

**RYOU YUUKI**

**ART CHISATO NARUSE**

**7**

**EATING  
MAGICAL POWER  
MADE me THE  
STRONGEST!**

**MAGIC  
STONE**  
*Gourmet*



**RYOU YUUKI**

ART **CHISATO NARUSE**



EATING  
MAGICAL POWER  
MADE ME THE  
**STRONGEST!**

# MAGIC STONE *Gourmet*



On a Moonlit Beach

*You're so sly.*

*How so?*

*Nothing.*



MAGIC  
STONE  
*Gourmet*

EATING  
MAGICAL POWER  
MADE ME THE  
**STRONGEST!**





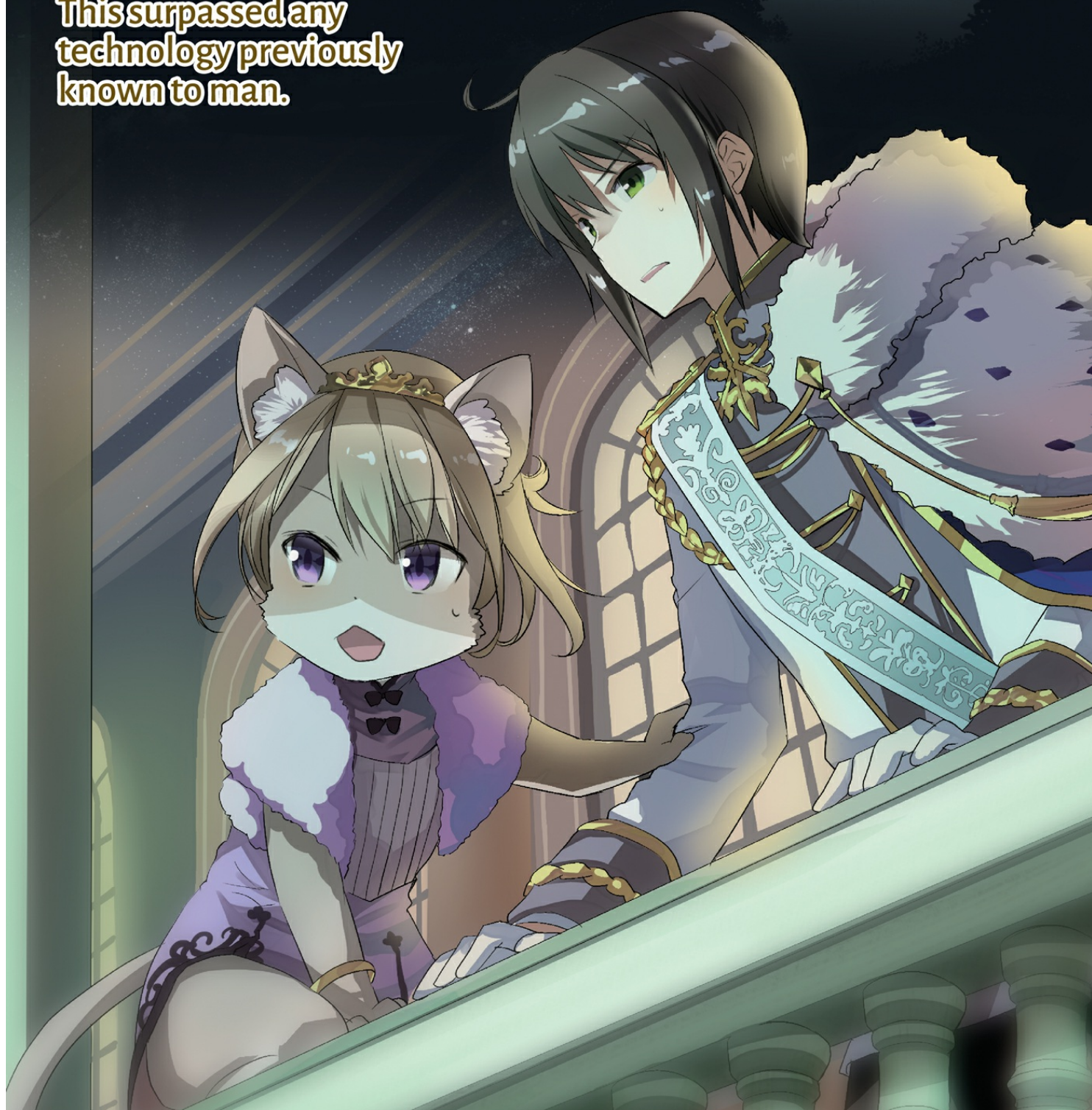
Every single guest raised their glasses and cheered in celebration of the prince's birthday.  
*Thank you!*





*Im-paws-ible...*

It gradually crackled like lightning, then pierced the clouds before exploding. The sky was dyed in a coat of blue illumination, one that shot through Ishtarica's heavens. This surpassed any technology previously known to man.







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# Prologue

When he looked up, Ein saw countless stars twinkling in the night sky above him. It was as if the stars themselves were welcoming the prince home from his journey to Syth Mill.

“A very grave turn of events. Heim has declared war on Rockdam” were the first words that came out of Warren’s mouth when he greeted his prince at the station. Despite the time of night, White Rose Station was still bustling with travelers—including Ein, who walked through the station’s royal corridor to reach the carriage that awaited him.

“They declared war?! Why?” Ein asked.

“Heim’s recent state of affairs has been tumultuous, to say the least,” Warren explained. “Not only has there been a string of kidnapped nobles, but some of them have even lost their heads.”

“I had no idea...”

“That’s not all, Your Highness. The assailant had somehow managed to slay one of Heim’s royals.”

Heim’s second prince had met a premature end. While he was completely overshadowed by his brothers, Rayfon and Tigger, the second prince wasn’t one to make enemies without good reason. And yet, his life had been taken in cold blood.

Krone couldn’t hide the sheer terror flowing through her body—her voice cracked feebly as she tried to keep her lips from trembling. “How is my family? Are my mother and the others safe?”

“They are,” Warren replied. “I shall provide you with further details when we arrive at the castle.”

While she was relieved to know her mother was safe, Krone struggled to keep any sense of composure. She tightly mashed her lips together, frightened for her family on the other side of the ocean. Absolutely no one could blame her



for being so shaken.

“Shall we go?” Warren suggested as they arrived at the carriage. “His Majesty awaits you at the castle.”

Ein nodded and exchanged a glance with Chris. He tugged on Krone’s hand and helped her inside before the carriage set off for the castle. This was a much gloomier ride home than usual.

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Needless to say, the streets of Kingsland were far busier than the rural back roads that surrounded Syth Mill. As he’d been out of town for a while, Ein could tell right away that the royal capital was as rowdy as ever—even from within the confines of his carriage. As he made his way White Night Castle, the prince noticed his grandfather’s home solemnly towering over the entire city. Though the building maintained its usual daunting aura, a sense of restlessness at the gates implied that Heim had shaken the castle.

“Where’s my grandfather?” Ein asked his chancellor. The crown prince stepped off the carriage the moment they arrived.

“His Majesty is waiting for you in the audience room,” Warren replied as Ein swiftly marched ahead. “Sir Ein! Please wait!”

“Sorry, but I can’t!” Ein called back. He proceeded to extend his hand to Krone, who was still in the carriage. “Let’s go, Krone!”

“E-Ein?” Krone asked.

“Let’s hurry! We need to ensure that your mother is safe.”

“Right!”

With a new sense of courage filling her heart, Krone took her beloved’s hand and allowed herself to be guided off of the carriage. From there, the pair ran for the audience room with not a care for those around them. As Krone rushed by, no one stopped to scold her; they instead sent her off with a solemn look on their faces. She quickly felt herself running out of breath, but Krone chose to entrust herself to Ein as he pulled her along to their destination.

After several minutes of running through many corridors, the pair finally



reached the massive double doors to the audience room. While a Knights Guard member stood on each side of the entrance, the doors let out a loud groan as Ein pushed them open. Within the room's depths, the grand and stern king quietly sat on his throne. Only then did the crown prince fix his posture.

"I'm sorry," he apologized to his advisor. "I was being too forceful."

"No, I don't mind at all," she replied. "Thank you for holding my hand. It actually helped me calm down a little."

She might have been out of breath, but she was able to regain her composure. After she caught her breath, Krone gave one last firm squeeze of Ein's hand and gazed up at him, her face filled with determination.

"Let's go," Krone said.

With that, the two walked across the plush carpet that led to the regal throne.

"Ah, welcome back, you two," Silverd said as the pair stopped in front of him.

The king turned to Ein before facing Krone. He saw a flicker of anxiety deep within her eyes, and Silverd wisely chose his words in hopes he could ease her fears.

"I am on your side," the king said firmly before he continued. "I've already given Warren my order, but Lily and the rest of her team have been dispatched to the continent. They should already be in Euro by now. The plan is to make contact with Heim via Euro and evacuate the remaining members of House August to Ishtarica."

"Your kindness and generosity truly humbles me..." Krone started.

"Now, now. Don't act so reserved with me." The king cleared his throat. "All we can do now is wait. I understand that it might make you anxious, but I ask that you put faith in our people."

"Grandfather, is Euro safe?" Ein asked.

"If you're asking me if Heim has declared war on them, the answer is no," the king replied. "I'm unsure if our little meeting proved effective, but I've received a report indicating that Heim is hesitant to take action against Euro."



“That’s relieving to hear. Then I can only hope that they’ll be safe.”

The crown prince turned to Krone, who finally smiled in relief. It was then that Warren and Chris finally arrived. Their tense expressions softened upon taking note of Krone’s composure, and they had already finished their own discussion on their way to the room.

“I apologize for throwing you into a frenzy as soon as you’ve returned home, but...” The king trailed off as his gaze wandered to the blade fastened at Ein’s waist. “What happened to your sword? It looks different from when you left.”

“Perhaps you’re imagining things,” Ein replied.

“Don’t you jest. Warren, you agree, don’t you?” The chancellor didn’t utter a word of response, prompting Silverd to pose his question again. “Warren?”

“Ah, er, I-I’m terribly sorry, Your Majesty,” Warren stammered. “I hadn’t noticed it earlier, but I agree. That sword looks different. It looks like...”

The chancellor trailed off. The blade looked familiar; if Chris knew of the weapon’s appearance, there was little chance that Warren had been kept unaware either. Naturally, the king knew as well.

“Even I have only seen it in documents, but it greatly resembles the blade of the first king,” Silverd said. “I suggest you try not to weasel your way out of this.”

“Ein?” Krone asked quizzically. Perhaps she hadn’t seen those documents; her attitude was proof enough that she wasn’t involved in this affair.

Chris, on the other hand, reacted a touch differently. She did her best to maintain her composure, but her eyes jittered aside for a brief moment.

“It seems as if you have plenty of stories to share with me,” Silverd said, his intimidating tone pressuring Ein to spill the beans.

The king, who’d been curious about the elven chief’s movements before Ein had left for Syth Mill, was dying to know why his grandson’s sword had undergone such a change. Silverd *had* to hear about what had occurred outside of his watch.

“Right... I’d prepared myself...” Ein said with a resigned sigh.



He felt Krone tug his sleeve. Her beautiful smile was absolutely breathtaking, but the flickering gaze that lingered behind her was so powerfully intimidating that it would make even a Demon Lord cower.

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Ein shared everything that he'd planned to tell the king—the story of his blade's transformation and the trial King Jayle had left for future generations. However, the prince was keen to hide his findings regarding Chris's lineage, his Demon Lord metamorphosis, and Demon Lord Arshay's role as Ishtarica's true first monarch. Ein noticed that no one was able to believe their eyes, but the new form of his blade was plain for all to see.

"I shall believe you," the king had declared. "I'm certain that the first king is capable of such a feat."

If the first king had been involved with the creation of the barrier protecting Syth Mill and the trial, nobody had any choice but to accept reality.

"Ein, is something the matter?" Silverd asked.

"No, nothing at all," Ein replied.

In accordance with the elf chief's wishes, the topic of Chris's place in the royal bloodline was off-limits.

"Your Highness, I beg of you to hear the request of this elderly elf," the chief had said. "I've promised Consort Laviola that I'd never speak about this to anyone else. I had no intention of breaking my promise, but here I am, talking about it with you. Could you please kindly keep this story tight to your chest and close to your heart?"

Ein decided to respect these wishes. He vowed to keep it a secret, even from Ishtarica's current king.

Fresh out of the bath, Ein walked out onto his room's balcony. The clock had struck midnight, signaling the start of another day. As Ein gazed at the transformed dark blade, Jayle's cryptic words from the battle remained freshly seared into his mind.







Not a single member of the royal inner circle had been able to muster up an answer. An unusually solemn expression had washed over Warren's face, but even he couldn't understand the messages.

"First King Jayle..."

The chief had mentioned that he'd left his power behind to fight an inevitable threat. Ein had no doubt in his mind that the red foxes were this very threat. *Is the chaos in Heim just a coincidence?* he wondered. When one considered the recent tragedy in Magna, the world had been thrown into a whirlpool of troubles as of late.

*"Perhaps it was a guardian of sorts, waiting in the depths of the shrine to hand the sword's power over to a worthy candidate."* The elven chief's words echoed in Ein's mind. If those words held true, then none of this was a coincidence. Whatever he did, the crown prince couldn't shake that thought.

He sighed and returned to his room, his eyes eventually settling on Laviola's magic stone as it sat on the edge of his desk. The chief had entrusted him with the stone before he left Syth Mill, with its power seemingly seeping into his body of its own volition. He'd never experienced anything like it before.

"I've only got questions," Ein muttered while disingenuously smiling.

He focused on the color of Laviola's stone. Most stones he absorbed would've long since lost their color by now, but Laviola's was as vibrant as ever. He could only surmise that was the case because he hadn't properly used his Absorb skill on it, but he had no clue otherwise. Meanwhile, his new Weaken skill seemed to only put him at disadvantage as long as he didn't have a way to utilize it. The stone still emitted a beautiful blue hue, reflecting the light from the chandelier above.

Ein yawned, a wave of drowsiness washing over him. The prince's life as of late had been nothing but a whirlwind, and he figured it was time to stop worrying about it and call it a day. He headed for his bedroom, lay on his bed, and prayed that all of his heart's deepest questions would be answered one day.

# Chapter One: Euro Falls

While Ein stood on his balcony, Elena and Tiggie were making a mad dash out of Heim. The pair rode in Tiggie's personal carriage while an entourage of servants and soldiers followed close behind in their own. The road to Euro looked to be dark, without a single streetlight in sight.

"As we no longer know who to trust, I'd like you to clarify the situation for me once more, Elena," the prince said. "There's a chance that House Bruno and Shannon Bruno have ties to Edward, one of Prince Amur's attendants, correct? But we're admittedly unsure if these parties are even actually related, not to mention that my father's words have left an uneasy feeling in my stomach."

"Precisely, Your Highness," Elena replied.

"I've got another question. Let's say my father and House Bruno were plotting something. Would there be any need to assassinate my brother?" King Garland's prolonged sobbing at the feet of his deceased child hadn't looked like an act. "It didn't seem like my father was simply playing a role, but his odd choice of words regarding Shannon can't be swept under the rug as a mere coincidence. Clearly, something is amiss."

"I actually have a theory about that."

"Let's hear it."

"If we were to presume that His Majesty and House Bruno conspired to assassinate your brother, the king would have summoned the Brunos right away if his grief were insincere. However, His Majesty made no such attempt." Elena's words implied that the second prince's death wasn't planned.

"If that were the case, my father supposedly worked with the Brunos, but they didn't tell him about the plan to murder my brother in advance. Hah, it sounds like Shannon is one step ahead of the king."

Tiggie's voice lost its usual gusto. When combined with his brother's death, Elena's words had worn away at his psyche. He was trying to act tough, but the



pain he felt was clear for all to see.

“If my father truly is in cahoots with House Bruno, no matter the result, he’s a failure of a king,” Tiggie remarked.

“Your Highness!” Elena cried.

“No need for you to say a word. As I have thrown away our nation’s capital in search of my love, it makes me a royal failure as well.” Elena fell silent at Tiggie’s words. “Thinking back, Krone was confident and undaunted from the first time I spoke with her. She spoke her mind clearly, and the fact that she didn’t gravitate towards me left a positive impression in my mind. She’s a beautiful lady, of course, but I also liked that she rebuffed my invitation.”

And so, when she disappeared, Tiggie had used his subjects’ precious tax funds as part of a wild hunt to find her. He met Ein and even took part in a meeting with Ishtarica’s royalty, but even Tiggie found it hard to parse any meaning from his brief island encounters with Krone.

“Their chancellor—Warren, was it?—had me pegged from the moment he saw me,” he said.

Perhaps Tiggie was simply just a touch clumsy. He had run wild in hopes of chasing after his first love, but he also had the capability of calmly assessing his situation. If one were to ignore his motives and the results of his actions, Tiggie had been quick to act with his previous personal visit to Euro. He wasn’t a fool, and perhaps he’d just strayed off the right path for a short while.

“Now then, Elena,” Tiggie said. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you. Once we reach Euro, depending on the situation, we shall part ways. Live on with Krone, in Ishtarica.”

Elena couldn’t hide her astonishment at the suddenness of it all. “Wh-Whatever are you saying, Your Highness?!”

“I’m keeping my current political affairs in mind. If push comes to shove, I shall lower my head. You must heed my words and seek shelter in Ishtarica. I won’t accept your dissent.”

“I mustn’t! How could I possibly flee and leave you behind, Your Highness?!”

“As I can no longer trust House Roundheart, your loyalty serves as a glimmer of hope that I can rely on.”

“Then why don’t we head to Ishtarica together?”

Tiggle flashed a weary smile in response to Elena’s insistent prioritizing of the royal family. “Don’t be a fool. There’s no chance that they will ever offer me shelter. That’s all I will say. I’m sorry, Elena, but I haven’t slept much, so I shall rest.”

“But... No, I understand. Once we reach Euro, I beg you to discuss this topic with me once more.”

“Heh, you’re a stubborn one.”

Tiggle closed his eyes and the steady breathing that followed implied that he was fast asleep. The fact that he was able to rest at all in the midst of such a crisis revealed that he’d been hardly able to catch a wink back at the castle. His body had reached its limit and was utterly exhausted.

*I should rest too*, Elena thought. No matter the situation, one required stamina if they were to press forward. She did her best to ignore unsettled emotions and the rapid beating of her heart as she desperately wished for sleep to wash over her.

Even among Heim’s carriages, Tiggle’s royal carriage was head and shoulders above the rest. Not only bolstered by a unique design, this carriage was pulled by the best horses in Heim. Naturally, the servants’ carriages were also rather special; what use would they be if the servants weren’t close behind to serve their master?

“Lady Elena, we’ve arrived,” a servant called, gently shaking the lady’s shoulders.

The carriage had reached its destination.

“What time is it?” Elena asked.

“It’s a little past three in the morning,” the servant replied.

“I guess the ride went smoothly. I’ll step outside to get some fresh air.”

With that, the servant returned to the carriage with the knights. Once Elena



saw them leave, she stood up and stretched her aching body as she placed a hand on the door. When she made it outside, she saw Euro right in front of her.

She sighed. "We really made it."

The carriages had stopped just outside Euro's castle district. The principality was surrounded by a cape, and the ocean breeze was way stronger than any that hit Heim. It was the perfect temperature to cool her warm body. *What shall I say to Prince Amur?* Even though a letter had already been prepared, it was of little use if Elena and Tiggle were there to convey their message in person. *Should I start by asking him the whereabouts of Sir Edward?* No, that seemed a bit too accusatory and lacked any sort of clarity. *I happened to stumble upon Sir Edward while we were still in Heim.* If Prince Amur was known to be involved in the chaos ripping Heim apart, Elena was sure she'd either be captured or beheaded right on the spot.

"I envy Sir Warren's composure and strength during times like these..." Elena mumbled.

Undoubtedly, the Ishtaricans heavily relied on Warren's self-confidence, placing their trust in him more than anyone else. Elena believed in herself, but she felt like a nobody when going toe-to-toe with the chancellor. *What would he do in this situation?* She thought back to their meeting, when Elena had seen Warren's impressive tactics in action.

*I'd like to ask Sir Edward for his cooperation with our investigation. This is perfect!* Her innocuous question would allow her to glean if Edward was still in Euro. As she cracked a wry smile, the stench of something burning reached her nose. *Is someone having a little bonfire?* Unalarmed, Elena nonchalantly glanced in the direction of the castle district.

Suddenly, a massive pillar of fire burst forth from the city.

Elena jolted in shock. "I must wake up His Highness!"

Assuming the worst-case scenario, she rushed to Tiggle's side. This wasn't good. She walked past the knights, who had noticed the fuss, and stepped inside Tiggle's carriage to rouse him.

"Your Highness! Your Highness!" she cried. She knew she was showing great

insolence to a royal, but now was not the time for formalities.

“Whatever is the matter? It’s noisy outside...” Tiggle mumbled.

“I understand that I’m being rather crass. We’ve arrived in Euro, but something is clearly amiss!”

She encouraged the prince to step out and Tiggle obediently obliged, immediately sensing trouble. When he turned his gaze to the castle district, the pillar of fire was gone, and fiery smoke billowed in its wake.

“What’s going on?!” Tiggle cried. “Whatever is happening to Euro?!”

In this state of emergency, Tiggle did his utmost to ease his nerves as he desperately racked his brain in search of the best steps to take next.

“We’ll stay away from the castle district,” he concluded.

“I think that’s wise,” Elena said. “You will evacuate the area, won’t you?”

Displeased with Elena’s suggestion, the prince tried to figure out the best way forward as his eyes darted around his surroundings. Moments later, he spotted his destination and smiled.

“I only had fear in my heart before, but now, I can only feel at ease!” the prince declared. “Everyone, take the bare minimum with you and head there!”

“Your Highness, you don’t mean...” Elena gasped.

“Oh, but I do! That’s all I can rely on now!”

Elena, the knights, and the other servants were beyond astonished, but they were all keenly aware that they had no other choice. No one offered a single word of dissent. Tiggle took a deep breath, inhaling the burned aroma.

“Let’s go!” he shouted. “To the Ishtarican warship!”

Tiggle had never once envisioned those words coming out of his mouth, but he cast aside his useless pride in the hope that he could protect his allies.

Tiggle’s knights took the vanguard with the prince following close behind. They walked down a steep cape and past a small stretch of even road. The group avoided even stepping in the direction of the castle district, and instead, headed straight for Ishtarica’s ship. The path’s uneven terrain made it easy for



one to lose their footing, not to mention that the ocean breeze felt as if the wind were trying to sweep the party away.

“Gah...” Tiggle grunted as he almost tripped.

A small rock rolled down, far beneath him, before colliding with a skerry. Its fragments sunk into the ocean depths. The darkness prevented Tiggle from getting a better look below him, but the unknown only invoked a deeper sense of fear within his heart. He took deep breaths, doing whatever he could to steady his breathing. Tiggle was actually tempted to praise himself for his efforts.

“We’re almost there!” the prince encouraged them. “Don’t give up now!”

The third prince’s bold words struck the hearts of his trembling servants. They pushed themselves, believing that they could still press on. However, the knights in front soon halted with frustrated expressions.

“We’ve reached a dead end,” they said. “From here on out, we’ve got no choice but to go through the castle district.”

The road ahead couldn’t be traversed so easily. Perhaps the knights could’ve done so with some effort, but with Tiggle, Elena, and a few other servants in the mix, the best choice was to head back. As they resigned themselves to a harrowing run through the castle district, a creepy cry could be heard approaching the entourage from behind.

“Squeak!”

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Near the Ishtarican warships docked by the castle, Lily gave orders to the knight as they assisted the Euroans in their evacuation from the area. Prince Amur was also assisting in the evacuation efforts and obediently followed all of Lily’s instructions.

“Miss Lily, are you sure that I can leave everything to you? I feel so indebted,” Prince Amur said.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Lily replied. “To tell you the truth, we have no idea what’s going on here either. For now, let’s focus on getting everyone to safety!”

The principality's leader, Amur, bowed deeply in gratitude. After Lily reassured the prince, she ordered the knights to guide him onto one of Ishtarica's ships. There were currently three of their ships docked at Euro's port. Many Euroans sought shelter and had been evacuated into these vessels, so Lily and the knights were trying to keep the situation under control.

"Lady Lily!" a knight reported. "The evacuation process has been going smoothly since our arrival."

"Nice! That's good to hear!" Lily replied.

"However, the number of casualties suffered before our arrival can't be calculated just yet. Countless corpses are still strewn about on the city streets." The knight opened the leather bag in his hand and took out a massive rat corpse that was roughly the size of a large dog.

"Are you trying to startle me?" Lily asked.

"Of course not," the knight replied. "Please take a closer look."

Just as Lily was about to note how disgusting the animal was, she peered at the rat. "I've never seen anything like it before."

An enormous magic stone, darker than night, was sitting proudly in the animal's stomach, making its presence known. Veins emanated from the stone, spreading throughout the rat's body.

"A magic stone should be an organism's weakness..." Lily muttered. "And yet, it's completely exposed for all the world to see."

"The stone has already been smashed and the beast's brain has been ruptured," the knight said. "It's undoubtedly dead."

"Yeah, that method might be best."

"And one of our comrades fell victim to this rat."

Lily jolted. For the first time in her entire life, she appeared to be absolutely confused. "Go on."

She gazed coldly at the animal's corpse. The knights that she'd brought to Euro were by no means weak. They might not have been Knights Guard material, but she had chosen full-fledged knights who were more than capable



of fending for themselves. She couldn't believe that any of them would've been killed by this creature.

"Our comrade was paralyzed all thanks to a single bite from that rat," the knight continued. "If I were to describe it, it's like all the fluid in his body was sucked out."

Lily couldn't quite imagine it.

"When we arrived at Euro, we immediately realized that *something* was attacking the city," the knight continued. "The creatures hiding in the darkness and pouncing on the citizens were these rats. We used magic tools to burn most of them to a crisp, but there's so many of them that we haven't been able to finish the job."

"They're not really an issue if you're only up against one of them, right?" Lily asked.

"Quite so. But as I've said, their numbers far surpass ours. And we've also confirmed the existence of another creature..." The knight took out another corpse.

"What is that? A rabbit?"

"Indeed. And like the rat, its stone is exposed." A massive magic stone was embedded in the rabbit's chest. "None of us have fallen to the rabbit so far, but they'll try and bite you just like the rat does."

Lily gave an annoyed click of her tongue as she started biting on her fingernail. She knew more than a thing or two about monsters, but even she had never encountered any rat or rabbit like these. And because of these beasts' seemingly sudden appearance, she had no idea what the cause was.

"Then we can't go to Heim..." she muttered. "Lady Elena... How can I..."

Lily's primary mission in Euro was to establish contact with Elena, but her hands were now full with assisting her nation's allies as they fought back against these mysterious creatures. Just as she was about to consider reporting back to Ishtarica and asking for backup, another knight appeared and quickly bowed.

“One of Heim’s knights is currently fighting in the castle district!” the knight reported. “They’ve already been under attack!”

Lily almost let out a pathetic gasp, but stopped herself just in time. She had started to see a ray of hope pierce through the smoke. Perhaps the person she was looking for was there.

“Who’s being attacked?!” Lily asked. “Did you see their faces?”

“Unfortunately, no!” the knight replied. “But there are reports that a woman is in the mix! I’ve already dispatched some knights in that direction!”

“I’ll join you! Lead the way!”

Despite the fact that stealth was her forte, her swordsmanship was no slouch when compared to that of an average Knights Guard member. But while she was confident in her stamina, Lily felt exhausted just looking at the sorry state of Euro’s castle district. The corpses that lay about the streets were withered husks, just as the knight had said they would be. Much like the fallen Ishtarican knight, it looked as though they had been sucked completely dry. Lily furrowed her brow as this was clearly outside the realm of anything she’d ever encountered before. After a brief moment, she turned her attention to the aforementioned Heim citizens who were said to be nearby.

“We should run into those Heims soon!” the knight shouted.

“Hurry! We need to keep running, faster than ever before!” Lily ordered.

“M-Most certainly! But Lady Lily, please be careful! While our surroundings are calm, we have no idea when those creatures will strike again!”

“I know that! Don’t worry about me!”

Just as the words left her lips, a shadow slunk out from a collapsed house.

“Squeak! Squeak!”

A large rat leaped out from the rubble, aiming for Lily’s jugular. When the knight whirled around to protect her, the rat was already closing in. Even though they knew they were too late, the knight unsheathed their sword and tried to save a seemingly unaware Lily. The Ishtarican knight regretted not paying more attention as regret started to grasp their heart. They bit their lip



with frustration. Just moments later, however, the rat's head was split in two.

"Check the rat," Lily ordered.

"Lady Lily, what did you..." the knight started.

"Nothing much. Just threw a knife at it."

The knight had no idea when exactly Lily had thrown her knife. "Th-That was amazing."

As they praised Lily's martial prowess, the knight gingerly approached the rat and used their sword to turn the creature on its back. A magic stone faintly flickered on its belly.

"It's losing magical energy," the knight reported. "It should be dead soon."

"Good..." Lily said. "It means we can kill it by crushing its head."

She could hear the clamor and the cries of the other knights in the distance.

"Burn them all! Pay no heed to the houses!"

"No, there's no end to them! We should return to the ship immediately!"

This situation was dire, but Lily wasn't against pushing through it all if it meant she could find who she was looking for.

"It seems they're fighting," the Ishtarican knight noted.

"We made it in time," Lily said before she let out a groan. "But hrmm... What do we do from here?"

Locked in a precarious position and a losing battle, Lily decided that it was no longer time to hold back.

"I wonder if I've got anything..." Lily mumbled to herself as she rummaged through her chest pocket. She had a few deadly tricks up her sleeve, but those tools were too dangerous to use with the Heims and her men nearby. "Ah, found it. This should be good."

Luckily, she'd come across the perfect tool for this exact situation. Lily nodded and removed a roughly five-centimeter-wide black sphere from her pocket. As she stepped forward into the chaos, Lily could only sympathize with the cries of the suffering knights around her.

“Urgh...” Lily groaned as she saw countless rats, rabbits, and giant moths crowding the place. Alongside a whole hive’s worth of insects, a terrifying horde of monsters surrounded the desperate band of knights.

Lily was eventually able to get a closer look and noticed her comrades protecting a band of travelers—injured Heim knights, servants, Elena, and Tigger.

“Lady Elena, heading to Euro is the best decision you’ve ever made,” Lily muttered. “No idea why that prince is with you, though.”

Massively outnumbered and overpowered, the powerful Ishtarican knights were forced to go on the defensive and protect the Heim citizens.

“Guess I’ll lend a helping hand,” Lily said. She took a deep breath and shouted, “Charge!”

Her voice echoed throughout the battlefield and to the ears of every nearby knight. All at once, they raised their shields and shoved the creatures away to create a little distance between them. With knights’ blades now all sheathed, they had become a sturdy wall of metal and muscle. From Elena and the Heims’ point of view, it looked like a barrier had been erected in an instant.

“Close your eyes!” Lily ordered.

Everyone obediently followed her orders, and Lily threw the black sphere in front of the knights. It loudly exploded with a blinding flash of light, causing the creatures to flinch and falter.

“Gah...” Tigger grunted. “Elena, what was that?!”

“Your Highness, please don’t move!” Elena shouted back.

Shocked by the sudden noise, the pair curled up into balls and covered their ears. Lily didn’t miss her opportunity, using this moment to swiftly approach Elena’s side.

“Someone pick up that prince!” Lily ordered. “I’ve got her! And as for the rest of you, grab whoever else needs help and run! Retreat! Retreat!”

They all dashed away to the Ishtarican warships.

“Who are you?!” Elena screamed, unable to hide her fear.

“Here I am! Your favorite little Lily is at your service!”





However, the sphere's explosion had temporarily shot Elena's hearing and vision; she must've stared directly into the light. The noblewoman could only crack open her eyes as she continued to struggle and flail about. Tiggie, on the other hand, was surprisingly quiet.

"Easy to carry, huh?" Lily remarked.

"Indeed..." a knight replied.

Perhaps Tiggie was frightened out of his mind or had simply been shocked—he'd fainted and was quietly allowing himself to be hoisted away.

"I'm gonna fire the flare," Lily ordered. "You all better be careful."

The retreating knights all nodded. Lily took out a scarlet crystal sphere from her pocket. The translucent orb glistened like a magic stone, but red smoke swirled inside. As she tossed it away, a crimson pillar rose into the air. Still barely able to open her eyes, Elena finally understood what the pillar of fire from earlier had been.

"Lily, you and your comrades saved us," Elena said.

"You finally noticed us, huh?" Lily replied. "But the knights saved you. I'm only swooping in at the final moment to take all the credit!"

"Tell me, what's going on in Euro?"

"And there you go hitting me with a serious question right away! I understand your concerns, but it'll have to wait until later. Now's not really the time to sit down for a chat."

"Squeak!"

"Kraaah!"

She could hear the creatures crying behind her back, probably writhing in pain from being burnt alive. However, the shrill cries gradually faded away. The other monsters, perhaps spooked by the ominous pillar of fire, showed no signs of attacking or giving chase. It was only a handful of minutes later that the group was able to escape the horrors of Euro's castle district.

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“We should be safe for now,” Lily said.

They had reached the pier where the warships were stationed. Ishtarican knights and officers assisted the last Euroans onto the boats, but each and every survivor looked pained to be leaving their beloved city as it lay enveloped in a fiery blaze. Taking command of the situation, Lily was in the process of confirming a few remaining details. In the midst of this, she took a moment to speak with Elena, who had managed to calm down.

“Lady Elena, you seem to be a touch *bothered* by our presence, but I assure you that is a coincidence, albeit a huge one,” Lily explained. “Speaking honestly, I was only sent here to retrieve the remaining members of House August.”

“In response to the assassinations?” Elena theorized.

“Precisely. We arrived a few hours ago, but those creatures appeared just as we started preparing to head to Heim. We’re not quite sure what happened ourselves...and I’m obviously unaware of why you put yourselves in such dangerous territory either.”

“There were a few things that happened on our end as well. The city was already in ruins when we arrived, but we noticed that the Ishtarican ships had been left unscathed...”

“Still, this is very peculiar. Why did you and that prince come here in person?”

“It’s difficult to explain, but we can no longer tell who’s friend or foe. This wasn’t our preferred plan either, but we honestly had no other choice. You could call it our last resolve.”

“Huh?” A confused Lily tilted her head to one side.

Elena, on the other hand, hesitated. She looked up at the crimson-flame-dyed sky, and chose her words carefully, trying to gauge the intentions of the spy in front of her.

“Would you know where Sir Edward is?” Elena inquired.

“Why do you ask?” Lily replied.

“If possible, I’d like his help in resolving Heim’s assassination scandal.”

“Then you should see Prince Amur first.”



“I know that. And where is he?”

“Inside the ship. He doesn’t have a scratch on him, so rest assured.”

It was then that Tiggie finally awoke. “Where...am I?” He’d been sleeping on the pier, but he was relieved to see Elena nearby.

“Oooh! I’m glad to see you’re doing well!” Lily remarked.

She stepped away from Elena and knelt in front of the prince; he’d just managed to sit up.

“Hello, my name is Lily.”

“I know that,” Tiggie snapped. “I wouldn’t forget the name of the woman who sneaked into our kingdom.”

“Goodness! Well, thank you for looking after me when I was in Heim. Since I’ve sorta saved your life here, could I ask a few questions?”

“Do as you like.” The prince was surprisingly obedient, but this was a wise decision.

“If you came to Euro without knowing who’s friend or foe, you fled Heim in a sense, didn’t you?”

“And what if I say that you’re right?”

“Why don’t we make a deal or two?” Tiggie hadn’t expected to hear those words, though he had hoped to. “Don’t you want us to save Lady Elena and your precious subordinates?”

Her words just might’ve been what Tiggie had been waiting to hear. He looked up eagerly and gave a firm nod, his face more serious than ever before. He had no tricks or deceit up his sleeve. In fact, his wavering eyes made it seem like he’d pinned all his hopes on Lily. “I beg you,” Tiggie said. “You don’t need to save me. But please save everyone else here.”

Even Lily was surprised to see the proud prince lower his head without hesitation. Still, she maintained her sternness.

“And what will you provide to our country?” Lily asked. “What benefit is there to save the prince of an enemy nation? Pray, tell.”

Tiggle immediately answered, "I'll do anything within my power."

Elena was also tempted to lower her head. She didn't expect the prince to be forgiven for his actions, but even so, she wanted to plead for the royal's life to be saved. However, Lily gave a jovial grin and stopped the noblewoman.

"All right! I got your statement!" the spy cackled with glee. "I got your words, so you can't lie to me! You better not go against what you've said! Now then, let's head into the ship, shall we?"

"H-Hey! Lily!" Elena cried. "What was that all about?!"

"Come now, let's head inside! Time to hurry back to Ishtarica!"

Lily plowed ahead; she was the one with power in this situation. But no one cared. Their lives had been spared, after all.

"Ah, and Lady Elena, why don't I tell you something useful?" Lily offered.

"And what would that be?" Elena replied.

"The man you're looking for, Edward, has been missing for the past few days."

The two Heims said not a word, but they looked visibly disappointed, knowing that their hunch had been proved right.

The trio headed for the ship's control room. The space was rustic with no unnecessary decor, built only for the purpose of handing down orders to the rest of the ship. As the three stood by the window, an officer appeared.

"We've finished negotiations with Prince Amur," the officer reported. "As a token of our well wishes, we shall shoulder a portion of their damages. Please confirm this document and sign over here."

"All right," Lily replied. "Prepare the main cannon."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"P-Prepare the main cannon?!" Tiggle cried. "What are you on about?!"

"Nothing, really," Lily assured him. "Those mysterious creatures are crawling around the city, so I'm just going to wipe them out in one fell swoop."

Elena understood the implications of the negotiations with Prince Amur. "You're planning on destroying the castle district."

“Bingo!” Lily answered. “The creatures that attacked you are but a mere fraction of the monsters lurking about. If there’s an entire horde of them hiding in the shadows, this is really the only way to ensure that they’re completely eradicated.”

The center of the ship opened wide, revealing a massive cylinder that proceeded to emerge from the opening.

“Y’know, depending on how our big island meeting went, we thought about using this bad boy to level your port city, Roundheart,” Lily added.

The colossal cylinder was inscribed with a series of characters that Tiggles couldn’t read. The cannon’s copper exterior looked plain atop its many support pillars, but it glistened with a metallic luster. A reddish-purple light started gathering at the tip of the cylinder, and the inscribed characters started brightly glowing.

“All three ships will fire in unison,” Lily ordered. “Three... Two... One...”

The crew members immediately started fiddling with the cannon’s controls as the other ships received Lily’s orders. All three ships were now prepared to fire.

“Zero.”

The moment Lily ended the countdown, every ship’s main cannon opened fire.

“What the...” Tiggles gasped. The words came spewing from the bottom of his heart and tumbled out his mouth.

An arc-shaped shock wave radiated out from the blast, intended to destroy the city. The shot’s powerful impact and recoil hit the ships like the air around them was itself bursting. It looked like the explosion had destroyed the city—in fact, the castle district had seemingly been reduced to ashes.

The most terrifying part of it all was the sheer scale of the attack. The Ishtaricans didn’t even seem to break a sweat as the relentless barrage annihilated the city. The blue, green, and purple lights emitted from the cannons appeared as if they were the wrath of God given form, like Euro was receiving divine retribution for its sins. Vestiges of purple lightning ran throughout the destroyed city, and steam rose from the tips of the hot cannons.



In a matter of seconds, the castle district was wiped off the map, and decades of a flourishing city's history vanished in the blink of an eye.

“These bad boys aren't just any cannons; they're magic stone cannons,” Lily explained. “We force the magic stone's powers to run wild and direct that volatile energy at any target. We've succeeded in creating smaller versions, but nothing can compare to the might of the cannons on these boats. Unfortunately, the cost of firing these cannons even once is rather hefty, so it's more of a last resort.”

Euro was by no means a small city. In fact, it might even have been larger than Roundheart. In mere seconds, however, the massive castle district had been reduced to rubble. Heim's citizens were at a loss for words as the terror of Ishtarica's might started to truly sink in.

“Lady Lily, we shall return to the royal capital, correct?” one of the officers asked.

“Yep. We should be careful on our way home,” she replied.

Lily was no longer focusing on the castle district—it had become a blip in her memories as she shifted her attention across the sea and back to Ishtarica. This unexpected series of events ran through her mind as she tried to understand it all.

Tiggle spent the rest of his ride home glued to the window. He gazed out at the sea without budging an inch until the ship had finally docked in Ishtarica's port.

## Chapter Two: His Desperation

The morning after Ein's return to Kingsland, he heard a knock on his door. The prince was a tad confused to be disturbed at the crack of dawn, but he stepped away from his desk to answer the door.

"Ah, Warren," Ein said.

The chancellor looked to be a touch troubled. "I'm terribly sorry to be bothering you at such an early hour, Your Highness."

"It's fine. I couldn't sleep, so I was up working instead."

"I appreciate your kind words."

"Yeah, sure... Would you like to come in? Did something happen in Heim or elsewhere?"

"Hrmm... I suppose the issue *technically* involves Heim...but it originated in Euro, you see."

Ein had no idea where his chancellor was going with this. While motioning for Warren to take a seat, the prince plopped on his sofa. As he sat across from Ein, Warren's body language appeared to be an even mix of awkward and apologetic.

"Sounds like you've got a lot to say," Ein said with a strained smile. "If you could just start from the beginning, I'd appreciate it."

"You're right," Warren replied. Even though the cait-sìth had his tongue, the chancellor couldn't fumble his words around the crown prince for much longer. "I shall spare you the details, but in short, Euro was attacked by a horde of mysterious creatures. However, we're not exactly sure if we *can* classify them as monsters. While they did possess magic stones, their appearances were far too bizarre."

Ein grimaced as he listened to the chancellor's shocking report.

"There were so many of them, far surpassing the size of any normal horde,"

Warren continued. "And so, we were left with no choice but to wipe away the city with our ships' magic stone cannons."

Despite the presence of the ever-reliable Lily and the superb knights under her command, they were still forced to rely on the warships to settle the situation. This was no simple matter—in fact, the situation was clearly more dire than Ein could possibly imagine.

"What of Prince Amur?" the crown prince inquired.

"We've managed to safely evacuate him in one of our ships," Warren answered. "The prince has already arrived at our port, but... It is with great sorrow that I must report that we lost a knight to one of these mysterious creatures."

Ein gazed at the ground, his thoughts going out to the brave soldier who had fallen in battle. To express his condolences, the prince immediately ordered the bereaved family to be sent compensation.

"Is the loss of one of our own the reason behind your hesitance?" Ein asked.

"Partially," Warren admitted. "However, we're also sheltering a rather unusual character."

"Unusual? And who might that be?"

"It'd do me no good to rob you of the details here, but...there are actually two refugees. The first is Lady Elena."

"Phew. I'm glad we were able to save her."

"We were very lucky. The pair was in Euro due to the recent string of assassinations in Heim." Warren continued, "However, Lady Elena isn't the issue... Her companion is."

"I see now..."

Ein was no fool. From the flow of their conversation, the prince knew exactly who Warren was talking about.

"You were being so cagey because Heim's third prince came along with her," Ein surmised. "Did I guess right?"

“Precisely, Sir Ein. Very impressive,” Warren replied.

“I don’t have the right words to describe how I feel, but why was he in Euro to begin with?”

“Like Lady Elena, it was likely in light of the assassinations. Perhaps he surmised that he’d be safer in Euro instead of remaining in Heim. I shall hear the details about his arrival later.”

“Ah, I see.”

“I’ve been pondering on how to best deal with Prince Tiggie, and I’ve already consulted His Majesty as well.”

“It’s a little suspicious that you’re telling me this, but I guess I’ll ask, just in case. What did my grandfather say?”

Bad premonitions often rang true, and Ein could feel his heart thud with dread.

“If I were to quote him word for word, he said, ‘I’ll leave it all to Ein,’” Warren replied.

“Ugh... So he’s just foisting all the work onto me...” Ein groaned.

“His Majesty has claimed that you share a deeper bond with Prince Tiggie, Your Highness. The scuffle over Lady Krone and your prior encounter with him in Euro is proof of it. But please be rest assured. I shall ensure that Heim won’t accuse us of kidnapping anyone.”

“I’m not worried about your end, but... Ugh... Why is it up to me?”

As Ein felt that he’d buried the hatchet with Tiggie after their fateful meeting, he wanted to avoid any unnecessary dustups. But perhaps the king left the final decision up to Ein as a display of care for his grandson.

“What if I said that I’d forbidden him from entering Ishtarica?” Ein asked.

“He’s already here, but I shall send the prince back to his home continent immediately,” Warren swiftly replied without hesitation. His words were anything but a joke.

“And if I asked you to restrain him?”



“I shall use the fact that he broke our contract as an excuse to throw him into jail.”

If the settled-upon contract from their nation’s prior meeting became a topic of conversation, even Elena would be unable to object. There’d be no protest if Ein doled out the most heartless of orders either. Despite being entrusted with this key decision, Ein had no sort of icy tone lingering in his voice.

“Gah, it feels like I have a tough decision to make...” Ein muttered. As a whirlwind of inexplicable emotions thrashed about within his mind, the prince slowly put words to his thoughts. “The third prince essentially fled to Ishtarica, didn’t he?”

“Indeed,” Warren replied.

“Many may believe my decision to be the wrong one, but I settled my grievances during the meeting. The prince lost his brother to a murderer before fleeing from the only home he’s ever known... I can’t bring myself to send him back or throw him into a cell.”

“I see...”

“At the very least, I think we should be able to offer him shelter.”

Warren chuckled. “You’re awfully kind, Your Highness.”

“I’m probably being naive, but I’m not in the mood to have a nasty feud to flare up under my watch. That’s all.” Ein scratched his temple as a mocking smile formed on his lips. “I want to avoid any trouble. I’m sorry, Warren, but could I ask you to take control of the negotiations?”

“Most certainly. Please leave it to me. I shall give it my all for our Ishtarica.”

The chancellor must’ve expected as much. His response was quick and without a hint of hesitation.

“I shall head for the port,” Warren said, about to take his leave.

“Please fill me in on the details once you return,” Ein requested.

“I believe you should rest. You’ve just returned from Syth Mill, and if you were up all night working, I fear that you might fall ill.”

“I’m fine. Besides, I don’t think I can sleep.”

“Then perhaps I shall ask Lady Krone to watch over you. She can make sure that you refrain from pushing yourself so hard...”

“Will you look at the time! It’s time for me to rest up!”

She’d just scolded him over the incident with the first king, and the topic of his Demon Lord transformation might come up if she were to look him over. Ein watched Warren leave before reluctantly heading back to bed.

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It wasn’t an understatement to describe the port’s activity as “hectic.” Recently dispatched ships had suddenly returned, and the port lights were blaring at the crack of dawn. Despite the time of day, a cacophony of heavy footsteps could be heard reverberating through the bustling crowd milling about. Within the commotion resided a squad of knights on patrol, their faces ominously stern.

On one of the ships, there was a peculiar iron box that sat in the middle of an otherwise empty room. The box had been doused with water before being frozen with a magical tool. As she approached the frozen cube, a cautious elf unsheathed her rapier.

“I shall confirm the contents,” Chris said.

Warren stood beside her. Before they met with Elena and Tiggie, the pair had decided to confirm the identity of Euro’s mysterious creatures. Chris had no idea what she was looking at. The hideous sight of this beast was tough to stomach, but it was bizarre to consider that an entire horde of these grotesque creatures had attacked Euro.

“I’ve never seen anything like it before,” Chris said. “Plus, it’s impossible for something to have a magic stone in this location. For a living creature to have its greatest weakness out in the open is nothing short of a defect”

“Hrmm... Could you say that this is an unfortunate evolutionary mutation?” Warren asked.

“Or perhaps, someone had artificially grafted a magic stone into these

creatures' bodies. Creatures like the Sea Dragon have their stones embedded in their foreheads, but they're powerful enough to create a catastrophe all by themselves. I don't think one could compare this frail rat with the might of such a terrifying monster."

"Indeed. The Sea Dragon has no natural enemies." Warren nodded in response to Chris's words. "The idea of someone inserting stones into these creatures is a more plausible theory than assuming that this is a new type of monster."

"Quite frankly, it's even more outlandish to claim that a new type of monster grouped together to attack a city."

"Which means that this debacle might..."

"Be connected to the red foxes. I've heard that they have the power to control monsters, and I do see a resemblance to Sage's wyvern in this creature."

Though the frozen creature didn't have the wyvern's bulging muscles, it carried a glaring similarity—completely out of the realm of common sense. Sage's previous mention of a mastermind and the red foxes' existence weighed heavy on the minds of Chris and Warren.

"Our main problem here is the sheer number of them," Warren said. "Regardless of how weak they are, a horde that requires the use of our main cannons is a serious threat."

The chancellor braced himself as he glanced at his clock. He'd spent more time than he'd expected.

"Pardon me, but I must be off," Warren said.

"Ah, right. You're going to Lady Elena, aren't you?" Chris asked.

"I'm very sorry. I must speak directly with them as well."

"I shall stay here and observe this creature for a bit longer. Princess Katima will be arriving later to conduct her own observations, so we shall double-check it then."

"I'd be most grateful if you could do that. Please let me know if anything

happens.”

With a few knights in tow, Warren left the room. The sounds of his feet stomping on the floor reverberated throughout the ship, bouncing off the pipes that hung above him. The chancellor walked much faster than he normally would within the castle.

“Your Excellency,” Lily called as she stood by the ship’s exit.

“Lily. I’m glad you’re safe,” Warren said.

“Your words are too kind.”

“Please don’t say that. I greatly rely on you. Where are the other two?”

Lily encouraged the chancellor to peer outside as she pointed to a carriage stationed by the pier.

“I’m grateful for your swiftly made preparations,” Warren said. “Shall we go?”

“Yes, sir!”

The chancellor let out a weary mental sigh as he headed for the carriage. He’d heard that Heim’s pompous prince had been acting surprisingly laudable, and Warren couldn’t help but wonder what exactly spurred this change. A touch interested, Warren continued down the ramp.

“How is Prince Tigger?” Warren asked.

“He spoke very little as though he was steeling his resolve,” Lily answered.

“Oho? More solemn than usual, I see...”

With every step he took towards the carriage, Warren found his mind filled with a myriad of questions. He’d been told about a few facts beforehand, but the most important questions still remained: why did the Heims flee, and what did they mean when they said they could no longer tell friend from foe? This was at the heart of the mystery that Warren sought to solve.

When the Ishtaricans arrived in front of the carriage, the knight on guard reported, “Heim’s knights remain on the ship.”

“That’s fine,” Warren replied. “Have them wait until I provide further instruction.”



“Yes, sir!”

The door of the carriage opened, and Lily stepped inside first, followed by Warren.

“I’d like to say that it’s been a while, but it hasn’t been all that long, has it?” the chancellor asked.

“Sir Warren, I’m honored to meet with you once again,” Elena replied.

The carriage creaked forward and the Ishtaricans sat down. The chancellor quickly greeted Heim’s prince before turning to Elena.

“Would you please tell me why you two fled Heim?” Warren asked.

“Will you promise His Highness’s safety?” Elena replied.

“His safety shall be assured either way. Sir Ein has ordered me to prepare lodging for your prince.”

“*He* said that?” Tiggie asked.

“Your Highness!” Elena hastily scolded.

“A-Apologies. I’m grateful to be a recipient of the crown prince’s generosity.”

Tiggie’s newfound obedience was a fresh sight for Warren.

“Now then, Lady Elena, will you please enlighten me on the details?” the chancellor inquired.

“Of course. Gladly,” she answered.

She spoke of the eerie coincidences popping up across Heim and King Garland’s strange display of respect for Shannon Bruno. With House Roundheart, House Bruno, and Edward all going missing, Elena spoke of her suspicions without leaving out a single detail. Every now and then, the expression on Warren’s face would go from surprised to pensive.

“I had no idea that the lady of House Bruno had met Sir Edward before our meeting...” Warren murmured.

“It was only by sheer coincidence that I was able to recall that detail,” Elena replied.

“I tip my hat to you for noticing. Indeed, that *is* quite suspicious.”

Despite the shaky quality of his words, Warren was quite sure of what was going on. The mysterious monster attack in Euro, the shadow looming within Heim, and the talk of a beast preparing to bare its fangs at Ishtarica all clearly stank of the red foxes. From there, it could easily be concluded that Shannon and Edward were allied with them. Not to mention the fox statue that the spearman had gifted Ein during his trip to Euro. Edward’s involvement in this affair was all but confirmed.

“I’m sorry,” Tiggle suddenly said. “I know that my words may not be worthy of your trust, but once this all dies down, I swear that I shall display my gratitude.”

“We can discuss that another day,” Warren replied. “First, I’d like some sort of proof.”

“Proof that His Highness and I haven’t been kidnapped, correct?” Elena asked.

“Precisely. Will you kindly give me your word?”

“I will,” Tiggle agreed. “I’ll sign whatever document you produce. However, I cannot promise that my father will agree to these terms. He’s like a completely different person now...”

Warren cracked a strained smile. “I must confess, I never expected a king like Garland to declare war on Rockdam.”

“Rockdam? We’ve never gone to war with them.”

“Heim mobilized their armed forces to that location. The implication is quite clear, is it not? You could say it’s a display of force without explicitly declaring war. Don’t you agree, Lady Elena?”

“You’ve hit a sore spot, but I must agree...” she replied.

This also implied that Tiggle’s words had lost their value. Should Heim’s king declare that his son’s signature was a forgery, his word would become fact throughout the kingdom. But Warren didn’t seem to mind.

“Still, that’s fine by me,” the chancellor said. “I shall trust your words, Prince Tiggle.”

“I understand I’m repeating myself, but I promise that your aid will not be

forgotten,” Tiggie replied. “I shall do whatever I can to repay my debt to you.”

The prince didn’t look like he was lying. In fact, it was as if the boy were plumbing the deep reaches of his heart in a desperate display of sincerity. Warren smiled, quite satisfied by this.

“I am happy to hear your decision,” he said. His smile was kind, unlike anything he’d ever shown to the Heim royal before. “I know that you must’ve agonized over the decision to rely on us.”

“No,” Tiggie replied. “I didn’t agonize at all. In just a few days, it felt like my world was completely flipped upside down. I hadn’t the mental leeway to dig in my heels with my silly pride.”

“It does seem like you’re more morose than usual.”

Tiggie turned to gaze out the window, trying to hide the feeble trembles of his cheeks. “I’ve recently seen a few terrifying things with my own two eyes.”

“Are you referring to the fact that you no longer know who your allies are?”

“Precisely. When I heard that my father could be involved, my mind went completely blank. My brother’s death turned into a fleeting memory and I desperately searched for a way to survive.” After scorning himself, he placed a hand over his eyes to shield them. “Even the room that I grew up in felt unfamiliar to me. Oddly enough, it was only then that I was able to think calmly. In the face of potential death, my mind had grown surprisingly calm.”

Perhaps his survival instinct had kicked in. He struggled to continue, but Tiggie was resolved to speak honestly.

“I was...probably afraid of staying in Heim,” he confessed. “And so, I left with Elena. I must’ve been secretly relying on the ties she had to Ishtarica.”

Even in the darkness, Ishtarica’s might was unwavering. Tiggie might’ve thought that Elena’s connections could spare him from a grisly fate. He admitted to having such foolish thoughts.

“A-After all that I’ve done, I chose to rely on the enemy while relying on the connections of my subordinate!” Tiggie cried. “Surely, there’s nothing more pathetic. I only believed in facts that were convenient for my hopes of survival. I

was gambling it all on such flimsy faith!”

He tried to maintain his composure, but his thin veneer was quickly wearing away. Tiggles started to sob like a child, his voice and shoulders trembling.

“We are all human. As are you,” Warren said.

“I’m just a vile, vulgar person! That’s all!” Tiggles cried. “As I find fault with my father, I’ve been desperately searching for a path to survival! I practically tossed my kingdom aside and crossed the sea with my subordinate!”

“Indeed, you did. But that’s not all.” Warren’s words implied that Tiggles had been courageous. “You valiantly marched through the battlefield, and you tossed away your pride to rely on us. The result of this sacrifice allowed you to save the lives of those who revere you, Prince Tiggles. And that is something you can hold your head up high about.”

Tiggles gasped and turned to the chancellor. The elderly man was calm and displayed no hostility whatsoever.

“Heh, I didn’t think *you’d* say those words to me,” Tiggles said. He tried to act tough once more as huge tears dripped off his face.

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The group split up upon reaching the castle; the knights guided Tiggles away to sign a document, leaving Elena and Warren behind.

“Sir Warren, the contract stated that our nations had cut all ties with each other,” Elena said. “A condition of the agreement, I believe we’re also forbidden from speaking to one another. What shall we do about that in this situation?”

“You have no need to worry,” Warren assured her. “Sir Ein has chosen to provide you and your fellow Heims with shelter, after all. Not to mention that we were able to get our hands on some precious information, thanks to you. We’ve finally been able to catch a glimpse of our fated foes.”

“Fated?”

“Ah, pardon me. That was a slip of the tongue.”

Indeed, Elena found herself clueless as to why Ishtarica seemed so fascinated with what she knew. However, the noblewoman was hesitant to pry further in

case her former allies just happen to be the “fated foes” he spoke of. While she pondered over those words, Warren casually switched topics.

“I shall head to my office and fetch the necessary documents for further discussion with Prince Tigger,” he announced.

“May I be allowed to sit in on this meeting?” Elena requested.

“Rest assured, I’m simply obtaining a signature from him, as we previously discussed.”

“Very well. Then where shall I wait?”

“A room has been prepared for you, so please rest there. Lady Martha?”

He clapped his hands, and a single maid swiftly appeared at his call. “My name is Martha, the first servant of this castle.” After this brief introduction, she turned to her guest. “Lady Elena, this way, please.”

As Elena had spent much of her life working in a castle, she believed that she was used to opulent ornaments and lavish decorations, but Ishtarica had far exceeded her expectations. The noblewoman could only obediently follow the maid, overwhelmed by the sheer size of White Night Castle as she walked across plush carpeting. After ascending a few stairs, she finally stopped on a floor that seemed to have very few people around. All the rooms on this floor seemed to be of great importance.

“Would you please wait in this room?” Martha requested.

“Right. I shall,” Elena replied.

She wondered if outsiders were allowed on this floor, but it didn’t seem wise for her to ask trivial questions. She wasn’t dissatisfied with her treatment, after all. Martha opened the door, and the noblewoman stepped inside. Elena thought that she’d be given a tour of the room, but...

“I shall bring some tea right away,” Martha said, leaving Elena to her own devices.

The door closed, and Elena was left alone in a rather ordinary room. Even though the sun’s morning rays were slowly trickling in, the room was still a touch dark. She spotted a large desk covered in books and documents, implying



that this was an office. Given that Elena was an officer of an enemy kingdom, was she really allowed to be left alone in this space? She decided to take a seat and headed for the sofa. Upon closer inspection, the room was furnished with lavish decor. The walls and floors were made of fine, sturdy wood, or marble. It was so magnificent that she assumed that only a select few were allowed such extravagance. She had been in a similar position within Heim's castle just two days ago, and now she found herself in Ishtarica's castle. The noblewoman couldn't help finding the humor in this situation.

When she approached the sofa, she noticed someone steadily breathing nearby. Perhaps the room's owner had been working and was now fast asleep—she didn't want to be treated as an intruder. As an act of self-defense, Elena was tempted to leave the room and call for someone, but the sleeper suddenly let out a soft groan.

“Mm...”

How could Elena forget the voice of her own daughter? She had no doubt about it.

“I see...” she whispered.

As she discovered Krone fast asleep, Elena felt like a fool for being so nervous. This was the office of Krone, the advisor of the crown prince. After cursing Warren and Martha for neglecting to fill her in on this fact, Elena felt secretly grateful for the pair's mischievous little act. She could see Krone moving around, clearly uncomfortable with her sleeping position.

“All right, all right,” Elena said wearily. “Over here.”

She placed her daughter's head on her lap. Possibly comforted by the plush sofa and the height of her mother's lap, the sleeping Krone obediently shifted positions. It even looked like she was smiling ever so slightly. *I remember something like this from years and years ago...* Elena thought, her mind reaching for a memory that was about a decade old.

When Krone was still living in House August and was about six or seven years old, she'd often borrowed her mother's lap after an exhausting night of study. A wave of drowsiness had approached the young girl in a flash, and she often fell asleep on the spot. Krone was no longer that young girl. Her fine hair was

smooth as silk, and her clear, supple skin would make any woman jealous. *I'm sure that Ishtarica's technology has allowed her to keep up her appearance,* Elena thought, trying her best to hide her jealousy.

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With Warren by his side, Ein made his way to Krone's office.

"Things sure are moving fast, and right under our noses too, aren't they?" Ein remarked half jokingly.

He was doing his best to ease the tension. With Shannon's status as Glint's fiancée and Edward's movements in mind, Ein was tempted to have the pair simultaneously restrained. However, things were far from that simple. Ishtarica had no motive to take action nor did Ein have a good reason to pursue the pair.

That alone wasn't too much of an issue as Ein could surely find some sort of excuse, but if Shannon and Edward weren't red foxes, Ishtarica would be seen as invaders, plain and simple. If only there were concrete evidence to connect the pair to the attack on Euro.

"No matter the situation, you cannot take to the front lines, Sir Ein," Warren warned.

"I-I know..." Ein stammered.

The prince knew that he wasn't allowed to fight, but he secretly wanted to end it by his own hand. He assumed that he wasn't completely unconnected to these affairs. Ein thought back to the first king's basement library, along with Jayle's diary pages and Marco's words. *"You should be especially wary now. After all, that filthy beast has been waiting in the wings for your existence to coalesce once again. You're an important piece in their scheme to exact revenge on Ishtarica's royal family."* If that Undead's words rang true, Ein was surely involved in some way *And King Jayle had also stated that he was waiting for me at the shrine,* the crown prince thought.

"I'm counting on you" had been Jayle's final words. He had entrusted his sword to Ein, transforming his black blade, but the crown prince had no idea how to utilize this power. The first king's other cryptic ramblings echoed in Ein's head. *"You must become a disaster...or you won't stand a chance against the*

*further disasters ahead of you.”*

Ein could only draw a single conclusion from this smattering of words. *I’m certain that a clash between the red foxes and myself is all but inevitable.* The prince knew that he had some sort of duty to fulfill and that he must never forget King Jayle’s words—the very ones Marco bet his life to see through to the end.

“Sir Ein? Is something the matter?” Warren asked.

Ein had stopped in front of Krone’s office and silently froze in place.

“Sorry, I was just thinking about what to say,” Ein replied.

“Is that so...” the chancellor said.

The crown prince knew that Warren had seen through his little fib, but he managed to fake a smile as he gently knocked on the door.

“It seems Lady Martha is inside, and I believe the tea has already been prepared,” Warren said.

As though in response to those words, Martha replied through the door.

“Then please excuse me,” Warren said. “I shall be off to report back.”

“All right,” Ein said. “I’m counting on you.” He placed his hand on the knob and stepped inside. “Hello, Elena. It’s been a while since we’ve been able to sit down for a chat. I know we don’t have much time, but I was eager to speak with you, so here I am.”

While the two parties had met during the conference, it wasn’t as though they’d had a private space to engage in a conversation. Ein had assumed that Elena was speaking with her daughter, but the tired Krone was still napping away on her mother’s lap. “Y-Your Highness!” Elena gasped.

She hastily tried to stand up, but he didn’t want to ruin the peaceful slumber of his beloved. He raised his hand to stop her and approached the sofa.

“Please stay as you are,” Ein requested. “We don’t want to wake Krone.”

Martha left the room upon seeing Ein take a seat. Elena was the first to break the silence.

“I can only give you words of gratitude and an apology,” she said.

“I understand, but I hope you won’t mind so much.”

“I shall! How can I possibly apologize for our past deeds? And yet, you accepted my father-in-law and Krone. What words of gratitude can I offer? Furthermore, you’ve graced us with such benevolence... I certainly have no idea what to say to you. I cannot possibly express my thoughts.”

It was honestly a wholesome sight. A daughter was happily snoozing away on her desperate mother’s lap, sucking out all of the situation’s tension.

“Your thoughts have been heard, and that’s more than enough,” Ein said casually.

His actions couldn’t be swept aside with such a simple comment, but he was nothing short of serious. He implied that Elena needn’t say anything more. Elena relented knowing that it’d be crass of her to push the issue.

“I didn’t know that Krone was asleep,” Ein remarked.

“I...apologize for my daughter’s unseemly state,” Elena replied.

“Ah ha ha... This isn’t her first time being like this, and not once have I found it unseemly.”

“You don’t mean to say that she’s been like this before? More than once?”

“Well... We had a little fight about her work, and it seems like she’s been taking some time to herself these days.”

Elena gazed down at her daughter, wondering if she ought to scold the young lady. The noblewoman would’ve never imagined her daughter fighting with the crown prince.

“As you may already know, she’s always been fierce and steadfast,” Elena apologetically said. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid she hasn’t changed one bit since she was a child.”

Ein was interested to hear more stories. “What kind of girl was she? Was she energetic?”

“Hmm... She always tossed marriage proposals from nobles into the trash

without a second glance. How is she doing now?”

“She’s always been a huge help... She’s irreplaceable to me. There isn’t an advisor better than Krone around here.”

It was then that the crown prince noticed his sleeping beloved smile ever so slightly. He wouldn’t miss even the smallest of changes in her demeanor.

“I was thinking...” Ein started, wondering if he should reveal the truth to Elena or not. He glanced down at his watch. “I’m sorry. I’ve actually been called by my grandfather.”

“Oh dear...” Elena said. “You decided to come all this way to pay a visit before your meeting?”

“I just wanted to drop by, so please don’t mind it at all.”

He’d just arrived, but he gulped down Martha’s freshly poured tea. It was a bit vexing to realize that the tea wasn’t piping hot, but of a comfortable temperature that allowed him to take large swigs—no doubt the maid knew about Ein’s prior engagement with the king. He stood up and decided to take his leave.

“I pray that we will have another opportunity to speak,” Ein said. “I’m sure your room will be ready soon, so please enjoy your conversation with Krone until then.”

“I’m also honored to be able to speak with you, Your Highness,” Elena replied, raising her head with Krone still on her lap. “I’m so sorry. It seems she’s still fast asleep.”

“Oh, there’s nothing to worry about. And I did say to enjoy a *conversation* with Krone,” Ein replied. He placed a hand on the door and turned to his seemingly sleeping advisor. “Krone, you can take it easy all day tomorrow. Don’t push yourself. And since you’ve got a rare opportunity to spend time with your mother, why don’t you drop the act?”

“Argh!” Krone cried. “I thought you’d keep quiet about it!”

“All right, all right. See you tonight.”

With that, Ein left the room. Elena was stunned by what she’d just heard.

Though she was overjoyed to see the two converse so naturally with each other, Elena sternly gazed at her daughter, who'd been feigning sleep this entire time.





“Oh my,” Krone remarked. “Your expression is terrifying, mother.” She remained lying down, with not a look of remorse on her face.

“And whose fault do you think that is?” Elena replied, frowning.

“But I really *was* asleep at first. I woke up when Ein came in, but I lost my timing to get up and greet him... I was deathly worried about you, mother, and when I came to, you were offering your lap as a pillow for me. As your daughter, surely I’d be allowed to act a bit spoiled.”

Krone flashed a mischievous smile and stuck out her tongue. Even Elena had lost the will to remain angry. It wasn’t as though she couldn’t understand her daughter’s feelings. Elena was anxious, and words couldn’t describe how overjoyed she was to be with her beloved daughter again. Surely, it wasn’t a coincidence that Elena’s accumulated stress and exhaustion from the past few days had suddenly evaporated.

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A few days passed. Now that Ishtarica had finally caught a glimpse of the red foxes off in the distance, several meetings were held every day. White Night Castle was never usually this busy. As time marched on, another alarming question started to pop up in the minds of the Ishtaricans.

Two of Heim’s most important citizens had seemingly vanished without a trace, and yet the kingdom didn’t appear to be bothered by it. Similarly, Heim’s forces hadn’t been sent to Euro in light of Prince Amur’s departure, nor were they attacking their neighbors. Heim’s march to Bardland and Rockdam had lost its steam, as though they required some time to build their military. With so many topics rattling about in his brain, Ein found himself mentally exhausted. Needing a breath of fresh air, the prince went on a walk around the castle and ended up bumping into a familiar figure upon rounding a corner.

“Oh...” he said.

“Hmm?” Tiggle remarked.

“Oops...” Lily sighed. She’d been tasked with keeping watch over Heim’s prince, but she didn’t exactly see this coming. She awkwardly grimaced, but immediately tried to regain her composure. “Are you taking a break, Sir Ein?”

“Y-Yeah, just need a breath of fresh air,” the crown prince replied. Amid the awkward atmosphere, he decided to exchange a few words with the Heim royal. “Um, it’s been a while, huh?”

“Not really,” Tiggie curtly replied.

Ein gave a forced smile. “Well, our last meeting was over the summer, and it’s been a few months since. It feels like a while to me.”

“We don’t have the kind of relationship where we’d meet each other often.”

Ein had heard that Tiggie was feeling a bit gloomy these days, but his harsh replies put the crown prince at ease.

“We haven’t even talked with each other much,” Tiggie pointed out. “We didn’t really have a lengthy conversation during the meeting, nor did we in Euro.”

“Whoa, you’re nitpicky.”

“Nit— No, I’m not being nitpicky! I’m grateful to you, of course, but I never imagined that you’d try to speak with me!”

“I’m a whimsical guy. Since this is a good opportunity, could you humor me and tag along?”

“Tag along?”

Tiggie was troubled by the sudden invitation and he glanced over to Lily. She couldn’t say much to the crown prince, but this wasn’t a request that could be easily agreed to either. However, Ein didn’t wait for a response and walked ahead.

“The garden’s close by, you know,” Ein remarked.

“H-Hey!” Tiggie cried.

“Don’t worry. I got it all covered. I won’t let anyone approach us, okay?”

Ein approached one of the waterways within the castle kingdom—the former abode of Sea Dragon twins from back when they happily splashed about as babies. As the twins had grown quite a bit since then, Ein felt a twinge of loneliness knowing that he could no longer see them so easily. He stretched his

body, taking deep breaths and allowing fresh air to fill his lungs. He'd been in countless meetings over the past few days, so this was a refreshing change of pace for the crown prince. There was no need to be overly wary, but Lily stood by Ein's side.

"Lily, could I ask you to chase everyone out of here?" he requested.

"Do the two of you want to be alone?" she asked.

"Yep. I'm sure you can probably hear us talking, but I'd appreciate it if you were out of sight."

"Your wish is my command."

Tiggle, on the other hand, was still unable to wrap his head around this situation. "And why did you bring me here? What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing much, just to talk," Ein replied. "As you've said, we've never had the chance to sit down and actually talk, right?"

*What an awfully lenient man*, Tiggle thought. He had no idea what Ein was thinking. Was there any meaning behind dragging a former enemy out for a little chat? Heim's prince wasn't able to make heads nor tails of it all.

"I wanted to have a proper conversation with you," Ein explained.

"So that you can shower me with complaints?" Tiggle asked.

"No, no, no. Nothing like that."

This exchange exposed Tiggle's immature side. As a royal who was under the benevolence of the crown prince, Tiggle had no right to take such a thorny attitude. He was well aware of that and admonished himself for acting so pompously. Simultaneously, Tiggle was shocked that he was able to speak so naturally with Ein.

"I think it's a little too late to send any complaints your way," Ein said. "Not like that would change the past anyway."

"But..." Tiggle started.

"Same goes for my mother too. She's stated that she no longer cares, so I don't want to care about it either. I'm very happy here, so let's let bygones be

bygones.”

“Then could I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“If you have this water-under-the-bridge attitude, then was our meeting really necessary?”

There was no question that Ishtarica had matters to settle, but was it truly necessary for kings to be in attendance? Tiggle simply couldn’t wrap his brain around it.

Ein flashed another strained smile. “Cutting right to the chase, huh?” He scratched his cheek sheepishly and added, “Actually, it all started because I said that I wanted to end it, once and for all. I never really expected it to have been blown out of proportion like that.”

“What does that mean?” Tiggle asked, implying that it was only natural for Ishtarica to take this matter seriously. “You wanted to settle the score with Heim, no?”

“Well, not quite...”

“Huh? Then what did you have in mind?”

Heim’s delegation had been forced to apologize at the end of the meeting, but was the crown prince *actually* looking for an apology? That didn’t seem quite right, especially if Ein and Olivia truly claimed to be over their years in Heim. *Then what else could he possibly want from our kingdom?* Tiggle wondered.

“I said it unconsciously, but I wanted to end a dispute...one that I absolutely didn’t want to back down from,” Ein explained.

A strong gust of wind blew across the two men, their hair fluttering in the breeze. Silence settled in for several moments.

“Tell me,” Tiggle requested, unable to take the silence. “What exactly were you looking to end?”

Ein finally turned to Heim’s prince, his eyes glittering with ferocity like never before. Deep within Ein’s gaze slumbered great power. It made one’s knees

instinctively buckle when faced with such might.

“I didn’t want to hand Krone over to anyone,” Ein declared. “Back then, that was the only thought that filled my mind.”

His piercing gaze was sharper than a blade, and Tiggie felt the air around him waver for a split second. The surrounding trees and foliage had started to tremble, and even the water of the waterways stood still as though it had frozen over. Tiggie couldn’t help but nervously gulp.

“That’s probably what I wanted to say to you,” Ein said. “I couldn’t say it at the meeting probably because I either didn’t have the opportunity, or I couldn’t commit to expressing myself to you in such a way. It’s probably a mix of both, really.” Ein gave himself a mocking smile and sighed.

“You’re completely unlike how Glint describes you,” Tiggie muttered.

“I can imagine the things he’d say about me.”

“Do you want to know?”

“No, that’s okay,” Ein replied with a chuckle.

Thanks to his mother’s words, Glint most likely had something of an inferiority complex. In fact, Tiggie had come to this conclusion himself upon looking back on the knight’s words. While Tiggie had never seen the crown prince in combat before, the Ishtarican royal exuded power and authority—a true man of might. It was a tough pill to swallow, but Tiggie had no choice but to admit that Ein was far more worthy of a crown than he’d ever be.

“You’re an extraordinary man...” Tiggie mumbled under his breath. He smiled, knowing that it wasn’t like him to sound so feeble. “Can I say one last thing?”

He stood up and started walking away, pointing his back to the crown prince. The sunny blue sky shone down upon Heim’s prince, his proud posture imbuing him with an air of confidence.

“Crown Prince Ein, I apologize for everything that I’ve done.”

Not once did Tiggie turn around to face Ein as he walked away. However, these words carried far more weight and emotion than anything that Tiggie had ever said. Should anyone make a thorny remark about his insolence, Ein would



surely step in and claim that he didn't mind. These words of apology clearly expressed the intentions of Heim's third prince, Tiggie von Heim. It might not have been perfect, but it was a firm, clear, and oddly refreshing statement.

"I'm not so bothered by his words anymore," Ein muttered. "That didn't feel bad at all."

As he gazed at Tiggie's back, one could catch a glimpse of the royal's imperfections—the ones that made him so perfectly human. Ein continued to watch Tiggie walking away, never once averting his eyes until Lily approached his side.

## Chapter Three: Mysterious Creatures and Ein's Sword

As autumn blew into Ishtarica, early morning and night alike grew chilly. Most evenings, one could spot flecks of snow falling in the royal capital's outskirts. It had been days since the attack on Euro, and a collection of high-ranking officials had chosen a particularly sunny afternoon to gather in one of White Night's most spacious meeting rooms.

"Now, the meowment of truth! Allow me to explain," Katima said. She stood up from her seat, holding a small stack of documents in one of her paws.

With Ein and Silverd seated beside her, Katima prepared to address an audience of Kingsland's most powerful nobles.

"The meowsterious creatures that attacked Euro are not monsters," Katima explained. "While their magic stones were connected to their internal organs, they possessed no cores. This means that they'll die as soon as the energy in their stones runs dry."

"Then what are they, Katima?" the king inquired.

"I have my paws full with a thorough investigation, but I think it's safe to assume that they're artificial creations."

"That sounds quite perilous."

"I'll make a follow-up report once our investigation of this purr-plexing creature concludes. And, oh... I found that constantly referring to these beasts as 'mysterious creatures' or 'those organisms' to be a whisker too wordy for my tastes. For now, I've taken to calling them 'chimeras.'"

"Very well. We shall adopt that name as well."

Further details surrounding the chimeras would be shared following the investigation's conclusion. As Katima spoke, Ein remained silent as he mulled things over. The chimeras' description shared some glaring similarities to the

ones in the visions he had while in Syth Mill. *They look just like the nonhumans that I saw running around that battlefield...* Black magic stones had been embedded into the collarbones of the opposing nonhuman soldiers; the stones' presence seemingly drove them all mad. With the full force of an entire army under his command, King Jayle ruthlessly cut down these beasts—one enemy at a time.

“But make no meowstake, these chimeras are *not* the same monsters that attacked Magna,” Katima said. While those monsters had seemingly lost all sense of reason like the chimeras, they were not the same. “In summation, we’ve encountered three types of creature so far: chimeras, Magna’s assailants, and Viscount Sage’s wyvern. We can assume that the same technology was pawisibly used to control Magna’s monsters and the wyvern.”

She added that the chimeras were unlike anything that she’d ever seen before. Ein and Silverd exchanged a glance, seemingly sharing the same thought: the elven chief’s predictions had come to pass.

If the red foxes were the masterminds behind these attacks, then the chief had been right on the money. The foxes were not acting together in a unified effort either. Then what of Ein’s visions from while he was in Syth Mill’s shrine? While those soldiers had seemingly gone berserk in a similar fashion to the recent attackers, they weren’t monsters—they were nonhumans. However, they still had undergone an out-of-control transformation that brought them closer to the chimeras. Ein found himself lost in his thoughts as he tried to piece it all together.

“I apologize for the wait, Your Majesty,” Warren said, entering the room. “I’ve dug up every possible scrap of information I could find. With this in hand, I’d like to share my findings with you.” He held a thick stack of documents that easily dwarfed Katima’s own discoveries.

These documents not only contained Warren’s unearthed information, but the current state of affairs in Heim. The chancellor took his seat before entering the discussion.

“In terms of war, Bardland and their neighbors to the south find themselves at a standstill of sorts,” Warren started. No one stopped to question why Heim,

the continent's champion, had been locked in such a struggle as of late. "I suppose one must refrain from taking the merchant's city lightly. As their level of wealth is proportionate to Heim's, it's not a surprise that their treasuries are quite full. Now while they might have not hired enough adventurers to match Heim's numbers, these warriors are of equal quality. Even with General Rogas in charge, the kingdom is struggling against Bardland's forces."

"Oho..." Silverd murmured.

"To be frank, Heim may find a way to handle Bardland, but it'll be a few years before they'll have enough men to face Rockdam."

It was a reckless decision to pick a fight with this pair of nations. Contrary to recent history, Bardland's presence and influence over the continent had been growing by the day. Money meant power, and the nation's wealthy merchants could hire plenty of powerful adventures with it. But that was not all their power could buy; it provided them with an ample supply of food, resources, and superb gear to go on the defensive with. If it was a war of attrition, Bardland could easily endure it.

"However, Heim's movements have been a touch curious," Warren continued. "I haven't been able to fully grasp the situation yet, but the kingdom seems to be rallying its morale. I'm quite certain that they have a trick up their sleeve, but we're not aware of what that trick exactly is just yet."

"And what of Euro?" Silverd inquired. "Does Heim still intend to invade a nation that's now a husk of its former glory?"

"I believe they do, but they're currently keeping their distance and watching from afar. I suspect that they're gauging the situation."

Either Heim had concluded that there was little gain in taking over the principality as it currently stood, or they already had their hands full with Bardland and Rockdam. Waging war with two nations at once required the kingdom's full attention.

"I've got one more thing I'd like to report," Warren stated, clearing his throat and straightening his posture. "Prince Amur's personal knight, Edward, has been located. He has been spotted by a garrison on the outskirts of Heim."

Silverd and the nobles were unable to hide the shock that crept onto their faces. As the nobles had yet to be informed of the red foxes' existence, they looked to be rather confused. Why in the world would one of Euro's own be mingling among the Heims?

"It seems that it's time we told everyone of the red foxes," Silverd whispered in Ein's ear. The king's next course of action had been decided upon.

Following the meeting and the nobles' departure from the room, the royals engaged in a quiet conversation.

"Grandfather, I'm certain that the chimeras are related to the red foxes," Ein firmly said.

"I agree, but what's with the sudden declaration?" Silverd asked.

"I saw a vision in Syth Mill's shrine—soldiers resembling these chimeras were fighting on the battlefield. And since I saw the first king was in the middle of this war zone, we can safely conclude that his enemies were the red foxes."

"Very well. I shall tell everyone about it later."

Confirming these suspicions was fruitful in and of itself. Ein believed that turning his suspicions into firm assertions would prove useful in the days to come.

"And Ein, I hope this meeting hasn't caused you to lose track of your schedule," Silverd said.

"I-I haven't!" the prince stammered. "I'll be sure to visit Mouton!"

Warren flashed a gentle smile as he approached the royals. "Oh, I'm certain that Sir Mouton will take a look at your weapon."

"Indeed. We must know how your blade transformed following this trial you've spoken of," Silverd added.

"I know!" Ein insisted. "Krone and Chris said the same thing this morning, you know!" He stood up and placed his hand over the hilt of his weapon. "I mustn't keep those ladies waiting. I shall be off."

Silverd watched on as his grandson left. Warren looked as if he were feeling a touch nostalgic as he watched the boy walk off.

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With Krone and Chris by his side, Ein left the castle and made his way to Mouton's grand atelier. Located in the middle of prime castle district real estate, the workshop could be seen from far away thanks to its massive forge. While Mouton's chimney could be seen puffing away, Ein and his entourage were just about to knock on the blacksmith's door. However, they heard a pair of loud voices coming from inside.

"You goddamn birdbrain! Why the hell did you waste all this precious material?!" a gruff voice roared.

"M-Master! You're the one who told me to take care of this material! I just followed *your* orders!" another voice screeched back.

"Huh?! Oh shit, on closer look, you're damn right! Ememe, you do some fast work!"

"Thank you!"

As always, their exchange was rowdy and cheery.

"Are all dwarves this energetic?" Ein wondered.

"I've seen many dwarves in my lifetime, but I've never seen one as energetic as Sir Mouton," Chris replied.

"Then what about harpies?"

"I think Miss Ememe is simply an exceptionally adorable person," Krone replied.

Ein could only nod in agreement. He knew that if he kept standing there, the sun would set before he could even knock on the door. He opened up his notebook just in case, confirming that he indeed had an appointment with the blacksmith today.

"It was so rowdy in there that I wondered if I got the date wrong, but I guess not," Ein said. "Oh no, a corner of my notebook's torn."

"You've been using it for quite a while," Krone remarked.

"Yeah... Maybe I'll pick up a new one soon."

After wrapping up some carefree banter, Ein finally gave the door a knock. The owner of a hasty voice could be heard shuffling towards the door to answer him.

“We’ve been waiting for you!” Ememe said as she welcomed the prince, her wings fluttering about.

“Oh yeah, we sure have!” Mouton energetically added as he stood within his workshop.

The blacksmith encouraged his trio of guests to step inside his shop. As always, his workspace was a cluttered mess, but the swords that hung on one of the shop’s walls served as proof of his renowned smithing prowess.

“Thanks for coming all this way, Your Highness,” Mouton said. “C’mon, you don’t wanna stand around, do ya? Sit, sit! Over here! Oy, Ememe! Get us some tea, will ya? Make sure you’ve got enough! Make the pot overflow, you hear me?”

“Leave that to me, Master!” Ememe replied. “I’m very good at letting the teapot overflow!”

This was nothing to be proud about, but Ememe nonchalantly flew out of the room to fetch some tea.

“All right then, let’s get down to it,” Mouton said. “Lemme see that sword of yours.”

He took the weapon, unsheathed it, and stared at the blade and its hilt.

After a few intense moments, Mouton quietly said, “I can’t believe it.”

The glimmer in his eyes and uneasiness in his voice said it all. He’d been spellbound by the blade’s glory, unable to believe what he was seeing. Mouton proceeded to stare at the sword for a good while longer before he finally let out a sigh. It seemed like he was attempting to calm himself, a rare sight for an easily excitable man such as him.

“Your Highness,” he said, placing the sword on the table. “This...is the king’s blade. No doubt about it.”

Ein had never heard that name before.



“There ain’t no dwarf who doesn’t know of this blade, Your Highness,” Mouton explained. “And it’s not just our species. Anyone who’s studious and can read the ancient texts’ll know about this weapon. So, the question is: why do you have this, Your Highness? I can tell that the sword that I forged for you is still in there, but what the hell’s going on?”

“A lot of things happened in Syth Mill,” Ein confessed.

“Tell me. If you don’t, I won’t be able to accurately analyze your sword.”

“Sir Ein, you may tell Sir Mouton everything,” Chris assured him.

“We’ve already received permission from Sir Warren,” Krone added.

“So much is happening behind my back...” Ein sighed and turned to the blacksmith. He thought back to his journey to Syth Mill and spoke of what happened within the shrine.

“You’re saying that the sword that I forged had broken?” Mouton asked, a pained expression dominating his face as he learned of the black sword’s demise.

Made from legendary material, that sword was born of countless, painstaking hours of forging in order to craft the perfect blade. It was tough for Mouton to swallow the fact that his masterpiece had almost crumbled after taking a few hits from Jayle’s sword. The blacksmith’s usual rowdy disposition dissipated when he learned the truth.

“Actually, no one knows of the smith responsible for forging the king’s blade,” he explained. “While it’s always been a nameless sword, it was the one that managed to slay Demon Lord Arshay. So obviously, it’s no normal weapon. Guess we should feel lucky that your blade wasn’t completely destroyed, Your Highness.”

“I’m sorry, Sir Mouton...” Chris started.

“Hmm? What’s up, elf lady?”

“I apologize for interjecting, but I’d like to know what exactly happened to Sir Ein’s sword. Can we still say that this is the blade that you forged?”

“I wonder... I’ve never seen a blade fuse with something else before, so I can’t

say for certain.” He took out his loupe, his voice uncertain. “The blade’s center of gravity and its weight are exactly the same, and it overall still carries a resemblance to Living Armor. Now while its appearance has changed, the sword’s core remains the same.”

“Does that mean that it hasn’t changed at all?” Ein asked.

“Not exactly. It *feels* different from the sword that I forged for you, and it’s enveloped in magical energy. I’m guessing your blade inherited some traits of the king’s blade. That’s all I can tell you for now.”

“Huh...”

“You can just assume that your blade’s been strengthened. And it’ll still listen to your commands, Your Highness.”

Just then, Ememe came flapping into the room while holding a teapot with one of her wings.

“Hmm?! Mrrrrmmm!” Ememe grunted, flying in an unstable position.

And who could blame her? As Mouton had ordered, the teapot she held was already overflowing, and it made little sense for her to fix her posture as hot tea went flying everywhere.

“Whoaaa there! I almost spilled a bit!” Ememe cried.

“You feather duster! You’re getting tea everywhere!” Mouton bellowed.

“Y-You told me to fill up the pot until it overflows! And I’m not a duster!”

As he adjusted his blade, Ein let out an awkward chuckle while watching master and apprentice flail about.

“Sir Ein, Sir Ein,” Chris said, her interest piqued.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Do you feel any different while swinging your sword?”

“Not really. Its feel and swing haven’t changed at all.”

Krone leaned towards Ein and peered at the blade. “I wonder if it has some kind of special power.”

It was only a passing remark, but Ein and Chris both jolted ever so slightly. It reminded the duo of a battle that had had them practically standing at death's door. Needless to say, they were relieved that they'd managed to make it out alive.

"It's certainly a possibility," Ein said.

He thought back to the powerful attack Jayle launched at him simply by saying the word "light." The prince had already tried to "light" things up in the hope of unlocking a new attack for his repertoire, but nothing happened. He couldn't use the first king's attack, but Ein felt as if he couldn't do anything else. The prince spoke of the possibility of using it, but he was going off a hunch more than anything.

"Hee hee. Intuition, I see," Krone giggled.

"Unfortunately, that's all I've got..." Ein admitted.

"It's not unfortunate at all. I was thinking the same thing, after all. The hero king himself, Jayle von Ishtarica entrusted you with his weapon. Surely, there must be some sort of meaning behind that."

Even if he only had a sliver of a chance to make this attack work, Ein felt it was worth testing further.

"Aghhh! Goddammit! All right, we've gotta chug this tea before it all spills!" Mouton roared.

The atmosphere around the workshop made it difficult for Ein to broach the subject. Mouton raised the overflowing pot of tea above his head and started pouring it into his mouth. Clearly, this wasn't the time for a serious discussion.

"You go, Master!" Ememe cheered. "Chug! Chug! Chug! You're doing well!"

"Hell yeah, I am!" Mouton shouted back. "I've always chugged all my— Gah?!"

"Master?! Master!"

The tea had gone down the wrong tube, and it was all too easy to guess why Mouton had a coughing fit. He lifelessly slumped over the table as the pot of tea fell onto his head with a loud bang. As Mouton suffered a terrible head injury,

Ein slumped his shoulders and asked if the smith was all right.

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The prince's very first idea was to simply swing the blade. As part of his training, Ein would do just that as he watched out for any changes. Later that evening, he returned to the castle for dinner and a short rest. Ein was dressed in a simple shirt and pants as he headed for the sandy beach behind the castle. He walked by the staircase that led to Katima's underground lab when he heard his aunt groaning.

"Mrow... I'm wiped..."

She slumped her shoulders as she emerged from the door.

"How's research going?" Ein asked.

"Mya ha ha! Can't mew tell?" Katima replied. There were no existing historical records with details on chimeras, so the trail of her investigation had run cold. "I've recently found the purr-fect assistant, so I'm grateful for that, I suppose."

"An assistant? When'd you hire one?"

"I didn't, technically. It's Elena. She's ameowzing! She said that she didn't want to just sit on her paws and wait around, so I had her help meowt! She's excellent!" Katima was clearly in high spirits thanks to Elena's unexpected helping hand.

"Elena is currently staying at Graff's manor, right?"

"Mm-hmm. The same manor as that third prince, mew know."

The knights were still watching her every move, but Elena had been granted many more freedoms since she first arrived in Ishtarica.

"Infurrmation is my main problem here," Katima groaned. "Even if I do have a fantastic assistant, it's of little use if there's nothing for me to sift through... The chimera investigation will be tough. Mrow..."

"Oh, how about asking the elven chief about it?" Ein suggested.

"We've already traded letters and unfurrtunately...she knows nothing."

"Hmm... Then I guess we're out of leads..."

“I’ll take my sweet time. I’ll be taking a cat nap.”

“All right. Thanks for your hard work.”

Katima tended to be at her most reliable at times like these. As he watched her leave, Ein hoped that she’d take good care of herself. From there, he set out for his own destination.

The nighttime sea breeze was chilly and crisp. As he was lightly dressed, Ein immediately felt the nip in the air as he stepped out outside. But when he started swinging his sword around, the extra exercise quickly warmed him up.

The prince swung his blade, his movements refined and polished from years of practice as a young boy. His next swing was from the style of swordplay that he’d learned while training with the Ishtarican knights. His blade didn’t particularly seem any different and Ein could only hear the sound of his sword cutting through air.

“Whew...” Ein sighed.

He stood still and fixed his gaze on the ground. His battle with Jayle still remained fresh within his mind, and the first king’s swordsmanship had become a vivid memory. It was far beyond anything that the crown prince had ever imagined, and the raw power was absolutely overwhelming.

“I feel like I’m at least a step closer than I’d been, but...”

His confidence had been shattered. Jayle’s expert swordsmanship could only be seen as a work of art—a brush that mercilessly shredded Ein’s pride with every stroke. Despite that, the prince had survived the encounter with his spirit intact. Holding on to his sense of perseverance, Ein strongly believed that he could go toe to toe with Jayle one day. Surely, he’d catch up to the first king in the years to come. *I should train myself more.*

Ein grasped his sword and assumed a fighting stance—the light of the moon reflecting off the blade. As beads of sweat started rolling down his body, one could notice the prince dripping in sweat with every move he made. He completely forgot about the time, mindlessly cutting through the air with his sword. The crown prince only stopped when he was satisfied with his swings. As he was catching his breath, he heard Krone’s voice pipe up from behind.

“You worked hard,” she said.

She was also dressed casually with a stole around her shoulders, protecting her from the cold. She handed Ein a towel and flashed a bewitching smile.

“It seems that my eyes can no longer keep up with your training sessions,” she said, her tone happy yet a touch disheartened.

“I’m glad that it appears that I’ve gotten stronger,” Ein replied. “And since when were you watching me?”

“Since shortly after you started training.”

“You could’ve called out to me.”

But Ein knew that Krone would do no such thing. She even tried to obscure her presence so as not to get in his way, and it sounded like she enjoyed watching him train on the sands. Perhaps Ein was to blame for not noticing her to begin with.

“All right,” Ein said, wiping the sweat off his brow as he walked over to a boulder on the beach.

The two said not a word as they sat together and gazed at the sea.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Ein started. “Did you ever meet Shannon while you were in Heim?”

“I made her acquaintance at a few parties,” Krone replied. “People were always gossiping over her due to that Blessing skill of hers, and people often compared the two of us.”

“Huh? Why?”

“She’s beautiful, bright, and was born with a rare, useful skill. Naturally, many nobles desired her hand in marriage. And, well...I received more than a few proposals when I was in Heim, hence the comparison.”

“Ah, sorry. I see now.”

It was crass of him to have her awkwardly state the reason. He stared at Krone’s profile; the silence was deafening.

“Wh-What?” she asked.

Ein said not a word and maintained his silence. *Even if Shannon truly is a red fox, it's odd that I still believe Krone to far outclass her.* Indeed, Shannon must've acted like a young lady, fitting for her age. But Krone's actions as a little lady left way more of a lasting impression on Ein—they felt more natural. He might've come to the realization far too late, but honestly, the prince could only admire his beloved.

"If you keep silently staring at me like that, even I'll blush..." Krone admitted. Her eyes grew damp and her cheeks turned pink, but she didn't look away. As she pouted, Krone furrowed her brows ever so slightly and looked up at him.

"I was just lost in my thoughts," Ein replied.

"While looking at me?"

"Yep."

"That was a quick response. And what were you thinking about?"

"That's a secret, I guess."

They continued to banter, and Krone opened her mouth to refute his remark.

"Do you think that answer will— *Ahchoo!*" Krone rarely sneezed in front of Ein.

"We should head back inside soon, huh?" Ein said, standing up.

"But your secret—"

"Your hand. Come on."

"Urgh..."

She took his hand and smiled once she felt his warmth. He was half a step ahead of her.

"You're so sly," she murmured with dissatisfaction.

"How so?" Ein asked.

"Nothing."

Krone wasn't too vexed about Ein keeping a secret to himself. However, she found herself to be a simple girl, as the touch of his hand melted her complaints



away. She couldn't bring herself to put her honest thoughts into words. The crown prince looked confused, unsure of what to say.

"Hee hee," she giggled.

With a satisfied smile, she leaned into his arms.

"Yeah, you're so sly," she whispered.

## Chapter Four: Despite It All, Daily Life Continues

In the early hours of the morning, the roars of Ein and numerous members of the Knights Guard could be heard echoing through the training grounds. As of late, the large, central arena had been filled with a constant and usual amount of tension. A rudimentary training session was in progress—one in which the knights would square off with Ein until they took a hit and were forced to leave the arena. This would go on until the prince had worked his way through all the knights.

“Gah... Thank you very much!” a knight said. In mere seconds, they’d been hit and forced to leave the arena.

“All right, who’s next?” Ein shouted.

Lloyd stood a good distance away, watching on as the prince kept putting down knights with increasing levels of gusto. “Sir Ein seems to be fighting with a renewed determination. He feels different, somehow.”

“I agree. It certainly seems to be the case,” Warren replied.

“The other knights have seemed to be affected by Sir Ein’s newfound energy. They’ve all changed and are now eagerly aiming for greater heights. I should be happy to see this transformation, but I still can’t shake my suspicions that something is wrong.”

“It’s been almost two months since the Euro debacle. I don’t blame you.”

“But Sir Warren, if what you said earlier is true, it’s only a matter of time before Bardland’s defensive line is pierced.”

“I believe so, yes.” Warren paused before continuing meaningfully, “Those two nations have been at a standstill for quite some time, but it seems as if Heim has finally finished their preparations. I’m not exactly aware of the details yet, but Bardland is already on the back foot now. Depending on what Heim reveals, the worst-case scenario may see the war reaching Bardland’s outer walls within mere days.”

“Shouldn’t we send troops and offer aid? Heim is already suspected of colluding with the red foxes. While only a few are aware of the foxes’ existence, we should prevent the continent’s residents from falling into the kingdom’s clutches.” Lloyd was frank with his words. “We should come up with some sort of excuse that allows us to dispatch the troops. We can say that the attack on Euro was a result of Heim running wild, or that their knights have been lurking about our nation and causing trouble.”

“Should we choose the latter option, we should spin a story that implies their knights broke a condition of the agreement put in place following our last meeting.”

An Ishtarican to the core, Lloyd admired the first king with all of his heart...and yet, the marshal’s suggestion went against that man’s very words. The red foxes had pushed Lloyd to such lengths.

“We cannot allow those who deceived Demon Lord Arshay to remain free for much longer,” Lloyd declared.

What if the foxes decided to bare their fangs before Ishtarica once again, just as they had centuries ago? This was something to be overly cautious of, and as a marshal, it was a part of Lloyd’s job to be wary.

“If we approach the port city of Roundheart from behind, we’d be able to destroy them with one blast,” Lloyd said. A single blow from a warship’s main cannon would certainly sink the flourishing city.

Warren shook his head. “The chance of a ground war is our real issue. With those chimeras around, even our forces may struggle against the kingdom’s troops. As the enemy is numerous and swift, it would be natural for us to employ magical tool-based weapons. While I haven’t heard of any additional chimera appearances since the attack on Euro, the foxes could certainly have a few more waiting in the wings as they wait for the perfect chance to strike.”

“Indeed... You’re right.”

“But I shall admit that I have considered invading Roundheart. They’d have to defend their rear while attacking in the front, wouldn’t they?”

“We could indeed force Heim’s forces to retreat and protect their city. Then

we ask for Bardland's and Rockdam's cooperation in the execution of a pincer maneuver to trap Heim between us."

If Lloyd had been one of Heim's soldiers, this was a scenario that he would want to avoid at any cost. Unfortunately, it was no small task to make this plan a reality.

"The issue isn't the ground war I mentioned earlier," Warren said as he gazed at the royal still fighting in the arena. "I want our preparations to be perfect."

"But Sir Warren, with our forces..." Lloyd started.

"Indeed. We could easily bring Heim to its knees."

"Exactly!"

"But I'm worried about what comes after that. Say we leveled Heim and vanquished the red foxes; the tragedy that follows would do us no good."

"Sir Warren?"

Why was the wise chancellor being so cautious? Lloyd didn't have a clue, but he didn't feel compelled to pry any deeper either. He had the utmost trust and respect for Warren; not once had the marshal ever doubted the chancellor.

"Ah, pardon me," Warren said. "I have a meeting with His Majesty."

"Hmm? Very well! I shall return to training as well. As you can see, I've got to hammer these knights into shape!"

"Ha ha ha ha! Why don't you cut them some slack? Surely, you cannot blame their defeat at the hands of Sir Ein's current vigor."

"I sympathize with them, but as knights, we mustn't always be on the losing side."

With that, Warren left the training grounds. He narrowed his eyes as the bright sunlight shone into his face. Warren smiled as he thought about Ein, the boy toiling away at his training in the arena.

"I must protect him," the chancellor muttered. Several scenarios flashed across his mind, and the chancellor was determined to avoid the worst one. "History cannot be repeated."

With his determination renewed, Warren firmly nodded and vowed to see his duties through to the end.

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Given the perilous times around him, Ein wasn't exactly sure if he should be at the academy. The attack on Euro alongside Heim's erratic movements on the warpath was concerning, but Ishtarica was on the other side of the ocean. For most citizens, business went on as usual without even the slightest ripples to be felt from these incidents. By all accounts, it was an average day.

The crown prince knew this, but he still couldn't help but feel awkward attending school. As December rolled around, the air grew much colder and snow started pouring on Kingsland. Ein nearly froze on his way to the academy, but he was no longer bothered by the cold once he stepped inside. The classrooms were so toasty that he could feel a wave of drowsiness wash over him.

"I'm sleepy..." Ein mumbled.

As he walked to his seat, Ein remembered that it'd been a while since he'd been at school, let alone homeroom.

"You're looking tired, Ein," Loran observed.

"The classroom's so warm. I'm trying to fight the urge to doze off," Ein replied.

"Look at you, all lazy so early in the morning," Butz scolded.

"His Highness must be busy," Leonardo replied.

"Speaking of, I heard that Duke Pholus arrived at the castle and brought a few days' worth of clothes along with him," Ein said.

"Ah, he has some work to finish with the chancellor. He thought it was far more efficient to stay at the castle for a few nights instead of returning home."

"Sorry to wear you guys down."

"Oh, it's nothing compared to how exhausted Your Highness and His Majesty must be feeling."

Butz found an opportunity to chime in. “I’ll be going to the castle soon myself.”

“Ah, the knights’ exam,” Leonardo said. “I’ve already finished the officers’ exam.”

“That was quick. You passed, didn’t you?”

“Yep.”

“Hah, you say it so easily. You make it sound like it’s no big deal.”

“A pass is a pass. Besides, you’ll be fine, Butz. I’m not an expert in your field, but you meet the standards for nobles, don’t you?”

“Doesn’t mean that I’ve passed yet. Standards don’t really matter. I’m actually pretty nervous, you know.”

“Good response. I’m glad to see that you aren’t too arrogant about yourself.”

Everyone would be graduating in the spring, and it’d be time for them to spread their wings and fly towards their futures. Ein would no longer be able to see his friends as often as he used to. Given his status as a member of the royal family, it wasn’t hard to imagine that the prince’s workload would increase exponentially. Only Loran remained quiet.



“So, what’re you gonna do?” Butz asked the werewolf.

“Huh? I’ve already got my post,” Loran replied.

“Wh-What?! That’s *quick!*”

“Someone recruited me. I’m very grateful for that. I can’t give you any details, so I hope that you’ll be able to draw your own conclusions from there.”

“Hired by the government, huh?”

Butz nodded, but Ein knew precisely what Loran was being hired for.

“I’m counting on you,” the crown prince said. He could only cheer the pup on as he refused to elaborate further on his new job.

Loran smiled, his ears perking up and his whiskers swishing about. It was no small task to be chosen to join the team behind the construction of *Leviathan*, the Sea Dragon vessel, but Ein truly believed that his friend would be just fine.

“Guess you’re all here,” Luke said as he opened the door and stepped into the classroom.

The man had been in charge of the Firsts in Ein’s class. As he’d managed to maintain his First status for almost six years now, the crown prince knew his teacher quite well.

“I’m here to discuss finals with you all,” Luke said, turning to write on the chalkboard. “As you might know, we at the Royal Kingsland Academy judge your efforts throughout the year with a test in December. For the sixth-years, this will be an exam for graduation. Since the founding of this academy, we have never had anyone fail their graduation exam. Naturally, I expect the same of you lot too. I’m certain that you sixth-years will make me proud.”

Luke didn’t mention that he had extremely high expectations for the Firsts; it was already implied. The pressure was overwhelming.

“The finals will be the same as you are used to,” he continued. “You will take two exams. One will be for your general education, and the other for your major or your field of expertise. We’ll calculate the grades from those two and determine a ranking among the sixth-years from there.”



For example, Ein and Butz would take a general education exam in addition to a swordsmanship exam.

“There are only about ten days left until the exam, but I hope you will all do your best and not slack off with the time you have left.” Luke paused. “I’m sure that you’re all also quite aware of the situation across the sea. However, we must march forward with our own lives. I understand that some of you may be anxious, but doing your best now and facing what stands immediately in front of you will lead to a brighter future. I believe that with all of my heart, and hope that you will face your exams without fear.”

These words might’ve sounded a touch cold, but a glimmer of kindness twinkled in Luke’s eyes. “Now, then, I shall hand out some of the details regarding finals. If you have any questions, feel free to speak with me at any time.”

After he finished passing out his stack of papers, Luke adjusted his glasses and left the room.

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Ein made his way to the teacher’s lounge that resided within the academy’s training grounds.

“Your exam will be first thing in the morning, Ein,” Kaizer said.

“Why me...” Ein groaned.

“Because I’ll be your opponent for this exam, of course.”

“Huh? So we’ll be all fighting you for our finals, Instructor Kaizer?”

“Nah, it’s just you. Remember the summoning platform that’s used for sparring against holograms of monsters? We’ll have the other students duke it out with the holograms, then bring in the swordsmanship sixth-years in to fight each other.”

“Ah, right. You need to rank the students.”

“Exactly. Do you want to participate too?”

“I...”

“You won’t, and you don’t want to participate either, right?”

Ein remained silent.

“You don’t have to tell me why,” Kaizer assured him. “You’ve been referred to as a hero, the Sea Dragon slayer, and the royal savior of Barth and Magna. I totally understand why you’d prefer not to participate, and I’m sure you’re afraid of affecting your peers as well. Obviously, they don’t need to worry about those sorts of things in their exams, but I’m sure they won’t be able to help it, and that’s hardly their fault. However, you still need a reason if you don’t wish to participate.”

And so, the idea was to finish only Ein’s exam first thing in the morning. The crown prince was very grateful for this kind suggestion, and he bowed deeply while sharing a word of thanks.

“You’ll be helping me out while other students take their exams,” Kaizer said. “I’m actually completely exhausted when the end of the year rolls around. I have to look after all of my students, from the first-years to sixth-years. Naturally, I never have time to relax. Seems like I’ll be able to take it easy this year thanks to you.” The instructor paused before he added, “By the way, the end of the year means that your birthday’s coming up.”

“Thanks to you and everyone else, I’ve lived to see another year,” Ein replied.

“I mean, I didn’t do anything, but yeah... It’s still an occasion to celebrate. You’ll probably be throwing another party at the castle, right?”

“I believe so. Only those in the castle will gather, or so I’m told.”

As the crown prince glanced at the calendar by Kaizer’s desk, he thought about the date of his morning exam.

“Looks like the party will be on the same day as the finals,” Ein remarked.

“Perfect. Then go all out and don’t hold back,” Kaizer replied.

The prince checked his watch. “Thank you for your considerate suggestion. I should take my leave.”

He gave another bow and stepped away from Kaizer.

“I’ll fill Luke in on the details of our chat!” the instructor called out. “Be

careful on your way home!”

As Ein stepped outside, he noticed many of his peers milling about—students of all ages and classes were preparing for their exams. He soon heard passionate cries and the clanging of swords in the distance.

“Butz...” Ein said, noticing his friend hard at work in the training grounds.

The crown prince was tempted to call out to his buddy, but he stopped himself upon hearing Butz’s loud, determination-filled roars. There was no need for Ein to disturb another’s training, especially after Butz had mentioned his nerves around the knights’ exam just this morning. Ein didn’t want to break his friend’s concentration; he could see the sweat pouring down Butz’s brow, huffing and puffing as he desperately fought to become stronger. Resolving himself to cheer on his friend from the shadows, the crown prince left the training grounds.

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Just outside the academy’s gates, Chris and Krone waited for Ein to arrive. The pair stood out like sore thumbs among the crowd, as though a spotlight had been cast on them. The falling fleck of snow ended up decorating the pair’s winter coats in superb fashion as well. Krone noticed a few puffs of white exit her mouth as she breathed in the frigid air.

“Welcome back,” she said.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Ein replied. “It’s rare to see you here, Krone.”

“I was working in the academy district today, so I decided to tag along as I wanted to walk home with you.”

The three walked down the street, their footsteps light and quick due to the cold air. Every breath they took was expelled with a white puff, and the two ladies’ cheeks were rosy thanks to the weather.

“It’s winter, huh?” Ein remarked.

“What’s wrong?” Krone asked.

“I can see your breath and everyone’s wearing coats... It kind of reminds me of our trip to Barth.”

She giggled. "Barth was freezing, wasn't it?"

Chris butted in, sounding a touch lonely. "I'm sad to say that I have no warm memories from that journey to reminisce with you about."

"I-I'm sorry..." Ein replied.

"When I heard that you defeated the Upaskamuy, I was relieved, then overjoyed, then worried because I knew that you'd pushed yourself to your limits again."

"Look! We're already at the station!" the crown prince pointed out, quickly walking ahead towards the station.

"You're switching topics!"

"I had no control over that situation! Besides, Lloyd gave me his permission back then!"

"But, but, but! I was still really, *really* worried!"

Needless to say, Ein did feel bad for making his knight worry so much. However, he wasn't keen on addressing the topic further and made a beeline for the station. When he made it to the platform, he was relieved that Chris had decided to drop the subject.

It was water train rush hour, and many exhausted Ishtaricans looked to hop the train so they could avoid a cold trek home. The creaking of the rails and murmuring of the crowd reached Ein's ears, but the sound of trains cutting through the wind or hitting the brakes would echo throughout the railcar every so often.

"Please excuse me," Chris said just before the train was set to pull into White Rose Station.

"What's wrong?" Ein asked.

"I just want to check the schedule... I'll be right beside you, so rest assured!"

She'd be right beside the railcar's coupling, and the trio had conveniently been close by. Chris opened the door and exited their railcar just as Ein felt a pair of eyes looking up at him. He gazed down at Krone, who stood by the wall and was staring up at the prince.

“Have you grown even taller?” she asked.

“Have I?” Ein inquired.

“Yeah, I think so. Your face used to be a lot closer to mine.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

But this growth spurt wasn’t a drastic one, as it must’ve been quite slight. Ein didn’t feel like he was that much taller.

“When you’re larger, it must be easier to reach the railcar’s handles,” Krone noted.

“It’s pretty inconvenient to suddenly grow taller though,” Ein replied, thinking back to his initial growth spurt. “I had to replace all my clothes, my furniture, and my bed.”

Just as Krone had said, it was indeed easier for him to grab the handles, but the difficulty he had adjusting to his newfound height remained a far more vivid memory in his mind. While glancing out the window, Ein happened to spot the Agustos Trading Firm building as it passed by.

“How’s Elena doing?” he asked.

“I’ve been enjoying meals with her and my grandfather. We’ve been talking quite a bit,” Krone replied.

“I’m glad to hear that, but...” He trailed off, knowing that he couldn’t breathe easy just yet—Krone’s father and younger brother still remained in Heim.

“Don’t worry,” Krone said. She must’ve noticed Ein’s thoughts. “My father and brother are fine. There hasn’t been a single assassination since the troops were mobilized, and I’ve even received a letter from my father.”

“I-I’m surprised that the letter made it here at all given everything that’s going on.”

“Hee hee. The other day, I had Lily meet with my father in Roundheart.”

It was risky to arrange a meeting within Heim’s royal capital. If they were in Roundheart, the Ishtarican could flee at the very moments things went awry.

“My father and brother have decided to remain in Heim,” Krone said.

“It’s dangerous there,” Ein replied. “Why do they want to stay?”

“They don’t want to constantly be in Ishtarica’s debt. And they want to do whatever they can in Heim. That’s what they told Lily.”

“They don’t have to worry about being in our debt.”

“My father must have some pride as a member of House August and Heim’s grand duke.” Krone’s younger brother had also agreed with his father’s wishes. “I’ve actually received a letter for you and His Majesty as well. Sir Warren had stated that he wanted to confirm the contents, so he took it away. I’m sure he’ll call for you tonight, Ein.”

The crown prince’s further opinions could wait until he read that letter. It would’ve been gauche to say anything about Harley’s courage, and if he had any lingering thoughts afterwards, Ein could say them then.

The crown prince sighed, his nerves easing. He realized that the back of his neck was lightly coated in sweat. It was warm to be stuck in a crowd, and his worries over Krone’s family had caused his heart to start racing.

“What a pity,” Krone remarked. “We’ve already arrived.”

“A pity? Why’s that?” Ein asked.

“Because I could almost hear your heartbeat.”

She looked up and cracked a joking smile. But just then, the railcar came to an abrupt stop—right as the train was about to pull into White Rose Station.

“Eek!” Krone cried.

“Whoa. Are you all right?” Ein said.

She leaned forward and lost her footing, falling into Ein’s chest. Should she honestly thank him or tell him that she could actually hear his heartbeat? Krone struggled to make up her mind, but she smiled upon remembering her prior conversation with him.

“I suppose this is thanks to your growth spurt,” she said.

It wasn’t all bad; she’d said as much. However, Krone started to blush, embarrassed by what she’d just said. She locked eyes with the prince as he

gazed down at her leaning against him.

“Surprisingly, it comes in handy sometimes,” Ein said. “It isn’t all bad, I guess.”

“Not bad at all,” Krone replied.

But they couldn’t remain like this forever. Krone was reluctant to step away, but she wanted to put some distance between them so she could hide her embarrassment. She noticed him quickly avert his gaze, and she was happy to see that he felt equally nervous. As the two were lost in their own world, their peace was suddenly shattered by a muffled gasp of pain.

“U-Ugh... Ouch...” Chris said.

Tears had formed in the corners of the knight’s eyes as she rubbed her aching forehead—she’d bumped her head on the door between railcars.

“I should”—Ein turned to his knight as he realized that they’d be arriving at White Rose Station shortly—“check and see if Chris is okay.”

Krone let out a strained chuckle and nodded before they reached for the door to meet up with the clumsy elf.

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Ein felt relieved to hear that the train’s abrupt stop wasn’t the result of a major accident. However, Chris found herself contending with some majorly unfortunate news once they made it back to the castle. Just as the trio entered the grand halls of White Night Castle, Martha arrived to greet them.

“I’m terribly sorry, Dame Chris,” the maid apologized. “Your personal bath is currently being repaired. I apologize for the inconvenience, but could you perhaps use another bath today?”

“It’s been so chilly out, so I was thinking of taking a bath once we returned... But I suppose it can’t be helped...” Chris replied.

“Huh? Don’t you have to get back to work, Chris?” Ein asked.

“I—”

“Sir Ein, Dame Chris is off duty today,” Martha interjected. “She wanted to personally escort you home today, so she asked Dill to switch places for an hour

or two.”

Chris’s cheeks turned red in an instant. “Why’d you tell him?!”

“There’s no need to hide this from Sir Ein, is there?”

The elf buried her face in her hands. Indeed, there was no need to keep her intentions a secret, but that didn’t make it any less embarrassing to have it said out loud.

“Dame Chris, how should we handle your bathing conundrum?” Martha asked.

“R-Right!” the elf quickly replied. “I’d prefer to use either the servants’ or knights’ baths!”

Just as the elf was about to leave and fetch a change of clothing, a lovely voice called out from behind the group.

“Welcome back, Ein,” Olivia said, descending from a nearby staircase and approaching her son. She looked as lovely as ever. “Oh dear. Why does Chris look so glum?”

“My bath apparently broke down...” Chris replied. “So, I was thinking of borrowing someone else’s for now.”

“Then why don’t we bathe together? It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Together? L-Lady Olivia!”

“Come, now. Hurry.”

Olivia and Chris shuffled away so quickly, one could swear that the knight had been practically dragged away by her princess. Those left to mill about the hall decided to wrap up their conversation as well.

“I’ll see you later, Ein,” Krone said. “I’ll be off working.”

“Roger that,” Ein replied. “Feel free to let me know if you need anything.”

“I won’t do that. Today’s your day off, isn’t it? You should take it easy and rest.”

With that, Krone turned around and left. The crown prince decided to obey his beloved’s wishes and indulge in this scant bit of time to himself.



“Ah,” Martha suddenly said. “I’ve placed a letter from Sir Warren on your desk. It would be much appreciated if you read through it when you have a moment to spare.”

“Letter?” Ein asked. “Ah, right! Of course!”

He was confused at first, but immediately remembered what Krone had told him. He was sure that it was a letter from Harley.

“I’ll go and read it right away!” Ein said.

He quickly headed for his room on the upper floors of the castle. Ein made sure to greet every knight, butler, and servant he bumped into on the way as his unusually swift strides allowed him to climb the staircase in seconds.

“There it is,” Ein said once he reached his room and glanced at his desk.

As he’d been told, a single envelope lay on the tabletop. He threw his uniform jacket on the sofa, placed his bag on the table, and took a seat at his desk. Ein proceeded to remove a single sheet of parchment from within the envelope. On first glance, the neat penmanship used to draft this letter appeared to be rather similar to Krone’s own handwriting.

*I apologize for greeting you in this fashion*, the letter started. The grand duke’s correspondence dove into a bevy of topics from there, beginning with a long list of apologies: for Ein’s mistreatment at the hands of House Roundheart, the insolence shown at what was supposed to be the young man’s debut, and for the trouble caused by his father and daughter. Harley followed up these apologies with words of gratitude, being especially pleased to know his wife was living well in Magna. Before signing off, the grand duke stated the reason behind his refusal to leave Heim.

Harley was a valiant man, without question. However, he refused to indebted himself to another, and decided to remain in Heim to find his own solutions. The final line of his letter implored Ein to ensure the safety of his wife and the third prince.

“‘When things calm down, I promise to pay you back for all the trouble...’” Ein read. “He doesn’t have to worry about any of that.”

Once the prince finished reading the letter, he put it back into the envelope.

Right on cue, there was a knock on his door.

“Pardon me, Sir Ein. May I come in?” Lloyd requested.

“Come in!” Ein called.

“Excuse me. Hmm? Ah, you’ve read the Grand Duke’s letter, I see.”

“Oh, this?”

Lloyd glanced at the letter that Ein had just slid back into its envelope.

“I think he’s quite the man,” Ein said. “Maybe it’s a cheeky remark on my part since I’m way younger than him...”

“Ha ha ha!” Lloyd laughed jovially. “But I understand what you mean. Sir Harley is a magnificent noble indeed.”

“Given that I was born into House Roundheart, I’m envious of him and his family.”

“Of course. But I assure you, the previous Count Roundheart was quite the man himself.”

“So I’ve been told. If memory serves...”

“Precisely. I believe you were told as much when you first arrived in Ishtarica.”

Before Olivia was married off to Rogas, a thorough investigation had been conducted by Ishtarican intelligence. Truthfully, she should’ve married into Heim’s royal family.

“Our investigation was to confirm Lady Olivia’s safety in a Heim marriage,” Lloyd divulged. “The previous lord of House Roundheart was of excellent character, and so, we chose his household. In addition to the secret agreement, Heim’s royal family had no suitors of an appropriate age at the time.”

And the rest was history. If the deal had been upheld, Ein would’ve become the next lord of House Roundheart and the house itself, a duchy.

“No need to dwell upon the past,” Ein said. “So, what brings you here? It’s unusual for you to stop by my room.”

“I was just notified of this news, Your Highness...” Lloyd started, his

expression shifting.

His face now stern, the marshal approached his prince while removing a folded map from his pocket.

“Please take a look at this,” he said. “This was Bardland’s defensive line.”

Heim was to the south, and in the center was Bardland. A red line was drawn by the merchants’ city, indicating the front lines of their grisly battle with the kingdom. An “X” had been drawn through this red line.

“And it was broken not long after the clock struck noon,” Lloyd informed.

“But I thought we had a bit more time when we talked this morning,” Ein said.

Bardland’s hired hands, the adventurers, took this news in one of two ways. Some retreated to the city while others joined forces with Heim.

“It’s only a matter of time before Bardland falls,” Lloyd grimly said. “Their city is surrounded by sturdy castle walls, but they lack the military might to fight against Heim. The merchants’ disadvantage is only increasing the kingdom’s power.”

“Is it because of the mysterious factor that we’ve been mentioning?” Ein asked.

“Unfortunately, our scouts couldn’t find anything. However, Heim’s morale is higher than ever. It’s odd though, many of their soldiers are bravely heading off to war as if they’ve been given an honorable suicide mission.”

“It’s only logical to assume that *something’s* brewing in that kingdom... Got it.”

“Personally, I believe we should smite the port city of Roundheart immediately.”

“So I’ve heard. And I know Warren is against it for now.”

No one doubted Warren’s tactical prowess, but it would’ve been appreciated if he were more transparent with his concerns. From the depths of his soul, Lloyd believed that Warren would never lose the initiative. However, the marshal would feel a touch more at ease if his colleague actually spoke his mind. Exasperated, Lloyd crossed his arms in front of him and sighed.

“That concludes my report,” he said.

“All right. Thank you,” Ein replied.

“If I receive any more information, I shall share it with you immediately. Please excuse me.”

The marshal bowed and left as quietly as he’d arrived. Once the crown prince was left alone, he stood up and walked to the window behind him. He opened it up and allowed the cold wind to blow through as he breathed puffs of white.

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Meanwhile, Chris found herself in the royals’ large baths. The place was so massive that a normal house could fit right in. Only the knight and her forceful princess were using the baths at that moment, but they couldn’t possibly fill up such a grand space by themselves. Of course, this wasn’t out of the ordinary for the Ishtarican royals.

“*Glub glub glub...*” Chris was seated in the corner of the bathtub, hugging her knees, half her face sunk into the water.

This couldn’t be seen as good bathing etiquette, but Olivia was Chris’s only company. The knight had known the second princess since her youth, and the two had often bathed together. It was easy for the elf to let her guard down.

“How is your forehead?” Olivia asked. She flashed a forced smile as she sat down nearby to wash herself.

The disgruntled Chris’s forehead was red, but it wasn’t because of what happened on the water train.

“Whatever are you talking about?” Chris asked.

“Oh, just that you were excited to use our large baths after so long...and that you let your guard down because I’m the only person around. You tripped and hit your forehead, didn’t you?”

“Why must you say everything in such detail?!”

“It’s your fault for playing dumb, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Urk... I don’t deny that...”

Chris gave up on offering a rebuttal and leaned over the edge of the tub, placing her head over her arms. Steam filled the bath as she gazed at Olivia, who was washing her hair. The princess was breathtaking, and there was no end in sight to the men that fell for her, but her body was covered by her beautiful long hair. Even Chris found herself stunned by Olivia's beauty. Olivia's naked body exuded elegance, and the elf started to feel embarrassed as she continued to stare at the princess.



“Is something the matter?” Olivia asked.

“I thought that you’re beautiful as always...” Chris murmured.

“Oh my, it’s an honor to hear it from someone such as yourself, Chris.”

Ein had once referred to Chris as “the goddess of the moon,” and indeed, her lovely appearance was befitting of that moniker. Her body already washed, Chris had gently tied her hair up, revealing her warm nape and her clear, blemish-free, porcelainlike skin. In fact, her skin reflected the light from the baths. Even when damp, her long eyelashes captivated onlookers with every blink.

“Lady Olivia...” Chris started.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“I wonder why the first king entrusted his blade to Sir Ein.”

“You’re free to ask as you like, but do you think I’d know the answer to that?”

“I’d thought that there might’ve been a secret within the royal family or something to that effect...”

“Even if there were, then I wouldn’t be able to tell you.”

“I-I know that!”

Chris must’ve been more relaxed than she’d thought. She gasped before she narrowed her eyes, comforted by the warm water.

“Hmm, but let’s see... Maybe I can tell you one thing,” Olivia said.

Olivia stood up and sank into Chris’s bathwater. She outstretched her leg and slipped into the warmth. With a relaxed sigh, the princess stretched out her body.

“Do you know something?” Chris asked.

“I do,” Olivia replied.

“Please tell me!” Chris perked up, hope bubbling up in her heart as Olivia sat beside her.

“That blade...”

“Yes?”

Olivia’s answer would only cause Chris to sigh. The princess chuckled and placed an index finger over her lips, revealing a peek at the mischievous side hidden under her beautiful exterior.

“Only Ein can use it,” the princess said.

Was that something that had to be spelled out? Chris looked stunned.

“Pardon?” the knight asked.

“That blade can only be used by Ein,” Olivia repeated.

“I know that! Sir Mouton had already told us so!”

“Hee hee.”

Olivia’s giggle implied she knew something, but the princess said nothing more. All she did was smile and sit beside the elf.

“Argh, fine!” Chris grumbled. She once again hugged her knees and sank her face into the water, bubbling away without paying any heed to manners.

“Oh dear, are you pouting?” Olivia asked.

She gazed at the adorably submerged elf before looking up at the ceiling. Steam was rising high above her as she heard the sounds of Chris blowing bubbles and the water that flowed beside her. It’d been a while since the two had taken a bath together. Even while drying their hair, the pair enjoyed their time in each other’s presence.



## Chapter Five: The Finals and the Light from the Window

Ten days later, Ein was taking a morning stroll around the courtyard when he spotted his grandmother, Lalalua, and her personal servant, Belia. The pair were sitting off by the terrace and enjoying a spot of tea. Upon noticing her grandson walking by, the queen immediately beckoned for him to join them. Ein took a seat across from her.

“A little walk before you head off to the academy, perhaps?” Lalalua asked. The dark elf looked as young as ever, and her beauty outshone the morning rays of the sun.

“Yeah,” Ein replied. “I had some time on my hands.”

“Then why not have a cup of tea with me?”

“I’d love to.”

“Nanny, would you please prepare Ein some tea?”

“Most certainly,” Belia said, preparing a cup for the crown prince immediately.

As always, the servant’s tea pouring skills were splendid. It looked as though she were employing a normal pouring technique, but the lovely aromas bouncing against the cup tickled Ein’s nose. He could feel his heart being soothed first thing in the morning.

“Here you are,” Belia said. “I do hope it suits your tastes, Your Highness.”

“Since it’s your tea, Belia, I’ll be sure to sip it with care,” Ein replied.

“My, oh my! I suppose my long life was worth it if I was graced with such a compliment from you, Your Highness.”

Belia emanated a calm aura as a gentle smile formed on her face. After she bowed and slowly walked away, she stood behind the queen.

“Today’s the day of your final exams, isn’t it?” Lalalua asked. “By the time you come home, we’ll be making the final preparations for your party. Everyone’s looking forward to your return, I’m sure.”

“I’m looking forward to it as well,” Ein replied. “I’ll do the best I can in my finals.” He took a sip of tea as praise tumbled out of his lips. “As usual, this tea is delicious! I remember Martha lamenting about how she couldn’t pour tea like you, Belia.”

“There’s a vast difference in experience,” Lalalua said. “Isn’t that right, Belia?”

“Indeed,” the maid replied. “When you’re as old as I am, you’ll start to learn the strength, type, and temperature of the tea that Queen Lalalua is looking for on any given day.”

She spoke calmly, but this kind of knowledge was anything but normal. She wasn’t lying or overstating her skills, and only told the truth. Ein had always known that the castle’s elderly hadn’t aged for naught. They all possessed great skill and wisdom that put them a head above those younger than them. Belia was no exception, not to forget Warren as well.

“Oh?” a familiar voice called out.

*Speak of the devil*, Ein thought. Warren happened to pass by the royals enjoying their tea.

“Queen Lalalua, Prince Ein, good day,” he said, approaching the duo. He bowed neatly in greeting and turned to the maid. “I’m terribly sorry, but may I please borrow Belia for a few moments?”

“How unusual. Is anything the matter?” Lalalua inquired.

“It’s about tonight’s party. The head chef would like Belia’s opinion, and I’d appreciate it if she followed me after your tea.”

“I see. Belia, you don’t have to mind me. You can go on.”

“Most certainly. Then I shall call for another servant in my stead.”

“No need. Ein needs to leave soon too, and I’ve decided to return to my room,” Lalalua said, standing up. “I’ll walk him to the castle gates, so I’ll see you later.”

With a gentle wave of the queen's hand, the maid and chancellor bowed their heads as she walked away. Ein walked alongside the queen without much thought.

"It's a bit unusual for Warren to talk with Belia, isn't it?" he remarked.

"I suppose so," Lalalua replied. "They're not on particularly bad terms, but it's not often that the two talk with each other so openly. Of course, it could be because Belia is always by my side."

Ein remembered what Martha had once told him. Many years ago, Warren and Belia were in a relationship. If that was true, surely their past and any lingering memories had remained in their minds as well.

"But it really is unusual for Warren to call for Belia in terms of food," Lalalua added.

"Huh, really?" Ein asked.

"Well, it's not really his job, is it? He could easily leave it to another civil officer. Ah, but perhaps he wants to personally be involved since it's your party, Ein."

"Huh... I know he's been busy recently, so I feel bad."

"Don't you worry about it. In fact, it's during these turbulent times that one needs to go all out and celebrate to receive the energy and strength they need."

She claimed that it was important to relax every now and then. As they walked past the morning fog-enveloped garden, the pair approached the corridor that led to the castle gates. *As always, Dill's quick.* Much like the glistening sword on his waist, the knight who solemnly stood by the gate was a handsome young man.

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Since the crown prince had been told that his exam would be held first thing in the morning, he rushed to the academy. The sun had just started to rise, and there weren't many people wandering around the Royal Kingsland Academy's campus. There were only a handful of students milling around aside from

Kaizer, who awaited Ein at the training grounds. The two had faced each other once many years ago, when Ein took his entrance exam. They stood at the exact same spot as that day.

“There’s actually another reason I wanted to do this first thing in the morning,” Kaizer said.

“Another reason?” Ein asked.

“I can tell you once we finish this exam. It’s a very negative and sad reason, but I don’t think it’ll do any good to keep it a secret from you, Ein.”

“You’re making me curious. Are you trying to confuse me before the exam?”

“Of course not! I’m just psychologically torn, that’s all!”

Suddenly, Kaizer stepped forward.

“You didn’t even signal that the match had started!” Ein cried, but he saw through the attack and easily dodged it.

“Come on! Here we go! Show me just how much you’ve grown over the years!”

“The match has already started, right?”

“Can’t you tell by looking? Sorry, but I’m not gonna fight you like I would a student. I’ll wield my sword like I did when I was an adventurer! Don’t let your guard down!”

As he’d stated, Kaizer broke out every trick in his arsenal. He used magical tools, tried to blind Ein, and even got a few kicks in. Indeed, this was no way to fight a student, but Kaizer planned to use his full power. However, Ein wasn’t willing to go down without a fight.

“Here I go!” Ein declared. All he could do was thank his instructor for taking him on as a serious opponent.

The crown prince firmly grasped his training sword, and the expression on his face transformed in an instant.

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It just was before rush hour at White Rose Station, but things at the Royal

Kingsland Academy were rowdier than usual. It was the school's precious exam day, and none of its students were taking a day off. There weren't many students at the academy, but those from nearby schools could sense the overwhelming aura that radiated off the institution.

The exams were well underway on the academy's training grounds. A mock battle against training dummies equipped with magical tools had just wrapped up.

"Um, Instructor Kaizer, why is your face so red?" Butz asked.

It was an innocuous question. For whatever reason, Kaizer's cheeks were red and swollen as he proctored the exam. He stood there with a look of frustration on his face.

"A lot of stuff happened," Kaizer replied.

Needless to say, Ein's exam had something to do with it, but he didn't want to delve into the details. Kaizer wasn't willing to admit that he'd lost, even against the crown prince. He'd called in Ein so early because he didn't want his other students to see him in such a wretched state. As Butz walked away, Ein approached him.

"Instructor Kaizer, I've finished writing the records," he said.

"All right, good work," Kaizer replied.

"Your cheeks still are red. Are you all right?"

"Showing pity to the loser, huh? No need to do that."

"Er, no, that's not really what I intended..."

"I'm kidding. Don't worry about it. Back when I was still an adventurer, I once ran away while carrying Majorica on my back...and I'd broken a bone too."

Kaizer had just described a situation beyond Ein's imagination. The prince was kind of curious to know what that must've looked like. This also meant that Kaizer was just fine.

"I was a bit pathetic, if I may say so myself," Kaizer said. "You tripped me, my head hit the ground, and I lost consciousness."

This wasn't about holding back. If he fell to the whims of his opponent, it signaled his defeat. Kaizer looked disappointed with his defeat, but it was almost refreshing to see this overwhelming difference in power. Without a doubt, Ein would receive full marks on his final exams.

"All right, next exam!" Kaizer called.

This would be a competition against students. They were separated by year, and each student would compete among their own grade. Other instructors would also be present to determine the outcome of the match, and Kaizer would round them all up to determine the final scores each student would receive. Students were scattered across the spacious training grounds, divided into separate matches as the exams began.

A few of the exams had already finished up when Kaizer's attention was caught by a particular student.

"He stands out..." the instructor murmured, gazing at Butz.

The boy's swordsmanship skills were a head above his peers; not once had he lost against his peers. In fact, he seemed to be easily besting his competitors. There was no doubt that he'd get full marks on this portion of the exam.

"If Dill Gracier was the sort of genius that could be seen only once every thirty years, then Butz's talent is the kind that can only be seen once a decade," Kaizer remarked.

"How unusual for you to shower others with praise," Ein observed.

"Hah! Even I believe in a little positive reinforcement from time to time!"

"Yes!" Butz's cry of victory echoed throughout the training ground.

Among all the students from years one through six, only Butz had won every one of his matches. As he clinched his final victory, he flashed a beaming smile. His body was trembling with elation as sweat dripped down his brow. The other students started to give him a round of applause and cheer at this amazing feat. Butz was shining brighter than anyone as he stood at the center of all the attention.

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The general education exam was held in the afternoon. After they were all done, Ein, Leonard, Butz, and Loran left the school and headed for the academy district. It was early in the evening, and they walked along the street, occasionally enjoying the food from the surrounding stalls. Dill was on guard duty nearby, but he made sure to keep his distance so as to not disturb their fun.

“Your Highness, are you sure about this?” Leonardo asked worriedly.

“Yep. Totally fine. I like stuff like this,” Ein asked.

Leonardo was unsure if the crown prince was actually allowed to stroll down the street while sampling the local street food—this seemed unbefitting of a royal. In addition, this little outing was meant to celebrate Ein’s birthday as well. This was initially suggested by Loran, who wanted to offer the crown prince his well wishes. Unfortunately, the cafeteria was crowded, and there weren’t any other places to share a light meal and host a small celebration. Butz had then suggested making the rounds to the academy district’s food stalls.

“This is delicious,” Ein said, paying no heed to his friend’s worries. “I think I’ll go get seconds.”

While the prince was off getting another skewer, Butz reassured Leonardo, “Don’t worry about it. Ein says he’s fine with it, so it’s fine.”

“I suppose so...” Leonardo replied with a sigh. “Am I worrying a bit too much about these matters?”

Dill was nearby, and perhaps it was best to enjoy this moment to its fullest. Leonardo wearily averted his gaze and turned to a store just beside him. A carriage had been stationed right in front, and a well-dressed man stepped inside. Assuming that this man must’ve been the store’s owner, Leonardo continued to wait for the crown prince’s return.

“Hey, Butz,” Loran suddenly said, wagging his tail joyfully.

“Hmm? What’s up?” Butz asked.

“I heard you’re the only one who won all his matches.”

“Oh, for the swordsmanship exam? Yeah, obviously. I mean, Ein wasn’t

there.”

“Giving up before the match?” Leonardo asked. “That’s not really like you.”

“He’s in a league of his own. As a guy who’s decent with his sword, I can tell when I’ve got no chance of winning just by standing next to someone.”

“Is that how it is?”

“I’ve got no chance against him. Ah, speak of the devil. He’s back.”

“Hmm? Did you mention my name?” Ein asked. His cheeks were stuffed with delicious meat.

“Just talking about the exam,” Butz said. “Hey, we said we’ll treat you today! Stop buying your own food! What’s the point of a birthday if you pay for everything yourself?!”

“You bought the first skewer, so don’t mention it.”

“Well, if you say so... You’ve got a hearty appetite, though. You sure you can eat that much before the party?”

“Yep. Totally fine. I’m always hungry these days, so I’ve been eating magic st — I mean, a lot of snacks.”

Ein just managed to stop himself in time. He couldn’t mention that he was eating magic stones. He’d been aware of his hunger before he visited Syth Mill, but he’d been constantly famished as of late. The crown prince’s friends had just been discussing his might, but the crown prince in question was so lax, that it led the trio to slump their shoulders. They exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

“Looks like you’re getting ready to hibernate or something,” Butz remarked.

“Well, once we graduate, we won’t be able to freely wander around like this,” Ein replied.

“Yeah.”

“Then I want to enjoy this moment while I can. I’m happy that we’re all together, and I want to have as much fun as possible.”

“Oh yeah!” Loran suddenly said, his ears perking up. “I *do* have a present



that'll be ready for you in the near future, Ein."

"That was sudden," Ein remarked.

"Ah ha ha! It's *really* big, so you can get your hopes up!" Loran gave a cheery laugh, hinting at the sheer size of the gift. "I'm hoping...that I can get it to you by next year, but we'll see."

Unlike the completely baffled Butz and Leonardo, Ein had an inkling as to what Loran was referring to. Having made a secret visit to the shipyard in the past, the crown prince knew that construction was well underway on a new royal warship—the Sea Dragon vessel, *Leviathan*.

"I'll be looking forward to it," Ein said. The prince's words were sincere, as he prayed that he could board the vessel soon.

Suddenly, a loud clatter echoed throughout the district. The doors of the store that Leonardo had just glanced at slammed open, and a trio of men rushed towards Ein and his friends.

"Hurry!"

"Right!"

The men looked to be adventurers, and they were carrying a leather bag filled with goods. They were clearly burglars, but it was a touch curious that this trio was callously robbing a store in broad daylight.

"I think I saw the store's owner earlier," Leonardo said. "Perhaps those thugs were waiting for the store to open up their safe."

*Ah, no wonder*, Ein thought.

Dill quickly approached the group. "Please stand back. The knights are headed this way."

This academy district was teeming with knights on patrol, and many could respond at a moment's notice. However...

"You idiots!" one of the men said. The trio was already prepared to start fighting. "You think we came here without a plan?!"

One unsheathed his sword while the other took out his staff. The last man

revealed a bottle filled with glowing green liquid.

“Take this, you damn mutts!” the man roared.

He threw the bottle on the stone pavement, causing the liquid to splatter everywhere. A glowing cloud of smoke billowed in the air, causing everyone to falter. Those who inhaled this smoke started to cough and stagger to the ground—the smoke was either poison or some sort of magical tool that mimicked tear gas. The knights faltered for only a moment, but the thugs picked up the pace.

“Sir Ein, I shall handle this,” Dill said.

The charging men were around ten meters away. The knight drew his sword, but Ein stepped forward.

“Nah, I’m fine,” the crown prince said.

Truthfully, he was most displeased. He wasn’t keen on seeing a robbery unfold before his eyes, but he was more upset that this precious outing with his friends had been interrupted. Before the smoke reached them, the thugs found the prince and his knight right in front of their noses. Dill, who was silenced by a powerful glare from Ein, could say nothing more.

“In the name of the crown prince, I shall restrain you all,” Ein declared.

Many innocent bystanders had already been harmed, so there was no need for the prince to provide his foes with any further warning. As the men rushed past Ein, their vision wavered for a split second. When they came to, they were lying on the ground, absolutely dazed and confused. The leather bag hit the pavement and a hefty number of gold coins came tumbling out.

“Gh... Gah...” one of the men grunted.

“What just...”

“Agh?!”

“Dill, order the knights,” Ein commanded.

“Yes, Your Highness!” the knight immediately replied.

Ein didn’t spare the men another glance as he walked towards the smoke. He

raised his hand, purifying the fumes that tormented the bystanders. Those who noticed the crown prince in action proceeded to shower him with praise and affection.

“See?” Butz said with a hint of resignation in his voice. “I don’t even know when he drew his sword. How could I possibly stand a chance against a guy like that?”

“I see... It’s no wonder that you’d give up,” Leonardo replied.

Butz thought back to Instructor Kaizer back at the academy. His face was red and swollen, and he’d stated that Ein’s exam had already ended.

“I get it now...” the boy muttered. He nodded, finding the instructor’s words back then to be quite convenient. It allowed Kaizer to avoid giving a further explanation.

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As the veil of night fell upon Kingsland, Silverd expressed his joy to all who stood within his castle’s party hall.

“As of today, my grandson has finally turned thirteen,” the king said jovially. “I’ve been eagerly awaiting this day.”

He raised his glass for a toast, commanding the attention of the venue. The king had been making merry the entire evening, but he suddenly furrowed his brows and tilted his head to the side. His beaming smile had been replaced with a droll expression.

“And on such an important day, I heard that a certain someone stood out as he took down a trio of bandits that robbed a store in the academy district,” Silverd said. “Ein, does any of this ring a bell?”

“Not at all,” the crown prince replied.

“Is that so... I heard that people saw someone who bore a striking resemblance to you.”

“I might’ve been a bit reckless, but I don’t think I was all that noticeable.”

“Now you’re just splitting hairs!”

Everyone in the party venue burst out laughing. Silverd had no intention of scolding his grandson. In truth, he should've said a word or two about Ein's recklessness, but the situation called for it, and the boy was unharmed. Compared to the crown prince's past actions, this incident was quaint and not much reason for alarm.

"In any case, the crown prince had apparently brandished his sword right before his own birthday party, but I ask that you all enjoy yourselves today," Silverd continued. "There's no need to hold back, and let us celebrate the birth of your mischievous crown prince."

Every single guest raised their glasses and cheered in celebration of the prince's birthday. A massive chandelier hung over the glimmering hall, and the tables were lined with a whole buffet of luxurious dishes that tended to whet one's appetite. The lavish party was a reflection of Ishtarica's flourishing growth, and Ein happily basked in the blessings that he'd received over the years.

"Thank you!" he said, raising his glass in gratitude.

Delectable dishes were carried directly to Ein's seat; he was the focus of tonight's party after all. All of his favorites were lined up, with many of the entrées originating from Magna—one of Ein's favorite food destinations.

"I wish I had a birthday every month..." Ein muttered to himself.

"You've got to be pulling my tail," Katima replied.

"Oh, Ein..." Krone murmured.

"I guess I should give my gift to a crown prince who mutters odd words. Here's a present from me-ow."

"Happy birthday, Ein," Krone added.

Each lady provided him with a neatly wrapped box that was roughly the size of his palm.



“Can I open it?” Ein asked.

“Of course,” Krone replied.

“Mew can open mine too,” Katima said.

“Thanks! I wonder what they are...” the crown prince said as he opened up Krone’s present first.

Inside was a lovely pen. It could be a splendid accessory if worn on his chest pocket, not to mention that it was of high quality.

“I’d love it if you could use it in your work,” Krone said.

“I’m already in love with it,” Ein replied. “I’ll start using it right away.”

“Hee hee. I’m glad to hear it.”

Ein moved on to the next gift as he turned to his aunt. “There isn’t a bomb in here or anything like that, right?”

“Don’t be a fool!” Katima replied. “Father would be hiss-terical if I gave you anything like that. I’d probably keep my eye open for a different opportunity to give mew anything like that.”

“Or you could just give me a gift that isn’t dangerous...”

“Enough with your hissing! Come on, open it!”

Ein was wary, but he was indeed curious to know what was in the box. He gingerly unwrapped it and peered inside.

“A...pen stand?” he asked.

He observed that the stand was made of precious metals. Instead of looking gaudy, the stand was quite refined. It looked like a small cat lying down with its arms curled, and a pen could be inserted in that slot. Most peculiar part of this gift was that this cat closely resembled a certain gift giver.

“Is this...” he started.

“A coincidence! Mrow!” Katima replied.

“I haven’t said anything yet.”

“But I know what you’re about to say! Mew think that this adorable cat looks

just like me-ow!”

Ein hated to admit it, but the cat was indeed adorable.

“Mrow... I tagged along when Krone and Chris went shopping this year. I decided to purr-chase a decent present for you.”

Hence, a pen and pen stand made a rather convenient set of gifts for Ein.

“W-Well, I’ll use it,” Ein replied. “It’s a lovely gift.”

He placed the pen stand on a nearby table and slotted Krone’s pen inside. He had zero complaints about his gifts, of course. He was more than happy with them.

“Um, Ein,” Krone said.

“Hmm?” he replied.

“I won’t name who, but please don’t forget that someone else was with us on our shopping excursion.” As she finished speaking, Krone started nudging her head towards a particularly sheepish elf who’d been hiding behind a pillar.

“I think I’ll go tell her that’s not a good hiding spot.”

“Don’t say anything mean.” Krone obviously knew that Ein had no such intention.

The crown prince smiled back. “I’ll be off.”

If he headed straight for her, she’d only flee. Of course, Ein didn’t want her to simply run from him. *I wonder why she’s always so embarrassed whenever she wants to give me a present.* It wasn’t that he couldn’t understand; there were certain worries that came with gift giving. The sender hoped that the receiver would enjoy their present, or agonize over other potential gifts. Ein didn’t want to hand wave all of that away and he forcefully approached his knight. Once he found himself shielded by another pillar, he moved swiftly towards the pillar that Chris was hiding behind.

“Don’t you know that these pillars aren’t the best hiding spots?” he asked.

“Wah!” Chris cried.

“Y-You don’t have to look so shocked.”

“But Sir Ein, pillars *do* make excellent hiding spots. If the castle is under siege, you could use the pillars to dodge any harm coming your way!”

“On my birthday? I don’t think the castle will be under siege.”

“Please don’t reply with common sense. It’s not fair.” She gave up and handed the crown prince his gift. “Happy birthday. Here’s a present from me.”

“You’re being awfully cooperative this year,” Ein remarked.

“Argh! You’ve got it all wrong! I wasn’t hiding because I was embarrassed. I was simply worried that the wrapping paper had gone askew! That’s all!”

She pouted, but her frown was turned upside down once Ein took the present from her hand. Through a squinty-eyed smile, Chris gently encouraged him to open the box.

“This is...”

Inside was a leather notebook. It was covered in ornate, metallic adornments that were sure to draw one’s attention. Upon opening it up, Ein found it to be the exact size of his previous notebook.

“You mentioned it at Sir Mouton’s workshop,” Chris explained. “I thought I’d gift you a new notebook.”

“Thank you!” Ein beamed. “I’ll start using this today!”

Surely, Krone’s present had this journal in mind. Ein wasn’t interested in jewelry or accessories, so he was grateful to always receive gifts that he could use. As the crown prince flashed his pearly whites at the knight, she found herself equally elated and joined in on the joy.

“A-Ahem!” Chris said, clearing her throat. She was a touch embarrassed to hear his honest words of gratitude. “Let’s step away from the pillar, shall we?”

“But you were the one who stood here...” Ein started.

“Enough about me! Let’s go and enjoy that smorgasbord of food over there!”

“Okay...”

He chased after a nimble Chris as they walked towards the center of the hall.

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“Happy birthday, Ein,” Olivia said, enveloping her son in her warm embrace. Her son had always been the apple of her eye.

She’d gifted him with a pair of gloves. They were comfortable to the touch, and looked quite warm. As her son expressed joy with his gift, Olivia hugged him once more, happier than she’d ever been before.

“You don’t change, Olivia,” Silverd remarked.

“But of course, father,” Olivia replied. “As you may already know, Ein is my everything.”

“Hah, everyone knows that. The entire nation *knows* that.”

“Are we sure about this?” Ein asked, finding an opportunity to speak. “Given everything that’s going on, I’m not sure we should host a birthday party during such a hectic time.”

“Of course,” Silverd replied. “It’s important to restrain yourself at times, but your birthday holds a greater meaning. None of our people would be happy to hear that the next king wasn’t able to celebrate his birthday.”

Any act that would lower the morale of Ishtarica’s citizens would lead to a national decline. Ein knew that very well, of course, but he simply had the tendency to step back—act with reservation. Trying to switch gears, he gulped down his entire cup of juice.

“You’re right. Since it’s a party I should enjoy my—” Ein stopped himself as he noticed an oddity in the air. “Grandfather, look.”

Outside a window and past the nearby balcony, there was a brilliant bluish-green light that illuminated the night sky beyond the horizon.

“What is that? That’s...” Silverd started.

“Ist,” Ein finished. “It’s coming from Magic City Ist.”

Ein was quite familiar with this display of lights—he’d seen it on the lowest floors of the Tower of Wisdom. The pool of liquefied magic stones connected to the basement furnace had given off the same exact glow. *But why is it dancing in the air?* Ein wondered. Furthermore, the light was approaching Kingsland.

“Mrow?! Th-That can’t be!” Katima cried, rushing towards the balcony.

“Aunt Katima!” Ein shouted, chasing after her as he also jumped outside.

The Cait-Sìth slowly walked towards the railing as her eyes were glued on the lights, sweat dripping down her brow. Her nervous gulps could be heard by Ein.

“Im-paws-ible...”

Unlike Ist’s artificial aurora, this blue light started to violently ripple as it hung over the night sky. It gradually crackled like lightning and pierced the clouds before exploding. The sky was dyed in a coat of blue illumination, one that shot through Ishtarica’s heavens. This surpassed any technology previously known to man. Several moments passed as the deluge of light refused to falter. Now a dark hue of blue and green, this ominous skyline spread throughout the nation.

## Chapter Six: Another Trip to Magic City Ist

The next day, a crowd gathered outside the gates of White Night Castle. Those who had witnessed last night's baffling light show were equally anxious and confused. However, a handful of Ishtarica's citizens felt differently about the situation—a few of them caught wind of what had happened in Ist.

In the audience room, Silverd read through a letter he'd been passed just moments ago. Katima sat beside him, patiently waiting for her father to finish reading. Ein and Warren quietly stood nearby as well.

"If I read this letter correctly, this magic pollution is a serious issue. Right, Katima?" Silverd asked.

"Purr-ecisely. In layman's terms, the monster magical energy within those stones is contaminating the air we breathe. It'll harm humans and nonhumans alike."

If a monster could communicate with society at-large, they were regarded as a member of a nonhuman species. Nonhumans lacked the trademark aggression of most monsters and the ability to consume magic stones. In fact, pure-blooded monster stones were poisonous to nonhumans, and meant that the magic pollution would impact their well-being.

"How much time and manpower would it take to purify it all?" Silverd inquired.

"That's the purr-oblem."

Ist's Tower of Wisdom had spiraled out of control last night.

"The tower is constantly burning through magical energy, mew see. It'd be impossible to count the amount of stones that've been thrown into its basement power pool. However, I'm pawsitive that there are thousands, if not tens of thousands, of liquefied stones stewing in that pool."

"So you're saying that we'd need just as many men as there are stones in that pool to handle it," Silverd concluded.

“Purrcisely. I hypothesize the furnace’s ancient age is the cause, but I received a report that claims the safety switch was pressed just as the tower went nuclear. I can only hope that we’ve narrowly avoided the worst possible outcome, but...mrow... By my calculations, the air would remain polluted for the next few decades, at the very least.”

“We might have dodged a tragedy, but that doesn’t change the fact that our nation is still in peril.”

“The tower’s safety mechanism managed to save all of those precious tools and documents I haven’t purr-used yet. Losing those would be the real tragedy.”

“Now then, how shall we go about this? We must discuss our future plans.”

“Here’s my purr-fessional take on the situation. If we do nothing, the pollution will spread in proportion to the density of magic in the air. In other words, we should act quickly.”

Unfortunately, no one knew where to start. If the tower’s aging furnace really was the problem, it wouldn’t be much of an issue. But if this incident was only a small part in a larger scheme, the Ishtaricans had a perpetrator to look for. Their first step forward would decide the nation’s fate in the days to come. However, the safety of Ishtarica’s people was of utmost importance.

“Warren, I’d like you to look into the status of Ist’s refugees,” Silverd ordered.

“I shall, sire,” the chancellor replied.

With his first move in place, the king awaited Warren’s report.

Due to the incident’s sheer scale, an endless stream of reports came flooding into the castle. Despite the many casualties, those who’d managed to escape Ist were safe. While it was important to mourn the dead, the survivors couldn’t be left to their own devices. As the castle negotiated with Ist’s neighbors to take in the survivors, Kingsland’s skilled doctors were dispatched to help on the ground. Back in the castle’s grand meeting room, the king and his advisors had their hands full when a letter from Oz arrived.

After confirming the letter’s contents, Warren read through it. “Your Majesty, Professor Oz claims that the furnace’s advanced age is the main cause, just as

Princess Katima predicted. The furnace already had gone through its annual maintenance and inspection, so it was deemed safe to operate. The professor feels that an accident may have contributed to the incident.”

The nation’s nobles quietly listened, thinking through this unfortunate accident. Accidents happen in even the best-maintained facilities; everyone knew this, but the scale of this incident couldn’t be waved away as a simple misfortune. With damage dealt to the Tower of Wisdom itself, it’d take many years for the facility to be fully repaired.

“My fiefdom is prepared to accept any who require shelter,” a noble said.

“We can provide plenty of supplies,” offered another.

“Give the word, and we’ll dispatch our men,” a third added.

“You’re all very reliable, and I’m counting on you all,” Silverd said. “I need you all to work together. I shall do my best as well, but your assistance is imperative in this situation.”

Further discussion kicked off among the nobles. Unlike the usual flow of an aristocratic meeting, speakers piped up when necessary as the group hashed out the fine details. It was rather unusual for such a meeting to be so rowdy.

“Professor Oz will be visiting Kingsland very soon,” Warren said, approaching the king. “He said he’d like to share what he knows and discuss our next steps. He should arrive sometime tomorrow.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve received good news,” Silverd replied. “I eagerly await Oz’s arrival.”

The royal capital wasn’t going to twiddle their thumbs in the face of such a situation.

“Everyone, as Oz makes his way here, we should prepare to dispatch a research team to Ist,” Silverd said. “If you have any researchers in mind, feel free to let me know.”

The nobles collectively raised their voices to respond, but a knock at the door quickly cut through the room’s rowdy atmosphere.

“Excuse me,” a voice called out.

Lily stepped in, her usual carefree demeanor completely vanishing into thin air. She approached Warren, who stood beside the king.

“Your Excellency, may I have a moment?” she inquired.

“Is anything the matter?” the chancellor asked.

“Bardland has fallen. I’ve received word that almost all of their adventurers have met an untimely end on the battlefield.”

“That was much faster than I anticipated.”

“I’ve got one more thing to tell you. A...Dusk operative has been terminated.”

Warren’s eyes went wide before he quickly shifted his gaze to follow. “What of the body?”

“Luckily, we were able to retrieve it. We also managed to bring home a few chimera corpses as well. They’ve been heavily secured, so I hope that they prove useful in Princess Katima’s research.”

“Where is the operative’s body now?”

“It rests on a ship docked in Magna, sir. As this was an undercover operation, the ship is incognito among the fishing vessels at port.”

“Very well. Now then, I must share this information with everyone here.”

The chancellor stood up and clapped his hands, commanding the entire room’s attention. First, he spoke of Bardland’s fall, but no one seemed to be particularly shocked by the news—everyone must’ve believed this news to be an inevitability. However, Ist’s state of affairs had the nobles riled up and eager to offer up their support in any way they could.

“We should also consider dispatching a platoon or two,” one of the aristocrats suggested.

“Indeed,” another agreed. “While we’re not sure that Heim is behind the chimeras, it’d be wise to consider sending some of our men to Euro.”

“If worse comes to worst, we can launch a seaside attack on the port city of Roundheart.”

“Wait, one minute!” another said. “I cannot let those grave ideations slide!

You'd be going against the first king's words!"

"I understand your feelings, but we should wait this one out for now."

As various opinions flew across the room, a single noble remained silent and calmly assessed the situation—Duke Pholus, Leonard's father. As the director of the Legal Affairs Bureau, he was always composed, and even the chancellor had placed his trust in this man. While the duke had once almost raised a hand against Krone, that was likely the only time he'd ever lost his cool. The duke raised his hand and stood up.

"Your Excellency, I believe that it is unnecessary to dispatch soldiers in the immediate future," he said boldly amid the noisy arguments. "The chimera pose no threat if they're few in number. By themselves, they're about as strong as an insect or a lowly slime. But as the attack on Euro has shown us, they're simply far too much to handle when they all pounce at once."

This fact made use of the warships' main cannons a necessity.

"We don't know if any aquatic chimeras exist either," the duke continued. "We need to gather as much information as possible and ensure the safety of our knights. I implore that we maintain cooler heads as we proceed."

"Indeed, I agree," the chancellor replied.

Quite a few nobles had spoken up in agreement, and some of the more hot-blooded aristocrats sought to dig their heels in. However, these hot heads had no choice but to admit that a calm approach was the most sensible one.

Once the crowd died down, Warren spoke once more. "We cannot ignore what's happening across the ocean, but we're currently preoccupied with the Tower of Wisdom. We must make that our priority. Of course, I shall be keeping a careful eye on Heim's activities, and I hope that puts your mind at ease."

No one could refute the chancellor's statement. Ultimately, everyone knew that launching an attack was out of the question—the Tower of Wisdom had to be their primary focus. While the nobles were still a tad agitated, they continued discussing how to best dispel the magic pollution.

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Just as the sun started to set, a shipment of debris from Ist had arrived at the castle's gates. The debris had been sent at Katima's request, as she wanted to gauge the danger of these contaminated items for herself. With an idea of his own, Ein made his way down Katima's lab. *Maybe my power can be of some help*, he thought.

Once he arrived, Ein gently knocked on the lab's door.

"Mrow?" Katima called.

"It's me," Ein replied. "Can I come in?"

"Do as mew wish."

"Pardon me... Ah, is that the debris sample you asked for?"

A massive chunk of detritus lay enclosed within a large glass case. From a passing glance, the sample looked like an average piece of rubble. *All right*. Ein braced himself and approached the sample. Katima whirled around, wearing a spectacles-shaped magical tool.

"Do mew need something?"

"Yeah, what's the state of magic pollution?" Ein said.

"It's way worse than I thought. It'll be decades before anyone will be able to live in Ist again. And it'd be quite a task to purr-ify the toxic fumes."

Purifying the city would most likely push Ishtarica to foot an unimaginably high bill. As the nation's first princess, Katima couldn't help but let the pain show on her face. However, Ein wasn't about to give up hope just yet. The prince reached for the glass case, his gaze filled with unshakable confidence and the hope that his idea would work.

"Mrooow?! That's dange— Wait! I see meow! Ein, you just might be able to..."

The case's lid easily flipped open and a smile quickly crept up the prince's face as he held his hand over the sample. Toxin Decomposition EX skill had activated, and purified the debris of its toxic qualities, making the sample safe enough to handle with one's bare hands.

"I should go to Ist," Ein said. He was sure that his powers could save Ishtarica.



“Mew’re right... With your power, it’d only take a few days! In only a day, mew could even...”

“Which is why I should be the one to go. There are many who need me.” He wanted to go to Ist as soon as possible. “I should leave quickly. Like you said, the higher the density of magic in the air, the more pollution will spread.”

“M-Mrow... You’re exactly right...”

“What are the odds of the furnace going berserk again?”

“With the safety device in place, almost zero! I’m pawsitive of that! The furr-nace has already been stopped, and it can’t be activated again! I’m sure that the magic stone pool has already hardened too!”

All Ein had to do now was convince the king. With the attack on Euro, the entirety of Ishtarica was on guard. It hadn’t been all that long since the summer debacle in Magna. *I’ll be fine. I’m sure that he’ll let me go.* Ein’s trip to Syth Mill had been approved, after all. Silverd should’ve still been in the grand meeting room.

“I want to take a contaminated sample with me to the meeting room,” Ein said.

“Oh? Are you going to convince father by purr-ifying it in front of him?” Katima asked.

“Bingo. Can I do that?”

“I can lend you one of these cases.”

Just moments later, Ein was fully prepared and walked out of the lab with a case of the contaminated debris. The prince carefully ascended the stairs so as not to drop his deadly package.

Silverd and the nobles had continued their meeting until well after the sunset. An accident as severe as this would be etched into Ishtarica’s history books. Very few incidents of this magnitude had occurred since the nation’s founding. As such, this situation created a mountain of work to tackle. Ein suddenly burst into the room with the sample in tow. He knew that he was attracting the room’s attention, but he said nothing more as he placed the case on the round

table. He glanced at his grandfather.

“Ein, you...” Silverd murmured.

“Grandfather, I’d like a moment of your time,” the crown prince insisted. He didn’t wait for an answer as he opened the lid and took out the toxic sample in front of the other nobles. “Putting on a bold display like this really takes me back.”

The nobles chuckled. Indeed, this wasn’t too far off from that fateful party from so long ago. That night, the prince defiantly hoisted a magic stone before the crowd and absorbed its power. The stone became white in process, morphing into a symbol of the royal family.

“This is a piece of debris from Ist,” Ein said. “It’s been contaminated by the magic pollution, but my power can purify it.”

“I’ve seen it with my own eyes,” Katima confirmed.

The nobles started to murmur, convinced by the crown prince’s declaration. What kind of power did he have? Many were shocked, but everyone was overjoyed to learn that their pollution issue could be resolved if Ein simply traveled Ist. If left to its own devices, the pollution could wreak unimaginable damage. But once the air was purified, the restoration effort could start in earnest. It was difficult to not feel a sliver of hope in the prince’s proposition. The king was equally intrigued by this idea, but a question plagued his mind.

“Wouldn’t it be rather difficult to purify an entire city?” Silverd asked.

Toxic Decomposition EX could manifest freely in the air. When he was a young boy, Ein had difficulty controlling the skill and had inadvertently absorbed a portion of Chris’s magic stone. This was due in no small part to their close proximity, and surely, things would be different if the prince were to use his power on an entire city. However, Katima had an idea of her own.

“There’s a thick pipe on the outside of the Tower of Wisdom,” Katima said. “It’s meant to distribute magical energy throughout the city, mew see!”

It was only then did the crown prince remember the various pipes that stretched across Ist. If he activated his skill at the main pipe and allowed it to flow throughout the rest of the network, Ein could theoretically purify the

entire city.

“But wouldn’t it be difficult to reach residences and plots of land?” the king inquired.

“Not a purr-oblem! If Ein does his thing for a few hours, the toxicity would be within manageable levels. We’d be able to swoop in and easily handle the pollution from there!”

Safety was the only issue that remained. While Silverd remained locked in thought, Lloyd stepped out from behind his king and chimed in.

“I shall go with him,” he declared.

“Hmm, that may be for the best,” Silverd agreed.

“No, Lloyd. I’d like for you to stay by my grandfather’s side,” Ein replied.

Lloyd couldn’t hide his confusion. “Hmm? Why? Do you find my power to be lacking?”

“Not at all. My concern rests with my grandfather and everyone else who will remain here. I wouldn’t want Ishtarica’s marshal to be away should anything happen.”

“I see. Indeed... You’re quite right, Sir Ein.” Lloyd’s gaze narrowed—he was impressed by the strong and reliable prince that stood before him.

“If you and Warren remain in Kingsland, I’ll be at ease as I head to Ist.”

“I agree,” Silverd said. “Unfortunately, Warren is currently out. He left the royal capital shortly after noon and is now on route to inspect a boat in Magna.” Ein blinked. He hadn’t expected this. But the king continued, “He’s to confirm the identity of a Dusk operative and examine a few chimera corpses. While he’s at it, Warren will be meeting with nearby cities to see if they’re willing to take in refugees from Ist. Finally, he also mentioned that he must inspect our cities’ defensive formations in preparation for the worst.”

The fact that the chancellor had chosen to personally handle these duties spoke volumes about the seriousness of this situation.

“He’ll be back tomorrow evening,” Silverd noted. “He’ll be riding in on the fallen operative’s ship, and dock at the port.”

“I understand,” Ein replied. “Then in regards to me leaving for Ist...”

“I’m not too keen on this idea, but I suppose there’s no other choice.”

“Then...”

Ein’s face beamed with joy, but the king stopped him. There was still one more question that filled Silverd’s mind as he turned to his daughter.

“Katima, how shall we travel to the Tower of Wisdom?” he inquired.

“Luckily, the tracks are safe!” she replied. “The royal water train can also protect us from the magical pollution, I purr-omise you that! As long as we don’t step outside, we should be safe.”

“Ein, I don’t mind if you bring the royal water train to its knees. Use it as you wish,” Silverd said.

It cost a pretty penny to develop and maintain the royal water train, but any damage was a small price to pay if Ist could be purified in a matter of days.

“Now then, who shall go with you?” Silverd wondered. “And what about your gear?”

“Purr-sonally, I’d recommend specialized clothing or gear crafted from powerful monster material.”

“Grandfather, I’d like to depart immediately if possible,” Ein said.

“I know,” Silverd replied. “Lloyd, gear up a few members of the Knights Guard. You have no need to hold back.”

“I’d like Chris and Dill to accompany me as well, so please make sure they’re prepared!” Ein called out.

“Ha ha!” Lloyd laughed. “No need to worry! Their gear is already good to go! It’s splendidly made to begin with!”

The Ishtaricans were finally starting to see a sliver of hope on the horizon. The gloomy atmosphere of the room started to slowly dissipate, as many prepared to bet it all on the back of their crown prince. Katima laughed and sidled up to her father.

“Mrow? If I recall correctly, this is practically the same party that went to Ist

last time,” she whispered. “Then purr-haps, I should go too...”

“You cannot. Stay here,” Silverd ordered.

“Mrow...”

Her lifeless, melancholic mewling echoed in Ein’s ears.

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Krone ended up taking Katima’s place on this trip to Ist. She hadn’t been an advisor when her beloved last traveled to the Magic City and wasn’t allowed to join him. However, she was ecstatic to learn that she’d be tagging along this time. The royal water train pulled into Ist at around midnight.

“It’s quiet,” Ein remarked as he stepped off the train.

There wasn’t a person in sight, and the station lights weren’t on either. The city relied so heavily on the tower’s power that even their water train station was out of commission.

“There are only a few patrolling knights and a handful of researchers still in the city,” Chris answered, stepping off the train as well.

“In any case, the pollution is intense here,” Ein observed.

The city was illuminated by a sickly green glow—a sign that the area had been thoroughly contaminated. The glow was easy to see at night, and one would swear it was a mystical sight if it weren’t a portent of death.

“If this persists for much longer, the magic’s scent will lead nearby monsters into the city as they search for energy,” Chris explained.

“And if the pollution still remains, it’ll turn into a monster nest,” Ein concluded.

“Precisely. If any of these monsters die, the fumes from their corpses and magic pollution would spark a chemical reaction, creating miasma. Ist would become uninhabitable.”

“In that case, I’m really glad that I got here as quickly as possible.”

He crouched low to the ground and touched the platform with his hand, activating his skill.

“All right, it works,” Ein said.

In a matter of moments, the station platform had lost its green glow, freeing it of magic pollution.

“You never fail to impress me, Sir Ein,” Chris said happily, folding her arms behind her back.

“I’ll step back on the train,” Ein replied. “I have to let Krone know that I’ll be making the journey from here on foot.”

“Certainly! I’ll be waiting!”

When Ein turned on his heels to head back, he bumped into another of his trusty knights.

“I could tell even from within the train,” Dill noted. “It seems the decontamination process is going smoothly.”

“Lucky for me,” Ein replied. “I’m going to tell Krone that I’ll be off.”

“Of course. I shall be stationed outside.”

“Roger that. Wait, huh?”

As Ein walked through the railcars, he noticed that something felt different—the interior was warmer than usual. He could tell from the breeze above him that the air conditioning was working, but his toes were rather toasty. It wasn’t a big deal, but he couldn’t help but be curious about it as he met Krone in one of the lounge cars.

“It’s warm,” he muttered as he entered the room.

“That was random. What happened?” Krone asked. She stood up from the sofa and approached the prince, gazing at him, equally perplexed.

“It’s nothing much... Though I couldn’t help but think the railcar flooring feels warmer than usual.”

“It is.”

“Did something happen to the furnace?”

“Nope. We’ve just pushed the royal train to its limit. As His Majesty instructed us, we didn’t hold back as we burned through our resources to reach Ist in

record time. Sir Lloyd gave the train's crew the proper order."

"Ah, no wonder."

Even the royals' state-of-the-art water train would overheat while making the mad dash to Ist.

"But it's all well within this train's manageable speed limits, so there's nothing to worry about," Krone reassured him. "I believe that I was told that..." She flipped through her journal to gather the specifics. "Ah, right here. The train should cool off in about thirty minutes."

Ein was curious to see the other notes she'd jotted down. "Could I take a peek at that?"

"Sure, but I don't have anything interesting written down."

"The information you just shared was interesting enough."

It might have been a tad ungentlemanly, but he stepped behind Krone and peered into her journal. Her usually neat handwriting was absolutely mesmerizing. She must've been told the specifics by the conductor or an engineer; her journal was filled to the brim with more notes than Ein had expected, and important points were color coded and highlighted. It was easy to read and divided neatly—he was sure that her journal alone could be used as a reference document.

"It's so easy to read," Ein observed.

"Thank you," Krone replied.

Acting a touch spoiled, she leaned back towards Ein so that he could catch a closer look at her journal. Who could say if she only wanted to give him a better look at the text or if she just wanted to be closer to him. As the prince had a lot on his plate, he quickly scanned the next page until he spotted something curious hidden among her notes.

"A cat?" he mumbled.

There was a drawing of a cat that had been circled. The word "important" was jotted down right next to it. Krone flinched and gasped as she immediately stepped away from him. She used both hands to press her notebook against her

chest, and her cheeks were redder than a tomato.





“D-Did you see it?” she asked sheepishly.

“I didn’t—no, I did,” Ein replied.

“Argh! Why did you rephrase your wording?!”

“I didn’t want to lie to you.”

Her notes were related to the Tower of Wisdom, and it was easy to guess why a picture of a cat was there.

“Princess Katima just asked me to draw an adorable cat, that’s all!” Krone cried. “I wasn’t doodling or anything!”

“I know, I know,” Ein assured her. “Don’t worry about that. And what did Aunt Katima say about your drawing?”

“She said that it was cute...”

“I expected as much. Could you show it to me again?”

“Do you promise to not laugh?”

“I won’t laugh. I thought it was cute too.”

A pouting Krone reluctantly showed her journal once more as Ein gazed at the drawing. According to Katima, it was best to divide the decontamination efforts into hour-long chunks. It was apparently far more efficient to handle things that way.

“This really is important information...” Ein said. He took out his pen and wrote the word “meow” right by the cat, circling it as well.

The quick flash of Ein’s playful side made Krone’s lips tug upwards.

“That pen...” she murmured.

“I am only using this pen now,” Ein replied. “It’s easy to write with and I love it.”

She felt her heart grow warm, happy to see that her birthday present was seeing use.

“I’m glad you’re putting it to work,” she whispered with a sigh of relief.

“I’ll be off, then,” Ein said. “I’ll do my best to purify Ist.”

“Okay. Don’t push yourself and be careful.”

She saw him off with a smile, and Ein walked back through the railcars. He gazed at the green light outside of the window and braced himself for the task ahead of him.

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About an hour had passed since Ein started his purification of Ist. He was on the rooftop of a structure connected to the thick pipes Katima had spoken of. Per his plan, the prince used one of the pipes to absorb the city’s toxins. It was an oddly refreshing sight to see that the green hue blanketing the city had started to gradually fade away. All he was doing was sitting on the pipe and placing his hand over it—Toxin Decomposition EX did all the work.

“We should take a break,” Dill said, checking his clock. He handed his master a bottle of water and smiled at the results.

“I think we’ll be finished not long after noon,” Ein said.

“I’m glad to see that things are progressing smoothly. How do you feel?”

“Fine. It’s not like I’m doing anything exhausting. I know it’s a bit crass of me to say, but it’s actually kind of boring to just be sitting here.”

“Not at all. I think it’s just like you to say that. In any case...” The knight trailed off as he turned around to face the sky. He gazed at the Tower of Wisdom and frowned. “The tower always emitted a light of its own. But looking at its current state, it must’ve been quite the accident for things to get so out of hand.”

Only the faint glow of emergency and door lights spilled through the cracks of the destroyed tower. A massive hole was blown through the middle of the building and down to its lower floors. The half-destroyed facilities, magical tools, lifts, and stairs still remained in a sorry state for the entire world to see. The tower was only standing because it was simply that sturdy. The blast of light that pierced the sky and the accompanying shock wave remained fresh in Ein’s memory.

“We’re lucky that it wasn’t completely destroyed,” Ein said.

“It’s difficult to say,” Dill remarked. “We have this dense magic pollution in

the air.”

Needless to say, Ein sat upon a destroyed facility as he worked away. However, much of the destruction was contained within the tower, and nearby buildings suffered from the initial explosion or the following shock wave. As much of Ist’s architecture was built on a sturdy foundation, not everything was completely destroyed.

“Sir Ein! Here I am!” Chris said, approaching the crown prince. She’d been patrolling the surrounding area to monitor the decontamination progress. “I overheard your conversation, but it seems the tower’s safety device kept it from being destroyed. However, it started spewing magic pollution in exchange.”

“Huh? Why?” Ein asked.

“Princess Katima mentioned that the light we saw served to divert the energy from the rest of the city. If the Tower of Wisdom were to be completely destroyed, the magic stone pool in the basement would explode and apparently vaporize Ist’s residents...in a matter of moments.”

“I see. That’s why the tower still has energy.”

Thanks to the safety device, the furnace had completely ceased to function and the liquefied magic stones hardened into single mass. This meant that magical energy was still contained within the pool.

“So that torrent of light rained upon the city and magic started leaking through the pipes, leading to the city’s complete contamination,” Ein said. The light had been purposefully shot through the sky.

“Sir Ein, I shall return to the water train to provide Lady Krone with a status update,” Chris said. “Would you like me to relay a message to her, Your Highness?”

“Then could you tell her to rest if she’s feeling sleepy or tired?” Ein asked.

“Ah ha ha... I can easily imagine her response...”

No doubt that the young lady would deny any exhaustion that she felt. And with that, Chris left.

“All right, we’ve got a bit more to go. Let’s do this,” Ein said.

“I wish you the best,” Dill replied. “Admittedly, it’s a touch frustrating to know I’m unable to do anything.”

“Your presence is more than enough. It’s great to have someone to talk to. Besides, I’m not doing much.”

“If you’re not doing much, then my work up until this point shall now be deemed as worthless.”

After some quick back-and-forth, Ein placed his hand on the pipe once more. His skill would activate even without touching the pipe, but he felt like this was more effective.

“All right, one more hour. Here we go,” the crown prince said as he gazed at the sun rising beyond the horizon.

He yawned and activated his skill once more.

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Morning hit Magna a few hours earlier than Ist. Warren, who had just finished meeting with some powerful nobles in the outskirts of the city, was taking a carriage ride home. Not a soul walked down the street as the chancellor rolled on through, but the scene made for a splendid view of the city.

Despite the early hour, Magna bustled with workers toiling away to rebuild the city. As smoke rose from the ships at port and nearby factories, the chancellor found himself overjoyed to know that Magna’s people were in high spirits.

“Whew...” He sighed, unable to hide his exhaustion.

“Speaking of,” one of Warren’s knights started, “this street had been sealed off due to the attack from this summer.”

“Oh? I haven’t heard of such a thing.”

“A monster had apparently eaten someone alive, so the city temporarily closed the street just to be safe. Professor Oz and his team of Istian researchers were forced to take another route too.”

“I see...”

“That poor soul’s body had changed color so much that we couldn’t even identify them. It was quite the horrific sight to behold.”

“Then we must be wary so that we don’t repeat such a tragedy.”

The center of the city was slowly drawing near as the shouts of the people outside grew louder and louder. Warren let out another quiet sigh.

After arriving at the incognito ship, the chancellor made plans to set off for Kingsland a little past noon. As he didn’t have any pressing matters to attend to, Warren sat back and enjoyed the ride. Sometime later, the royal capital’s port slowly came into view.

“Your Excellency, we’ll be at port shortly,” one of the knights reported.

When the chancellor gazed outside, they were indeed just about to enter Kingsland.

“Very well,” Warren said. “Then let us visit the morgue one last time.”

“Yes, sir! I shall guide you there!” the knight replied.

The chancellor slowly followed the knight, and the clacking of his leather shoes against the wooden floors echoed throughout the boat. Several moments later, loud clangs could be heard from outside—a signal that they’d safely docked at Kingsland’s pier.

“Please keep watch outside,” Warren requested.

“Yes, sir!” the knight replied.

The chancellor stepped inside the room which contained only a single stretcher. The Dusk operative’s body had been so preciously preserved it was as if they’d sit up and start talking at any moment. Warren grimaced upon looking at the deep gash that ran along the operative’s neck—the chancellor had dispatched them, after all.

“The spirit of the departed. May you rest in peace within our nation,” Warren murmured.

The chancellor prayed with all his being for his lost operative’s soul to rest

peacefully alongside Ishtarica's other slumbering heroes.

"Please excuse me, Your Excellency," a knight called.

"Whatever is the matter?" Warren inquired.

"Professor Oz has arrived and would like to meet with you as soon as possible. He's also requested to inspect one of the chimera corpses we brought back with us. He said he was intrigued by them." Indeed, today was the day that Oz would arrive in Kingsland. "He even prepared his own ship to make the journey."

There was a long moment of silence before Warren made a pointed reply. "Is that so. Very well. I shall meet him immediately."

"Then I shall tell him so— P-Professor Oz?!"

Moments after the knight yelped, the door opened and a man dressed in a white lab coat entered the morgue.

"Pardon me. I heard that you were here," the professor said.

"Ah, Professor Oz," Warren replied. "I've heard many rumors about you."

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. I'm terribly sorry for my insolence, but I heard about the emergency and immediately came."

"I see..." Warren stared at the knight stationed just outside the door. "You may leave. I must speak with the professor."

"Yes, sir!" the knight replied.

"Please refrain from opening the door...even if it starts to get a touch noisy."

There was no need for the knight to be forced out, so why did Warren give that command? Oz couldn't hide his befuddlement. But as Warren turned his back to the professor, Oz had an epiphany.

"I see... I suppose nothing gets past you, Chancellor," Oz said, his lips curling up to form a sinister smile.

"Professor Oz, the existence of this vessel is secret, you see," Warren divulged. "Even His Majesty doesn't know which ships I command or have acting as a decoy. I can easily count the number of people who know this

privileged information with both hands.”

“Oh, I know.”

This immediate reply connected the pieces. Oz’s true identity and goals were slowly being revealed.

“Professor Oz, you must be a red fox,” Warren accused.

“I wasn’t expecting to hear that,” Oz replied. “How very sudden...”

And so, his goals and reason for visiting this ship were easy to guess.

“You came here to kill me and collect the chimeras’ corpses, I take it?” Warren asked. He was met with deafening silence. “I have more than a few good reasons to accuse you of being a red fox. Unfortunately, sharing my thoughts with you may prove to be of little importance at this point. But I must ask, why were you in Magna this summer, Professor? A knight told me one of the streets had been closed and you were forced to make a detour.”

Warren recalled this bit of information that the knight innocuously let slip on the carriage ride to the boat.

“Oh, and please don’t say anything silly like you were there to ‘buy materials for your research,’” the chancellor added. “I know that you’ve met with Sir Ein. It’s rather unlikely that you’d have made two trips in such a short amount of time.”

“I...” Oz started.

“Indeed, just because you were in the city, it’s a bit far-fetched to pin you as the mastermind behind the attack on Magna. However, I cannot deny the coincidences. You were there when a monster similar to Viscount Sage’s wyvern attacked.”

As the chancellor spoke, Oz only flashed a fearless smile while listening intently.

“When Ein told me that there was a mastermind pulling Viscount Sage’s strings, I realized something,” Warren said, cornering the professor. “It was quite difficult to figure out the mastermind’s identity from the viscount’s ramblings. Without even a shred of evidence left, we had scant information to



work with. However, it's not so difficult for me to ascertain the identity of someone able to communicate with the viscount while offering him a wealth of technical expertise. I can't think of many people who fit that bill." The chancellor paused and added, "I assume the incident at the Tower of Wisdom was orchestrated as well?"

"I certainly didn't expect you to see right through me! Heh heh heh... I'm so glad I took the risk of meeting you!" Oz laughed heartily as he placed a hand over his forehead. He took out a book, opened it up, and placed his palm over a page. Several arrows of blinding light floated in the air. "Was it wise to be all alone, Your Excellency?"

"Of course. This is the best course of action," Warren replied. Needless to say, he had plans of his own. Having expected the worst, the chancellor placed the life of his knight before his own.

"Oh, I'm so terribly sorry, Your Excellency. You're simply a nuisance that impedes my progress! His Highness must mature even more! He must grow! He must become like Arshay was— No, he must shine even brighter than the berserk Demon Lord!"

The light arrows shone brighter still, resembling the light that had emanated from the Tower of Wisdom shortly before the accident. But just as Oz was about to launch a devastating attack...

"What is this?" he asked.

Red fog wrapped around his body. The professor tried to move his body, but he'd been immobilized. His hand was also ripped away from his book, causing the tome to plummet to the ground. While Oz was trying to comprehend the situation, a sharp pain coursed throughout his body.

"Gah! Agh! Ahhhhh!" he shrieked in agony.

He fell to his knees as large beads of sweat dripped from his brow. Warren turned around and revealed a jewel clutched in his hands; the professor widened his eyes in astonishment.

"This is a magical tool that I haven't even shown to His Majesty," Warren grunted. "It uses the power of *my* magic stone to restrain and kill my target in a

flash.”

It was a powerful tool that the chancellor possessed for the purpose of self-defense.

“Heh heh... Ah ha ha ha ha!” Oz shrieked happily. “Hilarious! ‘In a flash,’ you say?! What a very peculiar lie to spout! I’m still alive, as you can see! I-I’m still alive and well!”

Sweat started to pour from Warren’s brow as well, attesting to the power and energy that he had to use. His usual composure and calm demeanor had vanished.

“A magic stone, you say?” Oz asked. “How very odd indeed... Chancellor, I’ve heard that you’re a human...” Warren remained silent as the professor spoke once more. “Ah! I see now! You must be...”

“There’s no need for unnecessary chatter!” Warren shouted. “You’re...”

“Oh, what a pity! A tragedy indeed! I didn’t expect for our long-awaited *reunion* to occur in this fashion!”

Oz was gasping for air as his golden eyes glimmered with glee. A vortex of magical energy swirled within the solemn morgue as the two men glared at each other. Despite Oz being at a clear disadvantage, his smile was undaunted.

“Just as you have been wary, I’ve also made preparations of my own!” he roared.

Oz’s book opened and floated in the air before shooting a black stone into the Dusk operative’s corpse. The stone bore itself into the operative’s chest, affixing itself with a disgusting squelch. Warren could hear the sound of someone dragging their feet behind him as he slowly turned around.

“Ah... Ah...” the corpse groaned, slowly getting to their feet.

Their chest was split wide open as a black shadow emerged and enveloped their body. Slowly but surely, the operative’s body bulged with rippling muscles—much like Viscount Sage’s wyvern. A few moments later, the corpse inflated like a balloon as the transformation reached its completion. What had once been the head of a hero was now covered in sharp fangs and protruding horns

—reminiscent of the ogre that had once attacked Barth.

“Graaaaah!” the corpse shrieked, shaking the entire boat.

The knights could no longer stop themselves as they stormed into the morgue.

“Your Excellency!” a knight shouted. “Wh-What’s going on here?!”

“Stand back!” Warren ordered. “Call the other knights and—”

“Grah! Graaaaah!” the transformed operative bellowed, heading straight for the first available knight.

The knight’s neck was suddenly snapped in two before anyone had the chance to react. Naturally, the creature’s next target was Warren. But before the chancellor could activate another magical tool, the creature pounced, grabbed his arm, and threw him to the floor.

“Agh...” Warren gasped.

The jewel tumbled out of his grasp and rolled in front of the professor.

“*Huff... Huff...* I never knew you had such a powerful magical tool,” Oz said, panting for breath. “How in the world did you do it?” He staggered to his feet, gazing at the jewel. “Ah, I see now. That disgusting Elder Lich, Misty, must’ve made this. No wonder you were able to corner me. Oh, no need for an explanation, since I can imagine what happened. As my lab coat was crafted with some special materials, it repels most outside influence...but *her* tools are far more powerful. I also see why you weren’t able to kill me ‘in a flash.’”

The transformed operative released Warren from his grasp, giving him the chance to desperately rummage through his pockets in hopes of making an escape.

“Grar! Graaaaah!” the creature shouted as it heartlessly pierced the old man’s chest.

Just moments later, a fresh spray of blood coated the room in red. Warren coughed up so much blood, he found it difficult to breathe, let alone speak. In sharp contrast Oz cackled as he gleefully trembled.

“It’s because of that thing in your chest,” Oz said.

Indeed, a glowing magic stone of vermilion resided within Warren's chest.

"One's magical energy tends to be less effective when used against their *own* kind," Oz said. "I suppose that didn't work in your favor."

"Gah... Haaah..." Warren wheezed.

"Oh, don't glare at me like that! It's terrifying. But now I understand why you're such a nuisance, chancellor. It's been many centuries, and you're still standing in my way. How very annoying."

Even though Oz felt wiped out, he managed to drag his sluggish body towards Warren. In fact, the professor looked as though he'd faint at any moment. Suddenly, a cacophony of footsteps came rushing through the corridor that led to the morgue.

"I must be off," Oz said.

A moment later, a whole platoon of knights flooded into the room. Oz's eyes glimmered, causing the Dusk operative's corpse to attack him.

"Gah! H-Help! The corpse turned into a monster!" the professor shouted as he was slammed against a wall.

As he begged for help, a searing pain coursed through his body. He didn't need a doctor to know that he'd broken multiple bones. The professor hadn't planned for an injury, but he knew this grave error was entirely his fault, though he was tempted to file a complaint or two.

"Professor Oz?! Your Excellency!" a knight cried.

"Ready your swords!" another ordered. "The monster's attacking!"

"We'll defend the victims!" a third shouted. "Stay vigilant!"

The knights only saw Oz as another unfortunate victim of the attack. While the corpse was strong, the knights were well trained and ready to fight. They could easily overpower the monster, and the knights would come out victorious.

"Let's get him!" the knights' leader declared.

A clamor took over the room as the battle commenced. As his vision faded,

Warren knew that one of two outcomes lay before him—death or a deep slumber. His injury was far too severe to be referred to as “minor.” With his last bit of strength, the chancellor looked at Oz—the madman smiled.

## Chapter Seven: A Large Nation Without Him

Ein was set to return to Kingsland later that night. After he finished decontaminating Ist, the prince visited the refugees and offered his well wishes. The royal capital was on high alert like never before, and when Ein arrived at White Rose Station, knights arrived in droves. They guarded not only the platform, but the entire path that Ein took to the carriage. There wasn't a single opening in sight.

When Ein arrived back at White Night Castle, he hastily made his way to the nurse's station where Bara was.

He was short of breath as he ran as fast as he could. "*Huff... Huff...* Grandfather!"

He had heard that Silverd was also there, and Ein had forgotten to knock on the door as he rushed into the room.

"Grandfather! Where's Warren?!"

The seats in the room were of simple design, and rather cheap. It was not a seat fit for a king, but Silverd paid no heed as he sat beside a table in the back. Bara sat across from him.

"Ah, Ein," the king said. "I'm glad you're safe. I'd love to hear of your accomplishments and ask some questions, but..."

"That can wait until later!" Ein cried. "What happened to Warren?!"

"Indeed. Bara, could I ask you to explain?"

"O-Of course! Most certainly!" she replied.

The king knew that such matters were best left to the experts, speaking wearily before he buried his head in his hands.

"Your Highness, please allow me to explain the chancellor's condition," Bara started.

The slum-born Istian had been acting with great composure as of late, but she

couldn't help being nervous when faced with the royals. Her anxiety only heightened when she realized she'd be detailing the seriousness of Warren's condition.

"He's suffered a deep gash to his chest," Bara said. "Luckily, his knights used their tools to stop the bleeding and provide first aid from there. He's still alive, but I'm not sure if he'll regain consciousness..."

"So, there's a possibility that Warren won't wake up?" Ein asked.

"Unfortunately, that's the case. It'll heavily depend on our treatment plan from here on out..."

Ein felt the strength leave his body, but he used every ounce of power he had left to keep standing. He desperately tried to keep himself together. *If he's still alive, and with Ishtarica's technology...* Ein thought, clinging onto some sort of hope.

"Where's Warren now?" he asked.

"His Excellency is in his own room," Bara replied. "The healing equipment we have is in perfect condition, and we're providing him with the best treatment possible. I've been visiting him every few minutes to check in on him, and Lady Belia is always by his side."

Belia was the nation's best maid, and it was reassuring to learn that she sat by the chancellor's side.

"I know it's a bit late to ask, but why are you here, grandfather?" Ein inquired.

"Hmm? Ah, I was visiting Warren just moments ago myself," Silverd replied. "I wanted to see how he was doing."

"I see. Do we have any idea who attacked him? Any suspects?"

Ein hadn't a clue who'd attack the chancellor, but his confusion turned to rage when Silverd responded with a troubled look on his face.

"The corpse of a Dusk operative," the king replied. "According to the knights, the corpse transformed into some sort of monster and attacked everyone in the room. Professor Oz was also present and seriously wounded. He's on his way to a hospital as we speak."

“Professor Oz too?!” Ein gasped. “He did mention that he’d be coming to Kingsland... But grandfather, how could a corpse transform? I don’t understand!”

Silverd shook his head in response. Even he had no idea how the corpse transformed or what had occurred in the ship’s morgue. Without all the puzzle pieces in front of him, he could only scratch his head at this series of events.

“With Majorica’s assistance, the transformed corpse has been restrained in a special cage,” Silverd said. “Katima went to see the monster for herself, but it seems that she noticed a black stone embedded in its chest. Its heart had apparently morphed into a core as well...just like you’d see in a monster or nonhuman.”

“You mean...” Ein started. There was no need to spell it out.

“We shouldn’t discuss this here. Bara, I’m sorry for bothering you so much. I leave Warren in your capable hands.”

“O-Of course, Your Majesty!” Bara cried. She panicked, not expecting any apologies or words of gratitude.

Most would say she’d been rude in the presence of a royal, but Silverd thought Bara’s fumbling to be an adorable sight as he walked towards the door. Warren had been Silverd’s lifelong friend—the loss of someone so precious was surely traumatic. And yet, he put on a brave face, refusing to lose his dignity as Ishtarica’s king.

“Ein, why don’t you give Warren a visit as well?” Silverd asked. “I’m sure he’ll wake up when he hears that you’ve arrived to offer your well wishes.” After cracking a feeble joke, the king left.

Ein smiled weakly and waited for a few moments before he turned to Bara. “Can I pay him a visit?”

“Of course,” Bara replied. “Lady Belia is there as well, so if you have any questions, please ask her. I’ll be there in a few minutes!”

“All right. Then I’ll go and—”

“I must check on his magic stone as well!”



“Huh?”

*A magic stone? Does Warren carry around a precious stone or something? Even so, there's no reason for Bara to be checking up on that, Ein thought.*

“A magic stone?” he asked.

“Hmm?” Bara replied. “I’m referring to Sir Warren’s magic stone, of course. I had no idea, but the chancellor is a nonhuman, isn’t he?”

Ein had no idea. He’d never heard of such a thing. The crown prince was confused, but he did his best to maintain his cool.

“Sorry, I’ll just pay him a visit,” he managed to eke out. It was all he could muster as he faked a collected composure.

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Ein walked through the castle and straight to Warren’s room. He gently knocked on the door and heard Belia answer. The crown prince took a deep breath as he placed his hand on the handle—he still needed some time to process the fact that Warren wasn’t human. All he could do now was express his joy to know that the chancellor was still alive and pray for a full recovery. The room was divided into two separate quarters. One was the living room and study, equipped with a large desk. The other room, situated in the back, was his bedroom.

The crown prince stepped inside and said, “Hi, Belia. I’m here to visit Warren.”

“My, oh my,” the maid replied. “Thank you for visiting him, Your Highness.”

She looked a touch surprised, but immediately returned to her usual self. Her eyes looked exhausted, but she tried her best to hide it with her makeup. She stood up and bowed, but Ein immediately implored her to sit back down before he shifted his gaze to the bedridden Warren.

“I’m home, Warren,” Ein said.

The usual, gentle response didn’t come. The chancellor’s eyes remained closed as tubes stuck out from his body—a sign that his condition was serious.

“Grandfather said that Warren might awaken when I arrived, but I knew that

wouldn't happen," Ein said, a sad smile on his lips. He'd expected as much, but he couldn't hide his sorrow. He sat on the chair beside the bed and sighed.

"I'm terribly sorry," Belia apologized. "When he wakes up, I shall surely tell him of his insolence."

"Ah ha ha, no, don't do that."

The maid sounded serious, and Ein quickly stopped her.

"He's surrounded by all these amazing magical tools," Ein observed.

A series of tubes ran along the chancellor's body and into massive magical tools that surrounded his bed. The impressively sized tools worked away to keep Warren alive.

"Belia, I..." Ein started but trailed off.

The crown prince wasn't sure if he should ask whether she knew that Warren was a nonhuman. This didn't seem like the right time and he stopped himself, keeping the question in his mind for now.

"I hope he gets better soon," Ein finished, the words springing forth from the bottom of his heart. "I know I just arrived, but I should take my leave. I don't want to stay for too long and disturb Warren's rest."

"Please wait," Belia said. "Please allow this nanny to see you out."

Ein refused at first, but no servant would feel comfortable with allowing the crown prince to leave the room by himself. In the end, he gave in.

As they left Warren's room, Belia asked a nearby servant to keep watch over the chancellor. Not once did Ein and Belia exchange a word as she led him down the corridor and up a staircase. Only when they arrived at Ein's room did she speak.

"To show my gratitude, I shall pour you a cup of tea before I return," Belia said, calmly smiling.

Ein felt bad about declining Belia's offer, and once again gave in to her kindness as he invited her inside.

"I should write my report about Ist," Ein said. In the meantime, Belia began

pouring a cup of tea.

He took out a piece of parchment from his desk. All the while, the lovely aroma of tea wafted throughout the room, soothing his soul.

“Here you are,” she said, placing a hot cup of tea on his desk.

As she glanced his way, her eyes widened in astonishment. “That’s...”

She noticed Laviola’s magic stone sitting in the corner of Ein’s desk, and she couldn’t tear her eyes from it. It looked as though she was unable to believe her eyes; in any case, it was clear that Belia had lost her composure from seeing that stone.

“How... Why...” she managed to gasp in confusion.

Her lips trembled weakly as she slowly inched back. *Why does she look surprised? Is it because the magic stone is just lying there?* That couldn’t be the case. It wasn’t odd for Ein to have magic stones sitting on his desk.

“Is something wrong?” the crown prince inquired.

“It’s a very, very beautiful magic stone,” Belia murmured. “Where did you purchase it?”

She regained her composure and her usual gentle demeanor. However, one could tell from the slight wavering of her pupils that she still carried tension in her body. There was no way Ein could just brush this aside and nod agreeably. As the crown prince pondered over what to say, Belia narrowed her eyes and smiled. She proceeded to tilt her head to the side, as if to ask, “Is anything wrong?” but Ein’s suspicions remained.

“Do you know about this stone?” he asked without answering her question. He gazed down at the stone.

At the very least, it was alarming if Belia knew that this magic stone once belonged to Laviola. The elven chief had held on to it for many years. The maid inhaled deeply; Belia had served Queen Lalalua and the castle for decades. Naturally, she wasn’t just a skilled servant but highly intelligent as well. She had great conversational skills, but all of that had seemingly dissipated. She could only offer a troubled gaze.

“Belia, do you *know* about this stone?” Ein asked once more, gazing down. He placed Laviola’s magic stone in the palm of his hand.

“Perhaps I’d seen a jewel very similar to that hue at a store somewhere,” Belia replied.

“Did you visit that store with my grandmother?”

“That’s correct. I occasionally visit the castle district with Her Majesty, so I must’ve seen it during one of these excursions.”

Despite the pressure that Ein exerted, Belia smiled. This exchange seemed nothing out of the ordinary at a glance, but the crown prince was bothered by Belia’s demeanor. It was as though he’d missed something very important all along, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that *something* had escaped his notice. Usually, Ein would just let this slide with a brief “I see...” and think no further of it. He knew that Lalalua would often go shopping with Belia in tow; it wasn’t odd to visit a jewelry shop with the queen.

“Is that so...” Ein finally replied languidly.

Still, he was unable to tear his eyes away from the magic stone in his hand. Clearly, something was bothering him, and a torrent of questions and answers continued to swirl in his mind.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I must return to his side,” Belia said. It was unusual for her to press an issue.

But who could blame this dedicated maid for her eager desire to return to Warren’s side? After all, the chancellor was in a dangerous condition. But Ein’s mind kept racing, his senses sharper than usual as he lost himself in his thoughts. *Speaking of...* Belia’s dedication to Warren rang a bell. The two had apparently been in a relationship before. Martha had mentioned that the day Loran, Leonardo, and Butz visited the castle.

“Your Highness? Is something the matter?” Belia asked as the crown prince quietly stood up and faced out the window.

*I’ve heard a similar story before.*

“When I went to Syth Mill, the chief told me,” Ein started.

“Pardon? I’m completely lost...” Belia replied.

The elven chief had told Ein of the history of Ishtarica’s founding, as well as the existence of an important duo.

*“The gentleman who arrived to retrieve me was a friend of the first king. He developed many of our laws. The other attendant was Laviola’s maid and she remained by her side at all times,”* the chief had said.

Indeed, a pair had played a vital role in the lives of King Jayle and Consort Laviola, loyally serving the Ishtarican royal family. Oddly enough, once Ein started fitting the pieces together, more of the puzzle elegantly fell into place. He thought back to the story that Oz had once told him. It was easy to link it together when the professor had been gravely injured alongside Warren.

*“There was once a peculiar species, one that followed a woman whom they referred to as their chief. A trio of excellent subordinates worked under her: a passionate researcher, a superb spearman, and an immensely intelligent strategist.”*

The professor’s telling of the tale was so superb, Ein had managed to retain even the smallest details of the story.

*“The strategist had a different reason. He’d fallen in love with the queen of an allied species. His conquest of love would never reach fruition, of course. But even so, the man decided to remain by the queen’s side and watch over her.”*

These all seemed to connect together. If the man who’d developed Ishtarica’s laws was to be the strategist Oz mentioned, this man had fallen for Queen Laviola von Ishtarica. *And Warren has a magic stone. If he was the gentleman red fox, then could Belia be his red fox friend from childhood?* This theory actually held water.

*“There was another brokenhearted person in this relationship—his childhood friend. The little girl had grown into a lady and knew that her love would be unrequited, but she decided to stay with him anyway.”*

The chain of information linked itself together.

“Ha ha, I see,” Ein chuckled. “This seems a bit too convenient.”

His wry smile was aimed at his own hypothesis, but this was no laughing matter. Another question popped up in his mind. Why did Oz know about this story? The crown prince had done a good chunk of research himself and looked into any documents related to the red foxes, but were there more texts out there relating to the foxes? Indeed, the story that Oz had told never explicitly mentioned the red foxes; perhaps Ein had missed documents that subtly hinted at the species. He couldn't find an answer, and he currently didn't have the time to carefully mull it over.

"Belia," Ein said. He had mixed emotions about this revelation; this was completely out of the realm of reality. He'd lived with her this entire time, but he never imagined that she would be of topical importance to this subject. "I'm sorry to keep you. Can I ask you one more question?"

"Certainly. What might it be?" the maid replied.

Her gaze didn't carry a hint of worry as she obediently waited for the crown prince's words. The air around Ein suddenly transformed, exerting the royal family's overwhelming pressure. Surely, even Warren would have gasped in surprise.

"Under the name of Ein von Ishtarica, I hereby issue the royal family's absolute royal edict. I command that you not lie while answering the questions I'm about to ask. You must swear that you speak only of the truth."

The powerful aura caused Belia present to gulp nervously.

"Your...Highness?" Belia asked, completely astonished.

She hadn't expected this to happen, and tried to quickly quell the crown prince. She did her best to react, but Ein spoke first, vocalizing his thoughts.

"Belia, who was the first princess you ever served? Please tell me," Ein said.

His words landed a fatal blow on the maid. At once, her arms hung limply by her sides as though she'd lost all her strength. She gazed at the ground while glancing at the desk.

"I..." Belia said, struggling to provide a clear answer.

Ein decided to change his question. "The former royal capital. You and

Warren accompanied Consort Laviola to the royal family's original burial grounds, correct?"

The crown prince knew everything. Belia couldn't lie when faced with his gaze, and she never planned on going against the royal edict.

"We...did," Belia confessed.

The emotions that Ein felt were the most complicated yet. He hadn't felt this confused since he'd been reincarnated into this world. Thanks to Belia's confirmation, Ein felt satisfied to know that the gears of his hunch perfectly meshed together. Simultaneously, he had no idea where to direct his anger. This perplexed mindset made him most displeased.

"I see," Ein said. His reply was simple, but he just didn't have it in him to worry about anything else right now. "You were serving the owner of this magic stone, weren't you?"

It was an extremely roundabout question. Perhaps he should've just asked if Belia was a red fox, but he didn't have the courage to say it. He felt sweat form on his brow, and he felt the palm of his hand grow clammy as he held the stone. He wanted to pretend that he hadn't heard a thing and head to bed. He was tempted to just flee, but he deeply inhaled and steadied himself.

"Yes, I used to serve Consort Laviola," Belia replied.

Chancellor Warren and Head Servant Belia were the two red foxes that the elven chief had referred to.

"Why..." Ein started.

Why didn't they tell him? Why didn't they speak of Demon Lord Arshay and the existence of the red foxes looming in the shadows? Ein only had more questions.

"Y-Your Highness, Warren and I are..." Belia started.

"Are what?" Ein inquired.

His query was curt, but it wasn't just filled with rage. It was clear that he'd lost his cool, but his cold and piercing gaze didn't cause Belia to falter.

"I beg for your forgiveness," she said. "We couldn't tell you for a reason."

Ein felt irritated, like a man who was starving and deprived of food. It was annoying that the room he was in was warm. It was annoying that he was a little tired. It was annoying to hear Belia's excuses. Everything felt annoying to him at that moment.

The chief had mentioned that the pair weren't enemies and had taken important posts since the country's founding. There was no reason to doubt those words. The fact that Marco didn't see them as enemies was enough proof of this. Even so, Ein wanted an answer. Was Belia's reason so important that she had to keep everything a secret until now? Amid his annoyance, he felt shock and grief.

It was then that he noticed a warmth that he'd felt in Syth Mill—the power of Laviola's magic stone was flowing into his body. The gentle warmth seemed to beg for Ein to forgive the elderly maid.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. The tense fog vanished in an instant as he noticed his strength leave his body.

"Yes?" Ein answered.

The door opened, and Silverd emerged. "I passed by your room, but it sounded like it was getting noisy, so I decided to drop by. But I'm surprised to see you here, Belia." The king was astute at picking up subtle changes in one's demeanor; he was especially so when it came to those close to him. "Surely I've got the right to ask. Ein, you'll tell me, won't you?"

From beyond the open door, Lloyd gazed at the scene in worry. Clearly, he wasn't sure if he should enter the room or not, but the door quietly closed behind the king.

"To tell you the truth, I'm actually waiting for an explanation myself," Ein replied.

"You? Asked for an explanation? From Belia?" Silverd inquired.

"Correct. But I'm a little tired. I'd like to ease my nerves. I'm very sorry, but I think I should go out once to cool my head."

If he was being honest, he wanted to hear everything immediately. But Ein very much knew that he couldn't maintain his composure, and decided to leave



for a short while. As Silverd tried to stand in between them, the crown prince headed past the king and reached for the door.

“Belia,” Ein said.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

Not once did the crown prince turn around. “Please give my grandfather a brief explanation. I’d like to hear all about it later.”

How should one be on guard? Should there be someone to look after the two? Ein couldn’t come to the right answer, and he was unsure if he could simply let Warren and Belia be.

As the crown prince gripped the doorknob, Silverd said “Ein, I shall be waiting for you at the back of the audience room tonight. Will you be able to join me? Based on the circumstances, I’ll bring Belia with me as well.”

Though it sounded like a request, it was more akin to an order. Ein obediently nodded; he wanted to hear Belia’s story as well.

“I understand,” he replied. “After dinner and a short break, I shall head there.”

“If you’d like to cool your head, why not drop by Katima’s lab?” Silverd suggested. “According to Martha, the room’s a mess and Katima’s in a state of panic.”

“I’m not sure if that’ll cool my head, but I’ll head that way.”

And so, the crown prince opened the door and left the room quietly without turning back. He gave a quick bow to Lloyd and walked down the corridor. As he sluggishly walked towards Katima’s lab, Ein felt as if he weren’t the one moving his legs.

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If Martha was raising a stink about it, Katima’s room was undoubtedly a mess. However, Ein’s aunt had easily exceeded Ein’s expectations.

“Mrow?! Who goes there?! I’m busy, can’t mew see?! Oh, it’s you, Ein!”

It looked like a war zone. “Messy” didn’t even begin to describe the sorry

state of the first princess's room. Her massive bookcases lay toppled on the floor with their books spread out everywhere, and a vibrant smoke rose from a few of the magical research tools nearby.

"What's going on? Did you get in a fight with someone?" Ein inquired.

Katima popped out from within the mess. The only issue he had was with her annoyingly confident expression.

"Heh... I suppaws I've been battling with our world's greatest secrets..." she answered coolly.

"Huh?" Ein asked.

"I'm kidding! Just pulling your paw! I heard things went well in Ist. Krone and Chris came to report back to me meowments ago." She leaned back and asked, "So? Why are mew here?"

"I heard that your room was a mess, so I came to tease you."

"You're a meowgnificent nephew." She let out an exasperated sigh and emerged from the mountain of clutter. She had dust caked around her waist and used a handkerchief to clean herself up. "Well, mew came at the pawfect time. Here."

She approached her desk and grabbed an envelope. The princess swung her arms and threw it at Ein; the envelope landed in his hands with a dull crinkle.

"What's this?" Ein asked.

"Infurr-mation compiled by a genius Cait-Sìth, her brilliance second to none within the long hiss-tory of Ishtarica. That's why the room got torn apart, I tell mew. It happened a short while ago."

"Wait, you had friends like that? You should've told me."

"I'm talking about myself of course! Mroooow!"

His honest question was answered and he nodded in agreement. "So, what's this information on?"

"Hmph! Why don't mew just take a look!"

Katima would usually put on an annoyingly triumphant expression and explain

herself, but she wearily took a seat and implored her nephew to peruse her findings.

“As a result, I have concluded that one of the samples is a half-beast. The second sample is likely a reptilian,” Ein read. It was written with specialized words that were difficult to understand. The crown prince wanted an explanation in layman’s terms. This was clearly some kind of inspection report, but it was filled with numerous findings he couldn’t parse out. He skipped it all and went straight to the conclusion.

“It’s all thanks to Warren’s subordinates bringing in the chimera,” Katima said. “I suppaws all of my questions have been answered.”

“I’m sorry, but what do you mean by ‘sample one’ and ‘sample two’?” Ein asked.

“I was curious about the magic stones inside of the chimeras. They clearly weren’t the stones of a rat or a rabbit, mew see. At furrst, I assumed that these were simply how chimeras were. But thanks to those specimens Warren brought back, I was able to research them to my heart’s content.”

“Aunt Katima, you mean...”

She sighed and approached him. “There were quite a few chimeras. So I asked meowself: how did they gather all those stones? They couldn’t have just bought a bunch of useless stones, right? It’s been confirmed that these were nonhuman stones. Mew, see, there’s a question researchers have been asking themselves since days of yore.”

She was referring to the Great War.

“Many, many soldiers must’ve fought in that hiss-torical war. However, we’ve never found most of the nonhuman warriors’ magic stones. Mew also claimed to find a magic stone in the depths of the shrine in Syth Mill, right? Surely, that means that *someone* must’ve gathered them all there. But the number that mew saw wasn’t nearly enough. In other words, someone else had been gathering magic stones this entire time.” Katima showed an expression of clear discontent, her voice trembling with rage. “I’ll be furrank. The chimeras’ magic stones were once the stones of the nonhumans who fell in the Grrreat War.”

Today was full of surprises. Ein had just returned from Ist, and his head was ready to explode from the amount of information. He gazed at the unusually angry Katima as he scratched his head.

“No wonder this lab is a mess. You couldn’t suppress your rage, huh?” Ein said, glancing at the room that was in shambles.

“Mrow, well, that’s not the only reason. But I can’t deny that this room’s untidy.”

The princess slowly sat on the ground and gazed at one of the cabinets that lined her walls. Ein followed her gaze and stared at the furniture. Unlike the other cabinets in the room, this one was lavish and looked more expensive than the rest. On the floor in front of it lay clear cases filled with their own jumbled messes. He could clearly see the disorderly state that unfolded before him. Several magic stones were scattered on the floor, and some were even destroyed. Some of these precious stones also looked to be cracked, but Ein was too afraid to ask about them.

“How did this even happen? Were you just too absorbed in your research?” Ein inquired.

“Nope,” Katima replied. “I maaay have pawsibly pushed the limits of a couple machines, and it sort of went a tiny bit wild.”

*I see.* The room didn’t look like something had gone just a *tiny* bit wild, but Ein didn’t press the issue.

“I’ve had enough. I’m gonna hit the bath and take a catnap.”

“But it’s still light outside,” Ein remarked.

“Be quiet! Mew heard me! I’ll be catching a few Z’s! Good night!”

Katima had become completely defiant. She dove into the ground and rolled around. She wasn’t acting anything like a princess, but a smile spilled from Ein’s lips. It was the change of pace he needed to cool his head—unexpectedly so. He never said it out loud, but silently thanked his frisky, no-good cat of an aunt.

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As night fell upon Kingsland, Ein walked into the audience room as promised.

The quiet sound of his muffled footsteps across the plush carpet echoed loudly within the deathly silent room. In fact, the sound of his steps even bounced across the room's stone walls. *What's the correct answer in this situation?* Ein wondered as he neared the meeting room at the back. He asked Misty and Ramza within his body. Perhaps Marco also lived within the boy, but he wasn't sure. Unfortunately, the lack of an answer left Ein unsure if his query was ever heard.

Since he wanted to talk, he figured that a response wouldn't hurt. In fact, Ein was now tempted to complain a little. *Wait, Misty and Ramza must've known who Belia and Warren were.* The union of all these magic stones caused old faces to gather around once more, and he laughed dryly at this rare reunion.

He stood in front of the small room's door and gently knocked on it.

"Ein," Silverd called from within. "I've been waiting for you."

The crown prince slapped his cheeks once before entering. As he'd expected, Belia was already seated inside.

"Your Highness, please enjoy a cup," Belia said, handing the crown prince a cup of tea.

He clearly looked nervous and was acting reserved, but he felt much calmer than he was earlier. It seemed some time away had done him well. He sat in front of Silverd and obediently took the tea. Belia smiled, her lips curling up as she seemed relieved that her tea had been accepted.

"I thought Lloyd would be here too, grandfather," Ein said.

"I understand your implications," Silverd replied. "The elf chief may have stated that Belia and Warren aren't enemies, but you find it best to be alert."

"That's right."

"But I have decided to trust what I've seen and experienced throughout my life. I want to trust in the results that Warren and Belia have brought me until now."

Even so, Ein was worried. At the very least, Lloyd should've been waiting outside of the audience room.

“Ein, I’ve heard that you’ve issued a royal edict,” Silverd continued. “Is this true?”

“It is,” the crown prince replied. “If there are any issues, I’m prepared for the consequences.”

“I cannot deem your use of the edict to be unsatisfactory in this situation. There’ll be no punishment for you. And I’ve heard that Belia obeyed your edict. That would make her a citizen of Ishtarica, without a shred of doubt.” Silverd maintained his stance regarding the pair. “Should anything happen, you’ll be by my side, Ein. I know my words may sound a touch reckless, but as long as you’re here, I can remain confident in them. I’m always relying on you.”

*That really is reckless. I wish you didn’t dote over your grandson in such a situation,* Ein thought. But he held his tongue and shifted topics.

“So, how much do you know?” he asked.

“I know what species they hail from,” Silverd answered. “But I was told that explaining it all would take quite a while, so I’ve been waiting until now.”

“I see. Then I’d like to listen too.”

He glanced at Belia, and the maid cleared her throat. The air was still tense, but Ein and Silverd patiently waited for her to start.

“I’d like to first state that both Warren and I have lost a part of our memories, much like Sir Marco,” Belia said.

“I’m sorry,” Ein interrupted. “I have no idea what you’re on about.”

“Did you not find it odd that Sir Marco hadn’t told you much about his past? Surely, this was a curious decision.”

Ein could only agree. In fact, he had secretly been annoyed by how Marco hadn’t told him about it during their initial meeting. The crown prince nodded.

“When the red fox chief cursed the three of us, we all lost some of our memories.” Ein jolted, but Belia continued, “Additionally, the Curse of Solitude drove Her Majesty Arshay mad. She must’ve hated that we refused her orders. Before we knew it, Warren and I were under the curse as well. Luckily for us, we weren’t as affected by it as Sir Marco had been.”

Hence, they didn't die nor did they lose their sanity. However, they couldn't avoid the theft of their memories.

"I'm terribly sorry for my insolence, but could you enlighten me on exactly what the elven chief had told you?" Belia inquired.

"I was told about the Wernsteins," Ein replied. "I was also informed about what had occurred in the royal burial grounds."

Silverd looked perplexed, unsure of why the Wernsteins had been brought up here.

"Your Majesty, please allow me to share what the elven chief had told His Highness," Belia started.

"Belia! You can't!" Ein cried.

"I know. I'm fully aware of Consort Laviola's wishes and the elven chief's desires. Even so, we cannot keep this a secret from His Majesty any longer."

And so, Belia spoke of the secret. Ein had heard almost all of it back in Syth Mill, but the story was simply told from the maid's point of view. He wasn't sure if Belia had truly lost all her memories or had kept some details vague, but she practically said exactly the same things as the elven chief had.

"I was never blessed with the opportunity to meet with Prince Wilfried, but I've been told that he'd lived a splendid life," Belia explained.

Silverd turned limp, as though he was unable to fathom Chris's intimate ties to the royal family. He turned to Ein for help, but the crown prince only gave a firm nod of agreement.

"I can't believe this..." the king murmured.

He'd been shocked when Ein told him about what happened at the Demon Castle, but this new revelation absolutely blew his mind. Silverd couldn't have possibly imagined that one of his loyal subjects was a royal herself, that blood running thicker through her veins than his. He wasn't even aware of Wilfried's existence until now. With Silverd and Ein now on the same page, Belia could scratch at the heart of the issue. She started with why she had kept this all a secret until now.

“King Jayle’s orders kept us from saying a thing,” she started. “His Majesty had kept his birth in the former royal capital—I mean the Demon Lord’s former territory, a secret. He did so to avoid confusion among Ishtarica’s citizens and protect the nation.”

When the nations were first unified, their relationships with neighboring nations were fragile and could easily shatter. Combined with the Demon Lord’s rampage, any publicization of Jayle’s true birthplace could topple the family that unified these nations in the first place.

“In other words, the two of you kept the first king’s feelings in mind...and resolved to keep this a secret,” Silverd concluded.

When considering Ishtarica’s culture, perhaps that was the right decision. Belia hadn’t finished explaining herself, but Ein was already beginning to understand her reasoning.

“That’s one reason. But there’s actually another that prevented us from speaking of this,” Belia said. She placed her hands in front of her chest like she was praying and took deep breaths. “A few red foxes can completely change their appearances, as though they’ve been reborn as another person. Both Warren and I have prized this power above anything else, and it was that power that allowed us to continue serving Ishtarica.”

She glanced at the national flag that decorated the room. “We first served King Jayle and helped him found the Unified Nations of Ishtarica. Since then, we’ve served the country. Even to this day, we’ve served under you during your peaceful reign, King Silverd. Sometimes, we’d receive a title. Warren and I were never able to conceive a child, but we adopted a girl and raised her as our own—we lived as a family.”

“What kind of noble were you?” Silverd inquired.

Ein could see a flicker of nostalgia in Belia’s eyes as her voice softened, like a mother doting on her child. “We lived in an average household, one of a baron. It was an old and common title, so it hasn’t continued, but my daughter’s bloodline still continues.” Ein and Silverd stared intently, encouraging her to continue. “My daughter married a certain knight with a strong sense of justice. That valiant man is a duke these days. She actually serves by your side to this



very day, Your Majesty.”

Belia said nothing more, but it wasn't difficult to put two and two together. Silverd sank deeper into his sofa and placed a hand over his forehead while staring up at the ceiling. He couldn't have possibly expected any of this, and he was stunned by this whirlwind of truths that'd blown his mind.

“Now then, I suppose we should get back on track,” Belia said. “Warren and I used our abilities, occasionally giving advice openly or from the shadows. The decades turned into centuries as we continued to serve Ishtarica. However, we weren't aware of the drawbacks that came with shifting shapes.” Her voice had a tone of regret. “It was as though we'd lost ourselves and were forced to live new lives. Shifting our shapes must've been more akin to a rebirth. Instead of the memory loss that came with the curse, a shift felt like we were losing fragments of our recollections along the way. Those who still obey the red fox chief are likely doing well. They haven't been affected by the curse, so surely, they have their old memories as well.”

“I see...” Silverd mused.

“Once we realized that we'd lost our memories, it was already too late. We should've jotted down everything we could in our journals. I've long regretted the fact I hadn't done it more than once. We can't even remember Her Majesty Arshay's face anymore.” Belia pursed her lips, looking more sorrowful than ever. “And then, Princess Katima found Prince Wilfried's book, and Dame Christina translated it. Warren and I agonized over the best course of action. We wondered if we should tell you the truth, Your Majesty. We weren't sure if we could divulge our secrets to you.”

However, they couldn't do that.

“Perhaps it was irresponsible, maybe even disloyal on our part. In any case, we couldn't provide any insights into Prince Wilfried's observations. And so, we chose to keep our promise to King Jayle. We understood his fears very well, and we vowed to keep it all a secret.”

Her logic was sound. If she couldn't say anything useful, Belia thought it best to stay silent. However, Ein couldn't deny that her decision was irresponsible. Even if they sought to keep their promise to Jayle, Ein wanted to get his hands

on any information he could find. He found himself no longer skeptical of Belia's actions, but felt as if he had a gaping hole in his heart.

"If that's the case, then why was Chris sent to face the Sea Dragon?" Ein asked. At the very least, the prince's red fox allies hadn't lost their memories regarding the Wernstein bloodline.

"I..." Belia started.

"Ein," Silverd interrupted to shield the maid. "You're barking up the wrong tree. No matter the reason, I gave the final seal of approval. Additionally, all of our nobles had voted in favor of sending Chris to Magna."

"But—" Ein started.

"You're more emotional than usual, I see. I know what you want to say, but if we were to remove her royal lineage from the equation, Chris is a knight. Regardless of her social standing, we cannot disregard her status as a commander, and one who ranks just below our marshal no less. And..." Silverd paused and took a deep breath before dropping a bombshell on Ein. "Warren was actually against dispatching Chris."

Stunned, Ein jumped out of his chair. "I've never heard anything of the sort before!"

"But of course. We didn't have the opportunity to fill you in on the finer details of that meeting. Not to mention that you leaped into action before we had the chance to speak. In fact, you bested Lloyd and raced straight to Magna."

The crown prince gulped, unable to refute his grandfather's claims.

"Warren suggested we dispatch the royal vessels to form a defensive line. He dismissed the cost of losing an entire fleet, putting his focus on the safety of Chris and her knights. However, this would've meant that our armada would be crippled for decades to follow, as would our navy. Many of our nobles were against Warren's plan of action."

Ein was confused. If this was all true, it sounded like Warren had done his best to protect Chris.

“Back then, I did indeed believe it to be a reckless plan for a man as cautious as Warren,” Silverd continued. “But now, I understand. It’s no wonder; he was trying to protect Chris.”

Warren couldn’t vocally express his dissent, but he’d attempted to shield Chris from falling into a watery grave. However, the chancellor couldn’t always have his way. His suggestions would be occasionally overruled, and during a situation as minacious as the Sea Dragon attack on Magna, he couldn’t take full control of the operation.

“Truthfully, Your Majesty, I wanted to share all the details of my meeting with King Jayle,” Belia said. “Unfortunately, my memories of that are gone. Luckily, Warren remembers a bit more than I do. Before you cast judgment on us, I implore you to wait until he wakes up, Your Majesty.”

She stood up and lowered her head. The royals wanted to learn more, but if Belia’s words were to be trusted, she couldn’t fill in the blanks. Ein couldn’t figure out how to proceed in this situation.

“Very well,” Silverd replied. “I order you to remain by Warren’s side. We will be watching you, is that clear?”

Given what he’d just heard, Silverd might’ve been a touch easy on the pair. However, he knew that they’d faithfully served Ishtaria for centuries now. The king couldn’t bring himself to dole out a harsh punishment.

“I thank you for your benevolence, Your Majesty,” Belia said, large beads of tears spilling from her eyes.

“I don’t mind if you keep it vague, but are you unable to enlighten us a bit more?” Silverd asked.

“If you so desire, I shall tell you everything, of course. However, I’d like to warn you that my story may become inconsistent and incoherent. Frankly, I fear I might end up spouting nonsense.”

Silverd sighed with resignation. It sounded like he’d only become more confused.

“Very well,” he said. “When that cunning old fox wakes up, I’ll be sure to ask him a few questions.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Belia replied. “If possible, I would’ve liked to tell you of our journey to unify the nations and a myriad of other tales.”

*Awesome. I wanna hear about stuff like that.* Ein was dying to hear more details, but knew that he wasn’t able to. In a daze, the prince gulped down his now-cold cup of tea and gazed at the nighttime scenery from a nearby window.

As it was becoming quite late, the trio decided to call it a night. They’d only be able to pick up their conversation once Warren regained consciousness.

In the meantime, Ein and Silverd prayed that Heim would refrain from rocking the boat, but those prayers were in vain. Two days later, they learned that Heim had launched their invasion of Rockdam.

## Chapter Eight: The Beginning of War

Locked in the dead of winter, Kingsland's land port remained cold as ever. Under the frigid skies, roaring knights could be heard standing beside a docked warship.

"Oh, come on! We don't have enough materials! What the hell are you doing?!"

"Head inside! We're leaving soon!"

These knights weren't just from Kingsland, but from all over Ishtarica. Some of them were even veterans accustomed to fighting their region's monsters. When all put together, one would quickly notice that a legion of experienced fighters had been assembled.

"Ha ha ha!" the marshal laughed. "I'm glad to see that everyone's so energetic!"

"Father, perhaps we should take this a little more seriously..." his son said.

"No need for that! Rather than shaking in our boots, it's better for us to be loud and boisterous! That way, we won't be so gloomy!"

The Graciers stood beside the din and clamor of assembling soldiers.

"Good grief..." Dill said. "How can you be so bouncy despite the fact we're sailing into a war zone?"

"Surely you know about morale," Lloyd replied. "There's nothing more important than that."

"I'm referring to the exuberance coming off you... Ugh... Never mind." Dill gave a look of resignation in front of his oddly fired-up father.

"And where's Martha?"

"She's off attending to her duties in the castle. Her eyes are looking a touch red though."

“I see...”

Dill also gave a melancholic gaze at the ocean. “It’s been five days since Heim invaded Rockdam. Their capital has been besieged, and it’s only a matter of time before their nation falls. I suppose this is where we must act.”

“Precisely. Sir Warren is still unconscious, so our actions have been delayed. However, it’s not too late just yet. We must drive Heim out of Rockdam, then march for Bardland. After that, we simply need to invade Roundheart and settle things.”

This was but only one factor in Ishtarica’s decision to finally mobilize its troops. Such a ploy would normally be unpopular among most citizens, but Heim had given the military another excuse to act.

“I never expected them to capture Euro after it was deserted,” Dill remarked.

“But this is very convenient for us,” Lloyd replied. “It’s the best reason we have.”

When Prince Amur and his people were rescued, Euro had been left as nothing more than an empty husk. Heim’s occupation of Euro implied that they were looking to pick a fight with Ishtarica. This became the best excuse Ishtarica had to work with.

“Still, I wonder if there’s a reason they’d go this far,” Dill wondered. “Even if the foxes managed to manipulate the Demon Lord centuries ago, earning Ishtarica’s ire and their destruction in the process sounds absolutely meaningless to me.”

Even the debauched red foxes wouldn’t go on such a suicide mission.

“I agree, but the red foxes probably have different values than we do,” Lloyd replied. “For example, perhaps they have no intention of ruling anything. Perhaps they simply relish chaos and just want to stir the pot.”

Lloyd smiled, realizing his words were peculiarly similar to something the elven chief had once said.

“Perhaps the foxes’ chief has a goal in mind,” Lloyd said. “A motive that we would have no means of knowing, something only she is privy to.”

“Are you implying that she has a goal in mind, even if it means wiping out a kingdom that’s already under their thumb?” Dill asked.

“Indeed. No matter the reason, our goals won’t change. We’ll take her head.”

The roar of the knights reached their ears.

“We’ll defeat our enemy!”

“We’ll do it for Ishtarica!”

The Graciers recalled the past few days.

“His Majesty’s official notice stated that our enemy fled to Heim following the Great War and has been working from the shadows ever since,” Lloyd mused.

“I believe so,” Dill replied. “I think it was Sir Ein’s idea, but this wording avoids explicitly claiming that Demon Lord Arshay was manipulated. They haven’t said a word about the red foxes either.”

“Hmm... Indeed, it’s a bit too much to explain all at once. Along with what happened to Sir Warren and Professor Oz, there are some things that need to be kept quiet for now.”

Unlike Ein and Silverd, the Graciers didn’t have the full picture—especially the fact that Demon Lord Arshay had served as Ishtarica’s first monarch. However, they knew that the red foxes had manipulated Arshay. As such, the pair thought it was best to keep that matter a secret to prevent confusion among the citizens.

Additionally, a gag order kept Warren’s current condition under wraps. Only a select few within the castle knew he was out of commission. Needless to say, the chancellor’s absence greatly affected the nation’s productivity. The royals wanted to prevent other nations from discovering the news and avoid panic among their citizens. Oz was currently receiving treatment at a hospital near the castle, but that was also kept a secret.

“The people seem concerned, but many have been cross with Heim for a while now,” Dill said. “When combined with the kingdom’s recent acts, many have said it’s only natural for us to retaliate. His Majesty also claimed that the attack on Magna and Upaskamuy’s rampage in Barth were orchestrated by our

enemies from the Great War.”

“That’s most logical,” Lloyd agreed.

“We’ll be able to settle the score from many angles at once. It seems that quite a few people are eagerly watching on, as if they’re joining in on some sort of festivity.”

Lloyd’s cheeks twitched as he smiled awkwardly at the mention of any festivities. He scratched his freshly cut hair—a hairdo courtesy of his wife.

“Leave it all to me,” the marshal said. “It’s a shame that you can’t see me fight, Dill. However, I’ll take Sir Rogas’s head if it becomes necessary.”

“I believe in you, father. Now then, I shall return to Ein’s side. Why don’t you visit mother before you leave?”

“I parted ways with her yesterday. Asking to see her again after that would be quite greedy of me.”

“What kind of nonsense are you spouting? What will you do if you die on the battlefield? Stop being stubborn and go see her before you leave.”

“What?! H-Hey! Your father’s off to battle and you’re speaking as though I’m going to die!”

Lloyd grumpily poked Dill before he crossed his arms and turned away. Neither of the Graciers were serious, of course. The knights who walked past them didn’t find their banter to cross any line, and they smiled as they took in the wholesome scene of a father and his son.

“Enough! Go on! Sir Ein must be waiting for you!” Lloyd urged.

“I know, I know... I shall be off,” Dill replied.

They joked around until the very end, and the young Gracier had a large smile on his face as he turned to join his master’s side. They each had their own duties to fulfill, and so, Dill would remain by Ein’s side.

“Ah, before I go, father,” Dill said, “I believe mother is confirming your ship’s cargo.”

“The warship I’ll be on?” Lloyd asked.



“That’s right. I wish you the best of luck, father.”

Lloyd kept his back turned, but raised his hand in response to his son’s well wishes.

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While the knights set off from the main street, Silverd had started his address to the people of Ishtarica. Ein and Krone were waiting in a nearby carriage.

“And so, Ishtarica must settle the score with Heim and our enemies of yore!” Silverd’s booming voice echoed throughout the city. “Today, our heroes prepare to leave Magna’s port and claim victory!”

Inside the carriage, Ein could hear the citizens cheering every now and then.

“I can’t help but think, ‘if only Sir Warren were here with us,’ but I suppose that’s showing you some insolence, Ein,” Krone said.

Her heartfelt words implied that she knew the true identities of Warren and Belia. Everyone close to Ein knew about the pair, including the royal family, House Gracier, Krone, and Chris. Needless to say, they were all shocked by the news, but upon hearing Belia’s reasoning, they decided to accept the two red foxes.

“I know that those red foxes aren’t evil,” Ein said. “But I guess I need time to wrap my head around it all. I love both of them very much, and I’ve been worried about Warren’s condition. Still, I might need some time to process the truth.”

“No one can blame you for that,” Krone replied. “Truth be told, I can’t say that I’m able to maintain my composure through it all.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

He was truly grateful for her thoughtful words. It was then that the door of the carriage suddenly opened and Silverd stepped inside.

“Ein, how was my speech?” he asked.

“I think it was very fitting for you,” Ein replied. “You definitely have the dignity of a king.”

“Heh heh. I do, don’t I?”

Silverd smiled happily as he was praised by his grandson, and large beads of sweat appeared on his brow. It was still rather chilly outside, but it was clear that his speech had enveloped the king in a fiery passion. He grabbed the towel within the carriage and wiped his forehead and neck. A steam whistle rang shrilly from the port.

“Now that my speech has concluded, the fleet has mobilized,” Silverd said. “Let us return to the castle and pray for their safety.”

Ein nodded as he gazed at the fleet in the distance. He prayed for Lloyd and the other soldiers to return home safely. However, his mind was still dominated by his strange ties to the red foxes—he couldn’t find it in himself to express these complicated feelings.



## Chapter Nine: The Ones Who Made It Ashore

By the time night rolled around, a sprinkling of rain descended from above to cool a squad of weary warriors. Fighting since dawn, Rockdam's knights had much of their stamina chipped away from the prolonged battle. Some of them had even lost their will to live, psychologically worn down by Heim's brutal, days-long assault. Most of Rockdam's border and farmland had been occupied, and the royal capital's walls were about to cave in. These warriors expected a flood of Heims to come marching in, but one of the castle's knights noticed something odd swirling in the sea.

"Hey, wake up," the knight called.

"Give me a break," another replied. "Those barbaric Heims have finally shoved off. Let me rest before they attack again tomorrow. You should probably pray to God or something before you get wrapped up in trivial nonsense."

"C-Come on! Just look! Get up!"

Confusion won over exhaustion, and the knight dragged their ally to his feet. The ally looked annoyed as he gazed at the sea, but he noticed the oddity as well. As the view became clearer and clearer, the knight cried in surprise.

"A-Ahhh! Giants! Giants are coming from the sea!"

A fleet of twelve unfathomably massive shadows descended from the horizon, and they were headed straight for Rockdam's royal capital. The sight was unlike anything the knights had ever seen before, and the overwhelming aura emanated by this fleet was filled with determination. Moments later, a roaring impact was quickly followed up by a shock wave and a howl that rivaled the cries of a colossal monster. The booming explosion tempted others to cover their ears.

Just then, there was a blinding flash of light that was seared into the knight's minds. Had they been attacked? What had just occurred? The knights whirled

around to check on their castle, but they discovered it unscathed. Clearly, Rockdam's royal capital was safe, but they couldn't understand what just happened as confusion filled their faces.

"Hey! Look over there! There's smoke!" one of the knights shouted, noticing a series of billowing puffs right outside the castle gates.

Despite the time of night, the smoke still stood out in the darkening sky.

"Outside of the castle gates? Is Heim under attack?!" a knight asked.

"Someone! Call the general! Hurry!" another shouted.

With all hands on deck, Rockdam scurried to action as a sliver of hope emerged within their hearts.

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Rockdam's knight had just seen a light show courtesy of Ishtarica's fleet, freshly set off from Kingsland and ready to fire upon their enemy without warning.

"Marshal, the blast made contact," a knight reported back, notifying Lloyd of their successful barrage.

Lloyd smiled with satisfaction. "We fired right as things were calming down. No doubt they're surprised and afraid. My valiant comrades! This is the best opportunity we'll ever have! We'll hit the shore and attack our enemies on foot!"

As the marshal sent a few Knights Guard members towards the bridge's door, his voice boomed through the cabin.

"If Sir Rogas also happened to die, it would make our job a lot easier...but I suppose it won't be so convenient," Lloyd muttered.

He hoped for a lucky break, but it was difficult to imagine the general resting behind enemy lines. Lloyd flashed himself a mocking smile for his hopeless optimism. On the other hand, his knights showered him with praise. Even if they were showered with sweat from finishing their preparations.

"Sir Lloyd, our attack has hit, it seems!"

“The sounds of the explosion were magnificent!”

“They’re tired from battle! No doubt our attack did a number on them!” Lloyd bellowed as he took large strides to leave. The knights followed him from behind.

The marshal loudly barked his orders into a magical tool used for communication. “Notify all ships! Prepare the sorcery weapons out front! We’ll prepare for a land war! We Ishtaricans will take over this battlefield!” His booming voice was clearly understood. “Show no mercy! Bring home a victory for Ishtarica! Devour those Heim beasts! Crush them!”

His voice signaled the beginning of the battle.

Unfortunately, Rockdam’s port was too small to welcome Ishtarica’s entire fleet. And so, the warships docked in separate ports. The bow of each ship split wide open, and the knights got to work unloading massive sorcery weapons. Rockdam’s men were caught off guard, jolted awake by the Ishtaricans’ sudden appearance. Surely exhausted from the battle with Heim, many of the knights worriedly watched from afar, their swords at the ready in case they’d need to fight.

“I do feel a little ashamed about this,” Lloyd said.

To the exhausted Rockdam knights, Ishtarica’s warships only struck fear in their minds. The marshal looked guilty as he stepped onto Rockdam’s soil.

“What shall we do, Sir Lloyd?” one of the Knights Guard members inquired.

“We decided to dock our ship in Rockdam without warning,” Lloyd replied. “And because of that, we must apologize and show them our manners. Ah, the commander’s heading this way.”

Lloyd could see a lone knight off in the distance, rushing towards the port on horseback. He looked to be just shy of his forties, and his equipment stood out from the other knights. A large scar ran across one of his eyes, making it clear that this commander had seen his fair share of war. Lloyd raised one arm, sending a signal to the other knights.

Without another word and many loud footsteps, the knights aboard Lloyd’s boat lined up beautifully, faced forward, and froze in place. Rockdam’s

commander saw this act of respect and dismounted.

“My name is Lendl! I serve as the commander of the Republic of Rockdam’s military force! Unfortunately, we’re expecting guests tomorrow, and we haven’t time to welcome even more guests! I ask that you state your business and where you’re from!” He placed a hand over the greatsword slung across his back, ready for battle.

“Oho, your nation is blessed with an excellent commander indeed,” Lloyd said in admiration. Lendl looked undaunted in the face of Ishtarica’s might. “I beg for your forgiveness. I’m Lloyd Gracier, the marshal of the Unified Nations of Ishtarica. Due to an unfortunate string of events, we’ve arrived to lend you our aid. Let us fight alongside you, Rockdam.”

The moment Lloyd divulged his identity, the Ishtarican knights all unsheathed their swords in a display of respect and their eagerness to fight. The refined movements stole the attention of Rockdam’s exhausted citizens. In fact, many felt their knees buckle and fell to the ground upon hearing the word “Ishtarica.”

The Republic of Rockdam had regularly sent vessels to Ishtarica and carried a far greater understanding of the Unified Nations’ might than Heim ever did. Some had predicted Ishtarica’s arrival, but as the two nations held no ties, it was difficult to believe they would swoop in to assist an unaffiliated country.

“Once again, I ask that you forgive our insolence of being here without warning,” Lloyd said. “Allow us to oust these Heim savages.”

Lendl suspected that he faced the Ishtaricans and Lloyd would claim as such. But like his comrades, the commander couldn’t fathom why Ishtarica would go out of their way to offer assistance. Still cautious, Lendl silently and slowly approached Lloyd. The Knights Guard jolted in surprise and tried to protect their marshal, but Lloyd raised his hand.

“Stand back. Don’t do anything,” he ordered.

Lendl couldn’t process the Ishtaricans’ sudden appearance. He outstretched his hand with haggard breath, his eyes wavering and clinging to hope.

“If our home of Rockdam doesn’t fall to those barbarians, I’ll hope for nothing more,” Lendl said.

He stood before Lloyd, tossed his leather gloves aside, and offered his calloused hand. The two men exchanged a firm handshake.

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Rockdam was surrounded by tough, sturdy rocks that served as walls to protect the capital. Erected in ancient times, these walls were able to endure Heim's overwhelming ground assaults. However, the walls left the republic vulnerable to an invasion by sea.

As Rockdam periodically sent ships to Ishtarica, they kept their boats in top shape. Perhaps wary of that fact, Heim wanted to avoid a naval battle that would cost them their advantage and some of their tactical freedom.

"All ships have unloaded their sorcery weapons and our cavalry's horses," a Knights Guard member reported.

While walking above the walls, Lloyd asked, "How are the horses?"

"Some are nervous, but it shouldn't be much of an issue."

"That's good to hear. Then we shall advance towards Heim."

Lloyd planned on invading step by step, carefully wearing down his opponent. However, every step he took would certainly come swiftly.

"Sir Lloyd, may I ask you a question?" Lendl inquired.

"Of course. What's on your mind?" Lloyd replied.

"That blast of light from a while ago was Ishtarica's doing, correct? Is it not possible to use that attack and wipe out Heim in one go? Their forces are stationed right outside the castle walls, and their impressive numbers have allowed them to completely surround us. Your weapons would surely be able to destroy them instantaneously."

"Unfortunately, they're a touch out of range, and our first attack pushed our weapons to the limit," Lloyd replied. "They're not very effective against enemies at a distance. And so, we must march forward and close that gap."

As the closest warship, Lloyd's boat was the only one that could open fire. However, Heim's forces had taken themselves out of range with their hasty retreat.



“Sir Lendl, I apologize for my sudden visit, but I’d also like to meet with your head of state to offer my well wishes,” the marshal added.

“I’m terribly sorry, but that, you cannot do,” Lendl replied. Lloyd wondered if negotiations were necessary, but Rockdam’s commander hastily added, “I cannot say this to other nations so boldly, but our head of state feels psychologically cornered and is mentally unstable as a result. They’ve been trembling in their bed since morning, and they’re in no state to venture outside the confines of their room. I’m sorry.”

“A-Ah... I understand.”

Lloyd looked troubled, and the Knights Guard members behind him placed an exasperated hand over their foreheads. If the leader of a nation acted so cowardly, it would do no favors for the morale of their knights on the battlefield. Some of Lloyd’s knights started to pity those in the war zone.

“As you can see, Heim’s soldiers still remain,” Lendl said.

Lloyd and Lendl arrived at a hill that allowed them to look over the castle gates. Even though Ishtarica had launched a wide-angled strike, many of Heim’s men were still alive and stationed outside. Because of the soldiers’ vast network of camps, many of them had survived the initial blast.

“If we’re looking at their entire force, we should be able to push them back to Bardland within four days,” Lloyd observed. “There aren’t any troublesome chimeras or monsters present either.”

“Are you really going to launch an attack now?” Lendl asked. “The sun is already starting to set, and surely it’s inconvenient to fight in the dark.”

“The same could be said for our enemies. But we plan on establishing a camp before all of our daylight is gone.”

This remark touched on insanity. Lloyd had just claimed that they were not only going to chase out Heim’s forces from the area within the day, but they’d be setting up a base camp as well. Lendl’s jaw dropped to the floor, like a stupefied fish on a hook. Meanwhile, Lloyd called out to the Knights Guard.

“Surely, we’ve already carried our sorcery weapons to a location by the castle gates,” he said. “I’m sure the knights have finished their preparations as well. I

suppose we'll be going to war soon."

Rockdam's knights gingerly pried open the gates. The Ishtarican knights who were behind them stood tall, refined, and confident. None of them appeared to be feeling an ounce of fear. Rockdam's forces were reassured by this confidence, but opening the gates meant that they'd be defenseless. Still, they had no one left to rely on. Clinging to any kind of hope they could cling to, Rockdam's people prayed for the Ishtaricans' victory.

Heim's soldiers noticed the gates of Rockdam opening once more—a strange move for the exhausted nation.

"Hey! Aren't the gates opening?" one asked.

"Huh?! Wh-Why're they opening the gates?!" another Heim soldier asked.

Clearly, something was amiss. The general of Heim's forces quickly mounted on a horse and raced throughout the area, roaring out orders.

"Get into position! Hold your formations! The dead and the injured will be tended to later! Those with shields, step forward! Archers, stand behind them!"

If the enemy was going to charge forward, Heim simply needed to assume a defensive position. This was standard procedure and Heim's forces immediately got into formation. They weren't perfect, but they were enough of a threat to Rockdam. Once the gates fully opened, the Heims narrowed their eyes, eager to get a closer look at the view in front of them to gauge their situation. They were met with an unidentifiable object.

"What is that?" someone asked. "Is it a ballista or something?"

Composed of several tubes connected to a large cannon, this wide, pure-white machine resembled a giant crossbow. The Heim general had never seen anything like it before. In that moment, a sound enveloped in an overpowering pressure rumbled throughout the battlefield. The shaking ground only amplified the noise, putting Heim's soldiers on edge. Victory was on the horizon just mere minutes ago, but they were now wrapped up in a cloud of fear.

The deafening rumble continued to reverberate in the air as a legion of silver-clad warriors created another quake with the tips of their spears. An inexplicable aura seeped into the atmosphere, as if the air wavered in the

presence of these warriors. The Heim general felt a sense of dread strike the pit of their stomach.

“White knights...” they murmured.

Their new enemy moved so gracefully, as if these warriors made up a single creature. Disciplined—there was no other word to describe these graceful knights. Then all at once, the general realized who stood before them—the Ishtaricans. It was no wonder that their ballistas looked unfamiliar. About five hundred to six hundred meters away from the city, the Heims were easily out of the range of normal cannons. However, Ishtarica’s technological advancements were world-renowned.

“One of you, approach them,” the general ordered.

“At once!” one of the soldiers replied.

“Raise Heim’s flag in the air and approach their forces. Ask what their goals are.”

“Your wish is my command!”

The lone soldier rode their horse towards the Ishtarican forces. They waved the flag in the air and posed their question as a man emerged from a crowd of enormous horses. The man was a goliath in stature, perhaps on par with the monstrous horse he rode in on.

“Looks like that’s their commander,” a Heim general noted.

Moments later, their messenger raced back as though they were fleeing from death. It was crystal clear that something had gone wrong, and the Heim forces awaited for the messenger’s return. Just then...

“Huh? Is snow starting to fall?” the general wondered, reaching out to touch the flecks.

They were reminiscent of diamond dust as pale light danced in the air and glimmered. Only a moment later, the general would lose consciousness without being given time to process what had just occurred. Not once did they notice the light emitted from the cannon, and they had no idea why they’d been sent flying.

The men standing behind the Ishtaricans were at a loss for words. In the blink of an eye, a whole battalion of Heims was struck down. As the cannon's glimmer faded, Heim's shielders and those behind them had been reduced into a mass of flesh. One by one, they fell to the ground as fountains of blood left their bodies.

Did a cannon just go off? What the hell happened? It looked like Heim's front line had fallen, but how? All anyone could see was that glimmer of light before the front line was almost instantly crushed. How could one possibly start to comprehend what they'd seen? The Heim soldiers were locked in a state of shock and confusion from the loss of their commanding officer. On the other hand, the silver knights remained in formation and pressed forward.

"Rah!" the knights yelled, charging forward. It sounded like they were showering Heim with laughs of mockery.

The colossal ballista slowly inched forward as the knights once again struck the ground with their spears, like a grave omen. Heim had just lost their general, and even their second-in-command couldn't react in time.

The Heim soldiers screamed in terror, and the frontline warriors pushed past those behind them in an attempt to flee.

"Aaahhh!"

"They're attacking again! They won't let up!"

Slowly but surely, Heim's front line backed away, but the refined silver knights moved as a single organism, their aura making them seem larger than they appeared. Until just moments ago, Heim had thought of themselves as the apex predator. But now, the hunters had become the hunted, fleeing like scared animals—they weren't ready to be the prey.

"Retreat! Retreat! We don't know if our general is still alive or has been killed in action! We can't stay here!" the second-in-command finally ordered.

Their screaming cries were followed by a shrill whistle, signaling the forces to retreat.

Lloyd watched on as Heim's forces whipped around in a panic.

“Keep your eye on them,” he said to the Knights Guard. “This is what happens to the common soldier who loses their commander. Should I fall in battle, never forget the mission at hand. You must see your roles through to the end.”

“Yes, sir,” the knights replied.

Just as Heim’s forces finally started their retreat, the Ishtaricans pressed forward with their ballista.

“Rah!” the knights chanted once more, shaking the ground with the slamming of their spears.

This not only sent the message that Ishtarica stood on top, but served as a huge morale boost for its knights. After slowly trudging down the warpath, the knights made it to the site of the first ballista shot. A couple survivors remained, but they writhed in agony as they tried to stop their wounds from bleeding. They would die either way, but it seemed like their suffering had been prolonged.

“Cut them down,” Lloyd ordered.

No lives would be spared. Without hesitation, one of the marshal’s knights lopped off the heads of Heims in their path.

“It’s a bit of a pity to see them still clinging to life after getting hit by the Blast Bow,” a knight said, glancing at the huge weapon crawling up beside them. “We condense magic stone energy into cannonballs and let them rip. The final touch causes this ball to explode. I don’t even want to imagine what would happen to my body if I got caught up in that.”

“You have nothing to fear,” Lloyd replied casually. “If you rush back to the warship, you just might be able to survive.”

Corpses rolled by their feet. Unbothered, the marshal trotted along on his horse until he noticed another survivor.

“Hmm, seems like one’s still alive,” Lloyd noted.

He steered his horse and quickly approached the survivor. A knight clad in splendid attire was taking short and shallow breaths. Clearly at his end, the knight’s blood soaked the ground around him. As Lloyd drew closer, the knight

glared at him.

“*Huff... Huff...* Y-You... You bastard...!” the knight managed to gasp.

“I had thought that Rogas had been given command of this region,” Lloyd said. “I’m disappointed. Had he been killed here, our morale would’ve been higher than ever before.”

No longer did Lloyd deign to respect Rogas with a title. As the commander’s life quickly slipped from his grasp, the man couldn’t no longer hide his disdain for the marshal’s tone.

“But I suppose taking a general’s head is *something*,” Lloyd said. “It requires only a single shot, so it’s not all bad. Don’t think lowly of me.” He dismounted from his horse and unsheathed the short sword on his waist.

The battle was already over. As an act of chivalry, Lloyd found it best to land the final blow. But just as the marshal wound up his swing, the dying commander brought his lips up to Lloyd’s ear.

“Agh... *Huff...* Y-You mutt of a weak...crown prince...”

Lloyd jolted and froze in place. “I suppose you don’t need any help. That’s what it sounded like to me.” His icy gaze could freeze beer, his tone suppressing his rage as he headed for his horse.

The Knights Guard members nearby had no idea why the marshal stopped short, and cast a quizzical glance his way. However, Lloyd said nothing more and mounted his steed. Instead of any reasoning, he let out a victorious roar that implied an initial landslide victory.

While a handful of knights returned to Rockdam, the warships used a message bird to report the victory back to White Night Castle—news that hit Ishtarica almost instantly. Next, the Ishtarican knights would march to Bardland. After advancing a short distance, they set up camp and reveled in their victory.

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Not long after setting out for the morning, the advancing Ishtarican realized that lunchtime had hit. They decided to take a short break to satiate their

stomachs, but they weren't even a touch exhausted from last night's battle. At most, their feet might've been worn out from all the marching, but that was it.

"This is a bit...concerning," Lloyd mumbled.

He found the lack of a chimera presence to be suspicious, but thought it even more odd that an enemy commander had been cast aside like a disposable pawn. Perhaps Heim hadn't anticipated Ishtarica's arrival, but the kingdom had given up so easily despite their successful occupation of Euro.

"I've heard the monsters in this continent aren't powerful enough to transform into a Demon Lord," Lloyd said. "Then what will the red foxes use against us? Chimeras? Will they overwhelm us with numbers?"

No matter how hard he thought, the marshal couldn't come up with an answer; only skepticism filled his heart. He solemnly gazed up at the blue sky, his puffs of white breath carried away by the chilly breeze.

The following day, the Ishtarican forces once again marched forward with no issue. They didn't run into any enemies or traps. By the third day, they'd already arrived at the outskirts of Bardland.

"All troops, halt!" Lloyd ordered.

On command, everyone froze in place. Just past noon, it was a sunny day with clear skies overhead. There was little snowfall in this area, and clouds of dust had been kicked up by the marching knights. Bardland didn't have Rockdam's sturdy stone walls to protect it, allowing Lloyd to catch a glimpse of the situation within the city. Aware of Bardland's wealthy reputation, the marshal noticed that most of the city remained in decent shape. Heim's forces awaited them.

"They experienced the Blast Bow's power firsthand, and they still want to fight us head-on?" Lloyd wondered.

He raised his arm to ready a signal, gathering the attention of his troops. Those in charge of the ballista stepped forward. The marshal prepared to launch another series of attacks, hoping to end this in one blow as well. But he soon noticed a man stepping out of Heim's forces.

"Huh, so he *was* here," Lloyd remarked as he spotted Rogas.

Ishtarica had a long feud with the man, but Lloyd calmed himself as he spurred his horse forward until they were close enough to hear each other.

“You kidnapped our Prince Tiggie and even Lady Elena, you barbarians!” Rogas spat angrily. “What business do you have in our continent?!”

“Ah, so that’s the setting you lot are going with,” Lloyd replied, a touch troubled.

The marshal was curious to hear what Rogas had to say, but Lloyd couldn’t find the words to respond. The onslaught of Rockdam must’ve reached Heim’s ears, and it wasn’t difficult to assume that Ishtarica had arrived. Lloyd had predicted as much, but he only let out a wry smile when his motherland had been accused of kidnapping two of Heim’s citizens.

“I’ve no idea where that misinterpretation came from!” Lloyd roared. “But why must you invade Rockdam? Surely, you could’ve taken another course of action or sent a message along first!”

“But of course!” Rogas replied. “This is all to cement Heim’s status as the continent’s true champion!”

“Huh? Weren’t you on the hunt for the man who assassinated your nobles?” Lloyd proceeded to scratch his head and murmur with sorrow. “Ah, I see now...”

It felt as if these men were having two entirely different conversations—their words anything but coherent. When faced with Rogas’s overconfidence, Lloyd couldn’t help but pity the miserable man. The marshal could feel that the kingdom’s commander in chief had already fallen under the red foxes’ influence.

“In our nations’ last meeting, I found myself certain that no one could match your military prowess,” Lloyd said. “At the very least, you struck me as a man gifted in the art of war.”

“What sort of nonsense are you rambling on about? Your babbling ends here,” Rogas declared proudly, swinging his arm down.

Enveloped in colorful capes, Heim’s frontline forces firmly grasped their weapons and prepared themselves for a fight. Their equipment appeared to have been crafted from monster materials. Lloyd squinted at the fighters,



hoping to get a better look at their gear. However, the marshal felt himself overcome with a wave of explicable awkwardness.

“Sir Edward has provided us with invaluable insight!” Rogas declared.

The Heims must’ve seen their armor as a way to mitigate the impact of Blast Bow fire, but their understanding of the situation was far too naive. High-end gear might’ve been able to soften the blow, but their equipment was anything but that.

“Heroes of Heim! Plunge your swords of justice into these menacing savages!” Rogas declared.

The Heims erupted into a roaring procession of cheers. Despite being greatly outnumbered by these warriors, Lloyd believed “greatly” to be an exaggeration. Had the Ishtarican’s Blast Bow been sealed, they might’ve needed to change their approach, but...

“Indeed, you aren’t a bad commander at all,” Lloyd said.

The Heims had spread out like a pair of wings across the battlefield, ensuring their entire force couldn’t be wiped out with a single Blast Bow shot. Additionally, it likely provided Rogas’s only avenue of attack—striking the Ishtaricans as they reloaded the ballista. Lloyd let out a sigh as the commander in chief retreated behind the front line.

“If we crossed blades, I wanted to fight you as you once were...” the marshal said regretfully. “But I suppose I mustn’t wish for such a thing on the battlefield.”

Determined to put it all on the line, the Heims launched their charge against the Ishtaricans. However, the warriors’ vigor made it seem as if they’d set off on a suicide mission. They all shouted in desperation, hoping to keep their morale up.

“Don’t feel fear!”

“Charge!”

The skittish soldiers from a few days ago were nowhere to be seen. Much to the Ishtaricans’ confusion, these men were brimming with confidence.

“Prepare the first shot,” Lloyd ordered.

Quickly snapping back to their senses, the highly refined knights obeyed the command. Once they’d taken aim with the ballista, the knights waited as the Heims ran into the line of fire.

“Fire!”

Lloyd lowered his arm, and the shimmering particles of the Blast Bow’s bolt melted down an entire platoon of Heim’s soldiers.

“Gah!”

“It hurts! It hurts! Hah!”

The screams of these Heims made them sound like disposable pawns—ready to die for the cause. Even as their limbs were being blown away, the soldiers continued their desperate charge. Behind their bloodshot eyes, a desire to kill as many Ishtaricans as possible remained.

“Listen well, valiant Ishtaricans!” Lloyd roared. “It doesn’t matter if the enemy is ready to die! The weak won’t hold a candle to our might! You have nothing to fear! It’s time to show them that very power!”

The marshal proudly raised House Gracier’s greatsword into the air, its blade boldly shimmering in the sunlight. A custom weapon, the sword had been polished up by Mouton himself before Lloyd left for war. The marshal came prepared.

“It seems they have quite a few soldiers. I’ve no idea how their nation is faring...” Lloyd muttered. The Ishtaricans were indeed advancing towards Heim, but it seemed as if their enemy was gambling it all on this battle. The marshal quickly realized that he’d been lost in thought and hastily gave his next order. “Archers, fire!”

And so, the battle between Heim and Ishtarica had begun. The opposing front lines clashed, shaving away at the other’s military might. A good chunk of Heim’s frontline forces remained on the verge of death, but they stubbornly refused to go down. One had lost an arm while another had lost an eye, and even so, they ran ahead. Even if their limbs had been hacked away by the knights, these strange soldiers tried to chomp into their enemies as if they felt

no pain.

“What are you cowering in fear for, you fools?!” Lloyd roared as he slaughtered a squadron of Heim soldiers. “Aim for the head!”

He sliced cleanly through them like he was hunting an Eight-eyed Rabbit.

“Never forget!” Lloyd bellowed. “Our greatest enemy is pulling their strings! An enemy from the Demon Lord’s era!”

Heim’s forces hadn’t appeared to completely lose their minds. While they indeed were agitated and excited beyond the norm, their sense of self was still intact. Perhaps these warriors lived normal lives within the walls of Heim’s royal capital, but the red foxes could somehow influence them on the battlefield. The Heims had simply become agitated, on the verge of totally losing it.

“Cavalry, step back!” Lloyd ordered.

The Blast Bow readied to fire another shot. Loaded with another round, the cannon’s mouth was aimed squarely at the Heim soldiers as it unleashed its second attack.

“Fire!”

The Heims at the tip of the front line were preoccupied with closing the gap with the Ishtaricans, so Lloyd aimed at the soldiers behind them. The Blast Bow’s aim was true. While Lloyd had no idea how these soldiers were manipulated, he thought they might’ve suffered from blood loss. In any case, the Heims’ energy visibly decreased as every progressive step they took was heavier than the last. And yet, even with all the lost limbs, the Heim forces continued their charge; their resilience was shocking and exhausting.

*Now then...* Lloyd thought. There was no need for Ishtarica to end it all here. Judging from the situation, he didn’t need to force this invasion, and if their enemies continued to blindly charge, he’d simply need to continue firing the Blast Bow. If the Heims had even a chance of harming the Ishtaricans, there was no need for a head-on encounter. Indeed, the Ishtaricans needed to simply inch back as they kept firing the ballista.

“Retreat!” Lloyd ordered. “Retreat until you can just barely make out the Heim soldiers! We’ll step back for now!”

Why not torture the Heim soldiers and make them impatient? Should Heim's forces ever think of backing off, Ishtarica simply needed to chase after them and attack. If Heim still refused to leave Bardland, Ishtarica would take aim at the city and reduce it to rubble. There was no need to put the lives of Ishtarican knights at stake. However, Lloyd would soon need to abort this plan.

"Sir Lloyd! Please wait! There's a group behind us!" a knight reported.

"Behind us?!" Lloyd gasped.

They were fighting on open land with nowhere to hide. How in the world did Ishtarica allow themselves to be flanked? Lloyd was shocked by the sudden change in the situation, but if his enemies were multiplying, he had no other choice.

"Marshal! I-It's miasma! Our rear knights have..." a knight reported.

"Miasma?! Impossible!" Lloyd shouted. "Even if miasma were to appear here, our gear should be more than capable of protecting us!"

The marshal whirled around and noticed that a few of his men had fallen to the ground.

"I see! They're finally here!" the marshal said.

Behind the fallen Ishtarican knights resided a horde of creatures. Their cries were akin to grating metal or the shrill screams of a lady. Lloyd had seen the corpse of a chimera before, but he hadn't been told that they emitted miasma. *Then why...*

"The carriage! Miasma's leaking from that carriage!" A Knights Guard member pointed to the center of the chimera horde.

A large carriage was being pulled along by a handful of robed figures. Someone holding a spear sat in the coachman's seat. This carriage exuded opulence—a vehicle fit for a noble. Emanating from the undercarriage, a purple mist danced in the air: miasma. The gentle breeze carried the fumes throughout the air and into the chimera's lungs.

"A thick miasma that even our gear can't resist?!" Lloyd said. "How did Heim get their... No, the answer's clear."

There was no doubt in his mind that this was the red foxes' doing. If the carriage was the source, Ishtarica simply needed to destroy it. However, Lloyd needed the carriage to enter Blast Bow range, but the miasma only continued to multiply.

"Halt! We'll no longer retreat!" Lloyd ordered. "Move to the right wing and prepare to break through! Get into formation!"

Unable to back off, the Ishtaricans had no choice but to push forward.

"Take six of our Blast Bows and take aim at our rear!" the marshal shouted. "Target the carriage! Take out the chimeras surrounding it as well!"

He'd heard that the warships had been forced to use their main cannons in Euro. Fortunately, there were far fewer chimeras here.

"Archers at the ready! And fire!"

The order came abruptly, but the archers managed to follow through and launched a volley at Heim's forces.

"Cavalry! March forward! Aim for the right wing and cut down the Heims!"

As Lloyd executed an escape plan, it was of key importance that he kept his men from being surrounded on the battlefield.

"I simply don't understand," Lloyd muttered. "Won't miasma affect their allies as well? Or do they have some kind of gear that protects them?"

If that was true, only the Ishtaricans would suffer from the negative effects of the miasma. As Lloyd exhaled, a bead of sweat dripped onto his horse's reins before he gripped them even tighter. Ishtarica's scariest enemy was not the men in front of them, but the miasma creeping up from behind. Lloyd's men could take a few licks from Heims suicide chargers, but they could be dealt with. Still, time was one thing that the Ishtaricans couldn't afford right now.

"Then I should just get rid of Rogas and... Hmm?" Lloyd noticed Rogas suddenly galloping up to the front lines.

"Valiant comrades!" Rogas shouted. "I applaud you for enduring the attacks of these barbarians! The first prince—no, the crown prince's troops have arrived to aid us!"

As Rogas raised his men's morale, the soldiers all cheered victoriously, including those who had lost a body part or two. They all grabbed their weapons and swung them proudly, filled with energy like never before.

"The crown prince's holy power will surely save us and Heim!" Rogas bellowed. "March forward, heroes of Heim! Charge!"

"What's the meaning of this, Rogas?!" Lloyd roared. "Are you saying that the first prince is in the carriage that's leaking miasma?!"

Were Rogas's words to be believed? Heim's commander in chief cast an icy glare at Lloyd, as though he were looking at a disgusting sewer rat. Already foreseeing how this would go down, the marshal called over a member of the Knights Guard.

"I have a mission for you," Lloyd ordered. "Retreat from this battle and send a message bird back to Ishtarica. Make haste and return to Rockdam! From there, gather the equipment and knights we left behind. Bring them all here!"

Lloyd determined that at least one knight would need to escape. With so much information to process, the marshal believed that a message bird alone wouldn't be enough to convey the current situation on the battlefield. The knight was also tasked with bringing the rest of the troops from Bardland to Rockdam. The knight immediately understood the implications of this mission.

"Yes, sir!" the knight replied. "I shall leave immediately. Sir Lloyd, I wish you the best of luck!"

"Leave this place to me!" the marshal assured him.

After a firm response, the knight took his horse and parted ways with the rest of the Ishtaricans. He could likely reach Rockdam in one night, and Lloyd prayed for the knight's safety.

"You could say that my job is to eradicate vermin," Lloyd said, charging forward. "Is that not so, Rogas?!"

Right on cue, the rest of the Ishtaricans psyched themselves up and advanced. Their marshal would take the enemy commander's head. That thought alone was enough to raise the morale of the flinching Ishtarican knights.

This was only the beginning of the battle.

Screams rang in the air around Rogas.

“Gh...”

“My arm! My arm!”

“I know I made you wait, Rogas!” Lloyd shouted. “Your warm welcome caused me to falter for a moment there!”

The marshal left a trail of dead soldiers in his wake. He’d kicked up a cloud of dust so thick that it was difficult to believe that one person had been the cause of this destruction. The energy that surrounded Lloyd was unlike any other as he rushed forward on his steed, holding his greatsword up in the air.

“Are you ready to feel the might of my greatsword?!” Lloyd asked, holding his blade horizontally without wavering.

How much strength did this marshal even have? This movement alone conveyed the power that Lloyd commanded. Rogas knew that he couldn’t stand on even ground against him. Knowing his defeat would be a major blow to Heim, the commander foresaw the worst-case scenario and found it best to retreat for now.

“Sorry, but the battle has just begun,” Rogas said, trying to come up with excuses. “It’s far too early for us to face each other. So...”

Lloyd laughed jovially, placing a hand over his eyes. “Ha ha ha! I didn’t know what you were going to say, but I didn’t expect that!”

The marshal swung his greatsword to one side. The blade hadn’t even made contact with the Heims around him, and yet, their heads ended up rolling on the ground thanks to that single swing.

“I don’t mind it if you’re going to flee,” Lloyd shouted. “Tuck your tail between your legs and run away like the beasts that you are! But I’m good at hunting down vermin, you see. Now, will you still flee, Rogas?! Are you willing to lose your dignity as Heim’s commander in chief in your final moments?!”

Lloyd kicked his horse, signaling it to rush ahead, closing the gap between

himself and Rogas.

“You dare touch upon my dignity as a commander in chief?!” Rogas growled, unsheathing his blade. “You even mock my dignity! Just to what depths are you willing to sink, Ishtarica?!”

“Hah! Say what you will, you mangy cur!” Lloyd shouted. “The words of a man who once tried to flee with his tail between his legs won’t affect me!”

Regardless of whether they were from Ishtarica or Heim, everyone on the battlefield found themselves overwhelmed by the pressure emanating from the two men. Unable to butt in, the onlookers watched on at the clash, as though the world around them had frozen in place.

“Graaaaah!” Rogas roared, swinging his blade.

A second later, Lloyd raised his sword in response. The Heims cheered with glee, certain that this delay meant everything. The match must’ve been decided in Rogas’s favor. The Ishtaricans, on the other hand, were quiet as a tomb. Their sunny disposition left a lasting impression on the Heim soldiers.

“Hngh?!” Rogas grunted.

The two horses galloped past each other, and only Rogas fell off his steed. When some of the onlookers shifted their gaze to Heim’s general, they noticed his horse’s head was gone.

“You see, I’m not quite adept at fighting on horseback,” Lloyd divulged, dismounting from his own horse. He rushed straight for Rogas. “I feel sorry for the horse, but this is war. It can’t be helped.”

“You dare approach a man who’s fallen to the ground, Ishtarican marshal?!” Rogas challenged.

“Say what you will. It’s your fault for losing our little clash on horseback.”

Unable to stand up in time, Rogas blocked Lloyd’s swing with an unsteady posture.

“Tch!” the Heim general said through gritted teeth. Perhaps this stance worked in his favor. He sank into the ground and defended himself, but his legs started to tremble, overpowered by Lloyd’s mighty blow.



The marshal's overwhelming pressure emitted an aura that coursed through Rogas's body. He'd never felt anything like it before.

"You're fighting the strongest knight in all of Ishtarica!" Lloyd bellowed. "Did you think your pathetic posture could hold back my blade?"

He forced all his weight onto his attack, and Rogas completely lost his posture as the marshal swung his blade horizontally. It wasn't Lloyd's signature strike, but the blow's sheer force made it look like he was about to split the sky in two.

"Fly back from whence you came!" Lloyd roared.

Suddenly, a deafening clang rang out—like an explosion or a pair of boulders crashing into each other. Rogas just managed to raise his sword in time to prevent a direct hit, but Lloyd couldn't be stopped.

"Gah?!" Rogas gasped.

He was relieved to avoid a direct attack. But just as he was about to sigh, Rogas heard a loud crack coming from his sword.

"My blade... It's..." he cried.

A visible crack ran along the length of his sword, crumbling from the point of impact.

"Raaaaah!" the marshal bellowed.

His muscles bulging, Lloyd forced all of his power into his arms. There was a flash of light and he mercilessly landed another blow.

"Gah... Agh..." Rogas coughed.

Thanks to the heavy armor he wore, the commander in chief's armor hadn't been sliced in two. Instead, the razor-sharp broadsword shredded his plate mail and left a deep gash in his torso. Bright red blood dyed the dirt around him.

"If you still want to fight, stand up," Lloyd ordered. "I shall end it all with my blade."

"And if I don't stand up?" Rogas asked.

"I'll still end you, of course. I suppose the only difference is your will, or lack thereof."

“Your words sicken me.”

“Ah, there was one thing I wanted to ask you about,” Lloyd said as he prepared to land the final blow. “What can you tell me about a lady named Shannon?”

At that moment, Rogas’s expression transformed, his voice taking on a completely different tone. “Don’t you dare speak the miss’s name!” he shrieked. “She’s the fiancée of my son, Glint, and has offered us her precious wisdom in Lady Elena’s absence!”

“‘Miss,’ you say?” Lloyd asked. “I suppose that’s more than enough.” He nodded. Convinced that this Shannon was both the mastermind and red fox behind it all, the marshal raised his blade. “Enough. Like I said, I wanted to fight with you as you were, but...”

Lloyd swung down. Rogas tried to defend himself, but his body wouldn’t move. Knowing that it was the end, the commander in chief steeled his resolve.

“I’m terribly sorry,” a voice said. This particular voice belonged to another person on Ishtarica’s hit list. He used his spear to deflect the greatsword’s blow. “I can’t let this happen just yet. *Someone* has left us a script to follow.”

After pushing the marshal back, the man cast his robe aside. Underneath resided an elderly man with tufts of scarlet hair about him—ready to fight. His shirt made of soft material had been buttoned until the very top, and his dark pants were reminiscent of a suit bottom. The old man’s attire suited him well, but he stood out like a sore thumb in the middle of the battlefield.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Sir Lloyd. My name is Edward.” He smiled after easily parrying Lloyd’s attack.

“Hmm... You’re dressed rather neatly. You look like a butler or a civil officer—it’s not suited for the battlefield,” Lloyd replied.

“And you look like an actor. You’d be fitting for a...heel, perhaps?” He smiled gently.

Lloyd couldn’t stand the smug look on this man’s face. “Good or evil. One’s stance changes based on where they stand on the battlefield. It’s a very vague concept indeed.”

“Oh my, what a surprise! You’re more intelligent than you look.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Could you kindly stand aside? You’ve stopped me from finishing him off.” Lloyd started to grow impatient in the face of a battlefield that had become rather troublesome.

“We have a script to follow. Didn’t I say this already? Sir Rogas, retreat while you can. I shall handle this.”

“I’m sorry,” Rogas replied, frustration riddled on his face. “I owe you one, Sir Edward!”

He rather obediently hitched a ride with a member of his cavalry and made his retreat. Lloyd looked around and saw that the Ishtaricans had an overwhelming advantage. He let out a sigh of relief, but he still had the spreading miasma to contend with. With the marshal’s forces advanced a far way out, they’d put some distance between themselves and the miasma. However, Lloyd needed to quickly deal with Edward before the miasma reached them.

“I’ve no intention of joining in on your farce,” the marshal said. “I’m sorry, but I don’t remember standing on a stage with you.”

“You seem to be misunderstanding me,” Edward replied. “You’re an Ishtarican. You’ve been standing on the stage ever since you were brought into this world.”

“I didn’t think a beast had the intelligence to act so—”

Suddenly, something whizzed past Lloyd’s cheek. As he was on high alert, the marshal just barely managed to dodge it by the skin of his teeth, but a sliver of blood trickled down his face.

“How does it feel to be caught off guard by a beast?” Edward inquired.

“Unexpectedly, not bad at all,” Lloyd answered. “The fact that you can’t control your strength well shows that you’re a beast!”

As a red fox, Edward’s personality was difficult to grasp. If one were to make a comparison, he was like Warren in that sense. Lloyd stepped forward, paying heed to the spear’s range and ensuring that Edward couldn’t control this battle

as he pleased.

“I’ve fought Sir Rogas many times in the past,” Edward said. “Speaking from experience, his skills can’t compare to yours. That was a fine step you took.”

“Heh...” Lloyd grinned. “Winning against him isn’t something to be so happy about!”

“Oh, don’t say that. I’m praising you, can’t you see?”

To the marshal, this sensation was anything but nostalgic. Every single one of his attacks was casually parried and brushed aside, but not once did Edward take advantage of these openings. The red fox simply watched and observed; nothing was more humiliating to the marshal.

“You’re a troublesome man,” Lloyd said. “I wouldn’t want to be faced with more men like you. That’s all.”

“Oh, then there’s nothing to worry about!” Edward explained. “While there are still a few more of my kind lurking about, they’re all useless trash. If I were to be honest, you have far superior soldiers following you around.”

“Oho?”

“Oh dear, there’s no need to be so suspicious of my words. Why don’t I rephrase? Among the red foxes, I’m the most skilled in combat.”

Lloyd was shocked. Edward has proved himself to be indeed powerful, but who could’ve expected the red fox to so freely give out information?

“I used to be the Captain-Commander of the Black Knights, you see,” Edward prattled on. “There is no other red fox stronger than me.”

“The Black Knights?” Lloyd wondered. “Ah, the knights who presided over the Demon Lord’s former territory.”

The marshal immediately thought of Marco, remembering what Ein had said about the Living Armor’s rank.

“You specified red foxes,” Lloyd said. “Then there must be a different species stronger than you.”

The moment these words left his lips, Edward froze in place. The tip of his

spear wavered ever so slightly, displaying his emotions, and he plastered the fakest smile he could muster on his face.

“And who, pray tell, might you be referring to?” he asked. A smile was still taped onto his face, but his eyes were glaring and bulging like a reptile’s.

“Hmm, let’s see... I’ve never met him for myself, but perhaps the man that our crown prince met, for example. I’ve heard that his name was Marco, the vice captain of the Black Knights.”

Edward was seething, his eyes filled with rage. “And you’re saying that that armored bastard is better than me?”

Lloyd knew who Edward was talking about. “Ah, well, he was the Vice Captain, wasn’t he? My guess is that both the captain and vice captain were stronger than you, no?”

The marshal’s frank words caused Edward to seemingly turn into a totally different person. “Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down.”

The red fox started chewing on his left thumb. Before long, he went completely past the fingernail and was gnawing into his own flesh. His eyes started to waver and flicker as he distantly gazed towards the ground.

“My name is Edward... I am the greatest knight who received the favor of *that* person...” he mumbled to himself.

He bit down on his thumb again and again, causing blood to flow. It must’ve been rather painful, but he didn’t seem to care as he continued to tear through his own flesh.

“Ah, I see,” Edward said, suddenly regaining his cool. “It’s so very simple.”

He vanished for a split second, and in the next moment, appeared diagonally behind Lloyd. The marshal followed Edward’s movement while remaining wary of his spear, but the red fox didn’t attack with a weapon.

“Gh... Agh?!” Lloyd gasped.

It was just a kick, nothing more. However, Edward’s foot sank deeply into Lloyd’s side; the marshal felt like his organs were about to burst. He was

overcome with feelings of nausea and vomited from the impact of the blow.

“I should’ve done this from the start,” Edward said. “This allows me to wash away all my unpleasant feelings.”

As Lloyd pressed against his side, Edward landed another kick. Then another. Then another. The red fox wouldn’t let up, not once hesitating as he indulged in this act of pure violence. Again and again, he continued to kick Lloyd on the ground like a pebble he’d found on the side of the road. Edward attacked casually and without pause.

“I’m currently playing the role of a loyal knight to *that* person,” Edward said. “And for you to cast such words upon me is nothing short of humiliating. Are you listening to me?”

“Gah...” Lloyd grunted. “Y-You’ve become quite talkative...haven’t you?”

The marshal swung his greatsword around, but Edward dodged the attack as easily as he breathed. He outstretched his arms like a pair of wings.

“You were an excellent heel!” Edward crowed. “A magnificent actor indeed!”

He let out a weary sigh and pointed his spear at Lloyd. Just then, a robed man approached Edward’s side.

“I...I apologize. I apologize in...the middle...the middle of your stage...” the robed man said in a husky voice that sounded like sandpaper.

Without the assistance of a staff, he bowed deeply. The man’s awkward and unique posture creeped Lloyd out.

“P-Prince...Ray...fon is quite...quite...exhausted,” the robed man said, looking quite worried.

“The pig—ahem, I mean, Prince Rayfon is tired, you say?” Edward replied, clearing his throat to mask his previous callous remark.

“Y-Yes...”

“Well, I’ve made my promise to that person. But this will change the script, and that is a problem. Good grief. Very well, I suppose it’s time that we make our exit stage right.”

Fully realizing the situation, Edward lowered his spear in resignation. He mounted his horse with the robed man in tow, turning away from Lloyd.

“Unfortunately, there’s something else I must prioritize,” Edward said. “Curtain call on this act, I’m afraid. I’m not even sure if I can kill you just yet.”

“W-Wait!” Lloyd called. “What’s your goal?!” But the marshal wouldn’t receive the answer he sought.

“One last word of advice, I suppose,” Edward said. “We may be acting on a stage, but we shouldn’t discuss that hunk of Living Armor again. We won’t be associated with him anymore, after all. Till we next meet.”

Lloyd forced himself to sit up, but a sharp pain coursed throughout his entire body.

“Sir Lloyd!” a knight cried. “Are you all right?!”

“Somehow...” the marshall muttered. “And? How’s the situation on the battlefield?”

“I’m not sure, but the chimeras suddenly stopped moving. We haven’t incurred much damage, but Heim’s men have started a retreat of their own.”

“The chimeras suddenly stopped? What does that mean?”

A different Knights Guard member answered, “The miasma ceased leaking from the carriage. At around the same time, the chimeras suddenly became sluggish and stopped moving altogether. We used the Blast Bow to wipe them out in the meantime.”

However, Rayfon’s carriage was too sturdy to be destroyed.

“I suppose my life was spared,” Lloyd sighed.

He gazed beyond the dust clouds, where he could see the Heims retreating in the distance. Bardland had become completely abandoned, and he knew that things were about to get busy. Lloyd slapped his cheeks to perk himself up and switch gears.

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With the support of the Knights Guard, Lloyd managed to make it into the city

of Bardland. A knight who'd been patrolling the city approached him.

"I've called the mayor," the knight said.

An old man with a beard emerged from behind. He was dressed in the finery of nobles and a red cape that was more regal than gaudy. He slowly approached the marshal.

"My name is Garvey. I've been in charge of my fair share of companies since the good old days. Then as I got older, I was graciously asked to serve as Bardland's mayor. However, I'm just a simple merchant at the end of the day."

"Hmm? Are you alone, mayor?" Lloyd inquired.

"Here in Bardland, merchants with power control the city. Our nation is divided into districts with their own mayors to oversee them. There were eight mayors."

"I see... My name is Lloyd, and I serve Ishtarica as its marshal. You speak in past tense. What do you mean by 'there *were* eight mayors'?" He was curious about this peculiar choice of words.

"Two of them lost their heads to Heim's soldiers. The others have fled to God knows where."

"Ah... I understand now."

"They started fleeing when the adventurers we'd hired started giving up on the fight. They had seemingly fled together and vanished from Bardland. As for the adventurers who stuck around, we have no idea where they are; Heim took them."

With that all in mind, there weren't many people milling about. Lloyd had heard that Bardland was a nation that gathered wealth throughout the continent. Their monuments to that wealth had been destroyed, and no one remained to admire them.

"Only the weak and submissive remain in this city," Garvey admitted.

"I understand your situation," Lloyd replied. "We Ishtaricans, however, have no intention of invading Bardland or making any grand requests in return for our assistance. We simply would like to stay here for a few days and use this



city as our base.”

“You chased away Heim for us. We have no right to tell you to leave. Even though our city is in shambles, I’d like it if you and your men rested your tired bones for a little while. And of course, we won’t charge a single coin.”

“We cannot accept that sort of kindness. If we don’t pay our dues, we cannot maintain our neutral relationship with Bardland. And we don’t plan on holding back on payment either.”

He dug through his pocket and took out a small jewel—an expensive message bird that could transmit messages instantly across long distances.

“Commander Lloyd, sending a message,” he started. He explained his situation as much as time would allow. He didn’t have infinite energy and he had much he wanted to convey, but this was something that he couldn’t change.

Message birds couldn’t be used so casually, and wasting time and words was out of the question. After Lloyd conveyed the bare minimum, the message bird’s glow soared through the sky.

“I apologize for cutting us off,” Lloyd said.

“Please don’t mind us,” Garvey replied. “Then allow us to welcome you as much as we can. This way, please.”

The Ishtaricans were led to surprisingly lavish lodging, and after savoring a lovely meal, the tired knights enjoyed this time of rest. While relaxing, the knights took shifts watching out for Heim’s forces.

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Two days had passed since the Ishtaricans arrived in Bardland, and Lloyd decided that it was high time for them to see what Heim was up to. He eagerly awaited the return of the knight that he’d sent to Rockdam. Just then, Heim’s forces appeared beyond the horizon.

“The ballista is ready!” a knight reported. “An archery platform has been erected as well!”

“We’ll fight them head-on!” Lloyd roared. “We mustn’t allow them to

invade!”

Their aim was to protect the city and prevent it from being besieged. The city’s walls had to be spared.

“But two days shouldn’t be nearly enough time for them to march back...” Lloyd muttered, beads of sweat appearing on his brow.

He gazed at Heim’s soldiers, wondering what kind of gimmick or trap that they had up their sleeves. If they’d returned home then immediately returned to Bardland, the soldiers surely wouldn’t have had the chance to rest. Simply marching ahead would’ve been difficult for them.

“And it’ll be a real headache if he shows up again,” Lloyd said, referring to Edward.

The red fox was indeed powerful. Quite honestly, Rogas wasn’t the problem; it was keeping pace with Edward’s martial prowess. While the knights scrambled, several thoughts swirled within Lloyd’s mind as he headed to the archery platform. The platform’s foundation was built from stone, and its upper areas were constructed with reconstituted wood from a ruined building.

“How many men do they have?” Lloyd asked as he walked up the steep stairs of the platform.

Normally, he’d receive a response instantly. There must’ve been at least five knights on the platform, and yet, no answer came.

“I asked how many men Heim has,” Lloyd repeated a bit forcefully.

He placed his hand on the shoulder of a nearby knight.

“S-Sir Lloyd!” the knight stammered.

“Good grief. Why aren’t I receiving a response?” the marshal inquired.

He wearily peered into the knight’s face, which had gone white as a sheet. But before the marshal could hastily ask if anything was amiss...

“Please take a look at Heim’s forces,” another knight said.

Lloyd gazed into the horizon and understood his situation at once. In fact, it was as though reality were slapping him in the face.

“For a moment, I thought there was a dark cloud floating above them,” Lloyd said. “That’s the entire enemy force? All of *them*? I can’t believe it.”

A dark cloud stretched out in the distance. When Lloyd took a closer look, he saw a shockingly huge chimera army heading their way. Heim had a squadron of soldiers off to the side, but they couldn’t even compare to the chimeras’ overwhelming numbers. There must have been tens or even hundreds of thousands of them. There were more than enough chimeras to swallow the city whole. In the center was a carriage, presumably where Rayfon was seated, spouting miasma everywhere.

“Shouldn’t we retreat to Rockdam?” a knight inquired.

“There are far more of them than we expected,” another agreed. “And they acted much faster than we expected. Perhaps it’s best to retreat to Rockdam at once and regroup from there.”

Bardland’s walls wouldn’t stand a chance against this enemy force. While some walls had been partially repaired where possible, others were nothing but rubble. No doubt the chimeras could easily scale the tattered stones and flood into the city. The knights felt that it was better to retreat once than remain holed up in here. However...

“No,” Lloyd firmly replied. “If we left now, we’d be falling right into their trap.”

The marshal had no intention of retreating. He racked his brain for other solutions, but he ultimately deemed it best to remain in Bardland. His reasoning was quite simple.

“When looking at Heim’s forces, it’s easy to see that the chimeras will be able to cross the plains much faster than any soldier will,” Lloyd reasoned. “Indeed, they might approach us more swiftly than we can retreat.”

“How about firing our ballista while retreating?” a knight suggested.

“It’s a sensible plan, but they’d catch up to us either way.” If that were the case, Lloyd thought it would be better to use Bardland’s remaining walls to their advantage. “From now on, you can refer to Bardland as Ishtarica’s last line of defense. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“If they reach Ishtarica...” a knight murmured.

“Indeed. While I’m not sure if a chimera could cross the ocean, it wouldn’t be out of the question. And with their stamina, they could probably barrel right through a storm.” But that wasn’t all. “We can’t wipe them all out with a warship’s cannon blast. You all know that finding the right terrain to land the perfect shot is a challenge. That fact doesn’t change, even if we retreat to Rockdam.”

Still, Lloyd hadn’t given up. With hope still filling his heart, he turned back to his knights. “Don’t worry. Before we arrived in Bardland, I’d already sent off my message bird. I’ve shared what information we had with our motherland; we can expect more gear and reinforcements soon.”

The knights on the platform were shocked but elated. Lloyd was nervous himself, but they could only hold out the hope that help would arrive soon.

“I suppose the only worry I have is that I haven’t received a response,” he muttered.

He knew that message birds were expensive. With an increase in distance between parties came an increase in the material used to craft a message bird. Even sending a single message could rack up a rather large bill. Indeed, they weren’t to be used so casually, but Lloyd had basically signed up his men for a war. Surely, Ishtarica could’ve sent a word or two without sparing the expense.

“Our reinforcements can arrive as early as later today!” Lloyd bellowed. “We’ll stand strong against their attacks and stop them here! We must endure it no matter what!”

Those around him raised their arms in the air with gusto.

The battle was relentless. In a matter of minutes, the atmosphere had transformed completely. Lloyd seemed to be rather open in regard to his frustrations with the enemy.

“They’re a nasty lot,” he growled. “They’re not using any of their soldiers and are throwing those foul beasts at us to see what we’ll do next.”

Just as Lloyd had said, the Heims watched from a safe distance as they kept

flinging chimeras at Bardland's walls. A blast of silver particles would occasionally rain down on the battlefield, but the unending flood of chimeras wouldn't let up.

The miasma seeping from the carriage continued to power up the beasts. As long as the vehicle remained, the chimeras would only grow more powerful. Suddenly, the booming sound of a horn ripped through the air.

"There he is, that red fox..." the marshal said.

Serving as the Heims' horseback vanguard, Edward led the soldiers as they finally advanced. Meanwhile, Rayfon's carriage brought up the rear.

"Sir Lloyd!" a knight cried.

"He's the only target we'll have a problem pinning down," Lloyd said. "But I suppose there's no other choice. I'll handle him! Continue to cut down Heim's soldiers and their monsters!"

The marshal mounted his horse and galloped past the city's partially destroyed walls. Taking notice of Lloyd's approach, Edward rode out to meet him.

"Ha ha!" the red fox giggled. "It's only been a few days, hasn't it?"

"This won't be a repeat of last time!" Lloyd declared, removing his greatsword and pointing it at Edward. "I'll be taking your head today!"

Edward remained undaunted, his smile as broad as ever. "Oh, there's no need for silly pleasantries today. I've been told to hurry up and finish this act."

Suddenly, something bit Lloyd's horse on the leg. The steed neighed in shock and arched its back, throwing the marshal off-balance. A chimera rat had nibbled on the horse. The red fox had a clear opening to strike, but he froze in place.

"Huh? Is that..." Edward said, turning around and furrowing his brows as the dark army in the distance.

He clicked his tongue in annoyance while Lloyd managed to regain his balance. While the fox had his back turned, the marshal took the opportunity to swing his greatsword.

“I told you that I’ll finish this quickly,” Edward said.

His back still turned, he was quick as a flash as he thrust his spear right between Lloyd’s eyes. The marshal just barely managed to dodge a fatal blow, but...

“Gh! Aghhhhh!” Lloyd roared in pain.

The spear had pierced his left eye, but he managed to prevent the weapon from sinking any deeper.

“Y-You beast!” Lloyd growled.

“I’m surprised you managed to dodge that one,” Edward said coolly. “I intended to perforate your brain with that one, but oh well. Let’s try that again, shall we?”

Losing his left eye, Lloyd felt the vision in his right starting to fade. He managed to endure the pain and remain standing, but he hadn’t a chance against Edward in his current state.

After several brief clashes of blades, Lloyd felt every one of his attacks being parried—he was slowly but surely headed towards his death. Thinking he’d reached the end, Lloyd made his resolve and swung his sword around, relying solely on his strength. But just then...

“Wh-What are these?! Roots?!” Edward cried as tree roots locked him into place.

The roots shifted to protect Lloyd, and a dark fog immediately surrounded the panicking Edward.

“Blackvorn’s fog?” the marshal murmured.

He knew this mist very well. It was the signature skill of a Blackvorn, a monster that used its fog to trick people into becoming their next meal. But why was someone using this skill here, in Bardland? A tense silence settled in on the battlefield as everyone froze in place, completely baffled. Only could Edward sense the presence of a powerful being approaching him from behind. His ancient memories had reminded him of this overwhelming might.

“What’s going on?!” Edward screamed. “This event serves as yet another

beautiful stage for a story, but *they* never wished for such a twist!”

Both Lloyd and Edward were coincidentally reminded of the same thing—the appearance of a Demon Lord.

## Chapter Ten: The Crown Prince's Forces

White Night Castle had received Lloyd's message bird a few days ago. The message was short and to the point: Heim's forces were stronger than he expected and something on the battlefield was spewing a potent miasma that could penetrate the finest of gear. Ishtarica's royals and nobles found themselves quivering with fear, shocked at the idea that this miasma could easily strike down their knights. Over in the grand meeting room, Ein and Silverd were locked in a tense conversation.

"Never!" the king roared. "Don't you dare spout such nonsense again!"

"But our gear is flimsy paper to this miasma!" Ein reasoned. "Is that not so, Aunt Katima?"

"M-Mrow... If the knights' supawb gear doesn't have a chance against it, I don't think we could quickly slap together anything better..." she replied, clad in her lab coat. However, she started trembling in response to her father's powerful aura. "But if we were to use some precious materials... I might be able to whip up something that can withstand the miasma for a while..."

"With that in mind, I should go, Your Majesty," Ein said.

"We're talking about two entirely separate issues!" Silverd insisted.

"Not at all! My Toxin Decomposition EX skill should be up to the task. All I'll have to do is purify the battlefield; not too far off from what I did in Ist the other day."

"Well, if Ein can absorb a blue fire rose's toxins and come out of it without a scratch, I reckon it's fine. The purr-oblem is— Mrooow?!"

"Y-Your Majesty, please don't glare at her like that," Ein requested.

Silverd frowned as he slammed his fist into his desk. "But I can't have the crown prince running out into a war zone! Isn't that right, Krone?!"

Sitting next to Ein, the young advisor hastily turned her gaze to the king.



“Don’t you agree?” Silverd said to her. “Ein should not go!”

“I-Indeed, you’re absolutely right, Your Majesty,” Krone stammered.

*Now what?* Ein thought to himself, crossing his arms in front of himself as a troubled expression washed over his face. He hadn’t a clue as to what he should do.

“Chris, is there anything we can do?” Ein asked.

“I’ve got a perfect plan,” Chris replied.

“Huh?! Could you tell me?”

The two began speaking in hushed whispers; the knight sat on the opposite side of Ein. Chris’s usual, klutzy persona had disappeared when she replied with a confident response.

“You should run off to bed,” she said.

“Huh?” Ein asked.

“I’m certain that you’re just confused right now. I believe it’s best if you rest.”

“Aaaaaah, I see what you mean now.”

Chris’s beaming smile made things crystal clear: she wasn’t going to let Ein take a single step towards Bardland.

“We should believe in Sir Lloyd and wait,” she finished. “That’s our best option, I believe.”

“Hmm... I have this feeling that that won’t be the case...” Ein muttered.

“Is something the matter?”

“Since we’re up against the red foxes, I’m sure this won’t be a cakewalk. Not to mention that we have that miasma to worry about too.”

“It’s exactly as you say. Regardless, I can’t allow you to sail off to war, Sir Ein.”

The crown prince rested his face on his hand, troubled by his knight’s usual stubborn response. But just then, an idea hit him. He thought of something he’d been avoiding, prompting him to ignore his grandfather’s rage and turn to his aunt.

“Aunt Katima,” he said, his voice echoing throughout the room.

“Mm-hmm?” she replied, sounding thoroughly exhausted. Ein felt bad, but pushed through as he thought of apologies to her.

“We don’t know what *it* is, but *something* appeared in Bardland and started spewing out all of that miasma, right? Say that comes to Ishtarica, how much would we incur in damages?”

All the nobles present started to chatter worriedly about the prince’s question.

“You’re asking me-ow that?” Katima inquired.

“E-Ein, you...” Silverd started.

“I’m certain that you can provide me with a rough estimate at the very least,” Ein insisted.

In sharp contrast to the shock on Katima’s face, a passionate resolve burned within Ein’s eyes as he cast a sweeping glance across the room.

“Perhaps we’ve been unconsciously avoiding the issue,” Ein said. “If we were to avoid talk of the potential damage and possible solutions, it would be the same as casting our beloved nation aside.”

He stood up with gusto as the nobles all lent an ear. Some gazed at the floor while others buried their heads in their hands.

“Mrow... My nephew’s a bold one...” Katima muttered. She stood up from her specially made, low chair, and walked to the center of the room. “Your Majesty —no, father. May I?”

“Very well,” Silverd relented.

“Then I suppaws I shall tell you all my potential damage calculations. They’re all estimates, mind you. I don’t have enough infurr-mation to accurately provide you all with a clear number, so pawlease keep that in mind.”

The first princess’s trademark, humourous demeanor quickly vanished. Not once did she crack a joke.

“If it’s roughly the size of a carriage, such a contraption would be more than

enough to bring Kingsland screeching to a halt,” she continued. “In other words, it could send Ishtarica flying back to the days of the Great War. This device seems purposely compact for easy transportation, but even small packages can deal a meowssive blow. There’s no better weapon of its kind.” She said it in a roundabout fashion, but Katima implied the weapon could bring Ishtarica to its knees. “As I said earlier, our only countermeasure lies in the creation of new gear capable of withstanding miasma for purr-oloned periods of time. Even if we prioritized the royals’ safety, it’s impawisible to survive for a few days in a place thick with miasma. Plainly speaking, Ishtarica would be done for if that thing made landfall.”

A gloomy atmosphere filled the room. The dire explanation had led even Silverd to fall silent. The king’s gaze occasionally wandered off into the distance as he tried to maintain eye contact with his daughter.

Only Ein could muster up a bold response. “As you’ve all heard, this situation is being tied up by a handful of disparate factors. Our soldiers in Rockdam are ill-equipped to handle this threat. Worst-case scenario, they’ll all die and we’ll be none the wiser about it.”

The boy emanated an air akin to the king—one that demanded the attention of everyone around him. “Surely, you all remember the mysterious factor that Chancellor Warren had been mulling over before he was attacked. I’m certain that it must be what Marshal Lloyd is currently struggling against... An evil entity that spews miasma into the air.” The nobles all nodded along as Ein continued, “If we let this be, our beloved family members, friends, and our beautiful city of Kingsland will be taken away from us. If we don’t act now, we’ll lose not only those brave soldiers, but our entire nation as well.”

“And that’s why you want to go to Bardland, Ein?” Silverd asked.

“Exactly so.”

“Then what?! In the one-in-a-million chance should you fall, our nation will be without a crown prince!”

“Then things in Ishtarica will simply return to as they were before I arrived. That’s all. Don’t worry. You’re still well, grandfather, and Aunt Katima’s with us too.”

“Wh-Why are you bringing me up meow?!” Katima cried.

The crown prince’s words were far too important and weighty to be said so casually. But Ein wasn’t joking. He was as serious as ever, and it was clear that he’d made his resolve.

“There’s another reason we must act with haste,” Ein added, taking out a small jewel from his pocket—the mate of Lloyd’s message bird. “Don’t you find it odd that the message came from one of Lloyd’s knights, but not the marshal himself? We haven’t heard a peep from him.”

Finding this curious, the crown prince had used his message bird to send some sort of signal, but Lloyd hadn’t responded.

“Aunt Katima, what are the odds of a Syth Mill-esque situation? One where message birds can’t be used,” Ein asked.

“This is just a hypothesis, but there’s a possibility that comes to mind,” Katima replied. “If the miasma around Lloyd is thick enough to jam the magical energy emitted from the message birds, it can purr-event them from working at all.”

“In other words, Lloyd may have tried to contact us, but it hasn’t reached our side. And he’d have no means of ever knowing that, right?”

“Purr-ecisely.”

This meant that Lloyd and his knights had been isolated.

“I don’t intend to discuss whether our communication had been purposely jammed or if it’s simply an effect of the miasma,” Ein said. “But grandfather, time is of the essence. I *must* set sail and help Lloyd.”

“But...” Silverd started.

“Grandfather! We haven’t heard anything from Lloyd since his first skirmish in Rockdam! We don’t have the time to dawdle here!”

“But... Argh! We’ll end this meeting for now! Dismissed! Everyone, take a break!”

“Is this still not enough to sway him?” Ein mumbled under his breath as he returned to his seat between Chris and Krone.

“Are you really going to go?” Krone asked, approaching her beloved.

She took his hands and gently caressed them. It was ticklish, but Krone’s eyes were filled with affection.

“Yeah... I think I should go,” Ein said.

“And you won’t take me with you, will you?” she inquired.

There was a beat of silence before he answered, “I’m sorry.”

“You’re horrible. A truly horrible person you are.”

Just as a single tear was about to trickle down her cheek, Krone let go of Ein’s hand, abruptly stood up, and walked away from his side.

“Krone!” he called.

“Don’t worry,” she replied. “It’s not like I feel abandoned or anything like that. I’m just off to prepare a ship for you, so don’t worry. I’ll be checking up on the *Princess Olivia*, so just assume that you’ll be boarding that ship.”

The tear finally rolled down her cheek as she left the room, and Chris approached Ein’s side.

“Truth be told, I’d like to cry as well,” she said. “You’re stubborn, steadfast, and obstinate, Your Highness. We’re all desperately trying to hold back our tears.”

When Ein peered into her face, he saw that her eyes were damp and slightly red as she squeezed her lips shut. He reached out and placed his hands against her silently trembling shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” Ein said.

Chris gave the feeblest of smiles. “You don’t need to apologize. I’ll be more than satisfied if you simply say that you won’t go.” She clung onto a sliver of hope, but her wishes were in vain.

“I can’t do that. I’m the only one who won’t be affected by the miasma. This is something that only I can do.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

A large teardrop slipped out of Chris’s large, sapphire eyes. The tear glistened

like a jewel when coupled with the knight's beauty—a sort of striking charm that left a lasting impression on Ein.

“Do you remember our promise? You'd listen to one of my requests,” Chris implored.

“I said while we were at the holy grounds, didn't I?” Ein replied.

“I'd like to use it here. Please don't go.”

“I'm sorry. I can't obey that.”

She pushed him against the wall, grabbing the crown prince by the collar and putting all her weight onto him. The knight looked up at him with desperate eyes, imploring him to stay.

“If that's not enough, I'll offer myself to you,” she said. “You can work me like a slave. I don't mind.”

“Don't say that. Don't give yourself up so easily,” Ein replied.

“Easily?! Not at all! I truly just don't want you to go...”

Her shoulders trembled once more as she begged for him to nod along in agreement. But such a nod would never come. He placed his hands over her shoulders, working only to soothe her.

“Fine,” Chris finally said. “If that's how you feel, I have plans of my own.”

“Pardon?” Ein asked.

“I've reconfirmed something for myself in this moment. Much like Lady Krone, I simply cannot stand still and leave you be.” She hadn't turned defiant, but it was clear she'd had an epiphany.

“Much like her? What do you mean?”

“I won't tell a stubborn crown prince like you. When I'm able to pluck up the courage, I might be able to finally tell you all about it.” The elf stepped away from the crown prince and wiped her tears away. “If I'm going to be like Lady Krone, I can't be a woman who simply holds you back.”

“Wh-What are you talking about?!”

She cast a gentle gaze at the troubled boy. “It's a secret. But Sir Ein, you'll

take me with you, won't you?"

"I can't! Lloyd isn't here! And if you're gone, Kingsland will be left defenseless!"

"I don't care. I suppose that statement will get me in trouble, but my role is to protect you, Sir Ein. My absence here shouldn't be an issue. And we left Kingsland alone before, back when we met with Heim."

Just like Krone, the knight walked away and left the grand meeting room. She had a wider stride than Krone, but one could tell she carried a clear determination in her heart. Ein stood up to chase after his knight, but she'd already disappeared by the time he'd left the room. He stood there in a daze until a familiar voice called out to him.

"Hello, Ein."

"Grandmother!" Ein gasped. "Why are you..."

"It sounded like you were locked in a serious discussion, so I've been waiting out here. Lady Krone just passed by and provided me with a few details. Why don't you come with me, little one?" She didn't wait for a response and walked ahead.

"Grandmother! Where are you headed to?!"

"The shipyard, of course. Perhaps our new warship is ready for its maiden voyage."

She spoke of the colossal vessel that Ein had seen in the past—the one built with Sea Dragon materials. Truly, it was the most magnificent and mighty ship to have been built within Ishtarica's long history.

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When the construction of *Leviathan* started, various Sea Dragon materials had been scattered across Kingsland's shipyards for processing and construction. Now that they were well past that stage, a titanic ship stood proudly, supported by several beams. The boat looked as if it were complete, but Loran claimed it was still a work in progress. There were parts of the ship that still required confirmation and maintenance.

Built using every part of the Sea Dragon slain by Ein, *Leviathan* was a vessel fit for the future king—no expense was spared. Covered from keel to bow in the beast’s scales, the ship resembled a long cylinder coated in translucent crystals. The bow itself contained a sturdy power supply that stretched out like a pair of wings. Meanwhile, a massive shield crafted from even more scales enveloped the deck. The design was unique and unlike anything that Ishtarica had ever seen, emanating an aura all its own.

“If we’re going by fortification and attack power alone, *Leviathan* could ram the *White King* head-on and it’d hardly have a scratch,” Loran explained as Ein gazed at the vessel.

Lalalua was a short distance away, receiving an explanation from Professor Luke. They had split up to prevent Loran from getting too nervous.

“Thanks to these Sea Dragon materials, we’ve been able to tap into a greater power source that was once thought to be impossible for normal warships to use,” Loran explained. “If we’re going by pure speed, we might be a century ahead of our peers. In fact, we might never be able to build a vessel like this again without another Sea Dragon’s remains. And as you can see, it’s larger than the *White King*.”

Loran couldn’t hide his excitement as Ein started to grasp the ship’s overwhelming power. Lalalua also had her eyes wide open in astonishment.

“And it’s still not finished, right?” Ein asked.

“It’s almost finished, I guess,” Loran replied. “We just have some minute adjustments to make. There might not be any more major issues to address, but this is a king’s ship—your ship, Ein.”

*Then I guess we can get this ship moving*, Ein thought. He felt bad for not paying much attention to Loran’s enthusiastic care and craftsmanship, but the prince was thrilled to hear he had a seaworthy ship.

“Speaking of, why are you and Professor Luke guiding us around?” Ein wondered. “Is it just a coincidence?”

“Professor Luke is one of the project directors overseeing the ship’s construction,” Loran replied. “And I was selected as his assistant.”



Ein was shocked to see his classmate had received such a high promotion. His presence on this vital project was proof of his excellence, but if the pup had been chosen to be a project director's assistant, his efficiency needn't be stated.

"I was surprised that you'd suddenly dropped by for a visit," Loran said. "Is something wrong, Ein?"

"Well, some things have happened," Ein replied.

"Did you hear the good news, Ein?" Lalalua said as she approached him.

"I did. I'm glad to hear that it can be managed."

Both Loran and Luke were perplexed by this conversation, but the queen gave her order.

"By the name of Queen Lalalua, heed my command. Once you've finished the minimum arrangements, allow *Leviathan* to set sail. I don't mind if it's not still in perfect shape. Make sure that this ship touches the water by day's end. Is that clear?"

"Your Majesty?!" Luke spluttered. "Your sudden command perplexes me... I apologize for my confusion, but..."

The pair couldn't hide their panic in the face of this order. And who could blame them? They were told to ensure that this massive ship set sail by day's end, and they had no idea what had prompted the queen to give such an abrupt order. However, Lalalua's next few words caused the two to change their tune.

"Crown Prince Ein will use this vessel to cross the sea and aid our valiant soldiers," she said. "Time is of the essence and we require all the military might that we can muster."

Loran and Luke turned to Ein—a classmate and a student headed for war. They couldn't believe their ears.

"But Ein, why..." Loran started.

"Don't worry," the crown prince assured him. "I volunteered. I want to go."

Naturally, Loran was worried for his friend's safety, but once he heard the prince's firm declaration, the pup knew he couldn't change anyone's mind.

“Professor, allow me to supervise the entirety of the ship’s preparations,” Loran said.

“But you’ve got other work to—” Luke started.

“I want to do this. I’m doing this for Ein! I’ll make sure that *Leviathan* is in the best shape that it can be!”

This was all the werewolf pup could think of. This was all he could do for his friend. His determined eyes were pointed at Luke.

Ein and Lalalua stepped outside, all alone.

“Ein, there’s something I’d like to say to you,” the queen said with a serious expression on her face. “The royal family has many duties. They must make their nation flourish, work for the future, and protect their nation. That’s but a small fraction of what a royal must do. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I do,” Ein replied. “I believe I understand my role.”

“Then that’s fine. But what you’re trying to do is vital. Should you fail, you will cast a shadow over Ishtarica that will affect our nation for years to come. Even if this results in a draw, this fact will not change.”

The death of a crown prince would most assuredly rock Ishtarica in one way or another. Ein silently nodded at the queen’s words.

“But if this is something only you can do, then I suppose you must go and fulfill your duty,” Lalalua said. She paused and grabbed her grandson’s hand. “So, I shall approve of this mission. Queen Lalalua permits Crown Prince Ein to depart. In other words, I’m telling you to risk your life for your nation. Do you hate me for phrasing it as such, Ein?”

“Hate you?” Ein asked. “Not once has that thought ever crossed my mind.”

“My, oh my... You’re truly a kind child, Ein.”

For the first time in a while, Lalalua stroked Ein’s hair and pulled her beloved grandson into her tight embrace.

“This is a little embarrassing...” he said.

“This is one of the perks of being your grandmother. You mustn’t shy away from my hugs,” Lalalua said. After a short while, she stepped away, satisfied. “If I were to speak my own thoughts, not as a queen, I’d like to see Ishtarica under your rule before I die. I’d love to hold your child in my arms, and I would want to host a tea party with the entire family in the courtyard. Maybe a family vacation or two would be perfect. I’ve always avoided dreaming about such things as a royal... I know that we’re not given the luxury of privacy.”

Once she started vocalizing her wishes, she couldn’t stop. She joyfully chattered away, but suddenly sighed. “I mustn’t put any more of my wishes into words. If I do, so much will spill out from me. I fear you’ll discover how simple my desires really are.”

“I’ll settle things in Heim so you won’t need to spill one desire more,” Ein said.

As she peered into her grandson’s determined eyes, she believed in his victory and prayed for his success. She vehemently hoped that this war would end soon and the peaceful days would soon return.

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That night, despite the clock striking past midnight, Kingsland bustled with life. The port had been closed off by knights, and numerous Knights Guard members, knights, and civil officers were busily walking about. The royal capital’s citizens anxiously watched this abnormal hustle, but only the families of knights knew what was going on. No one else had been told a thing.

“Father’s just as stubborn,” Olivia muttered as she walked with Ein on the pier. “He could at least send you off.”

After Ein had returned to the castle, he hadn’t spoken or met with the king. As the preparations progressed, not once had Silverd made an appearance. Ein wanted to exchange a word or two with his grandfather before he left, but his wishes had yet to be answered.

“No, I’m the one being selfish,” Ein said. “It can’t be helped. Ah, mother, I must be off soon.”

“O-Oh dear... Is it that time already?” Olivia inquired with damp eyes as she peered at her son. “Will you come a little closer?” she implored him.

With outstretched arms, she invited him in for a hug. When Ein obediently stepped towards her, Olivia embraced him with all of her might. Her chest was warm and soft, her usual floral scent wafting around her. Ein took deep breaths to calm himself down as Olivia hugged his back and patted his head, reluctant to release him from her grasp.

“You *must* come home. Please,” Olivia said, pecking him on the cheek.

“Thank you,” Ein replied. “I think I can, thanks to you.”

Even in this precarious situation, his words reassured his mother. She was mesmerized by his confident words, and her face transformed into a serious expression soon after.

“Be careful, Ein,” she said. “When you come home, I’ll comb your hair again.”

“Okay! I’ll be off!”

He parted ways with Olivia and whirled around to head deeper into the pier. He met up with Krone, and the two walked forward.

“Hey,” Krone suddenly said.

“Hmm? What?” Ein asked.

Unlike the sorrowful attitude she’d displayed back at the castle, her tone contained a hint of elation.

“Do you, um, want me to give you a blessing? Like when I sent you off to face the Sea Dragon?” she asked.

“Huh?” Ein replied. “Yeah. I mean, of course I would...”

He found it difficult, to be honest. Mere hours ago, he’d made his beloved cry, and he felt it wasn’t his place to wish for anything from her.

“Why did you sound hesitant?” Krone asked in annoyance with a pout.

“I-I’m not! I’m just nervous!” Ein replied.

*I lied. Of course I hesitated,* he thought. But of course, he couldn’t possibly vocalize his thoughts.

“Hmm... Well, I won’t give it to you,” she said.

“Oh... So you’re not giving me a blessing, then?” Ein asked.

“Oh my, you sound disappointed. Did you want one that badly?”

“Of course I did.”

Krone couldn’t hide her surprise. “That was a quick response.”

“I guess I don’t want to hold back anymore.”

“I-I don’t know what’s caused you to switch gears, but if you insist, I’ll let you choose one thing.”

She giggled and mischievously looked up at the prince, imploring him to ask what she meant. Krone eagerly anticipated his forthcoming question.

“Choice? What kind of choice?” Ein asked.

“I could give you a blessing first, or...over here. I can give it to you *here* once you return.”

Upon being given two choices, Ein was confused by what she meant by the latter. Krone immediately lifted her index finger and touched Ein’s lips before she touched her own.



“So, that’ll be my reward when I return,” he concluded.

“Goodness, I’m not audacious enough to refer to myself as a reward,” Krone replied.

“But you are to me.”

“Then you’re choosing the second option?”

“Yeah. It’s not bad to know there’s a reward to come home to.”

This banter was so casual that one couldn’t have imagined that the crown prince was about to sail off to war. But this was rather befitting of the couple. They smiled and started to discuss plans after his return. There was no chance they’d end this meeting on a sorrowful note.

“This is as far as I can go,” Krone said, suddenly stopping in place. “Your boat’s way too big for Kingsland’s port. We have plans to remodel the port, but that’s not something that can be done overnight. You’ll need to take a dinghy out to *Leviathan*.”

A few hundred meters out onto the sea rested the *Leviathan* in all its glory. Several small ships floated beside it, and many were climbing aboard the main ship.

“Your crew is made up of those capable of taming the *White King*,” Krone explained. “They’re the best of the best.”

“Thank you,” Ein said. “I know this request was sudden, but you’ve already done so much for me.”

“You know that you’re always prone to making sudden requests. There’s never a dull moment around you, Ein.”

“I think I’ll probably be causing trouble for years to come.”

“As much as you like. When you return home, you can do as you wish.” In fact, Krone hoped that Ein would continue to be a troublemaker, implying that he’d return. She held back her tears.

Ein hugged her tightly and whispered in her ear. “I’ll be off.”

He desperately shook off his feelings of sorrow and boarded the dinghy

headed for the *Leviathan*. As Ein stood on the tiny vessel, he was shocked by the warship's size. Colossal—there was no other way to describe it. Ein, who'd boarded the *White King* before, knew that it was completely dwarfed by this enormous new ship. The sheer presence of the *Leviathan* was daunting.

He crossed his arms and said, "It's amazing that something so huge can sail through the waters."

Luckily, those around him kept their distance and treated the crown prince with restraint. No one was around to hear his mumblings. Just then, another woman approached Ein's side.

"U-Um, I saw Lady Olivia and Lady Krone speaking with you, so I thought that I should exchange a few words with you as well..." a sheepish elf said.

"Huh? Chris? Why're you here?" Ein asked.

She wore her knight's uniform but wasn't wearing any armor over it. A rapier hung from her belt, but it was clear that she wasn't off to the battlefield. She seemed hesitant, unsure of what to do until Ein's boat reached the *Leviathan*.

"I came to send you off," she said. "Unfortunately, against all of my wishes, and of my utmost reluctance, I've been forced to stay behind and act separately from you."

"Ha ha..." Ein chuckled. "Um, I'm sorry."

She puffed out her cheeks—a clear display of her dissatisfaction with the situation.

"At the very moment you find Sir Lloyd, we shall launch our attack on the port city of Roundheart," Chris said. "I shall sail there on the *Princess Olivia*, so we'll execute a sort of pincer movement." She was unable to hide her displeasure throughout the entire statement. "Um, I understand that this is an effective plan, but what do you think about your personal guard acting separately from you?"

"I feel really bad, honestly," Ein replied.

The crown prince had devised this plan. He kept it a secret that it was actually more difficult to convince his reluctant knight.



“I don’t need your apology,” Chris huffed. “But please, find Sir Lloyd then rendezvous with me! Oh, and I’ll have you know: I still haven’t given up on my secret plan to stowaway on the *Leviathan*!”

“It’s not really a secret if you tell me, is it?” Ein asked.

“I figured I’d be fine as long as you don’t notice me.”

“You can’t abuse your power and authority.”

For the first time, her face was stricken with shock. “Y-You made me give up on my secret plan... Then I suppose I have no other choice! You must meet up with me!”

“Yeah, I know. That’s my plan, so don’t worry.”

“You absolutely must! I won’t allow it to happen any other way!” After her firm words, the ship had reached the vessel. “This is as far as I’ll go. Sir Ein, I wish you the best of luck.”

The dinghy was tied right by the ramp of the *Leviathan*, and Chris stepped away from her master’s side. She still had much to do, and Ein could only muster a short “Thank you” to her back. He turned back to the ramp, knowing that Dill waited for him inside. Bara was also aboard and had been given her own room to serve the ship as its nurse.

The ramp shook with every step he took as he finally entered the colossal vessel. Ein had been blown away by the deck’s magnificence when a familiar voice called out to him.

“Have you finished saying your farewells to everyone?”

“G-Grandfather?!” Ein gasped.

Silverd had been waiting for the boy alongside Dill and a few members of the Knights Guard. Ein almost fell to the ground in astonishment; he’d been dying to exchange a few words with his grandfather but Ein hadn’t expected him to be onboard.

“You don’t have to look so surprised,” Silverd said.

“O-Of course I am!” Ein stammered. “I-I haven’t had the chance to speak with you for a while now...”

“Forgive me. I was agonizing over my own thoughts.” He brought one hand to his ear and touched the earring that he was wearing. “Your grandmother scolded me too. Heh heh... A king being scolded by his queen lacks a touch of dignity, I’d say.”

No doubt Lalalua had given a piece of her mind while Ein was away. As the king mocked himself, he removed his earring and offered it to the crown prince.

“Take it with you,” Silverd said. “I pray that this will save your life.”

The earring contained a Ruby of the earth. Ein had been protected by this sacred treasure during his clash with the Sea Dragon. This magical tool proved incredibly difficult to craft, and even the royal family didn’t have many to spare.

“This is my share,” Silverd said. “I think you should hold on to it for now, Ein.”

“I can’t do that,” the crown prince said. “Our knights are already spread thin as it is, and there are plenty of holes in our security!”

“You don’t need to worry about our defenses. They haven’t been seen in recent years, but each of our cities has tight, defensive formations. By tomorrow morning, sorcery weapons will be placed throughout Kingsland. In other words, should our efforts fail and the royal capital fall, it would’ve been no different if our seafaring troops had remained here.”

Before Ein could say another word, the king walked away alongside a member of the Knights Guard. He took large strides, exuding dignity and confidence. The crown prince could only watch his grandfather make his way to another dinghy.

Dill approached Ein. “His Majesty has been here for quite a while, sternly drilling each and every member of the crew. I believe he’s been quite worried about you, up until the very end.”

“He didn’t need to hide that from me,” Ein muttered.

“As king, I’m certain that His Majesty wields his own share of pride. But even us knights could tell how deeply worried he is about you, Sir Ein.”

After letting out a melancholic sigh, Ein turned around and bowed towards the dinghy setting out. He could no longer see Silverd, but this was the crown prince’s way of offering his gratitude.

“Let’s finish this up in a flash and return home,” Ein said, hope in his voice. “We’ll meet up with Lloyd, finish this off, and make our triumphant return.”

“Mm-hmm, that’s right, Your Highness! That’s the spirit. Let’s work hard, shall we?”

“Majorica?!” Ein gasped.

“Good evening,” the magic stone store owner said. “I know a thing or two about miasma, so leave that bit to me.” A thick floral scent surrounded the man’s body as he wiggled around and set a large bag on the floor. “Whew! This was heavy.”

“Why are you here, Majorica? This ship’s headed for Rockdam.”

“Oh, I know that, of course. His Majesty asked me to climb aboard. Since I have some information on miasma and monsters, he requested that I lend you my aid.”

“We’re headed for danger.”

“My, oh my. You’re headed there yourself, aren’t you?”

Majorica’s confidence made Ein and Dill feel as though they could rely upon him.

“All righty,” Majorica said. “I’ll be headed to my room. Call me if you need me!”

He turned around and waved as he left.

“He really is a reliable guy...” Ein murmured.

“Ha ha ha...” Dill gave a dry laugh.

The crown prince switched gears, ready to head for battle. “Has everything been loaded onto the ship?”

“Yes, Your Highness. The preparations were just wrapping up as you boarded. We’ve also requisitioned a set of ten cannons that far outclass the power of my father’s cannons.”

“How much power?”

“Simply put, their range and impact far exceed the Blast Bows. Unfortunately,

their size and weight are also much heavier than the weapons already in Bardland. They're not suited for long distances on foot, but please rest easily. The Knights Guard shall push them along."

Ein's cheeks twitched. "Um... Will you guys be okay?"

"It's not a problem at all. My father and his men made the march to Bardland, so we can push ourselves a little."

"Ah, okay. Just don't push yourselves too much."

"Please don't mind us. We have trained to be adaptable in situations like this. We've also brought a few bison to pull our cargo for us. They can also become our food supply if need be."

It was depressing to know that these bison had been sent off to work hard and then be grilled over a fire. Unfortunately, Ein couldn't spare the bison—he knew how tasty they were.

"I believe we'll be departing soon," Dill said.

Soon enough, the *Leviathan* slowly glided across the ocean and gradually sailed away from Kingsland.

"Whoa!" Ein cried.

In a matter of seconds, the vessel sped up at a rate Ein had never seen before. As the *Leviathan* grew even faster, it was clear that this vessel was unlike the *Princess Olivia* or the *White King*. The ship didn't part the ocean, but the water seemingly made way for this titanic vessel. Like the mighty beast it was crafted from, the vessel could easily be referred to as "king of the ocean."

The *Leviathan* left a vertical ripple in its wake, and its divine body glided across the ocean as though the boat had claimed dominion over it.

"We should reach Rockdam by sunrise," Dill reported.

"Then I'll rest a little until then," Ein replied.

"Of course. I shall guide you to your room."

On a winter day, Ein finally set sail. It wouldn't be too long before the sunrise, and the prince planned to rest as much as he could before the ship reached its

destination. Dill guided Ein to a room just as splendid as his quarters within White Knight Castle; the prince couldn't believe his eyes. However, all Ein could do now was pray that Lloyd and his men were holding out in Bardland.

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"Sir Ein! Sir Ein!" Dill shook the crown prince awake just as the sun started to peek through the horizon.

Having never been shaken awake by his knight before, Ein took a moment to process the experience as he sat up. A light breakfast sat on the prince's bedside table and he reached over to take a few bites. Not long after, he stretched and gazed out a nearby window; their ship had already docked.

"Did we run into any problems on the way here?" Ein asked.

"None which required us to wake you," Dill said.

"In other words, you still had a *few* problems."

"We sailed by two groups of sea monsters."

"That's not minor at all. Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Well, we destroyed them and went along our way. It wasn't anything pressing."

Even Silverd's vessel, the *White King*, couldn't accomplish such a feat. Yet, the *Leviathan* had done it twice. The crown prince quietly chewed on his sandwich.

"That's beyond reliable, really," Ein commented.

It went without saying that if a vessel was too large to dock in Kingsland, there was no way it'd fit in Rockdam's docks. Thus, the *Leviathan* had dropped its anchor a short distance away from land. Out of the corner of his eye, Ein noticed a warship approaching.

"We've already loaded up that ship with as many weapons and supplies that'll fit. Additionally, the ship will be ferrying us to the shores of Rockdam," Dill explained.

"Roger that," Ein replied. "I find myself constantly surprised, but I'm glad that we safely made it here."

“Then...”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

“Understood. Your belongings have already been loaded on board, so I ask that we leave immediately.”

As always, Dill demonstrated his efficiency as an excellent knight. Ein glanced at his knight when something unusual caught his eye.

“Have you always worn that necklace?” the crown prince inquired.

A small, cat-shaped necklace hung from Dill’s neck.

“I received this from Princess Katima,” Dill replied. “She claimed that it proved that I’m her assistant.”

“Ah, assistant!” Ein said, refusing to dwell upon this much further. “Got it! Yeah, makes sense.”

He quickly headed for the door.

“Sir Ein, is there something you’d like to say to me?” Dill inquired, befuddled.

“Nope, nothing at all. Don’t worry about it. There’s nothing wrong. Let’s hurry up and find Lloyd.”

And with that, Ein and a platoon of Ishtarican reinforcements quickly arrived on the beaches of Rockdam. The nation’s knights were stunned to behold the *Leviathan*, but they were flabbergasted by the arrival of the crown prince himself. Then all at once, everyone erupted into cheers.

Morale skyrocketed as the troops, primarily consisting of knights, eagerly commenced their journey to Bardland. As Lloyd had already paved the way ahead, Ein’s overencumbered men were able to smoothly march ahead without much trouble.

The following afternoon, Ein gazed upon the battlefield shortly after reaching the outskirts of Bardland. As the prince’s forces had stationed themselves on a tall hill overlooking the city, the Heims had been left seemingly unaware of their arrival.

“Oh dear... I guess you were right to rush out here, Your Highness,” Majorica

said, furrowing his brows concernedly at the gruesome scene.

“As Master Majorica says, I’m glad we arrived quickly,” Dill agreed.

“Yeah, as am I,” Ein replied.

“Is that the carriage spewing miasma?” Majorica asked. “I’ve heard that a piggy little first prince was on board.”

“There’s no doubt about it. That must be the mysterious element that worried Warren so much.”

Majorica gestured to the lavish carriage parked in the middle of the vast plain before them. In contrast to the silver, gold, and jewels that adorned the vehicle, the miasma spewing from it appeared to be poisonous. Accompanied by a robed man, chimeras flanked the carriage from all angles. *I think I can handle something that size*, Ein thought.

As most of Heim’s men seemed to be preoccupied with overpowering Lloyd and his troops, the surrounding area was relatively unguarded.

“And they’ve got a few interesting pets in tow,” Majorica observed.

“Undisciplined, they are just wild beasts,” Ein replied. “Dill.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the knight replied. “We can fire on your command.”

“So, what’s the plan, Your Highness?” Majorica asked.

“It’s clear to me that Lloyd was forced to take the defensive,” Ein answered. “The Heims are oddly lethargic, but there are too many chimeras for Lloyd to clear out in a timely manner.” He calmly observed the battlefield and carefully vocalized his thoughts. “Rockdam will be doomed if this defensive line falls. The marshal and his men are the only reason the city’s still standing.”

“I agree, Your Highness. Goodness... And I think it’s unreasonable to deem the marshal responsible for such a clear disadvantage.”

“I agree. That’s why we have to go and help them.”

Ein’s horse trotted a few paces forward and whirled around to face Dill and Majorica. The pair nodded and the prince smiled in satisfaction before he turned towards the other knights. They all wore stern expressions on their

faces. They'd just seen far more chimeras than they expected to encounter. Some knights were stunned by the grisly scene before them, while others observed the oddly behaved Heims. *This is no good.* If Ein gave the order, his knights would undoubtedly roar and charge into the fray. But with their current morale, the troops' full potential would remain sealed.

"Everyone, look at the comrades around you," Ein ordered. His voice was clear and echoed throughout the area. The crown prince prayed that his troops would regain even a sliver of their usual composure. "Look at the faces of your friends in war, and gaze upon their armor. Everything that enters your view is the pride of our nation."

The gentle thud of a spear hitting the ground rang through the air. Like a ripple, the other knights gradually followed suit, pounding their spears into the ground. The sound grew louder still, and it appeared as if the knights were regaining their lost courage.

"Thrust your spears. Swing your blades. Tear your enemies asunder!" Ein roared.

As he unsheathed the black sword on his waist, a brilliant light emanated from the blade—seemingly dulling the chimeras' movements. This wasn't a result of Ein's will—no, the blade glowed on its own, illuminating the battlefield.

"This is..." Ein murmured. As he trailed off, a certain word tumbled out of his mouth before he noticed it. "Light."

Ein looked to the sky, having just said the exact same word Jayle had uttered during his trial. Not snow, but particles of light fell from the heavens. As each fleck touched the earth, an explosion eradicated a crowd of chimeras. Then suddenly, a silvery breeze glided across the battlefield and purified the miasma in an instant. As silence settled on the war zone, Ein raised his sword high in the air.

"Charge! Protect our family!" he bellowed, gazing at the dark wave of Heim soldiers racing across the plain.

Ein rode at the vanguard as he charged ahead while giving his order. Then all at once, four cannons fired as the prince's troops followed his lead. The nearby chimeras were eviscerated in a flash. However, their air was instantly retainted



by another deluge of miasma that spewed from the carriage. While less thick than before, this issue was best handled first.

“My, oh my...” Majorica murmured. “He looks just like a king now.”

“He’s our crown prince, but also our pride and joy,” Dill replied.

“You’re right. But still...what was that amazing power we just saw?”

The magic stone master was confused and shaken. He gazed at the crown prince charging headfirst into battle and felt like everything would be all right if they stuck by the boy’s side. The other soldiers felt the same and morale skyrocketed after they witnessed Ein’s amazing power.

“Dill, I’ll leave the left wing to you!” Ein shouted. “Don’t let enemies come anywhere near Bara and the support squad! Majorica, could I ask you to handle the right wing? Corner the enemy!”

“Y-Y-Your Highness!” Majorica replied. “What are you going to do?!”

“Thanks to our cannons, I’ve got the perfect opening to take out that carriage!”

After all, only Ein was completely immune to the miasma. Taking advantage of the opening, he charged into the center of Heim’s forces to attack the carriage. Miasma started to leak into the air, mixing with the clouds of dust.

“Sir Ein!” Dill shouted, trying to approach the crown prince.

Ein stopped him. “I’m the only one that can do this! Dill, please ensure that our enemies don’t approach me!”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

“Argh, fine!” Majorica added. “Don’t push yourself too hard just because you’re swinging a Ruby of the earth around!”

“I know!” Ein called back. He grinned as he discovered the Heims locked in a state of panic.

“Kree!” a chimera screeched.

“Outta my way! Move!”

After slashing away a rat that’d tried to hit his blind spot, the prince headed

straight for the carriage. Oddly enough, he felt more power than ever coursing through his veins, and felt satisfied with his deep connection to the sword crafted from Marco's armor. He was overcome with a curious feeling of omnipotence as he gazed over the lucid battlefield. *Where's their commander?* Ein glanced around as the sound of a large horn echoed throughout the surrounding area.

"Enemy reinforcements?" he wondered aloud.

Panic filled Ein's mind—if he didn't hurry, Lloyd would be in danger. He quickly shook his head and redirected his focus to the carriage—he needed to take that out first. If he didn't stop the miasma, his soldiers wouldn't last long.

"The scent is abhorrent," he muttered.

The foul stench of rotting flesh offended his nose. He furrowed his brows at the putrid smell combined with dust, and encouraged his horse to rush ahead as soldiers awaited for his arrival.

"You're...in the presence...of His Highness."

"Stand...stand back...barbarian. Barbarian."

These grating voices and odd speech patterns came from the pair of hooded coachmen attending to the carriage. They hid their expressions behind their hoods, but one could easily tell that they were anything but normal. When Ein approached the carriage, they grabbed their spears and prepared to fight back.

"Grah!"

"For...Heim! For...Heim!"

However, they didn't stand a chance against the crown prince. As the black sword easily sliced through one of the coachmen and his spear, the other quickly fled from the battlefield. He seemed to be headed towards an area near the city, catching Ein completely off guard.

"What's his deal?" he wondered.

Curious about the fallen coachman's identity, Ein approached the man and removed his hood. The prince almost instantly recoiled at the sight, not at all expecting what he saw.

The coachman might have been a man at some point, but underneath the hood, he had the face of a half-rotting corpse. While the crown prince couldn't ascertain the cause of the transformation, knew it was clearly inhumane and cruel. Disgusted by it all, Ein headed over to the carriage doors. In the meantime, the nearby miasma had been purified and lost its toxic purple hues. The doors of the carriage swung open on its own, and Ein charged in to take a look inside. The person inside quickly took notice of the prince, his voice filled with elation.

"A-Ahhh! What an adorable lady!" the man screamed. "Come now! Come by my side!"

"You must be Rayfon," Ein said.

"I-I-I'm the crown prince. I'm Rayfon. C-Come. Come closer. Take off your clothes!"

"I don't know what misunderstanding you're having, but I'm a guy."

This was, without a doubt, Heim's first prince. However, he coughed up a dark puff of air with every breath he took. Oddly enough, miasma spewed from under his clothing as well. The carriage itself hadn't been radiating miasma—it was all coming out of Rayfon.

"H-H-Huh?" Rayfon stammered. "What are you on about? J-J-Just... Just... Just come over here! Come!"

Rayfon deliriously declared himself "the crown prince" and started stripping. Ein instinctively looked away, but something caught his eye. A round stone was embedded in the first prince's chest—a pure-black stone. A series of grotesque veins occasionally pulsated as they maintained the connection between Rayfon's body and the stone.

"Where'd you get that stone?" Ein asked.

"I-I-It was given to me! To me!" Rayfon cried. "B-By that noble... Huh? Who's that noble person? Who am I... I... Huh? H-H-H-Hey! Never mind that! Come! Come over here! Take off your clothes!"

"Ah, by the red foxes."

Ein hadn't the slightest feelings for Rayfon, but it was painful to see that he'd been used and abused so easily. He let out a sigh and slowly sat beside Rayfon inside the carriage.

"Huh? Ah? H-Huh?" Rayfon said.

Ein had pierced the stone with his sword, and the first prince could only open and close his mouth like a stunned fish while he stroked his stone. A viscous, black liquid leaked out from the shattered stone, and Rayfon became thinner and thinner—like a wilted flower that had suddenly lost its food source.

"A-Ah... Hrah! Huff... Ah..." Rayfon gasped in agony as he scratched at his throat.

Ein was tempted to look away, but he didn't avert his austere gaze as he stared at Heim's royal. As the one who pointed his blade at Rayfon, Ein felt that it was his duty to see the man through his final moments.

"Gah... Huff... Ah... Aghhh!" Rayfon screamed.

He turned into skin and bones like a mummy. After Ein confirmed Rayfon's death and the miasma's dissipation, he stepped out of the carriage with heavy footsteps.

"Damn it!" Ein grunted and swung his blade at the carriage, easily splitting it in two.

The vehicle toppled over with a dull thud as Ein stared at the ground, kicking it in frustration.

"Are you all right, Your Highness?!" Dill inquired as he approached on his horse. "I was worried and came rushing over. The enemy suddenly weakened!"

"They weakened?" Ein said, drawing his own conclusions. "Were the chimeras being buffed by the miasma or something?"

Suddenly, he felt a powerful presence residing near the city. There was no mistaking it.

"Edward!" Ein growled, his eyes filled with hatred as he'd finally found his enemy. He spotted another man kneeling in front of the red fox and hastily returned to his horse.

“Sir Ein?!” Dill asked.

“We have to hurry! Lloyd’s in danger!”

“Father is?! Then is that...”

At this rate, Ein knew that he wouldn’t make it in time. Lloyd could be skewered at any moment, and he’d fall to the ground without another word.

“Something! I must have something!” Ein said, racking his brain. “I’ve gotta have some kind of ability.”

The crown prince knew that he’d lost his cool, but in his desperation, he emitted the Blackvorn’s black fog without warning. As the fog was meant to deceive its target, Ein prayed that it would buy him a few more minutes. It was then that the words he’d said in the past flashed across his mind.

*“My name is Ein. Ein von Ishtarica. I am the next king who carries the blood of Ishtarica within my veins, and I am the Ishtarican royal family’s second—”*

*Right, Ein thought. I am the Ishtarican royal family’s second Demon Lord.* He remembered claiming so during his battle with Marco, and strong thoughts of his Dryad lineage sprung to his mind as well.

“There’s no way I’m giving up here!” Ein growled. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t desperate, but he used all the power he could muster. “Make it in time!”

Ein prayed that his Dryad abilities would save Lloyd in time, just as they had protected Chris during the battle with Jayle in Syth Mill.

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Just as he managed to raise his head, Lloyd pressed a hand against his left eye while gritting his teeth in pain. His son had suddenly arrived to support his body.

“Father! Are you all right?!” the young man cried.

“D-Dill?! Why’re you here?!” Lloyd asked.

“I’ll explain later! Lady Bara is with us too, so we should retreat for now!”

The marshal’s son should’ve been waiting at home in his beloved motherland, throwing Lloyd on the edge of tears. Instead of fighting him, he allowed Dill to

pick him up by the shoulder and support him.

“Majorica, I want you to wait here with Dill,” Ein ordered. “Leave this place to me.”

“Sir Ein?! Wh-Why are you...” Lloyd started.

This was no place for a crown prince. It might’ve done wonders for the knights’ morale, but fearing the worst, Lloyd couldn’t agree to Ein’s presence.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll explain everything later,” Ein said. “Most of the chimeras have also been dealt with. The knights should have more than enough men to regain our position on the battlefield, so you don’t need to worry about that. And...” The crown prince shifted his gaze from Lloyd to Edward, irritation clear in his tone. “I’ll take care of him.”

While everyone present was reluctant to leave Ein behind, they all knew that the crown prince was unwilling to bend. They obediently followed his orders.

“It’s been a while, Edward,” Ein said. The last time they spoke was during a meeting in Euro.

“Indeed, it really has been,” Edward replied. “You’ve grown quite a bit since the last time we met.”

“Thank you.”

Edward remained silent for a moment before he continued, “And you’ve really grown to resemble that odious man’s appearance.”

*What’s he talking about?* Ein had no idea what Edward was referring to, but before he could ask, the red fox spoke once more.

“That ability from earlier... Was that your doing?” He gazed at Ein’s roots with repulsion. The red fox clearly found them to be a nuisance, his face twisting with disgust.

“Yeah, it was,” Ein replied with a nod.

“I see! I see!” Edward screeched in annoyance. He grabbed his spear and aimed it squarely at Ein’s neck. Unfortunately...

“That was sudden. I thought you wanted to talk with me a little.”

“You dodged it.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Oh no, not at all! I was simply shocked. To tell you the truth, I’d hoped that you’d die with that blow.”

Ein flashed a troubled smile. He acted like a friendly young man, but in the next instant, he directed his murderous rage at the red fox. Faster than one could blink, Ein vanished from sight and reappeared in front of Edward, swinging his sword.

“Wha—” Edward cried.

He just barely managed to dodge the attack as fresh drops of blood danced in the air. But Edward was more shocked by Ein’s black blade than the boy’s speed.

“That blade is that armored bastard’s...” Edward started. “No! It can’t be! But why do you have that sword?! You have that...that repulsive man’s...king’s blade! Why?! Why is that in your hand?!”

Edward’s face made it clear that he was begging for an answer. It looked as though he’d crossed paths with an opponent that he’d hoped to never encounter.

“Wh-Why?! How?! How in the world?!” Edward cried, his breath turning haggard as he slammed his spear into the ground like a petulant child. “That face! And yet you dare look down on me?! How disgusting! Disgusting! Repulsive! Loathsome! Sickening!”

Despite his tantrum, the fox’s expert spearmanship was quite the sight to behold. Every blow he dealt was heavy and swift. But Ein managed to use all of his power to block the attacks—again, again, and again. This only angered the red fox even more.

“I don’t like this one bit,” Edward spat. He suddenly froze in place. “I also despise that excuse for swordplay you’ve displayed. Can’t you just gouge out your own eyeballs and kill yourself already? Fall to the ground of your own accord.”

“You do understand how stupid you sound, right?” Ein replied.

“I do. I just thought I’d ask anyway.”

This was far and away beyond someone just losing their mind. As Edward’s attitude continued to erratically shift, it became increasingly difficult to figure out what kind of man he was. While dangerous words tumbled out of Edward’s mouth, the gentle expression on his face made it appear as if he were an old man handing out ice cream to children. Yet, every one of the thorny words that left his lips was filled with homicidal rage.

“I want to kill you no matter what. Do I make myself clear?” Edward asked. Ein nodded as the Dullahan’s armor wrapped around his arm, causing the red fox to chuckle. “Ha ha ha. Why? Why do you wear that detestable armor? It’s truly baffling.”

Edward tilted his head to one side, baffled. In an attempt to vent his frustrations, he started pulling out a few strands of his hair.

“*They* told me to stop doing this, but I simply can’t seem to shake the habit,” he explained. “When I’m feeling distressed, I have this tendency to pluck away at my hair.”

Ein remained silent.

“When I comb through my hair with my fingers like so, I touch upon a strand with split ends every now and then,” Edward continued. “And the resulting stimulation gets me excited...like the last time I slept with my beloved lady.”

The crown prince quietly observed the red fox, who suddenly started talking about himself. The fox’s creepy rambling made Ein break out into goose bumps.

“But of course, this elation doesn’t even come close to a climax...but it’s still a moment of pleasure for me nonetheless,” Edward continued.

“Okay...” Ein replied.

“Goodness... I don’t like that attitude of yours either. Always with a condescending gaze. Can’t you see that your mocking tone is clearly filled with irritation?”

His intolerant words hinted at his own unique values and perspectives. After



letting out a final, giant sigh, he lithely bent his body and thrust his spear at Ein in one fluid movement.

“I’m going for the kill more than ever before,” Edward said.

Ein blocked the attack and stared straight at the red fox before he said, “I’ll do the same.” Four dark appendages—his Phantom Hands—emerged from his back.

“Hah! How very peculiar indeed... That move really takes me back.”

“Maybe its power will knock some nostalgia into you, red fox!”

The four Phantom Hands started moving as though they had minds of their own. Almost in unison, they shot out to grab Edward’s leg, torso, head, and spear in a bid to defeat the fox as quickly as possible.



“Tch...” Edward said with an annoyed click of his tongue. “How repulsive!”

“As I thought, you’re fast,” Ein muttered.

Had the red fox moved a few milliseconds later, his head would’ve been sliced cleanly off. However, Ein’s swipe at Edward’s neck failed to connect. The man was quick enough to make one recoil. In the blink of an eye, he launched a counterattack at Ein’s shoulder. The Dullahan’s armor was just barely able to block the blow, but any normal armor would’ve been blown away by the attack.

“This is how a skilled and trained warrior fights,” Edward said.

He flung his spear at Ein and used his newly created opening to close the gap. The red fox pulled out a knife from his pants and aimed for Ein’s chest, but suddenly, he froze in place.

“Thanks for telling me,” Ein said. “I learned something new.”

His words were clearly forced and fake; Edward felt like he was purposely allowed to approach the crown prince. Struck with confusion, the red fox spotted something glimmering in Ein’s ear.

“A ruby...of the earth?” he gasped.

Ein smiled fearlessly. It was then that Edward felt an ominous presence quickly approaching his back. While it was true that an opening had been made, the crown prince was fighting with that opening in mind—as though the boy could see the future. He was willing to lose the battle to win the war. When Edward stepped in to close the gap, the crown prince was convinced that the red fox would no longer be able to escape his Phantom Hands.

“You...” Edward growled, skillfully weaving his body and desperately trying to step away from Ein’s side.

He considered shattering the ruby of the earth, but the prince knew that he had no such time. If he tried to attack, he knew that he’d be quickly skewered, and his death would be in vain.

“Oh, I’m not planning to let you dodge this one,” Ein said.

A Phantom Hand tightly grasped one of Edward’s thighs, but he swiftly flipped his body in response. Before Ein could land a blow with the black sword, the fox

used his knife to slice the tendril and escape. However, a bit of blood dripped from his wounds in the process. After he gained some distance, he steadied his breathing and glared at the boy.

“Where did all that gusto from before go, red fox?” Ein goaded.

“Huff... Huff...” Edward panted. “I’ve never seen...a creature like you!”

As the fox slowly inched back, the crown prince slowly and confidently stepped forward.

“I’ve never heard of a crown prince stronger than a marshal!” the red fox added.

The only sound echoing throughout the battlefield was that of dirt being crushed beneath their feet. Even as they stood in the middle of a war zone, the duel between these men seemed as if it took place in a completely different world.

“You’re just like that man...” Edward muttered with a frivolous smile. “You very much resemble Jayle. You’re a leader, and yet you dare stand at the forefront of battle, emanating such a powerful aura and presence over the battlefield. And with your appearance, you’re the spitting image of him!”

“And what if I am?” Ein asked.

“Oh, nothing at all! Simply put, I just don’t like that. Not one bit!”

Edward steadied his breathing and grasped his chest as he stood tall. Bright-red blood flowed from his thigh wound, but he didn’t seem to mind at all. In fact, he was laughing.

“Ah, I’ve just remembered!” he cried. “My *former* daughters are in your care, it seems. I’ve only troubled you in that regard.”

“Former daughters? You have kids?” Ein asked.

“Bara is one. My second eldest daughter, May, has also been in your care, hasn’t she? Goodness gracious! I haven’t heard their names in ages, so it took me a long time to remember them!”

“They’re your daughters? Are you sure you aren’t lying?”

“Why would I do that? Neither of them hold much value to me, though. You can just use them as you please and toss them aside once they’ve outgrown their use. They’re more human than any other species, nor do they have stones or cores. Do as you like; they’re nothing more than simple humans.”

“You’re the lowest of the low.”

Ein vowed to never reveal the truth to Bara or ever ask if she wanted to reunite with her father. After hearing Belia’s side of the story, the prince was no longer as suspicious of her and Warren. Even if red fox blood flowed in Bara’s veins, their encounter in Ist was a total coincidence, and she had faithfully served the castle since. Ein was willing to trust her.

“There are only as many roles as there are actors,” Edward said. “Even if you deny it, I... Huh? You seem rather calm. Why is that? You’ve just been told that your enemy species is actually closer to you than you think. Any normal person would’ve had their whole world shattered by such a shocking revelation.”

Edward posed the question with a haggard look on his face, but he was quite interested in the boy’s train of thought. The crown prince’s initial response wasn’t panic, but an insult towards the red fox.

“Are you familiar with the names ‘Warren’ and ‘Belia’?” Ein inquired.

“Not at all. I can tell they’re a man and a woman, but...” Edward stopped himself. “Ah, I see now. No wonder you were so calm when you were told about Bara.” Finally putting two and two together, the red fox flashed a vulgar grin. “Those two are still here, I see. He’s still around, serving as Ishtarica’s chancellor. He must’ve *really* been fond of that Pixie. Heh heh. Their appearances changed so much that I didn’t notice at all.”

He started giving a weak round of applause. Angered by the fox’s naked taunt and casual attitude, Ein almost instinctively stepped forward, hoping to end this battle soon. But Edward kept his crass smile plastered on his face, only earning Ein’s further ire.

“I quite enjoyed our little chat, but you must die here,” Edward said as miasma leaked from the hems of his pants.

“You! What are...” Ein started.

“Long, long ago, Jayle was such an incredible nuisance...more than anyone else. And now, you’re just as much of one as he was.”

A breeze started to encircle Edward as Ein started to notice the many eyes fixed on him. After a quick survey of his surroundings, the prince saw a pack of chimeras ready to pounce. They inhaled the miasma wafting in from Edward, and their breathing grew more ferocious by the second. All around, certain sections of the ground started bulging. Edward quickly jumped back and gained his distance from Ein.

“I’ll say it one more time,” the red fox said. “You must die here.”

He snapped his fingers, and the chimeras all pounced on Ein—right on cue. At the same time, more chimeras erupted from the bulging plots of land, giving way to a massive army that charged at the crown prince. The chimeras’ eyes glimmered oddly as they continued to create this horrifying, never-before-seen sight.

“Even you should struggle against this many!” Edward shouted.

Ein said not a word. He stood there, stricken with grief. He mourned for those lost in the Great War, their magic stones most likely stolen and embedded in the chimeras charging his way. His heart was filled with an equal mix of grief and rage.

“Edward,” Ein said, staring daggers at the red fox. At the same time, he switched his grip on the black sword to a backhand one.

All the while, the army of chimeras closed in on the boy. But Ein didn’t panic. As the ground around him crumbled, completely isolating him from the rest of the world, he didn’t falter.

Edward could only flinch in shock, fearing the boy’s interminable courage. The red fox unconsciously took a step back. A seemingly limitless number of chimeras surrounded Ein, and Edward believed that the boy didn’t stand a chance. So why did Edward feel as if *he* was the one being cornered?

“I’ll be with you in a moment,” Ein vowed.

“Hah! Ha ha ha ha!” Edward laughed, feigning confidence. There was no way that Ein could handle so many chimeras. “What silly thing are you—”

“Don’t you *dare* allow yourself to be conceited for even a second, red fox.”

Ein’s voice reverberated throughout the war zone. With his backhand grip, he plunged his dark blade into the ground. For a split second, an impressive gust of wind blew through the boy’s surroundings and emitted a shock wave. The ground around suddenly started freezing. The sight was as beautiful as a polished crystal floor, but even the slightest touch would inflict severe frostbite upon its victims.

As soon as they set foot on the ground, the chimeras froze in a matter of mere moments. As for the beasts that had decided to pounce on the prince, they were skewered by a series of sharp and thick pillars of ice. Almost instantly, most of these abominations had met their end.

“Th-That power!” Edward gasped. “Why?! How in the world do you have that power?! Why can you use abilities unique to the King of the Tundra?!”

Ein had never heard Upaskamuy’s nickname before. No doubt Edward knew of the monster’s terrifying power. Anyone who’d dare to touch that magical ice would freeze in seconds—quite different from an average coating of frost.

“Impossible! It can’t be! Impossible! Impossible!” Edward screeched. “Why?! How do you have that power?!”

“I’ll say it once more, Edward,” Ein said, repeating himself. “I’ll be with you in a moment.”

In the blink of an eye, Ein approached the red fox. As the Ice Dragon’s skill tended to take quite a bit out of the crown prince, he couldn’t use it too often. He was surely exhausted, but he managed to swiftly close the gap between himself and Edward.

“Hah! Ah ha ha!” Edward laughed heartily. “Ah ha ha ha ha ha! How in the world? How do you have that power? I simply do not understand one bit!”

“I don’t need you to understand, and there’s no need for you to!” Ein roared.

“Oh yes, I suppose *you’d* say that. But I’m just dying to know the reason, you see! I’m simply— Gah?!”

Ein sunk the black sword into Edward’s shoulder, standing on his enemy’s

body in the process. The red fox's face twisted in a mixture of anger and pain as he desperately tried to dodge the prince's follow-up attacks.

"Kreeee!" A bat chimera suddenly appeared.

For a split second, Ein's view was blocked by the monster.

"I'll take my leave," Edward said. "It's annoying to admit, but it seems fighting you here isn't to my advantage."

While Ein remained temporarily blinded, Edward glanced around the battlefield in search of something.

"I suppose that pig in that carriage was also dealt with," the red fox muttered. "No matter."

Black smoke suddenly leaked out from under his clothes and he vanished into the mist, removing any trace he'd ever been there.

"Damn it..." Ein grunted.

The prince was so close to taking out his enemy, but the sly fox had slipped through his grasp. Ein could only redirect this anger towards himself. He had certainly won this war, but a single look at his face said it all—his heart had been filled with gloom. Regret ate at his mind as he lamented his lost opportunity to finish off the fox once and for all.

"I won't let you escape next time. I swear it," Ein said. Determination filled his voice as he gazed up at the sky.



## Chapter Eleven: Like the King of Heroes

Across the ocean, White Night Castle stood proudly at the heart of the colossal Ishtarica and its capital, Kingsland. It'd only been a few hours since the battle in Bardland had drawn to a close. As her dazzling, golden locks flew behind her, Chris hastily raced up the castle's stairs and to its highest floor—home to the royal family's personal rooms.

*"Huff... Huff..."* she panted.

She didn't wait for a reply after knocking on the door, deciding to just burst into the room. Anxious and exhausted, Krone and Olivia awaited her inside. With a mountain of documents stacked on the table in front of them, the pair sat next to each other on a sofa—they were deep in the middle of work.

"Princess Olivia! Lady Krone!" Chris shouted, hugging the two women upon rushing into the room.

"Ch-Chris?!" Olivia gasped. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Eek! Did something happen?" Krone asked.

Shock plastered the ladies' faces while they motioned for Chris to sit beside them. As a tear rolled down the elf's cheek, the pair feared the worst. But upon hearing the joyful tone in Chris's voice, Olivia's and Krone's dark faces quickly brightened.

"He won!" Chris cried.

"You mean..." Krone started.

"I do! I met with Sir Lloyd and heard of Sir Ein's valiant efforts on the battlefield! He did battle with an army of chimeras and came out victorious!"

The pair quickly returned Chris's hugs—they'd been yearning to hear those words for hours. A smiling Olivia sobbed while whispering "I'm so glad" over and over again. Krone trembled in joy, and the shining of her star crystal reminded her of her beloved's strength on the battlefield.

“I have to work hard too,” Krone murmured.

Chris snapped back to reality as she stepped away. “Indeed! I can’t be here! I’ll return to the port and make preparations!”

“You rushed all the way here for Krone’s and my sake, didn’t you?” Olivia asked.

“E-Er, I did... I actually left all the knights behind and ran here, so I must apologize to them when I return. Ah ha ha...”

“Hee hee. But thanks to you, I feel rejuvenated.”

“As do I,” Krone added.

Who could blame Chris for her haste? No one could fault her for rushing off. The trio exchanged another series of beaming, heartfelt smiles before Chris left the room. The knight gazed out a corridor window as she pressed a hand against her chest.

“Sir Ein, I’ll return to your side soon,” she said.

She later looked up at the sky while caressing her magic stone—the very one she’d offered up to him a while back. As the clouds glided across the vast Ishtarican sky, specks of snow fell upon the city. Chris silently prayed that her seafaring prince would return safe and sound.

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*It should be snowing in Ishtarica now,* Ein thought. He thought of his hometown as he clutched a magic stone in one hand and secretly absorbed its power. *This is far more satisfying than anything else.* As of late, the prince found his hunger to be better sated when he absorbed magic stones. He wasn’t sure if it was because he’d just used up a ton of magical energy, but he preferred absorption to mastication.

*Now then...* After he finished off his stone, Ein glanced around. Two days had passed since he prevailed in Bardland, and his forces lined up on the outskirts of the city bright and early.

They took a day off to rest, and another day had passed before they decided to march onward. Morale was still high, but many of the knights found

themselves confused and anxious. It was only natural. They'd just fought off a massive army, and there were no guarantees that another battle like that *wouldn't* happen again.

Ein quietly stood before his men, locked in thought about their well-being.

"Sir Ein," Lloyd said, sans an eye.

According to Bara, there was little chance of Lloyd regaining his lost eye even if he'd been treated immediately after the injury. But the stouthearted marshal claimed that it was a cheap price to pay if it meant that his life was spared—the scene was still fresh in Ein's mind.

"Once we return to Ishtarica, I shall be prepared to face whatever punishment comes my way," Lloyd said.

"Huh? Why?" Ein asked.

"The low morale is my responsibility. Had I been able to come up with a better plan and prevented the loss of my eye, perhaps this could've been avoided. Your appearance heightened our morale once more, but I still cannot deny that I should take responsibility for my soldiers' results."

"Absolutely not. Anyone would've struggled to lead in a war like this. We were able to keep on fighting and grasp victory because *you* were here."

Lloyd was tempted to refute his prince, but the boy's firm response silenced him.

"We should head off," Dill said, approaching the duo. "The necessary preparations have already been made."

"Thank you," Ein replied. "But continuing our march like this might be a bit problematic."

"Morale?"

The crown prince nodded. Morale had skyrocketed the moment Ein arrived and secured their victory. There was nothing like it. The soldiers were energetic after receiving the aid of the crown prince and winning alongside him, but that triumphant feeling slowly faded away as their thoughts returned to the enemy.

"I believe I shall address them," Ein said.

“Yes, Your Highness!” Dill replied.

A powerful aura surrounded the crown prince as he turned his back—tempting those around him to cling to the boy for hope. But Dill also sensed a hint of kindness in his stature, one reminiscent of his now-one-eyed father. The knight wasn’t wrong.

“Don’t worry,” Ein started calmly.

The seemingly quiet and composed tones of his voice had reached every knight within earshot. They all turned their attention to their prince, patiently waiting for him to speak again and wondering what exactly they shouldn’t worry about.

Ein was serene, his expression benevolent. “Everything will all go well.”

He sounded like a mother soothing a crying child, his merciful nature enveloping the troops around. No one had a clue as to what Ein was referring to, but they felt a passionate fire light up in their hearts. Surely, they’d be all right if they were by his side. Surely, there was nothing to fear. Their minds and bodies couldn’t help but feel convinced by his words. Ein trotted ahead on his horse before stopping on a small hill. He gazed at the soldiers before him and nodded in satisfaction, relieved to see that they’d regained their former gusto. And suddenly, the picturesque morning sun rose behind him.

“We will all become heroes,” he declared, implying that he knew that there would be more wars ahead of them in the future. “We will all be saviors.”

The knights started cheering, the gloomy atmosphere around them mere moments ago vanishing into thin air. They were all thrilled to hear their crown prince’s words.

“Raise your swords,” Ein ordered.

One by one, the soldiers unsheathed their blades and the clanging of metal echoed throughout the skies of Bardland. Lloyd, Dill, and Majorica all trembled with an excitement born from Ein’s voice. Gripped with a newfound courage, they could only shower him with praise as loudly called out his name.

“Come!” Ein shouted.

The knights could all see the first king of legend flickering within the crown prince. The comparisons continued when they realized that they'd fought survivors of the Great War. But Ein only thought about victory. He'd totally forgotten that King Jayle had said those words precisely in the visions he had back in Syth Mill. Ein faced the direction of Heim.

"Let us go!" he roared.

His loud orders signaled the start of Ishtarica's next long march.

## Afterword

I'm Ryou Yuuki, the author. Thank you for purchasing the seventh volume of *Magic Stone Gourmet*. Thanks to my loyal readers, I've been graciously given the opportunity to write a word of thanks once more. In June, the manga's second volume was published alongside the light novel, and much like the first volume, it's already been reprinted. Thank you very much.

As you may all know, the web novel version was used as a rough guideline in the construction of this book, and I added a bit to the plot for the light novel. I felt like I'd have far fewer revisions in the seventh volume than compared with the previous ones, but oddly enough, when I started writing, I was able to add quite a bit. It seemed like my worries were for naught. Perhaps I haven't calculated things correctly and I have much to learn in that department, but I was able to write what I wished and managed to create the seventh volume. Details like Warren being out of commission and Ein's return to Ist have all been jam-packed into this volume!

I'd be most delighted if you were able to enjoy this installment as well.

Now, to introduce the next volume... But first, I've got some news to share with you. Until now, Ein has been a young boy throughout this series, and I plan on drawing that to a close in the eighth volume. The date of the eighth volume's release has already been decided as I publish the seventh installment!

In the eighth volume, Ein will lead his troops in a fight against his fated enemies, the red foxes. It'll begin with the invasion of Heim. What battles will await him there? And what is Oz doing in the background? I hope you'll continue to read and witness the final trial of Ein's early adolescence.

I'd like to thank everyone as well. I had so much help publishing this volume as well, and we were finally able to finish this book! I'd like to thank Chisato Naruse for their superb illustrations, and I cannot express my gratitude enough. And as always, the cover designer has also provided me with a splendid cover. I'd also like to thank my two editors and everyone else who was involved in the

making of this book. Thank you to those who chose to sell *Magic Stone Gourmet* in their shops, and thank you to everyone else involved in transporting this volume.

Thanks to everyone, I was able to deliver another volume to all my readers. Thank you all so, so much. Truly.

And above all, I'd like to thank every reader out there. As I pray that we can meet again in the eighth volume to finish off the tale of Ein's early adolescence, I'd like to draw this volume's afterword to a close.

Please continue to support *Magic Stone Gourmet*.



RYOU YUUKI

ART CHISATO NARUSE



EATING  
MAGICAL POWER  
MADE ME THE  
**STRONGEST!**

# MAGIC STONE *Gourmet*



On a Moonlit Beach

*You're so sly.*

*How so?*

*Nothing.*



MAGIC  
STONE  
*Gourmet*

EATING  
MAGICAL POWER  
MADE ME THE  
**STRONGEST!**





Every single guest raised their glasses and cheered in celebration of the prince's birthday.

*Thank you!*

Chris

Olivia

Ein

Ishtarica's crown prince, a reincarnator born with the skill Toxin Decomposition EX who later evolved into a Demon Lord.

At Ein's Birthday Party

Silver

Ein's grandfather and the current king of Ishtarica.

Krone

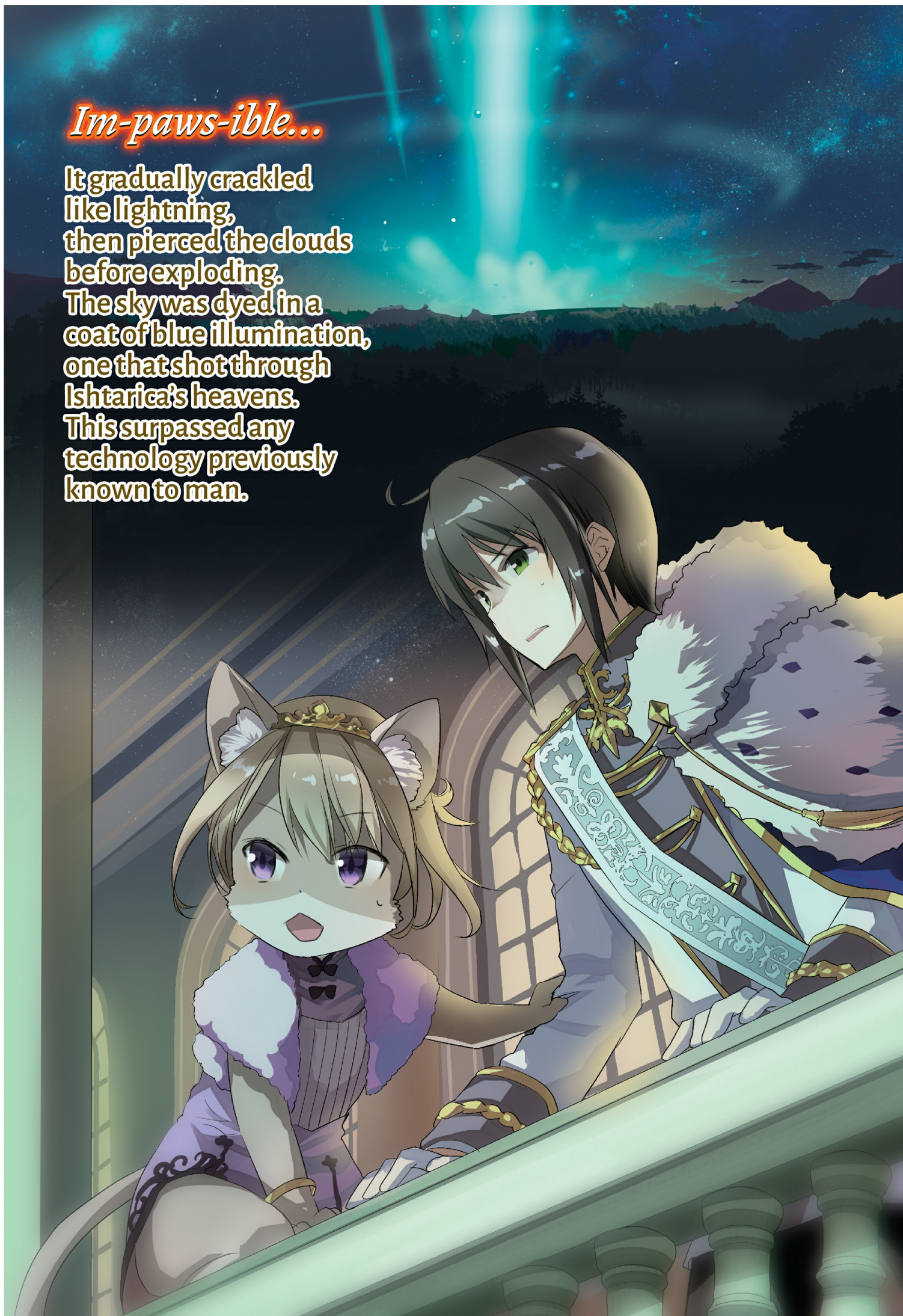
Katima





*Im-paws-ible...*

It gradually crackled like lightning, then pierced the clouds before exploding. The sky was dyed in a coat of blue illumination, one that shot through Ishtarica's heavens. This surpassed any technology previously known to man.





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Magic Stone Gourmet: Eating Magical Power Made Me the Strongest Volume  
7

by Ryou Yuuki

Translated by piyo Edited by Coop Bicknell

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