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NABESHIKI

ILLUSTRATOR  
KAWAGUCHI

# I PARRY EVERYTHING

WHAT DO YOU MEAN I'M THE STRONGEST?

I'M NOT EVEN AN ADVENTURER YET!



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“Huh? I-Is the water really that deep?  
Are we seriously expected to get in?”

“It is, and we are. Since we’re here, should we go for a swim together?”

“My lady... I think I shall refrain. Please go on without me.”

“Oh, no, don’t hold back on my account.

If you’d rather swim alone, then you’re welcome to go first.”

“N-No, please. I appreciate your concern, but, w-well...

To tell you the truth, I can’t— Gwah?!”

**I PARRY**  
EVERYTHING  
WHAT DO YOU MEAN IN THE FROGHEST  
OF MY EYES AS ADVENTURE YET 7  
“You have no talent at all.”  
So the man was told.  
But after mastering [Parry]  
and becoming the strongest...

# characters





# 【 The Story So Far 】

After a missive from the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza—a nation on uneasy terms with the Kingdom of Clays—granted the Kingdom permission to explore the Dungeon of Oblivion, King Clays and Prince Rein asked Noor and his companions to make the journey and discern Sarenza's true motives.

Accompanied by Lynne, Ines, and the Sarenza-born Rolo and Sirene, Noor ventured into the desert, where his party was almost immediately attacked by bandits. Upon quickly resolving the situation, they discovered that the bandits were children from a destitute beastfolk village. Noor immediately set about creating a well so that the villagers could sustain fields for crops, but his excavation roused the legendary Divine Beast Y-Gor, resulting in a fierce clash with far-reaching consequences.



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.

### Sirene



## Sirene

Vice-captain of the Hunter Corps led by Mianne, the Bow Sovereign. A prodigious archer with beastfolk blood who met the high standards of her captain and serves as the youngest vice-captain in the Six Army Corps.



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## Chapter 132: Soil Improvement

It was predawn when Ines, Instructor Noor, and I departed our lodgings in the village. Ines had recovered from her hurried coach journey to the royal capital, and the three of us were about to dismantle the Slaughter Shell.

In the desert, the harsh rays of the sun sapped one's stamina; our plan was to start working before sunrise and stop before it rose too far above the horizon. Yet when we reached our destination, ready to set about our task, a lance of fear shot through me. Unmoving though it was, the Slaughter Shell cut an intimidating figure in the gentle morning light.

Ines, who was laying eyes upon the creature for the very first time, looked perturbed. "So this is the Divine Beast of which you spoke. For you to have encountered it while I was absent, of all times..."

"Yeah," Instructor Noor said. "Now that I'm getting another look at it, it really is big."

"Indeed..."

Its colossal size had struck terror into me from the moment it first appeared. Instructor Noor, on the other hand, had seen it as little more than food and fertilizer, slaying it as quickly as he might have prepared ingredients on a chopping board. He had seen through it from the very beginning.

In hindsight, I realized that I, too, would have been able to slay the Slaughter Shell on my own. Had I retained my composure and analyzed our foe, I would have known to ignore its hard carapace and freeze the water in its body or paralyze it with an electric shock. Fire would also have worked, as its armor was weak to heat. I thought that was surprising for a creature that resided in the desert, but the village's legends *had* mentioned it thriving in an abundant forest. If the Slaughter Shell needed so much water to live, then of course it was sensitive to drought.

To my eternal chagrin, none of those weaknesses had occurred to me when



our opponent first appeared. Its overwhelming size had made my thoughts go blank...not to mention my general aversion to creatures with that sort of appearance.

“The more I reflect upon it, the more mistakes I find...”

If only I had carried out a thorough investigation the night before the battle; I could have prevented more of the Divine Beast’s carapace from going to waste. It was a highly valuable material with a hardness that rivaled adamantite, but that was only true while the creature was alive and provisioning it with water. No sooner had the Slaughter Shell died than its carapace started drying out and losing its unique qualities.

By the time I’d noticed, a majority of the carapace had already degraded. However, a deeper inspection revealed that the areas closest to the sections of the creature’s body that had stored the most water remained as hard as adamantite even half a day later. I hurriedly conjured a container with ice magic, filled it with water from the Wellspring Pipe that Ines had brought from the royal capital, and stored the surviving sections of carapace inside.

I’d wasted no time in contacting Melusine through the oracle’s orb. She had sounded excited about the news.

*“Of course! The lab would love to have it for research! Master Oken will handle the payment. We might not be able to buy it all, but we’ll take as much as we can get!”*

She had gone on to explain that, as well as being an unprecedented rare material, the carapace could potentially be used for arms and armor of exceedingly high quality. I’d discussed the matter with Instructor Noor and my father and brother, and we had decided to deliver all of the carapace I’d managed to store directly to the royal magical equipment research laboratory. Ines would take the coach there once our disassembly work was done.

Though I couldn’t think of any effective uses for the carapace, I was sure that Instructor Oken’s trusted right hand would reveal its secrets and make all manner of useful products from it.

“Meanwhile, the rest of the remains will go toward fertilizing the earth...”



According to Instructor Noor, the carapace was a farmer's best friend. It was packed with nutrients necessary for plant growth, so crushing it into a fine powder and scattering it over the earth would improve the soil quality in the long term. My experience with the subject was meager at best, so my comprehension was lacking where his was not, but I decided to trust in his wise words: "I could sort of just tell from the taste."

The villagers' ancestors had given the Slaughter Shell the name "Y-Gor," which meant "the gatekeeper beast of the sacred land." As my understanding of the creature improved, it became clear to me that this was about more than just its proclivity to kill. Despite all the death it had caused, it had then returned to the earth and blessed the land with great abundance.

Instructor Noor's tremendous insight gave me goose bumps. We had both seen the enormous Slaughter Shell, but only he had seen beyond the immediate danger to recognize its potential. It only reinforced my conviction that not just his strength but also his wisdom far exceeded my own. There was still so much for me to learn from him.

"Okay. Shall we get to work?" he said.

"Yes," I agreed. "Please get us started, Ines. Just as we planned."

"Yes, my lady. Please step back for a moment; this might be dangerous. [Divine Shield]."

Ines produced her sword of light and, with one smooth gesture, severed a chunk of carapace small enough for a person to carry. Instructor Noor wasted not a single moment before pounding it into even smaller pieces with the Black Blade.

"Sir Noor, was the size of that fragment acceptable?" Ines asked. "Or would you prefer something else?"

"No, that was just right. Keep passing them over and I'll do the rest."

*Incredible...*

I watched the pair break apart the Slaughter Shell, my thoughts a jumble. Having lost the master it was supposed to protect, the carapace had deteriorated enough that it was softer than yesterday but still more than sturdy



enough to repel an iron sword. Ines and Instructor Noor were processing it as simply as if it were a pile of loose soil. Anyone who saw their work might be deceived into thinking their task was easy when it was actually an unbelievable feat of skill.

“Lynne, is this small enough for you?”

“Yes, Instructor. Thank you.”

While I was lost in thought, Ines and Instructor Noor had already completed their task. Once huge slabs of carapace had now been reduced to a mound of crushed shards the size of pebbles. The sun had barely risen above the horizon, and neither one of them had so much as a bead of sweat on their brow.

Now, it was my turn.

“This gale is going to be on the stronger side, so please lower your centers of gravity,” I advised. “[Windblast].”

First, I used the explosive wind spell to blast all the carapace pieces up into the air. As they scattered, I took a deep breath and invoked my next spell.

“[Tornado].”

I created a massive vortex of wind using [Multicast] and [Fusion Magic]. The fragments mixed with desert sand, which ground them down into smaller and smaller particles as the storm continued to rage.

“[Purify]. [Enhance]. [Life Enhancement].”

Adding more to my [Multicast] at appropriate intervals, I enchanted the powdered Slaughter Shell remains with several types of magic. [Purify] would detoxify them, while [Enhance] and [Life Enhancement] would serve as insect repellent—at least according to a book I’d once read. I’d mentioned the idea to Instructor Noor, and he had welcomed the chance to test it out.

Then, once everything was in order and the tornado gradually began to weaken...

“[Ice Pillar].”

The moisture in the air that had gathered at the center of the whirlwind crystallized into a frozen tree so grand that it looked as though it had stood for

millennia. Its sheer size was a testament to how much water the Divine Beast had stored inside its body.

Admiring the thin shadows the translucent, sparkling trunk and its branches cast upon the sand, I released my [Tornado] spell, draining its power, and moved on to my next work of magic.

“[Hellfire].”

I overlaid eight instances of the spell—the most I could manage with [Multicast]—to create the hottest fireball I could possibly muster. From there, I launched the incandescent globe at the ice tree, evaporating it in an instant and converting all that water into a billowing column of steam.

“[Cocytus].”

The invocation of another ice spell drastically reduced the temperature in the air, turning the steam into a fine mist of water droplets that served as the nucleus of a sizable cloud. I assisted the process with one last spell.

“[Call Rain].”

At first, the cold droplets were sparse—a mere patter against my skin. But as time passed, the rainfall gradually intensified, eventually turning into a torrential downpour. It soon ran dry, of course—there was only so much water at hand—and a large rainbow formed as the last of the moisture evaporated under the sun’s rays.

“That should conclude the soil improvement,” I said. “Good work, everybody.”

“You’re...done already?” Instructor Noor murmured. “Wow...”

The rainbow, too, soon vanished under the harsh desert sunlight. We watched it go, admiring the sight, before Ines finally spoke up.

“My lady, it is time that I departed for the capital.”

“You should rest a little more,” I replied. “I know you’re just carrying out my request, but...”

“Thank you for your concern, but this cargo must be delivered with haste. And the longer I delay my departure, the later I will be to return.”



“I...suppose you’re right. But you must still be tired from yesterday. Don’t overdo it, okay?”

“Truth be told, I am in excellent condition. Surprisingly so, considering my lack of sufficient rest. Perhaps I owe it to the strange-tasting soup I ate last night. What *was* that, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“W-Well, you see...” I was hesitant to respond, conscious that Ines’s distaste for creatures like the Slaughter Shell was even greater than my own.

She gave a small shake of her head. “I suppose it isn’t important. But whatever it was, it energized the horses. They’re lively enough that we should make good time with our trip. Now, if you will excuse me.”

“R-Right. Safe travels, Ines.” I couldn’t help feeling a little guilty as she departed.

We had successfully completed the work we’d scheduled for the morning. I was about to propose we return to the village when...

“Sorry, Lynne, but could you help me a little while longer? We finished earlier than I expected, so I’d like to try growing something. Just as a test.”

“Of course. I don’t mind. But how...?”

We hadn’t planned to sow the seeds until tomorrow. My inner voice told me a one-day head start wouldn’t do much to help the villagers—but was that true, or was I once again shackled by the chains of common sense?

Instructor Noor retrieved several seeds from a bag. He laid them out on his hand, and an intense wave of sacred spirit began radiating from his entire body.

“[Low Heal].”

“Wha...?”

One of the seeds on his palm immediately sprouted, a vibrant green bud poking from its outer coating. The others soon followed suit.

*Im...possible...*

“Great,” Instructor Noor said. “Looks like that worked pretty well. This really takes me back... I used to grow crops like this all the time.”

There were potent magical skills able to produce all sorts of astounding results, but I'd never even heard of one that could make seeds sprout instantaneously. I stared at Instructor Noor in mute shock as he smiled wistfully in recollection of some fond memory or another. He opened the bag of compost he'd brought and, with his cultivation manual from the capital in one hand, adeptly mixed its contents into the earth with the Black Blade.

"Huh. Says here that this is as much compost as this crop needs. This really is a handy manual. Sorry to make another request of you, Lynne, but could you use that pipe we were given to water the earth? Be as generous with it as you can."

"R-Right. Of course."

Hearing my name brought me back to my senses. I did as Instructor Noor had asked, retrieving the Wellspring Pipe from my pack, supplying it with mana, and pouring the water it spewed over the newly sprouted crops.

"That should do. Thanks."

"Instructor, what are you...?"

"It's probably easier to demonstrate. [Low Heal]."

"But that's not...!"

He placed his hands on the ground and once again emanated sacred spirit, which he channeled into the soil. I could only watch incredulously as the crops he had just planted shot upward, their stems thickening by the moment. They developed plump green leaves that basked in the sunlight, an array of alluring flowers, and...

"They...fruited?" I asked.

"Oh, looks like that worked pretty well too. Yeah, whenever I used to get a little absent-minded and run out of food, this was how I made more. It even improves the taste. Here, try one." Instructor Noor casually plucked a red fruit and held it out to me.

"Th-Thank you...?"

"They call it a red dragon. It says here in the manual that you can eat it



straight from the plant. Might as well try one, right?”

Still relatively dazed, I accepted the fruit and took a bite. It was delightfully sweet and juicy.

“It’s...so good.”

“Right? This soil should make for an excellent garden,” Instructor Noor declared, scanning the desert horizon with a look of satisfaction. He plucked another fruit, ate it, and then pulled the Black Blade out of the sand and slung it over his shoulder. “Sorry I made you do all that extra work. Let’s get back to the village for a late breakfast. That snack made me pretty hungry.”

“Yes, Instructor. Rolo should already be preparing something, so I think we’ve timed this perfectly.”

“I can’t wait.”

Thus, I returned to the village with Instructor Noor, still unable to believe the miracle I’d just witnessed. A seed planted early in the morning—in the desert, of all places—had somehow fruited before the sun had even fully risen. It almost sounded like a joke!

## Chapter 133: Irrigating the Desert

Back at the village plaza, Rolo was awaiting Lynne and me with breakfast made and ready. He had used the same massive pot as before, and despite the early hour, there were plenty of people around.

“Welcome back, Noor, Lynne,” he said. “Good work out there. Breakfast is ready for you.”

“Thanks. I can’t wait to have some. It smells amazing.”

“I, too, am glad to partake.”

Lynne and I accepted our heaping bowls from Rolo, picked a random place to sit, and dug into our meals.

*So good. Like, this is dangerously delicious.*

Rolo had taken charge of today’s breakfast. Using leftover stock from yesterday’s Divine Beast stew, he’d whipped up a masterpiece dish every bit as tasty. I couldn’t think of a perfect description, but it was like eating a bowl of pure happiness.

The food wasn’t just amazing because I was hungry—it was the kind of dish you’d want to keep eating even when you were full to bursting. Being able to enjoy such amazing food over the next few days completely made up for the fact that the ingredients necessary to make it were so limited.

“This is so good,” I remarked.

“Indeed,” Lynne agreed. “It’s exquisite.”

I was so glad that I’d come with her to Sarenza.

For a while, I was too preoccupied with breakfast to think of anything else. Only once I’d emptied my bowl and gazed around the plaza did it occur to me that I couldn’t see Sirene, even though she’d helped Rolo with yesterday’s cooking.

“I don’t see Sirene anywhere...” I mused aloud.



“She’s out with the village’s skilled archers,” Lynne explained. “I asked if she could train them.”

“Oh, right. I did think it was quieter than usual. Rolo’s cooking seems as popular as ever, though, huh? I don’t think the line of people waiting to eat has gone down since we got here.”

“A true testament to its quality. He seems to have prepared quite a lot, so there’s plenty more to go around.”

“In that case...I think I’ll go for seconds.”

“By all means.”

Drawn in by Rolo’s siren song—“Seconds, anyone? There’s more than enough for everyone!”—men and women of all ages gathered near the pot at the center of the plaza. I joined the end of the line, no less eager than everyone else.

“That was a delicious meal,” Lynne said upon finishing her breakfast. I’d just emptied my fifth bowl.

“Time to go, then?”

“Yes. Forgive me for delaying us. Let’s go see Kyle.”

We had completed the morning’s work without a hitch, but there was a lot more still to be done. To that end, we headed to the village elder’s home to meet Kyle and discuss our plan for the rest of the day. He was already outside.

“Our apologies for the wait,” Lynne said.

“Not at all,” Kyle replied. “You told me to expect you a little after sunrise, so you aren’t late or anything.”

“Still, it’s a pretty early hour...” I added. “Sorry about that.”

“I don’t mind at all. Here.” He presented us with some paper. “As you both requested, I’ve drawn you a map of our village. It’s a little crude, so you might have to bear with me.”

“It looks great, thanks.”

“May we add to it?” Lynne asked.

“Of course. Use it as you please.”

Now that we’d prepared the earth, our next focus was setting up a local water source. Lynne examined Kyle’s map while we all discussed the best place to install one.

“Instructor, how about this high ground over here?”

“Looks good to me. Great elevation, and it’s right at the center of the village.”

“Yes, it certainly does stand out from an ease-of-access standpoint. Kyle, are there any issues with using the land in this area?”

“Not at all. The elder said you can build wherever you wish, be it inside or outside the village.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “The hole’s going to run pretty deep.”

“The hole...? Well, yes, that should be fine. But isn’t this for water? I don’t think there’s any to be had underground.”

“That’s quite all right,” Lynne said. “The hole is for storage.”

“Storage? But where will the water come from?”

“Well...”

My attempt to dig a well had failed catastrophically when we’d run into the Divine Beast, so we’d settled on using the Wellspring Pipe as a water source instead. Because it was so extremely valuable, we’d thought it best to obtain the elder’s permission before anything else. Lynne and I had met with him in the morning to explain our plans.

To begin with, the elder hadn’t understood our proposal to set up a water source in the village—but his confusion had quickly turned to shock when Lynne produced the Wellspring Pipe and demonstrated its potential. He’d shot up so suddenly that his head went straight through the ceiling! We had rushed over to help him, but his thoughts were completely elsewhere.

*“D-Do you mean to say...that our village will receive a constant water source?!”*



Lynne had replied in the affirmative, which caused the elder to freeze as though his soul had departed his body. I'd then told him about the crops I was going to plant, and Lynne had explained her plan to set up a militia of archers to keep the village's new water source safe from bandits. By the time we were done, the elder's expression had turned into a teary smile.

*"I cannot believe it. Am I dreaming? To think I would witness such miracles during my time in this world... Everything in the village is at your disposal! And, wait... Does this mean our other fantasies—goals we once dismissed as hopeless—are actually within our reach? Ha ha ha! Think of what we could accomplish! Why, the village might even be able to—!"*

He had continued to ramble for a while, the sparkle in his eye getting brighter while his expression grew more megalomaniacal. We had assumed that meant he was open to cooperating with us.

In any case, that was how we'd obtained the elder's permission to install a water source in the village. He must not have brought Kyle up to speed yet, but the younger beastfolk insisted that we shouldn't delay our business on his account. We headed straight for the site so we could start our work.

"Just watch," I said. "A demonstration should make this easier to understand."

"Indeed," Lynne agreed. "Please step back, Kyle. This might be dangerous."

"O-Okay...?" He looked completely lost but still did as instructed.

I started digging a hole with my sword. Well, it was more of a wide, shallow basin about as deep as I was tall. I turned to Lynne when I was done.

"All yours."

"Right," she said. "[Hellflare]."

Lynne positioned a fireball—one of her specialty spells—right above the basin I'd made. Craning my head, I thought it looked a bit like a second sun; the first had ascended into the sky quite some time ago. She brought the massive blazing orb low enough that it skimmed the ground, searing the sandy soil in the shape of a hemisphere.

Sometime later, Lynne paused to examine her work. “Instructor, will that do for the sand heating?”

“Yeah, that looks fine. It should be just right when it cools.”

The heated sand was bright red and viscous but would slowly harden into a glassy “reservoir.” It was dangerous to leave it so hot, but applying water could result in an explosion if we weren’t careful, so Lynne relied on wind magic to assist the natural cooling process.

“That was quick,” I remarked when she was done. “We should finish just before the day’s end, exactly as we planned.”

“Yes, Instructor. Next are the irrigation channels.”

“Right. Let’s get moving. See you later, Kyle.”

“O-Okay?” he stammered. “If you need anything else, please just let me know.”

Leaving the confused young man behind, Lynne and I returned to the area we’d allotted for the field and set about working. We’d almost finished the soil-improvement phase, but our canvas was still a flat expanse of sandy earth. We needed to divide it up and turn it into arable farmland for the various crops that were going to be grown here.

As it just so happened, Lynne already knew how we were going to separate the field—she had drawn up a plan during our discussion the night before. She’d said it was only a few rough notes and sketches, but they were methodically detailed, ensuring that our work would go smoothly.

“All right,” I said, consulting her drawings. “We’ll start here, then follow your plan. Could you take this wooden block and string for me?”

“Of course, Instructor.” Lynne took my crude tool—a long string tied to a random block I was borrowing from the village—and moved to the would-be corner of the field. “Is here okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. Push the wood into the ground, then bring me the loose end of the string.”

“Coming.”

From there, I used the string as a simple ruler, marking the ground at equal intervals to delineate the sides of eight separate plots. Then we set up more wood and string to indicate the perpendicular sides, creating a basic template.

“Looks like it’s going to be bigger than we thought,” Lynne noted.

“Yeah, but we’re going to need this much space to grow everything Ines brought from the capital.”

“Indeed.”

The field was going to be quite large—eight-by-eight square plots, making for sixty-four in total. We had originally wanted something smaller, but I wasn’t going to waste any of the seeds the young vendor had been kind enough to provide. Though some of them would last several years in storage, their germination rate would degrade over time, meaning it was best to sow them now while we had access to as much land and water as we could need.

The seeds wouldn’t all survive—this was a gamble more than anything else—but the more attempts we made, the better. If even a few varieties fruited, I would consider our work successful.

“All right, Lynne. You know what to do.”

“Yes. [Hellflare].”

Lynne conjured eight fireballs above the wooden blocks we’d driven into the ground. They hovered at a set height along the lines we’d created, turning strips of sand into syrupy channels that would soon harden into glass and divide up the field. We’d discussed the process in advance, but seeing it happen with my own eyes impressed me all over again. Lynne really could do anything.

*She never ceases to impress.*

Lynne’s talent should have been old news to me by now, but I couldn’t help admiring her each time she did something extraordinary. Having access to such potent fire would have made life so much easier for me growing up—no matter how intently I’d tried to turn [Tiny Flame] into something more useful, the most it had done was bake a single brick. Even that had taken three days, owing to the fire being so small, and the heat had never actually reached the inside, leaving me with something that shattered at the slightest impact.



And then there was Lynne, creating a sturdy foundation for an irrigation system in the blink of an eye. It was like watching a miracle worker ply her trade.

“Instructor, I’ve finished the groundwork for the irrigation system.”

“Yeah, thanks. Guess it’s my turn.”

“Let me cool the area first. [Tornado].” Lynne created a fierce whirlwind with a single hand, using her fine control to direct it around the plots of earth and chill the newly formed glass.

*Wow. She really can do anything.*

“How does that look?” she asked.

“Great, thanks. It should make the next step a whole lot easier.”

I placed the tip of my sword atop the first stretch of glass and regulated my breathing. I’d released one too many sighs of admiration while watching Lynne work; now it was time for me to step up and do my bit. The skills I’d acquired while cleaning drains in the royal capital were about to be put to the test.

“Here I go.”

I pressed my sword firmly into the glass and ran the blade along its length, doing my best to keep my hands steady. There was a satisfying scraping noise, and shallow grooves appeared in their wake.

*Perfect.*

I continued my work. The channels I created would serve as the basis of the “desert aqueducts” we needed.

*Looks like things are going to plan.*

Lynne had asked me how we were going to create an irrigation system large enough to support such an immense field. The first big issue was the lack of materials necessary to create the aqueducts, and the second was coming up with a way to ensure their long-term usage.

Thanks to Ines’s quick round trip, we now had a reliable water source and arable land. Our next challenge was working out how to get that water to the

crops. It had taken us some thought, but we'd eventually realized that the solution was right under our noses—literally. Lynne had explained that the sand in this area contained the composite materials necessary to produce glass if exposed to high enough temperatures. It would contain impurities, of course, but the samples she created during her tests were both hard and relatively durable. Thus, we had agreed upon the material for our aqueducts.

As for our next problem, we needed to build our irrigation system at a slight slope to ensure the easy conveyance of water. This, too, was solved through discussion.

The drains in the Kingdom's capital were all moderately inclined. Dirt and grit sometimes blocked them, but it was nothing a quick scouring couldn't fix. I'd cleaned more or less every drain in the city through my daily commissions from the Adventurers Guild, so I thoroughly understood the way they were constructed. They were engraved so deeply in my mind that I could picture them with my eyes closed.

And as it happened, they were the perfect shape for the irrigation system we needed.

Thanks to my black sword, cutting into hard glass was a nonissue. I could use my intimate knowledge of the drain network back in the capital to carve the same hollows into the crystalline strips running along our field, creating the perfect system of aqueducts.

*I can't believe all my time spent cleaning drains came in handy in a place like this.*

Now accustomed to the feel of my work, I continued to drag my sword along the glass. The hard part was over; all that remained was to follow through. I sped up slowly but surely, and the scraping noise grew increasingly louder.

*This is more fun than I expected.*

Because the drains in the royal capital were made of stone, I always had to be careful not to scratch them with my sword. Here, I could move as freely as I pleased, and a careless mistake or two wouldn't be the end of the world—there was more than enough sand nearby for us to start over any number of times. I didn't even need to worry about noise pollution, as there was no one around to

complain. It felt...liberating.

To be honest, I secretly enjoyed cleaning the drains I worked of grime and other refuse. Such jobs weren't too common in the capital these days, since everywhere was squeaky clean now, but carving Lynne's glass scratched a comparable itch.

Of course, the best part of this job was knowing how much it would improve the lives of the people around me. I'd enjoyed carving stone aqueduct components back in the royal capital, but this had that beat by a long shot.

"There. That should do it."

I completed my work in barely any time at all; the sun hadn't even reached its highest point in the sky. So enjoyable was the process that I wanted to take up my sword and get straight back to it, but the aqueducts were already the perfect depth.

"Good work, Instructor. Fine timing too—it's almost noon."

"Yeah. Shall we take a break?"

"I will prepare us somewhere to rest. [Ice Pillar]."

We sat against the icy column Lynne had created and started tucking into the packed lunches Rolo had given us. As we gazed out over the vast field and irrigation system we'd made, we chatted about the work to come.



## Chapter 134: Sirene's Archery

When she was still too young to understand her surroundings, Sirene escaped across the wall to Sarenza's north. She could hardly recall anything from that age, but she remembered the wall as high as a mountain, her much older brother's embrace, and the promise he had made before their parting.

*"We'll cross over and see you two again someday. I swear it. Just wait for me."*

For reasons Sirene hadn't been able to understand, her brother and father had stayed behind in Sarenza while she and her mother escaped. Believing in her brother's words, she had patiently awaited the day they would return.

But it never came.

Weeks had passed—then months and years—without even so much as a letter. Still, Sirene and her mother waited. Sirene would sometimes declare her intention to look for her absent brother and father, but her mother would take the little girl in her arms and say there was nothing to be done. It was already hard enough for the pair to eke out a living.

Sirene couldn't remember much about her life in Sarenza, but her days in the Kingdom of Clays were spent in poverty. Her mother had crossed into another country with a young daughter to feed and worked desperately hard to provide for them both, though her deteriorating health limited the jobs she could take.

Thanks to the king's policies, the royal library was open to any child who wished to utilize its services. Classes on reading and writing were freely available; one could even ask the librarians to read aloud a picture book. Sirene had spent most of her time there—and at other such places that granted free entry to children—while her mother was working. It had given her access to many of the same opportunities as the others her age, allowing her to enjoy a relatively normal childhood, if one discounted her shabbier clothes.

Sirene was grateful for her life in the Kingdom of Clays; though luxuries were beyond her reach, she never wanted for food and was satisfied with her

circumstances. Her mother still grieved the absence of her husband and son, but being able to live in peace with her daughter gave her more happiness than she could ever have hoped for.

It was on the eve of her fifth birthday that little Sirene first thought about becoming a soldier. She had taken an interest in the systems of the country where she had found salvation and wanted to repay her mother's hard work...though neither was her *main* motivation.

No, Sirene wished to join the Six Army Corps of the Royal Capital because a certain person had inspired her.

While playing alone in some corner of the city—she had no friends her age—Sirene had heard the name “Mianne” in a conversation between passersby. She had decided to eavesdrop, having nothing better to do, and that was when she learned of the Bow Sovereign, a beastfolk girl and peerless archer who served as captain of the Hunter Corps, one of the Six Army Corps that guarded the kingdom.

The young Sirene had wondered about Mianne. She, too, was a beastfolk girl. Not to mention, the Bow Sovereign had come from another country and still climbed the ranks to one of the most prestigious roles in the Kingdom of Clays. That news alone had sparked Sirene's interest and subsequent admiration. Beastfolk tended not to be as smart as humans, but many—like Mianne—were talented archers.

Sirene had gone home and begged for a practice bow. Her mother had eventually relented, stretching their budget to buy one as a birthday gift, and so began Sirene's march toward her dream.

The heights Sirene aspired to wouldn't be easy to reach—the Hunter Corps was renowned as the hardest of the Six Armies to join and demanded superb archery skills from its potential candidates. She was in luck, however, as her mother revealed she knew her way around a bow from the days when she had needed to hunt for food.

Sirene dove into her mother's lessons with great enthusiasm. They only covered the very basics, but she practiced them over and over again in private, surprising her mother with her rapid progress.

It hadn't been much later when, with a wry smile, Sirene's mother announced that she had nothing more to teach. Sirene had taken the news as a sign that she should search for a way to keep improving. She set out every day with her practice bow in hand, never minding that archery skills didn't exactly grow on trees.

Yet, against all odds, Sirene found what she was looking for.

Her mother had told her never to go into the forest near the city. It was too dangerous, she said. But when Sirene saw a woman venture onto that forbidden ground with a resplendent golden bow, she followed in secret and watched as the mystery archer loosed an arrow that scattered the distant clouds in the sky.

Then and there, Sirene knew—if she wanted anyone as her new teacher, it was this woman. If nothing else, she wanted to learn how to do what she'd just witnessed. She was convinced that as long as she imitated this person, she would improve. And if she improved, she might one day become good enough to join the Hunter Corps.

"Please teach me archery."

For a while, the woman examined the little girl who had suddenly appeared behind her. Then, she quietly asked, "How old are you?"

"Huh? Um...f-five."

"Hmm. Not too late to pick up a bow, but not too early either. Tell me, what do you want to become once you've learned to be an archer?"

"Huh?"

"If you just want to kill some time, there's no point in me teaching you. Is there something you want to achieve?"

"Ah-cheeve?"

"Yes... Something you want to do."

"Oh, yes. I want to be like Mianne."

The woman looked surprised. Several moments passed before she finally replied, "Mianne, huh...? Can you tell me more about her? There must be a lot



of people with that name.”

“Captain Mianne of the Hunter Corps. I want to be like her.”

“That so? Why?”

“H-Huh? U-Um...”

The rapid volley of questions made the young Sirene hesitate. She really had picked up archery to be like the Bow Sovereign, but she couldn’t reveal why. Though she had an objective in mind—a clear one, no less—her mother had warned her never to share it with anyone.

Yet something told Sirene that lying to this woman was a bad idea.

“I want to see my father and brother on the other side of the wall.”

“Yeah? Then show me your stance.”

Sirene took a moment to process the request. Rather than press for details, the woman had moved straight on to inspecting her archery. “O-Oh, okay... Like this?”

“Your posture is fine, but your grip is wrong. Someone of your height and weight should hold her bow like *this*. Also, lower your center of gravity a touch.”

“G-Gravitee...?”

“When you move, there’s a spot in your body that feels like your core, right? Try to lower it.”

“Oh, um... Like this?”

“Yes, that’s good. Try to keep it that low even when you’re just going about your day. If you get used to it, your flexibility and precision will improve significantly.”

“Flexy-billytee...? Presishun? Sig...nifickently?”

“In simple terms, you’ll find it easier to hit your targets.”



From then on, Sirene had gone to the forest every day without telling her mother. The mysterious woman wasn't always there—sometimes she didn't show up for ages—but Sirene paid it no mind and spent each morning practicing what her teacher had taught her.

On most occasions when the woman *did* return, she pointed out Sirene's bad habits, taught her ways to correct them, and then disappeared just as quickly as she'd come. Sometimes she demonstrated the results of her own practice. Sirene had thought even her mother's skill with a bow was magical, but this woman's technique surpassed it with ease. It was beautiful to behold.

Young Sirene continued to practice what the woman taught her. She trained and trained and trained, firing so many arrows that she quickly lost count. Even when her fingers bled and the skin on her hands started to peel, she lied to her mother by claiming she had tripped and scraped them while playing.

Sirene admired her teacher. Keeping up with the woman's training was tough, painful, and exhausting, but she enjoyed devoting her time to the mastery of a single art. It didn't take long for archery to become the only thing she ever thought about. One could say her obsession had come about because she had nothing else to do, but her enthusiasm persisted even to the present day.

By the time she was seven, Sirene knew how to read the wind. Her arrows flew sharper, faster, and farther than ever before. By the time she was ten, she could unleash a shot powerful enough to pierce the thick white clouds in the hot summer sky—though they barely even moved compared to when her teacher did it.

In all their time together, not once had Sirene and the woman exchanged names. Sirene had thought it best not to ask...barring the one time she succumbed to her curiosity.

"Does it matter who I am?" the woman asked in response. "Names are irrelevant on the battlefield."

Sirene nodded at her teacher's convincing logic and never asked again; she was perfectly content with being taught archery and getting to watch the woman use a bow. Not knowing each other's names meant never having to worry about things getting complicated—they could continue to devote



themselves to their mutual passion.

In the first place, Sirene never paid attention to anything except archery when she was with her teacher. They had spent entire days together without exchanging a word, simply firing arrows from morning till night. Sirene enjoyed their relationship and its consistency, and every moment she spent in the woman's company felt worthwhile.

The two remained ignorant of each other's identities until Sirene turned fifteen, the age at which one was allowed to take the Hunter Corps's entrance trial. She had expressed her intentions in passing when the woman suddenly turned to intensely study her face.

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Oh, um... Sirene." She wondered where this sudden curiosity had come from; her teacher had always maintained that she didn't care for names.

"Sirene," the woman repeated, "make sure you're there for our next entrance trial. I'm sure you'll pass."

In truth, Sirene was only moderately surprised to hear that her teacher belonged to the Hunter Corps. She had expected it to some degree, and it explained the woman's skill with a bow.

Though taking on the entrance trial had always been one of Sirene's plans, it was infamous for being one of the hardest tests the Kingdom officially managed. Passing on the first try was considered a tremendous achievement. Sirene had considered waiting until she'd improved more, but the encouragement she'd received from the teacher she respected so much gave her the push she needed. She put in a request for leave at the restaurant where she worked as a waitress—she had started there so she could contribute to her and her mother's expenses—and undertook that year's Hunter Corps entrance trial.

She passed on her first try.

It was anticlimactic, Sirene thought. She had assumed the trial would put her through her paces, but every task had seemed rudimentary compared to her usual training. Partway through, she had even started to wonder if she'd

mistakenly signed up for the wrong one. She'd checked with the examiners more than once, confirming the time, location, and contents of the trial, but they had all assured her that she was in the right place.

Following her trial, Sirene received the news that she was the youngest person ever to pass and that she even held the record for the *best results achieved*.

Though her doubts lingered, Sirene had at long last been able to enlist in the Hunter Corps. There, she had caught sight of the senior member who'd spent a decade as her teacher, but when she approached to express her gratitude...

"Great. Starting tomorrow, you're our vice-captain. I'm counting on you."

Sirene stood stock-still, unable to believe her ears. Something so outrageous would never be true, she thought; she must have misheard. She returned home, mostly euphoric, and shared the good news about the trial with her mother. The pair enjoyed a celebratory meal together before Sirene turned in for the night.

But even as she lay with her eyes closed, her teacher's words floated through her mind. What had she meant to say?

Sirene was somewhat sleep-deprived when she showed up at the Hunter Corps the next morning, reporting for her very first day of service. Her teacher had gathered everyone to make an announcement.

"This is Sirene. She just enlisted. As I'm sure you're all aware, the position of vice-captain has always been vacant. Well, starting tomorrow, Sirene here is going to take it."

There was uproar. Some found the change too sudden and hard to swallow, while others wondered why the title was being entrusted to a mere child. Sirene sympathized with their concerns more than anyone.

"Those of you who want to object, step forward. Beat her in a contest of skill and the role of vice-captain is yours."

The corps had just started to settle when the woman's proclamation evoked a fresh wave of enthusiasm. A unanimous cheer rang out, and various hunters

came forward, declaring themselves to be worthy vice-captains. Sirene recognized their names; they were all masters and veterans of archery.

Sirene wanted to surrender on the spot, but her teacher insisted that she stand her ground, speaking in the same calm voice as always. Thus, though she was reluctant and couldn't help thinking that she'd just been scammed somehow, Sirene agreed to compete against the corps's veteran hunters.

In the end, she won easily. Not a single person made for a close match. As Sirene and the other hunters stared at one another, speechless, and the rest of the corps came to grips with their shock, only a single person seemed unsurprised.

"Of course this was going to happen," the woman explained. "For the past decade, this young woman has been following my *very own* training regimen. She practiced almost every day without rest, might I add."

The entire corps turned to Sirene, their eyes betraying shock, horror, disbelief...and approval. Only then did she realize that her teacher since she was small was none other than Mianne, the Bow Sovereign.

Sirene, the youngest person ever to join the Hunter Corps, had served as its vice-captain ever since.



"I never expected to become a teacher so soon..."

Sirene gazed despairingly up at the desert sky. Somehow, she'd ended up as the archery instructor for the first village they'd stumbled into since coming to Sarenza. The graveness of their situation was just the icing on the cake: as an outsider, she had no stake in the villagers' plight, but her lessons would change the lives of her would-be students.

Princess Lynneburg had said that the archers only needed enough knowledge to defend a garden, so Sirene had agreed to help them without a second thought. Little had she known how enormous that garden was going to be.

By defeating the Divine Beast, Noor had procured enough quality land to sow every single one of the seeds Ines ferried from the Kingdom. Sirene had seen the area he planned to transform and immediately concluded that one would

need a small army to protect it. No matter how she looked at it, the task at hand was too great for her to complete alone.

Sirene had racked her brain for an excuse that would allow her to back out, only for Ines to return from the royal capital and relay that the princess's "request" had turned into a royal command from the king. To make matters worse, Sirene had received a letter directly from His Majesty encouraging her to try her best and assuring her that he would take the blame if anything went wrong.

No longer able to escape, Sirene leaped straight from simply being high-strung to feeling like her heart was in a vise. She was the vice-captain of the Kingdom's proud Hunter Corps, a role that put her in command of a great many subordinates, and while she did feel the need to meet the expectations thrust upon her, she was constantly anxious that she might not be good enough.

Sirene had enlisted with the Hunter Corps when she was only fifteen, having conquered the group's entrance trial as soon as she was old enough to take it. Captain Mianne, one of the legendary Six Sovereigns, had thrust her in the lofty vice-captain's seat not much later. Sirene hadn't believed she deserved it, and she had wrestled with those doubts ever since.

The power granted to the vice-captains of the Six Army Corps was second only to that of the Six Sovereigns, the central pillars of royal authority. For that reason, Sirene had to wonder if she really was the right person for the job—she didn't know much about politics, and there were dozens of veteran hunters in the corps who were far better at issuing orders and teaching archery. They were kind, attentive, and always there to lend a helping hand when she was lost due to her lack of experience. Her only advantage over them was how precisely she could make an arrow strike its target.

To tell the truth, Sirene's duties seemed more appropriate for a fresh recruit than a deputy leader; most of them simply involved her obeying the captain's orders like every other hunter in the corps. Even when she *did* receive tasks more appropriate for her station—such as sitting in on meetings—the more experienced veterans carried out the majority of her work for her. She really had to wonder why Captain Mianne had thought to make her the vice-captain.



The Six Army Corps all valued ability, but the Hunter Corps took meritocratic values to the extreme. Its promotion policy was exceedingly simple: “The better archer stands at the top.” Thus, while Sirene doubted her own leadership skills, she couldn’t really argue against her position; she’d bested everyone else in a fair contest.

Of course, Sirene still sincerely believed that experience was a better determinant of authority. Any one of the veterans would have made for a more suitable instructor.

“Still...” she muttered, “I guess whining won’t get me anywhere.”

Sirene slowly took in her surroundings. Despite having been told she would only be teaching a select few students, she had more than a hundred villagers gathered around her. They made up roughly half—no, maybe even the majority—of the village’s population. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping it might somehow be a trick of the light, but everything looked exactly the same when she opened them. No matter how much she wanted to cling to some imaginary savior and plead with them to help her, she had to manage on her own.

Her only way out was to get it over with.

“So, um...I guess I’ll start with a demonstration. Please watch closely.”

Fighting her nerves, Sirene decided to start by showing everyone her personal training regimen, hoping it would also do in place of an introduction. She was bad at speaking in front of crowds and thought it easier to tell what a person was like based on their actions rather than their words.

Of course, Sirene still wasn’t sure if she was doing the right thing. Other hunters in the corps had asked about her training methods, only to stare at her in disbelief when she actually explained them. Even when she demonstrated, they simply shook their heads and said they would never be able to imitate her. Going through that same exchange again and again had made her a little uncertain, but how else could she gain the villagers’ trust? They had accepted her little group because they’d defeated the Divine Beast, only that was all because of Noor. Sirene had done nothing but cook and dole out food since she’d arrived. Maybe they thought she was just an attendant of some kind.

*Still, my archery’s all that I’m worth,* Sirene told herself as she drew her bow

and aimed toward the sky. *I don't have any other ways to make them trust me.*

“First, one arrow.”

She loosed an arrow and watched it ascend. The villagers watched as well and murmured in appreciation as it disappeared into the vast blue sky. They seemed to recognize just how hard it was to maintain accuracy while shooting an arrow straight up into the air.

Sirene watched the villagers' expressions out of the corner of her eye and used their reactions to gauge what she needed to teach them. Beastfolk were naturally adept archers to begin with, so maybe it was best to skip any lectures and just answer whatever questions they had. She could decide what to teach her students once she had a feel for what interested them. The size of her class was no less intimidating, but at least she now knew what she was doing.

*Great. I don't need to pick any topics. I can just have them do it.*

Feeling a little more at ease, Sirene plucked a second arrow from her quiver, nocked it, and drew her bow, all in one smooth motion.

“Next, two.”

The second arrow shot directly upward until it struck the first, which had already started its descent. A sharp noise rang out, and a fresh wave of appreciation rippled through the crowd, this one louder than the last. Were they impressed, or did they think it was something they could do themselves? Perhaps it was the latter; the corps had plenty of hunters who could manage what she'd just done.

Still paying attention to the crowd, Sirene plucked two more arrows and nocked them both.

“Next...”

The arrows, fired simultaneously, struck the two that were spinning through the air, launching them upward in a spray of sparks. Sirene had intended to label them “three and four,” but she already found speaking tiresome. She wouldn't have the focus to spare from here on out, in any case.

Tracking the four arrows with her eyes as they whirled through the air,

reflecting the sunlight, Sirene wasted no time in nocking four more and releasing them into the sky.

“Next.”

The quartet of projectiles met their airborne counterparts, once again knocking them upward.

This time, the crowd didn't react at all. How was Sirene supposed to interpret that? Did they think she'd just done something amazing, or were they bored of watching more of the same? The latter wouldn't bode well for her, but she couldn't take her eyes off the arrows to check their expressions. She had started this demonstration, so she had to see it through to the end.

“Next.”

Carefully watching the eight arrows above her, Sirene waited a brief moment before nocking and unleashing eight more. Each drew its own trajectory as though it had a will of its own, and each met its mark.

“Next.”

Refusing to slow down, Sirene retrieved *sixteen* arrows from her quiver. They were airborne in the blink of an eye. Then she reached for the arrows she'd placed nearby, took exactly thirty-two of them, and casually tossed them above her head.

As she watched the sixteen arrows she'd just loosed strike their targets, Sirene took a deep breath. Though she followed this training regimen all the time, the next part would require complete focus. This wasn't live combat, so there wouldn't be any harm done if she slipped up...but in front of so many people, she felt intense pressure not to make a mistake.

Honestly speaking, she was just really nervous.

“Next.”

The thirty-two arrows she'd thrown almost seemed to be sucked onto her bowstring. She fired them, and they drew varying arcs across the clear blue sky. Thirty-two arrowheads clashed with thirty-two more, once again bouncing them upward.

“Next.”

Sixty-four arrows spun wildly through the hot desert air as Sirene retrieved her next batch of projectiles. Her bow wasn't long enough to accommodate them all at once, of course, so she separated them into two batches of thirty-two, which she tossed upward. They were against her bowstring barely a moment later and vanished just as quickly.

This time, a stream of sixty-four arrows ascended into the cloudless sky. They rose like a flock of migratory birds, scattering every which way, and their trajectories gradually changed as though they were seeking out their targets. A cacophony of clashing arrowheads resounded through the air like two battalions of warriors locked in a fierce skirmish.

“Next.”

Now, there were 128 arrows airborne. The final step involved Sirene releasing an equal number to bring them down somewhere safe. This was but one cycle of her training regimen, nicknamed “the 256 arrows,” though she hadn't known that when she learned it from Captain Mianne at only eight years old.

The exercise wasn't particularly tough compared to many of the others her ever-strict captain had taught her, but Sirene was still relieved to have reached the end without a hitch. Though she feared that messing up now would turn the entire demonstration into one enormous blunder, she forced herself to stay calm, repeating in her head that she'd managed it countless times before. She carefully watched the projectiles twinkling in the sky as she reached for the last bundle of arrows she was going to use.

*Huh? Where are they?*

Her fingers closed around empty air. Surprised, she glanced around at her immediate surroundings. The arrows she'd thought were there...*weren't*.

*What? Where did they go?*

Sirene suddenly remembered she wasn't in the Hunter Corps's training area. How had she forgotten? She'd only brought so many arrows with her on this journey, but her nerves had pushed that fact from her mind.

There were 128 arrows in the sky. To strike them all and alter their

trajectories, she needed just as many. She turned to count her remaining stock and realized she was 127 short. How had it come to this? Cold sweat trickled down Sirene's face as she started to grasp the situation she was in.

*What am I supposed to do now?!*

If she allowed the arrows to fall unimpeded, they would come straight down—right onto the villagers' heads. She couldn't allow that to happen. But she only had one arrow left, so how—?

*No, wait. I don't only have one. I still have one.*

She didn't have as many as she'd expected, but she wasn't empty-handed. This just called for a slight change of plan. If she could use her last arrow to safely knock aside all the others, then there wouldn't be a problem.

Sirene swallowed her nerves, took her last remaining arrow, and drew her bow with all of her might.

"Hit!"

The arrow flew horizontally through the gaps between the excited villagers—nowhere near the 128 raining down on them. An even greater stir spread through the crowd as they wondered what was going on, but their questions were answered when the arrow suddenly arced, whipping up a gust of wind as it shot back over Sirene's head. It blasted through the cloud of arrows above and created a minor sandstorm before smoothly returning to her hand without the slightest tremor.

When the small sandstorm subsided, the falling arrows finally struck the ground, sticking into the sand around Sirene's feet. The villagers immediately burst into applause and boisterous cheers while she wiped the cold sweat from her drenched brow.

*I won't lie... That was close.*

No harm was done, but still—it was hard to be relieved when she had almost caused a disaster. Normally, she would never have made the grievous mistake of miscounting her arrows. The power of the bow Captain Mianne had given her—a dungeon relic—had saved the day this time, but if not for that brute-force solution, the villagers might have been seriously injured.



Sirene wondered how the captain might have responded to her blunder if she'd been present, and the conclusion she reached made the fur on her ears and tail stand on end. Still, the beastfolk swarmed around her, their bows in hand and their eyes burning with motivation as they begged her to teach them. Her "self-introduction" had tragically failed to achieve its intended purpose, but its glitz had given her credibility in the eyes of her students. If anything, it had worked *too* well; their fervor was getting a little scary.

Stung with guilt and still unsure what she was doing, Sirene proceeded to fumble her way through leading a set of archery drills.



"Teach! I did just as you taught me, and my arrow hit the target even though my eyes were shut!"

"Good job, Golba. But you owe that to your diligent training, not to me."

"Missus Sirene! Thanks to you, I struck a scorpion on the other side of a sand dune just from sensing its presence and listening to the sounds it made! I never thought I could get this good!"

"Me? No, I'm sure you've always had a knack for it."

"Wah hah hah! Instructor Sirene! Me arrows've got an even sharper edge to 'em than in me younger years! I...I wish me late missus coulda seen 'em... *Sniff.*"

"I-Is that so? Um...good for you?"

"Thank you, Ms. Sirene. My arrows fly several times farther than they did before."

"Mine too! And now I can hit targets as small as a grain of sand!"

"Same here!"

"R-Right. Good work, everyone."

Despite everyone's praise, Sirene had simply passed on what she'd learned from Captain Mianne—the only training regimen she'd ever followed. The captain's methods were based on pure intuition, making them something of an enigma to a certain subset of the Hunter Corps, but Sirene thought they made perfect sense, and her fellow beastfolk had taken to them just as easily.

Being natural archers, Sirene's students already trained more consistently than the average person. They quickly adopted Captain Mianne's "tricks" and the method of reading the wind Sirene had learned from her mother as a child, and their abilities improved dramatically as a result.

At first, Sirene's reaction to the villagers' cheerful reports had been rather blasé: "Oh, really? Good for you." But as they'd come up to her more and more, she'd started to feel a sense of unease.

*Hold on. Did I...make a mistake?*

She was glad to have been useful, but she felt her students were progressing a little too quickly. Many among them—men and women of all ages—were already talented enough to be recruited into the Hunter Corps. What would happen if they continued to improve?

Over the span of a single lesson, the villagers had accumulated more strength than anyone would expect from a local militia tasked with protecting farmland. They were on track to become a not insignificant military power. Sirene wondered if she had set something outrageous in motion...but the rational part of her already knew the answer. She was past the point of no return.

But she was only following His Majesty's orders, right?

Sirene tried to assuage her own fears. The king and princess had told her to do her best—which was exactly what she'd done—and even stressed that they would assume all responsibility for the outcome.

*Right. This is fine. I'll be okay...I think.*

Despite her inner turmoil, Sirene was the villagers' instructor now; she had to act the part. She folded her arms and stood perfectly still, feigning composure as she watched countless arrows dart across the desert sky.

*Whatever. I don't care anymore.*

## Chapter 135: The Desert Irrigation System's Inauguration Ceremony

"[Hellflare]."

On our way back to the village, we constructed the waterway that would connect the finished irrigation system to the reservoir. Lynne once again melted the sand with her fireball spell; then, when it cooled, I used my black sword to scrape a groove into the fresh glass. The end result wasn't the prettiest thing to look at—just a simple, sturdy water channel—but for the purpose of transporting water to the field, it was plenty.

Compared to setting up the irrigation system, making the water channel was easy—the change in elevation from the field to the village was just right. We made it back while the sun was still up and connected the channel to the reservoir, marking the end of a good day's work.

"That concludes everything we planned to do today," Lynne remarked.

"Yeah," I replied. "Smooth sailing all the way. Let's go tell the old man."

"Yes, Instructor."

I wanted to build a cookhouse and somewhere for the villagers to wash their laundry, but I supposed we should tackle that another day instead of rushing to put something together. We headed to the white-haired, animal-eared elder's house and, entirely by chance, caught him on his way out.

"Ah, our honored guests," he said. "Is something amiss? Should you need any assistance, I—"

"No, we just came to tell you that the waterways are pretty much done," I explained.

"A-Already? B-But only half a day has passed..."

"Yeah, we finished sooner than expected. On that note, we wanted to ask where we should install the 'pipe' we told you about."

“O-Of course. I shall take you there at once. Kyle, could you come along? I am taking our guests underground.”

“Yes, Elder.”

The old man beckoned us inside, looking flustered. Only when he'd closed the door behind us did he pull back the sooty rug laid across the floor, exposing a square, worn-looking trapdoor made of wood. Kyle opened it to reveal stone steps that descended into the darkness.

“Please follow me,” the elder said. “I will show you to our village's storehouse.” He took a lit candle and led us down the steep stone staircase.

“How deep does this go?” I eventually asked. We'd been walking for a while, and there was still no end in sight. “Feels like we've gone pretty far already.”

“Generations of elders have managed this storehouse,” the old man explained. “The severe temperature changes on the surface make storing things difficult, so our ancestors excavated deep into the earth. We benefit from their toil to this day. Of course, we have no other assets worth mentioning, so...”

Speaking of the temperature, it *was* rather cool down here, especially compared to the heat of the surface. It would probably stay cool even when the nights grew cold. Using a deep underground space as a storehouse was a pretty smart idea.

“This way.”

“So this is the storehouse,” I mused. “It's bigger than I thought.”

We alighted in a cave that the light revealed to be surprisingly spacious. Lynne seemed quite impressed as we surveyed the area.

“Incredible. Did your ancestors excavate this entirely by hand?”

“We beastfolk pride ourselves on our sturdiness,” the elder explained. “As I understand it, our ancestors dedicated a long time to making this storehouse, creating it slowly but surely. It was passed down from one generation to the next and might be the reason past elders kept to this land no matter how poor we became.”

“Can anyone come here?” I asked. “It looked like you kept the entrance

hidden.”

“Entry used to be relatively unrestricted, but that changed several generations ago. Now, with the exception of the two of you, only Kyle and I even know it exists. It is my duty as the village elder to stockpile food here and distribute it fairly among the people in times of need. I am ashamed to say I have not been able to do much of that, but... Ah, my apologies. We have arrived.”

The elder came to a stop before a wall. He pressed a hand against it, and the stone opened up like a door to reveal a small room within.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A hidden chamber?” Lynne inquired.

“Though empty at the moment, it once served as the treasury where our people stored their valuables. Its contents were all sold to purchase food, so it now looks the same as any other room...but it just so happens to sit below the reservoir you created.”

“Yeah? Right below it?”

“Are you proposing we store the Wellspring Pipe here, Elder?” Lynne asked.

“Yes. I can think of no better place to keep your most generous donation. Not even Kyle knew about this room until now.”

“While we’re at it,” I said, “why don’t we set it up so it can send water straight to the surface? Assuming it really is below the reservoir...”

“From here to the surface?” Lynne mused, turning her attention to the ceiling. I gazed up as well.

“Yeah. During my time at one of the royal capital’s construction sites, I saw a pipe made of white metal being used to move water around. I figured we might be able to introduce something like that here.”

“I see... A hydraulic conveyance system using mithril pipework... The Wellspring Pipe produces enough water pressure to lend credence to the idea, and from a sanitation standpoint, using mithril would prevent the propagation of bacteria and other microorganisms. It would also eliminate the need to sneak



the Wellspring Pipe up to the surface each time the reservoir runs low; one could simply supply it with mana, and it would continue to produce water, even unattended. What an excellent suggestion, Instructor. I fully agree with you.”

“There’s still the problem of how we’re going to get the piping.”

“We could contact the royal capital and ask Ines to fetch the materials we need. I shall use the oracle’s orb at the soonest opportunity.”

“If you’re okay with that, then great.”

“P-Pardon me. I apologize for interrupting, but...” Kyle looked confused as he tried to follow the exchange between Lynne and me. “You mentioned producing water, but how? And may I ask you to explain this ‘pipe’ you keep referring to?”

“I guess we haven’t told you yet, have we?”

“Elder, Kyle will oversee the Wellspring Pipe with you, correct?” Lynne asked.

“Yes,” the old man replied. “Like me, he is able to manipulate a small amount of mana. Please bring him up to speed; I would stake my life on his just heart and ability to keep a secret.”

“Very well. Kyle—please hold this and channel mana into it. Just a little is fine.”

“Into this pipe thing? Okay.”

Kyle followed Lynne’s instructions, and water started gushing from the Wellspring Pipe’s tip. The old man wasn’t too surprised—he’d already known what to expect—but Kyle simply stared at it, dumbstruck, not caring that his feet were getting soaked.

“S-So much water...” he sputtered at last. “And it’s so clean! Wh-What *is* this pipe? Is this the water source you’ve been talking about?”

“Yes,” Lynne replied. “That one pipe alone can produce an impressive amount of water. Even if used exorbitantly, it should last you several centuries.”

“C-Centuries?! You would really give us something so valuable?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “It’s a long story, but the pipe belongs to me now. I only

requested it so I could leave it here for all of you. I wouldn't know what to do with it otherwise."

"Th-This is a dream come true... M-May I ask how long we are permitted to keep it?"

"I hadn't actually thought about that... Forever, I guess? Unless there's a problem with that."

"F-Forever? B-But you couldn't possibly... We have nothing to give you in exchange."

"Well, there *is* something we want to ask of you. It's not so much payment as just a request, though."

Kyle was on tenterhooks at first, but his worry morphed into confusion when I explained what Lynne and I wanted from his village.

"You want us to...tend to and harvest the field? That's it?"

"Hey, it's a pretty big field," I said. "It won't be as easy as you think."

"In exchange for this water, I'll do as much hard labor as you want me to. Are you sure you aren't giving us too much?"

The elder slowly shook his head and spoke gravely: "I understand how you feel, Kyle, but this priceless source of water is not the only blessing our honored guests have bestowed upon us. They went to great trouble to prepare us land with which we can sustain ourselves and to give us the knowledge and strength to protect it with our own hands. It is far beyond us to repay this debt as we are now...but we shall persevere. If we cannot do it in our lifetimes, then we need only entrust the task to future generations. *That* is our honored guests' wish."

"I see. We can return the favor over time."

"Indeed. Thus, it is imperative that we pass the story on to our children and grandchildren."

"Um, that wasn't actually what I..."

I attempted to correct them, but my words died in my throat. Kyle and the old man were making this out to be some kind of major event. I couldn't deny that I'd done them a favor by giving them the Wellspring Pipe, but this whole chain

of events had only come about because I'd wanted to try setting up a field in the desert. If anything, I'd thrust a pretty heavy responsibility on them...which was why I'd expressly told the old man that I didn't need anything in return.

But now, our two hosts—Kyle especially—were giving me the same vibe as a certain man back in the capital. Lynne's father reappeared in the back of my mind, trying to force tokens of his gratitude on me while refusing to listen to my protests.

I needed to act before things spiraled out of control. Seeking aid, I turned to the ever-reliable person by my side.

"Um, Lynne... They don't need to go *that* far, do they?"

"Indeed. My assistance was only minimal, so I would not feel right accepting anything in return. Their gratitude should go entirely to you, Instructor, for you both conceived *and* funded this enterprise. Does that sound acceptable, Elder?"

"I understand," he said. "And yes, of course."

A long silence passed before I found my voice again. "Lynne...?" I'd forgotten she was one of them!

As much as I appreciated the pair's eagerness to express their gratitude, I wasn't going to suddenly discover a use for whatever they decided to give me. I didn't want them to inconvenience themselves over something I wouldn't ever need.

Still, I didn't want to reject their goodwill. It was a little misplaced, that was all, so I tried to redirect it instead.

"How about this? If the field turns out well and you get a good harvest, let everyone in the village eat as much as they like. Save any leftovers in the storehouse, then sell what you can't save."

"Ah, I see," the elder said. "You wish for us to give you our profits."

"Oh, no. You don't need to do that."

"Then...how can we repay our debt to you?"

"Let's see..."

I wasn't going to admit that I didn't want their gratitude; instead, I would divert all their funds elsewhere. To that end, the next part of my scheme was the most important.

"First, use the money to ensure that no one who helps you tend the field wants for anything. If you do that and still have some to spare, then I want you to hire people."

"Hire people...? From outside the village, you mean?"

"Yeah. The field is pretty huge, so you'll want a lot of hands to get everything done. Tools too, actually. The more you think about it, the more you'll realize just how much you need. Put the money toward that first. I'll entrust the specifics to you."

"I... I understand. And when that is done, the surplus will go to you?"

"No, not yet. If you have more coin, use it to expand the fields. You're going to need more food to feed those people you hired, right? Homes for them too—and many other things, I'm sure. Spend your profits on that."

"B-But...our debt..."

"When you've gone through all the steps I just mentioned and the whole village is satisfied, *then* you can repay me. Oh, but make sure everyone has a decent amount of money saved up for retirement first. And don't give me any coin you can't afford to lose. Only under those conditions will I take repayment. I won't accept a *single* copper otherwise!"

My closing remark might have been overkill, but I figured this would stop them from trying to thank me anytime soon. Kyle and the old man exchanged a look, then nodded. Lynne, meanwhile, was staring at the ground, muttering something to herself with a very serious look on her face.

"—not only forgoes immediate gain in pursuit of the well-being of everyone involved, it also maximizes the potential for long-term returns. Is that the essence of Instructor Noor's investment strategy? I see... I am still too shortsighted. I must reflect on myself thoroughly if I am to grow."

To be honest, I'd thought Lynne would object to my ideas. The suspicion that I'd created a new major misunderstanding of some kind gnawed at me, but

everyone seemed to be on board, so I supposed everything would turn out all right. Hopefully.

“By the way,” I added, “when I said you could keep the pipe forever, I didn’t mean you had to. You’re welcome to sell the thing if you ever stop using it. I certainly don’t need it back.”

“No, we could never!” the elder protested. “To us, it already holds value far greater than gold. It is the treasure of our people, and we shall guard it with our lives for generations to come, even when it stops producing water.”

“You’re...welcome to do as you please. Just don’t overdo it, okay?”

Thus, we left the Wellspring Pipe in the village’s secret underground storehouse.



Lynne used the very convenient oracle’s orb to inform Ines, who was back in the capital, what kind of pipes we needed and the lengths we needed them to be. Ines would secure them and give them to us when she returned.

Unable to sit still in the meantime, I asked Lynne to help me lay the foundation for our pipework. She used her fire magic to cut an extremely thin hole from the storehouse to the surface, creating a glass conduit that we then connected to our water supply. The results were instant; the pipes hardly leaked at all, and water spouted up into the reservoir above.

This was far from a permanent solution, of course—we would eventually need to replace the pipes with metal ones, as Lynne’s could shatter if exposed to a great enough impact—but the village now had water in its reservoir. I was eager to get it running down the channel we’d made so I could see how well it worked.

“Wow! Is that all water?” a little girl exclaimed. “It’s so clear!”

“It is,” her mother replied. “Not even mommy has seen water this clean before...”

Curious villagers had started to gather, turning the event into an impromptu inauguration ceremony. They watched the reservoir slowly fill, hardly daring to



breathe, then erupted in cheers when water began flowing down the channel. It was like they couldn't believe what they were seeing. Even the mother and daughter near me seemed unsure how to react.

"Mommy, can I touch it?"

"Of course not. You wouldn't want to dirty the water, would you? Be a good girl and stay away from it until we have the elder's permission, okay?"

"Mm-kay..."

"Oh, you don't need to be so careful," I said. "You can even wash your hands in it, if you want. Just make sure you get your drinking water upstream."

"B-But it's so clean," the mother said. "We couldn't possibly..."

"Use as much as you like. There's a lot more where it came from, and it's only headed for the field anyway."

"Okay... But how do we have such clean water all of a sudden?"

It took me a moment to conjure up a response. "Yeah... Good question. It's a real mystery."

We were keeping the Wellspring Pipe secret from the villagers. The more people who knew about it, the more likely things were to get complicated, so we'd decided to go with Lynne's proposed cover story: now that the Divine Beast was dead, the water it had spent so long sucking up had returned to the land. It might have been a shaky story under any other circumstances, but it was made more believable by the creature's titanic size.

The elder and Kyle, his right-hand man, were the only two villagers aware of the Wellspring Pipe. Since they could also manipulate the mana necessary to use it, we'd entrusted its management entirely to them. Kyle was underground at that very moment, creating the water that had caused such a stir. He wasn't yet used to the process, so the strength of the spout waxed and waned, but that just made it look more like a natural phenomenon.

"H-Hey... Is this really water?"

"Wait, we can drink it? Without the elder's permission?"

"R-Really? You must've heard wrong."

“Oh, I get it. This isn’t even happening! The past few days have all been a dream. A really, *really* long one...”

Clean water must have been a rare sight for the villagers because they seemed too apprehensive to even touch it. One person tentatively tried, then another, emboldening others to do the same. Everyone who tasted some voiced their astonishment, and the kids even started to splash about in it once they understood that it wouldn’t run dry. The adults scolded them at first, but that soon changed when we assured them it was fine; some dipped their feet in, while others frolicked as merrily as the children.

“They appear to be enjoying themselves,” Lynne said.

“Yeah.”

We stepped into the channel and joined them. The cold water running over my feet was a nice reprieve from the hot desert air.

Despite our enjoyment, most of the villagers continued to watch from afar. Clean water was a precious commodity for the people of the desert; to many of them, bathing in it was outright unthinkable. Seeing them reminded me they would need water sources separate from the channel—sources they could drink from, cook with, and wash their clothes in. Constructing somewhere to store water for bathing also seemed like a good idea, though I wondered whether the majority would actually use it.

“Sirene and the others are back,” Lynne noted.

I turned to look and spied the beastfolk returning from their archery training—a large group with Sirene in the lead. Something about them seemed...*off*.

“My lady, I have returned.”

“Good work out there, Sirene. How was the training?”

“As per your command, I instructed everyone to the best of my ability. It went well...I think.”

“You think?”

“Well...they’ve all been like *that* since we started.”

Wearing a troubled expression, Sirene looked over her shoulder at the other

beastfolk, who were standing rank and file and clutching their bows to their chests with great care. No matter their age or sex, they all positively crackled with enthusiasm. You would think they were master archers from the intimidating aura they radiated, and their eyes glinted with the ferocity of wild animals. I was pretty sure they hadn't been like this when I'd seen them yesterday...

"I-It would appear your training was rather effective..." Lynne said, scanning the orderly formation.

"Perhaps a little *too* effective," Sirene lamented. "I'm scared of how they'll turn out..."

A young man with a particularly large build stepped out from the center of the front rank and saluted Sirene. "Instructor!" he bellowed. "Permission to ask a question?!"

"Uh...sure. Go ahead, Golba."

The young man's voice was loud enough to shake the air, and his size was a sight to behold. As I wondered how he'd grown so large in a village with such major food problems, he thumped his bow against his chest and saluted Sirene again.

"We have successfully reached the village! Awaiting orders, ma'am!"

"The training's over. You're free to do whatever you want. And there's no need to form up or salute me, okay?"

"Understood, Instructor! We look forward to receiving more of your guidance tomorrow!"

"We look forward to it, ma'am!" cried a chorus of voices.

"Uh...yeah. Th-Thanks for sticking with me?"

"Company!" Golba bellowed. "Bow to the instructor! Aaaaaand...dismissed!"

Following the brawny young man's orders, the unit bowed deeply to Sirene and then broke apart. Some of the villagers gathered in small groups to chat, looking sincerely satisfied, while others approached their instructor to shake her hand and thank her, shedding tears all the while.

What had caused this sudden and drastic change? I could sense an unbreakable bond between Sirene and her archers—or maybe “a clear-cut hierarchy” was a more accurate description. Whatever the case, it was good to see them getting along...even if Sirene looked totally overwhelmed.

“Well done, Sirene,” Lynne said. “Please be sure to rest, all right?”

“Yes, my lady. Thank you for your concern. Rolo is still cooking, so I would like to assist him first. I’ve nothing else to do right now.”

“Of course. Go ahead.”

Once the archers had scattered, Sirene jogged over to where Rolo and some of the villagers were preparing food. She easily mixed in with them and started to help out, much like the day before.

Our chefs finished their preparations just as I thought about how much I was looking forward to today’s meal. A long line formed in the blink of an eye as Rolo, Sirene, and the helping villagers began to dish out the food.

“There’s plenty to go around, so don’t shy away from coming back for seconds!”

Rolo’s routine announcement was like a magic spell, summoning a crowd to the large pot in an instant. The turnout was impressive, but it struck me as noticeably smaller than usual; many of the villagers were still staring at the water, once again reminding me how precious a resource it was for them. They sat in circles with their friends, engaging in pleasant conversation while they watched the steady stream. Some dipped their feet in while they ate, humming to themselves. Seeing their happy faces made all the work we’d done worth it.

“I’m glad today’s work went as smoothly as it did,” I said to Lynne.

“Me too, Instructor.”

That being said, we had discovered some new problems in the process.

Once I’d eaten, I strolled along the channel to help me digest my food. The water flowed without issue, but I spotted a few concerns, such as how easily sand accumulated at the bottom. It was only natural, since we were in the desert. We’d dug the groove deep, so it wouldn’t clog for a while yet, but we’d

need to cover the channel up to prevent that in the future.

Speaking of the future, I wanted to improve the ease of use of our water system, especially since it was destined to be a mainstay of the villagers' everyday lives. And while I was at it, I figured that I might as well spruce up the reservoir to make it nicer to look at.

There was no end to the number of minor adjustments I could make. None of them seemed particularly challenging—they were more just simple improvements I wanted to attempt—but they would keep me sufficiently busy for our last few days in the village.

I went to bed that night in a good mood, thinking of all the work I'd start on the next day.



Late into the night, we heard footsteps on the sand outside, carried to our room by the cold desert wind. Sirene sprang to her feet, having been the first to notice them.

"This isn't good, my lady. We're surrounded."

"What?!" Lynne invoked some kind of skill, and whatever it revealed seemed to take her by surprise. "I-Instructor, Rolo! Please wake up!"

I sat up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. Hadn't something like this happened to us not long ago?

"My apologies," Lynne said. "I wasn't cautious enough. They already have us surrounded."

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Is it the villagers again?"

"No, the *entire village* has been encircled." Lynne's face was pale, and her voice came out in a strained whisper. "There's nowhere to escape."



## Chapter 136: Visitors in the Night

We rushed to get dressed and hurried out of our lodgings. Lynne had detected a large group around the village, but it wasn't moving as of yet. It was strange—I couldn't hear any footsteps, and nothing even seemed to be alive out there, much less preparing to attack.

The villagers must have noticed the newcomers as well; I saw them exiting their houses, bows and knives in hand. There was a heaviness to the air hanging over the whole settlement.

"Lynne, which way should we go?" I asked.

"This way. I can't sense people in any other direction."

"Are you saying...there's something *other than people* surrounding us?"

"Yes, if my suspicions are correct."

Lynne seemed nervous as we followed her lead. It wasn't long before the figures of those enclosing the village faded out of the darkness and into view, lit by the pale moonlight. Large, strangely shaped puppets stood stock-still in a line across the sand.

"Are those golems...?" Lynne asked, utterly shocked to see them. "And they're...Origin Dolls?! But those are Sarenza's most precious assets! To see so many mobilized at once..."

"Golems?" I repeated.

I'd thought golems all resembled humans, but evidently not. The ones before us shared angular, rugged exteriors made of a material that brought hard ceramic to mind, but I saw forms akin to birds, beasts, large dragons, and others that I didn't even know how to describe.

While the eerie dolls that had emerged from the gloom captured our attention, someone called out from the darkness: "My deepest apologies for causing such a disturbance at this late hour, Lady Lynneburg."

I looked in the direction of the voice and saw a golem even more conspicuous than the rest—a bipedal dragon—step forward. The young man sitting atop it spoke politely.

“You must excuse me for the inappropriate setting of our meeting. I find the harsh rays of the sun quite disagreeable, you understand. I plead your forgiveness.”

“Do you know him, Lynne?” I asked.

“No... I’ve never seen him before.”

The young man didn’t seem like a bandit. Rather, his fine attire gave me the impression he was pretty wealthy. We were trying to figure out how to respond to him when he slid down from the dragon-shaped golem, alighted softly on the sand, and strolled toward us. Two figures clad in black appeared silently from the darkness behind him. One was a tall, one-armed male beastfolk, while the other was a slender woman of small stature.

Wearing a smile that lacked any hostility, the young man stopped before us and gave Lynne a respectful bow. “It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Lady Lynneburg.”

Lynne still seemed wary of the stranger. “Pardon my directness, but how do you know me? I don’t believe we’ve ever met.”

“You are quite correct. I know you from the stories Lord Rein told about his prodigious younger sister.”

“From my brother...? My apologies, but what is your relationship with him?”

“The two of us studied together in Mithra. We were quite close.”

“I see. Not to be curt, but might I trouble you to explain the current circumstances? Why have you surrounded the village with so many golems? And...*war* golems, at that.”

“Ah...yes. It does behoove me to explain, doesn’t it? I wouldn’t want the ladies and gentlemen gathering over there to misunderstand.” His gaze indicated the beastfolk villagers who’d gotten wind of the intruders. They were all visibly nervous, and some gripped weapons such as bows or knives.



“My apologies for the late introduction,” the young man continued. “I am Rashid, administrator of this Sarennu region. Although my primary duties are political in nature, I also serve the people here as the region’s chief tax collector. I’ve come today to perform an audit. As for the golems, they are only here for my protection.”

“There are...rather a lot of them for a simple guard detail.”

“As I’m sure you’ve already surmised, individuals in positions such as mine are the target of some resentment in this country. This protection is the bare minimum necessary for me to carry out my duties. But of course, my work here is already done; all that remains is for me to depart. I simply thought I might make your acquaintance while I was here.”

“You’re...done? With the audit?”

“Indeed. It would appear that the people of this village now possess some rather significant assets. In the interests of maintaining a fair and impartial tax policy for all residents of the region, they will now be obliged to pay the tax from which they were previously *exempt*. My assessment has judged the value of their assets to be quite considerable, so I thought I should inform them on top of speaking with you.”

“In other words, you came to levy a new tax on the village?”

“That is correct, Lady Lynneburg.” The tension never drained from Lynne’s expression, but under the moonlight, the young man’s gracious smile remained. “Our thorough audit has discovered a large agricultural area that did not exist last year. In accordance with the stipulations set by the Sarenza Commercial Association, I estimate the necessary tax to be eighty percent of its total revenue.”

“E-Eighty percent...?!”

“There is also the matter of the newly constructed waterway. The appropriate tax will be levied upon it, of course...but of more importance is the *water source*. Its existence alone is exceedingly significant.”

Lynne’s eyes wavered nervously. The young man fixed her with a steady gaze, still smiling, before continuing in a calm tone.

“As you know, water is a highly precious resource here in Sarenza’s northern region. In certain cases, water as clear as that in the village’s possession might even dwarf gold in its value as a commodity. I would be remiss in my duties as a tax official if I overlooked it.”

“Incidentally...what is the total sum of the tax associated with their assets?”

“Here is the assessed value from our audit. Though I must stress that this is only our *current* estimate.” The young man produced some kind of document and showed it to Lynne in one fluid motion. Based on her reaction, whatever it said must have been shocking.

“Wha...? But this amount is...! The villagers couldn’t possibly—”

“Pay? The Sarenza Trade Company oversees all governmental affairs. We are only requesting fair payment as per the rule of law. However, as we also conduct business in the financial sector, we are more than willing to offer low-interest loans to those unable to settle their tax accounts in the short term. That option might be worth looking into.”

“So you’re saying...they should take on debt to pay their taxes?”

“It might be the most prudent option, yes.” The smiling young man shrugged, and every single golem surrounding the village pivoted to face Lynne. “I realize it must sound peculiar to foreigners such as yourselves, but these are the laws of this land. I would appreciate your understanding in this matter.”

“A moment, please. A country’s government has the right to collect taxes, but is it not also duty bound to protect its people? What have you done to improve the lives of those living in this region?”

“My, so scrutinous! Poor as my ability may be, my subordinates and I preserve the peace and stability of this land through our armed might. Our contributions might not be obvious at first glance, but I assure you, it is because of our constant protection that the people of this village and others need not fear outside enemies as they go about their daily lives.”

“And where are these ‘outside enemies,’ might I ask?”

“Why, everywhere. Though they elude our sight, the seeds of danger are always present. It falls to those of us in power to prevent their germination,

despite the vast costs and tireless effort it requires. As Lord Rein's sister, you must understand this very well."

"You're...not wrong."

Lynne's conversation with the man had stopped making sense to me a while ago, but I could tell she was losing the exchange. I wasn't sure I'd seen that happen before; she was so impressively smart.

Though the young man had mentioned a number of concepts I couldn't quite grasp, the gist seemed to be that he spent a lot of money protecting the villagers from hidden enemies and wanted them to reimburse him. That seemed fair enough to me. But, wait... In that case, what if...?

"In short, if the villagers become able to protect themselves, they won't need to pay that expensive tax?" I asked, trying to wrap my head around the situation.

The talkative young man fell silent and studied my face. "What a fascinating way to frame the matter. Pardon me, for I realize it is rude to assume, but are you one of Lady Lynneburg's companions from the Kingdom of Clays?"

"That's right. I'm Noor. Nice to meet you."

"Rashid. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Even once we'd exchanged simple greetings, the young man continued to examine me. The surrounding golems, big and small, also turned their heads in my direction. What was the deal with them, anyway?

"I see," he said. "That would be an option, I suppose. It would even be logical, in a certain sense. But have you given due thought to the consequences? You would risk them crossing swords with not only the Sarenza Trade Company but House Sarenza too."

"Wait, what? Why? There's no reason for you to be enemies. Can't you just get along?"

"Perhaps I misheard you. I thought your plan was for this locality to refuse our country's protection and tread the path of independence."

"It was, I think. Is there some kind of problem with that?"



“Ah, I understand. You believe yourselves capable enough to pursue such an idea. Fascinating...” He nodded, then murmured something to the man beside him. “Shauza. Assess his value.”

“My lord.”

No sooner had the smile vanished from the young man’s face than his much larger companion disappeared.

“[Parry].”

Out of nowhere, the tall, one-armed beastfolk swung a dagger at my back, targeting my blind spot. A large spray of sparks shot into the darkness as I parried the heavy blow with my sword, casting enough light on his face for me to see that the man called Shauza was missing an eye as well as an arm. He nimbly leaped back as soon as our gazes met.

“Instructor Noor?!”

“What was that for?” I asked.

Maybe because of the darkness, I hadn’t been able to track a single one of the black-clad beastfolk’s movements. Though I’d barely managed to deflect his strike in time, my sword hand was still tingling from the impact.

“Well, Shauza?” the young man asked. “What’s he worth?”

“I could not tell from that one exchange.”

“Oh? You couldn’t?”

“No. At the very least, he will not be easy to appraise.”

“Hmm... ‘Not easy to appraise.’ Truly fascinating.” The young man’s lips curled in an amused grin. It seemed slightly sinister compared to the pasted-on smile he’d worn previously. “Lady Lynneburg, it appears your companion is more than just talk. How did your kingdom come by a talent like him, might I ask?”

“First, would you care to explain your reason for attacking him?”

“Hmm? My reason? Of course. Consider it a personal interest of mine. If you found it displeasing, then I apologize.”

“A personal interest...?”

“Yes. As minor and unimportant as I might be, I am a merchant. When your companion espoused such a grand idea, I wondered whether he had the ‘worth’ to back it up.”

“That’s your excuse?”

“For those of us who stake our livelihoods on the world of trade, the value of information exceeds all else. As a merchant, I was compelled to act.”

“Lord Rashid, I do not understand. Are you saying that you wish to do battle with us simply to evaluate this ‘worth’ of which you speak?”

The air was already tense, given that I’d just been attacked from behind, but Lynne’s exchange with the young man sent a buzz through the beastfolk watching us. When she moved to touch the hilt of her sword, tensions rose even further.

“Not at all, Lady Lynneburg. That would be absurd. I am disinclined toward the use of violence to begin with. Still...this leaves me in a bind. Both that gentleman and you seem to take issue with the methods of my country.”

“Anyone would after all that you’ve told us.”

“In that case, may I propose a compromise? So that we might amicably settle this difference between our parties.”

“A compromise, you say?”

Lynne seemed to grow more cautious, but the young man’s expression and gentle demeanor remained. Perhaps he saw through her because his smile broadened a fraction. He opened his arms wide in an exaggerated motion and continued.

“Between here and the central capital of Sarenza, there is a modestly sized town known as the City Forgotten by Time. Are you aware of it?”

“I am, though only by name.”

“It is one of the cities operated by the Sarenza Trade Company—of which I am the owner, as it happens. My proposal is as follows: you and I shall settle our dispute through a number of Trials.”

“Trials? As in, Sarenza’s ancient method of arbitration?”

“Indeed. The breadth of your knowledge is impressive—not that I expected any less of you. Since ancient times, our land has settled its disputes through fair and impartial games to avoid the outbreak of violence. It is a system of arbitration wherein the party with the superior wit and the most righteous cause in the eyes of the public is given preference. Though the practice is quite old, it is recognized in modern law.”

“So the legal legitimacy of our stances would depend on a wager?”

“Yes, exactly. Perhaps it would be easier to envision as a nonviolent duel with an element of entertainment. If you find the method agreeable, we might yet resolve this amicably.”

“Do we have anything to gain from going along with this?”

“Of course. In the event that you achieve victory over us, we will exempt this locality from the tax it currently owes. Though I am but a lowly regional government official, that much is within my power.”

“And if we lose?”

“I would ask you to grant me a single request. A simple one, of course—you need not worry on that front. However, on principle, it will need to be of equal value to the tax we are offering to absolve.”

The young man wore his usual smile, but Lynne looked uncertain. “I find it hard to believe we’d have a fair chance in these games,” she replied.

“As I said, this is merely a proposal on our part—a potential means of us finding common ground rather than resorting to violence. Whether you accept is at your discretion. We cannot be held accountable for your judgment.”

The young man looked around, his gaze encouraging Lynne to do the same. Beastfolk stared down the tide of golems, their faces grim. Some of the former were children, and their hands trembled as they gripped their bows. They looked ready to fight.

“Instructor Noor, what do you think?”

“His proposal sounds good to me. He’s saying they don’t want violence, and if going with them will smooth things over...”

“I suppose you’re right.” Lynne exchanged glances and nods with Sirene and Rolo, then turned back to the young man. “Very well. We shall travel to the City Forgotten by Time. Can you swear not to lay a hand on this village in the meantime?”

“But of course. I applaud your sagacious judgment, Lady Lynneburg.”

“We shall depart at first light tomorrow. Our transport is currently occupied.”

“That is no problem at all. I shall await your arrival at midday. As the ancient proverb goes, time is worth more than gold. The sooner we put our issues to rest, the better.”

“Indeed. On that front, we agree.”

“Then we of the City Forgotten by Time shall prepare for your welcome. My father *did* ask us to extend our hospitality to any visitors we might encounter from the Kingdom of Clays.”

“Your father being...?”

“Ah, dear me. It appears I was remiss in properly introducing myself. I am Rashid, eldest son of Zaid, the current head of House Sarenza. Tax exemption for an entire settlement is usually not a valid commodity to be placed on the scales of the Trials or used as a prize in a game, but my father will understand if we are acting for the sake of our foreign guests.”

“Tax exemption? Used as a prize?”

“Yes. It *is* but a ‘game,’ after all. Please enjoy it as though it were a bit of light entertainment.”

“I don’t see how I possibly could.”

The young man’s smile remained until the end, and so did Lynne’s wariness toward him. Sirene and Rolo kept their eyes locked on the two black-clad figures.

“Then, Lady Lynneburg, I shall take my leave. Do excuse me for dropping by at such a late hour. I sincerely look forward to our next meeting. In the meantime, please convey my regards to your brother, Rein, and inform him that Rashid misses him dearly.”

After delivering that one-sided farewell, the young man Rashid, his two black-clad companions, and the legion of golems vanished into the night without a sound.

## Chapter 137: Rashid, Merchant Scion

*"He said his name was Rashid? Are you certain, Lynne?"*

Once the legion of golems had departed, Princess Lynneburg had returned to a private room in her lodgings. There, she had set her portable, scaled-down oracle's orb on the desk and contacted Prince Rein, who was back in the Kingdom's capital.

*"Yes. He wanted me to tell you that he hopes to see you again."*

*"The feeling is anything but mutual, especially in the current circumstances. From what you've told me, he must be the man I remember. His claim of being the eldest son of House Sarenza is true, though his country's customs diverge from ours in that regard. They count all of his many half-siblings from different mothers."*

*"He mentioned that you were friends when you studied abroad in Mithra."*

Rein's face, shown by the oracle's orb, wore an especially sour expression. *"Yes, well...that is open to debate. We did spend two years there, but I would rather not think about the majority of our time together."*

*"Is he that troublesome?"*

*"I was hoping we would never cross paths again, but alas..."*

*"Sorry. This is all because of my inexperience..."*

*"No, this outcome was inevitable from the moment father agreed to give Noor a Wellspring Pipe. I and the others who discussed the matter with him are to blame. Though I must admit, I didn't expect you to run into them so soon."* Rein sighed, and the furrow in his brow deepened as he sat back in his chair.

*"This is only speculation, but...they might already have guessed that the village has a Wellspring Pipe. Despite the sheer absurdity of such a clean water source appearing out of nowhere, Rashid seemed to purposefully avoid asking about it, to the point that it almost felt forced."*



*"I wouldn't be surprised. If, as he said, he really is the administrator of the City Forgotten by Time, then he oversees one of Sarenza's Wellspring Pipes. He understands better than anyone how much wealth they can generate out in the desert. It couldn't have taken him long to piece everything together."*

*"There's a Wellspring Pipe in the City Forgotten by Time?"*

*"As I understand it, one of the Pipes the King Clays of several generations ago gave to Sarenza sits among the city's foundations. Though its main function is apparently to service an entertainment complex for the wealthy."*

*"A relic from the history books..."*

*"Indeed. I didn't expect you to have to visit such a place so soon after entering the country... Problems are piling up so quickly that I can almost feel a headache coming on."*

*"We're departing for the city tomorrow morning to participate in Rashid's Trials. Should we leave some of our party behind to protect the Pipe?"*

*After several moments of thought, the prince shook his head. "No, that shouldn't be necessary."*

*"Might I ask why?"*

*"He promised not to lay a hand on the village until your wager was decided, correct? Then take him at his word. We know he wants to levy new taxes, but his interest in the Pipe is pure speculation on our part. Maybe his showing up in the dead of night with a legion of golems was but a ploy to inflame your sense of caution and drive you to split your combat potential."*

*"So...you believe he might have some other objective?"*

*"If my memory serves me right, he's someone who keeps his cards close to his chest—who never makes his true goals obvious enough to extrapolate. But at the same time, he's not someone who double-deals."*

*"I'm not sure I understand."*

*"I can only speak anecdotally as someone who's dealt with him before, so take my next words with a grain of salt. I expect Rashid to follow the terms of your agreement to the letter. He always keeps his word...and only his word."*

“He keeps his word...? Do you mean to say he’s trustworthy?”

*“Exactly the opposite. Be wary of everything he doesn’t explicitly say.”*

The princess cocked her head slightly. “I... Pardon? What does that mean...?”

*“Someone as honest as you might find this hard to grasp, but he lives by the principle that a merchant’s reputation holds more importance than anything else. Rashid will abide by whatever promise he made you—though he will use semantics to his advantage. You must memorize whatever he says, for taking him at face value is a sure way to be exploited. The terms of any agreement can be interpreted in all sorts of ways.”*

“I... I see...?”

*“My apologies, but that’s all the advice I can give you. The more you dwell on his words and actions, the more uncertain you will grow. I suspect he even takes pleasure in that torment. Even so, you must be prepared for anything.”*

“Very well. I understand.”

Again, Rein adjusted his posture. Lynne knew exactly what the deep crease between his eyebrows meant.

*“Trials against Rashid, of all people... You really have been drawn into a nightmare of a situation, haven’t you?”*

“I can only apologize that I did not consult you first. I sincerely believed there was no other way to avoid a fight and keep the villagers safe.”

*“You saw it all with your own eyes, so I trust your judgment. Just keep in mind that you might be dancing to his tune. Maybe you responded exactly as he anticipated. You’ve already accepted a great deal of risk because of him.”*

“Yes, brother.”

*“To make matters worse, once you step foot in the City Forgotten by Time, we might not be able to provide you any more support.”* The prince put a hand to his head and breathed another deep sigh. *“Though I suppose our hands have been tied since the moment you entered Sarenza.”*

“My only knowledge of the country’s Trials comes from books I’ve read on the subject. Are they still formally acknowledged?”

*“They’re an ancient form of arbitration unique to Sarenza, but yes, they’re used even today. The parties involved compete before the public, acting under impartial rules, with the theory being that an audience will ensure everyone keeps to the agreed terms of their match.”*

*“So legitimacy is determined through an impartial contest.”*

*“Impartial on paper. In actual fact, Sarenza uses Trials as a smoke screen to justify almost anything. I’d go as far as to call them more dangerous than a duel with weapons.”*

*“Are they truly so cutthroat?”*

*“The contests themselves tend to be standard games, but they are anything but fair; bribes, tricks, and traps laid in advance are all on the table. Perhaps it is really a battle of wits—a contest to see who can cheat the most without being discovered. Even the games themselves are unjust, as they fail to account for disparities between the involved parties. They would pit an infant against a titan and call it evenhanded. I doubt your contests are going to be fair, but still, it is crucial that you play by the rules they lay out, even if only barely.”*

*“But...why?”*

*“Because they will too. Sarenza’s merchants consolidate their power through carefully worded contracts; not respecting their agreements would inspire others to do the same and call the legitimacy of their rule into question. Make no mistake, though—behind the scenes, they will attempt every trick in the book to gain an advantage over you. That’s the kind of place you’re headed to. Tread with caution.”*

*“We will. Has father said anything about all this?”*

*“Yes, he will accept full responsibility for the diplomatic outcome. He said that he wants you to do your best to resolve the issue under your own power and that he is entrusting the matter entirely to you and your companions. Ah, he also gave his regards to Sir Noor.”*

*“Thank you. I’ll pass that along.”*

Lynne stopped channeling mana into the oracle’s orb, ending her midnight correspondence with the royal capital.

## Chapter 138: Predeparture Preparations

“Okay. It’s all yours. If you don’t understand anything about the cultivation process, consult the manual in the elder’s house.”

We were about to leave for the City Forgotten by Time, and Lynne had said it would probably be a while before we returned to the village. That was why I’d gathered the villagers around the field early in the morning to give them a quick overview of how to tend to it.

There were sixty-four plots that needed to be looked after. We’d worked out the ideal number of people for each one—about as many as there were in the average family—and then distributed them among the volunteers. Groups who finished their work early could assist those around them.

As for me, my role was to teach everyone how to grow their produce.

“Can we really do whatever we want with the crops we harvest?” one of the villagers asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I want to test a few things out, but otherwise, the plots are yours. Consider the crops my way of apologizing for all the work I’ve forced on you. That might seem strange, but they’re yours to do with as you please.”

“Understood. We shall guard this field, the pride of our people, for generations to come!”

“Um... There’s no need to go *that* far...”

The villagers—Kyle included—had spent their entire lives out here in the desert. They had no farming expertise to speak of, but that was where my experiences from when I was a kid came in handy. Of course, my contribution was mostly teaching them how to use the new irrigation system; everything else they needed to know was covered in the amazing cultivation manual written by the young seed vendor.

We were too short on time for me to go into detail, so I’d covered only the essentials before directing everyone to the vendor’s cultivation manual, which

I'd entrusted to Kyle and the elder. The field was my responsibility, having been my idea in the first place, but the illustrated manual meant everyone would be able to carry on just fine even if I never came back.

The villagers absorbed my words with looks of complete dedication. I trusted they'd be just as diligent when it came to studying the vendor's manual. Thanks to that, I actually ended up finishing my work long before it was time to depart.

"These plots are in great hands," I said. "Lynne, I'm good to go whenever you are."

"Thank you, Instructor. We're just waiting for the village defense team."

At first, we'd considered asking everyone to tend the field, but Lynne had proposed splitting them into two groups: one to work the land and another to guard the village. People could pick what came more naturally to them, and there was less for each person to remember overall.

In accordance with our new plan, Lynne and I were in charge of the farmers, while Sirene and Rolo were training the village's security detail. I'd been a little surprised to hear that Rolo was teaching defense, but he apparently had really dexterous hands and was excellent with delicate tools. He could even improvise traps using things just lying around the village.

While I was teaching the farming team, Lynne had been with Kyle and the elder, discussing the best ways to protect the village. She had put together a number of schematics that they'd immediately set about implementing, starting with the construction of a watchtower. A high vantage point would give the beastfolk, who already had such good eyes, an excellent view of their surroundings, and Sirene maintained that they were already skilled enough with their bows to hit any target in their field of vision. It would greatly improve their combat potential.

The villagers didn't have enough construction materials on their own, so they'd sent people to purchase logs, sturdy ropes, and everything else they needed with the money I'd given them. Once they had the supplies, they would go about building everything at once.

"Instructor Sirene, ma'am! Requesting approval to use this location for our watchtower!"

“Oh yes, that spot works. But you don’t have to check with me for every little thing. Just follow the schematics.”

“Hear that, you lot?! The instructor approves! Form up! Atten-TION! Company... DIG!”

“SIR, YES, SIR!” cried a chorus of voices.

Because the watchtower was going to be quite tall, the village defense team needed to dig the foundations deep. The looks on their faces were deadly serious; suddenly being surrounded by an army of golems must have been a stark wake-up call.

Golba, with his large frame and booming voice, was proving to be a fantastic leader. He’d taken the initiative, gathering everyone together and giving them direction. Maybe he was a little *too* good—it was getting scary how completely in sync they were...

“Instructor Sirene! Golba, reporting in! We have finished excavating the first hole!”

“Hmm? Oh. G-Good job...?”

“Requesting further orders, ma’am!”

“U-Um... How about starting over there? B-But you really don’t have to keep asking me. The schematics—”

“Hear that, you lot? Over there!”

“SIR, YES, SIR!”

Sirene’s task force got straight back to work, digging like the hounds of the underworld were nipping at their heels. Each time they finished a hole, Golba turned to Sirene for more instructions, and it wasn’t long before they’d dug shafts for every single pillar that would support the eventual watchtower. Weren’t these people supposed to be archers? They looked like they could march into war with their shovels and pickaxes and come out unscathed...

Incidentally, I’d stood next to Golba that morning at breakfast while we waited to receive seconds. During our casual conversation, I’d asked how he’d gotten such an impressive physique, and he’d replied that he loved hunting and

eating Death Scorpions, a monster that no other villager dared to even put in their mouth. It meant he'd never lacked for food, which had allowed him to build so much muscle.

I'd thought that someone like Golba might have developed an immunity to the Divine Beast's toxin, but apparently not. He had, however, been working vigorously for the village's sake ever since his recovery.

Golba had told me that while Death Scorpions had a hard carapace, they were excellent when grilled. Cooking one released a crisp and pleasant aroma, and even their venom glands became edible. In fact, the glands were the tastiest part; he always wondered why the other villagers refused to eat them. Our tastes in food seemed to match pretty well, so I hoped to sit down with him for a relaxed conversation whenever we next returned to the village.

"Things appear to be going well on your end, Sirene," Lynne said.

"Almost *too* well, my lady. We owe it all to you."

"You say that as though your guidance hasn't been tremendously helpful. Good work. I'm thinking of heading out of the village to assist Rolo. Would you like to come along?"

"Gladly, my lady. R-Right, everyone, I'm going to excuse myself. You don't need to follow me, okay?"

"Understood, ma'am! We pray for your good fortune in battle!"

"But, um...I'm not going into battle..."

It seemed there were still a few kinks to work out when it came to Sirene's communication with the energetic villagers. Still, we parted from them without any further issues and headed out of the village. A short walk brought us to Rolo, Kyle, and several other beastfolk, all working away. The elder stood to the side, watching over them.

"Good work, Rolo," Lynne said in greeting. "How's everything coming along?"

"Well, thank you. I gave Kyle the traps I made and explained how to set them. We just need you to create the defensive sand walls and we'll be done."

"That's good to hear. In that case, Sirene, might I request your advice? Do you



think this is a good place for the village's walls?"

"Yes, my lady. At this distance, they won't interfere with the archers' line of fire."

"All right. Please stand back, everyone. We're short on time, so I'll conjure them all in a single burst." Lynne extended her arms and began to invoke a skill. "[Stone Wall]."

In the blink of an eye, layers of circular stone walls appeared around the entire village. Lynne's magic never failed to make me awestruck. Had she improved even more since our time in Mithra? Rolo and I were somewhat accustomed to her talents, but Kyle and Sirene looked shocked. The elder's legs were trembling violently.

"Sirene—will that do, do you think?" she asked.

"Y-Yes, my lady. It should suffice. I... I must admit, I didn't know you were capable of such an impressive feat..."

"The construction is a tad crude, if you ask me, but I suppose that can be solved at a later date."

"Lynne," I said, "there's a coach coming this way."

"That must be Ines. She's right on time—not that I expected anything less."

Ines arrived just as we finished up the last of our work. "My lady, I have returned," she announced.

"Well done, Ines."

"Lord Rein informed me of the circumstances. Let us depart at once."

"Of course. One thing first, though. Sirene?"

"Y-Yes, my lady?"

Lynne turned and examined Sirene closely before leaning in to whisper, "Not to intrude, but...do you not want to ask the villagers about *you-know-what* before we leave?"

Sirene looked confused at first, but then she followed Lynne's line of sight. "Ah...you mean my pendant? I *was* going to, if given the chance, but... Wait.

How do you even know about it, my lady?”

“I found out from Instructor Mianne.”

“That loose-lipped gossip of a master... She promised to keep it to herself.”

“Before we departed, she told me that you never take the initiative. That was why she asked me to assist you—by force, if necessary.”

“I...can’t exactly refute that. But still...”

“We’ve been lucky enough to make some friends, so why not take this chance to ask them?”

“I couldn’t possibly. I want to search for my family—I really do—but when I came to Sarenza, I resolved to put my duty first.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to give up on this wonderful opportunity. I really think you should ask.”

“Are you certain? What if I delay our departure?”

“That shouldn’t be an issue. Elder, may we borrow some of your wisdom?”

“But of course,” he replied, taking a step forward. “If this decrepit old man can be of assistance, then I shall share with you everything I know.”

“Can you tell us anything about Sirene’s pendant?”

“Her pendant? Let me have a look. Ah... Now where have I seen this crest before? I certainly know *something* of use. Yes, the words are on the tip of my — Hrm?!” The elder’s eyes widened as he stared at the pendant. “B-But...this crest! Young lady, could you be a member of the *Mio Tribe*?!”

Lynne shot her companion a pleased smile. “See, Sirene? It *was* worth asking!”

“Yes, my lady. I never thought I would encounter a lead so easily.”

“P-Pardon my interruption, but...Lady Sirene, where did you acquire that pendant?” the elder asked.

“My brother gave it to me when I was little, before we parted ways in Sarenza. I haven’t seen him since. I thought to search for him while on this trip, but I don’t have any other leads. What can you tell me about it?”

“I...I know the story behind it. But...”

“Is...something the matter?” Lynne asked. She and Sirene both looked puzzled.

The elder’s expression darkened. “It pains me dearly to say this, especially when you have done so much for us, but I must advise you to keep that pendant hidden once you depart the village. It would not be wise to let others see it.”



“You...want her to hide it?” Lynne repeated.

“Yes. Few among the younger generation would recognize it, but its crest could rouse less-than-positive emotions among many of their seniors.”

“Why?”

“A little over ten years ago, this country experienced a great war—one stirred up by the beastfolk. Their leaders were the Mio Tribe, who bore that claw mark as their crest.”

“A war...?”

Everyone turned to examine Sirene’s pendant. True enough, it was engraved with a mark that resembled a three-clawed slash.

“Sirene, have you heard of the Mio Tribe before?” Lynne asked.

“No... My mother probably knows the full story, including the meaning of the crest, but she always avoids the subject. She refuses to speak about it, no matter how many times I ask.”

“That might have been the wisest course to ensure you both a quiet life,” the elder said. “Possessing that pendant—no, even *mentioning* it—invites the risk of great disaster.”

“I...don’t quite understand.”

“Once, the Mio Tribe was highly trusted and respected among the beastfolk. Its members were exceptional warriors known for their valor, and they served as mediators for the great clanmeets. They represented one of our people’s most influential factions. Then, out of the blue, they started rallying for our freedom from the yoke of oppression, taking many of our kind with them to rebel against the rulers of Sarenza.”

“Truly...?” Lynne asked. “Word never reached the Kingdom of Clays.”

“Sarenza’s rulers must have placed an especially strict gag order on those traveling in and out of the country. News of a domestic rebellion would only have caused problems if allowed to spread beyond Sarenza’s borders. Even our ears were limited to rumors and hearsay.”

“How did the war end...?”

The old man lowered and slowly shook his head. “They lost, as you might already have guessed from the state of our village. We were not freed from our oppression; rather, our status only worsened. The Mio Tribe’s rebellion was used to justify the imposition of even stricter laws on our people, to the point that even minor tribes such as ours, which had nothing to do with the war, were impacted. Many beastfolk direct their anger not at Sarenza’s rulers but at those who instigated the rebellion in the first place.”

“So...what happened to the Mio Tribe?”

“As I understood it, they were wiped out to the last. Their leader and his son were mercilessly executed, and all other survivors were hunted down.”

“I...see.”

Sirene remained silent, simply clutching her pendant with a tight expression. Lynne turned to her.

“Forgive me, Sirene. I never thought—”

“You needn’t apologize, my lady. I always knew that reuniting with my family wouldn’t be easy. If anything, I’m glad to have learned the truth. I might have wasted my time searching for what was already a dead end.”

“Sirene...?”

“It’s okay. Really. We should depart soon, don’t you think? We need to be there by midday, so we shouldn’t drag our feet.” Sirene met everyone’s looks of concern with nothing but cheer, but it felt affected, to say the least.

“We shouldn’t, but...”

“Sirene is correct, my lady,” Ines interjected. “We might yet encounter unforeseen obstacles on our travels.”

“Yes, of course. You’re right, Ines. Let us depart.”

And so, we boarded the coach. Lynne, Rolo, Sirene, and I got comfortable, and then we were ready to go.

“Take us away, Ines.”

“Yes, my lady. I shall set a brisk pace for us, so please forgive any bumps and shakes.”

We said a quick farewell to the villagers, and our coach rushed out into the desert just as the sun started to ascend into the sky.



## Chapter 139: The City Forgotten by Time, Part 1

Ines had told us to prepare for a few bumps and shakes. Now that we'd actually set out, however, I realized that was a grave understatement.

*"Urp..."*

I'd fed the horses some of Rolo's Divine Beast cuisine before we departed, hoping it would energize them. It must have worked exceptionally well because, despite the weight of my sword, we were almost soaring across the sand.

Watching the scenery pass by in a blur had been invigorating at first...but things had slowly taken a turn for the worse. Though our coach was specially designed for desert travel, the horses pulled it along with no regard for the uneven ground, causing the body to jerk and rattle with each obstacle in our path. Everyone else seemed unbothered, but the constant turbulence was starting to make me sick.

I could stomach a bit of shaking. The problem was that each time we shot over the top of a massive sand dune, I genuinely feared we might take flight. I'd experienced a sense of weightlessness and even floated up out of my seat a couple of times before suddenly dropping down again. It churned up my insides something fierce and made certain things almost overflow that really should have stayed where they were.

As I desperately covered my mouth, a single thought ran through my mind: I really couldn't let this continue. The horses were going at full pelt—which was fair enough when we were in such a hurry—but maybe I could ask Ines and Lynne to let me out so I could run alongside the coach instead. Surely that'd be better than this, right?

I attempted to voice my question, only for the contents of my stomach to surge up into my throat. It wasn't long before my attention was fully occupied with my ongoing battle. I was sure I'd already lost—that I was practically a dead man fighting not to get buried—but after what felt like an eternity, we finally reached our destination. I was overcome with relief as the coach slowed down.

“The city’s in sight. I’m quite surprised we made such good time...” Lynne remarked. “I-Instructor Noor, are you all right? Y-You’re so pale!”

“I’m...fine. I’m already feeling better.”

Lynne’s concern had come at the crest of my final wave. We really had made good time, but as far as I was concerned, our arrival couldn’t have come soon enough. Even now that the rocking had subsided and my queasiness was starting to fade, I was consigning the memories of our ride to the farthest recesses of my mind. Just thinking about it made me feel sick again.

Hoping for a change of pace, I gazed out the coach’s window at the scenery. A strange-looking city sat a short distance away—rows and columns of shining stark-white buildings.

“Is that our destination?” I asked. “It’s so...bright.”

“Yes, that’s the City Forgotten by Time, second only to Sarenza’s capital in population. The architecture really is quite different from what you’d see in Mithra or the Kingdom, isn’t it?”

“It sure is.”

Even at a glance, it had a distinct feel from any other town or city I’d visited. The tall buildings that poked above the city’s protective sand-colored walls were seamless, having been made out of some kind of mortar before they were painted white. They dazzled so brightly under the harsh desert sun that it hurt my eyes to stare at them for too long.

When I’d heard we were going to one of Sarenza’s major cities, I’d pictured the beastfolk village on a larger scale. This was a lot whiter and tidier than I’d expected.

“Is that the entrance?” I asked. “I see what appear to be street stalls just past it.”

“That must be a market,” Lynne replied. “Trust the nation of trade to have a large commercial district, not a residential area, right inside the city’s entrance.”

As our coach neared the outer walls, the ground underfoot turned from unpaved sand to a flat stone roadway. We were headed for a set of large, open

wooden gates. Lynne showed the guards there some documents, and they waved us straight through, instructing us to head for the largest building in the city. We thanked them and continued on our way.

No sooner had we reached the market than an entirely new sight caught our attention: hanging between the tall white buildings were vast cloths of the same color that resembled canopies. They billowed in the dry wind, dappling the city with shadows. I assumed they were there to provide some respite from the harsh sunlight because rows upon rows of stalls and shops were crammed into the shade beneath them.

I spied colorful fruits on display stands, arrays of tools I'd never seen before, and so much more. A mouthwatering aroma filled the air, and there were a number of places selling drinks. Beneath the shade of the cloth canopies, people of all ages went about their days as they pleased, looking relatively content with themselves. The energy in the air befitted a place called "the country of merchants."

I was about to alight from the coach and go for a stroll, curious to see what kinds of wares were for sale, when a towering white wall came into view farther down the street.

"Is our destination beyond that wall, Lynne?" I asked.

"Our destination *is* that wall. Though you might not notice at first glance, it's actually a massive entertainment complex."

"Really?"

I studied it more closely and saw that she was right—its shape resembled a box more than a standard wall. It was interesting enough, but I couldn't stare too much; the glare was beginning to hurt my eyes, and the structure was so tall that I'd probably end up with a crick in my neck.

"From what I understand," Lynne said, "the appellation 'City Forgotten by Time' originally applied to that single complex. The urban area we just passed through sprang up independently as merchants gathered, seeking to cater to the wealthy customers who stayed within the City. It's been integrated since then, at least in the eyes of the people."

“So that building’s our destination? I still can’t see anything except a white wall.”

“Yes. I’ve heard plenty of rumors, but none of them prepared me for seeing it with my own eyes. It certainly is large, isn’t it?”

“How did they even create something that big...?” Lynne’s explanation had given me some context to the big white boxy thing ahead of us, but I still couldn’t believe it was the product of human hands.

“Its construction was said to have involved Sarenza’s unique golems. I doubt that’s a common practice, though, as only a small fraction of the country’s population has the knowledge and ability to command them. We wouldn’t be able to create something like this back in the Kingdom—it would prove exceptionally tough, if not outright impossible, through human labor alone.”

“I’ll bet.”

Like the other structures we’d seen, the painted white wall was completely smooth. It didn’t even have any windows, which gave the impression that it was some kind of massive fortress. I wasn’t sure how comfortable it was inside, but seeing it from our coach, I couldn’t help but sigh in admiration of its scale.

The building ahead of us was too big to be called a castle. In fact, it dwarfed any other structure that came to mind. Its seamless facade was impressive, to say the least, especially knowing that normal people had overseen its construction. Using their golems, they had made something truly amazing.

And this feat of architecture was where Rashid, the administrator of the City Forgotten by Time, was going to welcome us.

Shortly before reaching the structure, we encountered another checkpoint, where a gatekeeper came over to stop us. “Halt, please,” he said. “The special district beyond this point is off-limits to the general citizenry.”

“We are travelers from the Kingdom of Clays,” Lynne explained. “May we pass?”

“Ah, yes. I was informed about you. For safety’s sake, I still need proof of your identity.”

“Here you are.”

Lynne produced a document, which the guard examined for several moments. “Everything seems to be in order,” he eventually said. “You may enter.”

Ines directed our coach forward as part of the vast white wall opened to reveal what I thought was a small entrance. When we got closer, however, I realized it was wide enough for at least nine more coaches the size of ours. The immense size of this place was messing with my sense of scale.

We had almost reached the entrance when another person came out to greet us. He had sharp, somewhat severe eyes and long hair tied back in a ponytail.

“Esteemed guests, I bid you welcome to the City Forgotten by Time. I am Kron, and it is my honor to serve as your guide.”

The man, Kron, placed a white-gloved hand over his chest and gave us a courteous bow. His other glove was black, matching the rest of his attire—the same cut of clothes as the pair who’d accompanied Rashid to the beastfolk village.

“Proprietor Rashid has already informed me of your circumstances,” Kron said. “Allow me to lead you inside. You must be tired from your journey. Our staff will take your coach to our waiting area, so please feel free to leave it here.”

“Understood,” Lynne replied. “Thank you for your kind welcome.”

We alighted the coach and followed the black-clad man through the opening in the white wall. After passing through a large tunnel, we found ourselves in the building’s spacious interior. I froze in shock upon taking my first step inside.

“How...is this even possible?”

I’d expected the interior to match the windowless stark-white walls we’d seen outside. Instead, the sight before me was, in a word, unbelievable.

“Are those birds? I can see small animals over there. And...a stream? Teeming with fish, even... It’s like we’re in the mountains or a forest.”

In contrast to the barren desert we’d just traveled through, this place was lush with a diversity of plant life. The stream was clear, and its banks were

abundant with blooming flowers of all colors. Aged trees indistinguishable from the ones you'd see in the woods lined the area around us, serving as homes to all manner of chirping birds. Straining my ears allowed me to hear the patter of animals retreating across rocky terrain, no doubt startled by our appearance. The air carried the scents of earth and dry leaves and possessed a slight dampness characteristic of the forests I was used to.

It really was hard to believe we were indoors. I felt as though I'd suddenly been dropped into the wilderness.

"What *is* this place...?"

As I goggled at this wondrous spectacle, our long-haired guide launched into an explanation: "What you see are flora and fauna gathered from every corner of the world to be part of our collection. Some specimens are extremely rare and valuable, but all are allowed to grow and graze freely out here in the open. Part of the reason is to provide our guests with some pleasant scenery."

"Yeah? Wow."

They had managed to create an entirely separate environment out here in the heart of the desert. What surprised me even more, though, was how comfortable it felt. It was unusually bright despite the lack of windows, and a quick look above us explained why—the distant roof was made entirely of what appeared to be glass, giving us a clear view of the cloudless blue sky. Harsh sunlight shone through, but it wasn't hot at all; rather, I could feel a pleasant breeze coming from somewhere that gently rustled the leaves of the nearby trees.

I stood still and gazed skyward, wondering how this had all come to be. Lynne moved next to me and tried to see what I was looking at.

"Is something the matter, Instructor?"

"How is it so cool in here despite all the sunlight?"

"That's a good question. Perhaps they're using ice and wind magic. We have similar ease-of-living technology in the royal capital to cool the interiors of rooms, but I've never seen it applied on such a grand scale before."

"Oh, is that what our coach is equipped with?"

“Yes, though it pales in comparison to this.”

“Your observation is quite astute,” our black-clad guide said. “To maintain a stable degree of comfort across the entire complex, the air is meticulously regulated with relics sourced from the Dungeon of Oblivion. Since the flora and fauna of our collection require conditions similar to their native habitats, expert staff members oversee the varying levels of temperature and humidity for each area on a daily basis.”

“So the lack of windows keeps the climate outside from disturbing the atmospheric conditions you’ve created,” Lynne mused. “To think you could maintain such fine environmental control for so many different species... What a truly astounding achievement.”

“You honor us with your praise.”

I’d never known that the Kingdom of Clays possessed that sort of tech. As it turned out, even Ines’s armor was equipped with something similar, which solved the mystery of why she hadn’t seemed to mind the desert heat. I couldn’t imagine wearing such bulky attire *without* some kind of countermeasure for the torrid climate.

Ruminating over how impressive it was that so many methods to combat the heat existed, I continued to follow the others. Then our guide suddenly came to a stop. The white wall behind him bore a large door of some unknown material, and the long corridor beyond it continued out of sight.

“This marks the entrance to the main building’s interior,” he said. “Please leave your belongings here; we shall ensure they are attended to.”

Lynne looked puzzled. “Belongings? All we have on us are the bare essentials. Unless you mean to say...”

“Very astute, madam. We will take your weapons into our care. Afterward, please proceed farther inside, where another member of our staff will show you the change of attire we have prepared for you.”

“I’m...not sure I understand.”

“There is no hidden meaning, madam. In the interests of our many visitors’ safety, we prohibit objects that might cause harm from being brought onto the



premises. We humbly request your cooperation to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience for all our guests.”

“You won’t allow us the bare minimum required to protect ourselves?”

“I am afraid not. The rules apply equally to everyone. Fear not, though—we, the staff, bear the duty of assuring our visitors’ safety. I offer my deepest apologies, but not even you, our honored guests from far and foreign lands, can be given preferential treatment. Rest assured that if anything untoward occurs, we will deal with it as appropriate.”

The long-haired, black-clad man bowed politely before he continued, “Furthermore, this complex is furnished with various facilities that cater to the enjoyment of our guests. While you await your Trials with Proprietor Rashid, the full extent of our hospitality is at your disposal. It is, of course, on the house, so please relax to your hearts’ content.”

In contrast to our guide’s gentlemanly smile, Lynne looked extremely uneasy. “What do you think about this, Instructor?”

“I don’t see a problem,” I replied. “They say they’ll take care of anything that happens. And we’ve got Ines with us, don’t we?”

“I...suppose you’re right.”

Ines didn’t carry any weapons in the first place, so she had nothing to hand over. An argument could be made that she *was* the weapon, and one far more dangerous than any sharp object lying around—not that you’d ever catch me saying that when she was in earshot...

“It is as Sir Noor says, my lady—I am able to accomplish my duty even without any equipment,” Ines confirmed. “If we encounter any trouble, I shall quash it.”

“Very well. Sirene, Rolo, is this agreeable to you?”

“Yes, my lady. Whatever you command.”

“Mm-hmm. I’m fine with it too.”

“On behalf of everyone working at this fine establishment, I thank you for your understanding,” our guide said. “Now, if you would, please allow me to take your belongings.”

Convinced, Lynne detached her sword and dagger from her waist and handed them to the long-haired man. She also gave him her small wand—the one inlaid with a blue gemstone. Sirene handed over her bow in turn, while Rolo relinquished his cooking knife and a pair of gauntlets. Our guide carefully laid each of the weapons on an expensive-looking tablecloth atop a stand near the wall.

“If you would, sir.”

It was my turn next. I was about to give him my black sword when a thought suddenly occurred to me, causing me to pause.

“Sir? Is something the matter?”

“I was just wondering whether this is a good idea...”

The man’s brow furrowed, and a steely glint appeared in his eyes. “Please correct me if I am mistaken, sir, but are you implying that you do not trust us with your belongings?”

“No, not at all. It’s just...this sword is *really* heavy. I’m worried you might not be able to carry it on your own.”

“Ha! I must admit, I wasn’t expecting that!” The man grinned, then seemed to remember himself. “Please pardon my breach of etiquette. Our work here sometimes requires us to see to slightly...*rougher* duties, so you can rest assured, sir, that we are all physically well trained. No matter how heavy that sword might be, I am sure I will manage.”

“Yeah? Well, if you say so... Just be careful, okay? It’s heavier than it looks.”

“Sir, as professionals, we guarantee your belongings will not receive a single scratch under our care. Please be at ease.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about the sword. Just...take care not to hurt yourself, okay?”

“Again, sir, you have nothing to worry about. Or, if I may be so forward, is there another reason you do not wish to hand over your weapon?”

“No, that’s really it.”

“In that case, please allow me. I shall ensure it is cared for appropriately.”

The more I wavered, the more impatient our guide seemed to get. His polite tone never faltered, but a vein popped out on his forehead, and his glare was only getting sharper. He must have been quick-tempered.

Everyone was always taken aback when they first experienced the weight of my sword, so I wanted to be extra thorough with my warning. But, well, the man seemed to be confident in his own strength, so he'd probably be fine, right?

*Right...?*

"If the weapon's too heavy for you, then drop it without a second thought," I said. "Don't hesitate, or you might get hurt. Put your safety first, okay?"

"Understood, sir. But before we proceed, a few words of advice..." Our guide held out his black-gloved hand and, with a piercing stare, launched into an impromptu lecture.

"Dear guest, you might have come here from an *undeveloped* foreign land, but you would do well not to continue looking down on me and the other staff of the City Forgotten by Time. We take pride in our work as professionals. Our daily duties include not only the protection of all our guests but also the disposal of riffraff when the occasion demands it. Not one of us is too frail to carry a single sword. Unless, perhaps, that was meant as a joke of some kind. If so, I must regretfully admit that your nation's sense of humor is beyond me."

Despite his slow enunciation, his tone was low, and the vein on his forehead bulged even more than earlier. He looked really mad.

"Um...sorry?" I said. "Here, have the sword. But again, be careful."

"No, no, *I* should apologize. As the chief of this establishment's conflict resolution division, I find that my manner of speaking occasionally becomes a tad...*coarse*. Please forgive me. Now, it will be my pleasure to accept your—  
*Hngack!*"

Just as I'd feared, our guide sank down the moment I placed my sword in his outstretched hand. Somehow, he managed to force his knees to stop mid-bend and remain upright. But while he'd kept the blade from touching the ground, his expression was twisted in agony, and he was making weird noises from the

back of his throat.

I reached out to help him, but he shot me a glare and braced his stance.

*“Hngh... Gah!”*

To my surprise, the man managed to keep the sword steady. He was still making weird noises and standing in a strange squat, and the vein bulging from his forehead made it look like he was suffering immensely, but he was enduring nonetheless. He hadn't been lying when he'd said that he was physically well trained.



But then the moment passed, and our guide's valiant effort seemed to crumble as the sword slid from his grasp. It landed with a tremendous *boom*, forming a small crater and causing a web of cracks to spread through the floor and up the nearby wall.

"Are you all right?" I asked, worried.

The long-haired man simply stared at the cracked floor, his eyes devoid of all emotion. He was making the same face as some of my construction coworkers back in the royal capital who had similarly boasted of their strength before attempting to pick up my sword. These days, they tended to avoid me, looking terrified of the blade whenever they saw it.

"I'm glad you're not hurt," I said. "That was a close one."

Had the sword fallen ever so slightly to the side, it probably would have crushed his foot. I'd seen this coming, which was why I'd given the man so many warnings, but some things were hard to communicate through words alone...

"D-Division chief? Is something wrong?! Wh-What was that tremor just now?! D-Division chief?!"

A crowd of black-clad staff members came running, having felt the impact of my sword hitting the floor. They attempted to pick up the weapon themselves, but not one of them succeeded.

I was about to help out when I remembered what our long-haired guide, who was still rooted to the spot, had said about their professional pride. He had seemed so angry that, after some deliberation, I concluded that I'd only make things worse by trying to get involved.

"All right," I said. "Sorry, but I'm counting on you guys for the rest. If you find the sword too heavy, then you might want to call some more people over. If you can't budge it even then, you're welcome to leave it buried in the floor. I don't want you to overdo it and injure yourselves. I can just come back for it later."

The staff exchanged confused looks. "A-As you wish, sir," one of them replied.

“Sorry for the wait, Lynne. Let’s go.”

“R-Right.”

Leaving the staff to mill around the buried sword in bewilderment, we headed deeper into the complex, searching for our next guide.

## Chapter 140: The City Forgotten by Time, Part 2

“They’ve got such a diverse range of plants growing here,” I said. “It just keeps going.”

“Indeed,” Lynne replied. “I’ve never seen these specimens in the Kingdom of Clays—only in reference books. I’m surprised they’ve managed to gather so many rare breeds in one place.”

We’d started down what felt like a never-ending corridor, following our small-statured guide. And what a corridor it was. Its design wasn’t anything fancy—it was just a straight hallway—but the walls on either side were almost entirely transparent, creating a veritable panorama of all the flora and fauna. No matter where we looked, there was something to please the eye.

As we advanced deeper into the massive main building, Lynne occasionally dipped into her well of extensive knowledge and provided detailed commentary on the various plants and animals around us. The rest of us listened closely and nodded along. Eventually, part of the wall ahead turned a dark blue color. I thought it was painted at first, but when we got closer, I spotted fish of all shapes and sizes, many of which I didn’t recognize.

“Don’t tell me this is...a fish tank...?”

Considering its size, that might have been an understatement. The transparent wall continued farther down the passageway than my eyes could see. Just standing before it made me feel as though we’d stepped into the bottom of a lake.

We stood in place for a while, admiring the spectacle. Not one of us had expected to see something like this, especially not indoors. At some point, our guide parted ways with us, and a woman in black formal wear—someone we’d seen before—took over.

“I bid you welcome, dear guests. I am Melissa, the general manager of this establishment,” said the slim woman who had stood with Rashid and the one-



eyed beastfolk the previous evening. After introducing herself, she performed a perfect bow. “I suspect Kron already informed you at the door, but I am here to provide you with a change of clothes so that you may enjoy yourselves to the fullest extent within our walls.”

“A change of clothes?” Lynne repeated.

“Precisely. For the sake of convenience, each section of our fine establishment has all the attire our guests could need. Visitors are allowed to bring their own clothes, of course, but given the suddenness of your arrival, we humbly saw fit to provide some for you. Here—please see them for yourselves.”

Melissa presented an expensive-looking leather case to Ines, who promptly accepted it. She and Lynne checked its contents, causing the latter’s eyes to widen in surprise and the former’s to narrow.

“Must we wear these in order to proceed?”

“It is not compulsory, but you might find them more appropriate for our next destination. We have other guests, and your current attire may not be suitable.”

“What’s in the case?” I asked. Lynne’s and Ines’s reactions had me curious.

“They’re what one would call...bathing suits,” Lynne answered, her expression uncertain.

“Bathing suits?”

“I assume wherever we’re going has swimming facilities.”

“You are correct,” Melissa said, “though whether you use them is entirely up to you. Our guests may enjoy themselves in whatever manner they wish.”

“Ines, what should we do?” Lynne asked, worried.

“Please do not misunderstand,” Melissa added. “There are no...*contrivances* that would disadvantage you during the Trials to come. You must be weary from the long trip here, and Proprietor Rashid simply wishes to show you our hospitality.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. You will need to wait a short while before the Trials are ready to commence. In the meantime, he hopes you will relax to your hearts’ content. This area is usually reserved for our senior members; only on such an extremely special occasion would we grant anyone else access. If safety is your concern, rest assured that I and the rest of the staff will guarantee no danger befalls you.”

“Would you...mind if we examined the bathing suits more thoroughly?”

“Not at all. Inspect them to your satisfaction.”

Lynne and Ines exchanged glances and then set about examining the contents of the leather case.

“What do you think, Ines?”

“I see nothing that should warrant our concern. It appears she was telling the truth.”

“Very well, then. We’ll accept them.”

“Dear guests,” Melissa said, “thank you for your understanding. There are changing rooms at the end of this corridor; please allow me to show you to them. They are separated according to gender, but they lead to the same place, so please use them without concern.”

A quick glance brought two metallic plates to my attention, one depicting a man and the other, a woman. That was easy enough to understand—I saw them all the time in the royal capital’s bathhouses.

“As they might require some assistance to get into their bathing suits, I shall accompany the ladies of your party into the changing rooms,” Melissa explained. “My sincerest apologies, but the gentlemen must see to themselves. There are no special considerations for your attire, but let us know if you require aid nonetheless. A staff member will tend to you at once.”

“Got it,” I replied. “Thanks.”

I took a case containing male bathing suits from Melissa. She gave me a slight bow in response.

“Well, looks like Rolo and I won’t be with the rest of you,” I said.

“Then this is where we part ways,” Lynne replied. “See you soon, Rolo, Instructor Noor.”

“Yeah.”

Thus, we entered our respective rooms and started changing.

From the leather case Melissa had given me, I retrieved a pair of shorts that reached down to my knees. It appeared to be regular swimwear, but I could tell from how smooth it felt against my skin that it was a high-quality item. Just as Melissa had said, there was nothing tricky about putting it on.

Rolo and I quickly finished changing before going to reunite with Lynne and the others. We followed signs that directed us up a long staircase and through a dim hallway. Our time here so far had already been full of surprises, but nothing could have prepared me for what was to come.

“Is that an...indoor lake?”

Indeed, when we stepped out of the hallway and into the light, we saw a massive lake glittering in the sunlight. Men and women in skimpy clothing splashed about in the water, evidently enjoying themselves. We were still indoors—a quick look skyward revealed the same transparent ceiling as before—but it was easy to forget that when faced with the scale of our surroundings.

“Instructor. Sorry for the wait.”

I turned to see Lynne, Ines, and Sirene. Like Rolo and me, they had changed into bathing suits.

“It feels somewhat strange to be wearing this in the company of the opposite gender,” Lynne remarked, indicating her attire.

“I get what you mean, but it might not be as strange as we think,” I replied. “From what I’ve heard, there are baths in the royal capital where people can swim.”

“Not to mention its water-based training facilities. By that logic, I suppose this isn’t an issue.”

Despite their relatively revealing attire, Lynne and Ines seemed entirely unbothered. Sirene, in contrast, looked to be entirely out of her comfort zone.

She wore a white hooded jacket over her bathing suit and practically hid behind the others, her eyes darting all over the place as she checked if anyone was looking.

Truth be told, I didn't get her embarrassment. Her bathing suit wasn't any more revealing than her usual clothes.

"Your new attire suits you well," Melissa said, addressing us all. "In this part of our establishment, we keep the temperature higher to maximize comfort in the water. If you find yourselves getting too hot, please take a swim."

Now that I thought about it, she was right—it *was* pretty hot here. A dip in the lake would probably feel amazing.

Melissa still wore her black suit, but her expression betrayed not an ounce of discomfort. Maybe her clothes regulated temperature in the same way as Ines's armor. I was still contemplating the matter when movement in the water interrupted my train of thought. Upon approaching it and peering down, I saw fish of all kinds joyfully swimming about in the crystal clear lake.

"Are those the same fish we saw downstairs?" I asked.

"They are indeed," Melissa replied. "It's all the same body of water."

"Really? Wow."

"Our establishment takes pride in its aquarium, where guests not only admire the fish but swim with them too."

"Would you mind me catching and eating a few? You have so many that I'm sure you wouldn't miss them."

There was a drawn-out pause before Melissa answered. "Sir, the fish are here to be seen, not eaten. I hope you understand."

"Yeah? That's a shame."

It really was. The fish looked delicious, and their fatty flesh spoke to how well they were being fed.

"If you no longer require my assistance, then I shall take my leave," Melissa said. "A staff member will remain stationed outside and see to your needs as necessary. Approach them with whatever concerns you may have."

“Understood,” Lynne replied. “Thank you.”

“I shall come back to retrieve you when the appropriate time comes. Until then, please enjoy yourselves at your leisure.”

Melissa bowed and then departed, but not before shooting me a subtle look of concern. Lynne breathed a small sigh once she was gone.

“I can’t help but feel they’ve led us by the nose,” she said. “I mean, we’ve yet to even learn the details of our Trials. Nothing they’ve done has seemed malicious, but it’s hard to relax under our current circumstances.”

Lynne must have been on edge this whole time. Maybe she needed to relax a little; this lake area was clearly made so people could enjoy themselves, and we were dressed for the occasion. I could even hear the sounds of other people frolicking through the water.

“We’re already here, so what’s the harm in letting loose?” I said. “If you ask me, this place is full of things I’ve never seen in the Kingdom of Clays—things you probably can’t see anywhere else in the world. It seems a waste to not even *try* to enjoy it.”

“I...suppose you’re right, Instructor. And it *is* part of my duty to learn from other countries’ cultures for the good of the Kingdom. Not to mention, staying tense will only tire me out before our contest. I should unwind as the situation demands.”

“Yeah, that sounds wise.”

Lynne turned to the glimmering lake with a pleasant smile on her face. Sirene was in her line of sight, looking worried as she stood at the edge of the lake.

“Huh? I-Is the water really that deep? Are we seriously expected to get in?”

“It is, and we are,” Lynne replied. “Since we’re here, should we go for a swim together? Our hosts increased the temperature for a reason.”

Sirene looked anything but eager as she gingerly stuck her toes into the lake. Her nerves didn’t really surprise me; the water was so clear that peering into it gave me the same feeling as looking over the edge of a sheer drop. I’d elected to stay far, far away as a result. By chance, was Sirene also scared of heights? Or

could she just not swim?

“My lady... I think I shall refrain,” she eventually said. “Please go on without me.”

“Oh, no, don’t hold back on my account. If you’d rather swim alone, then you’re welcome to go first.”

“N-No, please. I appreciate your concern, but, w-well... To tell you the truth, I can’t—gwah?!”

“Hmm? Did you say something?”

Lynne’s gentle push was enough to disrupt Sirene’s balance. She toppled head over heels into the water, breaking the surface with an unnecessarily large splash, then went as still as a statue and quickly started to sink. A short while passed, but she didn’t come back up.

“She’s still down there, huh?” I mused aloud.

“S-Sirene?!”

Lynne frantically dove into the water to rescue our missing companion. Ines, meanwhile, simply watched the pair from dry land.

“Shouldn’t you help them?” I asked.

“No, I cannot swim.”

“Really? That’s unexpected.”

“Perhaps I phrased that poorly. I *can* swim, but my duties as my lady’s guard prevent me from doing so. In any case, she has the situation under control. My concern is unnecessary.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Together with Ines, I watched Lynne grab Sirene from the bottom of the lake and start swimming back up to the surface.

“I find it more problematic that Sirene cannot swim despite being a member of the Six Army Corps,” Ines remarked. “Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, but she should work on overcoming the latter, lest they get in the way of her most important duties.”

“Yeah, maybe...”

I’d met plenty of people who couldn’t swim, though none had ever been quite *that* bad. Even if you barely moved, it was pretty easy to stay on the surface...yet Sirene had sunk like a stone. Really, I could understand wanting to avoid the things you weren’t good at. My tolerance for heights had gone up a little thanks to Rala, but the fear was very much still there.

“Are you a good swimmer, then, Ines?” I asked.

“I would say so. I take as much pleasure in it as necessary to carry out my duties. If nothing else, I enjoy it more often than not, and I consider my proficiency better than average.”

“Then why not go for a swim? Even just a short one. You don’t have your armor on, remember, so you’re going to feel the heat if you just stand there.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I am fine. I cannot abandon my duties for something so trivial.”

Even as Ines remained stolid, her arms crossed, I could see the sweat trickling down her brow. She was having a harder time in the heat than when we were traveling through the desert. Her silver armor must have been even more comfortable than I realized.

At long last, Lynne broke the water’s surface, Sirene in her arms.

“I-I’m sorry!” she cried. “I thought you could swim!”

“I-It’s not your fault, my lady...” Sirene replied, coughing and sputtering all the while. “The Hunter Corps doesn’t teach us how to swim, and there was never a reason for me to learn. I-I’ll do my best to remedy that for the future...”

I was surprised to hear that Sirene had almost no swimming experience to speak of. That was when I noticed Rolo sitting on the ground at my side, showing zero interest in entering the water.

“Can you not swim either, Rolo?”

“No, I can. In a sense.”

“How about joining them in the water, then? It’s hot out here.”

“Well, my technique is probably closer to floating than anything else... As a kid, I was thrown into a swamp deeper than I was tall and made to survive on my own for a while. That was when I picked up the skill.”

“Oh... Sounds rough.”

Now that I thought about it, no one had taught me how to swim either; I’d just sort of picked it up in the process of trying to catch fish in the river near my mountain home. Nowadays, I considered it one of my strengths, but it hadn’t been easy when I was first starting out. I’d ended up being washed down numerous large waterfalls, and carelessly trying to catch fish during the aftermath of a storm had produced results just as unfortunate. The higher water levels and stronger currents had made me intimately familiar with mud and giant, painful rocks.

My near-death experiences weren’t something I wanted to repeat, but those frequent mistakes were the reason I’d naturally improved at swimming. It dawned on me then that I hadn’t swum once since moving to the royal capital.

“In that case, Sirene, why don’t I teach you?” Lynne proposed. “This is the perfect opportunity.”

“Huh...? You, my lady?”

“If you’re willing. I might not look it, but I’m quite a talented swimmer.”

“I...I couldn’t ask so much of you, my lady.”

“It’s fine. Really. You should only need a few pointers before you’re fully capable.”

“D-Do you think so? Then, if you d-don’t mind...”

“Of course. First and foremost, let’s get you accustomed to the water.”

“O-Okay. P-Please go easy on me!”

Rolo and I sat a safe distance from the lake’s edge and watched as the pair splashed about in the water. Ines watched too, though she remained standing at attention. Was it just my imagination, or did she look a little jealous? I couldn’t blame her if so; she might have said she could endure the heat, but it was still deeply unpleasant. Sure, it was cooler in here than outdoors, but the



sunlight was intense enough that just sitting in place was causing me to sweat buckets.

The longer I sat around, the more pleasantly refreshing the water looked. I didn't want Ines to feel excluded, but I was just about ready to take a dip. Before I could, however, there was a high-pitched scream, and a shrill voice rang out.

"Wh-What is the meaning of this?! What is *that*?!"

I scanned our surroundings, wondering if a wild animal or something was on the loose, but I couldn't see anything out of place.

"Goodness, what's gotten into you?" someone else asked.

"L-Look! Over there! A filthy *animal*! I thought this area was reserved for senior members!"

I turned to the source of the commotion and saw the woman pointing at Sirene, who was slowly moving through the water with Lynne's guidance. I'd never expected the outrage to be directed at one of my own companions.

"How did a *beastfolk* get in here?! I-It's...unsanitary! Someone change the water, and be quick about it!"

"Can the staff do their blasted jobs already?! And where are the guards?! Chase that thing out of here!"

As more and more of the people who had just moments ago been swimming happily started to raise their voices, the targets of their anger—Lynne and Sirene—seemed taken aback by the sudden change. They could only stare back in blank surprise.

## Chapter 141: The City Forgotten by Time, Part 3

“Tsk. A female beastfolk? Which eccentric brought *that* in here? This is a VIP area!”

“Ooh... This bathing suit was made to order, and now it’s unclean! Do you know how much it cost me?! I demand compensation! You there—her owners! I’ll sue!”

Lynne and Sirene continued to float in the water, calmly observing their surroundings. As much as the abuse didn’t seem to bother them, I doubted it would stop anytime soon.

“I’m sorry, my lady. It appears my being with you has stirred up something unpleasant. I’ll get out of the water and wait somewhere out of sight.”

“Wait a moment, Sirene. I’m going to have a word with those people. They’re being ridiculous.”

“No, my lady. It’s best not to encourage unnecessary trouble while we’re in a foreign land. If staying quiet and unseen is enough to settle the matter, then that’s what I’ll do. Rather, I should apologize. As soon as we arrived, I vaguely suspected that something like this might happen. I shouldn’t have let my guard down; I was having so much fun that I got carried away.”

“Sirene...?”

“Please forgive me for causing a disturbance. I’ll wait outside, so don’t mind me.”

To shouts and jeers, Sirene resolutely climbed out of the water and made toward the changing rooms. Before she could get very far, however, Rolo grabbed her arm from where he was still seated.

“Sirene, could you wait here?” he asked. “Just for a little bit.”

“Rolo?”

“I don’t think you need to leave. We can work this out.” Rolo slowly rose to

his feet and took in the faces of those cursing at Sirene from a distance. “The people here really hate beastfolk,” he muttered under his breath. “Yet there’s something here they hate even more. They don’t seem to have noticed. Is it because I’m so short...?”

He moved to the edge of the man-made lake and peered into the water, whispering something. (“I’m sorry to bother you while you’re enjoying a nice swim. Could you lend me your strength for a moment?”)

I wondered if Rolo was okay. He appeared to be talking to himself, but then I saw something rise from the bottom of the lake.

“Fish...?”

Not just a few but a whole school of them came up to the surface—a plethora of sizes, shapes, and colors. No sooner had those who noticed them begun to stir than the fish shot up into the air, creating an enormous pillar of water. Shrieks and screams abounded.

“What was—?!”

“Eek!”

“What’s happening?!”

By my estimate, hundreds of fish—maybe even a thousand—had leaped out of the water. Some sported rare colors and patterns that fascinated me, and their scales glittered in the sunlight with the tremendous spray they’d produced. It made for a magnificent spectacle.

The fish seemed to hang in the air, basking in the sun and flaunting their beautiful scales, before plunging back into the water with a deafening *crash*. They didn’t do anything else—in fact, they returned to the bottom of the lake as quickly as they’d appeared—but the sheer intensity with which they’d acted made it a sight to behold. Everyone seemed at a loss for words, having forgotten all about Sirene, and silence returned to the lake.

“Heeey! Over here!”

Rolo was still at the water’s edge, now waving his arms to catch everybody’s attention. He waited until all eyes were on him before he shouted out again.

“You hate demonfolk too, right? Well, you’re looking at one!”

He jumped, skipped, and continued to wave, doing his best to hold our focus. I couldn’t work out what he was trying to accomplish at first, but then I saw the other patrons’ confused stares twist into looks of comprehension and then agitation.

“That child...is a demonfolk?”

“A real one?! It can’t be...”

“I-Impossible! We’re in the City Forgotten by Time—in a high-security VIP area!”

“Th-Then how do you explain those fish just now?!”

A few people hurried out of the room. Everyone else stayed, tensely awaiting our companion’s next move.

“I’m Rolo. Nice to meet you all. As I just said, I’m a demonfolk.”

Rolo spoke clearly enough for the entire room to hear him, throwing another blanket of silence over the previous unrest. As he watched the other patrons start to distance themselves from him, he continued.

“As I’m sure you’re all aware, demonfolk have the ability to peek into people’s hearts. I need only to get close to you, and I’ll discover every last secret you’ve been keeping tucked away. I won’t reveal them, of course, but I doubt that puts your minds at ease. You all seem like you have plenty of things you can’t tell anyone.”

Rolo glanced around at the other patrons, who spiraled into an even greater panic than before.

“That hair! Those silver eyes! There’s no mistaking it—that’s the real thing!”

“A genuine demonfolk?! How did it even get in here?! What are the guards playing at?!”

“How could this happen?! A mere beastfolk is nothing compared to this!”

“Guards! *Guards!* Do your blasted jobs! Are you forgetting how much we spend each year to come here?!”

“Incompetent fools! Can they not even manage the bare minimum?! Damn it all, I say! I’m canceling my membership!”

“B-Begone! You wretched *things* don’t belong here!”

Despite being bombarded with hateful curses and glares, Rolo looked completely unruffled. “Is that so? But we were told we could play here. If you hate my being here so much, maybe *you* should leave instead. I was just thinking that I’d like to take a dip in the water...not that I can swim all too well.”

“Ludicrous! Do you really think anyone would allow that?! Get out! Now!”

“Yeah! Your kind isn’t allowed in here!”

“You want me to leave?” Rolo asked. He began to stretch, letting so many cold remarks go in one ear and out the other. “That’s not up to you, is it? I can do as I please.”

“Wh-What?!”

Rolo sucked in a deep breath and shouted, “Right!” at the top of his lungs, his loud voice not matching his small frame in the slightest. “If you don’t want me learning all of your secrets, this is your last chance to run! I’m about to dive in!”

Still the center of attention, our companion crouched down low before springing high up into the air—so high that he even skimmed the ceiling. He came down headfirst with the sun at his back, breached the water with a tremendous splash, and then sank into the lake’s depths.

“Whoa...”

Rolo had mentioned to me that he could float, but would that really be enough for him to recover from such an astonishing dive? I was starting to worry when loud screams rang out around us.

“A-Ahhhhhh!”

“Eek! H-Hurry! R-Run! Who knows what it might do if it gets near us?!”

“Blast! Disgusting thing! I’ll be lodging a complaint about this! Mark my words!”

Those who had stayed in the water now scrambled to be first to get out,

screaming or shouting curses as they snatched up their belongings and fled. Before I knew it, we had the spacious lake all to ourselves.

Rolo stayed under the water long enough that my fears almost got the better of me. He soon resurfaced with a loud gasp and started waving in our direction.

“Phew!”

Now alone in the lake, Rolo paddled toward us, swimming almost exactly as a dog would. He smiled at Lynne and Sirene, who were giving him incredulous looks.

“There. See? They’re all gone.”

Sirene continued to stare at him for a while, then blinked in realization. “Thank...you?”

“You’re welcome. Was that acceptable, Lynne? I mean, they left of their own volition.”

“So they did. Good job, Rolo.”

The pair exchanged smiles and thumbs-ups.

I’d always known that Lynne had guts, but Rolo was a surprise. He’d changed so much that I almost didn’t recognize him. Back when we’d first met, he’d seemed so timid and insecure. Now he had a whole array of special skills to his name. It saddened me a little to think I wouldn’t see that side of him again—the shy and somewhat gloomy Rolo who spoke too quietly to hear—though I guessed this was what people meant when they said that kids grew up fast. It was something to celebrate, all things considered.

But leaving my sentimental thoughts aside...

“It really is hot...”

Now that everyone else had departed, only one thought occupied my mind: the temperature. Sure, it was meant to make the water feel nicer, but wasn’t this a bit much? As if the heat weren’t bad enough, the moisture in the air meant it was uncomfortably humid.

Then there was the matter of Rolo’s magnificent dive.

*That must've felt so satisfying.*

I wanted nothing more than to follow his example. It wasn't something you could do in the royal capital's bathhouses, but here, we had the luxury of an especially deep lake. I wouldn't have wanted to attempt it with a bunch of strangers around, so I was especially relieved that Rolo had scared them all away.

This was my chance. I *had* to seize it.

Though I felt bad for Ines, who was dead set on staying out of the lake, the heat was getting to be too much for me. It was about time I took a dip as well. After seeing Rolo's dive, I couldn't contain myself any longer.

"Right, then," I said. "Think I'll take a page out of Rolo's book and go for a swim. Yeah, that sounds perfect."

"Instructor?"

"Here I go."

I made sure to stretch, then leaped just as high as Rolo had—high enough to skim the glass overhead. Or I tried to, at least; I must have jumped with a little too much gusto because I seemed mere moments away from crashing straight through it.

Improvising, I twisted my body in midair so that my feet touched the ceiling instead. I bent my knees to absorb the impact, then kicked straight down to the lake below. As soon as I breached its surface—with more force than I'd originally intended—I was overcome by the pleasant chill of the water against my skin.

I sank deeper from the momentum of my dive, soon reaching the very bottom of the lake. It was even cooler than the water above and all the more invigorating—a welcome reprieve from the heat I'd endured just a few seconds ago.

*This...feels way better than I expected.*

I gazed around the bottom of the huge man-made lake and spied the fish from before now energetically swimming about. Some of them darted away

from me, startled by the impact of my splash and wary of the sudden intruder, so I did my best to settle and stay as still as a rock. Maybe because they were used to people, the fish soon approached me in large numbers.

*They're so close. I could just reach out and grab some.*

Rare fish of all sorts had gathered around me, calmly swimming here and there. Some were large enough to make for an especially satisfying meal. My hands twitched in anticipation, but I pushed down my urges and cleared my mind. Melissa had said the fish were only to be admired, so eating them was out of the question.

I simply lay on the lake bed, watching the world above. It was magical. Light scattered as it hit the water's surface, so my entire field of vision was lit with a gently swaying curtain of sunbeams. Watching them dance in the cool water made me more comfortable than I could put into words. Being able to swim somewhere like this really was the height of luxury. Melissa hadn't been lying when she'd mentioned showing us hospitality.

After a pleasant swim with the fish, I shot back up to the surface.

*Oh. This might be bad.*

As soon as I poked my head up out of the water, I saw that things had changed. My showy dive must have produced some rather big waves. I assumed they hadn't caused any injuries, as there was barely anyone here to begin with, but Ines, who hadn't moved from the lake's edge, was drenched from head to toe.

And she was staring straight at me.

*Uh-oh.*

"Sorry, Ines."

"It was no trouble. I can't speak for the others, though."

Ines didn't seem mad, to my relief, but indicated Sirene with a meaningful glance. I turned to look and saw the animal-eared girl sitting with her knees to her chest, frightened to the point of trembling. She must have been swept away by the waves I'd created, and her fear of water had gotten the better of her. I



couldn't help feeling bad about that.

Lynne held out a hand and pulled Sirene to her feet. "Are you all right?"

"Y-Yes, I am. I suppose I'm still not used to the water. It doesn't make me quite as anxious anymore—thanks to you, my lady—but my experience is limited, so..."

"I see, I see. You have excellent physical intuition, so you should pick up swimming with just a little practice."

"D-Do you think so?"

"I do. Well, since we're here, why don't we conquer that fear of yours in one big leap? Thanks to Rolo, we won't need to worry about hecklers interrupting us."

"Okay. Thank you, my la... Wait, what do you mean, 'in one big leap'?"

Sirene barely had time to look confused before Lynne swept her up off her feet.



“Um... My lady? What are you...?”

“As I said, we should first get you accustomed to the water.”

“I understood that part. But why do you have me in a bridal carry?”

“I thought we might follow Rolo and Instructor Noor’s example and make a big splash.”

“Aah, so that’s why... Wait, um, my lady? Don’t get me wrong—I’m reeeeeeeally grateful—but don’t you think that might be...a bit much for me?”

“I’m going to be with you this time, so you’ve got nothing to worry about. Now then, here we go. Hold your breath, if you would.”

“W-Wait! Please! I’m still not mentally pre—hiyaaah?!”

Still carrying the poor Sirene, who let out a rather unique scream, Lynne leaped up into the air with a broad smile on her face. The pair crashed into the water, creating an impressive spray and several waves before starting to sink. I thought they could have made a greater splash, but maybe Lynne was holding back for the sake of her new student.

The displaced water barely even wet Ines’s feet. Her expression remained exactly the same, though something about her made me think she was unsatisfied.

As for Lynne and Sirene, they soon floated up to the lake’s surface.

“Pff-tah!”

“How was that, Sirene?”

“It...wasn’t as bad as I expected.”

“It only seemed scary because you clung to that assumption before jumping in. If you want to overcome your fears, then you need more exposure to them. Keep at it, and you won’t even think twice about swimming. I suspect you might even become an expert before the day’s end.”

“What a wonderful thought...”

“Shall we go again?”

“Hyah?!”

Despite her shrieks, Sirene didn't look as reluctant this time. In fact, I thought I noticed the slightest traces of a smile. She was definitely getting used to the water.

Ines remained silent and expressionless, but she also seemed a tad lonely as she watched the pair frolic about in the water. It had to be tough refraining from the things you enjoyed for the sake of your duties. Maybe I should make those huge waves again, I thought—not for my own benefit, but as a nice gesture for Ines, who was working so hard.

“What do you think, Rolo?”

“Let's do it.”

At times like this, Rolo's capacity for reading thoughts really was convenient; a single glance was all we needed to get on the same page. We stood together at the lake's edge, ready to enact our plan.

“Here goes, then.”

“Mm-hmm.”

We jumped at exactly the same time, planted our feet squarely on the ceiling, and then launched ourselves toward the very center of the man-made lake. Our plan was to create a wave even larger than mine.

Before we hit the lake, however, an idea came to me. By striking the water just as we crashed into it, maybe I could create an *enormous* wave.

“[Parry].”

No sooner had the thought occurred to me than my body took action. I stretched out my arm, making the shape of a blade with my hand, and tried to gently strike the lake's surface. My hand was met with pleasant resistance, and a moment later, the water before my eyes disappeared.

“Oops.”

“Huh?!”

At the same time, Rolo was blown aside by the impact. I recognized my

blunder immediately: I'd used way too much force. My strike had made an abrupt depression in the water's surface, so we fell for a little while longer than expected before splashing down at weird angles and sinking to the lake bed. I grabbed Rolo and dragged him back up to the surface.

"Pff-tahhh!"

"Sorry about that, Rolo," I said. "Guess I changed the plan at the very last moment, huh? Are you all right?"

"Mm-hmm. I'm fine. I was just a little surprised, that's all."

"Aah, okay. In that case...want to do it again?"

"Sure, I don't mind. It's just..."

Rolo smiled wryly and glanced over to where Lynne and Sirene were clinging to each other and shivering. Ines's expression remained as unchanging as ever. She didn't seem *that* angry as she silently returned the evicted fish to the water...

I quickly hopped out and did my bit to save the dying fish. It was my fault they'd all washed aground.

From there, I tried not to cause any more trouble. I lowered myself into the lake, swam around, and poked my head under the water to watch the fish. It was plenty fun, but it didn't quite match the exhilaration of our two-man dive.

*Rolo, let's wait a bit before we jump again. Better to play it safe for now.*

"O-Okay..."

*And it might be wise to get everyone's permission first...*

"Y-Yeah..."

On top of that, we needed to be extra careful not to blow the fish out of the lake. Rolo and I were meekly splashing about on the surface, secretly awaiting our next chance to dive, when I sensed another person in the area.

"Hey. I'm glad to see you're having fun, Lady Lynneburg."

The familiar-looking man sounded cheerful as he approached us. He had healthy brown skin, a loud floral shirt, and the same shorts as Rolo and me.

Perched on his head was a pair of tinted spectacles, and in his hand were two glasses containing strange-colored drinks.

“As the owner of this establishment, allow me to apologize for the unpleasantries you experienced today. I do hope you can forgive us. Rest assured, those who made use of such abusive language had their assets and possessions seized and were banished from the city. They are out in the desert as we speak, doubtless reflecting on their actions.”

The smiling, half naked figure was none other than Rashid, the man who'd invited us here in the first place.



## Chapter 142: The City Forgotten by Time, Part 4

“You...seized their assets and banished them?” Lynne asked, clearly bothered by what Rashid had just told us. “Such extreme measures can’t have been necessary.”

In truth, I was thinking the same thing. Sure, those guests *had* said some awful things to Sirene and Rolo, but stripping them naked and throwing them into the desert was a bit much, wasn’t it?

Rashid shook his head. “They denigrated state guests of Sarenza, Lady Lynneburg. Such a serious crime would normally warrant a timely execution. However, as we believe them to have acted in ignorance, I drastically reduced the severity of their punishment.”

“You consider the forfeiture of all of their belongings a drastic reduction?”

“If you would, please overlook Melissa’s part in guiding you here. It was my decision not to relocate the other guests. They were influential merchants of Sarenza, you see—it never once crossed my mind that such an issue could occur. I beg your forgiveness for my ineptitude.”

“You’ve apologized enough. We dealt with the problem ourselves. That being said, we hoped to settle the matter peacefully; there was no need to levy such severe punishment.”

“I admire your magnanimity. As we speak, our troublemakers must be reconsidering their foolish behavior with only the desert sand as their witness. I apologize once again for my heavy-handedness. Oh, but incidentally... As improper as this might seem, I wish to make a request of you.”

“What is it this time...?”

“Your attendant—Noor, was it? May I borrow him for a brief spell?”

“Instructor Noor?”

“Me?” I asked, surprised to have heard my name all of a sudden. I exchanged



a quick glance with Lynne.

“Yes,” Rashid answered. “I said as much yesterday, but he has piqued my interest. As you are his employer, Lady Lynneburg, I seek your permission to speak with him alone. It should take only a moment.”

“Instructor?” Lynne turned to me. “What do you think?”

“I don’t mind. He just wants to talk, right?”

“He accepts,” Lynne told the man. She looked worried, but a simple conversation wouldn’t do me any harm.

Rashid raised the two glasses in his hand with a smile. “My sincerest thanks, Lady Lynneburg. Noor—why don’t we take a seat over there and share a drink?”



Rashid set his drinks down on a small white table between two long chairs made for reclining. A large, equally white umbrella protected our seats from the sun’s harsh rays. Melissa had returned with similar drinks for Ines and Lynne, who now watched us from a distance. Their expressions turned somewhat strained when Rashid gave them a friendly smile and wave.

“So, Noor, what do you think of our city? Are you having a good time?”

“Of course. ‘A good time’ feels like an understatement.”

“Wonderful. It can’t have been easy to get here, but I see you were duly compensated.”

“More than anything else, the fish tank connected to your man-made lake is amazing. Diving in feels great, and the fish aren’t like any I’ve seen before.”

“You’re a man of good taste, I see. A dip in cool water under the scorching desert sun—Isn’t it the height of luxury?”

“Oh, absolutely. I can’t stress enough how impressive those fish were. You wouldn’t believe how much I wanted to catch, cook, and eat a few.”

There was a long pause before Rashid spoke again. “You...can, if you want. Eat them, that is. We can always procure more.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to trouble you.”

“Go ahead. Have them all, if you so wish.”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far.”

Rashid was a lot less troublesome—and a lot more charitable—than our first meeting had led me to believe. We relaxed on the long chairs for a while, sipping our cold drinks and making idle conversation.

“You mentioned wanting to speak with me,” I said. “I suspect you meant more than just some casual chatter, or else you wouldn’t have asked to see me alone.”

“How perceptive of you. Indeed, my main interest lies elsewhere.” Rashid placed his drink on the table and gazed up at the clear blue sky visible through the transparent ceiling. “Tell me, Noor, would you be willing to join us?”

“Join you?”

“You’re an adventurer, I take it—at least based on your appearance. How much did you charge for your services? You don’t have to tell me, of course...but if you come to our side, we can provide whatever your heart desires.”

“I don’t quite follow.”

Rashid smiled, evidently amused. “I expect great things from you, Noor. Shawza ranks among the three most capable individuals in all of Sarenza, yet not even he could get a grasp on your worth. Before you, he’d never met someone he couldn’t assess.”

“Oh...the guy missing an eye and an arm? Those were some pretty serious injuries. Is he strong?”

“His injuries weren’t from battle. He has his own set of circumstances.”

“On that note, the people here seem to have a real issue with beastfolk. The most Sirene did was get in the water, yet it still caused all that outrage.”

“Yes, there’s a long history behind that. I’m in the minority who don’t mind their presence. If pushed to pick a label, I would consider myself a believer in simple meritocracy. Origins, nationalities, convictions, and creeds—none of them particularly matter to me.”

“I see.”

“So, back to you. How much are you charging? If you’re honest with me, we can use it as a baseline.”

Rashid was right in his assumption—Lynne *had* hired me—but the guildmaster had negotiated in my stead. As a result, I didn’t know a thing about the terms of my contract. I supposed this chance to come to Sarenza was the greatest payment I could ask for, though I wondered whether that was what Rashid meant.

“Sorry, but I can’t tell you,” I said. “You’ll need to ask Lynne.”

Rashid chuckled. “Tight-lipped, are we? I can respect that. Then let us say no more of your current rate. If you join us, expect a kingsgold each and every day. That’s how much I think you’re worth.”

“A kingsgold? You mean one of those small, rainbow-colored coins?”

“Impressive. Very few people manage to acquire one. I take it you’ve been more fortunate.”

“Yeah, I came across a few.”

“Is that so? The Kingdom of Clays must not have mistreated you as much as I assumed.”

“A kingsgold a day, though? That’s a little...”

“Hmm? Is that not enough? How does two sound, then? Or perhaps three?”

“Oh, no, I meant to say it was excessive. I don’t need that much money.”

From what I remembered, a single kingsgold was enough to purchase an entire castle. That was already insane, but Rashid was offering me the equivalent of *three* castles *every single day*. One of my reasons for coming to Sarenza in the first place was to spend some of the vast savings I’d accumulated; earning even more would defeat the point.

“Oh?” Rashid studied me closely. “I must admit, I thought a man of your strength would desire more. Or perhaps there’s another form of payment you seek?”

“I guess you could say that. The way I see it, getting the chance to see another country’s culture is the best payment I could ask for. Everything’s a new discovery.”

“Hmm. You’re a convincing liar, I’ll give you that.”

“I’m telling the truth.”

“Indeed. Let’s move on, shall we?” Rashid said with a shrug and a knowing smile. I’d spoken honestly from the start, but he still wasn’t willing to believe me.

“Oh, incidentally...” he continued, “I took the opportunity to examine the sword you left with my employee. It’s quite magnificent. I’ve seen enough treasured blades to be sick of them for a lifetime, but I couldn’t even tell what yours was made of. Would you care to tell me?”

“It was a gift, so your guess is as good as mine,” I said. “Are you...saying that you want it?”

“Oh, no. As much as it piqued my interest, I don’t see a need for it. I suspect the costs associated with storing it would outweigh any benefits of having it in my collection. Though of course, if *you* come included, that’s another story.”

“Me...?”

“The Black Blade is impressive in isolation, but its value rises astronomically when paired with someone who can actually wield it. That’s what I desire, and I’m willing to pay a handsome sum to get it. So I’ll ask again—how much do you want? There’s a limit to the amount of money I can move around at the moment, though I suspect I can still raise enough to establish another city or two of this scale.”

“Money isn’t the issue. I really don’t need that much, anyway.”

“I see. Then I suppose I must prepare a sum enormous enough to change your mind.” Rashid seemed completely deaf to my insistence. He drained his glass, placed it on the table, and rose to his feet. “Thank you, Noor. I enjoyed our conversation. I’ll take my leave now, but I’m looking forward to the Trials. Give my regards to your employer, won’t you?”

Leaving me with the feeling that he'd spoken mostly *at* me rather than *with* me, Rashid departed, seeming to be in an excellent mood.

## Chapter 143: Sarenza's Gaming Hall, Part 1

After leaving the lake and changing back into our original clothes, we enjoyed the luxurious meal that had been prepared for us. Lynne and Ines hadn't wanted to eat at first, wary that it might have been tampered with, so I'd tried a bit of everything to put their minds at ease. Given my love of poisonous food, I'd actually been a little disappointed to find that every delicacy served was perfectly safe.

"Next, I shall guide you to the gaming hall, the venue for today's Trials."

Once we'd all eaten, we followed Melissa to our next destination. She stopped outside, informed us of the dress code, and then directed us to more changing rooms, where we put on clothes as formal as the ones we'd worn in Mithra. Only then were we allowed inside the gaming hall.

"This place is pretty big too."

It was a single room, which brought the lake to mind, but that was as far as the comparisons went. Rather than a wide, open expanse, we had entered what appeared to be an entire town squeezed into a space barely large enough to contain it. No sunlight streamed in from above, and our surroundings were so dimly lit that I almost believed it was nighttime. Temperature-wise, it was pleasantly comfortable.

The pathways ahead of us were lined with places for games—stalls and tables crowded with men and women of all ages, openly enjoying whatever entertainment took their fancy. We continued to follow Melissa, our eyes glued to the various attractions, until an especially large crowd came into view. Excited voices rang out from among the throng of people.

"What's that over there?" I asked.

"Our popular colosseum," Melissa replied without missing a beat. "Located at the very center of our establishment, it serves as the stage upon which the most capable combatants try to seize victory."

“Wow. This place has everything.”

“If you are interested, would you like to go inside?”

“Can we, Lynne?”

“Of course,” she replied. “Though we have similar venues in the Kingdom, they might not be the same as Sarenza’s. I think we should take a look—for my own reference, if nothing else.”

“As you wish,” Melissa said. “There is still some time before the Trials, so please observe at your leisure.”

We made our way over to the colosseum, where we just so happened to bump into Rashid. “Hey there, Lady Lynneburg. Have you come to spectate too?” he asked.

“Yes. My country has nothing exactly like it, so I thought this might be a good opportunity to learn something.”

“I admire your attitude. And what good timing—the main event is about to begin. Since we’re here, why don’t I serve as your chaperone? I just so happen to have designed this game; it would honor me greatly to have you in attendance.”

Rashid gave Lynne a slight smile and a shallow bow. I couldn’t help but think he was up to something. Then a woman’s voice echoed throughout the entire gaming hall.

*“Thank you, dear patrons, for gracing the City Forgotten by Time’s gaming hall with your presence. The colosseum’s last event is about to begin: Shin, the Immovable Wanderer, against the green dragon! Those who wish to place a bet, please purchase a ticket from a staff member within the allotted time. Once again—”*

““Place a bet’?” I muttered. “What does that mean?”

“Is this your first time gaming?” Rashid asked.

“Yeah. I didn’t understand a word of that.”

“At its core, betting is a game of stakes. You put money on whichever side you think will win and turn a profit if you’re right. The value of the return depends

on the favorability of the competitors—the weaker the person you bet on, the larger the payout. Simple, no?”

“Right...”

The chatter grew louder, and the air buzzed with enthusiasm.

*“The time has come, dear patrons! Will the unconquerable green dragon, victor of sixty consecutive bouts, defeat yet another challenger? Or will Shin, the Immovable Wanderer, our new rising star with fourteen wins and one draw, seize the laurels of victory? Stay on the edges of your seats, everyone! One hundred twenty seconds remain for those who wish to place a—”*

A fresh burst of cheers drowned out the announcer’s voice. The spectators appeared to be purchasing—or had already purchased—betting tickets. To the side of a circular arena enclosed by high walls, which I took to be the site of the upcoming battle, was a large black board covered with glowing red numbers.

*“The preliminary results are in! 3,261,000 for the reigning champion, the green dragon, against 184,700 for the challenger: Shin, the Immovable Wanderer. Please keep the odds in mind when placing bets, dear patrons! Sixty seconds remain for those who—”*

“What are those numbers?” I asked, indicating the board.

“They’re the aggregate sums of all the purchased betting tickets. In essence, they represent each competitor’s popularity. Today’s results tell us that very few patrons believe the challenger has a chance of winning.”

“Oh, I get it.”

“Fun, right? That board was a relic excavated from the Dungeon of Oblivion along with other pieces of golem technology. Its ability to calculate and display sums is quite convenient once you get used to it.”

“You don’t say...” I murmured. Since we’d arrived, Rashid had told me about all sorts of things I’d never seen in the Kingdom of Clays.

*“Betting is now closed, and the final results are being calculated. 15,107,000 for the green dragon against 2,906,900 for our challenger. A huge disparity in favor of our reigning champion!”*



Louder cheers rang out, and the atmosphere became even more energetic.

*“Now, the participants will make their entrance. Please welcome them with cheers and applause! From here on, our establishment cannot take responsibility for any injuries or damages suffered by patrons within these premises. Please enjoy the show!”*

During the latest announcement, a beastfolk man had stepped into the arena. He was built well but looked exhausted, and the blade in his hand was chipped and worn. His opponent, a massive green dragon, was brought into the arena in a cage before being let loose.

“So that guy’s going to fight that dragon?” I asked.

“Indeed,” Rashid said. “Their match is today’s centerpiece.”

“But he’s—”

*“Begin!”*

Though it was one against one, there was a huge disparity in the fighters’ sizes. It seemed unfair, all things considered, but the battle began before I could voice my concern.

And it played out exactly as I expected.

The man was more agile than the dragon, meaning he could dodge its attacks, but his inferior strength was still clear to see. As his nimble movements gradually slowed, the outcome became even more obvious than before.

“Is no one going to stop them?” I asked. “The victor’s plain to see.”

Rashid shook his head. “Here at the colosseum, every match is seen through to the end.”

“But if you don’t intervene, he’s going to be in grave danger.”

“That’s simply a part of the process. Those who participate are fully aware of the risks. They even sign contracts to that effect.”

“But the guy doesn’t stand a chance. You should put a stop to this before he gets seriously hurt.”

“I can’t do that, I’m afraid. The match will proceed until one side is slain. Such

is the crux of today's entertainment."

"Come again...?"

A loud cheer rose from the spectator seats as the green dragon struck its opponent with its thick tail, launching him into the arena's wall. The man slumped to the ground and remained there, immobile, as the dragon slowly advanced toward him.

"Are you really leaving him to die?" I asked.

"Of course. Those are the rules—the rules he agreed to, might I add. Our combatants accept the risk in their quest for fame and fortune."

"Can I...jump in to help?"

"Under normal circumstances? No. But if you really insist, I am more than willing to accommodate your wishes. You need only sign this contract; then you may act as you please."

"Yeah? Hand it over, then."

"Instructor?! " Lynne cried, but it was already too late. I scrawled my name on the document Rashid presented to me.

"There you go," I said. "I signed it."

"So you did. Then the contract is in effect. You may go."

"Wait! That contract—!"

Paying no mind to Lynne's exclamation, I jumped into the arena. My feet hadn't even touched the ground when a strange glow enveloped the green dragon entirely—the same blue light I'd seen in Mithra. The dragon struggled against its luminescent cage, furious, as a buzz ran through the spectators, and the female announcer's voice once again rang out.

*"It appears we have a new challenger! A round of applause for our brave and unknown competitor! A special exception is being made for this match—dear patrons, we have a tag team on our hands! Due to the change, betting will reopen, and the odds will be recalculated. Those who wish to adjust their bets, please inquire with your nearest staff member. Those who wish to retain their current bets may keep their tickets. Only sixty seconds remain for—"*

“What...?”

No sooner had the woman made her announcement than the numbers on the board started to change, moving so fast that it was hard to keep track of them. By entering the arena, I must have become a new target to bet on.

*“The tickets are being counted, and...the results are in! 16,729,000 for the green dragon against 3,805,200 for Shin, the Immovable Wanderer, and the nameless challenger! Once again, a huge disparity in favor of our reigning champion! Before we resume, remember that bets must be cashed out before the end of today’s business hours. We appreciate your understanding and continued patronage.”*

As the cheers grew more excited, I helped the collapsed beastfolk into a seated position.

“Are you okay?”

“Th-Thank you...” he wheezed. “I don’t know who you are, but...you saved my life.”

“Those are some pretty serious wounds. You should get them seen to.”

There was a brief pause as he got a closer look at me. “Hah, what? A human? I thought you were another beastfolk. Is this your idea of pity? Well, while I appreciate the sentiment, I don’t have the coin to pay for treatment. If I did, I wouldn’t be here in the first place.”

“Then I’ll treat you myself. My healing isn’t the best, but it should close your wounds, at least.”

“What...? What are you...?” The beastfolk fell silent, merely watching with a deep frown as I started using [Low Heal] on him.

“There. Done.”

“Huh? Th-Thanks. I’m not sure what you did, but I haven’t felt this good in a long time. I can’t even feel my injuries. Who *are* you? And how did you end up a battle slave?”

“A battle slave? What are you talking about? I’m an adventurer.”

“No, no—what are *you* talking about? Everyone who competes in this arena

only does so because they've signed a slave contract."

"Really?"

"What do you mean, *'really'*?"

A booming roar interrupted us. The luminescent blue cage had started to waver, and its prisoner was out for blood.

The man forced a bleak chuckle. "Thanks for saving me, but you wasted your time. I can't beat that thing even in perfect health. Figured this was my last chance to repay my debt from my days as a merchant, but I guess life ain't that lenient. I'd toss my weapon aside and accept death on my feet, but look how angry that brute is. It'd drag things out, for sure."

"Can I use your sword, then?"

"Go for it. Won't cut a damn thing, though—the blade's all battered from the other fights it's gotten me through."

"That's fine with me; I'm used to fighting with a blunt sword. Just make sure you get those wounds seen to, okay? I know someone with pretty amazing healing skills. I'll ask her to take a look at you when we're done here."

The man shot me an incredulous look. "Again, *what are you talking about?*"

*"Now then, dear patrons—the match shall resume! Our fighters are the reigning champion, the green dragon, versus Shin, the Immovable Wanderer, and the nameless challenger! Don't miss it!"*

The blue light vanished, and the green dragon began to move. I borrowed the man's sword, which looked as though it might fall apart at any moment, and settled into a combat stance, facing my enormous opponent head-on.

"All right. Looks like it's my turn."

## Chapter 144: Sarenza's Gaming Hall, Part 2

I faced the oncoming dragon, my borrowed sword at the ready.

In this scenario, the old me would probably have been shaking in his boots, but I was surprisingly calm. Everything I'd experienced must have numbed me to certain fears. Though the green dragon *was* intimidatingly large, it was just a runt compared to Rala, and it wasn't anywhere near as scary-looking as the skeleton I'd met in Mithra.

*Still, this won't be over until one of us dies, huh?*

**"GRRRAAAHHH!"**

The dragon interrupted my thoughts by slamming its massive claws down at my head.

"[Parry]."

I deflected the blow without issue, but I must have misjudged my control; my borrowed blade shattered into pieces. It struck me that I was probably too used to the weight and durability of my black sword. I wouldn't have been surprised if using regular weaponry was beyond me now.

**"GRAH...?"**

A jolt of panic shot through me at losing my weapon, but my parry appeared to have worked—the green dragon let out a bewildered growl and stumbled to the ground. It didn't stay there for long, though, soon rising to its feet and glaring at us even as a buzz ran through the audience.

**"GRRRRRR..."**

For some reason, the dragon wasn't drawing any closer. It simply slammed its massive tail against the stone floor, kicking up a cloud of dust, and growled once again.

A stir spread through the colosseum.

"What? The green dragon stopped moving. Who trained the accursed thing?"

They clearly failed at their job!”

“What’s going on? I thought this was today’s headliner!”

As the spectators’ voices reached my ears, I tried to approach the dragon. It backed away in response, even looking a little cautious.

“Is there a way we can withdraw from the match?” I asked the man behind me.

“What? Of course not. We don’t have that luxury. You signed a contract, didn’t you? And how did you manage that just now? I’ve never seen a sword outright crumble to pieces.”

“Sorry. I only meant to parry the blow, but I guess I put a little too much strength behind it.”

“Just ‘a little’? Bah, it doesn’t matter. Seems our opponent lost its will to fight.”

“Yeah.”

Given the circumstances, it was probably scared. Our match was being advertised as a fight to the death—not that I was going to play along.

“It’s okay. I won’t kill you.”

I tried to reassure the dragon, but it didn’t seem to register my words. In fact, it continued to retreat as I approached, even damaging the wall as it tried to back through it. I was pondering what to try next when I noticed small objects flying into the arena from above. Spectators were throwing their drinks, which shattered against the ground and walls.

“What is this farce?! Get on with the match!”

“I want my money back! Refund me, I say!”

“What are the organizers doing?! You call this entertainment?!”

“Fight! Kill! I’m not leaving until one of you dies!”

Before I’d realized it, the excitement and enthusiasm in the colosseum had twisted into jeers and insults.



“Oh dear, Lady Lynneburg. This is sure to result in a heavy loss.”

In the audience, a young man spoke to the girl dressed in black beside him. Spectators hurled abuse and objects into the arena all the while.

“This breach of our promise to provide a good show will damage the City Forgotten by Time’s good name,” he continued. “A serious blow indeed.”

The girl said nothing in response. A pleasant smile spread across the man’s face as he took in her reaction.

“Still, how was it, Lady Lynneburg? For you, our foreign guests, I organized this match as a special event.”

The young man—Rashid, the owner of the establishment around them—and Princess Lynneburg sat together in the audience, quietly watching the scene unfolding in the arena below. They had not spoken at all during the proceedings.

“I appreciate the effort, but I must apologize,” Lynne replied, her narrow eyes and cold stare contrasting the young man’s smile. “I don’t much care for blood sports.”

“Ah, that *is* a shame. Still, it appears our challenger’s contract is now with me, doesn’t it?”

“Just to be certain, may I confirm the contents of said contract? I should possess that right, as his current employer.”

“But of course. Study it as much as you wish. I must request that you be extra careful with it, though; it serves as precious evidence of his agreement with me.”

“As you wish. I shall handle it with the utmost care.”

The girl wearing a black dress accepted the bulky sheaf of parchment...then created a massive fireball in the palm of her hand.

“[Hellflare]. There. As promised, I *handled* it.”

In an instant, the parchment was reduced to ash. The sudden gout of flame shot high enough to reach the ceiling, eliciting a commotion from the rest of the spectators, but the princess’s expression failed to change. Likewise, the young

man's gentle smile remained.

"My, what a surprise," he said. "Is that how important contracts are treated in the Kingdom of Clays? I assumed things were slightly more civilized there, but I suppose I was mistaken."

"Does the law in Sarenza not state that a contract is invalid until the involved parties have reviewed its contents?" the girl asked dispassionately. "With that in mind, I thought you no longer had a use for it."

The young man continued to smile. "That is indeed the law of my country. However, if an exemption clause is included, then precedence recognizes the contract as valid—not that we even *have* a contract anymore. Ha ha ha! I suppose I've conceded this point to you, haven't I? Trust Rein's little sister to have such a thorough understanding of the law."

"My brother told me to be wary of your every action."

"Is that so? That might just be the greatest compliment he's ever paid me. We have a lot of history, you see, so there's no greater honor than to hear him speak of me in such a way."

The young man turned his eyes back to the arena, which was now littered with garbage. "One thing still eludes me, though. That green dragon is supposed to be savage. Why did it suddenly turn docile? You wouldn't happen to have *done* something, would you, Lady Lynneburg?"

"No, I'm as clueless as you are."

A boy's voice came from the seats behind them. "If you mean the berserk magic that was placed on the dragon, I already undid it. It didn't want to fight—it was just being forced to."

Rashid didn't turn to look at the new speaker; his eyes remained on the arena below. "Ah, I see. You must be the demonfolk. Your kind is able to control monsters, correct? Are you manipulating it even now?"

"No, the most I did was undo that magic. The dragon's always been the timid type."

"And when did you do that?"



“At the start of the match, right before the dragon was brought out. I did the same for all the poor monsters locked up below.”

“Did you, now? Magnificent. I wasn’t aware that the power of your people depicted in legends was this impressive. I would advise you not to overdo it, however. Draw too much attention and unsavory rumors will surely spread. ‘Those atrocious demonfolk are taking control of monsters and plotting against us once again!’”

“You’re right—I wouldn’t want that. I would rather you not resort to it.”

Rashid chuckled, causing his shoulders to shake. “You’re more fascinating than I thought. Rolo, was it? I very much like you.” Barely a moment later, his smile vanished, and his attention returned to the girl sitting beside him. “So, Lady Lynneburg...who am I to bill for today’s losses?”

“Surely not the Kingdom. I thought you meant to treat us hospitably.”

“Hah! Right you are! Nothing gets past you, does it? Very well, then; I shall fold the losses from this event’s cancellation into the expenses for your reception. You may rest assured—my father will shoulder the financials.”

“You have my appreciation.”

“For which you are very welcome.”

Their cold exchange concluded without a hint of a smile from either side. They turned away from each other to once again face the arena, which was empty of any activity but the jeers of the crowd.



“Enough with this farce!”

“I want my money back!”

We stood at the center of the circular arena, enduring complaints and other angry shouts from the spectators. They had taken to throwing more than just their drinks; I exchanged a look with Shin as we warded off trash and even flowerpots.

*“After careful consideration, the colosseum staff have decided to render today’s final match null and void. We deeply apologize to our patrons in*

*attendance. Please go to the relevant counters to be compensated for your betting tickets. Furthermore, in light of the circumstances, today's other events have also been canceled. We truly apologize for any inconvenience—"*

The shouts of anger and abuse got worse, and the spectators began throwing even more trash into the arena. We put up with it for a little while longer until the gate Shin had entered through slowly started to open.

"Hmm? I guess the match really is over."

"Truly? We're saved..."

"Sure looks that way."

Running from the persistent barrage of trash and other such projectiles, we hurried over to the gate and ducked under it, leaving the circular arena behind us. I parted ways with Shin in the waiting room—he insisted that he didn't need medical attention—and made my way back to the spectator seats, relying on directions I'd received from a passing staff member. Lynne greeted me upon my return.

"Instructor. You're safe."

"Yeah. Sorry for the wait."

Rashid moved to join us. "Welcome back. Did you enjoy your time in the arena?"

"I wouldn't say that I enjoyed it, but I'm glad things ended without anyone getting hurt."

"Yes, how fortuitous. However, it still pains me to hear that you didn't have fun. As one of the designers of this amusement, I consider it a mark against my pride." Rashid punctuated the remark with a performative shrug. Every gesture he made was exaggerated. He didn't seem as upset as he claimed to be.

Lynne stood behind the man without a word, a grim look on her face.

"Did something happen, Lynne?" I asked.

"No...nothing in particular."

"Indeed. Apart from her incinerating the contract between us, nothing of

much note occurred.”

“Contract? Oh, the thing I signed earlier?”

“My...apologies for that,” Lynne said. “I ‘accidentally’ burned it.”

“*Accidentally...?*”

“Please forgive me for taking matters into my own hands, Instructor. That contract would only have caused you problems, so I felt compelled to act.”

“I mean, I don’t really mind... What were its terms, anyway? I didn’t have time to read it.”

Rashid chuckled. “Pay that no heed, Noor. As it stands, our contract is nothing more than ash. It’s somewhat regrettable, but I never expected to obtain you through cheap tricks.”

“‘Cheap tricks’?” Lynne wore a stony expression.

The man shot her a glance before turning back to me, his lips still curved in a smile. “You are truly blessed with good companions, Noor. I want you more and more. Though of course, acquiring every one of you would be the best outcome.”

“Lord Rashid, we aren’t so dense that such basic deception would work on us.”

“Oh, I’m well aware. That’s why we’ve agreed to engage in a fair and open competition, is it not? We shall put *everything* on the line to make the victor obvious, and there won’t be room for the loser to complain.”

Was it just me, or was our host’s mood improving by the moment? Before I could ponder the question, all the lights in the gaming hall went out, plunging us into darkness that resembled the dead of night. As a commotion went up at the sudden change, Rashid threw his arms open wide.

“Now then! The *trifles* are over, so let the games begin! Melissa, take us to the VIP room!”

“As you wish.”

We followed our guide to the place that would serve as the staging area for

our Trials.

## Chapter 145: The Trials, Part 1 (Preliminary Meeting)

We passed through a long, dark, and narrow hallway into a single room. It was spacious, with scores of the same playing tables I'd seen in the gaming hall. Dozens of staff members clad in black formal attire stood at the room's edges, and the back wall was adorned with a massive painting of a set of golden scales.

"Lady Lynneburg—behold the site of our contest. What do you think?"

"Is this where we're conducting the Trials?"

"Indeed. This room is equipped to accommodate a wide array of games, and many a famous competition has been held in the presence of the *Scales of Arbitration*. I considered it an appropriate setting for our needs."

"So long as it's fair, the location doesn't matter to me."

No sooner had Rashid taken a seat before the massive painting of the scales than Melissa began reading from the documents in her hands.

"The preliminary meeting for the Trials between Rashid, proprietor of the City Forgotten by Time, and our guests from the Kingdom of Clays will now commence. I, Melissa, shall serve as host and moderator. Should anyone wish to object, speak now. Anything less will count as tacit consent to the topics of discussion, and ex post facto protests will not be recognized. If both parties agree to these terms, have your representatives declare their consent."

"No objections from me, of course," Rashid said.

After a brief moment of thought, Lynne replied as well. "I do not object to the terms stated thus far."

"The consent of both parties has been recognized. We shall now proceed to negotiations," Melissa declared. She turned to the next of her documents, her every move befitting a businesswoman. "Henceforth, we shall confirm the point of contention to be set upon the scales of the Trials. The point is as follows: both parties are in disagreement over the terms of the taxation rights concerning a desert village. Is this correct?"

“That’s how I understand it,” Rashid confirmed.

“Likewise,” Lynne said. “The assessed value of taxation I observed on the relevant documents was 4,820,970,000 gald per year. I consider that an unjust sum, given the village’s means.”

“You have a good memory. But allow me to say this, Lady Lynneburg—as a Sarenzan tax official, the amounts I decide upon are inherently recognized as just by the law. Moreover, though this might not be clear to someone who does not reside here, the assets in the village’s possession do indeed possess equivalent value. Its water supply is a Wellspring Pipe, one of the greatest treasures of the Kingdom of Clays, is it not? Given its prospective value, I would even say that my estimate was *conservative*.”

Evidently, Rashid knew about the Wellspring Pipe. Lynne appeared calm in the face of his smile, but I could tell she was a little shaken.

“You don’t need to confirm its existence if you don’t want to, but you must be wise enough to understand what an unprecedented concession I’m making here,” he continued. “As the chief tax official, my rulings are final; it would, under any other circumstances, be inconceivable to challenge one. Please don’t forget that these Trials are an exception out of respect for our honored guests.”

“And for that, you have my gratitude,” Lynne replied. “However, from our perspective, we see the situation as nothing more than you taking advantage of a region that, before coming into some wealth, was otherwise abandoned. You understand why we would object.”

“That’s simply how Sarenza operates, I’m afraid.”

“The irreconcilable disagreement between both parties has been recognized,” Melissa said. “Subsequently, the point of contention for today’s Trials will be recorded as ‘taxation rights for the village.’ The assessed value is determined as 4,820,970,000 gald. Both parties will now present to the table assets of equal value.”

“Do you have it, Melissa?” Rashid asked.

“Yes, Master Rashid. Here.”

Rashid took a single document from Melissa and placed it on the table.

“Obviously, I shall present the title deed to a year’s worth of the village’s taxes. And you?”

“Melissa, the item I placed in your care?”

“Of course, Lady Lynneburg.”

Melissa brought over a felt-covered panel. Atop it sat Lynne’s personal dagger.

“Oh? An adamantite dagger,” Rashid noted. “Even the hilt is adamantite. Such fine workmanship too. Taking its size into account, I imagine it would fetch a fair price.”

“I received it as a gift. Though I don’t ever intend to sell it, the market rate for such a weapon should be at least five billion.”

“Yes, I agree. Unfortunately, it won’t be enough.”

“May I ask why?” Lynne retorted, watching Rashid with a look of suspicion.

“As you know, supply and demand decide the value of all goods. In this case, as your opposition, I possess the right to determine the worth of what you have presented. Even if the market rate were twice or twenty times your estimate, a stake that does not interest me is worth nothing on this table. It is a fine item, but I simply do not desire it.”

Wearing his usual grin, Rashid slid the dagger back across the table. “So, Lady Lynneburg, I must ask that you provide something else. For reference, it would need to be worth at least five of your kingdom’s kingsolds. As long as it meets that criteria, near enough anything will do. Ah, but if you’re open to suggestions...perhaps the right of command over one of your attendants?”

Rashid gestured to those of us waiting behind Lynne. “Noor would do. Or perhaps Ines, the Divine Shield. Even the demonfolk boy would suffice; though his value is far below that of the other two, the market price of his kind has exploded since Mithra’s high priestess made her proclamation. I will also, of course, accept physical currency. As the law, not I, determines its value, it is the only exception to the rule. Though you would need the amount on hand.”

Lynne glared at her smiling adversary. “I do not have that much on me, and

using my companions as betting chips is out of the question.”

“Ever the compassionate employer. But here we find ourselves at an impasse. The Trials demand that both parties stake items of equal value. If you aren’t able to comply, then we cannot begin, and this special concession I’ve made for you will ultimately fall through.”

“Hold on,” I said. “If you need coin, I can chip in.”

“Instructor...?”

I retrieved the small pouch I’d stashed inside my jacket, then fished out five rainbow-colored coins and placed them on the table in front of Rashid. “Five kingsgolds, right?”

“Melissa. Check them,” he said.

“At once.”

Melissa took something that resembled a small viewing glass from her own jacket and used it to examine the coins. After a while, she placed them back on the table.

“They are all genuine, Master Rashid. They may serve as your opponents’ stake without issue.”

“Is that so? Very well then.” Our host turned to me. “Were you carrying those around this whole time?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I just so happened to have them on me.”

“Really? So five kingsgolds is mere pocket change to you...?”

“I-Instructor?! ” Lynne exclaimed. “Where did you even—?! ” Her shock starkly contrasted the look of strange amusement I was getting from Rashid. Now that I thought about it, I’d never actually told her about the money I was carrying.

“I must apologize, my lady.”

“Ines...?”

Before I could even attempt an explanation, Ines beat me to it. She leaned close to Lynne’s ear and whispered, “I was made aware of the amount he was carrying on his person when he gave it to me for my supply trip. His Majesty



instructed me not to mention it or Noor's actions, as they were 'personal matters with no relation to the Kingdom.'"

"Thank you, Ines. I understand now. But, Instructor, are you truly okay with this?"

"I don't mind what happens to it. I was going to use it all anyway."

"Then please accept both my thanks and my apologies. I swear, I *will* compensate you upon our return."

"Oh, there's no need for that. Everything with the village was my idea in the first place. Makes sense that I'd also have to foot the bill."

"It appears that both parties have presented their prices for the scales," Melissa interjected. "We shall proceed to the contents of the Trials. Lady Lynneburg, I must first request your opinion. The match will comprise a set of games agreed upon by both parties, and its outcome will determine the victor. Do you have any preferences you wish to make known?"

"Hmm..." Lynne pondered the question. "Do you have anything in mind, Instructor?"

"Let me think... I haven't played many games before, but..." My eyes stopped on a ten-sided die resting on the table near us. I went over to pick it up. "I *do* have some experience with these."

"Dice, is it?" Rashid asked. "Seemingly simple, but endlessly fascinating. An excellent choice, Noor. If I may make a suggestion, Lady Lynneburg, how about Three Dice?"

"Is that the name of the game? May I ask what the rules are?"

"As you can probably tell, it involves three dice. One player sticks them in a cup and shakes them, and the other tries to guess the outcome. Given its sheer simplicity, it shouldn't pose any issues for newcomers."

"In essence, it's a game based entirely on luck?"

"Not necessarily," I said. "There's a trick to it."

"Have you played Three Dice before, Instructor?"

“Not quite, but I’ve tried a similar game with my old coworkers. Beginners win all the time.”

The game I’d played used two six-sided dice, though the part about guessing the result was the same. I’d joined my coworkers during our break time, since they’d appeared to be enjoying themselves, and won quite a bit despite being a complete rookie. It was so much fun that I started playing on a regular basis—but barely a few days later, they kicked me out and said they’d never play with me again.

“It sounds as though you’re quite confident when it comes to this game, Noor,” Rashid said.

“More or less.”

“But to continue my explanation, Lady Lynneburg...why don’t we make Three Dice the first of three games that will constitute our match? This might be a contest, but it is also entertainment, and it would make for a poor spectacle if we decided the victor right away. There’s value in us enjoying ourselves together, don’t you think? Ah, and since I picked the first game, feel free to pick the next. I don’t mind.”

“Very well,” Lynne replied. “I’ll agree to that.”

“Then let the games begin. Melissa?”

“Sir.”

*“This is a message for all patrons within the facility. The Trials between Rashid, proprietor of the City Forgotten by Time, and our guests from the Kingdom of Clays will now begin. The match will appear on the screen mirrors installed throughout the premises for you to spectate at your leisure. We hope you enjoy the show.”*

“What is the meaning of this...?” Lynne muttered. As the announcement had promised, the black boards placed throughout the room suddenly changed to show moving images of us.

“Terrific, aren’t they?” Rashid crowed. “Like the number-displaying boards you saw in the colosseum, our screen mirrors are relics from the Dungeon of Oblivion. Their scope may be limited to within the building, but they can

reproduce a moving image of their target in real time.”

“You didn’t mention anything about this.”

“No? It must have slipped my mind. Still, the eyes of a third party are necessary to guarantee the outcome of the Trials. I’m sure you understand. Not to mention, in these circumstances, should we not allow as many people to enjoy the proceedings as we can? As the proprietor of this establishment, it is one of my duties to ensure the patrons’ entertainment. Do forgive me.”

“It appears my hands are tied.”

Rashid smiled, his amusement seeping through. “I shall take that to mean you agree.”

*“This will mark the last betting event of the day. Both parties participating in the Trials have agreed to a three-game match. Those who wish to purchase betting tickets, please inquire with the nearest staff member. Dear patrons, engage to your hearts’ content! Three hundred seconds remain until the first—”*

“Don’t tell me you mean for them to bet on us?”

“But of course. Contests this unique are a rare treat. Look how much attention we’re receiving. I daresay today’s Trials will go down in history.”

The black boards on the wall showed the betting statistics, and the numbers were increasing explosively. Rashid chuckled as he watched them climb higher, but Lynne was staring daggers at him.

“Ah, and another thing, Lady Lynneburg—as our games are being broadcast throughout the entire facility, please refrain from attempting to resolve things with the violence you’re so proficient at.”

“The thought never even crossed my mind.”

“Most wise. Let us be fair, impartial, and civilized. These are games, after all; shall we not enjoy them? That is why this room exists in the first place.”

*“Before the match begins, the ‘chips’ brought to the table by both parties will now be announced. As it stands, we have the City Forgotten by Time’s 4,820,970,000 against the Kingdom of Clays’s 4,820,970,000. Place your best bets, dear patrons.”*

No sooner had the announcement been made and the numbers appeared on the walls than shouts of excitement filled the air.

“Ah!” Rashid exclaimed, his smile growing wider. “They say money makes the world go round, and today, of all days, that’s truer than ever!”

“To think that Sarenza’s Trials would take place on such a large scale,” Lynne mused aloud. “I’ve studied them before, but this surpasses what I pictured.”

“Oh, this is far from the norm. We don’t usually have such vast sums in the balance. But you are a special guest, Lady Lynneburg. I did my best to give you an experience far more enjoyable than any ordinary patron of my establishment would receive. Is it to your liking?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“A shame. In any case, I should inform you that while we shall vie for each other’s chips in the impartial games we’re about to play, the loser won’t simply be the first to reach zero. Even if one side goes into the negatives, they may request a loan from the other, with interest determined between both parties. I’m sure you understand the implication.”

“Yes, though I wish I didn’t.”

“It makes the contest quite lenient on the loser, don’t you think? Now, let’s have some fun! Noor, will you be taking the first game?”

“Yeah.”

“As for us...how about you, Kron?”

“Sir.”

My opponent was the long-haired man who’d acted as our first guide. “It’s a pleasure to see you again,” he said to me.

“Likewise. Are you all right? You weren’t injured before, were you?”

“I don’t train so intensely for the likes of *you* to worry about me.”

“Glad to hear it.”

This was the same guy who’d almost dropped my sword on his foot. His eyes were bloodshot, and the way he spoke seemed rougher than before. It was like

he'd become an entirely different person. He held a metal cup containing three dice in one hand.

*"The first of the three games comprising these Trials shall be Three Dice. If you have purchased your betting tickets, dear patrons, then please sit back and enjoy the show."*

"This is my element," the man said. "You might be a state guest, but don't think I'll go easy on you. No hard feelings."

"Sounds good," I said. "Let's do this."

And with that, our first game began.

## Chapter 146: The Trials, Part 2 (Three Dice)

“What? You need me to explain the rules?”

“Yeah, if you wouldn’t mind. I’ve played something similar to this, but I was no expert.”

“Fine. It wouldn’t be much of a contest if you didn’t at least know how to play. But the Trials are sacred—under most other circumstances, this wouldn’t even be considered. Keep that in mind, and don’t come complaining to me later, all right?”

“Fair enough. Thanks.”

From across the table, Kron scrutinized the look on his opponent’s face.

*What’s he planning?*

The man claimed not to know the rules for Three Dice, but Kron didn’t believe him—only a fool would take everything his opponent said at face value. No dice had been thrown, but the game had already begun. Kron paid close attention to the man’s every word and action as he launched into an explanation.

“The core rules are simple: the dealer rolls three dice, and the player guesses the outcome, betting any amount they wish. The dealer pays out on a correct guess; otherwise, the player pays.”

“How do bets work?”

“You can bet in several ways. Guessing whether the total is odd or even is called a ‘strange.’ Likewise, an ‘up-down’ is when you guess higher or lower. Guessing the exact numbers on the dice is a ‘call.’ The payout depends on the method you choose; a strange pays the least, and a call pays the most.”

“Right. This is a lot to take in, but essentially...the best payouts come from guessing the exact numbers? That’s how it worked in the other game I played.”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Of course, actually doing it was another matter entirely.

“Now you know the rules,” Kron said. “Let’s begin. I assume you don’t mind if I deal first?”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

There was a slight pause before Kron replied. “All right. Place your first bet.”

“Let’s go with...this much.”

There was another pause. Then, “Are you sure?”

“Yep.”

Their brief exchange was enough for Kron to reach a conclusion. His opponent wasn’t acting ignorant—he was a genuine, dyed-in-the-wool amateur. In Three Dice, whoever dealt first had an overwhelming advantage. The game was about protecting one’s chips from the dealer; trying to guess the outcome of the dice was pure idiocy.

In almost all cases, Three Dice started with a fierce negotiation. Letting one’s opponent deal first was as good as throwing the game. And if that wasn’t enough, the man had just bet a gold chip. That gilded wooden disk represented a hundred million gald, enough to make even the gambling veteran Kron hesitate. Perhaps it would return to his opponent, but it was far more likely to be ceded to the dealer—along with a considerable amount more, if the man wasn’t careful.

It was a reckless bet, Kron thought: their game could end in a single roll of the dice. His opponent was an easy mark—one with a fat purse and no defenses to speak of. Kron suppressed the smile creeping onto his face and rolled the dice.

“Bet,” he said.

“Three, four, eight.”

Kron was taken aback; despite the exorbitant amount of money at stake, his opponent had made a call, the riskiest move. A correct guess would net him a hundred times his bet. An incorrect one would cost him tenfold. It was high risk, high reward, and his chances of winning were incredibly slim.

Ten billion for a correct guess. A billion lost otherwise. All in a single moment. It was the first roll of the game, and it was already sink or swim.

*What is he thinking?*

Kron had thought his opponent was an amateur. Now he wasn't sure. No one new to this game would put so much money at risk—not during the sacred Trials. The man had to be planning something with his all-or-nothing bet, but Kron couldn't read him. His expression was persistently casual, as though not a single thought ran through his head. Cheating seemed out of the question when they had so many eyes on them.

Three Dice wasn't forgiving enough to be won through instinct alone; it was a highly refined battle of wits, planning, and probability. Yet this man had sauntered in without a care in the world. No matter his scheme, one thing was clear—he was disrespecting the sanctity of the game. He would soon get his comeuppance for that.

“Open.”

Or so Kron assumed. His eyes widened in shock.

*Three, four, seven. Off by a single digit.*

“Oh, not quite,” his opponent said. “I was close, though.”

Kron was dumbstruck. The man spoke with too much certainty to be picking numbers at random. He must have used a trick of some kind—but what?

“Two out of three...” Kron said. “That's a no-count. You don't lose your bet, but I need to roll again.”

“Oh, is that how it works? Sure.”

Kron scooped up the dice, now knowing better than to underestimate his opponent. The man across from him was no mere amateur—he knew exactly how to feign inexperience.

Had the man cheated, Kron would certainly have noticed. But what did that mean for his suspiciously accurate guess? Was it purely luck? Perhaps. A near miss on a single roll wasn't beyond the realm of possibility.

Kron watched the dice tumble about in his cup, following their high-speed rotations like a hawk. Then, at long last, he placed the cup upside down on the table. His opponent had lucked out once, but it wouldn't happen again.



“Bet.”

“One, three, four.”

Another call. Did this man know no fear, or was he truly an idiot? He hadn’t cheated—Kron would stake his life on it—which meant he was relying entirely on luck. It was extremely unlikely to guess the exact number on more than one die. The man was about to be short a billion gald.

*Hell awaits you as soon as I remove this cup.*

“Open. Wha—?!”

One, three, three. Again, the man had missed out by a single digit.

“Huh. Off again,” he said. “Did I get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?”

Again, Kron couldn’t believe it. The chances of this happening were slim to none. His opponent must have been up to something. He was tainting their sacred match with some crass sleight of hand.

“What did you do?” Kron spat in a low, harsh voice, now shaking with anger. Both the cup and dice sat motionless on the table.

“Huh? Nothing.”

“You played a trick. I *know* you did. A double no-count would never happen otherwise, you blasted—”

“Kron.”

A word from his employer cut him short.

“Continue,” Rashid said, then indicated the screens around them. “Look. Our patrons are waiting.”

Kron looked at the screen mirrors on the walls. As his employer had said, there were crowds of spectators eagerly watching the proceedings. He had forgotten all about them, but the sight restored his calm.

“My apologies.”

He had already failed once in front of his employer; messing up twice in one day was out of the question. No matter how strongly he suspected it, he

couldn't accuse his opponent of cheating without being able to explain the trick. He would need to identify it as they played.

Kron returned the dice to their cup and shook them again, even more focused than before.

"Bet."

"Three, six, two."

Kron revealed the dice, and a shout almost escaped him. Another no-count. He hadn't seen the man do anything suspicious, so how had they ended up in the same situation yet again? He picked up the dice and cup another time, devoting every speck of his focus to the game.

"Bet."

"One, nine, eight."

"No-count...! We go again. Bet!"

"Five, five, four."

"Ngh! Another no-count?!"

Roll, call, no-count. Again, and again, and again. Something wasn't right; this was *inconceivable*.

*How is this happening?*

The man was cheating—that much was clear—yet Kron couldn't figure out how. He had spent two decades in the world of gamblers, fighting tooth and nail against the most capable opponents, but he'd never been humiliated like this.

One more roll. This time, he would figure out the truth. No matter what.

"Bet."

"One, three, four."

"Another...no-count..."

"Huh. I can't seem to get it right today."

No matter how desperately Kron searched, he found no evidence that his

opponent was cheating. "Can't seem to get it right"? What a barefaced lie. How had he ever thought this man was an amateur?

Kron was about to pause the game and request a thorough inspection of the dice when his opponent beat him to it.

"Sorry, but could you show me the dice for a moment?"

"Are you accusing me of cheating?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Fine. But be quick about it."

The man was up to something. Kron just needed to catch him in the act, then expose him in front of everyone. He watched carefully for whatever trickery was about to occur, staring so intently that his eyes turned bloodshot...but his opponent merely rolled the dice a few times before returning them.

"Thanks," the man said. "That should do."

"Already...?"

"Yeah."

Kron stared at the dice. He saw neither signs of new trickery nor evidence that some previous alteration had been removed. Was he simply mistaken?

No, that couldn't be true. He would pause the game and insist that the dice be checked again.

"Um, Instructor?"

But the princess spoke up before he could.

"Hmm?" the man replied.

"Why did you examine the dice? Have they been tampered with?"

"No, I don't think so. They're perfectly normal. I just wanted to hear their sound."

"Their sound...?"

Kron was just as confused. What did their sound have to do with anything? He and the princess listened intently...but the man's next words beggared belief.

“Well, dice make slightly different noises depending on which number they land on. As long as you can distinguish them, games like this are pretty easy to win.”

“Y-You can do that...?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t work out what I was doing wrong, but it seems I misremembered the numbers on one of the dice. I’ve got it now, though, so I should guess the next roll correctly.”

“I...I see...”

It was nonsense, Kron thought. Each number having its own sound was absurd enough, but to have distinguished and memorized them from a few cursory rolls? How could anyone have such keen ears? He knew for a fact that his opponent was lying...yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that *something* was amiss. Again and again, this man had beaten the odds—what was one more miracle on top of that?

Kron was at a loss. If what his opponent said was true, then the outcome of their game had been decided from the start.

“All right, whenever you’re ready,” the man said. “Oh, actually, could you hold on a moment?” In the blink of an eye, he removed his hundred-million-gald chip from the table.

*Ah, so you’ve finally realized what a reckless bet that was.*



The tension had just begun to drain from Kron's shoulders when the man placed two pure-white chips on the table.

"You're *raising*?!"

"Yeah. I'm sure I'll get the next one. Roll whenever you're ready."

The man had taken back his previous bet and replaced it with *two billion gald*. If his next call was wrong, Kron would win twenty billion without having done much at all. But if it was *right*...

Two hundred billion gald—enough to purchase several small countries—rested on a single roll. In the history of Three Dice, had there ever been a play as foolish as this? It was as though the world had gone mad. Even if the man didn't call, the payout would be absurd.

Sweat coated Kron's hands. They even began to tremble. His every instinct screamed at him not to throw the dice.

"What's wrong?" the man asked. "Not going to roll?"

"Ngh...!"

Kron felt as though the specter of death were looming over his shoulder. He shook the dice anyway, then placed the cup on the table.

There was a long pause.

"Bet."

"I've got it. Four, four, four."

Kron almost choked. Another call. And this time, the man had called triples, which would increase the payout a further tenfold. Given his initial bet of two billion—

"You can open," the man said.

Kron remained silent, frozen with his hand on the metal cup. Cold sweat ran down his brow. He tried to force his arm to move, but it was trembling so violently that it refused to obey.

Was the man bluffing? He had to be. The princess's question and the ensuing conversation were just a ploy to unnerve him—his experience as a gambler told

him so.

And yet, something else screamed at him to stop. Not his experience—or anything based in reason, for that matter—but something deeper. His gambler’s instincts, refined from years of surviving the cutthroat world of money and games, were shouting that something was wrong.

*Don’t lift that cup.*

It wasn’t just the money at stake that had made Kron lose his nerve; something about his opponent made him fundamentally different from everyone else he’d faced before. It was no mere fantasy—this man really could predict what numbers would appear.

Acceptance came quickly. Kron continued to hold the cup against the table, but he didn’t remain frozen for long.

“I...withdraw.”

“Hmm? What?”

It was the first time Kron had ever uttered those words. He had risen to his current position by winning every game that had come his way, so withdrawing from their match felt like casting away his pride. No, the humiliation was even greater than that. His life’s work—the trust and reputation he had gone to such great trouble to earn—had vanished in the blink of an eye. His employer would levy a heavy punishment on him for this loss.

Still, the man across the table scared him even more. For despite the mind-boggling amount of money that had just been at stake...

*How can he look so calm?*

“Wait, does that mean I win?” the man asked.

“Yes... In the event that the dealer withdraws, they must pay double the initial bet as penalty. Take it.”

“Really? But I barely did anything. I feel kind of bad...”

Four billion gald had changed hands with a single throw of the dice—dice that hadn’t even been checked. The man picked up the chips without even looking at them, as though the sum were nothing to him.

“I forfeit the rest of the game,” Kron said. “Victory is yours.”

“Yeah? I didn’t even get to roll the dice.” The man rose to his feet, looking slightly disappointed.

“That was magnificent, Instructor,” the princess cooed.

“Thanks. Guess I managed to scrape through.”

Kron threw the victors only a sidelong glance as he returned to his employer’s side. “My sincerest apologies, sir.”

“No, Kron—your judgment was sound. Look at the dice. You managed to cut our losses quite drastically.” Rashid approached the table and, with an icy smile, lifted the cup.

*Four, four, four.*

Exactly as predicted. Triplets *and* a call would have earned the man a thousand times his bet—two trillion gald in total. Kron’s life alone wouldn’t have made up for it.

“It seems you’ve narrowly evaded death’s grasp, Kron.”

There was a long, long pause before he responded: “Sir.”

As a gambler, Kron had spent his entire life flirting with death. This time, however, he had gotten a true glimpse of what waited on the other side.



## Chapter 147: The Trials, Part 3 (Lostman)

*“Game one, Three Dice, has concluded. The victors are our guests from the Kingdom of Clays, whose stack now stands at 8,820,970,000. The City Forgotten by Time trails behind with 820,970,000. Payouts are now available for patrons who placed bets on the outcome. Please inquire with staff members at the designated payment counters.”*

The female announcer’s voice resounded through the building, declaring victory for the Kingdom of Clays. Instructor Noor’s efforts in the first game had added a staggering four billion to our available funds and reduced our opponents’ to a mere fifth. Yet for some reason, Rashid wore the same tender smile as before. It was eerie.

“Excellently done, Lady Lynneburg,” he said. “What shall our next game be? The choice is yours, if you recall.”

I did recall, and my mind was already made up: “I’d like it to be Lostman, please.”

“Oh? A card game, then. And the numbers?”

“Three against three. My team will comprise Rolo, Sirene, and me.”

“As you wish. Are you not including Noor? The rules allow for consecutive participation.”

“I’m not, no. We can manage without him.”

“Then I shall choose Melissa, Kron, and myself. Kron, I assume you won’t mind playing again?”

There was a delay before the man’s response. “Sir.”

*“The participants have come to a decision. The second game shall be Lostman. Each party will field three players. You won’t want to miss this, dear patrons. Three hundred seconds remain for those who wish to place a bet.”*

“Shall we begin, Lady Lynneburg?”

“We shall. Ines, Instructor Noor, may I trouble you to watch the game for any impropriety?”

“My lady.”

“Sure. I’ll keep an eye out.”

Rashid continued to smile. “If you are ready, please follow me to the table.”

Rolo, Sirene, and I rose from our seats to join him at the round table where our game would take place.

“Melissa,” Rashid said, “the cards, if you would.”

“Sir. Lady Lynneburg, please inspect them to your satisfaction.”

I accepted the deck from Melissa, carefully looked it over, and then returned it. “They look clean to me.”

“Thank you.”

“Lady Lynneburg?” Rashid said. “May I make a request?”

“Of course,” I replied, though I made sure to watch him carefully.

“Would you allow Melissa to deal? One purpose of this match is to entertain our patrons, and she’s handy with a deck of cards.”

“I don’t mind, as long as everything is kept fair.”

“You have my thanks. Melissa?”

“Sir. If all participants are ready, I shall begin.”

No sooner had she made her proclamation than the cards burst from her hands as though they had minds of their own. Entertainment, indeed; I could hear the spectators’ exclamations of delight coming from outside the room.

*Astounding. My eyes can’t keep up.*



I'd expected something like this when Rashid had expressly appointed her, but Melissa was clearly the manager of this establishment for a reason. I frantically tried not to lose sight of any of the cards as they arced and curved around the spacious room.

"What do you think, Lady Lynneburg?" Rashid asked when the cards came to rest. "She's talented, isn't she?"

"She is," I said. "And I saw no signs of foul play."

He chuckled. "Ever vigilant, aren't you? Fret not—we of Sarenza would not dare sully the sanctity of this place. Isn't that right, Melissa, Kron?"

"Sir."

"Sir..."

"Now, with the entertainment concluded, shall we begin the game?"

"Um, one moment, please."

"Sirene?" I turned to the archer, whose hand was up in the air.

"Yes, young lady?" Rashid asked. "Is there an issue?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I just wanted to confirm something." Sirene cocked her head slightly. "Those aren't the cards Melissa was holding at the start, are they? She switched them all out. The original cards Lady Lynneburg checked are in the jacket pockets of the staff members by the wall. And as for the deck she just placed on the table—the third card from the top is the reaper. You don't use that in Lostman. Under these circumstances, I don't think we can begin."

"Melissa?"

"Yes, sir. Wonderfully spotted, ma'am."

Melissa stood and clapped once. The black-suited employees by the walls produced the cards from their jackets and started to applaud.

"Splendid. Your place at this table is well-earned," Rashid praised. "You have an excellent pair of eyes. Melissa's little sleight of hand was intended as a bit of surprise entertainment, but it appears we no longer need to go through with the reveal. What do you think, Lady Lynneburg? Was it to your liking?"

“I’m afraid not, no.”

“Ah, my. Then you have my apologies.” Rashid turned to his employee. “Come now, Melissa, this isn’t like you. You should know to hold back so that even *amateurs* may enjoy the show. Adaptability is the mark of a true entertainer.”

“As you say, sir. My deepest apologies.”

“Nevertheless... Young lady—Sirene, was it? Well done. Well done, indeed. I admit, I hadn’t paid you much attention before, but now you’ve caught my eye. If you are a companion to Noor and the Divine Shield, then it stands to reason that you are exceptional in your own way. Hmm... And you are quite adorable, now that I take a closer look.”

“H-Huh? Um...thanks?” She blushed slightly and scratched her cheek.

Sirene’s hearing and vision were exceptional. During Instructor Noor’s game of Three Dice, she had predicted the outcomes of several rolls purely from the sound of the dice. Though she had mentioned that she lacked any experience with games, it was reassuring to have her at the table.

“Lady Lynneburg—might I put forward an idea?” Rashid asked. “Should you find yourself short on chips, why not stake Sirene? I would value her quite highly.”

“As I told you before, I will never bet my companions. I doubt the need would even arise, considering how much of a lead we have.”

“Ah, do excuse me—you *did* say that, didn’t you? Still, should the circumstances change, please forgive me if I proposition you again. And allow me to apologize once more for Melissa’s little show. My only intention was to entertain you, but it seems to have had the opposite effect.”

“Indeed. I appreciate the sentiment, but it won’t be necessary going forth.”

“Ha ha, very well. No more surprises. Let us enjoy the purity of the games—a fair and open contest of wits! Melissa?”

“Sir.” Melissa turned to the table. “I shall now shuffle our cards for this game. I request that you inspect them again?”

I accepted the cards and, once again, looked them over. “I see no problems.

These should be fine.”

“Thank you.” Melissa shuffled the deck at a breakneck pace and dealt all six of us our hands.

“Sirene, did you see anything?” I asked.

“No, my lady. She distributed the cards fairly.”

“Your hands have been dealt,” Melissa stated. “All players, please check your cards.”

We each picked up our five-card hand.

“What shall we do for the ante?” Rashid asked. “Might I propose one hundred million to begin with?”

“That’s acceptable,” I agreed.

“One hundred million it is. As for who will play first...since Sirene saw through our little performance, why don’t we have your team decide?”

“Then, I go first?”

“Of course. Start us off, Lady Lynneburg.”

I drew a card from the deck at the center of the table and added it to my hand. Then, as per the rules of Lostman, I announced the card to the other players.

“Ten of flames.”

At its core, Lostman was a game of matching numbers. I took the card I’d just drawn and another from my hand—the ten of streams—and placed them both face down in the “lost” pile.

“Lost,” I said.

“Lie,” declared Rashid, who was sitting directly across from me. He reached out and flipped the cards I’d put down, revealing them to everyone at the table. “Oh? Do excuse me. It appears you were telling the truth, which means I must pay up. Here.” He slid a chip from his side of the table to ours.

The penalty for disputing a “true lost” was to pay the ante—in this case, one hundred million gald. It paled in comparison to the sums at stake during

Instructor Noor's game of Three Dice, but it was still a tremendous amount of money.

The basic rules of Lostman were exceedingly simple. First, a player would draw from the deck. If they had two or more cards bearing the same number in their hand, they could discard them together, declaring them "lost." The victor was the first person to discard their entire hand.

Each card in a deck bore one of four elements: stones, streams, flames, and gales. There were thirteen cards of each, totaling fifty-two cards overall. In a game with six players and five-card hands, the remaining deck would consist of twenty-two cards. Players could draw new cards but not exchange them with other participants, and therein lay the rub. Had that been all there was to Lostman, it would barely have counted as a game; from the moment the cards were dealt, the victor would already have been decided.

For that reason, Lostman had another key component: deception. During their turn, a player could discard *any* cards from their hand and declare them to be whatever they desired. If no one objected, those cards would remain face down, and the game would continue as normal. Otherwise, the cards would be revealed to the rest of the table.

If, when the cards were revealed, the accused player had evidently lied, they would need to pay double the ante and draw as many cards from the deck as they had discarded. Those without the funds to pay—or who had discarded the last of their cards—were declared "lost" and disqualified from the game. If the cards were a genuine match, the accuser would pay the ante instead.

In short, Lostman was a game of deceit and observation, with untruths serving to negate the bias of the deck. It was entirely feasible for the endgame to have no true matches at all, forcing those who remained to lie for their chance of seizing victory.

Of course, if a player were able to keep a "true lost" in their hand until that point, they would find themselves at a tremendous advantage.

In most cases, victory went to the most talented deceiver. Though lying came with risks, attempting to win honestly was statistically a bad move. It was important to strategize and save one's "truths" for the final, finishing moment.

Though I'd played a few games of Lostman with my family as a child, I was still more or less an amateur. I didn't know what tricks or cheats to expect from our opponents. Still, I saw no reason to fear being at a disadvantage. Not only did we have Sirene's outstanding vision on our side, but we also had Rolo, who could read minds. Through him, our team could coordinate without tipping off our opponents.

Ines had brought Melusine's magical communications prototype, which took the form of miniature earrings, back with her from the Kingdom. While we were waiting for the Trials to begin, Rolo had remodeled them so that Sirene and I would be able to hear his thoughts. It wasn't perfect, but we had at least come into this game prepared.

*"Sorry, Lynne. I can't read their thoughts."*

*"It's okay. We expected this to happen."*

Our opponents were well aware of Rolo's talents; it came as no surprise that they had prepared countermeasures.

Despite my reaction, Melissa's earlier "surprise" hadn't shocked me in the slightest. Rolo had warned me it was coming, and I'd simply feigned ignorance. Even so, I wouldn't have been able to determine what our dealer had done without Sirene's expertise. Rolo's mind-reading alone hadn't been enough for me to follow the path of the cards.

*"Mm-hmm. I think I can still get something out of them, but not without taking a risk. If I push too hard, they might notice what I'm doing and think the wrong things to trick me. They're definitely skilled enough to do that."*

*"I agree. Still, your presence alone keeps them in check. Keep it up."*

*"Mm-hmm. Got it."*

Rashid studied my face from across the table. "Oh? Is something the matter, Lady Lynneburg? You're awfully quiet. Having a secret heart-to-heart with young Rolo, perhaps?"

"For the sake of argument, let's say I am. Would there be an issue with that?"

"Not at all. To my knowledge, Lostman has no rules against peeking into the



hearts of other players. The same is true for the Trials. Ah, but pardon me—it's my turn, isn't it? Eleven of flames. Lost."



Rashid placed two cards on the table. I called his bluff and turned them over.

“Good eye, Lady Lynneburg. That’s another payout from me.”

Once more, an excessive amount of money was pushed across the table. Rashid smiled as he ceded the chips.

The penalty for being caught lying was double the ante—in this case, two hundred million gald. Our opponents had only a little more than five hundred million to play with. In this game of shaving away at each other’s funds, we remained at an overwhelming advantage.

But we couldn’t let our guards down. Not here, and not against opponents such as these.

“Your turn, Melissa,” Rashid said. “Go ahead.”

“Sir.” Melissa drew her card. “Four of stones. My hand contains no matches, so I must pass.”

“You’re next, Kron.”

“Sir.”

The game continued. Players took turns to draw and discard, attempting to read their opponents all the while.

“Thirteen of stones... Pass.”

“Two of streams. Lost.”

“Lie. Oh, it appears I was right this time. Double the ante, if you don’t mind.”

Absurd amounts of money moved back and forth across the table. Thanks to Rolo’s presence, things were going ever so slightly in our favor. We were on track to seize victory.

That is, until the deck started to thin.

“Six of flames. Lost.”

“Lie.”

“Two of gales... Lost.”

“Another lie.” Rashid grinned. “It looks as though you’re lost, Sirene.”

“Ngh... I’m sorry, my lady.”

“It’s all right. This isn’t over yet.”

Our opponents had called out Sirene’s lie, ultimately removing her from the game. It was now two against three.

“Twelve of streams. Lost.”

“Ah, another lie. That’s no good, Lady Lynneburg—honesty is the best policy. Please pay up.”

Rashid exposed my deception, bringing his team’s chips to a little over 1.5 billion. It was his third successful call in a row, but this one stood out to me as strange; he hadn’t even turned over my cards before declaring his success.

“A moment, please,” I said. “How did you know I was lying without checking my cards?”

“Hmm? I thought it was obvious. How many people do you think are watching us right now?”

“What are you suggesting?”

Rashid spread his arms wide, still smiling. “As I made clear, Lostman doesn’t forbid mind-reading. Nor does it forbid spectators from looking at players’ hands and informing their opponents of the contents. So long as we all abide by the *stated rule* of not looking at each other’s hands, the game remains fair and equal. Unless...you wish to object?”

I gazed around the room at the screen mirrors adorning the walls and the impassioned spectators displayed on them. There were countless people watching our game, and they were all our enemies.

But of course, this didn’t surprise me in the slightest.

“Not at all,” I said.

“Then let us continue the game. Your turn, Kron.”

“Sir.”

Though I was no expert at Lostman, that didn’t mean I’d neglected to consider our opponents’ strategies. I’d predicted that this might happen—though Rashid

and the others being shameless enough to follow through with it was something else entirely.

“Six of flames. Lost.”

“Lie. Please pay up.”

Kron recoiled in shock. It wasn't an unreasonable reaction; I'd just taken after Rashid and declared my victory without even checking his cards. Things were going exactly as I wanted them to. Our opponents making use of a trick gave us an opportunity to use it in return.

“Oh? Do you also have collaborators?” Rashid asked.

“I thought it was obvious,” I said, using his own words against him. “The game must be fair.”

“You came prepared, I see. But I ask how? I was quite thorough in ensuring that neither our patrons nor my staff would cooperate with you.” His smile darkened, and he began surveying the room. “Unless we have a turncoat in our midst?”

*“Your methods never change, do they, Rashid?”*

“That voice... Rein? It's been too long.”

Sitting upon the head of a sculpture in the corner of the room was the portable oracle's orb. It displayed an image of my brother, Rein, our collaborator for this game.

“I've missed you dearly, my friend.”

*“Were it up to me, our paths would never have crossed again. But I can't turn down a request from my sister.”*

“You've piqued my interest. I wasn't aware the Kingdom had such sophisticated communications technology. One misses out on so much without cultural exchange. When was that placed there, if you don't mind my asking? It required a deft hand, I'm sure.”

“During Melissa's little show,” I explained. “I asked Instructor Noor to set it up for us.”

“It’s not too far away, is it?” Noor asked. “I didn’t have time to give it more than a once-over.”

“No, it’s perfect. Thank you, Instructor.”

“I see...” Rashid muttered. “So *that* was your reason for not having him participate. It seems this point goes to you.” He smiled wryly and shrugged. “Still, that really is a marvelous piece of tech. Its potential must be limitless. Would you be interested in selling it to me?”

“It’s both a prototype and a state secret, so no.”

“Oh? Yet you were willing to reveal it to me?”

“The creator gave us permission, and we intend to put a standardized version on the market eventually. Consider this a demonstration.”

“Is that so? I’d heard the Spell Sovereign was a prolific inventor, but this exceeds my expectations. It serves as a poignant reminder that a country must interact with its neighbors lest it start to trail behind them. Your device will sell exceptionally well, I’m sure; I know *I’ll* be purchasing them by the wagonload. Rein, my friend—after we conclude matters here, why don’t we discuss a deal?”

*“Though we do plan to sell to other nations, I’d sooner sign a contract with Death than with you.”*

“That’s a shame,” Rashid opined, though he clearly seemed to be enjoying his conversation with my brother.

“As you can see,” I said, “we have a secret third party assisting us as well. As it places us on an equal footing, I assume that won’t be a problem?”

“Of course not. I see no reason to object.”

“Shall we continue the game, then? Your patrons are waiting.”

“Yes, you’re right. That being said, with our hands revealed to each other, this has been reduced to a mere game of chance. I don’t imagine that’s very entertaining. Lost.”

“Lie. Please pay up.”

“Ah, yes... I suppose that *is* what would happen with Rein watching. I don’t

suppose I could convince you to have him withdraw?”

“Am I under any obligation to heed that request?”

“I suppose not.” Rashid glanced at the oracle’s orb. “This is a rather awful thing to do to a friend, Rein.”

*“Hell will freeze over before I acknowledge your absurd claims.”*

The game continued.

“Your turn, Melissa. Go ahead.”

“Seven of stones. Pass.”

“Young Rolo.”

“Five of flames for me. Lost.”

“It appears you aren’t lying. How unfortunate.”

“Indeed, he wasn’t. My turn. Twelve of streams. Lost.”

“Another true lost. Not bad.”

Each player’s hand was as good as public knowledge, but the game was still going in our favor.

“Master Rashid. It seems safe to assume she is counting cards.”

“Yes, indeed. Well done, Lady Lynneburg. You’re quite diligent, aren’t you?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, not at all. Casino games might take issue, but this is a sacred match. Use whatever means you have at your disposal. I, too, have been card counting from the start. Anyone with that talent would depend on it. Isn’t that right, Melissa? There’s no point in bringing it up now.”

“Yes, sir. My apologies.”

Rashid turned back to me. “Still, it appears you have my number. I didn’t expect you to resort to peeking as well. You’re a determined opponent.”

“In the interest of a fair game, I considered it the best course of action.”

“Hah! Splendid. You understand exactly what fairness means in the context of

these Trials! You have your brother's instruction to thank for that, I presume?"

*"No matter how much I want to, I'll never forget the lessons I learned from studying with you in Mithra."*

As the match continued, only Rolo and I advanced our hands.

"Ah, what fun this is!" Rashid exclaimed. "It's been so long since I've been able to go all out. Lost!"

"Lie," I shot back. "I doubt you need me to tell you, but the game will end with my next turn."

"Indeed. The outcome is already apparent—you've bested me through and through. Shall we get this over with?"

Melissa and Rolo took their turns. I was next.

"One of flames. Lost. I've emptied my hand."

"You have indeed. You win ten times the ante. Here you are, Lady Lynneburg. The chips are all yours."

As soon as Rashid passed me my winnings—two gold chips and eight red ones—the announcement of our victory rang out.

*"Game two, Lostman, has concluded. The victors are our guests from the Kingdom of Clays, whose stack now stands at 10,420,970,000. The City Forgotten by Time lags even further behind with negative 779,030,000. Payouts are now available for patrons who placed bets on the outcome. Please inquire with staff members at the designated payment counters before the twenty-four-hour collection window ends."*

"Wonderful. Another win for you and your companions, Lady Lynneburg. You have my sincerest congratulations."

This marked our second win, and our opponents' second loss. Yet across the table, Rashid smiled pleasantly and applauded as though he were having all the fun in the world.



## Chapter 148: The Trials, Part 4 (Death Nine)

*“At the end of the game, the stack available to each party stands at negative 779,030,000 for the City Forgotten by Time against the Kingdom of Clays’s 10,420,970,000—”*

“Wonderful,” Rashid said. “Now, let us move on to the next game.”

Lynne studied him coolly. “I suppose it would be too optimistic to expect this to be the end.”

“But of course—we have completed only two rounds of our three-game match. That said, we can hardly continue when my side is eight hundred million in debt... Melissa?”

“Sir.” The woman placed eleven rainbow-colored coins atop the table.

“There we go,” Rashid said. “A little boost in capital.”

*“The City Forgotten by Time has added additional capital and repaid its debt, bringing its stack to 10,220,970,000 against the Kingdom of Clays’s 10,420,970,000.”*

“No...”

“Had you forgotten, Lady Lynneburg? The Trials are quite lenient on the losing party. The games may continue for as long as the players wish, so long as capital remains to be added. Worry not, though—you appear to still have the advantage. The full year of taxation rights is within your grasp. Ah, but please don’t allow that to affect your composure. Consider this a fun bit of entertainment for the patrons.”

Lynne said nothing. Rashid smiled as he studied her expression.

“Now, shall we decide upon the game? The right would normally fall to us, as we’re the ones at a disadvantage...but how about another game of dice? It *does* seem to be your specialty.”

“Dice again?”

“Indeed. Today’s Trials are also a form of hospitality, so it behooves me to make you some allowances.” Rashid grinned at me. “You may even let Noor play again. We might lose, but that’s the nature of the game.”

“Instructor?”

“If we play dice again, I think my chances are pretty good,” I said.

“Then...we shall agree.”

“How wonderful. Shawza? Would you?”

“If that is your wish, sir.” The one-armed beastfolk had appeared from nowhere and without a sound.

“Excellent. You shall play for us, then. Did you have anything in mind for the finale?”

“I would like to play Death Nine, sir.”

Lynne and I cocked our heads. “Death Nine?”

Rashid casually plucked nine dice from a tray in Melissa’s hands and tossed them across the table. “The rules are quite similar to Three Dice: one player tosses, and the other guesses the results. The biggest differences are the number of dice—nine instead of three—and the fact that players *must* alternate after each throw. There are no rerolls or ‘no-counts.’ The winner is determined by whoever guesses the most dice correctly.”

“I think I understand...” I murmured.

“The payout rates also differ. The amount paid to the winner depends on how many more dice they guessed correctly than the loser. One more is a payout of ten times the ante, two is a hundred times, three is a thousand times, and so on. In the rare event that the winner guesses all nine dice and the loser guesses none, the payout is a billion times the ante. A little on the high side, no? Not that I expect it to come to that, given Shawza’s and Noor’s talents.”

“A moment, please,” Lynne said. “I’ve never heard of a game with such ridiculous stakes.”

“Nevertheless, the right to decide remains with us for this round. Now, who will play for you? Will it be you again, Noor? I suspect that would give you the

best chance of winning.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Instructor...” Lynne said, shooting me a worried look.

“I can’t guarantee that I’ll win, but I won’t know unless I try. It still comes down to guessing the results on the dice, right? Shouldn’t be a problem; I’m warmed up from the first game.”

“Then I’ll entrust this to you, Instructor. But please be careful.”

“Will do,” I said. “I’ll give it my best shot.”

I stepped up to the table and my opponent, Shawza.

“Then let the final game begin,” Rashid announced. “Ah, but before that...”

“—————! —————!”

He raised a hand, and the oracle’s orb suddenly went mute. Lynne’s brother flickered out at the same time.

“Just in case,” Rashid said. “I assume you don’t mind, Lady Lynneburg?”

“Not at all. My brother has finished playing his role.”

“Such composure! You really are his sister. Now, what shall we do about the ante? Noor—you’re the player. Will you decide?”

“Sorry, but I don’t have a head for that kind of thing. Can I leave it to you, Lynne?”

She nodded, her calm expression unchanged. “Very well. Please set the ante at one hundred million.”

“Ha!” Rashid barked in amusement. “I didn’t take you for a gambler, Lady Lynneburg! You must have a talent for the profession if you can so skillfully recognize the pivotal moment!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I simply believe in my instructor. Since our win is set in stone, I thought it best to seize as great of an advantage as we can get.”

“Gamble, investment, trust—the essence is the same no matter how one

describes it. I'm glad to see my inkling was right—you and I are one of a kind. It's only raised my evaluation of you."

"Mm-hmm. May we proceed with the match, Lord Rashid?"

"We may. But of course, we are naught but outsiders now—all we can do is have faith in our players. I can hardly wait. This game is sure to go down in my nation's history."

*"The participants have concluded their deliberations. The third game will be 'Death Nine.' Keep your eyes peeled, dear patrons. Three hundred seconds remain for those who wish to place a bet."*

A timer appeared on one of the magical boards and started counting down. Before we got started, though...

"Sorry, but could you run me through the rules again?" I asked Shawza. "There was too much for me to remember the first time around."

My opponent studied me for a few seconds. "They are as Master Rashid said: one player rolls nine dice, and the other guesses the results. The players then swap roles, and the game continues. The winner is determined by whoever guesses the most dice correctly."

"So...get them all right when I guess, and don't let you get them when I roll?"

"A rough but accurate summary."

"And we have to take turns, right?"

"Yes. There are no outcomes that would require a player to reroll."

"Got it. Thanks."

Satisfied, I took a seat at the table.

"Can I assume you're both ready?" Rashid asked. "Order gives no advantage in Death Nine, but who shall guess first? Shawza?"

"Sure, I don't mind," I replied with a nod.

"Then you may begin. Shawza."

"Sir."

The one-armed beastfolk wasted no time in tossing the nine dice into the air. He caught them all with the metal cup in his hand, which he then slammed down onto the table.

“Bet.”

He’d moved so fast and so carefully that I’d heard barely a sound from the dice. Guessing all nine would be a tall order compared to during my game against Kron.

“Five, five, four, six, two... Seven and three... Then...eight and three?”

“Wrong,” Shawza said neutrally. “The last two are six and seven.”

“Shall we see which of you is correct?” Rashid asked. Then, a smile on his face, he lifted the cup off the table.

*Five, five, four, six, two, seven, three, six, seven.*

“Shawza guesses all nine, while Noor guesses only seven.” Rashid’s smile grew wider, and he handed me the cup. “Your turn to roll, Noor.”

“I just have to do what Shawza did, right?”

“You can, but there are no rules about how you roll. As long as the cup ends up on the table with all nine dice inside it, you can do whatever feels comfortable.”

“Got it. Here goes, then.”

Doing my best to imitate Shawza’s movements, I tossed the dice into the air. I tried not to let him see them as I caught them in the metal cup and slammed it down on the table. It went pretty smoothly for my first attempt, I thought, but the table must have disagreed; it caved in and sank into the floor. The impact traveled through the room, creating fissures that shot up the beautifully painted walls and even along the ceiling.

*Crap. Definitely overdid that one.*

I must’ve been nervous about it being my first time and put too much strength into my slam as a result. When I peered down, I saw the metal cup lodged in the remains of the table, crumpled and indented with the marks of my fingers. The room’s chandeliers wobbled precariously, as though they could

drop at any moment.

Still, the nine dice were on the table and safely under the cup. I probably hadn't broken any rules—not that I fully understood them yet.

I slowly released the cup and looked around. The room was still shuddering and making slight creaking noises.

“So...this is where I say ‘bet,’ right?”

## Chapter 149: The Trials, Part 5 (Death Nine)

Every screen mirror installed in the City Forgotten by Time showed the same scene: a man and a beastfolk playing a game of dice. Each time the former took his turn, there was a thunderous *bang*, and a tremor rippled through the entire building, inspiring yelps and panicked shrieks from the patrons.

The establishment was riddled with tiny cracks. Every bird inside had noticed the disturbance, adding a cacophony of chirps and screeches to the hubbub.

“What in the blazes are they doing? I can understand getting nervous about Death Nine, given its ludicrous ante, but there’s no need for such barbarism. How many tables have they broken so far?!”

“Look closer. The man from the Kingdom of Clays is the only one breaking them...”

Every spectator had their eyes glued to the proceedings. Since the start of the Trials, the guests’ participants had been irregular in every sense of the word. It made for novel entertainment; some patrons could hardly breathe, and others watched on with fear.

“Everything about this is mad. Neither one of them has guessed fewer than seven correctly. I’ve never seen anything like it, and I’ve been coming here for years!”

“Not to mention the one hundred million ante! They must be insane to stake that much—and on Death Nine, of all games. Someone should check whether that young lady’s right in the head.”

“Have you not been paying attention? There’s been enough riding on each round to buy a small country! I can’t believe it’s a regular match.”

“Yeah, and it’s *insane*. Think about it. The ante is *one hundred million*. What if someone hit the largest multiplier—a billion? In an instant, the loser’s debt would shoot up into the stars themselves!”

“These might be official Trials with a judge from House Sarenza, but what

could you even do in that situation? It wouldn't be a simple debt collection, that's for sure..."

"I doubt either party has enough to foot a bill that large. House Sarenza's assets aren't limitless, to say nothing of the Kingdom's cobwebbed coffers."

"Lord Rashid must have lost his mind to have engaged in such a match. And with foreigners, of all people. This could start a war if he's not careful."

"It's *already* a war—just one fought with dice instead of swords. What else can you call it when they're pushing sums large enough to employ entire armies across the table?"

"The outcome of this match could excite chaos all throughout the continent. Lord Rashid understands that, surely."

"Still, whatever the case, this is an unprecedented opportunity for us. Information is the great swayer of trade, and we'll know today's results before anyone else."

"You're right about that. Depending on how this goes, market prices are bound to shift drastically."

"Indeed. This is no time to be playing around with betting tickets!"

"Attendant! Get in touch with our business partners in the capital. This could change everything!"

Ambition burned in the merchants' chests as they watched the match, hardly daring to breathe. There was but a single question on their minds: how would it all end?



"Bet."

"Five, six, two, one, one, five, two, and...seven and three?"

We'd played a few rounds, and they'd all ended in one of two ways: a draw...or my loss.

"Wrong on the last two."

"Again, huh? Hmm."



This round, I'd guessed seven dice correctly. Shawza had guessed eight. That had been the story of our match so far. He wasn't getting them right every time, but I was always one step behind him.

Shawza had guessed one more die than me, making the payout ten times the ante—a billion gold overall. A king's gold worth of chips moved to our opponents' side of the table. We were steadily losing more and more of our pool.

"My turn to roll," I said.

"Please try not to break the table this time. We only have so many."

"Right. I'll be careful."

I tossed the nine dice into the air and caught them in the metal cup, which I then slammed down onto the table. I'd gotten the knack for it now. Kind of. The table still cracked, but at least it didn't break.

"Bet."

"Six, three, six, two, one...eight, zero, one, and nine."

"Hmm? I swear the first two are five and one."

Shawza considered that for a moment. "Open it and see."

"Here, look."

I was right; he'd made two mistakes. I, on the other hand, had guessed all nine correctly—not that it counted for anything on my turn. It *was* a little curious, now that I thought about it. My success rate was substantially higher when I rolled the dice. In fact, I'd perfectly called every one of my own rolls.

"My turn." Shawza held out his hand. "The dice?"

"Can you give me a moment?"

"Why?"

"I want to check the dice again. Just in case."

"I don't mind, but be quick about it."

First, I rolled the dice across the table a few times. There didn't seem to be

anything wrong with them. I'd committed their sounds to memory by now—we'd been using the same model since the game started—so why couldn't I get them all right? For some strange reason, I was always one or two short on Shawza's turn. I rolled the dice around in my hand for a while.

"Are you done?"

"Yeah, sorry. Thanks."

I returned the dice to Shawza. They weren't the problem—my check had told me that much.

"My roll, then."

Shawza tossed the dice up with the dexterity of a stage magician and smoothly scooped them into the cup. I paid particularly close attention to his movements this time...and was rewarded for the effort.

*Ah, I get it now.*

Each time Shawza tossed the dice, he slipped two out of his sleek fur—soft enough that birds would happily nest in it—and swapped them with the originals. No wonder I wasn't able to get a perfect score.

Shawza probably wasn't cheating. I'd asked about the rules several times by this point, and no one had said anything to suggest that swapping the dice wasn't allowed. Thinking about it, we'd swapped dice several times as I accidentally smashed them, so I was basically doing the same thing.

To summarize, there was nothing wrong with swapping the dice. The problem was how long it had taken me to notice. Now that I knew the trick, though, my next guess would surely be perfect.

"Bet."

"Two, eight, six, five, one, three, zero, seven, and six."

"You got one wrong."

"Hmm?"

Shawza quietly revealed the dice. He was right.

"That's weird. I was sure I'd gotten them all."

“Your turn to roll.”

I accepted the cup and dice, still puzzled. A quick check revealed that he’d replaced the original two he’d switched out. Was he making more switches that I wasn’t noticing?

Ines and Lynne didn’t seem to have caught on. I thought Sirene might have, since her vision was better than mine, but she’d been restless and fidgety since the start of the match. I would need to manage on my own, I supposed.

As for how I’d do that, well...if my opponent was determined to fool me, I needed only to return the favor.

“Are you going to roll?” Shawza asked.

“Yeah.”

*I just need to mess up his guesses, right?*

No sooner had I tossed the nine dice into the air than I activated one of my skills.

[Featherstep]

Sound disappeared entirely from my vicinity. The dice were utterly silent as I scooped them into the cup and placed it on the table.

“Bet. Take your guess.”

If we were both guessing the dice by the sounds they made, then I’d given Shawza nothing to work with. But while I was hoping that my new trick would win me the match...

“One, eight, six, five, two, four, four, seven...and six.”

“Wow. You got them all right.”

It seemed things wouldn’t be that simple.

Shawza had managed another perfect guess, meaning he’d scored one point more than me. Our pile of chips shrank by another billion’s worth.

“My turn to roll.”

“A moment, Shawza?” Rashid interrupted.

“Yes, sir?”

“For the next round... Well, you know what to do.”

“Understood, sir.”

I turned to see Rashid with a pleased smile on his face. Some unspoken message had passed between him and Shawza. Though I didn’t know what it was, I paid careful attention to my opponent; he was probably about to try something new.

“My roll.”

The nine dice left my opponent’s hand and went up into the air. So far, his technique hadn’t changed. But then...

*Crap.*

This time, the dice made no sound at all as Shawza scooped them into the cup. He’d copied my trick—which was the obvious move, now that I thought about it. [Featherstep] was the most basic skill in a thief’s arsenal; if I could use it, then of course my opponent could as well.

I was completely taken aback. How was I meant to guess when there were no sounds to guide me? The cup slammed onto the table.

“Bet.”

For a moment, I almost accepted defeat, but I couldn’t give up that easily. I pictured the trajectories of the dice the moment they had entered the cup and desperately tried to imagine which faces they would have landed on.

“Seven...seven...three, eight, one, three, two, eight...and two?”

“Four wrong.”

Shawza lifted the cup and proved himself right. I thanked the power of my imagination for the five I’d guessed correctly, but I knew I could do better. It was only because I’d tried to listen to the dice at first that my eyes hadn’t been able to keep up.

At a measly five out of nine, I’d just made my worst guess yet. Even before I’d understood Shawza’s switching trick, I’d never gotten more than two wrong. If

my opponent kept up his accuracy, I would lose the round for sure, and our team's chips would take a huge blow.

"Oh? Is something the matter, Noor?" Rashid asked. "That look in your eye tells me you're strategizing."

"Yeah, I am."

I'd been enjoying myself so far, but it was about time to take this more seriously. Shawza had great eyes and ears. If I rolled normally, he'd guess the dice.

"Rashid, can I double-check the rules again?"

"This far into the game?" He chuckled. "Certainly. Check them as many times as you wish. They don't take very long to explain."

"I can roll the dice however I want as long as I catch them in the cup and put it on the table, right?"

"Indeed. The rules state that a roll is valid as long as the dice come to a stop on the table. There are no rerolls, even if you accidentally allow your opponent to see the result."

"Got it. And breaking the table is fair game, right? Using my full strength would probably damage a lot more than that, but that's technically fine, isn't it?"

"Well...if destroying the table *were* against the rules, someone would certainly have told you by now. I've lost count of how many we've gotten through."

"Right. Are there any other rules?"

"No. Are you done? We don't want to keep the audience waiting."

"Yeah, thanks. That clears things up. Let's continue." I returned to the table and stood opposite my opponent. "Sorry for the holdup."

"It's your turn. Roll."

"Will do."

I tossed the nine dice high into the air. Then I used one hand to grab a small

chunk of table from the fragments scattered around me and the other to scoop the dice into the metal cup. At the same time, I activated a skill, bent my knees, and pushed straight down.

[Physical Enhancement]

The floor creaked as fissures spread out from under my feet, though it was nothing compared to the damage it had already taken. I braced myself to move and activated another of my skills.

[Featherstep]

Sound vanished from my vicinity.

“Here goes.”

This entire time, I’d been operating under one giant misunderstanding: I’d assumed this game was similar to the one I’d played before, where you had to sit around a table and show proper manners. But as Rashid and Shawza had made clear—several times, no less—as long as the dice came to a stop on the table, the roll was fine to bet on. Death Nine was so much more flexible than I’d realized!

And since the rules were so simple, my idea was equally as straightforward.

“Sorry, Rashid, but this might cause more damage to the building. I’ll fix it later, though.”

With both [Physical Enhancement] and [Featherstep] active, I *launched* into a top-speed sprint. The impact of my kickoff cratered the floor and caused the walls to tremble—though they made no sound around me.

I felt bad about causing so much destruction, but Rashid had seemed pretty lax about all the tables, and I fully planned to use the rest of the money I’d brought to help pay for the repairs. Shawza was so fast that I needed to go this fast to shake him. I continued my dash, slamming straight into a cracked wall and through to the other side.

“Eek!”

“Wh-What in the name of—?!”

Startled patrons cried out in shock. I could offer only a silent apology as I shot

past them and down the hallway.

Shawza had reacted quickly; I could already sense him behind me. I continued to grip both the table fragment and the cup containing the dice as I did my best to lose him.







*He'll catch up at this rate.*

Because I needed to keep the dice safely inside their cup, I couldn't go as fast as I wanted to. Shawza, on the other hand, was completely unburdened. I wove left and right, feinted turns, crashed through walls, and did absolutely everything I could to get away from him.

Several walls later, I was back at the lake.

"Eek! Wh-What is the meaning of this?!"

"Whaaagh!"

I dove into the cool water and started shaking the dice. The round wouldn't begin until they were stationary on the table and I said, "Bet." I could shake them as much as I wanted to before then, so why not roll them somewhere Shawza could neither see nor hear me? My technique amounted to little more than a jumble of cheap tricks, but I thought it might just give me enough of an edge to win.

As I'd suspected, there was nothing in the building that could stop me. I was careful not to do more damage than was necessary, but I ran through thick forests, plunged into rivers and swamps, and even jumped over the colosseum in my attempts to escape my opponent. The entire time, I made sure to keep a firm hold on the table fragment and cup. Dropping the dice now would spell my certain defeat.

I made several rounds of the entire building, keeping an eye out for Shawza behind me, before finally...

"That should do it."

I picked a random place to stop. The dice were well and truly scrambled; not even I could guess the outcome anymore. I trudged back to the Trials room and placed the half-crushed cup atop the table fragment in my other hand. Shawza trailed in behind me.

"Bet," I said, looking straight at him. "Your guess, Shawza."

I kept my arm locked, careful not to let the dice move in the slightest as I presented the cup and table fragment to my opponent. The rest was up to

chance; he had no tells or cues to rely on.

There was a long pause before Shawza spoke, his expression strained. “Six, eight...two, three, two, one, nine, seven...and three.”

“Is that your final guess?” Rashid asked.

“Yes...”

“Then show us the result, Noor.”

Almost uttering a prayer, I removed the metal cup from the hand-sized chunk of table atop my palm.

“Well?” Rashid prompted.

“He...got them wrong.”

“How many?”

“All of them. He didn’t get a single number right.”

“Is that so? Impressive.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Shawza hadn’t guessed any of the nine dice correctly, though he’d probably had a good chance of getting at least one or two. The outcome of our round was my five points against his zero.

“I finally won a round.”

“By no small amount,” Shawza quietly conceded.

The sound of someone clapping made me turn around.

“Congratulations, Noor,” Rashid said. “That was truly spectacular. At a difference of five guesses, you have me to the tune of ten trillion. I’m afraid that’s not a sum I can make up for with what I have on hand.”

“Does that mean the match is over?”

“It does. I’ve seen enough to satisfy me. Just as I hoped, you and your companions gave me an earnest, hard-fought match. I couldn’t be happier.”

I cocked my head at him. He sounded too upbeat for someone who’d just lost, but he simply kept applauding me, a broad smile on his face.

A moment later, all the black-suited staff members in the room started

clapping too. In contrast to their employer, however, their expressions were less than pleased. Melissa seemed the least impressed; her entire face was twitching.

Rashid turned to the crowd of pale faces and said, “What’s wrong?” There was a noticeable chill to his voice. “We have an obvious winner. The victory announcement should already have been made. The rules of the Trials are clear—we must now negotiate the debt.”

The announcement did eventually come, though the speaker’s voice trembled all the while.

*“Th-The match has concluded. The final amount in each p-party’s stack is...negative 9,982,779,030,000 for the City Forgotten by Time...against the Kingdom of C-Clays’s ten trill—?! Um...10,003,420,970,000. This marks the end of the Trials. P-Patrons with relevant betting tickets may collect their winnings at the counters on each—”*

## Chapter 150: Payment Negotiations

“Please rest assured, the settlement negotiations are held in private,” Rashid said, wearing his usual grin as he led the way. “We won’t have an audience this time.”

We soon entered a room reserved exclusively for matters of great importance. Staff members in black suits lined the periphery, as they did in the gaming room, and everything from the furniture to the ornaments looked polished and expensive. A closer inspection also revealed small cracks running along the walls. Those...were probably my fault.

Together with Ines, Lynne was carefully surveying the room, a wary look on her face. “I don’t detect any traps...” she muttered.

“But of course,” Rashid said. “This is simply a place for discussion.” He sat down in one of many beautifully crafted wooden chairs and urged us to do the same.

After one final glance around the room, Lynne joined Rashid at the table. The rest of us followed her lead.

“I appreciate your keeping these talks private,” she said. “May I ask, though—do you truly intend to pay such a tremendously large sum?”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing otherwise. Sacred law dictates that the results of the Trials must be enforced. Both House Sarenza and the Sarenza Commercial Association will devote their full support to seeing it through, whether the debtor is from a foreign country or a member of House Sarenza as I am.”

“So...you promise to go through with the payment?”

“I do. As you know, there is nothing more important to a merchant of Sarenza than the value of their word. Commerce is founded on trust, after all.” Rashid spread his arms wide in an exaggerated gesture and smiled. Sitting on the table was one of the boards from earlier, displaying the frankly absurd sum of money we’d won: 10,003,420,970,000. “Shall we get right to the negotiations, Lady

Lynneburg?”

“Very well. Let’s talk.”

“First, as a matter of course, the year’s worth of taxation rights we were competing over is yours. You may use or waive them as you wish. The value of those taxes will be subtracted from your winnings, the details of which we will now discuss. Do you have any desires you wish to make known?”

“Our initial goal was to make you reconsider the tax you were levying on the village. A sum that large would certainly have crippled it. However, as its residents are going to be self-sufficient from here on, I don’t think a one-year exemption will suffice. I’d rather it be extended into the foreseeable future.”

“A century’s worth of tax exemption, shall we say? It would mean a reduction of roughly five hundred billion from your winnings.”

“Is that okay with you, Instructor?”

“Sure, why not?” I was happy to give Lynne my approval. A hundred years would be plenty of time for the village to reach a point where it could stand on its own two feet.

Rashid chuckled, watching us with intense interest. “Ah, I see. His assets funded your buy-in, so you’re giving him the final say in how your payout is spent.”

“Is there an issue with that?”

“Not at all. Money is money, no matter who holds it. If anything, I quite like how you’ve shared the responsibility. Very well—I shall finalize the paperwork and present it to you later. That leaves you with roughly nine and a half trillion. Do you have any other ideas?”

I exchanged a glance with Lynne. Because we’d used my money to play our games, everyone was treating the winnings as though they were mine as well. Somehow, despite my best efforts to spend my money here in Sarenza, I’d ended up with more than I could even comprehend. I couldn’t even think of a good way to use it; something told me sightseeing wouldn’t make much of a dent. Lynne came from a wealthy family, so I thought I’d just leave the decision to her, but even she seemed to be at a loss.

Lynne's serious demeanor told me she wanted to spend our winnings carefully. I was nowhere near as considerate; in fact, I was starting to wonder if we should just fling stacks of money at every random person we came across.

"It would appear nothing's struck you yet," Rashid observed. "May I make a suggestion, then?"

"You?" Lynne asked.

"If you don't mind. Though maybe it's more of a request."

"Go on..."

"As I mentioned earlier, my house has no qualms about honoring its debt. We could, however, run into some issues of practicality if you request an immediate payment in physical currency. Essentially, I would be grateful if you considered other methods of compensation."

"When you say issues of practicality..."

"This establishment only keeps so much physical currency on the premises. We can provide you with the full payment if that is what you wish, but preparing it will take some time. Instead, my request is that you consider other, nonmonetary solutions."

"Such as?"

Rashid gave Lynne and me a look of satisfaction, pleased to see us so engaged in the conversation. "Such as this very facility—the City Forgotten by Time itself."

We looked around the room at his urging.

"Do you mean this building?" Lynne asked.

"As well as its assets and rights, including the right of management. Additionally, while the employees here are public servants paid for by the state—not transferable property in themselves—you would receive the owner's right of command over them. Their *lives* would be yours."

The staff members by the walls made no sound, but the air between them grew restless as they all glanced uneasily at one another. Rashid's smile didn't waver in the slightest.

“So not just the building but everything inside it as well?” I asked.

“Indeed. Say the word, and you may have it—such is your right as the victor of our Trials. Incidentally, the value of this establishment is at least two trillion gold. Even that is a very low estimate, but I’m willing to make an exception for you. Though I am somewhat biased, being the owner, I can say without a doubt that you won’t find a more meticulously run business on the continent. So? What do you think?”

“Uh, well...”

“The talented staff in this room are all included, of course. As the owner of this fine establishment, you would have complete command over them. If you still crave seafood, then send them out to sea. Have them catch you fresh fish for the rest of their days.”

It amazed me that Rashid could say such things—and with his usual smile, no less. Would the staff really spend their entire lives fishing for me? When I turned to look at them, the ones who met my eye stiffened, and their faces began to twitch.

“You would transfer *all* of the business’s rights?” Lynne asked. “Is that even possible? I thought this was a state-backed establishment.”

“It’s entirely possible. Sarenza’s laws allow for it, especially as part of a payout for our Trials. The owner of a business has the absolute right of say over it. How about it, Noor? One word, and this is all yours.”

“Instructor? What will you do?”

Rashid and Lynne both watched me, awaiting my response. I didn’t need to think for very long.

“I’m good, thanks. I wouldn’t know what to do with a building this large or the people working in it. The fish I catch myself are bound to be fresher, and there’s nothing else I need extra hands to help me with.”

“So you have no desire to own the City Forgotten by Time?”

“Nope.”

“I see. That’s a shame. What *do* you want, then? There are no restrictions on

what you can ask for.”

“Well...”

For a while, nothing came to mind. But then an idea began to form.

“Come to think of it, you’ve got people here who are forced to fight, don’t you? I’d like to help them out first.”

“You mean the gladiator slaves? How do you wish to help them?”

“Put simply, I want them to be freed. I was told they all have contracts hanging over their heads.”

“So they do. I should mention, however, that they’re the property of this establishment. If you had ownership rights, then you could simply tell them to do as they pleased.”

“Oh, is that how it works?”

“That being said, if you did release the slaves, the majority of them wouldn’t have anywhere to go. Do you have any ideas in that regard?”

“Honestly, I didn’t think that far ahead.”

“Then I can only insist that you take over as the owner. You wouldn’t need to think about much—the staff would handle everything for you. No matter your order, they would see it done.”

Rashid leaned across the table. His smile was beginning to seem a little unsettling. “You could even repurpose the building. House and feed all the gladiators, if that is your wish. Convert the entire place into a home for those without one.”

“Could I use it as an indoor farm and a place to store crops?”

“But of course. With the right of management, you could do anything. Does that not sound appealing?”

“Hmm...”

Rashid was pushing really hard to sell me on the idea of becoming the new owner. It certainly was an attractive offer; the establishment’s climate-control tech made it perfect for growing crops of all varieties. I could invite the seed



vendor from the royal capital and give him free rein to work as he pleased, and with all the staff around, there'd be plenty of people to get things done. The more I thought about it, the better the deal sounded.

Then again, it *was* suspicious how much Rashid was smiling at me, especially when he'd lost our match. It would probably be wise to consult Lynne first.

"What do you think, Lynne?"

"Hmm... I think what he's offering is worth far more than two trillion gald, especially as we're foreigners." She turned to Rashid. "Are you truly willing to part with it for that price?"

"I am," Rashid said plainly. "There is no greater shame for a merchant of Sarenza than to lie when making a transaction."

"Then...this sounds like a good deal."

"All right. I'll take it," I announced.

"Then it's all yours," Rashid said without missing a beat. Part of me wondered if there shouldn't be more to the transfer, but he continued before I could dwell on it. "What name shall we put on the deed? Just 'Noor'? Or would you rather we put your name, Lady Lynneburg?"

Lynne shook her head. "Instructor Noor provided the initial capital, so the reward should go to him."

"As you wish. Noor—from this moment on, the City Forgotten by Time is yours. Place your hand here, if you please."

"Like this?" I rested my hand on the blue piece of paper Rashid presented me with, and a red symbol on it faintly began to glow. "Is that it?"

"Yes, the transaction is complete. Everything here is now yours, both in name and substance. From the colosseum's gladiators, to the caged monsters, to the golems and employees and fish. Do whatever you like with them. Ah, before I forget—the repairs for the damage you caused are now your responsibility too. That shouldn't be an issue, though; I doubt they will cost too much."

"That's fine. I was planning to cover them anyway."

"Okay, everyone—pay your respects to the new owner."

The black-suited employees by the walls all bowed in my direction. There were so many of them gathered that the act caused a slight breeze.

“We can save the introductions for later. You’re owed another eight trillion gald—is there anything else you desire?”

Nothing came to mind. I tried to calculate how many years’ worth of meals eight trillion would get me but gave up almost immediately.

“I’ve got nothing. Lynne?”

“I seem to have drawn a blank.”

“Can we decide later?”

“Of course,” Rashid said. “If that is what you wish.”

“Are you sure? I thought you said something about practical issues.”

“That was if you wanted physical currency. For other forms of payment, I can be quite flexible. I’ll provide you with a promissory note—or several, if you’d prefer.”

“A promissory note?”

“Yes—a guarantee from House Sarenza. I daresay it would be far more convenient than having to carry around sacks of coins.”

I turned to Lynne, still unsure what a “promissory note” was.

“They aren’t common in the Kingdom of Clays, but you can think of them as money in paper form,” she explained. “The number written on the document indicates how much you’re owed.”

“And you can use it in exchange for real money?”

“Yes. It involves several more steps, but in essence, it functions the same as physical currency.”

“Sounds convenient. Why doesn’t everyone use paper money?”

“Logistics and trust,” Rashid said. “Both parties would need to agree that the paper has value, and only businesses of a certain scale accept it as a form of payment. Usually, you’d need to head to a branch of the Merchants Guild to exchange it for physical currency. There are cons to balance out the pros, but I

can still issue you one, if you wish.”

“Let’s go with that, then.”

“Excellent. Melissa?”

“Sir.”

Melissa produced a thick, fancy-looking piece of paper with gold trim. Rashid scribbled something on it before giving it to me.

“Ah, one last thing,” he said. “I’ll also issue you a trade permit guaranteed by House Sarenza. It will grant you authority equal to mine and authorization to buy and sell within the country’s borders. You should find it quite useful; no one will be able to refuse you the right of transaction.”

Lynne’s wariness turned to uncertainty when Rashid handed us another slip of paper. “We’re foreigners. Are you sure you should give us such a valuable document?” she asked.

“But of course, Lady Lynneburg. You’d most likely run into some red tape trying to use the promissory note without it. Consider it a sign of my friendship with Rein—though you’re also free to toss it, if you wish.”

“No, we’ll keep it. Thank you.”

“I feel kind of bad,” I remarked. “You’re giving us a lot.”

“You shouldn’t. Our match was more than entertaining enough to make up for it. I have *very* high hopes for whatever you might do next; this will surely be a trifle in comparison.”

On that note, Rashid chuckled happily and rose to his feet. “Well, that marks the end of the payment negotiations. Ah, but it’s been too long since I’ve experienced such an enjoyable loss. I just know tonight’s match will go down in Sarenza’s history books.”

We left the conference room behind, cracks and all, now richer to the tune of a hundred years of tax exemption, a trade license, a promissory note worth an exorbitant fortune, and the entire City Forgotten by Time.

## Chapter 151: Postmortem Behind Closed Doors

“Noor, may I take another moment of your time?”

As the City Forgotten by Time’s staff led their guests from the Kingdom of Clays away from the conference room, the former owner called out to the new proprietor.

“Rashid? Did you need something?”

“I wanted to congratulate you again. Everything here is now yours...which is what I was hoping to speak to you about.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no, nothing important. It’s just that some of the inner rooms still contain a few of my personal effects. Tea leaves, tea sets—nothing worth much. I was going to leave them all to you, but there are a few items among them that are especially dear to me.” Rashid smiled at the new proprietor, then glanced at Melissa and Shawza to his sides. “I was hoping to end my time here by enjoying some of my favorite tea with my attendants. Would you mind if we borrowed a room?”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

“Thank you. We’ll be in there for a little while, so you know where to find us if you need anything. The soundproofing is quite strong, but we’re sure to notice if you knock.”

“Got it.”

“Shall we, Melissa, Shawza? The new owner has given us his leave.”

“Sir.”

“Understood, sir.”

The trio turned into a long hallway that ended in a heavy metal door. Rashid asked Shawza to open it, and they stepped through into a room constructed to host particularly sensitive business deals—hence the soundproofing. An entire

wall dedicated to the storage of various kinds of tea leaves and tea sets spoke to the owner's frequent use of the space and penchant for tea.

"To think this is the last day I can spend in here..." Rashid ran his eyes along his collection of tea sets, all sitting on shelves on the wall, before picking out two cups and passing them to his attendants. "It might be my only regret about this entire experience. Still, the owner was gracious enough to let us use it one last time, so let's enjoy some tea, shall we?"

Grasping his intentions, Melissa silently began to prepare the tea. In the meantime, her one-armed, one-eyed compatriot fixed their lord with a sharp stare.

"Are you sure this was the right choice, sir?"

Rashid took his time selecting his own teacup, allowing the man's eyes to bore into his back, then sank into the large sofa at the center of the room. "Whatever do you mean, Shawza?"

"The final game, sir. I guessed every one of the dice incorrectly, as you ordered, but was this really the result you were hoping for?"

Shawza's gaze was piercing as he continued to watch his lord, but Rashid simply shook his head and shrugged. "Is that all you wanted to ask? Of course it was. You did an excellent job—but then, I never expect any less."

"Should I...take that at face value, sir?"

"You should. It was thanks to your efforts that the match had such a splendid conclusion. I would have liked to add an extra digit or two to their payout, but alas, we must be content with what we have. You didn't get cold feet while playing, did you?"

"No, not once. My opponent required my full attention. To be honest, it was pure luck that not one of my calls during that final roll was correct."

"Is that so? Trust you to manage it nonetheless. You performed flawlessly."

Rashid stretched his arms wide and let out a satisfied chuckle. Melissa, in contrast, wore a grave expression as she poured the tea.

"I worry that your father might have something to say about all this, sir."

“I doubt it. Ten trillion gold isn’t enough to make the old fool blink twice, let alone waste his breath. The rest of the family in the capital should be hearing news of my loss right about now. I can picture their meeting so clearly—everyone celebrating the chance of my familial status and assets being stripped away from me. If only they knew half a thought about anything.”

“Perhaps, but the risk is still there, and it would leave you with a significant amount of debt.”

“I suppose. But you know my personal assets have been frozen for some time. I might as well not have any. As far as I’m concerned, this was an excellent deal—our guests got what they wanted, and I was able to off-load an unnecessary burden at the perfect time. A win-win. And after I went to the express effort to gather such a large audience, House Sarenza’s hands are sure to be tied.”

Melissa looked uneasily at Rashid, who had picked up his teacup with a smile. “But that means your hands are tied too, sir.”

“That’s fine. I never intended to run anyway. I don’t even feel anything about giving this place away to our guests. It’s not like it was my money to begin with.”

“I still don’t understand. Why would you give *all* of your assets to those foreigners, of all people?”

“I did it *because* of who they were, Melissa. Besides, I didn’t give them *everything*—I still have some of my private golems and, above all else, you and Shawza. You’re free to do as you please, since I dismissed you from your position before handing the city over to Noor, and Shawza’s always been my personal bodyguard. I’ve held on to what matters. Ah, and I suppose I also have the right to enjoy this delicious tea, owing to the new owner’s generosity.”

“That doesn’t change the fact you gave him basically everything. Was it really necessary to go that far?”

“Maybe not...but don’t you find him entertaining?”

“‘Entertaining’?” Melissa stared at her lord in disbelief. “Was that your only reason?”

“Is it not enough?”

“Forgive me, sir, but no. This isn’t what we planned at all.”

“You’re right about that. I didn’t see this coming either. At first, my only intention was to put a sheltered little princess in my debt and make my dear friend Rein owe me one. Who could have guessed that she’d have such a fascinatingly absurd man as a travel companion?”

As Rashid sipped merrily at his tea, Melissa took a thick sheaf of documents from the table. “I can see your point, sir, even if I don’t agree with it. But I still think you should have ordered a reevaluation of the village’s taxes before believing these ludicrous claims.”

“No need. Beastfolk are terrible liars; they would never have fooled my auditors. And we saw the truth for ourselves, didn’t we?”

“If the tales of Noor’s feats *are* true, then all the more reason to be wary of him. He defies common sense.”

“That’s exactly why he’s so entertaining.”

Melissa sighed and returned the papers to the table. They described in minute detail the information House Sarenza’s auditors had gathered about the events in the beastfolk village, though most people would assume they were a fictional account of a hero from legend rather than genuine government documents.

Rashid picked up and flicked through the papers, chuckling again. “How many days do you think have passed since he entered Sarenza? The records say it’s barely been a week, yet the village has come so far. Given enough time, it could grow into a small nation of its own. Noor even has the wholehearted trust of King Clays. The Black Blade? A Wellspring Pipe? Even his own daughter. Those aren’t the kinds of things you entrust to someone who’s merely a good friend.”

“Yet another reason we should tread carefully around him.”

“Doesn’t the thought of what he might do make your heart race? The princess is more capable than the rumors claim, but even she pales in comparison to him when it comes to spectacle. We’ve given him money and power, and he’s sure to come up with the most entertaining way to use it. No one will be able to stop him.”

“So *that* was your reason for giving him the City Forgotten by Time.”

“Indeed. As I said, he’s entertaining.” Rashid tossed the thick stack of documents back in front of Melissa and smiled. “You know what they say: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Think of this as my way of investing in him.”

“It’s only an investment if you stand to gain from it. Are you sure that’s the case?”

“Ha ha! That’s exactly it, Melissa—one never knows what the future might bring! That’s why gambling is such a thrill!”

Melissa’s heavy sigh did nothing to sour her lord’s good mood.

“How about you, Shawza?” Rashid asked. “Are *you* sure about this?”

“I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

“Don’t play dumb. I know you noticed the beastfolk girl’s pendant.” Rashid cocked his head at an exaggerated angle as he studied his attendant’s expression. “It had a rather unique design, don’t you think?”

“Again, sir, I don’t know what you mean.”

“So be it. I don’t really care either way, so I’ll respect your decision. Though...I can only speak for myself.”

Rashid pointed at the room’s enchanted bell. It was ringing, an indication that someone was approaching from the hallway. Moments later, there came the faint tap of the knocker against the orichalcum door. The door was enchanted so that no other sounds would get in or out.

“She appears to have business with you, Shawza.”

There was another timid knock, and Rashid rose to answer it, wearing his characteristic grin.

“P-Pardon the intrusion...”

Standing in the doorway was a nervous-looking beastfolk girl—one of their opponents from their recent gambling match.



## Afterword

Thank you very much for reading another volume. This book marks the second installment of the Sarenza Arc, where our protagonist Noor used the money he earned in the royal capital for a number of new and exciting ventures, including becoming the owner of his very own grand casino. He went from agriculturally developing a beastfolk village to obtaining the City Forgotten by Time. What will he do next?

Whatever it is, it's sure to make a splash, so please look forward to it.

A number of key characters made their debut in this volume. Their motives and personalities will gradually be revealed, so keep your eyes peeled! I'd really like to find room for the story of Rashid and Melissa's first meeting as children...

Now, on to some announcements.

This is sure to be public knowledge by the time this volume hits the shelves, but *I Parry Everything* is getting an anime adaptation! I mean, wow. Like, what?! Part of me still thinks I'm dreaming—which is weird, as I've already been involved in several meetings about the script and casting the voice actors. Getting the chance to participate in these valuable experiences has helped reality to sink in, even if only slowly.

In particular, I was lucky enough to be able to participate in every script meeting. You might not know this, but putting a light novel author in that kind of setting is as good as throwing an amateur into a gathering of professionals. I can only thank all of the staff for being so accommodating with my inexperience.

I am truly grateful to the director, team managers, and scriptwriters, who were all unbelievably kind and welcoming. (I'm still constantly worried that I messed something up somewhere and everyone's just too nice to tell me.) I don't know whether I was of much help during the meetings, but I think the final script is an amazing piece of work.

As the author of these novels, I'm also lucky enough to get to review the concept art. It was incredible. Truly incredible. I don't really know how to describe it otherwise. Seeing the words I put down on paper come to life really moved me.

While the anime will, of course, be based on the light novels, everyone has their own unique interpretations of the stories they read. Seeing how different artists transform writing into high-quality images has been astounding—even to me, the author of this series. That includes the light novel illustrator, Kawaguchi-sensei; the manga artist, KRSG-sensei; and the anime director and staff. I am truly blessed to have been given the chance to work with and alongside so many amazing people.

I'd also like to express my sincere gratitude to the producer who took notice of *I Parry Everything* and proposed its transformation into an anime and to everyone else involved with the production committee.

Above all else, I wish to thank you, the reader, for enjoying this series for so long. This happened because of you. Thank you, truly.

(Also, I say this every volume, but Kawaguchi-san's illustrations and character designs are simply the best. As always, thank you so much.)

That should do it for the announcements and thank-yous. The story's going to keep escalating from here on out, so I would be overjoyed if you stuck with us for the journey to come.

Nabeshiki

Wow, the seventh volume already...  
Please stick with Parry for future  
installments too!!!

Here's an illustration featuring  
Lynne's and Noor's base designs—right  
from the start of the story.

Kawaguchi  
777"4  
@kwc.c



# Bonus Short Story

## The Divine Shield's Swim Class

"You there. You're slowing down. Being in the water is no excuse to break formation."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

"I realize your armor is heavy, but that's why we're training. Endure it."

The rank and file of the Warrior Corps, still clad in their weighty metal armor, were in a deep pool inside one of the royal capital's training facilities. Ines, the Divine Shield and the corps's vice-captain, supervised them from the water's edge. The rookies' training was specific to the Warrior Corps and exactly as it appeared: they were attempting to stay in formation while swimming in their armor. Devised by Captain Dandalg, it was a comprehensive exercise that developed them physically and mentally and improved their teamwork.

Running such drills was one of Ines's responsibilities as the vice-captain. As she issued instructions, she kept an eye out for any stragglers. Since a major recruitment period had just passed, the warriors' morale was higher than usual, but many still failed to disguise their exhaustion. Such was the difficulty of the exercise.

"In the thick of it, I see."

Ines turned to see her foster father, Dandalg—the man known as the Shield Sovereign. He moved to stand beside her and slowly examined the spacious room.

"Oh?" he said. "Things are going more smoothly than I expected."

"Indeed. The new recruits are keeping up with the others. We have a talented batch this year."

"Makes you look forward to their future potential. Hmm... In that case, maybe this exercise isn't quite stimulating enough."

“Father?”

No sooner had Ines spotted the mischievous smirk on Dandalg’s lips than he leaped high into the air—fully clad in armor—and cannonballed into the pool. The waves he produced were so enormous that one might think a great dragon had plunged into the water.

“Wa ha ha ha!” he roared. “How’s that, you lot? Don’t let a little splash ruin your formation—that was nothing compared to an attack from a water dragon!”

Dandalg started slapping the water’s surface, creating conditions that resembled a cyclone and drenching the warriors who were desperately trying to maintain their formation. From an outsider’s perspective, the Shield Sovereign was only indulging in some fun. For the warriors, however, their training had just drastically escalated in difficulty. One by one, they began to go limp from exhaustion.

“Hmm? Done already? Ines! Catch!”

Recognizing that the warriors had nothing left to give, Dandalg made a scooping motion with one arm, creating a massive wave that carried the dropouts to Ines at the poolside. She caught each of them as they arrived, laying them safely down on the floor.

After enjoying his aquatic rampage for a while longer, Dandalg finally returned to the edge of the water, a satisfied grin on his face. “Oh? There are more dropouts than usual.”

“Yes. Almost all the rookies, and a few from the main corps too.”

“I...might’ve gone a bit overboard, then.” Dandalg’s expression turned awkward as he faced his subordinates. “Sorry. You lot all right?”

The fierce wind and waves must have sapped all the energy from the defeated warriors, because none seemed capable of even responding. Even those who had survived the exercise struggled to remain afloat in the water.

Dandalg scratched his head. “Right! Training’s over! Use the rest of today for playtime. And don’t worry—you’ll still get your full wages! Captain’s orders!”

He doffed his armor and put it aside as smiles crept onto the warriors' faces. A ragged cheer went up as they followed their captain's example and began to strip. Soon enough, the atmosphere resembled a group holiday more than an intense training exercise.

Ines was calmly observing the change, still in her armor, when Dandalg stepped closer to her. "Might do you some good to join us once in a while. Though...I understand if you'd rather not mix in with a pack of loud, sweaty warriors."

"That doesn't bother me. Still, I'll refrain."

"Don't let the men know, but this is training too, in a sense. There might come a time when you'll need to dump your armor and swim among the chaos of a large group."

"Yes, I gathered."

"Hey, don't give me that frown. It's not an order. You're welcome to stay within your comfort zone."

"Sorry."

Dandalg turned and jumped back into the water, creating a spray even greater than his first. So much for his claim that training was over. The elites of the Warrior Corps, now without their armor weighing them down, rode the waves and wind with enjoyable ease. In contrast, the rookies sitting by the poolside looked pale as they watched their seniors, hugging their knees to their chests.

Ines approached the trainees, empathizing with them to an extent. "There's no need to rush," she said. "You'll get there eventually. These things take time."

"Y-Yes, ma'am."

Ines's words were partly introspective. There was no need to rush. One day, though, she knew she would have to join her compatriots.

The reason for Ines's reluctance set her apart from the Warrior Corps's rookies. She wasn't a bad swimmer—far from it. She knew she could outswim everyone present and endure Dandalg's cyclones far longer than the others,

with or without her armor on.

And there lay the crux of the issue: she couldn't bear to swim without her armor.

Ines's position meant that she was constantly clad in her full-body mithril armor. It had made her unaccustomed to attire that revealed anything more than her head. In her capacity as Princess Lynneburg's personal bodyguard, she had accompanied her charge on several lake pleasure trips and even swam with her, but the slightest suspicion that people might be watching made her reluctant to forgo her armor.

Ines considered everyone in the training facility a trusted comrade. She had never known any of them to even shoot her a suggestive look. Still, she couldn't stand the thought of showing any skin.

Deep down, Ines knew that she couldn't let simple embarrassment get in the way of her duty. Being in the Warrior Corps meant being entrusted with other people's lives; there was a chance that her hesitation might one day cost someone dearly. She wanted to believe that she wouldn't think twice in a true crisis, but she couldn't say for sure, and a single moment's pause could easily be the difference between life and death. She needed to be prepared at all times.

*I'll need to overcome this weakness eventually.*

But today, at least, she lacked the courage.

Feeling a little guilty that she had once again succumbed to her nerves, Ines waited for the training session to conclude before returning to the pool alone, using the key she was given as the vice-captain. She changed into her training swimwear and slipped into the water.

*It's not the water I dislike. That's for certain.*

Ines loved swimming. She could entrust herself to the water and forget all about life's various complications. It occurred to her that she could solve her problem simply by becoming as proficient a swimmer *with* armor as she was without...but that was probably going too far to avoid the root issue. Her reluctance to show her skin wasn't much of an obstacle in her regular duties, but it was a weakness she was aware of and therefore needed to conquer.

Ines swam late into the night, slowly steeling her resolve. As she finally pulled herself out of the water, she made a silent declaration: she would work up the courage to join the others next time.

But alas, that resolution proved to be hollow. For every subsequent swimming exercise, Ines remained by the poolside. Her swimming speed saw drastic improvements, at least; as it turned out, repeatedly training alone in the middle of the night was rather effective.





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I Parry Everything: What Do You Mean I'm the Strongest? I'm Not Even an Adventurer Yet! Volume 7

by Nabeshiki

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