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RYOU YUUKI

ART CHISATO NARUSE

EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE ME THE
STRONGEST!

MAGIC STONE *Gourmet*

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Prologue

As the royal water train sped back to Kingsland, the crown prince lay dreaming in his carriage. It'd only been a few hours since he faced off with Marco within the Demon Castle's great hall. In his dream, Ein was but a bystander.

He found himself inside a damp, dark cave.

Why was he born and for what purpose? No matter how much he racked his brain, he couldn't find an answer. A few hours had passed since he realized he had control over his body, but this discovery merely served to confirm his own existence. He proceeded to lean against a boulder.

"Eh... Eh..." he gasped.

This was the cry he had let out as a newborn. The impossible weight of his body along with the terrible emptiness of his stomach both mystified and frightened the boy. He could only push himself to let out awkward cries in his attempts to call for help.

"Nice to meet you, small skeleton. You don't seem to understand words just yet though," a woman's voice called out to him.

Now that could finally move his body, he was secretly relieved to learn that he wasn't alone. The robed woman suddenly appeared in front of him, rummaging through her pockets before taking out a few magic stones.

"Eat up. You must be hungry," she encouraged.

He instinctively knew that sustenance was being offered to him. Despite his sluggish body, he mustered up the strength to chomp down on the stones. While they were tasteless and the shards of chewed up stone passed right through his bony frame, he could feel an inexplicable sense of satisfaction with every bite. He no longer felt like he carried a heavy weight on his shoulders. In fact, he felt more nimble than he ever had before.

"Are you a child slave, perhaps?" the woman wondered. "I can't possibly

imagine why a little one such as yourself would be here all alone. Yesterday's earthquake caused this tunnel to collapse, and exposure to miasma must've turned you into a monster."

He couldn't understand a single thing the woman said.

"You poor thing," she said. "You've been left all alone."

She tightly embraced his bony little body and the sound of clattering bones echoed throughout the cave. He had no idea what was happening to him, but he could feel her warmth.

"Why don't we go together?" she offered. "I don't have a destination in mind, but I'm sure it'll be much less lonely than staying here by yourself."

The bony child stared at her with a look of befuddlement.

"My name is Misty Silvia. However, I don't use my family's name often. Please, just call me Misty."

Only then did Ein, as a bystander, remember something from Katima's ancient Elven tome. The name "Elder Lich Silvia" had been transcribed within the text. Thus, the woman's real name was Misty Silvia.

After leaving the cave, the pair walked quite a ways. They spent many days trekking across mountains, rivers, and more on their way to a giant forest. He wasn't exactly sure how many months had passed, but the Elder Lich and the bony child continued along their journey.

"Why don't we rest for today?" Misty suggested.

After hearing her suggestion, he laid his bony body on the ground. He'd grown stronger and larger than before. Perhaps due to the magic stones he ate along the way, he was able to push a few words out of his mouth.

"Ei..." he started saying.

However, he quickly fell asleep. Within the next few minutes, Misty noticed the skeleton boy was fast asleep.

"Good boy," she said. "Ah... I should think of a name for you."

Names were an important thing for a monster to have—it paved the way for

their evolution. Monsters didn't become stronger just because they received a name, but it was a critical ritual that hopefully led to a brighter future. Misty placed a finger on her lips for several minutes, deep in her thoughts.

"What about 'Ramza'?" she murmured, glancing at the small skeleton that slept beside her.

Years passed.

"Nom nom nom!"

Before an audience of two, a young silver-haired girl voraciously devoured magic stones. But that was not all, as she was surrounded by the dried meat and fruits the pair had prepared for their journey.

"She really does eat a lot..." the woman remarked.

"Misty, what species is this child?" the man asked.

"A demon...perhaps? But she's still a bit too small."

"Nom nom nom... Don't misunderstand," the girl said between chews. "I'm a chunk of potential. I'll have a growth spurt soon enough."

"I-I see. Well, forgive me for my assumption," Misty replied. "But why are you here all alone?"

"I have no tail nor do I have wings. So I was discarded. That's all."

Indeed, at a glance, the young girl looked like a normal human.

"What do you mean?" Ramza asked.

"That's all there is to it," the girl replied. "My mama threw me away because I wasn't a normal demon. There isn't a deeper meaning to it."

Misty showed her generosity to the child, just as she had for Ramza many years ago. "Would you like to come with us?"

"Huh? Me? Where to? With you guys?" the demon girl asked in a spat of confusion. The girl clearly had her hopes up, but she remained cautious in fear of the inevitable sadness that would follow if those hopes were dashed.

“What’s your name?” Misty inquired.

“I don’t have one, of course.”

“Then you can just give her one, Misty,” Ramza said. “Like you’d done for me.”

The three continued their journey, Ramza walking ahead with Misty following while she held the girl’s hand.

“How about Arshay? How does that sound?” Misty asked.

Arshay eagerly nodded, her eyes twinkling with delight.

Shy and introverted, Arshay was a girl who loved sleeping. She had her likes and dislikes as anyone else would, but her flaws were far from all she had to offer. The girl was blessed with a difficult-to-obtain ability that allowed her to increase her strength. Most monsters valued power above all else.

“No way. Impossible,” Arshay argued. “I don’t get it all. I don’t think it has to be me.”

The young girl was currently faced with a life-changing decision.

“I think my sister, Misty, is the perfect one for the role!” Arshay whined. “She’s got the appearance and her strict personality is a perfect fit!”

“Sounds like someone doesn’t want dinner tonight,” Misty replied.

“P-Peep!”

“Why’d you just chirp like a bird?” Ramza replied wearily. “It can’t be helped, can it? As the Demon Lord, you should be the one standing at the helm. Those we spared wish for that too.”

“I don’t care,” Arshay cried. “This must be some sort of mistake! I’m sure of it!”

“I remember a certain someone calling herself ‘a chunk of potential’ during our first meeting.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

As the girl played dumb, an exasperated Ramza placed a hand over his head.

“Ramza and I will do all the work,” Misty assured. “You just need to sit regally on the throne, Arshay.”

“Really? Do you swear? You’re not lying, are you?” Arshay asked.

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“You once said that there were no vegetables in my bag of snacks, but I noticed some sneaked in there.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Misty gazed into the distance, feigning innocence.

“Don’t play dumb. I’ve got a good memory.”

If that were the case, why doesn’t she remember what she said when they first met? Ramza was tempted to point that out, but he remained quiet. However, it seemed Misty’s words had done the trick as Arshay reluctantly nodded.

“But why me?” the little girl asked. “I’m just a demon. Not like brother Ramza who evolved into a Dullahan, and certainly not an Elder Lich like you, Misty. I could make a mistake that makes you both hate me! The thought of my older siblings hating me just makes me want to die.”

“We’re family. You have nothing to fear...but you’re not wrong. It might be a bit too late at this point, but why don’t we give ourselves a proper family name?” Misty suggested.

“Don’t you already have one?” Ramza asked.

“Sure, but I’ve got no use out of it. The name came to me on a whim anyways, so it means nothing.”

Generally, monsters never had family names to call their own. Most monsters didn’t hold meaningful relationships and very few ever wished to forge familial ties, but this trio was among that special minority.

“If you’re planning on setting us up with a family name, I’m all for it,” Ramza said.

“M-Me too! I’m for it too! I agree!” Arshay quickly added.

“Hmm, let me think...” Misty said. “Are you two aware of the name of this continent?”

“I do! I do! It’s Ishtar! I don’t know who started calling this place that, but I know that it’s Ishtar!”

As Arshay had stated, the name “Ishtar” had stuck, but no one was sure of its origins. Nowadays, it wasn’t just monsters who were familiar with this name—even humans had grown to widely adopt the Ishtar name.

“In the language of the gods, the word ‘riqua’ means family,” Misty said. “Since this is a good opportunity, why don’t we borrow that? But ‘riqua’ is a bit difficult to pronounce, so how about we simplify it to ‘rica’ instead?”

Ramza and Arshay had never felt so excited before. The fact that they would officially become a family was more valuable than any jewel in the world.

Misty opened her mouth once more. “So, our last name will be...”

Ein’s vision faded to white. He was unable to hear Misty’s final words, but it wasn’t hard to put two and two together. After all, her words were the start of the long history of Ishtarica’s royal family.

Chapter One: The Crown Prince's Growth Spurt

At just past ten o'clock in the evening, White Night's audience room was illuminated by an unusual set of lights. A small crowd had gathered in the hopes of getting answers from King Silverd.

"Father, just what kind of request did you make to Ein?!" Olivia shrieked. Her trademark elegance had fallen by the wayside to reveal the desperate face of a terrified mother.

Glistening like gemstones, Olivia's brown locks fluttered in the air as she questioned her father. The star crystal adorning her bosom shook about as she was gripped with fear for the one who'd presented her with the priceless gem—her son.

"C-Calm down, Olivia!" Silverd said, unable to provide an answer.

The king had received a message from the crown prince, stating that he'd be a bit late as he was stopping by Barth on the way home. However, Ein had also requested that his little detour be kept a secret from everyone else, including his mother.

"Your Majesty," Krone said frostily.

"Krone! Quell Olivia's distress!" Silverd pleaded.

But before he could claim that he knew nothing as well, Krone replied, "Forgive my insolence, Your Majesty, but please tell me. Just what were your orders to Ein?"

Silverd had hoped that Krone would understand, but it seemed she was just as worried as his daughter. Krone appeared to be calm on the surface, but the thorny bite to her words told another story. Her beautiful, silvery-blue hair flowed behind her as she took an ominous step forward, approaching the monarch. The young advisor's pale skin and amethyst eyes were pointed straight at him. Her overwhelming presence even caused the king to turn away.

"Oh dear," the chancellor said. "You seem to be in a spot of trouble, Your

Majesty.”

“W-Warren!” the king cried. “Don’t just crack an uneasy smile while stroking away at your beard! Do something! Anything!”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t heard anything either. If I were to choose, I’d side with the ladies.”

The chancellor didn’t side with the king. *Grrr... Just what is that crown prince up to?!* Silverd thought in desperation.

Ein should be returning from Barth shortly. Just then, the doors of the audience room opened.

“A-Ah, there you all are,” Martha said. The first servant rushed into the room, clearly out of breath.

“Martha! Whatever is the matter?” Silverd said, finding the maid’s sudden appearance to be a godsend. He approached her and spoke more casually than usual.

“Er, Sir Ein has returned. However...”

The news couldn’t have come at a better time.

“Is Ein really back?” Olivia said, pouncing on Martha’s words.

“H-He has,” Martha said uncomfortably. “I believe Sir Ein has returned. However...”

Olivia and Krone’s faces grew dark as the maid trailed off. Their faces were riddled with anxiety.

“Has something happened to Ein?” Olivia inquired.

“Something has happened, indeed...” Martha replied. “He’s...er...grown taller.”

Everyone in the audience room was confused by these words. As perplexed glances were exchanged, Martha added, “I think it’s best if you saw for yourselves. He’s waiting for you all in the grand hall, so if you would please head there,” and quickly left.

While it seemed clear that Ein had returned, no one could quite understand

just what had happened. The group left for the grand hall.

A short while ago, the royal water train had pulled into White Rose Station and Ein stepped out onto the platform. *That dream earlier was...* he thought. Based on the characters that appeared before him, Ein had glimpsed into memories of the Dullahan and the Elder Lich. If what he saw was to be believed, Demon Lord Arshay had an even-keeled personality for the most part. At the very least, Ein knew for sure that she wasn't keen on the idea of wiping out the entire continent.

"I knew it. Someone deliberately caused her to go berserk," Ein slowly said as he placed his hands in his pockets.

His fingers grazed the pink star crystal at the bottom of his pocket, a reminder that yesterday wasn't a dream.

"Did you say something, Sir Ein?" Dill, Ein's personal guard, asked.

"Nope, nothing. I'm glad we finally made it back!"

"Indeed. The trip was much longer than I anticipated. Of course, it seems like you've had a good reason for it..."

"I-I know! I'll refrain from doing anything like this again in the future!"

As Ein walked along, he felt like he was seeing everything again for the first time. Thanks to his Demon Lord growth spurt, the crown prince now walked with a longer stride and saw the world around him from newfound heights. Even though he was intimately familiar with White Rose, he felt like he'd never been there before.

"We should hurry," Dill advised.

"Right," Ein agreed. "I don't think the citizens should catch a glimpse of my new appearance just yet."

"Unfortunately, that's not what I mean. Everyone at the castle, His Majesty included, must be worried sick about you."

"Right, we should really pick up the pace."

The two rushed out of the station and sneaked into the prepared carriage awaiting their return.

Upon his return to the castle, Ein could feel the dumbstruck gazes of those around him. He couldn't blame them for their reaction to his new stature, nor could he raise an eyebrow at the whispering servants wondering who he was. They noted that the man walking beside Dill carried a resemblance to Olivia and Ein. Had someone pointed out that the crown prince had simply matured, no one would've questioned it—the man was clearly of royal lineage. However, as none of the servants were familiar with this enigmatic man just yet, they couldn't hide their confusion.

Ein placed his belongings on the ground and asked, "Where's Martha?"

The man's booming voice was clearly that of the crown prince, but his timbre had dropped in comparison to just a few days ago. His voice had changed, but it was Ein's voice without a shadow of a doubt. Martha immediately made her appearance, and Ein lowered his head.

"Where is Sir Ein? Has he not returned?" she asked her son, Dill.

"He's right beside me," Dill replied.

She was unable to brush this off as simple nonsense. Martha had recognized Ein as the crown prince when he entered the castle, but the unbelievable nature of this phenomenon had taken her aback—she needed time to fully process it.

"I can't believe you're truly Sir Ein..." she murmured.

"Something happened and I grew a couple centimeters," Ein replied. "I'll fill you in on the full details after I speak with my grandfather."

"I haven't a clue as to what's going on, but I understand. All I can tell is that you require a change of clothes, Sir Ein."

His shirt and slacks had become a little too small, to put it mildly.

"I'd like that, thank you. Could you please inform grandfather and everyone else that I'm back? I'll be here, unpacking my stuff," Ein said. He sounded tired, but he smiled like his usual self. "Oh, and could you bring something to tie my

hair back with? It's gotten a bit too long."

With his hair long like his mother's, a bit of makeup might've made it look like Ishtarica had a pair of second princesses. Ein still retained a bit of his boyish charm, but he gave off an air of smoldering maturity whenever he narrowed his eyes.

"I shall tell them right away," Martha. "And I shall bring you a hair tie immediately."

"Okay."

Ein watched as Martha swiftly left before he turned back to his belongings.

"Oh, and Dill..." he said while unpacking his things.

"Yes, Sir Ein?" Dill asked.

"It can be any time you're free, but could you come shopping with me?"

Dill had been reaching out to assist Ein with his belongings, but froze upon hearing the crown prince's sudden request. "I shall happily do so. What are you looking for?"

"Now that I've grown a bit, I'm going to need some new clothes. It'd be great if you could accompany me."

"In that case, I shall introduce you to a store that I frequent."

The two conversed as they always did, but everyone around them was still at a loss for words as they gazed on at the prince. It was only natural that they would question the crown prince's new look. While the onlookers stood there stumped, a familiar beauty approached the duo.

"Sir Ein, you're ba—" Chris said before stopping in her tracks. The Elf served as Olivia and Ein's personal guard.

Beautiful as a goddess of the moon herself, Chris's sapphire eyes glimmered brighter than any jewel. Unlike her usual hairdo, the knight's golden hair was down as it fluttered behind her.

"A-Are...you back?" she questioned.

If she had a tail, she'd undoubtedly been wagging it furiously. She was ecstatic

to hear about Ein's return, but her excited footsteps slowed down as she approached the young man. When she was just a few steps away, she stopped. She was like a cat who awkwardly kept its distance upon reuniting with its master after a long absence.

"I'm back, Chris," Ein said, squinting his eyes apologetically. He felt bad for being so late.

"H-Huh? Are you...Sir Ein?" the Elf asked.

"Yup. I'm Ein."

He stopped unpacking his belongings and approached her. His physical appearance had completely changed, so he couldn't blame her for looking so hesitant.

"Why did you grow?" she asked. "And your hair is so long now..."

The two had been of similar height before his transformation, but Ein was now clearly much taller than her.

"A lot of stuff happened...and I just...grew," he admitted. "Do I look weird?"

Chris blinked as she gazed up at him. "You look much more dignified now. I think you look wonderful, but I was worried if it was really you for a moment there."

"I normally wear this outfit, don't I? And look, here's my blade." As he proved himself to her, Ein flashed his usual smile.

"Could I inspect you more closely?"

"I think we're close enough, but sure."

They were only about two paces away, but Chris closed the gap until they were only about a few centimeters apart. Ein's mouth was agape when he realized that she was sniffing him. If his eyes weren't fooling him, she was judging him based on scent rather than by appearance. She placed her face close to his chest and sniffed around, paying no heed to the people around her. *Why did she want a closer inspection, then?* He felt Chris's ticklish breath on his chest.

"Mm-hmm. Yep..." Chris said with a nod of approval. "You really, truly are Sir

Ein!”

She happily gazed up at him, her doubts now dispelled. *That’s how you identify me?* It seemed like Chris had evolved into a faithful dog in the few days that he was gone, and he never dreamed of being identified by scent.

Several moments later, new voices rang out within the castle.

“Ah, Ein! You’ve finally—” Silverd looked to be about ten times more shocked than Chris was.

“This place should be fine,” Silverd said with a sigh. They were in a small room located in the depths of the audience room.

“You forcibly brought me here, but will my mother be fine with that?” Ein asked.

“The moment word spread that I sent you away, I was showered with complaints. I cannot blame them, for they were eagerly awaiting your return, but I, too, must know about your current circumstances. You’d best provide an explanation for everyone else and calm them down. This is solely your responsibility, is it not?”

“You’re absolutely correct. I apologize,” Ein said, lowering his head. He took out the tie he’d received from Martha and put his hair into a ponytail.

“Tell me everything. Why did you act recklessly on your own? Why have you grown? I don’t mind how long it takes. Don’t hide a single thing and speak the truth.”

Silverd wearily sank into a sofa. Upon seeing his exhausted grandfather, Ein deeply regretted that his conduct had led to such worry. However, he felt that his actions were justified as he’d brought some shocking news back home alongside his transformation.

However, the crown prince was reluctant to divulge the whole truth. *The first king wanted to hide his true identity.* Why was he buried in the Demon Lord’s domain? Who had done so? At the very least, there were no records of First King Jayle’s birth within the Demon Lord’s former territory. This meant that the

first king had chosen to hide his true lineage.

But Ein decided to tell his grandfather everything. He felt that information was something that King Silverd ought to know.

“Please keep what I’m about to say a secret, just between you and me,” Ein started. “I first had my suspicions when I presented myself in front of the first king’s grave...”

And so, the crown prince told his story. He explained why he sent a letter explaining his trip to the Demon Lord’s old territory, and the actions that he took. Silverd occasionally furrowed his brows sternly or let out a sigh, but he remained silent as Ein continued speaking.

The crown prince proceeded to share what happened to him. The king quietly sat there as Ein spoke of his encounter with the Dullahan and the Elder Lich in the land of dreams. Then the topic changed as the young man pointed out that the Demon Castle was the architectural spitting image of White Night. This extended to the Demon Castle’s royal burial ground, the true final resting place of the first king. Finally, Ein finished by sharing the details of his duel with Marco.

“Indeed... No one else must know of this,” Silverd admitted. “Only I should be aware of this matter.”

“However, I apologize for my selfish actions,” Ein apologized.

“Of course. You must take responsibility for your misuse of the royal water train. However, I don’t believe I have the mental wherewithal to punish you at this very moment. If your findings are to be believed, Ishtarica’s true first king would be none other than the Demon Lord.”

No one could blame the king for being so perplexed. It was no exaggeration to say that all of Ishtarica’s citizens had the utmost respect for the first king. The discovery that their beloved monarch was either related to or closely associated with the Demon Lord was a tough pill to swallow.

“I never once believed that that sword of yours would lead to this...” Silverd replied.

The king frowned as he gazed at the sword by Ein’s waist.

“Did you have any idea?” Ein asked. “You didn’t know that the first king wasn’t resting in the royal burial grounds, right?”

“I haven’t heard otherwise nor were there any records to suggest it. Needless to say, my father should have been under the same impression.”

The Demon Lord’s rampage had wrought untold destruction, resulting in the loss of countless lives and deep scars throughout the continent. Perhaps the first king had chosen to hide the truth in order to avoid a panic among Ishtarica’s citizens.

“I shall say it one more time,” Silverd warned. “You must not say a word of this to another soul.”

“I’m aware. I shall leave the decision-making up to you.”

“That would be for the best. One day, we will discuss whether this story should be passed down to our descendants or die with us.”

“I understand.”

“How much does Dill know? He accompanied you, did he not?”

“He knows nothing of what I’ve told you, but he did see my duel with Marco.”

“Then I shall speak with him later. I must forbid him from speaking of this to anyone else; this information cannot be publicized. Of course, this means that I cannot reward you for your findings.”

“I don’t mind. In exchange, you’ll ignore my reckless actions, won’t you?”

The king let out a chuckle. “Still bright as always, aren’t you?”

“I’ve learned plenty from being by your side.”

Should Silverd punish Ein, he’d need to publicize the reason behind his actions. This would inevitably force him to share the details of Ein’s discovery.

Ein’s report on the first king had finished, but Silverd’s sharp mind didn’t rest.

“Next, tell me the reason behind your growth spurt,” he requested.

The crown prince had expected to explain himself, but he was hoping he could get away with only reporting on the first king. The idea of talking about his status card had Ein more nervous than he was before breaking the news

about the first king.

“What are you faltering for?” the king inquired. “I think it’s a bit too late for that.”

Ein reluctantly nodded and rummaged through his tiny outfit, retrieving his status card from a pocket.

“The answer is written here,” he said.

Silverd gave another deep sigh and kept his head low as he extended his arm towards his grandson.

“Show me,” the king said curtly.

He grabbed the card from Ein’s hand and gingerly glanced at it. He first looked at the name before scanning the rest of his grandson’s stats. Silverd gulped in shock when his eyes reached the job section.

“Am I... Am I dreaming?” he wondered.

His eyes grew wide at the words “Demon Lord.” The same phrase had been displayed in the skills section as well, alongside a new skill called “Follower.” These changes were undoubtedly a result of absorbing Marco’s magic stone.

“This is madness... How could something so absurd happen?” Silverd questioned.

The king already had trouble processing the last revelation, but discovering his grandson was now a Demon Lord took things to a whole new level.

“What about your consciousness?!” Silverd demanded. “Do you feel any different?!”

“Not at all,” Ein confessed. “I feel mostly the same, but there is one change I’ve noticed.”

The king gulped, more nervous than ever before as he waited for his grandson to continue. “Do you have dangerous impulses or tendencies?”

“No, uh, my clothes have gotten smaller, so I’d like a new outfit.”

The light faded from Silverd’s worried eyes. He stood up and sat by Ein’s side as the boy looked up at him in confusion. The king suddenly raised his fist.

“Raaah!”

His iron fist fell upon Ein’s head.

“O-Ow! What was that for?!” the crown prince cried.

“I don’t like violence, but it’s sometimes necessary for my carefree grandson!”

“But it’s the truth! It’s really tight! It’s honestly suffocating me and I can barely breathe!”

“Rah!”

“O-Ow! Why’d you hit me again?!”

After his second punch, Silverd looked satisfied and returned to his sofa. “You may purchase a few sets of new clothing in the near future. You can call someone to the castle, or you may go to the castle district.”

The king’s iron fists were extremely painful. Ein rubbed his head as he felt a warm bump forming underneath his fingers.

“Cut your hair too,” Silverd suggested. “You have majestic locks like your mother, but they’ll get in the way when you brandish a sword.”

“Yes, I shall do so.”

“Good grief... You’ve made a grand accomplishment only to become a Demon Lord and play dumb about it... I simply cannot fathom a crown prince such as you on occasion. However, your new appearance reflects how you’d naturally mature; it’s quite a nice sight. You have a good look about your face.”

Ein glanced at the window upon hearing those words. Based on his appearance, it looked as though he’d aged four to five years. No one would’ve batted an eye if he’d claimed that he was a year or two older than Krone.

“How shall I tell mother and the others about my appearance?” Ein asked.

“You mustn’t say that you’ve turned into a Demon Lord,” Silverd answered. “Simply claim that you have grown from absorbing magic stones. I shall tell the citizens that you’ve undergone a rapid growth spurt as a powerful Dryad.”

Ein had become an adult Dryad just the other day, so this announcement would come as no surprise. The two felt guilty for lying, but they were left with

no other choice.

“And about your two skills...” Silverd started, referring to Demon Lord and Follower.

“I’m not quite sure myself,” Ein replied. “I think I’ll ask Aunt Katima about Follower.”

“That would be wise. Have you been able to use the Dullahan’s abilities at all?”

Ein thought back to the spiritual realm that he saw in his dreams. Misty claimed that he’d be able to use some more abilities by the time he returned home. Did she perhaps foresee that Ein would become the Demon Lord? The coma following his return from Euro was proof that his younger body couldn’t withstand the Dullahan’s power.

“I think...that I can,” Ein finally said.

He remembered the jet-black armor that surrounded his body the other day. He remembered how it felt. As he slowly envisioned the armor, a dark cloud gradually surrounded his right hand. It might have looked crude, but the jet-black armor that formed on his hand was filled with an intense power. *Feels more like a gauntlet...* It wasn’t a full set of armor just yet, but there was no reason for Ein to nitpick it now.

“I suppose I should expect no less from the Demon Lord himself,” Silverd muttered.

The two sighed for the umpteenth time as they exchanged a weary chuckle.

A while later, Ein left the audience room to find a trio of ladies waiting for him: Chris, Krone, and Martha. Krone stared at him intently without blinking.

“Um...” Ein quickly blurted out. His gaze met hers, but the situation didn’t change.

Krone stared at him quietly, taking a step back.

“Um... It’d be great if you spoke, or I’ll get a little worried,” he said.

It was odd to see her so silent, but her stares felt fresh for Ein. Until recently, they had been practically the same height, but she was now gazing up at him. As a growing boy, Ein couldn't help but be pleased with his transformation.

"May I stand by your side, Your Highness?" Krone finally asked stiffly. She spoke as though she were talking to a stranger.

"Of course. I don't mind," Ein replied.

Krone didn't reply and approached him, boldly closing the distance between the two.

"Pardon me," she said. She grabbed the fabric by his chest, stood on her tiptoes, and put her face close to his neck.

"Uh?!" Ein gasped.

Even Chris and Martha seemed shocked by Krone's passionate mannerisms. It looked like she was hugging him tight. Even though Ein had undergone a physical growth spurt, he couldn't keep himself from blushing, as he was emotionally the same as he'd always been.

She sniffed his nape, then his clavicle, and finally buried her face in his chest. *I've got an odd feeling of déjà vu here...* As Ein regained his composure, he was reminded of Chris's actions the moment he set foot in the castle. But unlike Chris, Krone was taking deep breaths and remained glued to his side. Her eyes softened as her face morphed into a visage of shock.

"Y-You really *are* Ein..." Krone murmured.

"Uh, does everyone confirm identities that way?" Ein asked.

As he didn't expect to be hit twice with the sniff test, the prince was overcome with a wave of awkwardness.

Ever since he arrived at the castle, he'd been bothered by how small and suffocating his clothes were. Unfortunately, he didn't have an outfit in his size just yet. Ein returned to his room, walking right past the living room and into his bedroom. He stood right in front of the full-length mirror and gazed pensively.

"Maybe I should've borrowed something from grandfather..." he muttered.

Though Silverd was a burlier man than Ein currently was, the prince hoped

that his grandfather would have something that would fit him. However, the idea of borrowing clothing from a king felt a bit off-putting.

“I guess it can’t be helped... Oh, hey, Martha?”

“Yes, Your Highness?” the maid asked.

“I haven’t seen mother since our initial meeting. What’s she up to now?”

“She happily returned to her room.”

“Huh?”

“She has loved and treasured you more than anyone else. When she saw that you’ve grown into such a mature and dignified young man, she lost some of her self-control. I think she’s planning on spoiling you more than before—ahem, pardon me.”

Ein smiled, understanding what kind of woman his mother was. He unbuttoned his shirt and threw on the bathrobe that had been prepared for him.

“I apologize that I don’t have any other clothing for you,” Martha said apologetically.

“It’s fine,” Ein replied. “I underwent a rapid growth spurt. It’s kind of my fault.” He found his own words to be rather humorous.

“We do have clothes prepared for guests, but it’s not fitting for someone of your stature. I shall have a few outfits prepared for you by tomorrow, so I beg you for your understanding.”

“This bathrobe feels nice, so I don’t mind.”

“I thank you for your kind words. If you require anything else, please feel free to call for me.”

With that, Martha left Ein’s bedroom. A short while later, he walked into his living room to find Krone and Chris sitting on the sofa.

“Are you going to cut your hair?” Krone asked.

“Well, yeah. It’s in the way,” Ein replied.

“It feels like a waste!” Chris protested. “I don’t think you need to cut your

hair!”

“I agree with Chris,” Krone added. “It feels like a waste.”

But I wanna cut it off... What do I do? Ein wondered as he sat across from the two ladies.

“Could I touch it a little?” Krone asked. She stood up without waiting for his reply.

“I didn’t give you my permission yet,” Ein said.

“So you won’t let me?”

“I didn’t say that...”

“Hee hee, then it’s not a problem.”

As always, Krone flashed a bewitching smile and sat by Ein’s side. At first, she playfully touched Ein’s hair, but gradually, her expression started to change.

“Huh? No way... Wait, really?” Krone gasped.

“Uh, Lady Krone? Whatever is the matter?” Chris asked.

“I just need a few moments.”

Krone immediately touched her own hair. She stroked her silky, silvery-blue locks as she’d done to Ein. It was as though she was confirming the feel of her own hair.

“No way...” she muttered.

“What are you gasping about?” Ein asked, unable to suppress his curiosity any longer.

“Just sit tight! Wait there, Ein!” a shocked Krone said sharply. She turned to the elf. “Chris, could you try stroking Ein’s hair from the opposite side?”

“Me?” the knight asked hesitantly.

“You start from the top and gently work your way down to the tips of his hair.”

“I don’t mind, but... Sir Ein, is it all right for me to touch you?”

“As much as you like,” Ein replied. “Which sounds weird, but yeah, I don’t

mind.”

Is something wrong with my hair? he wondered. Was it necessary for Chris to stroke his strands too? The elf approached Ein’s side and quietly reached out. Though tied back, Ein’s waist length hair still touched the sofa. Chris slowly stroked his locks before an equally stunned expression took over her face.

“It’s a bit embarrassing to be silently touched like this...” Ein said.

“Lady Krone...” Chris murmured.

“Yes...” Krone replied.

“Unfortunately, this seems to be the case.”

The two ladies nodded in understanding.



“What are you two going on about?” Ein asked. “For the life of me, I can’t understand why you’ve gone from gasping to just nodding along?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Krone replied, offering her right hand. “I couldn’t help myself. I think you should feel it for yourself. Maybe you’ll see why we’re so surprised.”

“Feel it for myself?”

“That’s right. Come on, hurry. It’s best if you confirm it with your own fingers.”

Despite his thorough confusion, Ein went along with Krone’s request and placed his hand atop her own. He noticed that her skin was delightfully soft to the touch.

“Run your fingers all the way through my hair,” she said. “And make sure to get a good feel for it.”

A pleasant scent wafted into Ein’s nose as his fingers were gently pushed through Krone’s silky, smooth hair. Unfortunately, this experience had left the prince none the wiser about his own.

“It’s gorgeous and silky, as always,” he noted. *It’s not like I touch her hair every day, but whatever. Yeah, it’s wonderful, but what’s she getting at?*

“Of course. I work hard to maintain it every day,” Krone replied. “Now feel your own hair.”

“Sure, but could you let go of my hand first?”

“Just do it! Compare your hair with mine!”

Ein ran his free hand through his hair and proceeded to tilt his head to the side, perplexed by it all. *I don’t get it.*

Krone frowned before pouting in frustration, “Your hair is silkier than mine!”

The crown prince finally understood what his advisor was talking about, but he found himself unable to nod along in agreement.

“I think your hair feels better and is more pleasant to touch,” Ein said.

“I-I’m really, truly happy to hear that, but...” Krone started.

“As ladies, it’s a little vexing to lose to you in this fashion,” Chris added.

“E-Exactly!”

“Hence, it really does feel like a waste for you to cut your hair, Sir Ein.”

Krone firmly nodded agreement, her eyes filled with a sense of anticipation.

“But it’ll be a hassle to keep my hair this long...” Ein replied.

In fact, his hair reached down to his waist now—and a headache to maintain as it was. Those of the fairer sex, including Olivia, Krone, and Chris, took great care of their luscious locks. Ein, on the other hand, had never tended to his hair before nor did he want to start a hair care regimen of his own. But above all else, his hair would be the way while in combat.

“How about just keeping your hair at shoulder length?” Chris suggested.

Ein touched his back, trying to gauge the length of his hair in case he decided to take the elf’s suggestion; it would still be a bit too long for his tastes.

“Sorry, but it still might be too troublesome for me,” Ein confessed.

Not one to give up, Krone started begging, “Can’t you keep it long? Please?”

“It’s difficult to move around with, but maybe I’ll keep my hair a bit longer than I usually do.”

“I see... It’s a shame, but I suppose I’ll make do with that,” Krone said before adding, “But Lady Olivia will surely say the same thing! Do your best and decline her request.”

And so, Ein was faced with a new problem.

The next morning, Ishtarica’s skies remained a touch dark as the oncoming dawn slowly brightened the sky into a rich blue. Ein woke up on his sofa, his memories jumbled from the night before. He must’ve fallen asleep in the middle of the conversation. Krone and Chris were worried about his monsterification. *But I don’t really feel odd at all*, Ein thought. In fact, he felt at ease.

Ein was thankful he had the chance to speak with Ramza in the spiritual realm

and bear witness to Marco's final moments. The crown prince could trust the Dullahan's words. *And then what did we talk about?* His mind was still sleeping away, but when he tried to move his waking body...

"Huh?" he whispered.

Nothing would move. After a quick glance around him, Ein quickly realized why—Chris was fast asleep on his lap while Krone slept against his shoulder. He could clearly make out the young advisor's steady breathing, but that wasn't the case for the elf's cryptic mumbling.

"No... If you're going to absorb me...do it more gently..." she muttered.

What kind of dream is she having? Ein found himself so impressed by the elf's insistence that he was tempted to award her for it.

"I've told you time and time again. I won't absorb your stone," he whispered.

Now then...how do I get up? The service bell was on Ein's desk, but he couldn't reach it from his spot on the sofa. He thought he couldn't ask for Martha's help, and would feel guilty to wake up his present company.

Left with no other choice, Ein whispered, "Martha."

There's no way she heard that, he thought as a strained smile crept up his face. But several seconds later, there was a knock on his door.

"Good morning. Did you call for me?" she asked.

"Martha, you're amazing..." Ein said under his breath.

She took that as his reply and opened the door. "How may I be of serv—"

The maid froze in shock, her eyes wide as she discovered the pair of beautiful ladies by Ein's side. Martha had walked in with a new set of well-fitting clothes for Ein, but she ended up dropping them to the floor.

"I think...it would be wise for you to choose your first queen in the near future," she said, still stunned. "I understand that you don't want to rank people, but our subjects would feel anxious otherwise."

"You're wrong. You're completely misunderstanding this situation," Ein insisted.

“We servants welcome this with open arms. It’s natural for a king to have many queens. I’m not upset with His Majesty’s preference for monogamy, of course, but our subjects would rest easier with more than one queen watching over them.”

“Sorry, Martha, could you listen to what I’m saying? Please.”

“Please, take your time.”

She swiftly picked up the dropped clothing and placed them on the sofa before she left the room.

“Now then...” Ein mumbled.

How could he get up? He was lost in his thoughts, trying to figure out an escape route away from the sofa.

While Ein was in the middle of calculating his getaway, Krone finally woke up to help him save the day. The pair managed to fully lie the fast-asleep Chris on the sofa, allowing the prince to stand up after so long. As he changed into his new clothing, Ein was relieved to put his arms through a pair of sleeves that no longer felt suffocating to him. With a new spring in his step thanks to his looser attire, the prince left Chris in Krone’s care before he left the room. From there, he walked down a flight of stairs.

“Hmm, mew really have grown,” a familiar lady said as she stood in the next corridor, her back turned towards the wall.

His aunt and the first princess of Ishtarica, Katima, was waiting for him. She was of the rare Cait-Sìth species and one of the nation’s brightest minds. Though she looked a touch surprised, she was calmer than anyone else.

“I guess I was too late in purr-oviding my findings.”

“Your findings?” Ein asked.

“In regard to your monsterification, of course.”

She approached him. There had already been a height difference between the two of them, but it was now more pronounced.

"I think I told mew in Ist, but monsterification is likely evolution. Just as a monster evolves over time, mew become stronger as you absorb stones. Mew've consumed quite a few magic stones, haven't you? When mew returned, I planned on telling you this, but..."

"Um..." Ein started.

"Mew don't have to say a thing. I can sort of parse out your situation as I look over your new form. And father told me last night to not pry furr-ther."

Katima surely had an inkling as to what was going on with Ein. The crown prince wasn't sure if she knew of his newfound Demon Lord status, but it wouldn't be odd if she reached that conclusion on her own. However...

"As long as mew can remain yourself, I don't really care. I don't mind if mew evolve or whatever."

That was the conclusion he had come to. Monsterification only concerned her if Ein were to lose his sense of self. Even if the process boiled down to a simple form of evolution, the retention of the prince's sanity would be a relief.

"I'm sorry..." Ein said. "It's quite comforting to hear your words."

"That's nothing for mew to worry about. If you need my assistance, just let me know." She flashed a fearless smile before turning on her heels to leave. "I thought mew went to Barth to elope or something... Mrow..."

"Uh, what? Did you just say something?"

"Nothing! If you need a paw, I'll be in my room! Later!" As usual, she gracefully walked away.

"She really is sharp..."

She was able to get a feeling for Ein's predicament without a single word from him. The young man's intelligence didn't hold a candle to that of his aunt. Though she was told to not pry any further, she had still given him a little advice and said that she'd be there when he needed her. Equally generous and kind, Katima didn't look like one to spend her days frivolously.

Once Katima left, Ein headed in the opposite direction.

"All right..." he said.

He didn't have a destination in mind, but he decided to take a stroll in the courtyard. As he walked along, Ein noticed a man in front of him. Taking note of the prince's presence, the smiling man walked up to greet him.

"Ah, Sir Ein, good morning," the elderly man said.

"Morning, Warren. You're early today," Ein replied.

"I had this thought last night as well, but cannot hide my astonishment from witnessing your dignified appearance."

"But I'll be cutting my hair later."

"Is that so? What a waste."

"Krone and Chris said the same thing, but it's difficult to move around with." After a quick greeting and some small talk, Ein asked, "Have you been working at such an early hour?"

Warren was always working from early in the morning. He had a lot on his plate, but it felt like he was earlier than usual.

"The year is coming to an end, so I've been taking care of a few small matters," the chancellor replied. "I've also been tending to the royal family's duties, as there's an inspection to be conducted at the beginning of the new year."

"Next year? Am I also scheduled to conduct an inspection?" Ein asked.

"Indeed. I would like for you to visit Magna, the port city."

"Is this about the red foxes?"

"No, nothing like that this time around. Though Sir Marco's information provides an enticing subject to investigate further, you have a completely different set of duties scheduled."

The chancellor further illuminated Ein on his upcoming duties: inspect the area and greet some of the local nobles.

"You're scheduled to leave by next spring, perhaps a bit before then," Warren said with a smile. He immediately turned stern. "And in the summer, you will be meeting with the Kingdom of Heim."

Ein had been waiting for this moment. “Sounds like we’ll have a bit of trouble.”

“Precisely. Both His Majesty and Heim’s monarch will be in attendance. Naturally, the generals of both armies will be accompanying them.”

“You mean...Rogas will be there too.”

“And I believe your younger brother will be attending alongside Heim’s third prince, Tigger.”

Warren then stated that he didn’t want Ein to push himself. This important meeting made discomfort inevitable for the prince. He could avoid it by skipping the meeting entirely, but that idea had Ein shaking his head.

“My words instigated this meeting in the first place,” the boy said. “I won’t run or hide from this.”

Warren chuckled. “Truly, you’ve become rather splendid.”

“Thank you. I’ve got a fabulous instructor who saw fit to teach me the ways of both the sword and the pen.”

“I’m honored to hear those words. Now then, once the exact dates of these trips are set, I shall inform you immediately. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out.”

Warren bowed and left. The morning sun rose beyond the nearby window, illuminating the gorgeous scenery of Kingsland with its rays.

“Okay,” Ein said, gathering himself.

He gazed out the window, feeling the crisp breeze against his body. A refreshed smile spilled from his lips. He then looked off in the direction of the Demon Castle and narrowed his eyes. While remembering the day of his furious scuffle with Marco, Ein reached out towards the sky and balled his hand into a fist. Feeling a surge of power course through his veins, the prince vowed to work hard today as well.

Chapter Two: Majorica and the Secret

While the snow began its descent upon Ishtarica, the faraway land of Heim prepared for its own bout of snowfall. It was an average day when Krone's mother, Elena, was walking through Heim's beloved royal castle. As "the continent's champion," Heim was bolstered by a colossal fortress that none of their neighbors could ever hope to match. The castle's interior was furnished with luxurious jeweled decor and lavish paintings—a sign of the kingdom's prosperity.

Just as she turned the corner, she bumped into a certain boy.

"Ah, Lady Elena," Glint Roundheart said. "You seem to be in quite the rush."

The boy was proclaimed to be the next lord of House Roundheart and served as Third Prince Tigger's guard. Glint frequented the castle for his duties. Though a hint of boyish mischief lit up his eyes, the young Roundheart had been developing a dignified resemblance to his father in recent years. Along with his handsome face, his role as the third prince's guard made it inevitable that Glint would become the talk of the aristocratic town. However, everyone knew that his heart belonged to his fiancée, Shannon.

"I'm about to meet with Prince Tigger," Elena said.

"What a coincidence," Glint replied. "I was just headed there myself. May I accompany you?"

"Of course."

Just as the two started walking alongside each other, Elena's thoughts drifted to Glint's relation to his older brother, the crown prince of Ishtarica. Ever since he was a little boy, Glint had high expectations and the superb Holy Knight skill thrust upon his shoulders. In other words, the two brothers were polar opposites—Ein, with no expectations placed upon him, and Glint, with only anticipation surrounding him. Elena had once tried to convince Krone to give Glint a chance, but the girl would have none of it. She firmly refused and didn't

budge, but after that fateful party, her heart had been stolen by Ein.

Neither Krone nor Elena had been aware of Heim's secret contract with Ishtarica at the time. When Elena took all of that into account, she realized that her daughter had truly fallen for Ein.

"Is anything the matter, Lady Elena?" Glint asked.

"Ah, I've just been thinking a little about Ishtarica," the lady confessed.

"It's a troublesome nation. They lack etiquette and are heavily reliant on the power afforded to them thanks to their size."

Elena was tempted to point out that Rogas and the rest of House Roundheart had treated Olivia unfairly, but she managed to remain silent.

"That man truly became their crown prince," Glint grumbled quietly. "I cannot understand what they're thinking."

Elena decided to pose a question. "This is quite difficult for me to say, but may I ask you something?"

"Certainly. What's bothering you?"

"I heard that the man who bested you in Euro is the personal guard of Ishtarica's crown prince. The Knight Guard members in attendance claimed that the crown prince was even stronger than your opponent. What do you make of this, Sir Glint?"

"H-Ha ha... You ask some tough questions, my lady." This was a bitter memory for Glint, but he couldn't refute the facts. "I believe it's just a simple exaggeration. That guard, Dill, was indeed powerful. I don't deny that. But for *that* man to surpass his guard in strength? I can only think that it's a tall tale."

"I see. I apologize for asking such an awkward question."

"Not to worry," Glint replied kindly, though he looked a tad miffed.

Elena nodded, but she felt skepticism fill her mind. She was curious about how Ein had come to be revered as Ishtarica's hero and how he'd single-handedly slain a gargantuan monster known as the Sea Dragon.

The conversation was short, but the lady had much to think about. Before she

knew it, the two had arrived at the courtyard where Tiggie was waiting for them.

“Thank you for coming! Have a seat,” Tiggie said, motioning the two to sit. “As I’m sure you’re both aware, this is about the letter we received from Ishtarica the other day. There were quite a few...unpleasant matters written down. Do you both not agree?”

There was nothing wrong with the penmanship. The handwriting was beautiful with neat letters. The thick and thin lines that created each letter were artistic.

“Elena, do you know who wrote this letter?” the prince inquired.

“I believe it’s the advisor to Ishtarica’s crown prince,” she replied.

“Hmm... Now that you mention it, there were a few final lines mentioning that.” Tiggie returned the letter back into his pocket. “Do you remember the spy, Lily?”

This was a bitter memory, but Lily was an excellent employee. She had served as Elena’s assistant and was extremely sharp. However, it had recently been discovered that she was actually an Ishtarican spy.

“It’s not right to always be on the receiving end,” Tiggie said. “Our kingdom should also act.”

Elena gave a look of surprise.

“Why do you look so shocked?” he asked. “Knowing your enemy is a basic component in the war of information.”

“But Your Highness, I believe that to be dangerous,” she countered. “That nation is massive compared to the Republic of Rockdam and the Principality of Euro.”

This was an important point that no one could deny. Heim needed to carefully choose their enemies.

“And even if you were to send a spy to Ishtarica, I’m quite anxious about the person we’d select,” Elena continued.

“Indeed. I had my apprehensions about that as well,” Tiggie replied.

“In such cases, one would require support from officers such as myself, but my appearance is already known to the enemy. This is especially true when taking Lily into account...she worked by my side for several years.”

“Then how about we send an agent that we can easily dispose of?”

“Pardon my insolence, that plan would likely end as an expensive child’s prank if used against Ishtarica.”

“That won’t do. But waiting around while twiddling my thumbs is simply...” Tiggle said, folding his arms in front as he groaned. “I suppose I must think about this a bit more. Ah, and you have training to do, don’t you, Glint? I know you just arrived, but I don’t mind if you’re off to train.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Glint replied. “Then please excuse me!”

“I’ll let you know should we think of something.”

Elena and Tiggle remained, the pair lost in their own thoughts. Elena was actually looking for a way to travel to Ishtarica. She trusted her own skills way more than those of anyone else, but she was also eager to catch a glimpse of her daughter’s new home. But as she’d stated earlier, her appearance was already known to the enemy and a simple visit might be impossible for her.

“What’s this? I’m in a good mood! You two shouldn’t look so glum in my presence!” an arrogant man said, approaching the pair. Though he was dressed in lavish clothing, this man was quite rotund. “Tiggle, your older brother whom you love and respect is back!”

The man’s name was Rayfon—Heim’s first prince and Tiggle’s older brother.

“You seem to be in high spirits,” Tiggle replied. “Where have you been today?”

“Oh, I just had some fun with the women of the castle district all night long! I’ve just returned!” Rayfon answered.

“Again?”

“Do you have any complaints? I haven’t troubled you, have I?”

“No, not at all...”

“Then what’s the issue? You’re such a troublesome guy.”

Tiggle looked clearly annoyed by Rayfon’s behavior, but he managed to suppress his anger.

“Ah, an open seat! Why don’t I use it?” Rayfon said.

Tiggle and Elena couldn’t possibly discuss any schemes now. The third prince glanced at his older brother as the rotund royal sat down beside him. Tiggle proceeded to shift to gaze directly at the ground.

“What were you two talking about?” Rayfon asked.

“Nothing much,” Tiggle replied. “Just about Ishtarica.”

“Oho? Pray, tell.”

“To you, brother?”

“Can you not? I’m the first prince, I’ll have you know.”

“That’s not what I mean... Sorry, Elena, could you explain to him?”

“Certainly,” Elena said. “Please allow me to provide some insight.”

She gave Rayfon a quick rundown, summarizing the events until now. The first prince unexpectedly listened on with interest.

“Ha ha!” he finally laughed. “You’re all fools!”

“B-Brother?” Tiggle asked.

“What reason is there to hesitate? If you can’t think of a plan, I’ve got a very simple solution!” He gave a crass smile. “Purchase a ship from a merchant in Bardland!”

Located in the center of the continent, Bardland wasn’t under the reign of a monarch and was instead controlled by merchants. Adventurers purchased materials and nobles spent their money on expensive lodgings there.

“And have that ship set sail from Rockdam!” Rayfon said. “Ishtarica accepts ships from that nation!”

“But brother, do you really think you can trick Ishtarica with that plan?” Tiggle asked.

“They simply need to know that the ship belongs to Heim, no? What problem is there?”

“I’m sure that they’d properly investigate the ships coming in.”

Rayfon smiled fearlessly. “I’ll lend you a few convenient people that I’ve got.” After flashing a grin, he told Tiggle and Elena his plan.

Back in Ishtarica, the people of White Night Castle were slowly becoming accustomed to Ein’s new appearance. Even though the crown prince was only an occasional visitor to the castle town, word of his transformation slowly but surely spread around the capital.

Ein and Katima were gathered in the courtyard—the very same place where his Dark Straw skill was born.

“Mrow... I don’t get it,” Katima meowed as she scribbled on her notepad.

She was trying to test out Ein’s new skill, Follower. But no matter what she did, the skill refused to activate or even reveal a hint of itself. The same thing had happened when Ein was unable to fully access his Dark Knight powers.

“Maybe I can’t use it right now,” Ein surmised.

“Might be,” Katima replied. “Since the name is Follower, I guessed that you could summon a familiar or something, but it seems like you can’t use it at the meowment.”

“That’s a shame.”

Ein had thought that he could perhaps summon Ramza or Misty. Despite this sliver of hope in his stomach, he understood things weren’t so easy.

“Okay, what about the other one?” Katima asked.

“You mean Ice Dragon?” Ein asked.

“Bingo. I’m pawsitive that an ability obtained from Upaskamuy will be useful.”

“I only hope that I can use it.”

Ein placed his hand over the open air. As the “Ice Dragon” name implied, perhaps he could freeze things or summon pillars of ice. He closed his eyes and

concentrated. Then, in the next moment, the pair's skin stung as the air around them started to freeze.

"Over there," Katima said, pointing her paw towards a bucket of water.

Ein obediently followed her orders, causing the water to start freezing almost instantly.

"Mrow... Let's see..."

"What's that stick you took out of your lab coat?" Ein asked.

"It's a magical tool to measure temperature. Mew can measure temperatures that normal thermometers can't."

She stuck the stick into the ice, but soon widened her eyes in shock. There was a crackle, and the magical tool shattered into tiny pieces.

"This might be a bit difficult to understand, but substances without magic in them have temperature limits. Gases, solids, and liquids have thresholds they cannot surpass. However, magic can remove these limitations. This tool was created to measure said magical substances, but..."

The tool had shattered instantly.

"It seems like mew can create ice colder than ice magic," she concluded.

"I see... That sounds strong," Ein replied.

Upaskamuy's icy terror was apparent for all to see, even while Ein had stood on the frozen lake as the brisk air pierced his skin. The prince had no doubts in his mind about his new power. *Can I use this power in a different way?* Ein wondered. He aimed his hand towards the sky.

"I feel like I can do something else with this," he said.

Suddenly, ice started to crackle and form in the open space. As the seconds ticked by, the shape was becoming more apparent—he was sculpting an Ice Dragon. Once he was finished making the head, he slowly created the tail. His finished ice sculpture was a bit taller than Katima and floated in the air. But...

"Whoops," he said.

If he relaxed, the sculpture would plummet from the skies above. He ended

up doing just that; the ice fell to the ground and dispersed into a biting, cold air as it shattered.

“Was that a Sea Dragon, my furr-end?”

“Yeah. I meant to make the twins,” Ein replied.

“It’s an interesting power furr sure. I’d like to look into it just a bit more.” She glanced down at her watch with regret. “But unfurrtunately, this is all the time we’ve got today.”

“Yep. It’s time for me to get to work too.”

The two started cleaning up. A while later, Dill arrived to pick up Ein and they left the castle.

A long water train’s ride away from Kingsland, there was a historical shipyard. But unlike other shipyards, no ordinary warship nor simple fishing boat had been constructed on its premises. In recent years, two very special ships had been built on these docks: the *Princess Olivia* and the *Princess Katima*. In short, this was a shipyard that solely dealt in the construction of royal vessels. Only a select few artisans were ever allowed to step inside.

Rivaling the security on display at the Tower of Wisdom, the shipyard was heavily guarded at all times with the interior’s goings-on kept highly confidential.

“This place is huge...” the crown prince said, awestruck.

The facility looked impressive from the outside, but on the inside, there was a massive magical tool that emanated an awesome power. Additionally, there was a turbine-like tool much like the one in the Tower of Wisdom, and an enormous cutting tool that could surely slice any normal home in half. Each and every single one of these tools was gigantic.

“The shipyard is tremendous as always,” Majorica sighed as he walked alongside the boy.

Dressed in his usual suspenders with the magic stones hiding his nipples, Majorica was here for work and to import some magic stones. Seeing this trip as

a perfect learning opportunity, Ein decided to tag along and look around. Behind them was Dill, who stood guard.

“Now then, where’s the stuff that you’re after, Your Highness?” Majorica asked.

“You make it sound so ominous,” Ein commented.

“Do you think so? But think about the weapons that’ll be installed.”

“Yeah...they’re ominous.”

“Exactly! We’re building this ship with cutting-edge technology and stocking it with the latest weapons! Considering that it’s mostly built out of Sea Dragon parts, it will clearly have an ominous air about it.”

“E-Er... The esteemed Ishtarican royal family will be using this vessel,” Dill said with a forced smile, carefully choosing his words.

“Perhaps I’ve been a bit *too* frank with my opinions,” Majorica replied with a chuckle. He glanced at Ein and flashed him with an apologetic pout. “Why don’t we wrap up the small talk and start our search?”

“Ah yes, for my *stuff*,” the crown prince added.

“Oh, I’m such a sinful soul. I feel like I’m a bad influence, teaching His Highness unnecessary words. Hmm? Could that be it?”

The trio walked past the massive magical tools and stopped in front of a certain ship. As its colossal body sat regally within the area, Ein gulped as though he were facing the Sea Dragon for the first time in his life. He was stunned by the ship’s overwhelming presence.

“That’s the Sea Dragon Vessel, *Leviathan*,” he murmured.

He was unable to hide his excitement at the ship that he’d eventually take command of. The vessel’s colossal body was luxuriously decked with the Sea Dragon’s scales, mesmerizing him with its pale-blue glow. Its sleek shape reminded the boy of a bullet or a halberd. The only unfortunate bit was that it was still incomplete. And yet, it was already much larger than the *Princess Olivia*.



“This is amazing,” Majorica said. “The weapons lining this vessel also must be magnificent.”

He’d been silent for a few moments, but Dill piped up with an observation he’d made, “If all of that were to be placed within *Leviathan*, it’s certainly possible that it could surpass His Majesty’s *White King* in size.”

“Possible?” Majorica asked.

“You don’t mean...”

“That’s right. The *White King* was built a few generations ago. Of course, we used the greatest technology available at the time and we had a generous budget for it. It’s still incredibly powerful when compared to other warships, and comes second to none. But *Leviathan* is on a completely different level.”

“Whether this vessel could surpass His Majesty’s isn’t even a question anymore.”

“Quite right. We’re now wondering just how powerful a single vessel could become.”

“I’ve heard rumors about it, but is this ship truly that powerful?”

“Of course. Under normal circumstances, certain weapons can’t be installed because the materials used aren’t that durable. But thanks to the Sea Dragon’s hearty remains, we can throw in all the weapons we like.”

That sounds amazing, Ein thought as he smiled. The Sea Dragon’s remains had propelled the ship far and away over the endurance finish line while allowing for an arsenal of weapons that no other vessel could say it had. This boat’s name would surely be a splendid fit for its qualities.

“Huh?” Ein said as he gazed at the ship. His eyes fell upon familiar faces.

“Whatever is the matter?” Dill asked.

“Don’t those two over there look familiar?”

The guard squinted, looking in the direction of Ein’s finger. He, too, saw familiar faces on the vessel.

“That must be Professor Luke. And beside him is...your friend from the

academy, Loran,” Dill observed.

Luke was dressed in a white coat with his normal academy attire underneath. As for Loran, his lab coat was a little too large for him. However, the pup’s werewolf ears and tail made for an adorable appearance.

“Why are they here?” Ein wondered.

“Why? They’re working here, of course,” Majorica replied as though nothing were wrong.

“Sir Majorica, I believe Sir Ein is wondering why *Loran* is here,” Dill added.

“Ah, I see. Well, that boy is quite intelligent. Professor Luke is famous throughout the continent for his research. I’d assume the little one is rather famed within the industry too.”

Loran had stood out ever since he entered the academy. In fact, he’d saved Ein during their field trip.

“Loran should’ve just told me that he was working on stuff like this,” Ein said.

“I’m sure he’s respecting confidentiality agreements,” Majorica replied. “He’s a good kid.”

There was no harm in telling Ein, for it would be his ship in the first place. However, it was well within Loran’s character to keep his nose down and shine through his work. “Good luck,” Ein mouthed as he turned on his heels and prepared to leave.

“Oh dear, are you leaving already?” Majorica asked.

“I’ll wait until it’s done,” Ein replied. “It’s splendid enough as it is.”

He was sure that the ship would look even more magnificent once it was completed. Ein couldn’t suppress the smile on his lips as he realized that his friend was part of the team building his ship. Trying to hide his delight, he quickly left the shipyard.

Once outside, the crown prince parted ways with his guard. Dill claimed that he’d forgotten something and had gone to fetch it.

“It seems like steady progress is being made on your ship,” Majorica

remarked. “Maybe they have some leftover materials from what they planned to use.”

“Hmm? ‘Planned to use’?” Ein asked.

“Oops...” Majorica turned away.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, it’s just a figure of speech.”

“Is it, now?”

“Of course! No need to be so doubtful of me.”

“Then could I ask the people in the shipyard what you just told me? They might be able to provide some further insight.”

“You really don’t let up, do you?” Majorica sighed in resignation and quickly looked around. After confirming that Dill was still gone, he drew close to the crown prince and whispered, “There was actually a plan to build another ship.”

“Huh? Even though everyone already has their own vessel?” Ein asked.

“There’s one member of the royal family who doesn’t. They’re no longer of this world, though.”

Ein had never heard about this before. “Th-There’s a royal family member that I know nothing about?!”

“It seems that way. I’m sure it was hidden from you. It happened before you were born, Your Highness. It’s considered a taboo subject among the citizens, so I don’t think any recent children are aware of this.”

“Sorry. Quite honestly, I’m shocked.”

However, he was also able to maintain his cool. If Ein had no knowledge about this, it meant that his family didn’t want him to know. If he questioned his family immediately, he feared that Majorica would be punished for letting this secret slip.

“Looks like someone’s curious,” Majorica observed.

“But I’m not sure if I could ask,” Ein confessed.

“Since I’m the one who let the cat out of the bag, if you promise to keep it a secret, I can tell you.”

“Wait...really? Are you sure?”

“You keep your promises, don’t you? But please, do keep it a secret. I wonder where I should start...” Majorica said as he gazed up at the sky. “The name of the royal who passed is LeFay von Ishtarica, the first prince.”

Ein gasped upon hearing the name. Though no one in the castle seemed bothered by this, King Silverd had more than two children. Ein had known that Katima, the first princess, was actually Silverd’s second child from their first meeting years ago. Alongside his mother, Ein’s aunt should’ve had an older sibling.

“He was a very intelligent man. A genius, really,” Majorica said.

“But...he passed away?” Ein asked.

“No. He simply vanished from this world, along with Chris’s older sister.” Ein’s eyes went round with shock as Majorica continued, “I’ve told you about her before, haven’t I?”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t able to find any details.”

“I had no other choice back then. Her name was Celestina Wernstein. As I’ve told you before, she was powerful enough to best even the marshal.”

“That much, I know.”

“You’re curious about her relationship with Prince LeFay, aren’t you?” Majorica asked, causing Ein to nod silently. “Celes was Prince LeFay’s personal guard. But she’d done something that was forbidden.”

Majorica wore a grim expression, sadness apparent on his face. The chilly breeze of winter brushed against the pair as though it embodied Majorica’s grief.

“In the center of the continent of Ishtar, there’s a place called the Dungeon of Spiriting Away,” he said. “There are rumors that one can never escape upon entering, or that you’d be taken away to the gods. It’s a mystical ruin surrounded by legends.”

By now, Ein was able to guess what had occurred. Celes must've...

"Did she try to take Prince LeFay away?" Ein asked.

"Not quite," Majorica replied. "To be precise, Prince LeFay insisted on visiting the Dungeon of Spiriting Away. Celes approved of this journey and accompanied him there."

Either way, there was no doubt that this was absolutely forbidden. As a personal guard, she was duty bound to stop her master from making any fatal missteps. Realizing that he'd forced Dill to go along with his plans many times, the crown prince felt pangs of guilt within himself.

"Those two were geniuses," Majorica said. "Their daily lives must've bored them. Prince LeFay was the kind of man who could recall any book after reading it once and Celes possessed power that was nothing short of absurd."

"Then Prince LeFay left the royal capital purely out of curiosity?" Ein asked.

"I believe so. They even left a letter hinting at that."

Hence, Majorica had claimed that the two were no longer of this world.

"It's like a deadly sin," Ein noted.

Though Ein didn't approve of the pair's actions, he didn't have the room to say much himself. He beat everyone in his way when he ran off to face the Sea Dragon.

"His Majesty said something similar back then," Majorica said.

"Grandfather did?" Ein asked.

"That's right. He was devastated...agonizing over the mistakes he might have made as a parent. But he held an equal amount of resentment for the prince, as he'd done something so forbidden."

Judging by Silverd's character, it made sense as to why he didn't speak of them.

"Perhaps that pair felt isolated somehow," Majorica mused. "They were geniuses who felt alienated from the rest of the world."

"Even so..." Ein started.

“That’s right. They did something unforgivable. But Prince LeFay always used to say, ‘I was born in the wrong place,’ like a force of habit. Maybe he discussed that with Celes. Of course, we have no way of knowing that now.”

As he deeply loved Ishtarica, Ein couldn’t have been thrilled by this tale. He scratched his temple in frustration, unable to suppress his own resentment for the first prince—he’d caused great sorrow for his beloved family.

“But you must keep this a secret. Not for me, but for His Majesty,” Majorica said.

“I know. I don’t want to remind grandfather of his grief,” Ein replied.

“No, I just don’t want to make His Majesty worry. He fears that you may do the same exact thing, Your Highness.”

“I’m at fault for making him worry like that.”

“You’re a man of action yourself. He’s afraid that you might be interested in doing the same.”

But Ein was certain that even if he was curious, he’d never approach that mystical dungeon of his own accord. He was sure of it.

“I’ll be fine. I love Ishtarica,” Ein replied. He couldn’t imagine parting ways with his family and this nation. “But I’m curious about one thing.”

“Hmm? And what might that be?” Majorica asked.

As the suffocating air settled, the boy asked, “Aren’t you a bit *too* knowledgeable about certain affairs?”

“Well, of course. I was in a party with those two.”

“Huh? What?! Uh?”

“It was me, Kaizer, Celes, Prince LeFay, and finally, the marshal.”

Ein’s jaw opened in shock as another gust of cold, sorrowful wind blew past them.

“I didn’t think you’d say something so amazing so casually,” Ein said with a smile, flashing his pearly whites.

Thinking back, Ein felt like he’d never been bored since he came to Ishtarica.

He was sure that his future was filled with equally exciting possibilities as he gazed up at the limitless, blue sky.

It'd only been a few hours since Ein's trip to the shipyard, but the remaining daylight had quickly dimmed into darkness, a result of the winter season's ever-shortening days. The prince's office was illuminated by the flickering vermilion flames of the fireplace that also warmed it. As he worked, Krone approached him.

"What's wrong?" the crown prince asked.

"Nothing really. Can't I just visit you sometimes?" Krone asked.

"Oh, I'd welcome you anytime."

Ein tried to stand up, but Krone motioned for him to remain seated. With light footsteps, she walked behind his chair.

"I didn't think you were in the middle of work," she said.

"Hmm, I wonder," Ein replied. "I guess you could say that I'm working, but I'm just sifting through documents related to Magna."

Krone tried to lean over him in an effort to scan the documents, but she looked to be a tad uncomfortable in her current position.

"Did my growth spurt make it hard to see over my shoulder?" Ein asked.

"Yes, just a little..." Krone replied. "But if I do this..."

She approached the boy's right shoulder, practically resting her face against him.

"Is this okay?"

She wasn't expecting a rejection, but Krone was going to be anxious until he replied.

"If you're fine with me being nervous," Ein replied in a joking tone.

Krone happily squinted her eyes. "As am I. We're two of a kind aren't we?"

"Hmm, then it might not be so bad after all."

He didn't just feel her breathing in his ears. He could hear her clothing move about and even the beating of her heart rang out loud and clear. A sweet floral scent filled his nose. Despite the nervous tension, Ein felt at ease when Krone was by his side.

"Ah, right there," Krone said, pointing at a document that depicted a magnificent, aristocratic manor.

"Judging by the scenery, it looks like we're on a cape, but is this..." Ein started.

"That's where we're planning on staying."

Ein hadn't known this. "It looks like someone's residence..."

"Don't worry. This manor belongs to the royal family and is the oldest one in existence. Were you not aware of it?"

"Not at all. I guess I haven't studied enough."

Krone chuckled. "Then I can tell you."

Though it was the oldest, the historical value of this manor was far more important.

"This villa was built by the first king," she said.

"Wait, really?!" Ein gasped.

"That's right. He left it behind for the royal family's future generations."

"I'm now embarrassed that I knew nothing about this," Ein said, dryly smiling.

Krone smiled back. "There's a secret in this manor."

"A secret?"

"That's right." She gave a dramatic pause before putting a finger to her lips. "Shhh. There's apparently a basement within the manor that's never been opened before."

Ein looked at her in surprise. Needless to say, his heart was pounding with excitement.

Chapter Three: An Epidemic

The new year was well underway and February was right around the corner. In the southern tip of Heim, the ruling royal family had one of their ships docked in the port city of Roundheart. It was rather chilly in that part of the kingdom.

“That must be it,” Elena said as she reached the port.

The officer standing beside her answered, “Correct. That’s the merchant ship that will periodically patrol around the continent.”

“Was it owned by one of Bardland’s merchants?”

“Yes. The trading company is on a lower rung of the industry when compared to the heavy hitters, but it has a well-balanced network of associates. I’d say they can get along well with any country.”

“It’s just as I’ve heard.”

“The first prince was recently notified of their problems. Business hasn’t been treating them well, and their debts are steadily piling up.”

“Prince Rayfon is truly knowledgeable when it comes to these sorts of matters.”

“I suppose he’d do what he must for his goals.”

“Perhaps so. I won’t pry any further.”

Warren had repeatedly hammered on about Rayfon’s worthlessness before, but even Elena and the rest of the prince’s subjects were unaware of his true talents. If there was a goal for him to achieve, Rayfon would sharpen his mind into a deadly knife, ready to strike with a multitude of tricks or schemes.

“Is the company president’s daughter that beautiful?” Elena inquired.

“There are rumors that aristocrats from various nations have asked for her hand in marriage,” the officer replied. “There’s no end to these requests.”

“I see... His Highness Rayfon must want her for himself.”

In exchange for shouldering the company's debt, he'd likely ask for the daughter's hand in marriage. The prince was surely offering under the table assistance to the man.

The docked ship lowered its ramp, and a number of men bustled inside.

“They have already been stripped of everything they own,” the officer said. “They're all neck-deep in debt and their families are gone. Well, their daughters and wives are. All of their personal and business assets have gone to their first prince.”

“Just to be sure, where do they hail from?” Elena asked.

“None of them are from Heim,” the officer answered, adding that they all used to be aristocrats or wealthy people. “In fact, they have all lost any citizenship they once had. They couldn't turn to their homeland for help as they're likely on the run for borrowing too much money.”

“I see... Indeed, they seem easy to manipulate.”

“Despite your words, you don't appear to be thrilled with this situation.”

“I'm not sympathizing with them. They must take responsibility for the destruction they wrought for refusing to stay in their place. They reap what they sow. However...”

Elena wasn't particularly keen on seeing other women thrown around like this. These women had all been forcibly abducted by Rayfon for his debauched ends. She didn't need to hear more to know what was happening to them.

“While I'm unsure if he plans to keep his promise, the first prince told those men that he'd free their families once the job was completed,” the officer finished.

“I don't like those who go against their word. I'll have to confirm later if the first prince truly intends on doing so,” Elena replied. *Though I'm willing to bet that he's lying*, she thought.

But for these desperate men, Rayfon's promise served as the perfect incentive.

“Oh, and could you bring this vessel’s owner to House August later?” Elena requested.

“Do you have any business with them?” the officer asked.

“Nothing in particular. But my father left me with a few tasks to take care of, and I must conduct some business with them.”

After their work was wrapped up, Elena was confident that she could keep the president’s daughter from being abducted. As a mother, she simply couldn’t let this atrocious act slide. But of course, Elena would need to craft an excuse to avoid Rayfon’s wrath should he discover her actions.

“Where have the daughters been taken to?” Elena asked.

“If memory serves...” the officer started.

She couldn’t hide her weariness while listening to the officer.

“I had no idea. I didn’t think he would go so far as to build a small estate for such a purpose,” she said.

Elena wanted to file a complaint about how the people’s taxes were being used, but it was already too late. She put her head in her hands and wondered if she should really get involved in the kingdom’s financial affairs.

That night, Elena had returned to the royal capital and quickly wrapped up business as she’d claimed. All she needed to do now was to come up with a convenient excuse.

“Madam, the house’s private army has returned,” a servant said.

“Thank you,” Elena replied. “How does it seem?”

“Judging from their behavior, I believe it’s progressing smoothly.”

“Then we should head to the basement.”

And so, Elena left her room and headed deeper into the manor. She glided through the impressive foyer that Ein had walked through years ago before she descended a set of dimly lit stairs. She made her way through the dusty, damp corridor and gently knocked on the basement door. The door opened, and the

soldiers inside all bowed towards her.

“If he’s tied up this tightly, I’m sure it’d be fine,” Elena said, gazing down at a rope-bound knight who rolled around on the floor.

The knight didn’t belong to Heim or Rockdam.

“Ah, you must be Lady Krone’s mother,” the knight said.

“And you must be a knight from Ishtarica,” Elena replied, noticing how he was clad in Ishtarican armor.

“Lady Elena, it took our entire army to restrain this person, and even then, some of us have been gravely injured,” a soldier said.

“I suppose I should expect no less from one of Ishtarica’s knights,” Elena replied.

“I agree.”

“You really did cause quite a bit of trouble,” Elena said before she turned to her army. “I want you all to leave this room.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” a soldier protested.

“No, I believe I’ll be quite all right.”

House August’s private army reluctantly followed their lady’s orders, leaving Elena and the knight all by themselves.

“Why don’t we make a little deal?” the lady asked.

“Ah, so all you wanted to do was disappoint me,” the knight replied.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’m saying that you shouldn’t underestimate me. I am a knight clad in the proud silver of Ishtarica.”

Anger enveloped Elena’s body. A powerful warrior by the name of Rogas lived in Heim, and yet...

“I didn’t think a single knight would be this impressive,” Elena confessed.

How many more of these knights were in Ishtarica? Excluding the ones stationed in Euro, Ishtarica was surely teeming with knights of this caliber.

Sweat dripped down Elena's neck as she stepped towards the knight.

"Take a look at this," she said. "Do you think you can still refuse?"

"How foolish! You can't bribe me!"

"No, I never thought I could ever do such a thing in the first place. Have a look."

She took out a piece of parchment and unfurled it in front of the knight, letting him read the words written down.

"This..." he gasped.

"It's worth listening to what I have to say, don't you think?" Elena replied.

As the knight was unable to hide his interest, Elena was sure that she'd won this battle.

"A-Are you being serious?" the knight asked.

"What use is there to lie?" Elena replied.

"Don't be absurd... What is your goal?"

"You very well know the answer, and yet you still ask, I see," Elena said in front of the panicked knight. She spoke confidently. "I want to point my blade towards Ishtarica and bring victory to Heim. For that, I'm willing to make a deal with you and utilize your existence to the fullest. I hope that explanation is enough for you?"

After a few agonizing minutes, the knight reluctantly eked out the words, "I want to talk."

When Elena heard those words, she unbound the knight while a broad smile filled her face—a grin that greatly resembled Krone's.

Fresh out of the bath, Ein bumped into his mother just as she was leaving the bath herself. The pair decided to take this opportunity to chat for a short while and they left for Olivia's room. Ein now sat on his mother's sofa as she stood behind him, brushing his hair.

"Ah, by the way, Ein, I'll go with you," Olivia said.

“Where to?” Ein asked.

“Ah, goodness! Don’t move, my dear. I haven’t finished brushing yet.”

Ein’s hair was a bit longer than before. Just as he’d promised Krone and Chris after returning from Barth, he’d cut his hair but kept it a tad longer than usual. This meant that if he wasn’t taking care of his new mane, it’d quickly become a tangled mess. Olivia enjoyed using this as an excuse to be with her son more often.

She happily hummed a little tune while brushing Ein’s hair. Olivia’s nighttime attire was quite revealing and given that Ein still saw her as more of a sister than a mother, he didn’t know where to look. He did his best to keep his gaze locked on the ground to prevent any awkward moments.

“Mother?” Ein asked.

“Yes?” Olivia asked.

“Er, um, so, where to? Where will you be going with me?”

“Ah, to Magna.”

“Wait, huh?”

“My mother advised my father of that. Since I haven’t been able to spend much time with you recently, she said this would be a great opportunity for us to relax a little.”

“Then it’ll be the first time in a while that I’ll have the chance to enjoy Magna with you.”

“That’s right. I’m already looking forward to it.”

She finished brushing his hair, but Ein stopped her when she tried to put the comb away.

“Why don’t I brush your hair?” he suggested.

It was still a little while before Ein’s bedtime, and he felt bad for not giving her hair the same level of care. He really wanted to brush her hair.

“Then I suppose I’ll take you up on your kind offer,” Olivia said.

“Let me know if it hurts, okay?” Ein asked.

The comb glided through his mother's silky brown locks as the pair made some small talk. Magna's inspection was coming up fast. In just a few weeks they'd leave the capital for that glistening seaside city. Ein knew it was a work trip, but he was looking forward to it regardless. He was sure that a good time was in store for him.

The following day, Ein popped out of bed and headed straight to the academy. With classes back in session for the new year, the prince returned to school as though nothing had happened. His sudden transformation had his peers saying otherwise at first, but they became accustomed to his new appearance within about a week. Ein walked out the gates of the training grounds with Butz by his side.

"I guess the four of us will still be Firsts going into our sixth year," Butz said.

"In the end, we were the only ones able to maintain our status," Ein replied.

"Looks like it. I shouldn't be the one to say this, but our group is special."

Only a select handful of students had managed to enter this notoriously rigorous institution and maintain their status as a First in the process. Given that annual overall grades decided student standings, the First class had a high turnover rate.

"Where are the other two?" Ein asked.

"Leonardo and Loran are both busy at work," Butz replied. "Tch, those two entered some kind of program all by themselves."

"Ah, makes sense."

"What, you knew about it?"

"I heard a little about Loran's program." In fact, Ein had seen the werewolf hard at work, but he didn't dare to speak a word of it. "But don't you also have an exam this year?"

"Y-Yeah. I wanna become a knight, so I need to pass that exam."

He was aiming to become a member of the Knights Guard. It had been Butz's goal ever since his visit to the knights' training grounds last year.

“In any case, the academy’s quieter than usual,” Butz remarked. “You think the rumored epidemic is to blame?”

Only then did Ein notice the silence. “There’s an epidemic?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty dangerous too, so I’ve heard it’s a troublesome disease.”

“Whoa... We should be careful.”

“And what’re *you* gonna do?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You can’t be serious... You’re the crown prince, aren’t you? What’re you gonna do from now on?”

“I think I’ll remain a crown prince for a while longer,” Ein replied, baffled. “I don’t plan on changing my status at all. It’ll change at the coronation, though.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Still, you can’t maintain this lifestyle, can you?”

“Hmm?”

“We’ll be graduating in about a year or so.”

Butz implied that the four wouldn’t be able to meet so easily after leaving the academy. For a moment, Ein felt hollow inside. He knew that he wouldn’t remain a child forever, but...

“It’ll get lonely,” Ein admitted.

“Yep,” Butz agreed.

But unlike the other students, it wasn’t as though they’d be far apart.

“Loran will probably become an amazing researcher, so I think he’ll be fine,” Ein said. “And Leonardo will become a civil servant. If you’re planning on becoming a member of the Knights Guard, Butz, then I think we’ll be able to see each other quite a bit.”

“H-Huh? Now that you mention it, you’re exactly right!”

Those who graduated with honors were almost guaranteed to be installed in important positions. Then surely, Ein would have plenty of opportunities to see his buddies from the academy.

“That doesn’t sound bad at all, huh?” Butz said. “All right, then!”

“Butz?” Ein asked.

“I’m gonna go swing my sword for a bit!”

They’d been walking for quite a while, leaving campus and heading for the academy’s gates. However, Butz turned on his heels and started back for the training grounds.

“H-Hey...” Ein feebly called in astonishment as he watched his friend leave. The crown prince was sure that a fire had been lit in Butz’s heart. “I should head home.”

Once his friend was gone, Ein smiled and walked ahead. The academy gates were right in front of him. It was past noon, but there were no signs of other students aside from the Firsts who walked beside him. He gazed at the sleepy campus, determined to live his last year of school life to the fullest.

The neatly maintained yards on campus made walks around the academy rather comfortable. While it was still in the middle of February and the trees hadn’t turned green just yet, the slow changing of the seasons was apparent for all to see. *When I return to the castle, I should do a bit of work before I leave for Magna*, Ein thought. This upcoming trip was set to be a cakewalk in comparison to his journeys to Ist or Barth. Magna was a shorter distance away, not to mention that it was far less dangerous. To put it simply, the lack of crime or any real danger made Magna a fairly safe place to visit.

“Huh?” Ein said as he approached the academy’s regal front gates.

“Welcome back,” Dill said.

It had always been Chris’s role to ferry the crown prince to and from the academy. She had recently resumed her role as Ein’s personal guard and was generally in charge of matters pertaining to him.

“How rare to see you here, Dill,” Ein remarked.

“Dame Chris has a reason for her absence,” the knight replied.

“Is she busy?”

Chris had always been busy with work and it wasn't out of the ordinary.

"She's fallen ill and is currently recuperating," Dill confessed. "I haven't heard for certain, but it seems like Lady Krone has also become ill..."

This was no small matter. They must've been extremely sick if it interfered with their duties. Ein was especially concerned as to why the pair had fallen ill around the same time.

"I'm worried," Ein said. "We should go."

With Dill in tow, the crown prince swiftly left the academy.

Upon his return to the castle, Ein darted straight to a small room located towards the back of the nurse's station. The smell of disinfectant hit his nose as he realized that the walls were lined with medicine bottles.

"They've both become victims of this epidemic," a woman seated behind a desk said. "It'll take a few weeks' rest for them to recover."

Dressed in a distinguished white coat, this woman was actually Bara. Her appearance was a far cry from that of the orphan in rags she had once been. She had been so diligent that she was apparently skilled enough to become a full-fledged doctor.

The epidemic... Must be what Butz was talking about earlier, Ein thought, processing the situation.

"You won't be able to see them for about ten days," Bara added. "We don't want you getting sick either, Your Highness."

"I don't think I'd be affected," Ein replied.

"Ah, r-right! That's quite true."

"I have to thank Toxin Decomposition. So, can I go to their rooms and heal them?"

"I personally wouldn't recommend that course of action."

"Huh? Why not?"

"Even if you cure them, Your Highness, it shall only be a temporary measure."

“Does that mean you want them to build immunity?”

Bara nodded. “It’s indeed an epidemic, but everyone will fall ill with this disease at least once in their lives. Once they build antibodies against it, there won’t be a second time. In this case, it might be better if they tough it out the first time around.”

Should Ein offer his assistance here, they might fall ill once more. There were no guarantees that he could remain by their side at all times, so Bara found it unwise to cure their ailments so swiftly.

“I’ve informed the ladies of their illness, and they’ve chosen to rest for now,” she said.

Had they important matters to attend to, they surely would have pushed through to handle them.

“The inspection this time around won’t be too serious anyway,” Ein added.

“I believe they will join you at a later date or perhaps skip it entirely,” Bara replied. There was no need for the ladies to worsen their condition by peeling themselves out of bed.

“Sir Ein, I shall take over their work,” Dill said.

“Mhm. You’re so reliable,” Ein replied.

In the next moment, the prince and his guard exchanged glances upon hearing a knock at the door. May opened the door and entered the room.

“Excuse me... Ah! Sir Ein, welcome back!” she quickly said.

The tiny maid seemed to be bursting with energy as she called out to Ein.

“May!” Bara scolded. “Don’t speak so casually with His Highness!”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Ein replied before turning to the little girl. “Are you here for work, May?”

“I am! Miss Martha asked me to call for you!”

“I see. And where is Martha?”

“Um, um... Right! She’s waiting on the courtyard terrace with the queen!”

“My grandmother? Then I should hurry.”

He thanked the little girl and petted her head. May let out a ticklish giggle and Ein, satisfied with her reaction, quickly left the room.

The courtyard terrace was one of Olivia and Lalalua’s favorite sports in the castle. A gorgeous floral kaleidoscope lined the waterways and covered the white stone around them. This neatly maintained corner was one of the castle’s points of pride.

“Did you call for me, grandmother?” Ein asked.

To be precise, Martha had called for him, but no servant would summon the crown prince.

“Welcome back, Ein,” Lalalua replied. “I don’t want to keep you standing, so why don’t you take a seat?”

As an elegant smile formed on her lips, one would be reminded that Lalalua didn’t look her age at all. She was said to be around Silverd’s age, but appeared to be a woman in her twenties. Was it due to her Dark Elf lineage? Who could say? But she could have easily been pegged as Olivia’s sister.

“Pardon me. It’s unusual to see you with Martha,” Ein commented.

“Ah, well, to tell you the truth, Belia has fallen ill as well,” the queen answered. “Martha is taking her place while she rests.”

Ein couldn’t hide the shock from what he had just heard. Belia was Queen Lalalua’s exclusive maid and was also the castle’s head servant. In the past, Martha had stated that Belia was her master. Ein had never heard of Belia taking a rest.

“How rare,” Ein said. “I thought she’d take fewer days off than Warren.”

“I’d like to agree, but Belia’s getting up there in age. She may not want to admit it, but one’s body will grow frail over time.”

“I see...” Ein nodded while taking a sip of tea that Martha had prepared. “Did Belia catch that nasty bug that’s been going around?”

“No, she’s simply fallen ill is all. That reminds me, did you hear about your ladies?”

"If you're talking about Krone and Chris, Bara told me just now."

"I'm glad to hear that. Don't go too overboard visiting them while they're ill, all right?"

"Huh? I thought you'd try to stop me, but I guess that isn't the case."

"Well, you won't catch it, right? But we ladies tend to get embarrassed if you visit us so boldly while we're ill."

"You're right. I'll visit them when their condition stabilizes."

However, he felt a tinge of loneliness knowing he couldn't speak with them. *Maybe I'll write them a letter later. They can read it once they're awake, and I don't think it'd tire them out too much.*

"By the way, grandmother, may I ask why you called for me?" Ein asked.

"Oh, it's nothing too important," Lalalua answered. "I simply wanted you to join me for a spot of tea. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Certainly, we cannot have anyone else fill such an important role," Ein said, sinking in his seat.

He enjoyed a chat with his grandmother until the early evening, when the sun started to set. The two had spent some leisurely time together.

Long after dinner had been served, Ein was wrapping up some work in his office when Bara dropped by to see him.

"Here are the ladies' medical records," she said.

"I know I asked you to bring these to me, but are you sure I can look at them?" Ein asked.

He might've outranked them, but he was still invading the ladies' privacy.

"They expected you to say as much. They've given me the personal go-ahead to provide you with these documents," Bara replied.

"Then I'll gladly take them," Ein said. "I'll check the contents later."

"Please do. They both apologize profusely for the inconvenience they

caused...”

“Could you tell them that they shouldn’t worry? They have nothing to apologize for.”

“Yes, of course.”

Krone and Chris both had a strong sense of responsibility, and while Ein wasn’t surprised to hear the ladies say that, he wanted them to take it easy in times like this.

“Mmm...” Ein said, stretching his back wearily. “I have my upcoming inspection of Magna to consider. Not to mention the mess with Heim.”

“You have my sympathy,” Bara replied.

The two exchanged strained chuckles as Ein engaged in some small talk.

“I hope that man holds my younger brother and the prince back,” he muttered.

“That man?” Bara asked.

“My former father. I don’t plan on sticking my nose into the affairs of other nations, though.”

“Ah, I see. It seems we’re both troubled by our fathers.”

“Are you talking about your own?”

“My father put me, May, and my mother through a lot of hardship.”

From her tone, one could tell that Bara harbored complex feelings about the situation. As she spoke, her strained smile turned into a painful frown. She simply sighed while gazing into empty space. Just like Ein, Bara had more than a few unpleasant memories surrounding her father.

“I was young when he left, so I don’t remember much about him,” she admitted.

“Huh? Did he leave Ist?”

“I’m not quite sure. He said he was bored one day and simply vanished. My poor mother was confused by it all and searched for my father for a while...but to no avail.”

“And then you started living in the alleyways?”

“N-No! We always lived in the slums, so our lives didn’t change much!”

Ein felt like her father was much worse than Rogas. While the crown prince had his fair share of complaints about his father, the man had at least put food in his mouth and a roof over his head. If there was a comparison to be made, Rogas was likely a much better father than Bara’s.

“You suffered far more than I have,” Ein said.

“But then, you picked us up and brought us here, Your Highness. We couldn’t be happier.”

“I’m glad. Is the castle inconvenient at all?”

“O-Of course not!” she hastily said, raising her voice. “In fact, I feel like we’ve been treated far too well. We’re truly happy.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Sorry for suddenly going on a tangent like that! I didn’t mean to bore you with my story! I-I shall go back to work!” She bowed and left Ein’s side. “If you require anything from me, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“Got it. Thank you.”

She swiftly left the crown prince’s office. Ein stared for a while before shifting his gaze to the floor. He started mulling over the conversation he’d just had with Bara.

“There are all sorts of fathers out there...” he muttered.

Everyone belonged to some form of family, and everyone was likely to be going through their own share of hard times. Ein felt as though he had a better understanding of that now.

“All right. I should read these medical records and... No, wait, before that...”

He stood up and headed for the window. The cool night breeze blew in a fresh gust of air into the room.

The night sky was filled with twinkling stars and didn’t have a cloud in sight. As he looked at the enormous evening star, Ein prayed for his ladies to get

better soon.

Chapter Four: An Intruder in the Large Nation

Bardland resided north of the Kingdom of Heim. Northwest of Bardland, in the northern region of the continent, was the Republic of Rockdam. Blessed with a vast domain of its own, Rockdam's military might was second only to the kingdom's.

As winter was drawing to a close, the footsteps of spring were quickly approaching in the republic.

"It's comparable to Port Roundheart," Elena observed.

Though she was a woman from Heim, she planned to depart from Rockdam's port and sail to Ishtarica—more precisely, the port city of Magna. This wasn't her first plan, but things had moved along smoothly thanks to Prince Rayfon's involvement. He'd been lusting after the daughter of a trading company's president, but the lady had managed to elude his grasp and evade capture. Displeased with the resultant situation, Rayfon had cornered Elena with a torrential downfall of incessant questions.

Of course, Elena had a few excuses ready to go. She explained that by commissioning the company to handle some of the previous grand duke's outstanding tasks, it would be a net benefit for the kingdom. Tickle and a whole host of aristocrats agreed with Elena's logic, leaving Rayfon with no choice but to nod his head and go along with it.

However...

"I didn't expect him to ask me to serve as the inspector..." she murmured. "It's quite convenient for me, though."

She was tasked with ensuring that no man would escape until the merchant ship reached Magna. Once they arrived at their destination, Elena was permitted to return right away. However, she knew that she had a long road ahead of her and that her plan had a fatal flaw: the Ishtaricans knew her face.

Elena chose to resolve this problem by purchasing a magical tool used by

adventurers. The tiny earring-shaped tool allowed her to change her hair and eye color. After tidying up her hair with a few accessories, even her family members—who were more familiar with her than Lily—would barely recognize her. Then with a robe to hide her clothing, Elena was confident in her perfect preparations.

“Lady Elena, the ship is ready for you,” a civil servant called. They wouldn’t be accompanying her on the voyage.

“Thank you,” Elena replied. “Then I suppose I should board the ship too.”

“This might be too late, but are you sure about this? If your identity is revealed, I shudder to imagine how you would be treated.”

“But it’s too late to stop this.” She spoke in a composed manner, showing that she was perhaps a bit too gung ho about this mission.

“Will those men really be of use?”

“They can’t run anymore, can they? I’m sure they’ll follow orders with everything they have left. Or else, the ladies they love may be on the chopping block.”

“You’re right. They might’ve gotten what they deserved, but I still sympathize.”

“I especially feel for their families.”

“Indeed. And where do you think the first prince obtained the magical tools he provided these men with?”

“I wonder... I tried asking, but he wouldn’t tell me.” This tool was indeed quite unique. “I wonder where exactly he discovered a tool that could spread miasma.”

The mission: the men on board would smuggle these dangerous tools into Ishtarican and use them in strategic locations. It was an incredibly reckless operation as miasma’s poisonous qualities could take lives in the blink of an eye without the proper protection.

“I didn’t think you’d agree to this plan, Lady Elena,” the civil servant said.

“Oh, and why do you think that?”

“Because we’re targeting random, innocent citizens.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that at all,” Elena replied with a smile, heading for the ship. “I believe in *both* of them.”

She said nothing more as she stepped into the cramped and dusty interior of this near inhospitable vessel. Elena still had the privilege of having a private room to herself, but the men’s room was undoubtedly too small for them all. As she reached her room, she set her luggage down.

“For the next few days, I suppose I must spend my time at sea in this room,” she said, already weary about this trip.

The voyage to Ishtarica would be long and arduous, but Elena managed to egg herself on—she knew this was a job she couldn’t refuse.

“And besides...”

This trip wouldn’t be completely terrible; she’d be able to see Ishtarica’s massive glory with her own eyes. It would surely give her a meaningful understanding of the power difference between the two nations.

The wooden ship didn’t have a window in sight. Elena’s quarters were always at an uncomfortable temperature and filled with stale air. Needless to say, she wasn’t thrilled with her accommodations at all. Even so, it was a decently built boat among most merchant ships. Vessels that carried adventurers often required them to huddle together when sleeping and they didn’t have a bathroom. These ships were usually built cheaply, leading to a constant rocking and creaking that bothered most passengers.

It’d been over a day since the ship had left Rockdam’s port—or so Elena thought. She wasn’t sure. The lack of windows kept her from seeing outside, and the harsh winds and rough waves of the sea prevented her from leaving her room. Even if she were able to ask the sailors for an update, she didn’t feel like risking her safety for a quick peek outside.

“I heard that you could take a nice nap on an Ishtarican boat and you’d be at your destination before you knew it,” Elena murmured.

What kind of technology had been employed? What kind of ship was it? She wasn't too knowledgeable on technical details, but she was still curious about the ship's build. Suddenly, the ship started to creak loudly and tilt, leading Elena's room to rock about. It was as though the elements were affirming that this would be an uncomfortable voyage. She had no idea if it was night or day, but believed that if she fell asleep, she'd have nothing to worry about. She prayed for sleep to come quickly so she'd be in Ishtarica when she next awoke.

She felt terrible when she woke up and heard loud knocking echoing throughout her room. The noise was atrocious to her ears, painful to hear even. The uncomfortable bedding didn't make for a good sleeping experience. She was feeling a touch nauseous too.

"What...is it?" Elena mumbled in annoyance as she got up and approached the door.

"I thank you for your patience. We're now in Ishtarica," one of the sailors called out.

"R-Really?" Elena asked.

She eagerly flung open the door and locked eyes with the sailor. While the voyage seemed to have taken a lot out of him, the man's bright smile was rather telling. Elena felt the fatigue and stiffness in her muscles quickly melt away as she scrambled to gather her luggage. With her bags in tow, Elena ran through the ship's bowels, pushed by the desire to feel the sun's rays against her skin after what felt like an eternity at sea. She ascended a flight of steps and saw a wooden door in front of her. Elena placed her hand on the knob, took a determined breath, and turned the knob.

"It's so bright," she mumbled.

As it'd been a while since she'd last taken in the sun's dazzling magnificence, her eyes started to sting right away. She kept herself from cracking the door open any further to protect her vision. While minding her gaze, Elena took a deep breath of fresh air. This port city smelled of the sea, but she didn't find its aromas to be fishy. *What kind of city is this?* she wondered.

She used her hand to shield her eyes from the sun, allowing her to widen her gaze. When Elena's vision had focused and let her take in Magna's scenery, the

gears in her brain briefly came to a screeching halt.

“This...”

All Elena knew was that she was in Magna—from its endless sea of cobalt blue to red-roofed homes that dotted the entire mass of the gorgeous city. Not to mention that Magna’s aforementioned “mass” blew Elena away with its sheer scale. When she had set off from Bardland, Elena had held the utmost confidence in Port Roundheart, but now, she wasn’t so sure.

“I guess it was rude to even compare...”

Port Roundheart was hardly a point of comparison, or even a good one at that. Elena simply stood there, absolutely stunned. There was a part of her that wouldn’t believe the tales of Ishtarica’s massive glory until she’d seen it for herself, but the reality had been far more than she’d imagined. She couldn’t fathom just how vastly the two nations contrasted until it was right in front of her face.

“Pardon me, madam...” the sailor from earlier called out.

“Whatever is the matter?” Elena inquired.

“The ship is quite damaged, you see. It’s difficult for me to say this, but...”

“Does the vessel require repairs?”

“I-Indeed. And on quite a large scale.”

This was crushing news to Elena’s ears. She’d planned on returning to Heim after a short rest, but it appeared that those plans were now out of the question. She seemed to think for a moment.

“Could you give me a few moments?” she finally said, swiftly walking away from the sailor. She immediately walked down the ship’s ramp and set foot onto Magna. “I thought something like this might happen.”

Hence, she’d struck a deal with an Ishtarican knight. The man was no longer in his official armor, but wearing his personal clothes.

“Here you are. A letter of introduction to a skilled artisan,” he said.

“Thank you. You’re a big help,” Elena replied.

“Then please excuse me. I have matters to attend to as well.”

The sailor immediately approached her after the knight took his leave.

“I’m shocked. I didn’t think Ishtarica would have a turncoat among their people,” he said.

“What use is there for me to lie?” Elena inquired as she smiled fearlessly.

Upon turning back towards the ship, Elena noticed the men on board making their moves. Kingsland was now firmly in their crosshairs for the next part of their plan.

“Will they be all right?” the sailor asked. “I hope Heim won’t be suspected of this.”

“Oh, there’s nothing to worry about,” Elena replied. “I believe in *both* of them.”

“What do you mean, madam?”

“Exactly as my words imply. In both of them.”

While the ship was now in a position to be quickly repaired, Elena had nowhere to stay. Given that she had some travel money on hand, it might have been in her best interests to find lodging soon.

“I’ll return once the repairs are complete,” Elena said as she walked into Magna’s bustling city streets.

While walking along the pier, she noticed an entire fleet of fishing vessels lined up. After catching a glimpse of them, Elena almost mistook these sturdy, splendid ships for aristocratic boats. The nearby military port had several ships of their own all lined up in a neat row. These warships looked as if they could easily wipe Roundheart off the map.

“I simply don’t understand...” Elena muttered.

Heim and Ishtarica existed in the same world, yet there was a stark, shocking power difference between the two nations. How was this possible? Still befuddled, Elena made her way to a street lined with stalls open for business.

“Ah, young lady! Yes, you, you looker! Feast your eyes on this fish! Looks

delicious, eh? Why don't you take one home?" a store owner called out. The man was clearly raised in Magna; his tanned skin and muscular arms gave the man a powerful visage.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Elena apologized. "I haven't even decided on my lodging just yet."

"Hmm? Oh, you're not here for *that*, are ya, young lady? Then I guess it can't be helped!"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Aw, come on! I know what you're here for! You came to Magna specifically for today, didn't ya? You should hurry! It'll be tough to find lodging today since that pair are coming down from the royal capital. You should get a move on!"

Elena had no clue as to what the beefy man was going on about, but she agreed that it was time for her to leave and find a place to stay. She'd never been in a massive crowd before, but now found herself wading through one as she searched for an inn.

Magna was gigantic. Elena was sure that she'd have no problem hunting down a room for the night, but her confidence ended up being misplaced. She'd been searching for a few hours now and she hadn't found a single inn.

"I'm so sorry," a concierge said. "We've been completely booked since noon too. We don't have any rooms available."

For the umpteenth time today, Elena failed to find a room. Even if she was turned down, she left no establishment feeling discouraged. However, her calves were aching from all the walking and the sun was starting to set. Needless to say, she was eager to find somewhere to stay.

"Maybe I should rest a bit," she said after walking out of a completely booked inn.

Through the bustling crowds, Elena was just able to make out a bench that sat on the other side of the street. Just as someone was getting ready to leave the bench, Elena swooped in and took a seat before anyone else could. A person in gray traveler's robes was already seated beside Elena, watching on as she tried to soothe her sore calves.

"I wouldn't want to sleep out on the streets..." she mumbled.

"Um..." the traveler beside her called out. "Pardon me, but are you having trouble finding an inn for the night?"

Thanks to the traveler's robe, Elena was only able to make out their mouth. But judging from their voice, she could tell that her current neighbor was a rather young man.

"Exactly so," Elena replied. "It's quite embarrassing for me to admit, but I didn't think this city would be so busy."

"Ha ha, I see," the traveler replied with a chuckle. "Indeed, it's quite a crowd."

In contrast to his appearance, the traveler let out a gentle laugh.

"Are you a traveler?" Elena required.

"Unfortunately, no," he replied. "I tend to spend most of my days in the royal capital."

"Are you actually a nobleman, then?"

"Well...not exactly," he replied, folding his arms in front while tilting his head to one side. "My rank is a bit troublesome to explain, you see."

If he's not an aristocrat, perhaps he's a merchant's son, Elena thought. At the very least, his refined gestures made it seem that he wasn't a commoner. It was quite apparent that he was highly educated. Not to mention that his timbre was quite pleasing to the ears.

"Then I won't pry any further," Elena replied. "That's more convenient for you, isn't it?"

The man chuckled. "Then why don't I provide you with a token of my appreciation? In exchange for your polite manners, of course."

"A man of your station went out of their way to speak with someone such as myself. Perhaps I should be the one thanking you."

"If a merchant decided to charge others for a mere conversation, they'd soon become obsolete," the man jokingly remarked as he stood up.

He was quite tall, forcing Elena to gaze up at him. The hair that fluttered

under his robes seemed a bit too long for a man.

“I know of a lodging that keeps a spare room, even during busy times like these,” the man said. “My aunt mentioned it to me.”

Once he finished speaking, he said nothing more and walked ahead. Elena hesitated for a moment, but she chose to follow him.

Chapter Five: What the First King Left Behind

Several hours ago, Elena's ship was nearing Magna's waters when the royal water train pulled into town. It was just before noon and the streets surrounding the station were packed with people like never before.

"Lady Olivia's popularity is a given, but it seems like quite a few are calling out to you as well, Sir Ein," Martha said as the crown prince stepped out of the train.

The crowd practically shouted at their sovereigns, hoping to catch the royal's attention with their boisterous roars. When it came to noise levels, Magna's station was rivaling that of White Rose—the nation's largest station.

"Do you think it has something to do with the Sea Dragon incident?" Ein asked.

"I believe so," Martha agreed. "Rumors have been circulating that you may be just as popular as the first king."

"Personally, I'd like my mother to be the priority."

"I'll be fine," Olivia replied, hearing her son's words. "I'm happier to see that you're so revered."

The second princess was thrilled to discover that her son was not only beloved by her, but by the public. All the praise being heaped upon him had apparently put her in a much better mood than usual. In fact, it was clear as day to see that she was in high spirits.

"It might be hard to stroll through the city if this keeps up," Ein said.

It was a shame, but Ein didn't want to start up a fuss if his identity was revealed in the middle of Magna. Standing beside him, Olivia was of the same mindset and tilted her head, troubled.

"This way, please, you two," Martha said, leading the royals to the exit.

"Usually, we would've liked to carve out some time for you to answer the cries

of the citizens, but your audience is much too crowded. For their safety, we shall cancel your greetings.”

“Ah, makes sense. That might be for the best,” Ein replied.

“A carriage has been prepared for you two. It would be greatly appreciated if you could please wave out the window as you ride along.”

“Got it. Shall we go, mother?”

“Let’s,” Olivia replied, walking a step ahead.

It was then that Ein noticed an oddity. “It’s not right for a princess to be walking alone. Why don’t I escort you?”

Olivia was visibly shocked by her son’s words and stopped walking immediately. As she saw her beloved boy extend his hand to her, she placed one hand over the glimmering star crystal that adorned her chest and flashed a beaming smile.

“Your Highness, would you kindly escort me, then?” Olivia asked.

“Most certainly. I shall do so,” Ein replied.

Following his transformation into a Demon Lord, Ein was now taller than his mother. Her son’s reliable behavior and mature demeanor comfortably allowed her to entrust everything to him as she took his hand.



Several minutes after the carriage's departure, the royals finally arrived at the first king's villa. There were no other homes or aristocratic estates nearby; the entire cape was reserved for the royal family and them alone. The residence wasn't far away from the station and featured an amazing view of the entire city. Undoubtedly, it was a prime location to hold such a residence. The villa itself was magnificently built, but maintained an eye-catching, regal flair to its architecture.

"It's much..." Ein started.

"Prettier than you imagined?" Dill inquired, approaching the prince.

"I meant that you could tell that it's well maintained at a glance."

The villa's ivory walls gave off an air of elegance and shot up into the air far enough for one to easily tell that the entire estate was about four stories high. The garden was also just as captivating, its trimmed hedges and perfectly manicured blades of grass providing a home for a colorful spread of flowers in bloom. It was easy to tell that an experienced gardener was running the show here.

"That salty scent wafting in from the sea puts me at ease, and this location is just tempting me to live here full-time," Ein said. "It'd be wonderful if I could tour a few stalls, you know..."

Dill laughed. "You may not, of course."

"Fair."

After enjoying the view for a short while, Ein walked towards the villa.

"Since mother and the others are already inside, I'd say it's time we headed in ourselves," he suggested.

"I agree. Shall we?" Dill replied.

The pair walked upon a stone tile path until they arrived at a thick, wooden door. Once they noticed the crown prince had arrived, a member of the Knights Guard swung open the door for his prince. With every new step Ein took into the villa, he could hear shoes clacking against the hardwood flooring. The

estate's interior design was rather simple, opting not to feature any opulent decor.

"Where will I be staying?" Ein asked.

"On the fourth floor, at the top of the manor," Dill replied. "The first king's room is also nearby, so you may pay a visit if you'd like."

"I think I'll do that when the time opens up."

There were two massive staircases on either side of the room, stretched out like a pair of wings that led to the higher floors. However, Ein's attention was quickly grabbed by a small door off in a nearby corner.

"Is that..." he asked.

"That's likely the staircase that leads to the basement," Dill answered.

"The one that's never been opened for some reason?"

"Precisely. Chancellor Warren informed me that you might approach that door."

"Wow... Then I think I'll try my luck later."

Ein decided it would be best to head to his room first, ascending the stairs and heading to the villa's top floor.

"Dill?" Ein asked.

"Yes, Your Highness?" the guard replied.

"Is there some sort of secret hidden in the basement?"

"I cannot say for sure... It's never been opened, after all."

"I also asked my grandfather about it, and it seems that his predecessors tried to look into it. They gave up after learning it wouldn't open up."

"Could've it been sealed away for a particular reason?"

"Oh, I thought that too. Perhaps only the first king could open it."

"I see... Then it might be difficult to open."

But of course, Ein would still try it out to sate his curiosity.

“I wonder what’s inside,” he wondered.

Ein wasn’t keen on prying the door open. That would make him like he was snooping around the house, and that didn’t sit right with him.

Once Ein finished unpacking his luggage, he headed off to his mother’s room.

“Wow, it’s the same in here as it is in my room,” he observed.

His mother giggled. “That’s right. I think it feels just like something between a manor and an inn.”

The rooms were furnished like a resort, hinting that this villa was indeed not the main house. Some of the furniture was made from weaved plants, and when coupled with the white walls, the interior was reminiscent of tropical islands. From the room’s bay window, one had a full view of Magna’s beaches, truly a one-of-a-kind sight. The mother and son were enjoying a breath of fresh air when Martha hesitantly approached them.

“Pardon me, but may I ask you something?” the maid inquired.

“What might that be?” Olivia replied.

“To be precise, I’d like to ask the both of you...”

The royals exchanged curious glances as they sat down on a nearby sofa.

“Of course. What is it?” Olivia asked.

“I’ve been a bit curious about this since before, but is the ocean breeze...not an issue for the two of you?” Martha questioned. “Does it not negatively affect your bodies?”

“O-Oh my, and why would you think that, I wonder?” Olivia looked a tad troubled.

“Both of you are Dryads, and I was worried about the salt in the air.”

“Ah, I see!” The princess nodded in understanding as she pressed an index finger on her lips while gazing at the ceiling. “Let’s see... I lived in a port city in the past, but I didn’t have an issue then.”

“A port city?”

“That’s right.” Olivia was clearly referring to Port Roundheart, but she refused to say it outright as she casually mused on her time there. “I went out for a walk on the beach with Ein, but I had no issues back then.”

“I’m quite relieved to hear that,” Martha replied with a smile and a nod. She didn’t pursue the “port city” subject any further. In fact, she clenched her fists so tightly that her veins started to pop out.

Did she regret unearthing her princess’s bitter memories of Roundheart? Or was she trying to hold back the rage she felt for the viscount’s family? Ein felt that it must’ve been a little bit of both.

“Look Ein! Do you see all those fish?” Olivia pointed out.

“Wow, that’s a lot,” Ein agreed.

From outside their window, the pair could see a school of fish swimming near the cape. The school’s scales gave off a silvery shimmer under the sun’s shining rays. One would never see a view like this from the royal capital’s port.

Suddenly, there were a few quiet knocks on the door.

“Allow me,” Martha said, moving to the door. She opened it to find Dill standing outside.

“Please give this to Sir Ein,” the knight said, handing Martha a small envelope before closing the door.

“What’s wrong?” Ein asked.

“This is from Dill. He said it was for you, Sir Ein,” she replied.

“For me? I wonder what it is.”

Ein opened up the envelope to find a simple report within. The report mentioned that the crowd surrounding the station had dispersed. While there were a few scuffles here and there, no one was injured in the hustle and bustle. That was outside of Ein’s control. After he finished reading, he stored the report in his pocket.

“It’s a bit early, but I suppose I shall take a bath,” Olivia said, rising from the sofa and turning to her maid. “Will you help me?”

“Certainly. Then I shall assign another servant to Sir Ein until then,” Martha replied.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. I’d like Ein to run an errand for me.”

An errand? the crown prince wondered quizzically.

“You want to visit the city, don’t you?” the princess asked her son.

“I do, but I think it’d be difficult,” Ein admitted, remembering his words at the station.

“Not to worry. I’ve borrowed something from my father which I think will be of use.”

“L-Lady Olivia?!” Martha asked.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it, Martha,” Olivia replied. “Father had foreseen this situation and lent this to me. If Ein wears it, no one will be able to piece together his identity.”

She stood up and reached into a nearby bag.

“It would be dangerous should his identity be exposed,” the maid said worriedly. “If something happens—”

“Lily will meet with him midway. It’ll be fine,” Olivia assured.

“Since when did you make such preparations?”

“Before we left Kingsland. Warren dispatched her to keep us safe. You don’t have to worry if Lily’s with us, do you, Martha?”

“O-Of course. Lady Lily is much stronger than my Dill, after all.”

“Then problem solved. Ein, could you come here for a moment?”

Ein obediently answered his mother’s call and gazed at the gray robe that she’d taken out. The color was a bit plain, but the fabric quality was clearly expensive. If Silverd had provided this to them, it was no ordinary robe.

“This robe possesses qualities similar to the Ruby of the earth, the charm you wore while fighting the Sea Dragon,” Olivia explained. “However, as this robe is less costly to produce, it might not save you from sure death.”

“I see... But if I wear this, I could cover my face with the hood,” Ein said.

Olivia giggled. “Perfect for traveling incognito, don’t you think?” She unfolded the robe and walked behind Ein. “I heard that your grandfather once used this robe to sneak out of the castle right under Belia’s nose.”

“Grandfather did?”

The crown prince’s cheek twitched for a moment, wondering exactly what his grandfather had been up to in the past. As the future king and a member of the royal family, Ein slowly put his arms through the sleeves. Ein had a feeling that he was more like his grandfather than the king would probably admit.

“I’ll be back in about an hour,” Ein said.

“I understand,” Olivia replied. “I’ll be taking a bath in the meantime, so take care, all right? And since I *am* having you run an errand, could you possibly purchase something in the city for me?”

Ein would gladly do so. His mother gave him a big farewell hug and the crown prince made his way for the city just as the sun started to set.

Ein knew that it’d look mighty suspicious if someone in a gray robe sauntered into town right from the cape; he’d turn heads for sure. With that in mind, he decided to swing up, around, and into Magna on a back road. It wasn’t much of a trip. There was a road from the cape to the beach. If he were to head to the city from there, he didn’t think he’d stand out.

“I totally look like I’m traveling incognito,” Ein remarked, his heart pounding with excitement.

The setting sun had tinted the water’s surface with a vibrant red—the crimson ocean seemingly stretching beyond the horizon. Off by the pier, there were fishing boats putting their anchors down for the night while other vessels prepared to set sail and reel in another catch or two. Ein stretched his back as he watched on from his corner of the port but noticed that he’d nearly drooled at the delicious smells wafting his way.

“Oops, I should move quickly,” he said.

The stalls were waiting for him. He swiftly made his way to the main street as the lovely aromas of scrumptious food drew closer and the sounds of bustling crowds grew louder. He finally reached the end of a street to discover an equal number of stalls and shops that seemed to entice him. *Where should I start?*

“Here I am!” Lily called out as she suddenly emerged from the shadows.

She was dressed in the same sort of robe as Ein. As the two walked alongside each other, they looked like a married couple of travelers or adventurers in a party.

“I’m glad you came when you did,” Ein said. “I was wondering where I should start.”

“They’re all great, so you should start with the one that catches your eye first then work your way out from there!” Lily replied. “I think that’s the best way to enjoy these.”

“That sounds great. Since it’s a great opportunity to have a little fun, why don’t you join in, Lily?”

“I mustn’t. I’m your guard and that means I can’t overlook my work while I’m accompanying you, Sir Ein... Buuuuuuuut, what do you think of the stall over there?”

She pointed over to a stall that served food that’d been grilled over a charcoal stove.

“Are you drooling?” Ein asked.

He pointed to where his drool would’ve been, encouraging her to follow suit.

“No way. There’s no way that I’m— Yeah! Hey! I’m not drooling!” Lily wailed as she confirmed that she wasn’t drooling.

The pouting spy looked like she was a tad embarrassed, frustrated that the prince had pulled one over on her. The pair headed for the stalls, noticing that some stalls used charcoal stoves while others employed griddles to cook up their sizzling eats. While Magna was a port city, it wasn’t known for seafood alone. As it held Ishtarica’s largest port, the city had access to anything one could wish for from around the continent. Even materials and monster meat

from Barth were occasionally up for grabs. A little ways past the port, there were a handful of places where merchants made merry. In other words...

“The smoke from these stalls makes up the very essence of Ishtarica,” Ein reasoned.

“So this could count as an inspection, then!” Lily said, happy that she had managed to craft an excuse.

The two walked off to a stall filled with seafood. This stall’s crown jewel was a massive fish that easily dwarfed a pair of adults lined up next to it. The fish’s stomach had been cut wide open and sliced into easily manageable chunks.

“It’s huge,” Ein observed.

“That’s right, son!” a merchant said. “That’s a serpent fish that was caught just this morning! It’s delicious, but it’s expensive, so there aren’t a lot of takers!”

“It’s delicious, then?”

“Delicious? That won’t even begin to describe the taste of it! If I could, I’d present it to the royal family!”

“He’s right,” Lily agreed. “I’ve only had it a few times before, but it’s absolutely delicious.”

“But it don’t last long, y’know?” the merchant said. “It’s not meant to be transported over days, so we’d need to make preparations if we wanna send this to the castle.”

No wonder I’ve never eaten it before. And if that was the case, Ein wasn’t about to let this chance slip by.

“This must be some sort of fate. Could I buy that fish?” Ein asked.

“You serious, son?” the merchant asked. “It’s stupidly expensive.”

The stall owner couldn’t see the dully dressed pair before him to be wealthy. He was actually a touch skeptical of them.

“Then we’ll buy this! Once we leave, payment will arrive!” Lily said.

“H-Huh?” the owner asked.

The fish might have been a little too big to call a souvenir, but it was a worthwhile purchase. Surely, the Knights Guard and the servants would be ecstatic to have a bite of this fish.

Once Ein left, a knight appeared from out of nowhere to immediately buy the serpent fish. The knight told the stall owner that the castle would be footing the bill and fish would be taken to the villa right away. This fishmonger was no fool; he'd put two and two together upon recalling the boy's elegant turn of phrase. However, the knight strongly encouraged the man to keep quiet about it. With a surprised look still on his face, the merchant returned to work.

Ein and Lily had made their way to another stall.

"You travelers must be adventurers," said the stall owner. "Since you've come all the way to Magna, it'd be your loss if you didn't enjoy some shopping on Stall Street!"

"Ah, that's the name of this street?" Ein asked.

"Yep. It's a nickname that we locals use! Want a skewer?"

"Hmm, let me think..."

This stall owner had been grilling a variety of skewered shellfish—seasoned with fish sauce and producing a savory, smoky aroma that wafted in the air. After seeing a sign that read "100 G," Ein realized it was cheaper than he expected.

"We have to eat this," Lily insisted. "Or else, it'd be our loss, right?"

"You're right," Ein said, giving in as Lily paid the man.

"Thanks for your patronage!" the man called. "If you like it, why don't you stop by on your way back? We're open at night too!"

The robed duo parted ways with the stall owner as Ein brought the piping hot skewer to his lips.

"This is...crazy good," Ein said.

"Absolutely crazy... That's really all I could say," Lily replied.

The clam's adductor muscles were fat and juicy while its long mantle was

wonderfully succulent. Ein had five pieces of wonderful shellfish on his skewer. The saltiness of the fish sauce was a pleasant addition to the taste. He took deep breaths of the steam rising from the shellfish and wolfed down the rest of his skewer. The flesh was springy and juicy, not to mention that the mantle was so delightfully chewy. Ein found himself savoring every last bite of his skewered clams.



“The fact I can buy one of these for a mere 100 G is a crime,” Ein said. “I think we should let the knights know about this one.”

“Shall we inspect that stall once more on our way back?” Lily suggested.

“We should. It’s part of my job, so there’s no helping it.”

Just then, another person called out to the pair just as they’d finished eating. “Yoo-hoo! You two in the robes! You can’t be satisfied with some skewers alone!”

“Huh? Us?” Ein asked.

“Yes, you! Clams aren’t enough, are they? You must eat some fish too! Come and see, darling!”

The owner’s stall had a massive grill. Every time the merchant fanned the rising steam towards the pair, the mouthwatering aromas of charcoal and grilling fish wafted into Ein’s nose.

“Our fish are fresher than the ones caught this morning! We only use fish caught at night so they truly are the freshest you can get!”

Who could resist? Ein almost unconsciously opened up his wallet.

“That’ll be 300 G for two!” the merchant said.

Without another word, he bought two servings of fish.

“You can eat everything from its head to its bones! Eat until your heart’s content!” the owner remarked.

And with that, the crown prince was handed fish grilled with salt. The aroma of the seafood, oil, and charcoal tickled his nose. He couldn’t stop himself from drooling this time around. It was so freshly grilled that oil was still popping atop the skin of the fish.

“Hmmm... Hrmmm,” Ein observed.

Underneath the crispy skin was juicy, piping hot, white fleshy goodness. The flavor was light and airy, with combined aromas of oil and charcoal perfectly complementing it.

“Magna’s awesome. Even their salt is different,” Ein remarked.

The generous amounts of coarse salt sprinkled over the white fish ended up cracking under Ein's teeth. He was grateful to know that Magna's cooks really knew how to season their food.

"At 150 G a pop, these are much too dangerous. We must report this back to the king," Ein said.

"You've got quite the mean streak, don't you, Sir Ein?" Lily replied. "His Majesty would want to eat it too."

The only thing Silverd would do was seethe with frustration while drool dripped down his mouth.

"Hey there, travelers! Why don't you visit my stall too?" another merchant asked.

You're on. Ein and Lily had just started making their rounds around Stall Street. After all, he'd only arrived earlier that day.

How many stalls had they visited? They were all so delicious that the prince couldn't fairly judge them against each other. Ein and Lily were now seated on an open bench, gazing at the cityscape.

"We ate so much," Lily said.

"And I'm looking for round two," Ein replied.

"Aye aye, sir! I'll go with you!"

After eating so much, the pair were pretty full. Every time they breathed, they could feel the seafood that they'd eaten permeating their bodies. Satisfaction filled Ein's mind as he surrendered himself to his feelings of laziness, leading the pair to rest for a good while.

"Hmm?" Lily said, standing up. "I received a message, so I'll be back in a moment."

"Can't you just do it here?" Ein asked.

"Well, I wouldn't want anyone to hear me. It'd be quite troublesome if they did. Oh, but my subordinates are on guard all around you, so there's nothing to worry about!"

She left, telling the boy that she'd be back in a while. Now all by his lonesome, Ein continued resting as another robed person sat down beside him. The person next to him looked like they were exhausted.

"I'm a little tired..." the robed person said. Ein couldn't see their face, but it sounded like a woman's voice.

As she spoke to herself, she started rubbing her legs. *Was she walking for quite some time?* Ein wondered. Knowing it was a bit rude, he couldn't help but peer at her.

"I wouldn't want to sleep out on the streets..." she mumbled.

On the streets? Ein wondered if she came all the way to Magna only to be forced to sleep outside.

"Um..." Ein said, feeling compelled to call out to her. "Pardon me, but are you having trouble finding an inn for the night?"

The woman looked a little surprised, but she immediately gathered herself and replied, "Exactly so. It's quite embarrassing for me to admit, but I didn't think this city would be so busy."

"Ha ha, I see. Indeed, it's quite a crowd."

"Are you a traveler?"

"Unfortunately, no. I tend to spend most of my days in the royal capital."

"Are you actually a nobleman, then?"

"Well...not exactly. My rank is a bit troublesome to explain, you see." He felt like royalty was in a different category.

"Then I won't pry any further. That's more convenient for you, isn't it?"

She quickly caught on to his reluctance to divulge and let it slide. Ein thanked her for her understanding as a smile slowly formed on his face.

He chuckled. "Then why don't I provide you with a token of my appreciation? In exchange for your polite manners, of course."

"A man of your station went out of their way to speak with someone such as myself. Perhaps I should be the one thanking you."

“If a merchant decided to charge others for a mere conversation, they’d soon become obsolete.”

Ein had planned on waiting for Lily, but he didn’t want to abandon this robed woman. Lily’s subordinates would surely fill her in later, so Ein resolved to help the robed woman find a place to stay.

“I know of lodging that keeps a spare room, even during busy times like these,” he said. “My aunt had mentioned it to me.”

Ein remembered Katina saying that some inns always had rooms open for aristocrats. This was so that the higher-ranking nobles could be at ease whenever they visited. *It’s probably my fault that everywhere’s closed anyway.* He was sure that there were many in the same boat as this woman. He couldn’t help everyone, but he at least wanted to give a hand to those in arm’s reach.

“We should hurry. I think it’s over there,” Ein said.

It was only then he realized that he wasn’t aware of the robed woman’s budget. *Worst case, I’ll just pay the difference.* If he used the money that he earned from his duties, it wouldn’t be considered immoral in the eyes of his citizens. With that thought in mind, Ein pressed forward.

Ein soon found an inn that was open to aristocrats only, but the innkeeper looked rather reluctant.

“It’s not that I don’t have available rooms, but I’m not sure if I could have them prepared immediately,” the innkeeper said, implying that they didn’t expect mere travelers to be able to afford their accommodations.

The innkeeper phrased their words carefully so as to not anger the robed guests. Ein was pleased to see that they weren’t chased away. As they both looked like travelers, he couldn’t blame the innkeeper if they were shooed at the door.

“Money isn’t an issue. Please,” Ein pleaded.

“Hrm. Hmmm...” the innkeeper groaned, folding their arms in front of them as they looked to be deep in thought.

Ein's final move would be to remove his hood and reveal himself.

"Why don't we discuss the pricing?" the innkeeper finally suggested.

"U-Um, you don't have to go that far..." the robed woman said in a troubled tone.

But if the crown prince backed down now, it'd be way more difficult to get her a room. Just then, a man walked past Ein.

"Owner, I've finished bringing in your stuff, so please excuse me," he said.

The man was carrying boxes that were filled with goods. *I feel like he can't see in front...* Ein thought. And just as he'd expected...

"I-I'm terribly sorry!" the man said, his shoulder bumping into Ein.

The crown prince's hood was pulled back, revealing his face to the wandering eyes of the innkeeper and their other guests.

"S-Sir?" the man muttered.

Everyone knew Ein's face, of course. Both the innkeeper and the man who'd bumped into him couldn't hide the shock on their faces. Their jaws had dropped to the floor. Before the robed woman had the chance to see his face, Ein hastily flipped his hood back on.

"I'm sorry. Can you please guide this person to a room?" Ein requested.

He knew that his identity was known, but there was no going back now.

"O-O-O-Of course! H-Hey, guide our honored guest into a room right away!" the innkeeper shouted.

"Wait, what about the fees?!" the robed woman hastily said before she was guided to her room.

"Here you are... Does this work for you?" the innkeeper said, showing the price list to the woman as they glanced at Ein.

The crown prince had planned on paying anyway, so he took the list and was about to approve payment.

"I'll be fine," the robed woman said, casually coughing up an impressive amount of money. "My time of stay is undetermined for now, but I'll first pay

for three nights.”

Is this woman an aristocrat too? Ein wondered. If so, it was weird that she hadn’t reserved a room earlier. He was truly confused by this woman and how she had paid these exorbitant fees like they were nothing.

“You may pay once you reach your room,” an employee said. “We shall guide you there first.”

“I’m glad that you were able to secure a room,” Ein said. “Hope you get some rest.”

“Th-Thank you so much!” the robed woman said. “Please allow me to repay this debt to you!”

“I didn’t do much. Please don’t be so bothered.”

The robed woman bowed her head several times before she finally ascended the stairs. She soon faded from view, and Ein was happy to be of assistance to the woman. *Now then...* He *was* traveling incognito, so he had to do the bare minimum.

“I’m traveling in secret, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone about my visit,” Ein said with a troubled smile.

The innkeeper and everyone else agreed to his request.

“Of course! Even if my life depends on it, Your Highness!” the innkeeper shouted.

“Y-You don’t have to go that far...” Ein said.

With that, he was about to leave the inn, but was stopped by the innkeeper.

“Please forgive me for my insolence, but may I shake your hand?” the innkeeper requested.

That was an easy request to fulfill.

“Sure. I’m sorry I was so forceful,” Ein replied. He grabbed the innkeeper’s hand with both of his.

The innkeeper looked like they were over the moon with the prince’s small gesture. “I’m never washing my hands again.”

“No, please do wash your hands,” the crown prince replied with a forced laugh as he finally left the inn.

As expected, a smiling Lily awaited him outside.

“You seem to be having fun. Did something good happen?” Ein asked.

“Yep, and I didn’t expect it either,” she replied. “I just saw my adorable former boss. She thinks she can disguise herself with a cheap tool.”

“What? Is there another aristocrat traveling incognito aside from me?”

“Seems like it! She’s in a league of her own, though.”

As Ein heard those words, he smiled just as broadly as Lily before he walked on. Before making his way back to the villa, he picked up a souvenir for his mother. His first incognito trip on the streets of Magna ended as a great success.

After enjoying Magna’s many delicacies with everyone at the villa, Ein kicked back in his bunk and fell asleep. But later in the evening, the prince realized that he was wide awake. There was no reason for him to be so restless; his bed was super comfortable and there were no blaring noises to rouse him.

“I can’t sleep...” he muttered.

He kept tossing and turning in his bed, but he didn’t feel drowsy at all. He got up, took a sip of water, and looked out the window. The water’s surface was illuminated by the sea of stars in the sky. Perhaps some of the fish swimming about glowed every now and then—like the flickering light of a firefly. Despite his voracious curiosity, even Ein wasn’t keen on going down to the ocean at this time of night.

“But I do believe I can head over there...” Ein mumbled, referring to the villa’s sealed basement.

After changing into a new set of clothes, Ein left his room and walked down the villa’s dimly lit corridors.

As he made his way to the basement, Ein ran into the Knights Guard members in charge of guarding the villa’s lower levels. The knights laughed when their

prince said he was headed for the basement. They weren't mocking the crown prince, of course, but they knew that it was par for the course for the curious Ein.

When he opened the door near the pair of staircases, he found a set of stone stairs that led to the basement. Ein descended without hesitation and was greeted by a large door.

"It's like I'm in front of a treasury..." he murmured, thoughts of the White Night's own treasury coming to his mind.

But upon closer inspection of the door's embedded magical tools, an odd sense of déjà vu started to really set in. It was smooth sailing down to the basement, but this door had become an obstacle.

"And this door won't open," Ein said.

Just as stated by Silverd and the kings of old. Ein had a hunch that only the first king was able to open the door, and the boy wasn't confident that he'd be the one to finally pry it open. He was here out of curiosity, and curiosity alone.

"I wonder what's inside... Treasure, maybe?"

He wasn't interested in treasure hunting, but he did wonder what the first king had left behind. He'd learned the truth last year in the Demon Lord's Castle. Just what was Ein's idol up to in this seaside basement? The boy was dying to find out.

But the door remained shut. With no visible keyholes anywhere on it, he had no clue on how to open the passageway. *I guess I should return to my room.* But just when he was about to give up, Ein touched the door one last time.

"Huh?" Ein gasped.

The magical tool started shifting the door to reveal a vertical line that ran down it. A loud click echoed throughout the room.

"Did it just...open?"

But why? Bewildered, Ein pushed the door as it slid out to the side. The basement interior slowly revealed itself, but there wasn't a piece of glittering treasure in sight. It looked like a beautiful library—packed with oodles of full

bookshelves. Ein's attention was soon caught by an open book that lay open upon a large desk in the depths of this library.

"Let's do this."

He didn't know why or how, but the fact of the matter was that the door had opened. The moment he took a step inside, the doors automatically closed behind him. However, the crown prince was less worried about finding a way out and more interested in exploring the first king's forgotten library. He wanted to take a look at the bookshelves, but the mysterious open book had taken priority for the boy.

"Was he in the middle of writing something?"

Upon grasping the book, Ein was shocked at what he started reading.

More species have started to follow them. Our voices fell on deaf ears. They wielded their power as though they were answering my older sister's desires. I wonder what father and mother are up to? Are they trying to stop my sister?

As Ein continued reading, he was sure that this was the first king's diary.

A countless number of my comrades have fallen. What happened to my sister? Is fighting against her the only path forward?

Ein flipped the pages and noticed that a good chunk of them were blank. However, several blank pages later, there were words expressing grief and sorrow jotted down.

I took my sister's life.

The next couple of pages were dedicated to his confession and repentance for his actions. Once that was over, there was more information regarding the red foxes.

When that woman fled, she said, "I'll never forgive you, Jayle." She was referring to me. She never explained why, but she stated that she would never allow me to be happy. I tried to kill her, but she used numerous monsters to bar my path, and I lost her. Other warriors mentioned that they had left from close by and crossed the sea, but it's hard to figure out where they've gone from there. I have a duty to rebuild Ishtarica.

The feelings that were written down were crystal clear. The first king seemed genuinely furious and disheartened by the conclusion of his pursuit.

It's been a year since we've established the new Ishtarica. As of today, I have ended my investigation into the red foxes' whereabouts. I may use this room once more after I abdicate the throne. I'll seal my diary here for future use.

The diary ended here. Once Ein finished reading, he closed his eyes for a few moments. He then nodded and reached out to the books on the shelves.

The villa's guests awoke in an uproar the next morning, a result of Ein's apparent disappearance. One of the knights who'd seen the prince last night informed Dill of the royal's intentions to visit the basement.

"I must investigate before Lady Olivia awakens," Dill muttered as he rushed down towards the basement.

However, the door was closed as usual. Was Ein truly inside? After much thought, Dill decided to violently bang on the door. He knew that this was something the first king had left behind, but his mind was filled with worry for his master. Several seconds later...

"The door?!" he gasped.

It suddenly started to slide open horizontally. From inside, a sleepy-eyed Ein emerged.

"Huh? Dill?" the crown prince asked.

"Sir Ein! Are you all right?!" Dill inquired.

"Y-Yeah. Sorry. I guess I made you all worry."

Once Ein left the hidden library, the doors started to automatically close behind him.

"Of course we were worried!" Dill cried. "A-And the doors!"

"I don't get it myself, but it opened," Ein replied.

"What happened inside?"

Ein struggled to provide an answer. Had he honestly shared his findings with

Dill, he'd be revealing all of the first king's secrets.

"Ah, the first king had left a couple books and some other things behind," Ein confessed. "But I'm not sure if I'm allowed to share my discoveries, so I might consult my grandfather first before I speak further. I'm sorry, but can you keep this basement a secret, even to the Knights Guard?"

"I understand," Dill replied.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't mind, as long as you're safe."

"You're always a huge help. I think I'll rest my eyes for a short while until my inspection."

"I'm unsure what happened inside, but are you saying that you haven't slept at all?"

"Unfortunately. I woke up at night and I've been reading books until a few moments ago."

"Books... I see."

"Can I ask you something?" Ein asked, stopping himself as he ascended the steps and turned around. "Do you know anything about the Curse of Solitude?"

"No, not at all..."

"Got it. Thank you."

Dill was tempted to ask what this curse was, but he managed to suppress his curiosity. Ein had seen it mentioned in the back of the first king's diary. *The red fox leader had a skill called the Curse of Solitude...* Ein thought. The first king had managed to discover this: the red fox chief was a highly intelligent being, one who turned the Demon Lord into a puppet with their skills and intellect.

And so, Arshay had been coerced into going berserk. Ein wasn't sure why exactly he had been able to open those doors. A whole mountain of questions ran through his brain, but he was grateful to have at least a few of them answered. While rubbing his heavy eyes, the crown prince decided that he'd make another trip down to the basement library later.

The inspection served as a commemorative ceremony more than anything else. Nobles gathered around the city square as the inspection kicked off. Given Ein and Olivia's Dryad lineage, the pair decided to plant a tree in commemoration of their visit. Namely, Ein's valiant efforts to save Magna served as the center of the celebration.

"Nothing to report from the Knights Guard."

"Nothing to report from the guards."

As he listened to the knights reporting to Dill, thoughts that he was "overly protected" popped into Ein's mind.

"Very well. Please continue to tend to your duties," Dill replied. He'd started to get used to giving out orders.

He wasn't even twenty yet, but the young knight carried himself with the utmost dignity.

"Martha, Dill's so reliable, isn't he?" Ein said.

"It'd be a problem if he weren't. He's the son of a marshal and the guard to the crown prince," Martha said. Despite her thorny remarks, she couldn't help but smile. "And the same should go for you, Sir Ein."

"Huh? Me?"

"Yes, you. You've truly become splendid, Your Highness. Many servants in the castle are looking forward to your reign."

The maid turned to him as she changed the subject. Upon hearing the conversation, Olivia approached Ein from behind.

"He's my Ein," the princess said. "Of course he'll become splendid."

She wrapped her beloved little boy in her arms.

"I'm well aware of that, Your Highness," Martha said to Olivia. "But please refrain from your usual habits while in the public eye."

"Oh, all right," Olivia said, wistfully releasing her son from her grasp.

She left with Martha in tow. Ein found himself a touch embarrassed by his

mother's clingy disposition as he flashed a sheepish smile. Dill rushed to his side shortly after.

"Thank you for waiting," the knight said. "It seemed like you were all enjoying yourselves."

"We were just talking about how dignified you are, Dill," Ein replied.

"I-I'm honored to hear that, but why the sudden praise?"

"A lot happened."

And so, Ein started to think about the tree that he'd be planting shortly.

Within moments of Ein and Martha's conversation, the ceremony started without a hitch. The aristocrat playing host to the ceremony gave a short speech before he handed out hemp sacks containing seedlings to everyone in attendance. Only aristocrats were present, but none of them had the rank to casually strike up a conversation with the royals. As the Knights Guard were working, a quick chat was out of the question. However, the power gap between royals and the nobles below them was rather visible, especially when the Knights Guard served as the divider between these two groups.

"We're planting a lot more than I thought," Ein observed.

"Indeed, it's on quite the grand scale," Dill agreed. "Magna's aristocrats said that they intended to start things off by celebrating their hero and his saintly mother."

Being called a hero made Ein feel a little awkward. "It's a given that my mother's a saint, but I feel a little touchy about being heralded as a 'hero.'"

"But your actions are worthy of this title."

"I guess it was a bit flashy."

"It really takes me back. The day you broke out of the castle and dragged me along to this city is still fresh in my mind. I was prepared to be executed back then, but now it's a pleasant memory."

"I'm *still* grateful that you helped me."

Back then, Dill had just started to call Ein by his name.

“We forcibly took command of the royal water train and charged into a seaside battle,” Dill reminisced.

“We’ve done some dangerous things, haven’t we?” Ein replied.

“‘Dangerous’ doesn’t even begin to cover it. It was akin to an act of suicide.”

The knight awkwardly shifted in his shoes while pointing his serious gaze in Ein’s direction. The pair silently locked eyes before the prince finally let out a forced laugh.

“I’ll do better next time,” Ein said.

“Please make sure that there won’t be a next time,” Dill requested, vocalizing his heart’s deepest wish.

Once most of the attendees had planted their trees, one of the hosts approached the pair.

“Officer Dill, may I please have a word?” the noble asked.

“Certainly. Is anything the matter?” Dill inquired.

“I would like His Royal Highness the Crown Prince and Her Royal Highness the Second Princess to plant the final tree,” the aristocrat said, pointing to a certain location.

As Dill’s gaze followed, he noticed that the final tree would be planted in a conspicuous location. A large hole had already been dug and a seedling was sitting in a nearby hemp sack. The knight turned to his master.

“I don’t mind,” Ein said. “What about you, mother?”

“I’ll do anything you’d like,” Olivia replied, offering her total support to her son as always.

The two royals followed the aristocrat to plant the final seedling. Once they reached the hole, the Knights Guard immediately surrounded them and glared at the crowd. *I feel like they’re worrying a bit too much...* Ein thought.

“But I guess it can’t be helped,” he muttered.

“Hmmm? Did you say something, dear?” Olivia asked.

“Nothing. Why don’t we plant this seedling?”

The hemp sack was much heavier than the others, but it was of no trouble to Ein. He gently placed it inside of the hole, and the two royals covered it with dirt and sand. Finally, Olivia took a watering can and sprinkled water over the freshly buried tree. The scent of the dirt floated in the air as the soil gradually absorbed the water, turning it into a darker color.

“This looks like some quality soil,” Ein remarked.

“Ah, did you think so too?” Olivia asked.

“Yeah. It just looks like it’s rich with nutrients.”

“I thought so too. Maybe Dryads can pick up on stuff like that.” The princess gazed at the seedling affectionately. “Grow up big and strong,” she gently said.

Ein thought about what he should say too, but he couldn’t find the perfect words and ended up copying his mother.

“Big and strong,” he repeated to the seedling, gently patting the dirt around it.

The tree had been successfully planted.

Just then, a loud gulping sound rang out, as though someone had swallowed something.

“Dill, do you just drink something?” Ein asked.

“I have not,” he replied. “I wonder what that sound was.”

For a split second, Ein was sure that he heard a gulp. While lost in his thoughts, he heard the sound once more. This time, he had a clear idea of where the sound came from. Olivia thought the same as the pair simultaneously looked in the same direction.

“That came from below, didn’t it?” Ein asked.

“Yes... I believe so as well,” Olivia replied.

Confused, the crown prince crouched down and pressed his ear on the ground. He heard the sound of something being swallowed as dirt was being scraped away. *Is there something underground?* The moment Ein stood up in

befuddlement, the ground in front of him started to swell up massively.

“Mother!” he cried, instinctively reaching over to shield Olivia.

“E-Ein?!” Olivia shouted.

The royals leaped away from the hole.

“Are you okay?!” Ein asked his mother.

“I’m fine. You protected me,” she assured him.

“I’m glad to hear that. But what just happened?”

When the crown prince whirled around to confirm the situation, he caught a glimpse of Dill’s face. The young officer wasn’t staring at the royals, but at the seedling that Ein had just planted. He looked flabbergasted by the sight before his eyes, his jaw agape as he was utterly speechless. Standing beside him, Martha had the same look on her face.

“Why do you two look so shocked?” Ein asked. “Wait, where’s the seedling?”

When he turned around, the seedling that he’d planted mere moments ago was gone. For whatever reason, a towering ripple tree stood in its place; one that was much larger than usual. The emerald leaves that sprung from the tree’s splendidly thick trunk looked to be quite healthy. Needless to say, this ripple tree was abnormally huge.

“Um Ein...” Olivia said, approaching her son before nervously clenching his sleeve. “That’s the seedling you just planted.”

Ein was struck with a realization. *Did it grow like that because I asked it to get big and strong?* Perhaps his status as a Dryad and the Demon Lord gave his words a potent effect? It was far too soon for him to reach a conclusion, but Ein felt like he was on to something.

“Wow, even its fruit is gorgeous...” Ein murmured.

“Unfortunately, now’s not the time to be captivated by fruit,” Dill said.

The crown prince agreed. After all, he couldn’t hide his shock either. As he gave a forced smile, he could hear the crowd furiously whispering. Some were wondering what had just occurred, while others asked if the crown prince was

responsible for this. No one seemed to fear him, but they were undoubtedly bewildered. *What do I do?* Ein was unable to think of a solution at the moment.

“Don’t worry,” his mother whispered in his ear. She raised her voice as she turned towards the crowd. “This is a symbol of Crown Prince Ein’s power. The crown prince is a rare specimen among most Dryads, and has been blessed with unique powers. As you can see, he’s grown considerably in the blink of an eye. His special abilities cultivated the seedling’s growth into a magnificent ripple tree.”

While the nobles quietly listened on, Ein found that he was stunned by his mother’s proud posturing.

“The crown prince isn’t simply a hero who defeated the Sea Dragon,” she continued. “He brings nature’s bounty along with him, allowing the first king’s beloved country to spectacularly flourish.”

The crowd remained silent as she flashed them with her trademark smile. A noble was the first to break the silence with a slow clap. Soon after, the entire crowd erupted in praise of Ein.

“To think that our hero brings nature’s blessing along with him! His Highness must surely be the first king reincarnated!”

Olivia’s rousing speech was a hit with a crowd, but only because Ein was already widely popular with the people.

“Goodness...” Martha muttered. “Are you sure you can say something like that, Lady Olivia?”

“Oh?” Olivia asked. “Do you find it to be problematic? It’s true that Ein had just created that tree. And the ripples look so delicious.”

The tree bore not twice, but four times as much fruit as the normal tree. The ripples’ vivid red skin gave off a beautiful luster along with a sweet-and-sour aroma that wafted to the people below. The trunk itself was as impressive as the fruit that grew upon it, easily reaching over ten meters in height. Overall, this beastly tree towering over the city was over thirty meters tall.

Seven to eight times larger than the average tree, this behemoth looked as if it were from a completely different species.

“Since we have the chance, why don’t we take a few ripples home?” Olivia suggested.

“Agreed,” Ein nodded. “They look like they’re delicious. I’d bet they’d be perfect to take with us.”

“Hmmm... I wonder how we can pluck them.”

“I can do that. Dill, could you find a ladder or something of the sort?”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!” the knight replied.

“And perhaps we could also take a bushel for grandfather and the folks back at the castle,” Ein suggested.

The panic on Martha’s face completely dissipated as she put her head in her hand and sighed deeply.

“If they taste good enough, I’d like to plant a tree in the castle,” Ein said before turning to the maid. “Don’t you think that’s a great idea, Martha?”

“Yes, of course,” the maid replied. “I’m sure that will be a fantastic idea.”

As she listened to their casual conversation, Martha felt like she shouldn’t worry so much anymore. Since Ein was the cause of the tree’s rapid growth, there was no further cause for alarm.

“I’m back and I have quite the ladder. I believe you should be able to reach the fruit with this,” Dill said before he noticed his mother’s weary visage. “Huh? Is anything the matter, mother?”

“Oh, it’s nothing at all,” she replied.

Her confused son continued to look on at her as the exhaustion continued creeping up her face.

Chapter Six: Showing Hospitality to a Lady and a Spy

Just as the rather shocking tree ceremony wrapped up, Elena awoke in her lodging. The sunrise peeked through cracks in her room's curtains.

Is it morning already? Elena wondered as her brain slowly kicked into gear. As she thought about last night, she realized that she had been rather lucky. Her room was much nicer than what she had expected, not to mention that her bed was downright luxurious in comparison to the already plush beds that resided within the August Estate. When she realized that her home kingdom had lost not just by size, but even by the quality of beds, she could only laugh.

Elena didn't utter a word, feeling reluctant to hop out of bed. She wasn't ready to wake up just yet. Unable to fight against this feeling, she didn't get her body up and going. But as she lay in bed, she heard the sound of china clattering against each other. Just then, the aroma of tea tickled her nose.

"Tea?" Elena mumbled.

She got up and made her way to the living room. When she opened the door, she encountered someone she thought she'd never see again.

"Oh, good morning! It seems like you've slept well!" a cheery voice greeted her.

Huh? Elena quickly shut the door.

"Huh? What? Wait, wasn't that..." she mumbled to herself, a little worked up.

She hadn't seen them in a while but there was no way that she'd forget that voice. Elena hadn't planned on meeting this person during her mission, but they were now clearly standing in her living room. Elena believed that she'd disguised herself perfectly. Then why was she found out? She couldn't help but wonder when her identity had been exposed. She'd been fast asleep until now, but she still wore that magic earring, just in case.

"Hey, Lady Elena? Isn't it rather rude of you to shut the door on me like that? Even your beloved maid is unable to hide her sadness!" a voice called out.

The voice belonged to Lily. There was no mistaking it.

“Oh, and how do these clothes look? Do they suit me? I feel like they do, but as a maiden, it’s nice to hear words of praise!” Lily exclaimed.

Her questions were so trivial that Elena felt foolish for being so worried. The visiting noble lady found this all to be troublesome and decided to speak with Lily through the door.

“Why are you here, Lily?” Elena asked.

“Huh? We’re in Ishtarica. Of course I’m here,” Lily replied.

“That’s not... You know what I mean, don’t you? How did you see through my disguise?”

“Then let me ask you: did you truly think you could fool my eyes with that cheap disguise? Ishtarica’s got a long history with magical tools. Of course we’d have tools that can cut through your disguise. See?”

Lily pointed to her right eye as Elena peeked through the keyhole to see what her former maid was up to. Lily wore the same uniform as she had in Heim, but Elena was more curious about her actions. The noblewoman was shocked when she noticed Lily remove something from her eye.

“I didn’t think you had something like that in your eye,” Elena remarked.

“Yep. A magical tool artisan thinned the lens from a pair of glasses before polishing it,” Lily replied. “I guess you could classify this as a glasses-type tool that can be applied directly to your eyeball. All of my subordinates and I use them.”

It wasn’t odd for a tool like that to exist. However, Elena had paid a hefty sum of gold to buy her earrings from a trusted adventurer. She had even requested some funds from the kingdom to pay for the tool. Was it just a vast difference in technology? The difference she felt was so great that Elena wasn’t sure if she quite had the words to describe it.

“Besides, I’m the one who asked you questions first!” Lily whined. “Tell me that I look good in this outfit!”

“All right, all right. You look great,” Elena said half-heartedly as she removed

her earrings and tossed them aside.

Quick as a flash, her eyes and hair color returned to normal.

“Heh heh heh!” Lily said proudly. “I thought so myself!”

Elena felt herself stagger as she opened the door in resignation. She was prepared to never return to Heim, but Lily made no attempt to restrain her at all. In fact, the maid spoke cheerfully, as if she were a playing kitten.

“Lookie! I look so cute, don’t I?” Lily said, twirling around as her skirt fluttered about.

She does look cute, but I just wish that she wouldn’t reveal the knives under her clothes, Elena thought.

“You seem to be carrying around quite a few weapons,” Elena observed.

“Do you need one?” Lily asked with a carefree smile. She offered a blade to the lady, but Elena didn’t need it, of course.

“I don’t.”

“Ah, right. You’re not very athletic, are you, Lady Elena.”

Elena took a sharp breath, offended by the words.

“Come on, don’t be so mad,” Lily said. “And the tea will start to get cold, but are you sure you don’t want to take a sip?”

“I will! Goodness!” Elena snapped.

She sank into a sofa and brought the cup of tea to her lips. The tea wasn’t scalding; it was easy to drink and delicious. When Lily worked at the castle in Heim, she’d always served this tea. Now that Elena knew that she’d been fooled that entire time, it was a bitter memory for her.

“So, why are you here, Lily? To capture me, perhaps?” Elena asked.

“Huh?” Lily replied. “Do you want to be caught?”

“You’d be a fool to not catch me here, I’d think.”

“Oh, please. If I wanted to do that, I would’ve sent you down to the royal capital’s dungeon already.”

Even so, Elena couldn't shake her feeling of suspicion. "Then why are you here?"

"I came to give you a tour of the city!" Lily replied, absolutely taking the wind out of Elena's sails.

"A-A tour?"

"That's right! You came to do some research on Ishtarica, didn't you? Then it's best if you have someone to guide you. Didn't you see an enormous ship when you arrived at the port?"

"I did. What about it?"

"Let's go take a look at it!"

Elena froze for a few moments before she managed to ask about the woman's true intentions. "Why are you willing to do that?"

Elena simply couldn't understand. Why would Lily be willing to divulge any information to the enemy?

But Lily didn't answer the question and casually replied, "So, you're not curious, then?"

"Even if I am, you don't have a reason to show it to me."

"Don't worry about the small stuff. The chancellor gave me his permission, so you just need to sit back and enjoy yourself, Lady Elena."

"The chancellor?"

"Yep. His name's Warren Lark. Do you know of him?"

Of course she did. How could Elena not know of Ishtarica's top civil servant, Chancellor Warren Lark? She'd never met him personally, but his brilliance was known far and wide. She hadn't forgotten how easily he had toyed with her kingdom's prince.

"But...I'm glad they took the bait..." Elena whispered under her breath. She was shocked at first, but let out a sigh of relief.

"Huh? Did you say something?" Lily asked.

"Nothing at all. I just want to confirm one last thing. It's not like you'll lop off

my head then, correct?”

“Whoa... You’ve got a terrifying imagination.”

“It’s only natural for me to have my apprehensions. So, am I right?”

“It’s just like you to be so oddly strong-willed at times. I cannot treat you as an honored guest, but the chancellor has told me to show you around as a visitor.”

“I see. Then I suppose I’ll take you up on that kind offer.”

Elena hadn’t turned defiant. Lily tried to probe the noblewoman’s innermost thoughts as she stood before her. Just why did Elena appear to be so laid-back? The sight of a familiar face clearly hadn’t put the lady at ease. There was a solid chance that Elena felt secure due to her relation to Krone and the fact that she was on good terms with Crown Prince Ein. Still, she had an inexplicable aura of composure. Lily thought back to her previous correspondence with the chancellor.

“During your meetings, you should be the most aware of Lady Elena,” Warren had told her the night prior.

“Hey, Lady Elena,” Lily said. “You’re hiding something from me, aren’t you?”

“If I was planning on doing something all by myself, then perhaps I do have a secret or two,” Elena replied.

Lily had neither over nor underestimated Elena. The noblewoman was intelligent. If Heim were to present any troublesome opponents, she would surely be at the top of that list. But what could Elena possibly do by herself?

“But you could do something if you’re working with someone,” Lily replied.

“You can think what you like, but that means that I’d be allied with an Ishtarican or an adventurer,” Elena replied.

“Or someone from Euro, perhaps.”

“Don’t be silly. It could certainly be anyone I’ve mentioned, but just how would I ally with them?”

“Hmmm... By presenting them with an amazing offer?”

Elena chuckled. “You’re saying that I could present them with something that makes it worth opposing you?”

Her words implied that such a thing was simply unrealistic. Lily made an exaggerated frown as she furrowed her brows.

“Ugh!” Lily finally said. “See, this is why you’re troublesome, Lady Elena! And you’re so good with your words!”

Elena chuckled. “I’m honored to receive such high praise from you.”

“I’m not praising you! And that’s why I told the chancellor that we should just bring you to Kingsland and have you live in the castle!”

“And? What did he say to that?”

“He said, ‘If that’s what Lady Elena desires.’”

In the end, it was clear that the Ishtarican had no intentions of capturing her. Still, Elena couldn’t quite understand. Judging from Lily’s attitude, it wasn’t as though Warren had his guard down. He’d judged that it was more beneficial to have Elena roam around freely than to lock her up, even if the noblewoman was unable to grasp his true intentions.

“You’ve got a choice, Lady Elena,” Lily said. “You can live here in Ishtarica or return home on one of your own ships. Much better than that cattle carrier you came in on.”

“C-Cattle carrier...”

“It’s absurd to cross the ocean on a rickety boat that’s built for livestock!”

“I’m not sure what to say, but it seems like I’ll be able to enjoy an elegant ride home.”

Lily sighed. “You’re really stubborn, aren’t you? You should just quietly live here with us.” Unlike her usual bright demeanor, she frowned while simultaneously looking bored.

“I’m sorry,” Elena said. “Despite everything that’s happened, Heim’s still my home.”

Her reply hadn’t changed one bit.

Lily and Elena left the lodge before making their way to the nearest station. After riding the water train past a few stations, the pair stepped off at the closest station to the shipyard.

“Lily,” Elena started.

“Yes?” Lily asked.

“How much money does this cost?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. It’s my treat.”

Lily’s castle armband fluttered about as she removed a train ticket from her pockets and handed it to Elena.

“240 G?” Elena asked.

“I *am* paid very well, so this is nothing to me.”

“How could a vehicle that swift be so cheap?”

“How else can commoners get around? The fare is the same for both criminals and even a certain skirt-chasing prince.”

Lily was alluding to Tigger, but Elena didn’t react.

There weren’t many commoners milling about near the shipyard. Only shipbuilders, knights, and officers bound for the military port were around. Elena started glancing around.

“Since I have the opportunity, I suppose I should get to know who I’m up against,” she said.

“Please! Do so to your heart’s content!” Lily replied. “Look around as much as you like.”

As she walked at Lily’s side, Elena allowed nothing to slide past her gaze. At first, she was surprised by the shipyard’s sheer scale. Her attention was quickly drawn to the shipyard’s location next to the port and numerous nearby factories. Some of these facilities were for processing sea crystals while others were home to naval artillery. Everything Elena saw blew Heim’s technology out of the water in every way possible. Ishtarica’s might had dropped any concept

of “common sense” she had completely on her head. She didn’t turn pale, but her eyes narrowed.

“Are you feeling unwell?” Lily asked.

“You don’t know why I look this way?” Elena retorted.

“I do, of course. And that’s why I’ve told you to forget about Heim, my lady.”

The pair pressed on. They set foot into a corner of the shipyard that housed a boat that hadn’t set sail just yet. This vessel looked slightly different when compared to its neighboring warships. As Elena took in the view, Lily spoke to one of the employees.

“Excuse me,” she said.

“Yes?” the employee replied, glancing at Lily’s armband. “Do you need anything?”

“How powerful is this warship against enemies?”

“Against monsters or people?”

“Hmmm... Well, how about a port city, for example?”

The employee quickly caught on. They’d gathered that Lily would like to know how the ship fared against a certain adversary.

“If we were to presume that this port city is Roundheart, it would be about this long to take it out with two of these boats,” the employee said, raising two of their fingers.

“I see...” Lily said.

Elena assumed that it would take them two whole days to decimate Roundheart. However, she soon learned that reality wouldn’t be so forgiving.

“Two ships in twenty minutes... That sounds about right,” Lily mused.

“Twenty?!” Elena spluttered. “Th-That can’t be possible...”

“Ah, but it is,” the employee answered. “That city is virtually defenseless from seabound attackers.”

“We’d be shooting at a city that has no hopes of fighting back, so that would

make sense,” Lily added.

The employee returned to work after Lily thanked them. Elena was frozen solid—Ishtarica’s military might surpassed anything she could have ever imagined.

“The firepower of these newly built warships will be used against our enemy nation,” Lily explained, her face taking a serious expression as she turned to Elena. “Much of our fleet was destroyed during our battle with the Sea Dragon. Naturally, we’d be using the latest technology available to replenish our armada. These vessels would be far more efficient than our older ships.”

“I see...” Elena said.

“Lady Elena, your nation has already been cornered. From my few years living in Heim, I know that a single Ishtarican ship would be a formidable opponent. We already have a few warships of this caliber docked at the royal capital...”

“So, you’re implying that we have absolutely no chance of winning?”

“Are you angry? And just what will you do with that anger?”

Lily was unusually aggressive today; she wanted Elena to abandon the idea of victory and Heim altogether. She hoped that Elena would finally leave Heim and live in Ishtarica, but the noblewoman refused to let her own convictions waver. She could never answer Lily’s wishes.

“I agree that we’re lacking in a few areas,” Elena admitted.

“In all sorts of areas, might I add,” Lily replied. “In fact, in what area do you find yourself superior to us? Is it size? Population? Culture? Or technology, perhaps?”

“We’ve got a long history. It allows us to be supreme throughout our continent.”

“But we’ve got a family that unified the entire continent.”

The ladies glared daggers at each other, neither keen on the idea of backing down. As a perilous air surrounded them, the first to give up was Lily.

“Oh, Lady Elena... I’ve always thought this, but aren’t you a bit *too* stubborn?” she asked.

“If you know that much, why don’t you give up? How long were you my subordinate for?” Elena replied.

“I guess I can say this now, but I think you work a bit too much. You even made a habit of stealing some of my sleep.”

“And you’ve been a big help, thank you. Just between you and me, my new subordinate doesn’t hold a candle to you. No good at all.”

So, why don’t you return to my side? Elena seemed to imply, turning the tables to invite Lily. The Ishtarican stared back blankly at the surprising offer, but her lips slowly curled up to form a smile. For the first time since their reunion, she wore a genuine, dazzling smile on her face.

“Is it lonely without me?” Lily asked.

“In terms of work, I suppose so. You used to be my excellent subordinate, though you seem a bit more lax now,” Elena said before she wistfully added, “If we were born in the same nation, I feel like I could’ve had an excellent relationship with you.”

If only Elena had been born in Ishtarica. If only Lily had been born in Heim. The Heim noblewoman favored Lily so much that these what-ifs flashed across her mind.

“Speaking of, yesterday was quite troublesome for me,” Elena said.

“Troublesome? How so?” Lily asked.

“The crowd. Is this city always this busy?”

“Ah... Well, the royal family, including the second princess, are actually visiting at the moment.”

To be precise, the crown prince was there too, but Lily purposefully kept that fact hidden.

“Lady Olivia is in this city right now?” Elena asked.

“Needless to say, you aren’t allowed to meet her,” Lily warned.

“I know that. I was just thinking about the old days.”

“Well, in any case, that’s the reason for the large crowd. There are plenty of

aristocrats visiting as well, so it's busier than ever."

"Ah, no wonder... Perhaps that's why I ran into him yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

Lily's good at covert operations. Maybe she knows something about it. Elena thought back to the robed man who helped her find a place to stay. She asked if Lily knew anything about him.

"I believe he's a noble or from a wealthy family," Elena said. "The people of the inn also seemed surprised, so I'm sure he's someone famous."

"Ah, right... Perhaps so," Lily replied.

"If you know anything about him, Lily, I'd like to thank him personally."

"Since I wasn't able to get a look at his face, it might be difficult to search for him."

This was the only excuse she could think of. As Lily looked away, her cheeks twitched upon hearing a few other factoids.

"But he had beautiful hair. It looked healthy and had a beautiful color like Lady Olivia's."

"L-Lady Elena, why don't we stop for some lunch?"

"What's with the sudden invitation? Were you always such a glutton?"

It wasn't a good idea to inform Elena that he was the very same boy her daughter had fallen for. Lily felt like she was holding on to a troublesome secret. In any case, she had a job to do. She continued to give Elena a tour while laughing every time a new wave of shock ran across the noblewoman's face.

Once they were together, the days just flew by for the pair. On her first day, Elena had seen the shipyard and the military port. It was only natural for the noblewoman to be dumbfounded when she discovered that Ishtarica's raw power far surpassed Heim's. On her second day, Lily gave her a tour of a few facilities in Magna. After the sun set and Elena had returned to her lodging, she immediately jotted down everything she'd learned, creating a healthy bundle of

documents. She also asked about her daughter, Krone.

Elena wondered how her daughter and father-in-law were getting along, but she'd only been told that they'd been living happily. It was a pity that she wasn't able to hear a thing about Krone's day-to-day life.

Elena sighed as she gazed at the calm sea and its gentle waves. She'd soon be heading home for Heim via Euro. So this time, she wouldn't be disembarking in Rockdam or Port Roundheart. But unlike the ship she'd sailed out in, Elena would be returning on a magnificent vessel.

"I'm sure it'd be a lovely voyage back," she said, gazing at the ship from the pier.

The vessel was smaller than the average warship, but as Elena was only familiar with Heim's ships, it was enormous regardless.

"Lady Elena! Are you ready?" Lily called. She'd walked ahead and inspected the ship.

"I am!" Elena replied, quickly approaching the Ishtarican.

The ship's steam whistle let out a shrill cry—a signal that the boat was about to depart. The blaring whistle was incredibly loud, as if it were trying to dwarf the massive ship it was attached to.

"Fun fact, our ships have two types of whistles," Lily said, putting her face close to Elena. "They sound completely different. One of them signals a departure."

"And the other?" Elena asked.

"A battle cry when we're going to war." Lily gave a mischievous giggle, but Elena didn't bat an eye.

"I'm glad it isn't the latter," the noblewoman said wearily.

"Aw, you're no fun. Oh, and your luggage has already been carried into your room!"

"Thank you. Despite our current standing as enemies, you've truly taken good care of me."

“If possible, I didn’t want us to be enemies.”

“Personally, I thought I’d gotten along quite well with you.”

“Argh! But it’s meaningless if you’re not completely on our side!” Elena couldn’t bring herself to nod in agreement before Lily posed a question. “So, are you going to inform the prince of everything you’ve learned here?”

“Of course,” Elena replied. “If I don’t, I’ll be punished.”

“Well, I guess so...”

“What? You look displeased.”

Elena had trouble reading Lily’s face, even if she was right in front of her. The Ishtarican appeared to be feeling a mix of inexplicable sadness and dissatisfaction.

“Nothing. It’s just that I’m personally disappointed that everything has gone according to plan,” Lily answered.

According to plan? Elena wondered. She would usually question a phrase such as this, but she pretended as if she didn’t hear it this time.

“It’s time for you to go,” Lily said. “I hope you haven’t forgotten anything.”

“You confirmed it for me yourself. I’m quite fine,” Elena replied.

“Heh heh heh. I’m glad to hear it.”

As the moment of departure was drawing near, a brief silence fell between the pair. Elena was reluctant to leave, but she couldn’t remain in Ishtarica forever.

“Well...” Elena said, as she started walking ahead. “I’m glad I was able to see you once more. From the bottom of my heart...I truly wish that we’ll meet again.”

With that, she stepped onto the ramp.

“Lady Elena,” Lily said. “Once you leave that ship, we’ll be enemies. Cut-and-dried. If given the order, I will slit your throat.”

She was only stating the obvious. For Elena’s part, she couldn’t complain; after all, she was about to return home unscathed.

“So, this ship and its ramp will act as a border, then?” Elena asked.

“That’s right.”

Lily had hoped that she might’ve been able to stop Elena at the last moment.

“But it’s too late for that,” Elena finally said, pressing forward. “Thank you for letting me go until now.”

“You truly are stubborn, until the very end,” Lily coolly remarked. “I’m happy to hear that you’ve seemed to enjoy your visit to Ishtarica. Though I am speaking on behalf of Chancellor Warren Lark, I guarantee that you shall have a comfortable return voyage.”

“Thank you very much.”

Elena stepped onto the ship. Soon after, the vessel’s ropes were untied from the pier and it set sail.

Once Elena had disappeared from her line of sight, Lily monotonically mumbled to herself, “I wished she would’ve given up on them.”

She then recalled Warren’s train of thought from her initial report on Elena’s arrival.

“I haven’t received anything, but we may be playing host to Lady Elena of Heim,” Warren had said.

“P-Pardon?” Lily has asked. She didn’t know what to expect, but she was baffled by what she heard.

“If that’s the case, we must welcome her warmly. We can’t share all of our secrets with her, but perhaps we can show her a few ships and give her a tour of our many facilities.” Warren had spoken without hesitation, as though he’d been expecting Elena’s visit for a while now. “Truthfully, I’d like to restrain her as she is an authority figure in Heim. But seeing as she is Lady Krone’s mother, we should avoid any use of force.”

“That’s the excuse you’ll be using, I take it?” Lily asked.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. However, I shall leave you to show her around, Lily. Don’t take your eyes off her.”

Needless to say, Warren had some plans of his own.

Lily looked weary as her mind shifted from thinking about Elena to watching her ship sailing away.

“If Lady Elena weren’t to report what she’d discovered on the ship, I’m sure she’d be labeled as a rebel,” Lily muttered. “So, I’m sure you’ll report back without lying.”

And that wasn’t all. Since the noblewoman was now aware of Ishtarica’s might, she would definitely advise Heim to end this argument on amicable terms.

“But if she does that, I feel like that prince would become irate and treat her coldly.”

Elena was guaranteed to join them in the meeting, but Tiggie would undoubtedly be annoyed by it. According to Warren, Elena was his only troublesome opponent. Naturally, he wanted her to be shunned by the prince. Indeed, the chancellor wasn’t one to be trifled with and acted with a cunning scheme in mind. Even so, Lily couldn’t understand one thing.

“If he was so wary of Lady Elena, I feel like capturing her would still be the best course of action.”

Did he choose a method that didn’t provoke Heim? Or did he have a different plan that justified these actions?

“Good grief... I don’t understand what the chancellor’s thinking at all.”

Lily had no idea what thoughts ran through his mind, but she was certain that he had something up his sleeve.

“Lady Elena, you’ve only caught a glimpse of a small corner of Ishtarica. The next time we meet, I pray that you still have your head.”

After a few moments, Lily melted away into the darkness of Magna’s nighttime streets.

“I’m guessing that that’s what’s on her mind,” Elena said.

Now sitting in a guest room, the noblewoman had come to the same conclusion as Lily. Her thoughts wandered to Warren, who must've been miles away somewhere in the royal capital.

"I've been severely underestimated, haven't I?" Elena muttered. "Does he truly think that he can toy with me so easily?"

She'd expected all of this, of course. Elena had been cooking up a scheme of her own for quite a while now.

"In terms of raw strength, it's clear that our kingdom doesn't hold a candle to them. In fact, I'm not sure if anyone can...but that doesn't mean that I will lose, now does it?"

She spoke firmly and without hesitation. "I'm far from a frail young thing, Chancellor Lark."

Chapter Seven: Her Family Name

It'd been a few days since the ripple tree incident. With Dill and the Knights Guard in tow, Ein found himself at a certain facility close to the port.

"The parts manufactured here are of such fine quality, they could be transported to Ist's Tower of Wisdom," a guide said, explaining the facility in great detail as Ein looked to the employees hurriedly working around him.

As they worked with the tiniest parts imaginable, these people wore loupes as they manipulated these parts with their hands. These incredibly dexterous artisans were crafting parts so small that one would need to squint their eyes to get a good look at them.

"Dill, look. They're amazing," Ein said.

"They're truly skilled craftsmen, using a completely different skill set from that of Sir Mouton's blacksmithing," Dill replied, walking alongside the crown prince.

"This division received a large endowment courtesy of the last king. Thanks to his generous funding, we were able to create the ideal environment for artisans to thrive in," the guide added.

That's good to know, Ein thought. Now that he knew that his great-grandfather had left this facility behind for future generations, the crown prince was determined to live up to that himself.

"I still have much to learn," Ein said. "Do merchants come here to purchase these wares?"

"Exactly as you say, Your Highness," the guide answered. "Merchants from all over the continent visit us to make their purchases, and even the occasional researcher from Ist has dropped by."

"Huh... That sounds amazing. Any researcher who comes here for themselves must be an expert in their field."

“Quite so. In fact, there’s been a group of them here for the past few days.”

Speak of the devil, I guess. The guide noticed a certain researcher nearby and motioned towards him.

“We’ve actually got a famous researcher here with us,” the guide told Ein.
“Over there, Your Highness.”

Who could it be? As Ein followed the guide’s direction, he saw a familiar figure.

“P-Professor Oz?!” he gasped.

Oz was walking alongside a few of his colleagues. Dressed in a white lab coat, the professor was meticulously going through his shopping list.

“Ah, do you know him?” the guide asked.

“Y-Yeah... I’ve met him before,” Ein replied.

“Is that so? They’ll be leaving for Ist tomorrow evening.”

Ein felt like this must’ve been some kind of fate. “Maybe I’ll go greet him.”

Dill nodded in agreement. With that, the crown prince walked towards Oz.

It was early in the afternoon and Ein was off in a peculiar corner by the port. He stood in a lavish salon meant to be used by aristocrats and those well-off enough to own a ship of their own. At the cost of a pretty penny, Ein had reserved the entirety of this luxurious salon just for this meeting.

“Please, have a seat, Professor Oz,” he offered, sitting down on a sofa.

“Ah, I’m truly honored. Thank you,” Oz replied as he took a seat across from Ein.

In lieu of a servant, Dill prepared cups of tea for his prince and the professor. Afterwards, the knight took his place behind Ein.

“It’s been a while,” Ein said.

“It really has. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” Oz started. “A-Ah, and my deepest apologies for the hubbub in Barth last year. I’m terribly sorry that I had

to decline your generous invitation. I assure you it wasn't meant to be a boorish act on my part."

"I-It's not a problem at all! I was truly grateful for your letter!"

"Hearing your kind words eases my guilt. And I've heard rumors, but it looks like you've truly had quite the growth spurt, Your Highness. You're looking much more dignified these days."

From a researcher's standpoint, Ein's rapid growth was certainly intriguing. Oz ensured that he showed no discourtesy to the crown prince, but he continued to intently observe the young man's growing body.

Ein wasn't keen on this important meeting ending with only a bit of small talk to show for it. He sat up straight and cleared his throat.

"You're here to do a little parts shopping, correct?" he asked.

"That's right," Oz replied. "I'd previously spoken with Magna's artisans regarding the procurement of materials critical in the construction of a vital piece of research equipment. I'm here to follow up on that request."

"You came all this way to see those parts for yourself?"

"Ha ha ha, I hear that kind of reaction quite often. Perhaps that's one of my many quirks. But if I can't see the parts right in front of me, I tend to be a touch on edge, unfortunately." The professor appeared to be slightly embarrassed.

"I think that's a splendid way of thinking."

"Ha ha, if I was lucky enough to have a chance encounter with you, Your Highness, I suppose I'm glad I came here."

"Are you always this engrossed in your research?"

"Now that you mention it, I think that's the case. I often profit as a result of integrating my hobbies into my work."

"Hobbies... I see."

It was clear that researching the unknown was exhilarating for the professor. These thoughts had passed Ein's mind before, but to Oz, research was his *joie de vivre*.

“Speaking of hobbies, there is something that I’ve been enjoying in secret,” Oz said.

“‘In secret,’ you say? That’s curious,” Ein replied.

“It’s nothing too impressive. I just enjoy looking into old tales and legends.”

“I see... I’m not too well-versed in ancient tales, so I’m a little interested to hear about them.”

“Then since we have the opportunity, may I share one of them with you?”

With plenty of time to spare, Ein had no reason to refuse the professor’s offer nor did he simply agree out of politeness. In fact, he was legitimately interested in this very topic. And so, the prince smiled and firmly nodded, waiting to hear Oz’s story.

“Long, long ago...” Oz started.

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 researcher loved his father—so much so that he was tempted to steal his father away from his mother.

The spearman loved to act—blending into stories and assuming the roles of their characters.

The strategist loved to read—spending all hours of the night reading alongside his childhood friend, a little girl.

The chief traveled the world with her trio of subordinates until she discovered a nation filled to the brim with villains. She made the bold decision to travel to this country on a quest to vanquish these ne’er-do-wells.

Following an arduous campaign, the chief was victorious. She had allied herself with many species on her journey to conquer evil. However, her task was far from finished. She hypothesized that other nations might have been overrun with these monsters, choosing to do it all again elsewhere. She hoped

that her subordinates would've accompanied her, but two of them had decided to bid farewell to the chief and to remain where they were—the researcher and the strategist.

The passionate researcher had chosen to stay as his father had done the same.

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.

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.

And so, the chief crossed the sea while the passionate researcher continued to be engrossed in his projects. The man who'd fallen for the queen chose to devote his life to her country so he could support her. He remained by her side in her final moments and was there when she passed. He continued to stay within that nation after her burial, watching over its future to this very day.

The story wasn't long, but Ein felt quite emotional upon hearing it. There weren't any morals or satisfying endings, but for some reason, he felt the tale had struck a chord in his heart. He was so absorbed by the story that he'd forgotten to blink.

"Thank you for listening," Oz finished.

"It's a tale that really sticks with you," Ein said. "Unlike the popular fairy tales, there doesn't seem to be a happy ending or a moral, but it was still very interesting."

Oz laughed. "There are all sorts of legends, after all. Ah..." He glanced at the clock and gave an apologetic expression. "I'm terribly sorry. I suppose time flies when you're having so much fun."

"You mean..."

"Yes, I'm afraid I must return to my lodging."

“I...see.” Ein gazed at the ground reluctantly, but he soon stood up and expressed his joy. “I’m so glad I was able to meet with you today. I’m looking forward to the next time we can meet.”

“I am as well. I’m truly honored to be given some of your time today. I shall be returning to my diligent research so that I may meet you once more, Your Highness.”

They exchanged a firm handshake.

“I shall see you out,” Ein said.

“N-No, you mustn’t! There’s no need for you to do such a thing, Your Highness!” Oz hastily replied.

“But...”

“Your feelings alone are enough to make me happy.” He quickly headed for the door. “Until we meet again, Your Highness.”

He deeply bowed before finally leaving Ein’s side. The prince remained standing there as he watched the professor leave, and sat back down before bringing his remaining tea to his lips. He closed his eyes, thinking about that story. *I wonder why...* Why was this story practically seared into his brain? Why was he unable to let it go?

Ein couldn’t find an explanation, remaining silent for a short while after he finished his tea.

That night, Ein was finishing up work in his bedroom. He remembered something that he’d forgotten to mention.

“I think I’ve forgotten one thing too many...” he said.

This was no coincidence. Ein had been thinking about this from the moment he encountered Oz and the topic of Barth came up.

“Well then...” Ein said, rising from his seat.

He stepped away from his desk and walked past his bedroom.

“Ah, Sir Ein,” Martha said. “Is anything the matter?”

She'd just stepped out of Olivia's room and was carrying a tray of empty tea supplies. It seemed like Olivia was still awake.

"I wanted to ask mother about something. Is she still awake?" Ein asked.

"She is," Martha nodded. "I believe she hasn't gone to bed yet."

"Great. Then I think I'll—"

"Ah, and there's something I'd like to tell you. Just a few moments ago, we received a message from the royal capital."

"To me?"

"Quite so. Lady Krone and Dame Chris will be arriving the morning after tomorrow."

"Did they recover?"

"It seems to be that way."

Ein smiled in relief. It'd been a while since he'd been able to see them and hear their voices. It hadn't even been a month since they had fallen ill, but Ein felt so lonely that it was like he hadn't seen the pair in years. He eagerly awaited their arrival with anticipation dancing in his heart.

"I'm looking forward to it," he said.

"As am I. But please take care not to fall ill yourself due to all the excitement," Martha said jokingly as she smiled.

"I'll be fine," Ein laughed as he left her side.

He walked towards his mother's room. Martha had said that Olivia was awake, but he wanted to be extra sure.

"Mother, are you still awake?" he called.

"I am. You may come in," Olivia said, immediately replying from within her room.

Ein entered the room to find his mother in her often-worn, revealing negligee. He did his best to preserve her modesty as he walked to her.

"Whatever is the matter?" Olivia inquired. "Are you having trouble sleeping?"

Would you like to snuggle up next to me? There's always a spot for you in my bed."

"I'll consider it if the situation ever presents an opportunity to warrant it," Ein replied. "I actually came to ask you a question."

He wanted to discuss the tombstone that he'd seen at the Demon Lord's castle.

"Chris's surname has quite a bit of history to it, right?" he asked.

Such a sudden question would only cause confusion. Olivia stared back blankly for a few moments, as he'd expected.

"It's lonely talking to you while you're standing so far away. Why don't you join me on the sofa?" she asked.

"You're right," Ein replied.

He took his mother's invitation and he walked on over. But she wasn't having it when he tried to sit across from her, so he ended up sitting right next to her.

"I didn't expect to hear that. You caught me off guard," she said.

"Er, um, I was just a bit curious about it," Ein confessed.

"You did nothing wrong. But I don't know much, so I might not have the answer you're looking for."

"I don't mind! Any bit helps!"

The princess put her hand against her lips. Coupled with her outfit, her provocative mannerisms were alluring. She was only thinking, and yet she looked so breathtakingly beautiful.

"She's not an aristocrat among the Elves..." Olivia said. "Chris said that she has used her family name since the old days."

Since the old days... I see. Ein was curious to know how long ago this was.

"So, you only know it's an old surname?" he asked.

"I suppose so... Even Chris only knew to that extent," Olivia answered.

"Does she perhaps have a branch family or the like?"

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never heard anything like that. Ah, but do I know quite a few embarrassing secrets and snafus from Chris’s past.”

I’m dying to find out. Ein didn’t dare to say it, but he wanted to know all the gory details behind Chris’s most cringeworthy moments. What exactly was she hiding? But he mustered everything he had to suppress the urge to ask.

“The only other thing I know about Chris is her lineage,” the princess said. “She’s not a pure-blooded Elf.”

“What?”

“I’ve heard that she has a little bit of Pixie in her. So, I’d say she has the blood of Elves and Pixies flowing through her veins. She came to me one day about this, smiling and apparently overjoyed to have learned more about her lineage.”

Ein could easily envision Chris’s beaming smile from the news, but that wasn’t on his mind right now. The puzzle pieces had started coming together so neatly that it gave him a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“I-I see. I had no idea...” Ein said, unable to muster up the courage to ask any more questions.

I’ll go to Chris with my other questions when she gets here. Doesn’t sound like she knows much, but I’ll keep my hopes up.

“I’m sorry to suddenly barge in,” Ein apologized.

“Don’t be,” Olivia replied. “I’m fine. And as I’ve said before, there’s always a spot for you here, Ein.”

Hearing his mother’s wholehearted support tempted Ein to act spoiled, and he shifted around awkwardly.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to hold myself back if I gave in, so I’ll endure it for now,” he said.

“When you say that, it makes me want to be even more forceful with you.”

“That’s not what I mean!”

If Olivia came on more strongly, he was sure that he’d give in to her every demand. She was simply that tolerant and loving a mother.

Per Martha's words, Chris and Krone arrived the morning after next. As soon as they saw Ein, the pair burst into a series of profuse apologies. They both saw it as unacceptable for the prince's advisor and personal knight to have fallen ill at the same time. While they bowed their heads, no one was really to blame in this situation.

"Don't worry. I'm just glad you two are safe," Ein replied before adding, "We shouldn't have to talk out here. Let's go inside."

Ein headed to the villa's living room with Krone and Chris following right behind him.

The three were engaged in a pleasant conversation as though they were trying to make up for lost time. After each of the ladies gave their reports, the trio forgot about the time as they continued to chatter. But just then, Krone seemed to realize something.

"Is something wrong?" Ein asked.

"The fruit that Chris and I ate must be..." she started.

"Oh, you mean the large ripple?"

"I heard you made the tree larger, Ein. I'm only confused by this. What actually happened?"

"I can't quite explain it any other way... So, both of you ate it?"

"We did!" Chris said. "It was delicious and rejuvenated our energy in no time!"

However, Ein really didn't have anything more to add. All he'd done was call out to the seedling, nothing special. Becoming a Demon Lord might have been related to the tree's growth, but he couldn't tell them that.

"I just talked to it, and it grew rapidly," Ein confessed.

"Well...I shouldn't be surprised by what you do," Krone said with resignation.

"I'm not sure if I'm happy to hear you use that reasoning."

She giggled. "It's not a problem. Queen Lalalua ate one as well and said it was

delicious.”

Then I guess that's fine, Ein thought, smiling.

“I’ve brought more tea,” Martha said, walking through the living room door with a fresh tray of goodies.

And in seconds, the maid had expertly poured another round of tea.

“It seems like there’s been quite a bit going on in the royal capital too, Martha,” Ein said.

“I’ve heard,” Martha replied. “Lady Katima told me all about it.”

“Aunt Katima did?”

Just then, Chris turned away. Upon closer inspection, she looked rather awkward as she blinked rapidly, and was even attempting to whistle. Her clumsy whistling didn’t make a sound.

“I won’t mention names, but a certain knight tried to escape the castle, saying, ‘I’m fine now! I’ll head to Magna right this instant!’” Martha said.

The light faded from Chris’s eyes as her cheeks started to turn pink. She set her cup of tea down and covered her cheeks with her hands, hiding her face. She fell onto the sofa, trying to bury her face out of sight.



“And what happened?” Ein asked.

“She was thrown back into her room, of course,” Martha replied. “But that’s just the beginning.”

Chris started flailing her legs as though she were trying to fight back.

Martha relentlessly continued, “She said that she wanted to get some fresh air and opened a window, only to try to jump out of it. She hid underneath her bed to try to fool the guards on patrol as well. Lady Katima’s sharp advice put a stop to all of these attempts.”

“I thought they caught on quickly!” Chris gasped. “Lady Katima was advising them?!”

You can’t react now...

Finally raising her head from out of the pillows, Chris was beet red out of embarrassment.

“Chris, Martha didn’t mention any names yet...” Ein called out gently.

“Er, I also heard about the fuss, you see!” Chris replied quickly.

“In any case, Chri—ahem, the fugitive who had run out of excuses finally came up with one last reason,” Martha said. Ein was curious to hear about Chris’s valiant efforts, but the next thing Martha said took the wind out of his sails. “She said, ‘I forgot something at Magna! I must go fetch it, so please don’t mind me!’”

Silence had fallen over the living room and Chris was burying her face in the sofa’s pillows once again. Everyone was at a loss for words as they exchanged glances. It seemed even Krone hadn’t heard the news before, finding herself unable to offer the knight any support. She gave a troubled smile as she struggled to find the right words. Ein stood up and sat next to Chris, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I like to judge people by their efforts,” he said. “So, um, thank you.”

“They finally used Lady Katima’s special numbing potion,” Martha finished. “It doesn’t negatively affect one’s body and is tasteless, so it was mixed into her food. It kept her in place for once.”

“N-No wonder my body felt so heavy...” the fugitive finally confessed. “If only I was more resistant to that.”

“Lady Katima had claimed, ‘It could down even a wyvern mew know!’”

“Ah, but medicine, potions, and the like aren’t very effective on me. Elves are highly resistant to such drugs.”

This was a convenient segue for Ein. While he pitied Chris for her intense embarrassment, the recent conversation with his mother came to his mind.

“This might be a bit sudden, but I’ve got a question for you, Chris,” Ein started. “Has your family’s name, Wernstein, been carried on since ancient times?”

“H-Huh? My family’s name?” Chris asked, confused by the intentions behind his question. But as her prince had posed it, she was determined to give an answer. “I’m not too knowledgeable about it myself, but it’s an old household name for sure. It’s not of aristocratic origin or anything, but...”

“But?”

“The surname Wernstein had been used in the past by ancient Pixies.”

“So, if we try searching, will we find a Pixie with this family name?”

“Unfortunately, that might be quite difficult. I’ve heard that Pixies usually don’t have names for their households.”

“I-I see...” Ein replied dryly.

As he listened to Chris’s words, he was focused on the magic stone inside of his body. He thought about Misty and Ramza in the spiritual realm, praying to them for an answer. But no reply came, and Ein was forced to thoroughly consider his next steps.

Late that night, Krone approached Ein while he was in the middle of some busywork. He looked at her with curious eyes before she passed him a letter from Warren.

“Warren?” Ein asked.

“Right,” Krone replied. “It’s a bit long, so would you like me to give you a brief summary?”

“Ah, that’d be great. If you’ve already read it, that would be helpful.”

Krone stood tall. She calmly met Ein’s gaze and spoke calmly. “We’ve officially decided on a meeting with Heim.”

“Did they agree, then?” Ein asked.

“No. Our date has been decided. But since Heim had been rushing us, I don’t think they could refuse.”

“Is it in the summer?”

“That’s right. I think Heim would agree to the date.”

That letter I sent has finally culminated in a meeting... Ein thought. He unconsciously started to smile.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself,” Krone noted.

“Truthfully, a little,” he admitted.

They looked at each other and giggled, but both of them were former citizens of Heim. They were now baring their fangs at their former home kingdom, and they weren’t mere commoners: one was the crown prince, and the other, his advisor.

“Are you okay with this, Krone?” Ein asked. “I believe the third prince would be in attendance.”

“Well... I suppose I need a refresher on what he looks like,” Krone said, her icy words catching Ein off guard. “Y-You don’t have to make that face!”

“Sorry. But since quite some time has passed and you’ve both grown, I’m sure he looks a bit different.”

“Hmm? I can’t say that I remember much of him from my days in Heim. I’ve only ever taken care to remember the defining characteristics of people I’ve briefly met at parties. I wasn’t interested in them either.” Krone hastily added, “Oh, but I’ve been much better about it since I came to Ishtarica. It’s part of my work, and everyone’s so kind!”

Ein smiled as she panicked. “I know. I’m not worried about that at all.”

“O-Oh. Then that’s fine,” she said.

She played with the ends of her hair, trying to hide her embarrassment. Ein wanted to tease her a bit more, but there was something that bothered him.

“I think your mother would be there too. Are you fine with that?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “It’s true that my mother’s name is Elena, but we’re no longer allies. I’m on Ishtarica’s side, and I’ll only follow you...Ein.”

Krone looked at the prince with a passionate gaze. Her usually dignified eyes glittered beautifully as they hid her spunky side.

“But I won’t be the one to go against my mother,” Krone added.

“Right. Now that you mention it, the head of the civil servants is...”

Chancellor Warren. No one could trump his authority and brilliant mind. At times, he’d give the kind smile of an elderly man, but he could unleash his sharp, piercing gaze at the drop of a hat. And sometimes, he’d expertly manipulate the conversation as though he could see right through a person.

“I feel like we can leave everything to Warren and he’ll take care of it,” Ein said.

Krone giggled. “I feel the same.”

“For now, I’m personally curious to know what Heim’s demands are.”

Heim had initially been searching for any leads regarding the whereabouts of Krone and Graff.

“But if you’re at the meeting, I feel like you’d answer their demands,” he said.

And if that were the case, there seemed to be little sense in hosting a meeting.

“I don’t think they’ll back off so obediently,” Krone surmised. “Heim thinks that I’ve been kidnapped by Ishtarica.”

“Warren should be able to reject that claim immediately,” Ein said.

“Of course.”

She spoke firmly, but Ein's question hadn't been answered. "I think we all have different ideas about this which makes me a little confused. Ishtarica, Heim, my grandfather, Warren, and I all seem to understand the word 'victory' very differently. We must all have our own thoughts about this."

Krone reached for a nearby scrap of paper and glided her pen across it. "Ishtarica wants a clear apology and an official severing of ties to Heim. In addition, we would likely ask them to stay out of our affairs with Euro."

This included Tigger's previous actions.

"Heim would likely request that me and my grandfather be returned," she continued. "But if we agreed to those terms, it would be tantamount to an admission of kidnapping."

"Ah, they'd want gold and further compensation for their troubles," Ein added.

"Which is why we won't be returning. We weren't kidnapped in the first place."

Heim was the one to breach the secret agreement, and yet they were acting so high-and-mighty. But Ein knew that pointing out this tidbit would simply infuriate his enemies, and no one was willing to waste their breath over that.

"What about you, Ein?" Krone inquired. "Did you want to request something from Heim?"

"No..." Ein said pensively. "As long as we can cut our ties, that's fine with me."

He also wanted to make sure that they wouldn't lay a finger on Krone.

"Then next up..." Krone continued. "Sir Warren likely has his own thoughts that are separate from Ishtarica's wishes. He might request something difficult to fulfill...or he may search for a reason that allows Ishtarica to take action in an emergency while still heeding the first king's orders."

"That sounds plausible."

"As for the third price of Heim... I think he just wants me."

"So, he doesn't care about anything else as long as you return, Krone?"

“I believe so... Perhaps I shouldn’t be the one to say it, but I think that’s the case.”

The third prince was a stubborn one and Krone couldn’t be sure that he had any other motives. However, she had no desire to return, and Ein had no desire to let her go. Tiggie’s wishes could never be fulfilled.

“All that’s left is...my mother,” Krone said.

“Lady Elena,” Ein added.

“Right. I believe that my mother also has a motive in mind. To be frank, I’m certain that she knows that her wishes can’t be granted by Heim. If that’s the case, she must have a different goal in mind, and desires for something that the prince hasn’t considered.”

“I don’t know much about her, but what kind of lady is she?”

“She’s very intelligent. At the very least, I know of no one in Heim who’s a match for her. I don’t believe any other country is blessed with a lady of her caliber.”

General Rogas and Elena were Heim’s aces in the hole. While Ishtarica’s military had an overwhelming advantage over the viscount’s forces, Elena could easily stand her ground in the arena of debate. However, Warren wouldn’t be letting his guard down against her.

Now then... Ein thought. He wondered what kind of meeting awaited him. Both he and Krone looked forward to it, but they were also a touch nervous.

Chapter Eight: The Stage Is Set

Across the sea, Heim's spring season had ended and was making way for the early stretches of summer. On this particular evening, Glint's fiancée, Shannon, was preparing to leave Roundheart Manor after an extended stay in the kingdom's royal capital.

"Thank you for your time today. I know it was difficult to fit in given your schedule," she said, bowing her head towards the boy. Glint's attention was especially taken with how Shannon's luscious red locks flowed behind her.

"I wanted to be with you, Shannon!" he insisted. "There's nothing for you to apologize for!"

Shannon giggled. "I must be the luckiest lady in the world."

She proceeded to walk out the manor's doors and to the carriage that awaited her. But just before was about to enter the vehicle, Shannon stopped in place and turned to Glint. The boy looked bemused as she stepped towards him to share a few parting thoughts.

"I heard you'll be leaving as well. Early tomorrow morning, if my ears are to be believed."

"You heard right," Glint replied. "It's a bit of a bother, but I must be off to Euro. It'll be the last time I speak with the Euroans before the meeting with Ishtarica. Ah, why don't I return with a souvenir? Is there anything you'd like?"

"A souvenir?"

"Anything you like."

"If that's the case...may I ask you to send a message? I have an old friend who resides in Euro. Our house has conducted business with this friend many times, and we plan to ask for their aid once more."

"Is that all? Of course. You can count on me."

"Oh, thank you so much!"

“And to whom am I sending this message?”

“It’s someone you’re well acquainted with, Sir Glint.”

“Is it, now?”

Deep in thought, the boy placed a hand over his forehead while Shannon smiled faintly at him.

“I want you to tell him that we should set a new stage,” Shannon said. She proceeded to whisper a few words in Glint’s ear.

The next morning, the port city of Roundheart was busier than usual following Glint’s departure for Euro. A member of Heim’s royal family with a squad of knights had just walked into town. Before the royal set sail, he wanted to conduct a hands-on inspection of the ongoing preparations.

“Your Highness, how is the situation?” a burly man asked.

“Ah, Rogas!” Tiggie exclaimed.

“The cries of the seafowl are pleasant to the ears. It’s as though they’re blessing our future.”

“Indeed! I suppose I shall soothe my heart with their lovely chirps.”

The pair couldn’t see it from the port, but their meeting place was off beyond the horizon. Despite that, they stood shoulder to shoulder as they both gazed in the same direction.

Tiggie’s voice trembled with a mix of profound emotion and delight. “It’s been a long and painful journey, but we’re here at last. Once Glint returns, we’ll prepare to set off immediately.”

It was then that the third prince came to a realization. “By the way, Rogas, I’ve heard that your son and wife will be in attendance as well.”

“My former son and wife, Your Highness,” Rogas replied.

“Right. And are you not bothered by that at all?”

“I’d be lying if I said I was unfazed by that fact. But as the commander in chief of this kingdom’s army, I have never once forgotten the fiery and proud blood

that flows through my veins.”

“You’re a reliable man.”

Tiggle seemed to be in an especially good mood today. As they talked, the number of vessels being prepared steadily increased.

“We have quite the fleet, it seems,” Rogas observed.

“Quite so,” Tiggle agreed. “We’ve hired more than a few adventurers to join us. It costs a handsome sum of gold for the kingdom to make this journey by sea.”

“There shall be many brave knights accompanying us on this voyage as well. If I recall correctly, the royal family will be represented by His Majesty, Your Highness, and the first prince.”

“That is correct. Elena and her subordinates will also be in attendance.”

“Our main forces have all assembled.”

“Indeed. We should put up a good fight, even against the likes of Ishtarica.”

Rogas nodded in agreement. He believed that they could compete against Ishtarica based on sheer numbers alone. In fact, he’d even convinced himself that Heim could negotiate for terms in their favor.

Beyond the very same horizon Rogas gazed into, Ishtarica’s prized warships were in formation as they sailed for the deserted island. This scrap of land no longer looked to be wild and poorly kept. In fact, a paved road now led to the heart of the island and a pair of ports had been built. Constructed on the island’s eastern and western shores, these ports were closer to their respective nations.

On the western port, the *White King* was docked in the middle of the fleet while the *Princess Katima* sat to its right and the *Princess Olivia* to its left. Surrounding the trio was an armada equipped with the most cutting-edge technology available. The glory of this massive naval fleet was a rare sight to behold.

Ein sailed over on the *Princess Olivia* for this trip and had just set foot on the

island when he noticed the Sea Dragon twins swimming up to the port.

“You guys have really grown...” Ein said.

“Rawr!”

“Rar! Raarar!”

As Ein watched the twins wriggle their gargantuan bodies, it was easy to see that they’d grown a tremendous amount. Now over thirty meters long, the pair continued to grow thanks to the regular buffet of magic stones courtesy of Katima. Recently, the younger brother, El, had started experiencing a change in his voice. Perhaps he’d soon be able to go toe-to-toe with the massive dragon Ein had slain off the coast of Magna a while back.

“These kids are reliable,” Krone said as she approached the trio.

“Yeah,” Ein agreed. “It was a good idea on grandfather’s part.”

The twins had only come along at Silverd’s last minute suggestion. Just as the royals were setting off from Kingsland, the twins refused to leave the *Princess Olivia*’s side as they knew Ein was on board. Then even after the royals left, the twins’ insistence on being glued to their father’s hip had caused the fleet to dock.

“Just bring them along, then,” Silverd suggested, insisting they could bring the twins along as a pair of massive guard dogs.

Considering that the fleet already commanded an overwhelming amount of military might, no one on board was sure if the additional “guard dogs” were necessary. But they relented under the theory of “the more, the merrier.”

“Ah, Sir Ein! There you are!” a knight called out.

“Huh? Chris?” Ein asked.

“I apologize for barging in. His Majesty has stated that he’d like to speak with you for a while. He’s currently waiting for you in a structure at the island’s center.”

“Got it. Then, uh...”

“Don’t worry about me,” Krone assured him. “I shall be waiting with Lady

Olivia.”

After he watched her return to the ship, Ein set off with Chris in tow to meet Silverd. As he walked to the island’s center, Ein found himself surrounded by dense foliage. However, the paved road made it an easy trek for the prince. In fact, he saw it as though he were enjoying a casual stroll through the jungle.

“Thanks to the twins, we didn’t encounter any small monsters on the voyage here,” Chris noted.

“I suppose you could refer to them as ‘the kings of these seas,’” Ein replied.

Chris chuckled. “That seems to be the case. Oh, but should anything occur, please let me know. With your order, I shall use our armada to decimate any sort of port city in an instant.”

“I won’t give you such a command.”

The fact that she specifically mentioned a “port city” had made her intentions crystal clear. More than anyone else, Chris had a serious bone to pick with Heim.

“Instead of starting a war, it’ll be more effective to put them in their place while we’re here on this island,” Ein reasoned.

“Ah ha ha...” Chris laughed. “So, you’ll be disarming them with pleasantries.”

“Kind but stern pleasantries.”

In any case, the island made for a comfortable battlefield. Though the summer was just starting, the weather wasn’t too hot or muggy and the waves surrounding this quiet plot of land calmly ebbed and flowed. It didn’t have many hills either, so the island was the perfect place for a resort getaway.

“Once everything has settled down, why don’t we all come back here for a little vacation?” Ein suggested.

Chris gave a happy smile and nodded.

“Ah, that must be it,” Ein said, finally emerging from the brush and arriving at a clearing lined with stone titles.

A stone structure lay in the depths of this clearing. The building was

reminiscent of a temple, sporting a massive triangular roof supported by a series of thick pillars. With no doors to be seen, one could look right into the spacious room inside.

“Then here I go,” Ein said.

“Of course,” Chris replied. “I shall remain here.”

With Ein stepping into the building, the pair parted ways.

On the inside, rows of chairs lined each side of the room—just as the island’s eastern and western ports had been prepared. The chairs’ positioning was an unsubtle hint at the divide between the two nations. Upon closer inspection, one could find a waiting room or place of rest located behind the seats. On the west side, Silverd was seated in the center chair.

“I apologize for the wait,” Ein called.

“Ah,” Silverd replied in acknowledgment. “I don’t want you standing about while we speak. Take a seat next to me.”

“Pardon me, but I’ve got to say that this is a rather splendid building.”

“Wherever we may be, our actions must show our nation in the best light. We mustn’t do anything that sullies our dignity.”

One could see this *modus operandi* as an honorable display of pride, but it could also be seen as quite vain. Everyone had their own interpretation of the king’s words, but Ein saw no issue with them.

“This moment rouses feelings from deep within me,” Silverd said. “We finally have our meeting with them.”

“I agree,” Ein replied.

Given his all but confirmed attendance, Rogas’s visage quickly flashed across the crown prince’s mind. How would Ein feel upon seeing his father for the first time in many years? He thought that he’d completely distanced himself from Rogas, but Ein wondered if his heart might thump with dread. And yet... *I’m not anxious about it at all*, the crown prince thought. Was it because he’d grown? There wasn’t an ounce of fear in his body.

“Oho, you seem to be just as calm as Warren is,” Silverd observed.

“Hmmm... I wonder,” Ein replied. “Do I look calm?”

“You look like a magnificent boulder, firm and unwavering.”

The king gently patted his grandson’s head. While Ein was a fair bit taller now, he hadn’t outgrown his grandfather just yet.

“G-Grandfather!” Ein stammered.

“Don’t be so embarrassed,” the king replied. “No matter how much you’ve grown, you’ll always be my grandson.”

“Well, when I’m older...like fifty or something, I hope you’ll take it easy on me.”

“Unfortunately for you, I have no intention of holding back as long as I’m around.”

As the pair enjoyed a calm moment together, they heard a door open with a loud clack.

“Ugh... Why meowst I be here too?” Katima sighed, walking out of the waiting room.

Her tail drooped a bit lower than usual, and she wasn’t walking at her normal brisk pace.

“Father...it’s still not too late, mew know. May I please go home?” Katima asked, appealing to her father with the most glittery kitty cat eyes imaginable.

“I’ve told you many times already. The answer is no,” Silverd replied.

“Mrow?! B-But why?! I don’t think it makes a difurr-ence whether I’m here or not!”

She wasn’t wrong. Warren and his associates would be overseeing the meeting, leaving Katima without a single thing to do. Olivia was only present due to her intimate involvement with the secret agreement. And yet, the first princess was still brought along for a very important reason.

“Why was I brought here?! Paw-lease explain!” she wailed before gasping in an epiphany. “M-Meow?! Could it be?! You require my genius intellect?!”

She smiled, willing to finally relent. However, the reality of the situation was

different, and Ein was well aware of the true reason behind Katima's presence. Silverd awkwardly glanced at his grandson, and the crown prince agreed that he'd break the news.

"Um, Aunt Katima," Ein started.

"Mew don't have to say a thing! You guys are nothing without me-ow..."

"I know that you've saved us time and again with that big brain of yours, Aunt Katima, but we brought you with us for a different reason this time around. If there isn't anyone left at the castle to rein you in the case something goes wrong, that might be a little risky."

"M-Mrow?!"

"It seems that it'd be dangerous if we let you be, so..."

With no one left in Kingsland to stop Katima from going over the top, Ein had stated his decision to bring her along.

"A-And that's why I was brought here? Like how mew leash a pet to purr-event them from getting into trouble?"

"I'm not sure if that analogy works..."

Katima sank to the ground as though she were melting. "My strength has left my body... Paw-lease just take me back to the ship..."

Silverd buried his face in his hands as he witnessed his daughter act nothing like a princess. She could've been taken away later, but it wasn't right to let a princess remain lying on the floor. Ein glanced around and noticed Dill peeking in from the waiting room.

"Sorry, could you come over here?" Ein called.

Dill immediately rushed to the crown prince's side. "My apologies. I didn't mean to peek, but it sounded like something happened..."

"Dill..." Silverd started. "As I eat humble pie, I'd like to make a request. My apologies, but would you please carry my daughter back to the ship?"

"Mrow... I'm begging mew..."

"H-How shall I carry her?" Dill asked politely.

“You can tie her up or drag her— Ahem, I’m kidding, of course. If you could carry her on your back, that’d be great.”

It wasn’t right for a man to carry an unmarried princess. However, no one present could express their dissent, and Katima even raised her paw in agreement as she found it to be an excellent suggestion. Dill’s face turned beet red with embarrassment.

“In fact, it’d be cat-astic if you could carry me all the time,” Katima purred.

What is she on about? Ein thought, burying his head in his hands.

“Th-Then please excuse me,” Dill said, approaching the princess.

“Ah, purr-fect! I leave the rest to mew!”

“Certainly. Please excuse us.”

The knight left the room with the princess on his back. A handsome young man like Dill could make anything look good, but carrying a no-good kitty cat on his back had stripped him of his usual attractive flair.



“In times of emergencies, I suppose I shall entrust Katima to Dill,” the king said as though he were offering a brilliant suggestion.

But Ein already had a reply prepared. “I wouldn’t call pushing a princess onto someone as ‘entrusting.’”

“You’re right,” Silverd mumbled wearily, watching Dill slowly leave.

The king was at a loss for words when he noticed his daughter’s tail happily wagging about as she was carried away. Needless to say, he was overcome with a myriad of conflicting emotions.

According to a prior message received by the Ishtaricans, Heim’s delegates would be arriving soon. As promised, a fleet of ships approached the island. Ein was enjoying the fresh sea breeze by the *Princess Olivia* when he noticed the ships, causing him to gasp. Naturally, he had no obligation to show himself before Heim’s people. As he wasn’t keen on the idea of speaking with them prior to the day of the meeting, Ein simply watched on as the ships sailed in.

Several minutes later, Heim’s fleet had finally docked and the ships’ occupants started disembarking.

“There they are...” Ein muttered.

Even from afar, he could recognize them from a glance. Rogas stood tall and regal, just as Ein remembered him. As for Glint, he looked a touch more mature since their last encounter in Euro. While Ein’s former family walked onto the island, a boy in lavish attire walked ahead of them.

“The third prince, Tiggle...” Ein murmured.

With the Roundhearts in tow, Tiggle surveyed his kingdom’s designated port. Once finished, the third prince started conversing with his company while glancing at the Ishtarican armada across the way. Even though he was a fair distance away, Ein could still make out what they were saying. When he honed his senses, it was as if he were part of the conversation. Before now, Ein would’ve never been able to pull off such a feat. There was a good chance this was another result of his transformation into a Demon Lord.

“Hmph, they’re just compensating!” Tiggie huffed. “These ships aren’t the least bit daunting!”

“Quite so! With our kingdom’s pride following us into battle, these mere dinghies are no obstacle to us!” Glint agreed, following suit and putting on a strong front.

Though the third prince’s gaze and footsteps made him look rather hesitant, he was still able to put on a brave face with his words. Fascinated by the new ships, the Sea Dragon twins swam closer to inspect them.

“Rar?”

“Rawr?”

“H-Hey, what are these things?!” Tiggie shrieked.

“Rar?”

“Rawr. Rawr...”

The twins poked their heads out of the water and seemed to be talking to each other. They didn’t seem at all bothered by Tiggie’s anxiety, and were glancing at each other calmly without a care. But right then, a frightened knight of Heim stepped in to protect his prince. However, Rogas quickly took to the front line and unsheathed his sword.

“Your Highness, please step back,” the general warned.

“V-Very well. I shall leave it to you!” Tiggie replied.

Rogas gazed at the pair of scaly beasts, in awe of their sheer size. He strained his eyes, trying to gauge just how powerful they were. However, the twins didn’t appear to be attacking. Both sides were frozen in place until an Ishtarican knight approached the kingdom’s delegates.

“El, Al, His Highness calls for you two!” Dill called. Ein’s personal knight had seen fit to quell the commotion himself.

“Rar?!”

“Rawr!”

With that, the Sea Dragons eagerly dived back into the water. El, however,

emerged once more...

“Bleh!” he said, spraying water onto Heim’s ships before he left.

Heim only saw this as water, but Dill knew differently. He had sensed that the Sea Dragon had spat on Heim.

“We didn’t mean to cause a stir,” Dill said. “The two monsters are His Highness the Crown Prince’s pets. They have no intention of harming others.”

He decided to let El’s action slide here. As Heim’s delegates collectively breathed a sigh of relief, Glint stared daggers into the Ishtarican.

“Father...that’s the man who fought me in Euro,” Glint said.

“Oho. Then I suppose this is Dill,” Rogas replied, placing a hand by his mouth and sizing the Ishtarican up.

Second to none within the kingdom’s borders, the general’s son had suffered a scathing defeat at the hands of this Ishtarican knight. Rogas was interested in Dill, and the burly man nodded in approval upon his own confirmation of the knight’s undoubtable power.

“I shall guide you to this island’s facilities,” Dill said. “This way, please.”

Dill walked ahead, not at all concerned with the skeptical glances being thrown his way. Tigger, however, was enraged by the absence of an apology in light of the twin’s earlier actions.

“Wait,” the third prince called. “My father and older brother haven’t left the ship yet.”

Were Heim’s king and first prince Rayfon still aboard?

“I’ll need you to guide them along as well,” Tigger demanded.

“Once I’ve finished guiding your group, I’m sure one of your people could escort your royals later on,” Dill answered with a moment of hesitation. The Heims had no time for a break.

“Gr... Fine!” Tigger roared. “And is that rude crown prince here as well?”

“I haven’t a clue who you’re talking about,” Dill replied coolly. “We Ishtaricans don’t have a rude crown prince.”

Had the third prince not insulted Ein, the Ishtarican knight would have certainly provided him with a satisfactory response. Rogas let out a small sigh as he had hoped for a definitive answer.

“Sir Dill, was it?” Rogas asked. “May I ask you a question?”

Unlike the response he’d given Tigger, Dill stopped to turn around and face Rogas. Those around the knight saw him as calm and collected, but in reality, Dill was fighting the urge to curse Rogas with every dirty word in the book.

“Whatever is the matter?” the Ishtarican inquired.

“May I?” Rogas asked.

“Certainly. Please don’t hold back.”

“Is it true that Olivia is here as well?”

“I find it quite rude for you to refer to her so casually. I believe a mere aristocrat calling out to our second princess in such a manner would only bring unwanted ire.” Dill remained firm.

“Ah, quite right. Apologies for my insolence,” Rogas replied obediently.

In truth, such a simple apology couldn’t have possibly been satisfactory, but Dill realized that heeding his words would’ve been Rogas’s best course of action. However, Dill was taken aback—he hadn’t expected Rogas to apologize so easily. At the same time, he was glad that Chris wasn’t with him. Had Rogas casually called out to Olivia with the Elven knight around, he’d have quickly discovered her blade at his throat.

“To answer your question, Her Highness the Second Princess is present,” Dill replied.

“I see...” Rogas said. “And would I be able to meet with her?”

“You may not, of course. I hope for your understanding.”

“Can I at least say a word to her?”

What does he have to say to the second princess at this point? Dill wondered as Rogas doubled down.

“At the very least, I do not have the authority to make that decision,” Dill

finally answered, avoiding a clear response.

“Then what about Ein?” the general inquired.

Just then, Dill reached for his sword.

“Hmm?!” Rogas gasped, instinctively gripping his blade as well.

Dill regretted unconsciously grasping his weapon and looked at the ground. He placed a hand over his chest, deriding himself for his heart’s loud, unexpected thumping. While doing so, Dill took a few deep breaths in the hopes of calming himself down.

“Sir Rogas, His Highness is our crown prince,” Dill said. “You do not have the right to refer to him so casually either. Regrettably, I fear that I won’t be able to answer any more of your questions.”

This was a self-imposed measure for Dill to keep himself restrained. Had he heard any more insolence, he’d be unable to stop his hand from reaching for his sword.

“I shall continue guiding you. This way, please,” the knight said. He had regained his composure and led the group to the center of the island.

Ein had been watching the entire time.

“I knew it...” he muttered.

Having foreseen this outcome, the crown prince smiled before placing an elbow on the nearby railing and resting his face in his hand. He gazed down at the sea and noticed the twins frolicking about. He was unsure whether to scold El for his actions or to praise him for them.

But in any case...

“This might turn out to be quite the perilous meeting...” Ein mumbled, shifting his gaze to the skies above.

That evening, Ein and Krone were taking a stroll not too far away from the Ishtarican port. Krone giggled. “The wind feels so nice.”

Her hair fluttered in the ocean breeze while reflections from the water's surface illuminated her with a bright scarlet light. She looked so beautiful, it was as if she had stepped out from the canvas of a fine painting.

"So... Why did you want to go for a walk all of a sudden?" she inquired.

"Hmm... I wonder," Ein replied. He didn't have much of a reason, but he decided to play dumb anyway.

"I shall be going toe-to-toe with my own mother... You're worried for me, aren't you, Ein?"

"Y-You don't have to say anything if you already know!"

"Hee hee, I'm sorry. I was so overjoyed I couldn't help myself." She crossed her arms behind her back and gazed up at the crimson sky. "You know, I thought I'd try avoiding my family or something of the sort. But I was wrong."

Ein listened silently.

"It seems like I'm more of an Ishtarican than I'd thought," she continued. "Maybe I'm just being callous, but now, I hold Ishtarica more dearly than anywhere else."

"Yeah, same here," Ein replied.

"I knew you'd say that."

"Apathy" was probably the best way to describe the crown prince's feelings for Heim. However, he didn't always feel this way. Especially when faced with the nations' ongoing feud or Tiggie's unrelenting persistence in his pursuit of Krone.

She flinched a little as she said, "Now that prince, he's the most troublesome of the whole bunch."

"You think he'll try to say something to you?" Ein inquired.

"I have no doubt that he will. I'm sure he'll try to take me back to Heim. Sir Warren has been worried about that possibility as well. He reassured me by saying, 'If their prince attempts to abduct you or do anything of the sort, his kingdom will be in shambles before we leave.'"

He doesn't have to be so casual about it. It almost sounds like a quick errand he'd take care of while on the way home from shopping, Ein thought. But he believed that the Ishtarican navy had more than enough firepower to do just that. Warren could easily contact the mainland on the way to Port Roundheart, and order the army to smite Heim in one fell swoop. However, when considering the current gulf in military might between nations, Heim had no chance of running off with Krone.

"Hey," Krone said, playfully closing the gap with Ein.

She bent her body at the hips and happily walked along.

"In the middle of the meeting, can you say 'my Krone' again, like you did before?" Krone requested.

"Gh... Th-That was so long ago..." Ein groaned.

"Won't you say it for me?" She gazed up at the crown prince hopefully.

"I-It'll depend on the situation."

"So, it's up to chance? I'd be much happier to hear a more definitive answer."

She stopped in front of Ein and leaned on his chest. She wrapped her arms around him, closing the gap.

"Won't you say it for me?" she pleaded once more.

The two were closer than ever before, and they could practically hear each other breathing along with their heartbeats.

"Krone..." Ein mumbled. Her name felt so natural on his lips.

He wrapped his arms around her and quietly pulled her close. There was no embarrassment or hesitation in his actions as he hugged her tightly, putting him at ease. His body moved on its own as though they'd done this so many times in the past.

"Mm..." Krone said, slowly closing her eyes and pointing her lips towards him.

Her glossy lips enticed the crown prince, drawing him near. They were so close that they could see each other's eyelashes and their lips were only a few centimeters away from each other...when their tender moment was rudely

interrupted. At that moment, the pair could hear a collection of unpleasant and unwanted voices from nearby.

“Just who the hell does that Dill think he is?!” Tiggle roared.

“Y-Your Highness, please calm down!” Glint hastily said.

The two boys were shouting a short distance away, causing Ein and Krone to instinctively freeze in place.

“I don’t think I’ve ever come this close to snapping,” Ein whispered grumpily, easily taking Krone into his arms.

Ein carried Krone like a proper princess as he swiftly moved through the jungle’s thickets. The crown prince didn’t want to be caught here—he wouldn’t know what they’d say, and the situation was likely to turn into a headache. Though he’d asked Krone on a walk out of concern for her, Ein wondered if he’d been too careless.

“I think we’d be fine here,” Ein said.

“M-Mm-hmm,” Krone replied.

As they hid themselves behind the trees, Ein tried to set her down, but she kept her arms wrapped around his neck.

“Be quiet for a bit, okay?” Ein asked.

The pair were holding each other tight when Krone felt a sensation of shock all over.

“I truly cannot stand that Ishtarica! That crown prince and his wretched guard are beyond insolent!” Tiggle grumbled.

“I agree,” Glint replied.

The third prince was blissfully unaware of the crown prince’s presence nearby.

“Not to mention that the crown prince’s advisor is a piece of work too!” Tiggle continued.

Krone’s ears perked up when Tiggle made mention of the advisor.

“Did you have any issues with his advisor?” Glint asked.

“Hmm? Do you not remember? I’m talking about the advisor who writes those oddly neat letters. I refuse to be friendly with anyone in the crown prince’s orbit! He infuriates me!”

“I understand your ire, Your Highness.”

“Ugh... But I suppose ranting about it will get me nowhere.”

Tiggle continued to be oblivious to the presence of Ein and Krone off in the foliage.

“Let’s go back,” Tiggle said eventually. “We’ll defeat them at that meeting!”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!” Glint replied.

Just as they had arrived, the pair left in a whirlwind. Despite watching them leave, Krone refused to leave the crown prince’s side. She quietly continued breathing on Ein’s chest and after a short while, rubbed her face on him.

“Um... Does my handwriting look weird?” she asked.

“I think it looks beautiful,” Ein replied. “And Warren said the same.”

“Right... Since I was requested to write the letter on behalf of Ishtarica, I rewrote it numerous times to make it look pretty.”

Not only was her moment with Ein ruined, but she’d even been slandered behind her back. Even Krone couldn’t hide her irritation.

“He’s a royal pain; I refuse to be involved with him ever again,” Krone said. “Ein, could you turn your cheek my way?”

“My cheek?” Ein asked quizzically.

She took her chance, bringing her lips close and brushing them against his cheek. She breathed a little sigh. Perhaps Krone had something that she didn’t want to surrender. The mood from earlier had completely dissipated, but she gave Ein a peck on the cheek. It was only for a few seconds, but the warmth of her soft lips was anything but a dream.

Ein fell silent as Krone buried her face into his neck.

“I-I’ll make do with this for now...” she mumbled.

Neither of them could gel back into the blissful mood from moments ago. This

was all she could offer. But unlike the Goddess's Blessing that Krone had bestowed upon Ein during the Sea Dragon fiasco, the passion from this kiss was one that had grown with time. Ein was so touched by this loving gesture that he could only continue to gently hold her in his arms.

Chapter Nine: The Meeting

The following day, the skies were overcast as the two nations prepared for their meeting. When lunchtime rolled around, Heim's delegates weren't sitting down for lunch, but rather, making their way to the structure at the island's center. The Ishtaricans hadn't arrived just yet.

"We're first? I don't quite like that," Garland von Heim, the current king, muttered.

Heim's king was of average height, just a touch taller than Ein. He wore a thick cape that was luxuriously embroidered with gold thread, and had a dazzling, gorgeous crown that sat upon his golden locks. From a passing glance, almost anyone could tell that this man enjoyed a life of opulence. He stroked his golden beard and grumbled as he took his seat.

"Do you not agree, Tiggle?" he asked.

"Exactly so, father," the third prince replied.

As the father and son sat down, the trio accompanying them saw fit to also take their seats, that trio consisting of Rogas, Elena, and Glint. Behind these five stood Heim's finest knights; their might was made apparent through their orderly and controlled movements.

However, these knights were mere squires when compared to the aura exuded by the knight now entering the room. With Garland and his party seated, a set of dignified knights made their appearance.

"Finally..." Heim's king remarked as Rogas looked to the warriors who'd just entered.

"Those must be the Knights Guard of Ishtarica," Rogas said.

"Have you seen them before, father?" Glint asked.

"No, this is my first time. But their refined movements clearly put them far above any regular knight. Though it seems like you've seen them before, Glint."

“I saw them in Euro.”

Though they were enemies, Rogas couldn't help but be impressed. Of course, the general knew that vocalizing his thoughts would only earn the ire of Tiggie and the rest of the delegation, so he kept quiet.

“Oho,” Garland said, widening his eyes at the individual who entered after the knights had taken their positions. His voice was filled with glee. “Not bad. She's a looker.”

He smiled as he laid his eyes on Chris. As though he were gazing at an object, the king's eyes darted around her entire body. He was thrilled with the Elf's powerful feminine aura.

“I apologize for the wait,” Warren said, finally emerging.

The Heims didn't respond to these words. Instead, the king whispered to his son.

“Tiggie, who *is* that man?” Garland asked.

“That man is Ishtarica's chancellor, Warren Lark,” Tiggie answered.

“Ah, this elderly man is the much-rumored chancellor?”

While the king looked oddly confident, Tiggie felt anything but. The bitter memories of being toyed with in Euro flashed across his mind. He'd been treated like a child and ultimately threw a tantrum, to his great humiliation. The mere thought of this incident annoyed Tiggie.

“Over there, Your Majesty,” Warren said.

“Very well,” Silverd said, appearing before the Heims.

Lloyd stood beside the king, ready to wield his blade at a moment's notice. Unlike Rogas, the king's guard stood behind Silverd.

“That must be Ishtarica's king...” Tiggie muttered with a gulp.

The third prince locked eyes with Silverd for a split second, but the boy quickly looked away when faced with the monarch's overwhelming presence. It went without saying, but Heim's prince had been humiliated once again. Garland sat beside his son, but showed no signs of comprehending the silent

battle unfolding before him as he flapped his gums at Warren.

“Your crown prince will be joining us won’t he?” Garland demanded.

“That’s right. I believe he’ll arrive in a few moments, so I hope for your patience,” Warren replied.

The crown prince had made the group wait quite a bit. Garland was clearly dissatisfied by this, but he didn’t say a word as he slumped his shoulders and quietly waited. Out of the entire delegation, Elena held the most complex of emotions. The crown prince of Ishtarica was Krone’s beloved, and while she was eager to see the man that her daughter had fallen for, she was reluctant to start an argument with him.

“Is anything the matter, Lady Elena?” Rogas asked worriedly, sitting beside her.

“Oh, nothing at all...” Elena replied. “You seem to be quite calm, Sir Rogas.”

“Oh, I wonder. I might be less composed than I seem.”

He’d be reunited with his son after all these years; there was no way he could fully keep his cool. Elena flashed a faint smile as she had just seen a new side to the mighty General Rogas.

The clack of leather shoes rang throughout the room. Elena soon realized that the sounds were coming from more than one person.

“It seems like the crown prince and his advisor will be present,” she noted.

“Indeed, that seems to be the case,” Rogas replied.

Heim’s delegation was displeased with the wait, but the Ishtaricans didn’t appear to care at all. In fact, many of them were smiling as though they were looking forward to this very situation.

“Ho hum,” Lily hummed as she stood in front of the Ishtarican’s waiting room.

She locked eyes with Elena and mouthed, “You’ll be reunited with the person you’ve been searching for.” Elena was unable to hide just how confused she’d been by these cryptic words.

“They’ve arrived,” Warren said loudly. “Over there is...”

A young man and young lady had walked in. The man had a longsword by his waist and was dressed in bright silver, the formal attire of the Ishtarican royal family. The lady was dressed in a complementary outfit.

“I present you His Highness the Crown Prince and His Highness’s advisor,” Warren said with a smile, introducing the pair.

“My name is Ein von Ishtarica, the crown prince.”

More than anyone else from Heim’s delegation, Elena was blown away by this man’s appearance as it wasn’t the first time they’d met. She realized that the mysterious robed figure who helped her in Magna was the very same prince standing before her today. It was no wonder that Lily wouldn’t give her any clear answers about it. At the same time, Elena realized the meaning of her former maid’s words from just moments ago. Beside Ein was her beloved daughter, Krone. Elena endured the tears that welled up in her eyes—her daughter had grown into a lovely young woman, but she didn’t expect Krone to have become the crown prince’s advisor. Elena’s body trembled with a tempest of overwhelming emotions.

“Impossible...” Rogas muttered.

He was the first to break the silence, astonished by the stark contrast between his son’s current appearance and his age. While Ein’s face still carried a hint of the boyish charm Rogas had once known, the boy’s towering stature appeared far too mature.

“It can’t be...” Tiggie mumbled. He stood up and tried to reach out lifelessly. “Why are you...”

She wasn’t keen on providing Tiggie with a reply, but the advisor introduced herself once the crown prince had finished.

“My name is Krone Agustos. I serve beside His Royal Highness the Crown Prince.”

“Krone!” Tiggie gasped. “Wh-Why are you here?!”

It’d been quite a while since they’d last met, but the third prince recognized her instantly—a feat that perhaps was worthy of praise on its own. However, Krone felt nothing from this reunion. Instead, she gazed at Tiggie as calmly as

possible.

“I am the crown prince’s advisor,” she said as indifferently as she could. “Surely, my attendance wouldn’t be an issue, would it?”

“What are you saying? You were kidnapped and dragged off to Ishtarica...” Tiggle claimed.

“Nothing of the sort occurred. I hope that knowledge puts your mind at ease.”

With that, she encouraged Ein to take a seat.

“Why are you sitting over there?!” Tiggle spluttered. “You’ve never even taken the moment to send me a letter...”

“As I’ve said, I’m the crown prince’s advisor. And I’ve written you a letter, haven’t I?” Krone replied, faintly smiling.

Tiggle was rather tickled to see her smile, but he hadn’t a clue what she was referring to. Regardless, the fact still stood that she was now seated beside the crown prince.

“A letter, you say?” Tiggle asked.

“Quite so,” Krone replied. “As you may know, I drafted every letter you’ve received on the nation’s behalf.”

The third prince gasped. Given Krone’s position, it meant that every letter sent to Heim had been written by her. It was then that Tiggle remembered his prior babbling.

“Those exquisite letters were...” Tiggle said. All too late, he tried to revise his words in an attempt to offer praise.

“There’s no need for you to be so polite,” Krone said. “I overheard your conversation with your guard last night and it seems that I’ve greatly displeased you with my words. I suppose my penmanship is less virtuous than I thought.”

She then turned away from the third prince—a clear sign that she had no intention of fielding any personal questions. Tiggle slumped back into his chair, lifelessly gazing at the crown prince and his advisor.

“You’re not lying, but aren’t you being a bit too hostile?” Ein whispered.

“That’s his punishment for ruining our moment,” Krone replied.

“He’s staring at us.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll pick up some cold medicine later.”

“Cold medicine?”

“It just feels chilly today, don’t you agree?”

“Got it...” Ein replied, realizing that his beloved’s dark sense of humor had come out to play.

The crown prince glanced over to Heim’s delegation on the other side of the room. The Roundhearts quietly sat in their chairs while Ein placed a hand over his chest. Fortunately, he was still rather calm, and it seemed he’d organized his thoughts more than he realized.

“Sir Ein, Lady Krone, are you two all right?” Warren asked.

“I’m fine,” Ein replied.

“I am too,” Krone added. “I’m more composed than I expected to be.”

“I’m glad to hear it. But please, don’t push yourselves,” the chancellor replied.

The stage was set. All they had to do was call a proper start to the meeting. However, a member of Heim’s delegation was the first to break the ice.

“Ha ha ha!” Garland laughed heartily. “There was no need for this silly meeting after all!”

“No need, you say?” Warren asked.

“But of course. My son was only searching for the young lady who sits beside you. There’s no meaning behind this meddlesome meeting, is there? I could levy a complaint or two at your nation’s behavior, but it’s better to cause less trouble. I suppose I can let all of that slide.”

“I see.”

“Don’t just nod; return her to us. She’s the daughter of House August.”

“House August?”

There was no sign that the meeting had started, but Garland’s words kicked

off the bloodthirsty war of words Ein had been anticipating.

“Don’t give me that. Stop playing dumb,” Garland said.

“Playing dumb?” Warren asked. “You say some odd things.”

“Then how else am I supposed to say it? Just as my son has claimed, your crown prince’s advisor is of House August, is she not?”

“Ah, pardon me. You were talking about House August, I see.”

“I don’t plan on wasting my time with your ridiculous nonsense.”

“I just wanted to hear your precise words. That’s all. Now then...” Warren stroked his beard, pretending to mull over Garland’s words. It was only for a brief moment, but this gesture irritated Garland immensely. “Lady Krone has my utmost trust. I believe her to be a true Ishtarican, one who just happens to serve the crown prince.”

“And what of it?”

“To be frank, I have no plans of letting her go.”

“Of one of Heim’s citizens? Our citizen?”

“Yes, *our* citizen”

Garland intuited that Warren wasn’t going to budge anytime soon, but neither was he. What would be the king’s solution? If Krone were to return to Heim, the kingdom must plan on making some sort of compromise or concession. However, Garland wasn’t crazy about this plan of action, nor was he sure if Warren would go for it.

“Hmm... How about we reimburse you for her cost of living up until this point?” Garland offered.

“Ah, I didn’t think it was your turn to play dumb now,” Warren said, his reply clearly accusatory. “Even if you were to pay us off, surely it would be fair to take the deficit we’d face with her loss into account.”

“I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but I suppose you’re after the same thing as everyone else: cold hard coin.”

“I am Ishtarica’s chancellor, and my wishes serve as our nation’s scales. If it

should help my country flourish, I certainly wouldn't mind making a few sacrifices."

"Ha ha ha! Very well, name your price!"

The king implied that he'd pay whatever was necessary. His pragmatic words provided a glimpse into the man's coldhearted, calculating side—one that only prioritized profits. Elena was infuriated to hear her daughter spoken of as a good to be sold and traded. But despite her rage, she was trying to get a feeling for Ishtarica's true intentions at the same time. The Ishtarican delegation didn't look even a touch fazed by the whole thing.

"I'd like to account for the influence she will accumulate as grows into old age," Warren said. "When added to the influence that she may hold beyond her passing, your estimated total comes out to a calculated thirty years' worth of our national budget. That's all that we need."

"Are you messing with us?" Tiggle growled.

Even Elena was unsure of Ishtarica's budget, but she could easily imagine that it was at least ten times more than that of Heim's—likely far, *far* more than that. There was little room to doubt that.

"Are you underestimating me?" Heim's king inquired.

"Oh, you jest," Warren replied. Truthfully speaking, the chancellor's asking price was completely unrealistic. "And I'm aware of the fact that Heim would be unable to cover this cost alone."

"If we raise our taxes—"

"It's still quite impossible. Even if you were to pluck out a piece of gold from every nook and cranny in your kingdom, it wouldn't be nearly enough."

Upon hearing these words, Elena's rage subsided. Just as he said before, Warren had absolutely no intention of letting Krone go. His asking price was simply a convenient excuse for Ishtarica to toy with Heim. As proof...

"I have no plans to proceed with this deal either," Warren said. "Why don't we end this topic?"

"No plans, you say?" Garland rumbled. "What in the world are you saying?!"

“You asked how valuable I find Lady Krone to be, King Garland. And so, I have given you a response. I have never explicitly stated that I would agree to this arrangement.”

“Don’t be silly. Your wishes serve as Ishtarica’s scale, do they not?”

“Hence, I shall not be letting Lady Krone go. Thirty years of our national budget can purchase your entire continent. However, I’m stating that her worth is far more valuable than your continent. You understand, don’t you?” Warren hadn’t budged one bit. “And we certainly aren’t willing to strike a deal with Heim.”

The chancellor paused and gave a deep sigh before he continued, “A deal can only be struck against parties we can trust.”

“First, your tomfoolery. Now, this attitude...” Garland said.

After quietly watching this exchange play out, Tiggie angrily piped up, “Despite this opportunity to meet, it seems you lot have no intention of speaking with us seriously. It’s as though you don’t plan on making peace with us.”

“Oh dear, that’s a surprise to hear,” Warren said, a touch hurt. He glanced at Tiggie with a forced smile. “How could we possibly trust the people who broke our important contract?”

“B-But your nation needs sea crystals, do you not?!”

“We do. However, we’ve been taking steps to resolve that issue.”

Back when Ishtarica was friendly with Heim, they had desperately relied on the kingdom for access to the precious resource. Flash forward to today, and Ishtarica had no intentions of bending to Heim’s will. After all, their current trade arrangement with Euro had been going smoothly while producing results that far exceeded expectations. There was still a nonzero chance that their supply of sea crystals would eventually dry up, but time could resolve this issue.

“We’ve been making progress on the development of magical tools that no longer require the use of sea crystals,” Warren stated. “Since there’s no danger of our resources depleting within the next few decades, a trade deal with Heim is unnecessary.”

“However!” Tiggle roared, unwilling to back down.

He tried walking over to the Ishtaricans. While it was only a few steps away, the boy stopped at the borderline. But just as he was about to cross that line, a booming voice from behind called out to stop him.

“Your Highness!” Rogas shouted. “You mustn’t step any farther!”

The general wasn’t looking at Tiggle, but at Lloyd, who stood behind Silverd.

“Ah, so you’ve noticed,” Lloyd said, slightly surprised.

“I only used my instincts,” Rogas replied.

The commander in chief yanked Tiggle by the arm and dragged him back over to Heim’s side of the room.

“Why’d you stop me?!” Tiggle said angrily.

“If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have been able to spare you,” Rogas replied.

“Wh-What do you...”

“I’m referring to the space between you and Ishtarica’s marshal. Even from that distance, it would’ve only taken a single step for him to close in on you.”

Tiggle shuddered when he heard Rogas’s words.

“I thought Ishtarica wouldn’t go to war,” Tiggle said, bravely standing on his trembling legs.

“Your Highness, that means nothing to Ishtarica right now,” a lady said.

“Why do you say that, Elena?”

“As the chancellor earlier noted: if we can not make amends, we’ll no longer be on any sort of friendly terms. On the contrary...”

“We’re more likely to be enemies, you say?” Warren asked with narrowed eyes.

“Indeed,” Elena replied. “I’m certain that you think that way.”

As the two stared at each other, Tiggle frowned while he trudged his way back to his seat. The little prince stomped so heavily as he walked—a clear indication that he wasn’t just displeased, he was offended. His grimace made it

all the more apparent.

“I suppose Ishtarica engages in its fair share of unexpected and meaningless action as well,” Garland said.

“Your Majesty,” Elena chided.

“Don’t stop me, Elena.”

Garland proceeded to chuckle. “If you wanted to completely cut ties with us, you could’ve done so quietly. Was there truly a need to prepare this island and gather us all here? Did you want everyone to hear your words?”

“Pardon me, but we believed that our ties had already been cut,” Warren replied.

“And? Did you have any business with my son, Tigger, or Euro?”

“Nothing in particular. We simply want assurance. If this meeting could relieve our spite and let bygones be bygones, we couldn’t be happier.”

“You’re contradicting yourself. Just moments ago, you stated that you couldn’t strike a deal with us because we were untrustworthy in your eyes.”

“Not at all. I’m not contradicting myself one bit.”

Only Elena noticed the murderous intent that permeated each and every word that came out of Warren’s mouth. Even Rogas was unable to sense that Ishtarica’s fangs had been subtly bared before Heim. This revelation led the noblewoman to widen her eyes in shock.

“Are those words on behalf of Ishtarica? Or are they your own, Chancellor?” Elena inquired.

But no response came. Both sides quietly glared at each other as the meeting came to a standstill. In contrast to Heim’s clearly annoyed royals, Silverd and Ein remained as calm as can be. As Elena sighed and exchanged a glance with Ein, the crown prince flashed a forced smile.

“Why don’t we continue this tomorrow? I feel as though we’ve talked enough for today,” he said.

There were only two days left. They still had much to talk about, but perhaps

this was a good place to end for the day. Sitting next to the royals, Warren nodded in agreement with Ein's declaration. Heim was of the same mindset. Before anyone else could stand up, Garland walked out with his knights in tow.

"Make haste," Garland barked, calling to his son from the entrance.

The third prince was tempted to speak with Krone, but he obediently left. Rogas then stood up with the knights, and Elena was the last to leave. She slowly stood up quietly and gazed at Krone for a short while before making her way to the exit.

"That was just like mother," Krone said.

"Were you fine with that?" Ein asked.

"Mm-hmm. I'm fine with this."

A moment of sorrow had been shared between the mother and daughter.

"Still, I cannot understand," Lloyd said. "What exactly do you think of Lady Krone's mother, Sir Warren?"

"Hmm? Whatever do you mean by that?" the chancellor questioned.

"She serves Heim so excellently as an officer, so referring to her as their 'ace' isn't faint praise. But if that is the case, why did she stay silent and let her royals do all the talking?"

"Well, if I were to guess, she was likely analyzing my words."

"Analyzing you?"

"Lady Elena is my sole concern as we meet with Heim. There's no need for me to state my reasoning at the moment, but please do not let your guard down around her." The chancellor broke into a smile. "She's plotting something, it seems."

"Very well," Silverd said. "I shall leave it all to you, Warren."

"Thank you. Please leave all aspects of tomorrow's meeting up to me, as you did today."

"Are you saying that our presence isn't required?"

As though to respond to Silverd's words, Warren stood up. He stood in front

of the Ishtarican delegation, spread his arms out, and spoke loudly.

“Please leave tomorrow’s meeting to me!”

No one doubted the chancellor’s words.

“Very well,” Silverd said on the nation’s behalf.

Just as he said he would, Warren acted on his own the following morning; separately from his king.

“Lily, have preparations been made?” Warren inquired.

“Yessir. Nothing is amiss,” she reported back.

She donned a conspicuous, black robe. However, this was a uniform of sorts worn by the spies under Warren’s command. Including Lily, the chancellor was surrounded by ten agents clad in black as he walked outside.

“Well done,” Warren said. “I intend to leave the final day of meetings in the care of Lady Krone. Thus, I’d like to clean up all the troublesome matters by the end of today.”

Lily handed the chancellor a stack of papers. “These are the replies we received from aristocrats.”

“I’m grateful to see that.”

“It’s all thanks to Sir Ein’s popularity.”

“Quite right. This method is only viable thanks to Sir Ein’s status as a hero. Not to mention that he’s just as beloved as the first king.”

“I’ve also caught word of House Pholus and their duke’s support as well.”

“Sir Ein has cultivated a deep bond with the duke’s son, Sir Leonardo. It seems that swayed House Pholus’s decision... Hmm?”

As Warren flipped through the pages, he came upon a map of Ishtarica. It was color coded in various places.

“This is the map depicting those in support, against, and uncertain of this idea,” Lily explained.

“The levels of support in Magna and Kingsland really stand out,” Warren observed, “In fact, almost everyone in Magna has offered their support.”

“We compiled this information last spring,” Lily replied. “Since this isn’t information for public consumption, everyone only gave their hypothetical replies, of course.”

“This is very helpful.” Once Warren finished reading, he tucked it away in his pocket. “It can even be used during times like these; one can never know too much.”

The chancellor let out a hearty chuckle as he headed for the meeting with Heim.

This time around, Heim’s delegation was late with Garland and Rogas nowhere to be seen. Accompanied by a whole host of knights and officers, Elena, Tiggie, and Glint walked into the room. However, the trio was stunned to see that only Ishtarica’s chancellor was sitting across from them. Elena was the first of her party to regain her composure. She only watched Warren silently as she prepared for the verbal dustup that was about to get underway.

“Is it just you today, Chancellor?” she inquired.

“Indeed,” Warren replied. “Everything has been left in my hands.”

“Is that so... His Highness is here with us, but His Majesty has also left this meeting up to our own discretion.”

Tiggie was already itching to chime in. His opponent hadn’t offered a single member of the royal family, only their chancellor. There was little wonder as to why he was irritated by this play, but Krone’s absence seemed to have dealt a blow to the little prince. In any case, Tiggie sat in the same seat Garland had rested his rump on the previous day. Elena was the last to sit down.



“Lady Elena,” an officer said, handing her a document. “His Majesty has claimed that we mustn’t ever take the blame. We cannot let Ishtarica do as they please.”

“It’s not just Heim who must take the blame,” Elena replied.

“Pardon?”

“No matter. Fall back.”

Once the officer had obediently done so, Elena decided to take the initiative.

“Chancellor, may we begin?” she requested.

“Certainly. We may,” Warren replied.

Elena didn’t have a specific topic in mind. She knew that they’d just clash and walk parallel paths with their opinions, or Warren would trick her into doing as he pleased. She had to start off strong.

“I’d like to confirm a few things regarding my father-in-law and daughter,” she started.

“Certainly,” Warren replied.

“If anything seems different from your understanding, please feel free to let me know. The two of them first headed to Bardland to recuperate.”

“That’s right.”

“They used our carriage to get to Bardland. From there, the pair used a carriage provided by either a merchant or the Euroans. Then after careful planning, they secretly left for Euro.”

“Indeed.”

“The two voluntarily formed a contract with the carriage then. Is this also true?”

Warren nodded, a little perplexed as to why she was asking for such minute details. It seemed like she was trying to gain his testimony or as if she was trying to steer the conversation in her favor.

“Were you unable to believe my nation’s reports?” Warren inquired.

“Oh, nothing like that at all,” Elena replied. “I’m very much aware of the power held by the Unified Nations of Ishtarica. I don’t doubt the route that those two took.”

“Then what would you like to know?”

“I just want to know if the two were kidnapped, or...”

“Are refugees, perhaps?”

Elena smiled. It was clear that the word “refugees” had caused her great joy, but Warren was unsure why.

“The two are refugees who fled to Ishtarica, I take it?” she asked.

“Are their standings important?” Warren replied.

“To me, it is. So, what are your thoughts?”

“Hmm...”

“If they aren’t, I’d like for you to tell me what their positions are. They weren’t kidnapped, but they now reside in Ishtarica. The two boarded an Ishtarican vessel in Euro and crossed the sea. And now Krone is the crown prince’s advisor. They aren’t just mere visitors then, are they?”

Elena implored Warren to make a decision.

“With that kind of argument, then I suppose I must state that they’re refugees,” Warren said. “However, they are already citizens of our nation.”

What Warren couldn’t understand was why exactly this confirmation was necessary. Since Elena clearly knew how Krone and Graff had fled to Ishtarica, there was little reason in verifying this. She was only able to explain what had happened to Tigger, but this sort of clarification was unnecessary. Surely, Elena didn’t want to waste her time with such trivial questions.

“So my family members are refugees, but yet, they are also Ishtarican citizens...” Elena mulled. “I see.”

“Is anything bothering you?” Warren asked.

“But of course. This is my family we’re talking about.”

It was obvious that she’d coerced Warren into making these statements, but

she had no openings to act upon.

“That’s right! Elena’s family had practically been stolen away!” Tiggie exclaimed.

“Y-Your Highness?!” Elena said, trying to stop the prince.

“Enough! I shall be the one to tell him!” Tiggie said, refusing to back down.

Warren fell silent, but he felt an oddity. Until now, the flow of the conversation had been quite smooth. Why didn’t Elena forcibly silence the boy? A woman as sharp as Elena could’ve surely figured out an option or two, but it was undoubtedly bad that the prince had butted in.

“Even if they were seeking refuge, Elena had been separated from her family!” Tiggie insisted. “It certainly brings her great sorrow for those around her to decide on these matters without her consent!”

“Ah, I’m so happy to hear that!” Warren suddenly said happily. “I never thought I’d be so elated to learn that I empathize with you, Third Prince!”

The chancellor clearly voiced his agreement, but Tiggie’s cheek twitched in response.

“Do you want to say something?” the third prince asked.

“It’s just such a coincidence,” Warren continued. “There was someone who lost their family who lives in our country too.”

“That’s none of my concern. If they’re one of your citizens, you should handle it yourselves.”

“Well, it just so happens that Heim ripped this citizen’s family away from them... I apologize for bringing this up now, but does any of this ring a bell?”

“Not a clue! Why do you believe we ripped a family apart?!”

While Tiggie raised his voice, Warren remained as calm as ever.

“Why, you ask? Well, because I’ve looked into it, of course,” Warren answered.

“Huh?” Tiggie said.

He wasn’t able to understand the chancellor’s words or even grasp a shred of

his true intentions. However, Warren quickly spelled out his thoughts.

“It seems that Heim’s first prince is living in the lap of luxury,” Warren said. “I’ve come to learn that he owns several manors, and upon further research, we’ve discovered that there’s an Ishtarican family confined within one of these properties.”

Tiggle gasped. None of the men manipulated by Rayfon were from Heim, so they surely must’ve been... Since they weren’t able to stay within Rockdam or Bardland borders, the men were easy to control. Had their identities been revealed, Heim would have been able to play dumb and cut them off. However...

“It certainly brings great sorrow to be separated from family, doesn’t it?” Warren said. “I couldn’t agree more.”

This changed things. While Tiggle didn’t know when Ishtarica had caught these men, the tables would be turned if Warren claimed them as his countrymen.

“E-Elena!” the prince said.

“Not to worry,” Elena replied, becoming the center of the conversation once more. “Chancellor, could those citizens perhaps be refugees as well?”

“Oh, I’m surprised you knew,” Warren replied.

“I just had a hunch. I’ve not been aware of your findings, but could you kindly allow me to take charge and return these Ishtaricans to their home?”

“Hmm... I personally believe that this would count as a preemptive strike on Heim’s part.”

“Oh, you jest!” Elena laughed. “The refugees’ families appeared in front of Prince Rayfon before the refugees themselves had sailed to Ishtarica. If you find this to be a crime, then I’d like to request something from your nation.”

“From us?”

“Quite so. My daughter and father-in-law are serious criminals.” Tiggle looked astonished beside her, but Elena confidently continued, “Despite their status as members of grand duke’s house, they left the country saying nary a word about

it to the royal family. Surely, this should be seen as an act of treason.”

“Perhaps you should take their circumstances into account first.”

“Feelings are null in the face of law. Perhaps they no longer wanted to serve a country that broke a contract. Even so, they have committed a crime. As the people who accepted them, Ishtarica could be seen as accomplices given your knowledge of their circumstances.”

Her words made sense. If Ishtarica wanted to argue about their new group of refugees, they certainly couldn’t complain if Heim grumbled about Krone. When it came to this issue, it was impossible to put one side at fault.

“Heim shall return those families to Ishtarica,” Elena said. “This would resolve the issue, would it not? If you were to bare your fangs here, you’d certainly be going against the first king’s word.”

“Indeed, that may be so,” Warren relented. “Very well.”

“Thank you.”

“Should the third prince draft a letter for me, I shall be satisfied.”

“B-But deciding on my brother’s matter by myself is—” Tiggie started.

“Pardon me, Your Highness, but now certainly isn’t the time to be concerned with such matters,” Elena interrupted him. “We cannot give them an opening for them to invade us.”

Tiggie felt wrapped in fear, clenching his fists tightly until they started to tremble. The boy’s face was beet red as he bit his lip and angrily slammed his fist on the desk. Only then did Warren give a nod of understanding, finally realizing where Elena’s true ambitions lay. He cracked a strained smile as the lady had scored a point on him in this battle of wits.

“As the third prince...I apologize for my older brother’s actions,” Tiggie managed to eke out.

“Then will you release them?” Warren asked.

“I shall.”

“Splendid. Then will you please get me that letter?”

“Do as you like.”

Tiggle weakly sat back down as he gazed into the floor over this blunder. How did Ishtarica know everything? This plan was specifically created to be nigh untraceable. Since Warren was aware of Rayfon’s manor, Tiggle knew he couldn’t make any careless excuses.

“I’m exhausted,” Tiggle said feebly, letting out a huge sigh.

“Since it seems the third prince is tired, why don’t we take a break?” Warren suggested.

“That’d be great. Elena... Here you go.” He handed the lady the royal family’s seal. “I’ll leave that issue to you. Under my name, you may make any promise you desire.”

“I understand,” Elena replied.

“I’ll be outside getting some fresh air. I’ll be back in a while, so please wait for me here until then.”

With Glint in tow, Tiggle left. Elena stood up and approached the chancellor sitting across from her. Officers and knights tried to follow her, but she raised her hand to stop them.

“I’ll be fine by myself, so please stay there,” she ordered.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She stood before the chancellor without walking loudly, and he encouraged her to take a seat beside him.

“I shall prepare the letter, so would you please give me a few moments?” an officer asked.

“Very well,” Elena replied.

Warren smiled. “You didn’t try to stop the third prince. Was that all a part of your plan?”

“It was,” Elena confessed. “Since I’m up against Ishtarica’s chancellor, I have to take any chance I can get.”

“That’s a good mindset to have. Did you attempt to employ our knight as part

of your ploy?”

“Do you have any complaints?”

“Oh, nothing like that. Judging from the contents of this letter, I wasn’t too worried. But I was quite surprised when that knight mentioned his exchange with you. I always thought that you simply wanted to spare some poor women from a terrible fate.”

Warren took out an envelope. It contained a list of the women imprisoned by Rayfon along with details regarding the refugees.

“You provided me with information that would let you hold Heim’s fate in the palm of your hand,” Warren said.

“I’d never give anything out for free,” Elena replied.

“Then you’re aware of my motives, perhaps?”

“Not of Ishtarica’s motives. But if it’s in regards to your personal motives, I think I’ve got an idea.”

“Interesting. Then why don’t we compare our answers?”

To outsiders, it appeared as if they were only discussing Rayfon. But in truth, they were trying to gauge each other’s feelings.

“Ishtarica wants not only to sever all ties to Heim, but they want some definitive proof to go along with it,” Elena started.

“Precisely so, Lady Elena,” Warren replied.

“Hence, this meeting. But you have other thoughts in mind. You don’t have an iota of trust in Heim, so you desire a different kind of proof—no, a justifiable reason, perhaps.”

This implied...

“You want an excuse to invade Heim,” Elena finished.

Warren didn’t nod his head, but he didn’t deny these claims either. He simply smiled at her. This was his answer in hopes of not going against the first king’s words, but in Elena’s mind, he might as well have agreed with her implication.

“To be precise, you wanted an excuse to act first should Heim try to make a

move,” Elena continued. “I believe this meeting has given you just that, Chancellor.”

“And why do you think that?” Warren asked.

“A promise written on paper can be ripped apart at any time. I’m certain that you think the same; you must’ve wanted to pursue another avenue of action should that occur.”

“Hmm, just as I thought. You’re rather sharp, Lady Elena.”

“I’m honored to receive such high praise from you.”

Warren’s requested letter had been drafted and handed off to Elena for verification. Once she confirmed the letter’s contents, she signed her name. After that, she took the royal seal that she received from Tiggle and firmly stamped it down.

“And now, we can no longer request for the return of Krone or my father-in-law,” Elena said, implying that Tiggle had to give up on her daughter as well.

“You have a few goals in mind yourself, Lady Elena,” Warren said. “Firstly, you wanted the third prince to give up on his quest for Lady Krone. Second, you wanted to save the women trapped by the first prince.” But above all... “You wanted to use these factors to end things amicably with us.”

This meeting wasn’t quite held for Heim—it was mostly to placate Tiggle’s wishes. Should the third prince give up on Krone, no one would bat an eye if Ishtarica wanted to sever all their ties to Heim. This would not only put many old grievances to bed, but allow Heim to evade the worst possible scenario—war.

“From the start, I had no confidence in claiming victory during this meeting, Chancellor,” Elena said.

“Hmm, which is why you decided to use the first prince’s issues to your advantage,” Warren replied. “And during this meeting, you steered me into saying that the people trapped in your first prince’s manor are refugees, as Lady Krone is. With that, you won my declaration that they’re unrelated to Heim.”

This prevented Ishtarica from filing any complaints about Rayfon. The

remaining issues were trivial. Though Heim was stubbornly fixated on the idea of a clear victor, they were unsuccessful in sticking their nose into Ishtarica's business. The moment Rayfon's misdeeds were brought to light, Elena believed that both Tiggle and Garland couldn't be so forward in their demands. And so, she...

"To me, this is a victory enough," Elena said.

Prince Tiggle's quest had come to an end, removing the need for an unnecessary conflict. To consider this meeting as a victory, Elena required that Heim's ties were severed with Ishtarica in an amicable manner.

"Oh my..." Warren said. "It seems like you were one step ahead of me."

Out of the numerous battles she'd fought, Elena had managed to end this one in a draw. This was a huge victory for Elena but provided a frustrating truth for Warren.

However...

"There was a small difference in understanding, but it more or less went as I'd expected," the chancellor said. He'd claimed that they wanted to compare answers, after all.

He wasn't talking about Elena's thoughts anymore; he just wanted to confirm if she was privy to his motives.

"Your plan was splendid, but a bit lacking," he said.

"Lacking?" Elena asked.

"Of course, if your primary goal is to evade war, then you've done just fine. But you see, there's something I want more than just an excuse."

Warren's eyes twinkled fearlessly, causing Elena to stare back at him in befuddlement.

Later that afternoon, King Garland of Heim made his appearance at Warren's request. The monarch wasn't eager to attend this meeting, but a combined appeal from Elena and Tiggle had reluctantly brought him out. Unlike the defeated Tiggle, Garland was still trying his best to maintain a shred of his pride.

As Heim's delegation pondered what was about to happen, Lily arrived and passed out a series of documents.

"Please take a look," Warren said.

All at once, everyone in the room started scanning the pages they'd been handed. It was a carefully color-coded map, divvying up Ishtarica in a series of vibrant colors. A few cities on the map had the words "support" or "against" written over them.

"These are the results of a survey given out to aristocrats from across the nation. Specifically, their thoughts on issues pertaining to Sir Ein," Warren said.

"Elena, what is this?" Tiggie asked in confusion.

Elena closed her eyes. "It means only one thing, of course. Please take a look at the port city of Magna. The crown prince appears to be incredibly popular there."

Over ninety percent were in favor of Ein.

"And the same goes for the royal capital as well," Elena continued. "It's no wonder, since Kingsland has deep ties with the crown prince. And we're being shown this because..."

"This must be a map showing the people in favor of or against the invasion of Heim..." Tiggie finished.

"I believe so."

"Gh... H-Hey! Are you lot planning on invading our kingdom?! Will you go against the first king's words and launch a preemptive strike?! We've done nothing!"

"Oh dear, the topic has shifted, I see," Warren said with a smile, unpreoccupied with the third prince's words. "We shall never launch a preemptive strike."

"Don't you lie to me!"

"I'm not at all. If we were to attack, we'd merely be settling your past debts."

"Past debts?"

“You broke our contract, did you not? That by itself is enough of a reason.”

“W-We didn’t use military force!”

“Hmm...” Warren tilted his head to one side while looking at Tigger. The chancellor then glanced at Elena, who was sitting right beside the prince. “What do you think, my lady?”

Asking me? What a nasty man... Elena thought. She didn’t dare vocalize her thoughts, but she loathed him for pushing this decision onto her. Like it or not, she had to provide an answer.

“I believe it has nothing to do with military force,” Elena replied. “But I suppose Ishtarica may view it differently.”

“Quite so,” Warren replied. “Now then, I’d like to state that this doesn’t reflect His Majesty’s opinion. In other words, this investigation only relays the thoughts of myself and the other nobles in our nation. Nothing written here is definite, so please keep that in mind.”

“What a waste of time. This is nothing more than a threat,” Garland said in an attempt to look tough.

“Then why don’t I tell you about the power I hold?” Warren suggested. “When it comes to the hierarchy of those who give out orders, it’s the king, the crown prince, then myself. With my authority, I can mobilize a fleet of ships and take full command of them.”

“Are you sane?”

“The first king’s words are very influential. But if worse comes to worst, I must become the poison.”

“Answer me, Chancellor!”

As Garland raised his voice, Elena fought against the impulse to cover her ears. Warren wasn’t planning on using force at the moment, but he was currently using raw power to apply pressure onto Heim. It was simple but effective against the enemy royal family’s refusal to listen to anyone.

“Do you understand what I mean by ‘poison,’ Lady Elena?” Warren inquired.

“The crown prince has the ability to decompose toxins,” Elena replied. “In

other words, his name and authority can remove any poison without effort. Even if it came from you, Chancellor.”

“Wonderful! That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Warren replied with a beaming smile. “But of course, it’s quite possible to settle your debts in a more peaceful fashion.”

Heim’s delegate was overcome with a moment of relief. The Heims regained their composure before they pathetically turned to Elena for advice, implying that everything would be left to her. But more importantly, the royal’s unspoken actions would make her the chancellor’s opponent. She recoiled at the responsibility, but nodded.

“May I ask what solution you have in mind? What are the terms?” Elena asked.

“First, I request that your kingdom cut off any and all communication with our nation,” Warren said. “This includes asking our Euroan allies to pass a message along, of course. However, this only applies to public matters. Our citizens may commingle to their heart’s content.”

For now, Heim could easily live with these terms.

“Next, I request that you enter a neutrality agreement with Euro,” the chancellor said.

“What would happen if Euro were to invade Heim?” Elena inquired.

“You may do as you like. Should something of the sort happen, I can confidently assume that Ishtarica’s partnership with Euro would come to an abrupt end.”

“I understand your response, but Heim would be left constantly on the defensive in that situation.”

“Unfortunately, that has nothing to do with us.”

Warren wasn’t wrong, but it was difficult to obediently nod along with his words. Upon realizing just how far the chancellor had dug his heels, Heim’s royals opted to remain silent and left it all to Elena.

“What would happen if we were to violate the first part of that agreement,

Chancellor?” Elena asked.

“We wouldn’t deploy our forces immediately, of course,” Warren replied. “But, we wouldn’t sit idly by either. If that comes to pass, we would send a fraction of our reserves to Euro and have them shipped to Bardland from there.”

“By reserves, are you referring to magical tools and weapons?”

It would be threatening enough if Ishtarica sent supplies to Bardland and the other countries around the continent, but Warren had something far more devastating in mind.

“We shall provide them wheat and other grains,” Warren answered. “As our nation is gargantuan when compared to Heim, we have fully stocked food reserves and a healthy surplus to go along with them. If we were to sell the excess, I’d foresee it being a rather excellent business deal.”

In that case, the primary issue would be the flow of product to Euro. Before even a single grain would make its way to Bardland, a steady river of gold would be flowing through Euro. In fact, the economic boom would allow the principality to exponentially increase its national budget without a problem. Euro would morph into a prosperous country with a mighty army to protect it—a pair of factors that could easily supercharge a nation’s growth. As a result, Heim would inevitably suffer a massive blow to their export industry.

“We haven’t touched this industry as we haven’t been particularly reliant on the grain trade,” Warren continued. “But should the situation change, I wouldn’t be able to make any guarantees.”

There wasn’t much that Elena could say in response to these ruthless claims.

“I pray that such a change won’t come,” she feebly replied.

To her ears, it sounded like Ishtarica could easily wipe them off the map without even lifting a finger of military might. Elena wished that the chancellor were lying, but she knew that this wasn’t a bluff. If the countries surrounding Heim were to amass power, the kingdom would eventually fall off the power ladder alongside their dignity. Heim was the continent’s champion, but they no longer had the leeway to act so boldly. In fact, this retaliatory plan of action was

far more humiliating and mean-spirited than a simple invasion.

“Now...” Warren said. He wasn’t done naming his terms just yet. “Lastly, I suppose I’d like an apology.”

Garland’s body jolted at the idea.

“It can be a small and simple apology, but I believe that to be quite significant all the same,” the chancellor explained. “It’s better than nothing at all. Please draft a letter of apology addressed to our king.”

“Are you telling *me* to apologize?” Garland asked.

“Is there a problem?”

“You’re telling a king to lower his head! Do you understand exactly what you are saying?!”

“Do *you* understand exactly who has suffered and to what degree their anger smolders? If you do, I highly recommend that you follow my request.”

Heim no longer had a choice in the matter, nor were they in any position to make one. Forced to swallow a tough pill, Garland breathed deeply and loudly as he flared his nostrils. Despite the fact his face had turned a deep shade of scarlet, the monarch attempted to calm himself down.

Still, he wasn’t so mad as to forget his survival instincts. After a few moments of simmering in anger, he calmed down and said in a trembling voice, “Tomorrow, then.”

Meanwhile, the crown prince was sitting in a room aboard the *Princess Olivia*.

“What’s this document, Ein?” Krone asked.

“It came to me this morning, before Warren left for the meeting,” Ein replied.

She was holding a copy of the document that Warren had brought with him into the grand conference room. Just like the original paper, it listed those in support of and against issues pertaining to the crown prince. Krone appeared to be transfixed on the document as she waited for an answer from Ein.

“It’s a little embarrassing to say out loud, but it sounds like Warren was asking

around to see if I should hasten my ascension to the throne,” Ein said.

“No wonder people in Kingsland and Magna have given their overwhelming support,” Krone noted.

“My grandfather doesn’t seem to mind the idea of abdicating the throne. It would give him a chance to finally rest.”

“Hmm... But you’re so popular, aren’t you?”

With a big smile on her face, Krone slid closer to Ein from the other end of the sofa. They were so close now that they were practically touching each other. Ein blushed after he caught a hint of her pleasant scent and felt her warmth next to him. But more than anything, he was tickled pink by the praise regarding his popularity.

“S-Sure, I guess!” he quickly said.

“You don’t have to look so embarrassed,” Krone replied.

“I’m not. I just wonder why now?”

“What do you mean?”

“The timing seems odd. I feel like there was no need for him to take this document into the meeting. I wonder if he had some sort of reason for it.”

“Hmm... Why don’t you ask Sir Warren later?”

“Well, maybe not.”

It didn’t seem like that important of a reason. All smiles, Ein and Krone continued chatting as they eagerly awaited Warren’s return.

“I’m sorry,” Garland said. On the last day of meetings, Heim’s monarch had finally given Ishtarica an apology. While he looked to be mighty frustrated, Garland personally handed a letter to Silverd.

“My deepest apologies,” Tigger said as he lowered his head. Opposed to his father, the prince’s face was much redder and therefore, much easier to read.

The little prince thought there was nothing more humiliating than lowering his head before Krone. However, this was necessary in order to conclude the

meeting on amicable terms. There was next to no chance Heim would get away without prostrating themselves.

“I shall accept your apology,” Silverd said.

The father and son duo breathed a sigh of relief and slowly returned to their chairs. They didn’t stagger away like newborn fawns, but they frailly walked along without the brash, indignant aura they arrived with. Tiggle stared at Krone as he sat down, unable to give up on her.

“He’s staring so hard...” Ein whispered as he dryly smiled.

Krone gently kicked Ein underneath the table. She didn’t take kindly to his indifference to the situation, using a kick in lieu of words to get her feelings across. He knew that his advisor would probably nag him later, but he found her badgering to be adorable.

Seeing her opportunity to jump in, Elena entered the conversation. “In regards to our neutrality agreement with Euro, wouldn’t it be best to stamp our seal there?”

“Certainly,” Krone replied in a businesslike tone. “We shall ask the principality to convey our schedule to you. Please be aware that once we’ve received the seal in Euro, that shall be the last time we speak.”

Even though the mother and daughter hadn’t seen each other in years, this was the discussion they had. A few members of Ishtarica’s Knights Guard felt a twinge of loneliness eat at their stomachs. On the other side of the aisle, some of Heim’s knights were silently weeping beneath their helmets. To them, it didn’t matter that Krone was an aristocrat who’d abandoned her home country.

“Per the chancellor’s earlier statements, all communication between us will cease,” Krone finished.

“Krone... Do you truly intend to never return?” Tiggle inquired. While there was a time and place for everything, the prince would likely never have this chance again should he let it slip through his fingers.

“I don’t think that’s something we should discuss here.”

Krone thought that it was beautiful to see someone so wholeheartedly in love

with another person. However, the road leading up to this moment was filled with obstacles, not to mention that she didn't care for Tiggie at all. Had she not made her thoughts into words, the third prince would never give up. With that in mind, she resolved herself to speak the following words.

"I shall never become your wife. It's an honor to see you think so fondly of me, but I hope that you can simply forget that I exist."

She knew that Tiggie's response would be one of shock, and indeed, it was. The prince wasn't willing to admit this, but he'd just been firmly rejected. Glint found himself tempted to raise a complaint or two, but he chose to bite his lip and bear the humiliation—the boy's rank and the situation wouldn't allow anything else.

"Now, I believe that concludes this meeting," Krone said as she glanced at Heim's delegation.

It was then that Garland said, "Why don't we end this with one final, friendly match?"

"There's no need," Krone replied.

"Your marshal and our general. The two can display their moves and— Hmm? What did you just say?"

"I said, 'There's no need.'"

"Wh-Why not?!"

"Because it doesn't seem necessary."

Having foreseen the king's suggestion from miles away, both Krone and Warren had an answer prepared well in advance. Barring extenuating circumstances, they chose to decline the match. A victory meant nothing here, and it would be a massive loss if Lloyd were to be injured.

"The marshal has duties to attend to once he returns home," Krone said. "I pray for your understanding."

That reason prevented Garland from pushing the topic further. Soon after, he seemingly had forgotten his fear and anger from earlier in the day. The monarch slumped his shoulders, looking as if he was now bored out of his mind.

Later that evening, Elena realized that she'd forgotten to confirm something during the meeting. Alongside Glint, she headed to the Ishtarican port, but discovered not a single member of the delegation was around. When she asked a member of the Knights Guard for help, she was told that they had gone to the island's center for a party. And so, the Heim pair started their trek through the forest.

"I'm sorry for dragging you along all this way," Elena apologized.

"Oh, not at all," Glint replied. "This is all a part of the job. Please don't mind me. Um, are you sure about Lady Krone?"

"She's long left the nest and is living on her own already. I suppose it's high time I let her go."

Elena was able to see the splendid young woman her daughter had grown into, a lady beyond her mother's wildest dreams. Elena could even sense how close Krone and Ein were, leaving her with nothing to worry about. She was a tad bothered by the lie that Heim had been told, but Elena felt that praying for her daughter's happiness wouldn't earn her ire.

"Is that how it is?" Glint replied. "I'm afraid I just can't wrap my head around it."

"When the day comes for you and Lady Shannon to welcome a child into this world, I think you will," Elena said.

Glint laughed. "Then I suppose I should look forward to that future answer." Just then, the knight immediately changed his expression. "Still, I simply cannot agree."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm talking about Lady Krone. I apologize for speaking ill of your daughter in front of you, but I can't seem to understand how she could choose *him*."

"I'm guessing you're referring to the crown prince?"

"Quite right. While he does have a decent face on him and is a bit smarter than most, His Highness far outclasses that man."

Troubled, Elena tilted her head to the side in response to Glint's discontent. The affairs of House Roundheart were well-known within the kingdom's social circles. As it had been told again and again: Glint was the superior younger brother, and the older brother, Ein, wasn't worthy of leading his house into the future. As a thread in this story, Glint likely held a stronger ill will towards his brother than most. In short, the younger Roundheart had a bad habit of unconsciously looking down on his older brother.

"That so-called Sea Dragon is apparently the size of an Ishtarican warship," Glint said. "There's no way he could kill a monster like that by himself."

"I suppose it'd make one doubt their ears at first..." Elena added.

"Exactly. My only thought is that they're trying to drown the crown prince with praise—"

Just as Glint was about to talk behind his brother's back, a familiar figure descended from the trees lining their current path.

"Mm-hmm, okay..." Lily said. "Then why don't you have a look?"

Elena buried her face in her hands. *Why can't she ever say hello like a normal person?* she wondered.

"Wh-Who are you?!" Glint roared, swiftly unsheathing his sword. "Where'd you come from?!"

"Oh, okay, so um, this thing here is called a *tree*. Do you know what that is?" Lily asked mockingly. "Anyhoo, I stepped off from this tree, right here. Do you follow me?"

"Don't provoke him..." Elena muttered. "Can't you just walk up to us?"

"Lady Elena?! Do you know who this woman is?!" Glint asked.

"She's the one who sneaked into our castle."

"A-Ah... No wonder she looked familiar. Then you must be Chancellor Warren's subordinate!"

"Ahhh, you got me. Yeah, okay, whatever," Lily replied. "So, do you wanna have a look or not?"

She looked as though this whole situation was giving her a headache. Lily proceeded to flip out her knife and started using it to scratch her neck. It might have been a bug bite, but no normal person would use a knife to scratch an itch. Just watching her scratch away made most others anxious.

“You appear without warning and now you’re asking if we ‘wanna have a look or not’?” Elena asked. “What are you trying to say?”

“Huh?” Lily replied. “You two were going on about how you couldn’t trust Sir Ein’s might.”

“So, what are you going to show us?”

“Why, Sir Ein, of course!”

What is she on about? Elena wondered as Lily flashed a carefree smile right back at her. The Ishtarican hadn’t answered a single question, and the mentally exhausted Elena hadn’t the patience to be kind with Lily.

“Listen! To! Me! What I’m saying is, what about the crown prince will you be showing us?!” Elena shouted, pinching the cheeks of her former subordinate and stretching them as far as they’d go.

“Waaah! O-Owww! Sh-Shtop that!” Lily wailed.

Glint looked slightly panicked. “We mustn’t use violence against them...”

“I don’t care!” Elena yelled back. “She suddenly appears out of nowhere and is all smiles while she’s toying with us!”

“L-Laley Elena... Pleash... Let go...” Lily begged. Her cheeks were stretched so far that she was having a tough time stringing vowels and consonants together.

Elena finally released the cheeks from her grasp. “Very well. But you’d best explain what you mean.”

“Oof... You’ve still got some spunk in you, Lady Elena...”

Lily’s cheeks were red, but she looked so happy that she was liable to break out into a dance at any moment.

“Why do you look so pleased with yourself?” Elena asked.

“Well, I got to speak with you,” Lily replied. “Now then, why don’t we walk

out to the clearing in front of the central structure? Sir Lloyd said that he wanted to have a quick match all of a sudden. Something about kicking things off...and Sir Ein will be engaging in some swordplay too.”

She walked ahead without waiting for a response.

“I-Is that true?!” Glint exclaimed.

“Yep!” Lily answered. “And could you hurry up and put your blade away already? I’ve got aichmophobia.”

“Hmm... Really?” Elena asked.

“Nah, I’m lying. I looove my knife!”

Even Elena couldn’t hold her own with Lily in the banter department. The noblewoman only needed to make a single passing remark before being teased relentlessly for it. Usually, not long after, Lily would be getting a huge kick out of Elena’s reactions and chuckling along.

“Ah, I’m starting to see it! There they are!” Lily said.

She quickly slowed down and took cover in a tree’s shadow. While gazing at the clearing before her, Elena noticed the surrounding area had been transformed into a simple party space with plenty of chairs and tables around. Many of Ishtarica’s authority figures and their knights were jovially chatting away.

“His Majesty, Sir Ein, Lady Olivia, Lady Katima, and everyone else has gathered before you,” Lily explained.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Tired already, Dill?!” Lloyd said, his booming voice echoing throughout the forest.

“That voice must be...” Glint said, crouching forward.

“Seems like Sir Lloyd and Dill are having their match,” Lily said.

Greatly interested, Glint and Elena peered deeper into the clearing.

The intense atmosphere of battle permeated the air while the sharp clanging of cold hard steel rang in everybody’s ears.

“Ha ha ha!” Lloyd laughed. “What’s wrong? Done already?”

Every time the marshal swung his blade, he’d backed Dill into a corner. As he watched from the shadows, Glint could hardly believe that Lloyd was human. This lumbering man easily overpowered the same knight that Glint found himself losing against.

“Gh...” Dill grunted, down on his knees.

His father stood before him without a scratch to his name. Lloyd looked to be a touch out of breath, but he wasn’t tired at all. Just as the match ended, one of the royals shouted at Dill.

“Hey, Dill! Why the heck are mew losing?! Mrow! C’mon you do this! And then that!”

“Aunt Katima, kneading with your paws doesn’t quite clarify anything,” Ein said wearily.

“Be quiet, mew! Dill! One meow time!”

“Don’t push him too much...”

After giving some cryptic advice, Katima chose to leave it all up to sheer willpower. Sitting beside her, Ein looked back at his aunt with world-weary eyes. However, Dill stood back up after hearing the princess’s words. There was no starting signal, but he took an aggressive step forward.

“Raaah!” he bellowed.

“You stood up again! Well done!” Lloyd praised. “I’d expect no less from my son!”

And yet, the marshal showed no signs of holding back. With supersonic speed, he brought down his greatsword and threw Dill back to the ground.

“Powerful as always, father...” the young knight panted.

The other knights chattered while watching the pair’s swords clash. Dill was easily blown back, but he could efficiently defend himself and regain his footing in the same split second. The fact that he still could talk made him a subject of admiration for the other members of the Knights Guard. Under the night sky, this exhibition match proceeded to its next step.

“All right, then! Meow, we must use our final weapon!” Katima shouted, standing on her chair as she tugged on Ein’s shirt.

“Why’re you pulling on my sleeve?” Ein asked.

“U-Um! Er! Sir Ein! If you’d like, I shall be Sir Lloyd’s opponent!” Chris hastily said.

“Oh, I’m not against fighting the marshal or anything,” Ein replied. “I just don’t want this no-good c—I mean, Aunt Katima to pull on my sleeve. I sort of would like to see a match between you and Lloyd, though.”

“No!” Katima insisted. “Ein, mew haven’t done meowch work while we’ve been out here! Mew must be brimming with energy! I’m pawsitive of that!”

“Are you picking a fight with me?”

Krone, Olivia, and Chris flashed a series of telling smiles at the duo.

“It’s the superior’s duty to avenge their fallen subordinate! In that case, this calls for mew, Ein!”

“You’re not wrong, but that’d put Chris before me,” Ein said.

“Mroooow! You’re such a nitpicky little nephew! Go! Shoo!”

Katima kicked the crown prince with gusto. Ein didn’t feel any pain whatsoever, but he definitely felt irritated. He was tempted to grab the Cait-Sìth by the scruff of her neck and tie her to a tree. Lucky for her, he didn’t indulge that urge and picked up a training sword. The prince’s eyes were now locked on Lloyd.

“Seems like I’m next,” Ein said.

“Hmm? Ha ha ha! I’ve been waiting for you, Sir Ein!” the marshal bellowed.

The nearby Knights Guard members looked to be more excited about this clash than the one that just wrapped up. One of them raised their arms and called out to the prince while others cheered for his victory.

“Your Highness!” a knight called.

“Sir Lloyd doesn’t have much stamina left!” another advised.

“H-Hey!” Lloyd complained. “Why aren’t any of you rooting for me?!”

“Let’s begin, Lloyd,” Ein said.

“Ugh... I feel like I’ve already lost, but I won’t lose when it comes to a test of swordplay!”

Ein grasped his blade and walked in front of Lloyd. Glint narrowed his eyes to view the match.

“Hmph! I’m sure this match will—” Glint started.

End in a flash. Thinking back to Lloyd’s fighting from mere moments ago, Glint was certain that his brother didn’t have a chance against such a mighty marshal. The young Roundheart was reluctant to admit it, but there was a real possibility Ishtarica’s marshal was way stronger than his father. Elena silently watched on.

She thought she heard her daughter call out, “You can do it, Ein!”

When she looked for the voice’s source, Elena saw her daughter’s sparkling eyes and a wide smile. Despite all the people around Krone, she didn’t hesitate to raise her voice. The noblewoman had never seen her daughter look so happy. Upon realizing that Krone truly loved Ein, Elena could feel Lily squeezing her hand.

“I’ll hold your hand,” her former subordinate said.

“Huh?!” Elena gasped.

“I know you might not want me to, but bear it for now. Ah, look, it’s coming.”

Just as Elena was about to point out that she wasn’t a child, she felt an earth-shattering clang reverberate throughout her entire body. She instinctively crouched low in response.

“Was that...” she murmured.

Elena wasn’t the only one shaking; the trees were as well. If it wasn’t the result of a strong gust of wind or an earthquake, what was it? While Glint looked to be equally surprised, he couldn’t tear his eyes away from his brother.

“Now, now! Everything is all right!” Lily said brightly.

As embarrassing as it was for her to admit, Elena had been scared stiff for a

moment. However, she refused to admit that Lily's hand-holding had put her at ease following the clang.

"I think you'll get used to it here shortly, so please do your best not to mind the match's intensity and keep watching," Lily encouraged.

"Get used to it?" Elena asked before she felt another thunderous shock wave. "Eep! L-Lily! Just what is going on?!"

"Sir Ein is simply swinging his sword. Like I said earlier, he's a hero."

As Lily calmly encouraged her to gaze back into the clearing, Elena noticed that Lloyd was exerting himself like never before. It was almost as if a different man had stepped in to face Ein after the last match. Over on the crown prince's side, he displayed an impressive degree of expertise with his blade.

"Is that...really him?" Glint murmured.

"I don't like how rude you're being, but yes, that is Sir Ein" Lily answered.

Even as they continued to speak, every single clash of blades sent a shock wave rippling throughout the forest. The ripples were so intense, they could be called sharp and even sting one's skin. Glint was at a loss for words; he never knew that the mere clanging of cold steel could unleash such powerful shock waves.

"Those two are genuine superhumans," Lily said. "One's a hero and the other's a marshal. Dill's an undoubtedly accomplished swordsman, but his prowess might fall short in the face of that duo."

"Sir Rogas once said that the crown prince never had any talent with a sword," Elena said, unable to believe the sight unfolding before her eyes.

"Well, if you really wanna go there, neither does Sir Lloyd. He was born with a skill called Needlework."

Yet, such a person could easily be called "the knight of all knights." None of Heim's people had ever fathomed that idea before, as it stood far apart from any form of common sense they were accustomed to.

"Impossible..." Glint managed to squeeze out feebly.

It was then that the boy realized the implications being made. If Ein could go

toe-to-toe with Lloyd, he could surely outclass Heim's general.

"Then it truly means that my father—" Glint started.

"Couldn't win against Sir Ein?" Lily inquired.

"Y-You!"

"Don't get angry at *me*! Isn't that what you were about to say?"

"Shut up! Just be quiet!"

Could my father hold his own against these two? Could he take a single blow?

These questions couldn't help but bubble to the surface of the boy's mind. Thus far, the championship match between Rogas and Edward of Euro was the most magnificent battle Glint had ever witnessed. However, the fight currently unfolding before him had far surpassed that—Ein and Lloyd's battle was truly unlike anything he'd ever seen before. The young knight tried to shake his head to forget it all, but his body could clearly recall the impact and intensity of everything he'd just witnessed.

"Dammit..." Glint muttered. He was gritting his teeth so hard that he came close to crushing his molars.

He proceeded to punch a nearby tree with all the might he could muster. Then, without another word, he ran straight for Heim's port.

"Whoops. Looks like he's fled," Lily said.

"Goodness... That's your fault, Lily," Elena sighed.

"Oooh! You sounded exactly like Lady Krone just now!"

"We've talked like this many times, have we not? And we're mother and daughter. Can't you tell?"

Once Elena was relaxed enough to engage in a little banter, Lily let go of her hand. The ocean breeze blew through the noblewoman's open hand, taking the warmth of her former subordinate's touch along with it. Elena knew that the two nations had cut ties, and the breeze seemed to serve as a reminder of that cold reality—the two ladies would be parting ways for good. Lily flashed her usual friendly smile.

“You heard her, Lady Krone. What do you think?” Lily asked, grinning from ear to ear as the advisor’s name left her lips.

“I believe Sir Warren to have been a great influence on me, but there will never be a greater influence than my mother,” a familiar voice said.

Elena wasn’t able to hide her befuddlement at first, but she quickly noticed the person standing behind her. “Huh?”

“Lady Krone, Lady Lily and I shall be waiting nearby,” Chris said.

“Thank you,” Krone replied.

It seemed Elena’s daughter had arrived alongside an Elven knight. With Lily in tow, Chris left the mother and daughter.

“It’s truly been a long time,” Krone said, hugging her mother tightly once they were alone.

Elena and Krone couldn’t give words to their feelings during the meeting, but now that they were alone, the pair didn’t need to worry about their present company.

“Krone, why are you here?” Elena asked.

“Lady Lily sent me a signal,” Krone replied. “Sir Warren saw it and I requested that Chris bring me over.”

When did they ever have a chance to do something like that? Elena wondered. But for now, she didn’t want to bother about the details—this might have been her last chance to see her beloved daughter’s face. As Elena hugged her daughter back, she realized just how much Krone had matured.



“You’ve become a far more attractive young lady,” Elena noted.

“Oh? Was I not pretty enough before?” Krone asked.

“You were the kind of girl who’d recklessly toss aside important documents tied to a marriage arrangement without so much as a glance.”

“How awful of you to say that. Though I do think it’s your fault for not bringing Ein’s papers along, mother.”

“Even if I had, I’m sure you would’ve discarded them.”

“That’s not true. If they were Ein’s, I would’ve thoroughly perused them.”

Krone hadn’t changed a bit from the little girl she was back in Heim, always confident and strong-willed. But perhaps she now shone much brighter as Heim was simply too small of a kingdom for her. Ishtarica had polished her very well.

“Your claims are baseless, and yet you’re so confident, aren’t you?” Elena asked.

“Of course. Which is why it’s your fault, mother,” Krone replied.

“All right, all right. I suppose I’ll tell your father that too.”

Satisfied with her mother’s answer, Krone was all smiles as she stepped away from Elena’s side.

“I heard that Ein found you lodging in Magna,” Krone said.

“I never would’ve guessed that the man was the crown prince,” Elena answered. “And? Who did you hear that from?”

“Sir Warren. Ah, but Ein doesn’t know that. Keep this a secret, okay?”

“I would’ve never expected the crown prince to be wandering around on his own. But now I know why. He’s very powerful, isn’t he?”

Krone giggled. “Well, he *is* a hero.”

“With a hero by your side, I suppose you could walk around at night.”

It was then that Krone frowned with displeasure. “I was about to finally lock lips with Ein, but the third prince and his knight happened to be around to ruin the moment.”

Three years older than Ein, Krone would be turning sixteen come her next birthday. An aristocratic woman would've already been married at her age, and some would even have children already. But if one's partner were to be the crown prince, the situation would change.

"Krone, I know that you like the crown prince, but..." Elena started, trying to scold her daughter for using an unladylike expression to describe kissing.

"No, I don't like Ein," Krone replied.

This confused Elena, who cocked her head to one side. She seemed to be a little surprised, but Elena was soon relieved to hear just how smitten her daughter was.

"I don't just like him," Krone said. "I love him. He's so dear to me. At least say that I really like him or something."

"Yes, yes... I understand that you love him..." Elena replied.

Love could change women, and it seemed Krone was no exception. Elena knew that her daughter had worked hard to achieve her rank, but seeing her act in such a way worried the Heim mother.

"And what does the crown prince think of you?" Elena asked.

"I wouldn't know," Krone answered. "I'm not Ein. But the other day, Ein was about to lock lips with me of his own volition."

As Elena thought of the crown prince, she knew that he viewed Krone quite favorably. It was a pity that Elena couldn't receive a clear response from her daughter, but Lily had previously said that things were going smoothly between the two of them. And so, as a mother, she prayed for her daughter's feelings to be requited.

"I hope no one will interrupt you next time," Elena said, rooting for her daughter's love.

While Krone and Elena were enjoying their conversation, Ein and Lloyd were finishing up their match. Showered by the praise of the Knights Guard, the prince returned to his seat following his brief workout. He looked quite satisfied

that he could take the rare opportunity to cross blades with Lloyd.

“Warren, is Krone over there?” Ein asked.

“Over there?” the chancellor replied.

“You know what I’m talking about, don’t you? I was focusing my senses during the match, so it’s easier for me to notice these things.”

Instead of turning around, Ein gazed at a grouping of trees.

“Chris isn’t here, so I’m guessing she went along as a guard,” he said.

“Lily was in hiding, but I’m surprised you noticed them all,” Warren replied.

Satisfied to hear that response, Ein smiled and took a sip of water. “Whew, that really hits the spot! Good grief... Lloyd’s stamina is shocking!”

They had decided to take a short break as the battle was starting to drag out. After a brief intermission, the second round would be underway.

“And he’s super tough too,” Ein added.

Had the crown prince been going for kill like in his duel with Marco, it would’ve been a different story. He had many more techniques and strategies at his disposal, but this match was more of a high-impact training session. Not to mention that the well-prepared Lloyd wasn’t about to go down without a fight. The Knights Guard were known far and wide for the powerful swinging of their swords, but their marshal’s blade was in a league of its own.

“You were so cool out there, Ein,” Olivia cheered. “I’m wishing you luck in the next round!”

Thanks to his mother’s words of encouragement, Ein felt some of the fight lighting back up within him.

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to come back victorious!” the crown prince said eagerly. “I’m fine with how things wrapped up, but are you, mother?”

“Are you talking about Heim?” Olivia asked.

“I am.”

“Well... I only attended the meeting as I was directly involved in the arrangement, but I don’t hold any particular feelings towards the nation. This

isn't about offering forgiveness; I simply am not interested in them anymore."

Warren straightened his posture. "Of course, but should you two desire, I'm ready to act whenever you wish."

Olivia smiled and posed a carefree question. "If I want the head of Roundheart, would you bring it to me?"

"I can do so right this instant."

"Oh, I'm just kidding. I wouldn't want to sully Ishtarica's name. So, I'm truly fine with ending it all like this."

Ishtarica had cut all of their ties to Heim, severing any shred of a relationship they once had. With that, Heim would never reach out to Ishtarica again nor would Olivia and Ein ever need to revisit their past.

"C'mon, Dill! Get some meat on your bones, eat up! Right meow! Regain your energy so mew can fight once more!"

"Ugh, L-Lady Katima! You're stuffing too much into my... Ulp..." Dill said in a panic.

The no-good cat had ruined the mood once again.

"Oh dear, oh dear... Sister..." Olivia said. "Ein, could I ask you to tend to them?"

"Most certainly," Ein replied. "Before Lloyd and I go back at it, I'll stop that no-good cat."

The party continued well into the night, with even members of the Knights Guard joining in on the match. Ein's final night on the island was truly a cheery one.

Chapter Ten: A Burning City and Falling Snow

At the conclusion of a meeting, the two involved parties would generally say their goodbyes with a final greeting. That was not the case this time. Ishtarica and Heim would completely sever their ties once they left the island, as promised. A final farewell was likely unnecessary, but...

“Then I await your message,” Elena said.

“Very well,” Warren replied.

They weren’t quite saying their goodbyes, but Heim’s officer and Ishtarica’s chancellor were making final adjustments. The rest of Heim’s delegation had already boarded the ship, but a pair of guards stood just a few steps away from Elena. Lloyd stood behind Warren from a short distance away.

“I never saw the first prince. Was he really here?” Warren asked.

“Prince Rayfon graciously agreed to tackle a few small tasks on the ship,” Elena replied.

The chancellor realized what had occurred—the first prince had undoubtedly brought women with him to engage in debauchery. If that were the case, his presence truly seemed completely unnecessary.

“Now then, this truly is the end,” Elena said.

“Quite so,” Warren agreed. “Next time you’d like to visit Ishtarica, please make sure to enter Euro through Bardland, then send a message to one of our ships there.”

“Pardon?”

“We usually don’t plan to maintain any ties with a high-ranking official such as yourself, but you’re a family member of our crown prince’s beloved. We don’t intend to keep families separated like that forever.”

Elena was stunned at Warren’s casual tone.

“Last night, I spoke with Krone as if it were our last,” she said.

“Oh? But Lady Krone knows about this as well,” Warren replied.

“It seems my daughter has decided to humor me for a bit. Would you please tell her that the next time we meet, I shall start by lecturing her?”

“Most certainly. Our next meeting shall be in Ishtarica, then.”

Elena turned around and headed for Heim’s ship. Warren watched her walk away for a short while before letting out a small sigh and turning on his heels. Lloyd walked beside the chancellor on the way to their boat.

“Will you make a personal visit to Euro, Sir Warren?” Lloyd inquired.

“No, I think I shall dispatch a representative in my stead,” the chancellor replied. “But it’s easy from here on.”

“Very well. I heard you talking about the first prince a little.”

“Ah, well, it’s nothing much. It turns out that he’s a fat, lazy, shut-in.”

“I suppose phrasing is also part of the art of conversation.”

The two men laughed at each other as they headed for the pier and boarded the *White King*.

As he sailed home on the *White King*, Ein gazed out of a nearby window. The crown prince was currently in his grandfather’s quarters to discuss their future plans.

“Our issues with Heim have been settled,” Silverd said. “The only troublesome matter left to attend to is...”

“My transformation into a Demon Lord?” Ein asked.

“There is that, but I was referring to the red foxes.”

“I wonder what their aims are.”

“Your guess is as good as mine. However, didn’t you mention what Marco had said regarding the foxes’ deep-seated resentment towards our royal family? Not to forget that they’d been waiting for an entity such as yourself to reemerge, correct? More bluntly, there’s no avenue for us to sever our ties with them.”

“I don’t quite understand what they intended by ‘waiting for me.’”

“Indeed. It sounds as though the red foxes have known of your existence for a while now. Yes, those words are rather cryptic, but we mustn’t ignore them.”

The only thing that added up was the intense grudge that foxes harbored against the Ishtarican royal family. If they were to take their revenge, Ein was set up to be the linchpin in their scheme.

“The fact that we’re unable to trace them is a sizable roadblock,” Silverd said.

“Agreed,” Ein nodded.

“Our only lead may lie in the first king’s basement library. I haven’t spoken of the library to anyone since you informed me of its existence, but...”

“Do you believe we should strip the shelves of every book and take them out?”

Silverd nodded quietly. “I haven’t a clue as to why you were able to open the door, but you can simply do so again.”

“I’m not sure if I can.”

“If you can’t, you can’t.”

Ein’s refusal to attempt opening the door presented an issue, but the prince generally agreed with his grandfather’s reasoning. Even though the library was home to some of the first king’s personal belongings, there was no reason for the current royal family to exercise caution if an issue pertained to them.

“You can store the books in Katima’s lab,” Silverd said.

“Ah, that place is full of secrets,” Ein replied. “But Aunt Katima’s place might get a bit cramped.”

“I’m sure she won’t mind.”

“But she’ll complain.”

“I paid for the construction of that basement facility myself; she can endure an ask or two of her.”

Ein had never heard that tidbit before, but Katima would likely welcome the books into her lab if that were the case. She was a curiosity magnet anyways,

allowing knowledge to clump upon her fur. The no-good cat wasn't one to swat away any new information that came her way.

Suddenly, the ship started to shake.

"Hmm?! What was that?" Silverd said.

The massive vessel rocked like never before. This wasn't just the ocean making waves—it was as though a Sea Dragon had emerged. Ein quickly braced Silverd from falling before taking a look outside.

"Grandfather, it seems something has happened," Ein reported.

The fleet of warships surrounding the *White King* were all in attack formation, firing their cannons as knights threw magical tools into the sea. The Ishtarican fleet wasn't too far away from Magna's shores. While locked in a spat of confusion, Ein heard a hearty knock on the door.

"I shall go," Ein said, leaving the king's side to answer the door.

"Please pardon my crass actions!" Lloyd said.

"What's going on outside?"

"An abnormal number of monsters have appeared! The Sea Dragon twins have swam in to defend us, but none of the monsters seem to have been intimidated by the pair. Instead of fleeing, the beasts have been flinging themselves at the twins as though they're prepared to die for a cause!"

Ein hadn't expected the twins to become a pair of true-blue guard dogs. However, this sudden fuss felt familiar. The crown prince had been in more than a few situations like this—it was impossible for him to *not* have felt a little déjà vu. He glanced outside.

"It's coming from over there," Ein said.

The prince was shocked to see Magna in such a state as the boat slowly approached the city. The usually refreshing colors of blue and white that adorned the city were nowhere to be seen, changed out for a horrifying baptism of crimson flames. As Ein took in the dreadful sight, he could practically hear the screams and agonizing shrieks coming from the city.

"Grandfather!" Ein shouted. "Please take a warship to Magna—no, let's have

mother and everyone else board the *White King*. I'll—"

"Wait! What are you planning?!" Silverd yelled.

"I'll board one of the warships and head for Magna."

The king wasn't able to stop his grandson from leaping into danger right away. He looked down and thought for a few moments.

"Give me a moment," Silverd said.

"Grandfather!"

"Do as I say!"

The firm words pushed Ein into silence, leaving him staring at his pensive grandfather. The king was desperately racking his brain for the best option to lead them out of this mess. He was for the idea of moving Olivia and the others into the *White King*, as they were unfortunately frail targets. However, he wasn't sure if he could allow Ein to take a warship to Magna.

"Lloyd, what is the damage to the fleet?" Silverd inquired.

"All of the ships are fine, Your Majesty," Lloyd replied.

"Then..." the king said, making his resolve. "Ein, I cannot permit you to board a warship. But..."

"Grandfather!" Ein shouted.

"Let me finish! I cannot permit you to board a warship, but you may use the *Princess Olivia*. Considering that she can endure a Sea Dragon's bite and that you'll have the twins beside you, you should be able to sail right through any friendly fire!"

"Your Majesty?! Are you sure about this?!" Lloyd asked.

"Lloyd, you must go with Ein," Silverd ordered. "I'm well guarded at the moment. It shouldn't pose a problem if Chris is with Olivia."

The king stood up with gusto.

"The twins are also guaranteed to heed Ein's every command," he continued. "This is what we must do to save Magna. But don't misunderstand me; this isn't a free pass to recklessly push your luck."

Ready to relay his orders to the rest of the fleet, the king burst out of the room with Ein and Lloyd following close behind.

The prince couldn't help but feel a tinge of irony looking at his current predicament. Schools of seafaring monsters attacked the warships just as they had during the Sea Dragon fiasco. Individually, these beasts might not even compare to the might of a Sea Dragon, but in a swarm, they could do some real damage to the fleet. However, the ones holding back this swarm were none other than a pair of Sea Dragons. Ein let out a strained laugh as he stood on the *Princess Olivia's* deck, but he also felt a pang of guilt hit him.

"This is all my fault," he said, remorseful.

"I don't understand," Lloyd said. "How could this be your fault?"

"It's all because I wanted to finally end things with Heim. I dragged you, Chris, my grandfather, and even a whole fleet of warships out to a secluded island to do it. And because of that, Ishtarica's security loosened up..."

"Pardon my insolence, but that's not the case," Lloyd said firmly. He claimed that security wasn't an issue. "All major cities, including Kingsland, could've called upon the support of our ships at any time. In addition, there weren't any issues with the forces that we had dispatched."

"Even so, we're under attack."

"Indeed, but it would've happened whether we had left or not."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Every city has their own arsenal of defensive equipment to fight monsters. This could include magical tools or sorcery weapons, but those in charge of protecting their city can utilize this arsenal at their discretion in a state of emergency. However, there's no sign that Magna used theirs. Please, look over there."

Ein obediently gazed at the edge of Magna. Outside of the destruction and death wrought in the city, there were no signs of disarray elsewhere. This implied that...

“The monsters suddenly appeared within the city, then?” Ein asked.

“I believe so,” Lloyd replied.

No defensive measures could predict that. In addition, it wasn’t as though Lloyd was constantly stationed in Magna.

“His Majesty feared what would happen with our absence,” Lloyd explained. “Frankly speaking, we’ve tightened security more than ever before to reassure him.”

Lloyd didn’t explicitly say that Ein shouldn’t feel guilty, but the marshal hoped that the pain on his prince’s face had slightly dissipated.

The city of Magna slowly came into view. The might of the *Princess Olivia* and the other warships accompanying her had taken out the sea monsters in their way, but this was also due in no small part to the Sea Dragon twins. Suddenly, a beast leaped out of the water in an attempt to attack the ship’s deck.

“Raaawr!” one of the twins roared, turning the monster into a corpse in the blink of an eye.

“Right,” Ein said. “Now isn’t the time to feel any regrets.”

“That’s the spirit,” Lloyd said.

Ein slapped his cheeks to encourage himself. He unsheathed his jet-black sword while gazing into the hellish flames that swallowed the city. With his heart pounding loudly and ever faster, the prince stood at the ship’s bow.

“I have to extinguish as many flames as possible,” he said.

He wasn’t sure if he had the magical energy to do it, but that hesitation lasted only for a split second. He raised his black sword to the sky as the clouds seemingly made way for his blade. His body started emanating a frosty air that stung one’s skin as crackling sounds of ice echoed throughout the air. Lloyd furrowed his brows in confusion as he looked up.

“Freeze,” Ein ordered.



The chills didn't come from the icy air, but from the raw power of Ein's voice—the sway of one who stood upon the highest mountain. Overwhelmed by his prince's aura, Lloyd widened his eyes in astonishment upon witnessing the torrent of magical energy that gushed from the boy's blade. The magic surrounding the sword glimmered like an aurora, its frosty waves more biting than even the tundra surrounding Barth. Then, Ein lowered his black sword.

“What?! Impossible...” Lloyd gasped, unable to believe what had just unfolded before his eyes.

The frozen wave seemingly danced through the air as it flew towards the city. However, the wave slowly took shape, sculpting a pair of heads that were each reminiscent of a Sea Dragon's cranium. From there, bodies and tails materialized, letting out loud crackles as the surrounding air froze around them. In all of his years, Lloyd had never heard of an ability that could freeze magical energy.

“And it's massive...” he murmured.

These “frozen dragons” were undoubtedly massive. While they weren't quite the size of an adult Sea Dragon, they could still stand toe-to-toe with a small warship. As the pair soared through the air and to the city, they invoked an explicable feeling of empyreal awe and fear.

Ein panted, catching his breath. He ended up using his sword to support his weight as he fell to his knees.

“Sir Ein?!” Lloyd called out in alarm.

“Don't worry, I just used a little too much of my magical energy,” Ein assured him.

He'd never felt such pain in his chest before, and his vision started to distort. But he couldn't go down yet—he had to see what his frozen dragons would do. Mustering all the strength he had left, Ein managed to stand up and gaze at the city. The frozen dragons soared in the center of the skies above Magna, arching their bodies like the curve of a bow. The pair entangled their bodies together and danced in the air as though they were trying to pierce the heavens. The two slowly merged into one entity, transforming into a sphere that glowed a pale

blue. The sphere started expanding, leading to a flash of blinding light.

The crackling of ice rang throughout the air, like the fleeting sounds of a crumbling chunk of ice. The sphere proceeded to explode, enveloping the city in a mixture of frigid air and snow. The strong winds ended up blowing the snow onto the sea, but the horrifying effigy that Magna had become grew smaller before everyone's eyes. No one thought a bit of snow could extinguish such a blaze.

"Sir Ein, just what...are your powers?" Lloyd murmured.

"Lloyd, there will be monsters waiting for us in the city," Ein replied. "We should hurry."

Ein never answered the marshal's question, but Lloyd firmly stopped the crown prince. The boy had just used his sword as a walking stick; he was in no shape to take part in a battle.

"I'm fine. Look," Ein said, gracefully tapping his feet against the ground.

It wasn't as though Lloyd's words fell on deaf ears, but a passionate glimmer flickered in Ein's eyes; the prince's determination was all too apparent.

"Please don't push yourself," Lloyd said.

"Yeah, I promise," Ein replied.

As Ein and Lloyd approached the city, it quickly became clear that the fire wasn't the only thing damaging Magna. Small monsters flew about, many of them reminiscent of Sage's bloodred wyvern back in Ist. Judging by their abnormally bulky bodies and their bloodshot eyes, it was obvious that these beasts had lost their sense of self; they were acting on instinct alone.

"It's the *Princess Olivia!*" a citizen shouted joyfully from somewhere by the sea.

The crown prince's Sea Dragons follow closely behind the boat, providing a thrilling spectacle as they tore every ocean monster to shreds. However, the creatures threatening the city still loomed large. The beasts started moving towards the seaside, where many of Magna's citizens had evacuated to. A

mother and her daughter were desperately running through the city in an attempt to flee, but the nervous little girl lost her footing. She fell out of her mother's grasp and onto the ground.

"Mo...m..." the girl whispered.

Though still quite young, she must've intuited that her life couldn't be spared. Tears dripped down her cheeks as she refused to shout for her mother. Hoping her mother could flee to safety, she squeezed her eyes shut.

"You're fine." A kind voice echoed in her ears.

Amid the agonizing shrieking and roaring monsters, the little girl couldn't help but wonder just who could sound so calm in this pandemonium. Despite that, she kept her eyes clamped shut and awaited a grisly end. After a few moments, she realized that the end hadn't come to pass yet.

"Huh?" she whispered in a hoarse voice before finally opening her eyes.

She gingerly turned around and saw a horde of slain monsters piled up on the ground—all of them sliced in half.

"Are you hurt?" a voice asked.

"I'm...not..." the girl managed to reply. However, she was left wondering who her savior was.

The man in front of her was dressed in the royal family's formal garb, but his hand was covered by a jet-black armguard. This small difference made him seem different from his fellow royals. When he turned round, the young Magna native recognized him right away.

"That's good to hear," he said. "You'll be fine now."

The famed hero reached out to grab her hand. Unlike moments ago, the little girl started weeping out of relief as she stood up. The hero gently patted her on the back, surrounding her with a warmth and kindness that soothed her worried mind. Gradually, the people started to notice the crown prince's presence and started cheering loudly.

"Sir Ein! Watch out!" Lloyd shouted as he swung down his greatsword.

He sliced through a monster that had tried to ambush Ein from a blind spot.

“You mustn’t let your guard down,” Lloyd warned.

“Please be careful!” Dill added.

“I thought I’d be fine with you two by me,” Ein replied. “And besides...”

A monster emerged from a roof just about Lloyd’s head. He reacted a moment later, slicing the monster in two as it attempted to pounce him. Upon closer inspection, this beast was also covered in unusual scratches.

“‘You mustn’t let your guard down,’ was it?” Ein asked.

“Heh. Ha ha ha ha ha!” Lloyd laughed heartily. “It seems I forgot to take my own advice while training!”

“That’s not true at all. Now then...”

Ein unsheathed his sword. But unlike the other times he’d brandished his blade, Magna’s citizens had their first opportunity to see their prince in combat for themselves. Ein pointed his blade high in the air towards the heavens.

“Disappear,” he commanded.

With that, he plunged his blade into the ground. Now, what would happen if Ein used Ocean Current following his Demon Lord transformation? The answer was simple: the skill would be more powerful than ever before. The nearby water levitated into the air, creating a wall of water. Then in the blink of an eye, the wall morphed into a downpour that quickly extinguished the burning homes by the ocean.

“Th-This is...” Lloyd muttered. “Good grief, this is quite impressive.”

“I’m happy to receive such high praise, but I’m not done yet,” Ein replied.

With the many monsters still roaming the city, they’d only rack up more casualties if they weren’t quickly dealt with. As Ein tried to dash forward, one of Magna’s residents stopped him.

“Crown Prince!” a voice called.

This would normally be considered rude behavior, but Lloyd and Dill decided to let it slide this time.

“You’re...from that stall,” Ein said. “What’s wrong?”

“I-It’s about the first king’s villa!” the resident cried.

Ein immediately turned towards the cape and discovered that the first king’s villa was up in flames.

“Lloyd, take command of the knights in the city,” Ein ordered. “We’ll head to the villa. Have the knights handle the remaining monsters.”

The crown prince actually wanted in on the action, but he hadn’t the time to spare. The villa’s basement library was filled with countless irreplaceable documents, making it imperative that the flames be extinguished before it was too late. After nodding along with his prince’s words, Lloyd started barking orders to the knights. Meanwhile, the crown prince glanced over to the store owner’s stall. It seemed they’d been open for business today and upon noticing an array of overcooked skewers on the grill, Ein took a bite out of one. Unfortunately, the food was anything but delicious as it was burnt to a crisp and doused with seawater.

“We’ll fix things up around here so I can enjoy another skewer soon,” Ein assured.

The store owner was in tears as the prince left for the villa with the Graciers following behind.

Ein didn’t bother with concealing himself by running on the beach, instead choosing to boldly dash through the city. As he ran, the voices of knights calling for an evacuation and the screaming of citizens reached his ears. Houses fell with a deafening rumble and the stench of burnt rubble had made its way to his nose, causing Ein to grimace. *I should probably use my Ice Dragon skill again, but...* He thought. He couldn’t. If he used that skill again, there’s no question he’d faint from the exhaustion.

“Reinforcements, please! No! There are too many of them!” a knight shouted.

Ein turned his head to find a knight carrying a young boy in his arms. The brave soul was clearly doing his best to fight back while protecting the child, but a horde of monsters had jumped him. Lloyd tried to rush in to offer aid, but he was too far away. Having foreseen the worst-case scenario, Ein unsheathed his sword without thinking. Acting on its own, the arm that removed the jet-black blade was now enveloped by complementary black armor. It wasn’t just this

arm; Ein's whole body was surrounded by the power of history's mightiest swordsman—the Dullahan.

"Make it!" Ein urged.

Engulfed by a dark aura, the blade was raised into the air. However, Ein wasn't about to use his ice abilities again. This time, he swung the blade down, unleashing a gust of jet-black magical energy at the creatures. A look of relief washed over the knight's face when the monsters all fell lifelessly to the ground.

"Y-Your Highness?!" the knight gasped. "Why are you—I mean, thank you so much for sparing my life! I cannot possibly thank you enough!"

"Don't worry about that! How's the city?" Ein shouted back.

"Most of our citizens have already evacuated, Your Highness!"

All that was left was to protect those who weren't able to flee in time. Ein gave a sigh of relief, but he was fighting with himself on what to do next. Should he save the citizens of Magna, who required his assistance, instead of heading for the villa?

"Please leave the city to us!" the knight yelled. "Go to the first king's villa!"

"Sir Ein, these knights have their duties, as do we," Lloyd said. "Would you kindly accept that knight's wishes and hurry to the villa?"

"Lloyd..." Ein replied.

"Since the number of monsters in the city has taken a nosedive, it shouldn't be an issue. Let us hurry!"

Ein stared at the ground in frustration, his clenched fists trembling ever so slightly. After a few moments, he made his resolve and raised his head.

"I'll leave the city to you!" the crown prince bellowed.

The knight let out a powerful roar in response to Ein's energetic plea, as if he'd seemingly regained some of his strength.

Upon reaching the cape, Ein and the Graciers discovered the villa in shambles.

Its former beauty turned to ash, the once majestic estate now looked to be beyond repair. While there were quite a few monsters nearby, none of them stood a chance against the trio. No one appeared to break a sweat, but they were all pained by the ruined villa.

“How could this be...” Dill murmured as he stepped forward.

The villa was in a sorrier state than any of the homes in the city. Was the basement safe? Instead of placing his bets on hope alone, Ein chose to act by activating his Ocean Current ability. It was then that he noticed something.

“Dill! Stand back!” Ein hastily said, stopping his hands.

“Sir Ein? What are you...” Dill started.

“Just stand back!”

The crown prince forcibly yanked Dill by the hand, dragging him away from the villa. Ein quickly did the same for Lloyd, bringing both Gracier men to safety. Before they could ask any questions, a sliver of light erupted from the villa and pierced through the heavens. The light didn’t blind them, but the rays were actually jet-black and accompanied by a purplish aura. Soon after, the land in front of Ein started to crack. The cape crumbled before their eyes and fell into the sea, villa and all.

“Don’t leave my side,” Ein warned, placing his hand in the air. “That air is miasma. My skill is activating on its own.”

The surrounding air was soon cleansed of the toxins, but it was undoubtedly miasma. And it wasn’t just ordinary miasma—even Lloyd and Dill could discern that from a passing glance.

“It’s like a condensed chunk of poison...” Lloyd observed.

“Father, why is miasma of this severity here?” Dill asked.

“I haven’t a clue... But I *do* know that this cannot be ignored.”

Ein had just lost the basement library, but another thought flashed across his mind. He gritted his teeth as he gazed down at the chaos terrorizing Magna.

“They did it...” he growled.

He was certain that the red foxes were behind this. The attacking monsters had gone utterly berserk and the first king's villa had fallen into a watery tomb. The foxes were certainly aware of the library's existence.

"I can't forgive them," Ein said.

The lives of many had been lost in this attack. While leveled buildings could be rebuilt, those who perished could never stand again. Ein was filled with indescribable rage, trembling as he gazed up into the sky.

"If you hate the royal family so much... If you want to kill me, you should aim for me alone," he said.

He unsheathed his black sword, the blade reflecting the dull crimson light shining from the city. For a split second, Ein thought he saw Marco in the same reflection before he tightened his grasp on the handle.

"S-Sir Ein?" Dill asked.

A swath of frozen land spewed forth from the prince, spreading all around him. The sight had Dill gulping and blinking rapidly.

"I won't let them do as they please anymore," Ein said, raising his sword into the heavens once more.

The Graciers assumed that Ein was using Ocean Current again, but they were wrong. That skill could only extinguish nearby flames, but Ein's rage had given him the power to surround himself with a level of magical energy that no mere human could muster.

"The one you want to kill is right here!" Ein bellowed.

A silver light spilled out from the jet-black blade. Once he plunged his blade into the earth, an eruption of light emerged from every crack and crevice. The cape was now a tundra, frostier than Barth could ever hope to be. As the ocean started freezing, deafening cracks echoed throughout the air—a result of the water's surface proceeding to instantly crack and crumble. A pillar of ice suddenly jutted out from one of the newly formed crevasses. Had the ice been brown, one could have mistaken it for a tree—indeed, a massive tree of ice had sprouted right before Ein's eyes.

The tree grew at lightning speed, quickly becoming several hundred meters tall while icy branches poked out from the trunk. In the blink of an eye, this titanic tree now towered over the entirety of Magna.

“How could this...” Lloyd shouted in awe.

No human should’ve ever been able to use such power—a feat only for gods to perform. As if it was a response to the tree’s rapid growth, icy roots started emerging throughout the city. The roots gave off a faint, flickering glow as if they were frozen fireflies. But more strikingly, they glowed just as Ein’s Phantom Hand did while absorbing a magic stone’s power. While it was a captivating sight, the monsters continued their rampage as the tree continued growing.

“Sir Ein...” Dill murmured.

The clash between Ein and Marco flashed across the knight’s mind; it was the day of Ein’s rapid growth spurt. Dill had been pondering the reason behind it for a long time now. If the crown prince had become a Demon Lord, it would explain why Silverd tried to keep everything under wraps. That was all Dill could think about as he watched the wintry scene unfold in front of his eyes.

“Let’s go, you two,” Ein said, walking ahead to the city. “There still might be monsters lurking about. Our help is needed.”

The Graciers nodded as specks of snow started to fall upon them. They soon noticed that snow had started falling all over Magna. Confused, they looked up to find the ice tree’s snowy leaves growing under the midsummer sun’s rays. The falling white flecks had extinguished the remaining flames, painting the city white in the process. The crown prince’s power was incomparable to that of the Ice Dragon’s skill alone.

“This isn’t normal snow,” Lloyd said. He couldn’t hide his curiosity surrounding this mysterious power, but the city came first. “Let’s follow Sir Ein, Dill.”

“Yessir!” his son replied.

Atop a hill just outside the city, a peculiar man was staring up at the icy tree.

“Ah! Ahhhhh! What wonderful power! Simply superb! He doesn’t lose to Arshay’s power! In fact, he shines so brightly that he might even surpass her!” a man exclaimed.

He was so close to the fiery chaos that sparks could reach him, but there wasn’t a spot of soot to be seen on his white lab coat. He readjusted his glasses as he continued to admire the massive tree. “I’d like to research that power.”

He licked his lips with delight.

“I want to cut him up, pry open his head, and take a good, long look at that magic stone of his.”

His words didn’t even attempt to hide his insatiable thirst for knowledge. As snow fell upon his hand, he immediately brought it to his mouth. The snow hadn’t an odd taste to it, but he felt pure magical energy emanating from it. The man tightly embraced himself as he trembled with joy. It had been a long time since his body had indulged in such sweetness.

“Th-That’s enough!” someone called out to him. The voice belonged to a subordinate of Heim’s first prince, Rayfon.

“I kept my promise with Prince Rayfon and you!” the subordinate said.

“Yes, and you’ve been very helpful,” the bespectacled man replied.

“And now it’s your turn to keep your end of the bargain! You’ll return my family to me, won’t you?!”

“That’s right. According to our promise, I’ll spare only your family if you hand over the magical tool Rayfon furnished you with. Though, the first prince isn’t the type to keep promises and you’d surely suffer a death sentence if Ishtarica caught you.”

In reality, the subordinate was spared thanks to Elena and Warren’s agreement. Unfortunately, this poor sap knew nothing of the arrangement and was being used.

“And you’re the famous professor, Oz, aren’t you?!” the subordinate cried. “That’s why I trusted you!”

“I’m honored,” Oz replied, grinning as he walked ahead. “Did you know?”

Contracts can be nullified if the party in question is dead.”

“Huh?”

“Good day.”

Oz placed his hand over the man’s face, releasing an air of miasma that enveloped his body. In a brief moment...

“Was it your first time inhaling such concentrated miasma?” Oz asked. “Ah, I suppose you can’t hear me anymore.”

The man fell to the ground, and Oz stepped on him as though he were a stray rock on the side of the road. With that, the esteemed professor left Magna in such high spirits that he thought about running around Kingsland completely naked.

“That old tale actually doesn’t end there, Your Highness,” Oz said while gallantly marching forward. “The passionate researcher couldn’t sate his curiosity to learn more. He remained on the continent and melted into the tapestry of this nation’s long history. He then led the people and built a Tower of Wisdom, creating a paradise for himself. And...”

The story still went on.

“The researcher—no, I was able to *reunite* with you.”

Did his body tremble from the cold? Or was it excitement?

“This is just the beginning, Your Highness. She—no, the chief shall soon bare her fangs against you.”

He once again looked up at the tree of ice. He let out a jovial laugh before vanishing from view.

Epilogue

It had been a few weeks since Ishtarica's royals had met with Heim. It was a clear and sunny day in Kingsland's port. Ein sat up against a wooden box with Krone at his side. She was holding a stack of documents.

"Thanks to you, the number of casualties was kept miraculously low," she read.

"It might be low, but there still were people who lost their lives," Ein replied. "I can't be pleased with that, but I am glad there were people I could save."

The entirety of Magna had been set ablaze, but few had actually perished in the attack. Once the fires had been completely extinguished, the icy tree disappeared as well. Ein had finally burned through all of his stamina on that fateful day.

"How long will it take to rebuild the city?" Ein asked.

"Hmm... It'll take around two years to completely return Magna to as it was," Krone replied. "That was what my grandfather told me the other day."

That was much quicker than Ein had expected. According to Silverd, the royal family was also offering their full support to the restoration efforts. It was only natural for them to do so, but their involvement would surely hasten the timeline.

"The twins saved us this time," Ein said with a smile, gazing at the twins as they happily frolicked.

Krone giggled. "Lady Katima said, 'It's all thanks to me-ow!'"

"She might be right. The magic stones that Aunt Katima kept feeding them ended up making them stronger."

"Shall I give her a word of thanks?"

"I will. I'll be more honest during times like these."

Ein stretched his back—he'd had quite a bit of work on his plate as of late.

Combined with Magna's needs, the prince was knee-deep in a busy season.

"Do you want to rest for a bit?" Krone asked, patting her lap and offering it to him.

"Uh..." Ein started.

"Are you pretending to be oblivious? Or are you truly that dense?"

"I wonder."

As he found it odd to be so embarrassed, Ein slowly lay down and rested his head on her lap. When he looked up at the sky, he saw her happily smiling down upon him. Krone used her head to shield Ein's eyes from the sun's rays, a display of her usual thoughtfulness. The gentle ocean breeze brushed against the pair's cheeks. He focused on the chirping of birds who aimed for the small fish swimming below, and closed his eyes. He felt like he could fall asleep almost instantly.

"I'll wake you up, so you can sleep for a bit," Krone said.

"I'm surprised you knew what I was thinking," Ein. "I didn't think you'd know that I'd fall asleep like this."

"Of course. This is you we're talking about."

"Is that how it is?"

"That's how it is."

Krone's smooth hands glided across Ein's cheek. Her pleasant scent calmed his heart and put him at ease.

"I think I'd also like to talk with you for a little while," Ein said.

"Oh dear... You're so selfish," Krone said, smiling without ever refusing his request. "When we have some time, let's go to Magna together."

Out of consideration for the crown prince, she'd likely arranged a schedule to allow him to appear in front of a crowd.

"R-Really?!" Ein suddenly exclaimed.

He eagerly popped up, causing the pair to lose their balance. They instinctively reached for each other, leading to a gentle embrace as they lay on

the pier.

“Ein?” Krone asked.

“Sorry, I was just so excited,” Ein replied.

They were now lying beside one another, able to feel each other’s breath graze their skin. They stared at each other without saying another word. Krone looked displeased while Ein flashed an apologetic smile.



“If we sleep together like this, it’d solve our problem, wouldn’t it?” Ein said. The words just tumbled out of his mouth. In fact, he was even a little shocked when he said it.

Before Ein could rephrase his words, Krone reached out and used his hand as her pillow as she closed her eyes.

“Well, it’s none other than your invitation, after all...” Krone said.

“It just came out of me...” Ein replied.

“But if you claim it’s a mistake and take it all back, I might cry out of grief.”

Ein knew that she wouldn’t cry, but it wasn’t bad to have this kind of day off...every once in a while.

“I don’t think it was a mistake... Nope,” Ein said.

He prayed that no one would find them together like this, but Ein wasn’t against lying beside his beloved.

A short while later, a sighing Dill arrived. He’d been searching for the two.

“Good grief... Sir Ein, I told you that there was a time and place for everything...” the knight said.

He was standing on a fishing boat docked at the port and let out another deep sigh.

“Wh-Whoa. I knew rumors about them, but...” a man said. He was the stall owner who’d sold Ein the serpent fish.

“I’m sorry, but could you please pretend that you never saw anything?” Dill requested.

“Sure thing. I’m indebted to His Highness, so I haven’t seen a thing!”

As the port city’s representative, the man had traveled to Kingsland to thank Ein personally. The crown prince’s actions were worthy of high praise from all of Magna’s citizens. In his boat, the stall owner had a wooden box filled with fresh fish kept cold thanks to a magical tool.

“Will those be all?” Dill asked.

“Yep! Every single one of our city’s fishermen had caught one of these beauts!” the man said. “It’s stuffed full of amazing fish!”

“Very well. If you don’t mind, will you kindly visit Sir Ein later?”

“Oh, I’d love to, but I’ve gotta get back and help with the restoration effort.” The man grinned, folding his tan arms in front of him. “Whoops, was almost about to forget... If this isn’t an issue, could you please give this letter to His Highness?”

“A letter?”

It was enclosed in a cheap envelope and was written in crude handwriting.

“It’s from that little girl that he saved the other day,” the man replied.

Dill could easily recall that moment.

“It might be a bit insolent to have His Majesty receive this letter, but...” the man started.

“No, Sir Ein is elated to receive such letters,” Dill replied. “I’m sure that he’ll also write a response, so please rest assured.”

“Hey, what?! *That’s* the hero that we all admire!”

The man let out a hearty laugh as Dill wished for his safety; the two then parted ways.

When the knight returned to the pier, he could no longer see Ein. Continuing to gaze in that direction, Dill mumbled “Perhaps I should let it slide, just for today.”

Dill felt it was uncouth to scold the crown prince while he was thinking of the royal’s heroic deed from just the other day. He stepped away and sat atop a wooden box, ensuring that no one would disturb Ein’s peaceful slumber. He took the letter he had just received from the stall owner and raised it up into the blue sky.

“Even a hero needs to rest his heart,” the knight said, his gentle tone floating away in the soft breeze.

Afterword

I'm Ryou Yuuki, the author. Thank you for purchasing the fifth volume of *Magic Stone Gourmet*. I'd like to first offer a word of thanks. The fourth volume was released alongside the manga, and thanks to everyone's support, I was able to reprint it.

As I write this afterword, we are on our third reprint. I was ecstatic to hear that many have read Kenji Sugawara's manga interpretation of *Magic Stone Gourmet*, but as the original author, I was so very excited to see my story in manga form. Please continue to support the light novel series along with the manga.

Now then, on to the sixth volume. Ein will visit the Elves' village, Chris's hometown! Elves haven't mingled much with the other species much, but there'll be another story awaiting our hero when you look at Chris's family name.

The red foxes had been known to manipulate the Demon Lord in the past, and now Ein has finally evolved into one himself. How will Demon Lord Ein act in the face of this mysterious, centuries-old feud? Oh, and this feud won't be staying in Ishtarica—the entire world will be embroiled in this affair.

As always, these volumes aren't just what you'll read in the web version, but have new stories added on. A new magic stone will appear in the sixth volume and I'll do my best in the hope that everyone can enjoy the story. Please look forward to it.

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the making of the fifth volume. Thank you to Chisato Naruse who has illustrated a grown Ein after his Demon Lord transformation. Without Naruse, I wouldn't have been able to write this series. Thank you so much for your illustrations both inside and outside of the book.

From the bottom of my heart, I'd like to thank the designer in charge of the binding of the book. Thank you to my two editors who have continued to be in

charge of my series. Thanks to them, I was able to continue this series onto the fifth volume. I cannot thank them enough. I'd like to thank the bookstores and everyone involved in the logistics of getting this book out there. Thank you to the sales team for their constant support.

And thank you to everyone who decided to pick up the fifth volume. I'd like to thank you from the bottom of my heart. Truly, thank you so much.

As I end this fifth volume, I hope to see everyone again in the sixth one.

Please continue to support *Magic Stone Gourmet*.

Is Ein really back?

H-He is. I believe Sir Ein has returned. However...

Olivia's and Krone's expressions grew dark as the maid trailed off. Their faces were riddled with anxiety.

Has something happened to Ein?

??

Within the Audience Room

MAGIC
STONE
Gourmet

EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE ME THE
STRONGEST!

5

A while later, Ein left the audience room to find a trio of ladies waiting for him: Chris, Krone, and Martha. Krone stared at him intently without blinking.

Chris

A beautiful but klutzy young elf who serves as the personal knight to Ishtarica's royals.

Martha

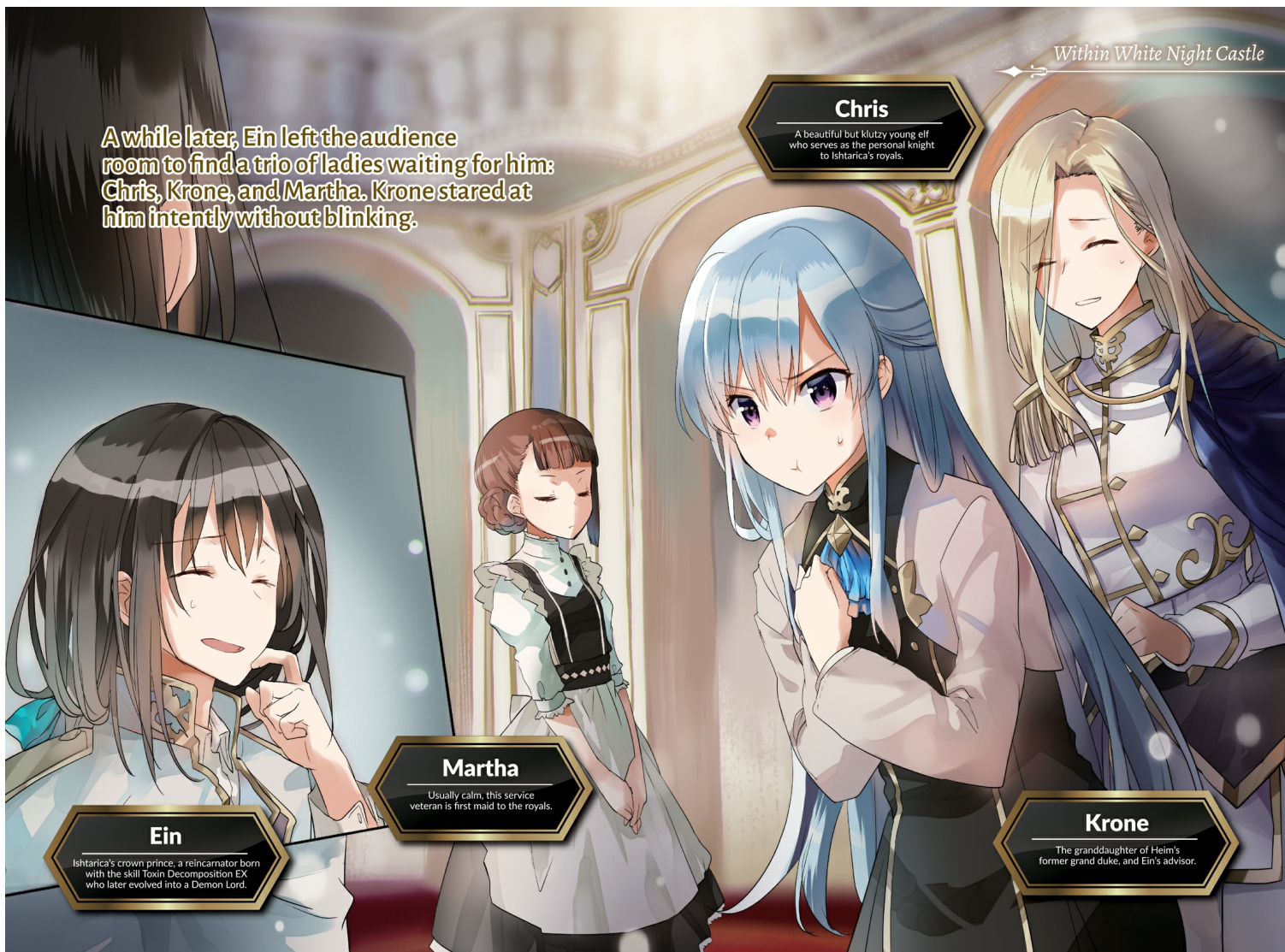
Usually calm, this service veteran is first maid to the royals.


Ein

Ishtarica's crown prince, a reincarnator born with the skill Toxin Decomposition EX who later evolved into a Demon Lord.

Krone

The granddaughter of Helm's former grand duke, and Ein's advisor.



An anime-style illustration of a young man with dark hair, Ein, wearing a light blue coat and holding a small wooden tray. He is looking down at a glowing, translucent ice dragon he has just created. The dragon is coiled and has a small, ornate crown on its head. In the bottom left corner, a young girl with brown hair and purple eyes, Katima, is looking up at the dragon with a surprised expression. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green with yellow light spots.

Ein placed his hand over the open air. Suddenly, ice started to crackle and form in the space. As the seconds ticked by, the shape was becoming more apparent—he was making an ice dragon.

It's an interesting power furr sure.

Katima

A free-spirited Cait-Sith and Ishtarica's first princess.

5

RYOU YUUKI

ART CHISATO NARUSE

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Magic Stone Gourmet: Eating Magical Power Made Me the Strongest Volume
5

by Ryou Yuuki

Translated by piyo

Edited by Coop Bicknell

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