

RYOU YUUKI

ART CHISATO NARUSE



EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE me the
STRONGEST!

MAGIC STONE *Gourmet*

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Prologue

For Ein Roundheart, becoming the crown prince overnight was a bit of a peculiar experience.

Out of the blue his grandfather, the king, made the proclamation, “I bestow upon you the title of crown prince!” However, his grandfather was a man that he had never met or even heard of before.

From the moment those words left his grandfather’s lips, the boy’s life had changed forever. Although he was the eldest son of a count, his family had regarded him as useless and disinherited him. He had never dreamed of becoming the crown prince of another, much more substantial kingdom. He was now strolling through the castle, escorted by two adults. They were on their way to the lower floors of the castle, looking to fetch a certain item.

Seriously, this place is way too big, the boy thought to himself.

Hanging from the ceiling was a glimmering chandelier that overlooked halls of well-polished white stone. The general decor gave off an air of elegant, but expensive taste.

“Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses. How do you do?” a servant greeted them as they passed by. His greeting was accompanied by a deep bow towards them.

“Uh, yeah, thank you,” the boy hesitantly replied with a forced smile as he stepped on a soft rug. He still wasn’t used to being addressed as a “Highness.” Suddenly, he heard a voice to his right.

“Ein, have you become accustomed to living in the castle?” asked Silverd, his grandfather and the current king.

The boy hadn’t been at the castle for long, and he could only offer a weak reply and smile. “Um, well, it’s only been around two weeks since I first set foot in this castle.”

“Hm... Indeed, you’re absolutely right.” The king nodded while stroking his

long beard. His large stature proceeded down the halls while his luxurious cape fluttered behind him.

The soothing, elegant tones of a woman's voice came from the boy's left. "Not to worry, Ein. You'll get used to it soon." Wearing a beautiful dress, she looked down at Ein with a saintly smile.

"I'm sorry, mother. It's just that this castle is much, much larger than my previous home." Ein said.

She chuckled. "You'll be living here from now on, so there's nothing to worry about."

"Indeed. Olivia is right," the king said.

Reassured by his mother's words, Ein continued to compare the castle with his previous mansion. *Hmmm... "otherworldly" is the perfect word for this situation*, he thought.

The mansion he had formerly lived in belonged to a count. While it was quite grand, the jump from nobility to royalty came with a substantial leap in luxury. Additionally, his new kingdom was much larger and more powerful than his home kingdom. Mulling it over, he couldn't help but be a little troubled by his current position.

I was called useless, but now I'm told that there's some worth to me. Life's full of surprises.

Ein was currently headed to the lower floors to gain a new power.

"Ah, there it is. The treasury," the king said.

The three proceeded towards their destination. Ein gulped, wondering about the treasures that were stored away inside. He kept his eyes trained on the large stone door in front of him—a door located at the end of a long, barren hallway. Examining the door's many keyholes, he soon realized that they were magic.

"So, beyond that door lies something that will give me a new power, right?" he asked Silverd, who was walking next to him. Ein knew that he couldn't contain his slowly growing excitement.

The king silently nodded while staring at the treasury door. “Indeed, there is. The treasury is home to the Dullahan’s magic stone. The Dullahan was second to none in the art of swordplay.”

Ein took another large gulp as he continued to listen to Silverd’s words.

“A few hundred years ago, at the time of the Demon Lord’s demise, the Dullahan was one of the Demon Lord’s most trusted associates. The king of swords—no one could even hope to best it while it held a sword firmly in its grasp. There are legends that it could even slice the heavens. The stone we’ve come for was made from this monster.”

The Dullahan’s magic stone was apparently regarded as a national treasure, but Ein believed it to be a deathly one. The stone contained so much power that if a monster were to absorb it, it would surely turn into a terrifying force of evil.

And something that powerful is going to become mine. The future can’t get any more promising than this, he thought.

Normally, the power contained within magic stones was considered to be highly poisonous to human beings. In other words, Ein’s method of obtaining power was unconventional. Sure, it was a vast world, but he was the only one who could do it this way. His heart beat faster with every step he took towards the door, his mind racing with thoughts of the stone’s potential.

Silverd stopped in front of the door. “Now then, let’s open this treasury, shall we?” He laid his hand on the center of the door.

“Th-The door?!” Ein gasped.

The scattered keyholes reacted to the king’s touch, slowly moving to form a vertical line. A low groaning sound soon followed. As if the mortared stones were shifting to slowly open the door. Ein could only stare in awe as the stone door pried itself open.

“Father, wherever could the Dullahan’s magic stone be?” Olivia excitedly asked Silverd.

“Let’s not be too hasty. Over there,” the exasperated king replied as he pointed his finger into the treasury.

Olivia grabbed Ein's hand, leading him deeper into the treasury. *Wow, there's so many amazing things here!* Despite his thoughts, the boy couldn't find the exact words to describe what made these items amazing to him. The treasury contained valuables such as precious metals, jewels, and swords, but it was also home to a menagerie of magical stones. Of course, Ein was being led to the most eye-catching stone of the collection. Was this the stone he was looking for? Above everything else, it was resting upon a white stone pedestal encrusted with jewels and gold trim.

"It's black...but also blue?" Ein wondered out loud.

The black diamond in front of him had a touch of blue flickering within. As he continued to stare at it with great curiosity, he heard his grandfather's voice.

"Olivia, don't touch that," Silverd warned his daughter.

"Of course. You do the same, father," she replied.

Worried for each other's safety, the father and daughter urged one another to keep their distance as Ein approached the pedestal—his gaze firmly locked on the Dullahan's magic stone. After sharing a few words with his grandfather, Ein reached out for the stone. With a deep breath, he took the enshrined stone into his grasp. As he exhaled, the boy's concentration shifted to pouring all of his will into the diamond. To become stronger, Ein must do something that only he could do: absorb the stone's power.

"The Dullahan's magic stone will surely assist you in the future. For a while now, I've thought that this stone exists for that purpose alone," Olivia said.

Meeting her affectionate smile, Ein nodded and shifted his focus back onto his palm. As he prepared to absorb the stone's power, he heard a mysterious voice. The voice didn't belong to his mother or grandfather, so he thought that he must've imagined it.

"All right, I'll begin," the boy said.

With a large gulp, he relinquished all of his senses to the item on his palm. He felt his senses growing sharper and stone growing warmer along with them. Once Ein began absorbing, a surprising incident occurred.

Huh?! Why?! What's...going on?!

The Dullahan's magic stone seemed to have a mind of its own. In contrast to Ein's intentions, it seemed to be pouring its magic into the boy. Then suddenly...

"Ugh! Wh-What?!" Silverd cried.

An immense maelstrom of pressure blasted out of the stone.

"Olivia! Stand behind me!" Silverd yelled.

"F-Father?!" Olivia gasped.

Quickly stepping back, the king raised his sturdy arms to protect his daughter. For Ein, it was just a weak gust of wind that blew his bangs aflutter. Then, a light, as brilliant as a crack of lightning shone from the stone, combining with a vortex of wind to create a fog of blue and black smoke that engulfed the boy.

Wait, wait, wait! Will I be okay? he thought.

Contrary to his wishes to simply absorb it, the power of the Dullahan's magic stone poured itself into Ein. The fog was slowly absorbed into his body, filling him with an overwhelming sensation of omnipotence.

"Ein, if you feel anything odd, let go of the stone immediately!" Silverd yelled.

It was the first time Ein had heard the king raise his voice to him, but his grandfather's actions came from genuine fear for the boy. The blinding light soon faded to purple, joining the fog that surrounded Ein.

"I-I know, but..." Ein stammered.

Try as he might, he couldn't let go of the item, as if it were glued to his palm. Seemingly in response to the boy's anxiety, the stone generated an odd warmth.

Does this mean I'll be okay?

The brilliant light and strong winds gradually died down with the remaining fog that surrounded Ein dissipating into the air. The only thing that remained was a bolt of lightning that ran along his body, which also disappeared into him after a few final flashes of light.

"I-Is it over?" the king asked.

"It seems to be, father," Olivia replied.

As though they'd just returned from an intense battle, a wave of calm silence suddenly rushed over the three. Ein slowly returned the stone to the pedestal and turned towards his approaching mother and grandfather.

"I'm sorry for making you worry," he said as he clenched his fists to confirm his newfound power. A sense of accomplishment filled his face. "I think it was a success. My body is filled with energy like never before."

It was like he was born again—all five of his senses felt completely renewed. Although the king and his daughter were concerned with what they had just seen, Ein didn't seem to be too troubled by it. Silverd felt the tension leave his body and let out a hearty laugh that deepened the wrinkles on his face.

"Ha ha ha! But of course! You've absorbed the power of a legendary monster, after all!" Silverd said.

Olivia giggled. "It's just as your grandfather says! You're even more wonderful now, Ein."

She brought her hand to her mouth and smiled as she slowly went to her son's side. She gently stroked his hair before bringing him in close to her for a hug. Following this expression of his mother's love, Ein removed a card from his inside pocket to show off his newfound strength.

Huh, the Dullahan's magic stone tastes like coffee. Not that I'm complaining—it tastes good. A rich aroma accompanied by a thick texture had tickled his palate and coursed through his body. Its scent was luxurious while its taste put him at ease.

"The Dullahan's armor requires magical power, and has been created with the use of a skill. Ein, you might be able to utilize that item as well!" Silverd said.

Brimming with excitement at the king's words, Ein's eyes sparkled as he turned his attention to the card. He gazed at his stats, the numbers indicating that he'd become way too strong. He couldn't help but smile at the news. He was suddenly hit by a flashback of the life he had lived up to now, struck by a memory of his life living under the roof of the count who disinherited him. *I was terrified as to what my fate would be once my younger brother was declared to be father's successor.* He couldn't help but feel a little sentimental looking back at the moments that led him to today.

Though Ein's life had been filled with its ups and downs, it might have all really started that one time he met God. *God was pretty easy to talk to*, Ein thought, thinking back.

Chapter One: An Unfortunate Reincarnation

He had no idea where he was and why he was there. It was a void permeated by white light from which the voice of God bellowed.

“Your cause of death was a pity! Now, to decide on your next life, you’ve gotta roll this gacha! You’re guaranteed a rare drop for this one!”

His past life was apparently “normal” on the rarity scale, so this “guaranteed rare drop” must have been arranged under some kind of special circumstance.

“My cause of death?” he asked.

He couldn’t remember a thing about his past life, much less how he died. The only knowledge he was equipped with was common sense. It was apparently normal for people to lose their memories once entering this void.

“You might retain some of your memories of your past life, but once you leave here, you’ll gradually forget everything,” God said.

“Ah, I see. Convenient for you.”

The question of how he died had him staring at God intensely.

“Your cause of death was blood loss. A bug spooked you while you were cooking.” God started to explain exactly what happened.

In his past life, he was terrified of bugs. While cooking, the sight of a creepy crawly sent him falling to the ground. However, he wasn’t the only thing that fell, as the knife he threw into the air was on a collision course with his throat. Aside from the fact that it was a quick death, God didn’t have much more to say about it.

“Pathetic doesn’t even begin to explain it.” he said.

According to God, it was probably a good knife since he liked to cook.

“Ha ha ha!” God laughed with her mouth wide open. “I’ll give it to you, I’ve never seen anyone die like that!”

At least it became a funny story, he thought as he buried his head in his hands.

“In any case,” God said. “You may enjoy a new life in a different world.”

The moment those words left God’s lips, he looked at her with a dead stare. He had no idea what she was talking about.

“Ah, don’t worry about it. Now, about that gacha...” God started.

His potential in life would increase and his appearance would be improved. If he was lucky, he could become not only an aristocrat, but a member of the royal family too.

Easy enough to understand. Surprisingly, fully comprehending his own abilities from birth was something he welcomed.

“Now then, let’s get started,” God said.

With a loud thud, she whipped out a run-of-the-mill gachapon machine from underneath her clothing. *I’m shocked that you had room for that considering how small you are,* he thought, amazed by the entity’s feat. God presented herself in the form of a young girl, so he couldn’t hide his shock that she just made a gachapon machine appear from her person.

“Come on up, give it a spin,” God encouraged.

Egged on by the deity, he felt his heart rate rising as he reached for the lever. He pulled the lever with gusto, causing a gold capsule to pop out of the machine. His jaw hit the floor in shock. However, when he looked over to see God’s reaction, she wasn’t so gobsmacked.

“Don’t be so surprised. All the capsules inside are gold,” she said with a mocking smile.

“Way to ruin my excitement!” he said loudly with a sigh.

After psyching himself up again, he opened the capsule to find a piece of paper inside. On it read the results of his gacha pull.

“It’s super rare!” he said.

Was he going to be born into money? Or would he perhaps be part of the

royal family? His imagination ran wild. He continued to read through the rest of the details listed on the paper.

“Wait... Huh? Wh-What’s this?” he asked, sounding troubled by what he just read.

The paper didn’t mention anything about his birth, it only said “TOXIN DECOMPOSITION EX” in large letters.

“That’s a skill. You’ve even got ‘EX’ on it. That’s cool,” God said.

So what? he thought, wanting to rebuff her remarks.

“So...you’re very tough against poison. You name it! Any kind of poison, bacteria, toxin, or anything in that neighborhood won’t do a single thing to you,” she said.

He understood that he’d received an amazing ability, but it didn’t really have any sort of flourish or pizzazz to it. *It’s a bit dull*, he thought as he let out a sigh. *Wait a second, what does she mean by a “skill”?*

“Speaking of, a skill? So the world I’m going to is?” he asked.

“You got it, you’ll be in an orthodox fantasy world.”

“You mean there’ll be monsters and magic and stuff?”

God proceeded to share some details about his destination. His heart started to flutter as God told him of a role-playing-gamelike world filled with monsters, status effects, and even magic. As exciting as this all was, he still wasn’t too crazy about Toxin Decomposition EX being his alleged “skill.”

“Hm? It says on the back that you’ll be reborn as the eldest son in the household of a count,” God noted, peering at the lines he had missed on the paper in his hands.

“Oh, you’re right. Hmmm, I guess this is where I have to make a compromise then,” he said.

“Goodness, your honesty hasn’t changed from your past life.”

Though he couldn’t remember that past life, he did know his behavior was uncouth before the eyes of God right in front of him. However, he had naturally

started to loosen up in front of her.

“I’m sorry. I guess this is the kind of person that I am,” he said. He had regret for his actions, wondering if his response to this unforeseen series of events might have been the cause. “By the way, are there any other reincarnators there besides me?”

“No one nearby. There might be one in an area that’ll take you a few years to get to on foot, but do you really want to live so close to one of these people?”

After pondering the thought for a few moments, the idea of having a reincarnator with unfathomably overpowered abilities nearby became absolutely terrifying to him. He put a hand over his chest and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Anyways, you’ll be restarting as a baby. Hm, I suppose it’s time,” God said wistfully, knowing that her time was up.

“So I’ll be starting a bright, new life! I’ll leave it all to you, God!” he said.

“Yeah yeah. See ya kid. I pray that your life is filled with blessings.” With a smile, she summoned a bright vortex at his feet, accompanied by a low humming that echoed throughout the void. “All right, then! Off you go! So long!”

Their separation came suddenly, God’s gaze gracing him with motherly love until he disappeared.

“Whew. That part’s over,” she muttered to herself with contentment. As the sound of the vortex lingered, the lone god found herself immersed in an indescribable feeling. It went without saying that God had sent countless souls off to a new life. The process this time around was similar to before, but sending someone off was the only part of it that was exactly the same for her.

“One of my wishes has finally come to fruition. Now then, I suppose I’ll relax a little. Well, for today at least,” she muttered as though she was reminiscing about something.

She gave a revelatory chuckle, her body trembling with some kind of satisfaction.

“Finally, I’m able to call you back to my world. That alone is enough for me,” she said.

He hadn’t been aware that his encounter with God wasn’t just a stroke of coincidence.

“‘Welcome home’ is what I should’ve said, I suppose. Now then, once more...show me how you’ll live.”

The true meaning behind her words was something that only God herself knew the answer to.

No one knew how much time had passed. He awoke as a bright light peeked in through the window. *How cliché, but I guess I just went through your bog-standard reincarnation after all*, he thought, followed by the realization that a beautiful brunette with glossy hair was holding him in her arms.

“Aw, you’re such a good baby, Ein,” she cooed.

That was his new name. This meant that the woman holding him was his mother. *I see, the reincarnation must’ve been a success. Being able to understand words must be a reincarnator perk.*

“Ngh... Waaah! Waaah!” His body felt ticklish and he naturally gave out a loud cry. This was a completely normal thing for babies to do, but he wasn’t thrilled that it involved crying against his will.

“Oh my darling, what’s wrong? Are you hungry?” she asked.

As she tried to calm him down, he continued to stare at the woman whom he presumed to be his mother. *Yeah... She’s not like my mother at all.* This opinion simply came from his feelings. Perhaps due to the fact that he had a past life, he couldn’t think of this woman as his mother. If anything, she felt more like an older sister with a large age gap.

However, her affectionate gaze and the warmth of her hand rubbing his back indicated that Ein was indeed precious to her. An inexplicable sense of comfort washed over him. *All right, this is my new life now. I’ll do my best.*

Five years had passed since Ein's reincarnation. He had been born in the largest kingdom on the continent, the kingdom of Heim. The land overseen by his family, the Roundhearts, wasn't far from the Royal Capital and was home to arguably the largest port city on the mainland. Thus, the Roundhearts held much sway within the capital. Ein, however, was filled with a torrent of complicated feelings. He was lying on the floor of his room, his limbs splayed out as if he were a starfish.

"Th-This is no good," he muttered between sighs. "The downsides are too much..."

His breathing grew haggard, and he found himself struggling to speak. He was in this sorry state after testing out his skill, one that he thought to be pretty lame.

"I-I can't stand..."

Seeing an opportunity arise, he decided to give Toxin Decomposition EX a spin. He looked for some poison, but wasn't able to find any. However, he remembered that God also mentioned bacteria and the like wouldn't hurt him either. With this in mind, he thought that mold would be a worthy candidate. As such, he nabbed some that had been growing on a tree outside the manor.

"B-But... I wasn't told that this would happen to me..."

He was exhausted. His appendages had gone numb and he was suffering under the weight of an intense headache. Until just a few minutes ago, he'd been unconscious as the pain was too great for him to bear. The mold disappeared after he successfully deconstructed it, but he had immediately fallen into his current state.

After a brief silence, he muttered, "This skill is lame and impractical. No one would be happy to have it."

He'd chosen a definitively bad skill. His body gradually felt better after an hour or so, but this was much too difficult for him to use. He finally managed to reach for the cup on his desk and gulped down some water.

"Yep... I won't use this skill."

The headaches were especially rough on him. He was mostly fine now, but he

wasn't willing to purposefully get another one. Unfortunately, Ein's misfortunes didn't end there. Aside from his skill, he was also troubled about one other thing.

"Phew," Ein said as he managed to drag himself onto his bed, his mind heavy with his troubles. "My younger brother's skill is amazing, but mine is just not good at all."

Though he was the eldest brother, Ein had already given up on becoming the successor to his household. "The older brother has Toxin Decomposition EX, and the younger brother is a Holy Knight... Jeez, my life was bad from the get-go."

Ein had a brother a year his junior, and that in and of itself wasn't a problem. However, his younger brother had a skill with a flashy name, Holy Knight. He felt like this battle was over before it even began.

"I'm pooped; time to read a book I guess," he mumbled, reaching for one by his bedside table. It was a book he had borrowed from his mother.

Of late, Ein would use some of his free time to read, often resting on the sofa in his room. It started as a way for him to get a feeling for his new world, but had turned into a bit of a hobby.

"What is this? A dragon? It's huge," he said.

He was reading a reference book, currently opened to a page with the image of a mighty sea-dwelling dragon. Seeing that the beast was apparently much larger than a ship, Ein was taken aback by the illustration.

"No way. Does something this big actually exist? Are we sure it's not like a tall tale or something? My skill won't stand a chance against this thing..."

He had been taken out by a bit of mold—there was no way he was suited for combat. He sighed deeply, with thoughts of a rough future ahead of him.

"Oh, I have some training with father after noon," he muttered.

Had he known the outcome, he wouldn't have tested out his new skill. Feeling slightly regretful, he lay on his bed in the hope that he'd regain some energy at least. Despite only having a few dozen or so minutes of rest, he was feeling

surprisingly energetic as he psyched himself up while on the way to the inner courtyard. After swinging his sword for a while, the man next to him spoke up.

“That sword’s starting to suit you,” he said.

“Th-Thank you!” Ein replied.

The man’s name was Rogas—he was Ein’s father and commander in chief of the Heim kingdom’s army. His masculine face, height, and sturdy physique left a lasting impression on others. *I wasn’t blessed with a good skill, so I must work hard*, Ein thought as he lost his breath with every desperate swing of his blade. Walking away with a super rare pull from the gacha machine meant that putting in the extra effort wasn’t a problem for him.

“Hah! Rah!” Ein continued for minutes on end as Rogas watched on.

When the boy’s arms finally started to tremble from exertion, Rogas told him, “You seem tired. We’ll take a break for a few minutes.”

“Y-Yessir!” Ein said, sitting on the ground.

He could feel the throb of exhaustion in his arms and legs. As he wiped the sweat from his brow, he noticed a woman using the opportunity to speak with Rogas.

“Sir Rogas, may I please request some of your time?” she asked.

“Hm? Camilla? What’s wrong?” Rogas replied.

Miss Camilla... Ein thought. Camilla wasn’t Ein’s biological mother; she was Rogas’s second wife.

“Pardon my intrusion while you’re on break,” she said. “I wanted to talk to you about Glint.”

“What about Glint?”

“He’s already four years old, so I believe he can start his training as well.”

The two were referring to Ein’s brother, who was a year younger than him. Glint was Camilla’s child and therefore he was Ein’s half brother, who also happened to possess a power that Ein did not.

“He was born with the Holy Knight skill. For the future of the Heim kingdom

and for the sake of the Roundheart family, I believe he's ready," she said.

Holy Knight was a skill so rare that few within the history of the Heim kingdom were known to have it. One could say that, unlike Ein, the younger Glint had a skill befitting such a distinguished family well-known for their prowess in combat.

"Indeed. I've been having the same thought," Rogas said with a firm nod. He was overflowing with expectations for Glint. "I'm sorry Ein, but that concludes our lesson for today. I must speak with Camilla."

Well, yeah. I knew you'd say that. Man, I feel like you let yourself go with the flow a little too easily. Though Ein was tired, he didn't like how his lesson had ended. Bringing himself to his feet, he bowed his head before his father, and turned to Camilla. "I understand. Please excuse me, Miss Camilla."

"Of course. Good day. Please continue to work hard for Glint in the future," she replied.

Yeah, yeah, whatever, Ein thought, fed up with his stepmother's words. She'd just stated that his baby brother would be the next head of the household.

"She's right, Ein. You must continue to work much harder than all of those around you," Rogas said without reprimanding his wife. His rather apathetic remarks were rooted in his great expectations for Glint.

Father isn't bad or anything, but he just continues to let things sweep him away. Miss Camilla's words especially, Ein thought. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was of little worth compared to his brother. He half-jokingly told himself that he hoped he wouldn't be disinherited.

"Of course. I shall continue to work hard. If you'll excuse me," Ein said as he left. He headed to the baths, hoping to wash his sweat away.

After a bath, Ein spent his free time before dinner in the archives. His only companions were the bookshelves that solemnly lined the walls. He sat down at his desk, proceeding to open up a book that had been resting on it. Ein was a kid who worked diligently and hard. He'd give it his all, whether it was training with his father or his nose deep into a book. His regular visits to the archives left

a positive impression on the servants working within the house. Many of them were excited to see where the future would take him, but he also did have a tendency to be a little too wrapped up in his own thoughts. After reading for a few hours, Ein realized that he was out of the paper he used to take notes from parts of his books.

“I did it again,” he mumbled.

The surface of his desk was littered with a mountain range of papers. Midway through his studies, he found a subject he was reading about to be quite intriguing. This led to him becoming way too invested in it. For Ein, the more inscrutable the topic, the easier it was for him to grasp. He had a feeling that this might have been another perk of reincarnation. As such, his stack of notes was enough to fill out multiple books. It wasn't likely that another five-year-old could do that.

“Young Master, dinner is ready. Ah, were you copying down some books again?” the house's butler said. Watching Ein pour all his effort into his work, the butler couldn't help but smile warmly at him.

“Y-Yeah. I was just about done,” Ein said. He was studying, but to most others it must've looked like he was simply copying the books.

“How wonderful. You're more diligent than others in not only your training, but your studies as well.”

Ein gave a forced smile. He was indeed diligent, but felt a little embarrassed since he thought that the bonuses of reincarnation had helped him out a fair bit.

“In the future, you could become a scholar... Or with your daily effort, you could even become a general,” the butler said.

Unlike Rogas and Camilla, the butler displayed an approving attitude to the boy. Ein's kind demeanor towards others and his earnestness had made him rightfully popular among the servants.

“I hope I can, but I can't say for sure,” Ein said.

He wanted to prove his worth somehow, so naturally, his mind was filled with such thoughts. Thus, the butler's words made him happy.

“I’m getting hungry, so I’ll call it a day,” Ein said as he left the room.

“Hm, I suppose I’ll tell the other servants that the Young Master has made himself quite the mountain within the archives,” the butler said playfully, glancing at the enormous stack of papers on the desk.

The next day, Glint had been prioritized for the day’s training. Rogas gave Ein some quick instructions before heading off to another room to coach the younger Roundheart. The following week, Rogas’s instructions became even more brief. The week after that, Ein was only swinging his sword. Three weeks after Glint started his training, Rogas didn’t even show up after Ein had finished his training regimen. *How can I get father’s approval so I can get back at Miss Camilla?*

While trying to think of a plan one evening, Ein was preoccupying himself by carving a sword out of a block of wood. This was meant to be a replacement for one of the many wooden swords he had broken. He had somehow snapped the base of his sword this evening, leaving him with a conundrum he couldn’t understand. Yes, his diligent training must have strained the wood, but could a child’s strength break a sword this easily? He had broken enough recently that it concerned him.

“This is weird. I feel like I’m only getting better at carving,” he muttered while continuing to shape his blade. He’d meant it as a joke, but couldn’t help but be proud of his work. He had carved so many blades that he’d developed some decent wood carving skills. He could even take a chunk of wood and make a small bear from it.

“I can even make a bear. I’m good.” He felt like he’d lost track of his initial goal, but he was having a bit of unexpected fun. He stashed the animal in his inner pocket and stood up with his newly carved sword in hand. “Hmmm... I think it’s bath time.”

He’d had a good workout today, even without a teacher. The sound of his blade had gradually changed, the whistles of his swings slicing through the air serving as proof of his improvement. With a sense of accomplishment, Ein waltzed his way back into the manor.

Boiling water in this world called for the use of certain equipment. Known as magical tools, this equipment required magic stones to operate. Said stones could be found within the bodies of monsters. The magical power inhabiting these stones was said to supply power, but they just seemed like boilers to the untrained eye.

After his bath, Ein stepped out onto the hallways and watched the sunset as the cool breeze from an open window blew upon him. As he was cooling off, an elderly servant approached him.

“Young Master, how was the bath?” she asked.

“It was lovely today as usual,” Ein replied with a carefree smile.

The servant smiled in response as well. “I’m glad to hear. Now then, would you please have some of these later? Do keep it a secret from the Master.”

Ein received a few cookies that were wrapped in paper. Rogas didn’t allow any snacks, so the servants would smuggle some to him from time to time.

“Many of the servants, myself included, look forward to your future Young Master. So we thought...”

Ein was touched by her kindness. “Thank you so much. Ah! I have a gift in return.” Ein took out a small bear that he’d carved earlier. “I made this in my spare time, but if you don’t mind, you can have it.”

Even he felt that he’d carved it quite well. He thought that this could easily look like a souvenir or gift from a store.

“My, my... How adorable! I shall gratefully accept this!” she said with a joyous smile. She carefully placed it in her pocket as though she’d received something precious. Suddenly, as if she’d remembered something, she said, “By the way, if you’ve the time, why don’t you visit the lady of the house? When I brought her tea earlier, she said that she would be finishing up soon.”

I see. That’s some good news. Ein’s next destination had been decided. “I understand. I’ll head that way, then.”

“If you require any assistance, please don’t hesitate to let me know,” the

servant said, as she then left his side.

*Well, she **is** my mom, but it's still hard for me to feel that way for her though.* In the end, he still saw his mother more as a much older sister. Same as before. He didn't really give it much more of his attention, and said, "All right, let's go to my mother's room."

In high spirits, he walked over to her room with pep in his step. His mother's room was close to his and he wasn't too far away from her either, as he had been cooling off in a nearby hallway.

"Mother, are you there?" he said as he gently knocked on the door. He knew that she was present, but he didn't know if he could go inside.

"Welcome. Come on in," she said. Watching him walk in with an affectionate gaze, Olivia was overjoyed to have her son visit.

"I heard that you were working, but are you done now?" Ein asked.

"I am. But even if I wasn't, the time I spend with you is the most important to me, Ein." she said.

After five years of living with her, he found that her kindness was seemingly limitless. She would unconditionally affirm him, and shower him with love. It was only natural for him to like his mother. One of the reasons for his obsession with proving his worth was to avoid making Olivia sad.

"Ah, you're nice and warm from the bath. You smell nice too." she said, rubbing his back as she held him in her arms.

When she did so, he clearly remembered that he'd been held in those arms for the past five years. Olivia guided her son to a sofa in the middle of the room and he sat down.

"You've been working really hard every single day, haven't you?" she said with a chuckle. "You're a good boy. A very good child."

Ein felt a little embarrassed as she continued to freely praise him. She sat down beside the boy and smiled as she looked down at him.

"Wh-What kind of work have you been doing, mother?" Ein said, changing topics to escape his embarrassment.

“I was compiling a report about the list of job notices I’d requested merchants and adventurers to handle. I was wondering what to do next.”

I see... I don't get it at all. Ein cocked his head to one side, assuming that this work was one of her tasks as an aristocrat, one who stood above others. “What kind of work were you requesting?”

“I’m looking for something. It’s in a place that is very difficult to access, so I can’t find it alone.”

Ein was interested in whatever she was looking for, but didn’t want to pry too much about her work.

“This job is something I’m doing by myself, so I have a bit more work to do than usual,” she said.

“Oh... So it’s got nothing to do with father, then?”

Simply working with merchants and adventurers surely required much negotiation. *She’s like a capable company president. I expect no less from a woman who came from a large merchant household.* Even her bloodline allowed her to become a competent worker. Watching her complete her work with no assistance made her look cool to him.

Ein strongly believed that his mother was an incredibly talented woman. To be the first wife of a count, she most likely had to be.

“By the way, how did you like the book I gave you yesterday?” Olivia asked.

“It was a really fun read! There was a huge dragon and everything!” he replied with enthusiasm.

In her eyes, every little thing he did was so adorable she couldn’t help watching him with great affection.



He's such an adorable and good child, Olivia thought to herself with a smile as she shared in his enthusiasm.

"Do you know why there are huge dragons like the one in your book, Ein? Well, they grow by eating magic stones," she explained.

By using a method unusable to humans, monsters could grow to gargantuan sizes. She saw her son's eyes light up as she continued to explain, knowing that he was on the edge of his seat listening to her.

"I wonder if I'd become stronger if I ate magic stones," Ein said.

Olivia seemed surprised by her son's words at first, but she soon took on a calm, reassuring tone. "You'll be fine. I know that you're working hard every day. I'm sure—no, I *know* that you'll grow up to become a wonderful person. You have nothing to worry about."

She looked straight into her son's eyes, her voice filled with confidence. Ein, drawn by his mother's powerful and beautiful gaze, stared back at her for a brief moment.

"Heh heh, I-I think you might be overestimating me," he said with an embarrassed laugh.

Olivia quickly shook her head. "No, I'm not at all. You are the most important thing in the world to me. Though, your tendency to get a little too focused on certain things might be your only minor flaw."

Her beautiful expression conveyed that no matter what would happen, without fail, she would love Ein for all he was. "You can become a stronger leader, one that won't lose out to your father," she said, reaching out and stroking his hair as he sat next to her.

"Erm, I wonder..." he said.

She chuckled. "You're so wonderful. In fact, you're the cutest little hard worker I know." He looked at her quizzically as she continued, "You train so hard, and all by yourself no less. You study just as hard every day as well, copying down any book you can get your hands on. There's no child as lovely as you are, Ein."

Ein felt that she was thinking too highly of him, but was no longer embarrassed by her praises. In fact, he felt that he could trust her words.

“For a child as wonderful as you, I have a small gift,” she suddenly said, standing up and heading over to her desk.

She took out a card about the size of the palm of her hand, and returned to her son’s side. She offered the card to him, and had him firmly grasp the item in his hands. “You were waiting for this to arrive, weren’t you? To tell you the truth, I just received it a few moments ago.”

Ein gazed at the card, slowly realizing what it was. “This must be...” He raised his voice in excitement as he turned to Olivia in surprise. “Mother!”

She nodded with satisfaction upon hearing the joy in her child’s voice. “Since we’ve received it, let’s take a look, shall we?” she said, encouraging her son.

With delight, he fixedly stared at the words on the card.

Ein Roundheart

[Job] Eldest son of the Roundheart household

[Stamina] 55

[Magical Power] 41

[Attack] 22

[Defense] 21

[Agility] 25

[Skills] Toxin Decomposition EX, Gift of Training

In this world, a special magical tool was used to ascertain each person’s skills and stats. However, only skills could be determined upon birth, and as a person grew older, they would have a card created to measure the other statuses.

“This must be my status card!” Ein said.

Olivia chuckled. “It was worth expediting this item. I’m glad to see you so happy.” She gently stroked his hair, and Ein smiled, feeling ticklish.

“Thank you so much! W-Wait, speaking of, what do these numbers indicate?” he asked, as he wondered how his numbers fared among his peers. Olivia had an idea as to why he was asking this question and offered an explanation.

“The average stamina stat for kids around your age is 10,” she said.

Ein was surprised by how low that average was, but it meant he far exceeded it.

“Your strength is the result of all your hard work, Ein,” she added.

He didn’t care about anything but hearing his mother’s praise. It must have been yet another advantage of reincarnation, but it was also true that he worked very hard.

“Huh, what’s this? It says ‘Gift of Training,’” Ein said. He was delighted with his stats, but he didn’t recognize this term.

“Ah, that’s proof God approves of your hard work,” she replied.

“Huh?”

“It’s a skill that strengthens your constitution. It makes your body less susceptible to illness, numbs any pain, and means you don’t tire easily.”

Considering that he was only five years old, this choice seemed out of character for God. He felt some of his strength leaving his body.

After a moment of silence, Olivia said, “I’ve also been very much aware that you’ve been doing all of this hard work by yourself, you know?” She sounded a little sad.

Given that he was still a youngster, Ein didn’t have that foundation of years upon years of hard work, but he still intended to continue his training. He thought this was perhaps one of God’s blessings.

That’s why...for you, I must... Olivia thought to herself, steeling her resolve. She shook her head and changed her expression to avoid Ein catching a glimpse of her downtrodden stare. “Because you’ve been working so hard, I can do it too. Let’s continue to work hard together, okay?”

“Okay!” Ein replied.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Olivia gave a response, allowing the person to enter. It was the kindly servant who had given Ein those cookies, but she was looking a little troubled. “Excuse me. I’ve received a message from the lady of the house.”

“From my mother-in-law?” Olivia asked, giving her servant a questioning look.

“A merchant has just arrived, and she’d like you to choose the tea leaves from their selection of wares.”

Olivia sighed. “I see. She’s telling me to do it instead of our servants.” Disappointment welled up from the bottom of her heart.

“Apparently so. She said that you have a better eye for this than the servants...”

“I’m sorry, mother. This must be my fault,” Ein said. His grandmother had been aggressively cold to him, outright stating that he wasn’t fit to be the household’s eldest son. That cold shoulder trickled down to Olivia, as her supposed mother-in-law loved to antagonize her.

“What good timing! Honestly, I wanted to go out and about with you anyway, Ein. Shall we choose your grandmother’s tea leaves first?” she said. Above all, Olivia dreaded seeing her son’s grief-stricken face. “Would you kindly come along with me, my brilliant knight?”

Her mannerisms were heartwarming, and it was apparent that she did so all in the best interests of her son. Yet, the look on her face also made it clear that she was indeed looking forward to going out and about with Ein.

“Of course! Please allow me to go with you!” he said.

She chuckled. “First, let’s go to the drawing room and pick out some tea leaves.” She winked at her servant, who looked apologetic, and stood up.

As the servant bowed, Olivia passed by her side and murmured, “Don’t you worry about it.”

The mother and son walked out into the mansion’s grand and luxurious hallways. All quite fitting for the dwelling of a count. Olivia and Ein held hands as they descended the stairs.

“Let us make haste and choose the tea leaves. I wouldn’t want my time with you to grow shorter,” Olivia said.

“We just need to choose leaves for black tea, so I’m sure we’ll be fine,” Ein replied.

The two approached the drawing room the merchant often used to set up shop on his visits to the mansion. With a knock, Olivia entered and Ein followed close behind.

“Ah, I’ve been waiting for you. Here are the wares I’ve brought with me for today—Madam Roundheart?!” the man said, surprised. The merchant was a man of solid build with an impressive, but elegant mustache. As he’d been waiting alone for a while, he was shocked by Olivia’s sudden appearance and stood up with a bow.

“I’m just here to select some tea leaves for my mother. Would you kindly show me your wares?” Olivia said.

“O-Of course! Right away!”

Though he was slightly flustered, he was very careful to remain respectful to his clientele as he opened up a number of bags. He brought out numerous bottles filled with tea leaves. Olivia took Ein’s hand and sat in front of the man.

“Down I go. Oh, this must be...” Ein murmured as he sat down and gazed at the items on the desk laid out in front of him. A crystal around the size of a fist glistening with a yellow sheen caught his eye in particular. “Is this a magic stone?”

“It is indeed. It’s a cheap stone used for magical tools, so you may touch it if you wish,” said the merchant, doing his best to restrain the spirited tone he often used in his business.

Ein decided to take up the kind offer and picked up the stone. For whatever reason, a sweet aroma emanated from the item.

“The magic energy of a pricier magic stone might be noxious to those who touch it, but since this one is only about 500 G, or 500 gold pieces, it’s all right for you to hold,” the man explained.

Gazing at it with interest, Ein held the stone up to the light, its translucency causing it to glitter like a jewel. While Olivia was beside him picking out tea leaves, he thought this was a good opportunity to ask more about the stone.

“What kind of magic stone do you need for a month’s worth of hot water?” the boy asked.

“For an average commoner’s household, a stone worth 3,000 G should do the trick,” the man replied.

Ein was a little surprised by how cheap it was, and assumed that this was equivalent to the monthly gas bill of a modern home.

“Are you perhaps interested in magic stones? If you’d like, I can give that to you,” the merchant said.

It was a generous offer, most likely because it was a cheap stone. Ein initially thought of declining, but ultimately accepted it.

“More luxurious stones can be used as decorations, along with many applications in magic and ceremonies. They can even be national treasures,” the man added.

Ein nodded with interest as Olivia finally spoke up from her silence.

“Now then. I’d like these three for today,” she said, pointing out the bottles of tea leaves she had chosen.

“Understood. I shall give these to your servants,” the man replied.

Upon hearing his response, Olivia stood up. She was nimble on her feet, eager to spend some time outside with her son.

“Ein, shall we go?” she said.

“Ah, yes! Of course!” Ein replied. He grabbed the sweet-scented stone and bowed towards the man.

The merchant, in turn, bowed deeply and kept his head down until the two were out of sight.

“I’m so excited to go outside with you, Ein,” Olivia said.

“I am as well, mother,” the boy replied.

Their words to each other were filled with joy from the bottoms of their hearts. As they left the drawing room, Ein tried to stash the stone away in his pocket, but his curiosity got the better of him.

“This stone smells so sweet,” he muttered, taking in the rich aroma that smelled as sweet as honey. He couldn’t help himself as he brought the stone in front of his nose and proceeded to give it a tiny lick. “Ugh, it’s so sweet!”

A sickly sweetness assaulted his palate, as if he had licked something made from honey and drenched in sugar. He couldn’t hide his reaction.

“Hmmm? Ein, is something the matter?” Olivia said, hearing his shocked voice. She turned around with a puzzled expression.

Not wanting to give off an impression of being a vulgar glutton, Ein quickly smiled and said, “N-Nothing! Nothing at all!”

He then realized that the magic stone had lost its color. Ein was confused by this, but hid the stone in his pocket.

Olivia giggled. “You’re quite the odd duckling sometimes, aren’t you? Come now, let’s go outside.”

“O-Of course! I’m right behind you!”

Olivia and Ein spent the rest of the day enjoying their time together outside. It went without saying that the time mother and child spent together was not only fun, but incredibly precious to them.

Ein Roundheart

[Job] Eldest son of the Roundheart household

[Stamina] 57 (Increased by 2!)

[Magical Power] 41

[Attack] 22

[Defense] 21

[Agility] 26 (Increased by 1!)

[Skills] Toxin Decomposition EX, Gift of Training

Chapter Two: Disinherited and the Hidden Bloodline

It had been a few months since Ein had given the magic stone a lick and he was still working diligently as always. He couldn't forgive the family for how they treated his mother and was still desperate to change their fortunes. He swung his sword as he did every morning, but today Ein noticed something that had prompted him to give a forced chuckle.

"Yeah, no, this is really weird," he said.

He was used to breaking his wooden sword all the time, but this was a bit different.

"Can a wooden sword cut through iron armor? I'm sure that's probably normal in this world," he said sarcastically before disagreeing with himself. "Yeah, right."

He had fashioned a wooden training dummy with iron armor to make it look like an enemy. An old-fashioned method, but it seemed like a good change of pace from swinging his blade in the air. However, he just sliced through the armor with a wooden sword. The sword was also busted, but that wasn't a concern for him.

"Hmmm... Maybe it's metal fatigue or something?" he said, but he wasn't quite sure how that would exactly work.

Hypothesizing that the metal must've been deteriorating, he scratched his head and started to walk off. He realized that he'd been training for far longer than he'd planned to and became slightly flustered.

"Whoops, I have to make my preparations, or I'll be late," he said.

He had to take an early bath and prepare to head out for a party in the Royal Capital. This social event served as the venue for aristocratic children to make their first official appearances. As such, Ein had been looking forward to it for the past few days, curious to see what the party was about.

He had more pep in his step than usual and he headed inside the manor.

Once Ein had left, a servant immediately arrived to clean up the training area.

“Huh? This armor looks like it was cut by something,” the servant noted.

They checked the sharp cut that ran through the armor, noticing that the iron itself was in good shape. It wasn't deteriorating, and it certainly didn't suffer from metal fatigue. The servant wondered what had occurred while they disposed of the armor and broken wooden sword.

A few hours after Ein finished his training, the Roundhearts headed for the Royal Capital in two horse-drawn carriages. Rogas, Camilla, and Glint rode in the front carriage. Ein and Olivia, however, were off in the carriage behind them. Ein briefly shifted his gaze from the book in his lap to glance at Olivia, who sat next to him. She had a grim expression on her face. *I guess there's no helping this situation. Glint is apparently set to be the next successor after all*, Ein thought.

Only Olivia had objected to this arrangement, so it was an open-and-shut matter. While she had expressed her outrage at how coldly the eldest son of the household had been treated, it had changed nothing. Discouraged, disappointed, and saddened by the turn of events, she ended up pouring herself into her work. Though busy with her responsibilities, alongside the requests she made to merchants and adventurers, Olivia made sure to spend any free time she had with her son.

I feel a bit of sorrow too, but... Ein thought. He was overjoyed to have his mother's praise and approval. She unconditionally loved and validated her son with all of her heart—it was hard to *not* feel some sort of affection towards her. *I can't stand to see my mother being scorned. I must somehow prove myself to my father*, he thought. With a firm determination in his heart, he swore that he would put more effort into his activities than ever before.

As he looked out the carriage window, his gaze darted between the views and people he had never seen before. The people walking about outside were called adventurers. Ein thought their freedom looked like a lot of fun.

“Do you think I could visit various places like these people do?” Ein asked. Normally, this would have been possible for the eldest son of an aristocrat, but

his younger brother had already been chosen as the next head of household.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to go on many journeys, Ein,” Olivia said.

The boy was surprised, as he didn’t expect his mother to accept his idea so easily.

“However, I am worried you may have to fight more than a few dangerous monsters,” she added.

Defeating a monster was the way to get rich quickly for an adventurer, but it wasn’t something that Ein could do easily. *At the very least, I’d like to find a beautiful jewel for mother*, he thought. He didn’t put much emphasis on fighting, preferring to forge his own path in life as an adventurer. With these thoughts in mind, Ein stroked the cover of the book that he was reading moments before.

“By the way, what book were you reading?” she asked.

“Oh, this is something I found in the archives. It’s a book that tells a rather common tale.”

He liked a vast array of stories, anything from heroic legends to romantic fairy tales. The book he was currently reading told the story of a princess who fell in love with a prince from another kingdom. The prince in particular had some cliché lines and seemed to be a bit of a show-off, but Ein found these choices to be interesting. Unusual, but still interesting.

“The story is reaching its climax as the two of them rendezvous in a field of flowers. The prince then offers her a stunning ring and asks her, ‘Princess, will you please accept this ring?’”

The prince and princess grew closer in the romance-filled scene. The prince’s lines weren’t exceptionally unique, but Ein was in awe of the prince’s mannerisms. In fact, he felt a hint of admiration towards the character.

“If you ask me, you’re much, much more wonderful than the prince in that story,” Olivia said.

Ein was tempted to respond with how she was much more wonderful than the princess in the book, but the embarrassment got to him first. After a

moment of silence, he said, "I'll do my best."

He realized that being on the receiving end of these lines felt way more awkward than giving them. Olivia gazed at Ein's embarrassed profile and squinted her eyes with joy. The two peacefully enjoyed their ride until they reached the Royal Capital.

Meanwhile, in the front carriage, Glint furrowed his brow and asked "Father, are we there yet?"

Glint had his mother's glossy blonde hair and shared his father's masculine facial features with his brother. Despite those good looks, he had an expression of discontent befitting that of a four-year-old boy. He'd gotten tired of the long carriage ride and had voiced his boredom.

"Glint, it'll take about two more hours. Just bear with it until then," Rogas said, reprimanding his son as though there was no other choice.

"The carriage behind us is so quiet. Wouldn't it be quite embarrassing if you can't be patient like they've been?" Camilla said, fanning the flames of competition between Glint and his brother.

Glint, who felt that his brother was inferior to him, expressed his emotions at the idea. "Huh?! I-I don't want to lose to my brother!"

He didn't even like to be compared to Ein, who was born with a dull skill. Rogas gave a forced smile while Camilla happily grinned.

"By the way, Glint, didn't you receive a letter before we left?" Camilla said.

"I did! I received my status card, you see!" he replied.

Of course Camilla knew this, but feigned ignorance and continued with her flattery. "My, how wonderful! Would you be able to show it to your father and mother?"

Glint took out his card from his inner pocket and handed it to his parents.

Glint Roundheart

[Job] Second son of the Roundheart household

[Stamina] 120

[Magical Power] 94

[Attack] 35

[Defense] 41

[Agility] 33

[Skills] Holy Knight

“Well done, my boy! You’ve got higher statuses than the twelve-year-olds who have finished their coming-of-age ceremonies! I’d expect no less from a Holy Knight!” Rogas said happily as he hugged his wife and son.

“Wh-Whoa! Father?!” Glint said as he trembled in joy from the high praise he’d just received from his father.

“That Holy Knight skill can eventually turn into your job. If you continue to polish your skills, you’ll be able to join a high rank among the Holy Knights,” Rogas said. Glint looked at his father with a sparkle in his eyes. “These high-ranking knights are called Heavenly Knights...”

Rogas explained that these knights were not only excellent with magic, but their endurance and constitution could rival that of a castle. Most terrifying of all, they could eradicate an entire enemy troop with a single flash of their blade. They were the knights of the knights. With a glimmer in his eye, Glint nodded and declared that he would, without fail, become a Heavenly Knight.

Camilla allowed herself a smug grin, in high spirits as if she had become victorious. Her son was now the successor to the household and Rogas’s constant doting over him made Ein look like a fool in comparison.

“Glint, I’m sure the girl to be your future wife will be very happy to hear that as well!” Camilla said.

Glint was silent for a moment. “Do you think so? Erm, I’m a little nervous.”

“Don’t worry. If you can’t get a woman, no other boy in Heim can. Even *that man’s* daughter will be smitten with you, no doubt,” Rogas reassured.

Feeling at ease because of his father's words, Glint clenched his fists.

"By the way, Sir Rogas. I'd like to ask about Miss Shannon, Glint's fiancée," Camilla started.

"You want to know what she's like, don't you?" he replied. She nodded, and Rogas continued, "She's the only daughter of Marquess Bruno. She turns six this year and is two years Glint's senior. However, she's already famous for her beauty and is said to be extremely intelligent."

"How wonderful. I'm glad that you'll be engaged to such a lovely lady, Glint."

Shannon was set to become Glint's fiancée, but the boy was still only four. Though he was a few months shy of turning five, this was considered to be an early engagement even among aristocrats. Camilla wasn't aware of what the girl was like because Rogas had taken the initiative, as she had left the matter entirely to him.

"At today's party, we'll be making you our next successor and announce your engagement to Shannon. Hold your head up high, my son," Rogas said.

Encouraged by his father, he raised his head. "Yes, father!"

"Sir Rogas, please don't forget that we must meet the others before the party," Camilla added.

Ein was supposed to be the star of this party, but Glint had taken that role for himself. Camilla gloated to herself over the fact that her son had been engaged before the eldest son.

As they neared the Royal Capital, Camilla was filled with anticipation while Rogas braced himself. Glint clenched his fists, thinking about the fiancée whom he'd never met before. Though he was feeling a little nervous, his eyes sparkled at the view outside his carriage window.

It was dusk when the Roundhearts had finally arrived at the residence of the aristocrat set to host the party. After he disembarked from the carriage, Ein found himself in awe of the estate's massive footprint. *What an amazing garden.* He walked through the gates to be greeted by a cornucopia of

greenery. His gaze met countless flowers and trees, each one neatly planted and tended after with great care. One could easily tell how skilled the gardener was—their canvas was beautiful and solemn.

“It’s so large,” Ein murmured.

Olivia giggled. “The residence belongs to the one and only grand duke of Heim, after all.”

Rogas slowly approached the two and said, “Olivia, Ein, we have some people to meet before we make our announcements today.”

The mother and son looked at Rogas quizzically.

“My husband, whatever do you mean by ‘some people to meet’?” Olivia asked.

“I’m referring to Glint’s fiancée, Miss Shannon, along with her family,” Rogas replied.

“I’m aware of the engagement, but I haven’t been told that *we* must meet them.”

Overhearing the conversation, Ein twitched his cheek. He knew that he was given the cold shoulder as was Olivia. *But you would normally notify us of such an important thing beforehand. I can tell that they probably hid it from us.*

“Hm? I’d requested Camilla to let you know, but she must’ve missed her opportunity,” Rogas said.

To think he let this matter rest with such a flimsy excuse made Ein tempted to point it out right in front of him. Olivia was seemingly on the same page as her son and coldly gazed at her husband.

She sighed and said, “I see. Let’s just say she really did forget. And you’re telling us that we must greet the fiancée and her family?”

“Indeed. As my first wife and the eldest son of this household, it’d be rude if you two don’t pay your respects.”

“Yes, I’m sure it would be.” Needless to say, Olivia wasn’t too thrilled about this. She had given a rather thorny reply; a far cry from her usual demeanor.

“Marquess Bruno and his family are already waiting,” Rogas said, shifting his attention to a trio of people who stood nearby. There was a man in his prime with a young girl who clung to his side. Behind them was a pretty, mature-looking woman who was smiling.

“I understand. Ein and I just have to meet them, correct?” Olivia said.

“Once you’re finished, wait for me in the hall of the manor. We don’t want to make the young girl nervous,” Rogas replied.

Ein truly wondered if their greetings were necessary at all. They were told to leave immediately after the formalities were done. He felt a sense of dissatisfaction growing within him.

“Certainly. Do what you like to suit your needs,” Olivia said sternly. She was almost at a loss for words.

Rogas felt rueful about the situation and crossed his arms with a grimace. Despite that, he immediately called for his second wife and son. “Camilla, Glint, come over here.”

The two approached him as requested. Camilla looked gleeful and victorious while Glint seemed restless. He was anxious about the engagement and imminent meeting. Rogas fixed his collar and started proudly walking in front of his family.

“Ein, just bear with this for a bit, okay?” Olivia whispered.

“I’m not bothered by it, so I’ll be fine,” he responded.

Olivia tried to show consideration towards her son, but Ein wanted to do the same for her as well.

“Make sure to not be rude to the others, boys,” Rogas warned.

“Of course! As your child, I’ll be sure to not sully your good name!” Glint replied enthusiastically. His response seemed far too mature for a four-year-old.

“Marquess Bruno, I apologize for making you wait,” Rogas said.

“Why, if it isn’t Count Roundheart! Not at all! You’ve come from afar, after all!” Bruno replied. The Marquess’s red hair and beard were neatly trimmed. He

was also clad in fine, expensive-looking clothing. He responded brightly to Rogas and gave him a firm handshake.

“Let’s get right down to introductions, shall we? These two are my wives,” Rogas said.

“It certainly has been a while, Lord Bruno,” Olivia said, greeting the man first. She pinched the hem of her dress and bowed her head—her elegant gestures putting even the flowers of the garden to shame.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I’m the second wife, Camilla. I’d like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for accepting the engagement with my son,” Camilla followed, being significantly more chatty.

Yes, I may have lost the battle between sons, but mother is much prettier than Miss Camilla, Ein thought. His way of thinking may have been pathetic, but he fiercely bragged to himself about his mother. He felt his pride for her bubbling up from the bottom of his heart.

“Here’s my eldest son, Ein. And here’s my second son, Glint,” Rogas said, extending his hand and patting the backs of his two sons.

The two boys said their greetings and bowed deeply.

“Thank you for your polite greetings. I am Aiden Bruno. I have a residence within the Royal Capital, and I have been graciously given the role of Minister of Justice. I’m pleased to meet you all,” Bruno said.

Minister of Justice. Amazing. Ein was unable to hide his surprise upon hearing the man’s occupation. The woman who stood behind him stepped forward.

“I’m his wife, Nackla. I’ve been looking forward to this day.”

“Lastly, I’d like to present my only daughter, Shannon. Come now, give them a greeting,” Aiden said.

The guest of honor at this meeting, Shannon, took a step forward. “Pleased to meet you. My name is Shannon Bruno,” the girl said, bowing her head.

She was wearing a cute dress. She had gorgeous, glossy red hair that went down to her shoulders, accompanied by rather charming almond-shaped eyes. Though it was their first meeting, her smile felt a little standoffish.

I think she's cute, but what is this that I'm feeling? It was a difficult feeling to express, but her mysterious smile wouldn't leave Ein's head. Their eyes met as she looked up, making it hard for Ein to see her as anything other than a normal girl.

"Heh heh," she giggled before flashing a smile at Ein.

Glint was obviously annoyed by this, but all Ein could do was smile in return.

"I'm so honored to meet the both of you. Lord Rogas, I've heard of your fantastic work as commander in chief. There's even a saying that goes, 'Where there's Heim, there's Rogas.' Sir Glint, I've heard that you might become a Heavenly Knight in the future," Shannon said. Her pleasant and thoughtful words were meant to humor the two of them.

After the girl spoke, Olivia whispered to Rogas, "I shall leave with Ein, so do take your time."

She put her hand on Ein's back and he nodded at her words, as he was also eager to leave.

"It seems you're being considerate towards Shannon," Aiden said.

"Don't you worry about it. Please excuse us," Olivia said with a purely formal smile as she turned away.

"Good day, Lady Olivia and Sir Ein," Shannon said gracefully.

Ein could only force a smile in response.

After they were a good distance away, Olivia sighed and put a hand on her cheek. "Goodness, they're only thinking about Glint."

"I'm fine. I'm satisfied that you're by my side, mother," Ein said. *I wish they'd just disinherit me*, he thought imprudently.

"You're all I need as well, Ein," she said, smiling at him like a goddess.

Every time he was alone with her, his feelings of inferiority would melt away.

"Lady Shannon apparently has a skill called 'Blessing' which is an excellent pairing for a Holy Knight," Olivia said.

As such, the Brunos were eager to betroth her to Glint, who had the prerequisite skill to become a Holy Knight. It seemed this engagement had multiple layers. Oddly enough, Ein couldn't even bring himself to like Shannon. As if out of instinct. He nodded along, looking bored.

Olivia looked at him strangely. "Ein, you don't seem too interested in the fact that your brother is getting engaged."

"Yes. I can't phrase this well, but I'm not very interested," he replied. He couldn't put words to how he felt, resulting in an ambiguous reply.

"I see. Then what kind of woman is your type?"

"Someone like you, mother." In fact, he wanted to instantly reply that his type was simply his mother. His stride grew larger as he hurriedly walked away to hide his embarrassment, hoping that his face wouldn't be seen.

"Why if we weren't at this manor, I'd be hugging you so tightly right now," she said.

"I suppose we can save that for next time."

I'll definitely have her hug me. Her embrace will be mine.

Having shown her strong determination and frustration, Olivia now happily hummed a tune. "Ah, speaking of," she suddenly said, smiling as she clapped her hands. "Now that my work has finally settled down, I can tell you all about it next time."

"Work? Ah, you mean the requests you've been making to merchants and adventurers."

"That's right. Once we have the time, I'll tell you all about what I've been doing."

The evening's events were looming over the two of them, but it was all in the past now. They had happily sauntered into the grand duke's manor, looking at its dazzlingly luxurious interior as they waited for Rogas to return.

Some time had passed since Olivia and Ein had parted ways with Rogas. The sky grew darker over the course of the evening, eventually turning to a shade of

deep blue. The accompanying cool breeze of the night blew at the two of them. However, the current situation wasn't as calm as the wind.

"So you admit that this is your fault, then?" Olivia said coldly to the party receptionist.

"Of course! We shall deal with whoever has sent out these invitations," he replied, apologizing for the umpteenth time as he bowed deeply.

"I'm not interested in that. It's more troublesome that we're using up this valuable time. So, can Ein join the party or not?"

She was so angry because Ein wasn't allowed to even enter the ballroom. *I didn't think this would happen...*

The party's host, the grand duke, had decided to allow only one child per family into the party. The rule was enacted following last year's party. When being presented, the grand duke's granddaughter attracted a rather rowdy crowd of children. *The grand duke was upset, but someone failed to inform us of this new rule.* Ein thought.

If this was the case, Glint simply needed to bear with being in the spotlight. Rogas and the others had already entered the party, however, and it was far too late to ask them to leave. *I wonder if this person's going to get punished as well.* Ein wondered.

It was easy to guess that Camilla must've been behind this, but seeing the look of panic on the receptionist's face made Ein feel bad. The man's gaze, hands, and face all looked restless. This wasn't his fault, but as a servant of the grand duke, there was the possibility he'd face punishment.

"I'm truly so sorry about this mishap! I-If there's anything I could do, I'd love to be of assistance," he said, but no solution came to mind. He started to look even more frantic as he broke out in a cold sweat. "P-Please wait just a bit longer. I'll do something that'll satisfy the two of you..."

Having bought himself some time to come up with a solution, the panicked receptionist couldn't stop himself from blinking compulsively. Feeling for the man, Ein had an epiphany. *Oh right, I'm remembering that beautiful garden they have.* Though the receptionist was posted in this hall, its now illuminated

corridors could easily draw one's attention to the estate's luscious inner courtyard. The terrace appeared to have a magical quality to it, giving it a wonderful atmosphere.

"Pardon me, but would you please make a request to the grand duke? He has such a splendid courtyard that it makes me wonder if we could possibly spend some time there? Just during the party, of course." Ein asked.

The receptionist was stunned by those words. After a few seconds of silence, he seemed to have gathered himself and said brightly, "Th-Thank you for such a wonderful suggestion! I shall ask him immediately!"

This suggestion would help save the grand duke's face while keeping others out of harm's way. The receptionist looked back and seemed grateful for Ein's kindness as he walked away.

"E-Ein..." Olivia said as she comprehended her son's act of grace.

However, Ein remained as nonchalant as ever. *I think the receptionist can breathe easy now.* Olivia was likely uneasy after voicing her concerns as well. Ein shifted his eye onto the courtyard.

"The grand duke's garden is lovely, mother," he said, remembering the book that he read in the carriage. The prince and princess's rendezvous in the flower field had left a lasting impression on the young boy's heart. It led him to treat Olivia like a princess herself. "These blooming flowers are just as lovely as you are. Would you mind joining me for a nighttime stroll in the gardens?"

His words felt a little cliché, but that was good enough for the moment. Having heard her son talk to her like a sweet prince caused Olivia's eyes to redden and well up with tears. With a proud smile, she gently embraced Ein in her arms.

Some minutes later, the receptionist returned to them. The man was wheezing as he'd been running just moments before. "I-I just received word from the grand duke that he'll grant your request."

Ein breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that he had overcome this situation.

“However, the grand duke has one condition. He’d like to provide you with a guide,” he added.

“A guide?” Ein said. He was fine with the stipulation providing that their would-be guide wouldn’t ruin this precious moment with his mother. He was curious as to just who this guide would be.

A short while later, a girl stepped out of the building. “Pleased to meet you. You must be the eldest son of the Roundheart household,” she said.

“Huh? I am, but who are you?” he asked after blinking at her in confusion.

Olivia seemed to have an idea who the girl was, but kept mum. Ein had his guard firmly up. He looked at his new acquaintance with suspicion, unsure of who she was or what business she had with them. The girl seemed slightly taken aback by his skeptical stare.

“My name is Krone. I am the granddaughter of Graff August, the current head of the August household,” she said.

This explained why Olivia stayed quiet. The girl came from a higher-ranking aristocratic family. Her beautiful light-blue hair—a mix of silver and sapphire—flowed behind her. She appeared to be both a few years older and a couple of inches taller than Ein. Krone was already quite lovely, but her current beauty suggested that she could compete with Olivia’s own dazzling presence in the future. He met the girl’s gaze and thought, *Hmmm, what is this? I feel oddly at ease when I’m with her.*

Ein felt a sense of comfort while standing by her side, as if he was naturally meant to be there. It wasn’t based on appearances however, as Ein’s unease around Shannon made these new feelings even more confusing for him.

“I’m Ein Roundheart. I hope I’m not being too rude, but do you have any business with us?” He couldn’t help but ask the question. Why would a member of the grand duke’s household come to meet *them*? As he stood by his mother’s side, Ein stared at the nearby Krone.

She stared back and said, “I see. You aren’t like the other kids.”

Puzzled by what she said, he asked again. “H-Huh? What do you mean?”

“It’s just that at the party, the other men are rather raucous as they’re attempting to get close to me.” In short, Ein piqued her curiosity—he had only asked her a question, not trying to do anything else.

“Ah, so it’s because I’m not invading your personal space, Lady Krone. I understand.” He gave a forced laugh to himself, baffled by this girl’s words. He was tempted to say that anyone would be wary of approaching a stranger, even if she was cute as a button. It felt like a shallow move that Ein was confident he’d never do himself. *Besides, when it comes to cuteness and loveliness, I see it in my mother every day!*

He couldn’t keep himself from flashing a forced smile as the edges of his mouth tugged upwards.

“Y-You don’t have to laugh at me, do you? I was just at the party, so I was a bit flustered by the sudden change in my company,” Krone said.

“N-No, I’m not laughing at you, Lady Krone.” He was feeling sympathetic because the party must’ve been hectic for her. *She’s a girl out of everyone’s league, but she felt a little ignored just now.*

He tried to offer an excuse, but couldn’t find the right words. However, Krone apparently had an inkling that Ein didn’t mean any harm by it. She sighed and said, “I understand. I’ll just take it that you’re a bit of an odd duck out.”

“H-Ha ha ha, I’m sorry. Thank you for your courtesy.”

After the awkward exchange concluded, Krone let out a cough and said, “In any case, I shall be accompanying you and your mother. Now, allow me to guide you to our household’s prized gardens.”

He finally remembered that the receptionist had stated that the grand duke would be providing them with a guide. With his memory jogged, Ein and his mother followed Krone’s elegant stride into the gardens.

A vast array of flowers adorned the garden, and yet again, one could sense the artistry of the gardener who was able to seed this priceless parcel. The light spilling from the manor spectacularly illuminated the trio’s surroundings. *It’s so dreamy, but it feels rude to sum it up with just one word.* The grand duke’s

courtyard was splendid, and felt even more splendiferous than the garden out front. Ein strolled through the courtyard alongside Krone and his mother.

“I didn’t think you’d be our guide, Lady Krone. Ein must feel very blessed,” Olivia said.

“Please don’t feel the need to be so stiff with me. I’m worried that our garden would pale in comparison to your beauty, Lady Olivia,” Krone replied.

Is she a fan of my mother? Ein had actually wanted to spend some time alone with his mother, but the situation had taken a turn. He felt his joy to outweigh that of Olivia’s in moments she was praised. His good mood had him humming a tune as he gazed at the flower beds.

“I suppose rumors are always unreliable,” Krone muttered.

Olivia seemed a little troubled and said, “You’re referring to Ein, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I can’t help but hear rumors about him. I’m sorry.”

Ein, who had been listening in on the conversation, turned around and asked, “Rumors? What do you mean?”

The boy seemed clueless and the two ladies gave a faint smile.

“The person in question is always the last to know. It’s nothing. I simply thought that you were much more gentlemanly than I’d expected,” Krone said.

“Oh, okay. I see. I’m glad to hear it,” the boy replied. He looked down to hide his reddened face after he had received the sudden compliment.

Olivia gazed at the flowers as she walked by his side while Krone kept a watchful eye on the two from a few steps behind them.

“Look, Ein. Those flowers are beautiful too,” Olivia said.

“You’re right. Could I take a closer look, Krone?” Ein asked.

“Certainly. Do be careful, and make sure you don’t touch them.” Krone said.

Curious about one of the flowers, Ein took his mother’s hand and proceeded forward.

“He’s the exact opposite of what I’ve heard,” Krone murmured quietly. She stood a good distance from the pair, and spoke quietly to herself out of their

earshot. “An inattentive personality and a boy with no manners, huh...”

She gave an exasperated sigh, remembering the gossip that she’d heard about the boy. After actually meeting him, she knew that these uncouth rumors were seasoned with lies. “He’s far more well-mannered than any of the other children at tonight’s party. His charming appearance is quite attention-grabbing, just like his mother.”

Ein was clearly the complete opposite of what she’d heard. In fact, his thoughtfulness had left a lasting impression on her. “It’s hard to find someone who could be so wonderfully considerate as him.”

To not humiliate Olivia, Ein had personally lowered his head, saying that he found something as beautiful as his mother. His words were so incredibly thoughtful that Krone even felt a sense of yearning, wanting to be praised in a similar fashion.

“It’s truly so beautiful, Lady Krone,” Ein said to her while she was talking to herself.

“Y-Yes. We’re quite proud of this courtyard. I’m happy to hear that it’s to your liking.”

“It looks like that flower is glowing due to magic or something of the like.”

Krone took a few steps closer to the pair. In front of Ein’s eyes lay a fluttering blue rose that was glowing in the night.

“That’s a Blue Fire Rose, and it glows by itself,” she explained.

The dancing blue light indeed glittered like fire.

“The water, soil, and weather all must align perfectly in the right conditions for this flower to bloom. It’s rather difficult to grow this flower, and requires quite a bit of fertilizer. Once it blooms, it absorbs magical power from its surroundings to glow,” Krone explained.

Ein listened to her intently, his face brimming with curiosity.

Krone giggled. “But you see, this rose contains an extremely dangerous toxin.”

His face turned pale, with that curiosity having turned into tension. “You’re not lying, are you? Is that true?”

“Of course. The poison from this single flower is strong enough to kill a thousand people.”

She seemed to take pride as she offered her knowledge, but Ein could only wonder why they decided to plant such a dangerous flower.

“Normally, only members of the royal family are allowed to visit this garden, so we’re usually not too worried,” she added.

“I-I see.”

As Krone had explained, the lack of foot traffic in the inner courtyard meant the flower wasn’t much cause for concern. If there was a guide like her escorting them, there was nothing to fear.

“In addition, it’s usually encased in glass. So today is quite the special occasion.”

“So you’re saying it’s fine, even if it’s deathly poisonous.”

“Indeed, you’re right.” She gave a graceful smile.

As the three had moved on to view other flowers, an elderly servant approached them.

“My lady, I’ve made the preparations,” the servant said to Krone.

“Thank you. If you two don’t mind, would you like to join me for a small party?” Krone said.

“Huh? A party?” replied Ein with a befuddled expression on his face.

“We’ve had some food and tea prepared for us in the courtyard salon. If you’d please join me.”

Perhaps it was from the walk in the garden, but Ein did feel a little thirsty. The two ladies accompanying him were also probably tired from their stroll.

“A party hosted indoors is rather boring, is it not? We should have a little party of our own instead,” Krone said.

Ein and Olivia cheerfully smiled at her words—ones phrased to show the utmost consideration towards her pair of guests.

“Oh my, we’re honored to receive an invitation from you, Lady Krone,” Olivia

said.

“I’m happy to hear you say that. I’ve prepared some seats over there, so allow me to guide you,” Krone replied.

They strolled through an area that they hadn’t before, slowly leaving the light of the manor. The tall hedges surrounding them presented the illusion that they had stepped off into another world.

“May I ask why you’re our guide, Lady Krone?” Olivia asked. She wasn’t dissatisfied with the girl, but she felt it to be a bit odd that Krone would play guide to aristocrats of a lower ranking.

“I’m willing to talk with you about that, so why don’t we first have a seat?” Krone replied apologetically. The trio had rather swiftly arrived at their destination as she had finished speaking.

The pavilion that greeted them was furnished with an ashen-colored patio set. Not a trace of dirt could be seen on it. The chairs were small, but suitable enough to enjoy the garden’s lovely and splendid views. *There’s a Blue Fire Rose here too.*

Beyond a simple fence was the rose he was now familiar with. Ein gathered himself and sat down with his mother.

“Now, regarding why I agreed to become your guide. I heard my grandfather talking...” Krone started after they sat down.

A few minutes before Krone would first meet Ein, the receptionist had scrambled his way to the grand duke’s feet. He proceeded to explain the situation with the elder Roundheart and his mother in great detail.

“So you’re telling me that our mistake as the household of the grand duke was met with thoughtfulness from a mere five-year-old child?” Grand Duke August said. He was seated at one of the most ornate tables in the ballroom—one that made it unmistakable for anyone but the grand duke himself. A lone butler was by his side, watching the party.

Having heard that a child had shown *him* this level of consideration, the grand

duke's brow furrowed in discontent. Despite being known for his stern demeanor among the aristocracy, he was troubled by this blunder.

"So, why is the younger Roundheart boy here instead of the eldest?" he asked.

"Well, Count Roundheart was first notified at the reception that only one child was to enter per family. His second wife had urged for Sir Glint to attend."

The grand duke had put two and two together. Aware of matters at the Roundheart's household, he surmised that Ein was pushed out of the competition.

"Even so, this is rather pitiable. Are the Roundhearts going against their promise and using their second son as their next successor?" he muttered to himself, deep in thought.

"Your Grace? What do you mean by promise?" asked his butler.

"Oh, it's nothing. I was just a little curious." The grand duke's words seemed to have a hidden meaning. After he cleared his throat, the grand duke provided his reply to the receptionist. "I'll grant their request to view the gardens along with a written apology in my name. I suppose my butler can serve as their guide."

Finishing his statement, he turned towards his butler. He felt that the most polite thing to do was to send his personal servant. "In any case, the eldest son of the Roundheart household is a man of great caliber. He brought no shame to his mother nor did he allow our August household to lose face. Not bad at all. I've started to take an interest in this young man," Grand Duke August said.

"As you say, I believe I should guide someone as chivalrous as him," the butler said.

The grand duke was about to accept this idea and put this incident behind him, when an unexpected person suddenly emerged.

"Oh, grandfather! You seem to be having a delightful chat," Krone said. She was his beloved granddaughter, whom he doted over.

Wondering just how much she'd heard, he said, "Hmmm, so you *were*

listening in on us, Krone.”

“Indeed, I was,” she said, as she turned towards the servant without an ounce of shame for eavesdropping. “Butler, please remain at my grandfather’s side for I shall guide them.”

Krone’s unexpected declaration took the two men by surprise. The butler was at a loss for words while the grand duke had put his palm to his forehead. The girl’s grandfather was seemingly troubled by this.

“Now that I think about it, you’ve been an admirer of Olivia’s since meeting her at a previous party,” he said.

“There isn’t anyone as wonderful as her. Her beauty blooms far greater than any flower while carrying an air about her that’s more saintly than any saint. Lady Olivia is truly the most splendid person that has ever graced my presence.”

Ah, so she must want to talk with Olivia, the grand duke thought.

“I would also like to speak with the eldest son. He seems to be a completely different person from whom the rumors paint him to be,” she added quietly so that no one could hear. She turned towards the receptionist. “Please tell them that they’re permitted to tour the gardens on the condition that a guide will be at their side.”

Before the receptionist replied, he glanced at Grand Duke August who seemed to have given up on this entire ordeal. The grand duke waved his hand in response, shooing the man away.

“Grandfather, many gentlemen have approached me today as though I’m a harlot of some sort. Am I not allowed to have some time for a bit of fun?” she asked.

Due to her appearance, she stood out wherever she went. This attention brought many men along with it—men who hoped to make some kind of connection by rushing to her side. No one could blame her for taking advantage of the sudden opportunity to play guide for the woman of her long-held admiration.

“Besides, it’s our responsibility to make it right when we’ve wronged Lady Olivia. Yet, to send one of our servants as a guide... One must be careful to not

embarrass oneself further, I believe.”

“Your Grace, the young lady is growing stronger by the day,” the butler said.

Combined with his butler’s words, the grand duke grimaced as he had nothing to say to his granddaughter’s sound logic. Unable to find a reason to turn her down, he could only watch Krone head towards the reception desk.

“I deeply apologize for putting you in this situation. This blunder was no doubt caused by the August household,” Krone said.

“You’re not at fault at all, Lady Krone. It seems like our household is to blame as well,” Olivia said.

Though the topic they were discussing made the noblewomen feel glum, Ein felt that the two still looked splendid. Their appearances and mannerisms remained as graceful as ever. He glanced at the Blue Fire Rose and felt that the two were far more beautiful than it. Out of the corner of her eye, Krone had noticed that Ein had been staring intently at the flower. He was cracking a forced smile as well.

“Um, if you don’t mind, would you like to hear the origins of the flower’s name?” Krone asked.

“Huh? Do you mean the Blue Fire Rose?” Ein asked.

She nodded and gave a mischievous smile. “The toxin I mentioned earlier apparently causes a pain so severe that it is said to make your body feel as if it’s on fire.”

The burning pain and bold color of the flower gave it the name: the Blue Fire Rose. Learning of the name’s chilling origin, Ein was a bit spooked by it.

“What a gruesome name,” he said.

“Heh heh, I agree. However, the Blue Fire Rose can also become a beautiful jewel.”

A rose with a terrifying toxin can become a jewel? Unable to fully understand what Krone meant, Ein started to wonder what kind of jewel it could even become.

“Do you mean like an artificial flower?”

“No, the flower can truly turn into a jewel. The chemical composition of the rose’s poison can cause substances to crystallize. If one were to swiftly remove all toxins from the flower’s root, its self-defense mechanism will activate. Or so I’ve heard.”

According to Krone, the rose would apparently start to harden from its bract before slowly morphing into a jewel of breathtaking beauty. *But crystallize? With poison? Is that even possible?* He’d heard of snake venom solidifying blood into jelly before. With that knowledge in mind, he felt that maybe it wasn’t too unusual for the flower’s poison to work like that.

Suddenly, he got an idea. *If it’s poisonous, does that mean...* He put his hand to his mouth, wondering if his skill would be of use in this case.

“The jewel is called a star crystal. They’re so rare that I’ve only seen them a few times.” she continued, paying no heed to Ein’s mannerisms. “The flower’s blue, flickering flame transforms into a jewel dyed in the colors of the night sky. Its small particles within glimmer like stars. It is, truly, an incredibly stunning jewel.”

The glow from the Blue Fire Rose resembled the starry night sky. Simply imagining it gave one a good idea of how mystical and beautiful it would appear to be.

“Wait, you’ve only seen it a few times? There aren’t any in this manor?” Ein questioned.

She was the granddaughter of the grand duke. With an abundance of Blue Fire Roses around, it wasn’t out of the question for her to possess at least one of these jewels.

Though Ein meant no ill will, Krone stared at him with an unfavorable expression and replied, “I hold an admiration for star crystals, but obtaining them is...difficult.”

He looked at her with surprise. *But you just need to remove the poison, right?* “Don’t you need to simply remove its toxins?”

There surely were many kinds of magic that allowed one to remove poison.

He couldn't understand why creating a star crystal would be any different.

"If one doesn't remove the poison swiftly, the flower will wilt. It's rather difficult to accomplish with magic, though there is a method that uses expensive medicine," she explained.

This must've been a costly method, but he was curious if it was so expensive that it would make even the grand duke's granddaughter hesitate to attempt it.

"Is this medicine expensive?" he asked with confusion.

Olivia, who stayed quiet until now, answered, "Ein, the medicine's cost would amount to many years of our land's tax revenue."

The boy was frozen with his mouth agape. He couldn't understand why it was so pricey. "Wh-What a reckless method."

However, this made one thing clear: his seemingly useless skill just might be able to see the light of day. According to God, Toxin Decomposition EX would make it so that no poison, bacteria, or anything of the sort could do a single thing to him.

"Swiftly remove the toxins from the roots. I see," he murmured, confirming how a star crystal was made. *I want to believe that even I can do something.*

Glint had taken the role of successor from Ein, with the latter feeling as though he continued to make Olivia suffer because of it. Ein had worked harder than anyone else in his desperate attempts to prove himself to his father. He wanted that effort to bear some kind of fruit; this desire lit a fire deep within his heart. *I can endure the headache; I just need to be careful to not lose consciousness.*

He remembered how his troublesome skill had negatively affected him the last time. Regardless, Ein was determined to give it his best shot this time around.

"Lady Krone, if someone could give you a star crystal...would you want it?" Ein asked. He suddenly stood up and nonchalantly walked towards the fence.

"Well, yes. I've longed for one, so I can't deny that I want it."

Then it should be fine. He took her words as approval for what he was about

to do. It was such a precious flower that he felt bad for forcibly removing it without permission. The two ladies, unaware of what he was about to do, stared at Ein as he slowly made his way to the flower.

“I’d like to express my gratitude for today. That longing of yours, I wish to make that into reality,” he said. He unintentionally said some lines that could have very well appeared in the pages of a fairy tale.

He took a deep breath and braced himself.

“What do you mean? Hey! What are you—” Krone yelled.

“Ein, no!” Olivia said.

The ladies saw Ein reaching behind the fence and they immediately stood up. Beyond the fence was a magnificent Blue Fire Rose. *I’m sorry for pulling you out so suddenly.* He apologized to the flower before he touched its roots.

As he applied some pressure with his fingertips, the slightly damp soil stuck to his skin. The roots of this plant apparently didn’t go very deep—with a tug, the flower immediately gave way.

He immersed himself in this unknown experience. Ein felt a sudden rush, as if he had a brain freeze from scarfing down an entire bowl of shaved ice. The feeling was accompanied by the tingling one would feel from chugging the fizziest of soft drinks. He felt no pain or discomfort as a cool, minty-flavored aura coursed through his body. *Ah, so this must be what Toxin Decomposition feels like.*

“No! Let go now!” Krone said in a panic.

“Ein, could you possibly be...” Olivia said rather calmly, having realized what the boy was up to.

He turned his back on the ladies’ voices and entrusted his entire body to this sensation. He felt the aura connect to his body like an artificial vein, and the senses of his fingertips heightened as he continued to grip the root of the flower. Like drinking a refreshing soft drink from a straw, he absorbed the poisonous substances. *Don’t worry. God told me that poison’s no match for me.*

He was afraid at first, but now he knew he had nothing to worry about. He

wanted to decompose the rose's poison in one go, but he had no real idea what he was doing. In the end, all he could do was focus on his fingertips as he squeezed the roots even harder.

A moment later, a blistering blue light emanated from the petals of the Blue Fire Rose. This was the signal that he was waiting for—the crystallization was about to begin. Ein's company stood behind him and reflexively squinted their eyes to protect themselves from the blinding light. *Hey, isn't it a bit too bright?!*

The rose glowed as if it was welcoming a new life into the world. It had morphed into a lone jewel. The precious stone must have received its “star crystal” moniker from the dazzling sight.

Once the light died down, Krone put both hands to her mouth and gasped. “Did you just...” She was overcome with a confusing torrent of emotions. Touched by the sight that had unfolded in front of her, she was unable to tear her eyes away from Ein.

A few moments later, a crackling sound echoed in the air.

“I think it's done,” Ein said after the sound had passed. Everything above the bract had separated itself from the rest of the flower, leaving a single jewel nestled in his palm.

Though now a gem, the stone retained its floral form. Each petal presented a magnificent encapsulation of the sky and the stars.

“What... Why... How did you...” Krone murmured, unable to finish sentences in her awe.

“This is my power. I haven't really had a way to use it until now,” he replied.

He smiled as Krone looked on at him in wonder. Ein returned to his seat, greeted by his mother's warm smile. Despite the sight of her smile, he had a pressing question on his mind. *Huh, I don't feel sick at all. Why's that?* The boy responded to his mother with a seemingly carefree smile of his own, but in truth, he was bewildered by the absence of the negative side effects that had plagued him before.

He didn't understand why, but he continued to approach Krone.

“I’ve brought something that you longed for. Will you please accept it?” he said. He sounded a bit like a show-off, but today was a party after all—a special event. These lines were fitting for gifting such a grandiose gemstone.

“I... Um... Erm...” Krone stammered, folding her hands in front of her chest as though she was praying. Flustered and confused, she blinked rapidly at Ein with an innocent gaze. Quite fitting for a little girl of her age.

“Lady Krone, please take this from me,” Ein said a little forcefully.

She finally reached for the jewel silently. “Okay, I shall *accept*.”

She formed a little bowl with her hands into which Ein placed the star crystal. The jewel glittered like the star-dotted night sky, a sight reminiscent of space itself. Krone blushed while gazing at the precious gem.

“That was wonderful, Ein,” Olivia said.

“I’m sorry. Once I realized that it was something I might be able to do, I just couldn’t sit still,” he replied.

She quietly stroked her son’s hair, content with his actions.

“Oh, Lady Krone. May I have another flower for my mother?” Ein asked.

“O-Of course. I don’t mind,” the girl replied as she stared at the jewel.

He once again approached a Blue Fire Rose.

“Please accept these feelings from me,” Ein said.

The second transformation went much smoother than the first. He’d gotten the hang of it, with his lack of hesitation hastening the process. The light was just as bright as the first time, but that was all.

Olivia giggled. “Thank you for such a wonderful gift.” She accepted the crystallized flower, but her smile seemed to sparkle more marvelously than the jewel itself.



“Wait, no, why are you able to make this?!” Krone yelled.

“Oh, you’re back to normal,” Ein noted.

Krone had finally managed to snap out of her shock and grabbed the boy’s hand. Her speech and mannerisms became a bit rougher.

“O-Of course I’d be stunned! Only two of these exist in Heim!”

Really? Jeez, I’m good. He had given himself a little praise before letting out a lighthearted chuckle. According to Krone, only the reigning Heim royalty owned artifacts containing the priceless gem. Namely, the king’s short sword and the queen’s necklace.

“I heard about your skill numerous times, but this...” she murmured.

I knew that she was aware of my skill. I guess it’s gotten a bit famous. Even if a count’s eldest son had a weird skill, it wasn’t easy to keep that knowledge under wraps. It was only natural that Krone would know about it.

“I believe my skill to be second to none in the department of decomposing poisons, bacteria, and the like,” he said. God had said so herself, and she was the most trustworthy source he had.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Krone replied, her cheeks still flushed. No one knew if her cheeks were red due to the excitement, or if she was feeling something else. There was no way to truly know what she felt, but squeezing the gem close to her chest was able to help her calm down.

“Are you really giving this to me?” she asked.

Ein didn’t want the jewel back. He felt the priceless stone to be a perfect fit for her flowery appearance.

“If you don’t want it, I’ll be troubled,” he said.

With the star crystal still resting against her chest, she closed her eyes as though she was taking in the moment. Following a brief pause, she nodded.

“There’s flowers over there as well. Let’s go,” Krone said.

“Ah indeed, Lady Krone,” Ein replied.

The extraordinary time the trio had spent together had come to an end as they resumed their tour of the gardens. However, unlike their initial foray into the gardens, it was easy to tell that something was going on between Ein and Krone. They had closed their distance to each other with Krone occasionally taking his hand to lead the way.

“You’re being way too polite to me once again. If you keep it up, I’m sure to get angry.” she said.

“I’m not used to it yet, so I can’t help it.” he replied.

“Then just get used to it.” Krone retorted.

“You’re the grand duke’s granddaughter, Krone. I’m the son of a count. You *do* understand the difference, right?” Ein said, requesting a touch of leniency.

They were a bit of an awkward pair, but no one would guess that they had just met. The two were relaxed around each other, as if they were old friends.

“Oh, then I should simply order you around as a member of the grand duke’s household, correct?” she joked sarcastically, indicating that she clearly had no intentions of doing so.

“You may do as you wish, Lady Krone.”

“Oh dear, there you go being so polite again.”

The two joked around playfully whilst exchanging smiles.

“I’m glad you couldn’t attend the party,” Krone muttered under her breath. Realizing her slip of the tongue, she immediately pursed her lips.

“Huh? Did you say something?” Ein asked.

“Not really. It’s just that I’m having a lot of fun with you.” She evaded his question, but her praise was no doubt the truth.

Ein turned away in embarrassment. Krone felt that his small tics and mannerisms were a joy to behold.

“Well, is the party boring?” he asked.

“Of course it is. We keep doing the same exact thing.” she replied.

For her, a party was the venue for the opposite sex to keep throwing

themselves at her in vain attempts to earn her favor. Ein let out a forced smile, under the impression she must have been through a tough time or two.

“By the way, I’ve noticed you’re rather mature.” Krone said.

“Mature?”

“Yes, are you not? You’re very thoughtful to Lady Olivia as well. Wouldn’t you agree?” she said, looking towards Olivia.

“Well, he *is* my son. So it would only be natural that he’s so wonderful,” Olivia replied, providing a vague answer to the question.

She stared at the woman with a look of slight befuddlement, but considering Krone was able to get to know Ein for herself, Olivia’s words made sense to her.

“In any case, you’re different from the other gentlemen,” Krone said.

“U-Um, thank you?” he replied.

“You don’t have to be so embarrassed,” she said.

He couldn’t help himself; forthright praise from a girl like Krone was hard for him to handle.

“Ummm, you don’t have to worry too much about that star crystal,” Ein said. He thought the incident had changed her demeanor far too much. He tried to use his words to lighten her mood.

“Well, if you must know, I had a positive impression of you before I received this star crystal.”

“Huh?”

She looked at him as though he’d said something rude.

“To tell you the truth, I was a little frustrated at first. When I arrived, you looked at me as though you didn’t know who I was, didn’t you?” she said with a giggle as she remembered their first meeting. “That might’ve been what started it. I wondered if you were different from the others. Seeing you show so much consideration to your mother and myself made me feel that you were easy to talk to.”

Well, it’s more fun for me that way, Ein thought, but he silently continued to

listen.

“Even after hearing about the mess with Sir Rogas, your poise and gallant actions made you look so impressive,” she said.

Well, there’s no use crying over spilled milk. He gave a shy nod. According to Krone, these initial actions had slowly won her over.

“Lastly, you didn’t just give me just a simple gift. No, you made one of my *dreams* come true! Are you aware of the big difference between the two?”

This must’ve been extremely important to her.

“And when you said that you had something for me that I longed for, I thought you looked so cool,” she said. Now looking a little shy, she bowed and looked up at the boy.

Krone was a lady who seemed to be out of everyone’s league. Her charming eccentricities had easily swayed Ein’s heart.

However he could only force out a curt reply. “Th-Thank you.” He wasn’t able to display his manly qualities as he’d done so previously.

“I think this part of you is also very fitting,” she said with a giggle.

The awkward exchange felt oddly comforting for him. Unfortunately, his delightful time had come to an abrupt close.

“I deeply apologize for disturbing your pleasant chat,” said a servant. They looked remorseful for having interjected into the trio’s conversation.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“His Grace has called for you. The party is about to end.”

Krone gave a deep sigh, realizing that she’d just been swiftly pulled back to reality.

“Ein, Lady Olivia, I’m terribly sorry. As one of the party’s hosts, I must leave to greet some of our guests.”

“Please don’t apologize. Ein and I had a lovely time with you this evening,” Olivia replied.

“It’s as my mother says. Thank you so much for this wonderful evening,

Krone.”

Ein sounded as if he were understanding of the situation, but in actuality, he wanted to keep talking with her. He knew she had her responsibilities to fulfill, but he couldn't help feeling lonely.

After a brief pause, Krone said, “I'll go to you next time.”

“Huh? Where?” he asked.

“Jeez! I'm saying I'll go to the port city!” She squinted her eyes and pouted, scolding Ein for not picking up what she was laying down. “It's not a problem, is it? Do you not want me to come?”

“There's no way I would think that. I'll be waiting there to welcome you.” he said.

It was difficult for him to visit the grand duke, but it was far easier for her to visit him. Satisfied with his response, Krone smiled.

“I've got a handful of boring lessons to get through, but I'll work hard so I can visit you,” she said.

“I'll be working hard too.”

Today, Ein had attained something important to him. He created a star crystal, but more importantly, he had forged some confidence in himself. He was brought down by feelings of inferiority when compared to Glint, but thanks to Krone, he felt his sense of determination renewed. This boost would keep him as diligent as ever.

“Then let's make a promise, Ein,” she said, taking his hand. “The next time we meet, let's aim to be even more astonishing than we are now.”

“I understand; it's a promise.”

With his hand firmly in her grasp, he made a pledge to do exactly as she asked. After a few seconds, Krone took a step back with a sense of satisfaction.

“Lady Olivia, thank you again for the lovely time we spent together. From the bottom of my heart, I look forward to the day we meet again,” she said.

The three returned to where they had first met before parting ways. Their

separation had made Krone and Ein feel a pang of loneliness, but also a rush of excitement for the day they could reunite.

After Krone had bid them farewell, Olivia and Ein had found themselves waiting quite a while for Rogas to return. *They're so late.* A good amount of time had passed since Krone had left their side. They saw a few aristocrats take their leave, but Rogas and his party were not among them.

"Pardon me, have you seen my husband—I mean, Count Roundheart?" Olivia asked a passing servant. She'd finally grown tired of waiting.

"Ah, Lady Roundheart... If you're referring to Count Roundheart, he's already left the party," the servant replied.

"Whatever do you mean?" Olivia coldly replied while Ein stood next to her, stunned.

"W-Well, Count Roundheart had wanted to host an evening party with a viscount that he was friendly with, so he'd left rather early..."

Upon hearing these words, Olivia didn't seem upset or saddened. Instead, she was completely devoid of emotion—as if she were a cold steel automaton. It appeared that any feelings she once had for Rogas were now long gone.

"I understand. Thank you for letting me know," she replied.

"It's my pleasure. If you require anything else, please don't hesitate to ask."

She sighed. "I suppose it was good timing that I'd just finished my work."

Disappointment—Ein could sense it in every word she uttered. With one hand, Olivia gracefully flipped her hair behind her. She retained her charming and pleasant traits, but looked at Ein as if she had given up on everything.

"Ein, do you love your father?" she asked.

"Huh?"

Not understanding the intention behind her question, he looked troubled. Olivia squatted, bringing herself down to Ein's eyeline. His nose was tickled by the faint, flowery fragrance that surrounded her.

“Are you asking how I truly feel?” he asked.

“That’s right. What are your thoughts? Do you love your father so much that you couldn’t bear to be apart from him?”

Perhaps Olivia wanted the boy to solely love her. Her horrible treatment at the hands of the house she had married into must’ve saddened her incredibly. Not to mention making her quite lonely as well.

“I’m grateful that he raised me. However, I can’t forgive how he’s treated you, mother. So no, I don’t particularly care for him,” Ein said.

Ein’s blunt, but honest answer prompted Olivia to remove her wedding ring and grasp it in her palm. Afterwards, she completely changed her expression and smiled.

“I’m glad. I can now tell you all about my work, but not here. Shall we chat in a quiet, yet beautiful place that’s more majestic than any other? My home country, perhaps?”

Home country? He tilted his head to one side, completely puzzled by her words. However, she didn’t elaborate.

“I have no further use for this, best to dispose of it,” she said. In a flash, the ring eroded and crumbled into dust.

Did she just use magic?! Ein panicked as he stared at the dusty remains of what had once been his mother’s wedding ring.

“M-Mother?! Why did you do that to your ring?!”

“Because I don’t need it anymore. I can’t endure it any longer; it’s nauseating to think that I would have any ties to *him*.”

She continued to say things that only raised more questions. Ein wanted to ask about the magic that she’d just used, but he was overcome with shock.

“Ein, let us soon set sail aboard a large and wondrous ship, okay?” she said.

“O-Okay. I’m looking forward to it.” *Why a ship?* Ein could only obediently nod as Olivia didn’t seem to be accepting any questions at the moment.

“Now then...*I’m going home. Make haste for my return,*” she said, suddenly

speaking into her earring. The piece of jewelry blinked two to three times in response.

What did she just do? Ein had lost his chance to ask about the ring, the ship, and the earring.

“Now, let’s return to the port city, shall we?” Olivia said.

“Okay. Father and the others aren’t here anyway. So if we leave now, do you think we’ll be able to make it back home before dawn?” Ein asked.

“I’m sure we’ll get there before midnight.”

The two left the manor and walked towards the carriage that they’d arrived in. Rogas wasn’t a topic of conversation on the ride home. Instead, they only shared small talk about their daily lives and other trivial subjects. While nothing earth-shattering, Ein and Olivia enjoyed the conversation they had on the way back to the port city of Roundheart. A few hours following their departure from the August estate in the deep of night, they had arrived in town, just moments before midnight. They were now in the port city that Ein had been born and raised in.

“I’m sorry for all the rush,” she said.

“Don’t be. It’s a lot of fun spending time with you, mother,” he replied.

He hadn’t been able to attend the party, but he had fun with Krone and even made a promise to her. While thinking of his renewed determination to continue his hard work, Ein had noticed that something was off.

“Mother? Are we not getting off here?” he asked. The carriage had neared the Roundheart residence, but it showed no signs of stopping.

“Not here. Just a bit more, okay?” she said.

“I understand.”

The carriage quickly passed the residence and headed towards the port. Still puzzled as one could be by the situation, the loud hustle and bustle of the city gradually entered Ein’s earshot.

“What’s going on? It’s so late, but it’s so noisy,” Ein said, as he thought that the city was far too loud for the time of night.

There were a few bars and restaurants open until the wee hours of the night, but this degree of rowdiness was a bit odd to him. He soon heard the tumultuous cries of many.

“Hey, what *is* that?!” one person asked.

“The Knights! Where are the Knights?!” another worriedly asked.

“Eeek! Hurry! Someone!” yelled yet another voice.

It didn’t seem like the kind of hubbub one would hear from a festival. He guessed that something must have happened.

“Madam, we’re running into a bit of a ballyhoo. Shall I proceed?” the coachman asked hesitantly.

Olivia silently nodded in response. *R-Really? Can we just keep going on?* Ein continued to be bewildered, but Olivia seemed to be in high spirits as she sat next to him. It was clear that she had an inkling as to what was going on. Ein was bothered by the commotion around him, but unable to ask why this was happening, he silently sat back down.

The port could now be seen as they passed through the main street and headed towards an open area. A large building that Ein had never seen before stood in front of him. *What is that?* He saw a huge, almost chimneylike structure—the object of the unrest around him. The structure was seemingly part of the large ship docked in the port. It was an unexpected sight to be greeted by.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” he gasped.

The ship was massive, much larger than two hundred meters in length. It was an exquisite vessel, its color a pure white. While aesthetically pleasing, the ship was equipped with various armaments and a rather large cylinder, presumably its main cannon.

“Great, it seems to have arrived. Now, it’s time to board, Ein,” Olivia said.

“W-Wait! Wait, what do you mean by ‘board’ this ship? Mother, what’s going on?” Ein stammered.

“Coachman? Would you kindly deliver this letter to the Roundhearts?” she

said, handing the servant a letter she'd prepared. She didn't answer any of her son's questions.

"C-C-Certainly!" the servant replied.

"Now, Ein. Let's go." Olivia left the carriage with Ein right behind her.

The crowd realized that two aristocrats were now among them and approached them for answers.

"Lady Olivia!" one person shouted.

"Lady Roundheart! What's going on?!" asked another.

Though Olivia would normally provide answers with an angelic smile, she dispensed with her saintly formalities and ignored the crowd. The mob kept their distance from her, but were tempted to grab her at any time.

Someone's getting off... Ein saw a dozen or so knights debark the ship as they had noticed Olivia's arrival. The last knight to disembark was particularly well-dressed and walked down the ramp towards the port.

"Mother!" Ein cried, looking vigilant.

"Don't worry. We'll be fine," Olivia said, putting her hand on his back to calm him down.

Does she know them? Ein only had more questions, but Olivia paid him no mind and proceeded forward. Ein continued to stay on guard, prepared to protect his mother should anything occur.

"Valiant knight, we aren't your enemy. Please be at ease," the particularly well-dressed knight said.

In a fluid motion, the knight got down on one knee and elegantly spoke in a refined fashion. Ein realized this knight was a woman.

"An ally?" Ein asked.

The knight took off her helmet to reveal a beautiful smile. Her fair complexion and golden locks were generally hidden underneath her armor. To Ein's eye, she looked to be around the same age as his mother.

"Yes, I am indeed your ally. Though that title might show some insolence to

you, given your status above us. However, we're not here to harm or show any ill will towards you. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Sir Ein."

"Uh, erm, yeah. P-Pleased to meet you too," Ein said, too surprised to give a proper reply. He couldn't deny that he was blown away by her beauty as well, but in any case, he could only provide a slow-witted response.

"It's been a while, Chris," Olivia said to the knight as though she was greeting an old friend.

"Indeed. I'm ecstatic to see you again, Lady Olivia. After receiving your call, we immediately sailed to this city aboard this ship, the *Princess Olivia*," Chris replied.

These words had taken Ein's confusion to its zenith. Still dazed, he and his mother were guided by Chris onto the massive vessel. As he gazed at the ship's grand interior, Ein thought to himself, *This ship is leagues apart from anything I'm familiar with.*

The kingdom of Heim was located on the southernmost area of the continent. Much of the land that stretched over the continent's southern half was under Heim's domain, therefore making it one of the largest regions in the land. However the kingdom was not only known for its size, as the military might of its army trounced that of other nations. Yes, they had their fair share of neighbors, but Heim lived up to its reputation as the king of the continent.

To the north of Heim was the trading city of Bardland. Located in the heart of the continent, merchants and adventurers from across the land often paid visits to the city. With all those who passed through, Bardland was naturally the place to find the newest and largest selection of wares one could desire. This city functioned a bit differently from its neighbors. When the continent was at war, Bardland was used as a neutral zone to sign treaties and end battles. The city belonged to no royal family and as such, the merchant's guild held power over it. Working alongside adventurers, the merchants owned and operated Bardland.



To the east of Bardland and northeast of Heim, was the Republic of Rockdam. In accordance with its own enacted laws, the republic's head of state was voted in via elections. The candidates in said elections were aristocrats who held titles. Rockdam's footprint consisted of about half of the continent's northern region and only Heim dwarfed it. The republic's military existed, but it had no real might behind it. For what their military lacked, it was more than made up for by a booming agricultural industry—an industry bolstered by Rockdam's abundance of large plots of fertile soil.

Lastly, there was the Principality of Euro. Located to the northwest of Heim and just west of Bardland, Euro was a smidgen smaller than Rockdam. The third largest country in the land, the principality was known for its army's elite force of cavaliers. The combat prowess of these horseback warriors was considered unrivaled throughout the continent. It made for a military force that was small, but vicious, once even bringing the great Rogas to his knees.

And those are all the regions that I'm familiar with. Ein was certain that no country or kingdom on this continent owned such a grand ship. The interior of the vessel had somehow jostled his memories, reminding him of a luxury hotel he had seen in his past life. A magnificent carpet was laid out on the floor without a wrinkle in sight. The oil-scented carpet's pleasant aroma was permeated with an air of elegance.

"Mother, I'm utterly confused," Ein said.

"Don't worry. We'll arrive at my room in a few moments. I'll explain everything to you there."

"I'll be waiting."

Ein was shocked by the sight of his mother's ring disintegrating and hearing the word "princess" being uttered as he boarded the ship. He was beyond puzzled, but for now, he had decided to put these thoughts entirely out of his mind.

"Speaking of, what sort of explanation must I give you, Chris?" Olivia asked.

"Everything. Even if I don't ask, I'm sure His Majesty will ask when you return," the knight replied.

“Ein and I are exhausted, so I’ll fill you in later. We’ve become a bit famished, so I’d like to grab a bite to eat.”

She looked so relaxed. Ein had never seen such an expression on her before. If he were to describe her, she looked comfortable and at ease.

“Certainly. I shall do so immediately,” Chris replied before she turned to a nearby knight. “You, inform the servants immediately.”

The knight briskly bowed and left the area. The trio had finally arrived at what Ein guessed to be his mother’s room. *Huh? Here? It’s huge.* In front of them stood a large door, one that looked to be about five meters tall. From a passing glance at the refined wood grain and the intricate carvings that adorned it, anyone could pick out the door as a luxurious piece of art.

“Let’s enter, shall we? I’d like Ein to get some rest,” Olivia said.

“I want you to rest as well, mother,” Ein said.

“My... Heh heh, then shall we both have a nap?”

“To think such a splendid little boy came into the world with the help of that *thing*. His Majesty will surely be pleased,” Chris mumbled under her breath.

“What was that Chris? Did you say something?” the boy asked politely.

“Nothing at all. Please, your room awaits,” she replied.

Ein thought that he heard her say something, but let it go as he was guided into the room. The floor was lined with a material resembling white marble. On the floor sat a thick, soft, luxurious burgundy rug that featured an exquisite design embossed upon it. Gorgeous paintings decorated the walls while a massive chandelier hung above them from the tall ceiling.

“Ein, over here,” Olivia said. She led her son to a rather lavish and large white sofa that sat in the middle of the room.

After the two had sat down and started to get comfortable, a servant arrived with refreshments.

“What have you brought us?” she asked.

“I’ve brought freshly squeezed ripple juice,” the servant replied, pouring an

orange liquid that was rife with the fragrance of apples.

Ein gulped. *I see. So this is made from “ripples.” Huh.* He continued to observe the drink while the servant placed the glass in front of him.

“You must be tired, aren’t you, Ein? Let’s have a drink, shall we?” his mother said.

Ein took the glass and took a sip. It tasted like apples, but the rich sweetness on his palate felt refined as the very room he sat in. After he enjoyed his delicious drink, he wanted to get back on topic. Olivia noticed Ein’s gaze and slowly started to reveal what she’d been hiding.

A man entered a room within the manor of Grand Duke August. He was panting as he tried to catch his breath.

“S-Sorry to make you wait, father!” said Harley, Graff August’s only son.

Today was the day Harley’s second child, Riel—the long-awaited and eldest son of the August family—was to make his public debut.

“You’re late, father,” a girl said sternly.

“I had some business to attend to regarding the party. Krone, shouldn’t you be sleeping?” Harley replied.

She turned away from him with a huff to ignore his words. He gave up trying to talk to her further. Once everyone calmed down, Graff said, “Let me explain.”

Harley fixed his posture upon hearing his father’s words. Graff wanted to discuss what had happened with Olivia and Ein, as well as Rogas’s words. Listening closely to his father, Harley wore a pained expression on his face and felt pity for the older Roundheart boy. Once he had finished speaking, Graff cleared his throat.

“What I’m about to discuss is the real meat of the issue. Don’t speak about this to anyone else, understand?” Graff said.

Krone, who’d remained silent the entire time, placed her cup of tea on the table.

“I’d like to talk about the origins of Olivia,” the grand duke said.

“Her origin? I heard that she was the daughter of a major merchant in Bardland,” Harley said.

“That understanding is incorrect; the situation is far from that simple. I had planned to keep the matter a secret until her boy was known far and wide as the successor to the Roundheart household.”

Harley and Krone stared at Graff, puzzled as to what he was talking about. Why was it necessary for Olivia to hide the truth under the guise of being a powerful merchant’s daughter?

“Would it still be troublesome even if I’m planning to choose Ein for myself?” the girl asked.

“What are you talking about, Krone?” Harley said.

“Harley, I’ll explain that to you later. But you might be right, Krone,” Graff said.

She felt at ease from seeing her grandfather’s face relax ever so slightly, but he quickly turned somber once more. “However, our ranks may be too different.” He sounded rather stern, his words carried weight behind them. “Say you sail two days across the ocean from the port city of Roundheart. Are you aware of what country you’ll reach at the end of your journey?”

Graff was referring to another continent, one that lay across the Heim-controlled seas—the continent of Ishtar.

“Of course. It’s the only country on that continent. The Unified Nations of Ishtarica is an utterly massive country,” Harley said.

“Very good. From your experience studying abroad, you must surely be aware of their overwhelming might?” the grand duke said.

“I could never forget it. We wouldn’t stand a chance against them.”

The culture, technology, and military might of Ishtarica was incomparable to that of Heim. Even the commoners lived in vastly different circumstances, making the country seem as if it existed in a different dimension. The vast continent of Ishtar exponentially dwarfed the continent that Heim was only a

part of.

“Various nonhuman species such as elves and half-beasts live in Ishtarica, correct?” Krone said.

“Oh, you’re rather knowledgeable, Krone. That is correct, many kinds of species do reside in that land,” Harley replied.

“Father, why has Ishtarica been mentioned?” Krone asked.

In the next moment, both father and daughter were shocked to see the grand duke look so flustered. Graff became tense, and large beads of sweat formed on his brow. Finally, he let out a feeble vocalization as though he was sighing.

“The Unified Nations of Ishtarica’s current king is Silverd von Ishtarica,” he said.

Krone didn’t have a clue as to what her grandfather was saying, but it seemed Harley was slowly starting to understand the situation.

“The third child of the king, and the second eldest daughter...” Graff said.

Sweat started to appear on Harley’s brow as his breathing grew haggard. Graff turned slightly downwards and continued to talk with a grim tone.

“Is the second princess, Olivia von Ishtarica. That is Lady Olivia’s *true name*.”

Krone finally understood. *When he meant differences in rank, he was referring to us. We’re ranked far below them.*

“Lady Olivia is a princess? But that means Ein is...” Krone said in panic as she realized the hidden truth.

If Olivia was a princess, her son Ein must be part of the Ishtarica royal family. Unable to process this realization, Krone could only stare weakly at the star crystal as she tried to cling on to any sense of reason she could muster.

Chapter Three: The Reason He Became a Crown Prince Overnight

A few hours had passed since they left Heim, but the speed of the ship was far above average. A trip that took two to three days for other ships merely took a few hours for the *Princess Olivia*. They then heard clattering sounds as though the vessel was now on rails, headed for the Royal Capital of Ishtarica. *Our civilizations differ too greatly. Why go through all this trouble?*

Ein couldn't understand why Olivia had left her gigantic home country to marry some aristocrat from Heim.

He decided to pluck up the courage to ask. "Um, moth—"

"Lady Olivia, did you receive that star crystal from the Roundheart household?" Chris suddenly asked.

"No, I didn't. Why do you ask?" Olivia said.

Olivia was gazing upon the star crystal she had received from her son. Perhaps it was in her hands as it had been a bit since she last handled it.

"You threw your ring away, so I felt it odd for you to have a star crystal in your possession." Chris said.

"Well, you see," Olivia started, explaining how Ein had gifted the jewel to her while at the August residence.

After a while, Chris looked at the boy with surprise. "I'm amazed that you're able to court a woman at such a young age."

"Huh? What? Court?" Ein asked, troubled by her words.

"When one gives a star crystal to another, it is generally considered a marriage proposal. It's an old custom, one that I've only seen royal families engage in on rare occasions."

Krone's words echoed inside the boy's head. *"Okay, I shall accept."* Thinking

back, he felt that this reply was odd. Now that he realized exactly what he'd done, Ein looked a bit troubled.

"But it makes a lot of sense if you're the sender, Sir Ein," Chris said.

Ein deeply nodded, as he understood why Olivia had been holding it so precious. He'd also learned more about the knight. Her name was Christina Wernstein. Originally Olivia's personal knight, Chris was now the vice captain of the Knights Guard. She was not only beautiful, but talented as well.

"By the way, what sort of vehicle are we riding in?" Ein asked. He'd boarded the vehicle as he had got on the ship. The red carpet was laid out for him once again, leading him to another luxurious room. He honestly had no idea what he stepped aboard. The sounds of rails outside made him curious about the identity of the vehicle.

"Ah, pardon my late explanation. You're currently riding a water train. To put it simply, we use magic stones to heat up the water tank," Chris said.

Oh, like a steam engine. The steam engines he was familiar with used coal, but this vehicle didn't seem to expel black smoke.

"So this moves by creating steam?" Ein asked.

"I'm surprised. I didn't expect you to know the mechanics that power this vehicle," Chris said.

"No, I just happened to read a book about it." he said.

He knew that the created steam was used to create locomotion, but he didn't understand the intricacies of the process. Because he read quite a few books, he felt that it wasn't odd to say he picked up this tidbit while reading.

"How admirable. You didn't fall behind on your studies," praised Chris.

"No, really! I-I was just lucky this time!" Ein said hastily, wanting to clear up this misunderstanding.

"You see, Chris? Isn't Ein such a good boy?" Olivia said.

Ein was tempted to correct her, but he soon changed his tune when his mother brought him close to her. He felt that it was all right to act smart every now and then.

“By the way, the message bird you sent was delivered to the quarters of the royal family’s butler,” Chris said.

What’s a message bird? Ein wondered.

Noticing the quizzical look on her son’s face, Olivia explained, “A message bird is a magical tool, and what it does is...”

It was an expensive, one-way, onetime-use magical tool that could deliver voice messages to far away lands. The earring she talked into at the grand duke’s residence was the tool she used to contact Ishtarica.

“In this situation, we used the *Princess Olivia* and the royal family’s water train to fetch you. All thanks to your message and the orders within it,” Chris said.

Ein and Olivia quietly listened.

“As such, we haven’t talked about this to His Majesty. I hope you can understand why,” Chris said. She sounded hesitant as her words trailed off.

Olivia lent a helping hand. “He’d be absolutely furious, wouldn’t he? Let’s just say that I placed a gag order on you all.”

“Thank you very much, Lady Olivia. If it’s under your word, I’m sure the servants in the butler’s quarters won’t be punished.”

The servants couldn’t ignore the second princess’s orders, so Olivia’s father wouldn’t be able to punish them.

“Oh? But then that makes me a daughter who suddenly returned home without any notice,” Olivia said.

Chris nodded with a forced smile; she looked a little troubled.

“Hm... Once we have a moment to rest at the castle, I’ll head over to my father immediately afterwards.”

“If you’ll allow me to offer some input, I believe it’d be best to meet him first...”

“No. Ein’s also tired from the long trip.”

He’d never seen his mother talk and act so freely before. He felt that even her

speech was different from usual. *I think this is good too.* However, he felt bad for the king.

“Chris, what time will this water train reach the Royal Capital?” he asked.

“Well, we’re scheduled to arrive at around eleven in the morning.”

This meant that at the earliest, they’d arrive at the castle by half past eleven.

“Ein, let’s take a bath once we arrive,” Olivia said.

“Ah, right. Okay,” Ein replied. He thought that it’d be rude to meet the king without cleaning himself.

“We can eat shortly past noon. Then after a quick nap, it would be best to meet the king around three,” the boy said.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay with such little rest? You’re free to relax for a few days,” Olivia said.

Ein felt that if he did so, he’d make the king wait for far too long. He was afraid that he’d be suddenly assaulted. “I’ll be fine. I’d like to promptly meet the king as your son,” he said in a dignified tone.

Olivia reluctantly nodded, but one could see flashes of her smile. She seemed to be pleased by her son’s attitude.

“Chris, would it be possible to have a room prepared for me?” Ein asked.

“What do you mean? Of course we have a room—”

“Shall we share a room for now, Ein?” Olivia said, cutting off the knight.

It seemed they’d come to a suitable agreement.

After some time had passed, the water train arrived at the Royal Capital. The station was called White Rose, and it was known as the largest station within the capital. *How many water train boarding areas are there?* The royal family’s water train stopped at a separate platform, located a floor above the others.

The fourth floor was home to around ten boarding areas, with each floor below it consisting of additional platforms. According to Chris, the party would leave the royal platform on the fifth floor and exit the station via a special

passage. From there, they'd board a carriage to the castle.

"It's so crowded," Ein remarked of the lower floors. The trio had been walking across the empty platform on their way to the special passage.

"This actually isn't too bad at the moment. White Rose Station is almost always packed," Chris replied.

So *this is considered pretty empty?* Ein's jaw dropped. He didn't expect to see this world's metropolitan rush hour.

"We're being watched, aren't we?" he said.

He noticed the stares of numerous passengers, but this was natural when considering that the royal family's train had stopped at the station. *Hm? Oh, those must be people from nonhuman species.* As he looked at the passengers, he saw kinds of people he had never seen walking around Heim. Some had a more bestial appearance while others simply looked like humans with gray skin. The melting pot of people around him made it clear to Ein that he was truly in a new country.

"Sir Ein, are you curious about the nonhumans?" Chris asked, as she noticed the boy's interested gaze. "The species that you and your mother hail from is rather rare in Ishtarica. You may not be able to meet others like you often, however..."

Ein was perplexed as to what was just said. *Aren't we humans?* He cocked his head to one side. "Ch-Chris? What do you mean by that?"

"H-Huh? I'm sorry, hasn't Lady Olivia told you?"

"Told me? I'm lost here..."

Utterly confused, he desperately looked to his mother for answers.

"The genes I inherited from my ancestors make me a dryad. The same goes for you, Ein," Olivia explained.

Huh? A dryad was a spirit or fairy that inhabited trees. Was she referring to this kind of dryad? His body didn't have any treelike features, but he continued to listen intently.

"When you get older, you'll have the power to summon roots as well," she

said.

“Summon roots? What?”

Chris stood beside them with a bemused look on her face, as though she wondered why this was kept a secret.

“I see you! You have something you want to say, right Chris?” Olivia said.

“Yes, yes I do.”

“If I didn’t keep this a secret, people might have caught on that I’m from Ishtarica.”

Olivia was right. There was no guarantee that Ein could prevent their secret from leaking, and she’d done her best to conceal her identity.

“That makes logical sense. I’d say that your decision was correct, Lady Olivia.”

“Right? I was upset that I had to keep this a secret from Ein.”

Ein remained surprisingly calm even when told that he wasn’t human. In fact, he was way calmer than he’d imagined. *W-Well, it’s fine if I’m of the same species as my mother, right?* He was surprised, but felt no alienation. He wanted to learn more about his heritage, but didn’t think he’d be able to properly process that information at the moment.

As though she’d remembered something, Olivia suddenly asked Chris, “Oh, by the way, I have a question for you. How did you explain away my time in Heim?”

“I said that you were married off to someone in Heim for the sake of the country. As for those who can cross the sea, I made sure to keep a close eye on them and their mouths shut.”

The reasoning seemed vague, but even a conspiracy wouldn’t faze Ein at this point. He was curious about the scale of this incident, as he heard that some people were forced into silence on the matter.

“In regards to a Roundheart citizen coming to and from Ishtarica... We somehow avoided any leaks of information by applying a rather healthy amount of pressure,” Chris said.

Pressure, huh. Then I guess it makes sense.

“However, our methods weren’t too forceful,” she added.

According to the knight, trade was almost nonexistent between Heim and Ishtarica. The biggest issue was the fees incurred from crossing the sea, making it hard for any transported goods to turn a profit. The ocean served as home to many powerful creatures and understandably, it cost a pretty penny to hire proper guards. The potential hit to their pocketbooks kept merchants far away from the trade route. Even the necessity of preparing a ship capable of enduring the long trip made their coffers shake.

“Once you sail out onto the open seas, you’ll find a horde of monsters running rampant. Your average fishermen have no hope of prevailing against these monsters, so it necessitates the need for a sturdy boat and enough coin to pay the right adventurers to guard her. It’s a costly proposition on the whole, and thus it’s rare for aristocrats to desire crossing the sea,” Chris finished.

“Wait a moment. You’ve said it’s rare, but that means there *are* aristocrats in Heim who’ve crossed the sea, right?” Ein asked. He didn’t think that Heim was home to such a rugged individual.

“As of recent times, we’ve seen the son of Grand Duke August. We did have someone keep an eye on him, however.”

Ein was shocked but not completely surprised. As he’d thought, the August household was in a class of its own. He hoped that one day, he could reunite with Krone in Ishtarica.

“We’ve received four requests from Ishtarican citizens to visit Heim, but we didn’t approve of any of them,” she said.

*So you **are** being forceful*, Ein thought, but he realized that Chris was truly committed to keeping his mother’s secret.

“There aren’t many adventurers who can cross the sea, so we made an arrangement with them. In exchange for their silence, we gave them favorable treatment in regards to their taxes.”

Capable adventurers probably make a lot of money. This deal must’ve been more than enough for these people. It was also easy to guess how Chris and the

others kept these people quiet.

The carriage they had taken from White Rose Station finally made its way to the castle gates. Chris disembarked first and walked off towards the gatekeeper. In the meantime, Ein peeked his head out of the carriage window. He was greeted by the view of a massive castle—one that seemingly had no end in sight. Its imposing structure stood resolutely towards the sky. As he continued to stare at this mind-blowing scenery with awe, Ein's attention was grabbed by the sound of Chris's voice.

"Vice Captain of the Knights Guard, Christina Wernstein will now enter the castle," she declared clearly.

While Ein was admiring her strong voice, Olivia delightfully made a comment. "She seems very dignified, but she's a bit of a klutz."

Klutz? She's a beautiful lady that clearly looks to be competent at her job. Ein was in disbelief at what he'd just heard.

"Now then, Lady Olivia and Sir Ein. Please watch your step as you exit the carriage—" The moment she offered her hand to them, the tip of Chris's toe dragged across the pavement and she lost her balance. After she flailed about for a brief instant, the knight had regained her composure and flashed the most graceful of smiles. "May I, Sir Ein?"

She just tripped, didn't she? What should I say? "Are you okay, Chris?" he asked.

"Please pay no mind to me. I'm not tired at all, so there's no need for you to worry."

"Oh, okay. I understand." Yeah, she hides it, but she does seem to be just a little bit clumsy.

Following her unsuccessful attempt at brushing off a clumsy fall, the knight gracefully guided Ein down from the carriage. Emerging from the vehicle, the young boy was shocked by the sight of the castle in its entirety.

"W-Wow... It's amazing," Ein gasped.

A waterway that curved and bent in many places ran through their

surroundings. The greenery around the waterway's turns was so well maintained that it gave the appearance of an insignia. The castle's gorgeous, almost endless visage was primarily constructed of white stone. From the gates, a path led visitors into the castle's opulent interior. Ein felt the astonishing scenery before his eyes to be detached from reality.

"Isn't it beautiful? You can see this every day from now on, but let's head to our room first," Olivia said. Wanting to hurry to their accommodations, Olivia gently grasped Ein's hand and walked past Chris.

"I shall continue to stand guard," Chris said.

"Jeez, we're inside the castle. So aren't we safe now? I've always said this to you."

"And I've always said to you that it'll be too late if I'm not there and the worst happens," the knight said, looking kind and composed despite scolding her lady.

"Yes, yes, I remember... Shall we all go in together, then?" Olivia said.

The trio had walked into the castle like they owned the place. It came as no surprise that everyone inside was shocked to see Olivia walk through the door, but the sheer amount of stunned faces left Chris giving a forced smile.

"Not many people within the castle are actually aware of why you left the country to get married, Lady Olivia," she said.

For a country as large as Ishtarica, not many were aware of Olivia's situation. Ein had only found himself with more questions.

"I'll tell you everything when we meet with your grandfather this evening. Please just wait a little longer, okay?" Olivia said.

"I understand. If you can talk about it then, I'll continue to wait," Ein replied.

"My goodness, you're such a good boy."

As always, Olivia's expressions showed nothing but sweet affection for her child.

"Lady Olivia, please don't tell me that you'll take root in Sir Ein," Chris said.

"Come now. Let's go, Ein," Olivia said.

Take root? Is this some kind of expression for dryads? Ein understood that it must've meant some sort of attachment. He would, of course, welcome her with open arms.

"Hey, Lady Olivia! Please don't ignore me!" Chris said.

Olivia offered no response, for her mind was elsewhere. Her knight continued to question her.

"Oh, would you excuse me? Could you tell Martha that I've brought Ein home?" Olivia said with a smile to a passerby knight.

"C-Certainly! I shall do so!" the surprised knight replied.

Olivia paid no mind to the stunned looks, but Ein could easily tell that the knights were caught off guard.

"Mother, what kind of person is Martha?" he asked.

"She's a servant who looked after me when I was young. She's a little scary sometimes, but she is a good person."

Huh, so I guess she's a strong and bold mother figure. Ein continued to imagine what Martha might be like and drew his own conclusions.

"Speaking of, we're not really seeing your family around, mother," Ein said.

"Hmmm, they might be busy with other matters. Right, Chris?"

"His Majesty is conducting his routine work while Her Majesty has gone to inspect a nearby town. I presume Her Highness Katima, the first princess, is in her underground research facility as usual." Chris said.

Ein found himself confused as to why his aunt Katima—a princess—would be in a research facility.

Chris suddenly noticed the troubled expression on his face and she asked, "By the way, Sir Ein. I hope I'm not being too impudent, but are you hungry?"

Ein got the impression that Chris seemed to be a bit tired as well. When asked about food, he realized that he was feeling famished.

"Ah, um... I haven't eaten anything since we boarded the water train. So I guess I am a little hungry," he said, his cheeks flushed. He seemed to be slightly

embarrassed that his hunger was pointed out.

“S-Sir Ein! Please don’t make that face! I simply thought that there weren’t many chances to grab a bite. I apologize for the misunderstanding.” Chris said.

“Don’t worry. These expressions are another one of his cute points,” Olivia replied.

After this exchange, Ein and Olivia enjoyed a dip in the castle’s immeasurably grand and luxurious bath. As he soaked in the bath’s hot water, Ein had found its comfort to be delightful.

Once they had finished their bath, Chris accompanied the two to Olivia’s quarters for a meal. When they arrived, they were greeted by a sudden voice.

“What’s the meaning behind this sudden divorce, Lady Olivia?” The woman who asked this question stood around 140 centimeters tall with a smile adorning her adorable, youthful face. The room around them was similarly lavish to the room aboard the *Princess Olivia*.

“Martha! You came!” Olivia cried as she approached the woman for a big hug.

Huh? This is Martha? Martha gave an expression like there was no helping it and rubbed Olivia’s back.

“Um, Sir Ein. Martha is an adult and a married woman,” Chris whispered in Ein’s ear.

“I-I wasn’t thinking of anything weird, okay?!” Ein instinctively, but firmly replied. He was frustrated that she had seen right through him.

“What kind of woman were you imagining?”

“Like a strong and bold woman. I thought she’d be a lot larger... Ack!” Ein stopped himself. Upon locking eyes with Chris, he knew that he’d just been tricked. She gave him a strained smile in response. “Right, yeah... I *was* thinking of something weird...”

In her own way, Chris was starting to understand the kind of person that Ein was. She smiled gently at him and quietly stood behind the boy.

“Indeed, I was eventually able to arrive. I had to prepare not only the food, but Sir Ein’s clothes as well. So yes, after all of this hard work, I was finally able to appear before you,” Martha said.

“H-Huh? Martha, are you angry?” Olivia asked.

“I’m more astounded than anything. Well, I doubt you’d want to hear my nagging after you’ve just come home...”

In the center of the room was a sofa and a table, lined with an impressive assortment of foods.

“You must be tired, so do have a bite first,” Martha said.

“It looks delicious. It’s been a while since I’ve had your cooking, Martha,” Olivia replied. Perhaps arriving home had finally taken some burden off her shoulders as tears welled up in her eyes.

Martha turned to Ein. “My name is Martha. I am the first servant and Lady Olivia’s personal servant as well. I’ve heard much about you from her letters.”

“Pleased to meet you. My name is Ein. I don’t believe I have a household name now, so you can just call me Ein.” He introduced himself only by his first name, having opted not to mention the Roundheart name. A number of emotions seemed to wash over Martha upon hearing this as she wore a sympathetic look on her face.

“We servants welcome you, Sir Ein. Please eat while the food is still warm.” Her words were considerate of his feelings, trying to provide him with some small comfort. It seemed trivial, but he was grateful for her heartwarming kindness.

Martha straightened her posture and asked, “In any case, Lady Olivia. Would you kindly tell me about the reason for your divorce?”

“Ein, will you come here?” Olivia said. After she was on the sofa, Olivia called her son towards her lap and he happily took his seat.

“I don’t find it honorable for you to use Ein as your way out,” Chris accused.

“Chris is so cold to me. Isn’t she just awful, Ein?” Olivia said.

“Indeed, she is,” her son answered.

The knight looked surprised and gazed at Ein with the word “ugh” written all over her face. Martha also looked at Ein with pity as she continued to talk.



“It seems you’ve educated your son quite well, Lady Olivia. I understand the situation and do not mind if you tell me after you’ve spoken to His Majesty. However, will you please make sure to fill me in?”

“Of course. I haven’t told Chris my reasons either, so I’ll be sure to tell you both,” Olivia said firmly, looking more serious than she’d been.

Martha and Chris backed down, respecting their lady’s opinion. After mother and son enjoyed a delicious and hearty meal from the castle, they immediately fell asleep—they must’ve been more tired than they thought.

As Ein had promised Chris on the water train, he and Olivia woke up around three in the afternoon. After they got around, the two were guided to the king by Martha and Chris.

“I’ve told everyone at the castle to pretend that they never saw you. I believe that His Majesty isn’t yet aware of your return, Lady Olivia,” Martha said.

“Oh? And why’d you do that?” Olivia asked.

“Because we don’t want to give His Majesty the time to think about unnecessary things.” Martha replied.

In other words, a sudden “I’m home” seemed to be the more favorable approach, as it would presumably cause the least amount of trouble. Martha’s gag order was only possible due to her position as first servant and Her Highness Olivia’s personal maid.

“I’ve done this out of consideration for His Majesty as well. If he’s anxious for prolonged periods of time, I fear it may negatively affect his health,” Martha said, stopping in front of a large door.

“This must be the conference room. I feel bad for barging in while he’s working,” Olivia murmured.

“You suddenly returned home without warning, so I believe that kind of consideration is unnecessary at this point.”

Olivia pouted at her personal servant’s sharp reply. “I know that. I just have a lot of reasons, okay?”

“I hope you will inform me of those reasons later.” Martha knocked on the

door a few times.

They received no response, but Olivia continued forward without a care.

“I shall be waiting for you here. If you require anything, please don’t hesitate to ask,” Martha said.

“Thank you. I’ll be on my way then,” Olivia said.

Martha remained by the door as Ein, Olivia, and Chris proceeded inside the conference room.

“I’m home, father,” Olivia said as she gazed at the end of the room.

Her stare stopped at a regal man sitting in a rather plush chair. He was a muscular man that towered at about 190 centimeters tall. He had silver locks and a grand beard of the same color. Olivia spoke in a normal fashion and slowly approached the man.

The man was silent for a moment before he said, “I’m sorry, Lloyd.”

Ein pitied his grandfather. Even as the king, he couldn’t have expected this situation. The first words he uttered were to the large man in armor who sat beside him.

“But could you punch me?” the king said.

“Understood. Raaah!” the large man replied.

Ein was stunned. He’d heard of people wanting their cheeks pinched, but he’d never expected someone to want a punch. The armor-clad man, Lloyd, socked the king with impressive strength.

“Oh father, why did you ask for that so suddenly?” Olivia asked.

“His Majesty is confused by your sudden return, Lady Olivia,” Chris said.

“But Chris, wouldn’t it still be rather sudden even if I gave a warning?”

That may have been true, but surely the king could have been offered some time to prepare himself.

“Everyone, His Majesty is unwell and his conference must be postponed. I forbid anyone to speak of what they just saw,” Lloyd said calmly.

As though he were using magic, his words shook Ein to the core. Completely different from the comedic farce he'd performed moments ago, Lloyd emanated an inexplicable air of intensity. The confused aristocrats left the conference room, and the king raised his head once the room was empty.

"Truthfully, I'm befuddled. Why is my daughter back home? She went off to get married. I haven't received a single report about this. What say you, Lloyd?" the king said.

"I'm in the same boat as you, Your Majesty. The knights haven't received anything either, but it seems that Chris was in the know," Lloyd replied, turning his sharp gaze towards Chris. He glared at her in an accusatory manner.

"Sir, I've been the guard for this mission at Lady Olivia's personal request. That is why I'm aware of this situation," she replied coolly at his stern gaze.

"I see... If this was at the behest of the second princess, I suppose I must overlook it."

As Olivia had promised; she protected the servants, butlers, and knights of this castle. After Lloyd had stated that he'd overlook this incident, the king sighed deeply and rested his chin on his hands. "And why have you returned? Is this child perhaps..."

Ein looked up at Olivia, wondering if he could answer this question. She gave a small nod in reply, and the boy took a step forward.

"Pleased to meet you. My na—I am Ein. My former household name was Roundheart."

The name Roundheart would've clued in the king immediately to the boy's identity.

"Hm... Then you must be Olivia's child. My grandson," the king said, gazing at the ground as he stroked his beard. Even this dignified man couldn't hide his shock at his grandson's sudden appearance.

Following a brief moment of silence, his stern expression loosened. "I am the king of Ishtarica, Silverd von Ishtarica. I am your grandfather."

His surging intensity permeated the air and every one of Ein's pores. The boy

gulped; he now understood that this was the pressure that the king exuded—the pressure of a man who led an immeasurable nation.

“Sir Ein, His Majesty and I have been looking forward to meeting you,” the armored man said before he cleared his throat and straightened his posture. “I apologize for my late introduction. My name is Lloyd Gracier. I am the army marshal and I have dedicated my life to maintaining the peace within Ishtarica.” The way he bent his knees and bowed was clearly aimed towards those of the royal family. He put his hand to his chest as he spoke.

He must be a man of great influence. Ein greeted the man in kind and Lloyd smiled before he stood up. Olivia had finally found her chance to get a word in.

“Regarding my reason for returning... I’ve dissolved my marriage, so I cannot return back to Heim,” she said.

“Lloyd... I’m sorry, but could you punch me again?”

“Pardon me, Your Majesty, but I do believe this is reality.”

“A reason, then! Give me a reason, Olivia!” the king said firmly. He hadn’t been given enough time to process his feelings.

“My main reason is that I believe Ein would be unhappy if we remained in Heim,” she said, explaining what she’d gone through to everyone in the room.

Her first story made the king’s brow furrow. Her second story made his veins pop. Her third story made the conference room tremble.

“Lloyd, prepare the budget meeting,” the king said.

“I shall do so immediately. Rogas may be an experienced soldier, but if you ask me, he’s but a simpleton. I shall be rid of him in a moment.” Lloyd replied.

This meeting is starting to sound dangerous... Ein gave a dry smile. With a similar smile on her face, Olivia shook her head at Lloyd’s words.

“Father, I don’t care about Heim anymore. Let’s not do this,” she said as though she was reprimanding the two men. She truly wanted no involvement with that kingdom. “With that in mind, may I tell Ein the reason I was married off to Heim in the first place?”

The boy’s body jolted in excitement as he was eager to finally hear her

explanation.

“Yes, you may do so. This secret agreement has collapsed, so I don’t mind if you tell everyone in this room,” he replied.

“Then I shall start,” Lloyd said. “Lady Olivia was married off to Heim because the kingdom possessed a resource that we desired.”

The resource was called sea crystal. It was a mineral created from crystallized bones of monsters who lived in the sea and could be found in the ocean’s depths. It was used in magical tools, where it would recognize the type of magic necessary and regulate the power of the magic stone installed.

“Everyone in our country uses magical tools, so we were desperate for sea crystals. We use them on a daily basis; either to cool ourselves on hot days or warm ourselves in freezing temperatures.”

Oh, so like an air conditioner. Ein understood that the greatest weapon of civilization was convenience and nodded without question. He didn’t think such a magical tool existed and was continuously surprised by these new discoveries.

“Magical tools that don’t use sea crystals will cause the energy from the magic stone to flow into your body and eat away at your flesh. So we’re using our technology to create magical tools that are different from the ones crafted in Heim.”

“All the magical tools in the Roundhearts’ manor were all actually from Ishtarica,” Olivia added. Ein nodded in agreement.

There was no way that Silverd would permit her daughter to use magical tools that he knew were poisonous to one’s body. It made sense why he’d want the natural resources to make these tools safer to use. It was the royal family’s duty to ensure that their citizens would flourish and Olivia’s marriage was part of that duty.

“We planned to provide Heim with support and make the deal public when you grew older, Sir Ein. That was our previously hidden agreement,” Lloyd said.

The deal would’ve been publicized with Ein receiving the title of duke once he had become of age. This was most likely a measure to raise him through the ranks as a member of the royal family.

“I—no—we spent a few years researching the Roundhearts,” the king said.

The previous Count Roundheart was apparently a capable and trustworthy man. As such, the king had his daughter marry into the family. However, the king and his soldier looked grim when they finished their story.

“When the previous count had passed away, I didn’t think it would deteriorate to the point of Lady Olivia needing to dissolve the marriage,” Lloyd murmured. They’d meant to have their bases covered so that she would be in a happy family, but were at a loss for words.

“I’d thought that I could protect our country from the impending threat of the Sea Dragon, but I could never foresee this future. I simply cannot hide my outrage,” the king muttered.

Ein looked at the king favorably, for he had shown both his kindness as a king and warmth as a father. However, the country needed something in lieu of the sea crystals that they’d failed to attain.

Olivia chuckled. “You don’t need to worry about the sea crystals. I’ve already prepared a new route for us.”

Everyone but Ein looked at her in confusion—the boy intently stared at his mother.

“As the first king declared, Ishtarica has pledged to never invade another region. This is why we had you marry off into a different kingdom, Lady Olivia. I doubt that you could find a new route so easily,” Lloyd said.

The details were unknown, but it was clear that the country had strictly obeyed the words of the first king. The extent of their revenge for this incident was to cut ties with the country. However, Olivia looked proud as she gave a mischievous grin and turned to Ein.

“You remember the work that I said I was doing? Don’t you Ein?” she asked.

“You mean...you were looking for sea crystals?!” he said.

He didn’t know just how shocked he could be. Ein could only stare at her in admiration as Olivia continued to prove her worth and be well prepared for any situation.

“Olivia, what are you two talking about?!” Silverd said, unable to contain himself as he saw the two engaged in a mysterious conversation.

“I’m saying that our country’s investigation committee is lacking. While I was the wife of a count, I continued to send requests to merchants and adventurers...and through that, I finally found a new source of sea crystals,” she replied.

Ein knew that she’d been working to find something very important all by herself, without the assistance of Rogas.

“I found it in a country to the northwest of Heim, Euro,” she said.

“W-Wait, Olivia! We searched the nearby seas of Euro!” Silverd cried in panic.

Seeing his grandfather’s flustered face, Ein remembered the geography of the country. “It wasn’t even in the nearby seas. Did the waves carry the crystals into the bay?” the boy asked.

“Indeed, Ein. Exactly as you say.” she replied.

Bays were mostly calm and serene, but this wasn’t so for the Principality of Euro. The rocky cliffs were sturdy and weren’t easy to carve, but the crashing of Euro’s powerful waves were able to make a dent into the cliffside. Olivia took out a leather bag from her inner pocket and reached for two marble-sized message birds.

“I found a trade route with Euro all by myself. Details are inside here, so I’d be grateful if you read through it,” she said, taking a small envelope in hand as well.

She handed the message birds and the envelope to Lloyd.

“Lady Olivia, you were creating a new trade route as a new merchant? And as for the prices...these are wonderful,” Lloyd said as he finished reading the papers. He voiced his honest opinion to Silverd, as the marshal could only marvel at the details of the trade agreement.

Silverd sighed. “And all I’ve done here is put you through a horrible experience...”

“I have my precious Ein now, so let’s call it even.” she said.

“I thank you for your kindness. I suppose I have to listen to one of your wishes these days, Olivia.”

Noticing Ein’s gaze, his mother looked down at her boy. They smiled at each other, happy that they were finally on the same page.

“In any case, it’s odd. Why was he disinherited simply due to the skill he was born with?” Lloyd said.

“Indeed. If that were the case *here*, you wouldn’t even be permitted to live, Lloyd,” the king replied.

Ein listened to the two’s conversation with interest. *What did they mean? What skill did that man possess?*

Upon noticing the boy’s gaze, Silverd said, “You see, Ein, Lloyd’s skill is...”

“P-Please wait, Your Majesty! Allow me to tell him myself!” Lloyd hastily cut in, looking a little embarrassed. He sheepishly scratched his head and gave a forced smile. “You see... I have a skill called ‘Needlework’...”

“N-Needlework?! You mean like sewing clothes and other garments?” Ein asked. This revelation greatly clashed with the norms he was brought up with in Heim.

“It’s a bit embarrassing to admit, given my sizable physique, but I worked hard to become a marshal.” Lloyd replied.

“Hmph, to think your future would be decided by the skill you were born with. What an old-fashioned way of thinking,” Silverd said, mocking Heim’s beliefs.

“It surprised me while living there. No one would lend an ear to anything I said,” Olivia said.

Slowly, Ein started to see a light of hope. In this country, his hard work and diligence might actually bear fruit.

“Ah, since we’re on that topic... Would you be able to show me your status card, Ein?” Silverd asked.

Ein was unsure if his miserable stats were worthy of the king’s eyes. Unable to decide for himself, Ein looked to his mother.

“You’re fine. You have nothing to be embarrassed about,” his mother reassured him.

“I understand. Then, uh, here...”

Ein

[Job] Sans famille

[Stamina] 235 (Increased by 178!)

[Magical Power] 341 (Increased by 300!)

[Attack] 74 (Increased by 52!)

[Defense] 40 (Increased by 19!)

[Agility] 95 (Increased by 69!)

[Skills] Toxin Decomposition EX, Absorb, Gift of Training

He took out his status card from his chest pocket. Though he hadn’t seen it in a while, he realized that the numbers seemed to be off.

“Hm? It’s a waste to disinherit a child with these stats,” Silverd said as he caught a side view of the card.

Why did my stats increase so much? That question started to preoccupy Ein’s mind.

“But isn’t this rather convenient, Your Majesty?” Lloyd said. He also took a look at the card and nodded with satisfaction.

“Heh heh, but of course. Ein’s my pride and joy,” Olivia said.

“Indeed. I can tell that you’re a diligent worker from your Gift of Training skill. I’ve heard about your sterling personality from Olivia as well. Lloyd, notify Warren,” the king said.

The marshal had written something down on a piece of paper he removed from his chest pocket. Once he was finished, he walked over to hand the note to a person that stood outside the door. Ein glanced at the faces of the adults in the room around him, curious as to what was about to happen.

“You don’t need to be so down, Ein. Toxic Decomposition EX is a splendid skill on its own, but it’s bolstered by your wonderful disposition as a hard worker. Additionally, the fact that you possess Absorb is proof that you’re Olivia’s child,” the king said.

What are they planning? The praise that Ein received seemed to have a hidden meaning behind it. It was true that his poison-neutralizing skill was valuable, but the boy couldn’t understand why the king had made points of his work ethic and his mother.

Ein remembered that he had one more question. “By the way, speaking of Absorb, I’d like to know more about dryads.” Indeed, he still wasn’t given an answer about his kind. “Also, why have my stats increased so dramatically?”

He was clearly baffled. Having noticed this, Chris stepped forward to break her silence.

“I can explain,” she said. She was holding a magic stone about the size of her hand. “Sir Ein, can you hold this magic stone and imagine yourself drinking something?”

“Drink the magic stone? It smells like ripple juice, but how would I drink it?” he asked Chris.

Everyone in the room widened their eyes with shock.

“This magic stone smells like ripple juice, you say?” Chris gasped.

“Chris, what’s that magic stone made of?” Olivia asked.

“It’s made from a monster called the Ripple Faker.” Chris replied.

Does the stone smell similar to the monster? Ein wondered as he nodded his head and listened closely.

Chris’s serious gaze met Ein’s eyes. “I see. Magic stones have an aroma as well... This might be a new discovery.” She cleared her throat. “Back on topic. You combined your Absorb and Toxin Decomposition skills, Sir Ein.”

In other words, he was eating energy.

“I noticed this during the ride on the water train,” she said. According to Chris, she had felt her body become sluggish whenever Ein grew hungry. This

was why she had asked about his hunger when they arrived at the castle. “Your magical energy and agility are high because those are unique traits I carry as an elf.”

Those two stats had drastically increased for Ein because he had absorbed some of her energy. “Y-You’re an elf? Your ears aren’t pointy, so I didn’t notice,” the boy said in shock.

Chris laughed. “It might be difficult to tell based on my appearance, but I’m a pure-blooded elf.” Her beautiful looks left no indication of elven traits, making it hard to tell that she was one. “We elves have different ear lengths based on where we live. I live in the Royal Capital, so...”

Apparently, the more an elf needed to listen intently, the longer their ears would become.

“Anyways, let’s consciously try absorbing the magic stone instead of doing it subconsciously this time,” Chris suggested.

“Um... I don’t just feel sick when I break down toxins; I lose consciousness from the pain,” Ein murmured, though he didn’t feel the same with the star crystal. He didn’t know the reason behind it, but there was no guarantee that it would go smoothly this time either.

After mulling over his words for a bit, Chris asked, “When you created the star crystal, did you feel the same?”

“No, not that time,” he replied.

She smiled reassuringly. “Then I’m sure you’ll be fine. I believe your Gift of Training skill managed to neutralize those negative effects.”

With one of his questions now answered, Ein felt his Gift of Training skill to be far too useful. Olivia had told him the skill made it so he wouldn’t easily tire or fall ill, that it even made him resistant to pain. However, he didn’t expect that pain to be completely nullified. His body must’ve been incredibly compatible with the skill.

“That makes sense to me now! I’ll give it a shot!” Ein said.

Thanks to the skill he inherited from his mother and rigorous diligence, Ein

finally had a use for his once “lame” skill. With these thoughts in mind, Ein smiled as he enthusiastically took the magic stone into his grasp. The stone gradually started to lose its color. *It tastes like ripples.* He swayed in joy as a rich, sweet flavor with a slight tang hit his palate before it ran through his body.

“Hmmm, I see. Looks like Chris’s hypothesis is correct,” Silverd said, staring at the now colorless magic stone—one that looked like an empty crystal ball.

“Yes, Your Majesty. Since dryads absorb nutrients from the atmosphere...”

Dryads were able to grow in the same way as monsters.

“Um... I finished absorbing the stone, but I don’t think my stats have changed,” Ein said.

“This is merely my hypothesis, but you must have a limit on what you can absorb from stones of the same monster or species. You were probably absorbing energy from the stones powering the water train,” Chris said.

If Ein wanted to increase his stats further, he needed to find magical stones of a higher quality.

“Speaking of, do all elves possess magic stones?” Ein asked.

“It’s not just elves. All nonhumans have magic stones in their bodies,” Chris replied.

His mouth opened in awe at this stunning revelation. “Wh-What? But if their magic stone is absorbed, won’t they die?”

Chris calmly provided an explanation to the worried Ein. According to her, nonhumans and monsters had two vital organs within their body. The first was the magic stone, containing magical energy and the stone’s life force. The second was the core, or what humans would refer to as a heart. It functioned similarly to the human heart, pumping blood and nutrients throughout the body. Should the magic stone be destroyed, the core would die. However, the stone could survive on its own, even if the core was destroyed. This was why one could see street vendors selling magic stones.

“I won’t die unless every bit of magic is sucked out of me, so please be at ease,” she said.

Ein put his hand on his chest and breathed a sigh of relief. Suddenly, someone knocked at the conference room door. It came at the perfect time as Lloyd looked to Silverd.

“I believe that’s Warren,” Lloyd said.

Is that the person who received the letter? Ein thought, feeling like a bystander. Lloyd stood up and went for the door.

“Ah! So Lady Olivia really *did* return! Welcome home, my lady!” said an elderly man who wore a silken robe. He had a refined smile as he looked at Ein and Olivia. He approached Ein and knelt to match the boy’s eye level. “My name is Warren Lark. I have graciously been offered the title of Chancellor. I hope we can get along, Sir Ein.”

Though Warren looked like a friendly old man, he was overflowing with an insuppressible air of intensity. He’d merely introduced himself, and yet Ein hung on his every word. Still smiling, Warren brought himself to his feet and made his way to Silverd’s side.

“Your Majesty, I’ve brought the requested documents. I’ve also received a message bird from Her Majesty the Queen, notifying you of her consent. Upon her return, she shall provide her official signature,” Warren said.

“Duly noted. And what’s Katima up to?” the king asked.

At the sound of her name, a huge thud was heard as the door slammed open. “I’m right here! So mew really did return, Olivia!” a large cat said.

The clothed, bipedal cat who had entered the room stood around 120 centimeters tall.

“Long time no see, sister. Your fur is as lovely as ever,” Olivia said.

“Meow? You think so? You’ve got purrfect taste!” Katima noticed Ein’s presence. “Oh, you must be Ein! I’m the first princess, Katima!”

“Th-The first princess?! B-But you’re a cat! Why is a cat walking on two legs and speaking in a human tongue?!” Ein said with surprise, unable to hide his honest thoughts.

“I’m a Cait-Sith and don’t you furrget it!” she said.

In front of Ein was a large, talking cat that his mother had just called her sister. In other words, she must have been one of Ishtarica's many nonhuman residents.

"Like Olivia, I inherited these genes from one of my ancestors. I suppose it's a result of pulling the royal family's pawsome gacha," Katima said.

"The royal family's gacha?" Ein asked.

Katima didn't bear the same intensity as Silverd, making it quite easy to talk with her. Ein and his aunt talked with each other as if they were a couple of old friends.

"Ishtarica's royal family is chock-full of numerous species. Sometimes, mew can end up with the genetics from one of our many ancestors. So do you get why I call it the 'royal family's gacha?'"

Ein forced a laugh from the thought of the royal family having a divine gacha as well. His aunt then told him that he needn't worry about formalities since they were of the same royal family.

"By the way, Lady Katima. May I receive your signature?" Warren asked.

"Hm? Sure. I've only heard pawsitive things about him. He is Olivia's kitten after nya'll," she replied.

Do they require signatures to accept me into the royal family? Ein continued to look troubled as Warren proceeded to remove a sheet of parchment from his pocket.

"Here we go... Is this purrfect?"

The boy expected Katima to sign her name, but she took out an ink pad and pressed her paw into the parchment with so much gusto that a slight pat could be heard.

"Huh?" Ein said, wondering if a paw print was a suitable signature. The sight had confused him more than anything.

"S-Sir Ein, since Lady Katima is a Cait-Sìth, a paw print is sufficient for her signature," Chris said.

"I-I see. I guess I'm just feeling a bit of culture shock," he replied, thanking the

knight with a nod.

Olivia had swiftly signed the paper, and Silverd had finally left his mark as well.

“Lloyd and I shall act as your witnesses and confirm the signing of this paper. Lloyd, if you will,” Warren said. The importance of this official document called for a few witnesses at the very least. After checking the parchment for about a minute, Warren gave his signature and handed it over to Silverd.

“Your Majesty, your declaration, please,” Warren said.

Silverd stood up and exhaled. Seeming to be more full of spirit than ever before, the air around him shuddered as he declared, “Under my name, Ein shall be a part of the royal family of Ishtarica, and...” This was a predictable outcome, but Ein never imagined that he’d become part of a royal family after losing his home. Had he said something of the sort before, he would have been ridiculed for this fantasy. However, Silverd wasn’t done speaking, putting his utmost weight into his words as those around him looked on solemnly. “Under the order of my name, Silverd von Ishtarica, I hereby declare Ein von Ishtarica as crown prince!”

Ein’s eyes went wide with shock as he felt his body growing tense. He raised his eyebrows in an exaggerated manner and his heart fluttered wildly. “I-I’m the crown prince?!”

Ein turned towards his mother standing next to him, but she only looked on at him with affection. He was considered a nuisance in a much smaller house, but now he was the crown prince of a country unrivaled in size. *What kind of joke is this?* He couldn’t help but feel his cheeks stiffen, but everyone around him was serious. *I just became the crown prince overnight.* He could only continue to be stunned in silence.

A new day had dawned at the residence of Grand Duke August and with it came an appeal from Krone to study abroad in Ishtarica.

“I understand your feelings, but it’s just not that simple,” Graff said.

“Why not? Is it money? Or is it academic level and etiquette? If so, I’m

leagues beyond my father in his days of studying abroad,” she replied, casually elevating herself above Harley right in front of his face.

“Indeed. You’re right, Krone. That’s exactly correct,” Graff said.

“F-Father?” Harley murmured, taken aback.

Though Graff doted over his grandchild, it was unexpected for him to express his emotions so blatantly.

“What is it, Harley? If you’ve got something to say, go ahead,” Graff said.

“Nothing at all,” was the reply Harley squeaked out. He felt anything he could say would be meaningless in front of his father, who adored Krone. However, it was true that his daughter was capable—when it came to academics and etiquette, she was arguably the most talented in the kingdom.

“Well, grandfather? How about it?” Krone said, going back on topic.

“Hmmm... Do you truly want to go to Ein that badly?” Graff asked.

She silently nodded deeply.

“Father, quite honestly, it might be best if we call him Sir Ein,” Harley chimed in.

“What a coincidence. I was thinking the same thing,” Graff replied.

Even the grand duke couldn’t casually refer to the crown prince of Ishtarica by his name. Given that it was rather rude, Graff gave a forced smile when Harley pointed out his blunder.

“Please, give me another opportunity to meet with him,” the girl begged. Her time with the boy had made her feel like a princess from a fairy tale. Even an outsider like Graff could easily tell that she had fallen for Ein.

Harley sighed and offered his daughter some assistance. “Father, it might be difficult to arrange it immediately, but let’s allow her to go.”

“Harley! Don’t say that so easily!”

“But once Krone becomes set on something, it’s tough to convince her otherwise. Don’t you remember the time she didn’t talk to you for three months, father?”

Graff had scolded his son, but he was overcome with memories of that traumatic incident. The cause of the fight was trivial, but being ignored by his granddaughter for so long was heartbreaking for the grand duke.

“Besides, if we consider the state of affairs in the near future, I believe this would be for the best,” Harley added. He was apprehensive about what would soon happen. “Ishtarica is a mild-mannered country of pacifists. However, I feel this incident has crossed quite a few lines. I believe they would cut ties with our kingdom at the very least.”

Graff gave a strained nod at his son’s words.

“If I were to go a step further, Euro and Rockdam would gain Ishtarica’s support. I wouldn’t even want to think of what would happen after that,” Harley finished.

The grand duke was in agreement with this as well. Just because Heim couldn’t establish diplomatic relations with Ishtarica, it didn’t mean that other countries were in the same situation.

“Please, father. Which would you like to prioritize, our family or the kingdom of Heim?”

Graff faltered, but answered after a sigh. “Our family has served Heim for generations, and while we’ve made our contributions, that family is the most important to me; our family...and the people who serve our household, without question.”

This answer was surely the wrong one as the grand duke and master of the household. The Augusts were at the top among Heim’s throng of aristocrats, but Graff was a man with a deep affection for his family and servants. *I chose my family. If I consider the potential situation the future could bring, I’m sure my choice isn’t wrong*, he thought.

Simply put, they would either become the enemies or allies of Ishtarica. Graff wanted to avoid enemies from across the sea. *I don’t care if they see me as a doting grandparent. I must cross the sea with Krone... Only then, might we have a chance of Ishtarica accepting her.*

As the grand duke, Graff had access to all sorts of information. Should

Ishtarica be even a little interested in said information, his family would be able to prove its worth. He continued to agonize over the best solution.

“Grandfather! So you mean...” Krone said, seeing a ray of hope. She leaned forward and asked her grandfather for clarification.

“Still, I can’t do this immediately. Let me think about it for a while,” Graff calmly said to his granddaughter to appease her before he quickly stated his reason. “It would be foolish for us to head to Ishtarica from Roundheart’s port.”

“Agreed. Ishtarica’s already thinking of cutting ties with our kingdom, and Heim’s ships have already left an awful impression. The closest port would be Euro, and that might be our best bet,” Harley said.

Worst-case scenario, one wrong move, and the entire ship would be capsized if it was suspected of anything dubious. It’d be covered up as an unfortunate accident—an outcome no one would desire.

“One year, Krone. Wait one year; we’ll try to think of a plan in the meantime,” Graff said, resting his head in his hand as he continued to think.

A year wasn’t short at all, but Krone was ecstatic by these reassuring words. “Really? I love you, grandfather!”

She hugged Graff out of excitement. The scene was wholesome, but each of Krone’s intelligent moves seemed calculating on her part. Graff didn’t think about this too deeply as he smiled at his granddaughter’s display of affection.

“Ha ha ha! You’re a good kid, Krone!” he said.

Harley covered his face with his hands, fed up with his father’s expression. “It’ll kind of look like we’re defecting, father.”

“Indeed, you’re correct.”

Because they were trying to cross the sea in secret, they couldn’t provide an excuse if they were accused of betrayal. After doing so, it’d be difficult to return to Heim. With a hint of melancholy, the two men looked at each other solemnly.

Chapter Four: Talent Blossoms, and a New Goal

The news of Olivia dissolving her marriage and returning home had shocked the citizens of Ishtarica. Even more shocking was that her son Ein was declared the crown prince. With the support of Chancellor Warren Lark, Marshal Lloyd Gracier, and Vice Captain of the Knights Guard Christina Wernstein behind it, Ishtarican aristocrats were easily inclined to support the declaration.

Many citizens had high expectations of Ein. He was not only the son of the popular Olivia, but he was also well-liked by the castle's servants and knights. It'd be a while until he'd be officially shown to the public, but the Royal Capital's citizens would be in high spirits every time they heard a rumor about the crown prince. They had eagerly awaited the day they could finally catch a glimpse of him.

It had been about two weeks since Ein had arrived in Ishtarica and fall was just around the corner. On this particular night, Ein was given his own room.

"I'm always shocked. This country is amazing," he murmured.

When he went out onto the terrace of his room, the view of the city was like peering into a box of jewels. Combined with the view of the water trains, the sights made it clear that he was in a civilization far different from Heim. As his room was higher up in the castle, Ein had cautiously approached the terrace's railing.

"Yeah, this country is *really* amazing." It'd been a while since he had some time to himself. The extra time allowed him to mull over a handful of things, but thoughts of his previous family dominated his mind. "Well, I became a prince before I was able to prove myself to my father and Miss Camilla." *What should I do now?* He smiled as though he was mocking himself.

Ein had been diligent because he wanted to prove his worth in Heim, unhappy with the way his mother had been treated. Now that he had left Heim and become Ishtarica's crown prince, he had no idea what to do next in his new position. He could only think of his feelings from when he was made royalty.

“I don’t like these half-baked feelings...and as the crown prince... Hmmm...”

This may have been imprudent, but he likely wouldn’t have felt this torn had he joined the royalty of a small, countryside kingdom. The magnitude of Ishtarica’s size applied a corresponding level of pressure on him. “It’s only natural for me to remain diligent, but...”

The issue wasn’t his effort, but his feelings. Memories of being considered “the Roundheart’s dead weight” pulled at his heartstrings. “I guess I’m a little regretful about that.”

In the end, Ein had crossed the sea without proving himself to Rogas. However, he couldn’t let the thought go. “I didn’t think I’d be this bothered by it after crossing the sea. Didn’t know that I hate to lose this much.”

He was in a different country with a position miles ahead of what he could ever have dreamed of attaining in Heim. Part of him felt like he could simply let go of his past. “But this just means that my mother’s amazing, not me.”

The only person who was able to prove their worth was Olivia, who had penned a large-scale trade agreement all by herself. Ein had no accomplishments to share; he’d simply tagged along to Ishtarica. He had no skill fit for combat and yet he was spoiled by his cushy surroundings. It felt like a stab in the chest for him.

“If I were to do something about this, I’d want a way to get back at Heim and show my worth as my mother did...but I also must do that as the crown prince...”

A mountain of problems continued to torment the boy. He wanted to think of a solution to resolve his feelings but he couldn’t find one. He was unable to find a sense of determination in his role as the crown prince, nor could he calm himself down. Ein could only continue to cast his troubled gaze into the sprawling city below the castle.

The next afternoon, Ein headed to Katima’s basement research facility. The visit was slightly forced as his status card had been swiped from him for some reason.

“Why did you lure me here all of a sudden?” Ein said to Katima. His way of speaking with Katima remained casual given how close they were.

“Olivia asked me to look into something. Do mew understand?” she said.

To his right, wooden bookshelves filled with books lined the walls. To his left, even more bookshelves lined the wall, but these were home to samples and resource documents. The samples on those shelves appeared to be bones and magic stones placed in some order of importance. The large desk that he presumed Katima used was littered with books and test tubes haphazardly scattered all over its surface.

“Yep, I see that you’re great at explaining yourself,” Ein replied sarcastically, but the large, talking cat in front of him seemed to be in high spirits.

Ein sat on the sofa in the middle of the room and gazed at the princess who was seated in front of him. “I’ll start. Meow, absorb everything inside this box,” she said, offering a wooden box to the boy.

The box was filled with random magic stones. “Are these magic stones?” he asked.

“That’s right. It’s an assortment of cheap magic stones. Around 500 G each,” she said. Ein only looked at them with doubt as he was suddenly told to absorb these stones. “Don’t you worry. Should anything go clawfully wrong, I’ve made some prepurrations. Do make haste since your mother is waiting.”

Should anything go awfully wrong? He was worried, but didn’t want to keep his mother waiting. “I should hurry then. It’s not like I dislike absorbing these stones.”

Thinking that he’d be doing this for his mother, he reached for the stones in the box without hesitation. Eager to press on, he started to concentrate and didn’t feel an ounce of timidity. *Is this the magic stone of another Ripple Faker?* A rich sweet-and-sour flavor flowed into his body, similar to the time he’d done so in front of the king. The more of the stone he absorbed, the stronger its taste became. He enjoyed it as if it was a dessert.

“M-Meow! You make it look easy...”

“I don’t want to make my mother wait, after all. I’m done,” the boy replied.

The magic stones in front of him now looked like glass marbles.

After peering at the stones to check on them herself, Katima gazed at Ein's status card. "Hmmm... Purrfect. Let's go on to the next one." After a satisfied nod, she provided another wooden box without much further explanation. "One of these stones goes for 90,000 G. Absorb all their power."

"That's so expensive. But it does make me curious to discover what an expensive magic stone tastes like."

With the quality of the stones drastically increasing, Katima had found her paw to be clenched while encouraging Ein through the absorption process. "There are harmless tree monsters called Vorn, but there's also another kind of monster that mimics their appearance to trick unsuspecting visitors into becoming its kibble. Those are called Blackvorns and this stone comes from one of them."

"I see. So that's why they're called Blackvorns. I guess I'll absorb these too," Ein said. He had found his aunt's anecdote regarding the monster to be incredibly easy to understand. He reached for the brown magic stone inside the box. "Ugh..." he said, suddenly putting his hand on his throat.

"A-Are mew okay?!"

"N-No, there's nothing wrong. It's just that I was overcome with a strong smell of walnuts. I'm not a big fan of them."

She was silent for a moment. "Uh, okay... I didn't really need to know that. I feel like a fool furr being so worried." Katima was concerned that he had difficulties absorbing the stone. As they talked, the stone in the box gradually took on the appearance of a glass ball as it lost its color. "You're half-dryad and you dislike tree nuts? That's weird."

"Well, I doubt dryads eat only tree nuts."

After some small talk, she checked his status card once again. She nodded, seemingly more satisfied with the results this time around. "For meow, we're done with the tests."

"Tests?" Ein asked.

“Yep. I wanted to check how strong mew’d get by absorbing stones! Especially if mew gained any new skills or had any side effects from the purrocess.”

No wonder she had me absorb all these different magic stones. I see why she’s so well prepared for the worst-case scenario.

“In conclusion, I’m quite pawsitive that your absorption ability has limits in regards to the skills and power it can give you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You require stones of a certain quality, my furrend. Nor can mew absorb power from stones you’ve already eaten.”

“So you mean that I wouldn’t get stronger if I absorbed another Ripple Faker stone?”

She nodded in reply. Ein felt a little down, thinking that his skill wasn’t as convenient as he’d expected.

“I purrceived no changes in you when you absorbed the Ripple Faker’s magic stone. The Blackvorn, however...” Katima’s words trailed off as she handed him his status card. Ein saw that his stamina had increased by about a hundred points and that he had also gained an unfamiliar skill.

“What’s this Thick Fog skill?” he asked.

“It’s a skill that Blackvorns use to confuse creatures living in the furrest. It’s just a fog, though.”

As the name suggested, it seemed to be a skill that expelled a dense fog and nothing else. “Hmm, I see,” he said. “Can I try using it, then?”

He immediately shifted his focus onto his new skill, with a white fog slowly emanating from his body in response. “Huh?! It’s really just a fog?!” It seemed to have no additional effects as it permeated the room.

“That’s what I said to mew! Goodness, who uses a new skill without waiting furr a concrete answer?!”

“I-I just got it, so I thought it’d be a waste if I didn’t use it...” It was indeed tempting to use, but Katima wanted the boy not to act so hastily. Still, she couldn’t help but nod when she saw his skill being used normally.

She sighed. “Well, whatever. It doesn’t seem to have a clawful effect on your body. Correct?”

“Yep. I’m fine. I’m relieved to hear that I can keep absorbing power from magic stones too.”

Katima had her arms crossed in front of her as she nodded with delight. “It’s great that there’s no side effects from absorbing power from these stones. If you’re feline anything odd, let me know immediately.”

She gracefully grabbed a pen with her paw and scribbled some notes in a thick notebook. As though this had been timed perfectly, a knock was heard on the door of the research facility. “I think that’s Olivia. You can scurry on home, Ein,” Katima said.

“Roger that. I don’t want to keep my mother waiting! Thank you for your help today,” he said.

“Ah, wait one sec! Take this note and pass it on to Olivia, pretty pawlease?”

Once she’d finished scribbling, she tore out the page and gave it to Ein. He folded the paper without checking its contents and headed towards the door. He put his hand on the large door and with a creak, he stepped outside.

“Ein, welcome back,” Olivia said. She smiled as she stood in a small room just outside the research facility.

“Ummm, I’m home?” Ein answered questioningly. It was the first time he had seen his mother today; Katima did nab him first thing that day after all. “Oh, this note is from Katima.”

She giggled. “Thank you.”

He wasn’t aware of the contents, but Olivia scanned the document with a serious gaze. Looking satisfied, she folded the piece of paper and tucked it away in her chest pocket. “I’m happy with these results. I’m more than happy with them. Let us be off.”

“M-Mother? Where are we going?”

“To quite a lovely place,” she replied.

No matter where he went, he was fine as long as he was by his mother’s side.

Led by Olivia, he ascended the stairs to the first floor. *Are these cave-like walls and ceilings part of Katima's interior design sensibilities? I don't mind this, but it feels like a hidden base.* His view grew brighter with every step he took up the stairs. Olivia continued to hold Ein's hand as she led him to the castle's first floor.

"You're back, Olivia," Silverd said. He was standing on a plush carpet that lay immediately outside the basement door. A cool breeze came through the window, carrying the gentle chirps of small birds. Ein looked at him quizzically, but the king's face looked more sullen than usual.

"I am. And as promised, let's make our way to the treasury," Olivia said.

"I know. I was the one who said I'd listen to your wishes during our meeting," her father replied. He was trying to atone for the years of misery he had put his daughter through.

Oh yeah, he did say something like that. But why now? Ein couldn't understand what the treasury had to do with any of this as he saw the king start to walk away. Olivia took Ein's hand and they followed behind Silverd.

"Thank you. Thanks to you, I'll be even happier," she said.

"Dear me, your happiness is far too easy to understand," Silverd replied with a sigh, shifting his gaze towards Ein.

"Of course. If I can watch Ein grow into a wonderful young man, I wouldn't wish for anything more," she said.

Ein had no idea what they were talking about, but he could feel his mother's sweet affection.

"Forgive me for asking, but why must I go to the treasury?" he asked.

"As my promised apology, your mother would like me to present you with a gift," Silverd said.

"P-Pardon? My mother wants you to give me a gift?" *That's so out of the blue.*

The boy looked to his mother but was only met with her happy smile.

"I'd only heard of her request this morning. It wasn't even until an hour ago that she had quickly requested your aunt to examine your strength, Ein," the

king said.

According to his story, this gift was a magic stone. The tests Ein had gone through were to ensure he felt no adverse effects upon absorbing a powerful magic stone. The test's results had quelled any of Olivia's worries. *What kind of stone will it be? Just what kind of awesome relic is hidden away in Ishtarica's treasury?*

Noticing Ein's sparkling eyes, Silverd said, "We're allowing you to absorb a magic stone that's considered to be one of Ishtarica's national treasures." He spoke with anxiety as each of his words hung heavy in the air. "The Dullahan's magic stone."

"D-Dullahan?" Ein asked. He'd at least been familiar with this name from his past life.

"The records indicated this monster possessed an immense amount of magical energy. With a swing of its blade, the beast could slice both the heavens and ocean in twain."

According to the king's story, the Dullahan was second to none when it came to the art of swordsmanship—bolstered by high attack and defensive power. Silverd continued to explain that the monster, clad in black armor, could even best a dragon with a single flash of its sword. "Our family has this stone passed down through the generations... The only one known to exist..." Due to the stone's importance, Silverd's reservations could still be heard in his voice.

"You don't know when to give up. Do you, father? You *said* that you'd provide a reward as an apology *and* as a gift for my hard work," Olivia said. A large reward was necessary, given that she had struck a trade deal that would help the country for years to come. In addition, Silverd felt he had to make up for making his daughter suffer with the Roundhearts. He was in no place to voice any kind of disagreement. "Didn't I also tell you this in my quarters? You've already accepted my terms, so please don't change your mind now."

The king sighed. "I know. I'm sure that magic stone will grant Ein new strength."

While it was unknown what they had discussed in her room, it was easy to guess that her skillful way of speaking had won over her father. Silverd once

again gave a glum look of defeat. Ein was keen to quickly change up this nervous atmosphere.

“Oh, s-speaking of, this castle really is huge!” the boy said.

He could see large corridors and tall ceilings in every direction he looked. The ceilings were adorned with extravagant chandeliers that hung above plush carpets. The decor made the halls look spacious, but elegant all at the same time. Silverd, perhaps delighted by his grandson’s words, felt the corners of his mouth tug upwards.

“It is, isn’t it? This castle was christened White Night after the first king’s affinity for the color of silver,” he said. He gave a gentle smile and stroked the boy’s hair. “You’ll be able to learn more about him in the future, but in the meantime, allow me to share a little story with you.”

The United Nations of Ishtarica’s first king had built the country following a massive war.

“Around five hundred years ago, an entity known as the Demon Lord appeared on the continent of Ishtar,” the king started.

“A-A Demon Lord?!” Ein cried. He didn’t expect those words to be used. He was relieved the entity didn’t exist anymore, but his response was overflowing with terror.

“Indeed, a Demon Lord. Records indicate that many species fell victim to his reign of terror.”

However, the first king stood on the front lines to defeat the Demon Lord. The king was a noble man who displayed the utmost bravery and pride in his battles with the entity. Those qualities allowed him to finally defeat the Demon Lord and quell the disaster that followed its every footstep.

“Many powerful warriors had fallen to the Demon Lord’s unnatural strength,” said Silverd.

In that era, the sky was dyed pitch-black and seas crashed with ferocious waves.

“In his victory, the first king fought through the Demon King’s castle and

smote the menace with his mighty blade.”

The first king’s words carried more priority than the words of any other. For the first time, Ein was learning a little about the foundations of Ishtarica’s culture.

“The first king sounds like a true hero,” the boy murmured.

“Precisely. While we’re on the topic, I should mention that the Dullahan was one of the Demon Lord’s most trusted people.”

“Y-You’re giving me the magic stone of a monster that powerful?!” Ein couldn’t imagine any other monster on par with one of Demon Lord’s inner circle.

“It’s said that one of his associates is still alive, but we’ll leave that story for another day.”

Silverd’s earnestly told stories had filled Ein with a wide range of emotions. First, he felt a great admiration for the first king and his displays of strength in his campaign against the Demon Lord. Second, a sense of nostalgia tore at his chest as though he’d just listened to something familiar. *I’ve never heard of this ancient story before, but why do I have this odd feeling about it? Is it because of the sense of responsibility I’ve felt since becoming the crown prince?* Along with his troubles from the night before, Ein was mentally preoccupied by ideas of how a crown prince should carry himself and the sense of duty that accompanies the position.

Unable to find an answer, Ein gave a lifeless yet innocent reply. “Um, it’s still hard for me to understand everything that’s been happening, but I can say that I greatly admire the first king.”

“Good. I pray that you can continue to protect the silver as the first king had done himself,” Silverd said.

“Silver?” Ein asked as he cocked his head to one side in response to his grandfather’s cryptic words.

“Yes, the first king adored silver. It’s a symbol of beauty and virtue that our household continues to use with pride to this day.” The color which symbolized the country was also the mark of the royal family—a color beloved by the man

who defeated the Demon Lord and unified the continent. Ein realized this hue was pridefully carried throughout the generations.

“I’ll do my best,” the boy said, with ever-growing ambition in his heart. It had made him remember the promise he had made to Krone.

Their promise carried ambiguities for they had simply pledged to become “even more astonishing than before.” Despite how vague the promise seemed to be, it was clear that it was one of Ein’s driving forces. At the present moment, he felt like he was receiving a hint that would help him find the last missing piece of this puzzle. The boy felt so close to a breakthrough as he continued to make small talk with his mother and grandfather. It was finally starting to sink in that Ein’s current life was quite different when compared to his time at Roundheart Manor.

“Ah, there it is. The treasury,” Silverd remarked.

They continued walking and saw the end of the hall. Ein gulped as he stared at the large door in front of him. *There’s an amazing door...* A single, enormous door stood at the end of the hall made from stone. It had numerous keyholes scattered randomly throughout. A menacing presence emanated from the door’s sheer existence.

“So, beyond that door lies something that will give me a new power, right?” Ein asked Silverd, who was walking next to him. Ein knew that he couldn’t contain his slowly growing excitement.

The king silently nodded while staring at the treasury door. “Within that treasury lies the crystallization of an incredible monster’s power.”

Ein once again gulped and continued to listen to Silverd’s words. He was just there to absorb the magic stone, but his throat felt terribly dry.

“Ein, shall we try again another day?” Silverd asked with worry, noticing his grandson’s nervousness.

“Ah, no, I’m fine. I’m just curious about absorbing the energy, so I’m a little excited,” Ein replied as he actually looked quite all right.

Silverd looked taken aback by the boy’s response. “Of course. You’re Olivia’s boy, so it’s only natural that you’re not fazed by much. Now then...”

The three stopped in front of the door. Silverd took a step forward and said, "Let's open this treasury, shall we?"

He laid his hand on the center of the door.

"Th-The door?!" Ein gasped.

The scattered keyholes reacted to the king's touch, slowly moving to form a vertical line.

"Everything here is a magical tool. The royal family themselves are the keys to these doors," the king explained.

At the center of the door, a magical tool lined up vertically to split the doorway in twain. A low groaning sound soon followed. As if the stone mortar was shifting to slowly open the door. Ein could only stare in awe as the stone door pried itself open.

"This is where the castle stores its riches. Remember it well, Ein," Silverd said.

Ein only gave a half-hearted response as he continued to look on with awe.

"Father, wherever could the Dullahan's magic stone be?" Olivia excitedly asked Silverd.

"Let's not be too hasty. Over there," the exasperated king replied as he pointed his finger into the treasury.

Olivia grabbed Ein's hand, leading him deeper into the treasury. *Wow, there's so many amazing things here!* Despite his thoughts, the boy couldn't find the exact words to describe what made these items amazing to him. The treasury contained valuables such as precious metals, jewels, and swords, but it was also home to a menagerie of magical stones. Of course, Ein was being led to the most eye-catching stone of the collection. Was this the stone he was looking for?

"Is that it?!" Ein murmured.

Olivia giggled. "That's right, the Dullahan's magic stone; the magic stone that will soon become part of your power."

Above everything else, it was resting upon a white stone pedestal encrusted with jewels and gold trim.

“It’s black...but also blue?” Ein wondered out loud.

The black diamond in front of him had a touch of blue flickering within. As he continued to stare at it with curiosity, he heard his grandfather’s voice.

“Olivia, don’t touch that,” Silverd warned his daughter.

“Of course. You do the same, father,” she replied.

Only Ein was immune to the stone’s negative effects as Olivia and Silverd couldn’t even touch it.

“Now that I think about it, is it all right for me to absorb this national treasure without any sort of documentation or legal process?” Ein asked.

“Indeed. Your misgivings would be generally correct; however...” the king said, knowing that this bit was only unfortunate to himself. “The Dullahan’s magic stone doesn’t belong to the people Ishtarica, but to the royal family.”

“I see. That’s why you can hand it over so easily.” Ein replied.

“Precisely. This is both a reward for Olivia’s hard work and to atone for my sins. Given those reasons, this is appropriate, I suppose.”

As the head of the royal family, Silverd had given his approval. Simple as that. The situation had plainly provided proper reasoning for Olivia to claim the stone.

“I’ll help myself then,” Ein said as he reached out to the pedestal. The pedestal itself was a bit tall and forced him to stand on his tiptoes to reach it. He spread out his arms and gingerly cupped the magic stone into his hand, as if he held something fragile.

“The Dullahan’s magic stone will surely assist you in the future. For a while now, I’ve thought that this stone exists for that purpose alone,” Olivia said.

Meeting her affectionate smile, Ein nodded and shifted his focus back onto his palm. *All right, let’s begin.* He heightened his level of concentration. *Wait, huh?*

“Grandfather, did you just say something?” Ein asked.

“*You’re back,*” a voice echoed in the back of his mind. It was clearly a man’s voice. Ein’s first thought was that it must’ve been his grandfather.

“Hm? I’ve been silent this entire time,” Silverd replied, looking puzzled.

Ein glanced around, but quite obviously, no one else was in sight. Was it just his imagination? He shook his head quickly. “I’m sorry; I must’ve been hearing things.”

He thought his mind was playing tricks on him before he returned his focus to the stone. “All right, I’ll begin.”

With a large gulp, he relinquished all of his senses to the item on his palm. He felt his senses growing sharper and stone growing warmer along with them. Once Ein began absorbing, a surprising incident occurred.

Huh?! Why?! What’s...going on?!

The Dullahan’s magic stone seemed to have a mind of its own. In contrast to Ein’s intentions, it seemed to be pouring its magic into the boy. Then suddenly...

“Ugh! Wh-What?! Olivia! Stand behind me!” Silverd cried.

An immense maelstrom of pressure blasted out of the stone. Quickly stepping back, the king raised his sturdy arms to protect his daughter.

“F-Father?!” Olivia gasped.

She looked at her son with worry as she continued to be protected by her father. For Ein, it was just a weak gust of wind that blew his bangs aflutter. Then, a light brilliant as the crack of lightning shone from the stone, combining with a vortex of wind to create a fog of blue and black smoke that engulfed the boy.

Wait, wait, wait! Will I be okay? he thought.

Contrary to his wishes to simply absorb it, the power of the Dullahan’s magic stone poured itself into Ein. The fog was slowly absorbed into his body, filling him with an overwhelming sensation of omnipotence.

“Ein, if you feel anything odd, let go of the stone immediately!” Silverd yelled.

It was the first time Ein had heard the king raise his voice to him, but his grandfather’s actions came from genuine fear for the boy. The blinding light soon faded to purple, joining the fog that surrounded Ein.

“I-I know, but...” Ein stammered.

Try as he might, he couldn't let go of the item, as if it were glued to his palm. Seemingly in response to the boy's anxiety, the stone generated an odd warmth.

What is this? It felt as though the magic stone was reassuring him. His mind mysteriously calmed itself and his nervous grasp on the item started to relax.
Does this mean I'll be okay?

The brilliant light and strong winds gradually died down with the fog that surrounded Ein dissipating into the air. The only thing that remained was a bolt of lightning that ran outside his body, which also disappeared into him following a few final flashes of light.

“I-Is it over?” the king asked.

“It seems to be, father,” Olivia replied.

As though they'd just returned from an intense battle, a wave of calm silence suddenly rushed over the three. Ein slowly returned the stone to the pedestal and turned towards his approaching mother and grandfather.

“I'm sorry for making you worry,” the boy said as he clenched his fists to confirm his newfound power. A sense of accomplishment filled his face. “I think it was a success. My body is filled with energy like never before.”

It was like he was born again—all five of his senses felt completely renewed. Although the king and his daughter were concerned with what they had just seen, Ein didn't seem to be too troubled by it. Silverd felt the tension leave his body and let out a hardy laugh that deepened the wrinkles on his face.

“Ha ha ha! But of course! You've absorbed the power of a legendary monster, after all!” Silverd said.

Olivia giggled. “It's just as your grandfather says! You're even more wonderful now, Ein.”

She brought her hand to her mouth and smiled as she slowly went to her son's side. She gently stroked his hair before bringing him in close to her for a hug.

I never thought I'd acquire the power of a national treasure. While his back was being rubbed gently, he remembered the time he was disinherited by the Roundheart household. He was reminiscing about his meeting with God and his lifestyle at the old manor when the king started speaking with joy in his voice.

“The Dullahan’s armor requires magical energy, and has been created with the use of a skill. Ein, you might be able to utilize that item as well!” Silverd said.

“I-I’ll check my status card!” Ein said quickly. He quietly separated himself from Olivia and took out the status card from his inner pocket. *Huh? It smells like coffee...* A rich coffee flavor trickled through his palate and through his body. *Is this how the Dullahan’s magic stone tastes?* The sensation lingered like an aftertaste that gently soothed him.

“Ein? Has anything...changed?” Olivia asked. She sounded nonchalant, but she was unable to hide her excitement. Her eyes sparkled as she urged her son to quickly check his card.

“Whoa... This is amazing...” Feeling his heartbeat grow faster, Ein hurriedly checked the numbers on his card. His new stats had caused him to widen his eyes in shock.

Ein von Ishtarica

[Job] Crown Prince

[Stamina] 1,355 (Increased by 1,120!)

[Magical Power] 2,541 (Increased by 2,100!)

[Attack] 218 (Increased by 144!)

[Defense] 540 (Increased by 500!)

[Agility] 95

[Skills] Dark Knight, Thick Fog, Toxin Decomposition EX, Absorb, Gift of Training

Wow, I'm really strong. I'm even famous now.

Silverd widened his eyes and the edges of his mouth tugged upwards before he let out a boisterous belly laugh. “Ha ha ha! Simply amazing!” The effects of absorbing this national treasure had surprised even the king.

“Heh heh, Ein, you’ve become even more wonderful now,” Olivia chuckled.

“Erm, uh, thank you?” Ein said.

“Hm, this is indeed a great result, but there’s something that’s been bothering me,” Silverd muttered. He was very impressed by the outcome, but he also seemed to have realized something. He put his hand on his mouth and glanced at his daughter. “Olivia, were you planning all this from the start?”

The air turned tense and Olivia gave a look of defeat. “Oh, did you figure me out?”

“A lot of things just didn’t seem to make sense. You dote on Ein so much, yet you seemingly didn’t realize his ability to absorb magic stones.”

Since when? Ein thought, but decided to ask a more straightforward question. “Grandfather, what are you talking about?”

“Nothing much. Just that Olivia had been carefully planning for this day.”

Ein seemed confused, but Olivia smiled down at her son. “I was afraid to take root in Rogas. I knew that my actions were for Ishtarica, but I wasn’t prepared to offer my life to live and die by his side.”

Her phrasing sounded familiar, but Ein had missed his previous opportunity to ask about it and could only listen in silence.

“I never gave myself over to him as his wife. It’s unforgivable, but I’m a dryad. Even the thought of taking root in Rogas made me cry,” she said, looking grim. “But if my marriage didn’t bear a child, our nation’s secret agreement wouldn’t be fulfilled. As such, I brought you into the world as a dryad, Ein.”

Silverd’s face also grew tense for he was filled with guilt.

“I thought about your happiness, Ein. The constant comparisons to Glint and your treatment were so horrible that I don’t wish to even think of it. It gave me no reason to stay in that household,” she said.

However, with the need for sea crystals still being a major issue, Olivia

decided to solve that problem herself. “Considering your power to absorb magic stones and the lack of nonhumans in Heim, you may have been killed for it.”

She guessed that Ein could absorb magic stones, but the risks of a public declaration in Heim prevented her from saying anything. With her son’s best interests in mind, she made plans to return to Ishtarica. That was her gambit until the day Ein could absorb the Dullahan’s magic stone. *I-Is she serious? She’s been thinking about this day for that long?* The boy was astounded when he heard of her story, but Silverd remained silent.

“So Ein was born using your dryad abilities?” the king asked.

Olivia nodded, though she looked slightly sheepish.

“Dryad abilities? Does this have something to do with ‘taking root’?” Ein asked.

“I’m sorry, but I’m rather hesitant to speak of it,” Silverd replied.

“Huh?” the boy said with a flat voice.

The king smiled at the boy’s voice, but his next statement sounded rather harsh. “I’ve decided to scold Olivia. Forgive me, but go on ahead and ask Warren about it.”

After an abrupt ending, they left the treasury. *What are they talking about?* Ein only had more questions, but had parted ways with his mother and grandfather to find Warren.

“No matter how many times I look at your card, these stats never cease to amaze me, Sir Ein,” Warren said.

“Indeed. Toxin Decomposition, Absorb, and Gift of Training?! There’s no better combination of skills, Sir Ein!” Lloyd added.

Ein had found the two men in a castle corner salon and told them of what had just transpired in the treasury. Both men were shocked upon seeing the boy’s status card, rereading it several times to ensure their eyes did not betray them.

“Warren, I actually came here to ask you about something,” Ein said.

“Me? Certainly, ask away.”

“What does it mean to ‘take root’ in someone?”

The air grew tense. The two men looked at each other before looking back at the boy with confusion.

“Why the sudden question, Sir Ein?” Warren asked.

Ein explained what he’d been told before Silverd left to scold Olivia. There wasn’t much information he could glean from the conversation, so his explanation wasn’t substantial. However, Ein tried his best to give a detailed story with what he did know.

“Aha, I see. So that’s the reason,” Lloyd said with a nod.

“I don’t understand what that means, nor do I understand why my grandfather acted in such a way,” Ein said. *What traits and abilities do dryads have? I’d like to start there.*

As the two men hesitated to tell the boy, another person entered the conversation.

“There mew are, Ein,” Katima said as she approached him, simultaneously saving Lloyd and Warren from answering the boy’s question.

“Aunt Katima? What’s up?” Ein asked.

“My sister asked me to lend you a paw, so here I am.” She confidently approached them and sat on the sofa before popping a few treats into her muzzle. She glanced at the panicked duo and wiped the crumbs off her lips. “I’ll teach you,” she said.

Ein gulped, eager to have his questions answered.

“Dryads are able to birth one kitten in their lifetime without the need for sexual relations.” she said.

“Like parthenogenesis?” Ein asked.

“Nah, dryads go with division. Though, mew’ll still need blood and the like from a partner of the opposite sex.”

According to her, using this ability was a rather complex process. The original

dryad would divide their magic stone and core to create a new being. From there, those provided fragments would grow into their own pair. The appearance, personality, and other traits of this new life would be a reflection of the parent. The intricacy of this once-in-a-lifetime act worried many Dryads and with good reason.

“Taking root in another is the other key dryad characteristic.” She tossed another snack into her muzzle as Ein waited impatiently to hear the rest. “Dryads are only able to have one mate in life and when that love is consummated, they are bound to share their life with that purrson. ‘Taking root’ is a troublesome trait.”

“Pardon?” Ein looked at the cat incredulously.

“Wh-Why are mew staring at me like that?! I speak the truth! That’s why there aren’t many dryads around!”

“Is this true?” Ein asked. His gaze was directed at Warren, who could only respond with an uncomfortable smile and a nod. “I see. I believe you, then.”

“Wh-Why don’t mew trust me?!”

It’s not that Ein didn’t believe his aunt’s words, but Warren’s actions were extremely persuasive. He wielded a certain amount of influence as the chancellor.

“In any case, it’s more of a last resort. Because she couldn’t purrform the act, her only other option was to create a child by herself. Dryads have hypnotic abilities, so they can avoid the necessary nightly activities if they must.”

Ein couldn’t hide his shock at this revelation.

“Well, I’m sure the pawblem was wrapped up in the passing of the last Count Roundheart.”

At the time, Olivia had planned on fulfilling her duties as promised. Those plans fell through once she lost hope in Rogas. Of course she was dismayed by the Roundhearts’ actions, but she also felt let down by Ishtarica’s investigation committee. Shouldering these sorrows all on her own, Olivia had feared the idea of permanently laying down her roots in the Roundheart household. As the king’s retainers, regrets had plagued the minds of Warren and Lloyd.

“Olivia did run from her duties a little, but I want mew to forgive her.”

The circumstances of his birth were unique, but his mother had still given him the gift of life. Ein considered the fear she must have felt—that she was fated to share her life with another person. After going through so much agony, she had finally decided to use this ability to give life while protecting her own.

“Father may have claimed to scold her, but I’m pawsitive that they’re just talking,” Katima said.

“I’m glad. That puts me at ease,” Ein said as he felt his chest tighten in pity for his mother.

From the glum looks on their faces, Warren and Lloyd must’ve felt the same way.

“Whew, I feel much better after hearing all that. I’m getting a little hungry now,” Ein said with a smile and nonchalant attitude.

“D-Do mew have nerves of steel? Or are mew just an idiot?!”

“This might seem a bit rude, but I’m glad that mother didn’t take root in my father, Rogas. It seems like her life isn’t in danger.” He wore a refreshed look on his face. “Your explanation is a big relief.”

Olivia had desperately worked for the good of her country, but she had suffered enough. Although she had fled from her obligation to take root in Rogas, the princess more than made up for it with the penning of a new trade agreement. She had fulfilled her duties as a princess of Ishtarica in doing so.

“But it’s not wrong of you to feel like she ungratefully neglected her duties through her actions. They’re natural thoughts to have,” he said to the pair of men who were in front of him. The boy was curious to know their opinions.

“The royal family has their duties. That being said—” Warren started.

“We have also failed in our duties as subjects and have done a great disservice to Lady Olivia,” Lloyd cut in, finishing Warren’s statement.

“Precisely. In addition, Heim fell short on their part of the secret agreement and broke their promise.”

The agreement stated that Olivia’s child would be the head of the household,

but the Roundhearts were the first to break that promise. Heim had made no effort to admonish them for doing so.

“We don’t intend on making any complaints regarding Lady Olivia’s actions,” Warren finished. Ein breathed a sigh of relief in response.

“Wait. Huh? How was I born then?” the boy asked.

“Dryads are viviparous, so you must’ve been born from a large fruit on a tree,” Katima said. Ein looked at his aunt with great confusion, unable to believe her words. “When dryads are in their human form, their belly grows like a human’s would. Though when they’re about to give birth, they apparently revert to their true form to drop the fruit from their branches.”

Huh, really. I don’t get it at all. Despite his befuddlement, Ein had no choice but to accept these words at face value. “Hey, aren’t you snacking a bit too much?” he asked.

While explaining things to Ein, Katima was popping snacks into her gullet whenever she had the chance. He wondered if she didn’t get thirsty.

“You’ll get fat if you eat too much,” he commented.

“Mrow! I want a sweet treat because I just used some of my brainpower! Don’t make it weird!”

Ein felt that she was incredibly easy to get along with. Combined with her catty mannerisms, she was comfortable to be around. *I guess this is what it’s like to have a pet*, he thought, but didn’t dare to say it aloud. Lloyd, on the other hand, had a thought of his own to voice.

“Speaking of the Dullahan’s stone, there’s one other magic stone regarded as a national treasure.” Lloyd’s statement had shocked Ein, as the boy didn’t think anything could surpass the power of the Dullahan’s stone. Especially after he recalled the bright lights, strong winds, and fog that surrounded him during the absorption process. “To tell you the truth, the Demon Lord’s magic stone is a decoration in the audience room.”

“Huh?! Say what?! Really?! By Demon Lord, do you mean the evil entity slain by the first king?!” Ein gasped, thinking back to the heroic tale still fresh in his mind. Learning of the Demon Lord’s magic stone had left Ein in so much shock

that he was unable to speak properly.

“He’s right. And with that in mind, you can never, ever step foot into the audience hall when you’re hungry. Doesn’t matter if it’s by accident or purrposely. Got that, Ein?” Katima said, who carefully ensured that he heeded her warning.

His eyes widened and he turned away. “I wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Huh? But Sir Ein, you seem to be smiling a little,” Warren replied.

As the boy’s lies were swiftly seen through, he had awkwardly raised his teacup to cover his face. The adults smiled, knowing that he just tried to play dumb.

“The first king was stronger than any other. Not only physically strong, but mentally powerful as well. We knights greatly admire him,” Lloyd said with a nod. He’d never met the first king, but the tales surrounding the figure had been his encouragement.

“Stronger than any other?” Ein murmured. Those words had struck a chord in his heart. The Demon Lord’s defeat at the hands of the first king was proof of his grand power.

“Indeed. From the bottoms of their hearts, everyone in Ishtarica holds great respect for him.”

In other words, he was not only a great king, but also towered above all others when it came to his physical fitness and combat prowess. While organizing his thoughts, Ein had remembered Silverd’s words. When Ein had said that he greatly admired the first king, Silverd had stated that the thought was a good one.

“Lloyd,” Ein said, realizing something. “If someone were to be amazing as the first king, would their name reach the people of Heim?”

“Of course,” Lloyd replied. “No matter how far a country may be, they’d surely hear of such authority.”

I see. So that’s what I need to do! Ein had the chance to not only get back at Rogas, but the entirety of Heim along with proving his mother’s worth while

doing it. This act would also show his value to Ishtarica as its crown prince. It was an ideal solution. *If I work hard to garner the level of fame the first king enjoys, the news will reach Heim and solve all my problems!* The moment he realized this, his body felt invigorated.

“Um, Lloyd, how could I become like the first king?” Ein asked. Had he not absorbed the power of Dullahan’s magic stone, he wouldn’t have been able to pose such a question. With a renewed sense of confidence thanks to his mother, he stared at the marshal with determination.

“Hm, it seems like you quite admire the first king. This is very good indeed, but let’s see...”

His achievements were vast—from unifying the continent to defeating the Demon Lord, he was a hero in every sense of the word. Lloyd had trouble coming up with a response as he could not think of any feats that could replicate the first king’s glory.

“You can’t do the same things as the first king, but you can surely attain the same heights that he’d gone to,” Warren said. “But that’s quite a ways away. It’s essential to work much, much harder than the average person. For example, Lloyd here became a marshal through years of hard work and effort. Through your training and studies, you must surpass him by becoming a man who is just as proficient with a pen as he is with a sword.”

After a brief pause, Ein replied “I understand what you’re saying.” He was still determined to fashion himself after the first king. It was the solution to all his problems, but he also couldn’t deny that his admiration for the man still lingered. Without wavering under Warren’s firm eye, Ein gave the man his honest reply.

“Very well. Then I shall do my best to support you as much as possible,” Warren said.

“R-Really?!”

“Of course. Shall we start tonight? I can provide some support for your studies. Knowledge can become your weapon, and it will surely assist you in wielding a sword.”

Ein was happy to have gained a reliable ally. Now that he had a clear goal, he didn't believe his intensive studying to be suffering in the least.

"Well, I'll be on my way meow!" Katima said, abruptly standing up.

"A-Aunt Katima? Where are you off to?" Ein asked.

"Mroooow?! To see the power of the Dullahan, of course!"

"Ah, I see."

She'd been helping the boy with testing, and like all researchers, she was eager to see the results with her own eyes.

"Please wait, I've got some documents to work on..." Lloyd said.

"Just rip those to shreds! Come on, follow me-ow!" Katima yelled before she threw some snacks into her snout and dragged Lloyd behind her to the salon door. "Warren! I'll have Lloyd train Ein for a bit! Will that be a purroblem for mew?"

Warren laughed. "Ha ha ha! I was planning to ask him to help Chris with Sir Ein's swordsmanship anyway. So this works out quite conveniently for me."

Ein's new trio of teachers were the Chancellor, the Marshal, and the Vice Captain of the Knights Guard—all held great authority in the massive country of Ishtarica. The boy felt his body giddy with excitement.

"Do be careful. I'd be grateful if you can give me a report later," Warren said.

"I shall do so myself. Now, shall we go?" Lloyd said.

Ein's life in Ishtarica had just kicked off. Once the trio had taken their leave, Warren was left by himself. He muttered to himself with delight, "Now, I suppose I'll have to formulate a robust lesson plan for our future king."

The chancellor had decided to think of a plan that would cultivate Ein into becoming a splendid king. The boy's studies would start tonight, after all. Everyone knew that Ein had set an extremely high bar for himself—one that wouldn't be easily reached.

"My goodness, Sir Ein bears quite the resemblance to a certain someone," Warren mumbled meaningfully before he left the salon.

The very same evening Ein had absorbed the crackling fog of the Dullahan's magic stone, Krone lay in her bed, trapped in her own fog—one of her thoughts.

"I suppose I'm a bit shallow," she murmured. Her love for Ein wasn't a lie, but she was thinking about how easily she'd fallen for him. "Hah... I said that other people talked to me as if I were some sort of prostitute..."

Krone scorned herself as though she was apologizing to him. She got up from her bed and walked to her desk. She unlocked a drawer that contained the star crystal, now stored in a bespoke box to safeguard it. With the jewel in hand, she returned to bed and held it tightly to her chest.

"Jeez, he left all by himself."

She laughed at how her weak words of resentment were a stark contrast to her true feelings. That day had been repeating on a loop in her mind. The warm smile Ein had given while presenting her with the star crystal was now burnt into her memory. Suddenly, she heard a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"My lady, do excuse me," a female servant of her household said. "The husband of the house has requested that I check on the progress of your assignments."

Krone sat up in her bed, assuming that her father had sent the servant.

"I believe he gave them to you last night. Were there any issues?" the servant asked.

"I'm done, so you may take them to him," replied Krone.

"Pardon? Are you done...with everything?" the servant said after a pause.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. You can bring me the next assignment." The girl spoke as if there was nothing wrong, but the servant just couldn't hide how amazed she was.

"I'm surprised. He told me that was a week's worth of work."

"Not really. These can be done quickly with just a bit of focus." *Besides, I*

*promised **him** that I'd become even more astonishing when we next meet...*

Their promise was vague, but it was one of the few ties she still had to Ein, who was now part of Ishtarica's royal family. The promise had become a driving force for Krone to continue working diligently.

"I-I understand. I shall inform him," the servant said.

"Please. Ah, could you also request a more difficult assignment?"

"Understood," the servant said after a brief pause.

The servant thought the assignments were already intended to be difficult for Krone. Yet the young lady requested something even more challenging, proving herself to be truly out of the ordinary. The servant nervously laughed to herself in response.

"Is that all? I'm sorry, I was just in the middle of thinking about something," Krone said.

"I-I have one more thing from the master of the house."

"My grandfather?" She looked quizzically.

"He told me that you should prepare to write a letter for *him*..."

"S-Say that to begin with! Ugh, I have to hurry and prepare one!"

Krone hastily got up and ran for her desk, but she made sure to place the star crystal down with great care.

"Oh, what shall I write? I've never written anything to a boy before..."

The young lady who was so confident moments ago was now horribly flustered over a single letter. The servant found this difference in demeanor to be adorable and couldn't suppress a chuckle.

"If you don't mind, why don't you ask the master of the house? He's very knowledgeable about poems as well," she advised.

"Y-You're right. Thank you. I'll go to my grandfather's room, then!"

"I understand. Do be careful."

Krone hastily rushed out of her room with her glossy, blue hair flowing wildly behind her. This was a rare sight—though she was overcome with various

feelings, it was clear that she couldn't hide her joy. She was less worried about the contents of her letter and more excited that she could even send one. She was finally acting like a girl her age.

"My, my. I hope you can do your best, my lady," the servant said, cheering the girl on from the shadows.

Perhaps thanks to these thoughts, Krone swiftly made her way to her grandfather's room. "Ah, I should send a letter to Lady Olivia as well. Oh no, I really should consult my grandfather about this..."

She had tons to write and so much to tell. Thinking about the pair across the ocean, she blushed as her footsteps grew lighter with each passing step. *I wonder what he's doing right now?*



Chapter Five: The Power of Nonhumans and the Magic Stone Shop

Some days later, summer was just greeting the shores of Ishtarica. The light of a beautiful day broke into the castle as Chris paced back and forth with a letter in hand. It was addressed to Ein, but due to some unique circumstances, the knight questioned if she should give it to him. She decided to first find Ein and started wandering the castle in search of the boy.

“Nya ha ha ha! The crown prince... The crown prince learned this skill! Nya ha ha ha!” a voice echoed in the building.

“But it was a success, so I have no complaints.”

“Some monsters are regarded as national disasters. What would happen to mew if you absorb their magic stones?”

Chris had found her target. Ein sounded quite pleased with himself. The brunette locks he inherited from his mother fluttered behind him in the air. He was playing around in the courtyard with Katima.

“Huh? What are you two doing?” Chris asked.

Ein had plans to venture outside the castle with Lloyd and the vice captain later today. Since she had a letter for him, Chris was glad to find him so easily.

“Heh heh heh! After a pawfully long eight months of dogged perseverance, our research has finally borne fruit! A round of applause, pawlease!” Katima said.

“C-Congratulations?” Chris replied with confusion, appeasing the first princess. “Right... It’s already been eight months, hasn’t it?” She sounded sentimental, like she was reminiscing about the distant past.

A lot happened in the past eight months. Chris and Lloyd became Ein’s teachers, instructing him in the art of swordsmanship. The boy had been learning to control his Absorb ability as well. Life in the castle was lively as ever,

especially after Ein's sixth birthday and the growth spurt that accompanied it. Chris couldn't help but smile seeing the boy grow taller than when they had first met.

"And...what research were you guys up to?" the knight asked.

"I'd love to chat with you about the details, but unfortunately, I've got some separate business to attend to! Chris, I leave Ein in your capable paws!"

"Y-Yes, of course."

Like a whirlwind, Katima suddenly left. One could sense her haste as she clutched a wooden box in her paws.

"Ah, how was the meeting, Chris?" Ein asked.

She gave a forced smile. "I don't really have any good news for you." She didn't have a look of despair, but one of irritation and frustration—like she seemingly felt thwarted. It was often said that the more threatened a beauty felt, the more powerful she'd become. One could clearly feel this fierce aura emanating from Chris.

"One of Warren's underlings has been staying undercover in Heim. According to his report..." Chris started.

The Roundheart household had been demolished.

"I see. So this was the punishment for breaking their promise. But is that all?" Ein asked.

"No. Because Rogas delivered Heim with a child bearing the Holy Knight skill, he bounced back from being a commoner. He's now a viscount and requested to keep using the Roundheart name."

Ein nodded firmly and looked up at the sky. "I knew it. I didn't think that kingdom would just toss aside the Roundhearts."

While master of the house, Rogas had made his name famous to surrounding countries as commander in chief and a general of Heim's army. Ein believed that Rogas's past contributions didn't allow the kingdom to cut ties with the man.

"They lost their land, but they kept their manor. This is much too..." Chris

trailed off.

This was much too trivial a punishment, and Heim was clearly making light of Ishtarica. Chris had wanted to say that, but stopped herself. Ein didn't seem to mind.

"It doesn't bother us. My mother and I are glad we were able to cut ties with them," he said.

Her face remained stern. Rogas has been demoted to a viscount and the family lost their land, but that was it. This light rap on the knuckles wasn't enough for Chris, nor was it for the king.

"Because they know that we don't start wars, they only gave the Roundhearts a slap on the wrist," Chris said.

Since Ishtarica followed the words of the first king, Heim knew that they wouldn't strike back. Ein couldn't help but wonder why they put so much faith in other countries.

"But Warren's going to exact revenge, isn't he?" he asked.

"Indeed. We shall cut ties with Heim and should any of their ships tie off on our docks, we'll take the necessary measures. And regarding Euro..."

This was the region Olivia had made the trade agreement with. The details of this were also explained during the meeting.

"We discussed the price of the trade, and agreed to provide the necessary equipment to harvest these resources. In addition, we've agreed to all of their demands," she said.

"What kind of demands did they have?"

"They wanted to make it public that they're trading with our country."

Euro didn't outright request support, but this method was of a similar vein. Simply publicizing this trade deal would put other countries on guard. Ein was pleased to hear of these reserved requests.

"These results are more than enough. We've scheduled to send one of our ships to Euro very soon," she said.

“Good to hear. Then shall we meet with Lloyd and... Oh, what’s that letter, Chris?”

“U-Um... You see...”

She’d let her guard down. She should’ve stored the letter in her pocket before she called out to Ein, but it was all too late. She was hesitant to offer a reply.

“Is that letter from Heim?” Ein asked.

From the rapid jerk of her body, Ein astutely understood that he’d hit the nail on the head.

“Um, I really don’t think you have to worry much...” Ein said, trying to reassure as he looked into her eyes.

“This actually isn’t from Heim, but Euro,” Chris said.

“Pardon? A letter from Euro?”

The knight had decided to tell Ein the truth, but it only confused him.

“I don’t think I have a friend from Euro,” he murmured.

“I-I’m sorry for my lack of explanation. This is a letter from an aristocrat in Heim, but it was sent from Euro.”

“An aristocrat? So you don’t know who it is?”

The boy furrowed his brows at this vague response.

“In exchange, I did receive a message. ‘The flower you gifted me is always by my side, Sir Ein.’ Does that ring a bell?” Chris asked after a brief pause of hesitation.

Huh? What’s that about? Ein crossed his arms and fell deep in thought.

“Hmmm... I had my misgivings, but I’m sure this letter is some sort of trick. I shall dispose of it immediately.”

The knight discreetly clicked her tongue, thinking that it must’ve been part of some Heim aristocrat’s harassment plot. Ein stopped her just as she was about to store it away in her pocket.

“Wait, Chris! I’m sorry, but I might have an idea who it’s from! Could you

show me the letter?” There was one possibility that he could think of. At the very least, he only knew of one person to whom he had given a flower.

“C-Certainly. I don’t mind showing it to you...” she said, handing him the letter as he quickly approached her.

With great enthusiasm, he opened the envelope with his fingernail and removed the letter.

“Heh heh, so that’s what she meant by flower,” he said. Ein smiled in response to the words he read, now reminiscing about the past as a result. “The letter says, ‘The evening I spent with you would make any jewel seem dull. However, only this flower reminds me of the sparkling time in my memory.’”

“S-Sir Ein? That sounds like a love letter, but is that what’s really written?” Chris asked.

It was a letter painstakingly sent from a different country, and must’ve taken quite some effort to deliver. Chris felt her tension melt away when she learned it was a simple love letter.

“The rest says, ‘I apologize for being unable to state my name. Once I receive a reply with permission to enter Ishtarica, I shall introduce myself once more.’ But that’s about it,” the boy said, blushing at such a passionate letter.

He laughed to mask his embarrassment as he happily handed Chris the paper. She read through the letter as well.

“It really is just a love letter...” she murmured. As Ishtarica had cut ties with Heim, the letter was sent through Euro. “Would you like to write a response?”

“Yes. This person treated my mother very well, so I’d like her to be granted passage into Ishtarica as requested.”

The slightly troubled knight relaxed. If this person was familiar with Olivia as well, it was a different story.

“If this person knew Lady Olivia, I shall welcome them with open arms. I’ll tell Sir Warren about it as well.” She made sure to commit it to memory so she wouldn’t forget.

She then remembered Ein’s conversation with Katima.

“By the way, what is this about the ‘fruits borne from your months of research with Lady Katima’?” she asked.

“Oh, that?” Ein took out a large claw from his pocket. “Here we are.”

The metallic claw seemed to have a unique air about it.

“Chris, do you know about Phantom Hands?” he asked.

“I do. It’s a technique the Dullahan used. I believe it was one of this dark knight’s main abilities.”

The Dullahan used its magical power to create a third arm. It was the only ability Ein was able to use after intense training. The length, attack, and endurance of the arm depended on the user’s ability. Based on the magical power alone, Phantom Hands could wield wondrous strength.

“If I combine Phantom Hands with this claw made by Katima...” Ein said. With might focused into the new power, a black tendril-like arm emerged from his back before equipping the claw on its tip. “I was testing this before you arrived! If I stab a monster with this, I could absorb its magic stone while it’s still alive.”



“I see... Why did you guys create such a threatening thing?” Chris said, unable to hide her bewilderment—astonished the pair had wasted eight months crafting a dangerous weapon. As always, the crown prince was full of surprises, but Chris had given a rather strained response to this bombshell. “Good for you.”

“Oh, we’ve called this Dark Straw. Fitting name, right?” the boy replied.

“I shall refrain from further comment,” Chris said after another uneasy pause.

Chris understood why Katima was busting a gut over the boy. The knight had regained her composure and guided Ein to Lloyd.

With a carriage prepared by the main gates, Lloyd was waiting for Ein and Chris to arrive. The trio planned to head to a forest located several minutes outside the Royal Capital. Once they arrived at the forest, Ein said, “What a beautiful day. You couldn’t ask for a more refreshing breeze.”

Chris chuckled. “I agree. This way, please.”

Once they left the carriage, the trio heard the chirping of birds ring in their ears as they delved deeper into the foliage.

“It’s so beautiful. I can’t imagine a monster lurking in here,” said Ein.

“There aren’t any dangerous ones, but it’s important to always remain vigilant,” Chris warned. Her words suddenly turned the boy wary of his surroundings.

The objective of their forest excursion was to give Ein some experience in fighting monsters. He had the basics of swordsmanship down pat, but it was now time to put those skills to the test in combat.

“I’ll lead the way, Sir Ein. Please follow behind with Chris by your side,” Lloyd said.

“I understand,” the boy replied.

As he had directed, Lloyd led the party with Chris and Ein standing side by side behind him. The prince’s companions were considered to be two of the

strongest warriors in the nation, thus making them quite reliable in any situation.

“Lloyd, what kind of monsters appear in this forest?” Ein asked.

“I’ve generally seen Forest Rats, Giant Caterpillars, and Green Slimes around here,” he replied.

“All three of them are about a meter in length. They’re not very strong, even if in a horde,” Chris added.

“I see. Knowing that puts me at ease,” Ein said, feeling relieved. He wasn’t expecting to defeat a powerful monster right away.

“Training against them should be much easier than sparring with the knights. You hold your own quite well, so I don’t think these monsters will be much trouble for you, Sir Ein,” Lloyd said. “Ah, there’s a Forest Rat.”

A large rat scurried out from between the trees. Its gray pelt gave it a resemblance to a normal rat at first glance, but the beast’s pair of tails and sharp claws soon revealed it was anything but.

“Sir Ein, I can tell you how to defeat it...” Chris started.

“I’ll be fine, Chris,” Ein said, cutting in. “I’ll figure that out while fighting.”

“Good luck.”

Ein stepped forward and unsheathed his iron short sword. He calmly took a fighting stance and breathed in deeply. *All right. I’ll do my best.* He calmly stared at the Forest Rat, and in the next moment, he leaped directly at the monster.

“This is Sir Ein’s first battle. It won’t be a challenge for him,” Lloyd murmured.

“I agree. These monsters are much weaker than the knights at the castle. So he might be a little confused on how to defeat it, but that should be it,” Chris replied.

The two happily cheered on the crown prince’s first battle, but several minutes later, they saw that their expectations had been betrayed. They expected the boy to at least struggle a little bit while fighting these beasts.

Several minutes later, Ein had moved on from the Forest Rat and continued to battle many other monsters.

“Sir Lloyd, it seems like the monsters here don’t stand a chance against him,” Chris said after a brief silence.

“Indeed. Though I did slightly expect this since he’s been sparring with the knights...”

The two were staring at Ein from behind as the boy continued to defeat monsters without breaking a sweat.

“Hmmm... They’re different from fighting with humans, but I think I can make do,” Ein said, casually prevailing over a Green Slime. He was a little confused about how to fight monsters at first, but he quickly got the hang of it. “I’m not a fan of the strange and bizarre foods that come along with these guys.”

One of his joys was whetting his palate with the flavors of magic stone, though he couldn’t say that the Forest Rat or Giant Caterpillar were particularly delectable. However, the Green Slime was a different story.

“These taste like melons! They’re so delicious...” he said. Training didn’t occupy a shred of his thought process at this point.

“Ha ha ha!” Lloyd laughed loudly. “It seems like these monsters weren’t enough for you, Sir Ein!”

The beefy man’s hearty laughter made the prince feel like the whole forest was shaking.

“They’re not humans either, so I was a bit troubled by how different they seemed to be,” the boy added.

“Indeed. Though those beasts were desperate to survive against you, after all.”

He would’ve felt bad if the monsters he fought just ran away, but he started to feel a little less guilty about it as the beasts attacked him first. With his first battle in the bag, Ein had gained some valuable experience.

“I’m glad that they were this strong today,” Ein said.

“That makes me happy to hear. Next time, let us fight stronger monsters,”

Lloyd replied.

“Oh, I’ve wanted to ask, but how strong are the most powerful monsters?” The Demon King and the Dullahan came to mind.

“Well, for example, there are dragons larger than our battleships.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” Ein said. He continued to gaze at the Green Slime.

Wanting to take his skill out for at least one test-drive, Ein took out the special claw that he received from Katima.

“Wait, is that...” Chris murmured, recognizing the item as the one she saw in the courtyard earlier.

“Since we’ve got the chance, is it all right if I try this out?” Ein asked.

“Certainly. I’d like to see your new skill as well. If you please,” Lloyd replied, intrigued by the rumored research he’d heard of.

With Lloyd’s approval, Ein summoned his Phantom Hands with glee and equipped the claw.

“Sir Lloyd, this is apparently called the Dark Straw,” Chris said.

“I-I see... Well, I guess it’s not wrong, judging from how it works... Indeed...” Lloyd didn’t quite state his opinion and gave a faint smile.

“All right, go!” Ein said.

The hand, forged by Ein’s magical power, zipped through the air and directly to its target. The skill didn’t seem like something a human could possibly use. The Green Slime was suddenly stabbed by the tendril. As the monster shuddered in shock, its magic stone gradually lost its color. A pale, foamlike light could be seen running through the Phantom Hand’s veins and into Ein.

“That must be the magic stone’s life force... So it really does act like a straw,” Lloyd remarked.

“I-Indeed. That’s...a straw,” Chris said.

The name had straightforwardly described the skill, but the absorption process was startling to see. The pale light faded once the magic stone had

completely lost its color.

“Absorbing a magic stone directly makes for a richer, fresh flavor,” Ein noted, planning to report his findings to Katima upon his return.

The skill was certainly strange, but no one doubted its potential advantages in battle. However, the sight of a black tendril emerging from a child’s back was alarming. Especially in how it was used to directly imbibe the power of a monster’s magic stone. Words failed to describe the torrent of feelings that washed over the two soldiers.

“Sir Ein, shall we call it for today?” Lloyd said, knowing that he couldn’t remain in his state of shock.

Ein looked up and noticed that the sun was starting to set. To his side, Chris was nodding in silence.

He bowed his head. “You’re right. Thank you so much for giving me your precious time today.”

His chaperones looked at him kindly in response before the trio returned to the carriage. When later asked about the results of Ein’s first battle, they could surely report it as a success.

While passing through town on the carriage ride home, Ein was greatly enjoying the vehicle’s cool interior. *This is an air conditioner, isn’t it?* On the ceiling of the carriage was a thin, square magical tool. A refreshing breeze blew from the tool and onto him, making for a more comfortable trip. Even the little things reminded Ein of Ishtarica’s differences when compared to Heim. *There’s so many people here...*

From half-beasts to humans with wings, a sprawling melting pot of citizens walked the city’s streets. Aside from its magical tools, Ishtarica was uniquely known for its diverse population. Ein’s attention was suddenly taken with a particular store—one he proceeded to stare at with great interest.

“Chris! Is that store...” Ein said, referring to the store’s large window. Many large magic stones adorned the storefront. Its ornate entrance reminded him of a luxury store.

“Huh? Ah, that store sells expensive magical stones,” Chris explained.

“It’s a famous store that even provides magic stones to the castle. Hm, since this is a good opportunity, shall we go visit it?” Lloyd offered.

“C-Can I, Lloyd?!” Ein asked excitedly.

“Certainly. However, since we have *certain* concerns, I won’t be able to accompany you,” he said apologetically. The “concerns” he spoke of were in reference to matters of Ein’s social standing.

“I’m wearing my own armor today, so I can escort you,” Chris offered with a smile. She was now wearing her helmet, obscuring her golden locks and good looks.

“Sorry, but could you stop the carriage in an alleyway over there?” Lloyd said, giving directions to the coachman. After a short while, it came to a stop. “I shall be waiting here, so please take Chris with you.”

“I’ll be off, Lloyd!” Ein said as he walked out with Chris. Lloyd sent them off with a manly grin. “I actually got some allowance from grandfather the other day, so I feel this is a good opportunity.”

“From His Majesty? Then I’m sure you can buy a magic stone to your liking,” she replied, wondering how much money the boy was given. “The store is called Majorica’s Magic Stones and they have quite the variety.”

A few moments later, they arrived at the store and Chris opened the door.

“My, welcome,” said a voice that greeted the pair.

The knight then heard a swift *thump*.

“S-Sir Ein? Why did you suddenly close the door?” Chris asked.

The boy had quietly closed it, surprised by the employee’s appearance.

“I wanted to visit a magic stone store, not a fetish exploration location,” the boy said.

“Y-Y-Y-You’re wrong!” Chris hastily replied, denying the accusation. “This really is an expensive magic stone store!”

Who could blame him? The employee had his golden hair gelled up and he

was virtually topless. He only wore a pair of suspenders adorned with magic stones, conveniently covering the area around his nipples. It was difficult to believe that this establishment sold premium magic stones.

“The owner is certainly...a unique person, but he’s very capable!” Chris added with a troubled look.

Ein wasn’t sure if “unique” could begin to describe this person. While he had his doubts, the boy sighed deeply and opened the door.

“I thought someone was playing a joke on me. Welcome, my small customer,” said the owner.

“E-Excuse me,” Ein said.

Upon confirming that there was no one else in the store, Chris removed her helmet. “It’s been a while, Majorica.”

Majorica smiled. “Why, if it isn’t Chris! Are you accompanying this little one?” He indirectly questioned the boy’s identity.

“Indeed, but that’s all I can say.”

While Ein was recognized as the crown prince, he hadn’t been officially shown to the public just yet. Because only his name was known, he wasn’t willing to introduce himself either. This is what Lloyd had been concerned about. Since the marshal didn’t have his personal attire on him, he couldn’t be seen with Ein publicly.

“Hmmm, I see. Well, he’s still a customer to me,” Majorica said, taking the hint and giving up. “And you need magic stones?”

The question was aimed at Chris, but Ein replied in her stead. “Yes, I wanted to see your selection of stones.”

“Oh, *you* did?” Majorica stared at the boy as if to judge his character before smiling. “Don’t touch the magic stones on the sea crystal pedestals. They might negatively affect your body, so please do be careful.”

“I understand. Will do.” Ein proceeded to walk around the moderately sized store. He was relieved to find that none of the magic stones smelled too strongly.

When he had previously come into contact with the Ripple Faker's magic stone, Ein took note of its strong scent. The experience had him worried that his nose would be greatly affected within this store. Perhaps thanks to the training of his absorption ability, the stones only gave off a faint aroma and nothing more. *This store's full of magic stones.* There were some stones that glittered like gold while others appeared to have lightning rumbling within. He continued to glance around the store in silence and came upon a reddish-black stone contained in an ornamental glass case.

Suddenly, a rich, meaty scent filled his nose. The aroma came from a gray magic stone that measured out to be about forty centimeters in length.

"Huh? Steak?" Ein muttered.

"Oh, you're an astute one, aren't you? That's a magic stone from a White Bison. It's a monster often used as an ingredient in a high-end meat dish," Majorica said.

Ein was curious about the taste.

"Hmmm, since you're with Chris, I suppose 30,000 G will do."

Grateful for the discount, the boy took out some gold coins from his leather wallet.

"All right, you've paid exactly. I'll wrap it up for you so that you can take it home."

The owner took the stone in hand and went behind the counter. Upon confirming that he was no longer there, Chris leaned into the boy's ear, "Sir Ein, please keep the fact that you can smell magic stones a secret."

"Ah, I'm sorry. I was being too thoughtless," Ein apologized, knowing that they had to safeguard this information from leaking.

The two continued to enjoy shopping for about an hour. After he purchased the White Bison's magic stone, he also bought the Green Wyvern's magic stone for 52,000 G—a bit pricier than his first purchase.

"Chris, maybe it's time for us to go," Ein said after he was satisfied. He felt guilty for making Lloyd wait as well.

“You’re right. Then let’s take our items and head back,” Chris said.

“All right, give me a bit,” Majorica said, fetching the items that Ein could take home.

Suddenly, an odd sound reached Ein’s ear. He turned around and his gaze met the reddish-black stone once again. He felt as if he heard a voice speak to him from within the ornamental glass case.

“Thank you for waiting... Oh, has that one caught your eye, little one?” Majorica asked.

“Yeah. I couldn’t help but stare at its pretty decorations,” Ein replied, hiding the fact that he heard a voice.

“It’s a special seal that I made to secure that stone. That’s a stone with some history attached to it.”

“A seal?”

“It’s said that the stone’s cursed. It’ll apparently appear in the dreams of its owner and chant, ‘Not you, not you...’”

Given the stone had been in Majorica’s store for five years now, Ein understood why it was in such an enclosure.

“But it’s odd, isn’t it? How could anyone hear voices from a magic stone?” Majorica said, though he still created a seal just in case.

Ein stood in silence. While he did feel something emanating from the stone, he didn’t think it was anything evil.

“Majorica, how much is that magic stone, case included?” Ein asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t seem to hear you. Could you repeat that?” Majorica replied, acting like he didn’t hear the boy.

“P-Please stop! It’ll be too late if we come to a realization after something bad happens!” Chris hastily said, trying to stop Ein.

Ein didn’t back down. “Majorica, how much is that magic stone?” *It doesn’t feel weird. I feel like I can just give it to Aunt Katima for research.*

“You don’t seem to be charmed or under a spell,” Majorica said, gazing at the

boy sharply. For a moment, a cold wind filled the store. Ein guessed that the owner must've done something.

"I'm fine. This is my decision," Ein said.

After a moment of silence, Majorica said, "If anything happens, bring it back to this store. I want you to keep that in mind too, Chris. Okay?"

"Honestly, I don't approve of this, but I know this boy is a stubborn one. I'm sure His Majesty will trust this item if it's under your seal," Chris replied.

Chris begrudgingly accepted the deal, fully aware that the voice was the stone's only known adverse effect.

"You can just pay for the materials for this case. It's 300,000 G, but is that all right with you?" Majorica asked.

"Yep, I can pay up," Ein said nonchalantly.

Chris was tempted to ask just how much money Ein had received from Silverd, but the boy's following words put her mind at ease.

"This was convenient. I've used up all the money that I've brought with me," Ein said.

It was clearly way too much money to give to a child, but Ein was a crown prince after all.

"Thank you for your purchase. I'll wrap this up for you as well," Majorica said.

"Okay. Then I'll be taking a look at some other magic stones until you're done," Ein replied, stepping away from the two adults.

"Goodness... Will His Highness the Crown Prince, become a man of legend?" Majorica asked.

"Wh-Whatever are you talking about?" Chris replied, flustered. She was very bad at acting.

"You dug your own grave on this one, you know? You talked about His Majesty's trust and all that..."

"Ah... Ha ha ha... U-Um, would you kindly keep this a secret, Majorica?"

"I wasn't planning on telling anyone... My, my."

It was odd enough that a vice captain of the Knights Guard would be accompanying a normal aristocrat. Majorica had his suspicions, and Chris's slip of the tongue had only confirmed them.

"You really are a klutz. You haven't shown those qualities to His Majesty yet?"

"Sh-Show what qualities?! I'm no klutz!"

"Oh? Then who just dug her own grave, I wonder?"

Chris stiffened at the harsh words. Her cheeks turned red and her eyes started to glisten with tears. "Gh... Ugh..."

Enjoying the situation, Majorica flashed a smile and said, "Come now, you don't want His Highness to see, do you? I've finished wrapping up the stones, so go on and take them to him."

He patted the knight's back and Chris approached the boy.

"Huh? Chris, your eyes are red..." Ein noted.

"I just had something get caught in my eye," Chris replied, putting on her helmet to hide her face.

Wondering what had happened with her, Ein left Majorica's store with Chris right behind him as though nothing were wrong.

In the kingdom of Heim, a manor was built for the new viscount. It was much too grand for a man of his position, yet, all the aristocrats gave their blessings without a complaint to be heard.

"How boring..." Krone sighed. She was resting her head on her hands as she watched the other guests attending the party. This celebration was commemorating the completion of the new Roundheart manor.

Deemed the star of the party, Rogas was surrounded by aristocrats who celebrated his new abode. Krone couldn't help but sigh as she looked on at this boring farce. *Jeez... There's no reason for them to visit the Royal Capital without Ein around.* With nothing to do, she stared at the drink in her glass.

"My lady, would you mind if I refill your glass?" an elderly servant said to her.

She was the very same servant who had snuck cookies to Ein in the past.

“Please do, thank you,” Krone replied after a brief pause.

The servant proceeded to pour some fruit juice into her glass and tried to make some conversation with the bored girl. “I’m sorry. It seems tonight’s gathering wasn’t to your liking.”

“No, it’s not your fault at all. I’m just a little bored because the person I’d like to meet isn’t here.”

“A person you’d like to meet... Are they from the Roundheart household?” The servant started to guide the girl to Glint, but Krone gave a nasal laugh.

Among the crowd of people, Glint wasn’t able to hold her interest in the slightest.

“I’m not interested in him. I’d like to meet Ein,” the girl replied. She was conflicted as to whether she should say his name, but didn’t seem to care anymore. Krone couldn’t help herself as she was irked by the assumption that she was after Glint.

“Have you met the Young Master?” the servant whispered, getting close to the girl. Krone’s attention was caught by the gloomy look on the elderly woman’s face.

“Indeed. I met him when my younger brother—I mean Ein’s younger brother was being shown to the public. I suppose that would make more sense for you?” Her sarcastic remarks seemed to be a test for the servant. Had the girl received a nasty response, she’d planned on going home after pointing out the servant’s discourtesy.

“No, that was Young Master’s special day,” the elderly woman earnestly replied. “After all, we servants have been eagerly waiting for him to splendidly take the stage.”

“Are you allowed to say such a thing?”

The servant put her index finger to her lips, indicating that this was a secret. Krone smiled for the first time today before asking, “Could you tell me about Ein?”

This servant must've known what kind of boy Ein was, so she was willing to talk. The young girl started to grow excited, finally thinking that this party may have been worth attending.

"He's very diligent and warm. Above all, he's incredibly kind to the servants. For that, I know he's a wonderful boy," the servant stated.

No matter how strained the relationship between father and son became, Ein had continued to work hard on his training all by himself. He was an avid reader and a bit of an airhead, but unrelentingly kind to those around him. The elderly woman continued to wax on about just how wonderful the eldest Roundheart was. "The archives of this new manor are home to the stacks of paper left behind by the Young Master. We servants called it his 'mountain of papers,' but we took care to store them on the bookshelves."

"Are you fine with doing such a thing? I believe you would be punished if you were found out," Krone said.

"As such, I'd appreciate it if you can keep this a secret as well, my lady." She continued to happily speak with the girl, despite the chance she might be punished. "Speaking of, please take a look. This is something that I received from the Young Master."

"A wooden animal?"

"Correct. The young master carved this."

Upon seeing the small, wooden bear, Krone was surprised and overjoyed at the discovery of Ein's many talents. The boy's daily life was more interesting than any story she'd ever heard. If a play was written based on the servant's story, there was a good chance that the girl would attend every performance.

"I received a flower from Ein," Krone said. "It's a beautiful flower that glimmers like a starry night sky."

"Oh my... That's a very fitting gift from the young master."

Without explicitly stating that it was a star crystal, the two looked at each other and smiled. It went without saying that the servant knew of Krone. The elderly woman was delighted to see the girl having fun, but was even more pleased to know that she desired to meet Ein.

“Krone, I’m sorry I left you alone,” Harley said, returning to the girl’s side.

Upon seeing his return, the servant quietly left.

“I don’t mind. I was able to hear about Ein as well,” Krone said.

“It’s best if you don’t say his name much. This involves our future plans as well,” he said.

“I’m well aware, but I don’t like how they assumed I was after someone else.” She gave her father a hint by glancing Glint’s way.

He sighed, sounding exasperated. “Fine.”

“Excuse me,” Rogas said while he approached the pair. “Our entire house is thrilled to be joined by two members from the house of August. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Krone.”

Rogas’s refined attire probably made him look quite attractive to many women, but Krone couldn’t have looked more unimpressed.

She gave a small sigh and stood up. “Pleased to meet you.”

Usually, she would offer another word or two of small talk, but she had a seemingly sterner demeanor while speaking with Rogas. She fell silent.

“Did you have fun at today’s party?”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” she replied. Rogas was confused by her response. “In my lifetime, there’s only one party I’ve had fun at.” She was referring to the evening she spent with Ein and Olivia in the inner courtyard.

Rogas seemed to be a little disappointed by her response. Before he could fully open his mouth to speak, Krone had changed the subject. “By the way, it seems Sir Glint and Lady Shannon have a friendly relationship.”

“Huh? I-Indeed. It’s just as you say, Lady Krone. The two seem to be a perfect match for each other,” Rogas replied. He was puzzled by this sudden statement, but it did feel nice for him to hear about his son. “It’s a pity that he couldn’t have a relationship with you, Lady Krone. Even so, I hope that he’ll grow up into a fine man...”

She giggled. “Indeed, Holy Knight is a splendid skill to possess. However...”

Harley mentally put his head in his hands for he knew that his daughter wouldn't simply offer praise. "That's all there is to Glint. There isn't a charming bone in his body and it's probably why I couldn't befriend him."

She gave him a dry smile like she was stating something trivial. Though she was the grand duke's granddaughter, her comments had seemed to take things a step too far. Rogas was outraged by the young girl's words, but he knew it was in line with her reputation for being rather blunt.

"Ha ha... You're rather forthright, aren't you?" Rogas replied with a strained laugh.

"In any case, you made an excellent judgment. Declaring him as your successor was a good move," she said honestly and without sarcasm.

"Indeed. I believe Glint is the right choice for our household and for the future of Heim." Rogas said. However, he was once again troubled by her praise.

Perhaps amused by the man's expressions, Krone smiled and stood up before turning to Harley. "Wonderful. Now then, shall we take our leave, father?"

"Yes, let's do that," Harley replied.

It was getting late, and it was customary for the highest-ranking aristocrats to leave first. She rejected Rogas's offer to see them off, but said a few words before departing.

"On that topic," Krone said, turning to face Rogas. "When it comes to charm and mental fortitude, I believe Ein to trump everyone else."

Rogas's jaw dropped in astonishment upon hearing Ein's name. Pleased that she had sufficiently riled the man, the girl made her leave in high spirits.

Once Harley and Krone boarded their carriage, he asked, "So, Krone. Why did you praise Rogas's decision?"

"It's obvious. His decision allowed Ein to become royalty of the largest nation there is," she replied.

Despite the boy's troubles, he was certainly most happy with his lifestyle in Ishtarica. Krone's attitude towards Rogas had remained consistent throughout the exchange.

“How is the planning of our trip to Euro proceeding?” she asked.

“I’ve spoken with your grandfather about it, so allow me to share our plan thus far.”

Graff would give Harley his title before traveling to Bardland to recuperate. Given the many aristocratic inns throughout the region, it wouldn’t be unusual for Graff to visit. Krone would tag along as a way for her to observe and expand her horizons. The duo would then use this trip as their excuse to sneak into Euro.

“Thanks to considerations made by the second princess Olivia, Ishtarica’s ship would remain docked at Euro for a while. When they return to Ishtarica with their shipment of sea crystals, the two of you will board the ship and go along with them.”

“I understand. I shall share your words of gratitude with them as well, father,” Krone replied. Knowing they might never see each other again, father and daughter looked at one another as a wistful silence fell upon the carriage.

Chapter Six: An Unprecedented Applicant

At the outset of autumn, both Ishtarican mornings and evenings had started to grow chilly. Off in one of the castle's corners, the knights were training with great vigor.

"Ah! R-Right there! If you step in right there!"

"My, my, do you want Ein to win that badly, Chris?"

"Of course! Sir Ein can definitely win this!"

Olivia was sitting in the stands by the training grounds and Chris was sitting right next to her. The knight was ecstatic as she cheered for the boy. Standing before the ladies was a small, arena-like stage. Inside the ring, Ein was engaged in mock combat with another knight.

"Raaah!" came a battle cry. Though he was taller than most boys his age, Ein was still a young child nonetheless. In his battle against the fully-fledged knight, the prince prioritized using his knowledge and technical prowess over strength.

"Ugh... I can't focus my aim!" the knight grunted.

The boy jumped around the battlefield in a rather obnoxious fashion. To put it in more complimentary terms, Ein had swiftly circled the knight to confuse him. The pair of combatants were huffing loudly, with the knight seemingly out of stamina. *Thanks to the Dullahan's magic stone, I can make up for my lack of physical ability. I know it's a bit unfair, but I should use this power to the fullest extent!* Without the aid of Phantom Hands, Ein fought the knight with only his sword and stamina.

Thanks to his greatly improved stats, he was able to fight toe-to-toe with an adult. The superb technique the boy employed was undoubtedly a fruit of his diligent training regimen.

"I'll...win!"

Ein swiftly dodged the knight's swing and stepped towards them. The knight

desperately tried to dodge, but without an adequate amount of space to do so, the boy took advantage of the opening and swung his short sword up.

“Huff... Huff...” Ein panted.

The blade stopped just short of the knight’s throat as the man tried to regain his bearings.

“I-I’ve lost...” the knight said. He dropped his sword and raised his arms in the air to surrender.

It’d been a bit over a year since Ein arrived in Ishtarica and he was now victorious over one of the castle’s elite knights. The clatter from the wooden sword as it hit the ground reverberated throughout the room and allowed Ein to finally process his victory.

“I-I won. I won, mother!” he said with a beaming smile. His face was awash with a blissful sense of accomplishment as he jogged towards his mother to share his joy.

“You’ve worked so hard, Ein. You were so cool out there,” Olivia said, hugging him tightly. She paid no attention to her son’s sweat dirtying her dress.

“Chris, thank you so much for teaching me as you always have!” Ein said, bowing deeply to express his gratitude.

She looked troubled by the crown prince’s actions and hastily waved her hands in the air. “S-Sir Ein! Please don’t! I’m very happy as well, so please raise your head!” Her beautiful golden hair flowed behind her—a reminder that her cute gestures were in stark contrast to her appearance. She wasn’t acting like a klutz this time around, but her roller coaster of expressions was quite charming.

“Come on, Chris. Don’t you have any words of praise for him?” Olivia asked.

“P-Praise?” Chris replied, looking flustered. She didn’t know how to praise the crown prince or if she was even allowed to do so. Visibly panicked, the knight took a few deep breaths in an attempt to calm down. “Excuse me. Do pardon me!”

Ein was tempted to ask why she sounded so reserved, but he restrained himself and silently waited for her response. She finally approached him and

kneled to his eye level. "You worked very, very hard to get here, haven't you? You looked so astonishing and mighty while you were fighting," She reached out and gently patted his head.

I sure do get a lot of head pats... I guess it's because I'm small. Her long hair went down to the boy's chest and surrounded him with a fragrance that put him at ease.

"Ah, erm, uh... Thank you very much," Ein said. He was a little bewildered, but his nerves won out as his face contorted in embarrassment.

"H-Huh? Did you not like it?! Please don't make that face!" Chris said.

"Oh, Chris. Ein isn't unhappy..." Olivia started.

Olivia was right; Ein wasn't upset at all.

"I'm fine, Chris! Please don't look so sad! And mother, please don't say it out loud! I'm so embarrassed!" a rattled Ein said. Watching a beautiful woman in such distress was a shocking sight. It made one think that even a drop of her tears could be destructive.

"Heh heh, but you're so cute... What a pity," Olivia said, sticking out her tongue mischievously.

She's so pretty and adorable at the same time. Ein couldn't stop praising his mother in his head.

In any case, he felt good. His body was full of energy and his mind felt refreshed. Suddenly, he heard someone clapping from a short distance away.

"You did it, Sir Ein!" Lloyd said, approaching the boy with a huge smile. Ein never noticed his arrival. Lloyd turned to the knight and said, "Now, we can't have you losing to His Highness when you're meant to defend him. Give me some laps outside the castle walls."

"Yessir!" the knight said, bowing his head to Ein and Olivia before running out of the training fields. The marshal was praising the boy, but...

"Lloyd? Um, perhaps that's a bit too strict?" Ein said.

"Nonsense. It's true that you've become quite reliable, but as a marshal, I simply cannot let my men off scot-free."

“But I just happened to have a skill that I was born with. The one that lets me absorb magic stones...” Ein felt a little apologetic for his victory.

“Don’t be absurd! You’ve attained this victory with your own hands!” Lloyd replied firmly. “Without your Gift of Training, you wouldn’t have been able to use your skills to this extent! This is the result of your hard work and effort!”

Olivia and Chris nodded in agreement. These earnest compliments had left Ein with yet another sheepish smile.

“From your current appearance, I would have never imagined you to be a crown prince,” Lloyd praised.

The boy’s training gear was covered in dirt, his hands were covered with numerous scrapes, and his hair was drenched in sweat. Ein wasn’t just a little boy who played hard and got dirty, no; he had acted with a firm goal in mind. This made Lloyd ecstatic.

“With each step you take, I feel you’re living up to the first king’s reputation,” he said.

“Well, with how dirty I am, no one would believe I’m the crown prince,” Ein replied. The sweat, dirt, and wounds that covered him were unfitting for a royal figure.

“Now then, I have some preparations to make. Let’s start whenever you’re ready, Sir Ein,” Lloyd said.

“Pardon?” Ein asked with a blank look. *What preparations could he be referring to?*

His lips turned up in a charming smile. “I do mock battles with knights as well. I haven’t clashed swords with you as I was worried for your safety. However, now that you’ve bested a knight, Sir Ein...”

I see. I’ll fight him without holding anything back. Ein slapped his cheeks to amp himself up before he gripped his sword and headed back to the stage. Lloyd’s massive figure gave off an air of intensity like never before. *He’s more like a giant mountain than a large boulder.* There was no way the boy could beat him, making it clear that they could only spar a little. Yet, Ein’s heart was dancing with excitement at the opportunity to cross swords with Marshal Lloyd

—Ishtarica’s greatest combatant. *He rose to the top with sheer effort, so he won’t be easy to beat...*

“S-Sir Ein! Sir Lloyd, d-d-doesn’t do well against opponents who hold their swords low!” Chris called out, cupping her hands over her mouth to amplify her voice. Ein could only laugh in response.

“Wait a minute, Chris! Y-You’re not supposed to tell people that!” Lloyd scolded.

Sitting next to her, Olivia couldn’t suppress her laughter and put her hand to her mouth. Chris had debated on giving away this tidbit, but being in Ein’s corner had swayed her into sharing it.

“Are there any other tips?” Ein asked.

“Nope! Good luck!” Chris pursed her lips and clenched both fists in front of her. She was ready to cheer the boy on.

He’s got no other weaknesses? I mean, I’ll try my best, of course. Once Ein regained his stamina, he took a step towards the general.

“Hey, that’s not fair! Sir Lloyd, you’re using way too much power against a six-year-old!”

The training swords were all made of wood, so how did the ground become like this? Ein stared at the crater in the ground; as if a small meteor had struck. He was shocked by the display of immense strength.

“But you were able to dodge it... Truly, you’ve grown to be quite remarkable!” Lloyd said.

There was no way Ein could block these attacks, so he opted to bob and weave, looking for an opening in Lloyd’s defenses. However, the marshal was strong, sturdy, and above all: powerful.

Finally understanding that he didn’t stand a chance against this man, Ein fell to the ground with his limbs splayed about. “I-I’ve lost...”

It only took a few minutes, but he wanted to praise himself for lasting that long at least.

“Um... Would you like some water?” Chris offered, approaching the boy out

of consideration.

“Hi Chris. I want water, but I wouldn’t get too close right now,” Ein replied, looking tired.

“Huh? Wh-Why’s that?”

“I used up too much of my stamina, so I might absorb your magic stone...or something.”

She quickly stepped back and put both arms in front of her chest. “Y-You can’t, okay?”

Why’s she touching her chest? With that, the exhausted prince’s day of training had concluded and a warm bath awaited him.

After he had prepared for bed that evening, Ein visited his mother’s room. They sat next to each other on the sofa and engaged in trivial conversation until Olivia suddenly shifted topics.

“It’s about time we prepare for you to attend an academy,” she said.

It was already fall and by the time winter arrived, Ein would be seven years old. Having remembered the existence of academies in this world, the boy’s interest was piqued.

“What kind of academy will I be going to?” he asked.

“The one in the Royal Capital where father serves as the chairman. If you’d like to visit a different academy, there’s one in the port city...”

Attending the latter academy would mean that Ein would be living alone. The idea of her child living away from her made Olivia’s eyes damp with tears.

“I believe it’s best that I attend the one in the Royal Capital. I’ll still get to live with you in that case, mother.”

Overjoyed by her son’s words, Olivia hugged him tightly. “You’re really...such a good boy. Then I suppose you shall be going to that academy by water train.”

“Huh? Is it okay for a crown prince like myself to commute via water train?”

“You’ll have guards by your side, so you’ll be just fine.”

Huh, so I guess that’s fine, then. He was surprised by how lax these rules

seemed to be.

“I know! I can tell you all about the academy that you’ll be attending,” Olivia started.

It was the Royal Kingsland Academy. Kingsland was the name of the Royal Capital, so they simply used the name as is. Unfortunately, the existence of the National Kingsland Academy made things confusing.

Ugh... That’s so hard to remember... One of them should change their name... True to its name, the Royal Academy was chaired by Silverd. A difficult school to be admitted to, it sported a student body that was less than half the size of the National Academy.

“You can challenge the entrance exam with your best subject,” Olivia said.

For example, one could use history or law to enter. Of course, sword skills and magical abilities were also valid for the entrance exam. However, this idea made Ein falter.

“My strong points are Toxin Decomposition EX and Dark Knight...” he mumbled. The specificity of his skills made them difficult to use and even harder to show off. He wasn’t sure if could use them at all.

“You’re right... I also think those two skills might be difficult to use,” Olivia said.

Normally, humans would never have the Dark Knight skill, thus making it unfeasible for use in the exam. Toxin Decomposition EX was his only other option, but there were no plans to publicize the skill due to how specific it was.

“Do I only have my sword skills left?” the boy asked.

“It’s a shame that you can’t use your powers, but that might be for the best.”

“Yeah... I’ll use my swordsmanship for the entrance exam.”

Thanks to the efforts of Lloyd and Chris, Ein’s way around a blade was well polished for a child of his age. The fruits of his unwavering diligence along with months of training in Ishtarica had given the boy a bit of confidence in himself.

“You were able to beat a knight of this castle. You’ll surely be fine during your swordsmanship exam,” Olivia said.

“I’ll do my best. By the way, when is the exam?”

“There’s quite a few applicants, so an exam is hosted every month in the run-up to winter.”

If this was a monthly event, Ein wanted to swiftly take care of it. He didn’t want to mull it over later.

“Then I’d like to finish this quickly, so could I enter the next available exam?” he asked.

“Sure, I understand. I’ll take care of all the necessary paperwork.”

Ein didn’t have a specialized training regimen for the entrance exam. After all, an average day of training for the crown prince was unexpected for one in his position. He could be seen swinging his sword in the early hours of the morning, diligently studying in the afternoon, and cramming in a little extra training along with a book before bed. A few days after he decided to take the entrance exam, Ein finally had a day off. Chris walked up to him with an idea in mind.

“Sir Ein, would you like to get out of the castle for a little change of scenery?” she asked.

“Get out of the castle? You’re right that I’d like a change of pace, but where would we go?” Ein replied.

It was a beautiful day outside, so Ein had decided to take advantage of the comfortable weather by reading in the castle’s courtyard. The boy looked up from his book when approached by Chris. The pair had become closer over the course of their time together. Slowly but surely, the knight’s manner of speech and mannerisms around the prince were becoming more casual.

“You still haven’t made an announcement of your princehood, so I was thinking we could maybe visit the beach behind the castle,” she said.

“Huh, we have a beach behind the castle?”

The small, sandy beach at the rear of the castle was meant for making an escape if need be. However, it appeared to be the perfect place for Ein to refresh himself, though it was too close to the castle to call it a proper outing.

He stood up from his seat in the grass and followed the knight out of the courtyard.

Two pairs of footsteps echoed through the castle halls. The building's glossy, polished stone gave off an air of holiness. Ein was now used to the occasional servant or knight bowing their heads to him. His attention was taken with the sight of Chris's refined stride in front of him, but the elf's gait soon wavered as she had tripped yet again.

"Eep!" The tip of her shoes struck the ground and she lost her balance. She didn't fall to the ground, but there definitely was a moment of silence. "Over here, Sir Ein." Chris said before smiling without saying another word.

Ein couldn't resist the temptation. "Oh, I know. How's your leg by the way?"

Her smile grew strained and she nodded silently.

"Is your leg really all right?" The boy was starting to enjoy this exchange and continued to ask out of genuine worry.

"Ugh... Y-You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

Of course he was. That much was crystal clear. "Oops, did you find me out?"

"Y-You really are Lady Olivia's boy... Jeez..."

They were mother and son, after all. It was only natural that the boy inherited a few of his mother's traits. Ein finally smiled, happy that he was able to be a little mischievous for once.

"Goodness... And here we are," Chris said. She had stopped at the end of a hallway that was deprived of sunlight.

"The door to this beach is rather plain looking," Ein observed.

"Indeed. It's not used often, but it's still a wonderful place."

The wooden door didn't look old, but it seemed to be quite simple when compared to the rest of the rather luxurious castle. With a creak, the door opened and welcomed the duo with a gust of cool air.

"Oh, it really is wonderful," the boy said.

A few steps away was a small, but lovely beach. He walked down a stone

ramp and stepped onto the white sand. The pale blue sea was clear, making for a gorgeous view when combined with the nearby rocks.

“It’s a little cold now, but you can swim here during the warm season,” she said.

“Can you swim, Chris?”

“Uhhh... Hey, look! We can get closer to the sand!”

Ah, so she can’t swim. But Ein refrained from further comment, since he’d just teased her. He walked with her on the silky sands.

“How are your preparations for the entrance exam going, Sir Ein?” she asked.

“Hmmm, I feel like it’d be enough if I just do my usual training,” he replied. He wanted to know if there was anything more he could do.

“You’re right. I know I probably shouldn’t say this, but since you can win against one of our castle’s knights, you’re practically a shoo-in.”

“Hm, you might be right.”

They slowly sat down on the rocks while they listened to the gentle crashing of the waves. The sea breeze blew at Chris’s hair, untying the band she used for her ponytail.

“Ah, pardon me. I’ll redo my hair,” she said. Her slender fingers pinched her hair tie and placed it in her mouth as she combed her hair. Ein noticed her pale nape as she skillfully arranged her glossy golden strands.

That’s a bit too much for me. Her gestures were alluring—any man would be charmed by a woman like her. The fragrance of flowers reached his nose every time her hair fluttered, making his heart beat faster. By the time she finished tying her hair, Ein had managed to calm himself down.

“H-Huh? Sir Ein, your face is red! Do you feel ill?” she asked innocently, unaware of his feelings.

He gave a strained and slightly frustrated laugh. “No, I just thought that you’re a bit sly, surprisingly enough.”

“Me?! U-Um, I’m not quite sure what you’re saying, but I feel you’re being a

bit unreasonable.”

She was right, but he felt the knight to be responsible for toying with his heart. Feeling a little defiant, the boy refocused his attention on the sounds of the waves.

“Goodness,” Chris said with a pouty tone. After a brief silence, she said, “By the way, the exam’s proctor is rather famous.”

“You mean they’re strong?” he asked.

“Much stronger than the knights of the castle. He was originally a famous adventurer and was scouted by the academy once he retired.”

Ein was excited; he felt the situation to be fitting for such a tough academy to get into. Not to mention that he was rather eager to meet a famous adventurer.

“You don’t have to win to pass the exam. You just need to show your skills, so I hope that puts your mind at ease,” Chris said.



“No, victory will be my goal. I won’t be so weak-willed as to give up before the fight’s even started.” The boy gazed at the waves, seemingly even more determined than before.

A stunned Chris looked at him before putting her hand to her lips with a chuckle. “I shall guide you to the examination grounds and will be waiting to hear of your victory.”

Like the kind melody of a music box, the boy listened to the crashing of the waves mingle with her voice. This was indeed the change of pace he had been looking for. His mind felt refreshed after a recent bout of slight exhaustion. Suddenly, a question filled Ein’s mind.

“Can you and Lloyd win against father—I mean, Rogas?” he asked.

“H-Ha ha ha... I didn’t think you’d ask,” she said with a troubled expression as she tilted her head.

“Was I not supposed to?”

“Not at all. I don’t think it’s a bad question or anything of the sort, but... Hm, all right. I shall show you the answer.” She cleared her throat and stood up. Chris removed the scabbard holstered on her waist before making some distance between herself and the prince. She called out to the boy, “I’m about to drop my blade to the sand. Once it falls, don’t let me out of your sight.”

“Huh? Um, okay,” the boy replied with a nod.

She released her scabbard and it fell onto the sands below in a matter of seconds.

“Huh?!” Ein gasped.

He’d promised the knight to keep her in his line of sight, but she had disappeared the moment he blinked. The boy looked around in a panic, trying to find where she went.

“Over here, Sir Ein,” Chris said.

He felt someone poking his shoulder. Ein turned around to find her kneeling next to him.

“Wh-When did you...”

“The moment my blade hit the ground. Rogas will lose sight of me, just like you did. That means I’m stronger.”

Grateful for being shown the answer, Ein could only thank her.

“I also believe Sir Lloyd can beat him in a battle of brute strength,” Chris added.

“I believe that.” The boy remembered the mock battle he had days prior. He knew from firsthand experience that the marshal possessed immense power even while using a wooden sword. Lloyd’s might could very well defeat Rogas.

“But not to worry, Sir Ein. You’ll be able to sense my movements eventually,” she said. Still kneeling, she folded her hands on her knees and gave a glittering smile.

“How many years will that take me?”

“Around ten or so years, I suppose?”

“I see... I’ve got a long way to go.” He knew that it couldn’t be helped, but he still had much room for improvement.

“Heh heh, don’t worry. You’re still a growing boy.”

Ein was deep in thought while she smiled with delight. *I did say that I wanted to be stronger than the first king, but that also means that I need to surpass Lloyd and Chris.* This challenge provided a seemingly tall and impregnable wall, but the boy knew he would have to take the painstaking effort to overcome it.

“There isn’t anything in Ishtarica that’s stronger than both you and Lloyd, right?”

“No, there is,” she said with a serious look on her face. “Do you remember when Sir Lloyd spoke of a large dragon on our trip to the forest?”

“Yeah, that rings a bell.”

“That’s a Sea Dragon—a monster worthy of being called a national disaster. It emerges from hibernation every century or two and takes many lives in the process.”

Lloyd had stated that this monster dwarfed battleships and was much too powerful for one to face alone.

“Some of the Demon Lord’s close aides are still alive as well. I’ve noticed the presence of some of them in the past,” she said. Apparently, the power Chris felt was so overwhelming that it convinced her that she wouldn’t stand a chance.

Ein had thought that Ishtarica was rather peaceful, but he had now learned that numerous threats lurked somewhere within the country.

“I’ll become strong enough to defeat them all. I won’t be able to achieve my goal if I don’t,” he said.

“Your goal was to be like the first king, correct?”

“Yep, that’s right.”

Chris put a finger to her lips, looking puzzled by the boy’s words. “Speaking of, why do you aim to be like the first king? I don’t think I’ve ever asked why.”

“Oh, I haven’t told you?”

She nodded her head.

“At first, I wanted to get back at Heim,” he said.

“Even though you’re no longer related to Heim?”

“I still had my regrets though. Mainly, in how relentlessly they looked down upon my mother.”

“I see.”

Remembering the tale of the Demon Lord and the first king, he continued, “I first felt a sense of admiration when I had just become the crown prince. However, I was still filled with regrets and frustration directed at my former kingdom. I didn’t know what to do.”

“And that’s when you heard the tale of the first king.” Chris said, understanding where the boy was coming from. She nodded meaningfully, agreeing with the boy.

“I discovered that if I strived to become like the first king, it would be the best

way to solve all my problems.”

“H-Huh? I’m sorry, I feel like you’ve lost me now...” *Solve his problems?* She was confused by his words.

“If I become strong, I can prove Heim wrong and wipe away my mother’s past of undue ridicule. If I become like the first king, no one could complain.”

“Th-That’s why you’re aiming to become like the Demon Lord’s slayer?” It may have been the most ideal solution, but she questioned his sanity for placing the bar so high. However, she was met with a carefree smile and nod.

“That’s right. I may have become slightly overconfident after absorbing the Dullahan’s magic stone, but I think I’ve made the right choice,” he said. He initially thought it was imprudent to even voice these thoughts, but Ein’s confidence grew after obtaining this new power. It allowed him to set his sights on the first king as his goalpost.

“Is it disrespectful towards the first king for me to use him as part of my reason to become stronger?” he asked.

“No, I think the great king would be overjoyed to know that someone of his progeny has made it a goal to live up to his legacy.” Many would surely question whether the prince was just a reckless child or if he was truly a legend in the making. However, Chris believed that the boy would one day become a majestic figure who would dazzle her.

“That’s a relief to hear. I’ll be in your care for future training as well,” he said.

The two continued to talk for about an hour until Ein’s hunger started to set in, at which point they left the beach for lunch.

A few days later, the morning of Ein’s entrance exam had dawned. *I’m surprised how long it took us to get here.* After leaving the castle, the crown prince and his knight had hopped on a water train at White Rose Station. They had boarded a standard commuter train instead of the royal family’s bespoke train. Roughly fifteen minutes after their departure, the pair had arrived at a station nearby the academy.

"I didn't think there'd be this many people," Ein murmured. He was surprised by the crowd he saw surrounding him as he approached the exam area.

"Though this area is located in the Royal Capital, it's known as an academy district. The place is always lively with many students, their guardians, and researchers around," Chris said.

It was so lively that the boy had thought this was a festival.

"I'm not a big fan of crowds, but I'll do my best to pass the exam," he said. He looked around and noticed a few others that were accompanied by knights. "There's quite a few aristocrats here too."

"You're right. In general, children from the Royal Capital attend this academy."

It's only natural that this place would be so crowded then. He gave a strained smile as Chris hit him with another unexpected tidbit.

"You know, Sir Lloyd's child also attends the Royal Kingsland Academy."

Ein was so astonished that it took him some time to process this new information. His eyes grew wide and he stared at Chris. "L-Lloyd's? Huh? Lloyd was married?"

"H-Huh? You didn't know? I'd assumed that you already knew..."

The knight's helmet was obscuring her face, but Ein could tell that she gave him a troubled yet confused smile.

"I hadn't heard about it at all," he replied.

"R-Really? Wh-What should I do..." she muttered as she thought to herself. "W-Well! I'm just going to tell you, so it shouldn't be a problem! Not a problem at all!"

After she seemed to have psyched herself up, she cleared her throat and gazed at the boy. "Sir Lloyd's wife is Martha."

"Y-You're kidding?!" He couldn't hide his shock and was unable to stay calm. "The tiny Martha is married to Lloyd?! That massive beast of a man?!"

"Please calm down. Many—I mean—well, everyone has said something

similar to that.”

“Well, yeah! They don’t even seem like a married couple at all.”

“They both have their positions to think about, so they don’t really make it obvious within the castle.”

Neither Lloyd nor Martha had conversations that hinted at them being married, nor did they act in such a manner. Ein didn’t really leave the castle, so he was unaware of what was going on outside of its walls. This was out of his control.

As Chris and Ein continued their conversation, the pair arrived at the Royal Kingsland Academy’s gates. Though the boy had just learned a surprising fact, his focus was shifted back to the exam.

“This is the Royal Kingsland Academy,” Chris said.

It’s so big... It’s more like a castle than an academy! He was taken with the impressive size of the facilities. Beyond the gates, he saw a multiplex of buildings that straddled vast fields of green. The campus was so large that the boy believed a small town could fit inside.

“The Royal Academy’s awesome...” he murmured.

Chris laughed. “Oh, there’s your examination area, Sir Ein.”

She pointed to a building that had a sizable crowd of children gathered around its entrance.

“All right, I’ll do my best,” he said after he took a glance at the crowd. Only applicants could enter the examination area.

“Good luck.” Chris cheered him on.

He slapped his cheeks and stepped forward. Ein passed through the academy’s gates and looked for the entrance area for his exam. He planned to take the physical exam, in which the use of a blade or martial arts was permitted. In addition, an applicant could use their skills unless it involved the use of a projectile or firearm. *Uhhh, is it over there?* With a guide in hand, he walked within the academy.

“Raaah!” a boy’s voice could be heard from afar. Ein noticed that they must

also be applicants. After wandering around a good number of buildings, the prince arrived at a kind of arena—greeted by the sight of a man who flawlessly received every strike from the boy attacking him.

“What are these flimsy attacks?! Hurry up and go home!” the man barked. Ein guessed this man to be the proctor.

This must be who Chris was talking about, but he’s so rude...

“Damn it!” the young boy shouted. Tears of frustration streamed down the boy’s face as his exam was now over.

“Hmph! You won’t be able to beat a low-level monster, much less the Sea Dragon! You’ve failed!” the man yelled.

That was the Royal Academy, where students were raised to serve the king. Thus, the institution had extremely high and particularly strict standards. If that boy had held back his tears and gritted his teeth, things may have played out differently.

“I’m next, please!” The next applicant stepped forward. Applicants to the Royal Kingsland Academy were forbidden from revealing their names as a measure to prevent any sort of nepotism or overly favorable treatment of an aristocratic child. Ein breathed a sigh of relief when he’d heard of this.

“Hmph! You’ve failed! You’re not suitable for this academy either!” the man roared.

A moment later, it was now Ein’s turn. He wasn’t completely relaxed, but was more calm than he had expected when he put his hand to his chest. He had figured out that the proctor was much stronger than the knights of White Night Castle. However, Ein didn’t believe his strikes would be meaningless against the man.

“I’m next,” he said, exhaling before stepping up.

“Come, brat. Win your approval from me,” the man snarled, signaling the start of the battle.

Ein gripped his wooden sword before closing the distance between himself and the proctor.

“Oho, you move quite well!”

Ein paid no mind to this faint praise and continued his attacks. He aimed for the man’s legs, joints, and neck. He continued to attack these weak points at random, in hopes that the proctor would be unable to predict where he would strike next.

“Hmph! Don’t think such a rote tactic will work against me,” he said.

“Gah!” Ein cried.

There was a vast difference between the physiques of both combatants. The proctor used this advantage to swiftly hit Ein in the side, knocking the wind out of the boy.

“Hm, you’re relying too much on your stats and the quality of your technique hasn’t caught up with them. Your master must come up short as well!”

The man’s insults may have been part of the exam, but they were certainly unkind to those on the receiving end. The indirect digs at Lloyd and Chris had angered the boy.

“Once more, please,” Ein said.

As Chris had said, the proctor was an undoubtedly strong and capable fighter. The man outclassed Lloyd’s men at the very least. *Still...*

“Then come at me again. I’ll put you in your place.”

“R-Right, thank you,” Ein said. *Still, how can this man hurl all these insults and speak so harshly?* He was aware that the proctor was also looking for a measure of mental fortitude, but this was going too far.

“Those that don’t know their place are generally the result of lousy parenting. I’m sure the same goes for you,” the proctor said.

Hm, so that’s his new angle. Ein had decided to use the Dark Knight’s skill. The man’s terse words were related to the exam, but the boy couldn’t forgive him for so openly shaming his mother. If he did nothing, it would mean that he had accepted the proctor’s insults. *I’m sorry Chris, but this is the one thing that I will not stand for!*

Researchers familiar with ancient monsters had made a relevant note in their

studies on the Dullahan—if it must be engaged, never fight it in one-on-one combat. If one were forced to cross blades with the monster, don't allow it to dictate the encounter's pace for even a moment. The Dullahan was the mightiest swordsman to ever master the blade—a testament to simply how terrifying it was.

"I know that you're just doing your job, but that has nothing to do with how I feel," Ein muttered, focusing his strength into his body. He closed his eyes to heighten his level of concentration.

"Say something, boy? If you've got time to compl...ain..." The proctor stammered and trailed off, unable to believe his eyes.

The boy was unable to use the Dark Knight's abilities to their fullest extent, with only Phantom Hands at his disposal. Just as the dryads were born with their absorption abilities, the Dullahan was born with its Phantom Hands. *Consume my magical power and grow to new heights!* He continued to pour his magical power into the skill. The free-moving hand was strong, but consumed a massive amount of power. The rageful energy that Ein had thrown into the hand allowed it to grow powerful beyond its previous limits.

"Boy... What are you doing?!" the examiner questioned, feeling the black aura emanating from the child.

"If I knew this was going to happen, I should've tested the Phantom Hands a bit more. Well, I guess I can make it stronger one step at a time," Ein said. The black tendril had grown muscular. Its veins pulsated like a bodybuilder flexing their muscles—a sight that shocked all who witnessed it. Not one, but two of these beefy tendrils had emerged from the boy's shoulder blades. "These don't shoot flames or anything, so this should be fine, right?" He reasoned that since his skill wasn't a projectile, it shouldn't present any problems for the exam.

"I'm telling you to give me an explanation!" the man ordered, looking panicked.

"That shouldn't be necessary, correct? I don't believe there were any rules about that," Ein said calmly, his cold gaze fixated on the proctor. Applicants weren't allowed to chide their proctors, but the boy couldn't suppress his rage for the man who insulted his mother.

“I don’t know what skill you have, but that’s fine by me. If simply growing an arm makes you stronger, I’m sure insects are much more powerful than you!”

The proctor put more power into his body than usual and before he rushed at the boy. He swung his blade at Ein’s shoulder, but the Phantom Hands received the blow.

“Tsk, that appendage of yours moves quite well!” the proctor said.



Ein used both of his hands to grasp the handle of his blade and swung it at the proctor.

“Hmph! You’ve simply gained another arm, but it’s a bit of a pain to deal with,” the man said.

I knew it. This guy’s strong. The powerful proctor had deftly received all of Ein’s blows. The man’s brief moment of shock was only the result of witnessing an ability incomparable to anything he had seen before.

“That’s not what you said before. Rah!” Ein said as he used one of his tendrils to sock the examiner.

Once again, the man swiftly blocked the strike. “Ugh! Gr... Each blow is heavy, damn you!”

Knowing that the battle was at a standstill, Ein made a decision. “No, I just need a bit more strength. If so...” *Devour my power and defeat the opponent.* He deeply focused on his Phantom Hands in order to increase its power even further.

“You strengthened it. Didn’t you, boy?” the examiner said, realizing what had happened.

Ein’s Phantom Hands violently tremored, like a vein trying suck out every bit of blood available. The proctor readied his guard, for he had noticed the tendrils gave off a pale blue light each time they pulsed.

“I’ll be going on the offensive now.” Ein ran towards the examiner, but it wasn’t with any kind of palpable speed. A debatable trade-off, this was one of the Dullahan’s key traits: great power and defense at the cost of movement speed.

“You use an odd technique, but I’m glad to see it slows you down... Hah!”

The proctor blocked a downward swing of Ein’s sword. Due to the force of the blow, the man stood firm on the ground as he blocked the strike with both arms.

“Are you sure about that?” Ein said with an icy stare.

For a split second, the proctor felt the hair rise on the back neck and caught a

glimpse of the boy's black tendrils. With the man's arms preoccupied at that very moment, the appendages veered in his direction. Despite the situation, the man wasn't willing to go down without a fight.

"I won't let you!" the examiner shouted. He twisted his body like a rag doll to dodge one of the hands. The other one it was up to his armor to block.

"That armor won't protect you anymore," Ein said mercilessly.

The strengthened appendage ripped through the armor easily. The impact had knocked the proctor a few meters away and onto the ground.

"Huff... Huff..." What's going on? I've never met a boy like this before..." Out of breath, he could only offer words of honest praise.

"I'm honored. Let us continue..." the boy started.

The proctor had managed to drag himself to his feet before throwing his sword to the ground. He raised his hands in surrender. "Don't be foolish. It's probably unprecedented for a proctor to lose, but you've passed the exam."

The moment these words left his lips, Ein felt a pang of regret. He didn't want to use the Dark Knight's skill nor did he plan to be so ill-behaved in the proctor's presence.

"Um, I'm terribly sorry for acting so arrogantly," he said.

"That goes both ways. I've still got exams to do, but I'll have to call for backup. In the history of this academy, you're probably the first kid to defeat a proctor in an entrance exam."

He took out a slip of paper from his inner pocket and handed it to the boy. "This is your proof of approval. Don't lose it; you'll need it later."

"O-Okay, I understand," Ein replied.

Once the battle was over, the fiery rage that had possessed the boy had gone elsewhere—only exhaustion and regret remained. However, a passing grade was a passing grade and Ein breathed a sigh of relief.

After the exam, Ein left the area with mixed emotions. He returned the way he came and found Chris waiting for him by the academy gates.

“Sir Ein, congratulations on your acceptance,” Chris said. Something about her normally kind voice was off.

“Th-Thank you... Yeah,” Ein replied. He couldn’t see her expression under the helmet, but he sensed a silent rage from her.

“You must be tired... I’m terribly sorry but I must scold—I mean, inform you of something. I hope you don’t mind.”

She knew that he’d used the Dark Knight’s skill. Though there was some distance between where she stood and the exam area, she could sense the skill’s aura.

“Um, Chris?”

“Yes, what is it?” she replied stiffly.

Ein could only force a smile as he heard her icy tone. “Are you just pouting or actually angry?”

“Both.”

The question would sound abstract to most other people, but Chris was able to offer a response. *Then I should be fine.* Ein figured that he most likely had a way out through the knight’s tinge of lighthearted frustration.

“I know it’s part of the exam, but even I would be angry if my time with you all was mocked so openly,” Ein said. He wasn’t lying—he was truly irritated when Chris and Lloyd were insulted, but the real trigger came from the words that followed.

“U-Ugh... Even so, you used a skill that you were expressly ordered not to use! It’s unacceptable, even if you felt that way!” she replied.

She just needed one more push. He knew that he’d messed up, but he was tired and didn’t want to be scolded.

She sighed. “His Majesty will most likely hear about this from the academy.”

“I think I injured the proctor... I wonder if he’ll be okay...”

“The academy has its own doctors. It’s his fault if he gets injured anyways. As I’ve said before, he was a famous and quite capable adventurer at one point.”

Ein was feeling downcast. He was terrified to discover how his grandfather would react to the news, but he wanted to go home and rest more than anything. *I'm excited for school to start next year...but when will Krone arrive?* Ein thought back to the time when he first met her at his supposed debut party. He'd sent a reply letter a while back, but hadn't received anything since. Ein trusted that Warren and the others had made the necessary preparations. *I wonder if I could see her before spring...*

He was excited to start his academy life and meet with Krone once again. The waiting made the boy feel so impossibly restless, but these thoughts soothed his weary mind and body.

That very same day, Euro was welcoming a pair of guests: an Ishtarican fleet and one of Heim's highest ranking aristocrats. The Ishtarican ships lined the docks as their crews were in the process of unloading a massive magical tool used to mine sea crystals. Krone was amazed at the sight.

"That's just a research vessel?" she said in shock.

"Indeed. Ishtarica's battleships are much larger," her grandfather said.

She couldn't even begin to guess the cost of these research ships. It was simply impossible for her to process the civilizational disparities between Heim and Ishtarica.

"I-I feel like Heim's naval forces wouldn't win against these research vessels," she murmured.

"Ha ha ha! Of course not! A light tap would crush one of Heim's ships to smithereens!" Graff laughed as he mocked his home country.

The two soon overheard the voices of Ishtaricans who stood nearby.

"Notify the third vessel. We'll expand both cargo bays and start the process."

"Roger. Third vessel, this is your operation center. Expand both designated bays, over."

Krone was shocked as she heard their conversation. "N-No way..."

The research vessel acknowledged the command and expanded the cargo

bays in an instant. Their movements were swift, smooth, and terrifyingly exact. She'd caught a glimpse of Ishtarica's advanced technology, but she also had witnessed their excellent leadership and organization. If she were to engage in a battle against them, she'd be surrounded before she knew it.

"Ah, so there you two were. How do you like our ship?" an Ishtarican civil servant said as he approached them. He was tasked with being their guide.

"I'm met with one shocking sight after another," Krone replied after a nervous pause.

"Is that so? I'm honored to see that you appear to be enjoying it." He encouraged the two to start walking. "Over here, please. We have a room all prepared for you." He pointed towards a ship.

"That vessel contains our room?"

"Precisely. We've received orders from the second princess to ensure you spend your next month in comfort."

She clenched her fists, expressing her gratefulness to Ishtarica from across the sea. "The second princess has my gratitude from the bottom of my heart."

"She's a kind person indeed. Now, if you would please follow me."

Graff and Krone followed the civil servant as they slowly walked down a slope that rode alongside the ocean. The intense splashing of waves could be heard on occasion—a reminder to the pair that they were no longer in Heim.

"Sorry to trouble you, but could you bring our belongings in later?" Graff asked.

"Ah, not to worry. We've already taken care of it. I hope that puts your mind at ease," the man replied.

"I-I see. You have my gratitude."

Graff didn't seem to have an ounce of spite in his reply. The grand duke was actually taken aback by how spry and competent his Ishtarican hosts were in their work. The vessel he was about to board was also of remarkable quality, boasting a luxurious, but strong build. It was a far cry from any ship built in Heim.

“Starting today, you’ll be living here for the next month,” the civil servant reiterated.

Graff, Krone, and their servants prepared for their monthlong journey.

“As we’ve explained before, this is to keep the two of you concealed. We’ll have you wait here until we finish our work in a month’s time. I pray for your understanding.”

“Of course,” Graff said. “We’re very grateful for your help.”

It was an easy condition to accept; they only had to wait a short while before setting sail for Ishtarica. The pair had planned to take a different route at first, but they were thankful to be piggybacking on the nation’s trade deal with Euro. Krone was even able to send a letter to Ein and receive a response.

Upon boarding the ship, Krone was stunned by the ship’s lavish interior. She found it to be reminiscent of a high-end inn. Finally, this was the first step in her journey to Ishtarica.

Chapter Seven: Reunited

Mornings and evenings had started to grow even chillier than before. It was a few minutes past noon within the courtyards of White Night Castle. Olivia had just heard a piece of news that made her tone of voice ice cold—incongruent with the smile on her face.

“Father? What did you just say?”

“W-Well, I’m planning to have Ein involved in some public duties,” Silverd said. Even as the king of Ishtarica, he couldn’t help but flinch at his daughter’s menacing aura.

“No, after that. Could you kindly repeat what you said?”

“...Warren and Chris have been tasked to oversee Ein’s duties.”

“And?”

“On the same day, you will work with Katima on a different set of public affairs that need tending to”

Olivia was most unsatisfied with the last bit and made her intentions clear. She couldn’t understand why she had to go elsewhere for a different set of duties.

“Are you trying to steal *my* Ein away from me?” she asked.

“Is this true, grandfather?” Ein asked. He had been nearby, listening in on the conversation.

“Of course not! My goodness, Olivia... The boy’s almost seven! Although he’s not ready for his announcement of princehood, it’s time he becomes accustomed to the public duties that come with the position.”

Ein hadn’t been tasked with anything of great importance though. He wasn’t able to do much just yet, so the number of his responsibilities was limited as well.

“I say that they’re public duties, but it’s more like an inspection. The ships

from Euro will be returning soon, so I'd like Ein to see sea crystals and the port maintenance firsthand!"

In other words, the king wanted Ein to learn from the experience as the boy would be greeted by many unfamiliar sights. While Ein was thrilled by this arrangement, his mother was unable to hide her dissatisfaction.

"Magna is rather far," she said with a sigh. "You're tearing me away from my child for an entire day."

"Um, mother, where is Magna?"

"Do you remember when we first arrived in Ishtarica? We boarded the water train in Magna."

Ein's first visit to the port city of Magna was only as a commuter; disembarking from the *Princess Olivia* before he'd hopped on a water train. Since he didn't get a view of the city during his initial visit, the prince would be getting a proper eyeful this time around.

"You're right, mother. If we calculate the travel time and account for the inspection, I'd probably be away from you for an entire day," Ein said.

"That's right. How could your grandfather be so cruel?"

"Ein, you understand, don't you?" Silverd asked.

The boy understood that he had much to learn in order to become an exceptional and well-rounded person. This inspection was a perfect opportunity to start working towards that goal.

"I generally share my mother's opinion, but I understand the importance of this opportunity."

"S-Sure. Well, it's good that you're honest."

While Ein was being reasonable, Olivia refused to budge on the topic. The boy thought he'd need to do some convincing on his end, but Silverd grinned as he had an ace up his sleeve.

"I knew that you'd be against it, but consider this," the king said. He removed a letter from his robes and confidently handed it to his daughter. Unaware of its contents, Olivia quietly read the letter to herself.

“I see,” she said with a sigh. “I understand now.”

“Everything lines up perfectly. You get it, don’t you?” Silverd said.

“Yes. I understand that I should exercise some *tolerance* in this situation.”

Like the flick of light switch, her attitude had completely changed. Olivia had easily given in and was now comfortable with the idea of her son conducting an inspection.

“I’ve told Warren to keep careful watch and ascertain her motives.”

“U-Um, what are you two talking about?” Ein asked, puzzled. He was curious to know why his mother’s demeanor had shifted so suddenly.

“It’s a secret, but I’m sure the night of your inspection will be a lively evening at the castle,” Olivia said as she put her index finger to her lips in a charming fashion.

Ein had been left in the dark once again. In a few days, he’d be off to Magna for the inspection.

“Hm, I’m a little curious, but I understand,” Ein said as he brought himself to his feet.

“Oh? Where are you going?” Olivia asked.

“I’m off to the restroom. I’ll be right back.”

He left the courtyard and walked into the castle. The sounds of his footsteps echoed throughout the castle, bouncing off its tall ceilings, wide hallways, and well-polished marble floors.

“Public duties, eh? That’s exciting,” he said with glee. He felt himself growing as a person, ecstatic to take on new opportunities such as this.

Ein walked in high spirits, until he was stopped in his tracks by the ruckus that came from the room directly to his right.

“What was that sound?” he said. He thought he had heard the sound of an explosion, but noticed it didn’t sound like a bomb. The room was one of the castle’s many offices. Ein slowly reached for the door handle. “Excuse me,” he said, his actions quite reserved for a crown prince.

“M-Meooooow?! This is clawful!”

He saw a cat busily running around the room and realized that it was Katima. Numerous pieces of equipment and monster materials were strewn across the office. Ein didn't know what made this room any different from her primary lab in the basement, but he did know that what he saw wasn't good.

“Ein?! Hurry and make a run furr it! At this rate, the magical tools will go berserk and... Meooooow?!”

The sound of another explosion filled the room and left smoke billowing from a large magical tool. Blown back by the impact, Katima was lying spread-eagle on the floor and out for the count.

“M-Meooooow...”

Out of steam, the cat had stopped moving—a sign that the situation was worsening by the second. Ein furrowed his brows at the magical tool. It was a glistening black sphere that dwarfed most carriages. He could see that the slightly dented tool had a series of metal tubes extending from it to the ground and into a furnace by the wall.

“I-I have no idea what this is,” he murmured, but he knew that he couldn't leave it be. Yet, he had no idea how to manipulate this tool. “I know! I just need to absorb its magic stone!”

Knowing that a magic stone powered the tool, he guessed that the device would settle down after he absorbed its stone. He turned his attention to the furnace, and noticed a magic stone had been randomly tossed inside.

“That must be it. If I just absorb that...” Ein said. He desperately ran to the stone without an ounce of hesitation. That strong will served him well; the tool had gradually died down from the use of his skill.

“*Huff... Huff...* It stopped...” he said.

Glad that nothing major happened, Ein took a deep sigh before he walked over to the still-incapacitated Katima.

“Ah, jeez... Here, are you okay?” he said, approaching her while lending his hand. After getting his aunt to her feet, he brushed some of the dust off of her

fur.

Though she was staggering, Katima had finally managed to compose herself and muttered, “Meow... That’s the purrfect spot...”

“I’m not grooming you, but okay. Are you injured?”

“I’m feline fine. I’m indebted to you,” she said with a hint of sadness in her meows. Perhaps it was the state of her office or the spectacular failure of this experiment that had her feeling so. “In any case, I’ve done it now... Jeez, these parts are purrprobably broken too. What should I do...”

“Hm? You don’t have any spare parts?”

“I’ve just run out, mew see. Unfurrrtunately, they aren’t available in the Royal Capital, so it’ll take a few weeks for them to get here after I place my order...” she said sadly. It was clear that these parts weren’t in ample supply.

“But they’re available in other cities?”

“Yep. I’d have to go to Magna or somewhere nearby...”

Wait, did she say “Magna?” Ein had remembered his earlier conversation with Olivia and Silverd.

“I’m going there on official business, actually. Would you like me to pick them up for you?” Ein offered.

“Meow?! R-Really?” Her eyes sparkled, filled with hope.

“Yep. I can get just what you need.”

“I-I’ll leave it in your capable paws! You can pay for these under my name, so please!”

Ein felt it was worth the effort if he could see the joy in his aunt’s eyes. He replied with a smile before leaving the office. After hitting the restroom, he returned to Olivia and Silverd for a much more pleasant chat than before.

A few days after that discussion, Ein had hopped aboard the royal family’s royal train bright and early. He was on his way to the grand port city of Magna.

“Please have a look over there, Sir Ein. Those are the battleships that we

Ishtaricans are so proud of,” Warren said as he pointed to a massive fleet of vessels.

Most mornings in Magna were often lively, with fishermen returning from sea and the market bustling with those looking to browse its various wares. Currently at the military port, Ein was a good distance away from the commotion of the market.

“As always, the sizes of these ships never cease to amaze me,” he said in awe. Chris stood next to him.

“They’re the primary vessels used in the defense of our country, after all. Do watch your step,” the knight said.

On this very day, Ein was in town to inspect the military’s vessels, their facilities, and the state of the city itself.

“I’m grateful that my grandfather has given me this opportunity, but he’s been scolding me a lot lately,” Ein said.

Ein started to feel a stomachache coming on as he remembered what happened after the entrance exam. Aware that Olivia wouldn’t hold the boy accountable, Silverd took the reins and harshly reprimanded his grandson. The king’s demeanor at that time was unlike his usually lenient bearing on the boy. Ever since, the king had made a point of repeating his warnings to Ein ad nauseam.

“Anyways, this a rather beefy port city,” Ein observed, his eyes twinkling.

“It’s Ishtarica’s largest port city and one of its three largest cities in general; with the exception of the Royal Capital, of course,” Chris explained as she smiled gently.

Numerous homes with red roofs and white walls could be seen dotting the scenery of the large bustling city. In between these buildings, a waterway snaked its way through the streets. Small boats would conduct business in the canal, often ferrying cargo to its destination.

“The seafood here is superb. In fact, it’s some of your mother’s favorite food,” she added.

Ein trembled with excitement upon hearing this new bit of information. *If that's the case, I've gotta make sure to bring back a lot of it for her.* Warren suddenly noticed a vessel enter his line of sight.

"Oh? It seems the ship that we were looking for has already arrived," he said.

"That must be from Euro. It seems they're in the middle of processing some affairs," Chris said.

Warren nodded and spoke to one of the military ship's crew members. "Excuse me, has the ship from Euro already finished unloading its cargo?"

"Yes, sir. We've unloaded one box for our reference... Over there, if you will." Covered in oil, the man pointed to a nearby wooden box branded with Ishtarica's seal.

Warren gave his thanks and the man hurriedly returned to his work.

"Sir Ein, I shall show you what a sea crystal looks like before it's processed," the chancellor said. This was the main objective of the boy's inspection duties for the day.

According to this label, this is from the first batch of mined resources from Euro's bay. Designated as shipment number 1-1. So it really is just a sample. Chris stepped forward, unsheathing her rapier and swinging it in one fluid motion. The blade moved so fast that Ein was unable to see it. He only felt a gust of wind as the box's metal fittings fell to the ground.

"Please have a look. These are sea crystals before they're processed," Warren said.

The chancellor held up a white, almost translucent stone that resembled a chunk of rock salt. He passed the stone to Ein so the boy could get a feeling for it.

"It feels like a large hunk of salt," he said.

Warren laughed. "Indeed, that's exactly so!"

Ein raised the sea crystal to the light and tried to confirm its weight. It was light enough that it could be held in one hand, but didn't seem to be all that special even in bright light.

“Once you’re done examining this sea crystal, I do believe that will conclude your inspection duties for the day,” Warren said.

“This was quite intriguing. Thank you so much,” Ein said.

“Sir Ein, shall we pick up a few souvenirs for Lady Olivia?” Chris asked.

Today’s inspection would be classified as one of Ein’s public duties, but he was free to do as he pleased once finished. Nabbing a souvenir or two for his mother sounded like a good idea.

“Chris, please accompany Sir Ein,” Warren said before he remembered a task for the knight. “Ah, yes. I actually have some documents that require your approval.”

“I can wait till you’re done, Chris,” Ein said.

“Hm, then I’ll have a room prepared for you to wait in,” Warren said out of consideration.

The boy didn’t feel that this was necessary and gazed towards the pier. “I’ll be fine. I’ll just watch the ocean from the pier until she’s done.”

Though fall was in full swing in Ishtarica, Magna’s gorgeous waters were clear and still fairly warm as small fish could be seen swimming in the port.

“It’s unsafe for you to stand by the pier alone. I can’t agree to it,” Chris said, hinting that a room should be prepared instead.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine if he stays within our field of vision, Chris,” Warren said. “If he falls into the ocean, I’m sure you’ll notice right away. There are no shady individuals allowed around here anyway.”

“This is a military port... So yes, only certain people can enter, but...” Though he’d be close, she was reluctant to let the crown prince be by himself.

“Sir Ein... Would you kindly wear this?” Warren took out a piece of red jewelry.

What is this? A necklace? The jewel was linked together by a long, thin chain that indicated this was some sort of necklace.

“A ruby of the earth... I understand. I guess it’s fine for him to go by the pier

in that case,” Chris relented.

“Ruby of the earth?” Ein asked. Upon closer inspection, he noticed a fire-like substance flickering within the jewel.

“It’s a precious magical tool. A powerful dragon’s core was condensed and placed inside a sea crystal,” Chris explained.

If met with a malicious presence, the jewel would glow before erecting a barrier to protect its wearer. Additionally, if the wearer was fatally injured, the tool would act as a life-support system. Though it was a single-use item, the necklace’s potent effects made it a perfect accessory for a royal’s ensemble.

“This jewel looks really expensive,” Ein said.

“Indeed. I wanted to give this to you earlier, but we had only finished crafting it last night,” Warren said as the boy donned the necklace.

“Don’t wander off any farther than the pier, okay?” Chris warned.

“I understand. I’ll wait until you’re done with your work,” he replied.

The water was so clear that Ein could see the ocean floor. The cool, but salty breeze tickled his nose. When combined with the pleasant warmth of the sun’s rays, the boy felt refreshed by his surroundings.

“Look at all these fish,” Ein said. He stared at the small creatures; they swam so close to him that he felt he could reach in and grab one.

When he focused his gaze farther into the sea, he saw a vibrant network of coral reefs dotting the ocean floor. *It seems like Chris might be a while, so I do believe it’s nap time.* The sounds of the ocean, the scent of the wind, and the warm rays made a strong argument for the boy to nod off on the pier. However, he wasn’t sure if a royal was allowed to nap out here. *I haven’t made my public appearance yet, so this might be my last chance to do this.*

He’d made up his mind and grinned as he proceeded to stare at a nearby pile of boxes. He felt that he could sleep peacefully behind them. The pier’s wooden floor gave a creak as the boy sat down on it.

“Not bad,” he said.

He stretched his entire body out and gazed up at the vast blue sky. It was the

perfect little hideaway for Ein. The boxes blocked the sun's rays from directly beating down on him. These conditions had allowed him to easily close his eyes and enjoy the beautiful weather.

Ein's nap at the pier was a comfortable one. The sounds of gently crashing waves meshed with the occasional squawk of a seagull had composed something of a lullaby to accompany his snooze. With the sea breeze lightly grazing his cheeks, the boy was immersed in a peculiar kind of comfort. He'd lost track of how much time had passed since he'd closed his eyes. It wasn't a deep sleep, but he'd never caught such a fulfilling wink before. Sometime later, Chris was still yet to be seen. Not bothering to count the minutes, the prince continued to peacefully nap as he waited for the knight to finish up.

Due to his small stature, no one noticed Ein nestled behind those boxes. The port workers were all preoccupied with their duties on the large ship or another task at hand. Thanks to a stroke of luck, the prince was able to take advantage of this rare occasion and could enjoy a nap for once.

Being alone didn't cause the boy to stand out, but what if he rested his head on someone's lap? In that case, it would only be a matter of time before they'd be noticed.

"Hm? Mmm..." It'd been several minutes and Ein was slowly waking up.

The strong wind had brushed his hair against his cheeks and made him feel a wee bit ticklish.

"Goodness... Are you ticklish?" A comforting voice reached his ears. Someone was brushing his hair away.

Ein had suddenly grown aware of the soothing voice that graced his ears and the warm hands that caressed his face. However, he didn't open his eyes just yet as he was still a little sleepy. Yes, the warm rays of the sun had blessed the boy with a most comfortable snooze, but he felt something different. He fell asleep beside the wooden boxes, so he expected to feel hardwood against his head. Instead, he was met with a soft texture accompanied by a floral aroma from above. *Wasn't I asleep at the pier?*

Confused, Ein rubbed his eyes and slowly opened them. He was hoping to learn why he had such a great nap.

“What will you say to me first? ‘Long time no see?’ Or perhaps ‘Thank you for lending me your lap?’”

The visage of a young lady entered the boy’s eyes; a young lady who had indeed allowed him to rest his head on her lap. Her voice was clearly directed at him. Ein instinctively reached out to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. Opting not to touch her cheek, he touched the tips of her silky smooth hair. The girl giggled as though she was a little ticklish. *So she is real.*

Ein gazed at her kindly and said, “How about, I’ve missed you?”

She looked more mature than before with a seemingly refined beauty. The girl blushed at his sweet words and caressed his cheek once more. She then pushed some of her hair aside, revealing the rose-shaped jewel she had in her grasp—the jewel glittered just as beautifully as she did.

A few hours earlier, a ship had returned from Euro while Ein was in the middle of his inspection.

“Welcome to Ishtarica and our wonderful port city of Magna,” a civil servant said.

Magna was a port city much larger than Roundheart. A charming flock of homes lined the coastline as schools of fish swam in the cobalt blue sea. With her ship docked alongside the many other vessels at port, Krone could see something new from every angle she had stood at.

“Now if you look over there, there’s a water train on its route. That’s faster than a spry horse and you’ll see them all throughout Ishtar,” the man explained.

Krone was shocked to hear that the vehicle could outpace a horse, as the equine species were the primary form of transportation in Heim.

“That must be reserved for aristocrats,” she said.

“Not necessarily. If you wanted to travel a short distance away, it would be more convenient and cheaper than buying a magic stone.”

She hadn’t even disembarked from the ship yet, but she was met with a new discovery just about every minute or so. Krone was excited to maybe ride the

water train herself if possible.

“I know that we’ve just arrived, Sir Graff, but we’ll need to go through the proper procedures in order for you to disembark.” the civil servant said. Graff nodded silently. “Once we’ve finished, I’ll introduce you to my superior, Chancellor Warren.”

The chancellor was in charge of Ishtarica’s civil servants in addition to being one of the king’s close confidants. Graff was quite unnerved; he didn’t expect to meet someone so important right away.

“Please lead the way,” Graff said.

Krone and Graff followed the servant down to the lower floors of the ship and passed through a tight hallway. After descending a few more flights of stairs, the servant ushered the pair into a large room on the first floor. At the opposite side of the room, an older gentleman rested on a sofa. Behind the man stood a gorgeous woman, whose beauty stunned the girl for a brief moment.

“Sir Graff, this gentleman is...” the civil servant started.

The old man realized the arrival of his guests. “Ah! Well, well, the long journey here must’ve tired you out.” He gave a kind smile and spoke in a friendly manner. “My name is Warren Lark. You must be Graff.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I’m Graff August and I only have words of gratitude.”

The duo of elder statesmen shook hands before Warren shifted his gaze to Krone. He blinked a few times and looked at her with surprise. A moment later, he looked down at the ground, trapped in deep thought.

“I’m Krone August. I truly thank you from the bottom of my heart for accepting us into your country,” she said. As Krone introduced herself, Warren had remained curiously mum. She did a curtsy and bowed her head.

“I-Indeed. You’ve done well coming here,” he said. Chris noticed that Warren was being suspiciously slow in his responses before he returned to his senses. “Ah, I must also introduce the gentlewoman behind me.”

He cleared his throat and had the woman behind him take a step forward. He

proceeded to introduce Chris as Ein's personal knight and one of the nation's prominent authority figures.

"Now that we've finished our introductions, may I ask you a few questions, Miss Krone?" Warren asked, his face changing along with the topic. As Ishtarica's chancellor, it was his duty to ascertain the personalities of every person he met—the Augusts included. Warren had a steely gaze that clashed with his gentle voice, though an intense aura could still be felt in his low rumbling tones.

"Certainly. I'll answer any question I am able to," she said. Krone had a hunch that this must've been some sort of final test or check for her and her grandfather.

"Why have you come to Ishtarica?" Though friendly, the air around Warren could give one goose bumps. Contrary to the rest of his face, the chancellor had a penetrating gaze—a look seemingly powerful enough to kill. "I'm still deciding if we should allow the two of you into our country."

He was telling her to prove her worth.

"If it's information, we already have that. Both you and your father attended the party held in celebration of the new Roundheart manor's completion, correct?" he said. The man had a terrifying amount of information at his fingertips. "I'd like to know why we should allow you to be at Sir Ein's side."

Overwhelmed by Warren's presence, Graff wore a pained expression on his face. Krone, on the other hand, answered the chancellor without feeling a hint of intimidation.

"Certainly. That I can do," she said, revealing the jewel she held in her left hand. "I received this from His Highness the Crown Prince. I've crossed the sea because I wanted to see him again."

There was a moment of silence as Warren stared at the jewel. "A star crystal, is it?"

"May I ask if you know what it means when this jewel is presented to someone of the opposite sex?" she said clearly.

This was the spark of her love and driving motivation for making the trek to

Ishtarica. With eyes reminiscent of Olivia's saintly gaze, Krone looked straight into Warren's death stare.

"Yes, I am aware of what that means. However, is there any proof that you received this from Sir Ein?"

Graff deepened the wrinkles of his face, thinking that the tables had turned. He certainly had no proof of this.

"Her Highness the Second Princess had also received a jewel from Sir Ein on the very same evening."

Chris gave a look of recognition. The day she met Ein, Olivia had told her that she received a jewel from him. She'd never stated that only *one* jewel was made.

"Even if she did possess this jewel, there's no proof that the two are related," Warren said.

"Only two star crystals exist in Heim. Both belong to the royal family, but I'm sure you're already aware of this, given your considerable power."

"Hm," Warren said with a nod. "But perhaps Sir Ein wasn't aware of its meaning." He insinuated that as such, this jewel also held no meaning.

Krone giggled. "Could you say the same if Her Highness the Second Princess was also at the scene?"

The second princess didn't stop his actions—this may have been a minute detail, but it was something that couldn't be ignored. In other words, Olivia had permitted Krone to be by Ein's side.

"I threw away my country and crossed the sea because I have feelings that I simply refuse to give up on."

After she gave these impassioned words, her eyes blinked as if she was saying, "*Is there anything else you'd like to ask?*" She had demonstrated that she was courageous and a quick thinker—determined to prove how serious she was. This girl didn't travel across the sea to see Ein on a lark and her responses had made that clear.

"When faced against me, you provided thoughtful and intelligent answers to

my questions. I have no complaints with your manner of dress either. Hm...” Warren was sizing her up, checking to see if she would be an asset to his crown prince. After mulling it over for a bit, he nodded with satisfaction and broke into a smile. “Very well. However, I still have some things that I’d like to discuss with your grandfather. Why don’t you go down to the pier and take a look at the ocean in the meantime?”

The chancellor’s words implied that the test was now over; Krone had been granted passage into the country. The young lady breathed a sigh of relief. She also understood that Warren’s suggestion to visit the pier was actually a request to leave the room.

“Actually, the ocean’s beauty caught my eye a while ago. I’ll take you up on your kind offer,” she replied with a smile.

“Sir Warren!” Chris said, flustered.

“I’ll listen to your concerns at a later time, Chris. Just follow my lead for the moment.” Warren said firmly, forcing the knight to back down.

Slightly troubled and confused, Krone walked down to the pier by herself.

She was feeling a little anxious as she had been provided with no guard or chaperone to accompany her. Thankfully, Krone was convinced that no one would try to harm her considering that the Ishtaricans had gone through much trouble to bring her into their country.

“Go to the pier? I don’t really understand why he said that so suddenly,” she murmured, baffled as to why she was sent away. The splendid view of the sea from Magna’s docks was soothing to her soul. She was thrilled to take a stroll after being cooped up on the ship for so long.

“I dare not say it in public, but Rogas Roundheart is a total imbecile. He was betrothed to a princess from a country such as this, but threw it all away with his despicable actions,” she said.

She had refrained from saying these exact words to the chancellor as they weren’t particularly ladylike in any regard.

“This wasn’t my first plan of action, but I did have a spectacular voyage thanks to the Ishtaricans.”

That original plan involved the hiring of guards and adventurers to protect the Augusts on their journey to Ishtarica. After hearing of the country's deal with Euro and the kindness shown to her by the second princess, Krone only had gratitude to express.

"What a beautiful day..."

She walked on the pier and gazed at the sea while the breeze grazed her cheeks. Though her clothes would get slightly dirty, she was tempted to sit down. She noticed a pile of wooden boxes. Thinking it was the perfect spot, she headed in that direction but was surprised to see someone had beaten her to the punch.

"E-Ein?!" she gasped.

She couldn't have possibly mistaken him for anyone else. He still had that lovely brunette head of hair and gentle smile, but seemed to have matured a bit since they last met. The reason she had crossed the sea was taking a nap against a stack of wooden boxes.

She giggled. "Ah, I see. This must be why the chancellor pointed me in this direction."

She understood his intentions, but also realized why the knight had looked so flustered. Chris was still on duty and had every right to be suspicious. Krone approached the boy with the lightest of footsteps.

"Hm? What's this jewel?"

She would have been furious if this was a gift from another woman, but she'd guessed that most royals would probably be sporting a gem or two.

"Wouldn't you hurt your head by sleeping here?"

Though it may have been a little forward, the unmarried lady lent him her lap. She couldn't just let him sleep on the cold, hard ground.

"Sleepyhead, are you having fun in the land of dreams?"

Though he had squirmed a wee bit upon receiving a gentle poke, the boy showed no signs of waking. Krone smiled at every little cute thing he did.

"You're napping on the lap of the grand duke's daughter? How luxurious.

Well, you *are* the crown prince, so I do suppose this is fitting.”

As she joked around, Krone stared at his face and gingerly moved his hair away from it. A short while later, Ein would be surprised to wake up in her lap.

“Hey, what’s with that necklace?” Krone asked the still groggy Ein.

“I was told it protects the royal family. Warren gave it to me,” he replied.

“I see.”

She gave a quick reply and tucked in her hair. She was relieved, but tried to hide her feelings as she was unwilling to admit it.

“Thank you for lending me your lap. It made for quite a comfortable snooze,” he said.

“Heh heh, I’m glad to hear it.”

Ein looked around and saw a handful of people watching them. Though their onlookers seemed to be smiling and meant no harm, their presence had made the boy feel a tad uncomfortable.

“How would you feel about a royal taking a nap next to a few boxes on the pier?” he asked Krone.

“Worried for the future.”

“Right... I should take care not to do this again. Anyways, are you here alone, Krone?” He was half joking, thinking that she might’ve been able to take care of herself.

“I came with my grandfather and a few of my old servants. On that ship, over there.” Krone said as she pointed at the vessel that had brought her. Graff had just stepped off the boat for a brief moment.

“So that’s Grand Duke August? He sure commands an overwhelming presence around him. That’s to be expected from one of Heim’s leaders.”

Staggered by the grand duke’s visage, Ein couldn’t stop his thoughts of awe and admiration from tumbling out of his mouth.

“Former grand duke, actually. Grandfather is already quite old, so my father is

now in charge of the household.”

Silence settled between the two. Both were thinking about what to say, but Krone spoke first.

“I was surprised when I heard that you had joined the royal family,” she said.

“Me too. It was shocking to learn so suddenly.”

“I didn’t think we’d ever talk again when you went to a different continent.”

“But here we are.”

Their conversation was to the point, but they quickly wanted to confirm their current situation. They were satisfied with this relationship for neither had any reservations.

“Now look at this; you dirtied your clothes by sleeping in such a place,” she said, brushing away some dirt on Ein’s back.

This was embarrassing for him. Even after becoming a royal, he was still causing trouble for her.

“Ever since we’ve reunited, I’ve only caused you trouble,” Ein said.

“Not too much. You don’t have to worry.”

She’d already brushed away the dust on her shoulders like a true aristocratic lady.

Chris sighed as she walked up to the pair. “Today’s the only day you’ll get away with sleeping in a place such as this.”

“I know. I embarrassed myself given the attention I’ve gathered,” Ein replied.

The knight had a clear view of the boy and knew that he’d been taking a nap this entire time. Instead of scolding him, she decided to let it slide this time.

“Are you done with your work?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ll leave the rest to Sir Warren.”

Warren still had some topics to discuss with Graff, and Chris had already wrapped up her other duties.

“I believe there isn’t a need for introductions, but for formality’s sake, this is

Lady Krone August,” Chris said.

“I’m Krone August. I’m struggling to find the words to express just how happy I am to see you once again, Your Highness. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for replying to my letter as well,” she said with a curtsy.

“This feels kind of weird, Krone...” Ein said. He knew why she was being so polite, but it felt out of place.

“S-Sir Ein, I do feel bad for Lady Krone if you say that to her,” Chris said.

“But I woke up from a nap on her lap not moments ago. Besides, the formalities after so long make me feel a bit lonely.”

Even though Krone couldn’t provide a response, she was overjoyed to learn that Ein hadn’t changed at all.

Chris sighed. “Lady Krone, this is the kind of man that Sir Ein is. Would you kindly come with us?”

“C-Certainly. I don’t mind, but whatever could you mean?” the girl replied.

“We’re currently off to buy some souvenirs for Lady Olivia. If you don’t mind, you’re welcome to join us.” Her words had already been approved by Warren and Graff.

Quite obviously, Krone would accept this offer no matter what. “I shall happily do so.” She then turned to Ein with a mischievous grin. “Your Highness, would you kindly allow me to accompany you?”

“Uh, yeah. Please...” Ein replied. He didn’t think an official approval was necessary since he was going to ask her anyway. Krone’s overly polite attitude was most likely her way of getting back at him. “By the way, you were true to your word. You really did make it to the port city.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Yes, but isn’t the port city you were referring to far away from here? It took a while for us to arrive.”

On the day of their promise, Krone had promised that she would visit the port city. She had kept her promise, even though it had taken some time and ended up being in an entirely *different* port city altogether. They looked into each other’s eyes and smiled, giddy to be reunited. *I didn’t think I’d get to see her*

today...

Ein was no doubt surprised, but thrilled by this development as well. After picking up a handful of souvenirs and plenty of seafood for Olivia, they all boarded the same water train as the sun started to set. His first set of public duties had ended in a rather cheery fashion.

The return trip to the Royal Capital amazed Krone at every turn. In her first ride on a water train, the girl was taken aback by the vehicle's blistering speed as it zoomed by the many cities and towns that dotted its path to the Royal Capital. The breathtaking view of Ein's new hometown had made her feel as if she were peering into a jewelry box—packed full of citizens that kept the lights on as they worked into the night. It was an atmosphere unlike any that could be found in Heim. She now understood why her grandfather had been so cautious when speaking of Ishtarica in the past.

Krone was awed once again upon her arrival at the castle, but her attention was soon shifted to a nearby conversation.

"Huh? Why are you here, Katima?" Ein asked.

"Parts! I've been eagerly waiting furr those parts!" Katima replied.

Krone was so overwhelmed by her surroundings that she had failed to notice the Cait-Sìth.

"I picked up the parts as you requested. I'm sure they're in another carriage, so make sure to go get them," he said.

"Furr real?! I-I can't sit still! Thank mew, Ein!" Katima said, running off.

The boy sent her off with a forced smile and he walked over to Krone, who was still in a state of complete shock.

"What's wrong, Krone?" he asked.

"I-I'm sorry. I was just surprised by how big this castle is," she replied, looking a tad flustered. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths.

"Your Highness, Krone has been awestruck by the many sights that greeted her on the journey to the Royal Capital. Finally seeing the castle must've made

it hard for her to calm herself,” Graff said.

Ein gave a forced chuckle. “The same thing happened to me, so I understand how she feels.”

As the trio were speaking, a smiling Warren approached them.

“Ahem. By the way, Sir Warren,” Graff said, clearing his throat. “I deeply apologize for the inconvenience, but could you introduce us to lodging along with an establishment for exchanging jewels?”

“Ah, if that’s what you’re worried about, we’ve prepared a room for you in the castle. I hope you can rest easy,” Warren replied.

Makes sense. Ein agreed with this arrangement, but Graff and Krone were unable to hide their incomprehension of the situation as they had never even dreamed of staying in the castle.

“S-Sir Warren! I believe you’re being far too kind!” Graff hastily said.

“I-Indeed! You’ve already been much too generous up to this point. We simply cannot have you prepare a room for us on top of everything else,” Krone said.

The two quickly tried to decline, but Warren smiled. “This was at the request of Lady Olivia herself, but if you truly do insist, I can relay that message to her.”

The Augusts were Olivia’s guests; there was no way they’d have the gall to refuse the kindness of a princess. The girl shifted her troubled gaze to Ein, who silently replied that they were welcome in his home.

“Grandfather, let us express gratitude for the second princess’s kindness,” Krone said.

The girl’s decision to thank Olivia was most likely the best course of action. Quite satisfied, Warren nodded in response.

“Now, please come inside. Lady Olivia wishes to have you both join her for dinner,” he said.

Once again, Graff and Krone both looked rather uneasy. They weren’t against the idea of dining with Olivia, but were nervous considering her status as the second princess. *I kind of feel bad about this now,* Ein thought as the anxious

Augusts were led inside the castle to where Olivia was waiting.

After ascending a few flights of stairs, they walked down a lengthy hallway that led to a dining room. Martha was awaiting the group by the dining room's doors.

"Welcome back, Sir Ein," she said.

Warren quietly made his exit.

"Are my assumptions correct that these are Sir Graff and Lady Krone?" she asked.

"Yep, you're correct. Is my mother inside?" Ein asked.

"She most certainly is. She's been waiting for you all, so please come right inside."

Once Martha opened the door, Olivia was waiting inside as though this was normal for her. "Welcome home, Ein."

A handful of chairs sat around a large dining table. Olivia was sitting in one of those chairs, gracefully poised as always.

"I'm back. I understand what you meant by a 'lively evening at the castle' now," he replied.

She giggled. "Are you surprised?"

Krone saw the same gentle smile that she had seen before on that special night at the August residence. Relieved by Olivia's familiar expressions, Krone finally felt herself starting to relax.

"Martha, please guide these two to their seats," Olivia said.

The pair still appeared to be a bit nervous as Martha guided them to their seats. Graff was seemingly putting on a brave face in spite of his nerves.

"Your Highness, Second Princess, I've been thinking of the right words to say. However, I'd like to apologize first and foremost," he said, in reference to what had happened in Heim.

"Your Grace, I wouldn't want you to worry about that at all. I'm living happily in Ishtarica," Olivia replied.

“H-However, one cannot deny the crime that Heim has committed along with our blunder at that party...”

“H-Hmmm... Ein, what should I do?”

“I believe it’s best that we accept the apology and refer to him more casually going forward,” the boy advised, knowing that this would be the least offensive course of action.

“Your Highness, thank you so much for answering my rude requests,” Krone said while she gave an elegant, but flustered curtsy.

“Of course, Lady Krone—I mean, uh, K-Krone? Would that be fine with you?” Olivia replied.

Krone smiled at Ein with gratitude and Olivia gave him a wide smile as well.

“But it’s a bit lonely to be called ‘Your Highness’ or ‘Princess,’ so I’d like for you to talk to me as you did before,” Olivia said.

“You’d like for me to speak with you as we did in Heim?” Krone asked.

Olivia replied with a nod, but the girl had noticed that one of the princess’s subjects was present. Was she allowed to be so casual with Martha around?

“Lady Krone, Lady Olivia has been quite the carefree person since she was young. We subjects would be pleased for you to converse with her as she desires,” Martha said, giving her approval.

Still hesitant, Krone looked to Ein.

“I feel the same,” the boy replied.

“All right, but I’ll change my manner of speech depending on the situation. Is that okay with you?” Krone replied. She didn’t accept their suggestions outright, but instead showed understanding of the royals’ wishes. Specifically, the desire for a casual atmosphere despite the massive gulf in rank and power.

“Yes, thank you,” Ein said. He had given his usual carefree smile, reminding Krone of the warmth she felt when they first met.

“In any case... You’ve grown more beautiful than ever before, Krone,” Olivia said.

“N-Not at all,” the girl replied.

“I’m sure there were many eager suitors looking to start a relationship with you.”

Krone cocked her head to one side, looking a little troubled. “In truth, I did receive quite a few requests, but I didn’t really read any of those letters. I tossed them all away, so I don’t exactly remember who any of the senders were. Right, grandfather?”

“Indeed. The biggest pain—I mean, we did have some slight trouble with a letter of courtship sent by the third prince,” Graff said.

“Oh my, was that an official request?” Olivia asked. As he listened on from the next seat over, Ein was also interested in the story behind this letter.

“It was unofficial, but anything a prince says is generally regarded as official.”

“That must have made your journey here quite difficult, I take it.”

Graff proceeded to explain his plan of stepping down from his position and having Krone tag along as he left Heim to recuperate. After exchanging enough information to muddy the waters, the pair had traveled to Euro unnoticed.

“I’m most impressed. I’d expect nothing less from the August household’s former master,” Olivia praised.

“Pardon me. May I bring in the food?” Martha suddenly interjected.

“Yes, please,” the princess replied. She looked to her son and Ein suddenly stood up in response.

“Sir Graff, Ishtarica has many delicacies that are unknown to Heim. Are there any dishes that either of you would dislike?” the boy said.

“H-Hey, Ein! There’s nothing I really dislike...” Krone started.

“I-Indeed, nothing in particular here either,” Graff added.

This sudden question was unfitting for the dining table. It had left Krone quite flustered while Graff looked befuddled.

“I wouldn’t want Krone to think that her first Ishtarican meal is unfit to her tastes. Sir Graff, would you please kindly offer me your assistance?”

Ein's words came off a little forcefully, but Graff understood that there must've been some sort of meaning behind the prince's request.

"If that's your reasoning, I certainly can't refuse," he replied, agreeing to play along with this farce. He had not a clue what Ein was up to, but felt a strong resolve coming from the boy's gaze.

"Mother, please excuse me for a moment," Ein said.

"Of course," Olivia replied.

Graff followed the boy's lead as they stood up and left the room without uttering another word. Olivia and Krone now had the dining room all to themselves.

"Now, Krone. I had Ein leave the room for a specific reason," Olivia said.

"You want to ask me something, don't you?" Krone replied.

She intelligently and quickly ascertained that she was left alone with Olivia to answer a question or two. As Krone gazed at her, the princess took a sip of her tea and stared back in response.

"What would you like to do from here on out?" Olivia asked. Her straightforward and honest question struck Krone's heart. "We're the only people in this room. There's no need for you to hide anything, is there?" Olivia wanted to hear the girl's true thoughts.

"Quite honestly, I'm not sure if I'm allowed to say this," Krone replied. She knew that the question wasn't about Ishtarica, but about Ein. However, she had her position to think about and couldn't easily vocalize her honest feelings.

Olivia chuckled and tried to give the girl a way out by changing her line of questioning. "Then would you like to remain in Ishtarica for the rest of your life?"

"I've resolved to do just that since leaving August manor."

Her answer came clearly and without hesitation. She didn't mind if she was called cold for throwing away her home country—Krone's feelings were much stronger than that. The girl had felt a twinge of pain in her chest, perhaps in

anxious anticipation of the answer she would receive.

“I see! Then there isn’t a problem at all!” Olivia smiled innocently as she put her hands together in front of her chest.

The second princess’s reply took Krone off guard. In her daze, the girl felt some of strength leave her body. “U-Um, Lady Olivia?”

“Actually, why don’t you also attend an academy next spring? You won’t be with Ein there, but the queen serves as a chairwoman for a women’s academy. She also just happens to be my mother.”

“I-I’m terribly sorry, but I don’t quite understand what you mean...” Krone was puzzled by this sudden change in topic.

“We’ve prepared a place that will polish a jewel such as yourself, Krone.” Olivia didn’t openly state her intentions, but the girl caught on. “If you become the most admired jewel there is, I’m sure everyone will nod without a complaint to be heard. How about it?”

It wasn’t difficult to guess the princess’s intentions. Olivia was stating that she’d be cheering for Krone’s relationship with Ein. With effort and diligence, the girl’s feelings would surely bear fruit one day.

“What do you think? Would you allow me to help you polish yourself into that very jewel?” Olivia asked.

Krone’s heart was struck by Olivia’s words, convinced that the princess must have been some sort of goddess. This was the girl’s opportunity to begin the hard work towards becoming someone worthy of standing beside the crown prince.

After a brief silence, Krone said, “Lady Olivia.”

She took a few deep breaths and gazed into the star crystal in her left hand. She finally looked back at Olivia and gave a firm nod.

Chapter Eight: A Farewell to a Powerless Past

It'd been two days since the Augusts had arrived in Ishtarica. Ever since the night she'd arrived, Krone hadn't been able to sit down with Ein for a chat. The girl and her grandfather had a laundry list of tasks to take care of first. With those tasks mostly cleaned up, Krone finally had the opportunity to tour the training grounds, where Ein was currently practicing.

"Wow," Krone said. She was unable to suppress her praise as she saw the boy hold his own against a knight.

The sight of a young boy going toe-to-toe with a full-fledged knight made her heart flutter.

"Ishtarica values ability above all else, Lady Krone. Though that may sound familiar, it doesn't mean that skills reign supreme as they do in Heim. Rather, we respect the diligence and hard work put into refining one's innate abilities." Lloyd said.

Ein had desperately trained to hone his swordsmanship, and as result he was a versatile fighter with many techniques at his disposal.

"Sir Ein has unprecedented potential, but he's put in more effort into his work than anyone else. He trains very early in the morning and studies late into the night." After showering the boy with endless praise, Lloyd smiled as he continued to watch Ein sparring away.

"Even from a passing glance, I can tell that he's been working very hard," Krone replied.

"I'm glad to hear it. While Sir Ein has received quite a bit of power by absorbing magic stones, I'll be even happier if you can see how tirelessly he works regardless."

Even in a country that valued hard work so greatly, Ein led the pack. Krone firmly believed it to be a result of his efforts—pains she had thought to be beyond her wildest dreams.

"Huff... Huff... Grrr..." The knight who faced Ein seemed to be out of breath, struggling in his battle with the boy.

"You've yet to see the full extent of Sir Ein's recently honed power," Lloyd said, grinning as Krone continued to observe the fight.

Puzzled by the marshal's words, she could only continue to stare at Ein.

"Rah!" Ein roared, swinging his sword with great force.

The knight lost his balance and swiftly tried to reposition himself. However, his uncoordinated hands had made themselves a target for the prince. With a quick flash of Ein's blade, the knight's weapon clattered to the ground.

"And stop!" Lloyd said loudly, ending the battle in Ein's victory.

Both out of breath, Ein and the knight proceeded to express their gratitude to each other.

"Your Highness, you've grown stronger once again," the knight said.

"I've got a long way to go, but thank you for the kind words," Ein replied.

The boy walked away and headed to Krone, who had decided to close the distance between them.

"Um, good job, Ein," she said. She handed him a fluffy towel and a large cup of water.

Ein wiped his sweat with the towel before he gulped the water down in one drink.

"Yeah, thanks," he replied with an innocent smile, expressing his gratitude to Krone's kindness. He felt refreshed after his victory.

"Was your opponent really a knight?" she asked.

"Yeah, they're the best of the knights tasked with defending the castle. Why do you ask?"

"Wh-Why? I didn't think someone your age could beat them."

Her question was only natural as she couldn't hide her surprise. When she was still in Heim, Krone had heard many rumors of Ein's penchant for diligent work. She never thought that he could possibly prevail against one of Ishtarica's

elite knights.

“In my case, it’s thanks to the stats I gained from absorbing magic stones,” he said, putting himself down.

“Whatever are you saying? As I’ve told you before, it’s all thanks to your hard work. Your Gift of Training allows you to use your powers, after all!” Lloyd said.

“Every time you say that, it makes me feel a lot better.”

“Ha ha ha! I’m glad to hear it! Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Lloyd said before he left.

With his training session concluded, Ein had planned to use some of his free time to have a chat with Krone.

“Sorry, but may I take a bath first?” he asked. Feeling a little reserved, the sweat-drenched Ein had taken a step back from the girl.

“No need, I don’t mind at all,” Krone replied, taking a step forward.

“B-But I mind.”

She suddenly grabbed his hand and started walking.

“H-Hey!” Ein called out.

“I told you that I don’t mind. Come on, let’s go!”

“It was a passing thought when we met in Heim, but I keep wondering if you’re the forceful type.”

“Heh heh, I wonder. Maybe I am? I did cross the ocean after all.”

Ein nodded at her convincing reply. Courageous, decisive, and highly intelligent—Krone was far removed from any of his preconceived notions. *That forceful streak of hers is pretty cute.* She held his hand as she did on that fateful night. The small reminder of those precious moments had Ein smiling.

“Oh, I’m a bit late to say this, but...” her smile beamed as she walked ahead of him. While gazing at him, Krone had leaned in towards him. “You looked wonderful back there, Ein.”

Her mannerisms made him believe that he hadn’t simply seen a girl, but a young woman.

“I-I think it’s sly of you to praise me so suddenly,” Ein replied, hiding his mouth and looking away. It was clear that he was too embarrassed to take the compliment.

“Are you embarrassed?” she asked, peering into his face.

“I’m just surprised.”

“Hm. I see. Your face is red, but you’re just surprised? Right?”

Krone tilted her head to one side in order to pose the question, but she already knew the answer. Taken with her cute gestures, Ein thought this to be incredibly unfair.

“Well, you know... I was just training,” he muttered. He tried to act all manly, but his weak reply lacked any real intensity.

“You said I was sly. What’s that got to do with training?”

“See, you’re being unfair again.”

“Heh heh, thank you.”

In the end, he couldn’t win against her and didn’t think he ever could. *That’s one of her charming traits though.* Ein only had warm feelings for her. Amused that she had won their little war of words, Krone walked alongside him with a little more pep in her step. As they walked along, the duo soon ran into the chancellor.

“Why, if it isn’t Sir Ein and Lady Krone. What good timing,” he said.

The pair had come to a full stop to hear what Warren had to say.

“This was decided just moments ago, but we’ll be having a party soon,” he said.

“A party?” Ein asked, confused. Krone had the same expression.

“Indeed. We must celebrate our successful first harvest of sea crystals from Euro.”

“Ah, I see. That *is* a joyous occasion.”

“We’d also like this to serve as Lady Olivia’s official welcome home party. We plan to host it in a little over two weeks from today. I would like Sir Ein to be

accompanied by you and your grandfather, Lady Krone.”

He now understood what Warren meant by “good timing.” However, Ein was left wondering if he really could attend as he hadn’t made his first public appearance yet.

“I understand why Krone can attend, but will I be allowed to?” he asked.

“What do you mean by that, Ein? What an odd thing to say,” Krone said. Her troubled expression implied that she wouldn’t go if he didn’t.

“Ha ha ha!” Warren laughed. “It’s great to see you two getting along so well. Of course, both of you are welcome. You and Krone shall be regarded as my guests.”

In other words, Ein could attend the party if he hid his identity. It was the first time he’d be attending an official party in Ishtarica, an idea that started to make him a little nervous.

“We must prepare outfits for you two. If you don’t mind, would you be able to spare some of your time this evening?” Warren asked.

Their measurements needed to be taken so the proper attire could be tailored for the party.

“Um, Sir Warren, I do have my own clothes,” Krone said.

“This is a gift from Lady Olivia. Please do accept it,” he replied.

“I understand. I shall send her my thanks.”

In Krone’s case, the proper Ishtarican attire for an event such as this would be a dress. Her interest was piqued—the young girl’s heart was truly fascinated by what set the fashion of Ishtarica apart from that of Heim. Regardless of her curiosity, the dress was an irrefusable gift from Lady Olivia herself.

“I shall send over a servant to you two later. Please excuse me,” Warren said, abruptly ending the conversation.

Ein and Krone smiled as they looked at each other. They hadn’t dreamed of attending a party together so soon.

“Your Highness, I’m excited to see you in your formal attire.”

“I’m excited to see you in your dress as well, my lady.”

The two ceremoniously exchanged pleasantries as they eagerly awaited the party. The following conversation was much too mature and quite unfitting for children of their age. A short while later, Ein and Krone moved their odd, but seemingly enjoyable chat to the courtyard.

Later that night, Krone was wrapping up the daily lessons that she now received from Warren.

“Our current peace may sometimes obscure this fact, but dangerous monsters exist in abundance. Please remember that,” Warren said. The chancellor’s lesson was a lengthy one and almost stretched past midnight. “This will be all for today’s lecture. Regarding your future prospects, I’ll be planning something out soon.”

“I understand. Thank you,” Krone said.

Her lessons were difficult and far beyond the scope of a typical nine-year-old’s curriculum. However, her painstaking efforts to be the best had allowed her to keep up with Warren’s strict instruction.

“Lady Krone, you must be tired. Why don’t you use the large baths?” Warren suggested. He could tell that Krone was exhausted.

“I-I really shouldn’t,” Krone said.

“It’s important for you to relax your tired bones as well. I insist.”

This was true, but she normally used the bath that was attached to her room. She had reservations about using the royal family’s bath.

“I understand. I’ll take you on your kind offer,” she relented.

“Please do. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Warren said, leaving her room.

The exhausted girl sighed and stood up from her chair. She managed to drag herself out of her room and towards the large baths. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t excited,” she murmured.

Though she was hesitant, she did look forward to using the large baths for

once. As Krone felt her excitement grow, her footsteps grew lighter as well.

“Oh? Lady Krone, what are you doing at this hour?” Martha asked.

“Good evening, Lady Martha.”

“Please, call me Martha.” She gave a forced smile in response to the girl’s polite demeanor. However, Krone didn’t feel she had the right to speak so casually with the woman.

“Then may I call you Miss Martha? Would that be okay?”

“Of course, but I don’t mind if you simply call me by my name.”

With that social business squared away, Krone answered Martha’s initial question. “Sir Warren suggested I use the large bath this evening, so I thought I would take him up on his kind offer.”

“Ah, I see. I hope you can relax to your heart’s content,” Martha said as she bowed deeply. Just as she was about to leave, Martha remembered something that stopped her in her tracks. “By the way, there’s a library on the way to the large bath.”

“Oh yes, it’s quite large from what I’ve heard.”

“I’ve actually just been there; Sir Ein needed something to drink.” Martha smiled and bowed her head once more before leaving.

“Did she just give me permission to see him at night?” Krone wondered out loud.

Her heart fluttered with joy upon realizing that she could see his face at the end of the day. She was already headed for the large bath, so Krone figured a visit to the library wasn’t too out of the way. After descending two flights of steps, she approached a large, old door. She gently pressed her hand against the door so as to not make any noise, and entered. She was greeted by the sight of a humongous, multilevel room packed with an army of bookcases. So many books lined the shelves that Krone wasn’t even able to fathom a guess as to how many the library held. The scent of old paper reached her nose while she looked for Ein.

“Wherever could he be?” she wondered. The girl glanced at the area around

the library's desks and chairs, but Ein was nowhere to be found. She ventured deeper into the room and came upon an area overlooked by a large window.

"Oh."

The boy was sitting alone with a number of thick books piled on his desk, but even more eye-catching was the stack of paper that sat next to him.

"That must be the rumored mountain of papers," she murmured.

Stacked high and covered in Ein's handwriting, the notes on display conveyed that the boy was just as diligent as everyone said he was. This was far beyond the capabilities of any normal person, but it was the result of his hard work regardless. Ein was so focused that he failed to realize Krone was approaching, and he silently continued to glide his pen across the paper.

"He's working hard so late into the night," she mumbled.

Seeing his daily routine firsthand had made Ein feel so dear to her. As a sort of prank, she sneaked up behind him and blew into his ear. Knowing that Martha had brought him a drink moments before, Krone guessed that he was about to take a break. So she decided to take this opportunity to tease him a little bit.

"H-Huh?! Huuuh?!" Ein yelped.

"A-Aren't you a little too surprised?" Krone said.

His entire body trembled and he glanced wildly around the room before his gaze locked on Krone, who was standing behind him.

"I-I'm not surprised! It was just a little ticklish!" Ein replied, looking flustered.

He was clearly trying to act tough, which Krone thought to be just adorable. She knew he'd be upset if she said it though, so she decided to keep her thoughts to herself.

"I finished my studies for today and I heard you were still working away... So I decided to come by," she said.

"I see. Though I'd appreciate it if you just talked to me normally next time."

"So if I talked to you first, could I tease you again?"

He quietly brought the drink to his lips. After he gulped it down, he calmed

down before he looked at Krone. “Isn’t it boring to watch me study?”

“That’s not true. I get to see something amazing.” She shifted her attention to the mountain of papers.



“The much rumored mountain of papers.”

“M-Much rumored? Huh?”

“It’s a secret. I’m only talking about how hard you work, Ein.”

Ein could only look at her, dumbfounded.

“I suppose that means I’ll have to pick up the pace,” she added.

She was far from lazy; in fact, she gave her all as best she could. However, upon learning that her beloved was working even harder than she did, Krone resolved to continue on more diligently than before.

“Oh, there’s something I’ve wanted to ask you, Ein. Is it true that you’ve broken a few trees’ worth of wooden swords?”

“Huh? Uh, where did you hear that? Wait, why do you ask?”

Krone smiled. Ein’s puzzled reaction confirmed that the kindly servant had told her the truth.

“You’re surprisingly violent, aren’t you Ein?” she asked. Krone didn’t think he was, but she was having too much fun to stop teasing him.

“I would carve myself a wooden sword every morning, but it would always break by the end of the day,” he explained.

“Hmmm. Were you using cheap lumber?”

“I don’t think so. I think it was the expensive wood they use to build ships.”

Krone was astonished. “Y-You destroyed a wooden sword of that quality in a single day?”

“I swung my sword a lot, but maybe I swung a bit too hard.”

Even so, it was impossible for a young boy to have enough strength to break in a sword—in half a day, to boot. Krone, wide-eyed, assumed that Ein must’ve shown his talent since he was young. A skilled veteran knight would struggle to do the same thing that Ein had done.

“You must’ve possessed some sort of strength that even skills can’t measure,” she muttered. She now felt more strongly about doing all she could to best

stand by his side.

She eventually turned away and left his side. “Ah right, I was planning on heading to the baths. Would you like to join me?” She giggled, once again teasing the boy.

His cheeks turned red. “I-I won’t! Go on, take a bath and rest!”

Krone got a kick out of how flustered he clearly was. If he was embarrassed, it meant that he must’ve found her alluring in some way.

“Heh heh... Well, next time, maybe?” she said, fully knowing that he was being conscientious of her actions.

She bid the boy good night and left Ein in silence—his face beet red.

After her bath, she had a happy and wonderful night of sleep. On this day, Krone realized that just being next to him made her feel so warm and fuzzy inside.

Three weeks after Krone’s arrival, Ishtarica’s high aristocracy had gathered within the great hall of White Night Castle. From a glance at the guests’ glimmering attire and the extravagant chandelier overhead, one could quickly tell that the castle’s parties were a step above the average aristocratic function. Having seen all of this for himself, Ein thought the event to be much flashier than he had anticipated.

“I-I’m sorry to keep you waiting, Ein,” Krone said, hastily approaching him.

“No worries; I didn’t wait at all,” the boy replied.

Krone was wearing a pink dress, one that gave off an impression quite different from how she normally carried herself. As for Ein, he was clad in a stylish set of formal attire.

“Um, I can go around and greet other guests if need be,” she offered. She was attending the party as the chancellor’s honored guest, and as such, she had made the time to speak with Ein first.

“I told you, I’m fine. You look great in that dress by the way,” Ein replied.

She giggled. "Thank you. You look wonderful as well."

After praising each other's appearances, the young couple toasted with their glasses of juice. Krone looked to be a bit tired as the pair finished their beverages.

"I've been steeling myself for this, but even the faint mention of Heim has the other guests staring daggers at me." she muttered.

"Did something happen?" Ein asked.

"N-No. It's just easy to tell how hated Heim is."

That hate stemmed from abuse hurled at their beloved royals by the kingdom. According to Krone, the temperature of the room intensified at the slightest reference to Heim—the aristocrats became visibly hostile in response.

"Wasn't Sir Warren by your side? They still acted like that even then?" Ein asked.

"He did reprimand them, but I don't feel that this can be helped."

"I don't want to just brush it off like that."

"I'm fine; it doesn't bother me at all. Anyways, isn't this a rather luxurious party?"

The pair looked at the centerpiece that sat on their table.

"I didn't expect a magic stone to be used like this," she said.

Almost every table had a stone serving as an expensive piece of decor—centerpieces that spectacularly glittered in the surrounding light.

"Same here... Now that I think about it, this is actually my first party. I haven't made my first public appearance after all," Ein said.

Any of Krone's misgivings had been wiped away by Ein's innocent smile. If he was having fun, it only provided her with more energy to keep going.

"Heh heh, then I guess we should make sure to have plenty of fun today. By the way, when is the official announcement of your princehood?" she said.

"After winter, apparently. Just before we start at the academy."

It was currently fall, so that meant his first official appearance was just around the corner.

“Then it would be best to prepare an address for later,” she said.

It was a necessity for the crown prince’s words to capture the hearts and minds of Ishtarica, but it might have been too large a task for Ein to mull over alone just yet.

“It’s a common tactic, but speaking of someone you admire is an option,” Krone advised.

“A person I admire. I see.”

Though the man served as more of a goalpost for the boy, the first king popped into Ein’s mind right away. The boy had settled on living up to the first king’s legacy as his best chance at getting back at Heim, proving his worth, and becoming a splendid crown prince in his own right.

“I guess it would help if I could speak as my grandfather does,” the boy said.

Krone giggled. “Yeah, your tone is too gentle.”

Above all, it didn’t suit him. However, this wasn’t the occasion to act modest or courteous. As he wondered if he should practice his public speaking, Ein heard some chatter from nearby.

“I simply cannot understand what the chancellor is thinking.”

“Indeed. Inviting someone from Heim to attend this party... It only sullies this castle.”

“Goodness, you’re absolutely right.”

They’re really not holding back. These remarks were an irritant to Ein’s ears, but Krone seemed to pay them no heed. When their eyes met, his gaze was met with her usual cute smile.

“Hm? Is there anything on my face?” she asked.

“Two eyes, a nose, and a mouth, I think.”

“Oh, so we match? That makes me happy.”

Ein had chosen to ignore the insults and focus on spending a wonderful

evening with Krone. She piped up just as he'd made up his mind.

"Oh, the food over at that table is fantastic. I'll bring you a plate."

"I'll go with you."

"You mustn't, Your Highness. I'll be right back, so wait here." She stopped him in his tracks and left.

"Hey! Ugh, she's already gone."

She separated herself from Ein and gracefully strolled around the party. He wasn't bothered by getting his own food, but obediently waited for her regardless. The prince knew that this was her way of showing respect for his position.

Once she left, Warren swiftly approached Ein. "I'm very happy to see that you seem to be having a good time." He gave a broad smile to the boy.

"Krone's by my side, after all. Is it all right for you to approach me?" Ein said.

"Not a problem at all. I make a point to speak with the guests at every party." He placed his glass on the table.

It seemed like the party had allowed Warren to loosen up a little, so Ein decided to try his hand at some small talk.

"Speaking of, if you're planning on speaking about someone you admire, the first king is a worthy candidate," Warren said.

"Oh, did you hear our conversation?"

"I'm terribly sorry. I know it's rather rude of me, but I was nearby."

Ein didn't think it was weird if Warren overheard him, though the boy felt a tinge of embarrassment. The chancellor proceeded to speak of the prince's recent behavior.

"It's foolish to simply talk about who you admire. Look at your own achievements. Through your rigorous studies and diligent training, you've been outshining all around you."

"I think you're praising me a bit too much."

"Nonsense. You're only six years old, yet you're able to stand victorious

against the knights of this castle. It shall certainly become a convincing factor when you state that you're aiming to be like the first king."

Warren had stated that this was proof of Ein's steady effort to live up to the first king's legacy. For that, he would surely leave a lasting impression in the hearts of Ishtaricans. The boy was happy to receive approval, but that couldn't satisfy him alone.

"Um, I'm happy to hear such kind words, but..." he started.

He did indeed admire the Demon Lord's slayer. The castle's knights were strong in their own right, but Ein still had a long way to go before he could even match the might of Lloyd and Chris.

"Hm, how good of you to be so ambitious. By the way," Warren started. The smiling chancellor stroked his beard as he continued. "Today's party is a gift from His Majesty. He knows that you've been working hard every day."

"A-A gift? This party is a gift?"

"He's been disappointed with the circumstances of your debut."

Ever the benevolent king, Silverd was more concerned with the disastrous event than Ein himself perhaps. For his part, Warren seemed to be a little dissatisfied as well.

"I was thinking of making today's party your announcement of princehood," he said.

According to him, it wasn't unusual for a royal to make their first public appearance before an audience of aristocrats.

"And as the chancellor, I have the authority to set the date of your debut," Warren added.

"Huh. So you don't need permission from grandfather?" Ein asked.

"In terms of the law, I don't. However, it's polite to ask him beforehand."

Ein would need to think of a small speech to give at his debut. *I have to say something, I guess.* Just as he was mulling it over, Warren broke the silence.

"Pardon me, Sir Ein. It seems that a disturbance has occurred," he said, gazing

in the direction of Krone and another aristocrat.

There seemed to have been something of a fuss as the other aristocrats had formed a crowd around them.

“You may be a guest of the chancellor, but how dare you show your face in Ishtarica!” The aristocrat’s loud, booming voice echoed throughout the great hall. The man glared maliciously at Krone, as if he were a wild beast ready to strike at any moment.

“You’re not worthy of being here! Come child, I’ll show you where you belong!” the man roared.

Sitting a good distance away from the commotion, Silverd signaled Warren to take action. However, Ein acted first upon seeing the man violently grab Krone’s hand.

“Sir Warren, let’s go!” the boy said, running ahead.

“P-Please wait! She’s my guest, so I shall deal with that aristocrat!” Warren called.

Ein was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn’t hear the chancellor’s words. *This reminds me of that day.* Krone’s current situation reminded Ein of the day he was barred from his own debut. With these feelings flashing across his mind, the boy’s body had moved before he could fully think things through. *I’ve become stronger since then. I won’t run away.*

“Sir Ein, I said that I shall deal with that aristocrat!” Suddenly, Warren stopped. “Wait, this might be...”

After taking a few steps forward, he grinned and whispered into Ein’s ear. “That aristocrat is a stubborn radical. He’s previously proposed an invasion of Heim.”

“You’re saying he hates Heim more than anyone else?” Ein said, finally responding to the chancellor’s words.

“It’s true that he’s more zealous about his home country than most, not to mention his terribly condescending opinions of Heim.”

Warren continued to give the boy information without trying to stop him.

“I understand. I shall inform him that his actions cannot be overlooked,” Ein said.

Warren slyly winked at Silverd, who watched on in concern. The chancellor’s smile had said it all.

“That cunning old fox...” Silverd muttered, putting his head in his hands.

All the king could do now was watch on, as was the case with Olivia as well. Closer to the ruckus, the worried mother was surrounded by her own gaggle of aristocrats.

“Sir Ein, a word of advice: since you’re the crown prince, I believe your actions should reflect your title,” Warren said.

“Even though that title hasn’t been publicly declared?”

“Indeed. Try to remember how His Majesty usually speaks.”

The more the boy asked, the more advice Warren had to give. *I thought of practicing how he speaks, but I didn’t expect this to happen.* Ein didn’t have the time to rehearse, but he wasn’t going to run away from this challenge.

“I understand,” he replied to Warren. Ein was breathing deeply as he continued to walk towards the aristocrat.

His feelings of responsibility and rage had subsided, now replaced with an odd, but ambitious aura.

“Excuse me, do you have any business with my guest?” Ein said as he finally arrived at Krone’s location. The prince stepped in between them before he sternly pushed the man’s hand away.

“E-Ein, I-I’m okay,” Krone said. Her tone of voice was hardened, but it was contrasted by the sad look on her face.

Her downtrodden expression tore at the boy’s heart. He firmly squeezed her hand before he turned to the aristocrat once more.

“You suddenly come in and speak this nonsense? Who are you? Isn’t she the chancellor’s guest?” the aristocrat said.

Warren was nowhere to be seen. Ein stood alone as Krone's unwavering shield.

"No, she's my guest. A guest approved by His Majesty," the boy replied.

"I see. I don't know who you belong to, child. However, that doesn't change how rude this is," the man replied. Ein didn't flinch and continued to stare at the aristocrat. "You should've considered your guest more carefully. It's only natural for us aristocrats to hold a grudge against Heim."

Unfortunately, a few aristocrats nodded along with him. Ein knew that was a sentiment he couldn't shake, as he understood why some would see Heim in such a negative light. The boy had fully made up his mind. *It's not Krone's fault. It's mine.* He felt that he was cast aside because he was seemingly worthless. Remembering the pain his mother had endured as a result, Ein couldn't bear to see Krone suffer through the same kind of torment. *I understand. This is something I have to do with my own two hands.* Standing his ground, Ein seriously gazed into the man's eyes.

"If you're holding a grudge against Heim, you should relay your concerns to me," Ein said. He had taken Warren's advice, opting to adjust his tone and manner of speech.

"Huh? Whatever are you on about? You've lost me."

"I'm sure I have, but I know who is truly at fault."

Not unlike his grandfather, Ein gave off a distinctive aura of intensity. The air around the boy had grown heavy as he took a step towards the man. The six-year-old was so intimidating that the grown man had found himself instinctively taking a step back.

"I'll say it once more. If you hold a grudge against Heim, the blame is to be left with me," Ein said. Overwhelmed by the boy's puzzling statement and intimidating presence, the flustered man was at a loss for words. "I don't expect you to wholly accept me. Royal blood may flow through my veins, yet I was deemed inferior to my younger brother and disinherited. That's why my mother led me back to this country."

"Royal blood? Are you saying that you're the crown prince?"

There was still some time before Ein's princehood would be announced. Additionally, it was unheard of for one of such status to appear before aristocrats without warning. The situation was unexpected, and the man refused to believe that the boy could be the crown prince.

"Something else appears to be at the forefront of your disdain for Heim. I see..." Ein said without answering the aristocrat's question.

The aristocrat was too stupefied to even point this out.

"You believe Heim to be a lowly, backwater kingdom. Furthermore, you're dissatisfied to know that the crown prince was not only born there, but also disinherited by that very same kingdom. Am I wrong?" Ein asked.

The crown prince had hit the nail on the head. He could see that the man had been taking out his frustrations on an easy target: Krone. This was the aristocrat's way of affirming his deep denial of Ein's existence.

"Not at all! I hold no objections towards His Highness the Crown Prince!" the aristocrat quickly said. Had he not done so, it would have been seen as imprudent.

Ein stretched out his hand to stop the man from going further. "I've no intention to reproach you for your feelings. In fact, I'll graciously accept all of your complaints. However, I cannot accept that you laid a hand on this girl."

Before they knew it, Ein and the aristocrat had become the party's center of attention. The crowd fell silent, for neither king nor the chancellor intervened. A few of the aristocratic onlookers started to believe that the boy in front of them might actually be the crown prince. *I guess you were right, Sir Warren. Today is my debut.* Upon remembering the chancellor's still-fresh words, Ein looked down and smiled.

"It's only natural for you to feel that way, of course," Ein said. He took a few deep breaths before he spoke once more. "I was born powerless. I've troubled my mother, been disowned by my father, and was mercilessly mocked by my younger brother." While it seemed odd to talk about his past, it was more than enough to draw the crowd's attention. "I've read a countless number of books and have also broken a countless number of swords. I continued to work diligently on my own, but I was disinherited as a result. My younger brother was

given the spotlight at my debut party.”

He gave a forced smile, as he thought that this was pathetic even by his standards. However, he wasn’t finished with his story yet—he had matters of greater importance to discuss.

“But that very same night, I met her. She gave me the chance to prove my own worth.” He glanced at the anxious girl behind him, signaling that everything would be all right. “And before I knew it, I crossed the sea and had set foot in Ishtarica. It was at that moment I learned that I was blessed with a magnificent grandfather, something that I had heard for the first time in my life.”

Silverd smiled as he silently rested his chin on his hands, overjoyed to hear his grandson call him “magnificent.”

“I’d like to apologize to everyone for my lack of strength. However!” Ein suddenly reached for a large, blue magic stone on the table.

“Wh-What are you doing?! That’s dangerous, let go!” the aristocrat swiftly said.

“There’s no need to worry.” The boy obstinately continued to reach for the stone. “I’ve already become much stronger, worthy of setting foot in this land.”

The great hall became wrapped in slight cacophony as the crowd intently focused on Ein’s actions. It was a natural reaction—holding an expensive magic stone with bare hands was seen as a suicidal act. In most cases, the holder’s flesh would be quickly eaten away.

“Allow me to show you why,” Ein said.

The boy grabbed the stone, raised it to the heavens, and absorbed the stone’s magical power. The blue hues of the rock gradually faded away, leaving a clear white stone in its place. In other words, the stone was...

“The silver that symbolizes our country, Ishtarica. That symbol now rests within my hands,” Ein finished, his act representing his country’s pride.

Maybe I grew up a little bit too. He may have never felt more grateful for his Gift of Training than he had that day. Ein smiled for a moment and looked at the

aristocrats attending the party. He'd created the silver hues that the first king had so loved.

"I overcame this monster's power and created our beloved silver in the process," he proudly declared. The aristocrats could only stare in awe as he continued, "So I ask you. Is there anyone here that finds our silver—our pride—to be weak?"

Ein chuckled nervously to himself as he thought the question was unfair. Anyone who had any complaints would indirectly be disobeying the first king as well.

"I ask you again. Is there anyone who finds the silver of Ishtarica to be weak?"

At that moment, a wide-eyed Silverd stared into the boy's back. "Ein, you... That..." The king's quiet murmurs couldn't be heard, but he was unable to hide his shock. Ein had just said something that no Ishtarican could ever forget. The prince had full command of the crowd's attention.

"If you've got nothing to say, it means that I'm a different person than before," Ein said. He refocused his intense gaze on the aristocrat—the boy wanted to hear the man's opinion. "If you find my efforts or competency to be lacking, I welcome you to visit the castle at any time. As I do every day, I'll be training in the early hours of the morning and studying well into the night. I have nothing to be embarrassed of."

The boy had stated that he wasn't simply enjoying a frivolous life of comfort; he was spending every day working tirelessly. With the man fully stunned, Ein finally stated his true identity.

"So I'd like to introduce myself with pride," Ein said. He didn't seem to feel any guilt in using Ishtarica's name. "My name is Ein—Ein von Ishtarica."

The moment those words left his lips, the crowd trembled as if they had been hit with a shock wave. He hadn't given his name in full until now, but it was enough for the room to realize what had just shaken them.

"Wha?!" The aristocrat who started this little scuffle was brought to his knees by this revelation. The boy's intensity had crushed the man's will.

"If there's any chance you can approve of me, I'd like you to do the same for

her,” Ein said. The corners of his mouth were tugged upwards into a strained smile as he quietly looked back at Krone.

The boy saw her clutching her hand in front of her chest before he turned back to face the man. “I’d like to ask again, to all of you in attendance.”

Nearby, Olivia and Chris gulped as the entire party fell silent. Ein let out an air of intensity like never before.

“Am I still weak in your eyes? And am I of little worth to you all?!” he yelled to everyone present at the party.

Some stared at Ein while others were shocked by his actions.

“If not, I’d like to make a promise to all of you and to the people of Ishtarica,” the boy said loudly and clearly. He’d initially stepped in to save Krone, but now he was finishing his first statement as the crown prince. Ein felt that he’d started it; however, he was about to end it with his final words.

“As the crown prince, but also as someone who holds admiration for one of our greatest...” Ein took a breath and suddenly felt an invigorating breeze dance across his heart. “I promise that Ishtarica will continue to shine for all eternity!”

Just as the words left his mouth, Ein felt that newfound vigor dissipate into exhaustion. *Ah, I’m probably satisfied.* He continued to regret the few minutes that led up to this moment, until he finally realized that the party was dead silent.



“I see...” Silverd murmured. The grandfather had felt touched by the boy’s words and smiled as he meaningfully gazed at his grandson.

Though she was smiling, Olivia’s eyes sparkled like jewels as they welled up with tears. *I just named myself... I should make sure to apologize later*, Ein thought. His debut had been planned, but he’d done something selfish because he couldn’t let the incident with Krone slide. He even didn’t want to think about the talking-to he’d most likely receive later, so he decided to put it out of his mind for the moment. Just then, something unexpected happened.

A small, inaudible gasp of surprise escaped from his lips. All the men had knelt in respect, and the ladies had gracefully followed suit.

“E-Ein, everyone’s...” Krone murmured out of surprise.

He also looked back at her, looking flustered. Startled by the situation, he looked to his mother.

“M-Mother?!” he gasped, seeing Olivia kneel as well.

Lloyd and Warren knelt alongside his mother while the king remained in place. As the second princess, Olivia only bowed her head for two people: the king and the crown prince. From the moment she had lowered her head, Ein had truly assumed the role of Ishtarica’s crown prince.

“Wh-What do I do?” the boy murmured.

When the dust had settled, Silverd stepped in to take control of the situation. After ordering the crowd back to their feet, the king implored them to give his grandson a round of applause in light of the boy’s sudden proclamation. As the party gave Ein a standing ovation, his proud grandfather leaned in and gave the boy a little advice for the future. The party was now filled with chatter regarding the crown prince, some even commending his bold words.

“How gallant he is!”

“Indeed. He’s more distinguished than the rumors made him out to be. It’s splendid to hear he relies on his own will rather than use his position as a crutch.”

The ladies in the room were most impressed by Ein's actions in the defense of Krone.

"How wonderful. To think he put his well-being on the line for a seafaring lady."

"It was lovely. Like witnessing a scene from a fairy tale, truly beautiful to behold."

Others were surprised by his abilities.

"I was surprised to see His Highness left unharmed by the power of that magic stone."

"He must be powerful. Ishtarica's future appears to be a bright one!"

"Indeed. I've no clue of his powers, but no normal man can accomplish that feat!"

The incident was sudden but had resulted only in words of praise for the newly revealed crown prince. The boy proceeded to make the rounds and spoke with a few members of the aristocracy. After many minutes of smiles and chatting, Ein approached Warren as the commotion died down.

"Um... I'm feeling a bit warm; could I possibly step out to the terrace for a breather?" Ein asked. His body was oddly toasty, probably due to a combination of nerves and excitement. He'd been rambling on without a break and desired a breath of fresh air.

"I don't mind. The terrace over there is only available to certain personnel, but I shall have a guard accompany you just in case," Warren replied.

However, Ein rejected the offer. "I'd like some time to think by myself. Is that okay with you?" The terrace entrance was located behind Silverd's chair, away from the eyes of other aristocrats.

"I understand. It's sure to be a chilly evening, so take care." Warren replied.

"Thank you," Ein said before he turned to Olivia. "I'll be back in a bit, mother."

"Sure, be careful," she replied.

Ein took his leave as Olivia beckoned Krone to come closer. The keen-eyed

royal was keeping an eye on the recent kerfuffle.

“Did you fall in love with Ein again, Krone?” Olivia asked.

“I have,” the girl replied. “How many times must I fall in love with him? I simply can’t find the answer.”

When they were in Heim, that boy had made one of her dreams come true. This time, he had gallantly stepped in to defend her honor. His manly speech had gotten ahold of her heart. She patted her blushing cheeks—tomato red for reasons dissimilar to Ein’s previous thoughts. Krone proceeded to let out a long exhale.

“I’m rather troubled. How can I talk to him? I feel like I won’t be my normal self,” she murmured. She heard the nearby aristocrats engaged in conversation.

“What a great man. What a splendid presence and aura!”

“Quite right. I never thought I’d hear anything like the first king’s speech.”

Krone suddenly realized why everyone had fallen to their knees.

“Lady Olivia, did everyone kneel because Ein’s words sounded similar to one of the first king’s speeches?” the girl asked.

Olivia giggled. “You’re absolutely correct.”

The pieces started to click together. Ein wasn’t just your run-of-the-mill crown prince.

“When the first king set out to defeat the Demon Lord, he used his beloved silver as a rallying cry for the people of Ishtarica. Quite similar to what we saw earlier this evening,” Warren added. Not only were Ein’s words reminiscent of the first king, but his presence greatly resembled the man as well.

Thus, the aristocrats were moved by his actions. Krone firmly believed Ein to be an amazing person. She stared at the terrace, eager to speak with him further. “Go on, Krone. You may go to Ein,” Olivia said. She encouraged the girl with one of her saintly smiles.

“Lady Olivia?” Krone asked.

“I’d like to make that request as well. Sir Ein will surely be ecstatic to be with

you, Lady Krone,” Warren said.

“It’s a bit of a brisk evening, so please wear this,” Chris said, putting a cloth over the girl’s shoulders.

Before she knew it, Krone was ready to go. She was a bit flustered, but her nerves couldn’t win against her desire to speak with Ein.

“Th-Thank you. Then if you’ll excuse me,” she said.

Olivia and the others watched on as she hurried to Ein.

“And she’s gone,” a deep voice said.

“Father,” Olivia remarked.

Once the girl was off, the king approached the group.

“My goodness. Truthfully, this kind of outburst would normally warrant a punishment. Seeing as I’ve already troubled the boy with the Roundheart nonsense and our sea crystal problem, I suppose I’ll let this one slide.” Silverd said. He had spared Ein from a reprimand earlier in the evening, opting to share a bit of advice instead.

The king seemed to look dissatisfied with Warren, but the chancellor didn’t appear to be too worried.

“What good timing, Your Majesty. I have my report on Lady Krone,” he said.

Both Silverd and Olivia were very interested to hear the news.

“Next year, Lady Krone will be admitted to the Liebe Girls’ Academy. I gave her a few tasks in preparation, but she’s provided me with results far beyond my anticipation,” Warren said.

“Hm, if you say so. The results must be very good in that case,” Silverd said.

“I’ve increased her number of tasks and have decided on how to best educate her.” When presented with additional tasks, Krone gave a strained smile and expressed her gratitude; it was essential for her to work as Ein did.

“And how will you educate her exactly?” Olivia asked.

“We had a few choices. First, a civil servant such as myself could teach her,” Warren said, raising a finger to keep count. “Second, she could become a lady

educated in a multitude of subjects. Unparalleled in knowledge, just like Her Highness.”

Silverd and Olivia continued to listen in silence, curious about the choice that Krone had made.

“Third, she could aim to become the queen and a ruler worthy of leading her country’s people.”

“And which option did Krone choose?” Silverd asked.

Warren smiled in silence for a few moments as he remembered the girl’s exact words. “She stated that she’d like to possess a highly developed intellect with a honed eye for decision-making, as the queen has. Additionally, she would be well educated so she can look after the king.”

Krone had stayed true to herself through and through—selfish and her choice filled with strong intentions. Silverd chuckled at the girl’s reliability and gazed in the direction of the terrace.

“Is that so? The new generation is filled with promising potential. How very troublesome, indeed.”

Ein was standing on the terrace; his elbows rested on the railing as he watched the bustling streets below him. The stars in the clear fall sky twinkled along with the city lights, as if he were looking into a jewelry store.

“Sir Warren was right; it really is chilly,” Ein murmured.

“Would you like to share this shawl with me then?”

A soft piece of cloth was wrapped around him by a familiar face.

“H-Huh? Krone?”

“The one and only.”

She was huddled next to Ein. For how excited he had been and still was, the boy wasn’t feeling nervous at all. The pair were almost shoulder to shoulder as they gazed down and into the city.

“Um, thank you. You know...for what you did back there,” Krone said, her face

beet red as she tried to keep her heart from racing.

Ein laughed. “Don’t mention it. It’s my fault that you were put into that situation in the first place.”

They proceeded to hold hands and Krone’s face grew even redder than before. For a brief moment, the pair had found themselves lost in each other’s eyes before returning to their senses. Their hands quickly darted apart as they shifted their attention back to the city’s scenery.

“I-In any case, Ishtarica sure is big,” Krone said.

“Y-Yeah. So many things about it still surprise me,” Ein said.

Heim was the pair’s only point of comparison. Ein was born in a bustling port city and Krone in Heim’s Royal Capital, but their current view was incomparable to either location.

“Hey, your words from earlier... Had you been actually thinking of them for a while now?” she asked.

“What if I said I was?”

She tilted her head to one side. “You’re a bad liar, Ein. I’ll know the answer from a single glance at your face.”

It seemed that she just wanted to ask, but had already known the answer to being with. With a frown on his face, Ein rested his chin on his hands.

“There are cities as large as Magna all over the continent,” he said. He’d never visited any of these cities, but the boy couldn’t help sizing up Heim in comparison to his new home country. “I thought it was amazing to have just one amazing city, but this amazing region has so many of them.”

“Ein, you used the word ‘amazing’ three times in that sentence.”

“That’s just how amazing this country is.”

In every direction he glanced, a new comparison popped into his mind. He sensed that it might take Heim a few centuries to catch up with Ishtarica’s societal and technological advancements. For Ein, “otherworldly” was still the only word that came to mind.

“I get what you’re trying to say though,” she said.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

The pair were hit by a strong gust of wind that caused Krone’s azure locks to dance in the wind for a brief moment. A floral aroma soon reached Ein’s nose and left him stunned by the charming scent. At that instant, the Royal Capital’s scenery had started to shift as well.

“Is this...” Krone mumbled, combing her hair with her hands. She noticed something fall on her hand that held the railing—something cold as ice that melted away at the slightest touch.

“It looks like snow,” Ein said.

A single speck of snow fluttered onto the girl’s hands with many more specks right behind it. Occasionally reflecting the strands of light emanating from within the city and the castle’s walls, the snow gorgeously glimmered in the night sky. A few clouds dotted the horizon, but it was still a clear and starry night. Looking down from the terrace, the city was now covered in a layer of shimmering white.

“Do you think they’re blessing the crown prince?” Krone asked.

“They could be welcoming your arrival, Krone,” Ein said.

They looked at each other and smiled.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if it was both?”

“Yeah, now that you say it, you might be right,” Ein said with a nod.

“If you look closely, you can tell that the water train is still running. It’s such a late hour, but so many people are out and about,” she said while gazing at the city. Like Ein, Krone had noticed how different things were from the moment she set foot in the Royal Capital. Since then, she had developed a discerning eye for even more of these variations.

“When I first arrived at White Rose Station, I thought that there must be some sort of festival going on,” she continued. The huge station was always bustling with commuters. “But Sir Warren quickly corrected me. I still remember how much that surprised me.”

Ein continued to listen to her soothing voice. Though each breath they took could be seen in the cold night air, the atmosphere around them was warm.

“Even that’s just a small portion of Ishtarica, right?”

“Yeah. So many more people live all over the continent.” Ein sported a confident demeanor as he stared into the city, quite unlike how he had presented himself in Heim.

“I wonder who really is the sly one here,” Krone grumbled, remembering what he told her the other day.

Krone had a sense of how reliable he now was, but she wasn’t keen on being left in his dust. She inhaled and turned to look at him.

“You see, I’ve also decided to work hard towards something. I won’t tell you what that is, though,” she said as a flicker of mischief glimmered in her eyes. It seemed like she wanted him to ask what it was.

“H-Huh? You’re willing to say that much and you won’t tell me?”

Krone and Warren had discussed her decision, but she wasn’t willing to divulge the exact details just yet.

“Heh heh. I never said I’d tell you, did I?” she said.

Ein slumped his shoulders in response to her impish ways. A short while later, Krone took a few steps away from him, her dress flowing in the wind before she turned around.

“There’s something you must always do at the end of a party,” she said.

“There is? What would that be?” he asked, the sound of his footsteps echoing about as he followed her.

“We don’t have any music, but this is a wonderful stage. There’s only one thing that comes to mind, no?”

“Ah, I get it now.” Ein corrected his posture and cleared his throat before he approached her. “Krone.”

He took a step closer and stuck his hand out to her. She’d been waiting for an invitation.

“May I have this dance for a single song?” he asked.

She silently took his hand and brought her free hand to her chest. The girl approached him as he pulled her ever closer. Blushing ever so slightly, Krone looked into his eyes before she spoke.

“Just one? You may have me for as many songs as you wish.”

Afterword

Hello, my name is Ryou Yuuki. Thank you so much for picking up volume one of *Magic Stone Gourmet*. This series is currently being serialized on the self-publishing website Shosetsuka ni Naro, and I graciously received the offer of having this made into a book.

I think the people who'd been following the web version of this novel have already realized that there are additional episodes and many revisions.

I've tweaked it so that newcomers and followers of the web version alike could enjoy the first volume of this series. The last chapter is a completely new addition, and I'm sure that future volumes will also contain numerous changes.

Ein still has to go to the academy and has a major event in the battle with the Sea Dragon ahead of him. There are stories about his friends and fights at the academy along with a clash between heroines. Please also stay tuned for characters that I couldn't fit into the first volume.

The new crown prince is about to face his first disaster. How will he use his power to overcome it? What will become of his father and younger brother in Heim? How will life continue on as he grows older? The end of Ein's tale isn't in Ishtarica, as many ordeals and adventures will be headed his way. I'd be overjoyed if you're able to stick around for the rest of his story.

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone involved with the making of *Magic Stone Gourmet*. I'd like to thank Kadokawa for making this into a book, my editors K and O, and Chisato Naruse for providing the illustrations.

I had my pair of editors help me out so many times, and I learned so many things from them. Every time I received the charming illustrations from Chisato Naruse, my heart would become all warm and fuzzy. Like finishing up preparations for a memorable festival, I felt a little lonely when everything was over. This feeling was very new to me.

I've been able to obtain this precious and valuable time thanks to the readers

and everyone else who cheered me on. I'd like to take this moment to thank all of you for your support from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you for reading until the end. I hope for your continued interest in *Magic Stone Gourmet*.

*I wasn't
blessed with
a good skill,
so I must work
hard!*

Ein lost his breath with every desperate swing of his blade. The super rare skill he received from God—Toxin Decomposition EX—was considered useless within the aristocratic household that he reincarnated into. He could only diligently train by himself...

**MAGIC
STONE**
Gourmet

EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE ME THE
STRONGEST!





Ein
A reincarnator born with the skill
Toxin Decomposition EX. He thought
his skill was dull until...

Drink the
magic stone?

Chris
A young elfen Vice Captain of the
Knights Guard. Skilled in combat,
but a bit of a klutz.


Under the order
of my name,
Silverd von Ishtarica,
I hereby declare
Ein von Ishtarica as
crown prince!

Ein's eyes went wide
with shock as he felt his
body growing tense.

I-I'm the
crown prince?!

Katima
The first princess of Ishtarica.
A very curious Cait-Sith and obsessive
scientist.

Olivia
Ein's mother and the second princess of Ishtarica.
Though quite wise, she occasionally becomes
irrational in matters regarding her son.



Krone

The eldest daughter of Heim's new grand duke. She sailed across the ocean to reunite with Ein in Ishtarica.

*What
will you say
to me first?
“Long time no see”?
Or perhaps
“Thank you for
lending me your
lap”?*

The visage of a young lady entered the boy's eyes; a young lady who had indeed allowed him to rest his head on her lap. Her voice was clearly directed at him.

*How about,
“I've missed
you”?*

RYOU YUUKI


ART CHISATO NARUSE



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Magic Stone Gourmet: Eating Magical Power Made Me the Strongest Volume
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by Ryou Yuuki

Translated by piyo

Edited by Coop Bicknell

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