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EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE ME THE
STRONGEST!

RYOU YUUKI

ART CHISATO NARUSE

MAGIC
STONE
Gourmet

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Prologue

A fierce blizzard roared, carrying the potential to freeze most living things within the blink of an eye. The rugged monsters living within the storm possessed powers that allowed them to brave the harsh environment. Amid the sea of white, near the Adventurer's Town Barth, there was a stone path that ran straight through the Demon Lord's former domain. In the domain's depths lurked the Demon Castle.

Despite the furious flurry, the Demon Castle never saw a speck of snow settle upon its walls. While it was located in northern Ishtar, the castle was shrouded in some kind of force that repelled the snow and prevented it from freezing over. The fortress sported a jet-black exterior that loomed within the blizzard. If anyone should follow the path farther into the domain, it would quickly become quite clear that they faced no ordinary derelict castle.

A loud metal clunk boomed from right outside the Demon Castle's gates—exactly where a knight stood.

"A capable vessel shall arrive shortly," a mature, low voice said. His tones echoed out into the distance despite the raging storm. "We've waited for centuries. Our time will come soon enough."

The knight was clad in an armor as jet-black as the Demon Castle itself. His body was covered in veinlike tubes that glowed like sapphire fireflies. The glow of the tubes grew brighter, reacting to the man's display of joy. The man thrust his arm into the air, summoning a jet-black greatsword that he firmly gripped in his hand.

"Hah! Heh heh hah hah!" another voice cackled.

A gigantic beast had emerged before the knight, its massive, gray body easily dwarfing a multistory building. The creature's burly limbs were covered in a pure-white fur that easily blended in with its snowy surroundings, but there was no hiding its bloodred face.

“These beasts are unnecessary,” the knight said. “You have no right to set foot in this castle.”

“Heh! Haaah!”

The beast swung its beefy right paw at the man, only to have a fountain of blood redder than its face spew from its body a moment later. It had no time to process what had happened—the beast had been cleanly sliced in two. The man’s hulking slab of cold steel had conjured up a sharp wind, slicing through the sky and the clouds blowing snow down upon him.

“This should be good enough,” the knight said, nodding in satisfaction. He then gazed at the azure skies above.

A few moments later, a horde of skeletons arrived and carried the beast’s corpse away. As the skeletons walked off, the knight stopped in his tracks and stared in the direction of Kingsland, the royal capital.



“I eagerly await your return,” he muttered before removing a piece of parchment from his pocket. “I shall fulfill my duties today as well.”

And with that, he placed his hand on the Demon Castle’s doors.

Chapter One: What Has Happened until Now, and Where to Go from There

My tenth year in this world was a busy one, Crown Prince Ein pensively thought. After fulfilling his duties as the king's proxy in Euro, the boy fell into a six-monthlong coma following a rageful outburst in which the Dullahan took over his body. When Ein awoke, his body had undergone a series of unprecedented changes. Monsterification had affected his body and mind, but there was also the real danger that Ein would lose himself in the process.

There was no doubt that the magic stones he'd absorbed were the cause of these changes. Despite the Elder Lich's promise to suppress her husband's rage, no one knew how dangerous the boy had become. After all, Ein's status card listed his job as "Named," just as a monster's would. To search for answers on his condition, the prince had made an incognito visit to Magic City Ist and met a renowned researcher in the process.

However, Ist wasn't lacking its own series of unexpected incidents. While on their way back to Kingsland, the water train Ein's party was aboard had been targeted by a wyvern. It was fairly safe to say that the party's journey was a whirlwind up to the very end.

This was all somehow connected to the mysterious monsters, the red foxes. In addition to his current state, Ein had a plethora of information that he needed to get his hands on.

I don't think my days are going to slow down anytime soon, Ein thought, gazing out of his carriage window.

"It's been six months since then," a woman's voice said, seated across from him.

"Yeah," Ein answered, responding to Chris. "It's a good memory these days."

The elf displayed her stunning beauty as usual. Her silky, golden strands of hair gently swayed as she let out a strained laugh in response to the prince.

“Has it, now? It’s not a good memory for me at all. The bridge’s repairs required six months to be fully completed.”

“It’s been quite a while, now that I think about it,” Ein replied. “I’ve even turned eleven in the meantime.”

April was two months away and he’d be entering his fifth year at the academy.

“Yes, Sage’s kraken did destroy the bridge, but now it looks spectacular,” Ein noted.

“Indeed. Not only were the tracks repaired, but all the noticeable deterioration was attended to as well. I’m truly surprised that they were able to finish it in only six months.”

As the marshal had stated, a complete bridge restoration carried out in such a short time was quite remarkable. Long enough to completely traverse brackish water, the bridge had supported Ishtarica’s trade network for many years. Needless to say, this was a project on an extremely large scale. As the pair approached the bridge, the cheers of the people had reached their ears.

“I suppose it’s only natural for someone such as yourself, Sir Ein,” Chris said.

“You’re exaggerating,” the prince replied.

“Ah ha ha. Not at all. You were the one who saved the train’s passengers that night. It’s why you’ve been invited to celebrate the completion of the bridge’s repairs.”

“The same goes for you too though, Chris. The pair of Sea Dragon babies gave us a hand as well.”

The elf sheepishly scratched her cheek before she looked away.

“A-Ahem! In any case, wasn’t the path here quite smooth, Sir Ein?” Chris remarked.

Ein nodded. The duo first hopped on a train at White Rose Station before later getting off at the closest station to the bridge. After that, they were led to a carriage accompanied by members of the Knights Guard—mounted on horseback to protect the prince and his marshal. Ein hadn’t given any orders;

he'd simply walked from door to door, all thanks to the actions of a certain official.

"It's all because of my excellent advisor," Ein said.

Warren hadn't been the one to make the necessary preparations this time around—no, this was all done by a certain young lady. In fact, this lady was sitting right next to Chris. Upon hearing herself mentioned, the lady finally opened her mouth.

"Are you talking about me, perhaps?" she inquired. Her sweet voice sounded like the gentle ringing of bells, accompanied by a beautiful smile.

"I'm talking about you for sure, Krone," the crown prince replied.

"Heh heh. Thank you."

Krone wasn't wearing a dress or her usual attire. She wasn't the granddaughter of Agustos Trading Firm's founder on this day, but rather, the crown prince's personal advisor. Her uniform was embellished with black accents, with her tights-clad legs sticking out from under her skirt. This classic bit of Ishatrican attire gave her a neat and tidy appearance, but Krone wasn't able to hide her stunning looks. The star crystal adorning her wrist was glimmering just as brightly as she did.

"You're a lady brimming with talent, winning out against the castle's civil servants and countless applicants," Chris said. "I've only recently heard of this, but I was informed that you were the only applicant who passed this winter's civil official exam with full marks, Lady Krone."

The marshal was unable to hide just how much Krone had impressed her. As the civil official exam was a test to discover personnel who'd serve the crown prince, the applicants were all of an extremely high caliber. The exam boasted an incredible difficulty; one that was quite frankly beyond a lady of Krone's age. Despite the uphill battle, Krone's victory as the sole applicant to score full marks had won her the position of Ein's advisor. Needless to say, Warren wasn't at all involved in the testing process—Krone had done it all on her own.

"If I may, Lady Krone," Chris started.

"What might it be?" Krone asked.

“Instead of being his advisor, did you not consider becoming Sir Ein’s personal servant, perhaps?”

“I did not. An advisor can be by his side as much as possible. And if I desire, I can become his maid when needed while doing my job as an advisor.”

“I-I see...”

It was only natural that Krone was able to produce such superb results, considering the hard work she’d put forth during her childhood days.

“And thanks to you, this carriage was provided to us by Agustos Trading Firm,” Ein added.

“It’s quite comfortable to travel in, is it not?” Krone inquired. “It’s a new make and model, but I had my grandfather keep the costs down.”

“Um, is Graff doing well?”

“I’m not quite sure what you mean by that, but he looked a little tired by the end of the business negotiations.”

That was exactly what Ein had feared. Even Heim’s “Champion of Trade” was no match for his granddaughter. However, Graff wasn’t a man willing to bend in business negotiations simply because he was related to his client—a testament to Krone’s skill as a negotiator.

“I didn’t want to sully your reputation by needlessly using the taxpayers’ money, Ein,” Krone bashfully said, looking as adorable as ever.

“Sir Ein, the results of Lady Krone’s business acumen even had Sir Warren grunting in admiration,” Chris said.

“Amazing...” Ein said in awe.

In any case, it was indeed admirable of the young lady to cut costs where she could. Ein nodded, knowing that Krone wouldn’t make a forceful push to reduce prices any more than was necessary.

“Ahem. Why don’t we prepare to disembark from the carriage?” Chris suggested.

“Yeah, got it,” Ein replied.

He peered out the window to discover the party's arena right before his eyes. Clad in his official jacket, Ein finished buttoning up his shirt. Just when he thought that he was good to go, a voice stopped him.

"Ein, could you wait for a moment?" Krone said, getting up from her seat. She proceeded to sit next to the boy before extending her arms towards him.

"Uh? What's going on?" Ein asked.

"Your buttons by your neck. They're off by one. I'll fix it right now, so don't move."

"I can do that myself—"

"Too late. I've already done it."

Ein sat there silently, subjected to Krone's whims—it looked like she was quite enjoying herself. For her part, Chris could only let out a weak laugh.

With the bridge restoration party done and dusted, Ein had safely started his fifth year at the academy. It was around 9 a.m. in the classroom and the prince was waiting for Luke, the Firsts' homeroom teacher, to arrive. Firsts had the unique privilege of attending classes as they pleased, but this meeting was required as it was the first day of the school year. Accompanying Ein were the werewolf Loran, the duke's son Leonardo, and their "big brother" Butz. The rest of the class sat waiting alongside the quartet.

While their classroom was located on a different floor every year, the room's interior remained the same. Sitting next to Ein and Loran, Butz spoke to his furry friend.

"You look sleepy," Butz remarked.

"Ah, yeah, I had some morning work to take care of," Loran replied.

"What are you doing so early in the day?"

From Ein's left came Leonardo's voice. "You should take care of yourself. It seems you have a troublesome pile of work to attend to."

"Thank you. I'll take care not to faint."

Only this quartet of boys had managed to successfully maintain their First status. At the top of his class, Ein leaned in to ask a nonchalant question.

“Why are we even all gathered today?”

“What’s with you all of a sudden, Ein?” Butz asked.

“Well, the Firsts only gather a few times a year, you know?”

“I mean, yeah. I have a solid hunch though.”

“Huh, really?”

“Yeah. You received an explanation before you started attending this academy, didn’t you? They discussed all sorts of future events.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t remember.”

“Well, then it’s your fault for not remembering.”

As usual, Butz didn’t hold back with his biting remarks. Ein couldn’t put together the right words to refute his claims.

“Your Highness, I believe we may be due for an educational trip,” Leonardo said. “Were you not aware of this?”

“Huh?” Ein replied, feeling the strength leave his body.

An educational trip? I can’t believe it. This was an academy that had its students train by fighting monsters. Could such a seemingly normal event exist?

“Where would we be going?” Ein asked. “A faraway fortress or a coal mine?”

“Why do you only have dangerous thoughts in your mind?” Butz asked. “We can freely choose to go wherever we desire, you know.”

“It’s as the man says, we have the freedom of choice,” Leonardo quipped. “We could go to White Rose Station or visit a knights’ station. As of recently, Agustos Trading Firm is also a popular destination. I believe the makeup of our group is up to us as well.”

“Look at all this freedom...” Ein muttered.

“The castle’s facilities are also rather popular,” Loran piped up. “Though it might not be too fun for you, Ein. It is your home, but most normal folks never

have the chance to set foot inside. So many would like to visit it.”

“I really don’t want to visit the castle...” Ein grumbled.

It felt like the group wanted to visit his home, but the crown prince wanted to avoid this at all costs. The boys chuckled when Ein instantly shot down the idea.

“How about Agustos Trading Firm?” Butz asked.

“Give me a break, please. There are many reasons that it’s a difficult place for me to visit...” Ein replied.

The owner’s granddaughter was now his advisor, after all. Quite frankly, it was another place he wanted to avoid.

“Come on now, don’t be so picky and selfish,” Butz said.

“I understand you want to tease His Highness, but you shouldn’t grin so broadly,” Leonardo muttered.

“Sorry, sorry. Okay, what about White Rose Station?”

By using the process of elimination, it was the most likely candidate.

“Yeah, it’s a large station,” Ein quickly said. “I think it’s an ideal place.”

“I-Indeed, I agree with His Highness.”

“Jeez. Look at you, all energetic and chipper again,” Butz mumbled.

“Ha ha... But it really *is* a large place, so I think it’ll be a good learning experience for us,” Loran added.

The boys were having a good time and looked forward to their upcoming trip, but Ein’s chipper mood wouldn’t last for long.

A little past noon, the boys were out at the terraced café. Ein was slumped over with his head in his hands while Butz tried his best to console the poor prince.

“Come on, lighten up,” Butz said. “You don’t have to be so down.”

“I never thought this would happen...” Ein groaned.

News of the educational trip had soured his mood. After homeroom, Luke had called out to Ein with further details.

“We’re just going on a group visit to my house!” Ein wailed.

Thanks to a few kind words on Chancellor Warren’s part, the quartet was already set to head for White Night Castle—specifically, a certain facility within the premises. This was a token of Warren’s gratitude, as the boy’s trio of friends had stuck by him through thick and thin. The other boys were ecstatic to hear the news as only high-ranking officials were allowed within the castle’s walls. The trio was getting some special treatment, but Warren had decided to let that slide just this once.

“If I knew this was going to happen, I would’ve chosen the Agustos Trading Firm instead!” Ein wailed. “I should give Aunt Katima something to make sure she doesn’t leave her research facility. The best thing to do is to confine her.”

He couldn’t allow the feisty Cait-Sith to run wild. Should she appear in front of his friends with a fire lit in her mischievous heart, there would be no stopping her.

“There’s nothing we can do, Ein,” Butz said. “You better prepare yourself by next month.”

“Ah! Leonard, I don’t have any clothes suitable for a castle visit!” Loran gasped.

“I can lend you an outfit,” Leonardo replied.

“Thanks! I could’ve hidden my clothes under a coat in the winter, but it’s almost spring.”

“I don’t mind, but you should probably find some formal clothes of your own in the near future.”

“You’re right. Once I receive my pay, I’ll go searching for some. Could you come with me to do some shopping?”

Ein was in a daze, gazing at his pair of friends—Loran and Leonardo seemed to be having fun, leaving the prince frustrated that he couldn’t share in their joy. The prince considered calling in sick on that day, but he knew that his flimsy lie would be seen through.

“If you mysteriously decide to become absent on that day, I’ll be sure to tell

Professor Luke,” Butz warned.

Ein gave a forced laugh. “Ha ha! No idea what you’re on about!”

“Good grief... We’re getting units for this, so you better participate.”

Indeed, there was no way for Ein to escape. If he wanted to graduate, the prince had no choice but to grit his teeth and attend the field trip to his own home.

Within one of the castle’s offices, Krone was working away when Warren approached her.

“Here’s a full breakdown of Sir Ein’s upcoming educational trip,” the chancellor said.

“Thank you,” Krone replied. “Let’s see... So they’ll tour the training grounds and all the facilities outside the gates, correct?”

“That’s right. Could you please confirm the trip’s schedule?”

“I understand.”

She gazed at the set of documents that she received, carefully reading each word to confirm that there were no mistakes.

“Will His Highness head to the academy on the day of?” Krone asked.

“He will indeed,” Warren replied. “They will meet up at the academy as is customary.”

“I see. I suppose that can’t be helped, then. Once the trip is over, will they part ways on-site?”

“They will. I would like to ask Sir Ein for some of his time after lunch, so we shall be cutting the trip a little short.”

“For his time? Does he have another appointment planned?”

“To tell you the truth, there has been some progress made regarding the string of incidents in Ist. I’d like to inform Sir Ein of what I know before discussing his future plans.”

The chancellor removed a letter from his pocket and handed it to the young advisor.

“I shall skim over the basics, so please read that letter later,” Warren said.

“All right,” Krone replied. “I shall do so.”

“Firstly...I’d like to discuss the actions of the late Viscount Sage. Over the past few years, he apparently made frequent visits to Barth.”

“Barth? As in the Adventurer’s Town, correct?”

Several thoughts popped up in Krone’s head. The year prior, Sage had attacked Ein with his wyvern and kraken while the prince was returning from his trip to Ist. His ability to manipulate these monsters closely resembled the power of a certain species—the red foxes. The foxes were known to be close to the Demon Lord. The Viscount’s frequent visits to Barth and the town’s proximity to the Demon Castle had led Krone to a particular conclusion.

“The red foxes used the viscount as their pawn, correct?” Krone asked.

“I believe that to be so,” Warren replied. “Aside from myself, Lady Katima has also arrived at the same conclusion.”

After the chancellor and the new advisor exchanged their opinions, Warren switched to a new topic.

“Let me get to the meat of the matter,” he said. “There are a few things I must note about Sir Ein and his future plans.”

“Please enlighten me.”

“We shall have Sir Ein head to Barth on official business. For the past few years, not a single member of the royal family has gone to inspect the area...”

Krone closed her eyes upon hearing those words. Indeed, it was vital to periodically check up on the nation’s major cities and the crown prince surely had other tasks to attend to. However, Warren’s thoughts likely didn’t end there. She immediately sensed that the chancellor had other motives.

“And another important matter is the state of Ein’s body,” Krone added.

“Precisely. As Professor Oz stated, we should look to the knowledge of other

adventurers. I shall have Sir Lloyd accompany the prince on this excursion, but only the former marshal will then head to the Demon Castle. It would be wonderful if Sir Lloyd could glean any insights, be it modern or ancient, on the red foxes and monsterification.”

“After all, we’d like to keep Ein from going down a path of no return...”

Krone’s downcast eyes made it clear that she was racked by a cloud of anxiety. As time mercilessly passed, she feared that Ein’s condition would worsen.

“Please be at ease,” the elderly man kindly assured her, gently smiling. “We’ll do whatever we can before anything unexpected happens to Sir Ein. In our past expeditions to the Demon Castle, we discovered a bevy of newfound knowledge on the inner workings of magic and magic stones through many books. Let us hope that we find more information on this upcoming expedition.”

Warren paused for a moment before continuing. “However...numerous monsters run rampant around the Demon Castle. In addition to Sir Lloyd, the prince will be accompanied by several members of the Knights Guard and an arsenal of sorcerous artillery.”

Krone chuckled. “Oh my. Then it seems like the continent’s greatest force will be assembled.”

Whether it was the denizens of Barth or the monsters surrounding the Demon Castle, no force could hope to best this mighty band of elite soldiers. The young girl breathed a sigh of relief, realizing that the chancellor had given serious consideration to the matters at hand.

“Sir Warren, may I ask one question?” Krone asked.

“Anything you wish.”

“It’s about the red fox statue that our party witnessed during Ein’s visit to Euro. Perhaps it would be best to scope out the principality as well.”

“Not to worry. I have dispatched my subordinates to Heim, Rockdam, Bardland, and many other cities. For instance, Lily is currently snooping around Heim.”

Krone was familiar with this name. Among the spies, Lily was said to be the best along with being one of Warren's most trusted allies.

"There's something fishy going on," the chancellor continued. "We likely need to continue our investigation into the red foxes."

Krone silently nodded. Ein's health was most important to her, but she also prayed that the red fox situation wouldn't take a turn for the worse.

Chapter Two: The Educational Trip

From within the castle's basement, the excited cheers of a smiling Katima could be heard echoing throughout the halls.

"Thank mew! You're the best nephew in the world, Ein!"

"Ha ha! Don't mention it!" Ein replied. "Take your time!"

With his primary mission for the day complete, a smiling Ein left Katima's lab. Now that his greatest threat was gone, he could only find himself grinning from ear to ear.

"There should be nothing left for me to fear! I...think," Ein said, the clacking of his footsteps reverberating up the stairwell.

The kicking of his leather boots against the ground sounded like a victory march to the boy. The hand holding his book bag started to slightly tremble, a sign of his enthusiasm. *I've done exactly what I needed to do.* Ein rushed up the stairs, calling out his advisor's name as he reached the ground floor.

"Krone! Where are you?!"

Moments after the prince yelled, a figure emerged from within the shadows cast by the pillars around the castle.

"Yes, yes, your Krone is here," she replied.

With spring on its way out, the weather had started to warm up a tad. The young advisor was currently wearing a sleeveless shirt that matched the hues of her light-blue locks. She also wore a white skirt that stopped just above her knees—an ensemble that gave off a buttoned-up appearance while maintaining a flowery charm. As always, she stole Ein's gaze.

"My plan was a success! It went perfectly!" the crown prince crowed.

"I'm glad to hear that," Krone replied. "And what did you do to Lady Katima?"

"I gave her her favorite dried foods! I handed a whole boxful to her, so she should be busy for a few hours."

Ein had managed to ward off his aunt, Ishtarica's first princess, with just a bit of food. Krone let out a weary sigh, realizing that the crown prince had chosen this course of action without hesitation.

"Well, as long as Lady Katima is happy...I suppose," she said.

The pair stopped in their tracks, now standing in front of the door that led outside.

"Then I'll be off!" Ein said.

"All right. Take care."

"I'll be fine! See you later!"

As soon as the door opened, Dill approached the crown prince; he'd been waiting for Ein for a while.

An hour later, Ein, Dill, and the prince's trio of friends were gathered outside of White Rose Station.

"Now, allow me to give a few words of warning," Dill said, fixing his posture. "As long as you don't pass in front of me, I'm sure we won't have any major problems. Make sure that you touch nothing. You will all be touring the training grounds as well today, so this is for your safety."

Ein's three friends nodded.

"Finally, while I understand that you're all good friends with Sir Ein, there are many within the castle who are quite strict when it comes to manners and protocol," Dill continued. "Please refer to Sir Ein as 'Your Highness' within the castle."

The boys hadn't obtained the privilege to refer to the prince by name as Warren and Dill had. Many of the castle's employees would either frown or be irked to hear their prince referred to so casually.

"Of course, Officer Dill. I shall be sure to have Butz follow these rules as well."

"You—Hey! Leonardo! Even I know that there's a time and place for things!"

Dill likely enjoyed seeing the pair's back-and-forth. His father had previously

told him that he was rather stiff, but nowadays he was much more cheery and acted his age more often.

“We’ll start at the night watchman’s office and other facilities near the castle’s gates,” Dill explained. “We’d like for you all to have a good look there as well. From there, we’ll go on a tour of the training grounds and the armory. Finally, we’ll go to the dining hall for lunch.”

From a quick glance, it was clear that the boys were excited for the trip. Ein had initially groaned at the idea of visiting the castle, but the lit-up faces of his friends made him feel much better about the whole thing.

Outside the castle gates, Loran looked up and let out a gasp.

“It’s huge!” he said.

The pup couldn’t find any other words to explain his shock—he was genuinely impressed by how large the castle was. He looked up in awe, trying to process its massive size.

“We shall now enter,” Dill said. “Please stay behind me.”

Ein was used to this scene, but that wasn’t the case for the trio of boys accompanying him. Loran was especially unfamiliar with grand occasions such as this. Unlike an aristocrat such as Leonardo or Butz, commoners were never presented with any opportunities to visit the castle. The splendid gardens and waterways within the castle’s gates impressed the werewolf as much as its massive architectural feats did. The trio of boys were all overwhelmed by a sight they had never seen up close for themselves.

Dill seemed to be walking a bit more slowly than usual.

“Are you...being considerate?” Ein asked.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Dill replied coolly, the corners of his lips tugging upwards.

Ein knew that he wasn’t just imagining things. “Then I’ll be talking out loud to myself here. Thank you for being so considerate of us.”

There was no response, but Dill’s smile became even more apparent.

“What you see in front of you is the entrance to our knights’ training grounds,” Dill said.

One could almost feel the heat emanating from the grounds. When the students tried to listen really closely, they could hear the clanging of swords and the roaring of knights. Butz sounded like he was especially taken with the sounds.

“Sir Ein, I have asked the knights to continue training without paying heed to your presence,” Dill said. “I hope for your kind understanding.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Ein replied. “In fact, that should be the norm for the training grounds.”

“That mustn’t be. We shall only be doing this for today.”

As Dill stopped in front of the training grounds and opened its gates, the trio of boys were quickly overwhelmed by the fiery passion of the knights training before their eyes.

“Raaaaah!”

“Hmph!”

“Haaaaah!”

The knights’ thunderous roars echoed throughout the training grounds.

“A-Awesome...” Butz murmured.

“Yeah,” Leonardo agreed. “I expected no less from the knights in charge of guarding White Night Castle.”

Loran’s mouth was agape in shock; the pup had been left speechless by what he saw.

“Loran! Loran!” Leonardo called to no avail. “Good grief... Butz, aren’t you used to seeing knights? Why are *you* so surprised?”

“Don’t be stupid. The Knights Guard is made up of the best of the best within Ishtarica.”

And he was right. However...

“Uh, Butz...” Ein said.

“Y-Yeah, E—I mean, Your Highness?”

“Um, well, you see...”

Upon seeing the crown prince shift around awkwardly, Dill approached the group. “Sir Butz, the knights currently training are not members of the Guard, but are instead our ordinary knights. The Knights Guard will be stopping by later today.”

Butz was unable to hide his befuddlement. He wasn’t arrogant, but the boy was confident in his own strength. However, he wasn’t sure if he’d stand a chance against the knights before him.

“The Knights Guard operates with a single duty,” Dill explained. “It goes without saying that they wouldn’t hesitate to lay down their lives for the royal family, but they also must be the strongest within the knightly ranks.”

Dill’s words implied that the training session they were watching was nothing compared to the daily regimen followed by the Knights Guard. Butz gulped.

“Thank you,” the boy humbly replied. “Thanks to this perspective, I now know where I stand.”

“I never thought I’d ever see you act so commendably,” Leonardo smugly remarked. “I’m surprised.”

“Hey! Don’t tease me, Leonardo!”

“Ha ha ha! And Loran, you’d best close your mouth now.”

“H-Huh?! When was it open?!”

“You were stunned from the start, you know,” Butz chided.

“You might be right... I was drooling a little.”

The trio sat on a bench while they silently watched the knights training in front of them. Had it been a few minutes? Several? Before they knew it, the knights had finished their mock battles and left. The boys’ surroundings were now dead silent, a stark contrast to the atmosphere from when they had first entered. The trio had expected to move on to the next part of the tour, but suddenly...

“Sir Butz,” Dill said.

“Uh, er, yes?!”

“And now, you shall bear witness to what you’ve been waiting for.”

“What I’ve been waiting for?”

Butz seemed to be perplexed, but Dill didn’t provide an answer as the doors swung open.

“Good day.”

“Your Highness.”

“I thank you for coming here.”

One after another, several knights walked onto the grounds while taking care to greet Ein as they passed by. Was it their posture? They had an aristocratic air to them.

“These must be the Knights Guard,” Leonardo said in admiration.

“Correct,” Dill said. “Their strength is in proportion to their dignified demeanor.”

“Is their training different from that of normal knights?”

“Needless to say, they must relentlessly train to hone their skills beyond that of an ordinary knight. In addition, they receive etiquette training akin to that of an aristocrat’s child and can elegantly serve up a spot of tea in the absence of a servant.”

The Knights Guard served the royal family—trained to stand by the royals in any situation.

“You will also see that they possess more than just elegance,” Dill said.

The Knights Guard began their training moments later, completely transforming the atmosphere around them. From the second they unsheathed their blades, the boys got goose bumps thanks to the terrifying aura that filled their surroundings. The sound of their swings was completely different from that of the castle’s knights, echoing so strongly that even the air itself started to shake.

The Knights Guard really were as powerful as they had been made out to be. Leonardo was shocked to see just how unfazed Ein was by the proceedings. In fact, the prince gave off the air of someone who possessed power that far beyond what the knights could muster.

“Butz, how long could you last against them?” Leonardo asked.

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“If you were to fight against the Knights Guard, how long could you hold out in battle?”

Butz let out a nasally, mocking laugh. “Not even ten seconds, I bet. They’re just amazing. From their movements, to their keen swordsmanship, to how they utilize their center of gravity... I wouldn’t stand a chance against them at all.”

With a sparkle in his eyes, Butz continued to gaze at the training knights—a band of warriors he had once aspired to be part of.

After the tour had been concluded, the group headed to the dining hall for lunch. Previously famished, Ein got up to go for seconds.

“The sight of that training regimen shocked me,” Leonardo said after the prince had left.

“Yep,” Butz agreed. “I might be realizing this a bit too late, but Ein sure grew up in an amazing environment.”

“Uh, I’d appreciate it if the two of you could bring me up to speed,” Loran said.

“While we were shocked by the Knights Guard’s training session, Ein didn’t appear to be fazed at all,” Butz explained. “In other words, it’s a sight he’s used to.”

“He must’ve thrown himself into that environment from a young age,” Leonardo added.

“From the sounds of it, he probably did. Our academy feels mediocre in comparison.”

“No wonder...” Loran muttered. “So that’s why Ein’s so strong.”

The pup thought back to when Ein had saved him from a vicious vampire on the night of the academy district competition. The trio had caught a glimpse of the prince’s efforts, ones that he had fought to keep under wraps. If Ein were to continue growing at such a rate, the trio would have to up their game so they wouldn’t be left behind. As the boys settled down, Ein approached them in high spirits.

“Hm? What are you guys talking about?” the prince asked.

“Just some stuff,” Butz replied. “Why do you look so happy?”

“Because today’s meal is just to my liking.”

The crown prince replied as though nothing were wrong, and he proceeded to innocently stare at his friends. The trio smiled as they didn’t expect to hear a statement like that from someone they’d just heaped praise upon. This answer was par for the course for Ein, though. The prince sat back in his chair before quizzically gazing at his trio of smiling friends.

Dressed in her maid’s attire, Martha approached the group.

“Sir Ein, pardon me for barging in during your meal,” she said.

“Huh? What’s wrong?” Ein asked.

“This is terribly awkward for me to say...but it is time for your afternoon commitments.”

The group had arrived at the dining hall early, but they had stayed a bit too long. When Ein gazed at the clock, he noticed that it was already past noon.

“Oh? You got some plans?” Butz asked.

“A little. I’ve got a few things to decide on,” Ein replied.

“Then I suppose we will part ways here, Your Highness,” Leonardo said.

“I’m sorry, but yes, I do believe we will. I’ll be taking my leave.”

The crown prince didn’t want to leave just yet, but he had Barth-related matters to discuss. Having just grabbed seconds, Ein shoveled the food in his mouth without taking the time to savor it—he deeply regretted that he hadn’t

kept his eye on the clock.

“Then E— I mean, Your Highness! I’ll see you at the academy!” Loran said, energetically waving his hand.

Ein returned the gesture as Martha led him out of the dining hall.

“Lady Krone is waiting for you in the office,” Martha said. “I shall escort you there.”

“Lead the way,” Ein said.

After they walked along for a short while, a little girl carrying a basket of vegetables appeared before the pair.

“Huh?” Ein said.

She looked much healthier and was wearing a new outfit, but Ein knew this girl very well.

“Ah! Your Highness! Hello!” the girl said.

“Hi, May.”

Six months ago, Ein had saved this orphan from the streets. She was equipped with an innocent smile and a cheery greeting, meaning the prince couldn’t help but smile at her.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Me? I, uh...”

Upon seeing the slightly troubled look on the girl’s face, Martha jumped in. “May has been working in the dining hall as of late. Since I’ve been tasked with looking after her, I wanted her to try her hand at a variety of tasks a little at a time. Just as I did in my youth.”

“Ah, so this must be your special training regimen for the gifted,” Ein said.

“Oh, it’s an honor to receive such high praise from you.”

“Well, Your Highness!” May said. “I’m headed for the dining hall!”

“Okay. Be careful,” Ein replied.

May’s spirited and bouncy reply hinted that she was someone who could be

relied upon.

“I’ve been teaching her everything that I’ve learned,” Martha said. “No matter what situation or location she might find herself in, a servant should always act with grace and elegance. But of course, she must learn her duties first.”

“I’m starting to get the impression that your master is quite an amazing person,” Ein noted.

“She is indeed. She’s still working within this castle,” Martha replied with a chuckle. “I might have neglected to mention this before, but my master is Lady Belia. She’s been the head servant and the queen’s personal maid for quite a long time.”

“Nanny?! I see... No wonder you’re so amazing, Martha.”

Known to Ein as “Nanny,” Belia almost exclusively attended to Queen Lalalua’s needs and no one else’s. For this reason, she was rarely seen in the castle’s halls. Even if she was spotted, the master maid was generally by the queen’s side. Belia was so well-known for her excellence that she served as the head servant alongside only the best of the castle’s personnel.

Tea tasted different based on whoever served it. Belia’s tea was so superb that Martha’s own pours couldn’t hold a candle to it, no matter how hard she tried. Additionally, Belia was able to answer and attend to Lalalua’s needs without the queen ever vocalizing her wishes. Of all the servants, Belia possessed expertise miles above the rest.

“As you say, she’s indeed an amazing woman. However, the lady does have her fair share of secrets,” Martha said. “Between you and me, I’ve heard that she used to date Sir Warren.”

“What?!” Ein gaped.

“I would appreciate it if you kept that tidbit a secret.”

Ein silently nodded, but his mouth was agape in shock. He was dying to hear the gory details of this relationship, but he didn’t want to pose any audacious inquiries and managed to reign in his curiosity.

“I’m satisfied to see May so happy providing her services to the castle,” Ein

said. “So, I’ll pretend I never heard what you just said.”

May’s older sister, Bara, was tending to a different task—working at a clinic located close to the knights’ training grounds. Bara couldn’t use healing magic, but perhaps due to her personality, she had stated herself that she was suited for work there.

Martha and Ein continued to converse as they approached the castle’s entrance. The knights had just opened the door when the prince found himself face-to-face with Krone. She had apparently tried to leave the castle, so the pair almost bumped into each other. The young advisor held a small bundle of documents close to her chest and Ein quickly stepped in to support her as she staggered.

“I-I’m sorry...” she said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ein replied. “But I thought you were in your office.”

“Sir Warren has prepared a conference room for us, so I was just on my way to fetch you. I’m glad I bumped into you here.”

As an intimate atmosphere emanated from the couple, Martha decided to take her leave. The servant bowed her head and let out a quick “please excuse me,” taking care not to become a third wheel.

“Then shall we get going?” Krone suggested, standing at the prince’s side as they started to walk along.

They were so close that the backs of their hands would occasionally touch, and when they walked up the stairs, Ein’s arm was around her waist to support her. The castle’s residents looked forward to seeing the couple grow closer by the day.

“Was your morning fun?” Krone asked.

“Well, it was nothing new, to be honest, but I did have a fun time with my friends,” Ein answered.

Krone giggled. “I suppose I didn’t need to ask. I can tell just by looking at your face.”

She used her thin fingers to playfully poke the prince’s cheek.

The couple continued to make a bit of small talk while ascending a few flights of stairs and proceeding deeper into the castle. Despite walking through genuinely majestic architecture, the pair were already quite accustomed to their surroundings.

“I think we’re here,” Krone said, proceeding to knock on the door in front of her.

“Come in,” a calm elderly voice replied, giving her the okay to enter. “I’d like to thank you both for coming. I can tell that you’ve had a rather enjoyable morning, Sir Ein.”

“I’ll leave that to your imagination,” Ein replied.

The chancellor chuckled. “Is that so... Well, it’s great to hear.”

Their greetings over, Ein decided to get down to business. “Now then, shall we begin?”

Once his youthful visitors had taken a seat, Warren handed a small stack of documents over to the prince. Ein immediately scanned through the pieces of parchment as the chancellor started to speak.

“As I had mentioned the other day, we will now be discussing your duties while in Barth,” Warren started.

“I’ll be surveying the area, correct?” Ein asked.

“Precisely. I wanted to review the details of the trip and your schedule.”

The chancellor continued, detailing the simple duties that were expected of the prince. However, it soon became clear that the survey was the boy’s primary task.

“I understand,” Ein said before turning to his advisor. “You’ll be coming along to Barth, right, Krone?”

“That’s right. I’m your advisor, aren’t I?”

In fact, she’d chosen that position expressly because it allowed her to tag along with him on expeditions.

“Then I’d assume that Dill and Chris are joining us as well,” Ein said.

“Ah, Dame Chris shall not be accompanying you on this trip,” Warren answered.

“Huh? Does she have business to attend to?”

Warren gave a strained laugh. “She *is* the marshal, so it’d be problematic if she were absent from the capital at the same time as Sir Lloyd...”

“Makes sense. I understand.”

“I hope you can find some solace in the fact that Sir Lloyd is looking forward to it. He claims that he’ll protect you, even at the cost of his life... So yes, he’s quite excited for the trip.”

“That’s reassuring. What was Chris’s reaction?”

“To be honest, we haven’t mentioned it to her yet.”

“Huh?”

Krone immediately envisioned Chris’s reaction to the news.

“Um, maybe you should be the one to break the news to her,” Krone said.

“I very much agree,” Warren added. “I assume that Dame Chris will be quite disappointed to hear that she must remain here this time around.”

Chris was fully aware that Ein would be on his way to Barth in the near future, so she must have assumed that she’d be tagging along. The marshal would most definitely be shocked to learn that she’d be sitting this one out. Ein could easily imagine the sullen expression that would dominate Chris’s face. It had almost been a year since the pair’s return trip from Ist and their promise to go on another journey together. Sadly, reality wouldn’t be so kind.

“In any case, now that you’ll be the one telling Dame Chris...” Warren started.

“You just pushed that responsibility onto me, huh?” Ein replied.

“No idea what you’re talking about. Next, I shall tell you of the party heading to Barth with you.”

“Got it.”

While steeling himself to break the news to Chris, Ein intently listened to Warren’s staffing breakdown.

“This time around, you shall go with a sizable party of more than a hundred personnel,” Warren said.

“That’s a lot,” Ein remarked.

“That’s simply how dangerous this trip could be.” The chancellor turned to Krone. “And Lady Krone...”

“Yes?” she replied.

“As you will be beside Sir Ein, you shall have the role of taking care of him. Does that present any problems for you?”

“Of course not. Please leave it to me.”

Ein found this to be a touch odd. Even though he was traveling with a massive party, was there some rule against the presence of servants?

“Is there a reason we’ll be without servants?” Ein asked.

“Oh, servants will be with you,” Warren answered. “Lady Krone will simply be tasked with tending to your needs.”

“I see... I sort of get it, sort of don’t...”

The prince closed his eyes, trying to organize the information that he’d received. Once he’d made sense of it, he nodded to himself. He’d be under Krone’s care while traveling with a large party. But before that, he’d have to inform Chris that she’d be staying behind. Ein was reluctant to tell her, as he couldn’t stop imagining the marshal hitting him with the loneliest pair of puppy dog eyes he’d ever seen.

“This might sound a tad abrupt, but you’ll be leaving next month,” Warren said.

“Then I shall revise Ein’s schedule accordingly,” Krone replied.

“Thank you. And, Sir Ein...”

“Huh? Yes?” the prince replied.

“Barth is known for its harsh weather and is covered in snow for about half of most years. The trek is about the same distance away from Kingsland as Ist, but the surrounding mountains and rugged terrain make for a much longer journey.

It's the same even if we were using the royal water train. By the way, how are you against the cold? I don't believe I've ever asked."

"Unfortunately, I have an easier time dealing with the heat," Ein replied, shaking his head.

Krone chuckled. "Then I suppose you'll have to bundle up with enough layers to make you sweat a little."

"I don't think that's right either..."

"Hm, I'm relieved to see that you have such an excellent advisor," Warren remarked.

"Don't tease me, please," Ein replied. "Does it mean that we'll have to prepare cold-resistant gear, then?"

"Indeed. It'll already be snowing by the time you head off to Barth, Sir Ein."

"Really?"

The winter tended to hit Barth much too quickly. Ein knew that snow dominated the town for half of the year, but his excursion would be in the middle of summer. He definitely wouldn't be enjoying much of the area's warm season.

"I guess the idea of seasons is just a moot point," Ein said.

The town seemed to go through its fair share of odd weather, but maybe it wasn't that odd in a world of magic.

"I suggest you take the time to enjoy the sights and sounds of Barth," Warren suggested. "It's also said to be a holy city for blacksmiths, so I believe you'll get some enjoyment out of it."

This tidbit aroused Ein's curiosity.

"We've requested Professor Oz to come along, but he's a very busy man. Unfortunately, he won't be available to join this expedition," Warren said.

"Well, he really does appear to be quite busy. I guess that can't be helped," Ein replied.

Barth was nestled in a harsh tundra that the crown prince couldn't even begin

to fathom, and he'd soon be on his way there.

Chapter Three: Adventurer's Town Barth

Several days later, Ein rested against one of his room's window sills as he took in the sights and sounds from the world below him.

"Madam advisor, we've just finished packing the supplies. Would you please kindly confirm it for me?"

"I shall. Thank you."

Preparations for the prince's journey to Barth were well underway within the grounds of White Night Castle. Whether it was medicine, clothing, or emergency rations, every piece of luggage heading for the Adventurer's Town was carefully inspected. Krone had taken charge of the operation, with countless knights and servants working under her. In fact, she'd been meticulously organizing and planning for the arduous trip over the past few days. Ein initially offered to assist her, but he'd been turned away.

And so, Ein was left to quietly gaze at Krone as she worked, having turned his room into her own personal office. The prince's hands weren't entirely idle as he'd been saddled with an important task of his own.

"All right," he mumbled, shifting his gaze towards the corner of the room. "Um, Chris? I'm sorry... I'll apologize again, so please don't look so glum..."

Despite being a guest in the prince's quarters, the elf was sitting off in the corner. Marshal Christina Wernstein of Ishtarica's Knights Guard, was sulking—a rare sight, indeed.

"Don't mind me," she pouted. "I'm staying home anyway."

"Um, er, you know I mind, don't you?" Ein said.

"I'm...the only one...left behind..."

In her current state, Chris made even the saddest of whimpering puppies look overjoyed by comparison. Visibly upset, the marshal looked as though she were no longer living; like the cog running her internal cuckoo clock had fallen out.

She hadn't moved an inch from her seat either. As Ein approached the marshal, he noticed that she had wound herself into a tight ball, hugging her knees.



“Chris?”

When the prince poked her hands, the marshal suddenly grabbed onto his prodding finger. A confused Ein tried to wriggle out of her grasp, but the elf's desperate grip remained firm. It was as if she saw her crown prince to be an irreplaceable jewel.

“Ugh, why is my heart so...” Chris mumbled under breath, her voice dying out before her words could reach Ein's ears.

Why does my heart ache so much? Chris thought to herself, trying to understand her own feelings. Knowing her position, she was well aware that she couldn't always be at the crown prince's side. She knew that, and yet, she couldn't shake off the grief that had welled up within her.

“Hmph...”

She suddenly looked up and stared at Ein, who wore a troubled expression on his face. Her lips still forming a pout, Chris gazed quietly before opening her mouth.

“You're awful... You should've told me so sooner,” Chris murmured.

“Ugh...” Ein said. “You're not wrong... However, the Knights Guard will be in trouble without you, Chris. By extension, that includes the citizens who call Kingsland home.”

The marshal pursed her lips. Despite the sullen nature of her damp eyes and flushed cheeks, Chris's natural beauty was accentuated.

“You're right...” she admitted. “But still...”

“I looked forward to going on another adventure with you too, you know,” Ein replied. “I'm not thrilled with this either.”

The boy hadn't told a single lie. Ein had gotten along quite well with Chris, and above all, he always enjoyed his time with her. He sincerely wished that his marshal could've accompanied him to Barth.

“It's not fair,” Chris said. “You can't say things like that to me.”

The marshal quickly wiped her tears away and lightly slapped her cheeks.

“Very well! I shall stay behind this time!” Chris declared.

She couldn’t organize her thoughts just yet, but the elf had given up on joining her prince for this adventure. She was heartbroken, but that was all part of her duty.

“Thank you...” Ein said. “I’ll make sure to bring back all kinds of souvenirs, so wait for me. With you here, everyone can rest easy knowing that they’re under your protection.”

The crown prince’s sunny smile stole Chris’s gaze. Indeed, she had one thing she had to admit without a shred of doubt: *I love it when he smiles.*

Ein’s departure date was here and the crowd around White Rose Station was rowdier than ever before. It was often said that Ishtarica was hot in the early summer, but the passionate cries of the city’s citizens were even hotter that day. Chris, Olivia, Warren, and the rest of the royal entourage rode with Ein to the station so they could send him off. From the moment he set foot on the royal platform, the crown prince was shaking the hands of his citizens and showering them with smiles. When he finally boarded his train, Ein discovered that Krone was already there to welcome him aboard.

“Heh heh, thank you for your hard work, Your Highness the Crown Prince,” Krone said with a chuckle. While using a handkerchief to pat away the beads of sweat on her prince’s brow, the young advisor found that she couldn’t keep herself from cracking a smile.

“Thank you,” Ein replied. “Are Lloyd and Dill already on board?”

“They’re in the carriage in front of us. Our company from the Knights Guard is split into two groups, effectively sandwiching your railcar.”

“Wait, that means...”

“We’re the only ones here. Do you need anyone else?”

“No... I think I’m fine if you’re with me.”

She’s an excellent advisor. Yeah, she’s just an advisor, Ein thought. And yet, he couldn’t help but be conscious of her. He had to treat her as he would any other

advisor, or else he'd feel oddly nervous.

"I can fetch you something to drink," Krone said. "Would you prefer a hot or cold beverage?"

"Iced tea, please," Ein replied.

"All right. Then why don't we head inside?"

Ein was in awe of how swiftly Krone had shown consideration for him, but he'd noticed a little something: he wasn't the only one dealing with the sweltering Ishtarican heat. *I'll pretend I never noticed it.* Whenever Krone wore anything made of thin fabric, she always made sure to wear a second layer. However, perhaps due to only being around Ein or her own forgetfulness—of which he wasn't sure—she was clad in a thin blouse. The fabric was sheer enough that the prince could see the outlines of her undergarments from behind.

"Well, I'll look away, of course," he mumbled.

He had conducted himself as a gentleman, one fitting of his title. The young man managed to steer his gaze off into empty space.

"Is something the matter?" Krone asked.

"Oh, nothing much," Ein replied. "I was just thinking that I'm thirsty."

"Really? You're such an odd duck at times."

Ein breathed a sigh of relief as his bald-faced lie had been a success, prompting the boy to give himself a little fist pump. Once he'd simmered down a bit further, the prince followed Krone into the car's lounge.

A few hours had passed since the train's departure from Kingsland. While the prince's party wasn't even halfway to their destination, the scenery around them had drastically changed. Alongside the rocky mountains that dominated the train's surroundings, a four-winged bird could be seen flying off in the distance. This train ride was nothing like the prince's trip to Ist. In fact, the new sights passing before the boy's eyes were quite refreshing to him.

Krone took the chance to slip in a word of warning to the dazzled prince. "You

seem to be having a rather enjoyable ride, but take care not to push yourself in Barth, okay?”

“I know,” Ein replied. “Compared to my trip to Ist, there’s way more tension in the air.”

“Hm... I wonder if I can trust your words.”

“I’m not *that* much of a kid.”

“Oh, I know that. Any normal child would listen to my warning.”

There was no way Ein could argue against that. He’d sneaked into Ist’s Tower of Wisdom and busted out of the castle to fight the Sea Dragon. No one exactly trusted the crown prince when it came to behaving himself.

“But,” Krone kindly added, “we’ll be venturing into the Demon Lord’s former territory, and the first king once led an expedition there. With Barth nearby, I’d imagine you’re nothing but excited to walk in the footsteps of your hero and take in the same sights as he did.”

“E-Exactly! Can you blame me?!” Ein enthusiastically replied, like he was a squirming fish who’d just been thrown into a bucket of fresh water.

“I’ve heard the territory holds secrets from the nation’s founding. It has captured my curiosity as well.”

“The nation’s founding?”

“Historians are divided on the exact details of Ishtarica’s founding. Was the nation established after the Demon Lord’s defeat? Or was it before that perhaps?”

“I’m surprised you know so much, Krone.”

“In my studies to become your advisor, familiarity with these topics was required.”

And she scored full marks on a test like that?! Ein thought, shocked by this story. For the boy, it was just further proof of Krone’s excellence.

“It’s said that clues to a potential answer can be found within the Demon Lord’s former territory. Thanks to those rumors, many have set out to

investigate the area.”

Unfamiliar with any of these stories until just moments ago, Ein found himself mulling over Krone’s words. *Was the Demon Lord’s rampage just before Ishtarica’s founding or did the rampage result in the nation’s unification and birth?* He gazed at the mountains that passed by as he tried to come to his own conclusions. But of course, he couldn’t find an answer. This topic had been divisive among historians for centuries; it would be absurd for Ein to come to any sort of conclusion in a matter of minutes.

“I hope we can find an answer to that soon,” Ein said.

“I agree,” Krone replied. “But I do have one question.”

“Hm? And what’s that?”

“Do you remember hearing about something called ‘the royal family’s gacha’?”

“I do. It involves the inheritance of our ancestors’ genes or the occurrence of an ancestral throwback. I believe the name was coined to jokingly describe that phenomenon.”

Additionally, those from many different species had made their way into Ishtarica’s royal family. Hence, even if both parents were human, they occasionally bore a child of another species—an ancestral throwback.

“But is there anything wrong with that?” Ein asked.

“Well, we don’t know for sure yet. However, a nonhuman hailing from the Demon Lord’s former territory might have been romantically involved with the royalty,” Krone said. “It’s a possibility.”

“It’s scary that I can’t outright deny that claim.”

In the end, the line between nonhuman and monster had continued to blur in accordance with the nation’s founding principles. Both species shared two important physical traits: the presence of a magic stone and an accompanying core. As long as one would coexist with humanity without the need for destruction, they would be deemed “nonhuman.” As a result, countless nonhuman species flourished within Ishtarica.

“Of what ancestry did the first queen hail from again?” Ein asked.

“If memory serves me correctly, the first king noted that she was a pixie,” Krone answered.

Pixies were said to be cute, fairylike creatures not too dissimilar to elves and dryads. Unfortunately, pixies had become quite rare in modern society, causing rumors of their extinction to swirl into the ether.

I wonder what my child might be? Ein would eventually need a wife. This was already set in stone, but he naturally thought about the royal family’s gacha. What part of the royal lineage would his children represent? He glanced over at Krone.

“H-Hm? What’s wrong?” Krone asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Sorry,” Ein replied. “I just started thinking about the future and stuff.”

“Heh, you’re so weird. The crown prince is no match for the heat of summer, I suppose.”

Heat wasn’t an issue for Ein right now, but he decided to let these claims slide. For now, he was hoping for his heart to be soothed by her smile.

The trip from Kingsland to Barth generally took half a day. As the northbound train continued along the tracks for quite some time, the prince’s party was greeted by even more fresh scenery. Before setting out, Ein had heard that his destination would be rather cold. However, his first glimpse of snow from a few hours back left him shocked to see this kind of weather in the summer. The mountains had gone from glistening under the golden hues of the sunset to glimmering under the moonlight. Just as the party was about to pull into Barth’s station, the train suddenly thrashed about.

“E-Ein,” Krone said.

“Don’t worry; it’ll die down soon,” Ein reassured her, clutching her hand.

The tremors continued for another twenty seconds, with the water train slowing to a stop. A few moments later, Ein heard knocking at the door and he stepped away from Krone to answer it.

“Pardon me,” Dill said. “A sudden earthquake has brought the train to halt.”

“I know. Will we be moving again soon?” Ein asked.

“I’ve been told that the train and tracks will be inspected first, just in case.”

Then in the blink of an eye, the furnace roared back to life and signaled that the train was set to get back on schedule.

“It seems like we’re fine,” Ein said.

“Indeed,” Dill agreed. “Then please excuse me. I’ll be back should anything else occur.”

Once Dill left, Ein returned to Krone’s side. The rest of the ride was smooth sailing as the train darted through the area’s distinct nighttime scenery. The silence of the night was so profound that the party was easily able to set aside thoughts of the earthquake from mere moments ago.

A few hours later, the train had finally pulled into Barth. As he opened the door, a chilly yet crisp breeze filled Ein’s lungs.

“Let’s see...” Krone said. “Ah, we were able to make it before midnight.”

Unlike the standard water train, the royal’s vehicle wasn’t beholden to a strict schedule. The conductors of these trains sped up or slowed down when necessary, as was the case with today’s earthquake. Ein and Krone grabbed their small carry-on bags before standing by the exit to their car. The prince shuddered as he could already feel the blustery, frozen winds blowing against him.

“It’s so cold!” he said. “Are we really on the same continent?”

“We are,” Krone answered. “Come now, put this on. You have to make sure your neck remains warm.”

She wrapped a hefty yet comfortable scarf around his neck. As Krone scrambled to get her prince in order, Ein noticed that she no longer dwarfed him. In fact, they were practically the same height now. When considering that he was a growing boy, the prince had a gut feeling that he’d probably be taller than her by the end of the year.

“Thank you,” Ein said, leaving the train.

He stared at the station's unfamiliar scenery and reached out to the train's exterior. To his surprise, he realized that the carriage was now cold to the touch.

"It's so cold! Whoa!" Ein gasped.

"Why did you even touch it?" Krone said wearily. "Stick out your hand."

Ein obediently followed her orders as she proceeded to grasp his hands.

"Am I the first crown prince to have his advisor do something like this for me?" Ein asked.

"Ah, so you're aware of that, Your Highness?" Krone replied.

"I'm sorry."

She continued to nag him a little bit, but Ein was grateful that she cared so much about the stray finger that touched the train. The boy felt a hint of excitement as she rubbed his fingertips, but he wondered if he was acting with impure motives. *I feel guilty now...*

"All right, let's go," Krone said before noticing the prince's shift in demeanor. "Oh? Why is your face so red? Are you embarrassed?"

"It's because the wind's so cold," Ein replied. "Please don't pry any further."

She chuckled. "Very well, Your Highness."

It only appeared to be a spot of flirting to most onlookers, making Ein quite relieved to know that Dill was off in another railcar.

"Now then, let's set foot into Barth!" Ein said, clearing his throat and shifting topics.

And so, the crown prince took his first step into the adventurer's town.

Barth was surrounded by a series of tall walls, structures that the water train had passed through to reach the station at the city's center. With Krone by his side, Ein proceeded farther into the station to meet with the Graciers.

"There was an earthquake, but I'm glad we've all arrived safely," Dill said, letting out puffs of white into the air with each breath he took. "Now then,

er...”

He glanced at his father, who was standing beside him. The young officer had tried to say something, but stopped himself. Lloyd easily caught on.

“Ah, you can call me ‘Sir Lloyd,’ though ‘Marshal’ would’ve been appropriate not too long ago,” Lloyd said.

“It’s only us around,” Ein said. “ So why don’t we drop the formalities for a little while?”

“You heard him,” Lloyd said. “Because you acted so timidly, His Highness has offered his kind consideration. You should be grateful.”

As the group left the station, Ein quickly noticed that Barth looked nothing like any of Ishtarica’s other cities. Barth was blanketed in snow and constantly falling flakes often glittered in the town’s ambient light. Ein’s eye darted about, leaving him surprised by the stout walls and sturdy iron gates around him. But when his focus narrowed on the town itself, the boy found himself enthralled with its unique architecture.

“Barth is a magnificent town,” Ein commented.

A billboard seemingly crafted out of monster bones stood before the many storefronts lining the streets. Blacksmiths energetically hammered away at their work with doors wide open, appearing as if they were impervious to the cold. Orange light spilled out from restaurants that boomed with the sounds of boisterous adventurers as they indulged in a pint or two while sharing hearty laughs. Though some adventurers tended to be much more tense, discussing strategies as they headed to the town gates for a nighttime hunt.

“It really is a town for adventurers,” Ein said.

“Indeed it is. I’d imagine that your young mind must be rather stimulated by its present surroundings!” Lloyd replied. “Sir Ein, why don’t I let you in on a small nugget of knowledge? Please look over there.”

He pointed to a large restaurant that was decorated with bones.

“Those are monster bones,” Lloyd elucidated. “However, it also shows the restaurant’s standing.”

“Standing?” Ein asked.

“To be blunt, those simple bones are rather expensive. The larger the bones, the stronger the beast. Only the most adept adventurer can best such a monster. In short, such materials are not for those with small pocketbooks.”

“I see. That sounds about right for a town like this. Though why did they go with bones, I wonder?”

“Ha ha ha! There’s a good reason for that! You’ll see it for yourself shortly!”

See? Lloyd’s enigmatic words piqued the prince’s curiosity, but the former marshal’s loud laughter led the boy to let his concerns slide on by. As the prince sighed, Krone posed a question.

“Sir Lloyd, is Ein not exactly welcome in these parts?”

“Hm? Why would you think that?” Lloyd inquired.

“Not a single person has reacted to Ein’s presence.”

“To be frank, it’s not like Sir Ein *isn’t* welcome. Actually, there are many that heap praise upon him for single-handedly defeating a Sea Dragon.”

Krone was even more confused. If that were really the case, why did no one react?

“The reason is very simple. I’m certain that the guild had posted bulletin board notices of Sir Ein’s arrival, but that’s the problem.” Everyone listened intently to Lloyd’s words, anxious to hear what he had to say next. However, he dispelled these worries in an instant. “No one ever pays attention to the bulletin board! I believe they simply aren’t aware! Ha ha ha ha!”

The youthful trio felt the strength leave their bodies. Could such ignorance be so casually laughed away? Even as the throne’s future successor, Ein couldn’t help but crack a smile. Most adventurers had no interest in the latest news from the royal capital.

“Ah, and there it is. Over there,” Lloyd said, guiding the group towards a peculiar sight.

A small hill stood in the depths of a wooded area. The surrounding terrain had been ruggedly gouged out, but a single solemn object caught the group’s

attention—an enormous skull.

“This monster had appeared out of nowhere, much like the Sea Dragon did. However, a royal slew it. And in this case, that royal was the first king,” Lloyd explained. “Only its sturdy skull remains, but this beast had a face full of fangs that could apparently crush an entire horde of wyverns with a single bite. The slicing power of its talons was so immense that legends say that it could carve mountains to dust. These very remains are the reason Barthites adorn their storefronts with bones, in reverence of the first king.”

If Ist was known for the enormous Tower of Wisdom, the same could be said for Barth and the massive skull. Only that could provide any impression of the beast’s size, which most could guess to be around ten stories tall. It was similar in shape to a human skull, but its aggressive jawline was filled with sharp fangs and the forehead sported a single horn that pointed towards the heavens.

“What kind of monster was it?” Ein asked.

“They’re extinct now, but it was likely an Ogre,” Lloyd said.

As the beast’s name implied, it was a demonic monster.

“Please take a look at the gash carved into the skull,” Lloyd said. “That’s a scar left by the first king from when he took its life.”

“Awesome...” Ein gasped, unable to suppress his awe.

“According to records, a single strike cracked the monster’s skull and stone.”

“Huh? That sounds familiar...” Dill muttered.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Dill? Is anything the matter?” Lloyd asked.

“N-Nothing. It’s just that there’s this certain royal who did something similar to take out a colossal sea monster.”

Everyone gasped and turned to Ein.

“Indeed...” Lloyd murmured. “You’ve fought just like the first king.”

“Um, Lloyd?” Ein said sheepishly. “I have my Phantom Hands and all...”

“According to the legends, the Ogre descended from the mountains to avoid another monster and started attacking humans. While the Sea Dragon isn’t one

to run away, it wreaks havoc all the same.”

Ein was thrilled to be compared to the first king—his hero.

“You look so happy, Ein,” Krone pointed out.

Ein tried to hide his smile and walked towards their lodge, hoping to mask his embarrassment. This moment of haste worked in their favor, as a powerful blizzard blew through town just moments after the quartet had arrived at their lodging.

Most of the lodge’s rooms had been reserved by Warren in advance, leaving space for only a few other aristocratic families. Lloyd mentioned that the party’s lodging wasn’t far off from their accommodations back in the royal capital, but the stuffed monsters decorating the rooms gave off a distinct Barthite personality.

Ein was excited to stay somewhere a bit different from his room back in Kingsland. Once he’d finished his bath, he stepped out onto the balcony. The blizzard had died down, and the skies were calm.

“Whoa, this is amazing,” Ein murmured.

A countless number of stars twinkled in the sky as a colorful aurora enveloped them. The aurora was initially a sunset orange before slowly shifting to a color reminiscent of the verdure of summer, then finally a beautiful cobalt blue that called back memories of the seas around Magna.

“You’ll catch a cold,” Krone called out to him, fresh out of her bath.

Her neck and collarbone looked warm from the bath. It was as if she were inviting Ein to come closer, but he hastily looked away.

“Walk out here, Krone. It’s beautiful,” Ein said.

“All right,” she said before she stared up at the skies, becoming as transfixed just as Ein had been moments ago.

Mesmerized gasps spilled from her mouth as she looked up and gulped. Ein stared in awe of her wonder, feeling as if he were looking into a dreamy scene hidden in the middle of a snow globe.

“To think the Demon Castle is near such a beautiful view...” Ein said. “Life really is stranger than fiction.”

“Oh, but it might be the other way around,” Krone pointed out. “Perhaps the Demon Lord specifically chose this location because she loved the view.”

And humans could’ve come after. As Ein remembered the visage of the Demon Lord, he thought that Krone perhaps wasn’t so far off. The wintry scene would’ve suited the adorable Demon Lord and her silver locks quite well.

Krone shivered for a moment.

“Why don’t we head inside?” Ein asked, putting his cloak around Krone before taking her shivering hands to lead her inside.

As he stepped forward, Ein was immediately greeted by the room’s warmth.

“A-All right. Thank you,” Krone stammered, slightly surprised that her hand was taken so suddenly.

She sat on a sofa by herself at first, but moved to sit next to Ein when she noticed he was sitting across from her.

“Hm?” Ein asked.

“I’m still a touch cold,” Krone insisted. “Can we stay like this for a little while longer?”

“Well, I guess—I mean, of course you can.”

“Heh. Thank you.”

She looked so happy that it seemed as though she’d start humming at any moment. The two silently sat together for a short while before Krone suddenly broke the silence.

“You’ll have to tend to your public duties tomorrow after lunch,” she said.

“Right. I have to meet and greet the lord of this region,” Ein replied.

She nodded, placing her hand over his. Was she doing it unconsciously? As Ein stared off into space, she started playing with his fingers. Ein found it ticklish, but he couldn’t tell her to stop, and he honestly didn’t mind.

“Barth’s lord is a count,” Krone said.

“And he’s coming to this lodge, right?” Ein asked.

“That’s right. I received a letter stating that he should arrive as you’re finishing up lunch.”

If so, Ein could sleep in for a while. All he’d done was ride on a train, but it was a long trip regardless. He wasn’t too crazy about working so early in the morning either.

“If the count did plan on an early morning visit, well...I don’t think I’d let that happen,” Krone said with a smile.

Despite flashing a carefree grin, Krone was serious nonetheless. Had the count arrived at an earlier time, she would’ve surely shooed him away.

“But I think you’ll be able to enjoy your time with Count Barth,” Krone added. “His letter mentioned that he heard that his younger brother, Kaizer, had become indebted to you...”

Ein was flabbergasted by this revelation. Krone giggled at his goofy, shocked face, but it didn’t bother him.

“You’re kidding, right?” Ein asked.

“Why would I lie? Good grief...” Krone replied.

“Wait, what? Instructor Kaizer is the son of a count? Why was he an adventurer, then?”

“Why don’t we worry about constructing a proper greeting for the count tomorrow?”

“Right... I’m looking forward to meeting him.”

After enjoying the nighttime cityscape for a little longer, the pair retired to their rooms.

The following afternoon, Lloyd approached Ein’s room as a seemingly on-guard Dill stood outside the door.

“Did you sleep well last night?” Lloyd asked.

“Yep,” Ein replied. “I have a warm room with a comfortable bed.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

It was about time for Count Barth to arrive. Ein checked his wristwatch and tried to calm his beating heart.

“Have you met Count Barth before, Lloyd?” Ein asked.

“A couple times in the past,” Lloyd said. “I believe I’ve had a chance to converse with him during a few of the castle’s parties.”

“What kind of person is he?”

“He’s incredibly pleasant to be around. The count greatly values compassion and is quite a warmhearted fellow. Additionally, he’s a bit of a rarity among aristocrats for he is a master swordsman. Besting a handful of Knights Guard members is the least he can do.”

“Wow. He sounds interesting.”

As Ein grew more excited, a knock was heard on the door.

“Ah, he must be here,” Lloyd said, approaching the door and checking outside.

He gazed at Ein, signaling that Count Barth was already outside. After taking a few deep breaths, the door opened.

“Pardon me,” a middle-aged man said, standing straight up.

As Lloyd had mentioned earlier, even his mannerisms were rather pleasant.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Raizer Barth. His Majesty has graciously allowed me to oversee this region, bestowing me with the title of count.”

Raizer gave a neat bow, one that turned the man’s posture into a sharp right angle. The count’s silver hair was nearly gelled in place and he sported a meticulously groomed beard that accentuated his masculine features. His energetic movements remind Ein of a well-trained soldier.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Ein replied. “I’m honored to have the opportunity to meet Barth’s renowned count myself.”

“Please, you may have a seat in front of His Highness,” Krone said.

Count Barth obediently took a seat before Ein while Lloyd moved behind his prince.

“Thank you for coming all this way to Barth. It’s a great honor,” the count said, his expression greatly resembling that of his brother.

In fact, the count’s nose and eyes bore a striking resemblance to the prince’s instructor.

“This is a wonderful town,” Ein said. “I very much like its ambience.”

Count Barth’s face wrinkled with joy, elated to hear the crown prince’s praise for his town.

“My people are a wild and rowdy bunch, but I’m grateful to hear your kind words,” the count said.

“I look forward to visiting a few blacksmith forges before I depart. I’ve heard that many talented metal artisans reside here.”

“Indeedly so. Barth is a gold mine of monster and mineral resources among many others. For most blacksmiths, it’s known as a holy place for the artisans that pass through town.”

“I look forward to it. If you have any recommendations for a blacksmith, do inform me later on.”

“Then I shall draft a letter of introduction to a blacksmith. That should allow you to enter their forge immediately.”

Ein smiled, genuinely grateful for the kind offer. However, the count’s phrasing jogged the prince’s memory.

“Ah, that reminds me. Count Barth, I’ve received a letter similar to that from your younger brother, Sir Kaizer,” Ein said.

The crown prince took out a letter he’d received from Kaizer about a year ago, before his departure to Ist. Since Kaizer was well-known as an adventurer, the letter would’ve supposedly benefited Ein.

“He gave you a letter of introduction?” Count Barth wondered.

“Is something wrong?” Ein inquired.

“Ah, it’s just that it’s quite surprising. However, Kaizer’s letter would surely help with your investigation, Your Highness.”

“Surprising?”

“Indeed. It’s quite unprecedented, actually. I’ve never heard of Kaizer writing such a letter before. As you can easily tell, he’s a stubborn one.”

Despite the biting words, Count Barth seemed to enjoy talking about his brother.

“He hasn’t contacted me recently, but I’m glad to hear that he’s well,” Count Barth said.

“I hope I’m not prying, but may I ask why Sir Kaizer decided to leave your household?” Ein asked.

“For his dream. We brothers were born and raised in Barth; hence, we’ve admired adventurers since our youth and frequented the guild. We weren’t old enough to take on any requests, of course. However, we simply enjoyed basking in the place’s atmosphere.”

“Ah.”

“I was the eldest son and perhaps from my parents’ point of view, I was the obedient one. Kaizer, on the other hand, yearned for freedom. That was it. He left House Barth on his own to pursue that. The two of us are not on bad terms despite that, you see.”

“I imagined a greater problem, to be honest.”

“I apologize for causing you worry. But I’m sure that...Kaizer was simply born into the wrong household. He’s a man with his own ambitions to achieve. That’s all there is to it. Ah, perhaps I’ve rambled on for a bit too much. My apologies.”

“Oh no, not at all. In fact, that was quite an interesting tale.”

“Thank you. By the way, I’ve heard that you’d be setting foot in the Demon Lord’s old territory, Your Highness.” He reached into his chest pocket and took out a letter. “Please take a look at this.”

Lloyd received the letter and scanned its contents. “This must be the most recent path into the Demon Lord’s former territory. Along with the recent

weather conditions, this should be an excellent reference.”

“That’ll be a huge help!” Ein said. “You have my gratitude, Count Barth.”

“I’m pleased to see your joy,” Count Barth replied. “But I have one more letter to give you.”

With that, the man took out another envelope that Ein was familiar with. There was even a familiar name listed on the front.

“Professor Oz?!” Ein gasped.

“To tell you the truth, Sir Oz had been in this town until a few days ago,” Count Barth divulged. “He was here to investigate something and seemed quite disappointed that he’d be missing you. The professor has jotted down some additional details in his correspondence.”

“All right, then I’ll take a look.”

The letter began with a word of apology. Professor Oz was eager to contribute his knowledge and expertise to the crown prince’s investigation, but had some long-standing commitments that couldn’t be changed. He was left with no choice but to decline Ein’s offer. The letter went on to explain the current situation of Barth.

“Huh, so the nearby monsters are less aggressive this time of year,” Ein said.

“Indeed. They’re more active in the colder weather.”

And so, Oz recommended Ein visit the Demon Lord’s former territory as well. If the rumors regarding the number of soldiers accompanying the crown prince were true, the boy would surely not be in any danger. The letter ended with a note stating that Ein’s quick wit and fleetness of foot might lead to some excellent discoveries.

As the prince relayed the contents of the letter to Lloyd, the knight appeared to be locked in a moment of deep thought.

“Indeed, the monsters are much less hostile right now...” the knight said pensively.

“Sir Lloyd, is it really safe for Ei—I mean, His Highness to head there?” Krone asked.

“I’m sure it shall be fine if there are only normal monsters about. But recent investigations have noted the presence of a powerful creature within the territory... It makes it difficult for me to nod my head in agreement.”

He must be talking about that mysterious presence that Chris mentioned before, Ein thought. More than a year ago, the marshal had accompanied the boy to Majorica’s shop and noted the presence of an unknown creature lurking within the shadows of the Demon Castle. With that in mind, Chris wasn’t too crazy about the idea of Ein leading a royal expedition there. As the crown prince was jogging his memory, the count chimed in.

“At this time of year, it should take about four hours on foot to reach the Demon Lord’s former territory,” Count Barth said, grimacing. “Currently, I cannot recommend you enter there.”

“Oh? And why’s that?” Lloyd asked with interest.

Ein decided to leave this conversation to Lloyd and chose to quietly listen.

“I cannot confirm the details just yet, but we’ve been receiving reports of disturbances in the area since late last night.”

Lloyd and Ein glanced at each other upon hearing the word “disturbances.”

“Since last night’s earthquake, the monsters have appeared to be restless...as though they were running away from something,” Count Barth explained.

“What are the adventurers doing?” Lloyd asked. “Are they taking further precautions on their hunts?”

“Exactly as you say. Except for the first-rate adventurers, no one is leaving the town.”

“Ah, that sounds like quite a precarious situation.”

“There’s just one little tidbit floating around... It’s still a rumor, mind you.”

“And what would that be?”

“A monster from the founding era might have emerged. It’s a rumor that’s been passed between the most skilled of adventurers.”

Lloyd’s eyebrows soared; he seemed to be familiar with this rumor. He folded

his arms in front of him and mumbled to himself. “It can’t be... Right now?” He turned to the count. “And what are your thoughts on this matter, Count Barth?”

“I likely have the same thoughts as you do.”

“I knew it.”

Only Ein and Krone were left in the dark. The couple exchanged glances, but they were as perplexed as ever. The only thing they were able to glean was the ominous atmosphere that filled the room.

“If our fears are correct, we must quickly return to the royal capital...” Lloyd said. “No, that might be too dangerous. We have Sir Ein’s physical condition to think about. We can’t just head back home.”

“Now then, why don’t we take a short break?” Ein’s advisor suddenly said.

“Hm? Lady Krone?”

“If this were to affect our future schedule then perhaps it’s best if we relay that information to His Highness the Crown Prince as well.”

Ein internally breathed a sigh of relief; Krone had swooped in to save this conversation with impeccable timing.

“I-Indeed,” Lloyd relented. “You’re quite right, Lady Krone.”

“Then let us do so,” Krone said before turning to the count. “Count Barth, I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience...”

“Not at all. I understand,” the count replied. “I shall leave for a moment so that His Highness and Sir Lloyd may discuss matters further.”

“Very well,” Lloyd answered.

The count rose from his seat and left. Once Ein confirmed that Raizer was gone, he opened his mouth.

“What’s going on?” Ein asked.

“Allow me to explain,” Lloyd answered. “However, I will warn you that the situation might require you to return to the royal capital. If it comes to that, I pray for your understanding.”

“Well, that all depends on what I hear. But before that, explain yourself.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Per the count’s earlier words, this matter is in regard to that beast from the founding era. If such a monster were to actually make an appearance, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that it wields power rivaling that of a Sea Dragon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you remember the story I told you yesterday? The one about the Ogre?”

Ein nodded.

“And how the legends mentioned that the Ogre fled the mountains to avoid another monster?” Lloyd went on.

“You mean...” Ein said.

“Precisely. There’s a good chance that very beast has finally shown itself.”

A monster that could spook even an Ogre? Within the blink of an eye, the expression on Ein’s face morphed into one of shock.

“The creature is known as Upaskamuy,” Lloyd said. “Unfortunately, we know little about the beast aside from its hulking physique and the chilly aura it emanates. The legends suggest that it might be a kind of dragon.”

“So we have no idea how powerful it is?” Ein asked.

“Precise measurements? No. However, we do know that it survived an encounter with the first king.”

Ein narrowed his eyes upon learning that the monster had clung to life despite a tussle with the Demon Lord’s slayer.

“At the end of their battle, the grievously wounded Upaskamuy used everything it had left to escape the first king,” Lloyd said. “The first king was said to have chased after it, but the monster had seemingly melted away into the roaring tundra. To get to the point, this monster presents a threat that would generally require your immediate departure, Sir Ein.”

“Are you saying that I should put a swift halt to my duties and the survey?”

“Correct, Your Highness. There’s no doubt in my mind that this would be the best course of action. I strongly believe this to be the same mysterious presence

that we've previously encountered."

Lloyd's words were correct. Ein crossed his arms and closed his eyes.

"Is there truly nothing we can do?" he wondered.

Krone's warm, gentle touch led the prince to strongly consider sitting this one out. However, how could a widely heralded hero flee from such a dangerous situation?

"Sir Ein, I implore you to not overthink this," Lloyd said. "Remember, you are the crown prince with a position to keep in mind."

"I know..."

As the future successor to the throne, Ein wasn't allowed to throw himself into the middle of such a dangerous situation. Should anything happen to him, it wouldn't be out of the question for Lloyd's head to be on the line. Regardless, Ein felt himself saddled with a heavy heart. Leaving Barth would give off the appearance that he was fleeing with his tail between his legs. Unable to put the right words to his feelings, the prince remained silent until he finally chose to open his mouth. However, he was cut off as the room gently creaked before proceeding to violently shake. The room violently trembled thrice at unpredictable intervals, like an earthquake. The door suddenly swung open as Dill and Count Barth rushed inside.

"Dill! Heed your manners in front of Sir Ein!" Lloyd scolded.

"I apologize, but this is an emergency!" Dill yelled back. "Count, if you will!"

"Of course!" Raizer replied.

The pair rushed out to the balcony, ripping open the doors before looking off into the horizon. Dill noticed that count's narrowed gaze had quickly made way for a grimace. Looking reproachfully upon his son, Lloyd joined the duo and requested an explanation.

"Dill! Just what is going on?" Lloyd demanded.

"Please look over that way!" Dill said. "It's where the water train tracks were laid!"

Torn asunder, the tracks were now out of commission. Chunks of railing

scattered upon the nearby dirt and snow were all that remained.

Ein exhaled as he processed the situation. “Seems like a simple carriage ride back to the royal capital is out of the question.”

Now then, what should I do? The prince scratched his head and let out a forced laugh.

Chapter Four: The Ancient Monster

The view from the count's manor allowed one to catch a bird's-eye view of Barth in its entirety, including the swarm of adventurers and citizens who were on their way to the manor's grand hall. It'd only been a few hours since the morning's ruckus, but the halted trains had caused adventurers to pour in with their own reports and sightings.

"Adventurers, are you sure about what you saw?" Count Barth asked.

A number of people nodded, as they'd been out hunting that morning. Raizer could vouch for the adventurers' abilities and strength out in the field. These men mentioned that they'd caught a glimpse of what they believed to be a massive white monster. The blizzard had obscured any discernible details, but the men had never seen a beast that colossal before. Everyone claimed that it must've been the primeval monster, Upaskamuy.

"My lord, we should assemble a subjugation team at once," an adventurer suggested.

"Agreed. With the trains down, we have no choice but to fight that thing with everything that Barth has to offer," another added.

"Hah! Don't be stupid. If even the first king couldn't kill it, I'm not keen to try it for myself," another countered.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to count me out as well. No amount of coin in the world could match the cost of my life," another agreed.

The adventurers were split down the middle. The count absolutely needed to assemble a team, but he lacked the power to invoke a decree of compulsory service. Raizer would obviously offer a princely reward, only for those willing to accept his request of course.

Ein was listening in on this conversation, seated beside Krone on one of the hall's sofas. Lloyd stood behind the pair, listening intently as well.

"Lloyd, I don't think I've asked this before..." Ein started.

“And what might that be?” Lloyd asked.

“How long will it take for reinforcements from the royal capital to arrive?”

“A party shall reach the nearest mountain range by tomorrow. However, they’ll be forced to travel on foot from that point on. I’d imagine it’d take at least two and a half days.”

“Got it.”

All the while, the voices of the adventurers continued to ring out.

“I’ll say it again: I’m not going.”

“Me neither. I actually value my life.”

“Who’s gonna pay us for this anyway? The guild? Unless they ring up HQ over in Kingsland, we wouldn’t get any dough for a mission of this scale.”

“Yeah. At the very least, we’d like the guarantee of a payday.”

These concerns didn’t bother Ein a bit. After all, it was only natural for an adventurer to worry about their life and how much they’d put it on the line for. The prince had no intention of scoffing at those worries. At the same time, he wanted to reward those valiant enough to take a stand against this monster.

“Hey, Lloyd. Didn’t you mention that the first king had left behind a nasty gash on that monster?” Ein asked. “Do you think it’s completely healed?”

“I doubt it,” Lloyd replied. “Apparently the wound was so deep that the beast was lucky to escape with its life. I’d assume that it isn’t in tip-top shape.”

Ein nodded, thinking he could act on that.

“But talk about bad timing,” the prince said, resting his face on his hand. “Why did it reemerge just as I arrived in Barth?”

“The thing stared at me from inside the blizzard with a gnarly pair of bloodred eyes!” an adventurer shouted. “It doesn’t matter how many lives I have; I wouldn’t stand a chance against it!”

Ein felt his heart thump. *Bloodred eyes?* Thoughts of Sage’s wyvern and its threatening gaze flashed across the prince’s mind.

“So, it’s not a coincidence, then?” the prince muttered.

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

“I have a theory, but if I’m right...it means I was trapped from the moment I stepped on that train.” Ein chuckled in a self-deriding manner before he stood up. “Upaskamuy might be connected to the red foxes.”

“May I request that you enlighten me on this theory?”

“So a monster that’s been sleeping for centuries suddenly goes on a rampage right when I show up. That’s not a coincidence. It seems like this Upaskamuy shares a few things with Sage’s wyvern. Let us not forget the earthquake from our first night here either.”

“But this is all just guesswork.”

“Be that as it may, I can’t ignore it.”

Lloyd fell silent at these words.

“It’s as though someone doesn’t want me to learn more about the red foxes,” Ein said.

“Then, is there someone...targeting you?” Krone asked.

“It’s a possibility. We still haven’t caught the mastermind who ordered Sage around.”

Amid the plethora of questions, one thing was clear: Ein wasn’t escaping from Upaskamuy’s rampage.

“In any case, we must fight,” the crown prince declared.

Ein would not only need to valiantly stand up against the monster as the first king had done, but put an end to it. Lloyd inadvertently bowed his head when faced with his prince’s dignified stature.

“But we mustn’t,” Lloyd argued. “We must remain here.”

“Even though I’m being targeted?” Ein inquired. “The monster might be lurking outside of Barth’s walls for now, but we can’t predict when this town will be turned into a battlefield. The lives of many will be at stake.”

“However, these are all merely theories.”

“But if I’m right, I’ll regret that I didn’t act sooner. Don’t worry. This is

different from my encounter with the Sea Dragon.”

As Ein’s words implied, a ray of hope shone down upon him this time around.

“We have sorcery weapons and you’re by my side, Lloyd,” Ein said. “Not to mention that we won’t be fighting at sea.”

They had more than enough firepower.

“I believe this to be my responsibility,” the crown prince finished.

“Pardon my insolence, but in no way is it your responsibility,” Lloyd replied.

“It is. If the first king failed to slay this monster, then it should be the royal family’s duty to finish the job. If that is the case, then I absolutely must not retreat nor allow my citizens to fall in harm’s way.”

“Well, that’s...”

“I’m not speaking without a plan. I do have something in mind, but I’ll need a map to check my surroundings and confirm the plan’s feasibility.”

Ein walked towards the currently conversing count and adventurers. Once he noticed that the crown prince was heading his way, Raizer’s bewilderment was plain for all to see.

“I’d like you all to take up arms in defense of Barth,” Ein requested the adventurers, cutting off the conversation.

“Who...are you?”

“Wait, you must be...”

A number of adventurers quickly recognized Ein’s face and hastily approached the royal.

“I shall promise you that the royal family will provide adequate compensation,” Ein said. “It shall be a sum worthy of the risk to your lives, and I guarantee that it will not pale in comparison to the rewards provided for the Sea Dragon’s slaying.”

This was a promise guaranteed by the crown prince himself. Morale rose among the adventurers as they got a better look at the brave hero who had slain the Sea Dragon.

“We’ve practically won!” an adventurer cheered.

“Yeah! We’ve got nothing to fear with a hero on our team!” another yelled.

The crowd became hopeful and cheery, reassured by the powerful force who joined their side. Raizer, however, quizzically tilted his head to one side. The crown prince had requested that the men defend Barth instead of slaying the monster. The count wondered why Ein phrased it that way, but the crowd had already surrounded the prince before he could ask. A roaring chant of “Your Highness!” proceeded to fill the room.

Within the count’s office, the group spoke for several minutes before Ein finally laid out his plan of action.

“Here,” he said, pointing to part of a large map that had splayed across the count’s desk. “We’ll defeat Upaskamuy right here.”

“Here” was a lake close to the Ogre’s skull. According to Raizer, the body of water was about an hour away from town.

“Your Highness, this is simply a frozen lake,” Raizer said. “Any monster that lives close to Barth is resistant to the cold.”

“You raise a logical point, Count Barth,” Ein replied. “But I’m not planning to freeze the monster to death.”

“Then what’s your plan?”

“Since we’ve been having these sporadic earthquakes, it means that the monster walks on land. So, I’ll stop it in its tracks by defrosting this lake and take it out there.”

“I’d like to give another word of advice. I believe Upaskamuy can still flee.”

The lake was big enough to accommodate a Sea Dragon, so Upaskamuy would probably fit. However, that wasn’t the issue.

“I’ll use my skills to lock it down,” Ein said. “Then we’ll deploy the sorcery weapons and down it in one fell swoop.”

Lloyd and Krone nodded in agreement. With his Ocean Current skill, Ein could manipulate the water to potentially trap the monster. He’d previously used the

skill to overheat the Tower of Wisdom's furnace so he could break into the building.

"S-Sir Lloyd, I cannot help but fret over His Highness's words," Count Barth said. "Do you truly have a bevy of sorcery weapons suitable for the task?"

"There's nothing to fear on that end," Lloyd replied. "In fact, we've brought ten magic stone cannons along with us."

"Ah, those fearsome weapons that fire off magic stone energy. Ten cannons would certainly suffice, but are you sure? I cannot imagine a world in which His Majesty would approve of this plan."

"Indeed. It's exactly as you say, Count Barth. And given that, I haven't contacted His Majesty nor will I be able to in the near future."

"D-Doesn't that present a problem?!"

"Oh, it's a gigantic problem, but His Highness the Crown Prince has left my hands tied."

The crown prince had issued a royal edict, prohibiting anyone from relaying the details of this mission via message bird or any other means of communication. Since the Knights Guard served the royal family, they found it difficult to avoid complying with this order.

"We'll act this evening," Lloyd said. "While members of the Knights Guard are carrying the cannons, I shall accompany my son to the lake and assist in the protection of Sir Ein."

"Is this not dangerous?" the count asked.

It was too late to entertain such a question. Ein was determined and unwilling to change his plans. In the end, Crown Prince Ein would be headed straight into danger. There was one more decision the group had made: Ein would leave Barth and step into the monster's presumed lair. Should Upaskamuy refrain from attacking him, it would imply that the beast wasn't after Ein. In that case, the prince promised to retreat back into the town.

"Would you please provide shelter for my advisor and the other officers?" Ein asked. "I shall leave a few Knights Guard members behind, but please let me

know should anything happen.”

“I don’t mind that, but...” Count Barth replied.

“Then I shall leave it to you.”

If Upaskamuy wasn’t after the crown prince, Ein would turn right around anyway. If the prince’s hunch was dead-on, he’d proceed with the plan. However, it wouldn’t trouble him too much if he was wrong either.

“I’d like to make another request,” Ein added. “Please lead any citizens or nonparticipating adventurers away from the manor.”

“Of course!” the count replied.

Ein locked eyes with Krone. “I’d like to rest for a moment. Please excuse me.” He grabbed her hands and left the room.

The two walked towards a corridor’s edge, just behind a pillar so they were alone. After they’d come to a stop, the pair finally faced each other.

“I think I might be starting to have some second thoughts about the first king,” a frowning Krone remarked as she tapped the ground with the tips of her toes. “He should’ve finished it off instead of leaving it for you to handle.”

“Is someone deeply treasuring me?”

“Someone is. At the very least, I’d like to be by your side...even if the whole world is against you.”

She giggled, causing Ein to smile along.

“Leave Barth to me,” she finally said. “I’ll do whatever I can while I’m waiting for you.”

Unlike his battle with the Sea Dragon, Krone indicated that she was all right with letting him go this time. She didn’t look distressed, but the lady was surely not free of worries. Was it trust? She seemed to be certain that Ein would come back safely. Perhaps their bond had grown stronger over time; she seemed to be a little more relaxed.

Even Ein was able to crack a small joke. “I wonder what Upaskamuy’s magic stone tastes like?”

“Hm... Chicken, perhaps?” Krone replied.

“Wait, you’ve tried its stone before?”

“H-Hey! Of course not! But it might be a dragon, right? And you said it might be related to wyverns and that they taste like chicken!”

The prince chuckled. “Heh I know. I’m just kidding. That’s all.”

“You’re horrible. What am I going to do with you when you return?”

“Ha ha, I hope you won’t be too mean to me.”

Ein stepped away from her and headed to the manor’s entrance. It finally started to set in for Krone that her beloved’s plan was truly underway.

“I’ll go cool my head outside,” Ein said. “I don’t want to be too agitated before the battle.”

“I understand. I’ll be sure to tell Sir Lloyd that,” Krone replied.

“Okay, thanks. I’ll probably head to the lodge or help carry the sorcery weapons afterwards.”

They were only going to be apart for a short while. Neither seemed wistful about their time apart, but were instead determined to fulfill their duties. Krone stared at Ein’s back until he was gone. She then returned to the count’s office.

While wandering in the town square, Ein decided to sit on a nearby bench. Members of the Knights Guard were close by, prepping the sorcery weapons and making any final adjustments. Thankfully, the winds were mild, with only small speckles of snow dancing in the sky. Conditions were temperate enough for the knights to march without any changes to the plan. Appearing from behind the bench, Dill opened his mouth.

“Sir Ein, everything is going as scheduled. An initial platoon of Knights Guard will soon leave for the lake. Meanwhile, we will leave town alongside my father and the remaining knights.”

“It’s all going as planned,” Ein replied. “What about the adventurers?”

“As discussed earlier, they’re preparing to defend the town.”

“I guess we’re on a short break for the moment, then.”

With an exhale, Ein relaxed before facing the Ogre skull hill off in the distance.

“Now that’s a big skull,” Ein observed. “You think you could use its fangs for something?”

“I believe it’s possible,” Dill answered. “Its fangs are sharp and hefty. Simply throwing it would count as a weapon.”

“Right. If we remove the bone that holds the upper jaw in place, we could use the mouth to chomp a wyvern in two.”

“Though I wonder if there’s any practical use for a weapon like that.”

“Ah... It’s probably super heavy.”

After a bit more back-and-forth, Dill suddenly changed the tone of his voice.

“Perhaps it’s a bit late to say this, but are you sure you want to go through with this?” he asked.

“I’ve already promised you,” Ein replied. “If Upaskamuy doesn’t attack me, I’ll return right away. In that situation, the sorcery weapons that we’ve carried out will be deployed and fired separately.”

“I’m well aware of that. Even so, it’s a question I’m asking you.”

“Mmm...”

“Sir Ein, I’d like to say this once more: you’re the crown prince.” Dill approached Ein’s face. “Should even a thousand citizens be sacrificed in your stead, you *must* live. Even if me, my father, and the Knights Guard are completely annihilated, *you* cannot die.”

Ein fell silent.

“Even if Barth falls, should Ishtarica lose you, the former will pale in comparison.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t completely agree with you,” Ein finally replied.

He stood up with a refreshed “Hup!” and put his hands on his waist while gazing at the nearby members of the Knights Guard.

“Even if I *am* the target, I have no plans on losing,” Ein said.

“But should the worst occur...”

“Don’t worry,” the crown prince said, firmly speaking with the powerful aura that he occasionally employed. With the knight overpowered, Ein continued.

“Returning from the land of the dead is nothing new to me.”

The sun had gradually started to set and the skies were clear. Set to depart after the initial platoon of Knights Guard members, the crown prince’s entourage included fewer than twenty among its ranks. Aside from the prince and the Graciers, the rest of the party was filled out by members of the Knights Guard. Ein was determined to enjoy the sights and sounds of Barth up until the last second, but reality wasn’t so lax. Standing at the front of the party, Lloyd noticed the presence of a nearby monster.

“Ah, an Eight-Eyed Rabbit,” he said.

“Huh? What’s that?” Ein asked.

“Over there.”

Lloyd pointed towards a large rabbit with eight eyes that was about the size of a horse-drawn carriage.

“The name is self-explanatory,” Lloyd said.

“Huh...” Ein muttered. “Is it delici—I mean, strong?”

“Two members of the Knights Guard would make short work of this monster. It makes for a tasty meal, but the vermin won’t fight back unless it’s concerned with its life at stake. It’ll generally use its superb agility to run off. So, you won’t see much of this rabbit’s meat on the market and what is around tends to be gone before it’s anywhere near Kingsland.”

“Sir Ein, I believe taste shouldn’t be your priority in this situation,” Dill added wearily.

“Lloyd, Dill is being strict as usual,” Ein whined.

“I’m not sure what to say...” Lloyd replied, sounding a little troubled.

Laughter erupted from the accompanying Knights Guard members as the tense atmosphere had relaxed slightly. It'd been several minutes since they'd left Barth, but the entire party had been walking on pins and needles. No one could let their guard down—Upaskamuy could strike at any time, as could the other monsters prowling around. Suddenly, the Eight-Eyed Rabbit took off.

“Oh no! My dinner!” Ein said, in an attempt to lighten the mood. However, that very same mood suddenly shifted. “It seems like I was right on the money.”

“Indeed...” Lloyd said. “This is a complicated feeling... I’m glad, but sad at the same time. Everyone should run. NOW!”

The entire party made a run for it as soon as Lloyd’s order rang out. The snow-covered ground wasn’t paved with stone or dirt. In fact, it was more akin to running through soft sand. As the snow reached their ankles, everyone struggled to press forward. The ground rumbled and a cold sweat washed over the party as they felt a massive presence charging up from behind.

“Hah! Hah!” Ein panted. “Lloyd, how long until we reach the lake?!”

“At this speed, it shouldn’t take ten minutes!” Lloyd shouted back.

“Great! I guess our everyday training is paying off!”

“Indeed! But when we return to Kingsland, I’m thinking of suggesting a snowfield-focused training regimen to His Majesty! We might run into a similar situation like this in the future!”

“I’ll join that training! For next time!”

Both Lloyd and Ein were thinking about the future—clear indications that they planned on making it back alive. Dill and the rest of the Knights Guard gave a firm nod as they exerted more power into their footsteps. However, exhaustion was soon catching up to the group as their breathing grew ragged from the relentlessly snowy ground. Running out of oxygen, the party’s only hope was their allies stationed at the lake. No one wanted to entertain the possibility that the group had already fallen victim to Upaskamuy as the beast’s roars pierced their ears.

“GIIIAAAHHH!”

It seemed to be screaming and wailing in agony, just as Sage's wyvern had. Ein's party could feel the monster's bloodcurdling howls as the nearby trees shook wildly. Before they knew it, the weather had grown worse as the snowfall intensified.

"The skies!" Ein cried.

"Sir Ein!" Lloyd yelled. "The monster is simply that powerful! Though the first king left a scar or two, its abilities are not to be underestimated!"

They were even starting to hear Upaskamuy's breathing. As the trees creaked in pain upon being knocked down, the monster seemed to stomp forward while gouging out the ground beneath it. The very sound struck fear into the knight's hearts.

"GRAR! GHIII!"

The menacing monster further closed the gap. Either from nervousness or exhaustion, a knight tripped and fell onto the ground. Then in the blink of an eye, Upaskamuy was directly above him.

"You! A monster who flees from the first king is..." the knight started, trying to loudly bellow that there was nothing to fear from such a coward.

But the knight proceeded to turn around and face Upaskamuy. Its ferocity and size were far beyond expectations, glaring at its prey with bloodshot eyes. And above all...

"RAAAAAH!"

With a deafening roar, the monster raised its burly leg into the air. Ein stopped and turned to face the fallen knight. About twenty meters away from the prince, the courageous knight prepared himself to be crushed. For the first time, Ein saw Upaskamuy in all its glory. How could one capture its enormous size? It wasn't as large as the Sea Dragon, but it clearly outmatched most small fortresses in size. The monster ran on all fours, its front legs much beefier than its back ones. Upaskamuy's body was covered in pale sapphire scales that extended all the way to its lengthy, thorn-adorned tail. The creature resembled a dinosaur, with its head seemingly larger than a house.

"It's that large?!" Ein shouted.

He had never expected the beast to boast such an impressive size. The fallen knight looked like a small puppy in the face of the terrifying creature. *It doesn't have an eye! And the wings on its back are...* From a passing glance at its missing eye, asymmetrical skeletal structure, and the absent patagium from its wings, Upaskamuy had a unique appearance. As Lloyd mentioned earlier, the monster clearly hadn't healed from its encounter with the first king. *I don't even want to picture it flying!*

Had Upaskamuy attacked them from above, the party wouldn't have stood a chance. Ein could only look on, shocked by the first king's display of power; the man had managed to gouge an eye out and mangle the creature's wings.

Despite the wounds, the monster could crush the fallen knight as easily as taking a breath.

"We cannot stop!" Lloyd bellowed, gripping Ein's hands and rushing forward.

Lloyd's actions implied that there was no saving the fallen knight, but Ein broke free of the former marshal's grasp.

"That knight joined *me* on this mission!" Ein shouted. "I can't just desert him!"

This was likely the wrong course of action. The poor soul should've been left to buy more time for the rest of the party to reach the lake. However, Ein couldn't cast his feelings aside. A thick fog emanated from his arm, surrounding the fallen knight and Upaskamuy in an instant. The monster, confused by the mist, faltered for a brief moment and hesitated in lowering its foot. The knight took this opportunity to stand up and start running.

"Is that the Blackvorn's Thick Fog?!" Lloyd asked. "I don't think it ever moved so oddly!"

"I don't know!" Ein shouted back. "But I attempted to control it and it worked!"

This was puzzling, but it was likely the result of desperation. Bringing up the party from behind, the once-fallen knight couldn't help but pose a question to the prince.

"Why did you save me?!" he asked. "You mustn't falter!"

“If you don’t want me to stop, then you shouldn’t either!” Ein roared back. “Then we can all make it to the lake safely! I’m not asking for anything too difficult!”

The knight felt tears stream down his cheeks upon hearing Ein’s forceful words. He wiped his tears away and was grateful to the prince who led the party.

“You’re in for a scolding when we return to the lodge!” Lloyd yelled.

“That can’t be helped! But your scolding sounds severe, so please go easy on me!” Ein shouted back.

“Well, I can’t promise anything!”

All the while, the group had managed to put some distance between themselves and Upaskamuy. Perhaps frightened by the fog that enveloped its face or simply trying to free itself, the monster stomped its front legs and crushed the trees around it. However, the fog wouldn’t last for much longer. Once it disappeared, the monster would again rush for Ein.

“But this is enough!” Ein said, offering words of encouragement. “We can reach the lake!”

Everyone else nodded, forcing their trembling legs to brave the exhaustion and press on.

The lakeside knights were on standby just a short way away from Ein. The moment they saw the prince and his group heading their way, they immediately prepared the sorcery weapons to be fired.

“We can see them!” Lloyd shouted.

“Yeah! I’m relieved to see that the knights are all safe!” Ein yelled back.

This was no doubt thanks to all the beast’s wounds left behind by the first king.

“Sir Ein! From here on, we must lure Upaskamuy into the lake!” Lloyd said.

At that point the cannons would be fired, but only then. The lake’s sturdy sheet of ice would shatter and melt to trap Upaskamuy.

“I’ll keep running ahead,” Ein said. “I’ll run across the frozen lake. When I’m a fair distance in, it’d be great if you could fire off those cannons.”

“D-Don’t be stupid!” Lloyd replied.

“I’m not being stupid or idiotic. That monster’s after me.”

Unable to whip out a retort, Lloyd fell silent. However, he was clearly skeptical of the entire plan.

“It’s nothing compared to the Sea Dragon!” Ein assured him. “Like I said, I can breathe on this battlefield and we’ve got cannons this time! And I’ve also got you, Dill, and a whole platoon of knights by my side!”

“But!”

“Are you still not up to the task? Even with all this manpower? Are Ishtarica’s greatest warriors really not enough to handle this?”

Ein’s provoking words and sharp glare were filled with defiance. These self-centered words were generally never uttered by the boy, but they struck a chord with Lloyd’s heart.

“Very well! Then I shall buy some time so that you may run through,” Lloyd said, his tone filled with a fighting spirit like never before.

The man’s valiant, military-veteran aura reminded Ein of when they first met. Lloyd’s voice was one of few that could reach the depths of the boy’s heart.

“Buy time? But how?” Ein asked.

“Oh, I’m just copying you, Sir Ein,” Lloyd replied before turning to his son. “Dill! You mustn’t leave Sir Ein’s side no matter what happens!”

“Yessir!”

Lloyd parted ways with the duo to take up a post by the lake, proceeding to unsheathe his greatsword and close his eyes. While he sensed the presence of Upaskamuy, he paid no heed to the voices of his allies. Even Dill had never seen his father exert this level of concentration before. Upaskamuy emerged from the forest, zeroing in on Ein’s position.

“Don’t be so hasty,” Lloyd said, standing before the mighty beast. “I’ll be your

opponent.”

No matter how large his blade was, it was clearly dwarfed by the massive monster. However, Lloyd was exerting such a powerful aura that it almost served as a glimmer of hope, as if he could handle the beast all on his own. The knight made it clear that he was dead set on making it out alive.

“GHGYAAA!”

A screeching Upaskamuy raised its right leg into the air, its claws aiming for Lloyd as it swung down. Many of the knight’s jaws were agape as they reached for their commander in the hope that he would survive.

“You’re injured, dragon.” A courageous voice cut through the breeze. “I can’t believe you’re this powerful despite your injuries.”

Everyone gazed at the valiant and gallant Lloyd—the man who’d braced himself for impact. He’d taken Upaskamuy’s attack with a single swing of his greatsword.



“But this won’t last long!” Lloyd roared upon hearing his weapon crack.

Just how famous was the trusty blade of Ishtarica’s last marshal? Upaskamuy exerted even more strength as it tried to pierce the man’s body with its claws, but Lloyd wasn’t budging.

“Raaaaah!” Lloyd bellowed. “Did you think you could crush me without a single thought?!”

He parried the leg and swung it to the side, causing Upaskamuy to stagger for a split second. Despite briefly losing its balance, the ancient monster immediately twisted its body to swipe its front leg at Lloyd.

“Argh!” Lloyd said, blown back by the impact.

He was left with only minor scratches, but something felt off about his sword.

“Just once more! And that’ll be enough!” a voice rang out.

But none of that matters right now. Don’t think! Lloyd thought to himself, pumping himself up before he dashed forward. With a swift leap, the former marshall closed the gap and swung his blade into the monster’s front leg. The sounds of iron pieces being slammed together shot through the air before Lloyd realized that his sword had crumbled into pieces. However, Lloyd’s blade wasn’t the only thing to crumble—Upaskamuy’s scales were also crushed. In fact, the blade had sunk deep into the monster’s leg, causing it to bleed.

Upaskamuy let out a surprised gasp as its body wavered. The monster hadn’t thought of Lloyd as more than an insignificant pebble, but now was left to glare at the man, surprised by his strength.

“Now then, what now?” Lloyd thought to himself as he let out a chuckle.

His weapon was no longer by his side. Had his blade been sturdier, he could’ve surely fought for longer. The man was powerful enough as all his attacks connected. That was his one regret, but at the moment Upaskamuy became fixated on Lloyd...

“Over here!” Ein yelled, throwing a chunk of ice at the monster with his Phantom Hands.

He was already on the edge of the lake. As the ice hit its face, the monster let

out a deafening roar as it zeroed in on Ein. Lloyd took the opportunity to flee.

“GHI! GAAAAAH!”

It slid across the ice, quickly approaching the crown prince. As Dill gulped nervously, Ein calmly raised his hand.

“Fire!”

The moment the order went out, a collection of bright lights shot through the forest. Rays of blue, green, and crimson illuminated the nighttime sky just before a large explosion was heard. A wave of magical energy and the metallic clangs of the bullets echoed through the air, as if a colorful aurora were directly aimed at the lake. The ice beneath Upaskamuy shattered moments later and aurora lights glimmered in the fresh, fluttering diamond dust.

“GRAAAH?!”

The monster’s hind legs sank into the water as it flailed about, trying to hang on with its front legs. However, the beast was unable to support its weight; cracks immediately splintered throughout the sheet of ice.

“Hurry!” Dill urged. “Or else, we’ll fall in too!”

“I know!” Ein replied, running ahead.

Upaskamuy’s front legs approached the boys from behind, desperately attempting to crush Ein with its claws. The prince was unshaken, refusing to turn back as he ran from the beast. Though a strong surge of impact reached his body, his legs never stopped as he continued to dash across the lake’s surface. The monster’s front legs eventually sank into the water. Right on cue, Ein reacted to the splashing and slid across the ice, finally turning around.

“I appreciate that you beautifully fell into my trap,” Ein said with a grin.

He unsheathed his blade and swiftly brought it down, cracking the ice beneath his feet. The prince then placed his hand over the water and activated the Sea Dragon’s skill.

“GHI?! GAH?! ”

The whirlpool of water became the shackles that restrained the massive beast. Trapped within the brutal vortex, Upaskamuy desperately fought to

escape using its front legs. Try as it might, the beast was unable to free itself from its watery prison.

“Truly, our crown prince is a valiant man,” Lloyd said, raising his arm from outside of the lake.

On his signal, the knights manning the cannons adjusted their trajectory and took aim at Upaskamuy’s massive body.

“It might fall short of the first king’s mighty attack, but try this on for size,” Lloyd declared. “This is the result of our nation’s wisdom and the advancements we’ve continued to strive for over the past few centuries!”

He swung his arm down and the magic stone cannons released another brilliant flash of color-filled light. The lethal aurora resulted in a shock wave as the cannon shells burrowed through the beast scales before lodging themselves within its body. The power of the magic stones burned Upaskamuy.

“AAAHHHH!”

Ein and Dill covered their ears as the creature let out a screeching roar that seemed to pierce the heavens. A second round of bullets, then a third were launched as the blinding aurora filled their vision. The sight had made it difficult for the pair to keep their eyes open.

“Sir Ein, are you all right?!” Dill yelled.

“Huh? What did you say?!” Ein shouted back.

“Are you all right?!”

“I can’t hear you! I can only read your lips!”

Since Ein could be seen smiling, he seemed to be doing fine. When their ears had finally recovered from the booming noises, Ein was able to speak with Dill.

“It seems like the plan was a success,” Ein said.

“Indeed so... I was worried for a brief moment,” Dill replied.

The relentless attacks had broken several of Upaskamuy’s claws, crushed its scales, and mangled its horns. Victory seemed assured. The monster had slowly tired itself out within its watery prison, allowing Ein to ease back on the amount

of power he needed to exert.

“But the first king’s power must’ve been terrifying,” Dill observed. “We had to lay down meticulous plans and rely on the power of ten cannons to hold our own against this beast.”

“Plus, the monster’s still injured from its battle with the first king,” Ein added.

“Quite right. The first king managed to face the monster and weaken it to the point where it had to flee... I wonder just how powerful he was.”

To be frank, the first king had single-handedly wielded more power than the combined strength of Ein’s current force.

“GAAAH! GH! AAAH!”

Each cannon had already fired over ten times before the monster had finally grown silent. Upaskamuy had finally lost the last of its strength, closing its eyes as it limply floated to the water’s surface.

However, one could never be faulted for exercising too much caution. Once the cannons had blown through all of their ammo, Ein walked over to Lloyd. It was an overwhelming victory for the Ishtaricans—a hard-earned win without a casualty to be seen. The party was nothing but smiles as a result of their triumph.

“We’ve done it!” Lloyd crowed. “There surely couldn’t be a sweeter victory!”

“Yep,” Ein agreed. “And it’s all thanks to the efforts of yourself and the Knights Guard, Lloyd.”

“Nonsense. We merely followed orders. From the moment you laid out your plan, this was your mission, Sir Ein.”

“We got lucky...in more ways than one.”

If he was asked to do it all again, the prince would be thinking twice the next time around.

“Father, perhaps we should confirm the monster’s death first,” Dill suggested.

“You’re right...but the location is a bit...” Lloyd replied.

“Ah. The water seems to be a bit...chilly.”

Taking a dip in freezing water was just asking for frostbite, especially in the middle of a blizzard.

“We unleashed a relentless assault on the beast,” Lloyd said. “Even if Upaskamuy isn’t dead, it’s undoubtedly on its last legs.”

For the moment, the party was preparing to pull out. Despite their exhaustion, the knights couldn’t leave their cannons by the lake. But on the bright side, the sorcery weapons could easily be lugged back to town as all the ammo had been used up. Rather tired himself, Ein plopped onto the ground.

“Lloyd, you were amazing,” Ein said.

“Hm? Me?” he asked.

“I couldn’t believe that you took that thing’s attack head-on and crushed its scales! To think that you can do all that with just one blade.”

“Ha ha ha ha! I’m truly honored to receive such high praise from you!”

Well, the knight did regret that his sword wasn’t more durable. If the blade was a slightly sturdier weapon, Lloyd might have been able to cleave off a leg...or two.

“I’m sure we all have the first king to thank for wearing it down a bit first,” Lloyd said. “Now then, I’ll be off to issue a few orders to the Knights Guard. For now, you and Dill may rest for a while longer.”

“Okay,” Ein replied.

After a well-earned break, Ein was eager to return to town and share the good news with Krone.

“We haven’t even set foot in the Demon Lord’s former territory, but I already feel like I’ve done everything I set out to do. I’m exhausted,” Ein remarked.

“I am as well,” Dill admitted. “But we haven’t been able to learn a single thing about your health or the red foxes.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to add an extra rest day to the trip, would it?”

“At the very least, I’m wholeheartedly for it.”

“Then I’ll discuss it with Krone.”

Ein had another reason to return quickly; Upaskamuy's death needed confirmation, but they'd also need a boat for that. In any case, they had to return to town at once. Ein glanced at the surface of the lake.

"Hm?" he muttered.

"Is something the matter?" Dill asked.

"I was just surprised to see the lake starting to freeze so quickly."

The shattered ice was slowly forming a thin film over the water and freezing over.

"The sun has practically set, and it's only going to get colder from here," Dill explained.

"Ah, makes sense. Fair enough."

While looking up at the sky, Ein noticed that it was filled with the faint lights of twinkling stars. Suddenly, crackling noises reverberated throughout the forest.

"What was that?!" Ein yelled.

"It doesn't seem like Upaskamuy has moved..." Dill muttered.

"Then what made that sound?"

The crown prince stood up, narrowing his eyes at Upaskamuy's visage before focusing on the water's surface. The crackling could still be heard—in fact, it was growing louder. The icy film started to grow even thicker while spreading throughout the lake's surroundings.

"Lloyd!" Ein yelled, trying to tell the knight that the monster was still alive.

"RAAAH! GAAAAAH!"

As the beast roared, it unleashed a blustery wind capable of freezing one's eyelashes. The lake's surface froze instantly, allowing the monster to brace itself and escape its watery prison. Back in its bearings, Upaskamuy immediately proceeded to zero in on Ein.

"HAH! GRAR! AAAHHH!"

Angrier than ever before, the beast lunged right at Ein. With the cannons out

of ammo, the fear of imminent defeat quickly flashed over the boy's mind. However, he suddenly cooked up a new plan of attack; it was far too early to give up.

"I can beat it..." Ein murmured.

He still had another weapon in his arsenal. While Dill was reaching out to pull Ein to safety, Lloyd was rushing to them. The prince was so focused that the Graciers appeared to him as if they were moving in slow motion. The prince looked away from the monster, turning his attention to Barth's beloved small hill.

"Over here!" Ein shouted, running ahead as the party followed behind him.

Mere moments later, Upaskamuy was hot on Ein's heels. However, the prince slammed his Phantom Hands into the ice, simultaneously crushing it while propelling the boy forward. The surface started cracking as the monster's hind leg fell back into the water. No one was going to let this chance slip through their fingers, prompting the party to keep their tired and aching bodies moving.

"Sir Ein, no!" Lloyd yelled. "The town isn't in that direction!"

"And that's just fine!" Ein shouted back with ease.

"Wh-What are you planning on doing?!"

"We have just the weapon to finish it off! But first, we need to hurry up!"

From the moment the group entered the forest, loud rumbles were echoing from behind them.

"GAAAAAH!"

Upaskamuy's cries were drenched in a rage-filled determination to kill Ein.

Ein desperately charged through the difficult-to-navigate forest, never forgetting the ominous presence closing in on him. He reached a slope and breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that he was headed in the right direction. The foliage above him started to thin as the monument to the first king's victory came into view.

"Since the first king couldn't clean up Upaskamuy for us, I don't think anyone

will mind if we use one of his monuments to finish the job!”

The Ogre’s skull was said to be an important asset to the nation, a symbol of the first king’s strength and valiant deeds. As Ein’s party reached the skull’s resting place, Dill finally caught on to the prince’s plan.

“A-Are you being serious?!” Dill asked.

“Like never before!” Ein shouted back.

The skull was the only real “weapon” left for the Ishtaricans to use as they had no other tools up to the task. If he was going to absorb Upaskamuy’s stone, he’d need to find it first. But unlike the Sea Dragon, the beast’s stone was protected by thick scales and a sturdy frame.

“That’s a dangerous idea!” Dill protested.

“A bit too late for that, I think!” Ein replied.

The crown prince sped up as he raced to the hill. The boy’s incredible stamina caught the former marshal and his knights off guard. In fact, Ein’s physical capabilities surpassed that of most Knights Guard members. Knowing that Ein wouldn’t stop, Dill shifted his focus to assisting his prince in any way he could.

“So, I’ve got a request for you, Dill,” Ein said, seemingly in response to the knight’s thoughts.

“Yes, Your Highness!”

“It’s super important.”

Dill gulped and silently waited for Ein to continue.

“Once I’ve dealt with Upaskamuy, I’m not gonna be able to move a muscle,” the prince said. “So when that happens, I’d be pleased if you’d carry me on your back!”

Dill snickered. “Of course. That, I shall do. I shall carry you anywhere you wish!”

Speeding ahead, Ein set foot on the hill to find the massive skull surrounded by flecks of silvery snow. The Ogre’s massive maw was still wide open, filled with rows of razor-sharp teeth displayed for all to see. However, the horn on

the beast's head caught Ein's attention as it could surely land a fatal blow if used against the dragon.

"GHIII! AAAHHHH!"

Upaskamuy emerged from the forest and was right on Ein's tail. Meanwhile, the Graciers and the Knights Guard broke through the tree line just a ways away. With the prince locked in its sights once more, the dragon leaped forward to catch up with him.

For his part, Ein continued racing to the skull.

"The Ogre looks like it was once a powerful monster," Ein muttered.

And yet, it had fled from Upaskamuy. Just how powerful would this dragon be if its eyes and wings were still intact? The mere thought caused Ein to shudder—it might have been more powerful than the Sea Dragon.

"Yeah, I guess the first king was just that strong! Way too strong!"

Thanks to the wounds left behind by the first king, Ein had been able to last at least this long against the dragon. However, the prince was determined to land the final blow.

"GAAAH! HAAAAAH!"

The boy was within the monster's striking distance, prompting Upaskamuy to swipe at him with one of its front legs. Unfortunately for the beast, it had lost sight of the boy among a sea of white fog, angering it further.

Ein inhaled deeply before bellowing, "Over here!"

Upaskamuy's face was surrounded by fog, but the enraged beast could still hear the boy's voice and charged in his direction. Strong in his own right, Ein was certain that he could kill the beast. Once Upaskamuy sensed the boy's presence nearby, it swung its front leg once again.

"I win," Ein muttered, standing at the foot of the Ogre's lower jaw.

The dragon's arm practically scraped the ground as it reached through the air. At the same time, Ein used his Phantom Hand to climb atop the skull before using one of his tendrils to whack the bone that propped open the Ogre's jaw. With a low rumble, the upper jaw slammed down on Upaskamuy's hand as it

reached into the maw of its former prey.

“AAAHHH?!”

A horrifying snap echoed throughout the air just before the dragon let out an agonizing yelp. Without mercy, the skull’s mighty maw had pierced Upaskamuy’s scales and crushed its arm. While the dragon faltered from the immense pain, Ein put all of his power into the Phantom Hands in an effort to rip off the Ogre’s horn.

“Raaaah!” Ein shouted, bracing himself.

A huge crack formed at the base of the horn as Ein ripped it away. Despite using his Phantom Hands to do the deed, the horn’s weight had the prince trembling. A strained smile formed on Ein’s face as his body reached its limit. With no time left to waste, the boy pushed his aching body to follow his commands, pouring his magic into the Phantom Hands.

“Faaall!”

Ein flung the horn at the beast’s throat with all the power he could muster. Just moments later, a dull squelch could be heard. The horn had hit its target.

“AH... AHHH.”

This time around, Upaskamuy truly was on the verge of death. Perhaps due to the horn’s forceful removal or simply the ravages of time, the Ogre’s skull crumbled within a few seconds. However, the skull had deeply wounded the dragon and revealed a glimmering magic stone. Despite its faint glittering, the stone appeared to be scratched.

“Is that the magic stone?”

The prince squinted upon realizing that the dragon was crawling on the ground, trying to escape. *It’s vitality is shocking!*

“But this is absolutely the end!”

Ein launched his Phantom Hands towards the dragon’s magic stone and started to absorb it, just as he had with the Sea Dragon’s stone. He was worried that he’d only accelerate his monsterification, but cast those thoughts aside to focus on absorbing the stone. Upaskamuy only had a bit of life left in it; that

flame was extinguished once the absorption was complete.

“All right.”

The dragon would likely never move again. As a wave of exhaustion rushed over his body, Ein mumbled a few words before passing out.

“Krone’s prediction...was wrong...”

Upaskamuy’s stone was absolutely delicious; its flavors were part of a story that the prince would bring home with him as a souvenir. In the moments before Dill caught him, Ein closed his eyes and indulged in this sweet victory.

Chapter Five: The Demon Lord's Old Territory

The sunrise rose to greet White Night Castle as the clacking of footsteps could be heard echoing throughout its halls. Whoever was walking about, it seemed that their footsteps were quite restless, suddenly stopping before starting up again.

"U-Um, Dame Chris... This is rather hard for me to say...but, uh...I have a message for you from Lady Olivia."

"From Lady Olivia?" the marshal asked.

Did something happen to Ein? Worry flashed across Chris's mind, but Olivia's message had entirely something else in mind. It was a complaint.

"She said, 'Your footsteps are horribly loud. Go feed the twins some,'" Martha replied.

The color faded from Chris's eyes as her mouth opened and the rest of her face morphed into a melancholic expression. She hated herself when she ended up causing a heap of trouble for others.

"Pardon me, Martha..." the marshal said. "Were my footsteps really that loud?"

The marshal looked like a puppy left out in the rain, making it difficult for the maid to truthfully reply. But since she was sent at the behest of her master, Martha was unable to lie to the elf.

"I suppose...it was just a *little* noisy," Martha said gently, trying to be as considerate as possible.

This also implied that if Martha found the footsteps to be a little noisy, it was likely extremely loud in the presence of others. Chris stood there dejected while Martha handed her a bucket.

"Lady Olivia asked me to give this to you," Martha said. "It contains today's feed."

“I guess she’s telling me to cool my head...” Chris muttered.

The bucket was filled with fish. Since the twin Sea Dragons were used to hunting on their own, they required very little food from the castle. Whatever food they received was carefully adjusted to ensure the pair wasn’t overfed.

“Thank you,” Chris said. “I shall be off, then.”

As the marshal sadly shuffled away, it was clear that she looked quite lonely.

“Hm, perhaps the rumors of the servants can’t simply be waved away,” Martha mumbled.

A rumor had been circulating around the castle: Chris might have seen Ein as a potential partner. When Martha laid eyes on the mooney marshal, she felt that there might have been some truth to the gossip.

Chris headed outside the castle with a bucket in hand. The summer heat made mornings swelteringly hot to the point that one would be drenched in sweat from sitting still. She arrived at the waterways and saw the twins playfully swimming around, waiting for their meal.

“All right, it’s mealtime!” she said, scattering the fish on the water’s surface.

The baby dragons eagerly chomped on the fish, but it seemed that they were a bit cramped within the waterways these days. If the pair kept growing, they wouldn’t be able to remain within the castle’s walls for much longer.

“Are you going to grow up big and strong like the Sea Dragon I knew? It was large, but I suppose you two still have a long way to go.”

The marshal crouched on top of a nearby shrub and gazed at the dragon as she rested her face on her hands. The Sea Dragon battle off the shore of Magna was still fresh in her mind, so it was easy for the marshal to remember when Ein swooped in to save her. The prince was just as smart as his mother and aunt, but the boy’s free-spirited nature led him to act in unexpected ways that often worried the marshal. But as of late, Chris felt as if she couldn’t keep her eyes off him for other reasons.

“Could you two pray that I accompany His Highness on his next journey?”

“Rawr? Raaawr?”

“Rar!”

The two stopped eating fish for a moment and adorably wiggled their fins at Chris. It was clear that they were trying to cheer her up.

“Heh heh... Thank you. I might be the first person who’s been consoled by a pair of Sea Dragons.”

As a token of thanks for their kindness, Chris dumped all the fish in her bucket in one go. The happy dragons eagerly chomped away at their meal.

Meanwhile in Barth, Ein heard humming so pleasant that he wanted to simply continue listening to it. When he woke up, the prince could tell that he’d been tucked into his bed. He saw the morning rays of the sun peeking in through the window, tempting him to continue dozing off. But he fought against the urge and managed to sit up.

“Are you awake?” a voice said, coming from by his bed.

“Krone?” Ein asked. “Huh? Why am I here?”

He glanced around and noticed that he was in one of the lodge’s bedrooms. Before Krone answered, she approached Ein and held him tightly.



"I was so, so worried," she said.

"I'm sorry," Ein apologized. "But I thought that it was the only way."

"I know."

For a brief moment, the two shared in each other's warmth. Once satisfied, they peeled themselves apart before Krone happily tilted her head to one side and squinted. She seemed to have suddenly remembered something as she proceeded to grab a letter from the nearby desk and quietly hand it to Ein.

"It's from the royal capital," she explained. "There was a letter for me and another one for you."

"It arrived so quickly," Ein said. "The tracks are still destroyed."

"Quick? Not at all. It took more than a day for you to finally open your eyes."

"You're kidding..."

"I'm not. Would you like me to check and see if you're still dreaming?"

Is she going to pinch my cheek? Ein nodded. Krone approached him and gently pecked him on the cheek.

"What do you think?" she asked.

What do I think? Her soft, warm lips and the sweet fragrance filling his mind indicated that the feeling was all too real. Possibly having an inkling into Ein's thoughts, she flashed a mischievous smile.

"So, this isn't the day after I defeated Upaskamuy..." Ein muttered.

"It's the day after that," Krone finished.

"Then I guess I really did sleep in."

No wonder they sent a letter. The prince noticed that it was from Warren. If it was a letter from his grandfather, Ein would've been tempted to never open it. He opened it up and scanned its contents. The letter began with a polite greeting and a word of relief that the party had safely arrived at Barth. Warren had included a brief warning about the Demon Lord's former territory as well. The letter's first page was seemingly innocuous, but it felt like the calm before the storm.

“I see... Mhm. All right...” Ein mumbled.

On the second page, the chancellor innocently touched upon the goings-on of the castle’s staff. Silverd had apparently been in a foul mood while preparing his fists for whatever reason. Warren asked the prince if he knew the reason behind the king’s inexplicable anger. Of course, Ein didn’t know what to say to that—he could think of more than one reason for his grandfather’s mood. Olivia and Chris were apparently acting the same as usual. In other words, the two ladies hadn’t been told of the troubles in Barth. The letter ended with a few words that had the prince breathing a sigh of relief: Silverd was going to give Ein a good scolding, but as the boy’s grandfather instead of as the king with a punishment in tow. Finally, Warren included one last tidbit about the Demon Lord’s former territory.

“The chancellor says that he’ll trust Lloyd’s judgment and allow me to join the investigation with his permission,” Ein read.

“I think Sir Warren changed his tune because of the report I sent,” Krone said.

“A report?”

“I told him all about Professor Oz’s letter. He must’ve deemed it meaningful for you to join.”

“Ah, no wonder...”

In addition, the mysterious presence that the investigations prior had noted was attributed to the now-defeated Upaskamuy. Ein then thought back to the monster.

“Speaking of—Krone, your predictions were wrong,” he said. “The Upaskamuy’s stone was delicious, like a steak I’d never had before in my life.”

“You idiot,” Krone said with a smile, relieved to see that Ein was back to his old self. “Taste aside, I wonder if your stats have changed?”

“Ah, then why don’t we take a look?”

He took out his status card from his pocket and noticed one difference.

Ein von Ishtarica

[Job] Named
[Stamina] 4055
[Magical Power] –
[Attack] –
[Defense] 952
[Agility] 395
[Skills] Dark Knight, Grand Sorcery, Ocean Current, Thick Fog, Toxin Decomposition EX, Absorb, Gift of Training, Ice Dragon

He found a new skill: Ice Dragon. Other than that, his stats hadn't changed since his battle with the Sea Dragon. The two looked at each other before letting out a forced laugh at the newfound skill.

After finishing up with his status card, Ein cleaned himself up and left the room to meet with the Graciers.

"Hi, guys," Ein said.

The pair were sitting on a sofa as they ate breakfast, but the food quickly fell out of their agape jaws. No doubt in part to the crown prince's shocking and sudden appearance.

"Krone, why don't we have breakfast too?" Ein suggested. "We'll eat wherever there's open space."

"All right. I shall relay that to the lodge's staff," his advisor said.

For better or for worse, Ein was his usual self and even the former marshal found himself at a loss for words.

"Dill," Ein suddenly said.

"Huh? Uh, yes, Your Highness?"

"What happened to Upaskamuy's corpse? I feel like its body could be scavenged for materials."

"Th-That's been left up to the royal family!"

"I see. Then I guess I'll have the others decide for me."

Dill couldn't hide just how shocked he was by his prince's calmness, but the knight managed to nod along all the same.

"Sir Ein. First, I'd like to congratulate you on your speedy recovery," Lloyd said.

"Thanks. You really saved me back there, Lloyd."

"I feel I'm not worthy of such high praise. How are you feeling?"

"If you told me to fight a Sea Dragon right now, I think I could take it on."

"I see. I'm genuinely relieved to hear that."

After some small talk, Ein sat in an open spot on the sofa.

"Why don't we discuss some work after breakfast?" Ein asked.

"Hm? I believe you can leave the rest to us..." Lloyd said.

"I plan on doing that, but I can't let you handle the Demon Lord's former territory on your own."

"A-Are you planning on heading there?! Yes, Sir Warren has given me the authority to allow you to join us, but it's only been a few days since you fought Upaskamuy!"

"But I'm already recovered and I can't keep lying around."

"I'm against it. There's no need for you to come along, Sir Ein."

"You think so? But Professor Oz's letter suggested that I come along."

"Th-That might be true, but it's still much too dangerous."

"But Count Barth did point out that the monsters are much less aggressive at this time of year. And given that the draconic root of all this fuss is gone, I feel that I should be able to go."

Lloyd had no room to argue. Just as Chris had said, Upaskamuy had been the very presence lurking within the Demon Lord's former territory. The area was now relatively safe, as the dragon no longer posed a threat. With the professor's recommendation in tow, the former marshal was in no position to refuse his prince's request.

“Shouldn’t you be running about town and gleaning information from the adventurers, Sir Ein?” Dill asked. “I believe it’ll be much safer for you to do that with Lady Krone by your side. On another note, the cannons are out of ammunition as well.”

“But that could be replenished easily,” Ein countered. “There’s an abundance of the necessary magic stones and metallic casings within Barth.”

This was also true. Lloyd finally gave a reluctant nod.

“Very well, but I’m not permitting you to push yourself too far.” Lloyd finally relented.

“I know,” the prince replied. “I’ll follow your orders. And? How do you two feel? How long should we allow the Knights Guard to rest before we can depart?”

“Dill and I are fine. I believe our men are ready to go as well. We knights don’t have a moment to be exhausted when you’ve already fully recovered, Sir Ein.”

“Great. Then let’s hash out the details after breakfast.”

In the end, the two knights couldn’t go against the crown prince’s words. The recent fight must’ve made Ein much more formidable as he steadily continued to grow more and more worthy of the king’s title. Not to mention that the boy’s aura had become all the more overwhelming.

A few days later, the prince’s party was walking to the Demon Lord’s former domain on the coldest morning Barth had seen yet. It’d been around three hours since the party had left town. They were surrounded by a winter wonderland of trees and snow as large birds and wyverns flew overhead. Despite the activity above them, the party hadn’t run into many monsters. The beasts they did encounter quickly ran off upon noticing the large party that they would be faced with.

“Isn’t it going a bit too smoothly?” Ein asked.

Lloyd laughed. “The recent Upaskamuy incident has caused everyone to flee with their tail between their legs. All the strong monsters of this area were

hiding in fear of that ancient beast.”

“I see... But it’s been three days give or take.”

“They’re monsters. They can stay hidden for weeks if they wish.”

It’s not as though Ein had hoped for a battle. He was just anxious about the road ahead because things were going a bit *too* smoothly.

“By the way...” Dill started. “I visited Count Barth’s manor yesterday and mentioned that you’d be headed for the Demon Lord’s former territory, Sir Ein. He seemed awfully surprised.”

“I don’t blame him,” Lloyd replied. “We were just as shocked.”

“Truly. I went around asking adventurers for any pertinent information and heard something rather interesting.”

“About me?” Ein asked.

“Quite so. They seem to think you’ve got the kingly potential to perhaps surpass the first king.”

“Hm... It’s quite insolent, but I can understand where they’re coming from,” Lloyd said.

“Come on... You can’t say that,” Ein scolded.

However, Dill and the entire Knights Guard were in agreement with the former marshal.

“But I can see why the adventurers would praise you,” Lloyd said.

“Lloyd, you say that, but—” Ein started.

“Sir Ein, it’s exactly as my father says,” Dill interjected. “You single-handedly defeated Upaskamuy and accomplished many other amazing feats. Looking at that all together, I can’t blame people for comparing you to him.”

“Even so,” Ein insisted. “I don’t think some will take kindly to weighing me against the first king.”

Lloyd and Dill gave a strained laugh. No one was belittling the first king or trying to flatter Ein. The crown prince’s past achievements had simply made him worthy of the comparisons.

As the group continued on cheerfully, the trees in front of them rustled. From the thickets emerged an Eight-Eyed Rabbit.

“Ah!” Ein gasped.

A delicious feast! It was the only thought that filled his mind as he eagerly unsheathed his blade.

“Boh!” The rabbit gave an unusual cry before it disappeared in an instant.

There was no real reason for the group to give chase, and Ein had no choice but to give up.

“Ack! Food!” Ein cried regretfully.

“S-Sir Ein, it’s called an Eight-Eyed Rabbit...” Dill replied wearily.

“But it’s delicious, isn’t it? It’d be great if we can hunt one right now.”

“I shall ask my mother to eventually buy some for the castle. Please endure it for now.”

“Th-That makes me impatient!”

“I don’t mind if you chase it around, but I must report that back to Lady Krone.”

“All right, let’s march ahead!”

The crown prince didn’t want to be known as the guy who chased monsters for their delicious flesh. He wasn’t sure what kind of scolding he’d receive, and above all, he was embarrassed.

“I appreciate your understanding,” Dill said.

“Ha ha ha ha! It’s great to hear you’re having fun, Sir Ein!” Lloyd bellowed before he shifted his attention to another subject. “Hm?”

“I’m not having fun...” Ein muttered before he also noticed an oddity. “Huh?”

The two silently stared ahead as Dill finally sensed the same presence.

“Dill, stay by Sir Ein’s side,” Lloyd ordered.

“Yessir.”

Something was lurking in the shadows. It couldn’t be seen just yet, but

something was staring at them. However...

"It's gone," Ein said.

The presence had disappeared just as suddenly as it arrived, as though it had never been there in the first place. The three men glanced at each other, wondering if their minds were just playing tricks on them.

"It might be a wary beast of some sort," Lloyd remarked.

"Yeah," Ein agreed. "Maybe Upaskamuy still has a lasting impact."

"Or it might be the Eight-Eyed Rabbit that you missed earlier."

"Don't say that. I'll be tempted to chase after it."

"Then I'll just report that to Lady Krone, as Dill had mentioned earlier... Ah, we're almost there."

From between the trees, a seemingly deserted village suddenly appeared before them.

"Wow..." Ein murmured.

Snow had gently fallen upon the group until now, but it had now completely disappeared within the territory. The clouds dissipated with every step they took, making way for clear blue skies.

"It feels kind of warm," Ein said, unfastening his bulky, cold-resistant attire.

It was as though spring had arrived for this area alone.

The group took a few more steps forward and the Demon Lord's former domain appeared before the boy in all its glory. Not a single breeze blew the dead trees around them. In fact, it was so dark that even the air appeared to carry a gray tinge.

"This must be it," Ein said.

At the end of the forest was a dilapidated city that contained hints of a once-vibrant civilization. Ein was almost perplexed by this sight as he looked up and discovered a building towering in the domain's depths.

"Is that...White Night?" Ein murmured, unable to suppress his awe as the royal castle's name left his lips. "Lloyd, that's...the Demon Castle, right?"

“Indeed so.”

Why? Why does the Demon Castle so closely resemble White Night? They looked so similar, that it went beyond a simple resemblance. It was as though Ein was staring at a mirror image of his home. The only thing that differed was the color. If White Night was a knight in shining armor of the same color, the Demon Castle was a warrior clad in black armor. Even the castle gates were a spitting image of the gates in Ein’s home. The prince only had more questions, but he couldn’t help but feel a hint of nostalgia.

“I don’t understand,” Ein said.

However, he was compelled by the urge to set foot on the stone pavement and tour the city. A torrent of sadness and joy flooded his mind, leaving the prince unable to organize his thoughts. However, one thing was clear: he was happy that he was able to be here.

The prince took a deep breath. His surroundings were devoid of color, as though time had stopped. There were no signs of life nor the smallest gust of wind. Even inanimate objects appeared to be lifeless.

This isn’t right... Ein thought to himself.

“Is this feeling...”

Were the Dullahan and the Elder Lich feeling nostalgia? He thought that he felt his chest waver for a split second, but there were no signs of his body being manipulated like before.

“If you want to say a few words, I’ll lend you my body,” Ein mumbled.

Suddenly, he felt something well up from the depths of his body. Had the pair awoken? *Please don’t go on a rampage*, Ein prayed as his mouth opened without his consent. What did the pair plan to say?

“I’m home.”

The words were short and concise as the voices of both a man and a woman were expelled from Ein’s mouth. The Graciers were nearby and deduced that the voices they’d heard belonged to the monsters. The moment those words had left Ein’s lips, something had changed.

“I can feel...a gust of wind,” Dill said.

But it didn’t end there. Seedlings sprouted from the dead trees and the chirping of birds could be heard. And finally...

“Impossible! These gates couldn’t be opened for centuries!” Lloyd gasped.

With an earthshaking rumble, the gates of the Demon Castle slowly started to yawn wide open, as though life had finally been breathed into this seemingly dead land. Everyone was at a loss for words at this inexplicable phenomenon.

Ein and his entourage hadn’t encountered a single problem since from the moment they’d set foot within the Demon Lord’s former domain. Around nightfall, all was quiet as the party was setting up camp. They couldn’t bring themselves to sleep within the ruins, much less within the halls of the now-open Demon Castle. So, the party had decided to set up their tents. Within his own tent, the prince lounged atop a camping bed.

“Magical tools sure are something,” he said.

Despite its temporary nature, the bed was quite comfortable and nestled in the interior of a tent more luxurious than any historic lodge. It was all thanks to the magical tools created with the cutting-edge technology of Ist. The spacious tent was around the size of eight tatami mats from Ein’s past life. The boy had no complaints to make about his comfortable abode. The investigation would commence tomorrow, and his current accommodations were more than enough to soothe the prince’s tired bones after a long day of marching. Suddenly, he heard the sound of scraping metal from outside of his tent.

“Hm?”

It was the sound of armor-clad knights walking around, a noise Ein was quite familiar with.

“Who could it be? Is something the matter?”

When he approached the entrance, he heard another sound—something crawled around as something large crashed into the ground. Thinking that he’d just heard an accident, the crown prince hastily left the tent.

“What is this?”

Before him were a pair of large, white clumps.

“Those are...Eight-Eyed Rabbits.”

The monsters didn't move an inch and appeared to have deep gashes in their necks upon closer inspection. When he touched their bodies, Ein noticed that the beasts had already run cold. Their blood seemed to have also been removed, as neither rabbit seemed to be bleeding.

“Who hunted...I mean, who brought this to me?”

The prince looked around, but he was the only person nearby.

“To everyone at White Night, I think I've encountered a poltergeist haunting the Demon Lord's former domain.”

The crown prince's first thought was to ask Lloyd if he had anything to do with this.

A short while later, the Graciers joined Ein in front of his tent.

“It's been killed masterfully,” Lloyd observed, staring in admiration at the technique used to slay the pair.

The prince had already asked members of the Knights Guard about it, but no one seemed to have a clue as to what he was on about.

“There's only one incision on their necks,” Lloyd noted. “There are no signs of poison being employed in the kill. Seems like they died from a single exacting wound... It feels like an offering.”

“I see,” Ein replied. “So I guess I'm being warmly welcomed into the Demon Lord's old territory. Now that's hospitality! Don't you feel the same, Dill?”

“Unfortunately, no,” the young officer admitted. “I can only feel that this was a warning.”

“I share Dill's sentiment,” Lloyd added. “Now then, what shall we do?”

“Why don't we dress these monsters for now?” Ein suggested.

“H-Hm?” Lloyd asked.

“They're delicious, right? You told me so, Lloyd.”

Lloyd and Dill exchanged a troubled glance.

“Father, I suppose this is how Sir Ein is,” Dill said. “It can’t be helped.”

“That’s right,” Ein said. “And I’ve already confirmed that it hasn’t been poisoned. Why don’t we cook it up and share it with everyone?”

Was this really safe? Could it have been a trap? The two knights were trying to come to their own conclusion while Ein held the rabbits in the air with his Phantom Hands.

“Lloyd, can you dress a rabbit?” Ein asked.

“I can with ease, but...” Lloyd muttered before he relented, sighing. “Very well.”

“F-Father?! Are you sure it’s safe?!” Dill yelped.

“This feels far too awkward to be part of a trap. Since Sir Ein has already confirmed that there’s no poison, I *suppose* we can eat it.”

“It’ll help raise everyone’s morale too,” Ein added.

Not to mention that these monsters would make for a delicious feast. Lloyd unsheathed his blade and proceeded to remove the rabbits’ hides.

“Dill, can you call everyone over?” Ein asked. “I want to make a fire and grill these.”

Dill sighed. “As you wish.”

He still wasn’t completely on board with this idea, but he left to call for the Knights Guard.

“The fat here is marbled beautifully,” Lloyd remarked. “Please have a look.”

Ein was simply excited to eat some meat. He gulped eagerly.

“Well then, we must polish off the meat without wasting a single morsel,” the prince replied.

It was more of a midnight snack at this time of night, but the prince enjoyed his magnificent feast alongside his men. With all the meat gobbled up and the party’s bellies satisfied, they all returned to their tents. Ein retired to his bed, lying down with a blissful smile before being whisked away to the land of

dreams.

When Ein awoke, he was greeted by an unfamiliar ceiling. The dark room had the perfect atmosphere for romance, but the boy snapped himself back to reality.

“Can someone tell me?” Ein asked. “Where am I?”

He got up and realized that he had been sleeping on a sofa—no longer in his tent. Ein looked around to discover that the romantic hideaway was filled with luxurious furniture and an obsidian rug lay on the floor. The door then suddenly opened, giving Ein a good shock.

“Ah, have you awoken?”

“A-Armor?!” Ein gasped.

Glowing blue veins ran along the suit of armor, including the helmet’s face. The veins kept Ein from making out just who was within the armor.

“Ah, yes, my body is made of armor,” the person replied. “Now then, why don’t you have a drink?”

The mysterious talking suit of armor placed a teacup by Ein before silently stepping back and standing solemnly.

“What is this?” Ein asked.

“Ah, pardon me. I’ve brought you tea brewed from an Elder Tree’s leaves.”

Ein could only guess that it was something amazing.

“Vorns that have lived for almost a thousand years are called Elder Trees,” the armor explained. “It’s indeed a very valuable ingredient, but I’ve prepared it just for a man of your caliber. Please enjoy.”

“I don’t quite get it, but I guess I’ll have a sip,” Ein said.

He felt like nothing would progress until he had the tea, so Ein just decided to go with the flow. *Poison won’t work on me anyway* was the only excuse that the prince could think of. Truthfully, he thought he had no chance of escaping the suit of armor anyway; it emanated a powerful aura that far outclassed Lloyd’s

strength. Not only was the seemingly powerful armor devoid of any openings; it seemed like it could take Ein's head at any moment. And so, Ein gave up and put the cup to his lips.

"Ah, this is delicious," the crown prince remarked.

"I'm pleased to hear that. If you can calm yourself down a bit more, I shall return you to your knights soon."

"R-Right! Where am I?!"

This was no time for Ein to relax while sipping tea.

"If you promise to finish the entire cup of tea, I shall tell you," the suit of armor said.

Ein didn't have the upper hand here—he was in a mysterious room with nothing much to protect him.

"Fine," Ein relented. "I'll drink it all. Could you please tell me where we are?"

"Certainly. Now then, where shall I start?"

"From the beginning, of course."

The suit of armor took a few steps forward and approached the boy. "Firstly, I have brought you here to offer you a word of warning. I recommend that you refrain from using the powers of Lord Ramza and Lady Misty."

"Sorry, what?"

"Ah, please pardon me. The Dullahan and the Elder Lich are respectively known as Lord Ramza and Lady Misty."

"I see... So you're saying that I can't use my Phantom Hands?"

"Precisely so. Your vessel is still quite unstable and should an accident occur, I'm unsure if we can defend against it."

Ein silently nodded while he sipped his tea.

"I apologize for forcibly bringing you here," the armor said, sounding like an oddly polite knight.

"Were you the one who brought me the Eight-Eyed Rabbit?" Ein asked.

“Precisely so. I saw you look rather vexed when you let the monster escape.”

“So the feeling that we were being watched back then was...”

“Ah, I believe that was me.”

It then clicked for Ein—the odd presence Chris had felt wasn’t Upaskamuy, but this suit of living armor. Indeed, the threat hadn’t been neutralized.

“Ah, apologies for the belated introduction,” the armor said, standing straight. “I am Marco, Vice Captain of the Demon Lord’s Imperial Guard. However, we’re more colloquially known as the Black Knights. As you’ve probably gathered from my visage, I am Undead, and a Living Armor at that.”

Ein’s attention had been consumed with each and every new term that Marco dropped. *Then I must be in...* The prince was sure that he was currently in the Demon Castle. But if he were to rephrase things a touch, Ein had been kidnapped and confined within the Demon Castle’s walls. He knew that it would be no small feat to ascertain the Living Armor’s motives, but the prince was keen to take advantage of his current predicament.

“Sir Marco,” Ein started.

“Please, just call me Marco.”

“Marco, what did you mean when you said that ‘my vessel is unstable’?”

“That is the best way I can explain it to you as your vessel has yet to stabilize. I apologize for the lack of a better explanation.”

“A-A ‘vessel?’ A ‘vessel,’ huh...”

Ein’s gut was telling him that Marco was speaking the truth without holding anything back. Even if he pried further, the prince doubted that he’d receive a better answer.

“All right, I’ll set that aside for the moment,” Ein said. “What did you mean about ‘an accident you’re not sure you could defend against’?”

Marco’s voice took on a more serious tone. “There’s a possibility that your core will go berserk...as was the case with Her Majesty.”

The image of the Demon Lord Arshay suddenly flashed across the boy’s mind.

“You’re saying there’s a chance I could lose myself and go on a rampage? Just as the Demon Lord did?”

“That is correct. The stink of that foul beast’s curse has yet to fully dissipate, and still hangs over this land. I hope you will forgive me for not broaching this topic.”

“Foul beast?”

Ein racked his mind for a moment before realizing that this “beast” was the very same creature he’d come to investigate.

“It seems you’ve caught on,” Marco said.

“Yes, unfortunately...” Ein replied, using this brief moment to finish his tea with a single gulp.

“The Elder Tree’s leaves are known for soothing one’s nerves along with protecting their psyche. They make for the perfect cup of tea to sip on in a situation such as this.”

Marco knelt down to Ein’s level.

“But why?” the prince asked. “Why are you trying to protect me by warning me of this?”

What reason did the Living Armor show such concern for this boy? It only left Ein with more questions. Ishtarica was locked in bitter conflict with the Demon Lord when she went berserk. Was it necessary for Arshay’s followers to be so kind and considerate to their enemy’s crown prince?

“Is that what plagues your mind?” Marco asked. “I believe that it’s only natural for a knight to serve the royal family.”

“You’re not wrong, but I’m a member of *Ishtarica*’s royal family,” Ein replied. Hence, there’d be no reason for such treatment.

However, Marco’s reply was tinged with a hint of confusion. “Of course. I believe that it’s only natural that I serve *Ishtarica*’s royal family.”

“Your chivalrous spirit is commendable.”

The pair were representatives of two entirely different nations, but the Living

Armor remained steadfastly loyal in the face of another royal family. The vice captain's spirit was indeed admirable. However, Ein was aware that the mighty couple within him were likely involved. After all, both the Dullahan and the Elder Lich were trusted members of the Demon Lord's inner circle. Likely sensing the couple's presence, Marco had chosen to treat the boy with the utmost kindness and offer a word or two of advice.

"I'm truly honored to receive such high praise from someone such as yourself," Marco said.

In any case, this Living Armor was not likely to be an enemy.

"You should be especially wary now. After all, that filthy beast has been waiting in the wings for your existence to coalesce once again. You're an important piece in their scheme to exact revenge on *Ishtarica's* royal family," Marco said.

"Waiting in the wings?"

"Yes. Please think back to your recent clash with Upaskamuy. That Ice Dragon was once the monarch of this region, but the foul beast's curse led the dragon to lose itself and burrow into the mountains. It was waiting for your arrival. Truthfully, I had wanted to slay the dragon myself, but personal reasons preclude me from leaving the castle for prolonged periods of time. I'm terribly sorry for my inaction."

"W-Well, you *are* one of the Demon Castle's knights. That, I understand. But what do you make of the red foxes? They were likely manipulating a former viscount in Ist. Would you say that they're after me?"

"I don't know what the beast is planning."

"But myself and the rest of the royal family are being targeted, right? It doesn't add up."

"I can only say that it is inevitable." Marco's words were just shy of a declaration, but left a mark on Ein nonetheless. "Your vessel is still too unstable for you to safely obtain more information. In the meantime, it is vital that you become stronger and cultivate greater knowledge."

'*Vessel*' again, huh... Ein knew that he was somehow related to this term, but

its meaning was too abstract for him to fully comprehend.

“Since it seems like you’ve calmed down, please allow me to guide you outside,” Marco said, opening the door as he beckoned to the boy.

As the prince stepped out, he noticed that the sun was about to set—he’d been inside the castle for quite some time. However, Ein wasn’t exactly within the Demon Castle’s halls. If he were to compare it to White Night Castle, the prince would’ve been held up in a room by the knight’s training grounds. He was most likely in the vice captain’s personal room.

“I think it’s best if you don’t enter the castle just yet. You should wait until your vessel matures,” Marco warned. The Living Armor had read the prince’s mind, causing the boy to sheepishly react. “If you’d like to learn more about the filthy beast, I recommend you venture to the continent’s southern region. They’re aiming for you and the rest of the royal family. But to uncover their scheme, you must make your move first.”

“To the south?” Ein asked.

“Indeed. After the great war, they headed south and left via a man-made port.”

“You mean...”

The puzzle pieces were slowly clicking into place. The Euroans saw the red foxes as their guardian deities and the man-made port in Ishtar’s south was likely Magna.

“They had even prepared a ship in secret,” Marco said. “They were well prepared. A superb species indeed.”

“The red foxes are superb?” Ein asked, baffled by Marco’s disjointed praise. “That’s an odd thing to say about a species that plunged Ishtarica into chaos by deceiving the Demon Lord. They seem more like a plague or an ill omen to me.”

“What?! Please don’t say something so careless!”

Ein fell silent.

“They were by Her Majesty’s side...protecting her and supporting her with their keen minds! How could we not love them... Love... Love...” Marco fell to

his knees and unsheathed his shortsword. “Raaaah!”

He stabbed his greaves once, then twice, and continued to swing his blade over a thousand times.

“Hah... Hah...” Marco panted, looking up at Ein. “Do you...see now?”

This must be the curse. It caused the victim to lose themselves and go berserk. *If even the Demon Lord went on a rampage, can anyone actually resist the curse?* Though the prince tried to calmly analyze the situation, he deeply gulped. At the same time, he’d realized that Marco was stronger than Upaskamuy.

“I now understand how I could lose my sense of self,” Ein said. “Thank you for saving me.”

The curse that had plagued the Demon Lord was still tormenting her subject.

“Isn’t it lonely to be by yourself in this castle?” Ein asked.

“Thank you for your kind words,” Marco replied. “But please don’t mind me. I have an important duty that I must fulfill.”

“I see. Then could I ask one last question?”

“Anything you desire.”

“Many have come before me to investigate the castle, but why didn’t you harm them?”

From Marco’s point of view, these people were akin to burglars. It wasn’t as though someone of Ein’s caliber was regularly stopping by. Why did Marco allow those who entered the castle to leave without any repercussions?

“There is one rule that we here must follow,” Marco started, reminiscing about the past. His aura seemed a bit more relaxed, like the calming force of a kind, elderly man. “That rule is...”

This rule turned out to be rather wholesome and quite wonderful. Unable to keep himself from smiling, Ein was truly thankful for his encounter with Marco. Before the two parted ways, the vice captain had one last thing to offer.

“Please take this. This is my past self, but perhaps you can create another

blade with it,” he said, handing Ein a small, wooden box.

Bewildered, the prince took the box and left the Demon Castle.

The sun was just about to fully set. After walking for a bit, Ein caught sight of Lloyd and Dill. The pair had been desperately searching for Ein and rushed to his side. Both the older and younger Graciers had worry splashed across their faces.

“Sir Ein! Are you all right?!” Dill asked.

“Sorry to worry you, Dill,” Ein replied. “I was just whisked away for a short while.”

“Whisked away?!”

“In any case, I’m glad to see that you’re safe,” Lloyd replied. “I shall receive whatever punishment that comes my way. And where have you been?”

“On the grounds of the Demon Castle,” the prince answered. He proceeded to inform the pair what had happened during his meeting with Marco. “I think it’s thanks to the couple inside of me. Their presence allowed me to be welcome and spared a terrible fate.”

“I believe you’re right,” Lloyd said.

“The vice captain even gave me a souvenir,” Ein said. “He is a truly chivalrous monster. I think he’s more than proved his trustworthiness.”

“B-But Sir Ein, then why didn’t he attack the previous investigation teams?!” Dill inquired. “Since you weren’t there, it wouldn’t be odd if he decided to strike!”

“Well, apparently it’s because of something the Demon Lord used to say,” Ein replied. It was the reason he smiled as he left the castle. “Like a force of habit, she always said, ‘You have to be nice to each other!’”

The Graciers were stunned for a moment before they smiled themselves.

“It’s similar to the first king’s rule that prohibited us from invading other nations,” Ein said. “Huh? Wait, doesn’t that mean that we’ve been following the Demon Lord’s rule too?”

It was weird enough for a Demon Lord to spout those words, but Ein felt like he could relate to her in some way. On his way to his tent, he scolded Lloyd and Dill for apologizing so much—Ein's brief abduction was unpreventable. Marco was clearly powerful and as the Black Knights' vice captain, he was seemingly from a completely different dimension. It was a rare but enjoyable encounter for Ein nonetheless. While gazing up at the starry sky, the prince vowed to work hard again tomorrow.

Chapter Six: The Cheery Blacksmith and His Apprentice

Three days after setting off for the Demon Lord's old territory, Ein finally returned to Barth. He'd arrived at his lodging just past noon, quickly exchanging words with Krone before he headed to the bath. When he hopped out, Krone was there waiting for him on the sofa. She had a cold drink ready for him on the nearby table, right next to a wooden box. The prince took a seat across from his advisor.

"I've heard that you've received quite the souvenir," Krone said.

"That's right! I didn't know too much about it myself, but I was shocked when Lloyd gave me the rundown on it," Ein replied.

He placed his hand on the box's lid, opening it to reveal a helmet.

"Molting is a once-in-a-lifetime occasion for Living Armors," Ein explained. "The rest of their bodies will melt away, but their helmets remain. This is the only helmet left in the country, so I'd say it's valuable enough to be regarded as a natural treasure."

"It seems that your welcome was warm beyond expectation."

"I believe we have the Dullahan and the Elder Lich within me to thank for that."

Krone quietly examined the large and sturdy helmet, noticing that it featured a series of unusual veins—the same that adorned Marco's armor, in fact. Despite its heft, the piece of armor was light enough for the young advisor to lift with ease. According to Lloyd, the helm was much tougher than one of Upaskamuy's scales.

"Marco floated the idea of using this to forge a new sword," Ein said.

"But it makes you a little anxious, doesn't it?" Krone asked.

"Yeah. Suggestions from powerful forces always make me nervous."

“No, that’s not what I mean. I meant that it would probably be quite the task to find an artisan up to the job of forging a blade. Fortunately, Barth is the blacksmith’s holy land...so you just might be in luck, but...”

“I should reach out to the count?”

“That’s a splendid idea.”

With a plan in mind, Ein was finally able to settle down. Considering that Upaskamuy had reemerged just before the prince had set foot in the Demon Lord’s old territory, the boy felt like it had been ages since he last relaxed. Relieved to have a moment to himself, Ein could feel exhaustion washing over him.

“Could I take a nap for a short while?” Ein asked.

“Sure,” Krone replied. “I’ll wake you up in a bit.”

“Thanks. Then I’ll sleep for a little while.”

The barefooted Ein walked across a plush carpet before stepping into his bedroom.

The next afternoon, Count Barth visited Ein’s lodge.

“Please take this letter of introduction with you,” the count said. “I don’t think you’d be refused.”

Upon hearing that Ein was searching for a blacksmith, Raizer scrambled to immediately prepare a letter for the boy. In a reserved manner, the count handed the boy a freshly drafted letter.

“You’re a big help,” Ein said.

“I feel undeserving of such high praise,” Count Barth replied. “But do note that while this artisan is talented with a forge, I can’t vouch for their people skills. I pray for your understanding on this subject.”

“I’m the one making a request, so I won’t mind,” Ein replied.

He was sort of expecting this situation to begin with. The trope of a “skilled yet boorish artisan” was a common but exciting concept to the prince.

“Shall we head there now, Your Highness?” Krone asked, sitting beside him.

Since he’d just returned from the Demon Lord’s former domain, Ein was already told that he had the day off.

“Hm...” Ein said, glancing at the scenery outside the window.

A harsh blizzard was blowing through the streets of Barth, making it a touch bothersome to go outside. However, Ein wouldn’t be in town for much longer. *Ah, this isn’t too bad when you compare it to our hike up to the old territory.*

“Let’s do that,” he finally said.

“It’s quite windy outside, so please do be careful,” the count said with a graceful bow. “Please excuse me.”

With that, he left the room.

“That letter is apparently referring you to the best blacksmith in Barth,” Krone said.

“Huh... That sounds amazing,” Ein replied.

“Yes, but I’ve heard that this artisan is a tad stubborn and they opt to choose their own jobs. I sure hope they take your request, Ein.”

The prince was a little nervous, but he had to put his best foot forward in order to leave a good first impression on the blacksmith. The two returned to their rooms and prepared to depart. With the Graciers in tow, the prince and his advisor walked out onto the snowy streets of Barth.

Luckily, the snowfall wasn’t too heavy and was gradually dying down. Ein was in a neighborhood filled with buildings built of thick stone—a series of architectural marvels that had quickly caught the boy’s imagination. To Ein, it was as if he were walking through an art museum. Had the weather been more agreeable, the scenery alone would’ve made for a dazzling tourist spot. Known as “artisan street,” the road ahead of the prince’s party was filled with blacksmiths and adventurers who couldn’t care less about the blizzard that surrounded them.

“By the way, did you find anything, Krone?” Ein asked.

“What do you mean?” she replied.

“Was there any new information on Sage or monsterification?”

“I’m sorry. There was, but what we unearthed was so technical that I couldn’t make heads nor tails of it. I’ve arranged for Lady Katima to inspect it further once we return to Kingsland.”

“Don’t worry about it. I didn’t learn much from the Demon Lord’s old territory either.”

“But you did learn something, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but I was kidnapped.”

The couple glanced at each other and chuckled. Krone was delighted by her beloved’s kind words.

“What’s the blacksmith’s name?” Ein asked.

“His name is Mouton,” Krone replied.

The prince felt that the name had a kind and cheery ring to it.

“Lady Krone, could that be the storefront we’re looking for?” Lloyd asked.

“Let’s see... Ah, I believe so. There’s also a sign there that reads ‘Mouton’s Forge.’”

“Um, I’m not quite sure about this...are you sure this is the place?” Ein asked.

Mouton’s Forge appeared to be quite...humble in comparison to the grand and extravagant storefronts that surrounded it. For whatever reason, a rack of dried meat hung next to the door while the forge’s sign was posted at a crooked angle. The storefront’s owner was clearly not of the motivated sort.

“I shall enter first,” Lloyd offered before turning to his son. “Dill, you’ll stand out front and keep watch.”

“Yessir.”

“But I’m the one here to make a request,” Ein insisted. “I should enter first and greet them.”

“Sir Ein...” Lloyd said.

“I don’t mind. All right, then. Pardon me!”

The prince walked through the door, the scents of charcoal and iron hitting his nose before a noisy exchange struck his ears.

“You goddamn idiot! I told you to use your arms when you swing down! Do you want to be skewered and roasted on a spit, you moron?!”

“M-Master! You told me that I should use my legs to exert greater force!”

Stunned, Ein couldn't tear his eyes away from the pair arguing in front of him. The fiery, rage-filled man before him seemed to be about the same size as Katima, but the man's burly arms and forest of chest hair had given the fellow a manly appearance. That visage was only bolstered by his neatly trimmed mustache and chiseled facial features. The lady arguing with him was a winged nonhuman. Each of her toned, feather-covered legs ended with razor-sharp talons. Her large set of wings was where most other species would have arms.



“That woman must be a harpy...” Lloyd observed.

“Why’s she holding a hammer with her legs?” Ein asked.

“Likely because she’s able to exert more force with them.”

However, seeing the harpy gripping her tools between her talons wasn’t an everyday sight.

“Huh?!” the man roared back. “I’ve never said anything stupid like that, peabrain! Just use your wings to pick up the damn hammer!”

“Fine! I will! See?! How’s this, huh?!” the harpy yelled back.

Ein and his group could only stand on the sidelines and gaze at the two shouting at each other. The harpy managed to grab the hammer with her wings and swung it down on an anvil. One could tell just how much energy she put into her movements, but she was simply unable to exert the same kind of power as she had with her legs.

“You bastard... What, are you underestimating blacksmiths?! What kind of weak-ass swing was that?! You’ve got fine legs, so use those to hammer down, you dodo!”

“Master! You’re confusing me!”

This seemingly unreasonable master was likely the blacksmith, Mouton. The duo’s comedy act was rather entertaining to the boy, but he couldn’t just stand there forever.

“Um, excuse me...” the prince said sheepishly.

“Huh? Who the hell are you guys?! How’d you get in?” Mouton barked.

“Uh, through the door...” Ein immediately replied before Krone poked him in the side for his unnecessary remark. “I mean, we’re not in yet.”

“Through the door?! Well, I guess that makes sense...”

“I carry a letter of introduction from Count Barth. May we come in?”

“Sure, come on in! I’ll treat you to some of the delicious grilled chicken I’ve got cooking away!”

“Master... You better not be talking about me...” the harpy muttered.

“Oy, Ememe! Bring us some tea, will you? We haven’t had a customer in a while!”

“I really can’t keep up with this, but I’m on it!” the harpy replied.

With a whoosh, Ememe left her seat. Ein was told that Mouton was a master of his craft, but why hadn’t the artisan seen any customers as of late?

“You sound like you wanna say something,” Mouton said. “Listen, I choose my customers—no, my materials. So, I don’t get a lot of ’em, you see. It’s not like my skills aren’t good, so don’t you worry about that. You might know me already, but I’m Mouton and I’m just too damn good at what I do! Gah ha ha ha!”

“I’m...” Ein started before the blacksmith raised his hand to stop the boy.

“You’re the crown prince, aren’t ya? The guy next to you is a Graciers, right? I see he’s wearing the master of house’s armor, yeah?”

Lloyd blinked several times before a smile formed on his face. “Ah, can you tell, Sir Mouton?”

“Course I can. That armor’s made by...”

Oooh?! Could it be?! Exciting!

“My second cousin!” Mouton finished.

His answer was far from any explanation that Ein could romanticize. Honestly, it was a bit awkward. Had it been Mouton himself or a sibling, there would’ve been more of a relationship, but... *He’s not unrelated to the armor, but he doesn’t have any close ties to it either. How do I react to this information?* Lloyd, Ein, and Krone had their jaws all agape in a moment of stunned silence.

“Thank you for waiting, everyone!” Ememe said, returning with the tea. “Hm? What’s wrong?”

The harpy’s return didn’t do much to sweep the awkward air of the conversation away.

“Now then, show me your material,” Mouton urged. “What do you want to

be forged into a sword? I don't want sonny's introduction to be put to waste, but I only take jobs based on what's in front of me."

Mouton's gaze turned sharp, as if he prepared to appraise the item he was about to see.

"The item is inside here," Lloyd said, handing the blacksmith a wooden box. "Please confirm its contents."

"Your Highness, you sure I can just open this up?" Mouton asked.

"Of course," Ein replied.

"Oh? You're awfully confident, aren't ya? Is it 'cause you're the crown prince? You've got something good here, huh?"

"I just happened to get my hands on it. I was lucky," Ein replied.

Lucky seemed like an understatement here, but there was no doubt that the prince had received this item by coincidence. Had he not used his Phantom Hands, he wouldn't have met Marco.

"I see," Mouton said. "Then I'll help myself!"

As the blacksmith placed his hand over the lid, Ememe appeared to be more nervous than her master. With everyone watching on, the box's contents were revealed for all to see.

"Oy! This can't be!" Mouton gasped.

"M-Master!"

The pair must've immediately known what they were dealing with; a man as boastful of his skill as Mouton certainly would.

"Ememe, you know what this is too?" Mouton asked.

"Yessir!" The apprentice was quite knowledgeable herself, it seemed. She opened her mouth once more. "And, what is this?"

She was great at delivering punch lines too.

"You little nitwit..." Mouton rumbled. "I've always thought this, but you sure you aren't just actually a bird?"

“H-How rude!” Ememe insisted. “I’m clearly a harpy!”

“The only thing good about you are those wings!”

“M-M-M-Master?! You can’t try to woo me like that! I have to prepare myself!”

Ah, so praising a harpy’s wings is akin to courtship, Ein thought. But I don’t think that tidbit will ever come in handy.

“Stop wiggling around, you numbskull!” Mouton yelled before turning to Ein. “Tch. Sorry about this, Your Highness.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it at all. I don’t mind,” Ein replied.

In fact, the prince found the scene unfolding before him to be rather amusing. However, he opted to keep those thoughts to himself as it might have been rude to express.

“This birdbrain aside, let’s get back on track, huh? So, looks like this is from a Living Armor, right?”

“Very much so,” Ein replied.

“I see... Well, it seems like you’ve got a few secrets of your own. But seeing as I am but a humble gentleman, I won’t pry any further.”

“I’m grateful for your consideration.”

“But you can’t just flaunt stuff like this, you hear? An idiotic, bougie boy born with a silver spoon in his mouth ain’t liable to use this for anything smart. Some greedy nincompoop could use it for moronic ends too. This helmet is priceless, got it?”

Money. Pride. Greed. These factors could easily lead an adventurer or one of wealth onto the road of corruption. Barth was known for the adventurers it gathered, hoping to strike it rich in the quest for gold and glory. Naturally, there were more than a few who acted foolishly in the pursuit of these goals.

“I can accept this request,” Mouton finally said. “But to process this material, I’m gonna need to fire up my magic stone furnace, and that’s gonna cost you a pretty penny. Is that fine with you?”

“A magic stone furnace?” Ein asked.

“There aren’t many of them, but mine’s right over there.” The blacksmith pointed his thick finger over to a black, rustic furnace. “It’s a simple device. We pump magic stones into it as fuel for a stupidly hot flame. Without that tool, we won’t be able to process your materials.”

Ein understood that while the process was simple on paper, it was both ludicrously cost-inefficient and expensive. With no idea how much his sword would cost, the prince wasn’t sure if this expense could be approved. As Ein pondered over the cost, Krone stepped in.

“Sir Mouton, pardon me, but what are the estimated processing costs for this material?” Krone asked.

“Hm? Ah, well, you’re gonna need at least five big bones for this one.”

Ein was grateful that Krone had asked this question. *Does he mean five million gold? I think we can afford that.* The prince was now operating on a sliver of hope. However, things were never that easy.

“Very well. Fifty million gold it is,” Krone replied.

“You’re a smart one, aren’t ya, missy? I wouldn’t mind if you threw in another twenty million for the processing fees!”

Ein hung his head, thinking that this was out of his reach.

Krone, however, continued. “Goodness me, you’ve given us quite a discount on that processing charge.”

“Well, the material’s the material, y’know? It feels good to be a part of it. I’m practically giving out my services here, damn you!”

“Then we will pay you a total of seventy million gold. Thank you so much.”

“K-Krone! That’s way too much money!” Ein gasped.

“I know,” she replied. “Is there a problem?”

“Can you decide on all of this yourself? Wouldn’t you get in trouble?”

Krone looked at him as though to say, “What in the world are you on about?”

“I know your budget and just how much you’re allowed to spend,” she finally

said. "So this isn't a problem at all. Are you satisfied with this answer?"

"Wait, I've never heard of this. I've got a budget?!"

"Of course you do. You're the crown prince."

"Yeah, I know that, but..."

"You defeated the Sea Dragon, didn't you? You practically killed one single-handedly. We've got more funds than you think, you know. All right?"

This was something that Ein had never heard before. It was good enough if his advisor was aware of the numbers, but he still felt a little out of the loop.

"So, what are ya gonna do about the handle?" Mouton asked.

"I have an idea for that," Lloyd said. "I'd like to use a chunk of Sea Dragon for it. I believe it's the only material suitable to be paired with Living Armor."

"Perfect! Yeah, that's a good idea!"

"Krone, this is progressing without me," Ein muttered.

She put her face close to his ear and whispered, "It's actually a great opportunity. It's not ideal for a crown prince to be without his signature weapon."

"Were you told to do this?" the prince whispered back.

"That's right. Sir Warren had asked me to have a blade forged for you whenever the opportunity presented itself."

Only Ein had been left in the dark on this entire matter. Now, he could only eagerly wait as his blade was forged. *I'm sure it'll be something amazing!* Ein thought, his heart fluttering.

"So? Where's the Sea Dragon material we'll need?" Mouton asked.

"It's in Kingsland," Lloyd replied.

The blacksmith frowned. "Hm... What'll we do about that? Don't get me wrong, it's not like I *don't* trust the folks in Kingsland, but I'd like to see it with my own two eyes y'know? I'd wanna choose the best materials myself."

His craftsman spirit was commendable, but Barth was quite a ways away from

the royal capital.

“Master! I’ve got an idea!” Ememe suddenly said.

“Hm? You’ve got something, featherhead? All right, let’s hear it.”

“Don’t treat me like a bird! Argh! It’s a really good idea, I promise! All right then, let me ask you a question: how many customers have you had within the past two years?”

“Haaah ha ha ha! That’s an easy one, you little chirper!” The humor was lost on Ein, but Mouton laughed loudly while ruffling the feathers atop Ememe’s head. The harpy also seemed to be enjoying herself. “Zero of course!”

The resulting shock from this revelation was akin to the blast of an exploding bottle rocket. It was oddly refreshing to see the blacksmith place his hand on his hips and proudly declare his lack of customers. Ein was dying to know how this man managed to make a living.

“Sooo... Why don’t we take a business trip to the royal capital and open up shop there?” the harpy suggested.

“You’ve got a decent head on your shoulders for a chicken! This town’s cold year-round, so might as well!”

“That’s right, Master! Barth’s so cold; I just don’t get it!”

“Right! And our last customer just wanted to get out of the rain anyway! All right then, Gracier! You heard me! We’ll be heading to Kingsland once we’ve packed up shop! You don’t mind me selecting the materials myself then, do you?”

“N-Not at all,” Lloyd stammered. “We’d be grateful.”

Mouton seemed like a man who just went with the flow. Even the former marshal was overwhelmed by the blacksmith’s energy. Actually, Lloyd seemed to be a little troubled that he couldn’t find the right words to refute the man.

“Um, Mouton, does that mean you’ll go to the royal capital to forge a sword for me?” Ein asked.

“You bet! It’s stupidly cold here, and the warmer climate is better on my old bones.”

“But Sir Mouton, what shall we do about your magic stone furnace?” Lloyd asked.

“Just take it apart! We’ll just put it back together when we get into town!”

“R-Right. Noted.”

“If I were to be a bit greedy, I’d want an excellent magic stone rotating device for the forge too...but I won’t force ya! I know ya can only get those bad boys in Ist...”

While Ein had no idea how this device was used, it seemed to be available for sale in Ist. Krone put a hand to her lips, appearing to be locked in deep thought. She raised her face and glanced at Ein. The crown prince knew that it was best to leave this matter to her and immediately gave a nod of approval.

“Sir Mouton, do you happen to know of Agustos Trading Firm?” the advisor asked.

“Huh? Sure I do. All of Barth’s craftsmen here are indebted to the firm.”

“To tell you the truth, I am the chairman’s granddaughter.” The revelation had Mouton’s eyebrows soaring as Krone continued. “I don’t like to beat around the bush, so please allow me to be frank with you. If there is anything you need, I believe my household and our firm can be of service.”

Krone’s confident face and demeanor made her all the more convincing.

“Anything, you say?” Mouton asked. “Missy, I’m sorry to ask this of you, but what exactly d’you mean by that?”

“Just as my words imply. From the arrangement of housing, to the purchase of land, and even preparing the tools necessary for your work, we shall do it all and ensure you have what you require upon your move.”

“Huh... And will you give us a discount?”

“Of course. I can promise you that.”

Mouton suddenly stood up and rummaged through a nearby shelf.

“Where was it now...” he muttered to himself, clearly looking for something.

Ememe immediately rushed to his side and offered her assistance.

“No, not this one... No, not that... Nope...” Mouton loudly mumbled as he continued to search for several minutes. When he finally found what he was looking for, the blacksmith returned to Krone with soot covering his forehead.

“This one! Found it! I’ll leave the rest to you then,” Mouton said, handing her a single sheet of paper and an unusually well-made stamp.

“Leave the rest to me? Wh-What do you mean by that?” Krone asked.

“If you go to the guild, you should be granted access to the funds listed on that sheet of paper. Take out as much as you need. If you have my stamp, you can buy me a new house, forge, and everything else I’ll need, right? Thanks!”

Even Krone couldn’t hide her shock as she glanced at Ein. The prince thought that the cost was likely far greater than anything Mouton had anticipated. Was there a way to tell the blacksmith so without embarrassing him? But after mulling it over for a few moments, Ein couldn’t think of anything to say. While the prince was thinking, Krone decided to take a look at the paper and gasped in surprise.

“Hm? What? Not enough?” Mouton asked.

That would be normal, for he hadn’t had any customers for the past few years. However, Krone was shocked about something completely different.

“You can buy a house in the best area possible, the newest forge, and then some... This is more than enough,” Krone said.

“Great! Then I’ll leave you to it! You can use it all if you need! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Th-Then a person from the firm shall be with you shortly. Details will be discussed then.”

“All right! I’ll be waiting!” Mouton concluded the meeting with a confident “I’ll forge ya the best blade in the world!”

Ein had expected a stubborn man, but he was quite pleasant to be around. The three left his store and met up with Dill. As they walked through the streets, Krone approached Ein’s side and whispered in his ear.

“How much do you think the latest furnace would cost?” Krone asked.

“I don’t know, ten million gold? Not a clue,” Ein replied.

She shook her head. “It’s much more than ten times that. If you were to buy a house in the best location in Kingsland, you’d need twice as much for the forge. But Mouton had saved up more than twice as much...combined.”

Ein was seriously shocked. *Just how much does that man make?!* Mouton was known to be the best blacksmith in Barth—it wouldn’t be odd if was sitting on a fortune and his lack of customers was a nonissue.

“He must be an amazing person...” Ein muttered.

He looked up at the skies and saw that the snow had stopped. For the umpteenth time, Ein thought to himself, *I’ve been busy ever since I’ve got here.* He eagerly awaited his new blade as he walked towards his lodge.

It had been a few days since Ein’s visit to Mouton’s Forge and plans for a second trip to the Demon Lord’s old territory were well underway. The prince was ecstatic to partake in another expedition, but his excitement was all for naught.

“I-I have to stay back?! But why?!” Ein asked, sitting in a small meeting room.

Lloyd gave a strained smile and tried to calm the prince. “Well, we’ve received more than enough information. It’s excellent that we’ve learned of the red foxes’ ancient departure from Magna, and that is good enough on its own.”

“But what about monsterification?”

“Alongside the Knights Guard, Dill and I will head into the territory. It’s much too dangerous for you to be there, Sir Ein.”

“Is it because of Marco?”

“Precisely. We don’t know what could happen to you, and there’s no need to put you in harm’s way.”

Ein couldn’t counter that argument. With his safety no longer guaranteed, he had little choice but to accept Lloyd’s decision.

“This means that neither Dill nor myself will be by your side,” Lloyd said.

“Members of the Knights Guard will be with you, but I’d like to ask you to stay inside unless it is absolutely necessary.”

“Right... I know that can’t be helped.”

“Please remain with Lady Krone and attend to any tasks that require your attention. It might not be the most exciting to trade correspondence with the guide, but I hope that you understand.”

What else could he do? Ein gave an obedient nod. The past few days had been a torrent of various jobs and the prince was still a tad exhausted. He decided to lay low in his lodging, treating it as a day off.

A short while later, Ein sat in his room as he watched his advisor hurriedly work through the stack of papers on her desk.

“Hey,” he called out.

“Yes? What is it?” Krone replied, her eyes looking a little tired.

“What do you think the word ‘vessel’ means?”

“Aside from being a container for something, right?”

“I think so. I think it’s something like a vessel as a king or the like.”

It was a question that had been on Ein’s mind as of late. When he fought Upaskamuy, the boy was said to be a vessel that could surpass the first king. Marco even made a point about the prince’s vessel needing to mature.

“What’s a vessel as a king?” Ein wondered.

“A king should be able to lead his citizens and work for the future of his nation,” Krone said. “There’s a lot of important things he must do...”

She awkwardly smiled, unable to come up with a clear answer herself.

“Is that how it is?” Ein asked. “Sorry for asking something weird so suddenly.”

“It’s fine. I’m your advisor, aren’t I?” she replied.

“I’m truly always in your debt. I really am grateful.”

“Heh heh. Well, I *am* doing my best to support you.”

Ein inadvertently extended his arm. Half dazed, the boy patted her beautiful

head of hair.

“Ein?” Krone asked, her eyes widening in shock. However, she quickly narrowed her eyes to enjoy this moment of being spoiled.

“Oh, er, sorry,” the prince replied. “It looked to me like you wanted to be praised.”

It was the only excuse he could come up with to explain his apparent daze.

“So is this my reward?” Krone asked.

“I guess...it is.”

She happily smiled as she folded her hands between her legs and squeezed them tightly. Her neck was turning pink and Ein could tell that she was growing embarrassed as her eyelids grew droopy. The prince felt his heart thud loudly.

“A-All right! All done!” he hastily said.

Her silky hair was soft to the touch. He could even hear her breathing, so he removed his hand as he felt it was bad for his heart. Krone seemed stunned for a moment before she pouted.

“You look dissatisfied,” Ein observed.

“Because I *am* dissatisfied,” she replied.

Did his sudden movements surprise her? Or was it because he had touched her without her express permission? As Ein thought about his actions, Krone decided to lend him a hand.

“It’s not enough for a reward,” she muttered.

“Not enough?” Ein asked.

Was Krone looking for some other kind of praise? The prince’s hunches had seemed to be off all day. It appeared as if he was being presented with the perfect opportunity to learn of a woman’s intricacies. Krone once again decided to push the prince in the right direction.

“What I mean is...if it’s a reward, can’t you do more of that?” she insisted.

Ein finally understood the meaning of her words when he saw her wistful expression. She wasn’t wishing for anything difficult; she simply wanted her

head to be patted for a bit longer.

“Sorry. Then if you don’t mind...” Ein said, extending his arm again.

She gently closed the gap between them, allowing him to easily pat her head.

“You’re the one who said it was a reward,” Krone said. “It’s unfair if you run away so quickly.”

“You’re right. Sorry.”

The prince hadn’t been able to take the pressure and had pulled his hand back. As Krone had suggested, this was as if he had run away. Ein breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that her mood had improved.

“Don’t stop caressing me until I tell you to, okay?” she said.

“As you wish, my lady.”

She enjoyed his gentle caresses for a while, humming a cheery tune as she returned to work.

How long had it been? When she came to, Krone realized that she was lying on a sofa.

“Mm... What time...” she muttered.

What time was it?

For the briefest of moments, the girl had no idea what was going on. She focused her brain on working itself out of its daze while she tried to get a grasp on her surroundings. Upon jogging her memory, Krone recalled that she was enjoying a postwork spot of tea while Ein was out. But then, she had been hit with a sudden wave of sleepiness and curled up for a quick nap. However, she found that she was now surrounded by darkness.

“And this should go here... Okay,” Ein said.

At first, the girl thought that her beloved’s voice was close to her ears. But as she slowly opened her eyes, Krone noticed his voice was coming from above. She could tell that Ein’s clothing was slightly disheveled and that he was a short way away, but she was otherwise befuddled by the situation.

“I guess helping out grandmother from time to time has its benefits,” Ein muttered. “Wait, it might be too late...is my signature good enough here? What am I saying? Of course it is.”

Krone turned a bit, placing her right cheek on her pillow as her left ear faced up. She felt something warm against her right cheek—as though she were resting on a pillow specifically made for her. The pillow’s pleasant firmness had Krone smiling, but it was only moments later that she realized that this “pillow” was actually Ein’s lap.

“If anything goes wrong, I can just say that I did it of my own accord,” Ein muttered with a slightly cheery tone. “It’s not a problem, I think. I can do this.”

Krone wanted to stay on his lap and listen to his voice all night, but her sense of duty as the crown prince’s advisor pushed her to sit up.

“I’m sorry, what time is it?” Krone asked.

“Ah, are you awake? It’s about 1 a.m.”

As she tried to get up further, Ein stopped her with his free hand. Realizing that a blanket had been draped over her, Krone felt guilty for being asleep for so long. “I wanted to take you to your room,” Ein admitted. “But I felt bad for entering your quarters without permission.”

While letting out a nervous chuckle, Ein gently patted Krone’s head. The rhythm of his pats would’ve caused her to sleep if she let her guard down. As she attempted to fight back against her drowsiness, she glanced at the table to discover that her mountain of documents was just about gone.

“My work...” Krone murmured. “D-Did you do it for me, Ein?!”

“I’ve done a majority of it. There’s still some left, but I think I can take care of them.”

Krone immediately tried to get up, but Ein gently kept her down.

“Lie down for a bit longer,” Ein said softly, his tone so kind that she couldn’t refuse.

His words had her heart beating so loud that she tried to wriggle around in an attempt to hide the thumping. There was no way she could show him her face

—she was sure it would be an unsightly visage.

“Ein...” she said.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” the prince asked.

“Can I stay like this for a bit longer?”

So, she decided to indulge in her desires just a little bit and gave in.

“Sure,” Ein replied.

As a kitten would, Krone curled up in his lap as a reminder of her presence.

Chapter Seven: I'll Give All My Rewards in Exchange for You

As his train neared Kingsland, Ein remembered that his home was still in the middle of a sweltering summer, a stark contrast to Barth's frigid climate. In fact, the rapid change in temperature wasn't very kind to the prince's body. Once the train pulled into the station, Ein stepped onto the royal platform and proceeded to wave at the citizens awaiting him on the lower platform. Just a few steps away from the prince, Martha and the castle's servants stood ready to greet him.

"Welcome back, Sir Ein," Martha said.

"I'm home. You should go see Lloyd and Dill."

"There's no need. I'm sure that man wouldn't die, even if he was left to fend for himself in a Barthite blizzard. I know he's alive."

"Uh, okay..."

This must be her kind of love, Ein thought, admiring the maid's poise. After all was said and done, she held the utmost trust in her husband.

"Lloyd really saved me while we were out there," Ein said.

"You're too kind," Martha replied. "I'm sure my husband would be elated to hear that, even after I send him off to Heaven."

"Uh, when he returns home, please be nice to him. Okay?"

"I wonder... I don't quite remember marrying a man who'd allow you to run off and fight a powerful monster by yourself. Especially when it behooved him to stop you."

The maid's words struck at Ein's chest like knives. The boy would indeed have to explain his actions in regard to Upaskamuy. Furthermore, he was confident that there would be no way out of a scolding from his grandfather. Ein's stomach started to ache from worry, but Krone came up from behind him and

whispered in his ear.

“You’ll be fine,” she said.

“Um, how’s the royal capital?” Ein asked.

“Nothing has changed, but the castle has felt rather lonely without your presence. Everyone has been eagerly awaiting your return,” Martha replied. “In particular, your mother appeared to miss you quite a bit, and well...the marshal seemed a touch...restless.”

Restless? Ein wondered. He couldn’t see Chris acting in such a manner.

“I’ll make sure to take a moment and speak with them both when we return,” Ein assured her.

“That sounds wonderful,” the maid replied. “However, you might not be able to take care of that tonight. We have a party planned.”

“There’s no need for such a grand celebration.”

“Oh, but there is. You’ve completed your duties in Barth and have slain another monster as well... I was told that you landed the final blow on the beast. His Majesty would be most displeased if we neglected to celebrate these achievements.”

And that was a situation that everyone wanted to avoid. Ein gave a reluctant nod while Krone stepped forward.

“Lady Martha... Just for my own reference, exactly how ‘restless’ was Dame Chris?” the advisor asked.

Ein thought that it was best to let sleeping dogs lie in this situation, but Krone went out of her way to press the issue. She looked to be a little hesitant, but had steeled herself.

“How shall I say this...” Martha started. “She’s been walking the castle’s halls for hours on end with no destination and appeared to be dazed while training.”

“Was she injured?” a concerned Krone asked.

“Oh, nothing of the sort. But while in her dazed state, she forgot to hold back and injured her sparring partner.”

Krone cracked an uneasy smile. It seemed that the elf was simply too strong and had forgotten to take it easy on her opponent.

“And thus, Lady Olivia had ordered the marshal outside to cool her head...several times,” Martha confessed.

“Ein...” Krone started.

“I know. I’ll speak with her later,” Ein replied, causing his advisor to squint happily in satisfaction. “Now then, why don’t we return to the castle...Krone?”

Standing before a staircase, Ein took the opportunity to grab Krone’s pale hands.

“Thank you. Could you kindly see me to the bottom?” she requested.

“Of course,” the prince replied. “I’m a bit embarrassed to hold hands outside, though.”

By seeing how the two conversed so naturally, Martha couldn’t but mutter to herself, “Dame Chris must be more assertive, or she’ll be left behind.”

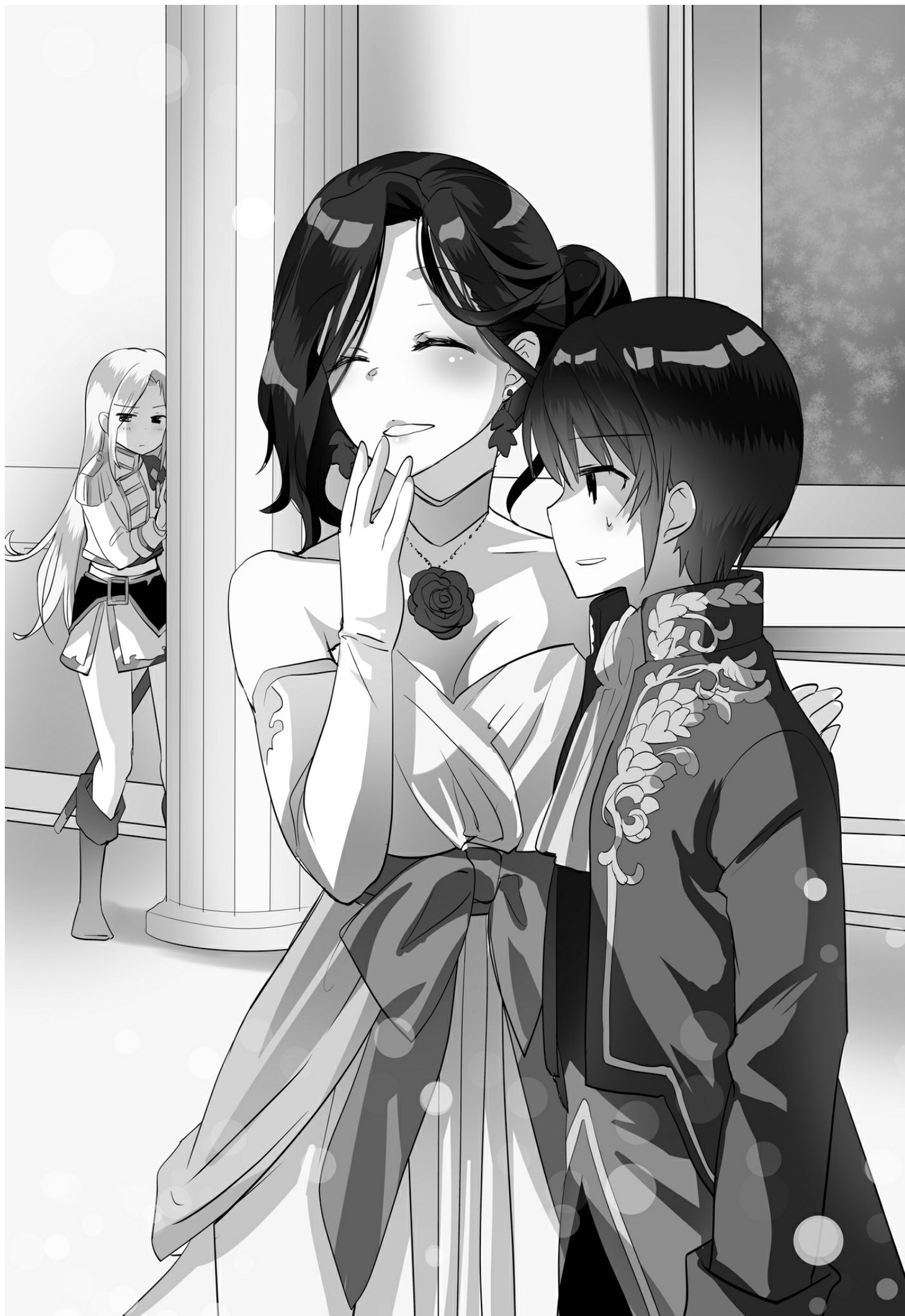
Later that evening, a shimmering celebration was hosted within the castle’s grand hall. Ein wasn’t nervous in the slightest as these kinds of functions had become routine for him. One such routine was the exhausting task of greeting all the guests at the start of the party. However, once that was taken care of, the prince was free to relax and enjoy the party as he pleased. He took a moment to speak with his mother before finally settling down, but he quickly noticed an oddity.

“Uh, mother...” Ein started.

“Yes? Whatever is the matter?”

“What would you do if you saw a clumsy elf staring at you from a few meters away?”

From behind the shadows of a nearby pillar, a beautiful blonde was sneaking in the occasional glance at the crown prince. Every time Ein tried to meet her gaze, she’d quickly disappear from view.



“Ah, she’s just a bit confused. It’s been quite a while since she’s last seen her master,” Olivia remarked.

Chris wasn’t a dog, but her actions certainly resembled one.

“I thought I hadn’t seen Chris for a while...” Ein said. “Also, aren’t *you* her master, mother?”

“I wonder... That might not be the case these days. Now then...” Olivia approached her son’s face. “She’s unable to approach and speak to you of her own accord.”

“Which means I should make the first move.”

“Please do. As she is now, Chris requires a more forceful approach than usual... Oh my, oh my, your face is so red! Are you embarrassed in front of your own mother?”

“O-Of course I am!”

Olivia chuckled. “Why, thank you.”

As always, the second princess was a natural at charming her son. She flashed an elegant smile at Ein before leaning in to share one last tip with him.

“Isn’t the terrace lovely?” she said. “But the crown prince isn’t to step out alone...why don’t you ask a guard to accompany you?”

With her last words whispered, Olivia glided across the grand hall to join Lalua.

“Now then,” Ein mumbled just as an impeccably timed servant arrived with a pair of glasses. “Huh? Two?”

“Would you have preferred one?”

After a moment of thought, Ein knew what the servant was implying. After they bowed and backed away, the prince deeply exhaled.

“Chris, I’d like to step out on the terrace. Would you kindly stand guard?” Ein asked.

The prince didn’t shout his request, but his tone was louder than it normally was; Chris surely would have heard it from her hiding place. Her body wildly

jolted for a moment before she slowly peeked out from behind the pillar. The marshal was clad in her knight's uniform and had her hair down. Despite the fact that her hairstyle was a bit out of place for a public function, the elf's visage was a refreshing sight.

"D-Did you call for me?" she asked.

"Yep, I did," Ein replied. "Can you accompany me to the terrace?"

She looked surprised for a moment before she followed Ein, her long hair swishing behind her. Ein usually waited for her response before walking forward but he was a touch more forceful this time around. The boy had taken his mother's advice to heart.

"Your hair's down today," Ein observed.

"Huh?!" Chris asked. "I-I mean, yes. It's a party, so I thought I'd show a little consideration."

Her status as a knight precluded her from wearing a dress, but it wasn't ideal if she looked rough and ready. She could only use accessories, makeup, or a change in hairstyle to primp up for these celebratory occasions. While Chris ran her hand through her hair, Ein noticed a few minute details. Namely, the tying back of hair above her ears.

"I think it suits you," Ein said. "Though it's unfortunate that I can only see your hair like this on special occasions."

Chris blushed so hard that she couldn't reply, only nodding in response. Upon their eventual arrival at the terrace, the pair were greeted by the serene silence of the night sky—a far cry from the commotion that filled the grand hall. The castle district's lights glimmered, as though ground and sky joined to create a single twinkling vista of stars.

"It's pretty chilly outside," Ein said. "I was getting warm in there, so this feels nice. Are you all right, Chris?"

"I-I am. I wanted to cool down as well," she replied.

"I'm glad to hear that. Here, why don't we relax and have a drink?"

The marshal finally pieced together just why the prince had walked out with a

pair of glasses in his hands. *Is she still being stiff?* Ein wondered. However, Chris took one of the glasses. It seemed that she was loosening up, at least a little bit.

“How were things while I was gone?” he asked.

Unfortunately, Ein didn’t have any specific topics he’d wanted to talk about. Without many ideas coming to mind, he decided to kick off the chat with some small talk.

“The city has been peaceful as always,” Chris replied. “I’d say it’s been the same for the castle as well. Lady Katima ran around with her usual energy while the twins were lovingly cared for. The only difference was your absence, Sir Ein.”

“But I’m back now. There shouldn’t be any more issues, right?”

“Ah ha ha... I suppose so. If you stay here forever, I don’t believe we’d have any problems.”

Chris flashed a dry smile before putting her lips to her drink. She held on to the glass’s stem with both hands while silently staring at the scenery below. A few moments later, she steeled her nerves in an effort to speak.

“S-Sir Ein!”

Holding the glass in front of her chest, the marshal stared straight into the crown prince’s eyes. She took a few quick breaths and looked down before mustering all of her courage. Chris raised her head once more, her voice filled with a determination she had never shown before.

“In truth, this sort of thing is never allowed,” Chris started. “But even so, I’d like to make a request. Would you please listen to me?”

While the elf seemed to have steeled herself, her gaze darted around as though she was begging Ein to listen. She pursed her lips and waited for an answer.

“If it’s a request from you, Chris, I’d grant anything you desire,” Ein replied. “But if you’d like to quit being a knight, I’d have to stop you. So first, tell me what’s on your mind?”

A breeze blew between them, as if the wind was responding to Chris’s display

of courage. Her golden locks fluttered in the wind, making it seem as if she were a divine angel who had stepped out of painting.

“I was worried,” she finally said.

“Hm? About me?” Ein asked.

She nodded. “Do you remember your first year at the academy? When we faced the Academy District bombing incident? That was our first major battle fighting together. Then it was the Sea Dragon, and after that, our infiltration of the Tower of Wisdom. Finally, we struggled against an enhanced wyvern on our way back... I’m trying to say that we’ve fought side by side so many times now.”

Her dignified visage and the sapphire eyes within it were now pointed directly at the boy.

“To me, it was a given that I was beside you. So, when I heard that you were battling something in a faraway place, I hated myself for being unable to do anything. I had thoughts like ‘Why couldn’t I fight with you?’ and the like. My heart ached with pain.”

Chris looked down, her cheeks slightly pink. Her lips seemed to tremble with fear, and it looked as though her shoulders were shaking as well.

“I...cannot bear the thought of you being hurt while we’re apart,” she finished.

“Chris, you’re the marshal,” Ein replied. “I can’t monopolize you.”

The role of a marshal surely wasn’t to become Ein’s personal knight. She was tasked with not only protecting the castle, but the royal capital and the entirety of Ishtarica by extension.

“B-But...” Chris insisted, approaching the boy. “Even so, I wanted to protect you, Sir Ein!”

She wanted to be the one to protect him—no one else. That was all she wanted to convey to the crown prince. Ein had calmly rejected her wishes, and she expected as much. But Chris wasn’t going to give up, sharing her feelings as a single tear rolled down her cheek. She couldn’t force the prince to do her bidding. She knew she was being insolent, but she couldn’t bring herself to stay

in front of Ein any longer. However, the prince stepped in to stop her just as she tried to run away.

“Wait, Chris.”

Ein nodded to himself, causing Chris to forget her sadness for a moment as she quizzically tilted her head.

“You can’t do it because you’re the marshal,” Ein said firmly. “Then I think...there’s another way.”

“Another way?” Chris asked.

“Right. I don’t think anyone would recommend I do this, but let’s do this tonight: why don’t we go and see if we can collect on my outstanding rewards?”

Chris had no idea what the boy was on about. However, she couldn’t talk back against Ein’s confident demeanor and opted to remain standing in silence.

Following the celebration, the king had returned to his chambers alongside his queen and chancellor. An ominous air hung over the monarch’s bedroom, but this atmosphere was born from Silverd’s own worry instead of an impending threat. The trio was waiting for Ein to make his appearance.

“That Ein...” Silverd muttered. “That *Ein* of ours asked that we pay out all of his rewards to him! Just what does he plan to ask for...”

Silverd was the only one in the room who appeared to be nervous about the whole deal. For their part, his wife and chancellor were having a good time. No matter what would happen, Silverd knew he stood alone and could only trust his own judgment. “Please calm yourself, Your Majesty,” Warren said. “Isn’t it splendid that he’s so forthright about settling up on his rewards? When you look at what he’s earned from his actions in Barth, this might be a good thing.”

“D-Don’t be a fool! Matters such as this aren’t so simple!”

“Then why don’t you reject his request?”

Unfortunately, this was an idea that Silverd would never agree to. He was known for espousing a simple rule: all good work must always be rewarded, but no bad deeds should go unpunished. Naturally, Silverd felt the kingly

responsibility to follow through on his word.

“Urgh...” Silverd groaned. “That, I cannot do. As the king, I must not forget that all good work must be rewarded while no bad deed goes unpunished.”

As Warren had predicted, the king wasn’t going to budge on this rule. Likely thinking the same thing, Lalalua found herself smiling alongside Warren.

A short while later, the trio heard a knock at the door.

“Your Majesty, it must be Sir Ein,” Warren said, getting up to open the door.

The king’s impatience grew with every step the chancellor took.

“Ah, Sir Ein! We’ve been waiting for you! Please come inside!” Warren said before noticing that the boy was not alone. “Hm? Dame Chris?”

“I called Chris to be here with me. Can we come in?” Ein asked.

The crown prince was acting way more confident than usual, much to the chancellor’s delight. Ein’s expedition to Barth had left a positive impression on him; his experiences left him all the bolder for it.

“Of course,” Warren replied. “Please go to His Majesty.”

“All right,” Ein replied. “Come on, Chris, let’s go.”

“Y-Yessir!”

Silverd was more confused than ever before. Why was Chris here? Did she have something to do with what Ein was about to discuss? *He’s not going to ask me if he can marry her, is he?* Silverd thought to himself.

“What’s with the sudden request, Ein? I understand you want to clear us of our debt to you,” Silverd said.

“There’s something—I mean, someone that I want, so I’d like to discuss that with you,” the crown prince replied.

Even in rephrasing his answer, Ein was brimming with confidence.

“How rare for you to want something,” the king said.

“It might be, grandfather. I don’t think I’ve ever even asked my mother about something that I desired. I believe this is my first such request.”

“Continue. What reward is it that you seek?”

Ein would normally take a noticeably deep breath at this point; it was a routine that amped him up. But this time around, he did no such thing and instead spoke with the utmost confidence.

“Before I ask for mine, there is one person I’d like to offer a reward to,” Ein started.

“What are you thinking?” Silverd asked.

“A variety of things. First, as the crown prince, I would like to request permission to reward Sir Lloyd Gracier for his efforts.”

“T-To Lloyd?!”

“Hm...” Warren said, noticing one thing.

Silverd had no chance of winning this argument. Even Warren had no idea what Ein desired, but it was clear that Ein held the upper hand in this exchange. Another bit that was clear was Ein’s power—he was a powerhouse in battle. Yes, he had the Dullahan’s power by his side, but he even managed to hold his own against the Sea Dragon. Once again, Warren was in awe of the prince’s intelligence.

“You must have the king’s vessel within you,” the chancellor muttered.

Ein’s eyes twitched. *Vessel again?* He gave a discreet chuckle, thinking that he’d been hearing the word quite often as of late.

“Thanks to Lloyd, our investigative team was able to return with superb results,” Ein continued. “I was able to join the team in Barth without any fear for my safety. Are these not the results *he* brought back?”

“Indeed, I agree that they are,” Silverd said. “Even if we were to commend Lloyd for his efforts, what do you desire for him?”

This was precisely the question that Ein had been waiting to hear. Happy to find that this exchange had played out in his favor, he proceeded to make his request.

“I’d like for you to retract one of his previous punishments,” the crown prince said.

Both Lalalua and Chris seemed to be confused by this request. However, Warren had pieced the boy's play together and nodded in understanding.

"I'm referring to the incident regarding the Sea Dragon. Lloyd allowed me to paralyze him, facilitating my escape from the castle. I'd like you to retract the punishment you issued at the time."

"What?! Ein, you don't mean..." the king started.

"As you might be aware, I'd like for you to reinstate Lloyd's knightly status and his title of marshal."

Lloyd no longer served the castle as a knight—he was Silverd's personally hired bodyguard.

"What have you been thinking about?!" Silverd shouted.

"As I've stated earlier, of various matters," Ein replied.

The other people within the room could only watch on as bystanders.

"Even if we were to reward Lloyd for his efforts, what do you have to say about your abduction at the hands of the Living Armor? It seems that it was a while before anyone noticed your disappearance. Who shall take responsibility for that?"

Silverd had already made his resolve, vowing to follow the rule that he'd known his entire life.

"I believe those were extenuating circumstances," Ein countered. "It's a bit difficult to determine who holds responsibility for that."

"Explain."

"The reason for my abduction was my own use of the Phantom Hands. Plainly, none of my knights were at the root of the problem. On the topic of responsibility, who do you deem to be held liable? Is it Dill, Lloyd, or the Knights Guard?"

"Why, Lloyd, of course. He was in charge of the entire operation."

"I see. Then I think you're misunderstanding matters, Your Majesty."

"M-Misunderstanding?"

The sound of Silverd's nervous gulp echoed throughout the room.

"From the moment our team left Barth to investigate the Demon Lord's old territory, I believe I was the one in charge. If the leader of the team should be held liable, that responsibility should fall onto me."

Ein's reasoning was a bit forced, but he wasn't mistaken. As he held the highest title, the crown prince would ultimately be held responsible for his own abduction.

"Therefore, I suggest we use one of my rewards to cancel that out. Punish me by removing a reward that I am owed."

"And what reward are you referring to exactly?"

"The one I'd receive from discovering that red foxes had used Magna's port to travel across the sea. That reward would cancel out my punishment. I believe them to be of similar value. Correct, Warren?"

Shocked by hearing his name so suddenly, the chancellor paused for a moment before providing an answer. Not only was he referred to so casually, but Warren also felt overpowered by the royal family's commanding aura.

"I-Indeed," Warren said. "As Sir Ein says, I believe they are of similar value as well. There's a chance that information on the foxes is even more valuable."

"That's good enough. The party we had tonight was my reward as well, after all," Ein replied before turning to the king. "Your Majesty, could you now agree to honor Lloyd for saving my life?"

"I suppose it can't be helped," Silverd relented. "But your reasoning won't allow for Lloyd's reinstatement as marshal. It's simply not enough."

"He has previously endangered the crown prince's life, but he saved me this time. Is that not enough?"

"Not at all. Stop speaking nonsense. This is an entirely different situation."

For the first time during this entire exchange, Ein seemed to be thinking to himself for a moment. Was there nothing else for him to do? As his company looked on at him anxiously, the boy soon opened his mouth.

"Then may I use the red fox's magic stone?" Ein asked. "I believe I still haven't

received a prize for bringing that back to the castle.”

“What?!” Silverd yelled. “Ein, what are you thinking?!”

“This should be more than enough. Shouldn’t it, grandfather?”

Ein switched how he addressed the king in an act of provocation. This wasn’t part of the prince’s play; he just wanted a prompt response. His gaze urged the king to act quickly and Silverd couldn’t find it in himself to fight back.

“Warren, I shall look over documentation in regards to Lloyd’s knighthood before I sleep,” Silverd finally said. “Prepare them for me.”

“As you wish,” the chancellor replied.

In the end, the king had given way—no, Ein had bent Silverd to his will. In front of the king, the prince had used his own powers to grant his earnest desire.

“But I don’t think we can have him as marshal,” Silverd said. “Chris is our marshal, is she not?”

“That is why I’d like you to dismiss her from her post, then reinstate her as personal knight to the second princess and crown prince.”

Everyone gasped at once, finally understanding Ein’s true intentions. However, Silverd carried a hint of fury in his timbre.

“I can’t dismiss a marshal so easily!” the king bellowed. “I was shocked to hear you wanted Lloyd reinstated as marshal, but I didn’t think you’d follow it up with an even more foolish demand!”

“If I may, Sir Ein, I believe that’s a tad too forceful...” Warren gingerly said, scolding the prince slightly.

But Ein’s expression didn’t change as he proceeded to open his mouth once more. “Your Majesty, I’m not finished yet. And Warren, this is a talk between the king and the crown prince. I’d appreciate it if you would watch your words.”

Ein spoke politely, but in essence, he had just told the chancellor to shut up.

“I think this arrangement is only natural,” Ein said.

“What are you trying to say?” Silverd asked after a pause.

“If Lloyd returned to knighthood and was reinstated as marshal, his skills would be utilized to their fullest potential. Additionally, I don’t believe Chris to have the right temperament or abilities for the position. She’s best suited to be a personal guard.”

“Everyone has things they’re good and bad at!”

“I’m not making an emotional appeal. Though this is a bit forceful, I want to do what’s best for Ishtarica. That’s my earnest desire.”

If Ein were to truly divulge his innermost thoughts, he wanted to grant Chris’s wish. His kindness had started this entire exchange in the first place, but he could never say such a thing, of course.

“Lloyd is one of Ishtarica’s national treasures,” Ein continued. “To treat him as a normal knight is nothing short of a waste. Hence, I’d like to use all the rewards that I’m owed to reinstate Lloyd as a marshal.”

Much of this proposed solution was forceful and too convenient for Ein’s ends. But even so, the crown prince’s words carried weight and power. When the room turned quiet, Lalalua was the one to break the silence.

“Dear, why don’t you give up?” she asked.

“What do you mean by that?” the king replied.

“It’s a bit forceful, indeed, but he has a point. Ein—I mean, my Crown Prince, may we return with a response in the morning? How does that sound?”

“I understand. Then I shall be waiting for an answer in the morning,” Ein said before turning to his knight. “Chris.”

“Huh?! Y-Yes?!” the elf yelped.

“Our meeting is over. Why don’t we leave?”

Chris had completely let her guard down, but was snapped back to reality by the crown prince’s words. She was overwhelmed by the sheer power and pressure exerted during the royals’ heated exchange. It was only then that she realized that Ein was growing ever closer to her line of sight. The boy’s domineering presence wasn’t from aura alone; he was growing taller and bolder by the day.

“Sir Ein! Sir Ein!” the elf called.

Adrenaline was still pumping through the boy’s veins, his nerves keeping his heart thumping loudly. If he were to judge his performance in the prior debate, Ein would probably point to his lingering anxiety. He was so rattled that he’d forgotten to respond to Chris’s words.

“Whoops. Sorry, Chris,” Ein replied. “What’s wrong?”

“Th-That’s my line!” Chris said. “How could you say such things to His Majesty?!”

“I guess I went to claim you for myself.”

“How could you be so relaxed?! Everything you’re owed will cease to be!”

“I don’t mind that. I had no use for all of that anyway.”

In fact, one could argue that Ein had been saving up his rewards to use them in a moment such as this.

“B-But you can’t do so much for me!” Chris insisted.

“I don’t mind. Ah, but I was so nervous! My grandfather’s terrifying! I couldn’t stop shaking while talking to him!”

“Y-You were nervous? But you were acting so boldly.”

“I just went with the flow of things, but I was actually terrified. I planned our conversation so that he’d hear me out, but I still couldn’t help feeling anxious while I was in the thick of things.”

Ein smiled casually, but Chris was flabbergasted to discover that she couldn’t read her prince’s thoughts at all.

“To think you were a little boy just a short while ago...” Chris reminisced.

“I was, but look at me now,” Ein replied, standing in place before approaching Chris’s side. “Look at how tall I am. I think I’ll be towering above you sooner or later.”

He was still shorter than his elf. However, in closing the distance between each other, Ein had positioned his handsome visage right in front of Chris. Her

face suddenly turned red so quickly that one could practically hear her entire head fizzle.

“S-S-S-Sir Ein?!” she yelped.

“Sorry,” Ein replied. “I guess I’m still a little excited from the earlier exchange.”

“No! Er, I didn’t dislike it or anything!”

Why can’t I phrase that better?! Chris thought to herself. She didn’t dislike that the prince was close to her. Failing to vocalize her thoughts, the elf began to loathe her brain’s slow processing speed in times like this.

The two continued down the hall cheerfully chattering away until they reached the prince’s room. It was time for them to part ways.

“Sir Ein, um, I know that this might be a bit insolent of me to ask, but may I make another request?” Chris asked.

“Hm? And what’s that?”

“Um, if I ever do become your personal guard, would you call my name forcefully as you’d done earlier? I would like that...”

The prince remembered his recent exit from his grandfather’s chambers.

“I’d appreciate it if you could do so when I become your guard!” the elf pleaded.

It was clear that she’d mustered much of her courage to say these words; her eyes had grown damp with tears while she clenched her fists. From the prince’s perspective, he was standing before a beautiful warrior on the verge of breaking into tears. How could he say no? The elf’s tears appeared to glitter like jewels.

“All right!” Ein hastily said. “I will! So please don’t cry!”

Chris would’ve surely cried if her pleas were rejected, but now she was about to cry tears of joy.

“Come on! It’s all right! Don’t cry, okay? Please!” Ein said.

“I-I’m sorry...” the elf apologized. “But these are tears of joy, so I’m fine!”

While loudly sniffing, Chris quickly wiped away her tears. The corners of her eyes were red, but her lips formed a bright smile.

“You’ve truly made my day! Good night!” she said.

The elf was practically skipping as she walked away. When he saw the marshal’s joy on display, Ein was glad that he’d gone through the trouble to speak with his grandfather. After nodding to himself in satisfaction, Ein opened the door to his room.

Ein woke up the next morning to find himself in a very good mood. Exhausted from the exchange with Silverd, the prince didn’t remember much of what happened after he entered his room last night. Seeing that he had woken up in his bed, he must have crawled in at some point before falling asleep. He wanted to sleep a bit more, but it was 8 a.m., and time for him to wake up.

“I should get changed.”

He slipped out of his soft covers and touched the change of clothes on his sofa. He’d fallen asleep without changing into his pajamas, and his formal attire had become wrinkled. He’d need to apologize to Martha later for that.

“But today’s a day off... I wouldn’t get in trouble for sleeping a bit longer.”

However, he didn’t want to be so lazy.

“No, I should play with the twins.”

As the Sea Dragons were all but guaranteed to have missed him, Ein wanted to dedicate a good bit of time to playing with them today. The moment he decided to wash up for breakfast, he heard a quiet knock on the door.

“Yes?” the prince asked after quickly changing his clothes.

The door opened and a woman entered his room.

“Ah, erm, good morning,” Ein said.

As he remembered the events of the night prior, he found it difficult to converse with her normally. But the lady didn’t seem at all bothered by his clumsy words and instead spoke energetically and happily.

“From today, I have been assigned as the personal knight to both Her

Highness the Second Princess and His Highness the Crown Prince! My name is Christina Wernstein! I hope we can get along!"

She was dressed in her knight uniform with her hair down, imbuing the knight with a divine aura. She looked especially beautiful today. Her demeanor signaled that she was happier than ever before. In fact, the smile that spilled from her lips was brimming with pure joy.

Spellbound, Ein could only blink as he gazed upon her.

"Ah, er, I don't think you have any plans today... Wh-What shall we do?" Chris asked.

While in her fit of joy, the knight likely hadn't thought everything through. She was probably just thrilled to share the good news with Ein. She even seemed to be slightly out of breath. With a snort, Ein couldn't help but burst into a giggling fit and hoped that she'd forgive him for it.

"Please don't laugh at me! Good grief!" Chris said.

"I'm sorry," Ein replied. "I don't have any plans either. I was just going to go play with the twins right now." The look of dissatisfaction disappeared from Chris's face. "And I'll have you come along with me, of course. I was just about to have breakfast, so..."

Ein remembered his promise from last night, causing a smile to form on his face. He then walked past her, speaking in that commanding tone she'd requested.

"I'd like to head to the dining area first. Come along...Chris."

"Yes, of course, Sir Ein!"

She must've been the best elf to ever be. Even if she were to be compared to history's most gorgeous elves, no one could hope to hold a candle to Chris's beauty. The priceless charm she radiated shone brighter than the rays of the morning sun.

Chapter Eight: Putting an End to an Undesired Relationship

It was near the end of autumn and the sun shone bright upon the royal capital. When Ein woke up on this particular day off from his duties, he noticed that a dreary and tense atmosphere hung over the castle.

“Did something happen?” he wondered aloud, quickly changing his clothes before leaving his room.

Ein’s floor was often quiet and usually devoid of any knights making their rounds. To bump into any knights, he’d need to head down a flight of stairs. Ein did just that, proceeding to tap a knight on the shoulder to get his attention.

“Did something happen?” Ein asked.

“Y-Your Highness! Er, well, something has happened...indeed, but it’s quite difficult to explain.”

“Hm?”

“I recommend you go to the audience room, Your Highness. I’m afraid I cannot say much more.”

Yep, I don’t get it at all. All that Ein could glean was that something had happened in the audience room. The Demon Lord’s magic stone had already been transferred to the treasury due to its reaction to the Dullahan’s presence within Ein. The stone’s removal was deemed necessary as the crown prince required access to the room in order to carry out his duties. Ein quickly thanked the knight before he walked towards the audience room.

On his way, he noticed that the dreary atmosphere was present throughout the entire castle. When he stopped outside of the audience room, he noticed that this air had become especially heavy, suffocating even.

“I guess I’ll enter,” the boy said.

With a loud creak, the large set of wooden double doors opened to reveal

Silverd on his throne. Lloyd and Warren were close by, visibly relieved that the prince had walked into the room as though reinforcements had arrived.

Ugh... What's going on here? Ein wondered.

Despite their status as the two of the king's closest confidants, the pair kept their distance from him. Silverd was gazing off into the distance with a thousand-yard stare. The intense, rageful aura emanating from the king filled the castle, and this was just from the irritated tapping of his fingers against an armrest. Ein likened the king's frustrated tapping to the sounds of a dragon's footsteps.

"Grandfather, is anything the matter?" Ein sheepishly called out.

"Hm?" Silverd said, looking up and sounding like his usual self. "Ah, Ein. You're awake early today."

"Good morning. Why are you all gathered in the audience room?"

"Ah, well, you see, I was about to go against the first king's words and launch a preemptive strike."

"Pardon?!"

Ein wasn't the only one in the room to be caught off guard, as Warren and Lloyd appeared to be equally shocked.

"Rage, hesitation, and self-loathing. Indeed, I'm currently filled with troublesome emotions," the king admitted.

"G-Grandfather?! What do you mean by a preemptive strike?! I-I mean with which country are you trying to go to war with?!" Ein stammered.

"Who else? Heim, of course."

"Why the sudden change of heart? That kingdom matters to us no longer, does it?!"

"Indeed. I had similar thoughts until this morning, when I received *this*."

From his pocket, he took out a letter. It was stamped with a gold seal, implying that a high-ranking nobleman had been the sender.

"Y-Your Majesty, when did you receive that letter?!" Warren cried.

The letter was unfamiliar to the chancellor. This was very odd, for every letter and report sent to the king was carefully inspected by Warren beforehand.

“It was sneaked in with a report from Euro,” Silverd grumbled. “Someone from Euro was likely paid to insert this letter.”

He handed the document to Ein.

“Wh-What does it say, Sir Ein?” Warren asked.

“Ah, I see...” the prince said as he scanned through the letter’s contents. “I can see why this would anger you, grandfather.”

The first king’s most important rule had been followed to the letter. Even after receiving word that his daughter was suffering under the hand of Heim’s nobility, Silverd had refrained from deploying Ishtarica’s military might.

“Over the years, I’ve heard many opinions trickle in on the topic of military force,” Silverd said. “And I’ve come to understand where these people are coming from. After all, I was absolutely furious to learn what had happened to your mother.”

“I understand that all too well,” Ein said. His shoulders slumped, the boy scoffed at the letter before turning to the chancellor. “Warren, this letter has rather selfish intentions behind it. In short, the author is demanding to know the whereabouts of Graff and his family members. While throwing a litany of gripes at me and my mother, they’ve also gone on to accuse Ishtarica of kidnapping the former grand duke.”

Stunned, Warren quietly listened on before replying. “My apologies, it seems as though I was taken aback for a brief moment.”

“You see, Warren? You understand my rage, do you not?” Silverd asked.

“Absolutely...” the chancellor replied. “I wasn’t expecting Heim’s third prince to be so persistent in his pursuit of Lady Krone.”

“How does his kingdom perceive him?”

“He’s highly regarded and is seen as the apparent heir to the throne. His brothers are not as kindly taken to. The first prince is not unlike an overfed pet, only concerned with stuffing his face with food and into ladies’ bosoms. The

second prince isn't much to write home about either."

Despite the silence that hung over the audience room, the king's simmering rage could still be felt by all present. For their part, Warren and Lloyd had long been fed up with Heim's nonsense. However, the crown prince appeared to be more upset than anyone else in the room.

"Shall we end this once and for all?" Ein muttered. The boy's decisive words demanded the room's attention, freezing his company in place.

Upon witnessing his grandson's face filled with such sheer determination, Silverd encouraged the boy to continue.

"Quite honestly, I'm tired of this nonsense," Ein said. "Krone is mine; she's *my* advisor. Heim's continued attempts to harass us rub me the wrong way."

Essentially, Ein was filled with the desire to keep Krone all for himself. It was only natural for her to be loved by the masses, but the boy was prepared to go wild with the Dullahan's power if anyone attempted to steal her away.

"Oh, she's 'yours,' you say?" Silverd said, snorting. "Heh. Ha ha! You heard that, everyone?! Ha ha ha!"

"Grandfather?! I'm obviously referring to her as my advisor!"

Once the king broke out in a fit of roaring laughter, Lloyd and Warren quickly followed suit. Thanks to their laughter, the gloomy atmosphere hanging over the castle had dissipated. Silverd couldn't help but find humor in the discovery that his grandson's display of bravado had resulted from the boy's desire to monopolize the little lady. Following a few final chuckles, the king's expression took a serious turn once more. "I'm not against that idea," he said. "I'm for putting an end to this affair."

"Um, but I don't intend to use military force," Ein replied. "As members of the royal family, I believe we should refrain from going against the first king's words."

"I know that. I have no intention of doing so either. There are more than a few ways in which we can finally settle this matter. Warren! Tell me the most effective method!"

“If we were to fight, I would suggest a duel...without risk to our lives, of course. The other method is via a public debate. Personally, I find that the latter would be much more effective in silencing our foe.”

“I don’t mind either,” Lloyd said. “If it’s a duel, I shall personally cross blades with them.”

“You’re raring to go, Lloyd,” the king remarked. “And what are your chances of winning?”

Overjoyed to hear his king’s words, Lloyd stood tall and prepared a response with that booming voice of his. Standing next to the marshal, Ein thought back to their clash with Upaskamuy—a battle in which Lloyd displayed power far beyond that of the normal human. If a warrior of his caliber were to face a mere man...

“I shall best them in one blow,” Lloyd declared.

This seemed like the only logical conclusion.

“I praise your confidence,” Silverd replied. “And I truly believe that you can do just that.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“Roundheart’s son has lost to yours... So if we were to have the same result among fathers, there’d never be a more delightful result. Be it a duel or a different method, we need a place for discussion. This is a perfect opportunity... It will also allow me to take revenge for breaking our deal and hurting my daughter.” Silverd stroked his beard in high spirits. “All right then, why don’t we make our declaration? I shall be present for the meeting as well.”

“Y-Your Majesty, that’s much too dangerous!” Warren protested.

“As Sir Warren says, it truly is!” Lloyd added.

“Don’t be a fool. We’ll deploy the *White King* and you’ll be by my side,” the king replied. “If I lost my life, the outcome would be just the same if I stayed holed up within the castle.”

The king showed no signs of stopping. Yearning to unleash his pent-up rage, Silverd had reached his limit.

“Now then, why don’t I write a reply?” Silverd said.

“Your Majesty, shall I write in your stead?” Warren offered.

“No need. None at all. I shall *personally* write them my response.”

“Understood. But if you will, please allow me to share a few words with them as well.”

The chancellor flashed a conniving grin—he clearly had a plan of his own in mind.

A few days later, a woman could be heard deeply sighing within the walls of Heim’s royal castle. The woman held a letter in her hand—a response she had received from Ishtarica earlier that morning. Her stomach had wretched in pain upon realizing that the third prince had sneaked a letter into their correspondence. She felt as if she was going to develop a stomach ulcer after reading Ishtarica’s reply. A young girl dressed in maid clothes approached the woman.

“Lady Elena, here are the documents that you’ve requested.”

This Elena had a striking resemblance to Krone. But it was more accurate to say that Krone resembled Elena, as the little lady was this woman’s daughter. Elena was remarkably talented, intelligent, and a woman of action. In fact, many had commended her bravery and boldness. Despite the societal challenges she faced as a woman, Elena had earned herself one of Heim’s most important positions.

“Thank you, Lily,” Elena replied.

The maid, Lily, was a loyal castle servant of four years and Elena’s personal attendant.

“Whatever is the matter? You seem upset,” Lily remarked.

“Can you blame me after reading this?” Elena replied. “Lily, are you aware of how much fish that Roundheart, the port city, has brought in annually over the past decade?”

“As far as common sense allows. But what does that mean?”

“It means that Ishtarica’s chancellor is quite the crafty one.”

Elena handed Lily a piece of paper.

“What is this?” Lily asked.

“These are details of Roundheart’s fishing yields,” Elena replied. “He even advised me to look into it as it seems that some are evading their taxes.”

Whenever faced with something unpleasant or critical matters, Elena tended to chew on her thumbnail. Of course, she was gnawing away while explaining the situation to Lily.

“I don’t even want to think what’ll happen to us if we attend their meeting in this state,” Elena muttered.

“Can we do something about it?” Lily asked.

“We *must* do something about it. We must work harder than ever, but I wonder what *we* can accuse them of? Suspicious about my father and my daughter being abducted? But I feel as though they can make any excuse they desire. What about their rude attitude towards Prince Tigger? He was in competition with the crown prince, so I suppose we don’t have much to say about that. Since we have General Rogas on our side, perhaps we will hold our own in a duel...”

“I see. I suppose you can come to that conclusion with that man—I mean, General Rogas.”

“I hope we can end it all with a simple duel... Ah, pardon me, I have an appointment with Prince Tigger.”

“I understand. Then I shall be cleaning this area.”

Lily gently smiled and obediently nodded.

“But you mustn’t refer to General Rogas as ‘that man.’ I assume it’s just a slip of the tongue, but still,” Elena warned.

“Me? Oh, perhaps you misheard me.”

Elena didn’t think she’d misheard and would let this matter slide, but she was on edge more than usual today. Half jokingly, she decided to lay a trap.

“Ah, speaking of, would you know when the Agustos household was required to file next year’s budget?” Elena asked.

“By November, I believe,” Lily replied instantly.

I see... Elena thought.

“Why did you react to the name ‘Agustos’?” Elena asked.

“Ah, have you found me out?” Lily replied with a graceful smile, changing her personality quicker than a cat rolling a ball. “But I expected as much! You’re seen as quite talented within Heim, aren’t you, Lady Elena?”

Lily was slowly showing her true self. The once noble maid, the pride of Heim’s servants, was nowhere to be seen.

“That letter also has a few words from Sir Warren, you see,” Lily explained. “He’s stated that I could come home. However, he’s encoded his message and I doubt you could decipher it. Well, I guess it is time for me to leave.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” Elena replied. “What are you going to do from here?”

“Huh? Return to Ishtarica, of course!”

“And do you think you can do that? One scream is all it takes for the knights to come barging in here.”

Quick as a flash, Lily disappeared from view.

“You can’t scream now, can you?” Lily said, pressing a knife to Elena’s throat.

Should the lady exert any force into her vocal cords, she was sure that her neck would be sliced. Expertly using her strength, Lily had silenced Elena.

“You should be a bit more careful, Lady Elena. Your fatal flaw is your carelessness,” Lily said, standing on a windowsill. “I’m not quite allowed to kill you. I’m just threatening you, but if you scream... Well, this is our little deal, okay?”

“I guess I have no choice but to listen. Goodness, you’re just adding insult to injury! Today is not my day.”

“Ah, you just sounded exactly like Lady Krone!”

“But of course. She grew up watching me work. Well, are you leaving the castle now?”

“Of course. What use is there for me to stay here any longer?”

“I took quite a liking to you. It’s truly a pity.”

“If you think so, would you like to come with me?”

Like a devil whispering in her ears, Elena found these words to be enticing. If she could go to Ishtarica, she could reunite with her beloved daughter and her father-in-law. Elena wanted nothing more, but...

“Unfortunately, I must refuse,” the lady finally said. “I still like Heim and it’s the kingdom I grew up in.”

“Ugh, all right, all right. What a pity, then,” Lilly replied.

“Could you tell me one more thing? Is Krone doing well?”

Elena had learned a little about her daughter’s whereabouts thanks to a previous letter. However, the noblewoman was curious to hear how her darling was from an Ishtarican’s point of view.

“Hmmm, it’s difficult to say,” Lily replied. “It’s been a while since I’ve been back home.”

The distance between the two nations made it difficult for the “maid” to make any trips home. Much like Elena, Lily had been busy with her own work as well.

“I can let you in on a tidbit about Lady Krone from about two months ago,” Lily said. “Is that all right with you?”

“That’s quite recent!” Elena replied.

Lily stuck out her tongue and gave a mischievous smile. “Weeell... She seemed to be having a lot of fun. That’s all I can tell you.”

With that, she opened the window and leaned out. The room was located on the upper floors of the castle; had any normal person just fallen, they would’ve been gravely injured.

“One last word of warning,” Lily said. “If you don’t want to find yourself

fighting against your own daughter, I'd strongly advise you to stop Heim's royal family."

Elena approached the window in hopes of hearing more details, but Lily jumped out before the noblewoman could close the distance. Elena gazed out the window, but her former attendant was nowhere to be seen.

"I never thought that some could truly vanish in a puff of smoke," Elena muttered.

Now then, where was she to begin? Elena sighed, knowing that she knew nothing while Ishtarica held all the cards. In contrast to her gloomy mood, Heim's skies were clear and sunny.

Chapter Nine: My True Home Nation and a New Sword

Now in the middle of November, Barth had grown colder than ever. The harsh winter season had spread to the Demon Lord's former territory as well, with blizzards blustering about nonstop as of late. Located in a corner of the Demon Castle, Marco screamed in agony from within the fortress's hidden basement.

"Gh! Aaahhh!"

The dim and dank basement appeared to have been crudely excavated, as if a rock was roughly gouged out. Marco was curled into a ball on the ground with numerous bottles and Elder Tree leaves scattered around him.

"You're a splendid person! A splendid person! A splendid... Aaahhh! I-I have not... Grah!"

Marco's body was tougher than most monsters. He injured himself, hoping that the pain would help keep his sense of self intact. Despite the agonizing pain that coursed through his body, the Living Armor still felt that he was himself. He not only ingested a mixture of poisons that should no longer exist; he coated his entire body in the sludge. The poisons slowly melted away Marco's metal flesh as he fought against the curse.

"Ha ha! Beast! You foul beast! After centuries, you're still unable to take one simple knight!"

Marco stood tall and proud despite the sharp pain he felt throughout his body. *I'm fine. I can still hold on to my consciousness. Every now and then, my mouth moves on its own to praise the red foxes, but I'm still Marco. I know that much.*

"Not yet... Not...yet..."

He then remembered Ein's face from a few months back. With the prince's face flashing across his mind, the knight knew he couldn't falter here. He had to remain strong until the boy's return to the Demon Castle.

“A beautiful person. A beautiful person. A beautiful person. A beautiful person.”

Marco couldn't recall the number of times he had fought his curse with pain, whether it was this month or even the past week.

“Th-The one who's most...beautiful...is Lord Arshay! Her heart...is the most beautiful thing of all!”

The red foxes who had cursed him were nasty customers indeed. The curse was designed to grow stronger with every passing thought of the Demon Lord.

“Heh. Ah ha ha!”

Marco was putting up a good fight, but the curse had been eating away at his mind and body for centuries. He was nearing his limit.

“My mission isn't over yet. Marco! You can still go on, can't you?!”

He goaded his aching body as the deadly poisons were the only things that could stabilize his spirit. Unfortunately, the Living Armor was quickly running out of poison. He was worried of course, but he had no choice but to endure—no choice but to douse his body with every drop of poison he had on hand. It was all he could do, the pain be damned.

After a while, the curse's power subsided.

“Hah... Hah... I made it through today too... You did well, Marco,” he praised himself. “This is all thanks to that splendid person.”

The end was nearing him. After seemingly pleading with himself to make it through the day, Marco envisioned his final moments.

After Ein had finished his classes for the day, he eagerly headed towards the academy gates. He locked eyes with Chris, who was waiting for his return.

“Welcome back, Sir Ein,” she said.

“I'm back! All right, let's go,” Ein replied.

“Of course! Please leave the guarding to me!”

Chris stood resolute as always, her golden locks wavering behind her. Ever

since returning to her post as Ein's personal knight, the elf had often left her hair down. The castle's staff had wondered about her change of heart, but soon understood why when they realized when the change had occurred.

"Oh? And I suppose I'm not worthy of your greeting?" Krone said mischievously, taking a moment to act a touch bratty.

"Sorry, sorry," Ein replied. "I'm back, Krone. Thanks for coming to fetch me."



Krone usually didn't go to Ein's academy, but she had her reasons for tagging along today. As Ein's advisor, she was waiting alongside Chris for her crown prince. *I feel like things have settled down*, Ein thought, quietly nodding as he glanced at his knight standing beside him.

A few months ago, news of Chris's sudden dismissal from her duties as marshal had spread throughout the royal capital like wildfire. While the citizens and aristocrats suspected a scandal or a cover-up, the castle's staff had remained quiet.

The following day, it became apparent that Chris had returned to her duties as the personal knight of the second princess and crown prince. Once informed of this development, Kingsland's citizens were pleased with the change. Chris had been regularly seen accompanying Ein to and from the academy, strengthening their understanding of the situation.

"I'm starting to get excited," Ein said, thinking about the rest of his day.

His footsteps seemed to be lighter than usual as he headed to the station, encouraging the ladies behind him to pick up the pace.

The early morning and evening had become rather chilly as of late. The trees that lined the main roads had turned a reddish-brown, reminiscent of the recently passed fall season. There weren't many people out and about yet, but rush hour would soon arrive at White Rose Station. Combined with the last train of the day coming from Magna, the station would be quickly crowded with passengers and water trains from all over the continent. Ein was on the way to his own destination, waving at the occasional citizen who recognized him.

The prince's party was walking right outside of the aristocratic district. They veered onto a street off the main road, but they were still headed for an excellent location—one right next to White Rose Station with a superb view of the ocean. In reality, there was no better place to be.

"I'm starting to see it," Krone remarked.

She was pointing at a newly constructed pair of buildings: a forge stocked full with the latest equipment and a house right next to it. Now Mouton and

Ememe's new home, the smiths could often be seen sleeping on the bed they set right in front of the furnace. They'd even gone out of their way to have monster bones delivered to keep in touch with their Barthite origins. The storefront's name had been written out on a sign in large, rough letters: Mouton's Forge #2.

"Then allow me," Chris said.

With a large clang and clatter, Chris rang the bell hanging by the door. After a short while, the door opened and Ememe peeked out.

"Oh! Welcome! We've been waiting for you! Come on! Come on in! Master's been waiting for you too!"

"Excuse me," Ein called, making his way into the forge.

Mouton waited at a newly furnished wooden table before he looked up and let out a hearty laugh.

"Gah ha ha ha! I've been waiting for ya, Your Highness!"

"Hello," Ein replied. "Is this it?"

The wooden box placed in the middle of the table had captured Ein's attention. Though made of plain timber, the narrow box somehow had an extravagant air about it.

"Yep, yep! This is it!" Mouton said. "Working with this material was like breaking a wild horse, so it was a real pain in the ass to get in order! But speaking of wild horses, Ememe might be a bit more—no, she's just an idiot. Sorry about that."

"You're so rude, Master! I'm not a horse, but a bir—I mean, harpy!" Ememe shouted.

"All right, let's leave that fool be. Come on, open it up! I'm quite proud of it. Hell, I'd even call it my best work yet!"

Mouton's eyes softened, as though he were watching his own hatchling leave the nest. Ein reached for the box, but not before he posed one final question.

"Are you sure I can open this?" he asked.

“Yep! I’m sure it’ll be loyal to you, Your Highness!”

Ein wasn’t quite sure if swords held loyalty nor did he quite understand the comparison to wild horses.

“All right,” Ein said.

He removed the lid, took a deep breath, and peered inside. The blade was covered with a silklike cloth that was soft and comfortable to the touch. When he grasped the cloth and gently tugged it away, the blade emerged before the boy’s eyes.

“You’re my new partner,” Ein said.

First, he took in the blade’s visage before even touching it. It was a longsword of roughly eighty centimeters long with a slightly widened blade. Not to be outdone by the blade, the hilt was fairly long itself. Much like the Living Armor it was born from, the jet-black blade had veins running through it. However, unlike Marco, the veins weren’t a bright blue but a faint turquoise. It rested calmly within the box, nestled inside as though it were on its throne. Enchanted by the sight, Ein reached out to grip the weapon’s hilt before letting out a gasp—the sword’s veins trembled, responding to his touch.

“That’s loyalty,” Mouton explained. “Whoever the material came from, they must have been a prideful one. This is a weapon to be wielded by no one else; it’s been forged for you and you alone, Your Highness. Take good care of it, ya hear?”

“I will,” Ein replied.

The hilt was fashioned out of Sea Dragon bone, making the weapon robust yet light in the hands.

“Oh, and I forgot to tell ya,” Mouton added. “This blade’s got a really stupid ability.”

“A stupid ability?” Ein asked.

“I think it glows when it’s near human bones...and nonhuman bones too I guess.”

“Why does it glow? That really is a bit silly...”

“When you’re working high-quality Undead material, you’ll occasionally get a weapon like this. It’s not like you can use it to call out to your friends, or anything really. It just reacts to bones, and it glows. And really faintly at that.”

“Is there a meaning to that?”

“No clue. Maybe you could use it to find a grave or something.”

Ein wasn’t planning to dig up any graves anytime soon.

“I’ve heard that back in the day, the most vindictive of aristocrats would taunt their torture victims with glowing weapons. Apparently, they also got off from seeing their swords light up as their foes died,” Mouton said.

“I don’t believe I’d ever have the chance to do that, nor would I use my sword like that. I’ll pass on that idea,” Ein replied.

“Gah ha ha ha! I know! No reason for you to develop such a nasty hobby anyway!”

Everyone’s cheeks twitched at the blacksmith’s story. *I guess there are people out there with terrible taste.* Ein collected himself before swinging his sword a few times, getting a feeling for his new partner.

“It suits you well, Ein,” Krone said.

“I agree. You look very dignified,” Chris added.

“Thanks. I like it too,” Ein replied.

“Come over here,” Mouton said, getting up from his chair and heading outside. “I haven’t tested how well it cuts either, so I wanna see it too.”

Ememe chased after her master as Ein and his entourage followed.

“Why not give that blade a whirl against that guy?” Mouton said, using his thumb to point at a peculiar item.

“What is that?” Ein asked.

“That’s a Sea Dragon bone. Not a problem with that, is there?”

Ein wondered if he really should when he noticed Krone glancing his way, signaling that he had her permission.

“But I don’t know how tough the bone is, so can I test it out a little first?” Ein asked.

If his new blade were to crack, he’d be devastated. He didn’t doubt Mouton’s skills or Marco’s material, but the prince wanted to confirm how well his sword could cut before trying it out on a bone. Ein followed Mouton, proceeding to stand before a Sea Dragon bone sitting on the ground.

“Hm? Ah, well, you’ve got a point, I guess,” the blacksmith said. “So? How are you gonna test it out, then?”

“First, I’ll go easy. I’ll just gently tap the bone with my blade.”

Ein’s plan was to gently tap the bone with his blade before gradually throwing more strength behind his swings.

“Your Highness, that ain’t tapping,” Mouton remarked. “That’s slicing.”

“H-Huh?!” Ein gasped.

The bone had been cleanly sliced in two.

“Pardon me, Sir Ein,” Chris said. “May I inspect the bone?”

“Hm? Uh, yes please,” Ein replied.

“It’s beautifully cut. Ah ha ha. An excellent swing of your sword.”

“Oh, Ein...” Krone said with a reproachful gaze.

“Wait, that wasn’t my fault!” Ein desperately said, approaching his advisor. “I only tapped it gently and the bone got cut!”

But the fact remained that the bone had been cut through like butter. Even Chris appeared to be confused by how well the blade seemed to slice.

“Oy, Ememe! You see that?! That was amazing!” Mouton called. “I don’t get it at all!”

“You’re amazing, Master!” the harpy replied. “I don’t get it either! I’m so confused, in fact, that I’m getting hungry!”

“Well said! I’m hungry too! Wanna go out and eat somewhere?! This calls for meat!”

“Really?! Really?! You’re so generous that I might fall for you!”

And so, the blacksmiths went on their way and left the prince’s party behind. *Uh, shouldn’t they lock their doors?* Ein thought, but he was too shocked to say anything.

“Chris, how tough is the Sea Dragon’s backbone?” Ein asked.

“Much tougher than the *White King*, I believe,” Chris replied. “But it’s hard to make any exact determinations.”

I see. So if I were to fight with grandfather, I’d only need my blade to run wild. Ein needed time to process things and his thoughts had instantly veered to the king instead.

“What shall we do?” Krone asked. “I feel we might need to take that away from Ein...”

“Don’t say something so horrible,” Ein replied.

The boy was now being treated like he was a threat.

“Don’t worry. I’m only about sixty percent serious,” his advisor replied.

“That’s more than half, are you sure I don’t need to worry?”

Krone only smiled in reply, hinting that the sword might really be confiscated from him. It was then that Mouton returned.

“I forgot to lock the doors!” Mouton said. “Ah, Your Highness! I’ve also made a scabbard for you, so be sure to take it home! I used the materials you gave me, so your sword should rest in the scabbard despite how well it cuts!”

“Th-Thank goodness,” Ein said, grateful for Mouton’s appearance.

The blacksmith emerged from the building with a scabbard and belt.

“Here,” he said. “I’ve used Sea Dragon scales for the scabbard! From there, I gave it a bit of a metallic finish and painted it black!”

Ein no longer wanted to know how much his weapon cost.

“Sir Ein, it’s a blade fitting for a hero!” Chris said.

“My stomach’s starting to hurt just by holding it,” Ein muttered.

“Ha ha ha ha! Don’t be silly, come on!” Mouton said. “Use the blade to your heart’s content! If anything happens, I’ll fix it any time! All right, I’m off to get some grub!”

“Ah, wait!” Ein called. “Does this sword have a name?!”

“I got nothing! Name it yourself, Your Highness!”

Ein watched Mouton turn his back and quickly fade from view. In thinking up a name, the prince knew that he’d like Marco’s assistance the next time they could meet. *What should I do for now? Should I just call it something simple like “Black Sword”?*

However, the prince was unsure if he’d ever have the chance to see Marco again. For now, Ein decided to refrain from officially naming his new partner.

When Ein returned to the castle, Dill arrived to welcome him home. While the young officer was another of the prince’s personal knights, Chris’s presence had allowed him to tend to his duties within the castle.

“Welcome back,” the young officer said. “That masterpiece on your waist...is that your new blade by chance?”

“That’s right,” Ein answered. “It’s more of a monster than I thought.”

“A monster?”

“It cuts extremely well, beyond my understanding. It’s not a blade I can carelessly unsheathe.”

“Is that so... I’m pleased to hear that you’ve received a wonderful blade.”

Dill was only able to keep his calm as he hadn’t seen the sword for himself. Ein stared into the distance and smiled, much to the young officer’s confusion.

“Ah, yes... It’s difficult for me to say this after such a joyous occasion, but there’s another matter that requires your immediate attention, Sir Ein,” Dill said with a serious tone, causing Ein’s expression to instantly change. “We’ve received a response from Heim.”

Ah, no wonder.

This feud would be settled once and for all, with no threads left dangling. Ein's bold words were the cause of this development, as the boy had prompted his grandfather to reply. Today, Heim had a response of their own. Ein's presence was requested in the discussion of this follow-up letter, but he found himself on the way to an unusual meeting place—the royal family's burial grounds.

Located at the back of the castle, the neatly maintained burial grounds were blessed by the sunshine that shone upon it. For countless generations, members of the Ishtarican royal family had been buried within these sacred grounds. Only members of the family and those with special permission were allowed to even set foot here.

If one were to venture into the graveyard's depths, they could find a spot that gave them a bird's-eye view of the entire cemetery. But that wasn't all, as an enormous gravestone was close by. Even the wise kings of old had been forbidden from being buried beside this gravestone, as it was the resting place of the first king. Neatly engraved into the stone was the epitaph: *Here lies the first king of Ishtarica, Jayle von Ishtarica. He sleeps in his beloved home.* Some of the letters were weathered and difficult to read, a sign that the grave had existed for centuries. As it wasn't a place that one could carelessly enter, even Ein had only been by it a handful of times.

Silverd silently stood in front of the first king's gravestone.

"Grandfather, I heard that you received a response from Heim," Ein said.

The king nodded without turning around and took out an envelope from his pocket. The letter was written on quality parchment, and it was sealed with gold.

"You best read the letter carefully," Silverd recommended.

"I shall. Please allow me," Ein said, preparing himself.

What was their response? What would they request? Filled with excitement and anxiety, the prince read the letter.

"Hm... I see..." Ein mumbled every so often and occasionally nodded, signaling to Silverd that he was reading.

The boy was tempted to grimace at what he was reading a few times, but he

paid them no heed and continued.

“I’ve finished reading it,” the prince said. “I think I understand the contents as well.”

“Then Ein, allow me to ask you,” Silverd said. “What do you think?”

“If I were to summarize the letter in a simple sentence, it would be ‘Come to Heim. We’ll decide who the true victor is within our castle.’ Am I wrong?”

“Unfortunately, you’re absolutely correct.”

Quite frankly, this was beyond foolish. Why would the king go out of his way to visit Heim and discuss matters within an enemy’s castle? Did they truly think that Ishtarica would accept such a selfish offer?

“This feels absolutely pointless,” Ein said. “They’re digging their own grave, so to speak.”

“I don’t blame you for thinking so,” Silverd replied.

“Additionally, I don’t think they’ve taken a moment to think about what could happen to the city of Roundheart if we arrived with our fleet.”

Silverd would be attending this meeting after all. Needless to say, a huge fleet would be prepared to guard the king. Should war break out, Roundheart’s port would be annihilated in mere moments. Ein could only question how Heim had jumped to their own conclusion on the matter.

“I have been considering one meeting place, you see,” Silverd said.

“And where would that be?” Ein asked.

“There’s a small uninhabited island between Heim and Ishtarica.”

“A neutral area.”

Had the two opposing nations decided to meet in Euro, they would only cause trouble for the principality’s people. In the worst-case scenario, the Euroans would be left to pick up the pieces. It was almost guaranteed that they’d decline to host such a meeting. As the king had stated, it was likely best to choose a neutral area.

“Since we have no other choice, I shall offer to prepare the island for our

meeting,” Silverd said. “That’s how I plan to respond.”

“I do feel it’s a waste of funds, but perhaps it’s a necessary evil in this case,” Ein replied.

“Indeed. It would be a frugal move if we could come to a conclusion there.”

If they could have their revenge on Heim for their past misdeed, it would be ideal for the Ishtarican royals. Of course, Warren and the others would prepare as much as possible to ensure that those wishes would be fulfilled.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Ein said.

“Then that’s how I shall reply,” the king replied before shifting topics. “Ah! And this letter was apparently written by your new advisor’s mother.”

No wonder the words looked so neat.

“She has very good handwriting,” Ein commented. “Heim has an excellent officer, it seems.”

“Indeed,” Silverd replied. “She’s wasted in a kingdom like Heim.”

The two royals bowed before the first king’s gravestone before they left.

With a new blade by his side, Ein was now preoccupied with Heim. As the boy’s mind focused on his work, another incident was afoot. Just before dawn was about to break, Olivia heard someone loudly and hastily knocking on her door.

“Who is it?” Olivia wondered.

It wasn’t fitting for a princess to shout loudly, but she couldn’t find the strength to shout anyway as she had just woken up. Instead, she rang the bell by her pillow.

“P-Pardon me!” Martha said, entering Olivia’s room.

The maid’s brow was drenched in sweat and her breathing was haggard—a far cry from her usual calm and composed demeanor.

“Martha? Whatever is the matter at such an early hour?” Olivia asked.

“I deeply apologize for disturbing your sleep, but please come with me!”

The maid would usually explain herself before anything else, but none of that came today. Perplexed, Olivia slipped out of bed and wrapped a dressing gown around her.

“I hope my attire isn’t an issue?” Olivia asked.

“None at all!” Martha cried. “There are no male knights around! Please hurry and head to Sir Ein’s bedroom!”

Something must’ve happened to my beloved Ein. Then I must hurry! Olivia thought.

“Has something occurred to Ein?” she asked.

“That’s correct, Your Highness!” Martha cried. “But what, I can’t quite explain!”

The two rushed out and headed to Ein’s room, a few seconds of a walk away.

The moment Olivia approached her son’s room, she was appalled by the sight. Numerous thick tree roots had penetrated the door of his room while Katima dangled in the air. She hung by her prized lab coat with her limbs lifelessly swinging below her.



“M-Mrow...”

“O-Oh dear...” Olivia murmured.

“Don’t mew ‘oh dear’ me, Olivia! What’s going on here?!”

“I believe those are the roots of my dear Ein.”

“That I know! Mroooow! I’m asking why these roots are sprouting here!”

Ah, I knew it... the second princess thought to herself before she glanced at Martha, hoping to confirm the situation first.

“Lady Katima was headed for bed when she happened to pass by Sir Ein’s bedroom door and was suddenly attacked by branches...or so she’d shouted,” Martha replied.

Upon hearing her maid’s explanation, Olivia glanced at the branches.

“I believe Ein’s roots have matured and are now searching for magic stones,” she explained.

“M-Mrow? Meow?”

“Dryads are said to reach adulthood when they can spread their roots. My roots never sprouted this energetically, but I believe it’s because Ein is a powerful dryad.”

“W-Wait just one second, Olivia. Let’s say that this is really a sign that Ein has reached adulthood as a dryad...” There was one more important detail that Katima wanted to confirm. “If Ein’s searching for magic stones, is he trying to absorb my stone?”

“I’m sure that while Ein is asleep, his body is naturally searching for nutrients from magic stones. But upon sensing that you were nearby, sister, he might have unconsciously tried to stop himself.”

“I-I-I-I might be a charming Cait-Sìth, but mew know I just can’t hand my stone over to him!”

Martha could only crack a strained smile at the scene unfolding before her eyes. Meanwhile, Katima continued to wail.

“I-In any case, I’d thank mew from the bottom of my nine lives if mew could

get me down.”

“Then I suppose I shall ask Ein,” Olivia replied, approaching the roots and gently placing her hand on them. “Ein, could you let my dear sister down?”

“I doubt even your voice can reach him while he’s asleep... Meow?!”

The roots slightly shook and lowered themselves to the ground, freeing Katima. After being gently stroked by Olivia, the roots retracted into the room. All that remained was a broken door and a few small roots.

“Well, that was clawful! All right then, I’ll be taking my leave!”

The Cait-Sith rushed down the corridor like a scared rabbit, hoping to never get caught by the roots again.

“Martha,” Olivia said.

“Hm? Ah, yes?”

“I think we’ll be fine now. Could you kindly request that a handyman fix the door?” The second princess proceeded to pick up a few short roots. “Why don’t we have a long talk about this at a later date, Ein?”

She gently held the roots close to her chest and hummed a little tune before returning to her room. The stunned Martha stared at the door for a time before snapping herself back to reality.

“I must have this door fixed,” she said, immediately returning to work.

The maid sighed, thinking that she’d surely be cleaning the roots that had sprouted within the prince’s room.

The sun hung high over Ishtarica’s skies as Ein and Chris walked around the castle. However, the prince quickly noticed that something was off about his knight today.

“Chris?” Ein asked.

“Hm? Uh, yes?!” Chris replied.

She’d been acting a little weird since word of Ein’s coming-of-age had spread throughout the castle. Ein had been told just what his roots were trying to do

the previous night.

“I’m fine, come on,” Ein said. “Nothing to be scared about at all.”

“A-Are you sure?” Chris asked. “You won’t try to wrap me up and absorb my stone?”

Not a chance I’d ever do that, Ein thought to himself, keeping Chris in the dark about his thoughts.

Olivia had mentioned another thing to the knight: even though Ein had come of age as a nonhuman, he was incredibly powerful due to the wide variety of stones he’d absorbed. There was no precedent for this, leaving the second princess unsure of what accidental chaos her son could cause. Olivia had ended her warning with a smile, advising that the elf take care to protect her stone.

“If I wrap you up and try to absorb your stone, I’d be a danger to society,” Ein replied. “Don’t worry. I have no interest in your stone.”

“Hm?!” Chris replied with a frown.

She would’ve been terrified if Ein had asked to absorb her stone, but she didn’t take kindly to Ein’s phrasing. It was as if he said he had no interest in her, leaving the elf slightly perturbed.

“Fine! Would you like to absorb my stone just a little?!” Chris insisted. “And what will you do if my stone turns out to be delicious?!”

“H-Huh?” Ein asked. “Is that what you’re angry about?”

As Chris approached him, the prince was unsure just what he had done to anger his knight. With her long, blonde locks wildly swaying around, Chris didn’t seem to give off an ounce of the fear that she’d felt moments before.

“Well then, Sir Ein!” Chris yelled. “My magic stone is right here! If you would like to absorb just a little... Just...a little!”

An elf’s magic stone was apparently located in the right side of their chest, and Chris thrust out her chest while she continued to firmly speak. However, she immediately realized what she was doing and was suddenly hit by a hurricane of embarrassment. Her face had turned into a bright red.

“Uh, er, well... I-I’m not ready yet,” she confessed. “Can you wait until I am?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I won’t absorb your magic stone,” Ein replied.

“You won’t?!”

“Of course not. Why are you putting your own life in danger?”

Chris sadly frowned, as though she was expecting her stone to be absorbed for whatever reason.

“What shall I do about these feelings? They’re quite hard to describe...” she said.

“It’d be great if you could forget them,” Ein replied.

The prince gave his out-of-control knight a sidelong glance before gazing up at the sky through a nearby window.

Ein had two tasks to take care of that evening: his academic studies, and the stack of public duties that he’d been assigned more frequently as of late. The prince read through documents that related to administrative duties alongside petitions from the nation’s noblemen. All of these documents had been reviewed by Warren before they even made it to Ein, but that was no reason for the prince to just give his stamp of approval without some careful examination of his own. As a tired Ein stretched out his back, he heard a knock on the door.

“Yes?” he called.

“Please excuse me,” Martha called, entering the prince’s office just as he was about to take a break. It was already 9 p.m.—the perfect time for an evening snack. “I’ve brought you a light snack and something warm to drink.”

“I’ll take it,” Ein replied. “I was just starting to crave a little something. Thank you.”

After standing up, the prince settled into his sofa and brought a steaming cup of tea to his lips. He felt the drink’s warmth spread throughout his body.

“It’s almost December already,” Martha remarked. “It’s become quite chilly, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s especially nippy early in the morning and at night,” Ein replied.

“Quite right. Please see to it that you take good care of yourself. Ah, and I’ve got a letter from His Majesty. Here you are.”

“Okay, thank you.”

With that, Martha quietly left the room. *All right, just a little more to go!* Ein thought as he reached for his snack. He gently slapped his cheeks to amp himself up.

“Maybe I’ll nibble on this while I read through the letter,” he said.

He should’ve just talked to me about this. We live in the same castle after all. While it was important for serious matters to be put in writing, Ein felt this approach to be a little stiff. He reached for the envelope regardless, thinking that the letter was surely of great importance.

“It’s two weeks out. I should attend the ceremony commemorating the last king’s passing...”

In a mere fortnight, Ein’s presence would be requested at this very event—standing before the last king’s grave. Until now, only Silverd would visit his father’s grave on the anniversary of his passing. It was indeed a tradition of the Ishtarican royal family, but only the king would’ve ever been in attendance.

“It seems that it’s time for me to learn about matters such as this... I see why I’ve been asked to attend.”

Since Ein had already reached adulthood, there were many things that his grandfather had left to teach him. The boy found himself grateful to receive a demonstration.

“The future king...”

Back in his days at Roundheart Manor, Ein had never once dreamed of being part of a royal family, let alone one that reigned over such a large nation. He could only recall his mother’s actions and the trouble he’d caused for the many people around him, leaving his heart constantly struck by pangs of guilt. What was his former family currently doing? Should a meeting with Heim be decided upon, he’d surely meet Rogas once again. *What kind of face should I make?* It

was still too early, but Ein couldn't help but worry about these matters.

"I have no murderous intent towards them, but would like to get just a little revenge..."

He no longer held any feelings of familial love nor any emotional attachments to the Roundhearts. Ein couldn't find the right words to describe what he felt now.

"As for Glint... Yeah, I think I'd be fine if he grew up somewhat healthily."

When thinking back to his treatment at the manor and the Euroan encounter with his brother, Ein might have been a bit too kind in his actions. However, Glint was a little boy back then and the parenting he'd received had definitely left a mark on him. With all that in mind, Ein felt no form of hatred towards his little brother. Yes, Glint had certainly annoyed him while in Euro, but that was all in the heat of the moment.

"For now, I'll work hard in the hope I won't be embarrassed by being referred to as 'the future king.'"

Ein returned to his desk with that thought in mind. If future generations didn't find Ein's rule to be peaceful, it would cast a negative light on Silverd, Olivia, and the rest of his family. Indeed, the crown prince couldn't allow himself to be seen as a foolish king by his descendants.

What had happened in Barth proceeded to flash across the boy's mind. The local adventurers had claimed that Ein's vessel was comparable to the first king's own. But while Ein was within the Demon Castle, Marco mentioned that the boy's vessel hadn't fully matured yet and was therefore unstable. What exactly was the king's "vessel"? The mystery lodged itself within Ein's brain, preventing him from getting any work done.

"Maybe I'll ask grandfather in two weeks."

The current king could surely point the boy in the right direction. Ein once again gently slapped his cheeks before he grabbed his pen to finish up the rest of his work.

Ein would attend his classes by day while tending to his further studies and

duties at night. As he fell into this routine, two weeks passed in the blink of an eye. The gray skies floated above the royal family's burial grounds while Silverd stroked his beard with interest.

"I see. So, Ein, you're at that age where you've become interested in such matters," the king said with a smile, gently patting the prince's head.

Ein was conducting his duties as the crown prince very well, but the king was overjoyed to hear that the boy was eager to learn about becoming a good king.

"But I require some time to discuss that," Silverd said. "First, we must do what we must. And then, we can take our time to talk. Are we clear?"

"Of course," Ein replied. "Then shall we go to the previous king's grave?"

Like fine mist, a light sprinkle of rain fell upon them—the weather wasn't good today. It was just before noon. It was pouring when Ein woke up, so things outside had slightly improved since then; it was still rather cloudy though. Drenched by the rain, the last king's gravestone had taken on a different appearance in comparison to Ein's last visit.

"You've grown," the king said. "That longsword doesn't look out of place on your waist anymore."

Ein was dressed in a formal uniform of white and silver that featured the royal family's emblem emblazoned across his chest. He wore gloves made from a smooth, white fabric and had his new partner fastened to his waist—Mouton's freshly forged blade. Given that he was tall for his age, Ein looked natural with the weapon at his side.

"Thanks to you, I've been lucky enough to have a healthy upbringing," Ein said.

"That's great to hear," Silverd replied. "Now then, come with me. Follow my movements and do as I do while paying respects to the previous king."

"I shall. Please allow me to observe your actions from behind you."

Silverd stood in front of the grave and showed Ein the proper steps. He first gave a bow and placed an offering in front of the grave. There were no loud prayers offered as the king silently proceeded to pay his respects without

uttering a single word. It had only been a few minutes, but it felt longer than that. Once Silverd was done, he finally raised a sword in front of his chest.

“And this is it,” Silverd said. “Did you watch carefully?”

“Yes,” Ein replied. “This was an excellent learning experience.”

“Then now it’s your turn to do the same for your great-grandfather. But of course, you’ll be doing this for me when you’re king! Ha ha ha!”

“I’m not sure how to reply to that, so I beg for your understanding.”

After praying that his grandfather continued to live a long and prosperous life, Ein stood up straight and stepped before the grave. He exhaled. Though the previous king was no longer with him, Ein was still in front of Ishtarica’s last monarch. A little nervous to offer his respects, the boy carefully recalled each of Silverd’s actions.

“Good,” Silverd would mutter every now and then, signaling that Ein was on the right track.

After a short while, the prince was nearing the end of the ritual. *I just need to take my sword...* Ein placed his black blade in front of his chest, hoping for everything to be over, when his sword suddenly started to glow. Ein was surprised for a moment, but immediately remembered the ability that Mouton had mentioned. However, Silverd could only look on in shock at the glowing blade.

“My deepest apologies!” Ein hastily cried. “I’d completely forgotten to explain this to you!”

Ein bowed in front of the grave and gave his grandfather a bow.

“What was that light?!” Silverd asked.

“I’ve been told that this happens when a blade like this is forged with powerful Undead materials,” Ein answered. “I should’ve explained this to you earlier. I’m terribly sorry.”

“I-I see. I’ve heard of weapons like that, but next time you must tell me about such things beforehand. Is that clear?”

Ein breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing that he’d be forgiven.

“If my memory serves me correctly, it glows in the presence of bones,” Silverd said.

“You’re exactly right. Though, I’m unsure if there’s a use for such an ability.”

“But one thing is clear: I now know that my father received a proper burial. That is something to take solace in.”

The area was so securely guarded that no graverobbers would ever dare to set foot in the royal family’s burial grounds. However, Silverd still felt sentimental upon knowing that his father’s eternal rest was undisturbed.

“Now then,” Silverd said after a while. “Why don’t I answer your question? It’s not something that should be discussed in front of others. You don’t mind if we talk here, do you?”

“Not at all, please,” Ein replied.

“Very good. The ‘king’s vessel,’ was it? To me, that term refers to one who can preside over the lives of all his citizens.”

“Over the lives of all his citizens?”

“Indeed. There might be different interpretations of this phrase, but take the Knights Guard, for instance. These knights can take lives with their blades just as I can take lives with my words. Of course, most of those lives are taken as a result of said words. Do you know why?”

“Because the Knights Guard act at the royal family’s command alone.”

“That’s right. If I choose my words unwisely and have the wrong person killed, their death...and by extension, their life, will be for naught.”

Silverd stood firm and proud. For his part, Ein had forgotten to blink upon hearing a king’s never-before-heard thoughts.

“A king cannot be a king by himself,” Silverd continued. “And should the hearts of the citizens leave him, that man will no longer be a king.”

“Which is why we cannot make mistakes,” Ein added.

“Precisely. I’m only a king because I have people working for me and citizens

who choose to respect me. More than anyone else, I'm not allowed to make mistakes. I must lend an ear to the voices of my people more than anyone else too." Silverd paused before he chose to finish. "And so...a self-conceited individual who shows no regard for others will never be worthy of being the king's vessel."

"Self-conceited..."

"You should agonize over that answer for now. You still have plenty of time to think about it. Now, Ein, why don't we head inside before you catch a cold?"

Silverd placed his large hand on Ein's shoulder. The warmth and kindness that the prince felt from its presence led him to give a small nod as he walked on.

A few evenings later, Ein appeared to be dazed while training with the knights. His mind was filled with a certain worry. It wasn't anything gloomy—he simply thought about his future and how he should conduct himself as a king. Silverd had said that one must never allow oneself to be self-conceited and inconsiderate. Lucky for Ein, the popular prince was hailed as a hero. With so many people always around him, the boy practically had no time for himself.

"Hm..." Ein muttered, parrying the blade of a Knights Guard member.

"Huh?! Gr, I can still go on!" the knight said, sounding slightly troubled.

Ein's mind was clearly elsewhere, but he still managed to put up a fight against the knight. Ever since the boy had faced Upaskamuy, he'd become even stronger, leaving not even a single opening.

"Even though my actions were born in admiration of the first king, they might have been self-conceited acts committed with little regard for the others..." Ein mumbled.

The crown prince had taken a fair share of actions unbecoming of his rank: his role in the academy district incident, his clash with the Sea Dragon, his encounter with Sage in Ist, and his recent battle with Upaskamuy in Barth. Ein couldn't refute that point, leading Silverd's words to flash across his mind. According to his grandfather, a man would no longer be king if the heart of the citizens had left him.

“I don’t want to believe that everything I’ve done was a mistake, but maybe I should step back and reconsider a few things.”

“Y-You seem to be worrying over something, but your actions have always seemed valiant to me, Your Highness!” the knight yelled.

“Thank you. Hearing that makes me feel a lot better,” Ein said with a smile, slightly loosening his grip on his sword.

The knight took that opportunity to swing his blade, but the prince suddenly disappeared from view. In the next instant, the knight felt a tap on the back of his knees, causing him to fall.

“Thank you for being my opponent today too. You’re a big help.”

Upon watching the prince quietly walk away, the knight muttered, “Why am I on my knees?”

Just arriving at the training grounds, Chris leaned in to provide an answer. “Sir Ein simply used his blade to give you a gentle nudge behind your knees.”

“A-Ah, Captain! I didn’t notice you,” the knight replied.

“I’m here because I heard Sir Ein was training. But he seems a bit different from usual... Is something the matter?”

“I’m not sure of the details,” the knight confessed before he remembered Ein’s words. “But His Highness said something along the lines of ‘My actions might have been self-conceited with little regard for others. I don’t want to think that my past actions were a mistake.’”

“Sir Ein being self-conceited?”

That’s not true at all, Chris thought. His words sometimes surprise me, but he always makes sure that everyone around him agrees before taking action. Is he worrying over the pressure that comes with being king? Or does he feel alienated from everyone else, a feeling that only the kings could empathize with?

“I have to be his strength...” Chris muttered, remembering what Ein had done for her after he returned from Barth. She thought about how she could support him. “Yeah, this is the only thing I’ve got.”

“Captain?”

“Ah, it’s nothing at all.”

Chris clearly had an idea in mind, but didn’t divulge the details.

“I can’t sleep,” Ein muttered.

It was late at night, and he’d slipped into his bed two hours ago. He’d occasionally feel drowsy, but he’d suddenly snap awake within minutes. As this process repeated over and over again, Ein realized that it was now midnight.

“Maybe I’ll take a small walk within the castle.”

He removed his pajamas and threw on some clothing he had nearby.

Every time he took a step across the lit corridor, the sound of his shoes hitting the floor echoed throughout the halls. He was surrounded by a uniquely mystical air as he walked through the castle’s interior. Before long, the boy had arrived at his destination.

“And so, the crown prince shall make his appearance...” Ein mumbled. “Just kidding.”

With a loud wooden creak, the audience room’s double doors opened.

“Well, I’ll never usually open these doors myself.”

The room was veiled in darkness and no one else was present. Ein walked across the thick, plush carpet before the regal throne captured his attention. Beside it was a seat for the queen, but the throne emanated an aura of dignity unlike anything else around it. It was a chair reserved solely for Silverd, and Ein would sit there himself one day.

“I wonder who made this throne.”

What kind of craftsman was involved? How old was it? He said this rhetorical question out loud, but wasn’t expecting anyone to actually answer him when he heard a voice pipe up from behind him.

“A new throne is crafted whenever the next king ascends to take his own seat. And so, your seat will be different from this one, Sir Ein.”

“Thanks for the explanation, Chris,” the prince replied without turning around.

He had no idea when she had appeared. The elf had probably noticed him from the moment he left his room. Ein would’ve usually noticed her presence, but today, he hadn’t sensed her at all.

“I believe this isn’t the right place for a late-night walk,” Chris said.

“Can you forgive me today?” Ein asked.

“Hm, I wonder...” Chris said with a teasing chuckle.

This was an unusual attitude for Chris to take, and Ein was astonished for a moment before he thought for a while and fired back with a joke of his own.

“If you won’t, I’ll absorb your magic stone like I’d done before,” the prince teased.

Chris would usually joke back here, but she responded differently today. “Of course. I don’t mind that at all. In fact, I’m here for you to do just that.”

“Huh? Wait, what are you saying?”

In his shock, Ein turned around and saw Chris standing right in front of him. She was so close that he could sense her breathing and make out her long eyelashes. The elf stared at the boy from such a close distance. The moonlight illuminated her, as if she were a moon goddess—possessing beauty far beyond any human could hope for. While she had a stunningly gorgeous face, she left no openings as she continued to gaze at the boy.

“I don’t mind if you absorb my stone. I’m here for you to do just that,” Chris repeated.

“I’m just kidding,” Ein replied. “I’m sorry for making such a weird joke.”

“Good grief... Do you purposefully act dull at times?” She took Ein’s hand and enveloped him with both of hers. “Sir Ein, you aren’t self-conceited, and you don’t act with little regard for others. As proof, I’m unwilling to leave your side no matter what.”

“What are you suddenly—”

“I heard about what happened this evening. You were worried that your actions were self-conceited and whether they were a mistake.”

“I-I did say that, but...”

“I’ve been by your side, watching you more than anyone else. So, I know it best. Sir Ein, you haven’t been wrong. You’re a person worthy of being called a hero. And so, I’d like to offer everything I have to you.” She gazed into his eyes. “Do you remember the other day? When you reached adulthood as a dryad? That morning, I asked you to wait until I was ready.”

“I remember that, but...”

“It’s the most valuable thing I can offer to you. And so, I shall give it to you, Sir Ein.”

The prince’s worries went elsewhere. He only desperately thought about how he could stop Chris, who was acting all by herself.

“My magic stone is right here,” she said, bringing Ein’s hands to the right side of her chest.

She was only wearing a shirt, but Ein felt something a little tougher underneath—likely her undergarments. Ein could feel how soft and warm she was through his touch. Her entire chest slightly changed in shape as she pressed Ein’s hand against her.

“Wh-What are you?!” Ein gasped.

The prince froze, stunned by the situation he found himself in. In the same situation, Chris gazed at Ein with a saintly expression.

“Can you tell?” she asked. “Like a heart, my magic stone continues to beat as well.”

The elf continued to gently and calmly support En’s hand. The warmth he felt was solely her kindness—a platonic warmth that could envelop his entire body. Her hands glided across his fingers and up his wrist, softly caressing up to almost his elbows. Her touch was filled with love.

“Even if you don’t want to absorb my stone, I shall offer it to you,” she said.

“Offer?” Ein repeated.

“That’s right. May I place my hand over your chest as well?”

“My chest? U-Um, sure, I guess...”

“Heh heh, thank you.” Chris slowly touched the right side of Ein’s chest. “This is an old elven ritual that’s been passed down through the generations. It normally holds a different meaning, but I do want to offer this to you, so I shall be using this method.”

There was a truly special meaning behind the moment in which a pair would silently hold their hands over each other’s magic stones.

“An elf’s magic stone is located on the right side of their chest,” Chris explained. “Touching the area around another’s stone is the greatest display of trust and emotional understanding between parties.”

“I see.”

“And I shall swear it,” Chris said, raising her face as her stone started to throb loudly. “Even in times of hardship or pain, even if we head to our death, I shall stand alongside you. Even upon my death, my soul shall always be with you. So please, I implore you to always remember this.”

Her damp eyes conveyed her passion and heart, and it was clear that she would always be by the boy’s side.

“Even if you become king, I shall always be with you,” Chris said with a smile.

Ein was enchanted by her beautiful smile and he found himself unable to suppress a small sigh. *She really is always here to save me.* No matter what, she’d always be with him. Able to confirm these feelings with her, Ein was confident that he could overcome any hardship that came his way.

However...

“I’m really happy that you’d say that to me, Chris,” Ein said. “But why did you decide to do this all of a sudden?”

“Huh?!” Chris gasped.

Ein certainly agonized over a few of his worries, but he wasn’t concerned to the point where Chris had to place his hand over her chest.

“B-Because you seemed to be in a daze, Sir Ein!” she said. “You were worried about becoming a king and how you felt alienated from the common folk, weren’t you?! I thought the pressure had gotten to you!”

“That’s not exactly what I’m worried about.”

He was simply fretting over his actions, ones that felt unfitting of a crown prince. It wasn’t as grave as Chris had assumed. Ein proceeded to explain how his actions were inspired by the first king, but the boy now felt that he should’ve reconsidered things. Chris’s face turned bright red as she proceeded to cover her face with her hands and crouched.

“I just jumped to conclusions, then...” she said.

“Uh, well, I’m really happy to hear you say all that, though,” Ein replied. “It was really heartwarming, and it’s given me motivation to work hard again!”

With damp eyes, Chris peeked out from between her fingers. It seemed as if this moon goddess was reaching the limits of her possible embarrassment. Ein crouched down and extended his hand to her.

“If you don’t mind, could we talk until we get sleepy?” he asked.

“I can’t... I’m so embarrassed right now...”

“But it made me so happy. I’d like to share this feeling with you.”

After all was said and done, Chris’s dedication had reached Ein’s heart.

“I’ve been blessed with so much support,” Ein said. “I didn’t want to end this with just admiration. I wouldn’t like that.”

Ein had never thought about this so firmly before. But now, he had a clear and strong desire to surpass the first king. He was more ambitious than ever before.

“Uh, admiration?” Chris asked.

“I’m talking about the first king. I should aim higher,” Ein replied.

“Higher?”

“Nothing. Come on, talk with me until I get sleepy!”

After a brief pause, she stammered, “I-I’ll do my best!”

Despite her embarrassment, the elf tried to put on an energetic face as Ein took her hand and led her out of the audience room.

In a small room behind the throne, a pair of men had watched the entire scene unfold before them. The men had been talking before Ein and Chris's arrival, not planning to eavesdrop on the conversation.

"How very reassuring. Do you not feel the same, Lloyd?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Perhaps it was the right decision to make her Sir Ein's personal knight."

"Indeed. I'm quite satisfied with the results. However, I do have but one worry."

"And what would that be?"

"Chris has just done...you know..." The king looked a little weary but seemingly had given up. He was now just determined to watch over them. "Ein probably doesn't know the meaning behind it, and Chris had used it differently as well. But she did mention that she'd offer everything to him."

"Ah, well... It *is* an ancient elven ritual, and I don't think many are aware of its true meaning," Lloyd replied.

"What a precocious crown prince... Good grief."

Despite his thorny remarks, the king couldn't hide the smile on his face.

The next morning, Ein walked onto the knights' training grounds and approached Lloyd.

"Ah, Sir Ein. It's rare to run into you here," Lloyd said.

"Morning. Can I join in?" Ein asked.

"Of course, but isn't it time you headed off to school?"

"I have some matters to attend to today, so I'm staying home."

"I see... Well, if that's the case..." Lloyd replied, remembering the scene that had played out in the audience room last night. As he felt like the boy was

trying to walk forward, the marshal offered a suggestion. “If you don’t mind, may I be your opponent? You’ve been growing at an astonishing pace as of late, and I don’t believe that any member of the Knights Guard would be a sufficient opponent for you anymore.”

Dill appeared just as Ein had decided to take Lloyd up on his offer “Ah, Sir Ein. Good morning,” the young officer said.

“Morning, Dill. I’m about to spar with your father and get some exercise in. I’m sorry, but could I borrow him for a little while?”

“But of course... If a father like him will suffice, please use him to your heart’s content.”

Lloyd wasn’t too keen on how his son had spoken of him, but the marshal had opted to hold himself back while in Ein’s presence. With a slight frown on his face, the marshal picked out a wooden sword to spar with.

“Sir Ein, what sword will you be using?” Lloyd asked.

“I think this one,” Ein said, choosing one of the many blades Lloyd had offered to him.

The prince had selected a longsword, one that wasn’t far off from his newly forged partner. The wooden blade felt different in the hand when compared to the black sword, but bore the closest resemblance to it.

“It’ll be tough for me to fight you right away,” Ein said. “Can I warm up against a few other people first?”

“Of course,” Lloyd replied. “To tell you the truth, I’ve recently found that if I don’t get my body moving, I’ll have a hard time dealing with you too, Sir Ein.”

“What are you on about? You never made it seem that way.”

Ein smiled and dashed off as Lloyd solemnly stood there. Once he watched the prince leave, he turned to his son. “Dill, be my opponent.”

“Hm? I don’t mind, but it feels a bit out of the blue,” Dill replied.

“You should get some quality training in as well. You never know what could happen.”

“Because you could possibly injure Sir Ein?”

This would’ve been a big problem indeed. Dill hastily made his preparations.

“It’s so that I won’t get injured,” Lloyd replied. “Sir Ein seems like a completely different person today, as though something has possessed him.”

But as he’d gone off to prepare, Dill wasn’t able to hear anything his father said.

Several minutes later, the two combatants stood in the center of the training ground.

“As always, we’ll only have one match,” Lloyd said. “Are you ready?”

“Yep. Whenever you are,” Ein replied.

If one could land a strike on the other’s gear, they would be deemed the victor. Targeting anything else was strictly prohibited.

“Dill, you be the referee,” Lloyd said.

“Very well. I shall do so,” Dill replied.

While the Graciers spoke to each other, Ein started entrusting his body to a certain kind of feeling—omnipotence. His body felt lighter than usual. When the boy had warmed up against several members of the Knights Guard, he found himself besting them as easily as he breathed. The series of one-sided scuffles had left the knights in a state of shock as they started to doubt their own abilities.

“Hm? Sir Ein seems to be...” Dill started.

“Ah, so you’ve noticed,” Lloyd said. Ein stood before the Graciers, but something was clearly different today. “I must find the cause of this oddity.”

Lloyd walked forward and raised his arm in the air. In the next moment, Dill had started the match.

“Begin!” the officer bellowed.

Ein instantly closed the gap between himself and Lloyd, proceeding to swing his blade.

“That’s quite a large swing!” Lloyd yelled. “I have nothing to fear!”

Ein was usually a touch more careful whenever he would rush forward. In fact, he would exercise caution and would never attack with a large swing. But today, he appeared to be bolder and more reckless in his actions.

“But you guarded my attack with both hands,” Ein observed. “Which means my attacks aren’t so light!”

Ein swiftly changed his blade’s target, unleashing a wild barrage of varied strikes on Lloyd’s hands, legs, shoulders, and chest. Despite the fact he was swinging a longsword around, the prince’s skillful swordsmanship had enchanted even nearby members of the Knights Guard.

“I have no idea what you’re on about!” Lloyd shouted back. “But I don’t care for only being on the receiving end!”

“Ugh, that was heavy!”

The marshal dwarfed Ein, not to mention the vast weight difference between them as well. The prince wasn’t having the easiest time receiving the wide swings of his foe’s attacks. At the end of the day, Lloyd was much stronger.

“Well received!” Lloyd commended him. “I’m just getting started!”

Despite the marshal’s size, he swiftly maneuvered his sword—the sound of the blade cutting through air echoing within the grounds. The whooshing sound was only a hint of the weapon’s ferocity.

“Hmph! Hah!” Lloyd grunted.

The knights started to look concerned.

“Will he be all right?”

“I think it’s far too dangerous... What shall we do?”

However, as the match’s referee, Dill had an entirely different impression of what was going on.

“Sir Ein is receiving all the attacks,” Dill noted. “He’s having a bit of trouble, but he can react to all of my father’s blows.”

The prince seemed to be in a spot of danger every now and then, but Dill

couldn't hide his disbelief at how well the prince carried himself.

"H-Huh?!" Lloyd said, faltering for a moment as he possibly realized this himself.

"You're amazing, Lloyd," Ein said. "You're so powerful, and I can tell that you haven't used your all yet. You seem to have limitless strength!"

"It's tough to hear that when you've blocked all my attacks!"

Oddly enough, Ein didn't seem out of breath and continued to calmly receive Lloyd's blows. For some reason, the marshal didn't seem to be the object of Ein's gaze.

"Sir Ein... Are you perhaps wishing for something more?" Lloyd asked.

The marshal suddenly lowered his blade and backed away from Ein, looking at the prince with concern.

"If I ask, will you show me?" Ein inquired.

"Heh... Ah ha ha ha! Sir Ein, that's quite a difficult request. I can't possibly fulfill that—"

"All right, then, Lloyd. What if it's an order?"

The air of the training grounds grew tense, as though time had frozen still. Some even felt the air grow chilly.

"You understand my words, don't you?" Lloyd asked. "It's wonderful that you're ambitious, but too much curiosity might hurt you."

Lloyd gazed sharply at the boy as an intimidating tone rumbled in his voice. His haggard breaths disappeared when he rested his blade on his shoulder. Dill realized that the sounds of his father's blade were often delayed by a beat in comparison to his actions. The marshal had been clearly moving faster than the naked eye could observe, but Dill was stunned by his father's actions nonetheless.

"I believe we should stop for today, but you don't seem quite satisfied yet, Sir Ein," Lloyd said. "Why don't you give me one final swing, and I shall receive that blow. Will you kindly forgive me then?"

Lloyd sounded calm, but he was fighting back against the passionate fire that had been lit in his heart at the same time. Was the boy before Lloyd the same prince he'd always known? One could tell that Ein had become much bolder, but that was an unlikely cause for this sudden shift in behavior.

"One swing?" Ein asked.

"Indeed. One swing. I shall receive your strongest attack head-on."

"Thank you, Lloyd."

Ein gave a few practice swings, adjusting the grip on his sword. With every swing he took, the sound changed ever so slightly. The first swing was Ein's usual strength. His second swing was a little louder. His third swing was akin to the sound of Lloyd's sword as it filled the entire room. On his fourth swing, he was faster than sound. Ein had no idea where this came from; he was merely practicing for a short while—how had his swordsmanship skills grown so drastically? *No, this isn't growth. This is more like evolution.* Ein didn't swing his blade for a fifth time. Lloyd was excited to see what Ein's fifth practice swing *could've* been. Could it have entered a different realm entirely?

"Now, Sir Ein..." Lloyd said. "Whenever you're ready."

"Right. Got it," Ein replied.

The prince took a deep breath, allowing fresh air to fill his lungs and course throughout his body. As though every cell had awakened, blood started pumping through his arms.

"You may exert as much strength as you desire," Lloyd said.

Ein gripped his sword with his right hand, lowering it diagonally as though his strength had left his body. He then took a step forward, then another, slowly walking forward as though he was bracing himself with every step. Little by little, Ein closed the gap with Lloyd. Gradually, the sword in the boy's hand was raised as he prepared to swing down. He did so casually and languidly, without exerting any unnecessary strength as he used his own unique rhythm. His last few steps were so fast that he disappeared from sight. Lloyd had been able to keep the boy in view, but the man couldn't help but be shocked for a split second. He braced himself and took a defensive stance to receive the prince's

attack.

“Sir...Ein?” Dill murmured, overcome with an odd feeling of déjà vu.

The young officer was reminded of their time in Euro. Ein’s current form was exactly the same as the Dullahan, who had lost himself upon seeing the wooden figurine of the red fox.

“Gh! Hmph!” Lloyd grunted, his defensive stance wavering as Ein’s sword made contact with his.

Their blades had merely clashed, but it felt as if an explosion had gone off. After a brief moment, a loud roar followed along with the sounds of metal being torn apart. Underneath his clothes, Lloyd could feel his veins pulsating as he desperately exerted everything he had to endure the attack. The balls of his feet, his calves, knees, and thighs were pumping out everything they could. He even borrowed the power of the ground to brace himself and stand firm. However, Ein’s strength easily overpowered the marshal’s best efforts and pushed him back. A few seconds later, the impact died down.

“I think this is the best I can currently do,” Ein finally said. “And sorry, I broke the training sword.”

The sword didn’t seem broken at all until Ein lowered his blade, at which point it crumbled to pieces.

“Dill,” Ein said.

“Y-Yes, Your Highness?”

“I’m sorry, but can I ask you to clean up for me? I have an appointment with my grandfather, and I’ll need to eat and clean myself up. I know I started this, and I’m really sorry, but could you accept my request?”

“O-Of course. But...”

Dill wanted an explanation for what had just happened. But Ein looked satisfied as sweat formed on his brow, and the officer felt compelled to stay silent.

“Thank you, Lloyd,” Ein said. “Because of you, I think I’ve improved.”

“Heh,” Lloyd chuckled. “I’m happy to hear that.”

Footsteps reverberated throughout the training grounds as Ein left. Once the prince was gone, Lloyd could feel himself sweating as he spoke to his son.

“Sorry, Dill, but I have to take a break from my duties...and I have one more thing to ask of you.”

Dill was a little flustered to see his father be this forceful, but he quietly listened on.

“Could you please take me to see Miss Bara? I think my right shoulder has been shattered,” Lloyd said, continuing to sweat.

Dill widened his eyes in shock, unable to believe his ears.

Ein showered, ate breakfast, and got dressed for his appointment. He was in his formal attire, the set with the royal family’s emblem embroidered into it. It was an unusual sight to take in as he fixed his hair. As the prince walked through the castle’s halls, a peculiar aura followed him. The servants couldn’t muster any greetings, the butler stopped in his tracks, and knights were now naturally lowering their heads. Ein eventually reached a quiet corridor, away from the view of everyone present. He’d walked past a knight who was keeping guard, but that was all. Silence filled the area. The chirps of the birds and the sunlight peeking from between the foliage spilled into the corridor. Silverd was standing at the end, in front of the door to the royal family’s burial grounds.

“I thought you’d come,” the king said.

“I’m sorry,” Ein apologized. “I know it’s not an area where I can set foot so carelessly.”

“I shall allow it. I can tell by your expression and attire. You’ve got an important reason to be here, don’t you?”

“I do.”

With Chris’s pledge to him now in his heart, Ein was here to solidify his determination.

“I’ve had some thoughts of my own, and I thought I’d present myself before His Majesty, the first king,” Ein said.

“How sudden,” Silverd remarked. “Have you been thinking about our conversation from the other day?”

Ein silently nodded. “I don’t think I’ve undergone any major changes, but I’ve grown to think that the path I’ve been walking isn’t incorrect.”

“Oh?”

“And so, I’d like to bring myself before the object of my admiration: the first king.”

“Have you been struck with an epiphany that’s led to these thoughts?”

“I have.”

“Very good. The ability to recognize that is a part of being the king’s vessel, as I mentioned,” Silverd said, smiling as he stood in front of his grandson. “I could never live up to the first king’s legacy. It’s not that I’ve ever lost my respect for him, but the constant comparisons had led me to begrudge him...for I knew that I could never win against such an opponent.”

“G-Grandfather! You mustn’t say that!”

“Indeed. I mustn’t. So this is a secret between the two of us. Don’t tell anyone else, all right?” He placed an index finger over his lips. “Naturally, your grandmother reveres the first king as well. Indeed, I’ve harbored ill feelings towards the first king...who has earned such reverence from my own wife. The man has a countless number of great achievements to his name, and I never once thought that I could hold a candle to him. But when I see you, Ein, I get the odd feeling that perhaps you could be like him. I’ve felt this a number of times.”

Silverd lastly patted Ein on the shoulder before he walked on.

“Make sure you don’t do anything rude at the burial grounds,” he said.

“Y-Yes! I shall not forget that!” Ein said.

He was a little confused that his grandfather had suddenly spoken his mind, but the boy was grateful for him nonetheless.

“Ah, and I’ve got one more thing to tell you,” Silverd said as he stopped in his tracks. He rustled around his pockets and took out a small piece of paper. “It’s a bit sudden, but I’d like for you to head to Viscount Sage’s former domain in a

few days. Just for a short while. The region doesn't have a new lord as of yet, so it's under the royal family's direct control for now."

"Would you like me to conduct something like an inspection?"

"Like one? No, it is an inspection."

"If it's my public duty, I suppose there's no helping it. I shall make sure to pick up some souvenirs."

"Very good. They have many delicious sweets in those parts, so I'd like it if you brought back quite a few for me."

The conversation lacked tension, but this wasn't bad at all.

Once Silverd's footsteps faded away, Ein placed his hand on the door to the burial grounds. Like before, the place was filled with a solemn air. The grounds were the resting places of kings throughout the generations—all former rulers of the Unified Nations of Ishtarica. While they might not have been as grand as the first king's, all of them were surely splendid in their own right. After a few moments, Ein finally approached the first king's grave.

"I'm sorry for suddenly making my appearance."

With a rustle, the soft grass crinkled beneath his foot. No other sound filled the air, causing the boy to find even his own breathing to be noisy. *All right, I'll begin.*

Ein lowered his head and presented the grave with his offering. He smoothly went through the process that Silverd had taught him, and finally brought his black blade to his chest. The sword didn't reflect any light and displayed its jet-black body in all its glory.



“Okay, then.”

After Ein had finished, he breathed a sigh of relief knowing that he’d followed the process precisely. He lowered his blade and bowed once more. Usually, one would leave after this, but Ein had some business to address today. After he made his resolve with the gravestone, he opened his mouth.

“I used to admire you.”

The boy spoke in past tense—an indication that his feelings had recently changed.

“I still do. I know that you’re amazing, but I now feel as though I don’t want to lose to you. I want to surpass you.”

The gravestone silently remained in place as Ein’s voice echoed throughout the burial grounds. The young man continued to stare at the stone for a good long while. *I wonder what the first king thought of what I just said? Does he see me to be an insolent descendant now?* Despite his second thoughts, Ein didn’t intend to take back his words. His gaze firmly transfixed on the stone, the prince proceeded to open his mouth.

“But I know that I’m unworthy of my role as crown prince. Please excuse me.”

With another bow, he walked away from the stone. But upon taking a few steps, something bothered Ein—like something was amiss.

“I think I placed my offering and followed the steps. Huh?”

He felt like he’d made an oversight. *But I don’t think I did anything wrong. I went through the process correctly. So, why does it feel different from the other day?*

“Yeah, I did everything correctly. I placed the blade to my chest, and...uh...”

As he remembered what he’d done, he noticed one difference. *It can’t be...* Ein hastily turned back and approached the stone.

“First king... King Jayle, please pardon me.”

Ein only wanted to raise his sword to the stone once more, but his better judgment led him to repeat the entire ritual. But unlike the previous time, his

confused mind was filled with a torrent of questions. After rushing through the rest of the process, Ein had reached the part where he'd need to raise his sword. While apologizing to Jayle's grave for his haste, Ein reached for his blade.

"Okay."

The prince stared at the grave, seeming as if he was a touch winded. With the blade and gravestone slowly approaching his chest, Ein's eyes were locked on his new partner.

"My sword...isn't glowing..."

It definitely had in front of the previous king's grave. That was the jet-black blade's ability, so it was only natural for it to be glowing. So, what happened? Why wasn't it glowing in front of first king Jayle's grave? *What could this mean?*

"Well, there's only one answer... King Jayle isn't here."

Before now, Ein had only raised his sword in front of the previous king's grave. However, the prince couldn't stop wondering why his blade wasn't glowing this time around.

"Is he buried elsewhere? But I've never heard of such a thing. I'm sure grandfather would've told me if that were the case."

Would there even be a reason to do that? Ein racked his brain for an answer. In a daze, his gaze wandered to Jayle's stone. A part of the first king's epitaph had bothered the prince.

He sleeps in his beloved home.

It was common for such words to be engraved, conveying the thoughts of the deceased to all who visited. There was nothing special about this practice, yet Ein was intrigued by the specific wording. The words of the Demon Castle's Undead knight came to the boy's mind. *"Of course. I believe that it's only natural that I serve Ishtarica's royal family."*

That's what he told me. There's no mistaking it.

"Marco, could you be..."

Ein heart thudded.

“Like a force of habit, she always said, ‘You have to be nice to each other!’”

Ein himself had said this before.

“The first king’s words forbade anyone from launching the first strike and starting a war... Is this a coincidence? It seems too convenient.”

The prince eventually came to a conclusion—he had stumbled upon one of the first king’s never-discovered secrets.

“Your Majesty, the first king. For you, is your beloved home perhaps...”

With a loud thump, Ein’s sword fell to the grass.

Chapter Ten: The Loyal Knight

A few days later, Ein visited Krone at her office. They talked about his inspection duties while she went about her work as usual.

“You must be talking about Viscount Sage’s former land,” his advisor said. “It should be under the royal family’s control for now.”

The prince always arrived without warning, but as Krone found it to be a welcome surprise, she never reprimanded him for doing so.

“Seems like it,” Ein replied. “I think this’ll be a good learning experience, so I’ve decided to go.”

“That’s a splendid mindset to have, Your Highness.”

“I know, right?”

“Then why don’t I adjust my schedule,” Krone said, opening her pocketbook while appearing to be deep in thought. “Hm?”

“Huh? What’s wrong?” Ein asked.

“I have an appointment with Lady Olivia on that day! I thought you had the day off, so I agreed to help her out...”

“So, you and I will be acting separately.”

“I-I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it. I know you don’t like to decline my mother’s requests too.”

Krone had a frown on her face but Ein was right.

“This means that Chris will probably be with mother too, right?” the prince asked.

“I haven’t heard of anything, but that will likely be the case.”

This meant that only Dill would be tagging along with Ein. This time around, that would end up being quite convenient for him.

“It should be fine; I’ll have Dill with me,” Ein said. “It’s just a simple inspection, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I’m really sorry.”

The prince gently patted his advisor on the head. “Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. I really will.”

“Goodness, my hair is going to be a mess.”

“All right, all right. Sorry.”

But if Krone vocalized her displeasure, she should’ve acted the part as well.

On the day of his inspection, Ein set out from Kingsland in the early hours of the morning. Five hours later, and the prince was within the viscount’s former territory. Sage’s land was renowned for its booming agricultural industry. The region was filled with a veritable cornucopia of crops alongside an equally vast array of stores, some of which were never seen in Kingsland. Many of these stores were quite simple, consisting of a sheet laid out on the ground with the merchant’s wares displayed atop it. His surroundings were humble, but Ein quite enjoyed the warm atmosphere of the people around him.

Many farmers had been eagerly awaiting the crown prince’s arrival, erupting into a sea of cheering when the prince took his first step into their region. Surrounded by the town’s much-vaunted rural scenery, Dill appeared to be exhausted.

“Er, is Lady Krone always doing work like this?” he asked wearily.

With the inspection at its climax and the sun starting to set, Dill was ready to throw in the towel.

“Yeah, she always is,” Ein replied. “I help her out occasionally, though.”

“I-I see...”

As a member of the Knights Guard and Ein’s personal knight, the young Dill had grown accustomed to a myriad of duties. But Krone’s regular duties still weighed heavy on the knight’s shoulders.

“I’ve come to truly understand the potential and skills that Lady Krone possesses,” he said. “I suppose I’m only suited to handle matters that involve swinging a sword...”

“That’s not true at all,” Ein quickly replied. “It’s just that Krone is capable, like Warren.”

“Ah... The sunset is so beautiful, yet I’m only reminded of how lacking I am...”

“You sort of sound like a poet today.”

But as the knight had mused, this region’s sunset was indeed beautiful. Golden ears of wheat glimmered in the distance, occasionally dancing in the wind whenever a breeze would blow through. Ein stood under an enchanting red sunset, soothed by the unique farmland aroma of crops, fertilizer, and dirt.

“What about the souvenirs I requested?” Ein inquired.

“I personally saw to it that the Knights Guard had loaded them onto the train,” Dill replied.

“Whew, that’s a relief.”

“Shall we return to the water train as well?”

“Hm...” Ein let out a dry smile as his time had come, knowing that Dill would likely be against it. “But I can’t *not* do it...”

“Pardon? Did you say something?” Dill asked.

“It’s nothing. Let’s get back on the train.”

This inspection was a bit too far out from the royal capital for a day trip, and Ein was scheduled to spend the night in his water train cabin. Since the prince had rode the royal train into town, preparations had been made to ensure that Ein and the Knights Guard could rest without worry.

“I believe that wraps up your schedule for today,” Dill said as they boarded the water train. “We’ll depart tomorrow morning, and we’re scheduled to arrive back at the royal capital a bit after noon.”

“Got it,” Ein replied. “I’m relieved that all went well.”

The prince turned to the view outside of his window. The beautiful and calm

scenery somehow resonated with the boy's heart.

"If you require anything, please call for me," Dill said. "If you'll excuse me."

The young knight lowered his head before attempting to take his leave, but Ein rummaged through his pockets and removed a letter.

"This is a letter from the royal family. Could you hand this to the conductor?" Ein asked.

"Certainly. I shall do so right away."

Dill was curious to know just what was in the letter, but decided to keep himself from pondering it further. The piece of parchment in his hands was about to kick off a plan that the knight knew nothing of. Dill could only nod obediently in response to his prince's orders.

"I'm sorry," Ein whispered as Dill left. "I'm glad though. If Krone or Chris were here, I doubt this would've worked."

The prince was sure that the pair of ladies would drill him for answers later, perplexed as to why they had been left out of the loop.

"I feel a little bad, though... It feels like I'm taking advantage of Dill's loyalty."

With a deep sigh, the boy repented his actions. Dill would soon meet with the conductor and the royal family's—no, *Ein's* letter would be delivered. Everything would then be set in motion as per the prince's orders. Ein was so nervous; he was worried how Dill might react.

"Maybe I can lock my doors and shut him out... No, I can't do that."

This was something that Ein had chosen to do. He decided to take responsibility for his actions until the end. The clickety-clack of the trains soon sounded, telling Ein that the vehicle was on the move.

"Seems like Dill has properly delivered the letter."

The water train slowly lurched forward as the scenery outside of the window changed bit by bit. They were headed in the opposite direction of the setting sun, to a region that was already dark. As though the train were being sucked into a black hole, it proceeded forward towards the darkness.

“And I can guess what’s coming next.”

At the moment those words left Ein’s mouth, he could hear loud knocking on the door to his railcar.

“Sir Ein?! Just what is going on here?!” Dill asked.

“You can come in. Let’s talk inside,” the prince replied.

The knight hastily rushed inside, visibly confused.

“Wh-Why is the water train on the move?!” Dill asked.

“Because that’s what the letter ordered,” Ein replied.

“That letter wasn’t from another member of the royal family... It was yours.”

Ein gave a goofy laugh, hoping to play dumb about this whole affair. But even Dill wasn’t about to let this slide.

“Please explain!” he demanded, approaching the prince with a sterner look on his face than usual.

“There’s something I have to look into as the crown prince,” Ein replied. “So, I’m headed for Barth.”

“B-Barth?! Does His Majesty know about this?”

“Nope. If I told him, he would’ve stopped me.”

Dill slumped his shoulders and buried his head in his hands. “You’re looking into something that could potentially get you stopped.”

“Don’t look so down.”

“I’m more weary if anything, Sir Ein.”

“Oh, and one more thing. I’ll tell you what I’m looking into once we reach Barth, so I hope you can endure your curiosity for now.” Ein’s talkativeness proved that this was clearly planned beforehand. “When I thought about it, you were the one I could trust the most, Dill. It’s not that I don’t trust the others and I don’t mean to compare you all, but I think it was for the best that you joined me on this trip.”

“I understand.”

Dill knew that his thoughts were wrong, but he couldn't suppress his joy upon hearing the prince's words.

"It'll take more than half a day to get to Barth," the knight said. "I suspect we'll arrive tomorrow, before the sun rises."

"I thought so," Ein replied. "But I'd like to act as soon as we arrive."

"Without waiting for dawn to break?"

"Right. I want to quickly return to the royal capital anyway."

"So you shall be moving while it's still dark... I understand."

"You're not stopping me?"

"I would stop you if you were the type to listen, but you're not. Perhaps I should at least act like I'm trying to, but since you've stated that you trust me the most, I would like to answer such high praise."

Dill left Ein's railcar shortly after. When finally left alone, Ein found himself overwhelmed by a wave of drowsiness.

When the prince came to, he found himself surrounded by serene greenery and warm air. While watching the gentle breeze blow across the grassy field before him, Ein realized he was lying down all by himself. The hill he lay on was just slightly taller than his surroundings; he also noticed the roots of a large tree nearby.

Am I dreaming?

The boy was sure that he had fallen asleep in his train car's bed. Such a warm breeze wouldn't be greeting him in Barth. Though oddly, Ein was quite familiar with this place.

"Ah, this must be..." Ein muttered.

This was where the Elder Lich had previously spoken to him.

"You awake?" a low voice suddenly asked him.

"And you are..." Ein replied.

“Is your denseness biological?”

The man was dressed in a black shirt and a similarly dark pair of pants. *Just how much black can one guy wear?* Ein thought. However, the man’s medium-long silver locks stood out among the sea of black. He proceeded to sigh before running his hand through his hair. He was without a doubt a man, but he seemed to carry an air of feminine sorrow about him. Not to mention that his attire had perplexed Ein for a moment, but he soon realized who this silver-haired figure was: the Dullahan, just as he had appeared in Katima’s ancient Elven tome.

“You finally realized who I am, didn’t you?” the Dullahan replied. “I’m not a fan of those who are slow in the head.”

Before Ein could offer a response, he heard a woman’s voice from behind him. “Dear, are you planning on nagging him here too?”

The prince was familiar with this voice. He turned around to discover a woman clad in a jet-black robe that obscured half of her face and had a large staff floating beside her.

“You don’t have to sound so uptight,” the Dullahan said.

“Then there’s no need for you to nag him either,” the woman replied. “I’m sorry, Ein. I’ll be watching over you from nearby, so please do your best.”

She then took a few steps away from the prince and stood still for a moment. Suddenly, a chair and table materialized out of thin air, and the woman gracefully took a seat. She removed her hood to reveal a head of gorgeously silky hair that appeared to be darker than obsidian. Like her husband, she looked a tad sorrowful, but that couldn’t obscure her beauty.

“Are you the Elder Lich?” Ein asked.

“If you’re referring to Misty over there, then yes, of course she is,” the Dullahan replied. “I’m here, after all, so it’s only obvious. Turn my way. Let’s begin.”

The Dullahan took out a large longsword and tossed it to Ein.

“You suddenly appeared in front of me and now we’re just gonna fight?” Ein

asked.

“What, you unsatisfied?” the Dullahan asked.

“Of course I am. In fact, I’m worried that you might take over my body.”

“I have no intentions of doing that, so no need to worry there. I just thought I’d train you a bit for tomorrow. And you can call me Ramza.”

“Ramza?”

“Yep, that’s fine.”

Ramza suddenly snapped his fingers. Ein’s body glowed for a moment before his entire body was enveloped in black armor.

“I’ll lend that to you,” the man said.

Ein couldn’t hide his shock as he examined his entire body. *There’s no mistaking it. This is the Dullahan’s armor from the book.*

“Armor’s important,” Ramza said. “Even if you can’t die in this world.”

“Uh, I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Ein replied.

“I can’t bear to see your poor swordsmanship skills. I’ll polish them a little so that I can at least endure the sight of your swings. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Wait, what?! I’m happy that you’ll watch over me—I mean, not take over my body, but I don’t know why you’re training me!”

“No particular reason. I just want you to ensure you defeat them not with power, but with skill.”

Them? But Ein’s question was never answered, and Ramza suddenly summoned a large sword before he assumed a fighting stance.

“Uh, what about armor for you, Ramza?” Ein asked.

“There’s no meaning for me to wear it, is there?” Ramza replied.

“But you said armor was important earlier.”

“Hah! Your swordsmanship is mere child’s play. Your blade will probably never reach me.”

The prince couldn’t hide his annoyance. He picked up the sword Ramza had

tossed his way and gripped it firmly in his hands.

“I have no idea how strong you are, but I can’t stand how easily you mock others!” Ein roared.

“Oh, he can cleanly slice a Sea Dragon down the middle with ease,” Misty remarked.

Oh. Uh. Okay.

“Then I hope you can teach me well!” Ein pivoted, lowering his head obediently.

“Sure,” Ramza replied.

Well then, of course my skills would look like child’s play to him. Why was I called here anyway? What do they want me to do? Questions swirled around in his mind, but Ein decided to leave those queries for later as he was about to train. The prince was dying to see Ramza’s power for himself—the power of a man who could supposedly slice a Sea Dragon in two.

It had only been a few hours since the royal water train had set off for Barth, but word of Ein’s change in schedule had reached White Night Castle. Completely ignorant of the ongoing situation, Katima was working away in her basement office—a book in one paw and a pen in the other. Gliding her pen across paper, she had been drafting a summary of her collected knowledge up to this point.

“For now, I suppose this is everything I know about monsterification.”

She started by covering Ein’s method of growing stronger—consuming other species as a monster would. Surely, this was an ability that no other human could hope to replicate.

“There’s no nonhuman who can do it either.”

Given that they were originally considered to be monsters themselves, nonhumans possessed magic stones and a core in lieu of a heart. But like the average human, they would feel some nasty side effects if they absorbed the stone from a member of another species. Many researchers accredited this to

evolution. Nonhumans were gradually losing their monstrous traits, becoming a sophisticated species more akin to humans. As of today, countless species had been recognized as “nonhuman” and all of them had integrated themselves into society without fail. It was proof that they weren’t so different from the average human. In other words...

“Technically, Ein is the only ‘human’ that pawssesses the ability to gain power from magic stones.”

The prince was doing something that even Elves, Dryads, and Cait-Sìth couldn’t do. This was just Katima’s opening statement.

“Will monsters feel a change within their bodies like Ein does?”

In short, they would. But there wasn’t enough available information on this specific topic. Katima had decided to conduct one last experiment in hopes of digging up one final nugget of information.

“Nya ha ha ha! I didn’t think a weak monster like the Big Bee would be useful here!”

With a dry laugh, she glanced at the cage sitting on her office floor. Inside was a single monster, a Giant Bee—the evolved form of a Big Bee. The insectoid monster was around the size of a large dog, and it still had enough room to evolve again—into a King Bee.

“But I fed this thing a meowssive number of cheap magic stones, and it shows no signs of evolving.”

This implied that something was lacking. Katima had hypothesized that it was the quantity of stones at first, but no changes could be observed.

“Mrow... Purrhaps the quality of the magic stones is a factor in evolution.”

The first princess wore a glove that was specially designed to endure the power of magic stones and proceeded to clutch a kraken stone that sat on her table.

“Cage lock: check! Emergency switch: check! All right, let’s do this!”

Katima approached the cage while the Giant Bee attempted to intimidate her by violently flapping its wings. She continued her approach and tossed the

magic stone into the cage.

“Eat!”

At first, the Giant Bee continued its attempts to startle the princess before it went for the magic stone. It quickly brought the stone to its mouth; the resulting crackling sound echoed throughout the office. It was as if the monster were chewing on a hunk of ice. And then...

“As I’d purredicted. You require high-quality magic stones to evolve.”

The Giant Bee’s body glowed a pale blue before it started to evolve. The beast’s wings sprawled out to new lengths as its body grew to twice its previous size. Without a doubt, this was a King Bee.

“I’ll just have it take a catnap for now.”

Katima threw a spherical magical tool inside of the cage and purple smoke quickly started to rise from the sphere. With the smoke pouring out, she left the room to avoid inhaling any of the fumes.

“Am I ameowzing? Or am I just really smart? My genius scares me...” she said as she ascended the stairs. However, her thoughts quickly turned to her nephew. “Up until meow, Ein’s been absorbing a wide variety of stones.”

As a young child, the prince had absorbed cheap magic stones that were commonly used for magical tools. With that in mind, he showed no signs of an evolution. But since his arrival in Ishtarica, Ein had absorbed the magic stones of the Dullahan, the Elder Lich, the Sea Dragon, and most recently, Upaskamuy.

“Ein’s monsterification might just be evolution.”

Katima had deduced her theory while in Ist last year, but she had finally had the chance to test it out today.

“I can’t dawdle around. Ein has more than enough power furrom the magic stones inside of him. Worst case, he might soon...”

Ein might truly evolve into a different being entirely. While they were in Ist, Katima reassured her nephew that he wouldn’t transform into a weak monster that would rob him of his reason and sense of self. Regardless of those assurances, it was a situation that she wanted to avoid. The first princess

wanted to share her findings with the boy immediately, but he wasn't around, unfortunately.

"Mrow! Why is he off dealing with public duties at such an important meowment?! Good grief! That stone-gobbling, mother-loving nephew of mine!"

Katima gave up on sharing the news with Ein and decided to call it a night.

Right before she was about to head for her bedroom, Katima stopped in front of the butler's quarters. She usually would pass by without a second thought, but she decided to drop in upon noticing a ruckus.

"It smells fishy!" Katima said with equal parts glee and curiosity—a natural reaction for the feline royal as she turned the doorknob. "Hello, folks! It's me-ow!"

She opened the door in a burst of gusto, stealing the entire room's attention.

"Ah, Lady Katima," a butler said. "Whatever is the matter?"

The room suddenly turned quiet as she gave a sweeping glance around.

"What are mew hiding? I only know of a few matters where mew would want to keep a secret from me-ow. Or shall I take a guess?"

Katima was intelligent, and it wasn't just book smarts. She was brimming with superb ideas and the wild imagination to match them.

"I should have more power than Olivia. Which means it should only be something that mew would like to keep a secret from mother and father, purrhaps..."

She grinned upon seeing a butler let out a sigh of relief.

"Ah, I furgot! It just might be in name only furr now, but there's one more person above mother! Crown Prince Ein. Did something happen to him?" The butlers couldn't win against the first princess's keen eye. "Come on! Speak! I'll keep it a secret!"

Having nowhere else to run, the butlers reluctantly told the truth. While away on an inspection, Ein had suddenly changed courses instead of heading home. Katima wondered why Ein was headed for Barth. Meanwhile, the butlers were secretly on the edge of their seats to hear the princess's take on the matter.

“I know why Ein’s off for Barth,” Katima finally said.

“R-Really?!”

“Nya ha ha. Don’t be shocked when mew hear the truth! Ein’s headed there because...” Again, the highly intelligent Katima had amazing ideas and imagination. “Because...Ein has secretly married a local woman theeere!”

Had Katima been her usual calm self, she might have been able to come to a different conclusion. However, she was of no use today. She’d just reached a conclusion on the links between monsterification and evolution; she was already more excited than usual.

“Meow then. I’ll pretend I never heard any of this, so don’t mew worry! I have some urgent matters to address, so tell Ein to visit my room when he gets back!”

After jumping to a completely unexpected and wild conclusion, a visibly satisfied Katima returned to her lab.

If I were to say something, it’s that I’m sorry for acting so confident in the beginning, Ein thought to himself. What would’ve happened to him if he wasn’t wearing the armor? He couldn’t even begin to imagine the possibly horrific outcome as he lay on the ground, all beaten up.

“Here you are!” Misty said. “One more round!”

Even if Ein’s mind and body were bruised, the Elder Lich promptly healed all of his wounds in an instant. The prince had been taking quite the extended beating, and was healed up over and over again.

“You’re simply running down an endless path. The psychological pain you feel from that is the best training for you, is it not?” Ramza said.

“Hah... Hah... I-I get what you’re saying, but I feel like my mental state can’t take much more of this,” Ein panted.

“If you want to give up, you’re too weak, simple as. If you don’t like that, stay quiet and keep fighting.”

Not a bead of sweat ran down Ramza’s face, much to Ein’s frustration.

“I don’t mean to make excuses, but doesn’t this place make you feel weird?” Ein asked. “My body feels heavier than usual...”

“Stand up,” Ramza ordered. “If you can still talk back, you can still fight.”

Ein didn’t like to always be on the losing end of a fight. He forced his aching body to stand and attack once more.

“Hm,” Ramza said, expertly and forcefully parrying Ein from the moment the boy swung his sword. He followed his parry up with a counterattack on the boy. “I don’t like how you move your arms. Try again.”

“Gh... Ah...” Ein gasped, feeling that Ramza’s blow had penetrated his armor and rattled his insides. The boy was then blown back, coughing as he fell to the ground.

“I understand one thing though,” Ramza said. “You probably have no inherent talent with a sword.”

“That’s...quite a sudden thing to say.”

“You’ve become what you currently are through sheer effort. Just like that Lloyd kid, you don’t have it in you to become stronger through innate talent. Perhaps you should be proud for making it this far on willpower alone, but...you’re more suited to monsterlike combat utilizing the Phantom Hands, like when you defeated that fish.”

“I’m sort of a human, you know.” *Did he call the Sea Dragon a “fish?” I can’t believe it.*

“I’m just talking about what you’re more suited towards. No matter. Let’s continue.”

“Dear, why don’t you give him a word of advice?” Misty suggested. “We don’t have all the time in the world, you know.”

“Ugh... Fine.” Ramza relented, unable to argue his wife’s words as he lowered his sword. “I’ll tell you your weakness. Listen well. Whatever you do, your fighting style is akin to how the strong wield their blade.”

“Um, sorry, can you elaborate?” Ein asked.

“Beating an opponent with a single flash of your blade is a privilege reserved

for the strong. No matter whom you might face, you have a habit of trying to end it in one swing.”

He took Ein’s hand and went behind him, gently showing Ein how to wield his sword. Ramza’s stature easily outsized Lloyd, his hand so large that the boy was surprised it enveloped his hands. *Even my father never showed me how to hold a sword like this.* Ramza was an inhuman monster who had died centuries ago, yet he exhibited paternal instincts.

“Don’t think about disrupting your opponent,” Ramza said. “In the end, that’s just you showing care for your enemy’s moments. Do the opposite: engulf and involve them in your fight. There’s no need to think about disrupting or besting them; that’s only the outcome of a battle.”

“It’s a bit difficult for me to understand,” Ein admitted.

Ramza’s tone was kind, but his words were hard to visualize.

“Then just keep trying things out until you get the hang of it,” Ramza said. “I’ll be your opponent. But if you try something boring, I’ll immediately send you rolling onto the ground.”

Ramza had a bad attitude, but Ein wasn’t against this idea at all. *What is this feeling?* Ein wondered. The prince was too embarrassed to vocalize his thoughts, but this man seemed more fatherly than his actual father. Ein secretly wished that he could stay here for a while longer.

How many hours had it been? Ein had lost all sense of time as he continued to focus on his first swing. Through arcane methods unknown to the prince, the passage of time within this realm had been slowed down. His technique was the only thing Ein thought of as he swung his sword for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, Ramza gave his nod of approval.

“It’s improved,” he said.

“I don’t know how many times I would’ve died without this armor,” Ein said.

“So, do you remember just how many times you’ve been blown back?”

Ein had been scolded and hit back for a variety of reasons: his form was bad, he was acting like a spoiled brat, among other issues. The prince no longer

knew just how many blows he'd taken.

"A countless number of times. I lost track, honestly," Ein admitted.

"In reality, if you had received any one of these blows on your physical body, you would've died," Ramza said. "Good for you. Now you know what it's like to receive an attack that'll kill you."

That's way too dangerous.

"I'll now show you how you can fight against a certain man's sword," Ramza said. "Don't ask anything and just quietly learn it. Is that clear?"

"Could you at least tell me why I need to learn this?" Ein asked.

"No need. You just need to use this knowledge when the time calls for it."

"Can I ask a different question, then? Could I summon this armor whenever I need to?"

"What, you want to summon it?"

"I'll never say no to powerful gear. I'll take what I can get."

Ein had been stuck with the Phantom Hands as the only Dullahan skill he could use for the longest time. He felt it was high time to learn at least one more ability from the man. Ramza fell silent.

"I'm sure you'd be able to use it by the time you return home," a troubled Misty answered in his stead.

"That's how it is," Ramza added. "Now, come here."

"Uh, huh?! Wait! Don't grab me all of a sudden!" Ein wailed. He'd been grabbed by the scruff of his neck and carried to a large plain. "I'll do my best! Don't treat me like a kid!"

"You *are* a kid," Ramza replied. "And especially so from my point of view."

"Argh! How vexing!"

Ein couldn't endure it any longer and vented his frustrations. For his part, Ramza couldn't stop himself from letting out a hearty laugh. The prince lifelessly buried his face in his hands while the seated Misty joyfully smiled at the pair.

“Your opponent will continue fighting,” Ramza said. “Have your body remember what kind of foe you’re up against and how such a person wields their sword.”

“I’ve been thinking about this for a while now, but you’re leaving a lot of this up to willpower,” Ein replied.

“Lectures and words are useless in battles. You need to actually practice and see for yourself, gaining practical knowledge from real fights. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

Perhaps things would’ve been different if Ein had the power to make his opponent acknowledge his talent. The prince was gently lowered down to the grass.

“Hold up your sword,” Ramza ordered. “I’ll strike and you only need to defend against it.”

Ein obediently took a fighting stance while Ramza did the same. *Huh? He seems completely different from before.* Put kindly, he looked steady, but lacked a certain kind of individuality to his movements. Ramza pointed his blade at the prince and disappeared from view in the blink of an eye.

“Hmph!” he grunted.

“Huh?! So fast!” Ein yelped.

At the very least, the prince was able to follow the Dullahan’s movements. While the boy had been caught off guard, it would have been scarier if Ramza had attacked from behind or the side instead of head-on.

“Good,” Ramza said. “If you react to it, continue defending yourself.”

The Dullahan seemed more knightly than Ishtarica’s knights. His sword was honest and straightforward as he carried on with his continuous attacks on Ein. Luckily for the prince, he was familiar with this fighting style—it was similar to the Knights Guard’s training regimen.

“This feels a bit too easy!” Ein shouted.

“No need to talk unnecessarily. It isn’t over yet,” Ramza said.

Ein was used to fighting against this style, but Ramza's blade was terrifyingly precise. His steady hand and expert movements were akin to Lloyd's, but the Dullahan's speed resembled Chris's style. Ramza was just as precise as Lloyd and as fast as Chris. *He's clearly above them! But I can still fight back!* The pair continued to cross swords for several minutes. As Ramza continued his barrage, Ein saw that there was an opening.

"Haaah!" Ein yelled, aiming for the opening that he found.

Ramza managed to properly defend himself against the attack despite his awkward position. Ein's attacks were simply not enough yet. *But what is this obvious habit he's creating?*

"Don't think about anything unnecessary," Ramza said. "Just continue what you've been doing."

"O-Okay!"

Even while they were talking, Ein could tell when he should strike. Taking the opportunity to swing his blade, the prince had disrupted Ramza's movements in the process. The Dullahan was clearly doing this on purpose; he usually wouldn't have had any trouble here.

"You just learned this, didn't you? Use your movements to control the battle," he said.

If there were any openings that Ein could sense, he simply had to grab that opportunity. *I need at least four—no, five more strikes!* Judging from the flow of the battle, he'd need to put in five more attacks before he could create a larger opening for himself. Ein steadied his aim and narrowed his eyes. *Now!* The prince grinned, pleased that the battle had gone exactly as he'd imagined, and took advantage of this opportunity to land a powerful strike.

"Dear, it's almost time," Misty called.

The pair had been training for quite some time, but the Dullahan stopped upon hearing his wife's words.

"Already?" Ramza replied. "It's still not enough."

Ein was more than satisfied with the time he'd spent with the couple. The adrenaline pumping through his body had woken him up a fair bit—a far cry from the sleepy look on his face from when he started.

“The train should arrive soon. It's almost time for him to wake up,” Misty said.

“Ah... I should be asleep,” Ein replied.

“I've healed your fatigue in your real world, so there's nothing for you to worry about.”

Her powers are really so mysterious. Ein bowed his head in gratitude before she disappeared in the blink of an eye.

“To tell you the truth, I'm not sure what's going on,” Ein said. “I don't know why I've been called here either, but I truly feel like I've received a valuable experience. And for that, you have my utmost gratitude.”

“It's fine,” Ramza replied. “I wanted to ask a favor.”

“A favor?”

“Right. I'd like to ask you something, Ein.”

His face was filled with grief and sorrow, looking pained as he indulged himself in nostalgia.

“Sure. What could it be?” Ein asked.

“If... If you were to ever cross swords against an opponent who uses the fighting style I just showed you, could you tell him one thing for me?” Ramza asked.

“I'm not sure of whom you speak of or if I'll ever fight them, but what would like me to pass along?”

“I want you to say...”

“Sir Ein! Sir Ein!”

As his body was shaken awake, he heard someone yelling in his ear.

“Hm? H-Huh?” Ein muttered.

“Are you up? We’ve arrived in Barth,” Dill replied.

Ein stared outside the window, realizing that his dark surroundings were covered with more snow than he’d ever seen before.

“Well, Dill. It’s been a while since we’ve last been in Barth, but I’ll need you to come with me.”

“Of course. And where shall we go?”

“I’ve already decided on our first stop.”

“And where would that be?”

“A flower shop. I need to buy a large bouquet of flowers because I have nothing else to offer. Ah, maybe I’ll buy some alcohol too.”

Dill was confused when he heard Ein’s words, but tagged along regardless. The pair stepped off the water train and into the nighttime streets of Barth.

As Ein said he would, he stopped by a flower shop to pick up a bouquet and purchased some liquor from a tavern beloved by the town’s best adventurers. *Is there something nearby?* Dill wondered as he silently followed the prince. He could no longer contain his curiosity and opened his mouth.

“Where are we headed for, Sir Ein?” Dill asked.

“I think a guide will arrive in a bit,” Ein replied.

“A guide? When did you call for someone like that?” The young knight noticed that if they proceeded farther, they could potentially run into monsters. “Sir Ein, this is about as far as we should go...”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. We’ve got a reliable person on our side. Ah, speak of the devil.”

Dill was more perplexed than ever before, but Ein refused to give a straight answer. As the prince stopped in his tracks, Dill put his guard up, expecting that something was about to happen.

“Long time no see, Marco. You’re there, aren’t you?” Ein called out.

Birds flew out from the trees.

“I’m impressed that you’ve noticed me,” Marco said, looking and sounding

exactly the same as before.

While Ein had called out this Living Armor, he felt like something was off. However, Dill had never encountered Marco before. In fact, the young knight felt so overwhelmed by the Undead's presence that he couldn't draw his blade.

"There's no need for you to be so wary," Marco said. "I'm not here to cause harm. I've only appeared because I'd been summoned."

"I know it's been a while since we last met, Marco, but could you escort us to the castle?" Ein asked.

"I see. So your vessel has stabilized and is about to bloom. As you wish. I shall take full responsibility and guide you there."

"S-Sir Ein?! Are we going to the Demon Castle?!" Dill yelped.

"That's why I bought all these things," Ein said. "Hold them carefully, okay?"

"I don't think any monsters will attack us. I'm here too," Marco added.

"Please tell me! What are you planning on doing at the Demon Castle?!" the young knight asked.

"Well, my primary motive is to visit a grave," Ein replied. "There's one within the castle's premises, isn't there, Marco? A burial ground where a member of the royal family lies."

Marco nodded at Ein's confident words.

They proceeded through the forest much more smoothly than before. The path to the Demon Lord's old territory wasn't covered by any snow. Ein wondered what Marco was here for.

"We shall...arrive in several minutes," Marco said.

"That's pretty quick," Ein remarked.

"Well...if it's easy to trek through, it's actually not too far away. And since I'm...your guide, we're using the closest...route."

Marco seemed to speak with uncertainty, the Undead's change in tone concerning Ein. However, a puff of purple smoke in the skies caught the prince's eye.

“What is that?” he asked.

“That’s...an area a short distance behind the Demon Castle. It’s...a dangerously poisonous swamp that even...Lady Misty chose to avoid. There’s something glowing...in its center, but to this day, no one has been able...to reach it. A countless number of adventurers and monsters have...lost their lives there. It’s a dangerous place.”

“Poison, huh? I get excited when I hear about things that glow. I feel like there might be some sort of treasure there.”

Dill gave a weary sigh, but Marco remained expressionless.

“It’s...only a ten-minute walk away from the castle. It’s dangerous, so...please do not ever visit the swamp,” Marco said.

Ein had absolute resistance against poison, but he decided to put those ideas aside for now. After all, he was there to confirm something within the Demon Castle.

As the trio continued to walk along, they noticed that the weather had calmed down.

“We will reach...town soon. Will...you be headed straight for the castle?” Marco asked.

“Yeah, I think I will,” Ein replied.

“Very well. Then...let us go.”

Ein looked up to the sky. Dawn was set to break in a few hours, but for now, moonlight alone illuminated the Demon Lord’s castle town. The trio’s dimly lit surroundings were silent, without a soul in sight.

“There is...one thing I must tell you,” Marco said.

“Hm? And what’s that?” Ein asked.

Ein stood right in front of the Demon Castle, and it was only a matter of time before he walked through its gates.

“There is...a room you must pass through...before you make it to the burial

grounds,” Marco said, his manner of speech odd and unstable as ever. “It’s a room that...has wonderful creators. I implore you to...be careful. I don’t think...you will lose.”

“I’ll be careful. I know that something weird will happen...” Ein replied, trailing off.

Marco was acting so naturally that Ein failed to react for a moment, but soon realized that the Living Armor’s verbal mannerisms were off. However, another noticeable difference was clear as day to the boy. *I see...* Ein thought to himself, his heart aching with grief and pain. He had finally grasped just what was bothering him, along with Ramza’s wish. *This is probably why I felt that something was off while we were in the forest.* Right away, Ein thought it unusual for Marco to leave the Demon Castle’s premises. The Living Armor had himself stated that he was unable to leave the area for prolonged periods of time. And yet, he’d done just that, heading to Barth’s outskirts to fetch Ein. The boy knew that something was now different about the man. Marco placed his hand on the door, ignorant of Ein’s concerns.

The Demon Castle’s exterior bore a striking resemblance to that of White Night. Marco charged ahead, not particularly concerned about the pair of surprised boys following him. After a few moments, the trio now stood before a black door. If one were within the halls of White Night, this door would have led to the sandy beach out back.

“We’re here,” Marco said.

One could also feel a heavy, menacing aura emanating from behind this particular door.

“Dill, I’d like you to stay at the door,” Ein said. “Marco, could you wait for me in the grand hall?”

“Very well. Then I shall head to the grand hall first,” Marco replied.

Ein breathed a sigh of relief. He had his fair share of concerns about the situation’s potential to go south. Not to mention that it would be rather convenient for the prince if he could split Dill and Marco apart.

“No matter what happens, you are not to enter this room, Dill,” Ein warned.

“In truth, I should stop you,” Dill replied. “But I understand. Please, I beg you. Don’t push yourself.”

“I know.”

Before entering the room, Ein took the items that Dill had bought for him back in Barth. With a loud creak, the door opened and a thick, black mist greeted the crown prince.

“Okay, here I go,” Ein said. He eventually closed the door and looked around. “This feels like a prison.”

There was nothing inside. It was simply made, like a stone prison without even a window to gaze out of. However, there was a faintly glowing door in the depths of the room. Ein slowly took a step, then another, gradually making his way forward. Then suddenly, his worst fears started coming to pass.

“What is this smell?”

A repugnant scent had filled the room and unfortunately, Ein was quite familiar with this smell. It was a bodily odor that most men would be acquainted with. While the crown prince was confused by the sudden assault on his senses, a young girl in chains suddenly emerged from the darkness.

“Who are you?” Ein asked, putting his guard up by unsheathing his black sword.

But his apprehensions were soon dispelled when he noticed that the girl was around the same age as him. Her filthy, red hair was covered in soot and she was clad in old, mud-stained rags. Upon closer inspection, he realized that her entire body had been sullied.

“Who could do something so horrible?!”

For a split second, Ein completely forgot that he was in the red foxes’ room.

“Me... Ve me...” the girl mumbled under her breath, making it hard to hear.

“I’ll save you right now!”

Noticing Ein’s voice, the girl slowly raised her head. Her long hair had covered much of her face, but the prince felt like they’d locked eyes for a moment. As Ein blinked, the girl faded from view.

“Will you...love me?”

The girl disappeared as her voice hit Ein’s ears. Confused by it all, the prince immediately glanced around in hopes of catching another glimpse of her. However, she was nowhere to be seen.

“Was that some kind of curse or something?!” Ein asked.

He checked his palms before touching his face and the rest of his body. The prince saw that he was safe, but wasn’t sure if there really was a curse at all.

“Ugh... I saw something awful.”

Whatever horrors that girl had gone through now tore at the boy’s heart. However, he didn’t believe that the red foxes’ curse alone was responsible. Ein only had more questions. He’d only passed through a single room, and yet he felt exhausted.

“I’ll keep going on.”

He’d consider the smaller matters later on. With no further obstacles impeding his way forward, Ein soon arrived at the glowing door. As he placed his hand on the knob and swung the door open, he was greeted by the sun rising over the horizon. It’d been a while since the chilly breeze of the Demon Castle’s burial grounds had welcomed a visitor—Ein. These grounds featured architecture that was rather similar to that of the royal family’s resting place in Kingsland.

“I didn’t think this area would be built the same too,” Ein muttered. “Your Majesty, the first king, this only displays your tenacity.”

The only difference between the two burial grounds was the number of gravestones. There were only five within the Demon Castle. There were two in the front, and three lined up in the back. Ein gazed at the grave in front of him, knowing that the answer he’d been seeking was here. While before the pair of front-facing gravestones, the boy removed his purchased items from his bag.

“Please excuse me.”

He proceeded to pay his respects to the dead, just as King Silverd had taught him. After carefully conducting the ritual a few times, Ein could feel his mental

fortitude stabilizing. Once he finished, the prince finally set eyes on the name engraved in the stone.

“As I thought. I knew it.”

Ein raised his black sword against his chest and his blade gave a gentle glow.

“I don’t know why or what happened... I’ve got so many questions, but thanks to you, I’ve been able to understand the truth just a bit more...first king,” Ein said, reading the epitaph on the stone.

Here lies the child of Ramza and Misty, the second king of Ishtarica, Jayle von Ishtarica. He sleeps in his beloved home.

The first king couldn’t bear to be referred to as the “second king.” In reality, the Demon Lord’s old territory was once part of Ishtarica. In fact, the first being to be hailed as the land’s king was none other than Demon Lord Arshay.

“I’m sorry, but let me confirm this,” Ein said, apologizing to the two beings within his body.

He stepped towards the back of the burial grounds, where three tombstones were lined up. They were engraved with the names of Ramza, Misty, Arshay, and the family name of “von Ishtarica.”

“In other words, he had no choice but to kill his own family.”

As Ramza and Misty were assisting the Demon Lord, it meant that the “first” king was acting on his own.

“But his remains are buried here, so I don’t think they died on bad terms.”

Ein stepped towards the stone that stood beside Jayle’s.

“Ah, I thought so,” the prince said, reading the stone.

Here lies the wife of Jayle, the second king of Ishtarica, Laviola von Ishtarica. She sleeps in her beloved hometown.

This was likely the beginning of the Ishtarica that Ein knew. Before the nations were unified, there was a different kind of Ishtarica in this continent.

“I still need time to process this. Hm?”

Under Laviola’s name were small, engraved letters. They’d been weathered

by time and it was difficult to read, but Ein managed to piece it together after a short while.

“Laviola Wernstein.”

Why’s Chris’s family name on here? Isn’t she an elf? Laviola’s species should’ve been a pixie. Ein only had more questions. Upon his return home, he would ask to see his family tree. *I’ll have Chris show it to me, even if she’s embarrassed about it!*

“Anyways, I should head back. Dill’s waiting for me.”

He’d had a few of his questions answered, but found himself asking some new ones in the process. Ultimately, Ein had a lot more on his mind after this encounter. His theory had been proved true and he was now filled with a torrent of conflicting emotions while he walked back to his knight.

With nothing impeding him on the way back, Ein safely returned to his knight.

“I’m back!” the prince said.

“Sir Ein! I’m so glad to see you safe!” Dill replied.

“Sorry about that. I’ve confirmed what I needed to know.”

“That’s great to hear. And...is it something you could tell me about?”

In truth, Ein was dying to spill the beans as fast as possible, but he was unsure if this important discovery could be broached with others. Could he honestly speak with people about this?

“Sorry. Can we return to Barth first?” Ein asked.

“Y-You’re right,” Dill replied. “I’m terribly sorry. I suppose I was a bit too excited.”

Since Ein couldn’t find an answer yet, he decided to leave it aside for now. He’d probably need an explanation by the time he returned to the water train, but he could leave that to his future self.

“Let’s go to the grand hall,” Ein said.

“Yessir!”

Before Ein stepped forward, he had one more warning for his knight.

“Sorry, can I ask one thing from you?” Ein inquired.

“Of course. And what might that be?” Dill asked.

“When we get to the grand hall, you mustn’t involve yourself. No matter what. I need you to promise me.”

“Mustn’t involve myself?”

Indeed. At the very least, Ein wanted to provide his opponent with a one-on-one fight for *his* final battle. Above all, Ramza had made this request as well. Dill was still puzzled, but he fell silent and walked behind the prince.

The castle was dimly lit, but it closely resembled White Night. Ein was so familiar with his surroundings that he didn’t feel like he needed a guard.

The pair eventually reached the great hall. They discovered Marco standing underneath a grand chandelier. He was so quiet and still that one might have thought he was already dead. But he turned around upon hearing Ein’s footsteps.

“Ah,” Marco said. “Have you...completed what you set out...to do?”

“Thanks to you,” Ein replied.

“I’m glad to hear that. Will you be returning to Barth now?”

“Dawn is about to break, and I’m thinking of heading home. I’ll be leaving this place soon.”

“I understand. Then why don’t I escort you out?”

Ein prayed. He prayed that he could silently leave the Demon Lord’s old territory without any mishaps.

“Ah. May I ask one thing?” Marco asked as he passed by the boy.

Ein stopped in his tracks, creeped out by how cheery Marco sounded.

“Sure. What is it?” the prince asked.

Ask about the burial grounds. Ask about the burial grounds!

“Do you mean the burial grounds?” Ein quickly added. “It was—”

“Oh no! I don’t...care about that place at all!” Marco interjected. “But, er...how was the room...that those people made? It was...splendid, wasn’t it?”

“Ah well, that room was...” Ein slowly said, placing his hand over his black sword and firmly gripping the hilt. He let out a sad sigh before he made his resolve and spat, “Awful. Absolutely awful. I’d like to know who has such poor taste.”

Trying to provoke a fight, Ein firmly spoke with a tone filled with hatred and disdain for the red foxes.

“That’s not good,” Marco replied. “Perhaps...you’re under some sort of illness. I shall invite you...to my home. The basement of...my house is filled with numerous types of medicine... Perhaps you can return to your normal state if I use it.”

“Hm... And what kind of medicine is it?” Ein asked, his heart panging with grief.

Is it too late?

“It causes extreme pain...and allows you to return to your senses... It’s a wonderful medicine. I’ve been using it...until just the other day.”

Marco had reached his limit very recently. Ein looked down, regretting the fact that he hadn’t visited sooner. He gritted his teeth, cursing the cruel and merciless nature of reality.

“That sounds wonderful,” Ein replied, drawing the black blade kept on his waist. “But I think I’ll be fine. I’ll return to town.”

The prince pointed his blade at Marco, a weapon forged from a piece of his opponent’s very own body.

“You mustn’t,” Marco said. “This is all for your sake. Yes, all for your saaake!”

His loud cry shook the walls of the hall as Marco produced a sword out of thin air, much like what Ramza had done. The Undead warrior rushed forward, winding up a large swing that was aimed at Ein’s neck.

“I won’t let that blade reach me,” the prince replied.

“S-Sir Ein?!” Dill cried.

“No, Dill! Stand back! That’s an order!”

Ein didn’t say much more than that, but he was sure that Dill would instantly perish if he joined the battle.

“But why?! Sir Marco is clearly going berserk!” Dill shouted.

“I said that you can’t! I’ll face Marco! I have to!” Ein replied.

After a brief clash, Marco took a few steps back. His movements were almost identical to Ramza’s movements in the boy’s dreams. The prince dryly smiled while a confused Marco hastily glanced around his surroundings.

“My attack was...blocked. With a blade like...the captain’s... Is the captain beside...you? Then why doesn’t the captain...shout how splendid...*they* are?! Ah! I know! I know! The captain...must also be ill! I’m right, aren’t I?! It must...be, right?! Ah, then...I shall be there shortly! Please...recuperate in my home! Rah! Aaahhh!”

As Marco once again leaped forward, Ein gave a sad smile.

“Even after you’ve become like that, your swordsmanship doesn’t change,” the prince said.

“Come now! Come here! Come! Don’t act so reserved! Recuperate in my home!”

Ein swung his black sword calmly, remembering what he saw in his dream. He silently searched for an opening while giving a sorrowful sigh.

“Why?! Why can you keep defending?! Is the captain beside you? Then why doesn’t the captain shout how splendid *they* are?! You must also be ill!” Marco screamed, repeating the words that he’d just said.

The man continued to attack Ein, but the prince had finally found the opening that he was looking for. The timing was exactly the same as his training; it wasn’t difficult for Ein to take advantage of that.

“Agh! Hah... Wh-Why?!” Marco cried. Ein’s single blow had left a deep gash on Marco’s armor. “Ah! I know! I know! Ah! You...lack faith! You lack faith towards them! You lack loyalty! Loyalty!”

At the moment those words left Marco’s mouth, he immediately slashed

himself, his tone and mannerisms returning to normal.

“Loyalty, my foot! What just... What... Gh... Ahhh!”

“Marco?!” Ein cried. “Are you back to normal?!”

“Hm? Ah, pardon me. I suppose I was just...confused for a moment! So...let us try this again, shall we! Come to my hooooome!”

Had Marco perhaps held on to a sliver of his sanity? With that intact, the word “loyalty” wouldn’t come out of the knight’s mouth if he was being controlled. He held on to the bit of pride he had left.

“I won’t go,” Ein said. “I...don’t think well of the red foxes. I think it’s only natural.”

Marco stopped in his tracks. “This goes beyond treatment... You must offer your body to theeem! That’s simply how rude your remarks are! Or are you...testing me? I see... Then I shall swallow my tears and personally deliver...your punishment!”

“I know you don’t think that, Marco!”

“Punishment! Punish! Punish! Punish! Punish! Punish! Punish! Punish!”

“You’ve taught me many things! Please recall that!” Ein shouted, disclosing his innermost thoughts. “Please! Come back!”

Had Marco not slashed himself earlier, Ein would’ve given up all hope. But upon seeing Marco’s actions, he wanted to gamble on a sliver of hope—that perhaps all wasn’t lost just yet. However, the red foxes’ curse remained to mock and deride the boy’s desire.

“Heh! No! No! No! I will...cure you! Not to worry! I shall do it!” Marco shouted, deteriorating so quickly that he was unable to form coherent sentences.

Suddenly, Ein heard a voice in his head.

“It’s over. Please, just set him free of his suffering,” the voice said, filled with equal parts grief and pain. It was as though the voice was gritting his teeth.

“Marco, I’ll be the one to face you in your final moments,” Ein said.

Remember the strength of Ramza, the Dullahan, who could defeat even the Sea Dragon with a single swing. Ein didn't possess the physique or strength to manifest Ramza's full power, but the boy could at least copy the Dullahan's movements and send Marco off.

"Here I come, Marco," Ein said.

He took a deep breath, getting a good whiff of the old carpeting and dust caked around him. His body grew warm, but Ein showed no fear and calmly entrusted himself to the rising temperature within. Suddenly, Ein could feel an indescribable sense of omnipotence coursing through his body.

"Marco, I think this is the vessel that you saw within me," Ein said.

The prince tightened his grip and veins coursing throughout his black blade started to pulsate.

"Is the castle...shaking?" Dill wondered.

It was calm, but the Demon Castle was no doubt trembling. As though it was reacting to Ein's every breath, the pulsating of the blade's veins grew louder still. This was a hymn—a hymn that celebrated the birth of a new king.

"Sir Ein?" Dill murmured.

The knight had been taken aback by the shaking, but his curiosity had been piqued by Ein's gradually changing appearance. The prince's hair had grown past his shoulders and his body now dwarfed Dill—a stunning sight as Ein was shorter than the knight just moments ago. Ein's face had morphed into a more dignified and masculine appearance without losing his mother's beauty. If the prince were to claim that his current form was a more mature version of himself, no one would've questioned it.

Dill blinked, and Ein had seemingly teleported and was now standing in front of Marco.

"My body isn't complete yet, but this is the best blade I can wield," Ein said.

He gripped his sword and took on a completely different style from his usual self. Upon causing Marco to stagger, Ein fired off a relentless flurry of attacks that prevented the Living Armor from defending himself.

“C-Captain?! Is that you, Captain?!” Marco asked.

What was reflected in the prince’s eyes? He continued to calmly attack an astonished Marco. The clangs of the swords rang in the air as the sound grew weaker and weaker. The battle was gradually drawing to a close.

“This is the end, Marco!”

The Undead’s sword was flung into the air as he staggered and went on one knee. When he looked up, Marco discovered Ein’s jet-black blade right before his eyes. The dull, loud screeching of metal ripping through metal echoed throughout the hall.



“A-Ahhh!” Marco screamed, placing both hands over his sliced chest as the veins pulsating throughout his body lost their glow. “Th-The one who pierced my armor wasn’t Captain...”

“It’s me,” a firm, clear voice said.

As his veins continued to blink, Marco raised his head to find Ein standing beside him.

“You?” the armor asked.

“That’s right, Marco. I pierced through your chest.”

The Undead gave a calm chuckle. “You’ve certainly gotten stronger.”

“D-Did you return to normal?! Marco! Have you come back to your senses?!” Ein cried, lowering his sword and moving in to support the Living Armor’s large body as he fell.

“Unfortunately, my memories are hazy,” Marco admitted. “But it seems like I’ve raised my sword against you.”

“Wait! I’ll somehow find a way to get you some magic stones! Don’t talk anymore!”

“I no longer have no need for them. My captain’s techniques have landed the final blow upon me. And there’s nothing more satisfying than that.”

His voice grew hoarse as the veins of light on his body stopped glowing.

“Wait! This is an order! You have a duty to listen to *my* commands, don’t you?!” Ein shouted.

“I think I’m at my limit. It pains me to say this, but I ask you to please let me go.”

Like a firefly losing its light, the glimmer of life started to fade from Marco. Tears spilled from Ein’s eyes as he struggled to watch the suit of armor die before his eyes.

“My captain is no longer here,” Marco said, forcing his dying body to squeeze out these words. “And so, I ask you. Will you please allow me to take my leave?”

Captain Ramza was no longer with him. Ramza's request echoed in Ein's head.

"If... If you were to ever cross swords against an opponent who uses the fighting style I just showed you, could you tell him one thing for me?"

Ein fought back his tears and fulfilled his promise. "Marco, then I've got one last order."

"Yes, Your Highness! I shall humbly receive your appointment!"

Had Marco still been well, he surely would've presented the prince with an energetic and bold salute. Upon seeing that the armor could no longer do so, Ein deeply inhaled before sharing Ramza's message.

"For the past few centuries, you've fulfilled your duties well."

Only then was Ein fully able to understand the meaning behind this message. When he had first met Marco, Ein had asked the armor if he didn't get lonely. Marco had replied that he was fulfilling an important duty.

"C-C-Captain?" Marco croaked.

Ein wasn't made aware of the details of Marco's duty, but the Living Armor was finally able to say that his mission was complete after hundreds of years.

"H-Heh heh. I wouldn't have expected such a wonderful gift in my final moments. Lastly, may I have the name of who you currently are?" Marco asked.

This was truly his last.

"My name is Ein. Ein von Ishtarica. I am the next king who carries the blood of Ishtarica within my veins, and I am the Ishtarican royal family's second—"

Only Marco heard the last bit of this sentence.

"Ah... How...simply dignified your name is," he said, trembling with elation as he breathed his last breaths. "I'm a happy knight. Sir Ein, please allow me to be by your side as well."

"Have a good, long rest," Ein replied. "I shall carry on your feelings."

The prince felt like the knight had given a satisfied smile.

"May your name be echoed throughout the land for eternity... Ah... Glory to Ishtarica."

Marco's body proceeded to turn to dust and was sent to the four corners of the world with a single breeze. Right before he disappeared, the knight had left a sheet of paper and a magic stone. The prince clutched the stone and immediately absorbed it, with notes of a coffee-like aroma hitting his nose before a bitterness ran throughout the rest of his body. While clenching the stone, Ein felt his chest thumping away as brilliant rays of light spilled out from the empty magic stone. As the stone turned to dust as well, the prince's body glowed yet again and his hair grew down to his waist.

"I think I was incomplete until now, but I'm done." Ein nodded as he reached for the sheet of paper. "I see. Marco held on to these instructions for centuries."

The instructions written down were brief, but Ein felt great emotion within these letters. The parchment was old and tattered, but the following words were clearly written: *Please protect the royal capital and our family.*

Signed, Ramza von Ishtarica

Marco was foolishly honest, yet earnest, as he had protected this castle for many centuries.

Epilogue

After the magnificent battle had concluded, Dill couldn't parse out the "who, what, and why" of what had just happened before his eyes. But more than anything else, the knight was perplexed by Ein's sudden and rapid growth spurt.

"You're...Sir Ein, correct?" Dill asked.

"Yup. I'm the Ein you know so well," the prince replied.

Dill usually had to look down while talking to the crown prince, but now his prince was looking down on him.

"Your hair has grown quite a bit," the knight remarked. "And your face is looking a bit more...mature."

Ein now looked to be about seventeen or eighteen years of age. Dill couldn't help but feel like the prince had aged a couple of years in minutes. Ein's entire physique had undergone a great transformation, looking completely different from when he initially stepped into the castle.

"I absorbed Marco's magic stone while we were fighting," Ein said. "I don't really understand it myself, but that seems to be the cause of my growth."

Of course, this was a lie. Just as he'd promised, Ein had fought Marco with only his sword. However, the prince wanted to explain everything later.

"It's a long story," Ein said. "I'll tell you everything I have to say on the train ride home. Is that all right with you?"

"I understand," Dill said. "For now, I'll agree to your suggestion."

Ein knew that he'd caused a lot of trouble, but Dill continued to trust in his prince despite it all. The prince was truly glad to have met such a kind knight.

"Why don't we take a little detour before we go back to Barth?" Ein said.

Although Ein had accomplished his mission and confirmed his suspicions, he had one more place he wanted to stop by before leaving. After all, the prince could rarely visit Barth to begin with.

“Sir Ein...you don’t mean that poisonous swamp...” Dill said.

“I expect no less from you, Dill! Let’s go!”

In sharp contrast to his composed attitude from moments ago, Ein now acted more like his usual self—a boy who couldn’t satisfy his almost lustful curiosity. Dill looked exhausted, but he chose to stick by Ein’s side as the prince went off on his own.

According to Marco, the poisonous swamp was nearby. The pair were surrounded by trees, breaking a branch or two as they marched on. The unstable terrain made it difficult for the pair to press forward, but at least it was exponentially easier than trudging through the snow. The morning rays of the sun peeked through the dense foliage.

“Ah, I think I see it! Over there!” Ein said.

“Is that the swamp?” Dill asked.

“It’s so easy to spot, so I’m guessing it is.”

Reddish-purple smoke filled the air surrounding the swamp. With Dill behind him, Ein stood tall and raised his hand over the smoke. He activated his Toxin Decomposition EX skill, transforming the smoke into transparent, harmless air.

“I think you shouldn’t get too close to the swamp, Dill,” Ein said.

“In truth, the same should go for you, Sir Ein,” the young knight replied.

“Yep, I agree.”

Ein chuckled as he stepped forward, casting his eyes on the more than ten-meter-wide swamp before him. A glossy, dark blue tar-like substance was bubbling within. Despite the substance’s appearance, it didn’t possess a foul stench—in fact, it was quite the opposite, reminding Ein of the aroma of roses. Then, just as Marco had noted, there was a glowing item in the center of the swamp.

“This aroma leads to poison?” Dill said. “There could be nearby animals and monsters that were tricked into approaching it.”

“I don’t see any here,” Ein replied. “I don’t see any footprints around nor can I find any small bugs buzzing about.”

This powerful pheromone-like scent was effective in deceiving nature. However, it wouldn't have been odd if any nearby life had immediately caught on to the swamp's trap and instinctively chose to avoid it.

"But with a scent this pleasant, I'm truly curious to know if this swamp really is poisonous," Dill observed.

"Ha ha, yeah. I agree."

Ein smiled and stepped inside the swamp. As he placed his hand above the gooey substance, a circular ripple of clear, pure water started to form.

"I think I'm detoxifying the swamp," Ein said.

"I would've appreciated a word or two before you stepped in," Dill replied.

"Ah, sorry... That's my bad." The prince apologetically scratched his head. "I'll go check out the glowing item, so could you wait here?"

"I shall. But there could still be monsters lurking about, so please be careful."

"Okay. Worst case, I'll grasp my sword and make a run for it. Wait for me here. Oh, the shallow areas are about as deep as a puddle. All right then, what can I find?"

Ein slowly took a step forward, making sure that he wouldn't suddenly fall into a deep spot. Dill looked on with a bit of worry.

"Hm. Mm-hmm," Ein mumbled as he took another step forward.

His feet were cold, but he was more curious about the bright light. As he gradually approached it, he started to smile.

"Wait, is that light..."

The light's glow was familiar to him. His footsteps grew rapidly as he approached the light's source.

"I see. It must've been the aroma of this flower."

He crouched down and extended a hand towards the flora.

"You're pink, but you're a Blue Fire Rose, aren't you?"

Calmly and rhythmically, a pink fire flickered within each of its petals. As Ein

approached the flower, he was sure that he was looking at a Blue Fire Rose; there was no way that he would've mistaken it.

"You've got poison too... I'm certain of your identity."

Ein wasn't exactly sure if he could refer to this pink flower as a *Blue* Fire Rose.

"I can't pluck you out."

The prince wanted to decompose the flower's toxins and remove it, but the rose wouldn't even budge from the mightiest tug.

"Just how deep do your roots go? You don't seem like you'd be big enough to have large roots anyway."

Is all the poison from around the swamp yours? Like as if they are your roots? Ein's surroundings were filled with so much toxic air, but it seemed impossible for a single rose to be the source. But upon taking liquid form, the toxins had coalesced into a swamp. It was truly no laughing matter. After a bit of thought, Ein stretched his hand over the swamp and removed the rest of its toxins. Ein cracked a faint smile upon seeing that the swamp's toxicity had visibly decreased.

"I'm getting all of it."

Once the poisonous swamp was completely purified, the Blue Fire Rose easily gave way and was plucked from its home.

"Lastly, I'll take your poison too."

He worked from the bottom, slowly absorbing the flower's toxins—a process that Ein had done before. The petals gave off a strong glimmer before they crystallized and transformed into a beautiful, priceless jewel.

"A pink star crystal, huh..."

Despite creating such a deadly toxin, this mutated Blue Fire Rose had the potential to become something so dazzling. It was as though the very essence of everlasting spring was trapped within the jewel, the petals seemingly dancing for eternity. Ein was enchanted by the beautiful star crystal, its regal elegance reminding him of spring's warmth.

"I'll take this home with me."

Ein and Dill immediately boarded the royal water train upon their return to Barth. As the pair reunited with the awaiting members of the Knights Guard, the men couldn't hide their surprise from seeing their prince's metamorphosis.

"I absorbed a magic stone and had a growth spurt," Ein explained simply.

The knights were all very confused, but they let it slide. As soon as Ein returned, the train pulled out of town.

"Dill... Are you sure I can tell you after we return to the royal capital?" Ein asked.

In truth, Ein had promised his knight an explanation on their ride home, but Dill had stated that it could come later—it was about all he could do to care for the tired Ein.

"May I ask one question, then?" Dill asked.

"Sure. Whatever you like," Ein replied.

"Were your actions for Ishtarica? Or was it to satisfy personal curiosity?"

"I believe that what I've done is important for the sake of Ishtarica."

Dill gave a gentle smile upon hearing those words. "Then I don't mind. As your guard, my role is to simply protect you. Even if that happens to be within the halls of the Demon Castle."

"I'm sorry for suddenly dragging you out here."

"Please don't apologize. But I can tell that you're exhausted. When we return to Kingsland, please allow me to speak with you when you're feeling more energetic." With that, Dill stepped away from the prince. "Please rest well. I shall be back when we're about to reach the royal capital."

He closed the door quietly behind him and left Ein on his own. Now that he was outside of Ein's railcar, Dill's voice couldn't reach the prince. Standing in place, the young knight muttered to himself.

"I couldn't do a single thing when he was fighting Sir Marco."

Dill had witnessed an undoubtedly fierce battle between Ein and Marco. It

pained the young knight to admit it, but his father likely would've had some difficulty as well. The clashing of steel before Dill's eye had been just that intense and powerful.

"As a guard and as a person by his side, I couldn't do anything. And so, Sir Ein, I should be the one apologizing."

Frustration welled up within him.

"Hah... Damn it. This is vexing."

Dill knew that things couldn't remain the same. At this rate, he felt so useless that it didn't matter if Ein had a guard or not. But what could the knight do?

"I have to become stronger. I have to be stronger than ever before, and be even more powerful than my father."

As large beads of tears rolled down his cheeks, Dill carefully thought about his future. He used the sleeves of his uniform to wipe away the tears.

Once Dill was gone, Ein was in the process of steeling his resolve. Atop a table in front of him was his status card.

"I guess I'll take a look," the prince muttered.

Truthfully speaking, Ein wanted to hurl his card out of the window instead of looking at it. However, the young man's final words to Marco were now echoing in his mind.

"My name is Ein. Ein von Ishtarica. I am the next king who carries the blood of Ishtarica within my veins, and I am the Ishtarican royal family's second—"

The words that followed were the most important.

"I knew it," Ein said.

His job was no longer listed as "Named." Two words had filled that row instead. He knew that he would need to report to Silverd as soon as he returned to Kingsland. Ein would have to think about what to do after that. The prince traced the two words with his finger and quietly read them aloud.

"Demon Lord."

A Demon Lord was born within the Ishtarican royal family. Until today, Ein had heard the term “vessel” on numerous occasions. Was the vessel he possessed that of the Demon Lord? As he chased after the red foxes, he couldn’t help but feel that this was some sort of fate.

[Job] Demon Lord
[Stamina] 235
[Magical Power] 341
[Attack] 74
[Defense] 40
[Agility] 95
[Skills] Demon Lord, Follower, Dark Knight, Grand Sorcery, Ocean Current, Thick Fog, Toxin Decomposition EX, Absorb, Gift of Training, Ice Dragon

Afterword

It's been a while. I'm the author, Ryou Yuuki. Thank you for picking up volume 4 of *Magic Stone Gourmet*. Were you able to enjoy the story? If you were, I couldn't be happier.

I've added a lot of new details to this volume as well. The battle with Upaskamuy in the first half of the volume was a completely new addition. I condensed some portions of the web novel while adding some things here and there as well. I think I did a good job of portraying Marco too.

This time around, the fourth volume of the novel and first volume of the manga will be simultaneously released in Japan. You'll be able to catch fresh glimpses of Ishtarica and a new side of the continent illustrated within the manga version!

The change in scenery from Heim to Ishtarica looks splendid! I think you'd be able to enjoy the manga version while thinking, "Oh, so this is the kind of world that Ein has lived in." I hope you can enjoy a new side to *Magic Stone Gourmet*. To those who haven't picked up the manga yet, I'd be grateful if you could consider doing so.

Now then, I'll talk about the next volume. In the fifth volume, the long-standing feud with Heim will finally be given a bit of closure. Ein has gone through so much up to this point and has undergone quite a bit of growth. What can he do? Also, Krone will surely be able to reunite with her mother, Elena, as well. A new story will unfold as Ishtarica aims to get some closure with Ein. Please look forward to the future installment!

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the creation of the fourth volume of *Magic Stone Gourmet*. I'm greatly indebted to Chisato Naruse this time around as well. Their stunning illustrations of Ein combined with their depiction of Barth's scenery has made this volume into something wonderful.

I'm greatly indebted to my two editors this time around as well. I'd like to say thanks to the bookstores, the marketing team, and everyone else who has been

involved with this series.

Above all, I'd like to thank you, the readers who have decided to pick this book up and have allowed me to continue this series through the fourth volume. Thank you very much for picking up this volume. I hope we can meet again in the fifth one!

Please continue to support *Magic Stone Gourmet!*

Just as the party was about to pull into Barth's station, the train suddenly thrashed about.

E-Ein.

*Don't worry;
it'll die down
soon.*

Ein reassured Krone,
clutching her hand.

On the royal water train to
the Adventurer's Town Barth.

MAGIC
STONE
Gourmet

EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE ME THE
STRONGEST!

4

Walking down Barth's artisan street,
on the hunt for a skilled blacksmith.

Huh...
That sounds
amazing.

The road ahead of the prince's
party was filled with blacksmiths
and adventurers who couldn't
care less about the blizzard that
surrounded them.

That letter is
apparently
referring you
to the best
blacksmith
in Barth.

Dill

A young knight and accomplished
swordsmen who greatly admires Ein.

Ein


Ishtarica's crown prince, and
reincarnator born with the skill
Toxin Decomposition EX.

Lloyd

Ishtarica's strongest knight
and Dill's father.

Krone

Ein's advisor, and granddaughter
of Heim's former grand duke.



*This is an old elven ritual
that's been passed down through
the generations.*

**There was a truly special meaning behind the moment
in which a pair would silently hold their hands over
each other's magic stones.**

*An elf's magic stone is located on the right
side of their chest. Touching the area around another's
stone is the greatest display of trust and emotional
understanding between parties.*

Chris

Despite her young age, this powerful but klutzy elf serves as Ishtarica's marshal.

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STRONGEST!

RYOU YUUKI
ART **CHISATO NARUSE**

MAGIC
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Magic Stone Gourmet: Eating Magical Power Made Me the Strongest Volume
5

by Ryou Yuuki

Translated by piyo

Edited by Coop Bicknell

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