildmaster considered my words. “Fun travels, huh? Well, I can’t dismiss that; I used to be an adventurer myself, after all. But if an excuse to travel is what you want, then you have so many other options, don’t you? Just hire some guards and you could set out whenever. Heck, if you wanted to make a living from it, you could use the coin you’ve saved to buy some merchandise and become a traveling mer—”

The guildmaster paused midsentence as he met my eye. “On second thought, forget that. It’s best that you don’t.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, blinking in surprise.

“Do you even need to ask? You’re fatally unsuited to being a merchant. In fact, it’s the last job you should ever take. The only future I can see is one where some good-for-nothing tricks you out of everything you have. Just forget it, okay?”

“That wouldn’t be the end of the world, though, would it? I’d just need to save up again.”

“How are you such an optimist when it comes to these things...?” The guildmaster scratched his head again, looking troubled. “Well, I suppose you could do all right dealing with the merchants who frequent the royal capital. Messing up a business deal won’t get you killed in these parts. Can’t say the same for Sarenza. The people there don’t think the same way we do.”

“Sarenza? Oh, south of the Kingdom, right?” As I recalled, it was a country set up by merchants, and a vast desert separated it from the Kingdom of Clays. I’d seen their traders in the royal capital every now and then.

“That’s the one. They assign exact prices to people, then buy and sell ’em like wares. In short, they deal in slaves. If you got involved with them, you’d soon end up drowning in debt you didn’t even know you had. Then you’d lose your freedom entirely. I’m saying this for your own good: they’re the last people you want to get involved with. You’d stop by to check on the merchandise only to *become it*—and that’s no joke.”

“I guess you’re right.”

The guildmaster made a fair point—I wasn't cut out to be a merchant. I could read and write, sure, but I was terrible with numbers. Still, I couldn't help being curious about the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza; the stories said it faced out onto a vast ocean, across which came trade, commerce, and people of all sorts of races. I'd already been to the Magic Empire to the east—though only briefly—and Mithra to the west, so of course I wanted to visit the last of the three great countries that neighbored the Kingdom of Clays.

The ocean, huh?

I wanted to see it at least once in my life.

"Noor," the guildmaster said, "don't even *think* about going to Sarenza. I can tell you already are from the look on your face. But you'd need to cross a scorching desert just to reach the first town, and public order is a mess there. To go alone would be suicidal. Since you told me you were able to take out a skeleton, you're probably feeling more confident...but it's when an adventurer feels confident that they're in the most danger."

"Yeah, I understand. Even with the skeleton, I was relying on the people around me. So don't worry—I won't get reckless."

"I can't tell if your luck's good or bad. One thing's clear, though—you get caught up in some kind of trouble wherever you go. Just be careful, all right? You only have one life."

"You're right. Okay. I'll see you around."

"Ah— Hey!"

I ended our conversation abruptly—the guildmaster seemed ready to ramble for even *longer* than usual—took the pouch of coins on the counter, and then left the Guild. "So in conclusion...I shouldn't go *alone*, right?" I mused aloud.

Despite the guildmaster's best attempts to dissuade me, the idea of being a traveling merchant had started to sound appealing. Exploration and danger went hand in hand, but since my hard work at the construction sites had apparently earned me a bit of coin, there was always the option of hiring some reliable people to journey with me.

Honestly, it *was* a bit of a shame; traveling with a hired guard wouldn't be the

same as my dream of adventuring in other lands under my own power. But as someone without talent, it was the closest I was likely to come.

Though I was being realistic, I didn't want to give up on my dream just yet. I'd gained valuable experience and even managed to become a little stronger, so there had to be more I could do before I shelved my adventuring aspirations for good. The thought of ever having to face a Goblin Emperor *did* give me the shivers—a regular goblin was large enough to uproot a tree with one hand, and a Goblin Emperor was said to be several times larger—but still. For the first time, I felt like I would actually be able to do something if I ever ran into one.

Of course, I couldn't let my confidence turn into recklessness.

"That took longer than I expected..." I muttered. "I should get a move on; Gilbert must be waiting for me."

Whatever the case, I needed to get stronger. Slinging my partner—the black sword—over my shoulder, I ran for my usual training spot.

Chapter 109: Bath Ticket

“Yo. You’re late.”

I’d arrived at my training spot in the forest to find a familiar man holding an equally familiar golden spear. “Yeah, sorry...” I apologized. “I was running an errand that dragged on a bit.”

“It’s fine; I wasn’t waiting that long. Got nothing I needed to do. Want to get right into it?”

“Yeah.”

The spearman—Gilbert—had joined me for training ever since I’d come back from Mithra. The most I could do was parry his attacks as they came at me, but he’d said that I made for a convenient sparring partner nonetheless. In his words, there weren’t many people in the city willing to be on the receiving end of his spear. And to me, Gilbert was the kind of partner I’d give an arm and a leg for. I practically leaped at the chance to train with him every morning.

“Here I go,” he said.

Gilbert gave his golden spear a light twirl and settled into a stance—and at once, the surrounding atmosphere became charged with intent. Birds scattered in droves as though they sensed the danger; then my opponent and his spear vanished.

[Dragrave]

I’d parried a monster’s lightning in Mithra, but Gilbert’s spear seemed even faster. During our first training sessions together, my eyes hadn’t been able to follow it, and I’d always felt like I was on the brink of death. But now, with so many mornings of experience under my belt, I was used to his speed. I calmly blocked the spear coming at me with my black sword, scattering sparks and causing a pleasant ringing sound to reverberate through the forest.



[Parry]

“Tsk. Blocked that one, huh?”

His first strike was like a greeting, but that didn’t mean I could relax; the next was already coming for my chest.

[Dragrave]

[Parry]

Gilbert’s movements became faster and sharper with each blow I parried. He was using the momentum of my swings to his advantage, and the tip of his spear was coming for my throat. It was the technique of a master, and the most I could do was play along.

[Parry]

Every time we trained, Gilbert’s strikes would be keener and faster than before. I was putting in the work to improve, but I was nowhere near catching up to him. Whenever I thought I’d taken a step closer, his spearmanship would rise to even greater heights.

The grass no longer grew in our dedicated training spot, and the earth bore the scars of our previous sparring matches. I felt bad for the forest and its inhabitants, but Gilbert wasn’t lenient enough with his spear that I could afford to dwell on it. As far as I was concerned, each strike, each exchange, was a matter of life and death.

“Man, I still can’t believe how well you deal with my spear.”

“Yeah, well...the skeleton’s attacks were about as fast, so I guess I just got used to it.”

“Speaking of which... You told me the story last time, but are you *sure* it was a skeleton you fought?”

“That’s what I was told.”

“Well, whatever. Next one’s coming.”

That was as much time as I was given to catch my breath. Gilbert resumed his onslaught, this time moving even faster.

[Dragrave]

[Parry]

I used every ounce of strength I could muster to sweep away the sharp point coming straight for my throat. A blast of sparks shot through the forest, and the spear jarred violently as though it might bend. It didn't, though, and instead shot toward my forehead, writhing like a live animal.

[Parry]

This time, I didn't oppose the spear's momentum; I simply tapped it aside, changing its trajectory enough that it stabbed through the air by my ear. My training with Gilbert had taught me a lot about conserving my strength like this. I'd realized it was, in many ways, superior to swinging with all my might; it allowed me to gain some insight into my opponent's next move, and thanks to that, I could now have conversations while I fought.

I wasn't sure I could call myself an "opponent" for Gilbert—the man was a master of his craft—but I did think I'd gotten stronger over the course of our sparring matches. Letting my guard down was still out of the question, though. Unless I wanted a spear through my throat.

[Dragrave]

[Parry]

I knocked away the spear that had once again targeted my neck, sending a particularly large spray of sparks through the forest. Unlike the other strikes I'd parried, this one had been strong enough to jar my arm, rendering it numb momentarily. Each time I got carried away during one of our sparring matches, a strike like this would come for me as though it could sense my conceit.

I was preparing for the next attack, cold sweat dripping down my brow, but it never came. Gilbert put some distance between us, then rested his spear against his shoulder and shook his head.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Done already?"

"Yeah, let's leave it there for today."

"I can keep going."

“Well, / can’t. Look. One more strike and it’ll snap.”

Gilbert held out his spear, revealing the large crack now running through it. His was no ordinary weapon, he had told me; it had apparently been discovered in the city’s Dungeon of the Lost and could repair any damage it sustained. Small nicks and scratches would vanish over the course of a quick conversation, but a fracture like that would need to be left alone for a whole day. It was a shame, but this morning’s training was over.

“Sorry...” I said. “I didn’t mean to put so much strength behind my swings.”

“Don’t worry about it. Wouldn’t be the first time. Though I still don’t know how you can crack orichalcum so easily. What’s *with* that sword?”

During the early days of my sparring with Gilbert, my control over my weapon hadn’t been great, so I’d always damaged his spear and put a premature stop to our training. It hadn’t happened recently...but I guess I’d gotten a little too carried away. And just when I’d started working up a sweat. I supposed it was no big deal; he had a work meeting to attend, anyway.

“Here,” I said. “As thanks for today.”

“‘Thanks’? That’s rare. Can’t say I need any from you, but if you’re offering... Hmm? The heck is this?” Gilbert stared at the small slip of paper I’d just given him.

“It’s an entry ticket for the newly opened Grand Bathhouse.”

“An entry ticket?”

“They were handing them out all over the city to celebrate the new aqueducts. I got a bunch of them, so I have plenty to spare.”

“Yeah? Guess I’ll take it, then. I’ll check the place out if the mood takes me—or hand the ticket to a subordinate if not.”

“Sounds good.”

Gilbert slung his cracked spear over his shoulder and turned his back to me. “See ya. I won’t let you damage it next time.”

“Yeah. And I won’t be so careless.”

I saw Gilbert off as he headed back to the city. Then I finished the rest of my training regimen and went to wash away the day's sweat, albeit a little earlier than usual.

Chapter 110: The Grand Bathhouse

“Oh? Fancy running into you here, Noor.”

Standing before the entrance to the newly opened Grand Bathhouse, I turned to see who had called out to me and recognized one of my coworkers from the construction sites. He called himself “the Bathhouse Master” and occasionally introduced me—a newcomer to the city—to unusual bathing spots. It had been so long since we’d last seen each other that I’d almost forgotten his face.

“It’s been a while,” I said. “How’ve you been? I haven’t seen you around at all lately.”

“Well, that’s because I just got back to the city.”

“Did you go somewhere?”

“Yeah, I was out of the capital for a while. Had to put some space between me and my beloved baths.”

“You did...?” I asked, unable to believe my ears. My coworker loved bathhouses so dearly that he had taken to calling the royal capital his “personal paradise.” I couldn’t see why he would choose to stay away from them.

“Don’t you remember? You were with me when I committed that grave mistake at Bathhouse Hydra.”

“Oh, *that*.”

Some time ago, during a trip to Bathhouse Hydra, my coworker had taken a reckless gamble and almost drowned as a result. The incident caused such a stir that the bathhouse was closed down the very next day—for putting its bathers at risk, according to the sign out front.

“It was no big deal, though,” I noted. “They removed the dangerous baths and reopened.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that I almost shut an old, storied establishment down for good,” he replied, clearly regretful. “Even if no one blames me for it, I

needed to repent for my sin. So I slapped myself with a bathing ban.”

“‘A bathing ban’?”

“Yeah. Haven’t gone to a single bathhouse since. Or even washed, to be honest with you. Any lesser punishment and I wouldn’t have forgiven myself.”

“Is that right?” I said at length. Now that he’d mentioned it, there *was* a bit of a stench following him...

“Still, it’s not every day that a bathhouse this big opens in the royal capital. It’s time for me to lift my self-imposed ban. How were things on your end, Noor? Your bathing life must have been boring without the Bathhouse King around to guide you.”

“No, not really.”

“C’mon, you don’t need to be embarrassed about it.”

“I’m not.”

There was a drawn-out pause before my coworker said, “Anyway...I take it you’re also here for the baths?”

“Of course.”

“How about we go in together? I’ll give you a rundown on the place.”

Just as his self-proclaimed titles “Bathhouse Master” and “Bathhouse King” suggested, my coworker was exceptionally well-versed in everything bathhouse-related. He had introduced me to a number of unique establishments in my short time living here. If not for him, I would never have visited Bathhouse Chimera and its hidden Steam Baths of Hell, which boasted waters of dangerously high temperatures, or Bathhouse Hydra and its Baths of Ruin and Rebirth, which used the tentacle-like appendages of the hydraleaf plant to remove dead skin. His commentary was always exaggerated, but only because he wanted to make things more exciting. He had a tendency to get a little carried away when it came to rare finds.

“Does this bathhouse have a fun gimmick like the others?” I asked.

“As far as its construction goes, no—this place is as orthodox as it gets. The baths themselves might not be anything to write home about, but that isn’t the

main appeal. You see, there's something about this bathhouse that sets it apart from all the others in the history of the royal capital. You can't talk about this place without mentioning it."

"You don't say."

My coworker knew everything there was to know about the city's bathhouses and their origins, so he'd always give me long-winded lectures whenever we saw each other. They were so technical and went into such meticulous detail that I rarely understood much of what he told me, but I enjoyed nodding along anyway.

"Yeah. This new bathhouse is a first for the Kingdom: it receives private *and* public funding! You wouldn't expect that of a city with such a rich history of bathhouses, would you?"

"I...suppose not?" I didn't know enough to understand *why* it was unexpected, so I took my coworker at his word.

"Still, that doesn't explain what all the fuss is about, does it? What's *interesting* is that this bathhouse uses a Wellspring Pipe, a special-grade dungeon relic strictly under the Kingdom's management. Customers can watch the relic produce water with their own eyes!"

"I...see?"

"Yeah. Wellspring Pipes are usually kept in the Kingdom's waterworks, where they supply the city through canals and aqueducts under tight surveillance. Since the relics play such a crucial role in supporting our lives, people aren't normally allowed to see them; they're valuable artifacts even on a worldwide scale. Lots of people know about them, but few have ever laid eyes on one."

I was sure he'd told me something along those lines before—that the water towers throughout the city weren't just for bathing and drinking but also helped with the irrigation of the nearby farmland. The relics were a keystone of the Kingdom that sustained the daily lives of its citizens.

"They're used for farming as well, right?" I asked.

"You got it. The Kingdom of Clays has never been blessed with much rain, and we don't have any mountains that could serve as decent water sources, so

people went through plenty of hardship back in the day. But thanks to all the Wellspring Pipes adventurers have found in the Dungeon of the Lost over the years, we've become one of the foremost countries in the field of water access. You could argue that the Kingdom wouldn't even have made it this far without them!"

"Wow, these...uh, water...pipes? They sound pretty amazing."

My coworker chuckled. "Now you're starting to get it. They're the reason the Kingdom was able to develop such a prosperous bathhouse culture. Our aqueducts' infrastructure is well established, and waste-and rainwater are properly separated and funneled through underground sewers. When it comes to water, you won't find a more developed nation!"



“I guess not.”

For a man who'd never stepped foot outside the royal capital, my coworker had made a lot of grand claims about the world at large. I'd always taken them with a grain of salt...but on this matter, he was probably right. I'd traveled to Mithra, the capital of the Magic Empire, and a number of villages and towns, and not a single one of them had waterways to rival ours. I was used to cleaning drains here in the royal capital, so it had surprised me to learn that other places didn't have drains in the first place. At least based on what I'd seen, we were so far ahead when it came to our infrastructure.

“To summarize,” my coworker said, “this new establishment is the first bathhouse in history where you can actually look at a Wellspring Pipe, a relic closely tied to the Kingdom's history. Wouldn't it be a shame to miss out?”

“You're right about that.”

Now that I thought about it, there was a stylized design of an odd-looking cylinder on the entry tickets I'd received. Was it supposed to be the Wellspring Pipe? The bathhouse hadn't seemed particularly special to me, but after listening to my coworker's explanation, I couldn't help my curiosity.

“So?” he asked. “Feeling a little more excited?”

“Yeah, I'm looking forward to seeing it.”

“That's the spirit. Let's go! If you think my commentary's over, wait till we're inside. Follow me, and I'll—”

“Excuse me, sir,” one of the guards by the bathhouse's entrance called out. “Could you come with us for a moment?”

I stopped in my tracks. They must have wanted to ask about the sword slung over my shoulder. But when I turned around, I realized they were looking not at me but at my coworker.

“Hmm? Have I done something wrong?” he asked. “I'm not carrying anything dangerous. Look. Empty-handed.”

“No, well...” The guard seemed uncomfortable. “We're terribly sorry, sir. It's just...”

“You’ll bother the other customers if you go in like that,” his partner finished.

“Excuse me?” my coworker asked. “Like what?”

I suddenly noticed that the other patrons were giving me and my coworker a wide berth; there was a perfectly empty circle around the two of us. Many of them were straight up glaring at my coworker while holding their noses. I guess he *did* smell a bit...

“Our apologies, but please come with us.”

“Wh-Why?! Isn’t this a government-run establishment *specifically* for public health and welfare?! You can’t chase me away for being dirty and smelling bad!”

Oh, so he knew.

“The bathhouse is also a leisure center,” one of the guards explained. “If you simply intend to bathe, there are many other options available to you. Once again, we apologize, but you need to come with us. Ah...will your companion also be...?”

“Me?” I asked. The guards must have lumped me together with my coworker.

“W-Wait! He’s got nothing to do with me! Take me away if you have to, but leave him be!”

“Is that true?” the guard asked me.

“Well, we’re acquaintances...but it was only by coincidence that we ran into each other today.”

“I see. Then there shouldn’t be any issues with you using the baths—as long as you leave your, er...signboard with our check-in staff.”

“Sure. This is a sword, though.”

“A sword...?” The guard looked bewildered for a moment. “Well, whatever it is, it can’t be taken into the baths.”

“Got it.”

The guards then grabbed my coworker by the shoulders.

“Noor,” he said. “Sorry our long-awaited reunion had to end so abruptly.”

“I’m sorry too. It doesn’t feel right to leave you behind.”

“Heh. Don’t sweat it. Just go on without me, okay? I’ll catch up soon. And don’t you worry—it’ll take more than this to thwart me.”

“Right...”

I watched the guards drag away my coworker, who was giving me a dramatic thumbs-up and a tearful smile, before continuing into the bathhouse. I made sure to leave my sword in the corner by the entrance—the same place everyone else had put their prohibited items.

“This place is pretty big...”

Even the baths themselves were impressively large; for all the people currently enjoying them, there was still plenty of room to spare. There were spots for customers to rinse themselves before getting in as well as separate cold and steam baths. They really hadn’t held back when building this place.

Those features alone were enough to qualify the bathhouse as a high-quality establishment, but there were also more unique baths than I could count. One was the Water Dragon’s Bath, which used wind magic to create bubbles and waves. As much as I wanted to try it, I decided not to; it was packed with kids playing around, and the last thing I wanted to do was interrupt their fun.

The Bathhouse Master had called this place “as orthodox as it gets,” but as far as I was concerned, it was a wonderland of curiosities. I supposed that seeing things with your own eyes was always better than relying on hearsay.

There were so many baths that a person wouldn’t be able to try them all in one visit, but it was nice watching everyone enjoy them. I would definitely come back in the future; after all, I’d managed to acquire a whole stack of entry tickets.



“That was better than I thought.”

After rinsing off and sampling the baths that had caught my eye, I exited into the bathhouse’s lobby. They had cold drinks for sale, so I purchased one and took a breather. I enjoyed the beverage at my leisure while watching the water

spouting from the pipe they had on display, admiring its novelty.

By the time I took my leave, the sun had already set.

“He never did come back...” I mused aloud.

I ended up not seeing my coworker for the rest of the day. As I silently thanked him for everything he’d taught me, I sent a prayer for his safety up into the clear, starry sky.

Chapter 111: The Envoy from Sarenza

Inside his office, Prince Rein set aside the sheaf of documents he'd been looking through and gazed up at King Clays, who had just recently come back from his trip to Mithra. "Father. You've returned," he said.

"Mm-hmm. Thank you for your hard work while I was gone, Rein. Did you see the high priestess's address? She was excellent. It was all rather enjoyable."

"Yes, I watched it on a spare oracle's orb in one of our magical equipment labs. She has a talent for giving speeches."

"Given the content, I suspect we'll see some friction in the coming days, but the public's reception seems to have been a lot more positive than we anticipated. It's almost strange how well they've taken her changes."

"It must be because of the new high priestess's natural charisma. Her script gave her a fantastic chance to shine."

"It was Holy Prince Tirrence who wrote it. And to think he's barely older than Lynne! I've got high hopes for the Theocracy's new system of governance." A delighted smile spread across the king's scarred face. "We'll need to keep an eye on them—though not for the same reasons as before."

"Incidentally, father, would you like to review the report I compiled on what happened in your absence?"

"I would tell you to take your time, but it's been a while since I've made a diplomatic appearance, and these old bones are all worn out. Unless you've something urgent I should know, I'd rather we keep it brief."

"Of course. That was always my intention. That being said, there is *one* matter that warrants some attention."

"The envoy from Sarenza? Carew gave me the overview." In a complete turnabout from his previous cheerful smile, the king's demeanor took a more severe turn. "Sending an envoy to us, their long-standing enemy, while refusing to send anyone to Mithra's ceremony was a very strange move indeed."

Especially when they're formal allies with the Holy Theocracy."

"We had the envoy under surveillance the entire time he was in the country. He wasn't anyone significant, it seems. His only role was to deliver us a letter, the contents of which were unknown to him."

"A letter, hmm? Did you read it?"

"Yes, after the Sovereign of Shadows confirmed it was safe to. There's no mistaking that it's an official missive from Sarenza. It took the appearance of a warm, run-of-the-mill greeting...yet it was clearly anything but."

"May I see it?"

"Of course. Here."

King Clays accepted the letter that was handed to him and read through it with narrowed eyes. "I see what you mean. 'Your kingdom's remarkable achievements have made a deep impression on us... We would be delighted to contribute, free of charge, to your continued progress.' That they even had to clarify their help was free doesn't surprise me—this is Sarenza we're dealing with—but still... I can't see why that man would send us such a letter, even if only as lip service. And why is he being so sycophantic about it?"

"I wonder the same, father. There's also the part that says, 'We stand prepared to offer your kingdom as much information as we, the Mercantile Free State, have accrued about living demonfolk.' And then they claim they'll grant us permission to explore the Dungeon of Oblivion near their capital."

"Each line only makes it harder to discern their intentions. I can see the connection to the demonfolk matter, given Rolo's involvement in all this...but why allow us to search their dungeon? Our kingdom has been seeking that permission since the days of our forefathers—to no avail, might I add."

"Indeed."

King Clays glared at the letter in silence, then turned to the prince, who was sitting back in his chair. "Rein. I want to hear your opinion first."

"Do you mean...whether we should accept their invitation?"

"In part. I want to know how you think we should interpret this blatantly

opaque letter.”

The prince spent some time in thought before he spoke again. “This is just my instinct speaking...but I don’t think the letter is of any real significance.”

“Oh?” The king examined the prince, his eyes widened in a slight show of surprise. “Is that so?”

“I suspect they do intend to make good on their promises...which only means they haven’t assigned much value to them. At a guess, I’d say they’re dangling several options in front of us and waiting to see which ones we’ll take.”

“I see. So they’re asking leading questions.”

“Yes.”

“That *would* make sense. In short, they’re probing us because they believe our kingdom *has something*.”

“That is my assumption.”

The king brooded the matter for a while before a small smile crept onto his face. “In that case, shall we ignore them entirely? Feigning ignorance is a specialty of mine.”

“I’m not sure that’s an option this time.”

“I suppose not. We accepted their letter, so refusing to answer would only confirm their suspicions. Still, what shall we do?”

There was a brief stretch of silence as the pair fell into thought. Then the king shook his head and returned the letter to Rein. “I won’t be of much help to you,” he confessed. “Using my head has never been my strong suit. Perhaps we should ask Oken for advice. We can delay our response long enough to do that, I presume.”

“Yes, we should take as much care as we can with our reply. Also...there is one more matter I must report.”

“Hmm? Is there?”

“Yes. It concerns Noor, the man to whom you gave the Black Blade.”

“Has something happened to him?”

“A-About that...” Rein gulped, much to King Clays’s surprise; it was rare to see the ever-calm prince so disturbed. “I shall give it to you straight: for some time now, he has been using the Black Blade, of all things, to clean the drains of our city’s sewer network. Furthermore, it would appear he also used it for excavation work during the reconstruction of the city’s aqueducts.”

“Construction? Excavation? As in, he was using it—*the Black Blade*—to dig?”

“Yes... According to our investigations, there’s also evidence that he used it as a *pile driver* to level the earth on various construction sites.”

“A pile driver? And, wait, did you say *cleaning drains*? He cleaned the city’s *sewers* with the— Pfft!”

The tension in the room suddenly vanished, replaced with roaring laughter. The prince stared at King Clays, who was holding his stomach, in dumbfounded shock. “F-Father?”

“Ha ha! Drain cleaning? Excellent! Never a boring moment with that man... I *knew* that giving him the Black Blade was the right decision.”

“You...aren’t angry?”

“Why would I be? It’s great that he’s getting so much use out of the thing. I mean, what was the alternative? Have it remain on the castle’s wall as a mere decoration? Instead, he’s been wielding it for the sake of our people. Ah, what a delight!”

There was more laughter and even some knee-slapping before the king finally exercised some control. “So, how was Noor paid for his work?” he asked, his eyes still teary. “Adequately, I trust. We can hardly let him go unrewarded after everything he’s done for our kingdom. If we don’t have the budget, sell off some of the royal treasury.”

“Regarding that—most of the compensation for his work passed through the Adventurers Guild. I went to the trouble of checking the receipts and running the numbers...whereupon I discovered that he received a full *fifth* of what we set aside for public works and the city’s reconstruction.”

King Clays paused. “He received a fifth of our *entire budget*? As ordinary compensation?”

“Yes. To be more precise, as the completion fees for commissions.”

Once again, the king laughed uproariously. “That man! He must be quite wealthy by now, I imagine!”

“Indeed. If we speak purely in terms of coin, then he has access to quite the fortune.”

“In that case, I suppose he’ll refuse any monetary rewards we try to give him. Now, what to do...?” The king hummed pleasantly and stroked his chin. “I can’t imagine I’ll puzzle out an answer. Tell him to ask for whatever he wants, and we’ll do what we can to make it happen. Wait, we’ve already told him that, haven’t we? What a pickle. It seems we’ve run into a dead end.”

After some more thought, King Clays grinned as deviously as a child with a penchant for pranks. “I know. Instead of a letter, why don’t we send *him* to Sarenza? We’ll give him a note that says, ‘You were so desperate to know, so here he is—the reason the Kingdom of Clays has been making so much progress!’ Wouldn’t that be a laugh?”

“That sounds rather...”

“I jest, of course; we could never ask that of our savior. But if we *did*...what a grand sight it would be. Imagine the sheer bewilderment on those merchants’ faces!”

“All I can *imagine* is a slew of international incidents...”

“You’re not wrong. I’m sure he’d cause a fuss over there...though I wouldn’t mind seeing that either.”

“Father...?”

King Clays allowed himself another round of laughter before regaining his composure. “Summon the Six Sovereigns; we’ll decide on our response to Sarenza’s letter together. As for Noor... Let’s see... For now, inform him that he has our unconditional assistance. Oh, and...” He locked eyes with Rein, his expression the picture of seriousness. “Tell him I managed to pass along those bear ornaments he gave me.”

Then he burst into laughter again.

Chapter 112: The Vice-Captains of the Six Army Corps

Several people sat facing one another inside the council room. Though its usual occupants were the Six Sovereigns, captains of the Six Army Corps of the Royal Capital, today's gathering was a good deal younger.

"I was told the Six Sovereigns received an urgent summons from His Majesty." Thunderflash Sirene, the vice-captain of the Hunter Corps, uneasily looked around at her colleagues. "Did something happen? Ines, do you know anything?"

Seated next to Sirene was Ines, the Divine Shield, of the Warrior Corps. She looked up from the thick sheaf of documents she was holding in one hand, having confirmed the day's agenda. "There's no need to fret. From what I've heard, there isn't an emergency. Though, since their meeting is of great importance, it will continue for some time. That's why we vice-captains were suddenly called upon to oversee the usual periodical debriefing."

Sitting on Ines's other side was a man with a golden spear slung over his shoulder. He had one leg on the council room's table and studied the ceiling with evident disinterest. "Tsk. Waste of time, if you ask me. The old masters could've just postponed it."

"We're here because they couldn't," Ines replied, lightly rebuking him. "This is one of our crucial duties as vice-captains."

"Yeah, yeah. I get it," Gilbert said with a small sigh. "Can we get started? I can already feel my body wasting away."

Next to the Spear Sovereign was a robe-clad woman with her arms crossed. She looked clearly displeased with the situation. "Um, Gilbert...? I came here thinking we were just going to have a meeting. Why do I need to patch you up too?"

"My bad, Marieberr. I went a little overboard with this morning's training.

Still, it's not like you'll have much else to do, right?"

"I... I mean, it's my job to heal you and your Swordsman Corps, so I'm not doing anything I wouldn't have done other—" She let out a shriek the moment she touched the man's arm. "Huh?! Gilbert?! You told me you just needed a checkup for a few aches and pains! But your bones and muscles are *pulp*! What in goodness's name did you do to yourself?!"

"Eh. Can't be helped, given my opponent. This always happens; he doesn't know the meaning of the word 'restraint.' Not that I'd *want* him to hold back."

"What?! How can you be so flippant about this?! You should be in agony!"

"Yeah, it hurts, but I've gotten used to it. And you're gonna have me fixed up in no time, right? Might as well get it over with."

Marieberr responded with a high-pitched whine of distress. "Th-This is insane! I hope you know that! I mean, I'll do it, but... Ugh! This is so gross! I can feel chunks of bone sloshing around in here!" As she complained, a gentle light enveloped the bluish-black limb...and quickly restored it to its usual color.

"Damn, that was fast. No wonder people call you the Saintess—you're a real cut above the run-of-the-mill clerics." Gilbert energetically rolled his shoulder several times, then gave Marieberr a few light slaps on the back. "Yeah, it feels perfect. Thanks."

In stark contrast to her delighted patient, Marieberr looked white as a sheet. "U-Ugh... It wasn't as bad as when your insides were all churned up, at least... But I'm putting my foot down! Make sure your bones stay *solid* from now on!"

"Ah, you'll get over it. Thanks again. Next time I'm injured, I'll let you know."

Marieberr's next whimper seemed to rest somewhere between a sob and a groan. "I... I could report you to the royal advisory committee, right? For sexual harassment?"

"H-Hang on. Where's this coming from...?"

Ines glanced sidelong at the Spear Sovereign, who was now desperately trying to console the teary-eyed Marieberr, before neatly arranging her papers and casting her eyes over the room. "Well then—the vice-captains' meeting shall

now commence. Please have your individual reports ready.”

But before she could continue, she suddenly felt that something was wrong. Looking around, she realized they were a person short.

“Hold on—where’s Melusine? She was just here.”

“She went back to her workshop,” Sirene replied.

“She...went back to her workshop?”

“Yep. Just a moment ago, while Marieberr was patching up Gilbert. She looked paler than ever and kept muttering about deadlines like she was reciting an incantation.” Sirene sighed, then rested her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. “She gave me her report and asked me to read the underlined parts for her. She also asked us to deliver ours to her workshop after the meeting and said she’d read them when she got the time.”

“What’s keeping her so busy? I’m not aware of any work that should be tying her up to this extent.”

“I don’t know the details, but that business with the oracle’s orbs in the Theocracy led to another huge order. She’s the one in charge, apparently.”

“I see. Then I suppose we’ll have to carry on without her.”

“Hold it, Ines,” Gilbert interrupted. “Aren’t we forgetting someone?”

“Not to my knowledge. We’re all here, barring Melusine.”

“What? Count again. We’re clearly missing someone. Where’s, uh...you know. What was her name again...? From the Shadow Company.”

Everyone looked around the council room.

“C-Come to think of it,” Marieberr said, “I haven’t seen her at all today...”

“Really?” Sirene asked. “I could have sworn she was just here, though.”

“Likewise,” Ines added. “I was under the impression she was with us.”

Not even when they surveyed the room together could they spot the Shadow Company’s vice-captain. Her whereabouts were a genuine mystery—but as they discussed it among themselves, a faint voice like the ringing of a tiny bell came from one of the empty chairs.

“—here. I’m right here.”

Surprised, the vice-captains focused their attention on the apparent source of the noise and gradually noticed what they’d missed: seated in the chair they’d all thought was empty was a woman with translucent white hair.

“Oops...” Gilbert muttered, averting his gaze a little as he realized the mistake he’d made.

“I’m right here...” the white-haired woman said.

“M-My poor heart!” Marieberr exclaimed.

“S-Since when have you been there?” Sirene asked.

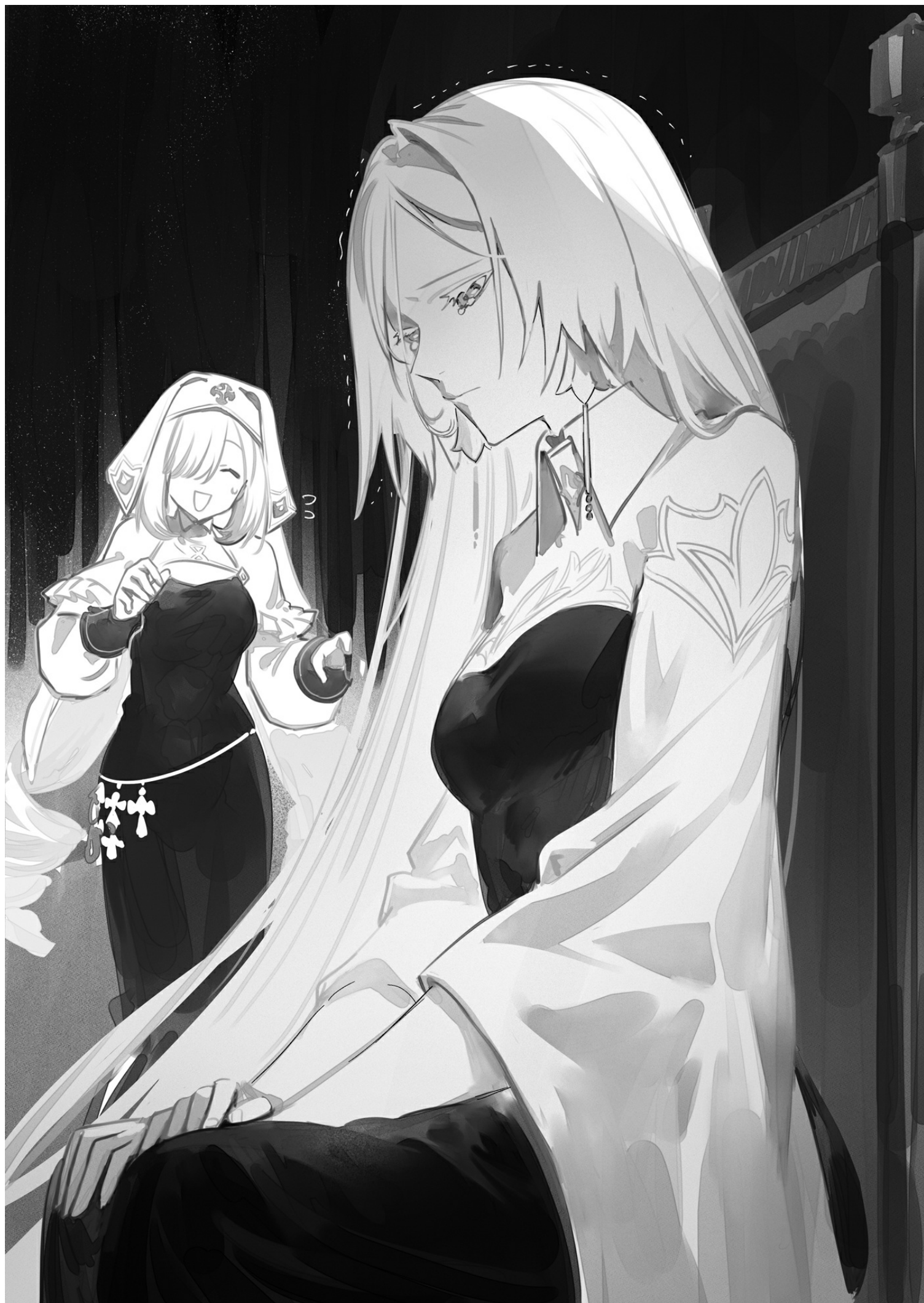
“From the beginning... I was the first one here.” The woman’s shoulders drooped, and her eyes brimmed with tears. “And my name is Rei, Gilbert. We’ve met before. Many times. Eighty-two, to be exact.”

“S-Sorry, Rei... H-Hey, Sirene! How come you didn’t notice her?”

“M-Me?! Are you saying this is *my* fault?! S-Sorry, Rei. I totally didn’t see you there.”

“I didn’t either...” Marieberr added.

“It’s fine, everyone. I’m used to it. Don’t worry...” Despite her assurances, Rei was visibly crestfallen.



Ines gave the room a cursory scan to make sure everyone except Melusine was present, ignoring the small fuss about Rei, and then nodded. “Very well, everybody. As we are all present, the Six Sovereigns’ meeting shall now commence with us vice-captains as stand-ins. First and foremost, each representative will give their individual report. Gil—”

“Nothing fazes you, does it, Ines?”

“Please keep such remarks to a minimum, Sirene. We’re in the midst of a meeting. As I was saying—Gilbert, the Swordsman Corps’s report, if you would.”

“I don’t remember usually being first...”

“You want this meeting to be over with, don’t you? On with it.”

“Tsk, fine... Oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I forgot to pick up the papers from my subordinates.”

“I suspected that might happen, so I took the liberty of collecting them all. Here. Read.”

“O-Oh... Th-Thanks?”

Though the vice-captains’ meeting lacked any sense of coherence, thanks to Ines’s heavy-handed guidance, it concluded without any issues.

Chapter 113: Melusine the Librarian

I, Melusine, was all alone in the magical equipment research laboratory's workshop. Of course I was going to air my grievances.

"That blasted, decrepit old scarecrow. 'Ho ho! Here's an order for five hundred more oracle's orbs.' You *just* got back and you're dumping all this on me?! You *know* what our production capabilities are! Use your brain before you take more orders!"

Oracle's orbs had been stuck in the prototype stage for *years*, so when Master Oken had approached me a few days ago and said we needed to make nearly three hundred of them, I thought he'd gone insane. Of course, I wasn't going to say something so rude to my direct superior, so I'd settled on asking whether his head was okay. That didn't sound much better, in retrospect.

To be honest, no one would have blamed me for voicing my true thoughts—such was the absurdity of the Spell Sovereign's request. The development of new magical equipment was usually measured on the scale of years.

In its composition, an oracle's orb was similar to an extant magical communications item that allowed one to make "calls" to others. But unlike said item, an oracle's orb did not just transmit voices; it also captured light—and therefore visual information—which it then converted to manawaves and relayed to an endpoint, where the input was reproduced.

The concept had existed for a long time, and there had been enough theory work for the prospect of actually creating one to hold promise. And yet, as with all research, we encountered several major technical problems that kept the oracle's orb from being fit for mass production. It normally took years to devise a solution; a mere few days was beyond preposterous.

So what had possessed me to accept?

The night before the delivery date had been hell—I managed the creation of the primary components through trial and error, while the boss, Master Oken,

forced mana into the end product. We had just barely finished in time. Through the use of unbelievably high-quality manastones given to us by Mithra—Demons’ Hearts, though we had since switched to calling them “Crimson Gems” for some reason—a slew of other outrageous materials that enthusiasts would drool over, and a flagrant disregard for our budget, we had achieved the impossible.

It was nothing short of a miracle that our orbs had worked when we’d needed them to; we had devoted ourselves to them, of course, but we hadn’t had the time to give them a trial run or even perform the most basic of our usual stress tests. Master Oken had agreed to take full responsibility for them, but a breakdown wouldn’t have been surprising in the slightest, so I’d spent the past few days living in fear of the complaints that would inevitably come flooding in.

And then, despite all that, he came back with an order for another five hundred. Does he never learn from his mistakes?

The look on my face must have betrayed my outrage—or maybe it was the way my shoulders had trembled as I’d read the specifications document—because Master Oken had quickly added, “H-How about...I raise your salary tenfold for the term?”

Honestly. My boss was too flippant. How could anyone turn down an offer like that? Partly on instinct, I’d cheerfully leaped up and cried, “Of course! I’ll start immediately!” In the end, I’d succumbed to the most powerful magic spell of all: money.

That being said, I was still peeved with Master Oken. Couldn’t he have secured us more time? There *was* such a thing as leaving a little breathing room. Moreover, since the order had come directly from the high priestess of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra—maybe he had a personal connection or something—the specifications for the quality of the final product and its delivery were unusually strict. I supposed that was a given, since it was for a national undertaking of some sort.

On the bright side, the budget we’d received was quite frankly colossal.

The oracle’s orbs were packed with delicate mechanisms that required fine-tuning to function. A burden as great as transmitting information internationally

meant that one wrong step could even result in them exploding. Entrusting the core components to the assembly workers was therefore out of the question, leaving Master Oken as the one person who could assist me. How unfortunate, then, that my magnificent, ever so reliable boss had suddenly become awfully busy and was always out as a result. Even if I delegated everything I *could* delegate, the lion's share of the work was still entirely on my shoulders.

I examined the schedule, then the mountain of components I'd yet to assemble.

This is not going to work...

My stomach hurt from all the anti-sleep potions I'd chugged—my own custom brew, might I add. I'd also needed to pull out of the vice-captains' meeting after leaving my report with my colleague Sirene. They would most likely be fine without me; Ines ran a particularly tight ship. I hated taking advantage of her like this, but I didn't have the leeway to worry about such things. Every second was precious.

To be frank, I didn't even belong with the other vice-captains. I was out of place among them. They were outliers in their respective fields, whereas I was just...me.

"I still don't know how I'm even the same rank as them..."

Mentally worn out from focusing so hard on my work, I took a moment to rest. My thoughts lingered on the other five vice-captains.

First, there was Ines, the Divine Shield—vice-captain of the Warrior Corps and the adopted daughter of Dandalg, mediator and spokesman of the Six Sovereigns. She was renowned as the wielder of a unique and peerless Gift, and such was her might that at a young age, she and she alone had been entrusted with guarding King Clays's beloved daughter. In terms of pure combat ability, she was said to be the equal of that invincible monster Gilbert.

Of course, there was more to Ines than just her battle prowess; she was also so beautiful that one couldn't even work up the inclination to be envious. I thought she was dashing gallant, and I certainly wasn't alone in my estimation—among the general soldiery, she had won the hearts of men and women alike. She was even the foremost candidate to become the next leader of the Six

Army Corps of the Royal Capital, an evaluation not a single soul would object to.

Next, there was the aforementioned monster, the vice-captain of the Swordsman Corps. He was also the commanding officer of the corps's elite squad, the Dragoon Company, and his subordinates had taken to calling him "Commander" as a show of respect. He had only been young when, in celebration of his talents, the king had bestowed upon him the title of "Spear Sovereign" and a masterwork orichalcum spear.

Gilbert was more sensible these days, but he was said to have been quite the ruffian when he was younger. Tales of his exploits—good and bad—could be found all throughout the royal capital, and he was particularly well-beloved among the city's delinquents and troublemakers. Truth be told, he was someone I wouldn't really like to get close to. He was always so overfamiliar with me that I'd started taking measures to keep him at a distance—and I knew Marieberr did the same.

Speaking of Marieberr, she was an extraordinary person as well. Known as the Saintess, she was the vice-captain of the Cleric Corps—though one wouldn't think so seeing her in person. Her talents put her shoulder to shoulder with the Divine Shield and the Spear Sovereign, and much like her peers, she hadn't been very old when the king had given her a title.

Marieberr's healing was painless—which was more than one could say for any medical treatment by Sain, the Sovereign of Salvation—and the general soldiery had come to treat her with almost religious reverence as a result. Her popularity and duties meant she was busy day and night, but in exchange, she had the highest salary out of all the vice-captains. To put it in her own words, "If my pay wasn't *at least* this good, I wouldn't be able to do all this."

I *did* wonder what kind of "saintess" refused to work unless she was paid, but I also sympathized with her; it was important to receive proper compensation for services rendered. Outside of work, I often went out with her and Sirene for tea, and our time together revealed she was an avid devourer of sweets. It was a mystery how she never gained any weight.

Then there was the youngest of all of us: Thunderflash Sirene. Her talents had caught the eye of Captain Mianne, who was known for her uncompromising

standards, and it was no wonder why—she was a rare genius even compared to the rest of the Hunter Corps, a group of abnormal masochists whose idea of a good time was hunting birds blindfolded.

Despite her young age, Sirene had an iron will and never seemed in awe of others. Her beastfolk blood meant her senses were excellent, and she could shoot down a few dozen birds with her back turned and eyes covered. Her skill with a bow was so spectacular that it almost felt *wrong*, like reality wasn't supposed to work that way...yet she was still said to be a novice compared to Captain Mianne. It made me wonder just how messed up the world of hunters must be.

My impression of Sirene was that she was always being run ragged in the Hunter Corps, but her life had at last gained a splash of color, according to Marieberr. The lucky man in question was none other than the demonfolk boy Rolo. That checked out, I supposed; Sirene had never been one to take the easy road. Not that I wouldn't support her—it was my every intention to do so.

Last but most definitely not least was Rei, the Phantom Princess and vice-captain of the Shadow Company. She had an unusual appearance owing to her beautiful, translucent white hair that almost seemed to shine in the light. Rumor had it that her combat prowess and intelligence-gathering skills were second only to Carew, the man known as both the Sovereign of Shadows and the Reaper, but I didn't know anything about her for certain. Though I'd met with Rei on many occasions—at least, I was pretty sure I had—I couldn't remember her very well. I was under the impression that she was beautiful...but everything else was hazy. She probably had a Gift of some kind.

Rei, too, was talented enough to have received a masterwork blade from King Clays, so I imagined she could easily dispatch anyone she didn't like without her target ever noticing she was there. Gilbert would be wise to watch his back.

And that was it for the other vice-captains, all true legends who would one day carve their names into the annals of the Kingdom's history. Then there was me, Melusine the Librarian. It was crazy that I could even be mentioned in the same breath as my colleagues. Despite being a member of the Magician Corps, I wasn't that great with magic. I didn't have a great physique, nor was I good in battle, as I could never keep up with those around me. Even serving as backup

was too much for me.

I can already tell what you're thinking—how could someone so meek serve as the vice-captain of the Magician Corps, lethal and experienced spellcasters one and all? I wondered the same thing, but the boss had said it was fine and not to worry about it. Plus, a certain someone had been blinded by her own self-serving interests when she'd seen all the appealing benefits the job had to offer.

Oh, right. That someone was me.

After I'd accepted the role, the boss had conferred on me the title of "the Librarian" because I used to work in the royal library.

Isn't that half-baked and way too on the nose?

Next to the Divine Shield, the Spear Sovereign, the Saintess, the Phantom Princess, and Thunderflash, "the Librarian" was just plain...*plain*. It stood out no matter how you looked at it.

Everyone around me was kind and treated me well, but even the simple act of attending a meeting with them had me cowering in awe. Besides, that kind of thing wasn't why I'd joined the magical equipment research lab in the first place.

Ever since I was small, I'd dreamed of a life surrounded by books. I'd studied so hard that my eyesight had worsened, but it had all paid off when I received my first job at the royal library. I'd spent my workdays amid my beloved tomes and my evenings tinkering with magical items—a hobby of mine. My salary had also gone to excellent use, as I'd used my days off to buy up all kinds of new books and board games. Every day had been fun, and I'd been happier than ever.

Then I'd met a peculiar old man.

He had spent ages searching the library for a particular book, so he almost jumped for joy when I took him to the right shelf. We chatted for a while, and then he shared with me his favorite pastime: disassembling and remodeling antique magical items he purchased from secondhand vendors. Of course, that was an interest of mine as well, so our conversation became rather

enthusiastic.

From that day onward, he had occasionally come by the library to visit me. We would stand around swapping stories and useful information about our recent projects. His appearance, speech, and demeanor made me think he was suspicious at first, but the more we interacted, the more I opened up to his jovial nature. Though we were generations apart and didn't even know each other's names, we became fast friends. It wasn't until much later that I found out who he really was.

During one of our usual conversations, the old man had told me about a workshop he used for research and invited me to see it. Thinking back, I'd noticed the extremely suspect look in his eyes, but I'd gone with him anyway. He was an old man; I'd seen no reason to believe he would try anything weird.

I could still remember entering that workshop for the very first time. It was like the world of my dreams had come to life. Touching even just one legendary-grade magical item had always seemed like a fantasy to me, but there were dozens lining the workshop's shelves. I'd also spotted stacks of raw materials so rare that they were only ever discussed, not seen, and old grimoires that not even the royal library had in its collection.

That wasn't all, though—the old man had told me I could come back *whenever I wanted*. He had even gone as far as to add, “If you want to help me with my work, you can use the materials and tools here to your heart's desire.”

As the cherry on top, he'd offered to pay me for my time too. He'd said that I wouldn't need to stop working at the library and could consider it pocket money for what was essentially an extension of my hobby.

I'd agreed on the spot, of course. Tinkering with magical equipment and items to my heart's content, using someone else's money and materials? And *getting paid* for the privilege? It had seemed to me like the opportunity of a lifetime. How else was I meant to react?

Of course, it hadn't taken me long to realize what an enormous trap I'd stepped into.

I'd started paying the workshop regular visits when I suddenly realized the items I was working on were arms and armor for the Six Army Corps of the

Royal Capital. And not just their standard gear; I was receiving *national-secret-grade equipment*. As the days passed, I received more and more tasks to do, eventually ending up in charge of the entire workshop. I'd replaced the person who had brought me there in the first place: Master Oken, the Spell Sovereign.

As my role at the workshop continued to expand, my lifestyle turned upside down to accommodate it. I used my main job at the library to rest, then spent every minute of my free time in serious work mode as Master Oken's stand-in. My income had increased dramatically because of my side gig, but the extra responsibilities kept me extremely busy.

I'd quickly recognized the danger of my situation and resolved to take a break from the workshop—only I couldn't stay away. Now that I was used to the fully equipped and outright perfect working environment of the royal magical equipment research lab, how could anyone expect me to return to my shoddy little workbench at home? To make matters worse, being at the workshop meant I could order components from the royal castle's first-rate blacksmiths and craftsmen—master artisans I'd never get to work with otherwise—and mark it as a regular work expense.

The workshop was too good to be true. I couldn't step away. Now that I'd tasted this grand new life, I couldn't go back to my old one.

And the pay was an *excellent* bonus.

The workshop had a hold on me, its comfort and efficiency a snare from which I couldn't break free. Then, after overcoming a few tough projects, I found the title of vice-captain of the Magician Corps thrust upon me—a title I most definitely didn't deserve.

Master Oken hadn't broken his initial promise to me—I was still technically a librarian, and my contract with the Magician Corps expressly delineated my work as the vice-captain as a side job. But still, what the heck? How had this whole mess even come about?

These days, the new board games I'd purchased lay unopened at home, piled high like a tower. Some were fossils I couldn't remember buying. My collection hadn't grown in quite a while, but only because I was now too busy to spend any of the money I was earning.

My life shouldn't have been like this. Though I'd read my contract before signing it, and the terms of my employment had always been clear to me, I'd never expected all the chaos that had followed. One of the key reasons I'd chosen a job as a librarian was the promise of regular vacation days. And as for my side gig, I'd only started coming to the workshop because I wanted to get paid to play with high-quality materials at no cost to myself.

"Stupid old scarecrow!" I snapped, returning from my recollections to the solitude of the workshop. "'Come and go whenever you like,' he said. If I did that, we'd never get these orbs done in time! This isn't what I was promised, damn it!"

"Ho ho. 'Old scarecrow'? Now who would that be, I wonder?"



I turned around in response to the familiar voice and saw my boss, the Spell Sovereign, standing right behind me. “Huh? You’re back sooner than I thought, Master Oken.”

“Er... You *do* realize it’s already deep into the night, don’t you, Melly? Looks like you’ve been working hard. So, who’s this old scarecrow you were complaining about?”

“Hmm? ‘Old scarecrow’? Did I really say that?”

“Ho ho. That was how it sounded to me.”

“Well, you *are* getting on in years. Are you sure you weren’t hearing things?”

“I’m not decrepit yet, girlie!”

For a while, we simply stared at each other in the gloomy workshop.

“For the record,” I said, “I *do* love you, Master Oken.”

“Ho ho? You’ll make me blush, telling me so direct— Hey! You won’t fool me that easily!”

“Oh, and if you increase our research budget, I’ll love you even more.”

“You always wear your heart on your sleeve. Well, since you’re working so hard, I suppose I can double it.”

“Huh?! Really?! I wasn’t actually expecting that to work. In that case, please upgrade the equipment and facilities too. As much as you can!”

“You have no shame, do you? Very well. Perhaps I’ll give the workshop’s layout a little renovation. I suspect it’s going to need one, anyway.”

“R-Really?! I love you, you old scare—Master Oken!”

“Ho ho! Well, I’ll leave you to it, Melly! Oh, but before I go, an extra order just came in. Here.”

“Huh? Wait, you never mentioned—”

Several days later, after giving in to my own greed and making a deal with a demon the boss, I managed to complete the last of the orders. I’d reached the

finish line just in the nick of time, though my eyes were hollow and teary, I was still clutching a magic potion in one hand, and I couldn't stop muttering darkly about how close I'd come to failure.

Feeling the freedom that came from having completed a major undertaking, I resolved to open the board games I'd neglected at home and enjoy them to my heart's content. I had no way of knowing that the next day, a demon with a white beard would arrive with a smile on his face and a stack of order forms from several countries.

"Ho ho! I've brought you a present!" he would say. "New orders!"

Chapter 114: Rolo and the Dragon

“Rolo, after you feed Rala, can you help me prepare the soup?”

“You want me to help with the restaurant’s food? Are you sure?”

“Well, you’ve already mastered all the basics. I figure it’s about time to teach you what’s next.”

“Okay. Thanks, Laius.”

After returning from Mithra, I’d started working with Mianne’s husband, Laius, at his restaurant.

These days, more and more strangers spoke to me when we crossed paths on the street. I wasn’t too surprised; Astirra’s speech had gone out to the whole continent with the help of the oracle’s orbs. Most people were really nice, but sometimes I ran into people who did nothing but shout abuse at me. It had made me decide to stop going into the city for a while. I’d holed up in Ines’s estate, spending all my time reading in the library or wandering the gardens, taking the occasional nap.

Mianne had approached me when she found out. *“If you’ve got so much free time on your hands, why not help out at our place?”* Since the restaurant her husband ran was small, there could only be so many customers around at once. And when I started working there, I discovered that the patrons were all very kind. Many of them I already knew, like Sirene and Marieberr.

Soon enough, I was helping out every day. That alone raised my spirits. I also considered it work worth doing, especially since Laius had treated me to delicious food there in the past.

At first, my duties had involved washing dishes and cleaning the floor. It was stuff that anyone could do, but I didn’t mind. Then, one day, Laius had asked me whether I was interested in cooking.

“I’ve never tried it, but I’d like to.”

So he'd started teaching me the basics, little by little.

Laius had praised my first dish, saying that I clearly had talent. The fuzzy feeling those words gave me had stuck with me all the way home, where I'd immediately made the same dish for Ines to try. She'd said it was delicious and then expressed her surprise when I revealed that I'd prepared it. I'd been hooked on cooking ever since.

I'd never even imagined that I could create something others would call "delicious," but now I could make all kinds of simple dishes.

Sirene and Marieberr were regulars at the restaurant and often came to eat together. Laius had secretly served them a dish I'd made for practice, and when he'd asked if they noticed anything different about it, they'd said they hadn't.

Though I didn't think my food was even close to being as good as Laius's, seeing Sirene eat it with a smile and call it delicious made me happy beyond words. I'd said that making it had been simple and that I'd gladly cook for her every day if she wanted, but she hadn't said anything in response. Maybe I'd gotten too carried away. I hadn't been able to read her thoughts very well at the time, but she had probably only complimented my dish to be nice.

At any rate, I was resolved to get better. The next time I cooked for her, I wanted her to say it was delicious from the bottom of her heart.

"Laius, I'm heading out to feed Rala."

"Take care. Make sure you get her thoughts this time, okay? I still need to nail down what she likes."

"I'll try, but don't get your hopes up..."

Rala was a light eater despite her mountainous size; a mouthful every few days was enough to satisfy her. Since I was the only person who could communicate with her to any reliable degree, it was my job to deliver her meals—my only job, in fact, if you didn't count helping out at Laius's restaurant.

Putting on the Cloak of the Hermit I'd borrowed from Lynne to avoid notice, I headed for the wilderness to the north of the city where Rala currently resided, pulling the cart carrying her meal behind me. It was hard work for someone of my stature and took about half a day.

At first, Rala's meals consisted of a single cow and pig—poor things—picked from the city's ranches. Not all livestock was raised to be eaten, though, and there weren't always fully grown animals available, meaning Rala sometimes had to wait. On one such occasion, Laius mentioned that the restaurant had a lot of leftover ingredients that were about to spoil, so I decided to bring those to her instead.

Part of me had worried that Rala would complain about the change, but I figured it would probably be fine. She'd never left a meal unfinished before.

The moment Rala had taken her first bite, there had been a noticeable change in her demeanor. Her eyes had flown open; she'd reared up in apparent agitation, causing a small, localized earthquake; and she'd insisted on knowing what she'd just eaten. I hadn't the heart to tell her it was leftover stock from the restaurant—she was much too proud for that—so I'd fudged things a little and said it was ingredients that humans used for high-class cooking. That had pleased her, and she'd asked to have the same thing next time, saying it tasted much better than livestock and that she didn't want to eat anything else.

Ever since then, I'd continued to feed Rala the leftover ingredients from Laius's restaurant. It was a huge relief, since it meant I didn't need to transport so much weight or listen to the cries of the poor animals.

Laius had laughed about Rala's new dining habits, saying she must be quite the gourmet if she could appreciate his restaurant's ingredients. I wasn't so sure, though; this was the same dragon who occasionally crunched down on nearby rocks and called them "delicious." That was why, even though I was bringing her yet another cartload of food, I still had no idea what her basis for tastiness was.

"It'd be nice if she gave me her thoughts today, but..."

Before I set out, Laius always seasoned the ingredients in new, complex ways, hoping to find Rala's favorite flavors. Today was no exception. He probably wanted to know whether she liked her food spicy or sweet, or whether this time was better or worse than the last—normal things like that. Rala always gobbled up her food without saying a word, though, which was why I'd told him not to get his hopes up.

“GRR... RAAHHM.”

Sure enough, today was no exception. Rala finished her meal, and her throat made satisfied rumbling sounds as our topic of conversation turned to Noor, her lord. She missed him as dearly as always. Every time we met, she told me how much she wanted to see him again. She understood that he had his own matters to take care of, though, and said she’d wait for him to come to her, even if she had to wait hundreds of years.

I’d explained many times that Noor wouldn’t live that long—he was only human—but Rala always stubbornly refused to listen. *“My lord is not so weak,”* she’d say. *“His lifespan will outstrip mine severalfold, at the very least.”* Something told me she just couldn’t process the idea of someone she thought was stronger than her dying first.

“GRRR. GRAHHH.”

“Y-You don’t say?”

“GRR. GAAH.”

Rala always made small talk with me after her meal, but she had recently taken a liking to reminiscing about the events in Mithra. In her words, while her lord had been as impressive as ever, “the little things who’d manipulated those odd lights” hadn’t been half bad either. She probably meant Ines and Lynne.

It was rare for Rala to take such a liking to others, but she cheerfully praised Ines and Lynne for managing to hold their own while fighting by her side. She was very insistent that she would need to bring them along the next time she was drawn into a similar scrap.

Personally, I could do without witnessing a battle like that ever again...



“Welcome back, Rolo. How did Rala react?”

“I couldn’t get anything out of her. Sorry.”

“Yeah? I guess gulping it down in silence is still a good sign. Still, I’ll get her to say, ‘It’s delicious!’ next time for sure.”

Laius seemed to view Rala’s feeding as some sort of challenge. He was

standing there with his arms crossed and a slightly vexed look on his face, grumbling to himself, when I heard the restaurant's door open.

"Oh, Sirene," I said. "Marieberr too. Welcome."

"Th-Thought we'd drop by again."

"We came to eat again!"

Marieberr returned my greeting with her usual cheery smile, but Sirene refused to meet my eye, instead jerking her head away to gaze outside the window. She did this every time she came, and it made me worry she had a problem with me. Her heart was always a bit of a chaotic mess, and I never detected any such negative feelings, but still; I hadn't been able to read her emotions for a while now.

"Welcome, Sirene, Marieberr. You've been stopping by a lot lately."

"I-It's because your cooking's so delicious, Laius."

"Well, thank you for saying so. Most of our patrons are on the older side, so I'm glad we're getting more younger regulars. Speaking of which, I see Melusine's with you today."

"Hello, Laius. It's been a while."

"Make yourselves at home, you three. Pick any seats you want. Rolo will have the usual tea ready for you soon."

"Thank you."

At night, the restaurant was always booked out with reservations. During the afternoon, however, its customer base consisted of passersby trickling in from the street. There were just enough for the restaurant to be considered busy—which, owing to its size, meant a number I could still count on my hands.

Sirene, Marieberr, and Melusine took their seats. I brewed some tea and brought it to their table, just as Laius said I would.

"Here you go."

"Thanks, Rolo."

"And this one's yours, Sirene. I cooled it down for you, as always."

“Th-Thanks...”

Even as she thanked me, Sirene continued to stare outside. I craned my neck to get a closer look at her face.

“Come on, Sirene,” Melusine said. “Is *that* how you’re trying to hide it?”

“Don’t bring it up in front of Rolo,” Marieberr chided. “Sirene will get so mad at you later.”

“But isn’t this a little too much? Even a malfunctioning golem would move more naturally.”

“It might not look like it, but she’s trying her best, okay? We need to support her, no matter how painful it is to watch.”

“You two know I can hear you, right?”

“U-Um, make yourselves at home?” Unsure of what else to do, I finished setting their tea down and carried the empty tray back into the kitchen, where Laius was watching the three with an amused smile.

“Oh, right. Rolo,” he said. “Could you chop up the ingredients for our soup? They’re in the back storeroom. And since this is your first time making it, why don’t we get the girls to try some? Will you be okay fetching the ingredients on your own? The box is pretty hefty.”

“Mm-hmm. I have the gauntlets with me today, so I’ll be fine.”

“Thanks. Sorry.”

I went straight to the spare room in the back where we kept our things and retrieved a pair of weighty gauntlets from my bag. They gleamed a dull silver.

The gauntlets originally belonged to Sigir from the Holy Theocracy of Mithra. I’d borrowed one during the crisis there, but when I’d tried to return it with the shortsword he’d also lent me, he’d given me the other gauntlet and told me to keep them. “*I’m not the one who needs them right now,*” he’d told me.

In the end, I accepted the gauntlets and gave Sigir my thanks. It was the first time I’d received such a gift from another person. I still remembered the emotions he’d passed along with it and how overjoyed it made me feel.

“There...we go.” After fitting the silver gauntlets onto my arms and experimentally flexing my fingers, I headed for the storeroom at the back of the kitchen.

Sigir’s gauntlets were a great help in my daily life. I’d never had much grip strength, but now I could reliably hold and carry things just like anyone else. That alone was enough to make me feel like I’d gotten stronger—not that I actually had.

“Now, where should I...? I guess here’s fine.”

I carried the box stuffed with ingredients out of the storeroom and set it down on the kitchen floor. Then I took out the ingredients we needed, neatly lined them up on the counter, and set about dicing them up. The knife made pleasant staccato taps against the chopping board as I cut the meat and vegetables into nice little pieces.

Cooking’s so fun.

Thanks to Sigir’s gauntlets, even the drudge work went smoothly. Using them carelessly could cause them to output far more force than intended—something that had caused me to split a few chopping boards in the past—but I was so well accustomed to them by now that I wasn’t too worried. As long as I paid attention, my fingers worked with nimbleness I could hardly believe. The gauntlets were perfect for chopping ingredients.

Though it hadn’t been that long since I’d started helping out at the restaurant, I already loved the work. I’d never thought creating something for others to enjoy could be so much fun. I was gradually learning to appreciate being recognized for the meals I made.

I paused my self-reflection when I finished chopping up the ingredients. My intention was to take a short break, but a scream echoed out from the dining area.

“A-Aah?! AAAHHH!!!”

Looking over, I saw Melusine pointing straight at me. Her other hand trembled as she clung to a half-empty teacup.

“I... I found you! Who would’ve guessed you’d be in a place like this?!”

“You...found who?” I turned around, expecting to see whoever she was referring to, but Laius was the only other person nearby. He looked just as confused as I was.

Melusine took a deep breath. “Wait, wait. Calm down, Melusine. You should make absolutely certain first... Hey, Rolo? Can I have a moment?”

“S-Sure.”

I set down my knife and went over to her table, still wearing my apron. Her eyes were fixed on the gauntlets I was wearing.

“Those gauntlets...” she said slowly. “Unless I’m mistaken, they’re the Giant’s Gauntlets, magical items meant to augment the movements of your arms and fingers.”

“I’m not sure about the name...” I said. “But yes, that’s how they work.”

“Can I take a closer look? Hmm... Yes, there’s no mistaking it. These really are the Giant’s Gauntlets, a special-grade dungeon relic discovered in Mithra over two centuries ago. Where did you get—? No, that doesn’t matter right now. Rolo, how are you operating them?”

“How? I don’t know what you mean...”

“You were just using them to chop vegetables, weren’t you? The Giant’s Gauntlets are famous for requiring extremely delicate mana manipulation. By all rights, you should have crushed the knife you were holding into scrap. How are you so dexterous with them?”

I took a few moments to think about it. “I...just kind of am?” From the start, I’d never paid any real attention to *how* I was using the gauntlets. I felt bad that I couldn’t give Melusine a better answer, but then I saw her reaction. She was gripping her teacup tightly in both hands, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I... I found youuuuuu!” she choked out in a voice close to a scream. “You’re *just* the person I’ve been looking for!” Ignoring the surprised stares of everyone in the restaurant, she turned to Sirene, who was sitting beside her. “Sorry, Sirene. I need Rolo.”

“Huh? H-Hold on, Melly. What are you—?!”

“Oh, don’t worry. I don’t mean like *that*. I just need to borrow him for a little while. A really little while, I promise! That’s okay, right? You don’t mind? And you’re okay with it too, right, Rolo?”

The eyes Melusine turned on me were sharp and glinting. My sudden unease caused me to peek reflexively into her heart, allowing me to see the conflicting anguish, hope, freedom, and captivity swirling about within her. I also sensed the same sort of predatory urges a carnivore felt upon finding its prey.

What’s going on? Her feelings are all a mess...

“You wouldn’t happen to have an interest in the production of magical equipment, would you?” Melusine pressed. “Even if you don’t, you *definitely* have talent—that’s a Melusine guarantee. How about you work with me? Come on. I’ll teach you as much as you need to know. From scratch and in excruciating detail, if necessary.”

Melusine began creeping toward me, still gripping her teacup so tightly that it trembled. Hot tea spilled onto the floor with every step she took, and the sheer intensity she exuded made me back away instinctively.

“T-Talent?” I repeated. “I mean, Oken said that too, but...I’ve never made anything before. I don’t think I can do it.” Besides, Oken had said my talent was for *using* magical items. Making them was a different story, right?

“Oken?! The old scarecrow said that?! That settles it, then! You’re guaranteed to be an immediate asset! In fact, come to our magical research lab right now! We can sort out your entry permit later!”

“B-But I’m a demonfolk. I might mess something up without meaning to!”

“Huh...? Oh, right. I forgot about that. Does it matter, though? I know *I* don’t give a damn.”

“Y-You don’t...?”

“Look, *forget* about that. Our workshop will welcome you with open arms! *Please* won’t you come with me? We’re on a *really* tight sched— Ahem! I mean, we could do with a little extra help.”

What was she just about to say?

“Don’t worry. There’s nothing to fear. Our workshop’s cozy, wholesome, and completely in accordance with all safety codes and regulations. Side jobs are a-okay, and you can come and go whenever you please. It’s completely up to you. How about it?”

The more Melusine said, the more certain I became that she was lying to me. But she really did want me to go with her. It was like she was pleading for help from the bottom of her heart. I turned to check with my boss.

“Laius, is it okay if I call it a day?”

He gave me a small smile and a nod. “No problem. Seems like Melusine’s at her wit’s end, so I can understand wanting to put her first. We can leave the soup lesson for another day.”

“Thanks. I finished cutting up the ingredients, by the way—they’re in the bowls over there.”

“No, thank *you*, Rolo. Good work today.”

“Okay, Melusine. I can go now.”

“You can?!” she exclaimed. “Ho ho! What a relief! Sorry, Marieberr, Sirene. That’s enough escaping from real— I mean, that’s enough of a tea break for me! I’ve got more important things to do. Follow me, Rolo!”

“Huh? Wh-What?!” Sirene looked completely lost.

“Oh, and I’ll cover today’s bill. Order whatever you want, you two!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Marieberr saluted enthusiastically. “You take care now!”

“Invite me along again sometime!”

After grabbing my arm with a frankly terrifying amount of strength, Melusine dragged me out of the restaurant. It was almost like a kidnapping, and that was how I ended up at the royal castle’s magical equipment research lab, saddled with another job on top of my restaurant work.

Chapter 115: The Royal Capital's Marketplace

After the aqueduct's unveiling ceremony, most foremen and laborers of the Builders Guild had taken leave. It had been a long time coming—everyone had been working nonstop to keep to the schedule, and this was our first good stopping point—but it meant I now had nothing to do. Pretty much every worksite that wasn't a completion priority was on break.

There were still commissions at the Adventurers Guild asking for support at the construction sites, but they were much harder to come by. Most of the time, when I checked with the guildmaster, they had already accepted the maximum number of workers. Even drain-cleaning work, which had long been a mainstay of my daily routine, was out of demand; the efficiency of the new aqueducts helped stop filth from building up in them.

My current lack of work wasn't necessarily an issue; I'd saved up enough money to relax for a while. Having nothing to do beyond my daily training regimen was just a little boring. That was why I'd set my sights on a trip to the royal capital's bustling marketplace. Though I'd been before to try rare foods and stock up on daily necessities, I'd never stopped to explore it thoroughly. Now that I actually had time on my hands, I planned to make some new discoveries.

Part of my curiosity stemmed from what the guildmaster had told me about the merchant trade.

"They really do have everything here..."

Looking around, I saw a fascinating assortment of wares that not even my imagination could have conjured up. As one might expect from a place renowned as "the city of adventurers," the royal capital's main streets—which led to the Dungeon of the Lost—were crammed with all manner of stores dealing in arms and armor, providing for clientele from all walks of life.

The city's central marketplace, however, was like taking a look backstage. Unlike the stores on the main streets, which appealed to a more general

customer base, the marketplace famously catered to professionals—chefs, craftsmen, blacksmiths, magicians, and more. On sunny days, specialty stores would display their wares outside, squeezing the already narrow lanes even tighter and adding to the hustle and bustle.

The alley was packed, but I could still make out some of the goods on display. Bottles of unfamiliar herbs likely meant for magicians, the hide and horns of a strange animal probably meant to be used to make weapons or armor, fruits I'd never seen before, and tools I couldn't even begin to guess how to use. I didn't know what anything was for, but I was having enough fun simply examining all these new curiosities.

Because I was standing around without buying anything, I was getting a lot of dirty looks from shopkeepers. They must have thought I was a thief or a window-shopper. Given that I was wearing my worn-out and slightly dirty work clothes, which also doubled as my casual wear, I couldn't really blame them.

Still, no matter what they thought, I was here to do more than just stare. I was carrying more money than usual and was set on spending it. The problem was that I didn't know what to buy. There was so much variety, which made me realize that even making a purchase required a certain amount of smarts.

One of my coworkers had said it wasn't good to let your money gather dust. Now that I was actually trying to spend it, though, I was drawing a complete blank. Maybe this was why Lynne's father gave his out so generously.

I did a few laps of the same alley while I weighed up my options. Then, when I stopped to peruse one store's wares, its young vendor called out to me.

"Hey, brother. You've been passin' in front of my store all morning. D'you need something? If not, could ya keep clear? The alleys being this narrow means if you're not buyin', you're gettin' in the way of business."

So many vendors had given me looks, but this young man was the first person who'd actually said something. He had a point; the alley *was* narrow, and hanging around without buying anything meant I was probably being a nuisance. But that wasn't my intention at all.

"I *want* to buy something. It's just...there's so much. I don't know what to get."

“Ah, yeah. Figured you were an amateur. Sorry, brother, but the stores ’round here sell to people who know what they’re doing. Regular folk don’t make good business. How ’bout you come back after you’ve studied up a little?”

As I’d suspected, this place was for people with a certain amount of knowledge. The young vendor seemed to want me gone, but he’d looked kind of bored for a while now, and no one else had shown an interest in his wares. A few questions wouldn’t do him any harm.

“By the way, what kind of things do you sell?”

“Supplies for farmers: fertilizer, tools, and the like. But as you can see, I mainly deal in seeds. S’pose that makes me a seed vendor, if you want to put a label on it.”

On closer inspection, I saw that he was right. He had plenty of bags displayed in neat rows and even more hanging from strings. “These are *all* seeds?” I asked. “Wow...”

“That they are. I doubt an amateur would even have seen most of these before.”

I continued to browse the man’s wares, in awe of the variety. His expression grew even more disinterested as he watched me.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never seen *seeds* before. Plant ’em, raise ’em, grow ’em into crops. You know—seeds?”

“Yes, I’ve grown my own crops before. For food.”

“Hmm? You’ve grown your own food?”

“Yeah. Ever since I was old enough to learn. For the past two decades, maybe?”

“Huh, that’s not half— Wait, *two decades*?! Th-That’s some experience you’ve got there...” The vendor’s previously irritated expression was gone, replaced with a more curious look.

“You could say that, yeah.” Before her health had taken a bad turn, my mother had taught me to farm and asked me to help with the fields. I’d started young, but she’d needed as much assistance as she could get after my father

died.

“Aah. That explains your build and those scars. Let me guess—you’re a serf from another country who worked off his contract and became an adventurer. Don’t mean to pry, but...am I right?”

“Not quite...but close enough, I guess. I *am* an adventurer.”

“Are you still doing fieldwork? No, I guess not, huh? Not if you’re adventuring.”

“Yeah, not since I came to the royal capital. I can buy my food here instead of having to grow it. And when I don’t mind splurging a little, the meals I can get at restaurants are way more delicious than anything I could make. I’ve gotten used to the luxury.”

“Thought so. Happens to most folk when they come to the big city. Still, damn shame to let all that experience go to waste.”

The young man cast his eyes up in thought, a hand on his chin. I wondered whether he’d also moved to the capital. It surprised me that our conversation had made it this far, but maybe he was just bored.

“Still, two decades...” the man repeated. “And since you were a kid, you said? Must’ve been tough.”

“I guess. It didn’t help that I was doing it all alone. I’ve always liked plants, though. As long as you care for them right, they flourish. I’ve never considered it a hardship or anything.”

“Alone? What about your family?”

“My parents died when I was small. Been alone ever since.”

“Yeah...? Man, that can’t have been easy. Farming alone since you were a kid just to stay alive... That’s somethin’ else. Sorry I treated you like an amateur. You’ve got more than what it takes to shop here. If you’ve got any questions, I’ll answer ’em.”

The young man’s eyes were a little teary. He must’ve sympathized with me. That hadn’t been my intention, but I wasn’t going to pass up an opportunity to learn more about his wares.

“In that case, what’s this? It looks like a root, but is it actually a seed of some kind?”

One of the many large wooden crates by my feet was packed full of something that resembled a blackish root. It had caught my eye because it seemed so out of place in what was otherwise a seed shop. The roots were much too big to be seeds, but I wondered what kind of crop they would grow into.

“No, that’s exactly what it looks like—a root.”

“Oh, so it really isn’t a seed.”

“Nope. It’s an edible root called pseudomandragora. Plant it, and it’ll grow basically on its own.”

“Pseudomandragora?”

“Yep, because it’s similar in color and texture to the dangerous magical plant that’s its namesake. Unlike actual mandragora, though, it won’t scream or put a curse on you when you dig it up.”

I’d never heard of mandragora before, but that didn’t matter. One part of the vendor’s explanation stood out to me above everything else: “You mentioned it was edible?”

“Yeah. It won’t win any beauty contests, but boiling or grilling it—or adding any heat to it, really—will draw out its natural sweetness. It’s a good crop for beginners, since it grows even in barren soil. As long as you remember to water it every now and then.”

“A sweet crop from barren soil...? That’s pretty amazing.”

I already knew from experience that preparing a field was hard work. Depending on the nutrient content of the soil, the same crop could ripen strangely or require a totally different cultivation method. Being able to grow in barren soil put pseudomandragora high in my estimation.

“Want to try one?” the vendor asked.



“Can I?”

“Sure. Here’s one I grilled earlier. I snack on them while I’m watching the store.”

“That so? I’ll give it a try, then.”

I accepted the morsel and popped it into my mouth. Based on the man’s explanation, I’d expected it to be sweeter, but it was by no means a disappointment.

“You’re right. It *is* sweet.”

“Right? That was one I cooked up in a hurry. If you grill them right, they taste even sweeter.”

“Interesting.”

The taste wasn’t that strong—because quite some time had passed since the vendor had grilled them, he told me—but the flesh was soft enough that I didn’t need to bite down hard at all. For something so easy to grow and cook, its faint sweetness was very impressive.

“These are great,” I said. “Can I get a whole bagful?”

“Oh? Plan to start a new garden?”

“No, not anytime soon. But I figure they’ll make for good snacks.”

“That they will. They keep well, and all you have to do is grill ’em.” As he spoke, the vendor filled a pouch with black roots and then handed it to me.

“There you go. Ten coppers’ worth. Even threw in a few extra.”

“Oh, thanks.” I gave him the coins and accepted the pouch of pseudomandragora.

“If you ever feel like starting a garden, come right back. I’ll give you a discount.”

“If the mood ever takes me, you can count on it. Thanks.”

As I walked away from the store, I wasted no time pulling a pseudomandragora from the pouch. “You can grill them, huh? Guess I’ll give it a shot now.” I used [Tiny Flame] to cook the root, then popped it into my mouth

when it looked about done.

“Mmm. It’s sweeter than the last one.”

The vendor hadn’t been lying when he’d said the grilling method would change its sweetness. As a further test, I made my flame a little stronger, then let a root cook until it was on the verge of burning. The taste changed significantly—and because it was fresh from the fire, the flesh was soft, fluffy, and delicious.

“This was a good find.”

I didn’t plan to start a new garden or field anytime soon, but as I wandered the marketplace, I decided that I’d stop by that seed store again for more.



I did rounds of the whole marketplace, speaking with all kinds of people I would never usually have spoken to and buying all kinds of things I would never usually have bought.

“I made less of a dent than I thought...”

There was still so much money burning a hole in my pocket. Everything I’d purchased was either a daily necessity I could use right away or some variety of snack food. A number of novel tools had caught my eye, but hearing what they were had been enough to satisfy me. Even when vendors tried pretty hard to sell me on their wares, the more I listened to their explanations, the more I realized just how little I needed them.

Maybe I could have bought more luxurious versions of the snacks and necessities I’d purchased, but I didn’t know where to find such things in the first place. I could have been daring and bought some land or a building, but indiscriminately buying things I didn’t need would only come back to bite me later.

All in all, after spending the whole day exploring the marketplace, I’d concluded that I just wasn’t good at shopping. That wasn’t to say I’d gained nothing from the experience, though. I now had a growing interest in the world of commerce, and while I wasn’t that interested in buying things, I absolutely loved watching wares change hands. It was fascinating to see so many

commodities being sourced from all over and delivered to the people who needed them. The city's marketplace was only one part of the full picture, but even that small glimpse was enjoyable.

The more I saw of the royal capital's marketplace, the more curious I got about Sarenza to the south. It was known as the country of merchants, and the markets in its capital were said to dwarf those found in Clays in both magnitude and number of available wares. The city faced the sea, so it was a hub of trade that received cargo ships and materials from all over the continent. Not only that, but its size and population were several times larger than those of the royal capital.

The royal marketplace already seemed vast to me. I couldn't even imagine what Sarenza's must be like, but if my trip today was any indication, it would surely be an amazing experience.

It was settled, then: if only once in my lifetime, I wanted to see Sarenza.

Many rumors painted Sarenza's merchants as unscrupulous crooks. I doubted they were all alike, though, and they had a reputation as "the best merchants on the continent." There had to be something to that—and whatever that something was, part of me admired it.

I more or less understood that I wasn't suited to being a merchant. I was carrying a bunch of cash, though, and the thought of trying my hand at the profession was starting to sound more appealing. There was a serious risk that I would just fritter my money away, but that didn't bother me; whoever it ended up with would probably have a better use for it.

Besides...there was always a chance I would actually be *good* at commerce. I saw no reason not to give it a go.

As the gathering spot of merchandise from all over the continent, maybe Sarenza would sell something neat that I wouldn't be able to find in the royal capital. Once that thought occurred to me, the urge to go there grew even stronger.

That said, I needed to be realistic; Sarenza wasn't an easy country to travel to. Crossing the border into the Kingdom of Clays was said to be relatively easy, but there were strict regulations in place when it came to crossing the other way.

Travel was allowed for trade and other such purposes, but the simple act of passing into Sarenza required all sorts of permits. The guildmaster had told me I'd need to hire someone with knowledge and experience before even attempting the journey. The question was where to find such a person.

Maybe I should ask him about it again.

"Hmm?"

As I pondered my situation, admiring the setting sun as I continued down one of the main streets, I suddenly sensed someone approaching me from behind. That feeling warped into surprise when I realized they'd woven through the crowd to reach me—but when I turned, I saw exactly the person I expected.

"It's been a while, Instructor Noor."

"Lynne? Yeah, it has."

The last time we'd met, she and her father had invited me to a ceremony in Mithra. It was strange that she always seemed to know where to find me, but I'd accepted it as a quirk of hers, like a bird with particularly good eyesight.

"Sorry about turning down your invitation before," I said.

"Not at all," Lynne replied. "I was told you had a personal matter to attend to. My apologies for presuming upon you when you were busy."

"That aside, I'm impressed you managed to find me among this crowd."

"Thank you. I used [Detect]. I realize it was rude of me to intrude upon your privacy, Instructor, but there is an urgent request I must make of you..."

"A request?"

"Yes. I realize not long has passed since our trip to Mithra, but would you be willing to accompany me south to the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza?"

"You want me to go with you to Sarenza?" I was taken aback by the coincidence. I'd just been thinking about going there, and it didn't get more convenient than that. "You mean as a porter again?"

"Officially speaking? Yes... I'm terribly sorry, but this is the best way for you to gain entry into Sarenza. My father feels the same. You must be taken aback by

the abruptness of my request, but your presence would be greatly reassuring. You see...”

“Sure. Okay.”

“In order to gain the right to succeed the thro— Pardon?”

“I was just thinking about going to Sarenza. If anything surprises me, it’s how well this all works out.”

Whatever explanation Lynne had planned to give, she’d abandoned it for a look of bewilderment. “You...were already thinking of going, Instructor?”

“Yeah. Not on important business or anything, though. I should ask this just in case, but since you want me there for work, will there be time to do some shopping?”

“I...would imagine so, yes.”

“In that case, I’d love to go with you. I’ll even cover everyone’s travel expenses if you need me to.”

“W-We couldn’t possibly let you do that! Like with Mithra, you won’t need to spend a single coin of your own money. You’ll be paid for your work, and my family will cover any expenses incurred during the journey. If there’s anything you wish to prepare beforehand, please don’t hesitate to tell us. We shall provide it for you.”

“O-Oh, uh... Sorry for the trouble?”

Lynne never missed a detail, as was always the case when she traveled. Part of me wanted to leave everything to her—she was offering, after all—but that wouldn’t get me any closer to using up the rest of my money. Maybe I could spend it during our trip instead; no one would question me using my own coin for personal purchases.

“So, when do we set out?” I asked.

“About that... I’m aware this is sudden, but we want to depart as soon as we can.”

“Yeah? That works better for me too.” Most of the construction sites were on break, but they’d open up again eventually. This was the perfect opportunity to

visit another country. It was such a stroke of good luck that it was actually kind of scary.

“Very well, then. If you don’t mind, Instructor, we’ll set out this evening or at dawn tomorrow.”

“Got it. Give me a little more time and then we can set out. I just need to get some money ready for the trip.”

“N-No, Instructor, we’ll provide for—”

“That’s okay. It’s for some personal shopping. I can’t make you cover that as well.”

And so, having asked Lynne to wait a short while, I made for the ever-familiar Adventurers Guild with an excited spring in my step.

Chapter 116: Funds for the Journey

When I reached the Adventurers Guild and asked to withdraw all of my money, the guildmaster told me to come back around noon the following day. As it turned out, they couldn't have it ready at such short notice. I asked Lynne to delay our departure, then returned to the Guild when they were ready for me.

"Come with me, Noor. We'll talk somewhere else today. And try not to goggle."

"Got it."

The guildmaster had an uncharacteristically serious look on his face as he beckoned me deeper into the Guild. We were headed for the back, which I'd never seen before. Three armed men sidled over to join us. The mood felt kind of heavy.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Some of our hired guards. Don't worry about them."

After ascending a staircase in the back and traversing a long hallway, we entered a room unfamiliar to me. Two of the scary-faced men waited outside, but the third came in with us and took a defensive position by the door.

"Here we are," the guildmaster said.

"Isn't it kind of dark in here?" I asked. "Oh, no windows."

It was broad daylight outside, but the room was almost pitch black. The lack of windows meant we had to rely on a dim candle, which illuminated a small wooden table bounded by two soft-looking leather chairs.

"Just take a seat for now," the guildmaster urged me. He ran his fingers through his grizzled hair before dropping onto one of the chairs.

Though I did as instructed, I couldn't help feeling a little bewildered. I'd expected the usual "pick up a pouch of coins at the counter" routine.

“Here’s your money.”

The guildmaster reached into a metal case behind him and retrieved a large leather bag, which he placed gently on the table. It was the same bag I’d given him to put the money in, but I’d never seen it so full to bursting before. The table creaked under its weight.

“As you requested, this is every coin you’ve earned thus far, barring a small sum put aside for living expenses. In other words, this bag contains nearly every coin you’ve got to your name.”

“Yeah? Every coin, huh?”

So my entire life savings fit inside a single bag. I couldn’t decide whether that was impressive or deeply disappointing. It seemed pretty heavy, at least; the small wooden table looked like it might collapse if I gave one of its legs a light poke.

“Noor,” the guildmaster began slowly, “this ain’t appropriate for me to say, given my position, but...are you *sure* about taking all this to *Sarenza*? You...won’t regret it, will you?”

“I’m sure. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

This wasn’t the guildmaster’s first attempt to dissuade me; he’d also tried several times yesterday. He knew I was going to Sarenza because Lynne’s request had come through the Adventurers Guild as a commission meant specifically for me. His many warnings about Sarenza aside, I could tell he was worried about my safety.

“Look, I get it,” the guildmaster said. “You must be sick of hearing me say the same things over and over again. It’s your money, right? Nobody can tell you how to use it. Here at the Guild, we have an unwritten rule about not interfering with adventurers’ finances, and the last thing I want to do is overstep. But *still*...”

He heaved a quiet sigh before looking me dead in the eye. “As your friend, let me ask—do you *really* understand what a fortune you’ve got here? And if so, do you truly intend to take it with you to *Sarenza*?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Really? So you know this isn’t just small change?”

“It’s a lot, but I can’t think of any decent ways to use it here. I figured using it all on a journey would be better than letting it sit around gathering dust.”

I’d only voiced my honest opinion, but the guildmaster slowly shook his head and sighed again. “Look, Noor... You’ve lived here for a while now. You know the value of money. But for posterity’s sake, can I explain just how much this is?” His expression was grim as he indicated the leather bag on the table.

“Well...” I was used to spending coins of smaller values, but what about the larger denominations I’d never seen before? An explanation sounded especially useful. “Sure. Please.”

“I’ll start from the bottom, then.”

The guildmaster started emptying the bag of coins, stacking them on the table one by one so they were easy to count. First, there were around a hundred coppers—I used those all the time. Next, a hundred of the squarish silver coins I saw now and then and another fifty notably larger silver coins. There were also a hundred small round gold coins and ten big ones, seven coins I’d never seen before that sparkled white, and five rectangular gemlike coins that glittered with a strange rainbow sheen.

Once the coins were all laid out on the table, the armed guard behind me gulped.

The guildmaster picked up a copper first and showed it to me. “This is a copper. It’s what you use to buy food and drinks, among other things.”

“I know that much. I use them all the time.”

“That you do. One will get you a freshly baked bun, while several will pay for a full meal. Now, next to the coppers—these small squarish ones—are smallsilvers. They’re worth a *hundred* coppers each. You’ve seen these around too, of course.”

“Yeah, every now and then. Used them too.”

“Right. As for the rest...you don’t see them used much.” The guildmaster put the copper and smallsilver coins back on the table and indicated the other silver

coins I wasn't as familiar with. "These large round ones are greatsilvers, and they're worth *ten* smallsilvers each. Not something to sneeze at. A handful can get you a good-quality weapon that'll last a lifetime. The small gold coins next to them are smallgolds. One is worth ten greatsilvers and can outfit most adventurers in decent gear from head to toe."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's a lot of money."

There were a hundred smallgolds on the table—a sizable fortune all on their own.

"Next are these much larger ones," the guildmaster continued. "Greatgolds, worth ten smallgolds each. One will cover the construction cost of an entire house—not big enough for an extended family but plenty for a single person. And you have ten."

"An entire house? Wow."

Picturing ten houses on the small trembling table instead of the coins only made it seem more likely to break. I picked up a greatgold and found it was much heavier than it looked.

"The coins I've mentioned so far are safe to use in front of others," the guildmaster explained. "Though you might want to keep your greatgolds away from prying eyes, if you can. These next ones, however, are in a league of their own. Don't flash them in front of strangers, or you're gonna be in for a bad time."

"Wait, there are coins more valuable than greatgolds?"

"Of course. They're right here, aren't they?" Looking slightly exasperated, the guildmaster pointed at the sparkling white coins and the glittering rainbow ones, both of which I'd definitely never seen before. "Listen to me, Noor—don't show these to people you don't trust. *Ever*. Once you do, your life might as well be forfeit."

"They're that dangerous?"

"Yes. I'll give you the rundown."

“Right.” I braced myself, paying close attention to the guildmaster’s grave-sounding explanation.

“These white ones are called platinum. One’s enough to buy a *small castle*. Not one built from scratch, mind you, but you could easily afford the construction of a new mansion. They’re worth ten times as much as a greatgold.”

“Ten times, huh?”

Truth be told, I was starting to lose track. The scale had already been hard to grasp when the guildmaster had said about a single coin covering the construction of a house. Still, I did my best to concentrate on what I was being told.

“Yeah. Nobody who’s lived a normal life will ever have seen one of these. It isn’t out of the question for a bandit gang to form up and attack someone they think has just *one* platinum. And you have seven right here.”

“That’s... Wow.”

“To be honest with you, I’m on tenterhooks just sitting here. But I’m not even finished—it goes higher. These little ones? They’re *kingsgold*.” The guildmaster picked up one of the small rainbow-colored coins to show me, but his hands were sweaty and trembling.

“Are you nervous?”

“Well...who wouldn’t be? Sure, I’ve seen these before...but this is the first time I’ve laid hands on one.”

“They’re that rare?”

“‘Rare’ doesn’t even begin to describe them. A single kingsgold is worth *ten* platinum. There’s no currency more valuable in the world. Not even I know how they’re made—just that they come from dungeon-derived techniques and are impossible to counterfeit. It takes a lot to even scratch one. They’ve long been used in transactions between royalty, and their international credibility is beyond doubt. As the name would suggest, it’s the currency of kings.”

“I...see.”

“A single kingsgold could build you a fine castle with vast gardens, and you’d still have plenty of change left over.”

“Wow.”

The currency of kings, huh? They definitely looked the part, glittering like small gemstones. But no matter how thoroughly the guildmaster explained it to me, it just wasn’t clicking. When I looked at the supposed fortune sitting on the table, I saw only a pile of coins.

Still, they were all worth money. That much I understood.

“Noor... You’ve had that look on your face for a while now. Is it just me, or does it say, ‘I don’t really get it’?”

“No, your explanation helped. I get it. More or less.”

“*Really?* I hate to state the obvious, but you’ll soon be walking around with *ten* greatgolds, *seven* platinum, and *five* kingsgold. In other words, ten new houses, seven mansions, and five castles...all stuffed into one scuffed-up bag. You get what I’m trying to say, right?”

“Yeah, I think so.” The more he emphasized its worth, the less I felt I needed all that money.

“I’m still getting a bad feeling... Again, this is a *lot* of money. I prepared it as you asked...but seeing it all laid out in front of me like this is giving me the shivers. I’ve never seen this much in one place.” The guildmaster covered his face with a hand, shook his head, and loosed a deep sigh.

“Well, if worse comes to worst and I feel like my life’s in danger...I can just hand the money over, right?”

“If that’ll even be enough. There’s no guarantee the thieves won’t kill you anyway to shut you up. Still, as long as you’re alive, I suppose you’ll always have another chance to earn more coin. It’s just...this is so much more than most would ever see in a lifetime. Use it carefully, you hear?”

The guildmaster then started putting the coins back into the leather bag. “Devil take me, but I’ve never heard of something this mad. Roaming around with such a fortune in a beaten old sack...”

“Should I store it in something else, then?”

The guildmaster paused in thought. “No...” he said at length. “In fact, this should draw less suspicion than a prim and proper case. Better to act casual than try any cheap tricks. You can get magical bags with [Concealment] applied to them, but they’re normally used to transfer valuables between bases, so you might as well be screaming to the world that you’ve got something worth stealing on you. I’m not even sure you could use one properly...”

There was another pause as the guildmaster studied my face. Then he shook his head and continued, “No, it’s not our job to advise you on these matters. It’s your money at the end of the day, so you’ll need to make up your own mind. Once I hand it over, it’s got nothing to do with me anymore.”

“Thanks for the explanation. It helped a lot.”

“Just one more thing. I don’t know how you plan to spend the money, but don’t tell anyone you’ve got platinum or kingsgold on you. Got it? *Anyone.*”

“Got it. I’ll do my best to be careful.”

“Take it, then. You earned it.”

“Thanks. Wow... It’s pretty heavy.”

I took the large bag from the guildmaster. He looked like he still wanted to say something but ultimately held his tongue. Whatever it was, I now had all the funds I’d need for my trip.

I knew from the guildmaster’s explanation that the bag’s contents represented a considerable amount of money, but that didn’t change the fact I couldn’t think of a way to spend it. And as for the risk of ne’er-do-wells targeting me, they wouldn’t do a thing as long as they didn’t find out about it in the first place, right? Maybe I could use it all before they even had the chance. Thinking about it like that relaxed me a little—it meant I only needed to be careful until I found something I wanted.

“All right,” I said. “I’m off.”

“Be careful out there, you hear? I mean it.”

Shouldering the heavy leather sack of coins, I left the Adventurers Guild and

headed to where I'd agreed to meet Lynne.

Chapter 117: The Dungeon of Oblivion

“Noor has agreed to go to Sarenza.”

“Has he now...?”

King Clays and Prince Rein faced each other in a dimly lit room, their gazes downcast and expressions subdued as they deliberated. They were both worried about the same thing: Princess Lynneburg’s recent declaration that she would be traveling to Sarenza.

“So Lynne’s set on going, no matter what?” the king asked.

“Yes. She claims she’s the only one suited to the task. The demonfolk boy Rolo has also expressed a desire to make the journey.”

“Sarenza’s letter *did* mention its readiness to provide information about the demonfolk within its borders. I didn’t expect the offer to prove so alluring...to Lynne and her companions, no less.”

Lynne and Rolo’s decision to travel to Sarenza meant the Kingdom of Clays had fully taken the bait. It was an unambiguous response to the Mercantile Free State’s leading questions. But at the same time, the enthusiasm with which they’d chomped down meant Sarenza still didn’t know what the Kingdom wanted most.

“Furthermore,” the prince said, “Lynne wishes to use her trials for the right of royal succession as a pretext. She believes that using the Dungeon of Oblivion will allow her to bring combat assets into Sarenza without arousing suspicion.”

The king made a bitter expression. “The Dungeon of Oblivion... As I recall, it contains golem technology still unknown to our kingdom. The place is a veritable treasure trove of knowledge we currently lack. If she can explore the dungeon and return safely, it should without a doubt fulfill the ‘exceptional deed’ requirement to obtain the right of succession. It’s as good a pretext for Lynne as any.”

The rite of succession to the throne, known commonly as the “trials of

succession,” was a timeworn tradition for those who wished to one day rule the Kingdom of Clays. Lynne planned to use it as her excuse for heading to Sarenza.

The Kingdom of Clays, being a nation of adventurers, required anyone who would take the throne to have achieved something spectacular. These people would then gather, and a contest would decide a victor among them—the person everyone would recognize as the new monarch. But of course, the first step was to perform an exceptional deed.

The king and prince had gone through this process already. Venturing into life-threatening danger was a matter of course, and one usually enlisted the help of staunch companions. Princess Lynneburg had challenged the Dungeon of the Lost, but the attempt on her life had put her trials on hold. Both men believed it was a good time for her to resume them.

“Still... Sarenza, of all places...”

The king had almost shot down Lynne’s proposal. Yet her insistent reasoning had made more sense than his objections. She had pointed out their unique opportunity to gain unrestricted entry to Sarenza, a nation with which the Kingdom had a long history of diplomatic silence. The two neighbors had remained distant for almost a century as attempts at interaction were obstructed by the massive wall separating the Kingdom’s south and Sarenza’s vast deserts.

Sarenza had erected the gargantuan construct of stone long ago, ostensibly to reduce the impact of sandstorms moving north toward the Kingdom, but both nations understood its true purpose. The wall prevented slaves, a principal trade good in Sarenza that was outlawed in the Kingdom, from seeking refuge in a nation where they could be free. This fundamental contrast in thinking ensured the two neighbors could never exist in harmony. In that sense, the temporary entry Lynne and her party had received was irrelevant—diplomatic relations would never change as long as the ideological clash persisted.

But at the same time, there was no telling when the Kingdom would ever have another such opportunity. Lynne had declared that she was the best person to take advantage and inspect the situation in Sarenza firsthand, as she understood the two nations’ history and laws and was sufficiently equipped to

defend herself.

“And she was right,” the king muttered. “She was. But...”

Lynne had said she was also the best candidate because of her youth, which would cause Sarenza to underestimate her. Furthermore, if she—a member of the Kingdom’s royalty—could lay eyes on the Mercantile Free State’s inner workings, it would greatly benefit future diplomatic endeavors.

The king and prince hadn’t been able to counter Lynne’s points. They were too logical, and that was precisely why the pair was so troubled.

It was only natural that a princess of the kingdom of adventurers would choose a path fraught with danger. Anyone who ran from it would not be fit to rule—the king had instilled that conviction into Lynne from a young age. This was an ordeal she was resolved to face, and he could not deny her of it simply because there were risks involved.

Assuming that Lynne faced the Dungeon of Oblivion and returned, it would be with something of great value in tow. The dungeon was unique, after all. Though exploratory teams had reached its deepest stratum eighty years prior, they had left the core intact, seeking to rinse the dungeon for as much as it was worth. It had never actually been conquered.

The monsters that manifested in the Dungeon of Oblivion were not beings of flesh but magical constructs with automatous bodies—golems. They did not act wildly or seek to foray beyond the dungeon. It was through its research into and use of these golems that Sarenza had developed its own unique industrial and military technologies. The chance to lay eyes on the fruits of their labor might never come again.

There was also the promise of new information about the demonfolk, which had spurred Rolo to act. In his words, he had originally been raised under the yoke of one of Sarenza’s slave merchants, trapped with other members of his people. The natural conclusion was that the Mercantile Free State’s intelligence offer concerned those individuals. Rolo was determined to find them, and his ability to read hearts would be a great boon if the group needed to conduct any negotiations.

Of course, the other party would be well aware of Rolo’s talents and enter

any form of discussion with countermeasures at the ready. That meant Lynne's party would be at a great disadvantage *without* him. It was no small risk for him to accompany her...but at the same time, his presence was indispensable.

Moreover, Rolo was the one who had glimpsed the secrets of the primordials. Together with the princess in the Dungeon of Oblivion, there was every chance they would make a world-shaking discovery. This was a tremendous advantage when it came to making the final decision—one that could not be ignored.

The more one considered it, the more reasons there seemed to be for Lynne and Rolo to venture to Sarenza.

"Honestly..." King Clays grumbled. "I wonder where she got this attitude." He knew he'd been rather reckless in his youth, but never to such a drastic extent. The strength of his daughter's character far outstripped that of his own.

The king already had an answer, though. He knew the princess had styled her hair after her mother, who had passed away when Lynne was small. The more he compared the two, the more he realized how alike they were, from their appearance to the way they spoke. Lynne had grown up to be just like his late wife even in her disposition. It was surely something to celebrate, but the king simply breathed a deep sigh.

"Let us consult the Six Sovereigns before we make the final verdict," he said.

"Indeed..." the prince replied at length.

In the end, they elected to consult a group they could trust before making their decision. The Six Sovereigns gathered swiftly and expressed their opinions, resulting in three declarations.

First: Princess Lynneburg and the demonfolk boy Rolo would depart to explore the Dungeon of Oblivion.

Second: Ines, the Divine Shield, and Noor would accompany them as their escort.

Third: Sirene, vice-captain of the Hunter Corps, who had been born in Sarenza and crossed the wall with her mother as a child, would accompany the group as their scout.

The party of five—the minimum number of personnel necessary—would head to Sarenza with a miniature, portable version of an oracle’s orb recently developed by Melusine, vice-captain of the Magician Corps. They would use it to periodically contact the rest of the Kingdom’s personnel, who would act as long-distance support.

Rolo and Lynne’s proficiency with magical equipment meant they could use the newly developed oracle’s orb to contact the royal capital whenever they wished, allowing the princess’s safety to be confirmed at any time. Those present at the meeting had insisted upon it to help persuade the king, who had adamantly wanted to keep her from going at all.

“I suppose you’re right...” he had grumbled. “And as the old adage goes... ‘If you love your children, send them out on an adventure.’”

And so, although the king’s expression had remained sour to the end, it was decided that Princess Lynneburg’s small party of elites would indeed travel to the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza. Those staying behind in the royal capital would act as their long-distance support.

Chapter 118: Onward to Sarenza

I'd already left the Adventurers Guild to meet Lynne. It was past noon, and the sun was high in the sky. I was in a bit of a hurry—I hoped everyone wasn't waiting on me—but when I arrived, I saw only one person I recognized.

"Rolo!"

He turned upon hearing my voice. "Noor, it's been a while."

"Are you going to Sarenza too?"

"Mm-hmm. I asked if I could, since I might get the chance to see some people I know."

"Oh, that's right. You were born there, weren't you?"

"Mm-hmm. I never got to spend much time outside, though, so it'll be just as unfamiliar for me as for you."

Rolo spoke and moved with confidence; the timid boy from when we'd first met was nowhere to be seen. It was honestly reassuring that he was coming with us.

"Are these people coming along as well?" I asked, looking at the others who had gathered. "I don't think I've met them before." I could see several men and a woman, all clad in black robes. The latter was petite and wore glasses. There was also a girl with a bow slung over her back and strange animal ears atop her head.

"Most of them are just here to see us off," Rolo explained. "Only Sirene over there is coming along."

He had gestured to the girl with animal ears, who casually strolled over and stood next to him. "Rolo," she said, "is this the 'Noor' I've heard so much about?"

"Mm-hmm. This is him."

She took a few brisk steps forward, then stopped right in front of me and

stood up straight. “My name is Sirene. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. At Captain Mianne’s recommendation, I was granted the honor of accompanying you all on your journey. I have heard a lot about you, Noor. Though I might not be as skilled as the captain, I will not be a burden. Our time together might be short, but I look forward to traveling with you.”

Sirene’s greeting was polite and no-nonsense. Ines and Lynne were like that too; I supposed etiquette was a big deal for everyone in the royal capital. I got the impression that Sirene really had her act together, despite her young age.

“Right. I’ll do my best not to burden you either,” I replied. “Good to be traveling with you.”

I went to shake her hand, and she reciprocated. Though her arms looked slender, she was far stronger than I’d expected. Her beautiful golden bow caught my eye.

A bow, huh? That takes me back.

The first time I’d touched one was when I attended the hunter training school as a child. I hadn’t known how to control my strength, so I’d ended up breaking every single bow the school had on hand. I’d even bent my instructor’s precious bow out of shape, ruining it.

As a result of that incident, I was forbidden from touching another bow. The rest of my hunter training had consisted of throwing rocks. I still managed to learn a lot, though; my instructor taught me things like how to read the wind and hit fast-moving targets from far away.

My time at the hunter training school was a fond memory for me now, but reminiscing had made me realize something—I’d never picked up a bow since. The urge was overwhelming. But before I could ask Sirene to show hers to me, she got a flighty look in her eyes.

“Is...something wrong?” I asked.

“No, it’s nothing...” she replied, backing away from me and trying to hide her bow with her arms.

Aah. I see.

Sirene had mentioned that she'd heard a lot about me. I'd broken more than a hundred bows during my time at her training school, and it wouldn't be strange for the story to have lingered. Her bow was no doubt precious to her, so of course she was being careful with it.

Still, I was sure I could control my strength much better these days. And all I wanted to do was touch it.

Just for a few moments. Really.

But when my focus returned to the bow, Sirene tried even harder to hide it from me.

"Are you *sure* nothing's wrong?" I asked.

There was a long silence before she said, "I'm sure. It's nothing."

"Oh... Okay."

When I looked at her bow again, she moved it completely out of my sight. She knew exactly where my attention was focused and what I was planning. And it didn't stop there—each time I tried to catch a glimpse, she hid it from me. It was actually rather fun, like playing with a stray cat.

"..."

"...!"

"..."

"...!!!"

Our little game had gone on for a while, her speed versus my seeking eyes, when someone called out to me.

"Instructor Noor!"

"Lynne?"

I wasn't sure when she'd arrived, but there she was. Ines was right behind her.

"My apologies for being late," Lynne began. "My schedule opened up enough for me to see to some other business, and the time got away from me."

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I pretty much just got here. If anything, I should apologize for delaying us in the first place.”

“Not at all. My request was quite sudden. And though I said we should depart at once, it’s not of critical importance, so...”

“I guess it all works out, then.”

Lynne caught sight of Sirene, my rival in our silent game of cat and mouse. “You are Sirene, I presume? It is a pleasure to finally meet you. I’d already left to undertake my trials by the time you entered service, but Instructor Mianne told me so much about you. It’s reassuring to know we’re going to have someone so capable with us on our journey.”

“Not at all,” Sirene respectfully replied. “It is an honor, Lady Lynneburg.”

Lynne’s smile grew a little troubled. “There’s no need to stand on ceremony. Just plain ‘Lynne’ is fine. After all, for the purpose of our travels, I’m naught but another adventurer.”

Sirene glanced at Ines, then shook her head. “Though I appreciate your kind words, my lady, I could never be so casual with you. It would feel *more* unnatural, not less.”

“I...see. If you find that easier, then that’s fine, of course.”

“You are most gracious.”

“Not to repeat myself, but I’m glad to be traveling with you.”

“Likewise, my lady. I shall endeavor not to be a burden.”

Seeing them stand next to each other, I noticed that Sirene was slightly taller than Lynne. They looked around the same age—or maybe Sirene looked a tiny bit older—but the hunter’s physique was clearly better trained and more solid.

“Well then, since we’ve all gathered, shall we make our departure?” Lynne asked.

I nodded and said, “Lead the way.”

We were just about to leave when we heard sobbing behind us. “Ngh... *Snff*... D’you *really* have to go, Rolo?” The black-robed woman with glasses was

clinging to him and bawling her eyes out.

“Roooloooooooo!” she wailed. “You hab—*snff*—*hab* to come back, okay?!”

“M-Mm-hmm. You stay safe too.”

The pair must have been rather close, as the petite woman was clinging to Rolo as if she’d never let go. I supposed he *had* said she was here to see him off.

“Don’t worry, Melusine,” Rolo added. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

“You’d better! ASAP, you hear me?! While I’ve still got life left in me! You have to! Please! You—*snff*—*haaab doooooo*!”

“R-Right.”

I’d thought the girl was so distraught because she didn’t want her dear friend to leave, but that didn’t seem right. It was more like she was begging him to rescue her.

“Melusine, you’re making a scene.”

“Sirene! You’d better keep Rolo safe, okay?! He’s already our top employee! It’s gotten to the point that we can’t go on without him!”

Melu-something-or-other refused to let go of Rolo, but Sirene insisted it was time for us to go and eventually managed to separate them. She handed the bespectacled woman over to the black-robed men, all with sharp eyes, who carried her away like a palanquin.

Sirene watched them leave, then heaved a great sigh. “That woman...”

Her back’s wide open. I could reach out and grab her bow.

But no sooner had the thought occurred to me than she nimbly hid it again. Wow. Did she have eyes in the back of her head? We stared at each other for several moments before I finally broke the silence.

“Is something the matter, Sirene?”

“No...” she said at length. “Nothing.”

The bow thing aside, we were all ready to depart.

“Shall we board the coach?” Lynne asked. “It might be a little cramped inside,

as we're using a model designed to traverse the desert, but it was furnished with everything necessary to ensure a comfortable journey."

Nonetheless, when I actually boarded the coach, I found its interior quite spacious. There were three rows of seats: one at the very front for the driver—Ines, in our case—and two wider that faced each other behind it. Interestingly enough, the driver's seat was fashioned so that Ines could steer the coach from inside—one of the desert survival measures Lynne had mentioned, maybe?

In short, there was more than enough room for five people to sit comfortably. I could even stretch my legs out. That being said...

"I guess there's not really anywhere to store souvenirs..." I mused aloud.

"Souvenirs?" Lynne repeated.

"Yeah. It's no big deal, though; I still don't know what I want, so I was going to sort out the transport when we got there."

"Do you plan to purchase quite a lot?"

"I do, but I won't know whether I actually will until we've had a look around. I want to scope the place out and see what I can find. The bears I got last time weren't received very well."

"Wh-What makes you say that, Instructor?!"

Lynne's eyes darted about frantically. I appreciated that she was being nice, but most of my coworkers had outright told me they didn't have anywhere to put the little carvings I'd tried to give them. The people who'd accepted them without a word of complaint—Lynne included—were awfully kind. A few had even been pleased with the gift. Those cases were rare, though, which was why I wanted to put more thought into my souvenirs this time around. Money was no object, so I was going to buy multiples of anything interesting that caught my eye.

Excitement welled up inside of me as I sank into my seat. I'd never been to Sarenza; what thrilling discoveries would our journey bring?

"Sir Noor. I'm in your care once again."

"Yeah, likewise. Looking forward to it."

My exchange with Ines was brief, maybe because we'd done this several times already. She calmly took the reins and said, "Now then. To Sarenza."

Thus, we finally departed the royal capital, marking the beginning of our journey to the desert nation.

Chapter 119: Desert Journey, Part 1

We entered the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza through Sandwatch Fort, a massive stone bastion built into the vast wall that separated the nation from the Kingdom of Clays.

The enormous wall reaching toward the sky had surprised me when I'd first seen it from a distance. Its main purpose was to prevent sand from blowing north into the Kingdom, but it also served as the border between our country and Sarenza. As far as boundaries went, I couldn't think of anything more clear-cut.

As soon as our coach rolled into Sarenza's side of the fort, a group of spear-wielding soldiers stopped us. They wore headdresses made out of wrapped white cloth. Lynne showed them some documents, and they let us pass without any trouble.

There sure were a lot of armed guards around, which made me realize just how tough it would have been to enter Sarenza on my own. I didn't know *why* there were so many...but I could guess why none of them wore armor. It was blisteringly hot near the wall. The sunlight was harsh enough that anyone clad in metal would probably be cooked alive—and we weren't even in the desert proper yet. I hadn't expected the weather to change so drastically when we were barely south of the border.

The severe heat made me especially thankful for our coach, which had a large awning to keep us in the shade. I'd wondered about its strange shape, but now I understood: it was absolutely necessary for a journey through the desert.

Beyond the massive gates, an empty stretch of sand awaited us. Sand, sand, and more sand; dunes as far as the eye could see. The only companion to the seemingly infinite expanse was the clear blue sky.

Though the desert before us was barren, it wasn't without its charm—the ripples made by the wind joined in all manner of beautiful patterns. It was a shame I could admire them only in short bursts; the reflected sunlight was

bright enough to hurt my eyes.

As our coach kept trundling along, the scenery never changed beyond the appearance of the odd small insect or strange, thorny plant. That alone was enough to fascinate me—I'd never experienced anything like it—but anyone would eventually tire of staring at the same old sights for what felt like an eternity.

"Deserts really are nothing but sand, huh?" I said to Lynne, who was sitting beside me. It was stating the obvious, but I couldn't help my impression from slipping out.

"Indeed," she replied. "The scenery will remain much the same for quite some time. Sarenza is mostly desert, and attempting the trek unprepared is a sure way to perish from heatstroke. Our coach was designed to maximize our comfort, but even that has its limits."

Just as Lynne said, though everything around us was a scorching desert, we were the picture of comfort. A single door separated us from the lethal outside, but our coach—which had apparently been custom-built by the royal magical equipment research laboratory—was equipped with advanced magical instruments that kept a cool breeze blowing for us. It was so comfortable, in fact, that I started to wonder whether we could even call this a trek.

Then again, another part of me agreed that trying to cross the desert without at least this much preparation was a terrible idea.

According to Lynne, the three stocky horses pulling our coach were also outfitted with magical instruments—personalized equipment enchanted with wind and ice magic to ensure their comfort. They hadn't shown any sign of tiring so far, and we were making a good pace through the hot sand. We weren't going as fast as when we'd traveled to Mithra, but it was respectable nonetheless.

By my estimate, we'd already come quite far. There was still a long stretch to go, though. I was just starting to feel restless when I saw some movement in the distance.

"What's that?" I asked.

“Are those...people?” Lynne added.

She was right; the figures in the distance were small, but I could make out their billowing gray robes and the white cloth covering their faces. Sirene, peering out the window, answered our questions.

“They’re all concealing weapons under those robes,” she said. “We can assume they’re bandits.”

“Bandits?” Lynne repeated.

“Yes. My mother was born and raised in Sarenza, and she told me bandits often attack isolated merchant wagons. They must think we’re a juicy target... I can also hear footsteps on the other side of that dune—there must be another ten or more of them lying in wait.” The animal ears atop Sirene’s head twitched as she gave us her brisk breakdown of the bandits’ forces.

“Wow,” I said, a little surprised. My eyes and ears were more perceptive than average—at least by my reckoning—but she had me completely beat. “You have good senses.”

“They’re...moving quite fast,” Sirene reported. “They must be accustomed to traveling through the desert. Ines, at our current speed, we won’t be able to shake them.”

The group of white-veiled figures drew nearer and nearer. Even as we watched them, they spread out as though to encircle our coach, their numbers only swelling as more of them appeared.

“My lady. It might be best if we stop the coach.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea. I wouldn’t want the horses to come to harm by chancing a hurried escape.”

Ines pulled on the reins, and our coach came to a slow halt atop the sand. At once, the bandits pursuing us stopped advancing and fanned out to our sides to cut off our escape. I could feel them watching our every move as they surrounded us.

“Looks like they’ve got business with us,” I said.

“Indeed,” Lynne agreed.

We both alighted from the coach and looked out at the gray-cloaked figures. Lynne, keeping a careful eye on our pursuers, stepped out on the other side as though to protect our transport. Rolo and Sirene joined Lynne and me.

“There appear to be...thirty, at a quick glance,” Lynne observed. “Not too many, then. That’s fortunate. Let’s be quick about it, shall we, Sirene?”

“Yes, my lady.”

The moment Sirene touched the bow on her back, the figures moved. I couldn’t see their faces under the white cloth, but the stances they adopted and the knives, bows, and other weapons they drew from within their cloaks made their intentions clear. Barely a second passed before a coordinated volley of arrows arced through the air toward us, falling like rain.

“Oh? They’re pretty good with bows. Still...” Sirene swiftly grabbed some arrows from her quiver—as many as there were closing in on us—then nocked them and drew her bow. “They’re a century too early to be challenging *me*.”

Sirene let her arrows soar, and each one met its mark, scattering the bandits’ projectiles through the air. She didn’t stop there, however; drawing and shooting in quick succession, she soon blanketed the sky with a volley even greater than the one that had targeted us. It surged through the desert air as though it were alive.

“[Arrow Storm].”

A ridiculously dense storm of arrows descended upon our gray-cloaked attackers. For a few heartbeats, the bandits stared up at the spectacle in blank shock, then quickly began to scatter. It was no use, though, as the projectiles still struck true. Every one of our pursuers found themselves pinned to the ground as Sirene’s arrows caught them by their hoods.

“What?!”

“Crap!”

The white cloth was pulled aside to reveal the faces of mere kids, all with animal ears atop their heads.

“Are those...?” I asked.

“Just as I suspected,” Sirene said. “They’re *beastfolk* children.”

Indeed, now that they’d lost the anonymity of their white veils, I could see they all resembled Sirene in appearance. There were boys *and* girls among them.

“Damn it!”

One of the boys, slightly taller than the rest, readied a knife and charged us, kicking up sand in his wake. He moved fast—especially for a child—and the point of his weapon was aimed straight at Lynne’s neck.

Nevertheless...

“L-Leave all your coin and possessions behind, and w-we’ll spare your lives!” he shouted as he ran. “Don’t bother resisting! O-Otherwise we’ll—”

“You’ll do *what*, exactly?”

“Hwuh?”

Before the animal-eared boy could finish, Lynne was behind him. He turned in shock, but her sword was already drawn; as easily as that, it had split his knife cleanly in two.

“Eek!” Seeing the tip of his blade hit the sand, the boy fell on his rear. A ripple of fear ran through the other children as who I assumed to be their leader was bested.

“Ines. Let us teach them a quick lesson on the error of their ways.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Ines dashed into the group of children, deftly evading their reckless swings and stabs as she grabbed them by the arms and tossed them to the ground. Those who tried to run were seized by the legs and sent tumbling, while others were picked up as one would carry a baby before being dumped headfirst into the sand. Soon enough, they were all buried in some capacity.



“Blegh!”

“Ack!”

“Mmnph!”

I felt sorry for the kids—especially the ones who got a mouthful of sand—but Ines was obviously holding back on them. She wasn’t about to use her sword of light on a group of children; the result would be an immediate bloodbath. Those were the kinds of idle thoughts that ran through my mind as Rolo and I watched the one-sided fight from next to the coach.

As for Lynne, she was using a thin, shining silver rope she had taken from somewhere to tie up the kids as they were defeated. “Please stay still,” she instructed them.

“Ow! The heck is this made of?!”

“Ack! What’s with this rope?! My knife won’t cut it!”

“It’s mithril wire,” Lynne explained. “I’ve looped some around your necks, so please be careful. If you struggle too much, you’ll decapitate yourselves.”

“Eep!” cried a chorus of voices.

Lynne’s shocking remark worked as intended; the animal-eared children froze immediately. Meanwhile, Sirene was observing our surroundings, visibly straining her ears.

“Lady Lynneburg,” she said, “this seems to be all of them. I can’t sense anyone else in the vicinity.”

“Yes, that seems to be the case,” Lynne agreed. “Good job, Sirene, Ines. But, my... Moving about in the desert works up a sweat, doesn’t it?”

“What shall we do with them, my lady?”

“Hmm... That *is* the problem, isn’t it?”

“Eep!”

Thanks to the efforts of the awfully reliable women of our party, the miniature bandits were all tied up in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 120: Desert Journey, Part 2

Most of the trussed animal-eared children cowered in place, sniffing to themselves. They appeared to have given up. One of them, however, had some fight left in him.

“Ugh! Just kill me and be done with it!”

It was the same boy who’d charged Lynne with a knife. Their leader, I assumed.

“Y-You won’t get anything from us!” he yelled. “Even if you torture us!”

I watched him struggle against his restraints out of the corner of my eye as I started inspecting the rest of our assailants.

They’re even younger than I thought.

The majority of the kids looked about ten, give or take a few years, but there were some *really* young ones mixed in with them. They were all thin, and the tallest of them was still shorter than Rolo. It was a little hard to believe they’d managed to chase down our coach.

“These are no ordinary kids,” I said. “What’s their deal? They’re quick on their feet, *and* they’ve got ears poking out of their heads.”

Lynne’s answer came swiftly: “They’re beastfolk.”

“Beastfolk?”

“Yes. There aren’t too many living in the Kingdom of Clays, so you rarely see them around the capital, but I’ve heard they’re very common here in Sarenza. They’re born with exceptional physical ability...but they don’t have much status, so many of them resort to crime. Still, I didn’t think even their children would turn to banditry.”

Beastfolk, huh? Like Sirene and my old hunter instructor?

Lynne slowly approached the tied-up children, causing several of them to flinch and draw back. “Eek! P-Please, spare us!” one cried.

“It’s all right,” Lynne reassured him. “We don’t mean to cause you any more harm.”

“R-Really?”

“Really. I simply wish to know what drove you to this.”

“W-Well—”

“H-Hey!” another of the kids shouted—the rowdy boy I’d tried to keep my eye on. “She’s a stranger! You can’t trust what she says!”

“B-But, Big Bro— Mnngh!”

The bandits’ leader—they called him “Big Bro,” apparently—was lying with his hands fastened behind his back, yet he still managed to stick his foot over the mouth of the child pleading to him. Dexterous kid.

“Don’t say *a word*,” he stressed. “No matter what we do, we can’t let them know where the village is!”

“‘The village’?” Lynne repeated. “Hmm... So you live in the area, then.”

“Aah—!”

“Idiot!” one of the other kids shouted. “So much for not saying anything!”

“I... I’m sorry!”

Though an argument had broken out among the children, they could only wriggle around in the sand. They looked a lot like caterpillars.

“Sounds like their village is somewhere close by...” I noted.

“Indeed,” Lynne replied. “I’ll try to find it with [Detect].” She squeezed her eyes shut as she invoked the skill, then opened them again just as suddenly. “I see. I think I’ve nailed it down. I sense a large gathering of people in the distance, south-southwest. It must be their village.”

“Wow. You can tell that much?”

“Eek!” one of the little bandits cried. “Sh-She can use [Detect]?! A-And from this far away?!”

“Damn it! Look what you’ve done!” complained another. “Now a stranger

found the village!”

“Wh-What should we do?! What should we do?!”

As the bandits panicked, their still-energetic leader thrashed around some more. Then he finally slumped onto the sand. The children might have been used to the unforgiving climate of the desert, but that didn’t make it any more bearable. It didn’t feel right to keep them tied up.

“Lynne, what should we do?” I asked. “We can’t just leave them here.”

“Hmm...”

There were twenty-something kids here—far too many for us to fit inside the coach. Stacking them atop the awning could work, but then they’d be exposed to the harsh sunlight.

“I’d rather not resort to that either,” Lynne agreed. “Ordinarily, those who run afoul of Sarenza’s laws are the purview of the Desert Guard, but...”

“The Desert Guard...?”

“Yes. Sarenza’s laws stipulate that criminals can be forced into slave labor, depending on the severity of their crime. In the case of these children, though... I doubt they’d escape execution.”

“Is it really that serious?”

“Yes. They might not have gotten anything from us, but the attempt alone counts as banditry. Sarenza takes a very harsh stance on it—even harsher than in the Kingdom of Clays. In no time at all, these children would end up with nooses around their necks or their heads on the chopping block.”

The kids paled at the thought. Lynne looked around, surveying their faces as they kept squirming. Some of them merely stared down at the sand, tears streaming down their faces as they thought about what they’d done.

“Of course,” Lynne continued, “that would only be a problem if we reported the crime. We could always hold our tongues and overlook it.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “None of us came to any harm, and they didn’t even manage to steal anything. Besides...I’m sure they had their reasons. They wouldn’t have resorted to something like this unless they were desperate.”

“Very true. Perhaps we should journey to their settlement and inquire about those reasons. Then we can decide their fates.”

“That’s a good plan.”

If we kept the children bound and continued on our way, execution would be the least of their worries; they’d shrivel up from dehydration long before the Desert Guard could detain them. It seemed best to take them back to their village and work things out from there.

The bandits’ leader scrambled to his feet, still restrained. “Y-You can’t!” he yelled. “Kill us right here if you have to! B-But you can’t go to the vil—”

“Do you think you’re in a position to make demands?”

“Eep!” The boy fell on his rear, frozen in shock as Ines bore down on him.

“You are guilty of banditry and attempted murder,” she continued, her voice low and threatening. “The laws of this land permit me to behead you on the spot. Nobody would complain. I am well within my rights to decapitate each and every one of you.”

“Eek!”

“Ines, don’t scare them too much,” Lynne said softly. “I feel sorry for them.”

“Banditry is a serious crime, no matter the country. These children must be taught a lesson, especially if we’re turning a blind eye to their misdeeds.”

“Yes...you have a point. Could you leave the teaching to me, at least?”

“Of course, my lady.”

“They’re still quite young. The best way to help them understand the severity of their actions is to demonstrate *the consequences*.” Lynne turned to the kids, drew the small wand she kept at her hip, and started the invocation for some kind of magic skill. “Watch closely, children. [Create Golem].”

The sand bulged and twisted into animal-eared dolls. There were as many as there were children, and they collectively mimicked the appearance of every single one of the tied-up bandits. The resemblance was uncanny. In no time at all, the kids’ shouts and tears were replaced with awe.

“Huh...? What...?”

“W-Wow...!”

Lynne shot the children another glance before drawing the dagger she kept at the small of her back. Barely a moment passed before it returned to its sheath, but that was all the time she needed.

“[Mistblade].”

The poor golems’ heads departed their bodies.

“Huh...?”

The heads arced through the air before striking the ground with dull *thumps*, squashing and deforming before the children’s eyes. Our captives merely watched in dead silence, their faces more pasty than ever. Had they forgotten how to cry?

“Make no mistake,” Lynne said, “this is what awaits you the next time you play at being bandits. Your loved ones will die with you. No matter your reasons, I need you to promise you won’t ever take that risk again.”

The animal-eared children vigorously nodded their heads in unison, not a speck of rebellion left in them. Even their leader, who had been so assertive before, was trembling with tears in his eyes.

I spied some unpleasant stains under a few of the young kids. Lynne really had made an impact on them. The desert heat would dry them out in no time; it was the *other* potential messes I was worried about.

“Do you promise?” Lynne pressed.

“Yes, ma’am!” the children shouted, now sitting bolt upright. “We’ll never do it again!”

“I think we’ve admonished them enough,” Ines said.

“Yes, so do I,” Lynne replied. “It’s hard not to feel a little bad for them. Still, things would have gone much worse for them if they had attempted this on anyone else.”

“Indeed... How should we proceed, my lady? Going to their village might pose

some risk if even the children there are thieves.”

“We can’t just abandon them. If we must put ourselves in danger to return them home, then so be it.”

“Ines, Lynne...” Rolo interjected, staring intently at the animal-eared children. “I don’t think we have anything to worry about.”

“Rolo?”

“Their loved ones are sick, but they don’t have the money for medicine. That’s why they attacked us. It was a last resort.”

“They’re sick, did you say?”

“Mm-hmm. The young, healthy adults all went off to work, leaving only the weaker ones behind. They’re almost all sick, so I doubt anyone will pose a threat to us. In fact, their village is almost done for. Do you think we could go help them?”

“I see...” Lynne muttered. “I think I understand now.”

“H-How does he know everyone’s sick?!” one child yelled, almost gawking at Rolo.

““A-Almost done for’?!” cried another. “How does he know so much?!”

“Idiot! Stop saying more than you need to!”

“Oh! C-Crap!”

Rolo’s evaluation had made the kids even more jittery. He must have hit the nail on the head.

“Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s head there at once,” Lynne declared. “Ines.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

“St-Stop!” the children shouted. “Y-You can’t go to the village!”

“P-Please! You— Wah! What are you doing?!”

“Sorry, but you’ll need to settle down,” I said. Lynne’s mind was made up, so I started picking up the struggling children and stacking them on the roof of our

coach. “Just bear with it for a little while. We don’t have anywhere else to put you.”

“Is it not a touch cruel to stick them up there...?” Lynne asked. “Though, we aren’t far from their settlement, I suppose, and they *did* attempt to rob us...”

“That said, the sun’s pretty intense. Should we throw something over them? Some cloth, maybe?”

“Yes, that’s a good idea. I’ll even use magic to create some ice. That should make the journey more comfortable for them.”

I piled the rest of the children onto our coach’s roof while Rolo and Sirene collected their scattered gray cloaks, which were perfect shelter from the blazing sun. Lynne created some ice to stick atop our makeshift cover, ensuring our passengers stayed cool.

And with that, we set out for the village.

Chapter 121: The Beastfolk Village, Part 1

It really wasn't long before the children's village came into view. Nobody was keeping watch, from what I could tell, and we encountered not even the slightest bit of resistance. It was so quiet and seemingly devoid of people that I started to wonder whether it was abandoned.

"Is anyone here?" I called.

A sickly looking man poked his head out. Lynne had barely finished explaining the reason for our arrival when he turned on his heel and rushed deeper into the village.

Sometime later, an old man with stark white fur and animal ears came tottering toward us. Once he was close enough, he got down on his knees and pressed his hands and head into the sand in supplication. "My brethren's actions have caused you harm. I implore you to accept my humblest apologies. The fault lies with us elders. Please, spare the children, at least!" He gazed up at the young bandits, who were still on the roof of our coach, and cried, "Oh, you absolute *fools!*"

The old man was hoarse and more sad than angry. "You don't need to bow your head," I said to him. "We're not going to do anything to the kids."

"Y-You would grant them your forgiveness? Truly? I was told they attempted to steal from you."

"Well, as you can see, they've already been punished." The children were safe from the sun, but it must have been like a sauna under their cloaks. "Right, Lynne?"

"Yes. They've learned their lesson, so we'll overlook it this time."

"T-Truly?! Y-You accept my apology?!" The old man prostrated himself again, his head practically scraping against the ground.

"You can stand up," I said. "Really. We're more interested to know why the children attacked us in the first place."

“If you seek a definite answer, I will need to ask them. But I *can* venture a guess. They must have been acting for the sake of the village—not that it excuses them! Their actions were unforgivable.”

“Could you elaborate for us?” Lynne asked. “If your village is having trouble, we might be able to help.”

“W-We wouldn’t want to presume on you! Overlooking our crime was generous enough!”

“We need money,” announced the boy leading the children; Ines and Sirene had finally let him down from atop the coach. “And we need it now.”

“What for?” I asked.

“We can’t save them without it.”

“Save who?”

The old man with white ears slowly shook his head. “As the village elder, I shall explain. These children... Most of their families are suffering from a disease with no hope of recovery.”

“Ah. A disease, huh?”

“Yes. The whole village, save a few people, has contracted the illness. We are not prosperous enough to buy them medicine, and even if we were, we would not know what to get; we do not have a doctor, so we have yet to identify the disease, and we are too poor to summon one from elsewhere. The children’s desperation must have driven them to banditry.”

The situation sounded pretty dire, all things considered.

“Instructor Noor, would you mind if we looked around?” Lynne asked.

“Not at all,” I replied. “Go ahead.”

“In that case...” She turned to a young lady standing nearby. “Excuse me, miss. Could you take me to the sick villagers?”

“A-As you wish.”

Lynne and the young lady headed deeper into the village. The white-eared old man kept his head down even when they were completely out of sight.

“To think the day would come when our village produced bandits...” he said. “We might be poor, but we have always taken great pride in our honor. And now... Now we have done something truly inexcusable. As the elder, the blame lies entirely with me.”

“Wh-Who cares about honor?!” the children’s leader snapped. “If we don’t find money fast, mama’s going to—”

“Foolish child! Your actions would only have caused *more* deaths, to say nothing of how you turned your blades on unassuming travelers! Can any of you look our ancestors in the eye and say that what you did was right?”

“Ngh...”

“Sniff...”

“W-We’re sorry...”

The children around us started to sob.

“How much would it cost to summon a doctor?” I asked.

“To be honest...” The old man cast his eyes down. “I do not know. Seldom does the opportunity arise. We would need to find someone willing to come all this way to our remote little village. They would demand quite a considerable sum, I suspect.”

“Use this, then. It should get you at least some of the way there.” I held out the money I’d planned to spend on souvenirs.

The old man accepted the bag out of sheer bewilderment. “M-May I ask what this is?”

“I can’t promise it’s enough for a doctor, but I want you to have it.”

“A-Are you certain? W-We cannot simply...”

“It’s no skin off my nose. I was just going to spend it on souvenirs. Besides, I can always earn more.”

“I-Is that so? Then I shall humbly accept. You have my deepest gratitude—for this and for overlooking the children’s crime. How can we ever repay you?”

“It’s fine. I know how these kids must feel. My own parents fell sick as well.”

Hearing the tragic story reminded me of the unfortunate deaths of my mother and father. Back then, if we'd had a doctor and proper medicine, they might have recovered. I couldn't dwell on it, though; I'd been too young to know any better, so the most I'd managed to do was care for them as they slowly wasted away.

I was content with knowing that my money could save these children's loved ones. It was of no use to me, anyway. I actually felt a little bad that I'd originally intended to waste it all on souvenirs. There was nothing wrong with spending money for your own enjoyment, but seeing the village's plight had driven away any such desires.

"Honored guest," the old man said, "we will never forget this kindness you have done us." Tears welled up in his eyes as he clung to the bag, oblivious to what I was thinking.

It wasn't long before Lynne returned.

"Instructor."

"Oh, Lynne," I said. "How are the villagers?"

"I carried out a quick inspection. If my suspicions are correct, then this isn't a disease at all."

"It's not?"

"From what I can tell, they've been poisoned."

"Poisoned...?" the old man and I asked in unison.

"On our way here, I inspected the makeup of the sand and found trace elements of poison. It's diluted enough that brief exposure shouldn't cause any issues, but the longer one lives here, the more it accumulates inside the body. I suspect that's why the people of this village grew so weak."

"Wow..." I muttered. "You figured out that much?"

"My inspection of the villagers told the same story—I noticed a large buildup of toxin in their bodies. Fortunately, it's nothing I can't deal with."

"I see. Are you going to treat them, then?"

“I already have. As long as they receive proper nutrition and time to rest, they should all make a full recovery.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Though, on the topic of nutrition, I am a little concerned. The villagers’ bodies were so susceptible to the poison because they were weakened to begin with. I’ve cured them, but the problem will return unless dietary changes are made.”

“Right, right.”

I could only nod along with Lynne’s explanation. She was phenomenal. During my short discussion with the old man about doctors and medicine, she’d gone ahead and solved the whole problem. Well, maybe not the *whole* problem.

“So they’re cured but need better nutrition?” I asked.

“Yes. I didn’t see much in the way of water or crops... The village’s lack of money is far from its only issue.”

“You can kind of tell just by looking around.”

The old man stared at us, confused. “I’m, um...terribly sorry to interrupt your conversation, but...m-may I confirm what your companion just said...?”

“She said your village doesn’t look like it has much in the way of food or water,” I replied.

“Y-Yes, that much is true. But, um, before that...”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

Before the old man could explain, a young woman’s voice reached our ears. “Elder,” she said.

“Lilya...?! But...weren’t you sick? Are you sure you should be up and about?”

“Yes, I’m fine now. That young lady cured me.”

“Wh-What?! Young miss, you had medicine?!”

Lynne shook her head. “No, but I *am* capable of a little healing magic.”

“H-Healing magic?! The art described as miracles brought about by human

hands?!”

“M-Mom...? Mom!” In the midst of the old man’s surprise, one of the bandits—a little girl—dashed over to the woman Lynne had cured.

“I was told about your little adventure...” the young woman said, catching the girl in a gentle embrace. “Thank you for trying to save me, Salya, but what you did was extremely dangerous. You must promise me you’ll never do it again.”

“O-Okay.”

“And apologize to the people you wronged.”

“Nnh... I... I’m sorry. A-And thank you. For saving my mom.”

Lynne smiled and gave the girl a little wave. “In the future, just be honest and ask for help, okay?”

“M-Mm-hmm... Thank you... Thank you so much!”

Lynne turned to the rest of the children. “The other villagers should also be on the mend. Go on. Go to them.”

“R-Really...? B-But...”

“M-Mom...!”

Breaking free of their shock, the children all thanked Lynne before scattering throughout the village.

Joy crossed the old man’s face, then gave way to astonishment when his eyes returned to Lynne. “I-Is it true? You cured everyone?”

“Yes. They weren’t that hard to treat, so it didn’t take me very long at all.”

“A miracle in the truest sense. I swear to repay this debt to you, young miss, no matter the cost.”

“It’s quite all right. I wasn’t expecting anything in return.”

“Th-Then how can we thank you?”

“Oh, I don’t need anything at all.”

“B-But... Not to disrespect your wishes, but would that not constitute a loss on your part? Wh-Why would you...?”

I exchanged a look with Lynne. “A loss in what sense?”

“We were in a position to help those in need, so we did,” Lynne added. “I don’t consider that a loss. It was a decision I made of my own free will; I couldn’t possibly accept payment for it.”

“Wh-What...? B-But to bring someone back from the verge of death, let alone an entire village... The market price of such a grand feat must be tremendously high!”

“I admit, disregarding the price of one’s services can cause long-term harm, but that’s no reason not to help someone who’s dying right in front of me. If we seem ignorant of your ways, then please excuse us—we are from another country and thus speak from the perspective of our own culture.”

“I see... You’re travelers from another country.” The old man relaxed, seemingly convinced.

“Yes. From the Kingdom of Clays to the north. We have not been here long.”

“Th-The Kingdom of Clays?! Have they opened the wall, then?!”

“No, we received special permission.”

“R-Right... My deepest apologies. I should not pry into the circumstances of those to whom we owe so much.”

“It’s all right. I don’t mind.”

It was almost impressive how quickly the old man switched between apologizing, expressing his gratitude, and demonstrating his shock. Our eyes met, and he made a quiet noise of realization.

“H-How could I have forgotten?” He approached me and held out the bag of money I’d given him. “Dear guest, we cannot accept this. Not after all you’ve done for us.”

“No, take it. You might not need medicine anymore, but you can use it for food and water. If you fall sick again because you weren’t eating well, you won’t be any better off than before we got here.”

“B-But—”

“Keep it. Really. I don’t need the money anyway. I’d rather it go toward feeding those kids. They looked pretty thin to me.”

The old man bit his lip as he fought back a fresh wave of tears. He was clutching the worn-out bag so tightly that I worried it might tear and spew its contents all over the ground. I was watching him anxiously when someone farther into the village called out.

“Elder! Quickly! Come to the plaza!”

“Hmm? Can it wait? I’m speaking with our honored guests.”

“Th-That’s just it! They’re laying out a feast in the plaza!”

“What?! A feast?!”

Come to think of it, our coach wasn’t anywhere in sight. Neither were Ines, Sirene, and Rolo. When the old man and I turned to Lynne, we found her awkwardly scratching her cheek.

“Sorry...” she said. “We anticipated a long trip, so our coach was well stocked with supplies. I asked Rolo to whip up something nutritious for the villagers, but I didn’t think it would cause this much excitement.”

“Rolo?” I asked. I didn’t know he could cook. A quick sniff drew my attention to a pleasant aroma drifting from deeper into the village.

“Elder! Everyone’s making their way to the plaza!” the young villager exclaimed. “Things might get out of hand if we don’t marshal them!”

“H-Honored guests! You have my sincerest apologies for cutting our discussion short, but...!”

“It’s fine,” I said. “We should apologize for causing such a fuss in the first place. Don’t forget to take that money with you.”

The old man’s eyes brimmed with tears yet again as he tightly squeezed the heavy bag. “W-We will never forget this debt!” he shouted. “I swear to repay it one day! No matter what it takes!” Then he rushed off with the young villager, moving faster than I would have thought possible for a man of his age.

Lynne and I made our way to the plaza as well, though we opted for a significantly more relaxed pace.

Chapter 122: The Beastfolk Village, Part 2

“Never in my life did I expect to see such a miracle...” the white-furred old man murmured, watching tenderly as ingredients were thrown into the giant pot sitting in the plaza.

The young beastfolk by his side nodded in response, likewise watching the burst of activity. “Me neither. It’s like they’re the party of heroes that fought the Divine Beast Y-Gor in the ancient legends. But...they’re more real than that. They’re our saviors.”

“Yes. They are.”

The villagers had been in tumult. Their sick friends and relatives, thought to be lost causes, had all risen from their beds the picture of health. Then the strange travelers had started cooking in their plaza.

The air was filled with a pleasant aroma. It wafted through the entire village, inviting everyone, young and old, to pop by and see what was happening. The plaza was buzzing with more life and excitement than during the great festival that took place once a year.

Many had at first been suspicious of the strangers and what they were doing. Then the circumstances of their arrival spread, and the villagers threw themselves at the travelers’ feet. How could they not when the party had escorted the would-be bandits back to town and overlooked their crime? They had even healed everyone who was sick. There had been quite a commotion as, together with their reunited children, the newly recovered villagers had gathered around the strangers and groveled for their forgiveness.

Some of the parents had started lecturing their sons and daughters, but the travelers had said there was no need. Though the children’s actions were nothing to be praised, they had already received a just punishment. No hard feelings remained.

It had taken quite a while for the crowd around the travelers to disperse. The

elder had worked desperately to control them, but now they were chatting merrily with their loved ones as they waited patiently for the food to be ready.

“It has been so long since I last saw the village like this,” he said.

“It might be my first time seeing it.”

“Ah, yes... Your generation never had the chance.”

“Unfortunately not.”

The village had no fields in which to grow crops, and there was nowhere for its people to hunt. Only by traveling to other towns to work or selling what little they could gather nearby were they able to make money. Food was scarce, and at least someone had always gone hungry.

Then things had taken a turn for the worse. One by one, the sturdy men and women who were the village’s breadwinners had started succumbing to illness. The village had grown poorer by the day, and many of the sick had died, starting with the frailest. It hadn’t taken long for the survivors to lose hope and the smiles to vanish from their faces.

Everyone could tell their village was on the verge of ruin. Just the day before, they had wandered the streets looking withdrawn and defeated. Yet as they sat around the plaza’s bonfire, they seemed not to have a care in the world. Though the sun was setting and the dark was almost upon them, they all welcomed the strangers who had so suddenly come to their village, their joy almost spilling from their hearts.

It was the first time the village’s younger generation had ever seen such peace. Even the elder had almost forgotten the sight.

“I never thought I’d move this well again,” the young beastfolk said. “The miracle of healing is incredible. The entire time that young woman was tending to me, I could think only that she was a goddess come to my bedside.”

“I understand how you feel,” the elder replied. “In fact, I would go a step further. To us, they are *greater* than the gods of legend. We see them and the true miracles they have performed with our own eyes.”

“You’re right.”

“We have nothing that would please them...but we can at least show them hospitality and the gratitude in our hearts.”

“Of course,” the young beastfolk said. He noticed, then, how the elder clung to the leather bag one of the travelers had given him. “How much is in there, do you think?”

“Hmm... The bag looks well used, and the kind man said the money was meant for souvenirs. For him to have given it away so freely—and to a stranger, no less—it must not be very much.” The elder’s eyes then grew teary as he continued in a soft voice, “Still, he uttered not a word of complaint; his only concern was how the money might help our village. That is reason enough to be grateful. We already owe these travelers a greater debt than we could ever repay. No matter how much coin is in here, we shall gracefully accept it and use every last copper for the sake of our people.”

The young beastfolk nodded seriously. “You’re right. Still, maybe we should take a look sooner rather than later. It would be helpful to know how much we were given.”

“Mmm, that certainly is true. But even if the amount is small, Kyle...you must not let it color how you treat them.”

“Of course. I could never be so rude.”

With the elder’s permission, the young beastfolk loosened the leather bag’s drawstring and peered inside. “E-Elder?!” he cried out in surprise. “Th-This is...!”

“Kyle? Did you not just tell me it would not change your behavior?”

“B-But...there’s *gold* in here!”

“Wh-What?! Smallgolds?!”

“Greatgolds too!”

“G-Greatgolds?!”

“Y-Yes! So many of them! And...what are these?”

The elder gazed into the bag the young beastfolk was holding open and recoiled in shock. The pair exchanged unbelieving looks, expressions twitching.

“C-Can we really accept all this, Elder?”

“Wh-What has that traveler given us...?”

Staring at the man sitting in the corner of the plaza, the elder fell to his hands and knees as if worshipping a god. Tears welled up in his eyes...but he came back to his senses when the young beastfolk spoke again.

“Um, Elder...”

“Surely there cannot be more.”

“There are white coins at the very bottom of the bag. And these shiny little rainbow-colored stones. I’ve never seen them before. What are they?”

“White coins? Let me see.” The elder took one such coin from Kyle and examined it carefully. “I do not recognize it either. Though it appears white, it shines like silver when it catches the light... I-It couldn’t be! Is this mithril?!”

“Mithril? W-Wait! He gave us platinum?!”

Kyle and the elder stared at the shining white coin sitting atop the latter’s palm, dumbfounded. A bag of greatgolds was hard to believe, but a bag of platinum? The pair exchanged another look as if attempting to assure each other that they weren’t dreaming. They had no idea what was happening.

“I... I cannot believe it,” the elder said. “C-Can this truly be...?”

“This is my first time seeing a real platinum coin.”

“This is my first time holding one!”

“Then...what does that make this glittering rainbow thing?”

“I could not say...”

Having regained some composure, the pair studied the other unfamiliar bits of metal.

“Hmm...” The elder mused aloud. “A gemlike object that glitters with a rainbow hue... It rings a bell.”

“Do you know something about it, Elder?”

“Let me think... My memory is vague, but I think I recall a rare metal of that

description. Unless I am mistaken, it was used among nobles and great merchant companies when making enormous business deals—deals that impacted whole countries. Wait... Small, rectangular, a rainbow glimmer that seems almost magical... Rain...bow...?”

“Elder? What’s wrong?”



The elder held the glittering coin, still as a corpse. “Nyuh...”

Kyle gave him a strange look. “‘Nyuh’?” he repeated.

“NYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

“E-Elder?!”

“K-Kyle! Th-This rainbow coin! How many are in the bag?! This is the only one, right?! It has to be! Right?!”

“There are four more.”

“He gave us FIIIVE?!” The elder’s overjoyed smile had vanished, replaced with a look of sheer horror. He was pale as a ghost and trembling as though he might collapse at any moment.

“Elder, what are they? Are they valuable?”

“‘V-Valuable’ does not even begin to describe it. This is kingsgold!”

“‘Kingsgold’?” Though the elder looked faint, Kyle took and simply stared at the rainbow-colored piece of metal. “Is that its name?”

“J-Just put it back in the bag! Now! We must return this to the traveler! At once!”

“B-But didn’t he give it to us? You said we should use it carefully—for the sake of the village.”

“Th-That may be so! But we simply *cannot* accept this much!”

Seeing the elder’s reaction, Kyle began to grasp their predicament. “Is this kingsgold really worth that much?”

“A-As I told you, its value goes beyond words! Sarenza’s most infamous bandit gangs would come charging into our village for just one of them! A small country would go to war for a *portion* of what sits inside this bag!”

“A... A single coin’s worth that much...?” Kyle took a cautious step back. Now that he understood the severity of their situation, he waited carefully for what the elder would say next. Something about the man seemed off as he clutched the bag of coins.

“Yet... Yet... The esteemed traveler told us to use it for the sake of the village...”

“Elder?”

“Imagine the improvements we could make...” The elder stared possessively at the bag’s contents, muttering to himself. “H-Hmm... Then perhaps we could just...accept it? M-Maybe just...one coin? But, no... No, no, no... That would not be... But then again...”

“What’s the matter, Elder? Elder?!”

He jerked in surprise at the young beastfolk’s voice. “Wh-Wha...?! What was I just...?”

“Weren’t we returning the bag to the traveler?”

“R-Right. Right! Hurry! Hurry and return it while I still cling to reason!”

“Do you want me to run over to him?”

“N-No, wait. *I* shall return it. Guard my back, Kyle! And tell *no one* about the contents of this bag! No one!”

“R-Right!”

The elder and the young beastfolk ran at full pelt toward the bag’s original owner, who was sitting in the plaza with everyone and waiting for dinner.

Chapter 123: Desert Banquet, Part 1 (A Great Stew)

"Ines, could you lightly stir-fry those chopped ingredients?"

"Certainly. Just enough that they don't brown, then toss them into the pot?"

"Mm-hmm."

At the heart of the young animal-eared boys and girls' village, Rolo gave Ines and Sirene instructions as they worked together to prepare dinner.

"As soon as you're done, please start on the next batch I give you."

"Okay. If you need anything else, simply let me know."

"Hey, Rolo. It's fine to cut them like this, right?"

"Mm-hmm. You're a great cook, Sirene. And your cutting technique is excellent."

"Y-You think? It was always just me and my mom at home, so I got a lot of practice. Maybe that's why."

"Oh, is that so? In that case, could you also take care of the ingredients over there? We'll need to prep a whole lot more if we want to feed everyone."

"G-Got it!"

Lynne had proposed using the ingredients stored in our coach to prepare a nutritious meal for the villagers. In short order, Rolo, Ines, and Sirene had taken over a section of the village's plaza, set up the large pot we had also brought with us, and immediately begun working.

As more and more people had come to the plaza, we'd realized that our pot wasn't big enough to feed them all. Instead, we'd asked to borrow the giant one meant for the village's festivals. It mustn't have been used for quite some time because it was covered with rust and required a thorough cleaning before we could even think about cooking with it. The sun had already started to set by the time everything was ready.

Now that the harsh rays of the midday sun were gone, the hot desert air had cooled, and the breeze was cold enough to feel chilly against one's skin. The animal-eared villagers gathered around the giant pot and its fire. The crowd was impressively large, even at a glance.

"I wasn't expecting all these people," I said. "I thought their village was deserted."

"Indeed," Lynne replied. "Their population is about three hundred, from what they've told me. It would appear that everyone's here."

"Three hundred, huh?"

We were sitting among the villagers, watching Rolo and the others cook. The village had seemed almost empty when we'd arrived, but now I could see that I was sorely mistaken.

"For a population this large, even just securing enough drinking water must be a challenge. Fortunately, the alterations to our coach mean we have an ample supply—not to mention Rolo's hearty soup."

"Yeah?"

Rolo and Sirene were dexterously chopping up ingredients—a massive pile of them, to be exact—before passing them on to Ines, who stir-fried them and tossed them into the giant pot. Everything they were preparing had come from our coach. There was an insulated storage area beneath the seats meant for keeping food cold, and it had apparently been full to bursting when we departed the Kingdom. I still couldn't believe so many ingredients had fit inside what seemed to be a relatively small space.

Though we had enough ingredients to feed all the villagers and then some, actually turning them into soup required a tremendous amount of work.

"Is it really okay for us to use so much of our food...?" I asked. "Wasn't it for the journey?"

"It's not a problem," Lynne replied. "We're using up most of our stock, but we made sure to leave just enough for the rest of the trip. Otherwise, it's best we prioritize the villagers' nutrition, I think."

“I can’t argue with that.”

Looking around, I could see hungry children staring intently at the soup Rolo and the others were preparing. The youngest among them—too young to have been part of the banditry attempt—were especially thin. I wondered whether that had contributed to them not being involved in the attack, but on closer inspection, the other kids were just as gaunt. I was impressed they’d managed to move as well as they had.

As soon as they’d found out their sick family members were cured, the children had come together with their loved ones to apologize to us. Some of their relatives had put their heads to the ground, crying and asking to be punished too, but we’d refused; disciplining these people who had already endured so much wouldn’t accomplish anything. It wasn’t like they were poor by choice, and their kids had only turned to crime out of sheer desperation.

According to Sirene, the would-be bandits hadn’t even intended to harm us. They had taken great care to make sure their arrows would miss. Sirene had returned the arrows to intimidate them, but if she’d simply let them follow their course, they wouldn’t have hit any of us. The kids had only intended to scare us into giving them our money and other goods, which was why Sirene had only targeted their masks and cloaks. Their subtle exchange had gone straight over my head.

I’d ended up asking Rolo for his take on the situation. He’d read the children’s hearts, so he’d understood what they were going through from the very beginning. Was I the only one who’d stood there vacantly without a clue as to what was happening around me? In hindsight, our attackers hadn’t seemed genuinely hostile. Maybe that was why I’d felt so laid-back.

The kids’ actions hadn’t been wise, by any means. One wrong move could easily have led to a far, far worse outcome. They seemed to understand that now, and they had even come to apologize, so we’d stressed that we didn’t intend to punish them any further. Many of the villagers had then bowed their heads to us and, for a while, remained almost completely still.

That fuss aside, though, everyone seemed much calmer now. They sat under the setting desert sun, watching the giant pot bubble and simmer. The scene

was picturesque in how tranquil everyone looked. As they waited eagerly for the food to be done, their eyes, which had previously reminded me of a dead fish, housed a faint glimmer of hope. Some of the kids were still downcast, but I was sure they'd cheer up when they tried Rolo, Sirene, and Ines's cooking.

"It sure smells nice," I remarked.

Lynne nodded. "Rolo's become quite the talented cook. He's been studying and working with an excellent teacher."

"I don't doubt that. Just the aroma is convincing enough."

"I stop by the restaurant on occasion. In a word, it's masterful. Perhaps our friendship makes me a little biased, but I would confidently declare Rolo a fair match for even the most renowned chefs in the city."

"Then I'm looking forward to trying his food. Hmm?" I noticed some of the kids looking at Lynne and me. As soon as I met their gaze, they shrank back in surprise.

"Instructor... I wish to make friends with those children, if you don't mind."

"Oh, of course. Go ahead."

Lynne approached them as nimbly and silently as a cat. She used the skill she'd invoked earlier to make more dolls of sand, then started performing her very own puppet show. I could see her satisfaction as the young children's eyes sparkled with delight and they lost themselves in the adorable way the dolls hopped around.

The kids involved in the afternoon's events, on the other hand, had gone pale upon seeing Lynne's puppets. Her punishment had worked exceptionally well; it wouldn't surprise me if everyone on the receiving end started seeing the dolls again in their nightmares. I certainly would, and I didn't even have anything to repent for.

"Honored guest."

I turned upon hearing a voice and saw the village elder with white animal ears standing a few paces ahead of me. He slowly closed the distance between us and bowed deeply.

“It has been too long since we have enjoyed a night of peace,” he said. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Oh, I didn’t really do anything. You should thank the others.”

“I am grateful to you all. More than you can imagine. But, truth be told, I am unsure how to show it.”

“The sick people are all cured now, right?”

“Yes, thanks to your benevolence.”

The old man then returned the bag of money I’d given him, an intense look on his face. In his words, he couldn’t possibly accept such an enormous sum.

Now that I thought about it, the guildmaster *had* warned me that my money would attract bandits. I’d dismissed the idea out of hand—how much coin could a guy like me really make?—but the old man’s reaction gave me cause to reconsider. No matter how much I insisted that he keep it, he replied that such vast riches would put the entire village in danger. What convinced me in the end was how pale he looked as he explained it to me.

Ultimately, we settled on him accepting only a few gold coins.

It was finally dawning on me how much money my worn-out bag must have contained. The thought made me nervous, so I did my best to put it out of my mind; there wasn’t much I could do now that we were traveling through Sarenza. I supposed that I would just need to set it aside for when we reached the nation’s capital.

“Honored guest. May I speak with you for a moment?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Pardon me, then.”

The old man sat beside me, staring at the huge pot. “Perhaps it is strange of me to ask, but...why have you ordinary humans been so good to us?”

“‘Why’?”

“Please excuse my discourtesy. It must sound as though I am trying to fault your goodwill. Perhaps such gestures are commonplace in the Kingdom of Clays

to the north. If only that were true in Sarenza. Here, it is rare for beastfolk and ordinary humans to even exchange words like this. As though we are equals, I mean.”

“Really?”

“If my eyes do not deceive me, there is a young beastfolk woman with you. Is she, too, from the Kingdom of Clays?”

“Yeah. She came with us.”

“I suppose that, in the Kingdom, it is not rare for beastfolk and ordinary humans to work shoulder to shoulder.”

“Sounds about right. I don’t think it’s rare at all.”

I couldn’t say for certain, of course; I was far from being an expert. Our conversation made me think, though—Rolo stood out a little too, didn’t he? Not that Lynne and the others seemed to mind. They all got on just fine.

For a while, the old man and I watched the trio cook.

“I...must confess to feeling envious,” he eventually said. “We beastfolk are treated poorly here in Sarenza. It was not always like this, as I understand it, but alas... We are less intelligent than ordinary humans, you see.”

“This might be a weird question, but why did you all make such a harsh environment your home? No matter how you look at it, this is no place for people to live.”

“You are exactly right. We live in such dire conditions because we must. Slowly but surely, we were driven here.”

“You were?”

The old man’s shoulders dropped as he watched the children playing nearby. “Perhaps that was a little misleading. We have inhabited this land for generations. It is said that, in the past, it was a paradise for us beastfolk. There was a lake that never ran dry and an abundant forest home to all the birds and beasts we could hunt.”

“A paradise? It sure doesn’t look like one.” The surrounding landscape was a vast expanse of sand. Forget forests—there wasn’t even a single tree.

“You are correct. The story dates back centuries. Not once has this old man laid eyes upon something so magical.”

“Really? Centuries?”

“Yes. I do not know whether the story is true, but it is what our ancestors taught us. ‘This land is our paradise,’ they said. ‘We, our children, and our children’s children must respect and guard it through the ages.’”

“I see... Then how did it end up like this?”

“Again, I am unsure. The legends say that the lake suddenly dried up and the forest withered into nothing. Our home has been like this since before I was born. Fruitless and desiccated. Its former splendor is an ancient legend. Who can say whether it holds any truth?”

The old man gave a hollow chuckle. “Make no mistake, though—that legend is not what keeps us here. We know our current lives are unsustainable, but each of our attempts to move has ended in failure.”

“Is there nowhere else you can go?”

He shook his head. “Though there are many settlements where we could spend our days in peace, the great merchant companies own them all. We would need to pay extortionate fees to use the land and water—fees we simply cannot afford. Many of the younger generation left our village saying they would even bear debt if they had to...but I am told they met fates worse than ours and gave up in the end.”

“I see...”

“Many came running back saying that life here was preferable to the hardships elsewhere. As for the others...I know not where their paths took them. I hope they found happiness, but I cannot bring myself to believe it.”

“Are there other villages facing the same problems?”

“Yes. Many who cannot bear the poverty abandon their homes to become wanderers and then find themselves in an even worse state than before. In the end, no matter where we go, we cannot escape our burdens. We have neither the wits nor the strength to break this deadlock; our only option is to accept it.

Some tribes have resorted to crime to sustain themselves, but I suspect they will meet their ends as someone else's disposable pawns."

"Right..." Anyone could see that the village was poor, but its circumstances were far bleaker than I'd ever imagined. Such hardships hadn't even crossed my mind when I'd first heard about "the country to the south."

"Things never used to be this bad," the old man continued. "Ever since they built the Northern Wall—during the days of my dear grandmother, I was told—the beastfolk's rigors have gotten steadily worse. Our only refuge, the Kingdom of Clays, was closed to us, and the taxes on land and water were suddenly raised. That was when our people became truly stranded."

"The Northern Wall... That's the one we came through, right? They won't let you through?"

"Only those with a license are granted passage, namely the merchants of large companies and those with the country's backing. Anyone who attempts to sneak through without permission is swiftly executed, and the guards are particularly merciless to our kind. That is why they are stationed there in the first place."

I thought back to our arrival in Sarenza. As the old man said, we'd seen guards all around the wall.

"In the past, some overcame the tight security and crossed the wall to escape Sarenza. I know not what happened to them, but whatever weakness they exploited was quickly dealt with. The guards are stricter now—they do not even let us approach."

"I see..." was the most I could say in response. The more I was told about the animal-eared people's situation, the worse it sounded. "I was meaning to ask—what do you normally eat here? A lot of you are pretty skinny."

"On occasion, one of the younger members of our village will travel far away to hunt or gather food, which we eat or sell at the market to buy water and other provisions. We have no one to back us, though, so we are regularly taken advantage of. Our wares are bought for low prices or we are overcharged. We cannot buy enough food or water to meet our needs, and the result is as you can see. As the head of this village, it shames me to say this...but our situation

will only continue to worsen. We have managed to survive this long—by a stroke of good fortune, no doubt—but our village will not last.”

The old man wore a melancholy smile. I was trying to decide how to react when our surroundings suddenly buzzed with excitement and cheers filled the air. Rolo and the others must have finished making dinner. I peered over and saw them serving an orderly line of villagers.

The children’s eyes sparkled as they accepted their bowls and hungrily spooned soup into their mouths. Judging by the looks on their faces, it was still too hot for them. Their lives were full of such great troubles, but for this joyful moment, they appeared to have forgotten them all.

“Honored guest,” the old man said. “Once again, I must ask that you forgive my rudeness.”

“Rudeness? Oh. You mean this?” I wasn’t sure what he meant for a moment, but then I remembered the leather bag full of coins.

“Yes. My deepest apologies, but there is nothing we can do with such a vast sum of money. I appreciate your intentions—more than I can put into words—but excessive wealth is like poison for the body. If we were to accept it, I am sure great misfortune would await us.”

“No, it’s my fault for not thinking. I didn’t mean to trouble you.”

“Not at all. You have given us far too much already.”

“Sorry I couldn’t do more for you.”

“With all due respect, that is nonsense. If not for you, we would never have enjoyed this rare moment of bliss. I cannot thank you enough.” The old man stood and smiled, then bowed deeply to me again. “There might not be much we can do for you, but please, at least allow us to accommodate you. Your companions have said that you plan to depart tomorrow, and the desert will remain bitterly cold until sunrise. I would humbly recommend an early night’s rest by a fire.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “Thanks.”

I parted ways with the old man and ate my share of soup. Lynne hadn’t been

kidding—Rolo’s cooking was masterful. It was so delicious, in fact, that I almost couldn’t believe it was real.

But after my conversation with the old man, there were far more important things on my mind.

Chapter 124: Desert Banquet, Part 2 (After the Banquet)

That night, we stayed in lodgings provided to us by the village: a large building near the plaza that was typically used for meetings. Some of the villagers had cleaned it while the rest of us were eating, so while it was rather dilapidated, there wasn't a speck of dust to be seen.

I'd wanted to follow my usual routine of bathing before bed—the desert heat had made me sweaty during the day—but water was such a precious resource here that the village had none to spare. Instead, Lynne had gone with me to retrieve some from the coach's specialized equipment and even heated it with magic so I could wipe myself down. She and the others in our group had cleaned themselves the same way.

The villagers couldn't believe their eyes; they'd never seen someone bathe with drinkable water. For them, it was a luxury—almost all of the money they made from their hunting and gathering trips went toward it, and even then, the water they ended up with was always slightly dirty. It was the best they could hope for, considering their lack of a personal water source.

The contrast between our way of thinking and the villagers' astounded me. They looked utterly shocked when Lynne informed them that the magical item in our coach could produce as much water as one had mana to spare. We'd traveled at an impressive pace, but this small settlement was still only half a day from the Kingdom; I'd never expected our cultures to be so different when all that separated us was a single wall.

It wasn't long before we all turned in for the night, tired from the journey so far. The place where we were lodging had strange architecture I'd never seen in the royal capital. We all slept together in a large circular room, at the center of which sat an equally round hearth with a chimney that reached the ceiling.

Lynne must have noticed my surprise; she explained that the building's layout was meant for comfort, as the desert became bitterly cold at night. It was built

differently than any other house in the village, she said, and our hosts must have given us what little fuel they had so we could keep a fire going. They were doing more than they could afford to show us their hospitality.

Rolo and Sirene were out like a light the moment they closed their eyes, and Ines, who had put aside her heavy armor in favor of a blanket, slept quietly by the window overlooking our coach. Lynne was still awake, deep in thought as she watched the scenery outside. I wasn't tired, and there was little else to do, so I reflected on the day's events.

I remembered my discussion with the old man. No matter how hard they worked, the people in this village didn't even have enough food to go around. Water had to be bought, except there was never enough, and the land was too barren for anyone to grow crops. Leaving wasn't even an option, as the villagers had nowhere else to go. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced—though I supposed we *were* in another country.

I wasn't raised in particularly wealthy circumstances, but I still considered myself very fortunate. There was a river near my mountain home and a forest full of animals I could hunt whenever I wanted. Digging deep enough into the ground caused water to well up pretty much anywhere, and my mother—once an expert on so many subjects—taught me how to set up wells to make growing crops more convenient.

These villagers, on the other hand, didn't have the land or water to grow their own food. They were good at hunting but lived in an area without much game, and even when they ventured out to find some, the money it earned them was meager at best.

"If only there were a crop that could grow in barren land..."

No sooner had the words escaped me than I remembered the young seed vendor I'd met in the royal capital. I reached into the pouch I'd brought and pulled out a blackened root—one of the pseudomandragoras I was carrying around to snack on.

"[Low Heal]."

As a test, I used my bottom-of-the-barrel cleric skill on the slender root. Tiny sprouts appeared all across its surface.

I knew it!

In the past, I'd used the skill on the seeds of crops I'd grown at my mountain home. It had worked on those and appeared to work on roots as well.

I might be able to use this.

I'd once believed that my [Low Heal] was useful only for slowly closing wounds, but the realization that it also worked against poison had inspired me to experiment. Most of my tests had failed, but I *had* discovered that using it on seeds caused them to sprout. Once planted, they had grown shockingly well, turning into healthy seedlings in what felt like the blink of an eye, and the crops they'd gone on to produce had tasted amazingly delicious. My home gardening experience had been smooth sailing ever since.

It had been a while since I'd used this particular skill; food was so easy to come by in the capital that, since moving there, I'd seen no reason to continue growing my own. In this remote village, however, it would surely come in handy. Hope sparked within me as I realized this barren desert might be able to grow crops after all.

I couldn't yet prove that my idea would work, and the odds seemed stacked against me, but it had to be worth a shot. I wanted nothing more than to rush out and test my theory.

For all my enthusiasm, there was *one* thing I thought might cause me trouble: even if the crops could grow in barren land, they would still need a source of water. I wouldn't let that stop me, though. It had already been brought to my attention that the desert had a rainy season—a time of periodic downpours that broke from the usual drought. If that was the case, there was sure to be water somewhere underground. I just needed to dig deep enough to find it.

Even if my attempt to set up a well proved unsuccessful, there were other options we could turn to. The water-producing magical item we had in our coach was one example. Though it was so precious here in Sarenza that none of the villagers had set eyes on one before, there were more than a few back in the royal capital. I'd heard about them from one of my coworkers, a man who called himself "the Bathhouse Master," and I'd even had the privilege of seeing one firsthand.

Lynne's father had told me time and time again that I could ask him for anything I needed. I'd yet to take him up on it, since there wasn't much I wanted, but maybe it was time to change that. A magical item common enough to be used in a bathhouse felt like a reasonable request. And even if he disagreed—he couldn't have meant *literally* anything, could he?—there was no harm in asking.

Once we had a water source, I would dig irrigation ditches for the crops. My black sword was perfect for that kind of thing. I could even plow the fields; a small one wouldn't take me longer than half a day. I'd racked up a decent amount of farming experience over the years and completed a few relevant construction jobs in the capital, so I was pretty sure of myself.

My thoughts then turned to something else the white-furred old man had told me—that the land around the village might once have been home to an abundant forest. It was an unsubstantiated account from long ago, but for the legend to have lasted all these years, there must have been *some* truth to it. Maybe there was nutrient-packed soil waiting beneath the sand.

I already intended to dig for water, so I thought I might as well turn the earth in the process. Finding good soil would be like striking gold. As those ideas raced through my head, I resolved to try them all as soon as possible.

Testing them out should take only two or three days.

I was more or less a tagalong on Lynne's journey through Sarenza, so I couldn't delay her too much, but I was sure she'd let me have a couple of days. Though I couldn't guarantee success, I wanted to give my solutions a go, at least.

"Lynne, are you still up?" I asked.

"I am."

"I've got a request, if that's okay."

Wrapped in the blanket the villagers had lent me, I quietly told Lynne about my plan. She was gazing out the window, watching a group of beastfolk children play around the embers of our cookfire.

"Can we stay in the village a little longer?" I asked. "I want to try setting up a

field.”

“A field?”

“Yeah. Just a small one, so I can experiment with a few things.”

“I see... An experimental crop field. As much as I want to contribute...will it not take too long to prepare?”

“I’m keeping it small-scale, so it should take two or three days at most. One, if I work fast enough.”

“O-One day...?”

“As I said, I’ve got some ideas in mind. Do you think you could give me that long?”

“Of course. We’ve had some leeway in our schedule from the very beginning. A small, several-day detour shouldn’t be a problem.”

“That’s good to hear. Thanks. On a related note, I’ve thought of something to ask your father.”

“You have?”

“He mentioned on a few occasions that he’d give me a hand if I ever need something. I think I’ll finally take him up on that.”

“Is that so? He’ll be glad to hear it, I’m sure. He’s been a little put out that you still haven’t requested anything, Instructor.”

“And...sorry, but there’s more. Could you let me know what you think about something?”

“Of course. I’ll do whatever I can to assist you.”

Our conversation continued deep into the night as we discussed what we could do for the village.

Chapter 125: The Desert Field, Part 1

Just as the old man had said, nights in the desert were awfully cold. My naive assumption that a simple bedroll would keep me snug was being thrown back in my face as I endured temperatures low enough to kill someone. Seeing my breath turn to vapor each time I opened my mouth reminded me why there was a large hearth right at the center of the room.

Lynne and I had gotten so deeply absorbed in our conversation that it was starting to get bright outside by the time we decided to stop and go to bed. I didn't sleep much in the end, but I forced myself to get up and keep watch with Ines, who had risen earlier than me. Together, we waited for the others to wake up.

Sirene was still in bed when she suddenly shot up and grabbed her bow, her hair a tangled mess. "I sense a large group of people nearby," she said warily. "We're surrounded." The sound of her voice woke Lynne and Rolo.

Ines and I checked what was going on from the windows and saw that the area around our building was packed with people.

"It appears to be the villagers," Ines noted. "What shall we do, my lady?"

"Let's go outside and see what they want," Lynne said.

"Then please allow me to take point."

Ines opened the door, and the rest of us trickled out after her. No sooner had we stepped outside than I spotted the old man I'd chatted with the day before looking flustered.

"O-Our deepest apologies for waking you!" he stammered. "We all wanted to see you off for your departure, so...!"

"Our departure?" I asked.

"I instructed everyone to stay quiet so as not to disturb your rest, but it only had the opposite effect," the old man explained, looking uncomfortable. "Truly,

I have no excuse.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what was going on.”

So they’d just come to say farewell, huh? I’d heard that beastfolk were talented, but I’d never expected them to be so stealthy. They were making barely any noise for such a large group. If Sirene hadn’t noticed them, how long would it have taken the rest of us to realize they were there?

I had the stray idea that their agility would make them excellent postal workers in the Kingdom. It was a moot point, though, since they couldn’t cross the northern wall.

“Lynne,” I said, “while we’re here, we should discuss what we spoke about last night.”

“Indeed, Instructor. The earlier we involve the elder, the better.”

The man in question was still seeking our forgiveness. “Once again, we extend our sincerest apologies to you all. We interrupted your rest despite your early departure. I shall disperse the villagers, so please return to your—”

“Actually, about that...”

I felt a little bad, since everyone had gathered to see us off, but this was the perfect opportunity. Getting the old man’s attention, I explained what Lynne and I had spoken about the previous night.



“You wish to stay in our village?” the elder asked. “But...why?”

“We won’t use any of your food or water,” I explained, “and we’ll do our best not to get in anyone’s way. Letting us stay for a few days wouldn’t be too much trouble, would it?”

“O-Of course not, but...”

“I want to grow *this*.”

“Is that...a plant root? No, a tuber of some kind?”

Our request had surprised the old man, so I’d retrieved a blackened root from its pouch as a visual aid. He didn’t seem to recognize it, but he was

knowledgeable enough to make a good guess.

“This is a pseudomandragora,” I explained. “It’s a crop that can grow in barren soil, apparently.”

“A crop? Do you mean to cultivate a field, then?”

“Yeah. That’s why I’d like to borrow some land. I’ll try not to make too much trouble for you.”

“O-Of course. That is more than we could ever ask for.”

“I won’t be getting in the way or anything?”

“N-Not at all. However...” The old man looked troubled. “As you have seen, our surroundings are nothing but sand and wasteland, and there are no sources of water with which to farm. I would rather not disagree with you...but I cannot imagine growing crops here. You would only waste precious time and effort.”

“Actually, I’ve got a few ideas for the soil and water.” I exchanged a look with Lynne, prompting her to explain.

“Elder, can anyone in the village manipulate mana?”

“Y-Yes. I, and several others, can manage the simplest of spells. How does that relate to the matter at hand?”

“That should do. We have an item in mind that should solve your problem, though it will require delicate operation. I am sure you wish to know more, but I would rather wait until we have confirmed that we can acquire one.”

“I... I see...?” the old man replied, unsure what she meant.

Lynne was, of course, referring to the water-producing magical item we’d discussed the night before. I’d spoken to her about the Wellspring Pipe I’d seen back in the capital, and she’d explained that several more were here in Sarenza. They were tremendously valuable items traded on an international scale; if we weren’t careful with how we proceeded, we genuinely risked starting a war.

I supposed the magical item in our coach would work as a temporary solution, but it was vastly inferior to the Wellspring Pipes, which produced vast spates of water in a single burst.

As I mulled over the details of our plan, I suddenly started to worry. If we succeeded in getting the villagers their very own Wellspring Pipe, would we not make them the target of looters the country over? Lynne had proposed that they use it discreetly to minimize the danger, but we would still need to be careful about who we brought into the loop.

In any case, whether we were even allowed to bring a new Wellspring Pipe into Sarenza was entirely up to Lynne's father and brother, who apparently knew a lot about politics and the economy. It would take them a while to reach a verdict, so I'd come up with another idea we could use in the meantime—one that would require much less thinking.

"I've got a question, if you don't mind," I said to the elder. "Have you ever dug any wells in the area?"

"On several occasions, but we never found any water. Even when we dug ten times as deep as one of our young men was tall."

"Would you let me dig even deeper? If my search comes up empty, I'll refill the hole for you."

"M-My stars... Y-You would do that much for us?"

"I can't promise it'll work, but I think it's worth a shot."

It was pretty common for areas that looked completely dry to have groundwater—you just had to dig deep enough to find it. Setting up wells had been one of my mother's many specialties, so she'd taught me a lot about it when I was small.

There was a river not far from my small mountain home, but I'd always considered the round trip to fetch water too much of a nuisance. That was why I'd excavated wells where I needed them or dug channels from mountain springs to supply my home. It wasn't how most kids spent their time, as I'd shockingly discovered after moving to the royal capital, but I'd needed an irrigated garden and plenty of water for my kitchen.

Even when my wells had run dry—or appeared to, at least—I'd needed only to dig a little deeper to get them flowing again. The water on the surface had vanished, but there was plenty more to be had underneath.

The vast desert around the village wasn't the same as the land around my mountain home; there wasn't anywhere near as much rain or a nearby river we could draw from. I'd worried we might not find any water at all, but then Lynne had proposed using one of her spells to detect reservoirs and the like hidden underground. Removing the guesswork would make our job a heck of a lot easier, so going ahead with our plan seemed a no-brainer.

"Then please, take one of our youngsters with you," the old man said. "He knows the desert like the back of his hand."

"Yeah? Sorry to trouble you."

"Not at all. You are our honored guests, and you have already done so much for our sake. Kyle, would you be their guide?"

"Of course." A young beastfolk man stepped out of the crowd that had come to see us off. "I am Kyle, aide to the elder. I was also one of the sick people your companion healed yesterday. I've yet to do anything to repay that debt, so please, whatever you need, do not hesitate to ask for my assistance."

"Sure thing," I said. "Sorry to make you tag along with me."

I recognized our guide as the young man who, together with the elder, had insisted on returning my money the night before. Slender though he was, his face seemed rugged and reliable.

"Not at all," Kyle assured me. "I am honored to travel with you. And your companion, of course." He turned to Lynne and said, "It is a pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine," Lynne replied. "We're pleased to have you along with us."

"And, of course, I cannot forget the armored lady, the pale-haired gentleman, and my fellow beastfolk."

"Good to be working with you," Ines said.

"Mm-hmm," Rolo agreed.

"Mmm. Pleasure," Sirene replied at length.

Lynne turned to Ines, who was waiting by the coach. "I'm counting on you, Ines. Please acquire everything on the list from the royal capital."

“As you wish, my lady. The round trip should take me but a single day if I make haste. Still, I must warn you to be careful. You are in foreign lands.”

“You needn’t worry. Instructor Noor, Rolo, and Sirene will be here with me.”

Ines looked at the three of us silently. Only when we nodded our understanding did she turn back to Lynne and proclaim, “I shall return shortly.”

“Do give my regards to father.”

Ines boarded the coach alone. Soon enough, it was kicking up a sandstorm as it disappeared over the horizon, drawn by brawny horses that could traverse the desert with ease.

“Was the coach...always that fast?” I asked. We hadn’t even come close to matching its current speed on the way here.

“It’s much lighter without us and our food stores,” Lynne explained.

“Makes sense.”

“More than anything else, though, it isn’t carrying the weight of your Black Blade. A regular coach wouldn’t even budge with it on board, so we had to furnish our horses with specialized equipment. That’s why they’re able to move so fast.”

“Oh yeah...”

She’d told me once already that the horses had been raised to transport heavy loads and that the coach had been custom-built for endurance. I’d thought that would negate the weight of my sword, but evidently not. The horses could now canter along the sand, free from their previous burden.

Feeling a little guilty about the inconvenience I must have caused, I stuck with Lynne as Kyle led us a short distance from the village proper—to the area that, according to their legends, had once been known as the Divine Forest.

Chapter 126: The Desert Field, Part 2

Kyle took Lynne and me outside the village. Rolo and Sirene had elected to stay behind, as Lynne had given them a task of some kind to complete. Our guide led us to what were apparently the remains of a once-abundant forest—but when we arrived, we found nothing but wasteland as far as the eye could see.

“This is where the Divine Forest once stood,” Kyle explained. “Legend says it was teeming with life.”

“Is that so?” I mused aloud. “It looks completely barren now.”

“Our village tried several methods to grow crops here during my grandmother’s generation, but not a single one produced results.”

“Yeah...?” I dug into the sand with my foot. There was soil underneath, though it was much paler than I’d expected and too lacking in nutrients for any standard crops to survive.

Lynne pressed her hands to the ground. She must have been testing for something because she soon shook her head and announced, “Instructor Noor, this soil contains poison.”

“Poison?”

“Yes, the same kind that weakened the villagers. Its presence is faint enough that you could swallow a small mouthful without coming to harm, but large swathes of this land appear to be polluted.”

“I see.”

“There *is* water, though. It might not be an active vein, but it feels deep and concentrated enough for a subterranean lake. If we test its quality and deem it usable, we could use it for some small-scale agricultural work.”

“You don’t say...”

In no time at all, using some kind of skill, Lynne had examined the soil and

searched the ground beneath it. She really could do anything. Her confirmation that there was water sparked my motivation.

I was getting used to Lynne being a master of all trades, but Kyle looked shocked. “There’s water underground...?” he asked. “Y-You can sense it?”

“I can, though I can only make out its rough volume and location. I don’t know its exact depth, and there isn’t much more I can say until we’ve dug down to examine it.”

“St-Still, that’s astounding... We weren’t sure there was any at all.”

“She’s amazing, isn’t she?” I said. “Just knowing where to dig is more than enough. I’ll get us down to it, so step over there for a bit.”

“Of course, Instructor,” Lynne replied. “The task is in your capable hands. I’ll wait with Kyle.”

Lynne moved at once, but the young beastfolk man merely stared at her in confusion. “Um... He doesn’t mean to dig alone, does he? I can help. I’m no slouch when it comes to arm strength.”

“We appreciate it, but Instructor Noor works much faster on his own.”

“Really?” Kyle was still reluctant, but he went to stand with Lynne nonetheless.

“That should do,” I said once they were a reasonable distance away. Then I planted my black sword into the ground. It pushed through the sand and soil with ease.

This should be a piece of cake.

My sword was still buried in the earth; I pulled on it with all my strength.

[Parry]

A massive cloud of sand and dirt shot up toward the clear sky as a vast hole opened at my feet. My blade had worked even better than I’d expected, and it was exhilarating. I didn’t need to keep my strength in check like I did when working on construction sites in the royal capital.

I was pretty sure I’d gotten a decent bit stronger since returning from Mithra.

My daily morning sparring sessions with Gilbert had definitely contributed, as had the time I'd spent digging up the city's new aqueducts. But of course, my time in the Holy Theocracy had also played a large role in my current strength. The spectacular experience of parrying that giant skeleton's black lightning must have placed an even greater burden on my body than I'd thought because my sword had seemed a bit lighter ever since.

Though I never wanted to go through anything that terrifying again, having to overcome such a great obstacle had allowed me to grow. That must have been what it meant to be an adventurer. It was a shame that I didn't feel any closer to developing a new skill, but thanks to Lynne's commissions, I was at least getting to experience adventure in my own way. I was pretty satisfied with that; I couldn't ask for more.

It was still a goal of mine to go on a solo journey—to take things easy and venture wherever the wind took me. To that end—but also because my travels with Lynne had taught me that enemies I stood no chance against alone were all over the place—I was determined to get stronger, even if my hard work didn't net me any new skills. I was still deciding what I should do for my daily training routine now that we were in Sarenza.

[Parry]

For now, this excavation work was a nice alternative. I was dumping tons of sand in the surrounding area, but it was a good workout for my arms, and the fact that no one lived in these parts meant I wasn't causing anyone any trouble. It suddenly occurred to me that I could probably do this the whole time we were in the desert.

Yeah, that could make for decent enough training.

I stuck my sword in the ground and dug up more sand, advancing deeper and deeper.

[Parry]

The displaced sand wanted to pour back into the hole I'd made, but I planted my sword into the ground and threw out even more sand before it could. I needed only to repeat the process a few more times before the hole was, to be frank, ridiculously large. Driven by my own momentum, I pressed on, going

deeper and deeper into the earth.

This is kinda fun.

The enjoyment I got from digging a massive hole felt a little childish, but that didn't matter to me—the steady rhythm of my sword cutting through the earth was just that satisfying. Being out in the desert meant I didn't need to worry about my surroundings and could go at it with everything I had.

For the umpteenth time, I appreciated the usefulness of my black sword. It had served me well in the royal capital, cleaving through rocks, making short work of grimy drains, and refusing to bend in the face of even the hardest-packed earth. Its blade was so broad that many had mistaken it for a shovel, but maybe they were on to something. If we were going to cultivate a field, the sword would probably make for a useful gardening tool.

[Parry]

Again, I dug into the ground. Though I'd yet to encounter any real problems, one thing stood out to me: the deeper I went, the more bleached and desiccated the earth appeared to be. My expectations were being turned on their head. If we really had come to the remains of an ancient forest, then there should have been at least *some* nutrient-dense soil.

Unless I simply went past it all...

My aim was to reach the water Lynne had detected. Everything else was an afterthought.

"I've gone pretty deep..."

Before I realized it, I was already fifty times as deep as the average person was tall. This was roughly where Lynne had claimed the water to be. I peered up from the bottom of the chasmal pit and saw her speaking with the young villager.

"Amazing..." he said. "I didn't think he'd go that deep."

"Indeed," Lynne replied. "As expected of my Instructor Noor."

"There's still so much I can't believe. Ever since you cured my illness, it feels like I've been stuck in a dream. To think there was an underground water

source this close to the village...”

“We shouldn’t celebrate until we’ve examined the water. It might be as polluted and as poisonous as the sand. If that turns out to be the case, then I can only apologize for getting your hopes up.”

“No, even that would be wonderful. Water is water, dirty or otherwise.”

Now that Lynne mentioned it, there *was* a chance that the water underground was as polluted as the sand. Still, I supposed even that would be better than nothing.

Having taken a short break, I thrust my sword into the ground again, continuing toward the water source that Lynne had described as a “subterranean lake.” I was a little more careful this time, cautious that water could come bursting out at any moment.

“Incidentally...” Lynne said, “your village’s legends claim there used to be a forest here, correct?”

“Yes,” Kyle replied. “The Divine Forest, to be more precise. Its lord, the Divine Beast, lived there as it pleased.”

“So the Divine Beast was the lord of the Divine Forest?”

“According to the legends, it resembled a massive scorpion with a translucent gray carapace as hard as rock. It was violent in nature and reigned over the forest by virtue of its size, occasionally even turning its fury upon our ancestors. By bringing death to all who entered its domain, it transformed the forest into fertile ground.”

Their lord sounded pretty dangerous, if you asked me...

“So it wasn’t a guardian deity of the forest,” Lynne said.

“Not at all. Y-Gor, as our ancestors called it, worked to our detriment as well. In our ancient language, its name roughly translates to ‘the gatekeeper beast of the sacred land.’ Wielding both righteousness and wickedness, it stood at the apex of all life in the forest, ensuring the land remained fertile by killing without discrimination. For a long time, our people coexisted with the Divine Beast and even regarded it with awe and respect. It would not cause us undue harm as

long as we did not intrude upon its forest. But of course, provoking its anger even once risked terrible calamity...”

“I see. But how did the forest end up in its current state?”

“We don’t know. According to the legends, it suddenly began to wither, and the Divine Beast went on an unstoppable rampage. It attacked the village, though our people managed to drive it back with the help of visiting travelers, and then vanished, while the forest continued to deteriorate until only barren desert remained. That was five centuries ago. Now, the story is considered mere legend, and only a few people in the village continue to pass it down.”

“Really? But, in that case... Could it be...?”

I couldn’t see Lynne, but the pause that followed told me she was deep in thought.

“Is something the matter?” Kyle asked.

“Truth be told, I once read about a creature like your Divine Beast. Y-Gor might have been what we call a Slaughter Shell.”

“A Slaughter Shell...?”

“Yes. It was a brief account in a rather old volume, and it described the creature in an almost mythic light that casts doubt on its existence, but it sounded a lot like the absent beast you described. It would also explain the poison that beset your village. You see, Slaughter Shells kill everything on the surface and scatter their nutrients, turning the land temporarily fertile.”

“Only temporarily?”

“Yes. Once the land has developed, Slaughter Shells burrow into the earth to better absorb nutrients and enter a prolonged period of hibernation. To help them feed, they scatter a weak poison called ‘dormancy toxin,’ which can cause illnesses with no apparent origins. Anything living in the area will gradually waste away and die.”

“Our ancestors never told us anything about poison, but the Divine Beast *did* burrow underground before it disappeared. As our legend goes, many saw it with their very own eyes.”

I nodded my understanding—not that Lynne or Kyle could see me. The creature in question made an area temporarily fertile, then set about consuming all the available nutrients. My first thought as I continued to dig was that it sounded pretty terrifying.

“You mentioned it had a translucent gray carapace,” Lynne continued. “That’s another known characteristic of Slaughter Shells. According to the reference materials I’ve read, their carapaces are said to be as hard as adamantite, impenetrable by ordinary weapons.”

“That...also matches our legend. We have a story about this visiting hero, Zalva, who took his party to subjugate the rampaging Divine Beast. None of their blades could penetrate its body, and they only barely managed to drive it off with an arrow through the eye. That’s why our people practice archery with such fervor.”

“Then it really is possible that your Divine Beast was a Slaughter Shell. It would explain the poison that’s rampant throughout the area. The magic potion that counteracts dormancy toxin was developed decades ago, as I recall, but the ingredients and formula aren’t particularly rare. I should be able to make it, assuming we have the necessary materials.”

“T-Truly?!”

“I can’t make any promises, but I’m rather certain,” Lynne declared. She and Kyle were solving all sorts of problems while I was down here digging.

“If you really can make an antidote, then I don’t know how we could ever thank you.”

“You should get the credit for teaching me your ancient legends in the first place. The people of your village must really cherish their history.”

“Oh, no... Very few people in the village care about such old stories. It’s hard enough just trying to survive—and, to be honest with you, not even I put much credence in them. My grandmother just happens to be passionate about preserving our people’s legends.”

“Then I suppose we should be grateful for her enthusiasm.”

“Yes, I think you’re right.”

Their cheerful conversation accompanied me as I continued shoveling through sand and dirt. Centuries-old legends coming full circle to save the village that had preserved them sounded like the makings of a great story. I didn't want to count my chickens before they hatched, but Lynne seemed pretty confident about her theory.

Even if you considered them vague fables from the past, legends weren't to be underestimated—hearing the exchange up above had made me realize that even the most absurd story could contain elements of truth. Maybe some of the fairy tales my father had told me were founded in fact, though I was pretty sure he'd made most of them up on the spot. I could only somewhat remember them, in any case, so there was no way for me to make sure.

"Still," Lynne said, "I wonder where the Divine Beast disappeared to. According to the book I read, they hibernate deep underground, storing up power as their hard shells absorb nutrients like a tree's roots, continuing to grow until the time comes for them to reawaken."

"Doesn't that mean the Divine Beast might be sleeping nearby?"

"You said your tale was centuries old, so I sincerely doubt it. Slaughter Shells are meant to relocate periodically as they grow. There are records of abnormal specimens that have stayed in one place for as long as five decades, and they ended up as large as a castle, able to shake the earth with a single stir. I shudder to think how large a Slaughter Shell that hibernated for five *centuries* would get."

"I guess you're right. We rarely experience earthquakes in these parts, and five centuries *is* a long time to spend sleeping..."

"It would turn into a true creature of legend at that point."

The two shared a quiet laugh.

Judging by their conversation, the creature that had inhabited this land all those years ago must have been truly formidable. I continued to hack away at the soil.

"Hmm?"

I'd dug roughly a hundred times my own height when my black sword struck

something hard. Was it a rock? Surely not; my blade usually carved through them. I took a closer look and saw what appeared to be a translucent gray boulder.

“This rock’s pretty hard...”

I struck it several more times with my sword, but nothing happened. Not even when I put a decent amount of strength into my swing.

“Maybe I should give it one big thwack...”

I raised my sword above my head and swung it down as hard as I could. The shock of the impact jarred my arms. The boulder remained intact, but a great crack now marred its surface. A few more tries would get me through—though I couldn’t deny that my opponent was tough.

A translucent gray rock... The more I thought about it, the more it rang a bell, but I couldn’t remember why it stood out to me. I was racking my brain for an answer when...

“Huh? An earthquake?!”

The entire area suddenly began to shake. I gazed up and saw Lynne and the young beastfolk leap back in surprise, trying not to get caught in the sand now spilling into the hole I’d made.

As a deluge of yellow rushed toward me, I realized the tremor wasn’t the result of an earthquake. It felt like something else entirely. The gray boulder beneath me was undulating like a living creature.

“What’s going on...?”

As I stood there, confused, the shaking became even more violent. A sudden, tremendous impact hit me from below, and in the blink of an eye, I was soaring through the sky with a cascade of sand.

“Instructor?!”

Surprised, I turned to look back down at the ground and saw...

“A shrimp?”

The strange creature, tall as a mountain with a gray carapace, cast an

enormous shadow over the desert that seemed to smother the village in the distance. And it was still climbing out of the veritable ocean of sand.

Chapter 127: The Divine Beast, Y-Gor

“I-It couldn’t be...!”

As I watched the titanic creature’s head surface, I was struck speechless. I didn’t want to believe it, but I was looking straight at the cause of the illness and poverty that had taken this land—at the living disaster that had sucked up this area’s nutrients and water, desolated the earth, and scattered poison to weaken everything else that remained.

A Slaughter Shell.

It had a translucent gray carapace said to be as hard as adamantite—yet another of the characteristics I’d read about. My evaluation was based mostly on a five-hundred-year-old book, but the accounts Kyle had shared with me and the poison that polluted this land made me even more sure of my conclusion.

It occurred to me then that the subterranean lake I’d detected with my intermediate-class thief skill [Locate Water] had actually been this creature. I was furious at my own lack of foresight. How had this possibility not occurred to me when Kyle was telling me about his people’s legends?

No, it was too late for me to dwell on my mistakes. The Slaughter Shell had risen, and it fell to us to do something about it.

“The question is,” I murmured, “what *can* we do against a creature this large?”

The Slaughter Shell wasn’t just huge; it was positively *colossal*. It had raised only its head aboveground as it studied its surroundings, but the desert trembled like the world was coming to an end. Even its slightest movements created aftershocks that could knock a person to the ground.

At first, I thought the creature was exactly as the ancient records had described. Then I realized that it was probably realms above even the abnormal specimens I’d read about. Slaughter Shells were meant to be huge, but this one was far too strong for mere humans to deal with.

The greatest Slaughter Shell recorded in my book had apparently spent five decades in hibernation. In that time, it had grown to the size of a castle and ended up so formidable that neither famous adventurers nor entire armies stood a chance against it. The creature had promptly been deemed an S-class threat—a foe considered *impossible* to subdue. Then it had vanished as though it had never been there to begin with, leaving only a trail of anecdotes that described it with mythic awe.

A suspicion wormed its way into my heart: what if this Slaughter Shell, the same one from the village's legends, was also the same one I'd read about in my book—the unconquerable threat? The timeline seemed to make sense.

But if that were true, then an abnormal specimen already deemed impossible to defeat by those from the dawn of the adventuring era had now spent another five centuries getting even stronger. Back then, abnormally sized Slaughter Shells had toppled entire buildings with a single movement, causing untold damage and casualties. How much worse would it be if this one went on a rampage? It had caused a tremendous earthquake simply by rising from the sand; if we let it run free even for a moment, it would devastate everyone and everything in its path.

My body trembled against my will, and a single conclusion passed my lips: "We...need to evacuate."

We had to get everyone out of the village, but where would we take them? There was nothing but a never-ending desert as far as the eye could see. Even if we retreated, where would we go?

My doubts clashed with my need to act, sending my thoughts spiraling into chaos. This couldn't have come at a worse time. Ines, the Divine Shield, might have been able to rend the creature with her blade of light, but she had already set out for the royal capital. We couldn't even hold out for her to notice the disturbance and turn around; given the coach's speed, it wouldn't be strange for her to have already arrived at her destination.

Next was the issue of the creature's carapace. It was tough as adamantite and able to endure a direct hit from the strongest weapons at our disposal; even Instructor Noor's Black Blade would simply bounce back on impact.

Stuck without Ines, our greatest offensive asset, we wouldn't stand a chance if we challenged the Slaughter Shell directly. But at the same time, there was nowhere we could run to. Our backs were against the wall.

As despair overcame me, I noticed something in the air plummeting toward us.

"I-Instructor Noor?"

Before I could say anything else, he landed with a *whump* near Kyle and me, sending up a large cloud of sand in the process. I was relieved to see that he wasn't injured, but he studied the colossal monster with a serious, studious look in his eyes even as he returned to his feet.

"Is that the Divine Beast you two were discussing, by any chance?" he asked.

"It is," I replied with a nod. "The signs all point to it."

"That means it's the same creature that's been covering this land in poison and taking all its nutrients, right?"

"I suspect so. Over the span of centuries, any nutrients that once belonged to this earth are now inside that monster's body."

"Hmm..."

Instructor Noor stared at the Slaughter Shell, apparently lost in thought. Then he murmured, "Guess it'll make for great fertilizer, then." His remark made no sense to me, but he spoke with such conviction that I still put my faith in him.

"Understood, Instructor," I said, relieved that we had any chance at all. "Then let us turn that creature into fertil... Wait, fertilizer?" I rolled the word around in my mind but still couldn't comprehend it.

Even in the face of my confusion, Instructor Noor's intense gaze hadn't strayed from the colossal monster. As though reacting to him, the Slaughter Shell raised its head, and its massive eyeballs swiveled in our direction.

That's right! The eyes!

According to the legend Kyle had shared with me, the villagers had once worked with heroes to drive back the monster and managed to repel it with an arrow to the eye. I doubted a projectile would do much now that it was so

large, but if we used Instructor Noor's Black Blade...

Had that been his aim all along?

"Huh?!"

A massive shock wave swept over me. The ground rumbled more violently than before, and a cloud of sand so large it resembled a dust storm shot up into the air. I was so distracted by the veil that, for a long moment, I didn't even realize the colossal monster towering over us had vanished.

"Huh. It jumped."

"Jumped...?"

I followed Instructor Noor's gaze up toward the sky. The sight caused my heart to leap into my throat.

"Im...possible!"

Just as Instructor Noor had said, the colossal Slaughter Shell had leaped high into the air. A creature so large it could be mistaken for a mountain—even larger than Rala, the Dragon of Calamity—with a carapace hard enough to rival adamantite, the toughest material in the world, was *deliberately attempting to crush us*. From our current angle, we couldn't even hope to aim for the weak point that was its eyes.



The monster splayed its armored limbs, blanketing the sky above us. Had it learned from its battle centuries ago? Was that why it was hiding its weak point from us? If so, it must have had intelligence as well as its imposing size and impenetrable shell. How were we supposed to slay such a formidable foe?

There was nothing we could do. Even if we ran, we would be dooming Kyle's village to complete and utter destruction. I could only look up and despair...but then I heard Instructor Noor speak in a quiet voice.

"Lynne, I have an idea. Could you go to the village and fetch Rolo for me?"

"R-Rolo?"

"Yeah. I want him to start preparing it as soon as he can. It's probably best when it's fresh."

"O-Okay. I'll rush back to the village and ask him to prepare, um... Prepare *what*, exactly?" I turned to my instructor, forgetting all about the Divine Beast descending on us. His expression remained entirely serious as he stared up at the sky.

"Thanks, I'm counting on you," he said. "Oh, and if you see that I'm in danger, help me out."

Then he vanished without a sound. By the time my eyes caught up with him, he was already in the air, holding his Black Blade at the ready.

[Stone Throw]

Instructor Noor swung his sword in a circle before launching it straight up into the sky. It spun at great speed, whistling as it sliced through the air, rising and rising until it was little more than a speck against the gray backdrop of the falling colossus.

"No...way..."

There was a sound like thunder, and a segment of the Divine Beast's nigh unbreakable carapace shattered like glass as its body was blasted back up into the sky.

Chapter 128: I Parry a Rock Shrimp

[Stone Throw]

Using one of the few skills at my disposal, I launched my black sword at the titanic creature plummeting toward us. It struck the exact point I'd targeted—because I'd practiced throwing it so many times, no doubt—and then rebounded, leaving a crack in my opponent's carapace and pushing it a short way back toward the sky.

It's as tough as I expected.

I'd gathered as much when I'd struck its translucent gray carapace the first time, but it really was unbelievably hard. Still, I was relieved to know that my sword could crack it with a simple throw. I hadn't put much thought into my battle plan before shooting up into the air, so this really was a stroke of good fortune.

Pushing the creature back up into the sky had given me a little more time to think. It wouldn't be long before it came crashing back down, so I used the opportunity to examine my opponent carefully. My suspicion was right.

That's not a scorpion; it looks more like a shrimp.

Lynne and our guide had compared the village's Divine Beast to a scorpion, but it more closely resembled the rock shrimp that frequented the river near my mountain home. It didn't have a pointed tail, for one thing. I doubted we'd all grown up in the same environment, so maybe that was just the closest comparison they could think of. Both creatures had tough carapaces, so they might even be related.

At any rate, the rock shrimp I was used to were large and rough-looking. I didn't know their proper name—I'd called them rock shrimp since I was small—but I'd caught plenty in the river back home, and they'd been a regular sight on my dinner table when I was a child. Man, they sure were delicious.

Anyone who'd ever seen one knew that rock shrimp had a very hard outer

shell. Beneath it, however, was plenty of tender meat. Once you peeled and steamed them, they made for an amazing meal.

If you asked me which tasted better, rock shrimp or my beloved dragon's ruin mushrooms, I wouldn't know what to say. Both sat in leagues of their own and were incomparable to anything else that came to mind. I'd derived an immense joy from eating them that I doubted any other ingredient could rival.

Probably because of my experiences as a kid, the creature in the sky looked pretty tasty to me. I doubted many others would see something so rough and rocklike and immediately want to eat it, but the more I studied it, the harder it became to see it as anything other than a ginormous meal. I'd never prepped something so large to be eaten...but I could always leave that to Rolo. Word was that he'd become an excellent cook.

The problem is that carapace...

I'd gone more or less all out when I'd thrown my sword, but the creature didn't seem bothered in the least. In fact, it appeared to be wriggling even more energetically than before. It might have been sluggish from its hibernation before my blow fully woke it up...

It was strange to think there were such scary shrimp running around. Once again, I was reminded that the world sure was a massive place.

I caught my sword as it fell, then returned my focus to the coarse-shell-covered shrimp.

"Hmm... How should I go about this?"

I didn't expect to lose; I understood the anatomy of a rock shrimp inside and out, and this creature was bound to be a pretty close match. Its size was the only issue. How was I supposed to bring down something this huge?

Even as I tried to puzzle out a solution, I continued to watch the titanic shrimp. Its giant eyeballs were glaring right at me. I wasn't sure if crustaceans could even emote, but this one almost seemed angry.

In any case, this was no time for such trivial observations. The shrimp suddenly twisted in midair, altering the trajectory of its fall.

Not good!

I sensed that it was trying to run from me, and the direction it was headed would take it straight through the village. We had a potential catastrophe on our hands. I sprang up high and smacked the creature as hard as I could with my sword—a simple, full-strength swing lacking any of the skill or finesse I displayed when parrying Gilbert’s spear.

[Parry]

An intense shock jolted through my arms as my sword struck its target. I’d just barely managed to turn it away from the village, but that was all. As much as it shuddered under the force of my blow, only a small portion of the shrimp’s carapace actually broke. I’d used all of my strength and barely even harmed the thing.

Crap! I should’ve thought this through!

I’d planned only as far as striking the shrimp with my sword. Now that I’d succeeded, there was nothing I could do but let gravity take me. I crashed into the sand—which wasn’t actually that bad, all things considered—and the shrimp soon followed, causing a thunderous *boom* that shook our surroundings. Barely a moment passed before the creature scrambled to its feet and started clawing its way into the ground.

I won’t let you go that easily.

Before my succulent prey could escape, I thrust my sword at its underbelly and *pushed*, sending it back toward the sky in a great cloud of sand.

[Parry]

Again, its titanic form shot through the air. Seeing it squirm helplessly did even more to convince me—its body was *definitely* similar to that of a rock shrimp. It might have posed a problem on the ground, where it could rampage about, but it couldn’t do anything while it was airborne. Its decision to leap up above us had been its downfall.

None of my strikes seemed to be harming my opponent. I wasn’t too bothered, though. Its hard carapace existed to protect its tender and juicy insides, where it was keeping its precious water. As long as I persisted enough

to break through its armor, the harsh desert heat would do the rest of the work for me, causing the shrimp to dry out and die on its own.

My sword was steadily chipping away at my opponent's defenses, but was this really the best approach? Though I was determined not to let it escape me, there had to be a more efficient way.

It can't hurt to experiment.

I squeezed the grip of my sword, preparing to throw it again. My first priority was figuring out the best way to remove the shrimp's carapace. My second was keeping it airborne so it wouldn't escape. I couldn't miss this next shot.

[Stone Throw]

It was my second time using the skill today. My black sword actually whirred as it tore through the air, spinning as fast as I could make it go, and slammed into my opponent with so much force that it curled around the blade.

"There we go."

I'd targeted a vulnerable-seeming part of the shrimp's stomach, slightly removed from its direct center. My suspicion that it was less durable than the rest of the carapace must have been correct because a huge chunk broke away and the creature's bodily fluids sprayed out.

Even while it was airborne, the shrimp writhed in pain. Part of me felt bad for it, but I never showed mercy to my food. Besides, it must have preyed on countless other creatures to reach its current size. I wasn't being unreasonable in the slightest.

Eat or be eaten—that was the golden rule of the natural world. My stomach's needs trumped my sprouting feelings of remorse, and its grumbling made it painfully easy to decide what I should do next.

Sorry, but I can't spare you.

My mind was made up: I was going to bring this creature down. I studied it closely again and saw its squishy insides peeking through a break in its carapace. As I'd suspected, much like with the rock shrimp I'd always caught back home, its hard outer shell meant there was something soft underneath.

Seeing all the tender white meat confirmed something else for me as well.

No surprise there.

In my experience, poisonous creatures tended to be scrumptious. And the stronger the poison, the better the taste—because the poison protected the nutrients in their bodies or something of the sort. I suspected that was why crustaceans were also so yummy—their carapaces existed to protect their nutrient-packed meat from predators. Rock shrimp was quite simply exquisite.

On the topic of shelled creatures, the mature ones were the most delicious. As they aged and grew larger, more nutrients accumulated inside them, adding both depth and dimension to their taste. There were exceptions, of course, but the largest ones were known to be indescribably mouthwatering.

I recalled something Lynne had said earlier—that the Divine Beast must have spent centuries hoarding this area's nutrients. I didn't know whether that was actually the case, but there was no denying the shrimp's enormous size. It had met and exceeded every one of my criteria for a phenomenal meal. If nothing else, it *had* to taste amazing. Maybe even more amazing than anything I'd ever eaten before.

I already knew the shrimp was going to be delicious—years of living off the land had given me a keen eye for these things—but it was far too large for me to eat on my own. Even if we shared it with everyone in the village, I suspected it would mostly end up being used as compost to replenish the barren land. It seemed wasteful to use something so delicious to prepare a garden, but there was no helping it, I supposed.

First things first, though, I need to peel away the carapace. As carefully as I can.

Pushing through my hesitation, I used my [Featherstep] skill, which allowed me to ignore air resistance, to chase my falling sword. I wasn't going to let this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity slip through my fingers. I'd already thrown my weapon twice, so I was getting used to using it as a projectile. Once it was back in my hand, I spun my entire body to build momentum, rotating so fast that I started to feel dizzy...and then *launched* my blade at the airborne shrimp.

[Stone Throw]

My third use of the skill roared through the air before crashing into the shrimp's sturdy shell. Loud, rocky *cracks* followed, and a massive chunk of the shrimp's carapace simply fell away. It was as satisfying to watch as descaling a fish felt.

Helpless, the shrimp started plummeting back toward the sand.

I won't let you fall again.

Using the rock shrimp's gigantic legs as footholds, I employed another [Featherstep] to retrieve my sword. I swung the blade around in midair, then released it at just the right moment to strike the colossal creature above me.

[Stone Throw]

The shrimp arched pathetically around my blade before the attack once again thrust it high up into the sky.

"Wow. That one got some air time."

My throws were getting stronger with each attempt; all that remained was to finish the job. Each time the shrimp approached the ground, I sent it back up into the air with my sword, ensuring it wouldn't escape into the sand. Its hard outer shell continued to fragment and scatter.

Despite my prey's intimidating size, our scrap felt more like food prep than hunting or fighting. Not that I'd cooked since moving to the royal capital. As I continued chipping away at the shrimp's carapace, I started to appreciate the convenience of not needing to break out a chopping board or anything of the sort.

[Parry]

Again and again, I used the momentum of the shrimp's descent to send it back into the air, then bombarded it with my sword while it was defenseless. By what must have been my thirtieth throw, the creature was almost entirely bare. It looked pitiful, its tender flesh exposed to the harsh sun, and appeared to have weakened quite a bit.

I realized then that the shrimp wasn't even trying to resist. I stopped attacking and watched as it crashed to the sand, limp and unmoving. It must have died

quite some time ago. It was a ferocious creature that had slaughtered many others, but still—it had survived hundreds of years before our encounter. The knowledge that I'd taken its life weighed heavily on me.

“Sorry...” I said. “But your death won’t be in vain.”

As cruel as it was to take the life of another living creature, I would put its nutrients to good use. I mouthed a prayer over the corpse of the peeled rock shrimp before hurrying to fetch Lynne and the others. I would need everyone’s help to take apart my fresh catch.

Chapter 129: Stocking Up in the Royal Capital

“I must admit, I didn’t expect to return to the capital so soon...”

Now traveling alone, Ines had spurred the coach back across the border on her return journey to the royal capital. Leaving behind so much cargo had made the horses a lot faster than before; in fact, she had already arrived.

Ines had three objectives to complete in the Kingdom. One, she would go to the magical equipment research laboratory to retrieve the items Princess Lynneburg had requested in her note. Two, she would decide whether it was reasonable to transport a Wellspring Pipe to Sarenza—and then actually transport one if so. And three, she would use the money entrusted to her by a certain man to purchase a certain item.

Because the Kingdom’s Wellspring Pipes were national treasures integral to the capital and the country at large, King Clays had decided to consult his aides and associates about sending one across the border. In the meantime, Ines was seeking out a certain seed vendor as part of a request for Noor.

“Now, how am I to read this map...?” she mused aloud, staring uncertainly at the paper in her hands. After leaving the city’s main streets, she had made it as far as the central market in the old downtown district before losing her bearings. Noor’s map was amateurish at best, and even he had said she would probably need to rely on her own intuition to fill in the blanks.

To his credit, Noor had interspersed the map with detailed instructions on how to reach the seed vendor. The problem was that they largely comprised vague descriptions of alleyways with notes to turn at “the tool shop run by an old man” or “the house with the tired dog.” It wasn’t a reliable tool for navigating the cobweb of side streets that was the old downtown district. Ines considered it her own fault for not triple-checking with him prior to her departure.

Giving up on the map, Ines started checking the shops she came across one by one. There weren’t too many stores in the market that specialized in seeds, so

even the fragmented information she had come in handy when asking passersby for directions.

“Oh, *that* shop. You want to head that way.”

In the end, Ines found her destination without too much trouble. She stepped through the doorway of a small store and spoke to the young man at the counter.

“You sell crop seeds here, correct?”

“Yes, welcome! How can I—?” The young man’s expression turned curious as he set eyes upon his newest customer. “Oh! You’re a knight of the Kingdom, aren’t you, ma’am? What brings a woman of your station to a store like this?”

“I need a crop that can grow and survive in a wasteland. An acquaintance told me you might be able to provide some useful advice.”

“A wasteland, huh? That’s a little vague; there are plenty of seeds that could work. Is there anything more you can tell me?”

“The man who sent me requested something comparable to these.” Ines presented the young shopkeeper with one of the blackened roots Noor had given her.

“Hmm? That’s a pseudomandragora. I’m fairly sure this is the only store that sells them, so... Oh, was it the guy with all those scars on his arms? I can’t think of anyone else who bought them recently. Is he getting back into gardening or something?”

“My apologies, but the most I can say is that you aren’t far wrong. The rest is a matter of national secrecy.”

“National secrecy? That guy? Seriously?” The young man gave Ines an uncomprehending look before he met her gaze and nodded. “Right. Okay. Well, in that case, I’ll do what I can to help. Any experienced farmer’s a friend of mine. Oh, and don’t worry—you can trust me to keep a secret. I won’t tell anyone you were here.”

Ines was a little apprehensive; despite his assertion, the shopkeeper came across as someone who would jump at the chance to gossip. Still, she retrieved

the leather bag that Noor had given her.

“He gave me these funds for the purchase and said that he wanted as much as they could get him.”

The young shopkeeper frowned at the bag. “That thing looks pretty beat-up...” It must have stood out against the formal attire of the woman carrying it, but his eyes shot open the moment he peered inside. “Th-The heck?!”

“Is something the matter?”

“You tell me! Don’t you know what’s in here?!”

“My apologies. If you would allow me to look, I— Wh-What in the...?!”

Though initially skeptical, Ines had inspected the bag to find a heap of small- and greatgolds. She even spied some platinum. Noor had thrust it upon her with such a complete lack of regard that she hadn’t bothered to check its contents before. He couldn’t have picked a worse receptacle for such an enormous sum; the bag’s shoddy leather looked as though it might burst open at any moment.

Ines came to a sudden realization—for Noor to have given her this much money in the first place meant he had taken it out of the Kingdom and into Sarenza, a foreign country. Princess Lynneburg must not have known—or anyone else, for that matter.

“What in heaven’s name was that man thinking...?” she muttered.

“Not to complain, but that much is kind of overkill. A single greatgold would net you my entire stock. How about just a smallsilver for now? That should cover a set of ready-to-plant seeds. I’ll even write you a basic guide on how to properly sow them.”

“For only a smallsilver?”

“Just as a deposit. I’ll run the numbers before we finalize the order and then refund any excess or ask for the rest of the payment, if necessary.”

“Very well. Please have it ready within the day.” Ines retrieved a smallsilver from the bag and passed it to the young man, still taken aback by the discrepancy between the amount she’d unknowingly been given and the

amount she was actually spending. “For reference, I’ve only as much space as a normal-size wagon. Keep that in mind when you make your estimate.”

“Thanks for your business. Here’s a list of my shop’s prices, if you’re curious. I’ll do all the calculations for you, but don’t fret—if you happen to see these goods cheaper elsewhere, I’m open to matching their prices or negotiating.”

“Your prices are already quite reasonable...”

“Quick returns on quality items—that’s my motto. I take smaller profits in exchange for a regular customer base. Overcharging for seeds sounds foolish; I don’t want any weird rumors going around. If you’re pleased with your purchase, I ask only that you come back again sometime and give me more business.”

Ines was surprised. She had expected the young man to be the material type, but the vast fortune in her possession hadn’t fazed him at all. Ashamed to have been so shallow, she concluded that one couldn’t judge a person based on first impressions.

“So, that takes care of the deposit,” the shopkeeper continued. “Is there really nothing else you can tell me about your plans? They might be secret, but I won’t be able to find you good seeds unless you give me more to work with.”

“Let me see...” Ines produced the other bag Noor had given her. “Would this be of any use? It’s a sample of our soil.”

“Yeah, that’s great! Better than relying on word of mouth, that’s for sure. It doesn’t surprise me that your friend thought this far ahead. I knew he was...”

The shopkeeper opened up the bag and immediately fell silent. A long moment passed before he finally said, “This sample’s more sand than anything else...”

“I thought so too. He insisted on using it, though.”

“I mean, I’m not saying it’s *completely* unusable, but...it’s rare for much of anything to grow in this kind of soil. Is there a reason you’re so set on using it?”

“My apologies, but I’m not at liberty to answer.”

“Ha ha! He’s not planning on converting the great desert of Sarenza into

farmland, is he?”

Just a hint of discomfort slipped through Ines’s otherwise perfect facade. “My apologies, but I’m not at liberty to answer.”

The young shopkeeper recalled what they’d discussed. “Oops, sorry. Didn’t mean to pry. It’s just, as a seed vendor, it’s always been a dream of mine to conquer Sarenza’s barren deserts. I used to wander around the southern wall and test the soil. It was about the same as your sample—that’s the only reason I asked.”

“Conquer...Sarenza?”

“Yeah. Just picture it—a single seed vendor using his knowledge and skills to turn a vast desert into arable land. Wouldn’t it be amazing? Everyone always laughs at me when I tell them, but seeing that sample of yours reminded me I’m not the only fool with a dream.”

The young man must have realized that he was rambling to a woman he barely knew because he then cleared his throat and said, “A-Anyway... My absurd dream aside, it’s good you brought a sample. I might not know what your friend is up to, but I can still give you a professional opinion. I’ll close up shop for the day while I take care of your order. Oh, but could you wait around a little while longer? I’ve got a few more questions for you. Tell me as much as you can without giving away any of those national secrets.”

“The most I can give you are the general weather conditions, the lay of the land, and the like.”

“That’s more than enough. Anything else would depend on your specific plot of land, so you’d need to do some experimenting. By the way—you’re okay for water, right?”

“Yes, we have plans to secure a water source. Please work under the assumption that we’ll have one.”

“Great. That gives us plenty more options.”

As he continued to ask Ines questions, the young shopkeeper placed the sand she’d given him on the counter. He poked and prodded it, peering through a magnifying glass all the while, and took notes on a sheet of paper.

“Hmm... There’s actually claylike dirt in this sample. It only looks like sand because it’s so desiccated. If we’re assuming there’s going to be water, then making it arable definitely isn’t out of the question. Use the right soil conditioner and you might be able to grow purple noses or white ogres. It’s a long shot, but maybe you could even plant some red dragons. They’re native to the desert, you see. Tough to care for, but I’ll give you an instruction manual. Your friend told me he spent two decades tending a field, so I expect him to manage. Oh, in that case, I’ll add some blue slimes to your order. They’re for experts, but I’ve heard they’re resistant to drought. Not cheap but still within your budget.”

“The budget might not be an issue, but there’s only so much a single coach can hold. Please keep that in mind.”

“Right, right. But seeds are tiny little things. You could pile ’em high and still have plenty of room to spare. Wait, did you say a coach? I’ll throw in some compost, then. Had some of the good stuff delivered just this morning. Now, assuming there’s going to be water, harsh sunlight, and especially high temperatures... Yeah, let’s go with the fermented soil conditioner. It should do wonders for the pseudomandragora. Oh, I almost forgot the desert wheat I stocked up on recently. It’s highly drought-resistant. Tastes awful, but a bag’s worth can’t hurt. Then there’s... Oh, right! Yeah, that one’s been sitting in the back of the storeroom for ages. And if you’ve got a whole coach to work with, then I can even throw in—”

Ines’s warning had only encouraged the seed merchant, who was eagerly covering his notepaper with tiny black scrawls. She was watching him uneasily when she realized that her earring was gently vibrating. No sooner had she touched it than she heard one of her colleagues.

“Ines, is now a good time?”

The voice belonged to Melusine, vice-captain of the Magician Corps and the developer of the earring-shaped communications device.

“Melusine?” Ines asked in a low voice. “Is something the matter?”

The earring Melusine had developed was a miniature piece of magical equipment capable of long-distance communication magic. Ines had received it

—and a short lecture on its operation—during her brief stop at the palace. It really did seem useful.

The royal magical research laboratory—run by Oken in name but entirely by Melusine in practice—seemed to have a new product of some kind every time Ines visited. More than nine out of ten of them were Melusine’s own inventions, and she’d created so many that she was apparently raking in patent and licensing royalties on top of the salary she was receiving from the royal palace.

Ines had proposed that Melusine use her passive income to slow down and pay more attention to her health, but the vice-captain could never refuse the promise of a great reward. She was always at her desk, surrounded by new prototypes and empty vials of her self-brewed vitality and anti-sleep potions. Melusine claimed that half of her inventions were things she made for fun when she was taking a break from work, but Ines couldn’t distinguish them for the life of her.

Still, even Ines could tell that Melusine’s latest self-proclaimed masterpiece—the miniature communications earring—was a groundbreaking invention. Oken, the Spell Sovereign, had joined them at the palace and explained the numerous technical challenges that had come from trying to shrink down a magical tool normally large enough to need to be placed on a desk. It sounded extremely complicated, but the end result was worth every drop of blood, sweat, and tears put into it.

Even though the earring couldn’t transmit as far as its regular-size alternative, it more than made up for it through convenience. Its existence would make leading and coordinating with soldiers much simpler and dramatically improve the communications expediency of the Six Army Corps of the Royal Capital.

The developer of this revolutionary new invention had claimed it was only an extension of her tinkering hobby. Ines disagreed, very much of the opinion that Melusine had turned into a walking encyclopedia of military secrets. Perhaps it would be prudent to establish a new division of the Warrior Corps dedicated to her protection. Then again, the vice-captain was always in the company of the fanatical members of the Magician Corps, who shared her grueling work hours and consistently looked just as tired. Ines concluded that Melusine would

probably be fine.

“First of all, His Majesty came to a decision.”

“I see,” Ines replied, now speaking even more quietly. “If that was only first, I assume you have more to tell me.”

“Yeah. It’s about the princess. She contacted us with her oracle’s orb.”

“Don’t tell me something happened.”

“Well, something did happen. It’s all been resolved, but I thought I should fill you in as soon as I could.”

“Noted,” Ines said. Hearing that there had been trouble made her regret leaving the princess’s side, but she was relieved to know the matter had been resolved. “As much as I want to ask for the details, I’m in company at the moment.”

“Yeah, I figured. It’s not exactly confidential, but it’s probably better that we play it safe. Can we have this conversation in person? I’m in the conference room with the others.”

“Understood. I’ll make my way there now.”

Her next destination decided, Ines called out to the young man still working away with all the enthusiasm in the world. “Can I leave the rest to you? And would you mind me paying upon the delivery of the goods?”

“Not in the slightest! You gave me that small silver as a deposit. I can have the invoice ready for you in a moment, but the rest can wait until the day’s end, right?”

“Yes. If you can make the delivery this evening, you can hand me the invoice then. My time is rather limited, so unless there’s an issue with my order, I’d rather be quick about loading it all onto my coach. Could you meet me outside the palace when it’s ready?”

“Done and done! That means I’ve got more time to draft up the order, right? In that case, I’ll pour all the knowledge I’ve accumulated as a seed vendor into the greatest cultivation instruction manual you’ll ever feast your eyes on! Ha ha ha! There’s nothing better than a flexible budget! I can feel the inspiration

coursing through my veins!”

“I’ll...leave you to it.”

Earlier, Ines had thought she could trust the young shopkeeper’s expertise. His bloodshot eyes now gave her cause to reconsider, but she tried not to dwell on it as she took her leave. Melusine was awaiting her in the royal palace.

Chapter 130: The Wellspring Pipe

Upon receiving Princess Lynneburg's message from Sarenza through the oracle's orb, Prince Rein had the sudden sense that his vague fears had come true.

"To send a Wellspring Pipe, of all things, to Sarenza..."

Such was the request that Noor, the man accompanying Lynne, had made of the king.

Wellspring Pipes were first-class relics from the Dungeon of the Lost. Because several of them had been found together when they were discovered, they were categorized as only quasi-national treasures, but the prince considered that a gross undervaluation. The pipes were of vital importance to the Kingdom of Clays. Each one deserved to be a treasure in its own right, more remarkable than anything else their nation had at its disposal.

Though much mystery still surrounded the Wellspring Pipes, they were able to produce absurd amounts of water from seemingly nothing. Their limits were unclear, but Oken, who had arrived in the Kingdom of Clays more than a century ago and was recognized as the Spell Sovereign, had concluded that they once contained enough water to rival several thousand large lakes. Ever since, the Kingdom used them to facilitate large-scale agriculture.

Indeed, Wellspring Pipes had become the backbone of the Kingdom's agricultural system. In the event that they failed, the Kingdom would cease to function, so it had always been prudent when using them.

In recent years, the Magician Corps—now with the genius magical equipment engineer Melusine among its ranks—had calculated that the Wellspring Pipes would last at least another millennium if used at their current rate. As a result, the pipes had been assigned even greater importance, even being included in the Kingdom's conservation policies.

A single Wellspring Pipe had the potential to support an entire nation's food

production. For that reason, even though there were more than ten sitting unused in the royal treasury, the price of a single unit was beyond measure.

In the past, when the pipes weren't as highly valued, three had passed from the Kingdom to another nation. It was a willing exchange, as the King Clays of the time had found his neighbor's destitution too much to bear.

The northern region of the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza had once resembled the Kingdom in its relative abundance, but an unexplainable drought had reduced it to wasteland and created a chronic water shortage for the people living there. In response to the catastrophe, the incumbent King Clays had gone to see the damage with his own eyes. So severely had the region been devastated that he had promptly offered the ruler of Sarenza, the chief executive of a major countrywide merchant operation, one of the Wellspring Pipes from the Kingdom's treasury. The chief executive had welcomed the idea, and a written agreement between the two nations had quickly been established.

Thus, the relic was handed over to House Sarenza.

Yet no matter how long King Clays waited, he received no news that the water shortages to the south had abated. His patience ran so thin that he returned to the region to check on its progress, only to find that its poverty had somehow *gotten worse*.

At once, the king had sent a missive of protest to House Sarenza, demanding an explanation. The reply he'd received was blunt:

"We have followed the terms of our agreement."

In said agreement, the chief executive had agreed to distribute water from the Wellspring Pipe at a reasonable price. House Sarenza had insisted that its prices *were* reasonable and that they only appeared to be expensive because of "perfectly justifiable handling and transportation fees." But when the king carried out a private investigation of the water being sold, he found that it was not just overpriced but also terribly unsanitary.

From there, the only news the king had received concerned the large-scale leisure facility due to be constructed in the heart of Sarenza's desert. Targeted toward the rich, it removed any lingering doubts that the Wellspring Pipe was

being used not to help the needy but to line the pockets of an elite few.

King Clays had received the news with indignation, but House Sarenza was right—the actions they had taken did technically conform to their agreement with the Kingdom. Regretting having signed it in the first place, the king sought to reopen negotiations.

“We should not have been so vague with our terms. Still, House Sarenza’s methods are not in the spirit of our agreement. I wish to propose a new contract.”

The merchants of Sarenza had received King Clay’s proposal with warm smiles and made him a new promise:

“Indeed, it would appear we were not on the same page. This time, we swear to ensure the provision of water throughout every corner of our land.”

The king at the time, famously mild-mannered and generous, had accepted that promise and given two more of the Kingdom’s invaluable Wellspring Pipes to House Sarenza. Anyone with sense could predict the events that followed.

To the very end, the king was unable to help his neighbor’s people. His negligence cost the Kingdom three indispensable relics while the elite of Sarenza’s merchant associations fattened their coin pouches and used their newly acquired profits to further expand their influence.

Thus began the friction between the Kingdom of Clays and the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza. Only a few years later, Sarenza constructed Sandwatch Fort “to prevent the harmful movement of sand from Sarenzan deserts into the Kingdom.” It was a false pretense, of course; the wall’s true purpose was to prevent one of the Free State’s principal commodities—beastfolk slaves—from escaping to a nation whose sense of ethics Sarenza saw as bothersome.

Many had suspected Sarenza’s intentions even before the wall was erected—but by the time King Clays and everyone else came to accept the truth, it was already too late. Sandwatch was sturdy and unyielding, and its perimeter was kept under tight supervision. Passing through was out of the question.

Several decades had passed since the dispute, and another King Clays had come and gone, but the nations’ interactions were still mostly limited to the

exchange of a bare few necessities. Their relationship was thorny at best, and one could say that the Wellspring Pipes were to blame.

Lynne had to be aware of the Kingdom's history with Sarenza, but the unaware Noor was on track to cause another international incident. Prince Rein knew that his father, the current King Clays, also understood their situation. And yet...

"My word. That man's a devil of a troublemaker, isn't he?"

Despite his words, the king had a broad smile on his face as he sat on his throne. He had worn the same worrying expression since Lynne contacted them from Sarenza.

"A troublemaker, indeed..." King Clays cheerfully continued. "Sending another Wellspring Pipe to Sarenza won't be easy. Having said that, I most certainly did promise him *anything*. How can I gripe and groan now that he's finally made a request? It wouldn't be appropriate behavior for the ruler of a kingdom, would it, Rein?"

"Father, are you quite serious?"

The king took a brief moment to study his son's unease. "Oh, don't let it trouble you so much. We're doing this purely to repay Noor. Wellspring Pipes might have caused us problems with Sarenza in the past...but we're giving this one to a single man. Where's the harm in that?"

"B-But, father, *Wellspring Pipes* are—"

"First-class relics of vital importance to the Kingdom. Yes, I'm aware. They're useful enough that they deserve to be seen as national treasures, and we must treat their management with due precaution. But...once we give Noor his pipe, it's up to him how he uses it, no? What he does with his possessions is of no concern to us."

"If only we could make House Sarenza buy that..."

"They feigned ignorance just as well when the king two generations before me gave them all those Wellspring Pipes. Don't tell me you've forgotten." King Clays laughed cheerfully. "Besides, we wouldn't be lying. We really can't predict what might happen."

The king's voice then dropped to an almost silent whisper as he added, "Though I'm sure it'll be fun to watch."

"Father...?" Prince Rein stared at King Clays.

"Did you...hear that?" the king asked, staring back at him.

There was a drawn-out pause. "No... I'll endeavor to pretend that I didn't. Still, when House Sarenza finds out, they won't hold their tongues about it."

"I suspect not," King Clays replied, now looking as serious as his son. "But as inconvenient as they might find it, we'd only be keeping to the terms of our promise with Noor. Third parties wouldn't have a right to complain. In the first place, once Noor has his Wellspring Pipe, there won't be anything our family can do to change his path. Not even all the troops at our command would stand a chance against him."

In the prince's opinion, that wasn't something a member of royalty should ever admit. He unfortunately had to agree, though; Noor had already exceeded what the combined might of the Kingdom's forces could manage. In fact, taking the information he'd recently learned into account, the prince wasn't sure if even the king and the Six Sovereigns together would come out victorious.

Because he couldn't be forced to obey the Kingdom's laws, it was difficult to reconcile Noor's status as an ordinary citizen. Of course, he had been exceptionally cooperative so far, and there was no point in the Kingdom making an enemy of him, but such complete autonomy was practically unheard of.

In a sense, he had more freedom than even the king.

"Sarenza already has three of our Wellspring Pipes," the king said. "Each time they use them to their own ends, they're feigning ignorance of our intentions. Isn't what Noor's trying to do simply an example for them to learn from? A message that says, 'This is what you rotten bastards should have been doing from the start!' If you think about it like that, we should charge them for the lesson!"

"I doubt they'd agree. In fact, I suspect they would openly oppose the idea."

"Yes, I suppose they would. Especially when Noor plans to interfere with the number one thing they've tried to keep outsiders away from."

Using their monopoly on the food, water, and labor markets, the merchants who controlled Sarenza could fix market prices and concentrate the nation's wealth however they wished, keeping an iron grip on their authority. Noor's plan would disrupt that stranglehold by introducing new means of acquiring food and water and dramatically improving the status of the beastfolk, a major source of valuable labor. His actions would challenge market values and even change the status quo.

In such a situation, the Free State's top merchants would grow dangerously wary. Depending on how severely Noor changed things, they could end up losing the entirety of their wealth. How they might react to that development worried the prince immensely.

"Still, turning a patch of desert into farmland to help the beastfolk become self-reliant..." King Clays muttered. "That man is outrageous. Even if he succeeds, won't they need some form of armed might to protect it? I suppose Lynne did mention something in regard to that, didn't she?"

"She did. Her note explained that if everyone in the settlement received adequate training, they would have more than enough strength to defend themselves. As it turns out, they have an impressive aptitude for archery."

"I see. So she wants Mianne's best disciple to teach them the ways of the bow? That sounds interesting...if not awfully strenuous."

"Moreover, Carew has informed me that Rolo's skills as a thief are now advanced enough to match his talent for magical equipment engineering. He's proficient enough to apply them to point defense. Using traps and the like, he could fortify the beastfolk settlement to a level where they could protect their village and the entirety of their arable land on their own."

"That's no small feat. Wouldn't that set them up to become a major domestic military power?"

"Yes. They would wield enough strength to protect their domain and enough land and water to be self-reliant when it comes to food. In other words, they..."

The king said the prince's worry out loud: "They'd essentially be a country of their own."

“Yes.”

For a while, the throne room was silent as father and son pondered what Noor and Lynne were about to do within Sarenza’s borders. As rulers and administrators of their own kingdom, they knew what such a development would mean.

“Remind me, Rein—what are the requirements for an autonomous state to be internationally recognized as a country?”

“As I recall, it would need at least two adjacent nations to formally recognize it. Or, failing that, one adjacent nation and two others elsewhere. Wait, father... You can’t possibly mean to...”

“We won’t push for their independence, no. That will depend on their intentions. But if the circumstances are right, it might be prudent to lay the groundwork. Mithra’s high priestess and the Magic Empire’s new Emperor Milva are both reasonable enough to understand. And with their support as well as our own, this new state would meet the requirements it needs. Simple as that. Of course, I’m speaking *hypothetically*.”

“If matters were to play out in such a manner, Noor would technically have established a country. Wouldn’t that make our kingdom active backers, not just providers of tacit consent?”

“Are you sure about that?” Even when faced with Prince Rein’s unease, the king remained perfectly calm. “Noor would only be removing the obstacles standing in the way of their independence. Any events that *naturally occur* in Sarenza in the aftermath are none of our concern. Besides, are you forgetting how many times the Free State has interfered with minor nations? We’d simply be taking a page out of their book, though I’d consider our methods more peaceful than selling secondhand arms to opposing factions, fanning a feud, and then sweeping in to snatch up all the profits. They wouldn’t have grounds to object.”

The prince shook his head, a hand to his brow. “I can only see this resulting in chaos.”

In response, King Clays wore a joyful smile. “It’s one of countless possible outcomes. Not to mention, it won’t happen anytime soon—Noor and the others

are still experimenting with turning the desert into arable land. That brings us back to the matter of the Wellspring Pipe. I intend to let him have it. Is that all right, Rein?”

The prince closed his eyes and shook his head, resigned. It seemed the king would not be dissuaded. “Very well. I shall give Ines approval to bring a Wellspring Pipe back to Sarenza with her. Make no mistake, though—I’m still worried about what might happen when it comes to light.”

“I suppose it’s only a matter of time, but we’ll just feign complete ignorance until it does. Having said that, we can’t have Noor take the blame for our kingdom’s relationship with Sarenza. If we have to, say that he was acting under my royal decree.”

“Your royal decree, father?”

“Yes. No matter what he does or what happens, let me be accountable for it all. How can I do anything less for the man who saved our kingdom several times over? I’d give him my head if he asked for it. Even then, I’m sure I could bite through that fat chief executive’s windpipe!”

Prince Rein wasn’t sure how to respond. Even as the king laughed, it was hard to gauge how much of what he’d said was meant in jest.

Shortly afterward, Princess Lynneburg conveyed through the oracle’s orb that the Divine Beast thought to have caused the desertification of Sarenza’s northern region had been slain. She announced that its titanic carcass would be carved up and that the nutrients within would be returned to the earth, making the prospect of turning a considerably large area into arable land seem probable.

The king’s reaction was to laugh uproariously and slap his knees. Prince Rein, on the other hand, could only look pleadingly at the ceiling, troubled by the premonitions of the chaos to come.

Chapter 131: Divine Beast Stew

Suppressing my impatience, I discussed the best way to cook rock shrimp with everyone who'd gathered. Explaining the situation hadn't taken long—Rolo and Sirene had seen me bounce the creature up into the sky and made it most of the way over to us before Lynne had even gone to fetch them.

Once we'd consulted with our chef, Rolo, we decided to take only as much shrimp meat as we could eat back to the village with us. The rest of the carcass would remain here to be used as fertilizer. Lynne froze it all with ice magic so we wouldn't need to worry about it rotting within the next day or so.

Everyone chipped in with ideas for preparing the fertilizer, but we eventually decided to wait for Ines, who was due to return the following day. Her sword of light would easily slice through the giant rock shrimp's hard carapace. We paused our work there and made our way back to the village, eager to taste the shrimp while it was still fresh. Lynne cleaned the meat with her [Purify] skill, then Rolo lathered it with some basic seasoning and simmered it in a large pot to make a simple stew.

"That smells amazing..."

It wasn't done yet, but the aroma coming from the large pot on the cookfire was astounding. I'd thought even while I was fighting the rock shrimp that it was going to be delicious, but this exceeded my expectations.

Villagers came to the plaza in dribs and drabs, drawn in by the amazing smells that continued to spread. Everyone's eyes were focused on Rolo's pot, which was now steaming nicely.

"Not long now," he said. "You all came at just the right time."

When almost all the villagers had gathered, Rolo finally announced that the stew was ready. He damped down the cooking fire while Sirene portioned out the thick white broth into wooden bowls and piled the meat onto plates. The latter was so tender that it almost gleamed in the sunlight.

The stew looked downright heavenly. I supposed the Divine Beast was living up to its name.

“Here you are, Instructor,” Lynne said. “Please have the first sip.”

“Is that really okay?” I asked.

“Of course. We wouldn’t even have it without you.”

“Yeah...? Well, I guess I *am* best suited to test it for poison.”

“N-No, you shouldn’t need to worry about that. I purified the meat as best I could.”

“I don’t doubt that you did. Some of the villagers might be cautious, though, since that creature *was* the source of all the poison in the area. I can show them it’s perfectly safe—and in the unlikely event that it *is* still poisonous, it won’t do me any harm.”

Because I’d slain the rock shrimp—or the Divine Beast, as everyone called it—I was allowed to eat it first. Truth be told, I thought they were giving me a little too much credit; we wouldn’t have found it in the first place if not for Lynne, and it was thanks to her that we could actually eat it. Still, it *had* poisoned the land, so there was a chance its body still contained some unknown toxin.

Now came the moment of truth: the taste test.

“Well, I’ll dig right in.”

I couldn’t help feeling nervous as I raised my bowl. The entire village was watching me. I wasn’t actually worried about poison; I trusted that Lynne had done her part. It was the *taste* that concerned me.

Timidly, I brought a spoonful of thick white broth to my lips. The moment it touched my tongue, my thoughts went stark white, and my body became as rigid as stone.

“It’s...”

“I-Instructor Noor?”

Everyone watched me anxiously, unsure what to do. I heard someone ask whether I was all right, but I wasn’t able to answer them. I couldn’t move my

body at all.

The cause of my paralysis wasn't the poison everyone was worried about. I'd tasted all sorts of dangerous substances since I was a child and could say with certainty that this stew didn't contain any at all. Lynne's skill must have made it safe, exactly as she'd said. Instead, I was overwhelmed with a wonderful taste that spread slowly through my mouth. I'd taken only a single sip of broth, but it had sent a shock like lightning through my body. I was being led through a world of rich and complex flavors.



I was silent not because of poison but because I was too busy savoring the stew. I'd never had *anything* like it before. I didn't even want to speak, but I squeezed out a single word to reassure the people worrying about me.

"Delicious..."

That was the most I could manage. The broth had depth too profound to put into words. I tried to come up with a description that would do it justice, but nothing in my below-average vocabulary could express the profundity of what I was tasting.

My mind was awash with images of the animals that had succumbed to the shrimp's poison and the lush forests that had vanished so long ago. It was the cycle of life—a concept that transcended eternity. The rock shrimp had condensed all that history into its body, and the simple act of drinking its broth had filled my head with thoughts of a vibrant green world.

I was convinced—the fertile land the elder had described really had existed. It must have. How else could the rock shrimp have developed such a deep taste? I could see a relaxed stream of water. Trees of all sorts had grown in abundance, their fruits and seeds helping the forest spread even farther. Birds had gathered in their crowns, and other animals had gathered to hunt them. The forest had welcomed all manner of creatures, and together, they had all thrived.

For a while, I simply closed my eyes and indulged in the majestic visions. Then I realized that I still hadn't finished my duty and gripped my spoon. I slowly moved to scoop up some of the gleaming white rock shrimp on the wooden plate...and shuddered.

That was just the broth. The best is yet to come...

Rolo hadn't simmered the stew for that long, meaning most of the flavor was still in the meat. A single spoonful of broth had almost launched me into another world, but this white flesh was the rock shrimp's final weapon. I couldn't even begin to imagine what it had in store for me.

Swallowing my breath, I nervously readied my wooden spoon.

"Here...goes..."

I prepared to have my second taste of giant shrimp. I couldn't even describe it as eating anymore—no, the experience had transcended into something much greater. The meat fell apart at the slightest touch of my spoon, having been cooked to perfection, and the depth of the scent that arose from it was enough to confirm its deliciousness.

I wanted to take my time and savor it, but everyone was waiting on me. I steeled my resolve and tossed a small morsel into my mouth.

“Mngh...”

Before I could even bite down, the taste hit me. I rolled the morsel around in my mouth, afraid to chew, but it was no use; Rolo, being an expert culinarian, had cooked the meat just right, and it naturally melted on my tongue.

The burst of savoriness that followed almost knocked me out cold—but that was just the beginning. So tender was the shrimp meat that, when I did eventually bite down, it broke apart with ease and released even more rich juices. Happiness previously unknown to me assaulted my tongue twofold, then threefold. I was in a realm of taste that refused to let me go.

Again, I searched for a word to describe what I was experiencing. Only this time, one actually came to me: *divine*. My vocabulary was lacking compared to most, but there couldn't have existed a more perfect summary.

Before I knew it, my bowl was empty. I'd completely forgotten my role as a food taster and consumed my meal without a second thought. A quick look around revealed that everyone was staring at me, deeply concerned. I was a little embarrassed to have lost control while they were watching.

“Sorry about that. There's no poison. Quick—everyone *needs* to try this.”

“R-Right.”

Rolo and Sirene doled out stew from the large pot into wooden bowls, which the villagers accepted and passed along. I did my best to help distribute them, still embarrassed about my food-induced trance.

“Th-Thank you.”

“Th-This is...”

“It smells so good...”

At first, the villagers were tentative. But as they tasted the stew, even the eldest among them started devouring it with gusto. I couldn’t blame them; it was just that delicious. *Too* delicious, almost. I wanted ten more bowls.

“There’s still plenty to go around,” Rolo called out.

The children who’d drained their bowls immediately swarmed the pot. Then the adults. I was right there with them, of course.

The sun beat down on us, but Lynne had used magic to create several ice pillars that kept us all cool. Laughter and excited chatter filled the air as the feast continued into the night.



“Divine Beast stew” was a huge hit.

According to Lynne, the creature we’d slain had a mythical reputation for being exceptionally rare, meaning we were unlikely to get our hands on another one. I was a little upset that I’d never get another chance to eat it once our current supply ran out, but that wouldn’t be for a long time; we’d stashed a ton of frozen meat in the village’s previously empty storehouses.

Things were looking up for us. Rolo had mentioned wanting to cook the rock shrimp into dishes other than stew, so I was looking forward to that as well.

Full to bursting, we decided to turn in early for the night. We’d need to be at our best tomorrow when Ines came with our supplies.

“Hmm? Are those hoofbeats...?”

But before we could get much rest, we were all woken by a low thundering noise coming from outside. We went to see what it was, slightly surprised, and found that Ines had returned with the coach.

“Ines? You’re back already?” Lynne asked. “We all thought you’d return tomorrow.”

“I started planning my return as soon as I received your report, my lady. I would have come sooner, but I needed to wait for the seeds to be delivered. I am deeply sorry to have disturbed you at this late hour.”

“Not at all. I should apologize, if anyone. It sounds like I worried you.”

There really was no need for Ines to apologize—she was acting like she’d shown up late when really she’d arrived much earlier than we’d expected. The coach’s horses looked exhausted, but they perked up when I showed them our leftover stew. They shoved their noses into their bowls, whinnying with glee as they licked up every last drop. Even animals recognized its deliciousness.

We sent the hardworking horses and the equally weary Ines off to rest while I set about examining the order she’d picked up from the royal capital. She’d gathered everything I’d requested...and so much more. The coach’s storage space was chock-full of bags and sacks, most of which contained crop seeds. I also spied a thick cultivation manual that the young seed vendor had apparently spent half the day writing for me.

“Wow...”

The manual was full of comprehensive notes about the cultivation of each crop in the coach and what I would need to look out for. He’d also written extensively about farming on barren ground. Everything from soil preparation methods to instructions on how to prevent disease was detailed in small, neat letters.

I’d only asked Ines to pick me up something like the pseudomandragora.

Accompanying the bags of seeds was a note that said, “I don’t know what the conditions are like there, so here’s a little bit of everything to experiment with.” Indeed, there were so many kinds of crops that I didn’t know where to start. Fortunately for me, I’d just come into an enormous supply of extremely high-quality fertilizer.

I truly was glad to have met that seed vendor.

Excited for tomorrow, I started thumbing through the cultivation manual. It was fascinating and contained all sorts of thorough explanations about how to raise the seeds he’d given me. So many wonderful images arose in my mind as I wondered what kind of garden I could make out here in the desert.

Because many of the seeds here were completely new to me, I didn’t have the slightest idea what they would produce. That was where the manual came

in handy once again—for each seed, there was a simple illustration of what it would yield and some notes summarizing how the crop tasted and the best ways to cook it. The vendor had also included some tips about using the plants' remains.

Each page I read sparked a new idea. It really did seem like the sky was the limit. I was having too much fun to even think about putting the manual down, and when I reached the end, the sun had already risen over the horizon.

“Morning already? Now I’ve done it...”

Despite not having slept a wink, I didn’t feel the slightest bit exhausted. In fact, I was more energetic than usual. Was it because I’d eaten fifteen bowls of Divine Beast stew the night before? As I greeted the morning light, the enormity of the task ahead started to sink in.

Now that Ines had returned, I had everything I needed to start experimenting. And if that wasn’t exciting enough, Lynne’s father had generously agreed to give me a Wellspring Pipe. He’d even sent me a letter saying I could use it as I pleased, as he’d take the blame if anything went wrong.

“I really am blessed to have such wonderful people in my life.”

We had seeds, fertilizer, and plenty of water. Not to mention, I was feeling unusually energetic. It was finally time to begin.

“First, I need to till the earth.”

Picturing the abundant forest my rock shrimp stew had shown me the night before, I picked up my soon-to-be work partner, my black sword, and used it to shield my eyes from the early morning sunlight that blanketed the vast desert before me.

Perfect Conditions, Perfect Materials

“So there’s a piece of Slaughter Shell carapace in here, is there? I’m surprised Master Oken even has any. Blech... It smells rotten!”

I, Melusine, brushed the dust from the strange chest my boss had given me and set it on my workbench in the royal magical equipment laboratory. It was weathered, transparent, and full of water. I was tasked with inspecting the small sample contained within.

The reason for my current endeavor was simple: Princess Lynneburg, currently in Sarenza, had informed us through an oracle’s orb that her party had slain a Slaughter Shell of epic proportions. Upon learning that we might soon receive an abundance of materials so rare that most people wouldn’t see them even once in their lifetime, I’d asked my boss, Master Oken, what we could do with them.

“Now that you mention it, there might be something like that in the back of the storeroom.”

Sure enough, he’d gone into the magical equipment research lab’s storeroom and come back with a strange, dust-covered chest. In his words, he’d “picked it up at some secondhand store,” so I was free to use it as I pleased. We were about to be given a whole lot more than a sample, so he’d dumped it in my lap and proposed that I come up with some ideas for how to use it.

“I remember seeing a thing or two about Slaughter Shell carapaces in a few old papers,” I mused aloud. “They’re more or less legendary-grade materials. Does that old scarecrow even know how much this thing is worth? Maybe he’s lost his wits... Ugh! And the harvesting date!”

A label on the chest stated that its contents were several centuries old. This sample was a rare historical relic no matter how you looked at it. The prospect of experimenting with it made my stomach ache a little.

Of course, I would use only a small part of the carapace and set aside the rest,

but the thought of working with it at all put me on edge.

Slaughter Shell parts really were rare, so I couldn't believe we were about to receive them by the wagonload. Based on Princess Lynneburg's report, the carapace was going to be in excellent condition. She'd understood its value, having read about such creatures before, and preserved it in water as quickly as she could.

I expected no less from the princess. She was far more than just her title.

Several years ago, during my time as an active librarian, I'd seen a little girl who looked to be about ten request a history book from the closed stacks. Her talent had impressed me—it was a book that even experts would have balked at—but I'd never expected to learn she was a princess. Her genius shone through, and she was passionately studious. No wonder she'd recognized the Slaughter Shell for what it was.

Indeed, Princess Lynneburg was an exceptional talent, but she wasn't the only one in her family. Her brother, Prince Rein, had almost completely taken over the king's work by this point. They were a remarkable pair.

By the Kingdom's rules, the two siblings would one day need to compete for the throne. I was truly lucky to have been born here because either one of them would make for a ruler beyond compare.

I placed a small sliver of Slaughter Shell carapace under a magical microscope and peered into the eyepiece. "Hmm... Yes, I think I *could* turn this into armor or some kind of weapon..."

Earlier, when I'd relayed the princess's report to King Clays, he'd remarked that it might be interesting to turn the shell into arms or armor. It had sounded more like a casual, somewhat joking remark than an actual order...but that wouldn't deter me. It was unthinkable for a vassal to ignore her king's will, much less refuse him.

But truth be told, I was just scared of disappointing King Clays. I took the initiative because, in my eyes, I didn't have any other choice. Now, what was the best way to go about this?

"I suppose I'll run experiments to determine its physical properties. The

literature that exists is too old to be of use, so I'll need a new baseline to work from."

When discovering the properties of a new material, there were quite a few inspection processes to go through. I enjoyed weapon and armor development, but doing it properly took a lot of time and work. And with so many other projects to balance, I really was in need of another set of hands.

"If only Rolo were here..."

As far as I was concerned, he was already an irreplaceable assistant. I'd only brought him on board to get me through a rough patch, but these days, having him next to me was like having a dozen extra arms. He hadn't learned to read or write—or received much of an education at all, for that matter—but his memory was excellent, and he absorbed whatever he was taught like a sponge. He was very methodical, which made me comfortable entrusting him with sensitive tools, and the Giant's Gauntlets in his possession made heavy labor a piece of cake.

For the finishing touch, he could tell when I was exhausted without me needing to say a word. He always had a cup of tea and a smile ready for me.

Rolo was genuinely talented. There was no better way to put it. He was the assistant of my dreams—someone I'd give an arm and a leg for. I hoped Sirene would forgive me, but I'd started to want a duplicate Rolo to help me out at home. He did so, so much to reduce my workload.

I could scrape by without him. He exuded a sense of calm that was outright indispensable during crunch time, but things were relatively slow right now; I didn't need him that desperately.

But please come back soon, my beloved assistant.

I would make do in his absence, but there was so much I wanted to delegate to him. That thought ran through my mind as I turned my attention back to the subject of my research.

"Now, what can I make out of this...?"

Times like this, when I was lost in thought and able to brainstorm new ideas, were far and away the most enjoyable part of my work. Not that I could get too

carried away with the pressure of the king's pleasant smile at the back of my mind.

As I used the panoply of expensive magical tools and measuring devices that the lab came furnished with, the abnormality of the carapace became apparent. It was *hard*, exactly as the literature claimed. Not enough to rival adamantite in strength, but close enough to warrant comparison. Perhaps I could put it to similar uses.

Though the shell might not have been as tough as adamantite, it had the potential to be far more practical. It was much lighter, surprisingly flexible, and so compressible that, when I placed it under our press—one powerful enough to crush anything up to and including dragontusk—it broke only under the highest output setting.

The deeper I delved into the carapace's abnormalities, the greater my confusion became. During his battle with the Slaughter Shell in Sarenza, Noor had managed to break through its shell with brute strength alone. How on earth was that even possible?

According to the princess, Noor had cracked the carapace first by throwing his Black Blade at the airborne Slaughter Shell. He'd thrown it many times, in fact, bouncing the titanic creature back up into the air with each strike and preventing it from reaching the ground. It had made for a very one-sided hunt.

Okay. Hold on.

Under normal circumstances, Slaughter Shells induced complete and utter despair. Each time one appeared, it was safe to assume the loss of an entire city or two at least. The Black Blade was a peerless artifact, but that alone didn't guarantee victory. It was still a tremendous feat that Noor had broken through his opponent's defenses.

Perplexed, I went back over the details of the battle. He'd *thrown* his sword at the creature? And what was that about him keeping it up in the air? It had all sounded so absurd that I'd kept asking the princess to repeat herself. Even now, I'd yet to grasp it all, but if I could make a small observation...

Swords aren't meant to be thrown!

Of course, how a tool was used depended on the person, but I was beginning to think we should give the Black Blade a new name. “The Black Club” sounded a lot more appropriate. Putting that aside, though...

I’d experimented on the Black Blade in the past, but my best attempts to understand it had only unearthed more mysteries. To say it was “durable” was a severe understatement; it was more like it completely disallowed external interference. An unknown force repelled anything that attempted to touch the blade or vice versa, which had thwarted all the material tests we’d attempted to run.

To make matters worse, when we’d used a high-powered magical microscope to examine the sword in finer detail, the most we’d seen was a vague blur. It was like a mirage preventing us from seeing its makeup. I remembered getting chills at the time, because it felt like the blade itself refused to even let me look at it.

Though it seemed to exist as a solid object, the Black Blade was a mystery in physical form that couldn’t be observed or tampered with. How did one even go about creating such a strange thing? It was unbelievably heavy as well, but not in the usual sense. Just as its durability was a more complex phenomenon, it was less that it had “weight” and more that it seemed to warp the very space around it.

Back when the king had still wielded the Black Blade, he’d mentioned that he could feel it being pulled slightly toward the dungeon. Its perceived weight varied depending on the person, he’d said, but its *actual* weight changed too. He’d given us so many ominous anecdotes about it defying the laws of the world.

You wouldn’t find such an irrational material or anything even remotely like it anywhere else you looked.

Nothing was known about the Black Blade except that it had been discovered in the depths of the Dungeon of the Lost. Even Master Oken, ever the sore loser, had thrown his hands up and abandoned the examination. It was the right call, in my opinion; we lacked too much knowledge in too many fields to even begin to understand the weapon. We’d need another few centuries—no,

maybe even more than that.

At the very least, I suspected that the knowledge of a mere few generations wouldn't even scratch the surface. It would probably take a collective of prodigies more than several millennia to solve even a single piece of the puzzle. It was a mystery why such an object even existed in this world, which prompted more questions about its current wielder.

I'd gotten a look at Noor right before he and the others had set out for Sarenza. It had made my head spin to see him with the Black Blade slung over his shoulder like a common farming tool. Had it always been that light? It was hard enough to believe someone could regularly carry it around.

The king had put the sword to good use in the past, but now someone else had taken on the mantle, proving that he hadn't been a unique case. Having led the analysis team tasked with inspecting the blade, I could say with all certainty that one would need to possess *literally* inhuman strength to swing it around. I wouldn't reveal such thoughts to the king even under threat of torture, but it made me wonder if we should classify Noor as some new species of monster.

Though he had such a gentle-seeming face, Noor was strong enough to have bested the Dragon of Calamity in single combat. I didn't doubt the story—Rala had recounted it to Rolo on more than one occasion—but I couldn't wrap my head around it. Was it really okay to let a man like that run around unchecked as a normal citizen?

Not that it was my place to say anything. If not for Noor, the royal capital would already have been destroyed. He also had the king's trust, which meant more to me than anything else.

Noor's existence was more of a mystery than the Black Blade, but I resolved not to dwell on it further; I needed to focus on the task at hand. At least my questions about this carapace were likely to have answers.

"I see... I'm starting to get you now."

The lab's expensive measurement devices had made one thing clear: this shell was *amazing*. It was a hackneyed expression, sure, but the only one that came to mind.

As I already knew, the carapace was tough but pliable and lightweight. If made into arms or armor as the king had proposed, it would surely be a first-class piece of equipment. It wasn't perfect, though; my research had revealed glaring weaknesses to heat and dehydration. Slaughter Shells needed water to survive, which explained why the one in Sarenza had drained an entire forest and reduced it to a barren wasteland.

The shell sitting before me had evolved under the assumption that it would always have access to water. It was strongest when wet, but no combatant would want a sword or armor they had to keep applying water to. I would need to devise an external solution to that problem. Combining it with spirit mercury—which had the properties of water *and* metal—was an option, albeit an expensive one.

The carapace's next flaw was its weakness to impacts. You wouldn't expect it from something so insanely tough, but it would instantly shatter if struck hard enough. Noor must have surpassed that threshold when he'd smashed it apart with the Black Blade, though few other people had the means to apply that much force.

I ran several more tests before I reached my conclusion:

“This shell...contains a *wealth* of potential.”

There were things it couldn't do and circumstances where it wouldn't be suitable. But if we found ways to compensate for those shortcomings, we could put the carapace to all sorts of uses.

Accomplishment welled up inside of me; I'd discovered a dream material with truly outstanding properties. I was so glad to have put the work in and to have made it this far.

But aren't I first and foremost a librarian?

I'd taken an extended leave of absence because I was so busy working this side job, but still. How had things turned out like this?

I tried to refocus. My mind tended to wander when I worked alone.

“Right. How should I put you to use?”

I racked my brain for ideas. The shell was brittle but pliable and exceptionally durable under the right circumstances. Would it work best as armor? Or as a shield, maybe? A strong enough blow might shatter it, but it would still work well as a onetime safeguard.

I paused in thought. Was it really a good idea to turn such a rare and seldom-seen material into a piece of disposable equipment? We were about to receive a huge supply of them from Sarenza, but still... I decided to shelve the idea for now.

“Then maybe...a spear?”

Armor was out of the question, so I turned to the king’s other proposal—a weapon. I’d considered swords, hammers, and axes before concluding that a spear was the best choice. It, too, would only be single-use, but it would make much better use of the hard and pliable qualities of the carapace. Maybe I would ask Gilbert to test it out and give me his thoughts...but rumor had it he was always breaking the orichalcum spear the king had given him.

I put that on hold as well. Getting through even one spear a day would quickly use up our valuable carapace.

My next thought was to make a bow the likes of which no one had ever seen before. It was my best idea so far, barring one slight issue: according to the numerical data from the sample on my workbench, one would need superhuman strength to draw it. I could only foresee a future where everyone yelled at me for making such a bizarre piece of equipment that no one could actually use.

Though, conversely...it would also be a contender for *the greatest bow ever made*. In theory.

“The greatest bow that anyone’s ever seen, huh?”

The very words tickled the engineer in me. So what if we couldn’t find a practical use for the bow? The tests we could run alone would make it worthwhile. And who knew? Maybe I *would* find someone strong enough to draw it.

“Captain Dandalg of the Warrior Corps, maybe? He’s not an archer, though...”

Not to mention, back when the Six Sovereigns were active adventurers, he'd tried and failed to hold up King Clays's Black Blade. Maybe the king would make for a better candidate, then. But I couldn't ask the kingdom's top authority to help me with my experiments...

Captain Mianne of the Hunter Corps came to mind next, but I struck her off the list almost immediately. I suspected she'd get mad at me as soon as she laid eyes on my creation.

Then what about Noor? Though he hadn't come across as particularly dexterous, he *had* seemed nice enough to help me out. He was probably the only one strong enough to draw such a bow, but would he ever have a reason to use it? I mean, he'd *thrown* the Black Blade—and with enough brute strength to break through a Slaughter Shell carapace.

That's a resounding no. Calm down, me. Think this through.

"Ah, whatever. I can find someone to wield the bow later. As the boss always says, 'Create something new! Something the world's never seen before!'"

Words couldn't describe my displeasure with Master Oken for always dumping so much work on me, but I still respected him for his generous encouragement. He had experience befitting his age, having tasted failure more times than anyone could count. I was truly lucky to have him as my superior.

Under normal circumstances, rushing ahead without thinking and creating something useless would make an inventor sick with guilt—especially when it meant wasting the people's hard-earned tax money. Here, however, those failures were forgiven.

To my initial astonishment, the laboratory operated almost entirely on the sales proceeds from the magical equipment it developed. The land and building were both courtesy of the king. We still received *some* tax money from the royal treasury, so we couldn't do anything too weird, but a dash of recklessness was forgivable as long as it remained within the confines of our budget.

It helped that Master Oken was the head of the lab. Despite his age, he was still a bundle of curiosity. Danger didn't scare him—his experiments almost welcomed it—and that bravery had rubbed off on the rest of us. By this point, we were all right behind him when he raved about us "doing what nobody's

ever done before!”

Because of our team’s strange dynamic, I was sure we’d created more failed products since my arrival than anyone else. But once in a blue moon, we made a huge discovery that brought in copious amounts of money for the lab. Not only that, but if the magical equipment we created caught the eye of a specialty buyer, it could end up being mass-produced, with royalties from the sales going straight into the pockets of the developer. The system did wonders for our motivation.

Even some of my own inventions had started to sell, padding my savings nicely. A contented sigh escaped me; to think I’d only been pursuing my hobby.

“I love working here.”

That said, I *was* going to quit if my workload got any worse. I hated being so busy. That probably wouldn’t happen for a while, though...

I was still deep in thought when I realized there were birds chirping outside.

“Hmm? Is it that time already?”

I gazed upon the world outside my window and saw that it was morning. I wasn’t too surprised, considering how late I’d started working—time slipped through my fingers when I was focused on something that interested me. Once again, I was reminded of the importance of a talented assistant.

“I ought to get some sleep...”

My curiosity had gotten the better of me, but no matter; we weren’t unbearably busy at the moment. I finished up what I was doing and tidied my workbench before heading straight for the nap room. It was such a common routine for me, brought about by the lab’s many crunch periods, that I sometimes forgot this wasn’t my home. Most of my seniors had taken to calling me a live-in researcher. It had started mostly as a joke, but now it was getting too real.

Despite being a relatively new addition to the magical equipment research lab, I’d already been entrusted with a key. Maybe that was why the nap room had so quickly become my own little domain. Ines had even said recently—in all sincerity—that I should start receiving my mail there.

That was where I drew the line, of course; even I clung to some semblance of pride. I always did my best to go home...at least when I remembered to. I couldn't actually recall when I'd stayed there last.

"The lab just has everything I need..."

It was a lot nicer than my home, which I'd neglected to clean for quite a while now. And when I needed to rest, the nap room was the picture of comfort. I'd gone as far as to furnish it with the best bed and bedclothes around. I wouldn't ever tell anyone, but sleeping there was one of my greatest pleasures.

I blamed the lab's lax budget. You could buy whatever luxuries you wanted here as long as you did it under the pretext of "creating a more comfortable work environment." We had plenty of facilities to alleviate exhaustion, like a bath and a sauna, and could eat whenever we wanted.

This place was heaven, to say the least.

Though I knew settling in was a bad idea, the workshop was already full of my belongings. Forget a change of clothes—my entire wardrobe was here. It didn't even matter that I was awful at keeping on top of my laundry because a special attendant sorted it out for me. There was also the benefit of not having to commute, since I could roll out of bed and get straight to work.

Oh no...

The more I thought about it, the fewer reasons there were for me to ever return home. Maybe I could play one of the many board games I'd yet to open, but that was about it. The lab was so perfect that it actually annoyed me.

"Whatever... I'm going to bed."

I didn't need that much rest. And if push came to shove, I could always stumble my way over to Marieberr; she wouldn't look pleased about it, but she'd cure my exhaustion in five seconds flat. In the absolute worst-case scenario, I could go a few days without sleeping at all.

Probably not wise from a human standpoint, though. I should start counting sheep.

I turned the sign hanging near the nap room to the side that read "Sleeping—

please be quiet” and snuggled into my wonderfully comfortable bed, listening to the footsteps in the previously quiet hallway. The world was just waking up. It made me a little uneasy to think that my sleep schedule was the exact opposite of everyone else’s, but my lack of imminent deadlines meant I could indulge as much as I wanted.

“Mmm... Good night...”

There was a dream material waiting for me that was definitely worth tinkering with. I buried my face into the fluffy blanket I’d purchased with the lab’s abundant budget, my thoughts leaping this way and that as I pondered what I’d make.

Life was good.

Afterword

Thank you for reading the newest installment of *I Parry Everything*. This volume marks the beginning of the Sarenza Arc, where our characters set out on a new journey into the desert. The unfamiliar scenery on the cover and the appearance of new characters lend a real feeling of freshness to the series, don't they?

Sirene might be front and center on the cover, but she wasn't slated to go to Sarenza in my original outline of the plot. Only when I received her character design from Kawaguchi-san—and stared at it for ages—did it suddenly click that she was dressed perfectly for a jaunt through the desert. From that point onward, I was convinced that she definitely *had* to go, so I overwrote what I'd prepared and restarted the arc from the ground up. Web novel readers had to wait quite a while as a result...but I believe the story was all the better for it.

Kawaguchi-san's character designs for this volume are once again phenomenal, especially for vice-captains Rei and Melusine. I hope to give them both many opportunities to shine—though it might be a little while before they become involved in the story.

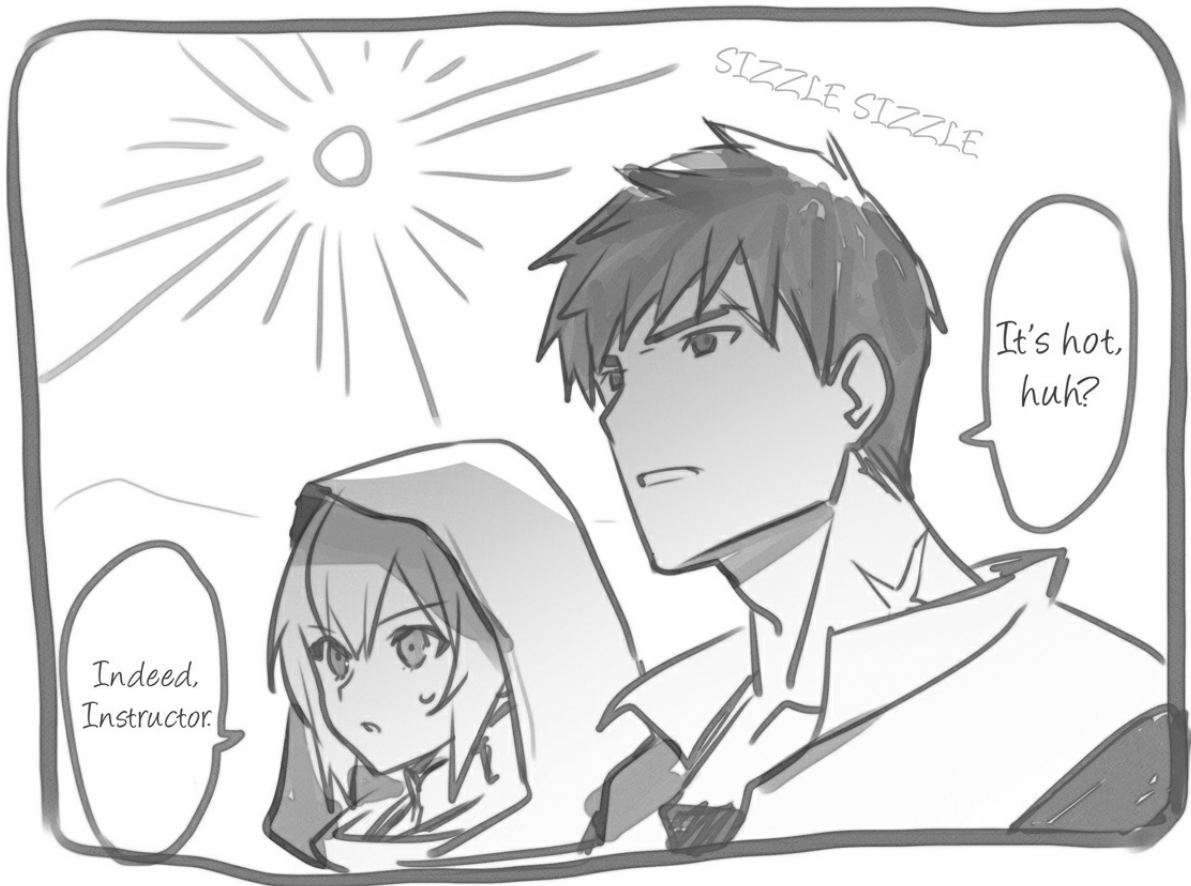
Of course, the characters in the color illustrations, regular illustrations, and on the cover are also utterly flawless. Thank you, truly.

There was an enormous one-year gap between this volume and the previous one, but I plan to release the next book in a much shorter time frame. Like in the previous arcs, the story will only escalate as we move in to the later parts, so I would once again be delighted if you continued to follow along.

June 2023

Nabeshiki

Adaptability: Excellent



Thank you for reading! ㄉㄉㄉ"4
Kawaguchi

Bonus Short Story

The Young King's Adventures

"You must be Sig, the rumored master swordsman."

"And you are?"

"Me? I'm the first prince of the Kingdom of Clays. But what's more important right now is that I'm an adventurer seeking comrades to challenge the Dungeon of the Lost with me." The boy with a large scar over one eye stood in front of the long-haired young man carrying a longsword and smiled. "Word has it you're better than good with that blade. Draw it. I'll see for myself whether the rumors of your skill are true."

"Prince or no, you had best not take me lightly. Your swordsmanship is no match for mine."

"Sounds like you're rather arrogant yourself. That's some fine boasting from someone who doesn't know a thing about me."

"So many before you have given me the same spiel. It gets tiresome. In the end, not one of them amounted to more than rust on my blade."

"What a coincidence. It sounds like we've met the same kind of people."

On that day, two swordsmen who had never known defeat crossed blades. The boy who called himself a prince lost utterly and thoroughly to the long-haired swordsman, but as he lay on the ground, tasting his first loss, his expression was one of elation.

"Ha ha! Astounding! You're as good as they say! Join me, Sig. I need your sword to achieve my dream."

"Then keep dreaming. Losers have no right to make demands. Come back when you've refined your skills."

"Of course! That goes without saying! Once I've set my sights on something, I

don't give up."

Just as he'd promised, the prince continued to challenge Sig. His skills were vastly inferior, but only at first; he closed the distance a little with each loss until, several months later, the long-haired swordsman conceded. Sig claimed to have used a technique not meant to be unleashed upon people...yet the prince had withstood it.



Some days later, the pair stood shoulder to shoulder in a tavern.

"You're still looking for comrades, then?"

"Yes. The shallower strata won't be an issue for us, but we'll need more support to challenge the depths. Three years of exploring the dungeon alone made that clear to me."

"To think the Dungeon of the Lost goes so deep..."

"Hey, Sig... He looks promising, doesn't he? He'd make a good shield just by standing there."

"Indeed, his frame *is* rather large."

A giant of a man sat glumly at a nearby table, sighing over a stack of coppers. The prince went over to him.

"Greetings, friend. Money troubles?"

"Hmm...? Oh, yes. Isn't it obvious? My old mercenary company let me go, even though I served with them for years. They told me I used up too much of their food budget for a guy whose only talent is being a shield. Said they didn't need a lumberin' giant like me around... *Sniff.*"

"In that case, why not be *my* shield? We can't let that strong body of yours go to waste."

"What? I'm not sure I follow..."

"I don't mean for free, of course. Come on—all you have to do is beat me in a contest. Pick whatever you're best at."

"Whatever I'm best at?" The large man's stomach rumbled so ferociously that

it almost shook the tavern. “What if I want to challenge you to an eating contest?”

“That’s fine. In fact, I was just beginning to get hungry.”

“Hey now... Are you serious? You’re footing the bill if you lose, you know. D-Don’t make a deal you’re gonna regret!”

And so, their eating contest began. To all the onlookers, it was an obvious mismatch...but it was the large man who ended up slumped over the table, groaning in pain.

“Ugh... No more...! H-How did this happen?! How can you eat more than me with a body like that?!”

“Ha ha! Well, I’ve always had a sturdy stomach.”

“Unbelievable... Though I’ve gotta admit, I’m pretty content.”

“Now we have a sword *and* a shield. If we’re doing this by the book, we should get a sharp-eyed scout next...”

As the giant man sank to the floor, the prince scanned the busy tavern. His eyes settled on a table that seemed particularly boisterous.



“Rat scum! You cheated!”

The source of the disturbance was a group of men who appeared to have just finished a gambling game. They were gathered around and staring at a man wearing a strange mask.

“Oh, do you have proof?” he asked. “Or is this a blind accusation? You must be a sore loser to have resorted to such a convenient excuse.”

“Shut up! Get him, lads!”

The group had given up on trying to figure out the masked man’s trick—assuming he had actually used one. They charged at him together...but he evaded their assault with a single agile maneuver. The brawl continued for a little while longer until the ruffians, no better at fighting than gambling, spat several caustic remarks and stormed out of the tavern.

“Hey, Sig. Is it just me, or did that man just...?”

“Yes, he stole every single one of their wallets during that fight. He was even conscientious enough to return them to their chest pockets after looting the contents. I’m impressed he managed it with all these eyes on him.”

Sig looked positively amazed, but the prince laughed cheerily and slapped his knee. “That’s it, then,” he said. “We’re getting him next.”

“Prince...?”

The prince strode over to the table where the disturbance had occurred and addressed the masked man. “Greetings, Master Swindler. How would you feel about doing a job for me?”

“And who might you be? I don’t recall having business with you.”

“Fine. I’ll challenge you to a contest, then. If you win, I’ll give you every coin I’ve got.” There was a heavy *thump* as the one-eyed boy dropped a sack full of money on the table. “How about it?”

The masked man smiled. “You don’t look very old. How much gambling experience do you have?”

“None at all. You could say my family was on the stricter side when I was growing up.”

“Is that so? Do you need me to explain the rules, then?”

“No, I saw you play against those others. I don’t need more than that.”

“Ha! And you seek to challenge me? You’re bold, I’ll give you that, but Lady Luck doesn’t pity the naive.”

The game between the prince and the masked man commenced. They made it only a few rounds before the latter was entirely out of money.

“How...? I can understand you seeing through my simpler tricks, but only luck and chance could have decided those last rounds. How were they still so one-sided...?”

“Ha ha! It must have been beginner’s luck. I’ve always been quite fortunate.”

“You’re actually serious... Well, a loss is a loss. What’s this ‘job’ you want me

for?”

“I’m going to challenge the Dungeon of the Lost. And as it just so happens, it’s packed with relics worth enough to blow whatever tiny sums you make from these tavern games out of the water. Come with me, and you’ll soon wonder why you ever thought cheating thugs out of their money was worth your time.”

“Ah. The dungeon? Now *that’s* a gamble if ever I’ve heard one.”

“Now that you know, I’m actually in the market for more worthy allies. Anyone come to mind? You seem like a man with connections.”

“Well, I *am* an information broker by trade. I’ve someone in mind, but he’s...”



Using the information given to him by the gambler Carew, the prince led former mercenary Dandalg and swordsman Sig to the rocky mountain ranges, where monsters prowled in large numbers.

“Oh, visitors?” The young man sitting atop a boulder appeared to have been meditating. He wore a gentle expression as he examined the prince and his companions. “Rarely do guests travel this deep into these mountains. May I ask with whom I am speaking?”

“You must be Sain, the heretic cleric. I’m looking for comrades to join me on an adventure, and I’ve heard that your healing magic is the best around. I’ll get straight to the point—join me.”

“I am terribly sorry, especially as you’ve come all this way, but I must decline. As you can see, I am practicing asceticism; I do not have time to play at being an adventurer.”

“So you’re using this place to train, huh? Interesting. Mind teaching me some of the basics?”

“Not at all...but I cannot guarantee your safety while you are here.”

“How long would you advise me to stay? Give me the bare minimum.”

“Several months should be enough to determine whether you have aptitude.”

“All right. Dandalg, Sig—sorry, but you’ll need to come pick me up in a year.”

“P-Prince...?”

Thus, the prince parted with his newly made companions to join Sain in his solitary training. Over the next few months, the two completely opened up to each other.

“I really am surprised. No one has ever lasted this long before.”

“Ha ha! It was rough at first, but I enjoyed it more than I thought I would. A few months like this wouldn’t be so bad every once in a while. Having said that...I’m close to dying of boredom. Doing the same things in the same place day in and day out just doesn’t suit me.”

Sain chuckled. “There is no end to the path of self-improvement. We must continually test ourselves, no matter the time or place, else we will never reach our limits.”

“Yeah? If we improve by testing ourselves, then I can show you somewhere much better than a safe, carefree mountain retreat. Won’t you come with me, Sain?”

“So this is a ‘carefree mountain retreat,’ is it?”

“Sorry, was that rude of me?”

“No, not at all. I find myself quite fascinated.”

Then, a year to the day since the prince joined Sain...

“Oh, there you are!” Dandalg exclaimed. “We haven’t heard a thing from you since we parted ways. Truth be told, I thought you were dead.”

“I’m impressed you all came back,” the prince replied. “Especially you, Dandalg. None of you thought to run away?”

“Didn’t have much of a choice. Sig’s too obsessed with honing his swordsmanship to hold down an actual job, and I still haven’t found anywhere willing to hire me. Since we used up the last of the funds you gave us, we’ve had to live off whatever Carew makes from gambling. Let’s work already! I want to eat a meal bought with my own hard-earned coin!”

The prince laughed at Dandalg’s anguished expression and turned to his companion of the past year. “How about it, Sain? We’re setting out.”

“Very well. You win. I shall join you on your travels.”

“Yeah? Excellent. Now that we have a cleric, I want a magician who’s just as exceptional.”



“*The Spell Sovereign*? You want to recruit him?”

“Yeah. He was my tutor as a kid. I’m sure he’ll join us if I ask him to.”

“But isn’t he an old man past his second century? Is he even physically capable of all the traveling we’ll be doing?”

“Of course. He’s conquered several dungeons of his own, and we’ll find no greater asset when it comes to challenging the Dungeon of the Lost. Honestly, it’s enough to make me wonder if I’m cheating. He’s a moody old man, but friendly, so he’ll blend right in with us.”

“How can someone be moody *and* friendly?”

The prince led the way until the group came to a small magical equipment workshop tucked away in a corner of the royal capital. An old man with a magnificent white beard poked his head out the door.

“Ho ho? If it isn’t the mischievous little prince. Haven’t seen you in a while. Had a bit of a growth spurt, eh? My, what happened to your eye?”

“Got a bit reckless when I was fifteen. I challenged the Dungeon of the Lost alone and got this scar to commemorate it.”

“Rash as ever, I see. I thought time would temper your mischievous side, but it seems to have only inflamed it.”

“On that note, I’ve come to make a request of you. Will you challenge the Dungeon of the Lost with me?”

“Ho ho? You want to drag this senile old man along on your adventures?”

“I do. I can think of no better teacher for our inexperience than Oken, the Spell Sovereign, the greatest magician in the whole world. I seek your wisdom.”

“H-Ho ho? W-Well, if you insist, I suppose I wouldn’t be opposed to helping out...”

"Psst. Prince. Isn't he too much of a pushover?"

"Whisper any louder and he'll hear you, Dandalg. The old man deserves to be shown some respect, at least when we're asking him for something."

"I can already hear you, little brats."

"Prince, I have an update for you," Carew interjected. "Do you recall when you asked me to find the person with the keenest senses in the Kingdom?"



Once again following Carew's information, the group took a trip to the city's old quarter. A small girl armed with a bow stood at the end of a dim alleyway. She wore a cloak with the hood pulled low over her eyes, but the shape of her nonhuman ears was still easy to make out.

"A beastfolk?" the prince asked. "You're a rare sight here in the royal capital."

"So what if I am? Want a taste of my arrows?" The girl appeared to be in her early teens, but she watched the six men with sharp and intimidating eyes.

"Ha ha! You're as prickly as the rumors claim! Mianne, is it? I'm no enemy of yours. Rather, I'd like you to lend me your strength."

"What could you possibly want from a beastfolk? For the record, I'm not looking for any dirty work."

"Hear me out first. I'm destined to become king—that's just how it is. I detest politics and all the work that's involved, but I'm going to be the strongest, which means I'll end up winning the contest for the right of succession. What I'm saying is...if you come with me, you're in for the journey of a lifetime."

The girl was incredulous. She looked at the large man standing behind the one-eyed youth and asked, "Is this guy insane?"

"Hmm... He does come off that way, doesn't he?" Dandalg replied.

"Well, I've said my piece," the prince concluded. "Now it's your turn—what do you want in exchange for joining me? You can ask for anything."

The girl exhaled slowly. "Anything, huh? If you're telling the truth about being a prince and really will become the king one day, then I want you to transform

this city into a place where even beastfolk can lead normal lives. That's my only wish."

"Ha! I see! An excellent request, but you might want to pick something else."

"Why? You told me to ask for anything."

"Because the kingdom I want to create will already *be* that kind of place. I can't compensate you with something I was going to do anyway."

"So you're asking me to trust you—is that it? You've been spouting all these grand claims since you showed up. Is there a reason for your confidence, or are you just deluded? How are you going to make your dreams a reality?"

"I'll do what I want. That's it. The results will invariably follow."

"That's barely an answer."

"Is there anything I could say that would convince you? I suspect not." The one-eyed youth grinned and extended a hand to the girl. "If you don't believe me, then see my resolve with your own eyes."

Instead of accepting the handshake, the girl threw back her hood to reveal her face. "Fine. I'll join you. But if you give me even the slightest reason to believe that what you just told me was a lie, I'll shoot an arrow through your heart."

"By all means. I don't mind at all."

"Prince, are you sure about this?" Dandalg asked. "She looks like she could stick you in the back at any moment."

"Ha ha ha! You worry too much! I've got a good eye for people. But if a stray arrow *does* end up coming my way, I'm counting on you to stop it."

"Come on... Give me a break..."

"So, what do you want me for?" the girl interrupted. "Where are we going?"

"Oh, right. I almost forgot. We're heading for the deepest layers of the Dungeon of the Lost."

There was a long silence before she said, "I *knew* you were insane."

"Ha ha! You've a harsh tongue, I see! This just gets better and better!"

Dandalg looked uneasily between the pair, one stern-faced and the other laughing merrily.

The prince's ideal adventuring party was complete, and they wasted no time before challenging the Dungeon of the Lost. Exploring its strata was no easy feat, but Mianne's keen eyes and ears—the final piece of the puzzle—allowed them to progress smoothly. Their team of seven forged ahead, blazing a trail through previously unexplored ground.

Then, at long last, they set foot in a strange room in the dungeon's depths.

"This place feels different from everything else we've seen. I wonder why."

"Look. Something's floating in the center."

"What *is* that? A sword? It's so beat-up and worn that I can't tell."

"It probably *used to be* a sword, at least."

"Why is something like that being stored so precious this deep inside the dungeon?"

"Hmm. I'll bet my beard this room was built expressly for its sake."

The group of seven looked up at the black sword of sorts floating in the middle of the room.

"Interesting..." the prince mused aloud. "All right, I'm taking it."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Prince. This deep in the dungeon, there's no telling what you might spring."

"Carew? Oken? Any sign of traps?"

"I can't sense any. But the architecture here is too ancient for me to give you a guarantee."

"Ho ho. I don't detect any either. This appears to be a safe area."

"Then I'll trust your instincts."

"Prince, I really don't think— Aaand he's gone."

"If some unseen trap burns him to a crisp, then that nullifies his promise with me. I say let him go. The rest of us should return home."

“Mianne...”

“You needn’t worry, you two. As long as his head and torso are intact, I can put him back together.”

“Don’t *you* start, Sain...”

“Whatever do you mean? My medical abilities are the admirable result of hard work and steady effort.”

“Hey, everyone! Look! I’m fine! There weren’t any traps!”

They all looked up at the cheerful sound of the prince’s voice. He was waving to them from above, his other hand firmly grasping the floating black object.

“This thing’s heavier than I thought. Here, Dandalg! Catch!”

“Hey! We don’t know how valuable that thing might be! Don’t just throw it like some— Gack!”

Dandalg attempted to catch the black sword flying through the air toward him, but its sheer weight made it slip from his hands and dig deep into the floor with a resounding *boom*.

“H-Huh...? Saying that thing’s heavy is a grave understatement. What’s going on here? It was floating just a moment ago, wasn’t it?!”

“Ho ho. It would appear this room really is a special place of power. Do you recall what I said about it being created expressly for that object?”

“That’s a lot of work for a single sword.”

“Which says a lot about it, don’t you think?”

As everyone scrutinized the archaeological remains of an unknown civilization, the prince dropped down to join them. “Sorry about that. I didn’t think I could carry it with just one hand.”

“My life flashed before my eyes,” Dandalg complained. “But what now? It won’t be easy bringing something that heavy back with us. I won’t be able to carry it, at least.”

“If I use both hands, I should be able to manage. I could probably even swing it around if I’ve been physically enhanced.”

“Hmph. Guess our prince really is a monster.”

“Still, it *is* a sword. Would you like it, Sig?”

“I’ve no use for a blade that’s lost its edge.”

“I’ll hold on to it, then. Its edge might be gone, but it’s still hard and heavy. Bet I could do some serious damage to the monsters down here if I used it as a projectile.” The prince smiled and raised the swordlike object above his head. “Hmm... It must be a never-before-seen relic, so I think I’ll give it a name. Given its color...how about ‘the Black Blade’?”

“It’s your call, but...isn’t that a little too on the nose?”

“Straight to the point, no frills attached. Could we expect anything less from the prince?”

That was how the prince and his six adventuring companions retrieved the relic known as the Black Blade from the Dungeon of the Lost. They continued to journey together until the prince became king and put the sword down for good.

For the next twenty-odd years, the Black Blade hung quietly on the wall behind the throne...until it encountered a certain man.



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I Parry Everything: What Do You Mean I'm the Strongest? I'm Not Even an Adventurer Yet! Volume 6

by Nabeshiki

Translated by Jason Li Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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